

By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death.

(Hebrews 11:17-19)

One of the most famous brands of car around the world is the British-built Jaguar

- At a tenner short of £27,000, the modest entry level XE model would make an ideal gift for your minister
- Keeping him suitably humble while allowing him to know that you appreciate him
- A promotional video from the car company begins:
- ‘Here at Jaguar quality is not just about delivering expectations but delivering beyond expectations’
- Testing needs to make sure the car is equipped for temperatures of -40 degrees in Russia
- The top of the dashboard is tested to 248 degrees Fahrenheit to make sure it can withstand hot climates
- It has been tested to drive through Death Valley, California and through mountains
- The car is sprayed with 1500 gallons of water in two and a half hours, presumably for weather in Devon
- It is subjected to extreme testing but this is not testing to prove that the vehicle will fail
- It is testing to show that the vehicle has proved itself and will live up to its specifications and price tag

In the phrase, ‘By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice’

- the word translated ‘tested’ means learning the nature or character of someone by extensive testing
- Paul uses this word ‘put yourselves to the test as to whether you are in the faith (or not)’ (2 Cor. 13:5)
- Similarly ‘the Pharisees and Sadducees came ... to test him (i.e. Jesus) (Mt. 16:1)
- God provides opportunities for his children to demonstrate and grow their faith (cf. Gen. 22:1)

The story of Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac begins by saying ‘God tested Abraham’ (Genesis 22:1)

- In similar cases God tests faith and faithfulness by expecting obedience in testing circumstances (Dt. 8:2)
- God commands Abraham to take Isaac to the region of Moriah and sacrifice him as a burnt offering
- We know from the Biblical narrative that Abraham had more than one son so the phrase:
- ‘your son, your only son, whom you love’ is perhaps better translated ‘your unique son’
- No indication is given as to the location of Moriah except that it was three days’ travel from Beersheba
- But another reference (2 Chronicles 3:1) identifies it as the site of the temple in Jerusalem
- And later it is referred to as the mountain of the LORD – only two mountains are named this way in OT
- Jerusalem (Ps. 24:3; Isa. 2:3; Zech. 8:3) and Sinai (Num. 10:33) – so there is a strong case for Jerusalem

While the command to sacrifice his son is shocking, it was not, perhaps, so shocking to Abraham as it is to us

- Human sacrifice was common among the Canaanites – though later forbidden for Israelites
- Genesis does not play out the obvious emotional drama – that is plain enough for everyone to see
- We have no indication as to Isaac’s age only the clues from what he says and does, he is not a small boy
- As the drama heightens – only the intervention of God restrains Abraham from killing Isaac on the altar
- And it seems that the whole episode is done for God’s benefit (Genesis 22:12)
- “Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”

One of the challenges of the story is to understand why God needed to confirm something he already knew

- If God knows the end from the beginning and is omniscient, no knowledge can be added to this
- I can only suggest that the difference is between theoretical and experiential knowledge
- Isn’t that the essence of testing? Some years ago a member who had fallen out with me was critically ill
- His diagnosis came only a few weeks after he had stormed out of a meeting in a temper
- I was apprehensive as I rang the bell but when I saw him he said, ‘I knew you would come’ (compliment)

I HARAN: GIVING UP THE PAST

The story of Abraham (Abram) begins after the account of the Tower of Babel and a long genealogy

- The Lord had said to Abram ‘Leave your country, your people and your father’s household
- And go to the land I will show you’ (Gen. 12:1-3) – God promised a nation, a great name and blessing
- Although Abraham was born at Ur, his family had already set out for Canaan but stopped at Haran
- The journey from Ur to Canaan by a sensible route is about 1100 miles and Haran about half-way
- It was still over 500 miles from Haran to Canaan when God called Abraham to a new land but
- ‘they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there’ (Gen. 12:5)

It is fair to say that the Bible does not make much of what Abraham gave up to go to Canaan

- The focus of the story is on the promises and faithfulness of God – but Abraham did leave things behind
- He left behind a familiar land, a familiar people and his father’s household, that is his family
- In the NT we find Abraham being used as the model of faith, trusting God’s word enough to live by it

For the Christian believer, the call to discipleship has traditionally been expressed as following Jesus

- But whereas many of us have sung, ‘turned from home and toil and kindred leaving all for his dear sake’
- The truth is that we have often not felt required to move geographically from our land, community, family
- And, therefore, have not even contemplated whether we might be required to move spiritually
- From our land, community and family: as if the Christian journey is one that will arrive somewhere
- But not require us to leave anywhere – so what we must consider is really a very simple question
- And simple questions are often the most challenging: what is God calling you to leave behind?

II CANAAN: ANTICIPATING THE BLESSING

Not only once did God make great promises to Abraham – the promises were not always easy to believe

- But Abraham still believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness
- Abraham was promised, on more than one occasion, that he would be father of a great nation
- To mark this nation out from other peoples of the world, God gave Abraham the sign of circumcision
- ‘Abraham’s faith was found not in what he felt or what he thought, but how he lived’ (Mitchell Lewis)
- He believed God, even though the promise had not yet been fulfilled (and he was 99 years old)

The call of Abraham (Gen. 12:1-4) is one of the most significant passages in the Bible

- It marks a turning point in the story of salvation – primeval history has been pretty depressing
- Unbelief, disobedience, murder and a catalogue of death are followed by divine judgment
- But even after the flood sin returned – but to Abraham a great plan of salvation is unfolded
- all peoples on earth will be blessed through you, a man will father a son, a family and a nation
- and through that nation, all nations of the earth shall be blessed – and when Abraham was called, he went

For Abraham, faith meant stepping out into the unknown, leaving the familiar behind, anticipating the blessing

- this is the essence of the great doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone (Gen. 15:6)
- Abraham’s story demonstrates not only the initial commitments but also the continuing demands of faith
- As the story unfolds, it shows that Abraham does not always get it right
- The plan that Sarah and Abraham put together to ‘help God out’ by Abraham fathering a child by Hagar
- Sarah’s maidservant, is a particular case in point – it is a reminder of the danger of helping God out
- By which I mean that God requires our faith and obedience and not our ingenuity
- In the fulfilment of his promises, something that Abraham will discover in the supreme test

III MORIAH: SURRENDERING THE FUTURE

In Jewish tradition Abraham was said to have been tested by God on ten different occasions

- But none greater than the one the writer to the Hebrews pinpoints, ‘offering Isaac as a sacrifice’
- If ever a believer had the right to be bewildered by the command of God, it is here
- Yet Abraham refused to act in any way other than the Lord had told him
- How could it be that he should sacrifice this unique son, when God had promised descendants by Isaac?
- This was the promised son for whom Abraham and Sarah had waited 25 years
- Abraham was left no option – if Isaac had to be sacrificed, then God would still raise him

Abraham said to his servants, ‘Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.’

(Gen. 22:5)

The plural ‘we will come back to you’ is important – Abraham believed that Isaac would return with him

- ‘Abraham refused to put limits to either his obedience or God’s power’ (Brown)
- It there are times when we are inclined to wonder ‘what is God doing in all of this?’
- Then we are in the company of Abraham, and perhaps many other ‘heroes of the faith’
- Maybe our testing has come in a personal way, ‘something that seems tragic and senseless’
- Maybe our testing has come not through lack of opportunity – I never did anything great for God
- Maybe our testing has come simply by the age in which we live – a time of decline in faith and church
- But while God cares about us what he commands is that through all the various tests of life
- We remain obedient to what the Apostle Paul called ‘the heavenly vision’ (Acts 26:19) – following Christ

For many of us the story of Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac is dulled by familiarity

- We have known the story and we know how it ends – but Abraham did not know how the story ended
- If he had known how the story ended, what kind of faith would he have shown
- What kind of charade would the whole episode have been if Abraham had known how it ended?

Now, we might take a moment to consider our own circumstances, maybe we feel that we are being tested

- To be honest, who can be in the church today, or in the modern world today and not feel tested?
- And if we move from the general to the specific, how can we not feel that we are being tested?
- Maybe like Abraham, we feel we are trudging through an arid place under the hot sun
- Even our fellow-travellers, like Isaac, sometimes ask inopportune questions, ‘Where is the sacrifice’
- We have the wood, we have the fire, and ‘God will provide’ sounds awfully like a cop out
- I think we can conclude that Abraham meant ‘I don't know how God is going to work it out, but he is.’

Earlier I spoke of the story of ‘Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac’ – a nit-picker might say, but he didn't

- To which I would reply, ‘Yes he did, because he gave him completely to God’ who gave a substitute
- And here the sign, fulfilled perfectly in Jesus, the Eternal Lamb of God is revealed

God will provide – it is, I suppose, the essence of faith – trusting in the one who sees the end from the beginning

- The extreme testing to which Abraham was subjected was God's means not only of proving his faith
- But also of revealing an even greater truth – Abraham was accepted by God because he trusted God
- Abraham was ready to obey God, even though it was all beyond his understanding
- Today, God speaks to us, through the world around us, through Christian testimony
- But primarily through the Bible which contains the message of Jesus and his command, ‘follow me’