

WHAT GOD WANTS FROM US  
GENESIS 22:1-19

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

The most frustrating course that I had in college was a speech class. I don't remember the name of it, but it had something to do with discussion and interpersonal relationships. Rather than presenting us with a syllabus on the first day that explained the requirements of the course, the professor asked us what we wanted to do. The first couple of weeks were spent talking about that without ever coming to any conclusion. The only assignments that I can remember that we were given were to read two books. Most of the classes were spent talking about whatever subjects came up in a free flowing discussion. When it came to giving out grades, the professor asked us to write down what grade we thought that we should get. My guess is that he based his grading pretty much on that.

My frustration was that I didn't know what his expectations of me as a student were. I didn't know what he wanted from me. Whether we are dealing with a mate or a parent or a boss or a teacher, we are more content and secure when we know what is expected of us. I suspect that the same thing is true of our relationship with God.

We all know that God wants us to be good and to help others and to have integrity. But I sometimes sense that we are a little more uncertain about what He really wants from us. How can I know that my life is pleasing in His eyes? Consciously or unconsciously we come to tentative conclusions about that. We conclude that He wants us to be a success in our business, or that He wants us to be good parents, or that He wants us to be very involved in church, or that He wants us to give generously to charity.

Genesis #22 gives us insight into what God really wants from His children. We have been studying the life of Abraham on Sunday mornings, and we have seen that God had given Abraham several promises. The biggest promise, perhaps, was that He would make of Abraham a great nation. That nation was to come through a special son of Abraham and Sarah. This long expected son, however, didn't show up until they were old. It was, in fact, a miraculous birth. This special child and the manner of his birth were to foreshadow the long expected birth of another child, a Savior of the world.

In our study of Abraham we have seen that this Old Testament character faced tests and trials. The test in our passage today is the most difficult of all. It is his semester final and ACT and Graduate Records Exam all wrapped into one.

I.

So in the first ten verses of Genesis #22 we find that GOD TESTS ABRAHAM. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. GOD TESTS ABRAHAM) Everything finally seemed to be going well for Abraham in his old age. He had his child of promise. He was experiencing

material prosperity. There was peace in the land. But then came this disturbing divine encounter,

We read in vv. 1 & 2 of Genesis 22: **“After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, ‘Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ 2 He said, ‘Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.”** The verb in v. 2 translated here as “go” appears two times in Genesis. Both times God is speaking to Abraham. It appears also in #12 when God tells Abraham to go forth from his country to the land of Canaan. (GENESIS 12:1) Our ESV translation of Genesis 12 v. 1 says, **“Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land I will show you.”** Abraham is being called upon to make a sacrifice of his past. Now Abraham is being called upon by that same God to go and sacrifice his future, his son.

We also have in v. 1 the first use in the Bible of the verb “test.” The King James Version says in v. 1, **“God tempted Abraham.”** That is not an accurate translation. The New Testament assures us that God does not tempt His children. Also the Hebrew verb that is used here means “to test” or “to prove the quality of something.”

(FORD TEST TRACK) When Ford takes cars out to its test track, it may have different purposes in mind. (CORVETTE) If it tests a Chevy product, the purpose may be to find flaws in a product that the competition offers. (FORD MUSTANG) But when Ford tests a new Mustang model, the hope and the intent is to find that it is a quality product. So it was with God’s test of Abraham. (PROJECTOR OFF)

God is omniscient. He knows the quality of Abraham’s faith. But he seeks to reveal it for Abraham’s sake, for Isaac’s sake, for their descendants’ sake, and ultimately for our sake. When the Lord announced that Sodom was going to be destroyed, He knew how many righteous people were in the city. But He allowed Abraham to bargain with Him, and He said that He would go down to the city as an angel to examine its spiritual status. Again this was for the benefit of Abraham and those who would follow after him. He knew all along what the story was.

In v. 2 the Lord acknowledges the difficulty of the test. He describes Isaac as his only son and the son whom he loves. This is also the first mention of love in the Bible. The first love expressed in the Bible is that of a father to his only, or unique, son. God tells Abraham to offer Isaac as a burnt offering. The original language leaves no doubt that this is to be a physical sacrifice.

We should also note that the Quran and the Muslim faith claim that it was Ishmael rather than Isaac who was almost sacrificed in this situation. There is a Muslim feast called Eid al-Adha where this is celebrated. It is the second of the two main holidays celebrated in Islam. It is a four day holiday.

This command to Abraham must have come as a terrible shock to him. Last week we saw that the Lord had asked Abraham to give up Ishmael and to send him off with his mother. Now he was being requested to give up Isaac, to make him a burnt offering. That didn't make sense. The Lord had said that this son was to be the one who would produce a great nation. "Now He wants to kill him, and He wants me to do it? That makes no sense. How could God ask me to do this?"

Child sacrifice was not unknown in the land of Canaan. Archaeologists have determined that it was practiced there from very early times on into the time well past Abraham's day. Animal sacrifice was more common, but sometimes the ancient people of the Near East believed that the gods could only be pleased by human sacrifice. Perhaps Abraham knew people who had done it. Perhaps he had asked himself the question if he could ever do such a thing for his God. But surely Abraham's God would never make such a request, would He?

Some have concluded that the Lord wasn't really asking for a literal physical sacrifice. That is an easy out. The normal sense of the words doesn't allow for that. The ethics of God's actions here have been a challenge for students of the Bible down through the centuries. Five factors may be helpful in looking at God's difficult request.

**First**, God was the Creator of Isaac's life, and He had the right to take it back. Isaac's conception was a miracle. So the Lord had a special claim upon Isaac's life. **Second**, the Canaanites had so much trust in their false gods that they were willing to sacrifice their children to them. Abraham's willingness to obey God showed that his faith was no less than theirs. **Third**, the Lord in the end would not permit Abraham to do this thing. He was simply seeking Abraham's total commitment. **Fourth**, there was no deceit or dishonesty on God's part in making this request. He simply told Abraham to offer his son as a burnt offering. **Fifth**, what God in the end would not require of any father, he would do Himself in sacrificing His Son. This entire incident becomes a teaching tool, an illustration, a type, of the love which God the Father has for us in His willingness to sacrifice His unique Son so that we might have eternal life.

In v. 3 we find that Abraham responded promptly. Early in the morning he set out from Beersheba with Isaac and a couple of servants for the land of Moriah (PROJECTOR ON--- BEERSHEBA TO MT. MORIAH), which was later to be part of Jerusalem. My guess is that he didn't tell Sarah what he was doing.

Moriah was about fifty miles away, and the trip would have taken probably three days. What Abraham was thinking and what he talked about with Isaac we are not told. (PROJECTOR OFF) But when they arrived at the hill, he told the other two young men who were with them to stay where they were while Isaac and Abraham went off to make the sacrifice. Abraham didn't want them to stop him if they saw what he was about to do.

In v. 5 he tells them, "... **I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.**" The verb "come again" is plural. Abraham is implying that the two of

them will both return. Was he just putting off the two servants, or did he really expect to return with Isaac?

The New Testament has a verse that relates to our understanding of Abraham's thinking at this point. (PROJECTOR ON--- HEBREWS 11:17) In Hebrews #11 v. 17 the author says, "**By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac...**" Two verses later the author of Hebrews writes (HEBREWS 11:19), "**He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead...**"

Abraham had no precedent for believing that Isaac would rise from the dead. The only thing that he could figure out was that he was going to kill Isaac, and God was going to raise him from the dead. For God said that Isaac was the child of promise, and by now Abraham had come to have complete faith in God and His promises. (PROJECTOR OFF) We might contrast Abraham's faith with that of the apostles who could not imagine that Jesus was going to die. Then when He died, they had great difficulty believing that He rose from the dead.

Notice in v. 6 in our passage that the wood for the burnt offering is laid on Isaac. Does that have any familiar parallel? Jesus was likewise required to carry the wood of his cross to the place of sacrifice.

As they approached that hill, Isaac finally asked his father where the lamb was. Abraham says in v. 8, "**God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.**" Abraham has not yet told Isaac what he plans to do. Perhaps he regards Isaac in some sense as fulfilling the role of the lamb.

The altar was set up, and the wood was arranged. The text does not say so, but probably Abraham explained to Isaac what was about to happen. We are not told how old Isaac was. But if he was old enough to carry the firewood up the hill, he must have been old enough to resist his aging father. The fact that he allows himself to be bound suggests that Isaac submitted to his father's will. What a discussion that must have been! My reading of this is that there was great faith and trust in God on the part of both Abraham and Isaac.

II.

In vv. 11-19 we find then that GOD PROVIDES FOR ABRAHAM. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. GOD PROVIDES FOR ABRAHAM) With the discussion over, with Isaac submitting to his father's binding, with conflicting emotions coursing through his mind, Abraham raises his knife, fully intending to kill his son. It was a dramatic scene, a scene that has been depicted by religious artists down through the centuries. (SIXTH CENTURY SYNAGOGUE MOSAIC) It was pictured on a mosaic on a synagogue floor in the sixth century. (DONATELLO SCULPTURE) A sculptor by the name of Donatello sculpted it in this way in the 14th century. (CARAVAGGIO PAINTING) Caravaggio painted it this way

in the 16th century. (REMBRANDT PAINTING) Rembrandt pictured it this way in the 17th century.

Before Abraham could plunge his knife downward, his agony was interrupted by the angel of the Lord, **“Abraham, Abraham. Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.”** (PROJECTOR OFF)

The omniscient God already knew that Abraham feared Him. But the Hebrew word that is used here often refers to knowledge gained by personal experience. Here Abraham's actions have truly demonstrated his fear of God. Fear of God, of course, refers not simply to a dread of God, but rather to a respect and reverence and awe that comes from a recognition of who God is.

Now this holy God provides a substitute for Abraham's intended victim. According to vv. 13 & 14, **“And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. 14 So Abraham called the name of that place, ‘The Lord will provide’; as it is said to this day, ‘On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.’”** The verb for “provide” actually means “to see.” But it is to see in our sense of “to see to something, to provide what is needed.” The Lord has provided a substitutionary sacrifice in fulfillment of the prophetic words of Abraham in v. 8, where he said, **“God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering...”**

In vv. 15-18 we read, **“And the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven 16 and said, ‘By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, 17 I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, 18 and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.’”**

Since the Lord can vow by no one higher than Himself, He swears by Himself to carry out this promise. Previously the unconditional covenant that He had made with Abraham was the basis of that promise. Now the Lord says that Abraham's faith is also a basis for great blessing and an abundant fulfillment. The promise of blessing to all the nations of the world will ultimately be fulfilled in the birth--- and death--- of a long expected son, a savior, a physical descendant of Abraham. So it was, according to v. 19, that they all returned to Beersheba.

### III.A.

(PROJECTOR ON--- THE APPLICATIONS) Consider then THE APPLICATIONS. The question which still remains is: What does God want from us? The answer is: GOD DESIRES TOTAL COMMITMENT AND TRUST FROM HIS PEOPLE. (III. THE APPLICATIONS A. GOD DESIRES...) The basis for a relationship with God is faith in Him. Back in #15 we were told that Abraham believed in God, and God credited that to

him as righteousness. Since the time of Christ the content of that faith must also involve a trust in the God-man Jesus Christ and His death for us on the cross. But it is faith in Him alone that brings us forgiveness of sins and the guarantee of eternal life and a destiny in heaven and membership in His family. Paul describes this salvation as a gift which can only be received by faith.

Beyond that what the Lord seeks to develop in us is complete commitment and trust in Him. Sometimes that commitment will lead to success in our careers; sometimes it will not. Sometimes that will lead to financial success; sometimes it will not. Sometimes total commitment will mean full time vocational Christian service; sometimes it will not. Sometimes that will mean great personal sacrifice and suffering; sometimes it will not. But the primary thing that He is looking for is total commitment so that we can be used in whatever path He lays out for us and so that we can know and enjoy Him to the fullest.

The test that we see presented in this chapter of a believer's commitment to God is whether there is anything in our lives that is so important to us that we could not let go of it. If we lost our health; if our child or grandchild or husband or wife or parent died; if we were laid off from our job; if the house burned down; would God still have first place in our lives? We can't always answer that question until the situation arises. But sometimes we know that we are holding back from God in a certain area or areas of our lives. The challenge to us is to give the Lord absolute first place in our lives.

A year after missionary William Carey arrived in India from England his commitment underwent a severe test. In 1794 his five year old son died. But the Father of Modern Missions, as he was later known, continued his work. He was certain that God wanted him in India. His wife did not respond so well. After this tragic incident her mental health deteriorated. According to other missionaries, she was mentally deranged until the time of her death a number of years later.

The Lord desires to have first place in our lives. The Apostle Paul wrote in Romans #12 v. 1, **"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."**

B.

The first lesson that I find here is simply that the Lord desires to have first place in our lives. The second is that **GOD USES TESTS TO DEVELOP OUR FAITH.** (III. THE APPLICATIONS A. B. GOD USES TESTS...) Abraham faced significant spiritual tests in his lifetime. He did not pass all of them. He did not always demonstrate total commitment and trust. We don't always do that either. The encouraging thing, however, is that we serve a gracious and patient God, and we can grow in faith and learn from our failures. Abraham did. His faith grew to the point that he was willing to risk everything to obey God.

Jim Eliot, who was one of five missionaries who died in trying to reach the Auca Indians in Peru with the gospel (JIM ELIOT QUOTE), wrote when he was only twenty-one, **“One does not surrender a life in an instant. That which is life-long can only be surrendered in a lifetime.”** (*Shadow of the Almighty*, p. 91) Pretty perceptive for one who was only twenty-one years old.

When the Civil War broke out, Washington, DC, was in a precarious situation. (WASHINGTON DC MAP) Virginia, part of the Confederacy, lay immediately to the south. Washington was surrounded on three sides by Maryland, whose loyalty to the Union at the beginning of the war was divided. The Union army was also in disarray.

(GENERAL GEORGE MCCLELLAN) President Lincoln called upon General George McClellan to organize his army. McClellan did a great job. He organized the men and trained them. He supplied them with weapons and ammunition and food. Morale rose. The President encouraged him to take the offensive. McClellan argued that he needed more time. Weeks went by. In August of 1861 he wrote to his wife, **“The enemy have three to four times my force--- the President is an idiot, the old General [General Scott] is in his dotage--- they cannot or will not see the true state of affairs.”** The reality was that the Union army was twice as large in numbers as the Confederate army across the Potomac River.

Lincoln continued to encourage McClellan to attack. In November 1861 when the Union army in Washington had three times the number of men and artillery pieces as the rebels, General McClellan complained in a letter, **“I cannot move without more means...”**

Eventually Lincoln had to get somebody else to lead the army because McClellan was unwilling to take a risk. He would not step out in faith and join the battle and put his resources to work. (PROJECTOR OFF)

God’s primary concern is not our happiness and material well being. His goal is to make us like Jesus. He wants us to develop our faith. He uses tests and trials in the process so that we will grow up and become mature men and women of God who will take risks for Him and who will use the divine resources that He has put at our disposal. He wants us to expect great things from God and to attempt great things for God

C.

God wants total commitment and trust from us. He uses tests to develop our faith. Thirdly, GOD PROVIDES ABUNDANTLY FOR HIS PEOPLE. (I. A. B. C. GOD PROVIDES...) The Lord provided Abraham with a ram for a substitute for Isaac. Abraham saw that as a significant and supernatural provision. For he named that place Jehovah-jireh, or The Lord Will Provide. Abraham listened as the Lord repeated His promise to make of him a great nation and to greatly bless his descendants and to bring blessing through him to all of the nations of the world.

As Abraham was about to plunge his knife into his son's body, the text says that it was the angel of the Lord who intervened. The "angel of the Lord" is a term that is used in the Old Testament to describe the Son of God. What the Son of God desired that no other son should endure at the hands of his father, He Himself endured 2000 years later. What God the Father desired that no human father do to his son, He Himself did that we might have eternal life.

What Abraham said in v. 8 about God providing the lamb for the sacrifice was ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He was the substitutionary sacrifice. (JOHN 1:29) John the Baptist said of Him, as recorded in John's Gospel #1 v. 29, "**Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!**" What God promised Abraham in v. 18 about blessing all of the nations of the world through his descendants was fulfilled in Christ. For the death of Christ would bring salvation not only to the Jews but also to the Gentiles.

The place of this sacrifice would be Mount Moriah where Isaac was almost sacrificed. (2 CHRONICLES 3:1) Second Chronicles #3 v. 1 says, "**Then Solomon began to build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah...**" The Jews were to offer sacrifices for a thousand years on that same hill. Finally Jesus Christ would become the final sacrifice for sin on one of the outer reaches of that hill. (PROJECTOR OFF)

A central theme of the story of Abraham is the provision of a long expected son in fulfillment of the promises of God. That son was provided by means of a miraculous birth. In the process the faith of Abraham was developed to the point that he was able to believe that God would raise this son from the dead after his requested sacrifice.

A central story of the Bible is the provision of a long expected son, a Messiah, who would fulfill the promises of God. That son was provided by means of a miraculous birth. Eventually this Son would be sacrificed to pay the penalty for the sins of the world. He would rise again from the dead. We are called upon to have faith to believe that this is true. For if we will believe that this baby born in Bethlehem was God's Son who died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins and that He rose again from the dead, the promise of God is that we will receive the gift of eternal life and membership in His family. Faith in Jesus is the foundational thing that God wants from us. Over time, as with Abraham, he desires us to grow in faith to the point that we will totally trust Him.