

February 6, 2011

## THE SUPREME CRISIS, Part Two

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Last week we discussed Genesis 22 as a picture of God's love for His own Son, and as a picture of his love for us, based in part on the fact that the first mention of the word "love" in Scripture appears in this passage. Today we are going to look at the same passage from a different perspective, since we also find the first mention of testing in Scripture here as well.

Do you like tests? I don't know many people who do. Tests are meant to show us whether or not we have the right stuff inside of us. If we do, we pass the test; if we don't, then we know we are not yet ready to move on.

It is exactly for this reason that God tests us. God knows about, plans for, and brings about every test—every single test! Why? Is it because He needs to know what is in our hearts? No! God knows our hearts better than we do! *The testing reveals to us and to those around us what is in our hearts.* God's tests show us whether or not we are truly dependent upon Him.

This is especially relevant for us because we have our own time of testing as a church. We've come out of an extremely difficult situation in which the church was "nuked"; we find ourselves in the unpleasant aftermath of all that. We're currently in a sort of trial of endurance. You've heard me say that I believe the church will grow when our own hearts are prepared to receive growth. Those aren't just pretty words meant to make you feel good; there is more to it. I believe there are certain things God is looking for from us. We're concerned about our membership numbers, we're concerned about growth, and we're concerned about the finances. I tell you with great conviction that this time of testing is God's hand of providence, and it is exactly what we need at this moment in time. Our test is not in the same degree as the testing of Abraham that we will discuss today; yet we can glean lessons that will be useful to us right now. This is a "where-the-rubber-meets-the-road" moment for us, and the awesome truth is that God providentially arranged for us to study this exact passage at this exact time.

Let's turn to Genesis 22 and learn about Abraham's supreme crisis.

<sup>1</sup>*And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am.*

<sup>2</sup>*And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.*

Remember, that word "tempt" in the King James Version has shifted meaning somewhat in the last few centuries. A better understanding is conveyed by the words "test" or "prove." God issues a test to Abraham—and what a test!

We know of Isaac. He is the only son born to Abraham by his wife Sarah, and that Isaac's birth was very, very late in life for the happy couple. He was given to Abraham in fulfillment of certain distinct promises. God had made it very clear that these promises were to be fulfilled in and through Isaac; yet here God tells Abraham to offer that special, beloved child as a burnt offering.

This seems entirely out of character for God, does it not? God abhors child sacrifice, and we often see later in Scripture that He condemns pagan civilizations for causing their sons to “pass through the fire,” a euphemism for child sacrifice. Even before the Law is given in which we find “Thou shalt not kill,” we still know that God values human life. In fact, one of the first things God gave Noah and his sons after the Flood was an injunction against murder. How can it be in the nature of God to break His promises to Abraham and cause Abraham to break God’s own law against murder?

Let us look again at the second part of verse two: “offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.” On closer inspection, does God tell Abraham to kill Isaac? I won’t haggle over a semantic difference, but I think when we get to the end of the story we’ll see that Abraham did exactly what was asked of him—no more and no less. He *offered* Isaac. It is very clear to me that God never had any intention of allowing this to be carried out at all. Instead, this is a test—a test designed to show Abraham the center of his love. Does he truly love the Lord his God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength?

Let’s continue in verse three, shall we?

*<sup>3</sup>And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him.*

*<sup>4</sup>Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off.*

*<sup>5</sup>And Abraham said unto his young men, Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you.*

There is no hesitation at all from Abraham. In fact, we are not told Abraham’s reaction at all. But do we really need to read how Abraham felt? No, I think we can get that from our own imagination and experience! How would you feel if you were Abraham?

The story does tell us that Abraham hastened to do as he was told. The next morning, he himself entered into the work of preparing for the journey and the sacrifice to come. He, Isaac, and two servants set off for the land of Moriah, a three day journey, which as we noted last week is the immediate vicinity of Jerusalem. It is the place, or very near to it, where much later God would sacrifice His own Son, Jesus.

But let me draw your attention to verse 5. Do you notice what Abraham said to his servants? He said, “You wait here; my son and I will go worship, and then come back to you.” Somewhere in those dark days and sleepless nights, between the time God had given the command and the moment recorded here, Abraham had come to believe that God’s request that he offer his son could not be made to contradict or destroy the promises God had made regarding Isaac. Abraham believed God. The book of Hebrews informs us that Abraham had come to the conclusion that God would raise Isaac from the dead (Heb. 11:19), even though nothing like that had ever happened in the history of the world up to that point.

Let’s look at the next few verses:

*<sup>6</sup>And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together.*

<sup>7</sup>*And Isaac spake unto Abraham his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?*

<sup>8</sup>*And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together.*

Isaac is a young man, perhaps twenty years old and possibly even into his thirties. Our word “lad” gives the impression that he is a child, but the Hebrew word underneath has a much larger age span. In any case, he’s seen sacrifices before. He has not questioned his father up to this point, no doubt trusting that his father has a plan to acquire a sacrificial animal before reaching the destination. But they did not stop at Jerusalem or any other settlement to purchase a lamb. Now they are apparently at the final leg of the journey, and still they have no lamb. Isaac opens his mouth to ask the obvious question: “We’ve got everything else we need, but where is the lamb?”

And so we find one of the great prophetic utterances of Scripture: My son, God will provide Himself a Lamb. What remarkable faith! The total fulfillment of these words would not be seen until much later, when Jesus Christ came as the Lamb of God. That was far beyond Abraham’s sight; in fact, Abraham’s mind and heart were centered on the ordeal that awaited at the top of the mountain.

<sup>9</sup>*And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood.*

<sup>10</sup>*And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.*

<sup>11</sup>*And the angel of the LORD called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I.*

<sup>12</sup>*And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me.*

<sup>13</sup>*And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns: and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son.*

<sup>14</sup>*And Abraham called the name of that place Jehovahjireh: as it is said to this day, In the mount of the LORD it shall be seen.*

Notice the obedience of both Abraham and Isaac. Isaac was old enough to resist; yet we find him bound, lying upon the altar. These last few moments must have been hard to bear for both father and son. The moment of truth—will Abraham take up the knife?

Yes, he does stretch out his hand to the knife; but before he can do any damage, he hears the voice of God again. Friends, let me ask you, why did God wait until that moment to intercede? Why wait until Abraham had the knife in his hand? God Himself tells Abraham the reason: *it was a test*. Abraham passed the test.

Abraham looks up and sees a ram caught nearby. Yes, God did provide a sacrifice that day! The ram served as a substitute for Isaac, just as the Lamb of God serves as a sacrifice for us. Notice what Abraham called the place: Jehovah-Jireh, which means God will provide. Let me share something that another preacher has noted about this passage:

Because of this wonderful triumph in his life, he calls this place, “God will provide.” Because of this miracle there sprang up a little saying in Israel, a proverb:

“When you get to the mount, it will be provided.”

Do you know what that means? God’s ways with men are such that it seems as though deliverance will never come. It seems that you will never be delivered. But if you go on, when you get to the mount it will be provided. Man’s disappointments are God’s appointments. It is never too late for God. Even if Abraham had had to carry the bloody business through to its end, nevertheless, his father’s heart was quiet in restful peace because he knew God would raise his son from the dead. He had promised; therefore, it must be.<sup>1</sup>

Have you ever been there? Have you ever thought, “Can this really be God’s plan for me?” or, “Will this trial ever end?” Yes, we’ve been there, haven’t we? We’ve been there as a church, and I dare say most of you have been there with your families. We’ve had disappointment and heartache. We’ve been tested. That’s why that quote struck me right between the eyes: “Man’s disappointments are God’s appointments.”

Abraham’s test is followed by a great blessing.

<sup>15</sup>*And the angel of the LORD called unto Abraham out of heaven the second time,*

<sup>16</sup>*And said, By myself have I sworn, saith the LORD, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son:*

<sup>17</sup>*That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies;*

<sup>18</sup>*And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice.*

<sup>19</sup>*So Abraham returned unto his young men, and they rose up and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham dwelt at Beersheba.*

God had a blessing prepared for Abraham which Abraham would have missed had he not gone through the time of testing.

Our God is the God of resurrection. When it looks as though we are throwing away every chance of blessing, God transforms in a moment the very thing we give up into the most richly rewarding and meaningful experience we have ever had.<sup>2</sup>

Friends, I believe that God has wonderful things in store for you individually and for Waverly Hall Baptist Church. The hard times that we go through reveal what’s inside. The things that God gives us have no value to us until we are willing to give them up. Do we really love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength? Only the trials can tell us!

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<sup>1</sup> Ray Stedman, “Life’s Hardest Trial.” 1968. Available at <http://www.raystedman.org/old-testament/genesis/lifes-hardest-trial>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.