

Introduction:

A. Elie Wiesel [Vee sel'], the great Jewish writer, known best for his writing about the holocaust, wrote many other things as well, including, *Messengers of God*, about Bible characters and stories. In his chapter, "The Sacrifice of Isaac: a Survivor's Story," he says, "*As a child, I read and read this tale, my heart beating wildly; I felt dark apprehension come over me and carry me far away. There was no understanding the three characters. Why would God, the merciful Father, demand that Abraham become inhuman, and why would Abraham accept? And Isaac, why did he submit so meekly? Not having received a direct order to let himself be sacrificed, why did he consent? I could not understand.*" [p.73]

B. There is no other story like this in the Old Testament. There is but one other in all of human history. It is the great finale to Abraham's life. Oh, he lived on many more years. He had other children. He buried his wife, Sarah, and finally died at age 175. His faith story started in Gen 12:

The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

"I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;

I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.

³I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth

will be blessed through you." (Gen 12:1-3)

And now in Gen 22, the words follow the same pattern,

Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah.

Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.”

Once God had asked Abram to burn his bridges behind him. Now he asks him to burn the only bridge ahead of him. [from Greidanus] **Turn to Gen. 22.**

- C. We cannot help but ponder the impenetrable emotions of this story but our text does not help us. There is not one *feeling* word in this story yet we can't help but wonder what this *felt* like.

The three characters here—God, Abraham, and Isaac—each invite our focus. Each focus gives us something significant to consider. **Focus on God** and we must weigh his goodness, his mysterious ways, and his promises. **Focus on Abraham** (as Hebrews 11 does) and we meditate on faith in God. **Focus on Isaac** and we see God's redemption up close and personal.

- D. We will spend two Sundays here. Today I will focus more on the test of Abraham and next week more on God's provision. So it begins: “*Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, ‘Abraham’ ‘Here I am,’ he replied.*”

I. GOD'S TEST OF FAITH

- A. Illus.: Are you familiar with the ancient practice of *trial by ordeal*? It was a way to determine someone's guilt or innocence on the assumption that God would protect the innocent no matter what. So for example, in an ordeal by fire the accused had to walk 9 feet over red-hot ploughshares. Sometimes the proof of innocence was to be that they weren't burned at all but more often it was that infection didn't set in and they healed.

Was that what God was doing to Abraham—an ordeal, a trial by fire? We think of it that way sometimes but that’s not what God does. God’s tests of faith are not trials by ordeal but the refining of gold.

God’s tests of faith are not exploratory—“let’s see what you’re made of.” God wasn’t double-checking to find out whether or not Abraham’s faith was genuine enough. He knew. God himself had given and shaped Abraham’s faith by promises, struggles, forgiveness, and wonders over many years. In **Gen 15** God showed Abraham the stars and told him his descendants would be that innumerable. The Bible says there, “*And Abram believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.*” Abraham had seen that promise come to pass when Isaac, the promised son, was born, miraculously to a 90-year-old mother and 100-year-old dad—the great nativity story of the Old Testament.

Listen to what Paul teaches us about this in **Rom 4:19-22**:

Without weakening in his faith, [Abraham] faced the fact that **his body was as good as dead**—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah’s womb was also **dead**. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but **was strengthened in his faith** and gave glory to God, being **fully persuaded** that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why “it was credited to him as righteousness.”

- B. So when Abraham faced this test he wasn’t coming to it cold. We tend to put ourselves in his shoes and cannot imagine having the faith to trust God in such a test. But you may not be where Abraham was. Did you notice the **indications of Abraham’s faith in this story?**
1. He did not delay. “*Early the next morning*” he rose and prepared to leave.

2. Later, in **v.5** he told his servants, *“We will worship and then we will come back to you.”*
3. In **v.9** after Isaac asked where the lamb was for the burnt offering, Abraham said, *“God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.”*

Oh, I do not think this was easy for Abraham. The way the text emphasizes his love for his son makes the enormity of this command obvious: *“Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac [He laughs]—and go...”* God’s tests of faith often take us out beyond the place of clarity, into frayed emotions and broken hearts, to wonder, *“What if I have this wrong? What if God is not like the Bible says?”*

Sometimes when we look into the suffering of other believers we say, *“I don’t know how she does it. I don’t think I could bear up under that.”* God *does* give us more than we can bear sometimes, make no mistake about that, and in those times we may lose touch with God. We may not know what to believe anymore. We may not be able to pray. We may cry out with **Ps. 88**, *“Darkness is my only companion.”* **But unless sin invades and conquers, your faith will not fail.**

In writing to suffering Christians Peter said in **1 Pet 1:6-7**, *“...now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”* God’s tests of faith are not trials by ordeal but the refining of gold.

- C. One thing I know from experience is that when our faith is under fire and it seems God is silent in our suffering we consider more seriously the things God has taught us. I

suspect that those three days journeying to Moriah was like that for Abraham. I think he reasoned and prayed out implications of his faith he hadn't grasped before:

1. That God *could not under any circumstances forsake his promise* to bless the world through this son, Isaac.
2. That God had given life from two dead bodies already once and so he could give life again. In fact, **Heb. 11:19** says, "**Abraham reasoned [considered] that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death.**" See that! *Reasoned*. In the end, Abraham could more easily believe God would raise his dead son than he could imagine God breaking his promise!
3. That in the past God accepted the sacrifice of a lamb in the place of a man as a kind of place-holder of salvation so he told Isaac, "*God himself will provide the lamb.*"

Perhaps you've had a journey like Abraham's—some lonely turmoil of a trip through the far borders of your faith where you had no choice but to pray through the promises of God, to think through what you have in Christ, to decide tighten your grip on God. All the bridges burned. There is no Christian worth their salt who doesn't face these times. We always feel ill-prepared and shaky; doubting our faith even if we don't doubt God. **But God does not test you with ordeals to prove your faithlessness. He is refining your golden faith.**

This story is a masterpiece of telling. **Vv.6-8** (emphasizing, "*the two of them went on together*" in v.6 & 8). **Fleming Rutledge** writes, "*This is beyond commentary. It sinks in of its own weightiness. The pace of the narrative, so reticent, so controlled, now slows to an excruciating crawl:*" **Vv.9-10...**

In Judaism this story is called the Akedah—The Binding.

II. THE BINDING – AS GOOD AS DEAD

- A. To the Jews this story is focused on Isaac because Isaac's favored son would be Jacob, and Jacob was renamed Israel. So it was their life as a people that was bound on that altar. The threat that Abraham pondered and that Isaac embodied was the sudden death of the promise God had made to Abraham at the beginning: *"I will make you into a great nation... all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."* **Not if Isaac dies, they won't!** It would all end with a whimper. **Elie Wiesel** points out that the Hebrew word for *burnt offering* is *ola*, *"which means an offering that has been totally consumed, a holocaust."* Oh, this story carries a great deal more weight to the Jews than most of us Gentiles have ever considered. Wiesel writes, *"Here is a story that contains Jewish destiny in its totality, just as the flame is contained in the single spark by which it comes to life. Every major theme, every passion and obsession that make Judaism the adventure that it is, can be traced back to it...."*
- B. **V.10**, *"Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son."* Time is up. The blessing of God on all the world faces the blade of that knife. One more moment and the bitter, hostile un-promised son Ishmael becomes Abraham's only legacy. **In that moment, Isaac is as good as dead.** Abraham will not fail to obey. He will not lose his nerve. Isaac will not struggle to escape. Nothing hinders the knife and the fire, the blade and the blaze.
- C. **Vv.11-14...** In one very important sense, the sacrifice God required of Abraham was offered because God looks on the heart. *"You have not withheld from me your son, your only son."* There the son of Abraham was as good as dead. God

would have seen nothing more if Isaac died. Isaac *was* consecrated to God as surely as if his body had been consumed by fire. That he still lived was a kind of resurrection story just the way his birth was the Old Testament's great nativity story. **The Jews read this story—the Akedah—every year on their New Year's Day**, because long before their rescue from Egypt, this was their fresh start—their new beginning; **the day they were, you might say, born again.**

Conclusion

The Test. Sacrifice and faith. Abraham's faith in God—his faith that God would absolutely keep his promise even if it meant bringing Isaac back from the dead—glittered like purest gold. **In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that by looking at Abraham we see the heart of God!**

The Binding. Submission and salvation. In dying—or all but dying—the people of God lived when God provided a lamb in their place.

I don't know who wrote this, and I hope its masculine language won't put you off. I think of it often, and I thought of it here.

*When God wants to drill a man,
And skill a man
And fill a man,
When God wants to mold a man
To play the noblest part,
When He yearns with all His heart
To create so great and bold a man
That all the world will be amazed,
Watch his methods, watch his ways.
How he ruthlessly perfects whom he royally elects,
How he hammers him,*

*And hurts him,
And with mighty blows converts him
Into trial shapes of clay which only God understands
Till his tortured heart is crying
And he lifts beseeching hands.
How He bends but never breaks
When His good He undertakes
Then He uses whom He chooses
And with every purpose fuses him
By every act induces him
To try His splendor out.
God knows what he's about.*

(Author unknown)