

# THE OBEDIENCE OF FAITH

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Our text for today's message is our Old Testament lesson—the account of Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah. This will be an expository sermon and you are welcome to follow along in your bulletins.

***Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” “Here I am,” he replied. Then God said, “Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.” [Genesis 22:1-2]***

The account of God's testing of Abraham is quite possibly the most dramatic moment in the entire Bible. God had chosen Abraham to be the father of a great nation—a nation from which He would one day raise up a Messiah who would be the Savior of mankind. He had promised Abraham that this Messiah would be a descendent of a son Abraham would bear in his old age. And now that the son had been born, God commanded Abraham to take his son out and kill him. Everything in us screams out in outrage against this command. How could a good and merciful God possibly order a father do such a barbarous thing? Such a God is not loving and gracious, but cruel and sadistic. How could He possibly be worthy of our worship?

It's easy to see why this story has been a stumbling block for believers and unbelievers as well. Granted, God rescinds his command, but what could he possibly have had in mind when he put Abraham to such a terrible test? For that matter, why does God test us at all? Is Christianity supposed to be some kind of school where we have to keep proving what we've learned in order to get a good grade? Or is it just pass or fail? Well, it all boils down to how we understand the word “test.” What does it mean when the Bible says that “*God tested Abraham.*”

***Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. He 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.” Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. [22:3-6a]***

The first thing we notice is that even though God's command to Abraham must have seemed horrific, Abraham responds as he always does: with immediate and complete obedience. He raises no protest, but goes about making arrangements. He travels to the place God designated, Mount Moriah, and begins preparing things for the sacrifice.

Luther described Abraham's reaction to God's instructions as, "*The obedience of faith.*" What he meant was that Abraham was willing to do whatever God commanded with complete faith that God would bring good out of it. As Moses wrote of him, "*Abraham believed the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness.*"

It's really, really important to understand that THIS is the kind of obedience that God wants from us. When we hear the word "obedience, our minds tend to turn to what we might call "legal obedience" or obedience to God's moral law. To obey God, we think, means to obey the Ten Commandments—to refrain from lying, killing, stealing, lusting, coveting and so forth. And the next thing that occurs to us that is that we don't have it in us to practice this kind of obedience. We break God's laws all the time because we're rebellious in our hearts and sinful in our natures. Oh we might not murder someone, but we certainly nurse anger against other people in our hearts, and didn't Jesus say that that was just as bad? We might not steal our neighbor's Corvette, but we might covet it and there's a commandment against that too. Try as we might, we can't obey God's moral code, so how can God expect us to be obedient?

Well, He can because the kind of obedience that God wants from us—and the kind that Abraham showed—has nothing to do with obeying his moral law and everything to do with placing our trust in his promises. That's why Luther called it the obedience of faith, because it obeys God's invitation to us to trust that He will cause all things to work together for good in our lives. This is the kind of obedience—and faith—that Abraham had. Not only did he immediately set about doing what God had commanded him to do, he completely trusted God to bring good out of what God had commanded him to do—even out of the slaying of his own son. How do we know that he had this kind of faith? Because we are told that when they approached the place where the sacrifice was to be offered, 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.*" Did you hear that last sentence? **"And then we will come back to you!"** Abraham had no fear of sacrificing his own son because he knew that God could raise the dead to new life and he knew that God had promised to raise a great nation through his son. He knew that God would bring good out of whatever God commanded him to do. THIS is the obedience of faith. That is why Paul calls Abraham "the man of faith" and holds him up as an example of faith to those who follow Christ.

***As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?" "Yes, my son?" Abraham replied. "The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together. [22:6b-8]***

*"God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering..."* Sometimes people in the Bible speak words of prophecy without understanding the meaning of what they are saying. The classic example is the high priest Caiaphas who said to the Sanhedrin regarding Christ,, *"You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish."* Caiaphas had one thing in mind, which was the assassination of Jesus Christ in order to maintain the social order and keep peace with Rome, but God had another thing in mind, which was the sacrificial death of His Son so that the sins of mankind could be forgiven. Caiaphas spoke the truth even though he had no concept of what he was saying. And that is exactly what seems to be happening here: God provided a son to Abraham and his son is God's to do with as he pleases. God would provide the sacrifice, even if Abraham had no idea of how God would go about doing it.

***When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son." [22:9-12]***

This is, perhaps, the greatest test ever passed by a sinful human being. God knows that our sin leads us to worship other things than him—our possessions, our careers, our heroes, our children. And he also knows that when we worship these things rather than him, we are turning gifts into idols. He knows that the only way we can truly love our children is to love God more. Abraham loved God even more than he loved Isaac, and both father and son were blessed by his love.

***Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. Abraham called that place The Lord Will Provide. And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided." [22:13-14]***

Consider what God has done here. Biblical sacrifices are offered for the forgiveness of sins. God said to Adam, *"On the day you eat of it you will surely die,"* and Paul said, *"the wages of sin is death."* Death must atone for sin: either the death of the sinner or the death of an acceptable substitute must be offered up because there can be no forgiveness of sins apart from the shedding of blood. And

there on Mount Moriah, God provided a substitute for Isaac, a ram, who died in his place and saved his life. A little over two thousand years later God would provide another substitute, another sacrifice. He would provide His own son, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, as an acceptable sacrifice for the sins of all men, so that mankind could be reconciled to God and live eternally in His grace. In the fullness of time, Mount Moriah became Mount Calvary *and on the mountain of the Lord, it was provided.*

***The angel of the Lord called to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, "I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me." [22:15-18]***

Abraham trusted God and it redounded to him in righteousness and the fruits of righteousness: a son in his old age and a glorious destiny for his descendants. The test was passed according to the promises of God. So why did God test Abraham? Why does God test any of us? It's not so that he can find out how much faith we have. God is omniscient—he already knows how much faith we have. Besides, He is the One who gave it to us to begin with. God tests us so that *WE* can find out how much faith we have and learn to believe with all our hearts that, *"...in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."* (Romans 8:28)

May God give to each and every one of us the faith of Abraham.

Amen.