

## Explore the Bible Adult Leader Commentary

### Session 12

#### The Faith Test

#### Genesis 22:1-14

**Context:** Genesis 22:1–23:20

**Memory Verse:** Genesis 22:8

**Main Idea:** Abraham demonstrated faith in God’s power to save.

#### FIRST THOUGHTS

Students have various reactions when a schoolteacher announces a test. One student may be unprepared. Perhaps he or she forgot to study or ignored the impending time of the test. This student could be nervous, worried, or doubtful. Another student might be excited about taking the test. This student is well prepared after serious study. He or she might anticipate shining academically. For good or for bad, a test can reveal what a student has learned or not learned.

*(In PSG, p. 123) When you hear the word “test,” what emotions rush through your mind? When is a test welcomed? unwelcomed?*

Genesis 22 records a major test of Abraham’s faith—a test he could not have anticipated. But this test was a great opportunity for Abraham to demonstrate the lessons of faith he had learned over the years of following the Lord. Years earlier, God had called him to leave his home and journey to a land he did not know. God had promised him offspring, only to make him wait for 25 years before the birth of Isaac. This delay allowed Abraham to learn important things about faith. All the lessons of faith now culminated in this great test of faith. And through this test, Abraham would discover the depths of his own faith while God provided a foreshadowing of the greatest gift our world has ever known.

#### UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

##### Genesis 22:1–23:20

God’s call of Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 is central to every episode in Abraham’s life. God pledged to multiply Abraham’s descendants into a nation that would occupy the land of Canaan and to bless all humanity through Abraham. Every event in Abraham’s life moves the narrative one step closer to that blessing.

In the aftermath of Isaac’s birth, Sarah convinced Abraham to send away Ishmael and Hagar (21:8-21). Their exile cemented Isaac’s place as Abraham’s sole heir and thereby eliminated any potential future conflict within the family. At the same time, tension with the nearby city-state of Gerar threatened to escalate into open warfare. Water is scarce in the region, and Gerar’s inhabitants viewed Abraham as a dangerous foreign rival for control of this resource. Abraham secured peaceful relations by negotiating a covenant with Gerar’s king (21:22-34).

In chapter 22, God tested Abraham by instructing him to offer Isaac as a sacrifice (22:1-7). Abraham was confident that God either would provide an acceptable substitute for Isaac (22:8) or straightaway resurrect the slain boy (see Heb. 11:17-19). God provided a lamb, caught providentially in the nearby brush, to be sacrificed in Isaac’s place (Gen. 22:9-18).

Following this episode Abraham relocated to Beer-sheba (22:19). After setting up his camp there, Abraham received news from his family back in Haran. His brother had fathered eight sons. The youngest of these had a daughter named Rebekah (22:20-24). She was destined to play a prominent role in the fulfillment of God’s covenant with Abraham and Isaac.

Sarah died when Isaac was 37 years of age (23:1). Abraham lacked a proper burial site for her, so he purchased the cave of Machpelah in which to bury her (23:2-19). The Lord had promised Abraham’s descendants would possess the entire land of Canaan (15:18-21), but this small family cemetery was the only land Abraham himself ever would own.

#### EXPLORE THE TEXT

##### THE TEST PRESENTED (Gen. 22:1-2)

<sup>1</sup> *After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, “Abraham!” “Here I am,” he answered.* <sup>2</sup> *“Take your son,” He said, “your only son Isaac, whom you love, go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.”*

## VERSE 1

*After these things* refers to the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael and to the establishment of a covenant with Abimelech. Hagar’s departure with her son provided Abraham with domestic serenity. The treaty with Abimelech eliminated the constant danger that the local population posed to Abraham. Abraham’s final years seemed destined to be peaceful, devoted to enjoying Isaac growing into manhood. However, one more ordeal challenged Abraham’s illusive tranquility. On this occasion the Lord created the disturbance.

*Tested* here does not suggest that God enticed Abraham to do wrong. The primary sense conveyed by the Hebrew verb is the idea of proving the quality of something. When God tests people, the testing refines the character of the individual so that the person might walk in God’s ways more closely. Abraham’s test challenged his faith in God more than any trial before or after it. Hereafter he would always be certain about his commitment to the Lord.

The Lord called Abraham by name. God’s vocalization of the name recalls the significance of it (see 17:5). Abraham means “father of a multitude.” God promised Abraham innumerable descendants. Oblivious to the magnitude of the test he faced, Abraham answered, “*Here I am.*” His simple response conveyed his availability for God’s service and his willingness to obey. Genuine peace only can be found in a right relationship with the Lord that comes out of obedience.

## VERSE 2

God’s words unquestionably shocked Abraham. They defied common sense, took away the object of his love, and terminated his future hope. The *land of Moriah* and *one of the mountains I will tell you about* are both semi-vague terms. According to 2 Chronicles 3:1, Solomon erected the first temple on Mount Moriah. Jewish tradition claimed the temple was built at the site where Abraham offered Isaac. The designation here as *the land of Moriah* rather than Mount Moriah allows for this possibility but does not confirm it.

The indefinite description of Abraham’s destination is reminiscent of God’s initial summons (see Gen. 12:1). On that occasion God’s promises were still an unfulfilled hope; now the promises were wrapped up in the life of a child designated to become a human sacrifice. A burnt offering was a sacrifice in which the whole offering was burned on the altar. It symbolized giving everything to God. Here the sense was that the Lord claimed Isaac’s life and with it Abraham’s prospect. Abraham must surrender them to God.

*How has God tested your faith? What did the test reveal about your trust in the Lord? How has it impacted your life since it occurred?*

## THE TEST PREPARATION (Gen. 22:3-8)

<sup>3</sup> *So Abraham got up early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took with him two of his young men and his son Isaac. He split wood for a burnt offering and set out to go to the place God had told him about.* <sup>4</sup> *On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance.* <sup>5</sup> *Then Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will go over there to worship; then we’ll come back to you.”* <sup>6</sup> *Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac. In his hand he took the fire and the sacrificial knife, and the two of them walked on together.* <sup>7</sup> *Then Isaac spoke to his father Abraham and said, “My father.” And he replied, “Here I am, my son.” Isaac said, “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”* <sup>8</sup> *Abraham answered, “God Himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” Then the two of them walked on together.*

Abraham took Isaac and the other items needed to offer his son as a sacrifice to God. Abraham expressed confidence in God and His ability to provide.

## VERSES 3-4

The man who so boldly interceded for Sodom and Gomorrah did not raise any protest. He made no intercession for his miraculous son. The writer of Hebrews attributed Abraham’s compliance to his faith in God (Heb. 11:17-19). That faith was the nucleus of his covenant relationship with the Lord (see Gen. 15:6b). Abraham’s silence here indicates his faith had grown from a perplexed “how can I know?” (15:8) into an unqualified maturity that obeyed without asking for explanation.

The words *early in the morning* convey a sense of resolve. This earnestness adds more evidence to the depth of Abraham's faith and his determination to fully submit to God. Going to *the place God had told him about* reminds the reader that divine instructions governed Abraham's preparation.

Few trees grew in the region where these events transpired, so Abraham took wood with him. The mention of firewood functions to demonstrate the meticulous manner in which Abraham carried out his preparation. Every detail was addressed. To everyone else it appeared he neglected to take a sacrificial lamb. But the simple statement that Abraham took Isaac with him confirms he had taken care of this detail too. Inasmuch as Abraham understood God's directive, the sacrifice would be his son Isaac.

The consumption of a burnt offering on an altar was an act of worship. Genuine worship expresses itself in obedience. *On the third day* reveals Abraham's unwillingness to compromise his worship for expediency. Although other suitable sites may have been closer or more convenient, he continued his journey until he reached the mountain God specified.

*(In PSG, p. 126) What did Abraham's immediate action reveal about his faith? How does the speed of obedience reveal a person's level of faith?*

#### **VERSE 5**

The reason for the two servants accompanying Abraham and Isaac is not stated. Their presence may have been due to Abraham's affluence. For a man of his status to travel without servants would have been unlikely. Nonetheless, he must confront his test alone. The necessity of him commanding the young men to remain with the donkey suggests they may have suspected something unusual was transpiring. At the same time, his final statement expressed his faith in God. Abraham assured them that *we'll come back to you*. Note the plural pronoun *we*. Abraham fully expected Isaac to return with him.

The Hebrew verb *worship* literally means to bow down. Thus in Hebrew thought, worship was to prostrate oneself in the presence of Yahweh. Submission to God is the essence of true worship. Obeying Him is far more important than singing the music we prefer or adhering to an order of service that is familiar. Worship involves meeting God's expectation rather than our own. It is worth noting that Abraham approached God expecting it to cost him dearly. Although he believed God would restore Isaac's life, taking that life by his own hand would be traumatic for both him and his son.

#### **VERSES 6-7**

The evidence suggests Isaac was an adolescent boy at this time. His physical vitality almost certainly was superior to that of his elderly father. Consequently, the task of lugging firewood naturally fell to the youth. The distance Abraham and Isaac walked is not stated, but it surely was sufficient to separate them completely from the two servants attending the donkey.

For a time the two traveled in silence, the son no doubt pondering the absence of a lamb. Finally the silence was broken as Isaac breached the topic of the missing lamb. He respectfully addressed his father to acquire his attention. Abraham's response to his son was identical to his response to God: *Here I am*. Just as he was ready to fulfill his obligations to God (v. 1), he also was ready to fulfill his responsibilities as a parent.

The trademarks of Abraham's sojourn in Canaan were his tent and altar. Wherever he pitched his tent, he piled up rocks for an altar. Hence, Isaac was familiar with sacrifice as an act of worship. He observed that he and his father were carrying everything required to sacrifice, save the lamb. Therefore he inquired, "*Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?*"

#### **VERSE 8**

Abraham answered Isaac's inquiry with prophetic insight: "*God Himself will provide the lamb.*" In time God would provide a lamb that could remove human sin. John the Baptist announced that Jesus was "the Lamb of God" because Jesus "takes away the sin of the world" (see John 1:29). In anticipation of God's provision Abraham and Isaac continued walking toward the place for the sacrifice.

#### **THE TEST PASSED (Gen. 22:9-12)**

*<sup>9</sup> When they arrived at the place that God had told him about, Abraham built the altar there and arranged the wood. He bound his son Isaac and placed him on the altar on top of the wood. <sup>10</sup> Then Abraham reached out and took the knife to slaughter his son. <sup>11</sup> But the Angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" He replied, "Here I am." <sup>12</sup> Then He said, "Do not lay a hand on the boy or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your only son from Me."*

God stopped Abraham prior to sacrificing Isaac, showing approval of Abraham's faith.

## VERSES 9-10

Abraham's conformity to his comprehension of God's instructions brought Isaac to the brink of death. When the two reached the site, Abraham stacked uncut stones to form an altar. He then positioned the wood so that it would burn effectively. Everything was ready, except for the sacrifice.

The words *he bound his son Isaac* conceals profound human drama. The identity of Isaac as the sacrifice no longer could be suppressed. That a healthy teenage boy could have evaded or overpowered a man who was a century older than him seems obvious. The son voluntarily submitted to his father's will. His submission was the ultimate expression of faith in his father. In submitting, Isaac became a type of Christ, for Christ voiced this same submission in His prayer in Gethsemane (see Luke 22:42). Abraham then placed his son upon the altar and reached out to strike the death blow.

*(In PSG, p. 128) What is the connection between Abraham's faith and his willingness to obey the Lord in his actions? How important is the connection between faith and works for believers today?*

## VERSES 11-12

The *Angel of the LORD* is some manifestation of Yahweh Himself. This adaptation gives humanity a visible or audible representation of God that is both real and accurate. Whenever the *Angel of the LORD* speaks, God's words are in first person.

The repetition of Abraham's name denotes the urgency of God's intervention. His interruption of Abraham's action indicates God did not intend for Abraham to kill Isaac. Sacrifices served as metaphors of spiritual truth. The burnt offering required giving something valuable in its entirety to God. It symbolized giving oneself completely to the Lord. Abraham's actions demonstrated complete trust and submission.

Once more Abraham answered God. Now he knew the magnitude of the test. Yet his answer remained identical to his earlier response (22:1): *Here I am*.

Having stopped Abraham from sacrificing Isaac, God made clear that no harm was to come to the boy. The only human sacrifice God has ever permitted was that of His own Son.

God announced that Abraham passed the test. *Fear God* is an expression of piety. Trepidation is the natural response to God's presence (see Isa. 6:5; Ezek. 1:28; Rev. 1:17). However, this kind of terror is not what this phrase depicted. It describes Abraham as an individual who lived his life with a keen awareness of God's nearness and with a clear grasp of God's character. The awesome realization that a holy God had chosen to enter into a covenant relationship with a sinful man dominated Abraham's awareness. His commitment to God forged his attitude and his behavior.

*(In PSG, p. 129) What does it mean to fear God, and why is having that fear important? What does this test reveal to us about the nature of Abraham's faith?*

## THE TEST PROVISION (Gen. 22:13-14)

<sup>13</sup> *Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught in the thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram and offered it as a burnt offering in place of his son.* <sup>14</sup> *And Abraham named that place The LORD Will Provide, so today it is said: "It will be provided on the LORD's mountain."*

God provided a lamb that would serve as a sacrifice in Isaac's place.

## VERSE 13

The words *looked up and saw* convey discovery (see also 22:4). Abraham had promised his son that God would provide the appropriate sacrifice. God's provision already was in place, only Abraham did not see it previously. The trek to the hilltop in Moriah had been a journey of breakthrough discovery for God's veteran servant. Now God allowed him to peer across future centuries and see Jesus (see John 8:56).

God's provision of a ram displays the significance of substitutionary atonement vividly. As John the Baptist foresaw, Christ is the true Lamb of God who takes away sin (John 1:29). Whereas Isaac faced physical death, humanity—you and I—face spiritual death, eternal separation from God as punishment for our sin. But Christ took our penalty upon Himself and made eternal life possible for us.

## VERSE 14

Abraham named the location of the place *The LORD Will Provide*. There he sacrificed God's provision as an act of unrestrained worship. Jesus said that Abraham rejoiced (John 8:56). How much more should we rejoice as we worship today? Our sacrifice has been made, but death could not hold the Lamb of God (see Rev. 5:6-14). He lives and reigns!

*What discoveries have you made about God through this journey in the Book of Genesis?*

## **KEY DOCTRINE**

### *Family*

Parents are to teach their children spiritual and moral values and to lead them, through consistent lifestyle example and loving discipline, to make choices based on biblical truth.

## **BIBLE SKILL**

*Interpret difficult Bible passages in light of the whole biblical message.*

God's command for Abraham to offer Isaac as a burnt offering seems out of character for God. Taken in isolation, the command in Genesis 22:2 easily could be misapplied with tragic consequences. Read Psalms 40:6-8; 51:16-17; and Hebrews 10:1-14. What insight into God's command to Abraham do these verses provide? What principles do you see? What do the instructions reveal about God? about faith?

## **BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR**

For additional context, read "The Angel of the Lord" in the Fall 2015 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at [lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator](http://lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator).