

THE SUPREME TEST

by Steve Zeisler

This week I have had to face some of the awful "why" questions that attend Christian faith and ministry. On Friday I spoke with a beautiful and talented mother of young children. As we spoke she was in the hospital about to undergo surgery for an advanced form of cancer. Not having any clue of its existence before a recent check-up, she now found herself facing a difficult series of operations and treatment. The question looms, Why are some assigned to suffer?

Yesterday this church was the scene for two very different types of ministry. Early in the day there was the wedding of two of the fine young people of this congregation. The bride grew up among us, and her family has ministered here over the years. She and the groom both have contributed much to our life here. It was a beautiful celebration for two people who had grown in the Lord as a part of our fellowship beginning life together. Shortly afterwards, there was a memorial service for a young man from Palo Alto High School who threw himself in front of a train. At 16 years old, he found himself unable to bear the burdens that he carried deep within. Thus, he resorted to suicide. Again, we ask, "Why?"

These things do not make sense. Why does life governed by a sovereign God present questions too great for us to answer and pressures that seem unreasonable and irrational? Genesis 22, the record of Abraham being told to sacrifice Isaac, is going to help us with the problem of the difficult, hurtful, frightening assignments that make no sense. Many of us have faced trials in our lives that seemed reasonable. Perhaps, having sinned, we have had to face the consequences of our rebellion. We could see the rationale for experiencing these difficulties because of the actions we had taken previously. But more difficult are the questions, pressures and circumstances that seem to arise for no apparent reason, when no good seems possible from them. James Boice wrote of the distress Abraham faced when God told him to sacrifice his son:

God had told Abraham that Isaac was to live, marry, and have a family, and that from that family there would come One who would be the deliverer. Now God says that Isaac is to be sacrificed, and for the first time in all Abraham's experience with God he is confronted by a conflict between God's command and God's promise. Earlier, Abraham had been tested as to whether he would believe that God could do the seemingly impossible task of giving Abraham and Sarah a son. That was a hard test, but it was not as hard as this one. This test involved a conflict apparently within the words of God Himself. God had promised posterity through Isaac. But God had now also commanded Abraham to kill him.

This account in Scripture has long been regarded as one of the most dramatically gripping and brilliantly written descriptions of human life in all of history. At times it is a visual drama with action described sparingly. We can see Abraham silhouetted against the morning sky, chopping wood he assumes will burn the corpse of his son. We are told nothing of his emotions. We only see him act in obedience to God and are filled with emotions of our own as we consider how we would react in a similar situation.

At other points there is powerful dialogue such as the gripping interchange that began with Isaac's question, "Where is the lamb?" I hope our study of these verses will impact us at great depth spiritually and emotionally.

Look at verses 1 through 8:

Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And He said, "Here I am!" And He said, "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you!" So Abraham rose early in the

morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and Isaac his son; and he split wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from a distance. And Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go yonder; and we will worship and return to you!" And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son, and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. And Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son!" And he said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" And Abraham said, "God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son. So the two of them walked on together.

We are told in verse one that the Lord initiated this test (the results will be given in verse 12; "I know that you fear God.") He did not need to apply this test to learn something he did not already know. There was a similar interaction in Genesis 19 when the Lord told Abraham that he would send angels down to Sodom to see if the outcry was as awful as had been reported. Again, the surface implication was that God did not know what he would find when he ran the test. But that cannot be—our Lord is omniscient! There is nothing hidden from him.

Abraham did not know his own heart. The test was run so that the Lord God could speak tremendous words of approval to Abraham to answer the question, "Is this man wholly given over to the Lord his God?" You will recall that Abraham had some big-league failures and rebellions in his life. There were times when fear and hopelessness were greater than his faith. Thus, the test was run to answer the question in a most dramatic form at the climax of the story of this man's life. In his response, God spoke of his approval of Abraham in great and powerful terms. The test was run not for God's sake but for Abraham's.

As we read verse 2, we recognize that the painful nature of this assignment and its requirements was fully known by the Lord when he gave it. You cannot help but hear the drumbeat in his words as he said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and sacrifice him!" Ishmael had long since been sent away. There was only one son left. He was to take the son whom he loved and sacrifice him.

It is helpful for me to see how God knows and expresses his knowledge of the awful thing he was asking of Abraham because there are times when you and I face pain-filled circumstances that are confusing and frightening. We need to know that our Lord understands all that we are going through even as he could understand and describe to Abraham what he was requiring of him. We do not experience hurts like this without God knowing in depth and in detail what we are going through.

The second thing that stands out in these early verses is the nature of Abraham's obedience. The passage says he left early the next day, reflecting an instantaneous response. He did not procrastinate or look for a way out. He did not resist in all the manners that we often do. He quickly did what he was told to do and did so unstintingly even to the point of gathering and splitting the wood himself that would be required for the sacrifice.

For three days the group traveled looking for the place God would indicate. Not once did Abraham turn back; he went on day after day. Again, we do not hear about Abraham's feelings. We do not know his thoughts although we can conjecture about them. What we see is a man doing what God commanded.

Abraham was told to go to the land of Moriah and offer a sacrifice on a mountain to be designated by God. As we read on, it is evident that God had a particular place in mind. Scholars and commentators have struggled with this because reference to Moriah is infrequent in Scripture. This particular mountain is more frequently known by other names, but in II Chronicles 3:1 we read: "Then Solomon began to build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where the Lord had appeared to his father David." The place to which Abraham was being sent was the hill that would later be surrounded by the city of Jerusalem, the hill where the temple would be built.

Mount Moriah is the very same mountain where Jesus Christ as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" would be sacrificed. This is where Abraham was being sent with his only son. And the wood of the sacrifice to be laid on the back of his only son reminds us of the cross laid on Christ's back. Thus, the sacrifice

which was withheld this time would one day happen in the same place in a like manner to the only son of God.

The two short speeches given by Abraham in verses 5 through 8 are compact and powerful. In verse 5 he said to the two servants who traveled with them, "Stay here. I and the lad will go yonder, and we will worship and return to you." Notice that he said, "We will worship." He did not say, "I am going to kill my son." At this point, he was not caught up in his own feelings and struggles. He recognized that they were going to enter more fully than ever into the presence of God. The Lord God would be there with them. What they would experience was not an act of deprivation and sorrow but an act of closeness to God. Although Abraham did not know exactly what would happen, he did know that he was going to serve in the presence of God as an act of worship. And this act would not be the meaningless murder of his son.

You may remember what David said in the 23rd Psalm: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me." Abraham agreed with the psalmist, "If I am required to go to a place where death and its darkness are present, I won't fear because where I go you will be with me." Thus, Abraham could say, "We are going to worship."

The other staggering thing he said was, "We will return." The verb is plural: "We are going to worship. We are going to return." Under the inspiration of the Spirit, the writer of Hebrews tells us that by this time, after three days of traveling and wrestling in his heart, Abraham had concluded that God's command and God's promise would never violate each other and that if necessary the Lord would raise his son from the dead. God had promised life and family to Isaac. Therefore, Abraham thought, "If he dies, the Lord will raise him." In this conviction Abraham could say to the young men who stayed behind, "We are going to worship, and we are going to return."

The second speech raises the dramatic pitch even higher. Isaac asked, "I see the wood and the fire. I see all the elements for sacrifice, but where is the lamb?" Abraham's answer on first blush seems like an evasion; but it is profound indeed: "The Lord himself will provide the lamb." And surely he would! Again, we do not know what Abraham imagined would happen-if he even let himself speculate. But he did know that God had called him to worship with a sacrifice. Therefore, he concluded that God would supply the one to be sacrificed, but more than that he could not say. This was evidently enough for Isaac because, as we will see in a moment, he cooperated even to the point of passively allowing himself to be bound. Isaac believed that Abraham was on God's errand, and therefore he had faith as well.

The question that Isaac asked reverberates throughout the rest of the Old Testament and indeed through all of life. Where is the lamb? Where is the means by which God will deal with human sin and failure? The rest of the prophets, priests and kings of the Old Testament, the people of God living out their lives of failure and success, asked themselves in every generation, "Where is the lamb, the final and supreme act by which God will meet the needs of sinners and allow them freedom and life?"

There is, of course, the great passage in the gospel of John when John the Baptist pointed to the one who had just come back from the temptation in the wilderness and said, "This is the Lamb of God." The question was answered! There is One who is in fact supremely the One whom God would send to be the sacrifice to meet our needs. Isaac asked, "Where is the lamb?" Centuries later, John the Baptist would point to Jesus Christ and answer, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

Let us read the rest of the story. By the way, we must assume that Isaac was at least a young man, old enough to carry a large quantity of wood on his own shoulders. Certainly he was old enough to have resisted Abraham if he did not also believe. Look at verse 9:

Then they came to the place of which God had told him; and Abraham built the altar there, and arranged the wood, and bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. And Abraham stretched out his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am!' And he said, 'Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me!' Then Abraham raised his eyes and looked, and behold,

behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the place of his son. And Abraham called the name of that place The Lord Will Provide, as it is said to this day. "In the mount of the Lord it will be provided!" Then the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, "By Myself I have sworn," declares the Lord, "because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies. And in your descendants all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice!" So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham lived at Beersheba.

Abraham must have been at a fixed point in concentration as he raised the knife, little aware that anything else existed in the universe. The Angel of the Lord had to call his name twice to get his attention. Suddenly, it became clear to Abraham that he was not alone on the mountain and that this drama was not being carried out in a barren place. All of heaven had riveted its attention there. He unexpectedly heard the voice of God at this moment. He not only heard something; he saw something. When he turned around and saw the animal that had been provided, he knew that God had broken through to meet his need. God stopped Abraham from doing that which would have broken his heart when he gave him another answer, another provision.

We said that God proposed the test for Abraham. The results of the test are given in two important stages. First, in verse 12, the Lord testified to Abraham, "I know that you fear God." What a great testimony—to hear from God himself the certain announcement that we are the kind of people who indeed fear and respect God with all our hearts! Second, he commented in verse 18, "All the nations of the earth shall be blessed because you have obeyed my voice." Testimony was given to the fear of the Lord which resided in Abraham and to the obedience that issued from his respect. There can be nothing more wonderful than to have the Spirit's witness attesting to our godly character and living obedience to God, reflecting growth in our love and respect for him. It must have deeply encouraged Abraham to realize that God had examined him and was now giving him the wonderful results of that examination.

More intensely than ever, the Lord speaks about his promises to Abraham involving his posterity and what will happen as a result of that posterity—victory over enemies, success, etc. These promises are not new for Abraham, but they have never been spoken so strongly. In verse 16, the Lord said, "By Myself I have sworn" that I will greatly bless you. The writer of Hebrews was staggered by this phrase, as we should be. It ought to be enough for God to announce what is true, to say what he will do. But to redouble this by taking an oath on his own name guaranteeing that he will do what he has promised is an amazing condescension. God not only declares his purpose, he takes an oath to bless us. There can be no doubt that He will bring about his best intention for us.

We should think not only of Abraham's story but of Jesus'. We must realize that centuries later this same drama is going to be played out on the same mountain on an eternal scale. Donald Grey Barnhouse says, "God is showing us a pageant, a type, a parable of the heavenly Father offering up His only begotten Son."

Many have been confused and have wrestled with the notion that God would require human sacrifice. Certainly, he does not require it! The ancient Near Eastern gods typically were thought to use the sacrifices and other activities of worship to gather strength to carry out whatever duties they were supposed to perform. The gods would feed upon the sacrifices. When someone burned a child to Molech, he somehow strengthened the god. When ritual sexuality was carried out in ancient temples, the people were trying to increase the potency of their gods who at times grew impotent and unable to act. Thus, human beings would energize the gods by their lives and activities.

What we encounter in this story of Abraham and the Lord God could not be more opposite. God does not need sacrifices to strengthen himself. He does not take life from the creation so he can carry out his activity as God. Rather, the opposite is true. He is the life-giver, the one who breathes life into his people who need him.

The Lord invited Abraham into his own story. Abraham was going through what God the Father would later experience in his own son being sacrificed. The Lord was not taking life from human sacrifice; he was raising

up Abraham and Isaac so that they could see and understand that he would be the giver of life.

A very important point is made in the name Abraham gave to Mount Moriah -Jehovah-jireh, The Lord Will Provide. Again the verb is important. He did not say, "The Lord has provided." If he were thinking about the miraculous provision of the ram caught in the thicket, he would have named the place in the past tense. But he did not. In John 8 when there was debate as to his eternal nature, Jesus said, 'Abraham saw my day and was glad.' I think Jesus was thinking of this event when he said this. In this experience, Abraham realized that on this mountain the Lord God would provide the life-giving sacrifice for us all. Thus, he left a name behind that would remind us of the day coming when God would provide for his people. Abraham saw into the future and knew the sacrifice was coming. He saw Jesus and believed in him. As a result, he called the place "God will provide." Abraham was taken into God's story and allowed to understand something of the nature of the cross.

To come full circle, we began with the observation that what God was calling Abraham to do made no sense. This is what made it possible for him to learn what he did. Abraham saw the cross of Christ. He saw it in a way that few have ever seen it because of his experience with Isaac. Had he failed to obey, had he resisted and denied what the Lord had assigned because he could not understand it he never would have had the depth of insight that he did. He would not have become the friend of God.

The thief on the cross next to Jesus said to his fellow thief, "We are only getting what we deserve in this punishment. We are thieves and murderers being executed for our crimes." Many of us have had hard and painful assignments in life because we deserved them. And we know we deserved them. They could have been predicted, if we were smart enough, as the just desserts of our own sinful choices. But that kind of difficulty is different than Abraham's. In this one, Abraham was merely trusting God when he faced the awful prospect of executing his son. He was aware of nothing he had done wrong. This is why it did not make any sense. In fact, it contradicted what God promised-that Isaac would have children. Although it was painful, difficult and seemed unreasonable he trusted God and discovered something about the love of God who would give up his son for our sakes. Jesus did not deserve what he got, and Abraham came to see this by trusting his God in the midst of things he could not understand.

There are many areas of our lives where we may find ourselves suffering difficulty for no good reason that we can see. Many have longed to use their spiritual gifts to glorify God, but find barriers and rejection blocking every attempt. Others have sought with honesty and sensitivity to develop godly relationships, yet count only failed friendships and loneliness as the result. Why would God keep from his people the very things he has told them to pursue? Why do we have hard assignments that make no sense?

This is the lesson Abraham faced-having to do something that was demanding, frightening and difficult just because God said so, not because he could see the good result to come. Trusting God in a magnificent testimony of obedience, and learning about the cross of Christ as a result, he came to understand the nature of God and the sacrifice of Jesus in a way that he never would have otherwise. We too must learn to pray "that I may know him, and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death." (Phil. 3:10) It is in the great tests of life that such prayers are answered.

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