

08

SESSION EIGHT

The Testing of Abraham

SESSION SUMMARY

In the previous session, we saw how God chose Abraham out of all the people on earth to be the father of faith, the one through whom the Savior would come. Though Abraham was getting along in years and had no children, he believed God would keep this extraordinary promise.

In this session we see how Abraham's faith in God's promise was put to the test. God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, the very son Abraham and Sarah had been promised and God had finally given them. Believing God would somehow be true to His word, Abraham was willing to obey, even if it meant giving up his beloved son. This event gives us a picture of the special sacrifice God requires for sin and a picture of saving faith in God's promises. As we embrace God's promises, we are empowered to engage in His mission.

SCRIPTURE

Genesis 22:1-14; Hebrews 11:17-19

THE POINT

Faith is trusting in God to keep His promise to provide salvation.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Good news! Research shows that 67% of Americans believe there is such a place as heaven. But here's the bad news: Most Americans believe the way to get there is by "being a good person." ¹

We shouldn't be surprised. Pop culture indoctrinates us with the idea that by our goodness we work our way up to God. Wayne Cochran's song "Last Kiss," made famous by J. Frank Wilson and the Cavaliers and later covered by Pearl Jam, mourns the tragic loss of a girlfriend, and then, in longing for reunion, talks about being good so he can see her again someday in heaven.

When baseball legend Tony Gwynn died, the ESPN sports talk show "First Take" featured Stephen A. Smith reassuring the world that Gwynn was in a better place because of his great character.

The default view of most Americans is that heaven does exist, but the way to get there is through obedience. Christians know that's not the case. The Bible teaches from cover to cover that salvation is by grace alone through faith in Christ. It's not a result of good works, "so that no one may boast" (Eph. 2:8-9).

But while the New Testament makes it clear that we are saved by faith, not works, it also makes clear that faith is accompanied by works. In other words, real faith demonstrates that it is real by the good works it produces.

This session will examine the unfaltering faith of Abraham and how all believers are to be so filled with the confidence in God's resurrection power that we are willing to live every day for His mission.

- **If I asked your school friends if you were a Christian, what evidence would they be able to offer of your faith?**
- **Why is it important that we live in a way that reflects Christ to those around us?**

Option 2

Prior to the session, search the Internet for some sample ACT or SAT practice questions. Select a few to write on the board. As students arrive, distribute paper and pencils and announce that today they are going to take a quiz. Following the activity, discuss some of the common reasons students are tested (to see what they've learned, to get accepted to college, etc.).

- **What might a teacher conclude after you pass or fail a test? What might you learn about yourself? (I'm good at math, I didn't study enough, etc.)**

This session will examine how God tested Abraham. As a result, Abraham learned that God would provide.

- **When have you been tested in your faith? What did you learn from that experience?**

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

Faith is trusting in God to keep His promise to provide salvation.

CHARACTERS

- **The Triune God:** Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **Abraham:** biblical patriarch; chosen by God to be the father of many nations
- **Isaac:** the promised son to Abraham and Sarah

PLOT

The last session marked a bright moment in history when we saw God's rescue plan take shape in the choosing and calling of Abraham. It showed us that while humanity is still broken and contaminated because of sin, God still hasn't abandoned us to ourselves. It showed us that God keeps His promises, and that He is at work to restore and make all things new once more.

In the midst of this good news, however, we come to a historical event that is difficult to fathom at first. It appears, on the surface, to make no sense and serve no good purpose whatsoever. In fact, it even makes us initially wonder how God is going to pull off this rescue plan if things go the way He has commanded them.

So what is God doing in this story? What is He teaching us about genuine faith, about His sovereignty over all things, about ourselves, and ultimately, about His future Son?

GOD ASKED FOR A SACRIFICE

Remember that God had made a covenant with Abraham in which He promised Abraham land as well as offspring as numerous as the stars in the sky, and that through Abraham's descendants all the nations of the earth would be blessed. God promised to redeem the peoples of the planet through Abraham's family.

The problem, of course, was that Abraham and Sarah didn't have any children, and Sarah was well past the age of being able to conceive. But God repeatedly stated that Abraham and Sarah would have a child of their own, and Abraham believed God's promise.

In the chapters between what we studied in the previous session and this one, several situations arose, including a threat to the fulfillment of God's promise when a king named Abimelech attempted to take Sarah as his wife. But God remained faithful and miraculously provided a son named Isaac (Gen. 21). Isaac was not only the child God promised Abraham and Sarah; he was the heir through whom God's promises would be carried forward.

More than a decade later, however, Abraham's faith was put to the test big time. God told Abraham to do something that would horrify any father, but especially a man through whom the salvation of the world was to come.

After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again 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 they went both of them together. (Gen. 22:1-6)

It's easy to say we trust someone, but the proof of that trust is demonstrated by obedience. We see this truth in this story with Abraham. Here the covenant-making God has tested Abraham's faith by telling him to sacrifice his "only son Isaac." This is no small or insignificant request. Abraham not only deeply loves his son, but he also knows that Isaac was the start of God's fulfilling promise to bless all the peoples of the earth through his offspring. God had not only promised Abraham offspring as numerous as the sand, but He had also promised that his descendents would restore the world. If Isaac were to die in this way, then the promise of rescuing the world would die with him. God's test of Abraham went beyond anything we can fathom because its implications affected the salvation of the world. It seems that if Isaac dies, the promise dies with him.

TIMELINE

ABRAHAM AND ISAAC

Abraham's faith is tested when commanded to sacrifice his son.

ABRAHAM'S HEIRS RECEIVE THE PROMISE

The promise of the covenant is passed to Abraham's descendants.

JACOB AND ESAU

Family dysfunction erupts between parents and sons for the birthright blessing.

But in obedient faith, Abraham rose early in the morning, gathered the materials for a sacrifice, and set out for the place God told him to go. After a three-day journey, Abraham saw the place and told his servants to remain with the donkey. He said that he and the boy would go over to that mountain to worship and then return. So he took the wood and laid it on Isaac; he himself carried the fire and the knife, and they set off for the mountain.

Abraham demonstrated strong faith in the promises of God. Not only did he intend to sacrifice Isaac, but he also believed that somehow the boy would come away alive on the other side. After all, he told his servants that after the sacrifice was done he and Isaac would “come again to you” (22:5). He believed that God would keep the seed promise even if it required resurrection from the dead (Heb. 11:17-19).

Abraham and Isaac headed up the mountain for the sacrifice. Abraham did not know exactly what would happen, but he still trusted in the promises of God.

GOD PROVIDES THE SACRIFICE AND CALLS ABRAHAM TO TRUST IN HIM

So how does this climatic moment in history end? What happens to the promise? Let's continue to read to find out.

And Isaac said to his father Abraham, “My father!” And he said, “Here am I, my son.” He said, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham said, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So they went both of them together. When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here am I.” He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of that place, “The LORD will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.” (Gen. 22:7-14)

Notice what Isaac asked his father: “Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Isaac saw that his dad had the knife and fire, and Isaac himself was carrying the wood, but there was no animal. Isaac’s question echoes through the pages of the Old Testament: Where is the lamb? How will the sacrifice take place? Abraham answered, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering.” In a nutshell, this is the heart of Christian faith. We believe God provides salvation because He is the One who provides the substitute.

When they reached the place, Abraham built an altar and arranged the wood. He bound his son, laid him on the altar, and raised his knife to sacrifice the boy. We shudder to think of what that moment was like. What was going through his mind at that second?

Suddenly, the Angel of the Lord called from heaven and told Abraham not to touch the boy, “for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your only son from Me.” Abraham’s faith was tested, and he passed with flying colors because he was willing to obey God, even if it cost him everything. True faith leads to obedience (see Jas. 2).

After the Angel stopped him, Abraham saw a ram caught in some thorns. God had provided this animal for the sacrifice as a substitute for Isaac. Abraham offered the ram instead and named the place “The Lord Will Provide.”

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

In Hebrews 11:17-19, the New Testament writer gives us inspired insight into this event in Abraham’s life. He tells us what Abraham was thinking and what motivated his obedience to the Lord.

Hebrews 11 is considered the “Faith Hall of Fame,” and in this passage the author praises Abraham’s faith. Faith was the means by which Abraham offered up Isaac when the Lord tested him. Abraham had received a promise that his offspring—his heir—would be the one to bring restoration to the world, and even though God’s command to sacrifice Isaac looked contrary to that promise, he began to carry it out.

Why did he offer Isaac? Abraham offered Isaac not just because he had faith, but because he had faith in resurrection from the dead. He thought God was able to raise Isaac from the grave, just as God had been able to bring life out of Sarah’s “dead” womb. (See Gen. 17:15-19; 21:1-5.)

Perhaps you’ve been in a situation where you felt God was testing your faith. Sometimes it may even seem like God is asking too much. In those times, we can lean on the truth that we can always trust the sovereignty of God. Abraham already knew that He could trust God, but this experience confirmed that trust even more.

- **What situation are you facing right now that requires you to trust and obey God?** (p. 55, PSG)
- **What do you already know about God? How can that knowledge help you to trust Him?** (p. 55, PSG)

God provided a ram for Abraham and Isaac; you can trust God to provide for you as well.

TIMELINE

JACOB WRESTLES WITH GOD

Jacob, the deceiver, is forever changed after being broken through his encounter with God.

JOSEPH’S HARDSHIPS

The sufferings of Joseph and the mercies of God.

THE SALVATION OF MANY

God brings good out of the evil done to Joseph.

CHRIST CONNECTION

We are familiar with the idea of a substitute. Substitute teachers take the place of our regular teachers when they have to miss a day. Subs come into the game to play in our place. Sweet’N Low® is a substitute for sugar in our tea. Substitutes are important when a teacher is sick or when a starting point guard can’t get the job done; substitutes perform tasks for us when we are unable.

The theme of substitution is at the heart of Christianity, and the theme of the substitute lamb runs throughout the Bible. Abraham said that God would provide a lamb. As we will see in future sessions, at the Passover a lamb’s blood was shed as a substitute for the life of a firstborn son in Israel (firstborn sons just like Isaac). That sacrifice caused the death angel to pass over them. Also, on the Day of Atonement animals were given in place of the Israelites as substitute sacrifices. All of these stories point forward to the moment when the Lord Jesus Himself would die as the sacrifice for our sins (see 1 Cor. 5:7). God provided His only begotten Son as the substitute for the world.

Here in Genesis 22, God provides a ram to be the substitute for Isaac. Just as Isaac (the willing son to be sacrificed) hints at Jesus (God’s Son who went up the mountain), so also the ram hints at Jesus as our substitute. The ram caught in the thorns points ahead to the coming descendant from Abraham, Jesus the King, who will be crowned with thorns and pierced for our transgressions.

When it comes down to it, we see several parallels between Abraham’s story and the gospel of Jesus as told in Genesis 22. For instance:

- Isaac was Abraham’s “only” son (of promise), and Jesus is God’s “only” Son (John 3:16).
- Both Isaac and Jesus were subject to be sacrificed.
- Just as Isaac willingly submitted to be sacrificed on a mountain, Jesus willingly submitted to crucifixion on Calvary.
- Both Isaac and Jesus carried the wood for the sacrifice.
- When asked where the sacrificial lamb was, Abraham responded that God would provide it. God ultimately provided the sacrificial lamb when He gave His “only Son” as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). Jesus is our substitute.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Christ the Substitute

At the heart of the atonement is Jesus Christ substituting Himself for sinners as He died on the cross. This truth is seen against the backdrop of the Old Testament sacrificial system, which provided a picture of humanity’s need for sin to be covered and guilt to be removed by an innocent sacrifice. Jesus perfectly revealed and did the will of God, taking upon Himself human nature, with its demands and necessities, and identifying Himself completely with humankind yet without sin. He honored the divine law by His personal obedience, and in His substitutionary death on the cross, He made provision for the redemption of humanity from sin.

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **Like Abraham, we may not know when we are being tested. In what ways should Abraham's story impact our obedience?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **When was a time you sensed God testing you? What did you learn about Him from that experience? What did you learn about yourself?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **How does faith fuel obedience?** *Faith is connected to obedience given the fact that faith—genuine belief and trust in Christ for the forgiveness of sins—will automatically be demonstrated in the way that we live.*
- **Why is it important for us to trust in the provision of God and not in our own work?** *Whether in talking about salvation or living life in general, the Bible is clear that no amount of human effort or works is good enough to put one's trust in. In all areas, whether in salvation or living wisely from day to day, we are to seek the provision that God supplies, so that in all things He will get the glory (1 Pet. 4:11).*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES

HEAD



The story of Abraham and Isaac is mind-boggling to the reader at first. Isaac is the promised son to Abraham and Sarah, and God has specifically stated that it will be through Isaac that Abraham's descendants will be named—meaning the covenant will continue through him. Yet while it is mind-boggling at first, we quickly come to realize what God is doing through this event.

- **What are some things God asks us to do in His Word that may seem counter intuitive? Why does He ask us to do these things?** *Examples might include: love your enemies (Matt. 5:44); if you want to save your life, then lay it down (Matt. 16:25); deny ourselves and take up the cross (Matt. 16:24), etc. Whatever examples you arrive at, help students to see the wisdom in these commands.*
- **Why is it important that God provide a substitute for us?** *Quite simply because we are unable to provide one for ourselves. Apart from God's grace and provision, humanity would be forever separated from Him.*

HEART



The Abraham we see in this event is somewhat different from the Abraham we have seen in previous chapters. That is because Abraham has learned over time and through some poor past decisions that God can be trusted and will fulfill what He has promised. While Isaac was asked to be the sacrifice, one could also say that in another sense Abraham's will was also a sacrifice.

- **How does Abraham's obedience challenge you to be more obedient to God?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **How does Abraham's faith in God challenge your own faith in God?** *Answers to this question will vary.*

HANDS



Abraham's faith and belief in God influenced his decisions and the way he lived. The same is true for us as well—true faith will also result in a transformed life.

- **How has this session challenged you to live differently?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **How might you be able to use this story in the Bible to point others toward Christ?** **Explain.** *Help students think of creative ways they might be able to illustrate to someone the foreshadowing of Christ in this account.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, items #8 and #9 can be used during group time. Item #8, The Lord Will Provide, is a poster showing how God has provided a substitute in different sections of the Old Testament, beginning in Gen. 22. Item #9 is an artistic poster of the cross of Christ being foreshadowed by the sacrifice of Isaac.

SOURCES

1. Bob Smietana, "Americans Believe in Heaven, Hell, and a Little Bit of Heresy," LifeWay Research, 28 Oct 2014 [cited 11 March 2015]. Available from the Internet: www.lifewayresearch.com.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- Leader Training Videos
- One Conversations
- Midweek Studies
- Circular Timeline Poster
- App (for both leader and student)



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at

GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for **free online training** on how to lead a group visit

MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject