

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I haven't met a student yet that enjoys taking tests. Everyone dreads them, don't they? So why do teachers give tests? Are teachers mean people who enjoy making others suffer? Maybe you can think of a teacher you've had that made you wonder. But, no, that's not why they give tests. One reason they give them is to check understanding. Are you getting what they're teaching? Has effective learning taken place? A test helps determine that. But there is a second reason to give a test that maybe we don't think about as often. And that is the test is beneficial for the student. The test is an opportunity for the student to review what he has learned and to cement it in the brain one more time. By making the student recall again what was already taught... by using this information yet another time, the truths are anchored in the students' brain, and it's much more likely that the lesson will stay with them for the long run.

Friends, it is for this second benefit in testing that our Lord God *will* test your faith and mine. He tests our faith... not because *He* doesn't know how strong it is. He tests our faith because it's an opportunity for us to recall God's promises in a real life situation. It's an opportunity to use what he has taught us. It is exercise for our faith, and it makes our faith stronger. God tests the faith of his children, because he loves us and he wants us to have faith that will last through our life and bring us to eternity.

How can we handle tests of faith? How will we be blessed through tests of faith? Let's take a second look at the first lesson we heard earlier from Genesis 22 about Abraham's test of faith. This is one of the most fascinating stories in Scripture. God has lots to teach us today. Our text begins.

¹ God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. ² 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."

Here is the ultimate test of faith for Abraham. God commands Abraham to do the most difficult thing imaginable for him. He tells him to take his only son Isaac... and God even acknowledges that Abraham loves him dearly... and to go sacrifice him on a mountain as a burnt offering. In Old Testament times, a burnt offering was not a sacrifice for sin. It was a sacrifice that symbolized a person's complete dedication to God. In offering Isaac he was commanding Abraham to show his complete dedication to God. He was commanding Abraham to show that God and his Word and his commands came first above absolutely everything else in his life. There was no other command God could have given Abraham that would have been more difficult for him to obey.

Now let's pause there a moment. If you would, think of what command God would give you that would be most difficult for you to obey? What is it in your life that you love dearly? Your children? Your spouse? Your house? Your car? Your bank account? Your TV? Your computer? What if God came to you and commanded you to show your total dedication to him by separating yourself from that person or that thing forever? Could you do it? Could you obey?

Let's bring this even closer to home. God HAS given us commands in Scripture that he most definitely wants us to obey. For example: 1) God says our relationship with him is the highest priority in life. That relationship is strengthened through Bible study, the sacraments, gathering with fellow believers and prayer. Make a quick mental note: How many times per day average over the past week did you take time for Bible study, sacraments, gathering with fellow believers and prayer? Do you obey? Always? 2) God says that sharing his word and promises with the lost *must* be a high priority. How many have you told about Christ, or invited to church this past week? This past month? Do you obey? Always? 3) He says he wants you to give cheerfully, generously, off the top, proportionately... of what he has given you. Do you obey? Always?

Just as with Abraham, God had given us commands in his Word... difficult commands... and he absolutely expects and demands that we obey him. Completely. Always. What was Abraham's reaction to God's difficult command?

³ *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.* ⁴ *On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance.* ⁵ *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."* ⁶ *Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together,* ⁷ *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?"* ⁸ *Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son."* *And the two of them went on together.* ⁹ *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.* ¹⁰ *Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son.*

God said. Abraham obeyed! He did what seems almost inconceivable. He was going to sacrifice his dearly loved son because God told him to! How could he have such obedience... such unwavering faith? We really need to know more about Abraham's life to find the answer to that question. You see God established a habit of making promises to Abraham and then keeping them. One amazing promise he made to Abraham was that his barren, elderly wife would give birth to a son. It seemed unbelievable. But Abraham believed. For 25 years, God waited to make good on his promise. And then he did it. At the age of 100 and his wife at age 75, she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. God kept his promise. Abraham new God could be trusted.

As a result, when this later test of faith came along, Abraham had that history to look back on. He could see the many promises God had made... and how he had never broken a single one. God's promise / fulfillment ratio was 100%. And so Abraham implicitly trusted that in this situation too, if God commanded something difficult and seemingly contradictory, God would work it out just as he always did.

The letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament gives us a bit of a glimpse into what was going through Abraham's head. ⁴⁷ *By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son,* ¹⁸ *even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned."* ^{c 19} *Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac*

^c Gen. 21:12

back from death.” Isn’t that amazing? Here’s how Abraham could bring himself to obey this command of God. He thought, “God promised a great nation would come from my son Isaac. God never breaks his promises. But God commanded me to sacrifice Isaac. Therefore, the only way this can resolve is if God would raise Isaac back to life after I sacrifice him, because God *will* keep his promise. Therefore, I can peacefully sacrifice my son. I will obey.” That, friends, is implicit trust in God’s promises. Even though human reason could have come up with every reason to disobey this command, Abraham’s implicit faith in God and in his perfect track record of keeping promises caused him to obey.

Abraham’s faith grew that day. He had a test. The test was an opportunity to put his faith into practice. He took what was in his head and he lived it in his life. He was richly blessed for it. Here’s something we will do well to note. I think we’re accustomed to faith being something that takes place in our head and heart. We acknowledge. We affirm. We trust. That’s faith *But when there’s faith on the inside, it shows itself on the outside... by obedience to God.* Do you implicitly trust God and his promises? You don’t need to answer out loud or shake your head. Instead, show me this next week of your life, and by your obedience it will be evident if there is trust in God and his promises.

Let’s go back to that brief list I put together of commands of God that perhaps we have sometimes found difficult to obey. Can you think of times when haven’t maintained your relationship with God as he desires? Been lax in Bible study, worship, fellowship and prayer? Has sharing Christ with others not been a high priority? Has generous giving been a struggle. First, let’s remember these failures to obey are serious. How would God have reacted if Abraham had *not* obeyed him when he ordered him to sacrifice his son? I don’t know, but I know he would have been angry. Look at God’s reaction when his chosen people again and again rejected him.

So before we talk about a new life of faith and obedience to God this next week, let’s resolve the past week’s failures of faith and obedience. (And the past month’s... and year’s.)

Please take some time in prayer to speak to God about these things. Let him know you understand your failures. Let him know you’re sorry. Then I want you to remember with joy God’s most amazing promise in Scripture. And that is he loves you so much he forgives you. He forgives you because he had his own Son come here to take your place. He took your place in holy living... doing what you did not and could not. He took your place in receiving God’s wrath and punishment. See: the cross! He assures you it’s true with his glorious resurrection.

So as you consider how you’re obedience hasn’t lived up to Abraham’s, confess, repent, turn to Jesus for forgiveness. Now let’s consider this next week. Remember God’s promises and grace each and every hour of every day this coming week. Trust them. Live them. You know, he really does love you and consider you his dear child. So he commands us to know his Word, encourage one another and pray. This is your motivation to spend time with him in Bible study and prayer! He really will bless others through your witnessing of Jesus’ name, and he promises to be with you and help you when you do it! So he commands you to witness. So witness! He really will provide for your every earthly need. So he commands you to trust him and give generously. So confidently give generously knowing you won’t out-give God’s ability to provide! Strength and motivation for obedience to God come from God’s love and promises. Know them better. Trust them. See your life really change, and conform to God’s will!

One more thing to talk about in this story. We didn’t get to the end yet. Abraham is about to bring the knife down on his son, trusting God will raise him back from the dead, when this happens:

¹¹ But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. ¹² "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." ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ So 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." ¹⁵ The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time ¹⁶ and said, "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ 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, ¹⁸ and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."

There was going to be a sacrifice that day... God required it. When God told Abraham not to lay hand on his boy, then, God did something amazing which we don't want to overlook. In a thicket of bushes nearby, Abraham sees some rustling. There is a ram caught by its horns. God provided a suitable sacrifice. Instead of the boy, a ram. Provided by God. Abraham's faith was rewarded. God didn't violate one of his promises. He kept them. And then he repeated them yet again to Abraham for his strengthening. God promises blessing, countless descendants, land for them to live in, and most importantly the promise that all nations on earth would be blessed through Abraham's offspring... a promise that came true when Jesus was born.

Do you see how God works? He provided a suitable sacrifice for you and for me too. Not a ram... but a Lamb... of God... who takes away the sins of the world. Instead of you, his Son. Provided by God. For your sins. God provides.

When God's Word is obeyed, he will bless you just as he blessed Abraham. You will have the joy of seeing God's promises fulfilled in your life as you do what God says. You will see your life be filled with joy. You will see fear vanish. You will be filled with a peace that surpasses all understanding. You will see your God meet your needs and bring you safely to eternal paradise.

Friends, your faith *will* be tested. It will be tested for your benefit and blessing. God loves you so much, he doesn't just give you a faith for up here (head), he gives you a faith that's useful. He gives you a faith that is visible in how you use your hands and feet and mouth in your everyday living. So obey God's Word. Implicitly trust his promises. For you have complete assurance of his love and mercy. Trust in the Lord who provides! Amen.