

**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."**

### **Because God loves us more!**

During our Sundays in Lent we are going to look at times of testing in a Christian's life. Why does God sometimes test us? Doesn't he know already what's in our heart? Of course, he does. He also knew what was in Abraham's heart when he tested him and asked him to give up his one and only son as a burnt offering. If God knew what was in Abraham's heart, then why did he test him? Was he only being cruel to him? Of course not. God tested Abraham, not so that God would know what was in Abraham's heart, but so that Abraham would know what was in his heart.

But seriously, why does God ask for Abraham's only child, Isaac? If there was any source of idolatry in Abraham, it would come from his love for Isaac. Idolatry is when you love something more than God. Rarely will we love some wooden statue more than God. We probably won't even love something evil more than God, though we can be caught up in it. I have never met someone who actually loved his alcoholism or his pornography or his gambling more than god. They were caught in a sin and they hated themselves for it. Most often Christians aren't led to love evil things more than God. But we are led to love good things too much.

#### **1. Loving good things too much**

For Abraham, there was a danger that he would love Isaac too much. Certainly, he never idolized his material possessions, even though he was a rich man. When God called him in Genesis 12, Abraham left it all behind – his business, his family, his friends, his home – to live the rest of his life in a tent. How many of us would do that? Would we love our stuff too much to do whatever God asked us to do? In Genesis 13, he gives Lot the choice of the land, even though God said it belonged to him. When he rescued Lot in Genesis 14, he gave a tenth of the plunder to the priest of God in Salem and the gave the rest back to its owners. Who of us has that kind of generosity?

But when it came to having a son, we see weakness on Abraham's part. We see a hint of it in Genesis 15. God came to Abraham and said that he was his shield and very great reward. In essence, God said, "Abraham, I am all that you will ever want and need in this life." And how did Abraham respond? **"But Abram said, 'Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?'"** Abraham said that what God offered was not enough. He needed more. He needed that son that God promised. Then God in his patience and mercy repeated the promise that he would have a son. Abraham believed and it was counted to him for righteousness.

It's hard for us, perhaps, to imagine how it was for Abraham. In that culture and at the time, having a son was everything. It was your future. It was carrying on your name. It was your pride

in the community. When God didn't keep his promise right away, Sarah convinced her husband to sleep with her servant, Hagar, and Abraham went along with it. Why in the world would he do that? Why would he jeopardize their marriage? Why would he doubt God's promise? It was because they wanted that child so much.

What are the good things in your life that you have the danger of loving too much? How far would you go to protect your children, and to make sure they succeed in life, or just to make them happy? You might have heard the story of Wanda Holloway from Texas. Holloway had an intense desire for her daughter Shanna to be a cheerleader. In 1991, when Shanna narrowly missed out on a spot on her junior high school squad, Holloway asked her ex-brother-in-law to hire a hitman to kill Verna Heath, mother of the 14-year-old girl who had earned her daughter's place on the squad. Holloway believed that Heath's daughter would be so devastated by her mother's death that she would drop out of the cheerleading team, thereby giving her daughter a chance. She loved her daughter so much that she was willing to murder an innocent woman so her daughter could be on the junior high cheerleading squad.

Of course, you wouldn't do anything like that, would you? But what would you do because you love your children so much? Would you overlook the sin they are committing and not correct them, because you are afraid that they might reject you? Would you push them into a premiere sports league that will effectively take them out of church for the next two months, because it might mean they can start on the team next fall? Would you buy them whatever they want to make them happy, just because you want to see that smile on their faces?

And if you aren't a parent, then what is the "baby" in your life? We will use that expression. A man might say of the business he started, "This is my baby." As I watched the Olympics this last week, I couldn't help but notice that Olympians on the platform never pointed to heaven, the way I've seen some sports heroes do, or gave thanks to God in their interviews. Has the gold medal become their god in this life? What are the things that we pursue with such a passion that it becomes the love of our life? Is it our career? Is it the pursuit of money and the prestige it buys us?

Children and sports and jobs and careers and money – these are all good things. Abraham had all these things, and he was blessed by God. The danger lies when we have love these good things too much.

And when that happens, you not only destroy your relationship, you will destroy the very thing you love. Parents who love their children too much spoil them and destroy them. Athletes who sacrifice everything for their sport leave behind wrecked marriages and eventually crash and burn. People who love their careers too much find little time for their children and their families – or the worship of the one person who can give them real joy and fulfillment in their lives. The only way we keep our priorities straight and our faith in tact is to love God above all things.

## **II. Love God above all things.**

When Abraham was 100 years old, God kept his promise to these two elderly people who wondered if they would ever have a child. You know what they called him? They called him "laughter," which is what Isaac means. He put a smile on their face every morning. He filled their hearts with such joy that they just couldn't stop laughing. Isaac was everything God had

promised them. He was their joy and their delight, and he was the heir that would carry the promise of a Savior.

About twenty years later, when Isaac was about that age when a father becomes proud of his son in a special way, God came to Abraham and said, "I want you to give back your son, your one and only Son, and give him to me as a burnt offering at a place where I will show you." God was testing Abraham's heart to see if he loved Isaac too much. He was testing his heart to see if he feared, loved and trusted in God above all things.

Abraham did love God above all. He searched his heart and knew that Isaac could never replace God in his heart. Notice that he got up early the next morning to go to the place that God showed them. It took them three days, and every step of that journey tested Abraham's heart as nothing before had tested his heart. When they got to the foot of the mountain, Abraham put the wood on Isaac, who was stronger, to carry it up the mountain. When Isaac sensed something was not quite right, he asked where the lamb for the sacrifice was, and Abraham told him that God would provide the sacrifice. Did he know how prophetically he was speaking? I don't think so. On the mountain, he built the altar. He laid the wood on the altar and tied his son, who must have consented to what his father was going to do. He even came to the point of raising his knife, when God stopped him and said, "Now I know that you fear God and love me above all things because you have not held back your only son." God then provided Abraham with a ram that he used instead.

How did Abraham do this? How could he love God so much that he would sacrifice even his only child? In Hebrews 11, we have the reason. Abraham believed. He believed that God made a promise to him that Isaac was the heir of the Savior, and God would never, ever fail to keep the promise of a Savior. He reasoned that God would raise him from the dead. We have a hint of that in the story, because Abraham told his servants that they would come back down the mountain after the sacrifice. He wasn't lying. He believed that would really happen. Abraham loved God above all things, because he knew that God loved him more.

### **III. Because God loves us more**

There is so much in this story that looks forward to that greatest act of love that the world has ever known, the day God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son to die alone on a cross outside the city of Jerusalem. Why does God ask Abraham for his one and only Son? Surely, he wants us to see the pain in Abraham's sacrifice so that we can see the pain in God's sacrifice. Why did God take Abraham to a special mountain that he would show him? That mountain is called Moriah, and it is the same mountain region where later they would build the temple in Jerusalem. What if the place where Abraham built his altar and tied his son to it is the same place where God erected a cross and nailed his Son to it? Abraham says that "on this mountain God will provide." Did he know how prophetic he was, that it was on that same mountain that God provided the sacrifice of his son?

Abraham could see these things from a distance and by faith. Yet he knew that God loved him more than he could ever love God. We don't see this from a distance. We see this clearly revealed through Jesus and the Holy Scriptures. There in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed to his dear Father in heaven and begged with tears, "Father, if it is possible, take this cup of suffering from me." On the cross, he cried out with agony, "My God, my God, why have

you forsaken me?" We often look at the love for us that Jesus had in his heart when he made that journey to the cross. But do we also think of the love that our heavenly Father must have for us? Paul said it well in his letter to the Romans. **"He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, how shall he not along with him give us all things?"** We ask how Abraham could do what he did, but how could God the Father do what he did? It's because God loves us more, more than we ever loved him, more than we could ever imagine. God loved us even though he has seen the idolatry our hearts and every sin we have ever committed. If you have measured how wide and long and high and deep God's love in Christ is, how can you not love him with your heart and soul and mind? How can you not love him above all things?

We might think that Abraham's test was unusual, but it is not. We face this test every day of our lives. Can we love God more than all the good things we have in our lives? You will be blessed if you do. You will be a better parent if you love God more than your children, because then you will not spoil them or smother them with your love. You will be a better athlete if you can keep your love for God moderates your ambitions so that they do not consume you. You will be a better employee or employer when God's love consumes you more than your work.

And at the end of the day, when you have passed the test, and you have loved God with your heart and soul and mind, God loves you even more. Sometimes I will lean over and whisper in my wife's ear, "I love you to the moon and back." And she will say, "I love you more." God loves you more than you can ever imagine, and he showed when he did not spare his one and only Son to save you. Amen.