

DON'T STAND ON THE REEF

Genesis 22 – 15th in a series on Abraham

Years ago we were on a vacation on the island of Oahu. The best place to go snorkeling on Oahu is a nature preserve on the east coast of the island called Hanauma Bay. It is a sheltered bay, nearly closed off to the ocean except for a relatively small mouth, so the waters inside are usually very calm. Usually, but not always. The day we went it was quite breezy and there was a heavy swell at just the right angle to enter the bay. So when we went into the water we found it to be quite rough. It was a struggle to just stay afloat. All over, as you go into that area, there are signs telling you not to stand on the reef. If you stand on it you kill the coral, which is a living thing. It is the coral that makes it a beautiful place and one that draws the fish. So everyone is quite committed to making sure to protect the coral and not stand on the reef. That is, they're committed until they are out there in the water getting extremely tired as they fight the swell and the rough waters. When it feels to them like it's either going to be the coral or them, the coral loses. That day, on numerous occasions, I looked around and could see quite a few people standing on the coral in order to rest for a bit.

I think there is a spiritual parallel. Often God's people are committed to doing his will, right up to the point where they think their survival and their happiness is at stake, and then they do the spiritual equivalent of standing on the coral. They do what they think they have to do in order to protect themselves or gain their happiness, even if it tramples all over God's will. I feel safe in asserting that every single one of us has done that at some point in life. Today we are going to look at the example of one person who at the crucial point refused to compromise. We are going to look at Genesis 22 as we near the end of our study of the life of Abraham.

This is a bizarre and somewhat puzzling story. It makes us uncomfortable because things happen in this story that seem uncharacteristic and even unworthy of God. I do not have answers for every question this story raises. But I do know that this is actually the climax of the story of Abraham. It throws in our face the central issue of his life, which is also the central issue of ours.

GOD GAVE A DISTURBING ORDER

There are a few incidents in the Bible that cause us heartburn. This is definitely one of them. In fact, it may be the most disturbing episode in the entire Old Testament. In this passage God tells Abraham to take his son, Isaac, to the region of Moriah and sacrifice him there. Moriah was the place where Solomon's Temple would ultimately be built.

Hold on! After the long wait for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham and Sarah that he would give them a son, now he tells Abraham to kill that son? That is troubling on several levels. First, it presents a terrible moral problem. One of God's Ten Commandments is that we should not kill. Are we really to believe that in total violation of that sacred commandment God now tells Abraham to kill his own son? He tells him to murder his own child. How can that be? Sadly, human sacrifice has a long history. The fact that Abraham didn't even raise an objection when he heard this command, suggests that he was familiar with human sacrifice. History tells us that it was a known practice in that region in his day.

There's a Chinese legend that thousands of people who were human sacrifices are buried in the Great Wall. The Japanese report an ancient practice of burying young maidens alive at the base of construction projects to ward off disaster. The Aztecs reportedly sacrificed 80,000 prisoners during the re-consecration of one of their great pyramids in 1487. But God has always condemned the practice. He has always been adamantly opposed to it. Leviticus 18:21 says, "you shall not give any of your offspring to offer them to Molech." Deuteronomy 12:31 calls child sacrifice an abominable act before the Lord. Jeremiah 7:30-31 says that human sacrifice is a detestable act.

So this passage tells us that God ordered something he is dead set against, something that we today would find horrifying. Obviously, we have a moral and theological problem with it. But there's also a logical problem. God has promised Abraham for so long that he would have a son. What sense would it now make to have him kill the very son he had promised him? God had promised that from this son would come descendants too numerous to count. There's no way that could happen if Abraham killed that son as instructed in this passage.

How do we resolve these serious concerns? We can say that God never intended for Abraham to actually kill his son. In fact, I feel quite confident in asserting that to be true. But that leaves us with a problem. Was God just playing games with Abraham? Was he playing some sort of a devious trick on him?

Verse 1 tells us that God *tested* Abraham. The idea was that the God was not playing a game, nor was he trying to be devious, but he was putting Abraham's faith to a test. Why would he do such a thing? Did he need to learn what Abraham was really made of? Did he want to see if Abraham really did have faith? The answer to those questions is no. God knew all along what was in Abraham and what Abraham was going to do. Therefore, the test had something to do with

Abraham. The test was for his benefit, not for God's. I will come back to this thought later.

There are times when we will not understand what God is doing. This passage certainly reminds us of that. I have no doubt that Abraham was deeply troubled by this command and did not understand it at all. We can learn something from him. There are going to be times, and this is one of them, where I have to submit to God and trust in his goodness and his justice. While I may not have all the answers about this incident I need to just submit to God and trust as Abraham did.

ABRAHAM OBEYED

Abraham submitted to God. He headed out with Isaac in tow, fully intending to carry out God's orders. I cannot imagine the turmoil that he must have experienced on that trip. But he did not waver. How difficult it must've been for him when Isaac asked him where the sacrificial animal was. Abraham said, "God will provide the animal, my son." Some people criticize Abraham, claiming that he knew exactly what he was going to do and that he was hiding the truth from his son. I do not believe that is true.

At the end of verse 5 when they reached the hill where the sacrifice was going to be made, Abraham told his servants who had accompanied him to wait there at the bottom of the hill while he and Isaac went up to the top to perform the sacrifice. It's important to notice his words when he told them to wait. He said, "*We* will worship and then *we* will come back to you." Notice the use of the word "*we*." Abraham believed that he was not going to come back from the top of that hill alone. He believed that Isaac was going to come back with him.

Once again there are critics who claim that Abraham was lying to his servants about what he was going to do. We know from previous incidents that Abraham has not been above twisting the truth. But I believe that this is exactly what Abraham believed. Hebrews 11:19 says, "Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead." Abraham was confident at last that God would keep his promise. He had promised that not only would Abraham and Sarah have a son but that from that son would come many descendants. That could only happen if that son was alive. So Abraham wasn't sure how he would do it, but he knew that God would see to it that Isaac continued to live. Perhaps God would provide some substitute as he suggested to Isaac. Or perhaps God would raise Isaac from the dead as Hebrews 11 tells us. Either way Abraham was confident that Isaac was not going to die.

So Abraham proceeded with the sacrifice. He built an altar and put wood on it. Then he put Isaac on top of the wood. What a terrifying moment that must've been for both Isaac and Abraham. I'm sure that Isaac was both completely at a loss to understand what his father was doing and scared to death. It must've been horrible for Abraham to try to tell him that everything would be all right in the end. But that is just what he did.

GOD CAME TO THE RESCUE

Just as Abraham was about to do the deed, an angel of the Lord stopped him. He was told, "Do not lay a hand on the boy." The message to him was, "Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son." At that moment Abraham spotted a ram caught in some bushes nearby. He captured the ram and used it to be the sacrifice to the Lord. In his relief Abraham gave that place and name. He called it Yahweh Yireh, which means the Lord will provide.

In response to Abraham's act of faith, the Lord once again reiterated his promise to Abraham. He promised that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky and the salmon beach. And once again he reminded him that through his offspring all nations would be blessed. After that Abraham and Isaac headed back home together.

IMPLICATIONS

TESTS WILL COME

This incident is about God testing Abraham's faith. We, too, will be tested. Things are going to happen in our lives that severely test our faith. This incident is totally shocking and mystifying. I believe that God did this so that we could learn from it. The passage warns us that there will be things that happen in our lives that will be shocking and mystifying that we feel are unworthy of a loving and good God. It will be as though God is being cruel and asking us to slaughter the best things, the dearest things in our lives, things that even seem to be in his will. Abraham stands for every person of faith asking, "Surely you cannot mean this, Lord."

David wrote in Psalm 26:2, "Test me, Lord, and try me, examine my heart and my mind." He wrote a similar thing in Psalm 139:23. There he said, "Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts." The apostle Peter wrote in 1 Peter 4:12, "Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come upon you to test you, as though some strange thing were happening to you."

But why does God test? Doesn't he know what is in our minds and hearts? When we had to take tests in school it was because the teacher wanted to find out if any of the class material had actually penetrated our thick skulls. Had we mastered the material in the class? It doesn't make sense that God would have to give us tests to find out whether we had mastered his material, does it?

Isaiah 46:10 quotes God saying, "I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times what is still to come." That says God knows what is going to happen long before it occurs. So he knew that Abraham was going to pass that test before he ever gave it to him. He knows how we are going to do on whatever tests come our way before we ever are faced with them. Psalm 44:20-21 says, "If we had forgotten the name of our God or had spread out our hands to a foreign God, would not God have discovered it, since he knows the secrets of the heart?" God knows the secrets of the hearts of men. So he doesn't need to give us tests to know what's in there and what we're going to do.

Then why did he test Abraham and why does he give us tests? Psalm 66:10 says, "for you, God, tested us; you refined us like silver." That verse says that God tests us in order to refine us. In order to refine silver you have to heat it up. It is only through that process that it becomes more pure. And that is exactly why God tests us. It is not for his benefit. It is not so that he can learn something about us because he already knows all about us. God tests us to make us stronger. He tests us to purify our faith. When we exercise our faith in a difficult situation our confidence in God becomes even greater so we can learn to trust him even more.

My son has been doing CrossFit training to keep in shape. CrossFit is a particular approach to exercise that is "designed to elicit as broad an adaptational response as possible." The idea is to continually challenge your body. So a CrossFit workout might consist of running a 200 meter sprint followed immediately by doing as many bench press repetitions as possible in one minute, then another 200 meter sprint followed by doing as many repetitions of a rowing exercise for one minute as possible. Then you would repeat that series 3 times. The philosophy behind their methods is to stress your body in broad ways because that's what makes it stronger. In other words, they bring physical tests to your body and in so doing they make it stronger and healthier.

Our son-in-law, Michael, is a flight instructor, training Navy and Marine pilots to become fighter pilots. Part of the process requires that they stress the young pilots, that they push them beyond their comfort levels. That's the only way they can become capable as fighter pilots. One of the elements of that training that is

uncomfortable for them is formation flying. The students have always learned that when you're flying you want to get as far as possible from any other object in the sky. When they try to get the students to fly in formation the students forever want to move away from the aircraft that they must fly with. So the instructor is continually saying, "You gotta move in closer."

I always wondered why they made a big thing about flying in formation. I asked Michael about that. He asked what if they're flying at night on a mission with no lights on or in heavy weather? The only way they could do that is by flying close enough to each other that they can see the other airplanes. And so, to make them better fighter pilots they force them to do something that stresses them out and makes them distinctly uncomfortable.

Do you find it surprising then that God might do the same thing for us? He seeks to make us stronger people, people who are more like Jesus. He wants us to live in peace and joy and love every day of our lives. But the only way for that to happen is for us to have stronger faith. And that requires that we be tested.

For a variety of reasons, chief of them being that we lived on one income, a pastor's income, in a very expensive area for many years, when it came time for our daughter to go to college we did not have a large college fund to draw from. We were staring at an expected family contribution of thousands of dollars a year. How much did we have saved up? It was about \$2.75. That's what was in the dish where I put spare change. How in the world were we ever going to pay for our daughter's college education? Well we prayed, and we asked God to provide for us. And Carissa did get some significant scholarship money, which is what got the figure down to \$16,000. How would we ever make up the rest? We cobbled together a ridiculously optimistic plan that required everything to go just right. If everything worked just as we envisioned, it would leave us with a gap for her first year of only about \$2000, and we trusted that somehow God would provide that. It only took about two months for our plan to completely unravel. Everything that we needed to go right went absolutely wrong. And we had some other things that we never even anticipated go wrong as well. It looked like a disaster. I feared that Carissa's college education was going to consist of one semester because that's all we could afford. But we continued to trust God, and to our amazement, we got her all the way through that first year. And then we got her through her second year, and it wasn't through our cleverness or our discipline. God did one interesting thing right after another to get us through those years. After Carissa made it through her junior year the game changed. Toby graduated from high school and it was time for him to go to college as well. Now we had two kids to put through college

instead of one. I recall how stressed I got the last semester of Carissa's high school years as I looked to the future and tried to figure out how in the world we were ever going to pay for her college education. I experienced almost none of that stress as Toby was nearing his graduation. I should've been more stressed than ever. But I wasn't because I had learned. God had put us through a test for three years. We had no answers but God had provided. So when it came time for Toby to go to college we said, "We don't know how he's going to do it but we know that God is going to provide." The test made us stronger.

THE TEST IS ABOUT GOING "ALL IN"

I am not a poker player. However I've heard the expression "all in" and I know what it means. I've seen it depicted in movies and TV shows. There comes a point when a person who is playing in a poker game shoves all of his chips to the center of the table. He's betting everything. If he loses, he loses everything. That's what God was asking of Abraham.

What has been the central issue for Abraham and Sarah throughout much of our study of his life? It has been God's promise to give them a son and ultimately to make of that child a great nation through whom the entire world would be blessed. It all hangs on that son. We have seen how they took a detour or two but finally trusted God. God came through when it seemed impossible and gave them that son. And now, God is asking Abraham to let go of that son. Not just let go of him, but to actually kill him by his own hand. He is asking Abraham to destroy that which was most important to him.

Maybe you saw the article about professional gambler Dave Oancea. While he makes some claims which are dubious at best, one has been verified. Back in April he made a series of bets totaling \$100,000 that the Kansas City Royals would win the World Series this year. Just before the World Series, he had the opportunity to hedge his bet by putting money on the New York Mets to win the World Series. Had he done so he would have guaranteed himself winnings of \$750,000. But he didn't. Instead he went all in on the Kansas City Royals. He won \$2,457,000. To do that he had to risk it all.

God asks the same thing of us that he did of Abraham. He asks us to hold nothing back. His call is for us to go "all in" on obeying him. Exodus 20:3 tells us that his first commandment is, "You shall have no other gods before me." We are not to allow anything to come before our worship of God. Nothing is to be as important as worshiping him. Deuteronomy 6:5 says, Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." That is a good description

of going all in. When Jesus was asked what the most important commandment was he said it was that one. The most important thing in life is to love God with all that we are and all that we have.

It is all too common for us to want to hedge our bets. Sure we want to obey God, sort of. But we want to take care of ourselves, too. God is telling us he wants us to hold nothing back from him. He wants us to give him everything we are and everything we have.

Perhaps you remember Karen Watson. She was the missionary who was killed in Iraq a few years ago. She had written a letter to her pastor that was only to be opened should she be killed. In that letter she wrote, “You should be opening this letter in the event of my death. When God calls there are no regrets... To obey was my objective, to suffer was expected. His glory was my reward. Care more than some think is wise. Risk more than some think is safe. Dream more than some think is practical. Expect more than something is possible. I was called not to comfort or success, but to obedience.” That woman was all in. She passed the ultimate test. To obey God was her objective and his glory was her reward.

I guarantee you there will be times in your life when you will be holding tightly onto something that you believe you absolutely must have, and God doesn't let you have it. You've been committed to obeying God, but now you don't know if you can or you want to trust him anymore. Yes, you are committed to not standing on the reef, but now life has gotten too tough, and you need to take care of yourself. This is a test. God is asking if you are willing to do what Abraham did and go all in. Will you let go?

Not long ago on one of those warm days I was in my study at home working with the window open. Outside I could hear some kids. One of them was a little girl and she was loudly belting out the song, *Let It Go*. Are you tired of that song yet? Seems like you hear it everywhere, doesn't it? I'm not a big fan of the message of that song actually. But we are called to the message of that title. Let it go. Whatever it is that you are hanging on to and keeping back from God, let it go. It's highly likely that if you're holding on to something like that, God, at some point is going to put you to the test. He's going to give you an opportunity to let him pry your fingers away from that thing that you have a death grip on.

Know that the truth is that life eventually ends up being about letting go. In the early stages life is about adding things. We add the ability to walk, the ability to talk, the ability to tie our shoes, the ability to read, the ability to add and subtract.

We add physical size and strength and find new skills like playing a sport or a musical instrument or driving a car. At some point we add people into our lives like a spouse, and then children. The process of adding is impressive.

But you've heard the expression, "over the hill." A hill has a peak. You go up and up and up until you hit that peak, and then you start down the other side. There is a point in life, where instead of adding, you start taking things away. For an athlete the process is tangible. When one's age no longer begins with a 2 you find the process undeniable. You are not quite as fast, your reaction time is not as lightning quick, you're not quite as strong. Oh, you may delay the process. Maybe you're a Tom Brady and believe that you can play at a high level well into your 40s, but the process is inevitable. For all of us our eyes start losing their focusing power, or hair begins changing color. We began to lose the ability to feel good because something is stiff or painful all the time. Those of us who were lucky used to be able to eat as much of anything we wanted with no effect, but on the other side of that hill we begin to find that all we need to do is walk by a bakery and we gain weight. And then your kids who were so important and so integral to your life, those kids who wanted nothing more than your attention and approval, have the temerity to go off and live their own lives. Oh, they love you, but honestly you don't matter that much anymore. Their lives are focused somewhere else. And then comes a time when your position at work goes away and you find that no one cares about what you think anymore, no one wants what you have to offer. No matter how important you thought you were, now you are irrelevant and old. Eventually, of course, your health, your strength, your beauty are all gone, and then even your life itself is taken from you. The point is, pretty much everything that you value, everything that matters to you, will be taken away from you in this life. That tells me that the only way to navigate through this life with peace and with joy is to learn to let it go. It is to learn to trust God with it and let him have it, whatever it is, and to do with it whatever he chooses.

What do you have difficulty letting go of? It could be a desire for success and recognition. It could be a lifestyle. It could be money. It could be anger at someone who has hurt you severely. It could be the desire for vindication. It could be your sexuality. It could be your desire to be seen as important. The list of things that you could hold onto tightly and keep from God is long indeed.

There will be times when, although you are committed to not standing on the reef, you will be tempted to do just that, because you are absolutely sure it is the only way you can survive. There are going to be times when you are going to face a test that seems impossible to you. You cannot understand why this is happening and

why God doesn't change the situation. Understand that you are going through a test. What is being tested is whether you will go all in with the Lord. Will you give him everything that you are and everything you have and accept whatever he has to give to you?

PASSING THE TEST REQUIRES FAITH

What enabled Abraham to pass his test? What kept him from balking when God asked the inconceivable and impossible? The answer is that he had hope. His hope stemmed from one thing. He was absolutely certain that God was going to keep his promise that he would have a son and from that son would come a great nation through whom God would bless the world. By this time in his life he had exactly zero doubt about that. He believed it with all of his heart.

God promised Abraham and Sarah a son, and then nothing happened. Years went by. Their hearts were in agony because what they wanted most in life was not happening. Why did God wait for so long? He promised, then he did nothing for decades. He did nothing until it finally was impossible for the couple to have a child. Game over. They were too old now, the clock had run out. The idea that they could have a child was literally laughable. It simply could not happen. And then God gave them a son. The joy could not be contained. But more important, they now had absolute, unshakable faith that they could trust God with anything and everything, including their son, Isaac. All those years of waiting, all those years of confusion, that ridiculous answer to so many prayers built Abraham's faith to the point where he was prepared to pass this test. He now had faith, so he vaulted over this obstacle with ease.

Abraham was willing to obey God's command because he was confident in God's promise. Had he refused to obey it would have been because he did not believe in God's promise. Every time we disobey God it begins with a failure to believe. We do not believe that God is going to provide what he has promised us.

God has not promised us a life of ease and comfort. He has not promised us that everything would go our way. But what he has promised is a life of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness and faithfulness. He has promised us eternal life. He promised life to the fullest. How do we get that life? There are going to be moments in your life when you will be tempted to think it is something that you have to go get it, whatever way you think is best, and that you cannot trust God for it because God has allowed some awful thing in your life. That is the moment when you are being tested. That is the moment when you need to believe God's promise. If you fail to believe, you will fail to obey.

We struggle with understanding why God would put Abraham through such a terrible test. There is an important message for us to remember here. God was doing something that extended far beyond Abraham's life. Isaac, the beloved child, was sentenced to die. But God provided a substitute. God stepped in and rescued him and a substitute was provided. We are the beloved child and we are condemned to die. But God has provided a substitute. He has provided a lamb, the lamb of God, Jesus Christ who died in our place so that we might live. This is significant because ***Abraham never knew that part of the story***. He never knew that what he was going through was a picture of the central truth of God's plan to rescue the human race.

What we need to remember is that we might go through a test that we don't understand. We may not see an outcome that we wish we would have. But it is entirely possible that God is doing something in our lives like what he did in Abraham's life. We are going through a test of the meaning of which extends far beyond our understanding and our little lives. And so it is essential that we trust.

In the end believing in the character, the goodness, the love, the mercy and the grace of our God in every situation is what will enable us to pass the test. And when we pass the test will find that we have become even stronger in our faith, more at peace, more joyful and better than we have ever been before.

Laurie and I, as we neared the end of August, were excited. We had planned what was for us, a dream vacation. We were going to spend 5 days in Hawaii with our kids and their amazing spouses. As the time drew near a friend said to me, "Did you know that there's a hurricane headed for Hawaii?" I thought nothing of it because hurricanes almost never hit Hawaii. But I checked it out, and was dismayed to learn this one was taking dead aim at the islands. I started fretting. My first concern was whether we would even be able to get there. I kept calling the airline about it and they said they just didn't know. I started going into my "Aw come on, Lord. This isn't funny" act. I prayed. I told the Lord I was not happy. The weather in Hawaii in early September is never bad. I told the Lord it felt like he was out specifically to ruin our trip. Then a new concern popped up. Even if we got there what kind of vacation were we going to have if we were subjected to tropical storm winds and rain every day? There's nothing like sitting in your hotel room watching it rain for days on end. And that's just what was predicted for our time in Hawaii. I finally had to let it go. I had to pray that if God wanted to mess up our trip he would help me accept that with grace and faith. The first thing that happened was that the airline finally assured me we'd be able to get there. But now

we had the bad weather to look forward to. I found that the key for me was to let it go. If it's bad, then it's bad. If that's what you want, Lord, then so be it. I found some peace. Until I went all in and trusted God I was fearful, frustrated and annoyed. Only when I let go was I at peace.

As we boarded that flight I was thinking, "Oh boy, we're going to be flying right by a hurricane. We're going to experience the turbulence to end all turbulence. This is going to be the aviation equivalent of being in a Kitchen Aid blender." I hate that. But it didn't seem to bother me. Sure enough, with about an hour left in our flight, the pilot announced that we were about to pass Hurricane Ignacio. He instructed the flight attendants to sit down and buckle up and warned us we were about to experience severe turbulence. I said, "Okay, Lord, here we go." The rest of the flight we had one tiny little bump and that was it. My point is not that if you let it go, everything will go your way. Rather it is, let it go, trust God, and you can be at peace and you can grow stronger in your faith. By the way, we had good weather. After the kids left we had one day of rain, and it was the day college football was on television, so Laurie and I got to watch TV all day!

This is a trivial example of a test. But the principle is the same whether you are talking about a dream vacation or the life of your infant son in the ICU. I've been through both and can tell you that while the stakes are very different, the principle being tested is the same.