

Faith to Lay Your Isaac Down

Rich Nathan
December 3 & 4, 2016
The Journey of Faith
Genesis 22

Have you ever had a recurring dream? The vast majority of adults do, but I'm talking about a recurring dream of something that's really negative. Something like being chased or falling, something that feels more like a nightmare. Have you ever had a recurring dream?

One of my recurring dreams is taking a final exam in a class that I've cut all semester. Now, I virtually never cut class. But in the dream, I'm not only totally unprepared to take the final, but because I've been cutting the class all semester I can't find the room. So, I'm late for the test that I'm unprepared to take. Have any of you had a similar kind of recurring dream about taking an exam that you didn't study for?

From the moment we're born, we're tested. The hearing of newborns is tested. Their vision is tested. Their height and weight and head circumference are measured. Throughout life, we undergo a battery of medical tests. Men and women have our blood pressure checked, our cholesterol screened, our lipid levels profiled. There are bone density tests, Vitamin D tests. If you are over 50, you've probably gone through a colonoscopy. There is a skin cancer screening, thyroid test, hearing and eye exams. Women go through pap tests, mammograms, and cancer screenings. Men get prostate exams, metabolic syndrome screenings. There are so many different types of health tests that a person goes through over the course of their life.

How many government mandated, standardized tests does a typical student in the United States have to take between Pre-Kindergarten and 12th grade? The typical student in the United States takes **112** government mandated, standardized tests between Pre-K and 12th grade. I'm not talking about all the quizzes and exams kids take that are created by their classroom teacher. I'm talking about standardized tests mandated by the states. In most places, 8th grade is the worst because they take 10-11 mandated tests along with all the other quizzes and exams.

And if you go through four years of college and grad school or professional school, you literally are tested thousands of times over the course of your academic career. No wonder I have recurring nightmares of taking tests!

We take swimming tests, driving tests, personality tests, IQ tests, psychological health tests like the MMPI. Some of you have taken citizenship tests in order to become

American citizens. You may have had an adoptive parent screening, a background test if you are in law enforcement.

We are tested and tested and tested by people all the time. But in the 21st century we have forgotten a major theme found in the Bible. That theme is that God has designed life to be a continual series of tests with one question on each test. There's just one question that God asks. Here is the test question that we are asked dozens of times every day through circumstances, through our conversations, through our relationship, especially negative relationships, bruising interactions, little choices about whether we choose to forgive or not, what we choose to say or don't say, what we choose to eat or not eat, seemingly inconsequential decisions and in massive life-changing choices, God is constantly asking us one test question. Here's the test question that we are continually asked throughout our life:

Will you trust and obey God and his Word regardless?

In the passage that we're going to look at today, God tests Abraham to the maximum. We read these words in Genesis 22:1-2:

Genesis 22:1-2

Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham! "Here I am," he replied.

² Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you."

God tested Abraham to the maximum by asking Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, up to the Lord.

I've been doing a series on faith. We've been looking at the life of Abraham. What we have discovered is that if you want to have a relationship with God that makes a real difference in your life, there is never a time where you don't have to exercise faith. We need faith for every challenge of life, every season of life, every part of life. There comes a time in everyone's life when, like Abraham, we are called to lay our Isaac down. I called today's talk, "Faith to Lay Your Isaac Down".

Let's pray

Genesis 22 contains one of the most famous stories in the Bible. I preached on this text a number of times. The sacrifice of Isaac is the theme of many famous paintings.

Let's look again at verses 1-2:

Genesis 22:1-2

Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!”
“Here I am,” he replied.

² Then God said, “Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.”

This theme of God testing, as I said in my introduction, is a major theme in the Bible. One Biblical scholar wrote this:

“The Bible is a collection of test narratives, and the view of life that emerges is that life is a continuous testing, with events at every point eliciting responses from a person that at the same time define that person’s character. The specific vocabulary of testing occurs more than 200 times in English translations of the Bible.”

So, let me begin with this question:

Why does God test?

Testing is all about developing our faith. Remember, there’s a single question of virtually every test that we face.

Will you trust and obey God and his Word regardless?

In this circumstance, in this relationship, in this conversation will you trust and obey God regardless? Faith doesn’t develop by sitting around in a small group setting and just talking about faith. Faith is like a muscle, it has to be used.

Testing is a muscle-builder

Faith needs to be employed. Faith needs to be used. The more you use your faith, the stronger your faith is. Why does God test us? To build up our faith muscles. He tests us because

Testing is a mirror

God knows what we’re like. He doesn’t test us to find out whether we’re going to trust him and obey him in this situation. He already knows. He tests us to show us ourselves in the mirror, something we don’t like to do. We like to distract ourselves. We like to deceive ourselves. We have distorted views of ourselves. Testing holds up a mirror.

Whatever we imagine about our relationship with God, whatever we imagine is the quality of our characters, or our ability to handle various things, whatever we show to others about who we are, testing shows us ourselves.

For example, there are situations in life that put us under stress. Are any of you experiencing a lot of stress now? A lot of pressure? The question is: how will you handle the stress and the pressure? Will you depend on yourself and your own devices or will you depend on God?

Psalm 50 says:

Psalm 50:15

¹⁵ call on me in the day of trouble;
I will deliver you, and you will honor me.”

So the pressure test holds up a mirror to us and asks us the question: are you turning to God when you're in trouble or are you turning to some other thing or some other person? I would just say parenthetically that God is not being mean by allowing pressure to be applied to our life. In fact, the failure to pressure testings can result in disaster.

There's a movie that's been out for several months called "Deep Water Horizon". It's about the BP oil spill back in 2010 in the Gulf of Mexico. Eleven people were killed when that floating oil rig exploded. The oil spill was the largest oil spill in all of history. One of the reasons that there was a disaster was because BP had not done a diagnostic test to test the strength of the cement that they had injected into the wall of the well. The failure to properly test killed people. The failure to properly test Samsung phones has resulted in this new Galaxy phone spontaneously bursting into flames in people's pockets.

God doesn't test us because he's mean, God tests us because he loves us and he wants us to succeed and not blow out. Testing is a muscle-builder. Testing is a mirror.

Testing is a motivator

Tests from God are primarily designed to put into us what is not currently in us. To call forth a response of patience, or love, or obedience, or faith – to bring out a virtue and a quality that may not yet be in your life in its mature form.

Let me put it this way. Because of inertia, you know what inertia is – 8th grade science – “A body at rests tends to remain at rest.” Inertia. A body sitting in front of a TV or a computer screen for too long eating Cheez Whiz and pork rinds tends to remain at rest. Inertia. Our pattern of prayerlessness; our pattern of general laziness; the pattern in our lives of everything just heading toward dissolution – whether we are talking about our eating habits, our spending habits, or spending hours watching worthless TV or we're addicted to social media, sex outside of marriage, it is incredibly difficult to

overcome human inertia without God's tests. Will power just doesn't do it, does it? Will power won't get you off the sofa and get a bunch of disciplines into our lives? Will power won't get us exercising and eating right and spending right and praying right and getting off of Facebook right? But tests do. Put a major crisis in our lives, one of these unexpected break-ins, unanticipated challenges, a child with autism, an arrest, a sick spouse, a dying parent, a heart-attack, an unplanned pregnancy, a marital crisis, a broken relationship, a lay-off from work – put a crisis in our lives and suddenly we have all the motivation we need to change.

The truth is most of us are propelled forward not because we are such great people. We change because of pain. As my favorite Christian author C.S. Lewis said,

“Pain is God's megaphone, designed to awaken a sleeping world.”

So, we talked about why God tests. Tests are muscle building for our faith, tests are mirrors, tests are motivators. I want us to consider together:

How God tests

One way God tests is through delay.

The test of delay

Genesis 22:3–4

3 Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded 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.

The great father of the Protestant Reformation, John Calvin, observed that the delay made Abraham's ordeal even more painful. Calvin writes:

God does not require him to put his son immediately to death, but compels him to contemplate this execution in his mind during three whole days, that in preparing to sacrifice his son, his suffering would be increased.

One of the greatest tests of life is a test of prolonged sorrow. We have a parent who goes through a long period of decline in their health. There is a progressive, debilitating disease. The test of delay, just having something go on and on and on. It's one thing, friend, for you and me to rally in the face of some acute challenge, some immediate crisis. Almost all of us can rally for a short period of time to deal with an immediate crisis, but tests that go on and on, day after day, month after month, year after year –

chronic lingering illnesses, long term mental illness, long term disability, long term unemployment, long term difficulties in marriage, long term addiction by a loved one.

It's hard to keep trusting God with that kind of test. Here's the question:

Will you trust and obey God and his Word regardless?

What kind of tests do we face? We face the test of delay and we face

The test of love

Genesis 22:1-2

Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!"

"Here I am," he replied.

² Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you."

Think about what Isaac represented to Abraham. Certainly, like all fathers, Abraham loved his child. In the ancient world, a son was prized above all else because a son was the heir – someone you gave all your possessions to. A son in the ancient world would care for his parents in old age. A son was responsible for burying his parents when they died. A daughter married into the other family, but a son was there forever. Unlike today, where in American culture we say, "A son is a son until he gets a wife, but a daughter is a daughter for all of her life." That's not the way it was in the ancient world.

But Isaac was more than a son for life. He was more than Abraham and Sarah's social security. Isaac was the fulfillment of the incredible promises that God had made to Abraham.

It was through Isaac that God promised to bless all the people on the earth.

Isaac was Abraham's treasure. Abraham had waited 100 years for Isaac. Isaac was the answer to all of Abraham's prayers. All of Abraham's hopes, all of Abraham's dreams were wrapped up in Isaac. You could say that Isaac was the central point of Abraham's existence. Isaac was Abraham's love, his one true treasure in life.

Now, God asks Abraham to lay his Isaac down. Give me your Isaac! So, my question for you today is this: who or what is your Isaac? What is it that you love above all else? What is your treasure? What is the thing that has been the hardest for you to release to God? Or what do you fear would be the hardest thing for you to give up to God? Who or what is your Isaac?

Let me share with a few common Isaacs, things that we treasure that are hard to give up. There is:

The Isaac of possessions

A few years ago, right before Christmas, there was a break-in in our home and the thieves took, among other things, all of our jewelry. My family was in the jewelry business and over the course of 35 years, I bought Marlene really beautiful jewelry for special occasions – on significant anniversaries or significant birthdays. The thieves took everything. They took Marlene’s engagement ring. They took away all the presents that I’d given her for 35 years. From me, they took my Bar Mitzvah watch, a gold watch that I’d had since I was 13-years old. They took my Phi Beta Kappa key – a little gold key I was given for being part of an honor society.

One of the hardest things to lose was a little gold cross that Marlene’s mother wore as a baby. Marlene’s mother died a year before the break-in. And one special thing that she left behind was a little gold cross that she wore as a baby, but it was all taken and never recovered. We were angry about the violation. We were sad that some things that had precious memories attached to were stolen. It hurt. Friend, do you have an Isaac of possessions, something that you loved that was hard to lay down?

Then there is the

Isaac of vocation

Our work or our career or our ministries, it’s not just a job it’s a calling. Maybe to you it’s teaching or practicing medicine. For me, as a pastor, I have a calling to preach and lead the church. In everyone’s life, there is a time where we have to lay the Isaac of vocation down, either because of age or illness or job cutbacks, firing, retirement. The Isaac of vocation is particularly difficult to lay down because our vocation is often wrapped up in our own identity, who we see ourselves to be and what we see as our place in the world. Our vocation is tied up with our feelings of purpose, a sense of here’s what I bring to the world. Here’s the value add I make.

Have any of you ever been asked to lay down the Isaac of your vocation? One of the most faith-stretching Isaacs to sacrifice is

The Isaac of dreams

The Isaac of dreams refers to the dream you’ve always had about how your life would go. How you thought your life would unfold. In this regard, I think of couples who always wanted to have a baby, but for some reason God doesn’t give them a baby. Or a

single woman who always wanted a baby and she's unmarried and the clock is ticking. One woman described the pain of infertility as being like a wound. She said:

When we first get a gash or a cut from an injury, it screams with pain and bleeds profusely. All attention is on the wound. That's what infertility is like. When we're first diagnosed all attention is focused on it. There are many extremely painful days filled with emotions and "bleeding" tears. Some days we are filled with more hope and can handle the wound being "touched" by others through their questions or comments. Other days, it takes only a glance at a pregnant woman walking down the street or a cute baby commercial to get the tears flowing again. Going in for fertility treatment can feel like an open wound, or more like the scab stage, with the hope of new skin growing underneath. But when the pregnancy test again comes back negative, it's like the scab is ripped off too soon and healing most start all over again.

Once you've resolved your infertility, a scar may remain. You may not notice it on a daily basis, but there will be times when you're brought back to those days of struggle or the many tears shed. It may come when friends talk about their pregnancies and you're reminded that you haven't had a pregnancy. It may come when someone announces an unplanned second or third pregnancy and you haven't had a first.

I just want to speak to those of you women whose Isaac may be the dream of having a baby. You don't have to walk through the pain of infertility by yourself. We have a support group here, it's called Sisters of Sarah.

Sisters of Sarah

1st Thursdays, 7:15-9:15pm

Register jmanserson30@gmail.com or musical04@live.com

This is a hope and support group for women facing the hardship of primary or secondary infertility. The group shares food, discusses openly and prays together.

You can just write to one of these two email addresses or just contact our Support for Life ministry for help. There is hope and there is support for women facing the hardship of infertility.

Maybe your dream was to have a happy marriage, but that Isaac has been taken either because of unwanted singleness or divorce. Every one of us needs to be loved. Every one of us wants to feel chosen. Every one of us feels pain when we're alone.

Our Support for Life ministry is offering a special program this month for those who may have difficulty at Christmas because of grief or pain. We're hosting a Blue Christmas service on Thursday, December 15 @ 7:00pm.

Blue Christmas

Thursday, December 15, 7:00-9:30pm

Christmas can be difficult for those who are grieving or in pain. Blue Christmas services are traditionally held on the longest day of the year, acknowledging the darkness in which we often wait during a season of Advent. Join us for a sacred service of scripture, music, meditation and remembrance as we wait in hope and certainty for God's light. For more information please contact: Support for Life, 614-259-5472.

Have any of you been through a period of your life when you had to lay down an Isaac? Certainly, among the hardest things to lay down is

The Isaac of relationships

Your Isaac may have been for you your father or mother, a beloved sibling, your spouse, or like Abraham, your son or your daughter. Some of you have literally been asked to lay your Isaac down.

The question, of course, for all of us to ask is why? Is there no other way for my faith to be stretched than this? No other way for me to see my limits than for God to hold up this mirror? No other motivation to get me moving than for me to go through this particular pain?

Sometimes friends and loved ones ask us these questions. What do you say to someone who has had to lay their Isaac down? Ultimately, friend, our wisest posture when we are asked these questions by someone who has had to lay their Isaac down is to not be like Job's friends who talked and talked and with every statement caused more pain. Job's friends had it right in the beginning when they saw Job suffering. They were quiet. They quietly prayed for Job.

So, I cannot tell you why *you've* been required to lay your Isaac down. But perhaps we can ask together why it was that God may have asked *Abraham* to lay his Isaac down. Perhaps as we look at Abraham's life, it may offer some comfort to some of you who are listening to me today.

Yes, tests build our faith muscles. And, yes, tests are mirrors to help us see where we are. And, yes, tests are motivators. But, why Isaac in Abraham's case? Why Isaac? Was there no other way? The best theory of why God asked Abraham to lay his Isaac down was suggested by an Anglican Bishop back in the 18th century. The man's name was William Warburton. He said that perhaps Abraham had asked God repeatedly how it was that God would bless all the families on the earth, through him and his descendants. How will I bless the world through you, Abraham?

How do tests point to Christ?

God decided not to hand Abraham a book explaining God's way of blessing the world through Christ. God decided that he wasn't going to give Abraham a teaching about the way of salvation through Christ. God decided not to give Abraham some abstract lesson or theological discourse of how he would save and bless the world. God decided that he was going to show Abraham in his own experience God's way of blessing the world. "I'm going to have you, Abraham, re-enact in your life a drama. Abraham, you're going to play the part of God the Father in the drama. And your son, Isaac, is going to play the part of my son, Jesus. You're wondering how salvation and blessing will come to the world. I'm going to show you how as you live out this script. I'm going to show you my way of saving people."

There's almost an exact parallel between Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac and God's sacrifice of Jesus.

The place of sacrifice

Genesis 22:2

2 Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you."

Chronicles tells us that Moriah was the place that King David chose to build the Temple where sacrifices were made. Mt. Moriah is none other than Mt. Zion which is not only the site of the future Temple, but the site of the crucifixion of Jesus. The place where Abraham was to sacrifice Isaac in the Old Testament corresponds to the place where God sacrificed his son in the New Testament.

Now, let's consider the parallel between the means of sacrifice.

The means of sacrifice

In the story in Genesis 22, Isaac carries the wood that he will be sacrificed on.

Genesis 22:6

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.

What a picture of Jesus, who carried the cross beam on his shoulders on which he would be crucified. Isaac carried the wood on which he would be sacrificed and so did Jesus. And there is a correspondence regarding the agent of the sacrifice.

The agent of sacrifice

Who put Jesus to death? According to the New Testament, we know that Jesus was crucified because of the envy of the religious leaders. He was crucified because of the greed of Judas Iscariot. He was crucified because of the corruption of Pontius Pilate and the threat he was to the Roman government of his day. But behind the human agents, we see the points of correspondence with the Genesis 22 sacrifice of Isaac. God the Father was sacrificing his Son, just as father Abraham was asked to sacrifice his son. Here's what we read in John 3:16:

John 3:16

16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

And the final point of correspondence concerns:

The substitute for the sacrifice

Genesis 22:11–14

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."

As Abraham raised the knife to sacrifice his son, the Angel of the Lord stops him. Isaac was spared. A substitute was provided by God. Here's where the story of Isaac diverges from the story of Jesus. In the story of Jesus, no Angel stopped the knife from coming down into the chest of Jesus Christ. There was no substitute for Jesus; Jesus was the substitute. Romans 8:32 says this:

Romans 8:32

32 He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

When we lay our Isaac down, to a huge degree we are, in our own experience, embodying God's way of salvation and blessing for the world. We are learning in our own experience that suffering and self-sacrifice is God's way of saving this broken, sinful world. When we lay our Isaac down, we are walking in the footsteps of Jesus as he went to the cross. We are experiencing what the Apostle Paul called "the fellowship of his suffering".

You know, sometimes God gives us back our Isaac. He did with Abraham. Sometimes he does with us. Sometimes God brings a baby into the life of the childless. Sometimes God brings a spouse into the life of a single person. Sometimes God restores vocation to a person who's had it ripped away. Sometimes God brings back our possessions. Sometimes, in this life, God returns our Isaac. And sometimes he doesn't. But the test of faith is always the same: Will you trust and obey God and his Word regardless?

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Genesis 22

- I. Why does God test?
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 - B. Testing is a mirror
 - C. Testing is a motivator
- II. _____ does God test?
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 - B. The test of love
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 - 2. The Isaac of vocation
 - 3. The Isaac of dreams
 - 4. The Isaac of relationships
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