

God Builds Our Faith by Testing

⊕ He probes deep. (vv.1-5)

⊕ He blesses wide and long. (vv.9-18)

In the name of Jesus, the Lamb provided by God, dear children of the heavenly Father,

Doesn't it seem that what we fear most comes up first on God's agenda? One of my greatest fears in youth was talking to strangers about my faith. That was dead even with public speaking. And the one thing I was sure I never wanted to be was a pastor. How can God take our deepest fears and turn them into our greatest joys? We are commanded to put our *"hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment."* (1 Timothy 6:17 NIV) But why so much pain to get there?

It has everything to do with how we are designed. For instance, if you came here from Great Britain, you could not drive because cars can't swim or fly. And if you drive British-style on the left side of the road, your face and your windshield will pay. You can't fight the design of roads or cars. You and I were designed to worship God. God knows it's death on the wrong side of the road without Him. So in order to bless us, **God Builds Our Faith by Testing.** Painful as it is...

⊕ He probes deep. (vv.1-5)

For just a few minutes put yourself in Abraham's sandals and tell me what would be your greatest fear? The promise came when you were seventy-five. But the time the LORD delivered, twenty-five years have passed. You know the miracle. Abraham laughed and so did his wife Sarah when they heard what God had in mind. But just as God promised, Isaac was born to a 100-year-old father and a 90-year-old barren woman. Now who was laughing? Abraham and Sarah. They named him *Isaac*, which means, "laughter." And who would not laugh with them at such a miraculous gift of God?

So what would Abraham fear more than the loss of His only son? I cannot imagine the shock of God coming to test Abraham with a command like this: *"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."* To get a little feel for burnt offerings we would need the ushers to set our full collection plates on the altar and light them on fire. Would that be a shock? But human sacrifice of your only son? Who of us would not throw up our hands and say, "God, that's just too much. Didn't you promise me a son? And didn't you say my Savior, the covenant Offspring, would come from my son? How can you command this in the same breath as you say, *"whom you love"?*

Perhaps no where else in Scripture do we see a test where God **probes** so **deep**. This tells us it is not an accident when God puts us in situations where we might lose someone or something we love more than anything else in the world. One mother refused her pastor's advice to pray, "Thy will be done," for her sick son. She wanted him healed. Years later she saw him hung on the gallows for murder. She had no use for God's Word through Isaiah that *"the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil."* (Isaiah 57:1 NIV) But how could Abraham see anything but evil in the LORD's command?

Just look through the eyes of faith. See what he does. *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. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance.* He wasted no time getting started and left no chance for Sarah to ask the gory details. It helps to pray in the Lord's time of testing: "Help me, Lord, to learn my lessons well and get as much mileage as I can from the pain." Abraham had about fifty miles to cover and three days for Satan to pound him with every logical reason to turn back and forget God. Yet

he pressed on and made sure no one will be along to misunderstand. *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.*"

What did God find when He probed **deep** in Abraham's heart? The Holy Spirit actually explains in the great Faith Chapter, Hebrews 11: *"Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking he did receive Isaac back from death."* God's Name, His reputation as the true and faithful One, the Savior-God (LORD, Jehovah) rested on Isaac as the heir of the promise. The Christ would have to come from Isaac's line for God to be true and faithful. Deep in Abraham's soul he was confident that the God who miraculously created His son could raise his ashes so that together they could walk back down that mountain. It's what Abraham told his son. When Isaac asked, *"The fire and wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together.*

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To really appreciate this you also need to know that Isaac was not a little boy as artists sometimes picture him. The context clearly shows he was at least a teenager if not a young man who could easily have walked away from his elderly father. But already you see how God **blesses wide and long** because the faith of Abraham has nestled in the heart of his son. Isaac did not put up a fight. He let his father tie him and put him on the altar piled high with wood. He watched his father raise the knife without a word or a whimper. And he heard the voice of the LORD that brought the test to a successful end.

The angel of the LORD called out...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." That's all God wanted to know. Do you fear me more than you love your son? God is a jealous God who deserves the best of our love and respect. He wants so much to bless us. But blessing is impossible if anything else has our heart.

Then God provided *a ram caught by its horns* in a thicket for Abraham to sacrifice *as a burnt offering instead of his son. 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."* Solomon built the LORD's temple on Mount Moriah in Jerusalem. Centuries of burnt offerings would rise to heaven foreshadowing the total sacrifice of God's own Son in place of all of us idolaters who constantly love things and people more than God.

God was willing to pay the death of His only Son for us. The *angel of the LORD*, the pre-incarnate Christ Himself, *called to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, 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, and"* Literally, "In your Seed all the nations of the earth will be blessed on account of whom you have listened in my voice." Listening to God's Word created and strengthened Abraham's faith to believe and obey God's Word.

Thanks to Jesus, the Offspring of Abraham, God does not test us like bending a pencil until it breaks. **God Builds Our Faith by Testing.** Job could say with confidence: *"When he has tested me, I will come forth as gold."* (23:10) **He probes deep**, heating our faith like gold in a crucible for impurities to float to the top. He skims off the dross of doubt and fear. Peter explained: *"These [trials] have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed."* (1 Peter 1:7)

God **blesses wide and long** with a Savior testified all over the Old Testament also in Abraham's son of the promise. How can we miss that just as the wood was placed on Isaac to carry to the place of sacrifice and there be laid upon it, so the wooden cross was laid on Jesus to carry to Golgotha and there be nailed upon it. God the Father did not stop that Sacrifice of His one and only Son but gave Him up for us all. And nothing else will He withhold from us, especially not stronger faith. **God Builds Our Faith by Testing.** Amen.