

Faith Tested

- ⊕ Great grief! (vv.1-10)
- ⊕ Great relief! (vv.11-18)

Through the cross of Lent to the crown of Easter, dear fellow redeemed:

How confident are you in the darkness? Kids might think it's fun as long as they're with friends and flashlights. Adults get more fearful from criminals in the darkness. And the elderly add the fear of falling. From a traditional Scottish poem: *"From ghoulies and ghosties / And long-legged beasties / And things that go bump in the night, / Good Lord, deliver us!"*¹ But thanks to God's guardian angels, we have nothing to fear in the physical darkness. Our trials and tribulations have much more to do with matters of the heart, disappointments in life, and sometimes the heavy crosses that God puts on His people. The Patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – were given extraordinary blessings. And as Jesus says, ***"From everyone to whom much was given, much will be expected. From the one who was entrusted with much, much more will be asked."*** (Luke 12:48 EHV)² Abraham's **Faith** was **Tested** uniquely by...

⊕ Great grief! (vv.1-10)

Things were finally settling down for Abraham and Sarah. By God's command he sent away servant wife Hagar and son Ishmael. The LORD comforted Abraham's distress by His promise for the son of laughter: ***"It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned."*** (Genesis 21:12 NIV84) Once Abraham had a treaty with the local Philistine government, they could enjoy life in the far south at Beersheba, *the well of the seven-oath*. Their pride and joy was Isaac growing into a fine young man.

Then came the greatest bombshell of Abraham's life, one which no other believer has had to endure. ***"Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, 'Abraham!' 'Here I am,' he replied. 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.'"*** What can a believer do when God seems to turn into a tyrant and enemy? Not only Abraham's family, but his faith and salvation were all wrapped up in Isaac through whom God had promised the Savior. Now the old man of maybe 120 years has a command in direct contradiction to God's earlier promise – or so it seems. God did not tell him, "This is only a test." And the same Hebrew word is used for *test* as for *temptation*. Yet God says through James that God tempts no one. (James 1:13) Same word, but entirely different goal. Satan *tempts* to break our faith and destroy our souls. God *tests* us like tempering steel to strengthen our faith and hone the edge on ***"the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God."*** (Ephesians 6:17 NIV84)

Great grief! But how does Abraham react? ***"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."*** He does not tell Sarah to break her heart or the family to talk him out of obedience to God. He's so determined that he does all the slave work to get going right away. It would be three days and about fifty miles of anguish to walk with his only son Isaac. God had doubled down on Abraham's grief by pointing out his fatherly attachment to this dear son. But now they were within sight of Mount Moriah, and Abraham had to go alone, lest anyone try to stop him. The bundle of firewood carried by the donkey now went on the sturdy back of Isaac. Then Abraham said something strange: ***"He said to his servants, 'Stay here with the donkey***

¹ Wikipedia: The Denham Tracts, edited by James Hardy, (London: Folklore Society, 1895), vol. 2, pp.76-80.

² EHV – Scriptures from the *Holy Bible – Evangelical Heritage Version*. The Wartburg Project, © 2017. NPH: 800-662-6022.

while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.” (Genesis 22:5 NIV84) What was he thinking? How could Abraham have hope in such a time as this?

It’s one thing to be confident yourself, but when the kids start asking questions, especially in dangerous, deadly situations, it’s hard to keep your spirits up. How did Abraham react when Isaac asked a very good question? Note the relationship reminders! ***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?”*** Abraham’s answer was literally: ***“God will see to it – a lamb.”***

“The Hebrew word translated ‘we will come back’ is an emphatic verb form expressing the speaker’s determination. It hints at the answer Abraham had reached to this awful question that was torturing him: ‘How can a merciful God cut off the messianic line?’ Abraham’s faith answered, ‘If God commands me to kill Isaac and I obey him, then God is simply going to have to bring Isaac’s ashes back to life, and the two of us are going to come back down this mountain.’”³

We don’t know if Abraham explained anything to Isaac now. But God’s Word had been in their home penetrating Isaac’s ears and heart since infancy. How else could the grown son let his father build an altar, bind him like a sacrificial animal, and lay him on his back with eyes up to heaven? How could he lie there and not fight back when the knife was upraised and ready to slit his throat like a lamb? Faith unseen was working in Isaac’s heart as well as his father’s. “With closed eyes he [Abraham] hid himself in the darkness of faith, and there he found eternal light.”⁴ Our eyes cannot see how God will fulfill all His promises. But in this “darkness of faith” our sanctified sight is so certain of God’s Word that we continue over the bridge of the cross toward the light of life. God would reward Abraham’s confidence with...

⊕ **Great relief! (vv.11-18)**

“The Angel of the LORD” is the pre-incarnate Christ, the second Person of the Trinity, who appears at key times in Old Testament history. ***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.”*** God wanted to see Abraham’s faith in action so Abraham could see his faith too.

And God counted Abraham’s sacrifice as done! The Holy Spirit interprets this through His holy writer to the Hebrews: ***“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, even though God had said to him, ‘It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.’ Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.”*** (Hebrews 11:17-19 NIV84)

Spotlight ***“Behold!”*** the ram in the thicket. God provided as substitute for Abraham’s son. God provided His one and only, dearly loved Son as a substitute for sinners all! Even for you. Even for me.

We have already been told, ***“Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.”*** (Genesis 15:6 NIV84) Now his works follow as evidence of that faith. If you don’t know you have faith, it’s like a treasure buried in your back yard. It does you little good if you don’t know it’s there. God works faith in your heart which is obedience to the Gospel (Mark 1:12-15.) Remember last Sunday. ***“Listen to him!”*** (Mark 9:7) That’s the word here in Hebrew for ***“obey”*** – ***“listen.”*** ***The angel of the LORD 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***

³ Jeske, J. C. (2001). *Genesis* (2nd ed.). The People's Bible (183). NPH at 1-800-662-6022.

⁴ Luther, Martin. (EA op ex4,136) Commenting on Genesis 17 about Abraham’s faith, quoted by H. Sasse in essay on “Luther’s Theology of the Cross” – SSQ2004x-MLC, Prof. A. Koelpin. See *LW*, Vol. 3, on Ge 17:16.

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seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.”

Do you *listen / obey* with God’s gift of time – Sunday morning, Wednesday evenings? Do you *listen / obey* with God’s gifts of talents at home, work, church? Do you have to be asked or do you pay enough loving attention to do good on your own without being asked? Do you *listen / obey* with God’s gifts of money in your offerings or are you “robbing God” by giving little or nothing of thanks and praise in a way that matters and helps us spread the Good News of God’s grace in Christ? Read Malachi on “robbing God” and repenting to receive His abundant blessings!

God sacrificed His own Son and stopped Abraham from sacrificing Isaac. What God really wants is your heart, not just in words, but in action and in truth. He just wants to bless you the way He turned around and blessed Abraham after he passed the test of faith. Faith not only trusts, but opens the way for God to bless as He so lovingly, steadfastly desires. Check out the cross. Follow with Jesus. Blessings are still streaming from the Mountain of the LORD, Mount Moriah, where Solomon built the temple. There Jesus served as the ultimate sacrifice, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And from there God continues to provide through His Word:

“On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth. The LORD has spoken.” (Isaiah 25:6–8 NIV84)

Faith Tested can surely bring **Great grief!** But God holds us steady on His holy Word to cross that bridge of suffering to the far side of **Great relief!** The Christian cross, the Means of Grace from the cross of Christ, God’s full and free justification from Jesus’ resurrection – all is well even when God seems like your enemy in the sometime darkness of our doubts and fears. Behind a frowning face He holds a Father’s heart. “Be Still, My Soul!” (CW 415) The clouds will soon part and the sunshine of God’s grace will be beaming in the face of God’s own Son. Amen.