

(Gaining God's Approval) 5. the Testing of Abraham

by Zac Poonen

Zac Poonen's sermon explores the profound tests of faith faced by Abraham, illustrating the path to gaining God's approval through obedience and sacrifice.

Scripture: Luke 14:26

Topics: "Faith And Obedience", "Discipleship Lessons"

Description

Zac Poonen preaches on the journey of Abraham's faith and obedience, highlighting the tests he faced over fifty years before receiving God's certificate of approval. From leaving his hometown to sacrificing his son Isaac, Abraham demonstrated sacrificial obedience and a willingness to prioritize God above all else. Each test Abraham faced reveals important lessons on discipleship, including the need to break ties with worldly attachments, trust God with material possessions, and offer everything, even our most cherished blessings, on the altar of surrender to God.

Transcript

A day came in Abraham's life, almost fifty years after God had first called him, when God Himself gave Abraham this certificate of approval, "Now I know that you are a fearer of God" (Gen. 22:12).

That was no cheap Bible college degree or honorary doctorate of divinity! Abraham would not have cared two paises for such cheap papers as many of today's Christians hanker after. He wanted the real thing - God's certificate of approval on his life - and he got it.

It wasn't an easy road to that graduation day on Mount Moriah! But it was worth everything that Abraham had gone through to hear those words from God.

God doesn't give His certificates easily. He gave it to Abraham after fifty years of testing him.

In Jesus' case, we saw that the Father publicly proclaimed His pleasure in Him only after thirty years of testing Him in Nazareth.

The First Test

When Abraham was 75 years old, God had called him to leave his hometown and his relatives in Ur of the Chaldees and to step out in faith in God, into the unknown. That was the first test that he passed. It is not easy to make a break with father, mother, brothers and sisters etc., But until that umbilical cord that ties us to them is broken we can never be disciples of Jesus!

Jesus said, "If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple." (Lk.14:26).

Abraham obeyed God at once.

I have wondered what would have happened if Abraham had turned down God's call. God would certainly not have forced him. God would have found someone else; and we would never have heard of Abraham again. That someone else who responded to God would have become the father of faith and the ancestor of the Messiah! How much Abraham would have missed if he had failed in that first test! Little did he realise when he stepped out of Ur, turning his back on the pleadings of his relatives, what a glorious future God had planned for him.

God still calls people, as He called Abraham. Little do those who are being called realise what great issues hang in the balance when they have heard the call of God. Church history, throughout these 20 centuries, is filled with the amazing stories of men and women who responded to God's call immediately, joyfully and wholeheartedly like Abraham and who fulfilled God's purposes.

Eternity alone will reveal however, how many others were also called, who did not respond and who wasted their lives. The rich young ruler who turned away from Jesus to embrace his money a little tighter, was but one among many who were called, but who made the wrong choice when tested.

Those whom God calls usually find that their first and greatest hindrance comes from their unconverted and carnal relatives. That was why Jesus spoke of 'hating father and mother' as being the first condition of discipleship.

Abraham passed the test here - though not in one step. His father joined him on the journey out of Ur, but persuaded Abraham to stop at Haran (half-way to Canaan).

"Terah took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife; and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans in order to enter the land of Canaan; and they went as far as Haran, and settled there." (Gen.11:31).

God, in mercy, took away Abraham's father in death, so that Abraham might not be hindered any longer. Then Abraham moved on to Canaan.

We must never let our love for our relatives hinder us from God's purpose for our lives.

More than four hundred years later, the sons of Levi had to take a similar stand against their relatives when the children of Israel worshipped the golden calf.

Moses came down from the mount at that time and called out, "Whoever is for the Lord, come to me." (Exod.32:26). The sons of Levi came to him immediately. They were ordered to go into the camp and slay the idolaters with the sword - and not to spare even their own relatives. The sons of Levi did this unhesitatingly.

Moses describing their action later, says, "He (Levi) obeyed Your (God's) instructions and destroyed many sinners, even his own children, brothers, fathers and mothers. (Therefore) the Levites shall teach God's laws to Israel" (Deut. 33:9,10-Living).

Little did the Israelites realise that day, that God was testing them to see who could be His priests. The Levites qualified. And so God made them His priests. That was not partiality. God had tested all twelve tribes at that time. Only the tribe of Levi had passed the test.

The Second Test

Once Abraham had become free from his relatives, then God could test him in relation to material things. This too is a further requirement for discipleship.

Jesus said, "Whoever does not forsake all his own possessions cannot be My disciple" (Lk. 14:33).

In Genesis chapters 13 and 14, we read of two incidents where Abraham was tested in relation to mammon. The first time was when he and Lot had to separate, because their flocks had become too large for them to stay together. It would have been easy, and right too, for Abraham as the senior man and as the man whom God had called to Canaan, to take the first pick of the land. But with genuine unselfishness and large-heartedness, he told Lot to choose first. Lot chose what looked like the best to human eyes - the land of Sodom.

But neither Abraham nor Lot realised that God had been a silent witness to this transaction - as He is to all our financial transactions. God was so delighted with the unselfishness manifested by Abraham, that He immediately spoke to him and told him that his seed would inherit all the land that Abraham could see - in all four directions. This included the portion chosen by Lot as well.

"The Lord said to Abram after Lot had separated from him, 'Now lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land which you see, I will give it to you and to your descendants forever.'" (Gen.14:14,15).

Today, nearly 4000 years later, we find that God has kept His word. The descendants of Abraham (the Jews) are living in that land that God gave to Abraham. The descendants of Lot (some of the Arabs) however have lost what their forefather grabbed. Such are God's ways. The meek will inherit the earth.

In Genesis 14, we find Abraham again behaving with the dignity becoming of a true servant of God, in the matter of material things. Abraham had rescued the people and the property of the king of Sodom from his enemies. As a reward, the king of Sodom offered all the property to Abraham. But Abraham refused to take anything.

"And Abram said to the king of Sodom, "I have sworn to the Lord God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth, that I will not take a thread or a sandal thong or anything that is yours, lest you should say, 'I have made Abram rich.'" (Gen.14:22,23).

In effect, what Abraham was saying was, "Since my God is the Owner of heaven and earth, I don't need anything from you."

Again God was a silent listener to the conversation. He immediately appeared to Abraham and told him that He Himself would reward him.

"After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, saying, `Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great.'" (Gen.15:1).

If we honour God, He will certainly honour us.

The children of Adam are masters at grabbing things from others - if not by force then at least when such things are offered freely. We don't realise that God is testing us in our financial transactions and in our conversations about financial matters. Based on how we conduct ourselves in such situations, God determines what place we can have in His kingdom and in His remnant army on earth.

The Third Test

Abraham had been tested in relation to his parents and in relation to material wealth. Now he had to be tested in relation to his son.

This was to be the final test before He got God's certificate of approval.

When God spoke to Abraham that night to offer Isaac as a sacrifice, Abraham was 125 years old and had already obtained a name among the people as a man of God. Genesis 21:22 tells us that "at that time (King) Abimelech and Phicol, the commander of his army, spoke to Abraham, saying, `God is with you in all that you do.'"

But God cares nothing for the high opinions that other men have about us. God wanted to test Abraham Himself. And so He spoke to Abraham quietly that night; and no-one else heard what God had spoken to him. Genesis 22:1 tells us: "After these things (that is, after King Abimelech had given Abraham a certificate as a man of God), God tested Abraham, and said to him, `Abraham!' And he said, `Here I am.'"

It was a costly thing that God asked him for that night. Abraham could have gone about the next day, doing nothing about it, and no-one would have known that Abraham had disobeyed God. That was how God was going to test whether Abraham feared Him or not.

And that is how God tests us too. He speaks to us secretly in our heart - so quietly that not even those living with us know what God has said to us. One reason why God has given each of us a totally private area - our thought-life - is to test us to see whether we fear Him or not.

If our thoughts sounded out loud like our words do, then we would all keep our thoughts pure, for we would not want anyone to think less of us. But when our thoughts are so secret that only God can see them, it is easy to find out whether we fear Him or not.

If we harbour impure and unloving thoughts that we would not want our fellow-believers to know about, it would clearly prove that we fear men but not God. That is unfortunately the condition of the vast majority of believers. God has tested them and they have failed the test.

How few there are like Joseph, who when tempted sexually in secret, said "How can I do such a wicked thing as this? It would be a sin against God" (Gen. 39:9-Living). Such young men are the ones who get God's certificate of approval.

Very, very few believers are totally faithful in the area of sexual purity in their thought-life. But it is through these few that God can demonstrate to Satan that He still has some sons on earth who would rather pluck out their right eye than commit a sin with that eye and who would rather die than lust in their thoughts. The

way to life is narrow and there are few who find it. But the wonderful thing is that there are a few!

Abraham passed the test. He did not seek just for a good testimony before men. He wanted to obey God even in the secret area. And so he took Isaac the very next morning and journeyed towards Mount Moriah and there he offered the darling of his heart to God, saying thereby, "Lord, I love You more than anyone and anything on earth."

It was then that God gave Abraham His certificate of approval and promised to bless him without measure: "By Myself I have sworn,' says the Lord, 'because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you....and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies. And in your descendants all the nations of the earth shall be blessed because you have obeyed My voice.'" (Gen.22:16-18).

Nothing delights God as much as sacrificial obedience.

To be 'pure in heart' is more than to have just a clean thought-life (Mt.5:8). It is to have nothing in one's heart but God alone. Many who live clean and upright lives nevertheless have an idolatrous attachment to their job or to the ministry that God has given them. They have not learnt to offer their God-given Isaacs on the altar back to God.

Do you want God plus some gift, or God plus some ministry, or God plus the good opinions of men, or perhaps God plus health? God plus some Isaac? Or is God alone sufficient for you?

No-one can be approved of God who does not pass the test here. Only when we come to the place where we can sincerely say to the Lord, "Lord, whom have I in heaven but Thee, and there is no-one and nothing on earth that I desire beside Thee" (Psa. 73:25), do we qualify as far as God is concerned.

This is the Mount Moriah that each of us has to climb, where we offer everything that is dear to us on the altar to God and are left with God alone.

If our joy increases through an increment in our salary or through a promotion in our job, or through a gift that we receive, or if it decreases when we don't get the expected promotion or gift, that would clearly indicate that our joy is found in God plus something earthly. Then we certainly need to purify our joy until we learn to 'rejoice in the Lord' alone. If our joy is found in God alone, it will not increase with the addition of anything earthly nor will it decrease when something of this earth is lost.

Philippians 4:4 commands us to "rejoice in the Lord always".

The reason why most believers cannot rejoice ALWAYS is because their joy is not found in the Lord alone. It is in the Lord plus something else.

When our heart is pure - having place for the Lord alone - our joy will be pure too.

Step by step God had led Abraham on, to this place of total dedication - and now God was going to bless all the families of the earth through him. The rivers of blessing began to flow from Abraham's life when he came down from Mount Moriah.

God's purpose is that Abraham's blessing should be ours too.

Galatians 3:14 says, "That in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith."

God desires that the rivers of living water (the blessing of the Spirit) should now flow through each of us.

But how many are willing to pay the price?

And how many qualify, when God tests them?

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