

The Test

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Preacher: Joe Hall

[0 : 0 0] Well, as a church family, we have been tracking through the section of Genesis for a few months together. Perhaps if you haven't been with us, you may be familiar with this part of the book of Genesis. And I wonder if you could give this bit of Genesis chapters 12 to 25 a title, what would it be? I hope I've persuaded you if you've been with us that the title ought not to be the life of Abraham. But what then could it be or what should it be? One of the challenges with working through bigger chunks of the Bible is that it's easy to lose the thread that holds it all together. That's not the case in our evening series just now looking at the book of Habakkuk.

Three chapters, three weeks. It's quite easy to get the book at a glance. But in Genesis, a lot has happened, hasn't it, in the last 22 chapters, even in the last 10 chapters since chapter 12. So what is it that ties this bit all together? Well, I've not done a great job of sharing this, but I hope that you may guess at least that one plausible title might be The Promise. The Promise. That's been my working title through this series. Chapter 12. God made a promise to restore his blessing to a fallen, sinful, and broken world through this man and his family. And every chapter since then has been building on that promise. Either God has confirmed or developed his promise in some way, or Abraham has trusted or has failed to trust God in that promise in some way. So that the big question that this bit of Genesis is here to answer is this, can we trust God to keep his promise, to redeem and to bless the world through this chosen person? Therefore, do we trust God to keep that wonderful promise? Last time in Genesis, we saw God keep his promise to Abraham and Sarah in a great big way, didn't we? He gave them the son that he had long promised then. We saw him begin to fulfill his other promises to this family. The big message, the big confidence this book gives us is surely this, that God is never going to go back on his word. And he is never going to let down those who put their trust in him to keep his promise. But now that bond of trust is going to be tested in a great big way.

And brothers and sisters, if we trust in God today, or if we think that we trust in God, well, this chapter is here to ask us, how trustworthy do we think he is? Just how trustworthy is our God?

What would it take to break your trust in him? Could anything break that bond of trust with God, our Savior? If this series is the promise, then this chapter is the test. Let's see then how God proves his faithfulness to this family, beginning with a confusing call. And I wonder how you felt when we read the first couple of verses in this chapter. 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, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the region of Moriah, sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain that I will show you.

Sacrifice your son? Maybe you're wondering, imagine you are, what kind of God commands a man to make a human sacrifice of his son? We feel sick, don't we, at the very idea of that. Is this the same faithful God of grace that we have seen up to this point in Genesis? Now, for context, it's worth knowing that the whole Old Testament, God commands his people not to do this. And some of the other nations at that time, human sacrifice was going on horrifically. People did sacrifice their own children, thinking that it would please the gods that they serve. But listen to these words from Leviticus chapter 20, where God says, anyone living in Israel who sacrifices any of his children to Molech, that's the name of an idol, is to be put to death. The members of the community are to stone him.

[5 : 03] And if they fail to put him to death, says God, I myself will set my face against him and his family and cut them off from the people together with all who follow him. So God is clear, and I hope that's clear to us, that child sacrifice is completely detestable to him. The Bible says he is the opposite.

Of the false gods who thought that the people served in that way. In fact, later when Israel did begin to do this, the prophets raged against it. And it's one of the big reasons that God disowned his people and gave them over to be destroyed. So then, why does God call Abraham to sacrifice his son?

It's a confusing call. It's confusing because God takes no pleasure in this kind of sacrifice. It's confusing too because God knows how loved Isaac is by his parents. See that repetition in verse 2?

Did you pick it up? Isaac is described in four ways, each more personal than the last. Your son, your only son, the son you love. You're Isaac. People sometimes assume that people who lived in the past in times where children died more frequently, therefore didn't love their children to the same depth or maybe weren't as close to their children as we are. But studies have actually found that in sometimes in places at least that that's not true. That every child who was born and died was loved and grieved even by families who lost two, three, four children. That parental bond of love is stressed, isn't it, in verse 2? And we feel it.

You have two wonderful, dear little boys, and I cannot imagine the pain and confusion in Abraham's heart when God told him to do this. Every parent's mind has leapt, hasn't it, at some point to the worst conclusion. They toddle out of sight around the corner and you fear the very worst. But to hear God tell you to sacrifice your son, your only son, who you love, your little Isaac, it's unimaginably painful, isn't it?

[7 : 36] It's confusing too, of course, because of God's promise. This is the very son God promised and has finally given this family. For 25 years, this family had waited on God to fulfill his word. He at last has done it.

And now he's seemingly taking back the son. Is God really going back on his words? As much as we feel Abraham's pain at the loss of Isaac, it's much bigger than Isaac, isn't it? It's much bigger than one father's love because this was the son who was born to confirm and to carry on God's promise plan, his promise to bless the world, a fallen world through this family.

Why now is God calling Abraham to slay his son as a sacrifice? It is a confusing call. I hope we're confused by it. But verse one tells us why God is doing it. Sometime later, God tested Abraham. Now, when we hear the word test, perhaps we think, you know, God is kind of setting an exam for Abraham for Abraham or kind of in some manipulative way setting him up to fail. But remember, God's purpose in this book is to confirm his complete trustworthiness to his people. And so this test is not set to fail Abraham or even to prove Abraham, how much Abraham trusts God. God knows, doesn't he, how Abraham trusts him. He sees his heart. But it is a test to prove to Abraham and to us that his trust is in the right place. It is a test that proves God's own trustworthiness and his own faithfulness to us.

And it's worth saying that God doesn't test us as Christians in this very specific way now. Okay, we are not to expect that when we go home, God is going to speak to us and lay something on the line and tell us this is the test. That is not how God deals with us. God deals with Abraham, the father of the faithful in this way, so that we, the children of that faith, might learn from him and see who God is in and through this test. But having said that, we heard before from James, didn't we, that in God's providence and in the ordinary run of life, we face trials of various kinds, things that go on that are confusing to us and that we do not understand that are painful. Yet, said James, remember, consider those times pure joy. Why? Because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

It is completely counterintuitive to us this. But if we're trusting in God, he says, those trials become stress tests that we can only gain from. Because those trials prove our trust is in the right place.

[10 : 56] Because if our trust is in God, then whatever comes our way, he will prove himself faithful in all circumstances. He is faithful to bring us through every trial and every temptation. So count it pure joy, says James, to have him test himself in that way in your life. God does not test us to fail us, but he tests our trust to prove to us again how trustworthy he is. And secondly, we see that that test brings out of Abraham a fearful faith. A fearful faith. Now, fearful not in the sense that he was scared, though I'm sure he was terrified, but fearful in the sense of verse 12, that he feared God and that he lived in the light of God's character and word more so than his circumstances. God has called Abraham in the same way he did in chapter 12. Back then, remember, the Lord said to Abraham, go from your country, your people, and your father's house to the land I will show you. So now, verse 2, you take your son and go to Moriah to the mountain I will show you. Okay, it's echoing the same call again.

And as at first, Abraham went where God showed him, so now Abraham goes in faith, verse 3. Early the next morning, he got ready and set out for the place God had told him about.

He answers the call. Now, if this was a film, this is where we would get all the close-up shots. Okay, we're meant to see this play out in our minds. The action slows right down. Genesis wants us to be in the scene, to see the colors, the textures, to feel the suspense, to smell the sweat, and to spot the detail of these verses. Just see, glance down, see how verse 3 has a sort of flashback when he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering he set out. And you can feel his dread, can't you, as he got up at dawn and went on his own to cut the wood for the sacrifice.

How much wood will this sacrifice need? But he will have enough. Abraham goes with Isaac and two servants, but on the third day, he sees the destination on the horizon, and he says to his servants, wait here, the father and son, they go on alone. And what does he tell the servants as they part? I and the boy will go over there, we will worship, and then we will come back to you.

Did he choke up over those words? You would think he would have needed to go somewhere private to sob over those words, wouldn't he? What does he tell them? He says, we will come back.

[13 : 56] He says that knowing what he is going to do, how they must worship God, but he tells the servants, doesn't he, to wait for them both to return. Now, why does he say that? Is it purely, okay, to spare him having to say why it is that they're really going? Well, just tuck that away for a minute, because in verse six, the camera follows the father and son on their journey.

They go on. Abraham loads the wood onto Isaac while he carries the fire and the knife, and side by side, they walk on. It's a haunting scene, isn't it? We can picture it in our minds, partly because we know that in the silence, Isaac has a question that he feels now that he must ask. Just find verse seven with me in your Bible. Let this play in your mind. See how slowly this unfolds. As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father, Abraham, father, yes, my son, Abraham replied, the fire and wood are here, said Isaac, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?

That question must have broke daddy's heart, mustn't it? What can he say? We know, don't we, where the offering is? We know that Abraham knows where the offering is to you. We both know the answer, but look, are they the same answer? We know that Isaac is the offering, but look at verse eight, Abraham answered. What does he say? God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.

And again, how could he have said that without breaking down? But why does he say it? He knows why he's going, doesn't he? He knows what must be done. Is it only again to spare him from saying what he has to do? Tuck that away. Tuck that away. Notice that that is the last thing that either of them say before they get there. They go on in silence. And when they finally reach the place God told Abraham to go, Abraham built an altar. He arranged the wood. See, the text has slowed down so much. It's almost painful, isn't it? We can't look away from the detail of the text. And only then, when everything else had been done, he bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar on top of the wood.

And he didn't simply take a knife, but reached out his hand. Just let it play in your mind's eye. Reached out his hand and closed his fingers around the knife and took the knife to slay his son.

[16 : 55] Now, let me pause there and ask, what do we think is going to happen next? It's a difficult question because we've read the story. But maybe a better way to put the question is, what does Abraham think is going to happen next? You know, I asked you to put two things away, just to tuck them away. Do you remember what they were? The back of your mind? Abraham told the servants that they were going to worship and then we will come back to you, father and son. And he told his son, God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering. Now, the question is, did he say those things simply to spare himself having to tell them what he knew had to happen? Or did he say those things because that is what he believed really would happen? That father and son would return and that God would provide?

You remember, this man is not new to God as he has walked with God for 25 years. He has known his God. He has heard God's promise. He's trusted God all these long years. Has it not crossed his mind in the last three days that God must, that he must, must still be faithful to his word, even in and through what he has called him to do? Surely that is all that he's thought about.

It's all that he's agonized about. How do we come out of this, God, and your promise still be intact? How do I go through with this? And you still be the God of covenant love?

And so you know, I don't think he's bluffing in verse 5. I don't think he's bluffing in verse 8. I think that Abraham believes that he and Isaac will go back together and that God will provide for himself another sacrifice. Why would he think that? Is it purely wishful thinking? Well, no. He believes that because now at last, this man trusts God to keep his promise implicitly. If you're not convinced by that, just flick in your Bible to Hebrews chapter 11 verses 17 to 19. Hebrews 11, 17 to 19. Here's the New Testament reflecting on the faith of the Old Testament. Listen to how the Bible reflects on Abraham's faith in this scene. Hebrews 11, 17 says, by faith, Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He had embraced the promises.

He had embraced 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. There's the tension. See it? He is about to do this, though he knows that. How does Abraham resolve this tension in his heart? If you've got it opened, you'll see it. Verse 19, Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead.

[19 : 59] Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead. That, says Hebrews, is what Abraham told himself when he got up that morning and cut the wood and saddled the donkey and set out with the servants and walked with his son and built the altar and made the wood and put his son upon it and took the knife. He told himself, whatever God has called me to do, he will be as good as his word, even if it means that I have to sacrifice my son and he has to raise him from the dead.

Friends, that is a fearful faith. That is a fearful faith. That he held God in such high honor and trusted him so deeply and held his word so tightly that he could not think that God would not be true to his promise.

Whatever he was called to do and whatever it would cost him to do it. I wonder, brothers and sisters, is your faith a fearful faith?

Is yours a faith that fears God in this way? That you stand in awe of God to the point that you would do anything and live in any way that he called you, believing implicitly that he could not fail you?

That he could not lie to you? Have your trials and temptations proved to you yet that your covenant God is that trustworthy? And that even if his plan involves death, even your own death, that he would not stop even at death to keep his word to you in Christ.

[21 : 54] Do you fear God as you put your trust in him? Our faith should be fearful because our God is that faithful. We see that in our third point, a saving provision.

And now we press pause on verse 10, the most dramatic moment, didn't we? The son tied to the altar, his father standing over him with the knife about to fall. But, verse 11, what a relief.

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. We can breathe again, can't we?

Yes, because Isaac is saved, but yes, because God is as good as his word. Abraham believed God could even bring Isaac back from the dead, and so, says Hebrews, in a manner of speaking, he did receive Isaac back from the dead.

[23 : 01] The angel, the Lord cries to Abraham. Twice, doesn't he? There's an urgency in his voice. Notice Abraham replies simply, here I am.

It's the same words he used before. Here I am, Lord. Here I am. Whatever you tell me next, whatever you say, that's okay. I will do it. I trust you with it.

So imagine the relief then and the joy that washed over him when the Lord said, don't touch him. Put the knife down. For all the reasons we said this was a confusing call, it is now a saving provision, isn't it?

Praise God that he is not the kind of God that delights in sacrifices like this, but he hates the spilling of innocent blood. Praise God that he does not separate Isaac from his parents in this terrible way, but he gives him back to them.

Praise God that he has not slain his promise on the altar of his glory, but he was faithful to his promise by rescuing this promised son from death.

[24 : 11] Praise God. He has proved himself faithful, hasn't he? And in so doing, Abraham's faith in him is completely vindicated. That is the test.

His belief that Isaac would live to see the other side of this sacrifice, it was not a bluff. It was completely true. Abraham's trust is in the right place.

And that is what the angel of the Lord says, isn't it? Now I know that you fear God. Now that is evident, not only to God, but to us, isn't it? Your trust has been proved.

And in some ways, the story could end there, couldn't it? We've had the setting, we've had the problem, we've had the resolution. The point has been proved. We've seen who God is, what faith in him is.

We've seen what trusting his promise looks like, but that's still not the end, is it? Because what happens? The Lord provides another to take Isaac's place on the altar.

[25 : 14] Now many a powerful sermon has been preached, drawing out the poignancy of father and son going up the mountain together. As if in Abraham and Isaac, we were meant to see God the father and God the son going up to the cross.

But is that where Genesis shows us Christ in this story? Is Abraham supposed to represent God to us here? Or is God playing himself in this drama?

It seems, doesn't it, not to add up to say that Abraham is standing in for God and Isaac for Jesus. But that is not to say that we don't see Christ on this page.

Where do we see a sacrifice? Where do we see a substitution? Where do we see a lamb slain? Where does Abraham see those things?

Look with him. Abraham looked up and there in the thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over, took the ram, and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son.

[26 : 21] So Abraham called that place the Lord will provide. There is God providing the sacrifice that sets us free from sin and death. What did Abraham say?

God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering. And he did. And he has. Friends, Abraham trusted God beyond doubt that he would provide a lamb in place of his son to take his place.

He trusted beyond doubt that God was faithful to save his son by the death of a sacrifice that he would provide. And so for us, trusting God's promise is no different today.

God has promised to redeem us from death by himself providing a sacrifice. Here we see in this family a shadow of that reality.

But we look at Christ on the cross and we see the real thing. Behold on the cross the Lamb of God. God's very own Lamb given to take away the sins of the world.

[27 : 33] There is God's provision for us. There it is. There is the ram caught in the thicket by its horns. There is our sacrifice crowned with thorns and nailed to the wood in the place of all who would trust in him who were destined to die but now live because God is faithful.

There on the cross is the yes and amen to God's covenant promise made so long before. And that relief and that joy that washed over Abraham to hear the voice of God cry out to him here is another.

Well that relief and joy is the same that washes over us but infinitely so as we look at the cross and see the sacrifice that has freed us from death by taking our place there.

The sacrifice that God himself gave in love for us his children. And how is it that we are freed by that sacrifice? Well how else we receive this rescue through nothing more or less than by faith in our faithful God and his word.

Abraham trusted that promise of God from far off but we have something better God's promise fulfilled in the cross of Christ. And friends that is what it means to trust this faithful God and his unfailing word simply this that we put our trust in his son our sacrifice Jesus today and his death in our place on the cross and that is it.

[29 : 10] we put our trust in a faithful God to keep his word and in the sacrifice he has provided for us. God was able even to raise him from the dead wasn't he?

So now our savior lives forever to bless all the families of the earth by his death and through his death to redeem us from death. See the cross proves that our trust could not be better placed today.

There is nowhere better to set your hope than in this God and the sacrifice he has given. And that leaves us finally and more briefly with an unshakable promise.

The passage ends with God confirming his promise still further doesn't it? 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've 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 the sand on the 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.

I won't tire you again by showing you the three M's of this covenant here but you can see them yourself as you glance through to multiply him to magnify him to make him a mediator of God's blessing to the world and all through his faith in this covenant God to stay true to this word as he has proved himself to be in this test.

[30 : 56] And so friends we are left with this question that we began with what is your trust in the covenant God today the God of Abraham is he who you trust to see you through tomorrow?

What would you not trust him with? What could he call you to that you would not go through with for trust in this God? What could he put you through that you would not trust him to bring you through in Christ?

What could he give you that you could not look at the cross and say that the Lord himself has provided a sacrifice for my eternal salvation therefore I can trust him implicitly with the rest?

He promises, doesn't he? But through an offspring through a child through a descendant of this man and his family he would bless all nations on earth.

And we today gather on the ground of that promise fulfilled don't we? At the foot of the cross that one chosen son that one promised son who took our place that we might not be cursed but be blessed by the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[32 : 16] Is that not sufficient for us brothers and sisters to trust him with tomorrow? With this week? With next week? With this year? With this life? With our death?

He is sufficient. He is trustworthy. He is faithful to the end. Let's pray together now. Our God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ we praise you for you are faithful.

We praise you that there is no circumstance that there is no call that you are not trustworthy that you are not our rock our refuge that you do not purpose to save us to bring us through and to prove yourself faithful to us.

Father we pray that you would help us and help our hearts Lord to trust the promise of your word to trust your promise fulfilled in Christ. Lord pray for anyone here Lord who as yet has not rested their trust in him.

Oh Lord by your faithfulness by your love draw them to him we pray. Lord and for those of us who do have our trust resting in him today we pray that we might live in the fear of you Lord that we might trust you not only with our souls but therefore with our lives not only with our deaths but with everything in between.

[33 : 48] Lord we pray that our trust in you would be whole and complete. Our Father how we thank you that you without needing to prove yourself to us again and again do so we pray for we ask in Jesus name Amen.