

Lesson 5: Genesis 16-26 Abraham 2

Introduction

We are continuing on with Abraham and four covenant events in his life. In our last lesson we considered the promise made in Genesis 12 and the covenant cut in Genesis 15. In this lesson we will address the covenant sign in Genesis 17 and the covenant test in Genesis 22. To set us up for the covenant sign and the covenant test, I want to follow-up on the theme of faith we addressed in our last lesson.

The weak or human side of Abraham's faith came out in Genesis 15. Twice God restated his promise from Genesis 12 and twice Abraham questioned God: "How will I have a son?" and "How will I get land?" The words and behavior of a person can be interpreted in various ways. Is this the cry of faith or is this the loss of faith? Often biblical narrative leaves us to interpret the state of a person's heart as the story unfolds. What does God say? What does God do? What are the consequences? The unfolding of the narrative gives insight into the state of a person's heart and mind. In Genesis 15, God's response of encouragement to Abraham suggests that Abraham's questions came from a place of belief.

In this particular case, we get additional help from Scripture. Paul wrote in Romans 4:19-21,

"And without becoming weak in faith [Abraham] contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb; yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief, but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, being fully assured that what he had promised, he was able also to perform."

Now, Paul's personal opinion, as a believer, scholar, theologian, missionary, would certainly be worth considering. Paul's opinion recorded in one of his New Testament letters is even more valuable. This is inspired interpretation. This is no longer merely Paul's opinion. This is God's perspective on Abraham's faith communicated through Paul. The Bible is our first and best commentary on the Bible.

Paul says a couple of things here. First, he says that Abraham was able to contemplate the hopelessness of his situation without "becoming weak in faith." Second, he says that it is "with respect to the promise of God [that] he did not waver in unbelief." And third he says that Abraham was not static in his faith, but "grew strong in faith." Abraham's faith journey does not give us the formula of faith because there is no exact formula. This is individual relationship with God, not chemistry. His life does not give us a formula. It gives us a model to consider and learn from.

As interpreters we have the challenge of considering how the life of Abraham matches up with these words from Paul. It is not always an obvious match. Paul seems to present a stronger picture than I see in Genesis. Abraham questions God. Abraham presents his wife with half-truths to protect himself. Abraham gets Hagar pregnant to produce an heir. This all looks like weakness of faith to me.

On the other hand, Abraham picked up and moved from a safe place to an unknown place based only on the word he got from God. He consistently built altars at which to worship. When Lot's eyes look for the best part of the land, Abraham's eyes look to God. When the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah offer Abraham reward, Abraham refuses, saying, "I have sworn to Yahweh, 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 (Genesis 14:22).'"

This last one is especially revealing to me because it happens right before the questioning in Genesis 15. Abraham's faith comes out in his public response. Then when it is just he and God, Abraham let's out his emotion. He is courageous before men and vulnerable before God. That sounds like real faith to me.

And this is a great question to consider. Go through the life of Abraham and ask, “What does faith look like when it is worked out through a life journey with God? What human ups and downs should be expected? What does it mean to stay true?”

Here are a couple of thoughts from me. The first point from Paul is that Abraham did not become weak in the faith as a result of the hopelessness surrounding him. This does not mean that Abraham was not afraid. And it does not mean that he did not make some bad choices. It does not mean that he did not sin. I think we can say that Abraham showed human weakness, even if he never gave up on the promise. He never weakened his commitment to the core truth God had communicated. “You will have a promised child. And through him the nations will be blessed.”

Even with the lies about Sarah and sleeping with Hagar, while these events communicate sin and fear and fleshly independence, it is possible that they still come from a core conviction about the promise. And though implied by the original call and the repeated mentioning of her barrenness, God did not specifically say the son must be through Sarah, at least not before the sin with Hagar. Sex with Hagar is not necessarily a denial of the promise but possibly faith in the promise exercised through fleshly independence. Abraham acts on his own to bring about the promise he believes in.

Paul’s second point emphasizes that it is with “respect to the promise” that Abraham does not waver. There are all kinds of things in life that I worry about. And I sin. And I try to help God out. And there is a lot I am not sure about. And I think in spite of all that I can say that I have not wavered in this one thing. Jesus is my hope. I have no other hope. Jesus is my anchor. The gospel is my touchstone.

Do you know what it means to say something is a touchstone? I think we usually mean it is the thing which keeps us grounded to reality. Literally, a touchstone is a type of stone used for testing the purity of precious metals such as gold or silver. When gold is rubbed across a touchstone it leaves a streak that reveals the quality of the gold.

For me, there is so much I am not sure about but the gospel of Jesus, that is not one of those things. It is at the very center of my core conviction. I filter all other truth through the gospel. It keeps me grounded. It helps me test other beliefs. It’s what I always come back to. It’s my touchstone.

In Abraham’s walk with God, the revealed truth of the promise provided a touchstone for him to test all other experiences. The promise helped him evaluate his own faith approach. The use of the touchstone is not an exact science. It is a hard task to walk through life with God. Often, we do not see our mistakes until after we have made them, and then we re-evaluate. Abraham kept coming back to Yahweh and the promise. This is what he knew to be true.

And it is worth noticing the third thing Paul said, “Abraham grew in faith.” Saying that he was not weak in faith and did not waver in regard to the promise is not the same thing as saying that he started off as a spiritual giant. Abraham began with faith, but he also had a lot of room to grow in faith. Sometimes he fixed his eyes on Yahweh and correctly applied the promise. At other times he failed badly but still came back to Yahweh and re-evaluated. In the same way for us, being committed in faith to Jesus and the gospel does not mean we understand half of everything correctly or will always choose to walk in the Spirit. Even as we cling to Jesus, we still make mistakes and still have room, like Abraham, to grow in faith.

Without denying his struggles, Paul recognizes that Abraham had a core commitment to Yahweh and his promise. And while insisting that Abraham never gave up on that promise, Paul allows that Abraham grew over time.

Let’s turn now to the next two covenant moments in the life of Abraham to see how his faith continues to play out in relationship with God.

Genesis 17

Considering the covenant sign in Genesis 17 we still do not have the promised son. We have seen Abraham struggle to understand how God is going to give him that son. God here makes it crystal

clear that the promised son is to come from Sarah. At the same time, God gives Abraham a specific stipulation to go along with the covenant that has already been cut.

The importance of this encounter is highlighted literarily through the elaborate structure of the account. Like Genesis 15 there is a pattern to the text. The pattern here is chiasitic, meaning that the first and last section of the text are parallel. The second and second to last section are parallel. The third and third to last section are parallel. And so on. Genesis 17 has 6 parallel frames with a middle section.

The structure of the text

I'll read just the first 3 verses to give us an idea of the text and then explain the structure. This is Genesis 17:1-3.

¹ Now when Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; Walk before Me, and be blameless. ² "I will establish My covenant between Me and you, And I will multiply you exceedingly." ³ Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying,

The beginning frame and ending frame in verse 1a and verses 24-25 both refer to Abraham and his age of 99 years. The end adds that Ishmael is 13 years. The second frame is in 1b where the text says, "the Lord appeared to Abram" and is parallel to 22b where we are told, "God went up from Abraham." The third frame is in 1c where it says, "and said to him" which is parallel to 22 where we are told God "finished talking with him." All three elements come together in this way, "When Abraham was 99 the Lord appeared and spoke to him." And then notice how the same three things are said in reverse order at the end. "God stopped talking and went up from Abraham when he was 99."

So far this is just setting the stage in a stylistically pleasing way. Abraham's age lets us know this was 24 years after the promise was made and 1 year before his 100th birthday. Since we are also told that Ishmael is 13 and Ishmael was not around in Genesis 15, we know the covenant sign is being given at least 13 years and 9 months after covenant was cut. It is also made clear to us that this is one of those special moments in the life of Abraham when God appears and God speaks.

- A Abraham 99 (1a)
- B The LORD appears (1b)
- C God speaks (1c)
- D First speech (1d-2)
- E Abraham falls on his face (3a)
- F Second speech (name-change, nations, kings) (4-8)
- X THIRD SPEECH (9-14)
- F' Fourth speech (name-change, nations, kings) (15-16)
- E' Abraham falls on his face (17)
- D' Fifth speech (19-21)
- C' God ceases speaking (22a)
- B' God goes up from him (22b)
- A' Abraham 99 and Ishmael 13 (24-25) (Wenham, *WBC Genesis 16-50*, 17)

The fourth frame gets us into the meat of the dialogue. There are going to be five short speeches separated by Abraham falling on his face in worship. The first speech in 1d-2 parallels the fifth speech in 19-21. Then we have Abraham falling on his face in both 3a and 17. Then the second speech in 4-8 parallels the fourth speech in 15-16. And speech number 3 comes at the center of the structure in 9-14.

So, this is what we have in the three sets of speeches. Let's go through the three sets of speeches.

Speeches 1 and 5

In speeches 1 and 5 God promises to establish his covenant. First, we have in 1d-2:

"I am God Almighty; Walk before Me, and be blameless. ² "I will **establish My covenant** between Me and you, And I will multiply you exceedingly."

Then we have in 19-21:

¹⁹ But God said, "No, but Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will **establish My covenant** [see, there is that same language] with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. ²⁰ "As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him, and will make him fruitful and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall become the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. ²¹ "But **My covenant I will establish with Isaac**, whom Sarah will bear to you at this season next year."

In this fifth speech God makes very clear that the covenant is through Isaac the son of Sarah. Ishmael will be blessed, but the covenant is with Isaac. Also notice that in the first speech we get the first hint at stipulations in the covenant. In chapter 15 Abraham is passive during the cutting of covenant, and no expectations are placed on him. Here in verse 1 God says, "Walk before me and be blameless." Those are expectations and we are going to come back to that.

Speeches 2 and 4

I will let you read speeches 2 and 4 later for yourself. They occur in 4-8 and 15-16. The parallelism is very apparent. In the second speech God changes Abram's name which is "exalted father" to Abraham which is "father of a multitude." God also promises that nations and kings will come from him. Then in the fourth speech we have the same, but in relation to Sarah. Her name is changed from Sarai to Sarah, both of which mean princess. And she shall be mother of nations and kings.

We have this development from the first half of the chiasm to the second half. The first half in verses 1-8 reaffirm the promises made to Abraham with the added call to "walk before me and be blameless." The second half, starting in verse 15, now makes absolutely clear that the promise will be fulfilled through Sarah's future son Isaac.

Speech 3

The third speech takes center place in the narrative. This is where we get the sign of circumcision. This is the first specific stipulation of the Abrahamic covenant. Let's read part of that speech, verses 9-11.

⁹ God said further to Abraham, "Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰ "This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹ "And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you.

Circumcision is not just one of many commands. Circumcision is a special command. It is a sign. We should then ask, "In what way does circumcision serve as a sign?" We could understand circumcision as a sign that marks male Jews physically. We could also understand circumcision as a ritual, providing some kind of action by which Jewish parents can signal their commitment to covenant relationship with God. These are both ways by which circumcision serves as a sign. It is a physical mark and a ritual action. But there is more. Circumcision also communicates symbolically.

We have learned that covenants are not made. They are cut. Circumcision is a cutting ceremony. Most male boys will grow up, leave father and mother, cleave to their wife, and become head of their own household. And whenever one of these potential heads of a household is born, his parents make an oath on his behalf. Because this has to do with heads of households and future descendants, this oath is connected to the male reproductive organ. And being the oath of covenant, it is a curse. Through this cutting of covenant, the parents of the current household are proclaiming

on this head of a future household, if he grows up to break covenant with Yahweh, to turn his back on God and walk away from him, then let him be cut off from the covenant community and let his seed, his descendants, be cut off. That's the cutting of covenant. Circumcision is a calling of a curse down on the descendants of those children who would walk away from God.

Along with the symbolic of curse of cutting. We later learn there is a symbolic blessing. It is the idea of having a circumcised heart. It is the cutting off of the sinful human flesh, so that we might walk with God out of a heart of love for him. Moses uses that language of the circumcised heart in Deuteronomy 30:6. This idea of blessing and curse is not foreign to us who are under the New Covenant. Baptism symbolizes both death and life, both curse and blessing. Going under the water we are baptized into the death of Christ. We are united with him in the curse that he took for us. So, we are crucified with him in his death. Coming back up out of the water symbolizes the new life that we now live in him, the blessing of new life.

The Two Questions of Covenant

Before moving on to the covenant test, let's address that issue I said I would come back to. We could jump right into Genesis 17, without considering what has already taken place, and read these words, "Walk before me, and be blameless. And I will establish my covenant between me and you, and I will multiply you exceedingly." And we could conclude that this is a works-based covenant. That's what this sounds like. If you walk before me in a way that is blameless, then I will establish my covenant and then I will multiply you. But if we came to that conclusion, we would be making the very normal mistake of confusing the two questions of covenant. The first of which has already been established for us in the earlier cutting of covenant moment in Genesis 15.

The first question of covenant is, "What makes me acceptable to be in covenant relationship with a holy God?" God could answer that question with a whole range of stipulations, things we have to do to be acceptable. It could just be the ten commandments. But he did not do that. What stipulations did Abraham have to meet in Genesis 15 before righteousness was reckoned to him? None. Not one. Abraham was dead asleep, completely passive, when God himself walked through the cut sacrifices. God proclaimed that he would take on himself the curse of broken covenant. Abraham's part was simply to believe in God. He believed and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.

Paul tells us in Romans 4 that we should not miss the distance between Genesis 15 and Genesis 17. God intentionally waited over a decade to communicate covenant stipulations. This is Romans 4:9-11, "For we say, 'Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.' How then was it reckoned? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised; and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised." The question of acceptability or righteousness before a holy God is accomplished 100% by grace. Stipulations added later, like circumcision, are not requirements for getting in or staying in covenant relationship with God. This is Paul's point when he goes on to say in Romans 4:14-15:

¹⁴ For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified; ¹⁵ for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, there also is no violation.

Paul is arguing that anytime law is a condition, whenever stipulations are required, humans fail. The law will bring wrath. That is guaranteed. You will not live up to God's holiness. If the requirement is faith plus law then "faith is made void and the promise is nullified." A promise given to sinful human beings based on their ability to be good enough is a null promise. The conditions cannot be fulfilled. We need a way where there is no law involved. So, Paul says in the next verse,

¹⁶ For this reason [the promise is] by faith, in order that *it may be* in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants.

We must not confuse the two questions of covenant. The first question of what makes us acceptable or righteous is grace alone, 100% grace. There is then a second question, which is, "Being accepted

into covenant relationship with God, how then should I live.” This is the question that Genesis 17:1 applies to. Being in covenant relationship with God, Abraham is now being told how God expects him to live out that covenant. God expects Abraham to walk with him and to pursue blamelessness. And within the covenant relationship the believer’s obedience does matter. Failing to walk with God affects our experience of life with God. Our behavior affects the blessing that comes from pursuing life as life is meant to be pursued. I can stick ice cream in my ear, but I cannot rightly be mad at the ice cream man if I don’t like the feeling ice cream in my ear or if I get sick as a result. I am not using the blessing of ice cream as it was intended to be used. Blessing comes from doing life as life is meant to be done. And that has to do with walking with God and pursuing blamelessness. If I do not walk through life with God, I cannot blame him that I miss out on the intended blessings of life. The fulness of life is found in God. If I turn another way, that’s on me.

On top of that, I cannot blame God for disciplining me when I stubbornly insist on living in a way that dishonors him and hurts other people. Even when I am firm in my relationship with God by grace, I can still grieve my heavenly father just as any child can. But these are second question issues. Assuming that I have already placed my faith in God and entered into relationship with him, these are issues about “How I we live out this relationship I already have?” Failure to live out the covenant cannot be the basis for acceptance into the covenant. None of us would last out the day.

Let’s shift our attention now to that final covenant event in Abraham’s life in Genesis 22.

Genesis 22

Though, right after the covenant sign is given, God promises that Isaac will be born in a year, Abraham’s life does not continue on as one smooth blessing. After the guarantee of Isaac’s birth, Sodom and Gomorrah are destroyed. That might have just been a somber moment of justice on evil people, but it turns out to be personally tragic for Abraham when the wife of his nephew Lot dies. Tragedy turns to scandal when, in desperation, Lot’s daughters trick him to commit incest. After that we get Abraham’s second time of lying about Sarah. Then there is conflict in the family as Sarah turns against Hagar and her son Ishmael. Whoever said the life of faith would be easy? All this struggle, all this struggle and mess certainly could have led Abraham to re-evaluate his perspective on the original promise of good news given in Genesis 12. By the time we get to chapter 22, I can imagine Abraham looking back over 35 years of walking with God and seeing the promise of good news with very different eyes. It is the same promise. But Abraham is not the same man. His commitment to the promise continues unwavering, but with much deeper appreciation of what he has in his relationship with God.

At the end of Genesis 21, we find Abraham at Beersheba. He has made a covenant with Abimelech. He has dug a well. He has planted a tree. That sounds to me like a man ready to settle down. He even calls on the name of Yahweh in a new way, calling him the Everlasting God. He has passed through so much. And now he seems to have found a place of peace. But before he settles down in a place of rest, God has something for Abraham to do, a test. The command comes in 22:1-4.

22:1-4

¹ Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” ² He said, “Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you.” ³ So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and Isaac his son; and he split wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. ⁴ On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from a distance.

I cannot imagine God giving the Abraham of Genesis 12 the command to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham would have thought Yahweh truly wanted child sacrifice. But this Abraham of Genesis 22 has walked with God over 30 years. He has come to know the character of God and has learned one thing for sure about the promise child. It is Isaac. God allowed Abraham to struggle towards this realization

until with the giving of the covenant sign, he made it absolutely clear, the child will come from Sarah and his name will be Isaac.

Abraham would have taken this command to sacrifice Isaac, and he would have tested it against the touchstone of the promise. The command would have been filtered through that core conviction. We have seen Abraham struggle with God. He questioned God prior to the cutting of covenant. He asked God to accept Ishmael. He pleaded with God to spare Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham does not have a problem interacting with and arguing with God. But here, when asked to give his son Isaac as a burnt offering, he doesn't say anything. He doesn't ask for God to spare Isaac. Why not? Abraham seems to be in tune with God's leading here. He trusts God in the promise. So, he is able to simply obey. Verses 5-8 give more insight into Abraham's mind.

22:5-8

⁵ Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go over there; and we will worship and return to you." ⁶ Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son, and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. ⁷ Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." And he said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" ⁸ Abraham said, "God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together.

Abraham knows that he is coming off the mountain with Isaac. He tells the servants to wait until he comes back with the boy. Fortunately, if we are not sure that we are interpreting the narrative correctly here, Hebrews 11:17-19 gives us another one of those inspired interpretations so that we can know for sure Abraham's state of mind. It says this,

¹⁷ By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; ¹⁸ *it was he* to whom it was said, "IN ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS SHALL BE CALLED." ¹⁹ He considered that God is able to raise *people* even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type.

I do not think this means that Abraham proceeded on without any worry or fear or emotional struggle. Jesus knew the joy set before him, and yet, his sweat turned to blood as he anguished in the garden the night before his death. I expect that Abraham's deep trust in God existed in tension with his love as a father and the struggle of doing what was required of him.

Abraham placed his faith in the character of God and the promise of God. That trust was well-placed. Listen to verses 8-14.

22:8-14

⁹ Then they came to the place of which God had told him; and Abraham built the altar there and arranged the wood, and bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ¹² He said, "Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me." ¹³ Then Abraham raised his eyes and looked, and behold, behind *him* a ram caught in the thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram and offered him up for a burnt offering in the place of his son. ¹⁴ Abraham called the name of that place The LORD Will Provide, as it is said to this day, "In the mount of the LORD it will be provided."

God holds off until after Abraham binds Isaac and reaches out to pick up the knife. As a dad, I can only hope that Isaac thought they were role playing, that he never got to the level of fear that his father actually intended to sacrifice him. That's my hope. We are not told, so I'll trust God with that. Whatever God wanted for Isaac, I am sure he accomplished for Isaac.

With Abraham, I see God doing at least three things here. First, this is another monument of grace in the Law. During the cutting of covenant, God took the curse on himself. That was our first monument. Here again, though we each deserve to die for our sins, God is showing us that he will provide a substitute. This is a symbol of the atonement. It is a monument of grace.

I think God is doing something else here as well. He could have communicated the idea of a substitute without requiring Abraham to be so emotionally invested in the symbol. There are other ways, like putting the blood of a lamb on your doorposts. But God set up this test in a way that would bring all the father love of Abraham to the forefront. Even believing his child could be raised from the dead, Abraham comes to the point of emotional anguish of actually having to sacrifice his own son. He is right at the edge. I believe God set this up to allow Abraham to somehow be lifted up into the experience of God. When God the Father walked through the covenant sacrifice and said, "Let me take the curse," he had already agreed with God the Son that God the Son must die. God's promise of grace is free to us, but it comes at incredibly cost to him. Grace requires a sacrifice that cuts deep into the father-heart of God. Through this experience Abraham has gained insight into the heart of the one who truly must give up his son in order to redeem people.

Along with the symbol of grace and Abraham's participation in the heart of God, there is also a third thing God is doing here; the test. Let's read the rest of the passage, 15-19.

22:15-18

¹⁵ Then the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, ¹⁶ and said, "By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. ¹⁸ "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice." ¹⁹ So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham lived at Beersheba.

God affirms the covenant, saying "Because you have done this thing...indeed I will greatly bless you..." So, we ask, "Is the promise now conditional?" God promised to Abraham in Genesis 12 that he would be a blessing. He promised him in Genesis 15 that his descendants would be as the stars in heaven and the sand on the seashore. Are we not being told that is all conditional? Would God not have blessed Abraham if Abraham refused to offer Isaac or if his will faltered at the last moment? If he couldn't pick up the knife. I do not believe so. We can take the idea of a test in two different ways. A test can be an ordeal that must be passed through as a condition for something else. Or a test can be used to reveal the true nature of something. I do not believe the promise that God made with Abraham was conditional on his ability to pass this test. I believe that this test was designed to prove or reveal the true nature of the faith Abraham already had. It is the kind of test Peter talks about in the first chapter of his first letter. This is verses 6-7,

⁶ In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, ⁷ so that the proof of your faith, *being* more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ;

Peter speaks of a faith that is tested as you would test ore by the fire. Fire burns away impurity and shows you if there is any gold in the ore. God's test of Abraham's faith reveals gold. It reveals the faith that God recognized years previously in Genesis 15:6. That faith was present then when God declared Abraham righteous by faith. The point of this test is not to see if Abraham has faith, but to reveal, to draw out, the saving faith he already possesses.

As we have considered many of the events in Abraham's life, we have had reason to wonder about his faith. But now, through this test, what we thought we were seeing is affirmed. This is a man whose faith with respect to the promise of God has not wavered. Through the ups and downs, the boldness, the weakness, the success, the sin, the good choices, the bad, he really did believe in that

core message of the promise. God was his anchor and the promise was his touchstone. And he grew in that faith. We see that here in this unique moment of testing. And he saw it himself. Abraham himself was affirmed in his own belief through this test. He sees his faith shine like gold. He is affirmed that what God has been doing through him all these years is real.

God is doing a similar work in you. He is calling you through your weakness, your courage, your fear, your sin to hold onto Jesus as your anchor and to employ his gospel as your touchstone, your test for everything else. This is the one thing we know for sure to be true; Jesus and his gospel. As we hold onto him, there will be times when we God grants us a test, so that we can see for sure that we do indeed believe. We pass through it, and we see that his work in us is real. Place your faith in his promise to you that you are saved and made acceptable by the grace of Jesus. Believe that gospel. Believe in Jesus. Then walk with him pursuing the life he has designed for you, and you cannot help but be changed.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as you read Genesis 17? What do you notice as interesting or important or strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. What do you make of Abraham laughing and crying out for God to accept Ishmael as the promised child in Genesis 17:17-18? And what do you make of God's comments to Sarah regarding her laughter in 18:9-15? How do you see human reaction mixed with faith and doubt working out in these two situations?
3. Abraham calls Sarah his sister again in chapter 20, this time to a ruler in Canaan, Abimelech. Does this contradict that idea that Abraham grew over the years in faith? How do you understand this repetition of weakness?
4. What stands out to you as you read Genesis 22? What do you notice as interesting or important or strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
5. How do you understand God's words in 16-17, "...because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed..."? Was the blessing conditional on Abraham's obedience? What would Abraham have missed out on if he did not obey God in sacrificing Isaac?