

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL

Pastor Troy Schreiner www.victorylutheran.org

Worship Series: *Rethinking Religion*

Service Theme: *Rethinking Tests, Trials, and Temptations*

Sermon Theme: *Blessed by Tests*

February 18, 2024— Genesis 22:1-18

“Some time later God tested Abraham. ‘Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and sacrifice him as a burnt offering.’”

“At once the Spirit sent [Jesus] out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan.” In both of

those readings today, we see godly people facing heartbreaking, gut-wrenching tests and temptations. And maybe you noticed that in both, God is actively involved. God is the one who tests Abraham. And it's God the Holy Spirit who sends Jesus out into the wilderness for forty days of deprivation to square off against Satan's temptations. In both accounts, God seems like the bad guy, doesn't he?

Which fits well with the assumptions that many people from many different religions have. Like the karma system from Buddhism and Hinduism, which teaches that people who do good will be rewarded with good things, and those who do bad will be punished with bad. Or the tenet of many religions, like Islam or Judaism, that you have to perform certain practices and meet certain criteria to be blessed by God, otherwise you'll receive his wrath. Even some Christian denominations teach works righteousness, that we have to do enough good works to earn God's love and salvation. Or the Prosperity Gospel, which teaches that if your faith is strong enough, God will always make you happy, healthy, and wealthy. Maybe while enduring trials, tests, and temptations, you've even wondered, “Is God punishing me for something I did wrong?” All those different religious assumptions espouse the same basic idea: trials, tests, and temptations are always bad; punishment from God for not doing enough good.

But this morning, let's follow the lead of our sermon series and ***Rethink Trials, Tests, and Temptations***. Is it possible, that instead of

punishments from God, trials, tests, and temptations are actually something God allows...for our good? That we're **Blessed by Tests**?

But let's be real. It's hard to discern any blessing out of what God commands Abraham, isn't it? Sacrifice your son? You can even feel God twisting the knife deeper and deeper into Abraham's heart with each subsequent phrase. ***“Your son. Your only son. Whom you love. Isaac.”*** There was no mistaking what a gut punch this test would be for Abraham! It would be for any of us with kids or grandkids. “What if God told me to sacrifice them?” But for Abraham, this test was on another level.

This wasn't the first time God had tested Abraham. About 30 years earlier, God told Abraham to leave his homeland and extended family, pack up his wife and his possessions, and move to a distant unknown land that God would reveal to him later. Can you imagine? But Abraham trusted and went.

About 5 years later, God tested Abraham again, promising to turn Abraham into a great nation. That might not seem like a test, until you realize that Abraham was a childless old man with an old, barren wife. Yet, God promised that they would have a son who would make Abraham's descendants into a great nation. And Abraham trusted. Then God tested them again, making them wait for 25 years until the now 100 year-old Abraham and 90-year-old Sarah welcomed their miraculous son, Isaac. Just as God promised.

But that's exactly why this was such an arduous test for Abraham. Why would God do this? How could God possibly keep all the promises he'd made to Abraham, which were inextricably connected to Isaac, if Abraham had to kill him? Not only would Abraham be chopping down the physical family tree God had promised, but he'd also be cutting off himself, his family, and the whole world from the salvation God promised through the Savior that would come from Abraham's family line!

How would Abraham respond to this test from God? And in line with our “rethinking,” how could God use this test to bless Abraham?

There's no way Abraham slept much that night. Yet, we're told, ***“Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two 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.”*** As tempting as it must have been to drag his feet and delay their departure, Abraham set out early the next morning. The region of Moriah where God told him to go was about 50 miles away, a three-day journey. That made this test even more excruciating! Not only did God command Abraham to do this unimaginable task, he forced him to wrestle with it for an agonizing three days of travel.

Finally, on the third day, the dreaded mountain loomed before them. How tempting it must have been to cling to his son and run in the opposite direction. But instead, Abraham placed the wood for the sacrifice on his son's back, telling the two servants, ***“We will worship and then we will come back to you.”***

Don't gloss over the pronouns Abraham uses here. WE will worship, and then WE will come back to you. If Abraham obeyed God's command, it wouldn't be “we” coming back. But Abraham's words communicated the faith in his heart. Abraham trusted that somehow, God was going to do something to keep the promises he'd made to Abraham through Isaac. Thousands of years later, the author of the book of Hebrews gives us a glimpse into Abraham's heart. ***“By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead.”***

In Abraham's heart of faith, it was more likely that God would bring his son back to life-- something that hadn't ever happened in the Bible before this point-- than that God would fail to keep his promises to Abraham. So Abraham and Isaac climbed the mountain, trusting that, ***“God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering.”***

And there, on Mount Moriah, where a millennium later, King Solomon built the grandiose Temple for God, Abraham built a simple altar. He arranged the wood on it, tied up Isaac, and placed him on top. Then, likely with trembling hands and tear-stained cheeks, Abraham raised the knife to slay his son. When suddenly, the angel of the LORD called

out from heaven, ***“Abraham! Abraham! Do not lay a hand on the boy. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”***

Then, just as Abraham trusted, the LORD provided a substitutionary sacrifice—a ram caught by its horns in the thicket, which Abraham ***“sacrificed as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide.”***

Let's apply this account to our rethinking of trials, tests, and temptations. At first blush, this test might seem like some kind of punishment on Abraham, like we tend to assume about trials, tests, and temptations. But we can see how God was actually using it to bless Abraham. Obviously, in the end God spares Isaac. But even before the end, God was blessing Abraham through this test.

What did this test force Abraham to do? It forced him to remember and reflect. During that sleepless night before they set out, God's previous promises must have been running through Abraham's mind constantly. During the three days of “windshield time” as they traveled to Moriah, Abraham must have constantly wrestled to apply those promises to what God commanded. And you can bet that throughout the whole ordeal, Abraham was in constant communication with God; calling out to God in prayer to remove the command, or carry it out in a different way, or at the very least, to give for the spiritual strength he'd need to obey. Such a test gave Abraham the opportunity to apply and exercise his faith and trust in God.

Much like our physical muscles, which get stronger when we stress, strain, and put them to use, test, trials, and temptations allow us to stress, strain, and put to use our spiritual muscles. When everything in life is going really well, it's easy for our spiritual muscles to get flabby and atrophied as we get complacent about our spiritual lives, like spiritual couch potatoes. We know and hear the promises of God, but we don't take them to heart, because it seems we don't need to apply them to our lives. But when, trials, tests, and temptations force us to wrestle with, remember, and reflect on God's Word and promises, we rely on them, and cling to them like never before!

This test was also another opportunity for Abraham to see God's faithfulness in keeping his promises. As the all-knowing God, who has known all things for eternity, he gave this test to Abraham already knowing what the outcome would be. This wasn't a test for God to see whether Abraham would be faithful, it was a test to allow Abraham to see the extent of his trust and love for God, and to see God's love and faithfulness to him! And having come out on the other side seeing God's faithfulness, think how much better Abraham was able to trust in God and his promises from this point on! This test wasn't for God's benefit. It was for Abraham's!

And so are the trials, tests, and temptations which God allows us to face. I know some of your Mount Moriah's, and some I don't. Some of you are still climbing the mountain, unsure of what's going to happen once you get to the top. Others have already come back down the mountain, reflecting on how God used that test for your good. Others are still back at camp, because God hasn't revealed the test you'll face just yet. Or probably, you're in a mix of all three circumstances at once.

But when we change our thinking, and see that God is blessing us through these tests, then like Abraham told Isaac as they climbed Mount Moriah, ***"The LORD will provide."*** Abraham didn't know how, but he trusted in faith that the LORD would. And sometimes that's all we can say when we face trials, tests, and temptations in our lives. "I'm not sure how. I'm not sure when. But I know the LORD will provide for me even in this, so that he can keep his promises to me." What a beautiful attitude of faith and trust we can have, when we've seen God's faithfulness in providing and keeping his promises!

And ultimately, God has given us no reason to doubt that he will bless us, even through trials, tests, and temptations. Because in both of these readings where God seems to be the bad guy, he's actually providing good for his people. In both readings, God isn't just providing a model for us to follow. He's showing us a substitute, who saves us!

What happens on Mount Moriah drips with foreshadowing of what would happen 2,000 years on a different mountain very nearby—

Mount Calvary. God really was willing to sacrifice his Son, his only Son, whom he loves. Jesus. At Mount Calvary, the Father places the wood for the sacrifice on his son's back. On Mount Calvary, God provides a substitutionary lamb who would be sacrificed so that we are spared. In fact, Scripture tells us that the Angel of the LORD who stopped Abraham from sacrificing Isaac is none other than the Son of God, the pre-incarnate Christ who intercedes for us to the Father by pointing to his perfect obedience and substitutionary sacrifice, so that we are spared. The Christ, who willingly went to battle, deflecting every temptation Satan could throw at him, and came out sinless. Even those temptations God allowed his Son to face were a blessing, as Jesus lives a life of perfect obedience; to be the one who ***"was tempted in every, just as we are, yet was without sin."***

Jesus gives us the reason to rethink trials, tests, and temptations. Because in Jesus, God doesn't allow us to face anything that he wasn't willing to face himself! Can we trust that the God who willingly took our place in the face of the most gut-wrenching trials, tests, and temptations in order to save us, also allows us to face trials, tests, and temptations—not to punish us, but to bless us? We can! Because the LORD will provide. We've seen it before. We'll see it again.

To watch this sermon on YouTube, go to:

[tinyurl.com/mr2zu8xn](https://www.tinyurl.com/mr2zu8xn)