

Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!"

"Here I am," he replied.

² 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 I will show you."

³ Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded 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. ⁴ On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. ⁵ He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you."

⁶ Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, ⁷ 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?"

⁸ Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together.

⁹ When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!"

"Here I am," he replied.

¹² "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."

¹³ Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴ So Abraham called that place The Lord Will Provide. And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided."

¹⁵ The angel of the Lord called to Abraham from heaven a second time ¹⁶ and said, "I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities

of their enemies, ¹⁸ and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.”

“Yahweh yireh,” Abraham said. “The LORD will provide.” That’s what he called the mountain, and I’m guessing he said it with tears of joy in his eyes. After all, when he said those same words to Isaac on the way up the mountain – “God himself will provide the lamb for the offering” – he probably had no idea how true what he said was. He was probably just trying to spare poor Isaac the gory details of what was coming. But God *made* his words come true! The LORD provided a ram caught in the bushes for the burnt offering that day.

But maybe we’re getting a little ahead of ourselves. Because first, Abraham learned that day about something else the LORD provides, and it’s something we should learn, too: The LORD provides tests.

Of course, Abraham didn’t know it was a test at first. God tells us that – but he doesn’t tell Abraham that. So can you imagine how those words must have cut him like a knife and shaken him to the core? **“Abraham,”** God says. **“Here I am,”** Abraham says. **“Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and...sacrifice him as a burnt offering.”** Isaac was so precious to him and Sarah. They had spent 25 years waiting on God’s promise, and when he finally came, he was a miracle baby. Barren Sarah was 90, Abraham 100, when he was born. They were so happy they named him “laughter” – he was the joy of their heart.

But he was more than that. He was also this world’s hope for salvation. Because God had promised Abraham, time and again, he’d send the world a Savior from sin. And he promised he’d do it through Isaac, and none other.

So can you imagine the struggle in Abraham’s heart as he tried to sleep that night? Abraham’s human, like us, and if we’d struggle in that kind of situation, so did he. “Why would God make me wait years for a son, only to take him away from me? How will God keep his promise to save me from sin, if the promise-bearer is dead and burned to ashes?” I think there was a wrestling match in his heart between his love for his God, and his love for his son; between trust in God’s promise, and trust in everything else inside of him – his reason, his emotion – that screamed, “Don’t do this.”

And now you start to see, don’t you? When the Lord provided this test, what was the real sacrifice he wanted? Not just his son...but his heart. What God was really calling Abraham to put on the altar was a heart that loved God more than Isaac, and trusted God more than himself.

We might think God is cruel for providing a test like this. After all, God didn’t need a test to see what was in Abraham’s heart – he’s omniscient. But he gave him one. And he seems to make it as painful as possible: saying **“your only son, the one you love,”** giving him three long

days of journey to wrestle with it. We might question God's motives for dealing with Abraham like this.

But did you notice who didn't question? Abraham. As much as he must have struggled, he doesn't say a word to question God. He doesn't even procrastinate, to see if God will change his mind. He gets up early the next morning and gets to work. He loved God more than his son – the raised knife proved that. He trusted God more than he trusted himself – his words to his servants at the foot of the mountain show that. **“We will worship, and we will come back to you.”** Abraham would kill Isaac. But God would just have to raise him from the dead. Because God promised a Savior through him, and God's promises don't fail.

Would you have done it? If the LORD had provided this test for you, would you have gotten up early the next morning to get right to it? Would you have loved God more than your only son, trusted God enough to tie him to the altar and raise the knife with every intention of letting it fall? It's not a bad question to consider – to gauge our own hearts' devotion to God.

But the truth is it doesn't need to be hypothetical. The LORD still provides tests for us – opportunities for us to love him above all and trust him more than ourselves. And they are sometimes every bit as painful as Abraham's. When God really seems to be twisting the knife, takes from us the things or the people that are nearest and dearest to us...have you loved God enough then to cheerfully say, “I still have you, Lord, and that's all I need?” Trusted him enough to suffer without complaining or second-guessing his wisdom?

But many of these tests are more mundane and everyday. Not as painful, but still a struggle. God calls you to put your spouse before yourself, even if your spouse isn't returning the favor; to love and serve others, even when they aren't loving you back. Do you love God enough to sacrifice yourself like that? To do it cheerfully? Trust his promises to care for you enough to always put others first?

God calls you to give an offering that shows he's first. Do you love him enough to do that, even when it means giving up creature comforts to do so? Trust his promise to provide enough to give, even when your budget is so tight you're not sure how he will provide?

God calls you to make time in worship and his word the most important thing in life. Do you love him enough to do that for you and your kids, even when it means giving up other activities you love? Trust him when he says it's the one thing needed – enough to do it?

You're starting to see, right? The tests might be different, but the struggle is the same. It's the wrestle for your heart's highest love, and your heart's greatest trust – that's the sacrifice God wants, and nothing less. And what we've given is so far less. How many times haven't we failed the tests?

Of course, so did Abraham. Do you remember how he fared in some of the other tests the LORD provided? God tested him with a famine that drove him to Egypt, where instead of trusting God's promises, he lied to save his own skin. God tested him with a 25-year wait for

Isaac's birth, and instead of trusting that promise, he tried to force God's hand by sleeping with his maid-servant. No, Abraham failed tests, too.

And that's why the Lord promised to provide. It's really the high point of this lesson, and it comes right at the end. God says to him, "**I swear by myself...through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed.**" You know what God is promising there, don't you? One day, God would provide one of Isaac's descendants to bless all nations. One day, God would provide from among Isaac's descendants the Savior that Abraham and you and me and all nations need.

And he did. He provided a substitute for you. A substitute who was tested, like you are. Who struggled, like you do. For 40 days, the devil had at him, trying to get him to give up his love and trust in God...such a struggle that he needed angels to come and strengthen him! But a struggle he won, every test perfectly passed...all for you. So his passing record could cover your failures.

And then this substitute went to the cross for you. "Yahweh yireh," Abraham called the mountain, and he couldn't have known just how true his words were. Not just because on that mountain the LORD provided a ram to take Isaac's place on the altar. But because on a rocky outcropping on that same mountain 2000 years later the LORD provided a lamb to take your place on the cross, to suffer the punishment you deserved, to save you from your sins. On the same mountain where a father loved his God so much that he was willing to sacrifice his only son...on that mountain, the Heavenly Father loved you so much that he actually did sacrifice his only Son in your place. On that mountain, the LORD provided you with a Savior, with forgiveness, with eternal life.

It's amazing, when you really think about it. The God whom we have loved so little has loved us so much. The God for whom we are willing to sacrifice so little has sacrificed his best, his only Son, just to forgive the littleness of our heart's devotion. Just so that, in Christ, he could declare us to be people who have passed the test.

When you know this God's love, then you also understand why the LORD provided Abraham with this test in the first place – why he gave him the struggle. It wasn't because he got a kick out of watching him wrestle. It was because he loved him. Just think of it: As he wrestled in his heart, he returned time and again to God's love and promises. And each time he did, the LORD provided. God strengthened his faith, reassured him of his love - really enabled him to pass this test.

And the same is true for you. The daily wrestling match between our love for God and for everything else...between your trust in God and everything inside of you that tells you the opposite...especially those most painful trials when God really twists the knife...know where that leads you, time and again? To the cross, where the LORD provides for you. Forgiveness for your failures. Assures you of his love so big that nothing can separate you from it. Strengthens your trust in him, increases your love for him...

Provides you with a heart more and more like the one he gave Abraham. One that loves and trusts God more and more; one moved to love selflessly and give sacrificially; one that can cheerfully submit to whatever trial he sends us; one more and more willing to give it all up for the one who gave it all up for me. Enabling us to pass the tests with the confidence that, in Christ, we already have.

He called the mountain, "The LORD will provide." May our eyes fill with tears of joy this Lent as we see how in love he already has. May our hearts be filled with the confidence that, in every test, he always will. Amen.