



I am very excited about this sermon today! I believe that God is going to speak a word of truth to you through His word. I've shared the themes of this sermon with people this week and I'm stunned by the reaction. People are talking about it, thinking about it and sharing it with others. And that isn't because of me. My ideas are not worthy of talking about. But God's Spirit has been resonating with this passage of scripture this week in a bunch of peoples' lives. I can't wait to share it with you today.

In our passage of scripture Abraham faces a test and Abraham has a big need. The **test** is the call to sacrifice Isaac. The **need** is for God to somehow save Isaac. What kind of tests have you faced in life? What kind of tests are you facing today? Think of a time when you had a need.

Sometimes our needs are little, sometimes big. Maybe you're underwater on your house mortgage; you're fighting with your neighbor, you're figuring out the transitions in life: a really hard school year, first real job, dating/marriage, really young kids, teenagers, empty nester, death of your parents, a health problem. What kind of tests are you facing today?

God's tests intersect our felt needs. And in that intersection we make a choice: Will I trust God? Is God able to meet my need? Is God willing to meet it? Can I trust God to meet my every need? Not just the obvious easy ones but the ones that seem impossible, like in the video, falling when God isn't there. And how does God use these tests and needs in our lives, clearly something we'd like to avoid, for something grand and beautiful? These are the questions our passage of scripture answers today.

### **An Extreme Test is given: How will Abraham respond to God's test to sacrifice his son?**

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, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about" (Genesis 22:1-2).

This Extreme Test is to sacrifice Isaac as a burnt offering. Abraham is not just saying, "here I am – in this spot, see me?" No, it's much more than that. The Hebrew word here, *hinneni*, communicates predetermined obedience. It's like saying, "Your wish is my command" or from the movie *The Princess Bride*, the famous phrase, "As you wish." It's a phrase of loving devotion and heart-felt

obedience, to do whatever. Abraham is telling God, "I'm yours, whatever you ask, I'll be obedient."

He's not told to "kill" his son; he's told to "sacrifice" him. That's a key distinction. For example, if God would have told Abraham to "go into the tent and kill your son, your only son Isaac," I believe Abraham would have told God "no." Or he would have concluded, I must be hallucinating, because human sacrifice and murder were very different in their culture. Almost every culture in the Ancient Near East practiced human sacrifice, meaning that Abraham was familiar with this custom. Because Abraham is living before any of the Bible has been given, it's fair to say that Abraham has not been taught decisively that human sacrifice is abhorrent to the mind of the Almighty God he follows. Back then, the act of sacrificing the first-born son was done to cover the sin and discretions of the entire family. The idea was this—the fruit of their body for the sin of their soul. Altars were erected everywhere for this purpose. People lived with a keen awareness of their unforgiven sin and desperately wanted to appease the various unknown gods.

Abraham would have been bothered by this call to sacrifice Isaac, like any parent. But his rationale would have been different than ours. He would have been wondering, how can my obedience to this command of God (on one hand) contradict God's promise to me (on the other)? How can God fulfill His covenant to make me the father of a nation, His nation, if my heir is dead? Troubling questions that most likely were swirling around in the head of Abraham.

"Son" is used 13 times. I believe "son" is repeated so much to communicate to us a lesson. The "son" is a tangible expression of God's goodness, God's power and God's covenant promise. God was using that which Abraham cherished the most to reveal the depths of Abraham's trust. I believe this is the reason people recoil at this story. We're petrified that God might test us to this same degree. In our hearts, we're afraid to ask, but we want to know, is God going to use what I cherish the most to reveal the depths of my trust in Him? And if he does, how will I respond? Will I prove to be faithful? Or will I turn my back on God?

Of course, we never know how we'd respond to a test until the moment of the testing, right? Remember Peter the disciple? Jesus tells the disciples that some of them are going to fall away from the faith. And Peter, boisterous, loud-mouthed Peter, says, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will." Then the

tests come and Peter denies three times that very night that he knows Jesus. We never know how we'll respond to a test until the moment of the testing.

So while we don't know how we'll react in these future tests, we can do something to be better prepared. I propose that the Bible reveals two potential responses to the testing in our lives. Abraham, King David, Queen Esther, and even Jesus, had these two potential responses before them whenever tests came their way: Live by Real Faith and Live by Circumstances.

**Live by Real Faith:** I live with confidence that God is who He says He is and that He will do everything He has promised to do. What's happening now and what I'm feeling now are merely circumstances—by nature untrustworthy.

**Live by Circumstances:** What's happening now and what I'm feeling now determine what I believe for now.

### History of Abraham

Some examples of Living by Real Faith in Abraham's life are he says "yes" to God's call to leave his family and go to the Promised Land; he gives Lot first choice of the land; he trusts the covenant God makes with him, and he trusts that God will provide an heir with his wife Sarah.

Examples of Living by Circumstances in Abraham's life are he left the promised land because he was afraid of the famine in the land; he lied about Sarah being his sister because he's afraid he'll be killed and his wife taken, and after waiting 10 years for Sarah to get pregnant, Abraham gets Hagar pregnant in order to ensure an heir.

Abraham lived both ways. Just like King David, Queen Esther and us. The only person to **always** live by Real Faith was Jesus. We'll come back to him later but for now let's look at how Abraham responded in Genesis 22. Let's apply these two categories—Living by Real Faith or Living by Circumstances—to determine how Abraham was living.

Verse 1: *"Here I am"* – pre-determined submission to whatever God wanted.

Verse 3: *"Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey . . ."* – no hesitation to act upon God's instructions.

Verse 5: *"Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you."* Look at how Abraham speaks in faith that they'll both return. It doesn't tell us in this passage of scripture, but Abraham is expecting God to raise Isaac from the dead after he sacrifices him. *"Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death"* (Heb. 11:19).

Verse 8: Abraham says, *"God himself will provide the Lamb for the burnt offering."* Again, Abraham anticipating that God would solve his problem.

Verse 10: Abraham took the final step of commitment to follow God's instructions, *"Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son."* This is the climatic moment when Abraham is in full tension of his circumstance (in one hand) obedience to God and (in the other hand) destroy the promises of God.

Clearly, Abraham is Living by Real Faith in this situation. In the face of conflicting emotions about sacrificing his son and unsolved questions about how all of the details will work out, Abraham trusted who God is, God's character, and what God had promised, a nation from his offspring.

Let's think about our lives and how we respond to the tests that come our way. The most recent big test for me was waiting for God to provide my new job. If you are new here at CPC, so am I! Today is my eleventh Sunday at CPC. I am so grateful that God brought me here. I have this deep contentment in my soul, and I am so excited for today and the future. I'm praying that God will allow you and me to be a part of transforming the Peninsula into a God-glorifying place! I believe that God brought us together for something amazing. But there was a test that I endured before I got here: the test of waiting for God to provide. And during that test I vacillated between Living by Real Faith and Living by Circumstances.

One year and four months—that's the length of time I waited. From the point on April 4 when I clearly knew that God wanted me in a different ministry position, to saying "yes" to join the CPC staff, was one year and four months, 485 days of testing, 5,820 awake hours of testing. I knew that God was calling me to a pastoral position where I could do two things: preach and lead from my heart. But I couldn't do it where I was and I knew God wanted something different for me.

At moments throughout every day I was confronted with that choice: Live by Real Faith or Live by Circumstances. Many moments I felt like that woman in the video. I was ecstatic and excited because I had trusted. Then nothing would happen and I was going through another round of testing. There were some dark moments of despair and confusion and crying out to God for clarification and direction. I asked God if I got it totally wrong. I asked God why it was taking soooooo long. There were days filled with grumpiness. I know I seem like a happy guy. But when circumstances in your world don't make sense and you focus on all of that confusion, the result is not good. There were many days when I felt like all I had was God. Tests are hard because they stretch us beyond who we currently are.

*“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything”* (James 1:2–4). God uses tests to develop our perseverance, grow us in maturity and make us complete.

God will test us because His testing brings out our best. But don't confuse this with temptation. Satan will tempt us to bring out our worst. I asked you earlier, What kind of tests you are facing today? Your two potential responses are: Live by Real Faith or Live by Circumstances.

### **The remedy**

The remedy to living by circumstances is directing your focus to God. Let me tell you about something that's emerged as a regular pattern in my life, something that I've stumbled upon when I'm bothered by something, stressed, hurting or struggling. I go to God's Word, not to find a specific answer to my situation—I've done that plenty over the years—but, when you don't even know what you really need I go to God's Word to find God Himself. In a miraculous way, as I do this, my attention is taken off of my problem and put on God. Isn't that what Abraham is doing in this passage of scripture today? Focusing totally on God? But we have a huge advantage over Abraham—we have the Word. Through His Word He ministers to our heart, gives refreshment to our spirit, lightens our load, relieves our stress and reassures us that He is in control of everything in our lives.

Are you going to God regularly to hear from Him in the Bible? It's a vital part of living by real faith. And that is the point I'm making here. When you and I are facing tests, soak in God's Word, put our focus on Him and we will live by real faith. The point of these tests is not for us to muster up the strength and start acting in obedience to God but be like Abraham. Obedience is good, don't misunderstand. But obedience is experienced as a response to knowing the God of the universe by reading the Bible.

To get prepared, to be as ready as possible, consider taking the 7-day challenge. It involves two parts: each day, earnestly pray to God, asking that He will reveal Himself to you, and each day, read the Bible. I am confident of this, God will not leave you hanging. He will draw you close. And in miraculous ways, He will give refreshment to your soul, even though nothing else in your life has changed.

### **An unexpected solution is provided**

**“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.” 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. 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”** (Gen. 22:12–14).

There is one and only one reason we can always trust God; one and only one reason that we should live by Real Faith. The phrase is right there in verse 14: **“The Lord will provide.”** God embodies the combination of being all-powerful and all loving. If you take either one away you get a scary deity. But with the combination, we know our Heavenly Father. This combination means that your need cannot outrun God's provision. Tests come. Tests challenge and unsettle us. Tests reveal our needs. Abraham here had the gigantic need for God to save Isaac. And God provided a ram as a substitute sacrifice. God provided.

### **Your need cannot outrun God's provision**

What need could you ever have that the all-powerful, all-loving God of the universe can't meet? Yes, there are times when we **feel** that our needs are as large as mountains. He can still meet your needs. Yes, there are times when we make big mistakes and consequences will be experienced. He can still meet your needs. No matter where you find yourself today, your need cannot outrun God's provision.

So why does it feel like some of our needs go unmet? Have you ever felt that? I know I certainly have.

### **Am I promised that?**

Remember that Abraham is trusting in the covenantal promise from God that a great nation will come from his decedents. We can definitely and always trust God's promises. We can, in fact, base our entire lives on them. However, some people base their lives on ideas they **think** are God's promises, which really aren't. Let's check out some examples:

God will help those who help themselves. **False** (Ben Franklin wrote that in *Poor Richard's Almanac*).

God will heal all my sickness and disease. **False**

God will give you a happy marriage. **False**

Christian parents are guaranteed their children will love and follow God. **False**

God will grow my retirement fund, increase the equity in my house and cover all my health care needs. **False**

What about what He **does** promise?

Christians will experience trials and testing. **True** (James 1:2-30)

God will comfort me when I read the Bible. **True** (Psalm 119: 25, 28)

Christians are blessed with every spiritual blessing. **True** (Eph 1:3)

God will continually grow me spiritually. **True** (Phil 1:6)

God will give me an amazing peace right in the middle of difficulty. **True** (Phil 4:6-7)

God loves you. He's going to minister deeply to your heart. Your need for that will never outrun God's provision. But we've got to separate what God promises to supply from the American Dream. Just like Abraham received an unexpected solution to his situation, the ram in the bushes, we often get an unexpected solution as well: often peace, without resolution of the need. That's because God gives us what we really **need** and we often ask for what we really **want**. That's why I gave you this little quiz. To remind all of us that we can stake our lives on God's perfect and bountiful provision. Imagine how the Peninsula would be changed if all of us lived this way!

### **Conclusion**

God used this experience of testing to reassure Abraham that walking by real faith is always best because his need will never outrun God's provision. A blessing is coming in his future. The Lord promises him in verses 15-18 numerous descendants, conquering descendants, descendants that will bless the whole earth. Jesus is **the** descendant of Abraham's that will bless the whole earth.

God uses this experience of Abraham's to teach us the same lesson. Tests and needs come. Live by Real Faith and trust God's

provision. Think about this—because of Jesus Christ, our greatest need, the forgiveness of sin, is met. And He will continually meet our needs as we follow Him.

Will you trust God with the test you are facing today? Will you allow God to use that test to grow you and strengthen you? Will you focus on God by reading His word for seven days?

Imagine this. Imagine that we all lived lives focused on God and living by faith. Imagine how that would affect us and all of the people in our lives. I want to be part of that, with all of you, my new church family. I said earlier that I believe God brought us together for something amazing. That applies to today. God wants to do something amazing in us today.

My prayer this week for you has been this: do something amazing in people's hearts. Give hope in darkness, give encouragement, give strength to the weak, give perspective to the discouraged. . . ultimately give yourself to each of us. That's what we truly need.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

© 2010 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA  
Catalog No. 1350-8FC