

## **“What Is the Hardest Test You Have Ever Taken?”**

### **Genesis 22:1-14**

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This morning, we are going to examine one of the most difficult passages in scripture. Dr. Walter Brueggemann, the Old Testament scholar, refers to it as theologically demanding. He's being nice.

Before I had children, I could read this story without a lot of emotion. That changed after I had my family. Now I struggle to get past my emotions to the story. How do you explain what happened on a hill far away between Abraham and his son, Isaac?

It goes without saying that any parent in our society who would attempt what Abraham did would be charged with abuse and taken to jail. We have parents who are currently incarcerated for doing less. So, why did Abraham come within seconds of sacrificing his son on an altar of worship?

According to Thomas Cahill in his book, The Gifts of the Jews, the key to understanding this story is to focus upon the relationship between Abraham and God, not Abraham and Isaac. This story was one piece in the puzzle of Abraham's awareness of who God was and His intent for the world. As a matter of fact, it was a major piece.

This helped me, because I feel the key to understanding this passage is found in the meaning of the word Moriah. This was the name of the place where Abraham took Isaac to sacrifice him. Moriah means “a place of learning.”

This story was about what God and Abraham needed to learn that only a test as difficult as this could reveal. Look carefully at Genesis 22:12, “Do not lay a hand on the boy.” God said. “Now **I know** that you fear God because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”

This was what we would refer to as “a teachable moment.” God, Abraham and even Isaac were the students. Let's see what each needed to learn and if they passed the test.

**Let's begin with God. What did He need to learn?** This question may bother some people. Many think that God knows everything and would have no need to learn anything. I disagree. Why would the writer say, “**Now I know** that you fear God because you have not withheld your son, your only son from me?” This implied that God did not know what He needed to know prior to this test. At least, this is the way I see it.

So, what did God need to learn? He needed to know Abraham's level of commitment. How serious was Abraham about partnering with Him to do His work and will?

If you were going into business with another, would you want to know their level of commitment? If you were choosing a mate, would you want to know their level of commitment to the relationship? You know the answers to these questions. God is no different, in my opinion. He needed to know Abraham's level of commitment.

Would Abraham love Him more than anything or anyone? Would anything be so precious to Abraham that he would be unwilling to give it to God should He ask for it? Was Abraham willing to trust and obey God even when he could not understand Him? These were important questions that needed answering. There was only one way to discover the answer, so God gave Abraham the ultimate test.

**What did Abraham need to learn?** He needed to learn that becoming a partner with God would demand an unprecedented and unparalleled level of commitment. He was not making a flippant promise or shallow commitment. This was serious. A lot was at stake, the redemption of all mankind. The mission would be risky and demanding. Would Abraham listen to God and be obedient? Would he do the difficult? Would he trust God above all others? Would he be

reliable and faithful? Abraham needed to realize the seriousness of making a commitment with God. It would require giving God all he had, past, present and future.

This sounds similar to the level of commitment outlined in the Declaration of Independence. Do you recall the last line of this historic document? “We mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor.” The fifty-six men who signed that paper made the highest level of commitment to birth this nation. All of them paid a high price, too. Nine died during the Revolution either at the hands of the enemy or as a result of hardships. Twelve had their homes sacked, looted, occupied by the enemy or burned. Several lost family members and nearly all of them died in poverty. Why? They were wholeheartedly committed to their cause. That’s the kind of commitment Abraham needed to make, too. I think he learned it that day.

Abraham also needed to learn that the God who was calling him was unlike other gods of that time. While we do not know how common it was, we know that human sacrifice was practiced in that culture under what they thought was divine guidance. Children were sacrificed to appease people’s gods. Some speculate that this was why Abraham made this journey to Moriah. If others revealed their level of commitment to pagan gods by sacrificing a child, how could he do less? Even if this was true, the lesson learned about Yahweh was a profound one for Abraham. He learned that his God was not pleased with death but life. He wanted human sacrifices all right, but living ones.

Paul wrote it beautifully in Romans 12:1-2, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God which is your spiritual act of worship.” The prophet Hosea figured it out years before Paul when he wrote, “For I desire mercy not sacrifice and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings” Hosea 6:6.

**I think it is also appropriate to ask what Isaac needed to learn?** Even though the relationship between Abraham and God overshadowed him, there were still things he needed to learn and no doubt did. After all, he was about nine or ten years old, a very impressionable age. So, what do you think he learned?

I’m not sure. I have tried to put myself in his place and figure out what was going through his mind and how he responded to this traumatic incident. The narrator gives us the impression he was obedient and evidently fairly calm. That’s hard to imagine, but then I’m looking at this from a 21st Century perspective. Everything changes when you roll back the clock four thousand years.

What did Isaac learn? Who knows for sure? One thing I am certain of, though, is that he recalled this event many times down through the years. I am confident he spent countless hours reliving this near death experience. Perhaps what he learned at the age of nine or after years of reflection was how serious faith was. It was life and death, but thank goodness, more life than death.

Let’s move this into the present. Where was your Moriah? Where was the place or what was the event that taught you more about God, life and yourself than any other? What did you learn? What did God learn? Did you pass the test? I hope so, but if you didn’t, why not take it again?