

Do you want a stronger faith? I know the answer is kind of obvious. The ability to trust deeper and to believe that much easier. To think about God and not have any doubts. To know everything that happens in life is really going to be for your good. To not question God and how life plays out. If you want to start out this Lent season with a stronger faith then today is the day to be here.

To get stronger faith will require tests though. That's right. Experiencing tests. Not tests like you take in school where you might sweat before you enter but it's over in thirty minutes. Not tests like your driving test where you may have panicked because you figured you couldn't parallel park but then the test never even asked you to do that. Not tests like for licensing or for accreditation in your business or career. Stronger faith requires really difficult tests.

For us to get Lent started with stronger faith we're going to take a special look at the first lesson and the testing of someone else. Abraham's testing will help us learn more about our own testing.

Get Lent started with stronger faith
God brings tests
God makes promises

Are you familiar with the concept of giving something up for Lent? I really don't know how big of a thing that is, especially in an area not dominated by Roman Catholics. It's easy to understand. During the six weeks of Lent you take something you like and you stop using it. It might be candy or video games, extra sugar or Coke. You promise yourself for the next six weeks you won't partake. Giving up something for Lent came about as a way to remember what Jesus suffered. But come on. Candy? Video games? Coke? For some those might seem extreme, but in reality giving up candy for 42 days is nothing. That's not really a test.

The test God brought to Abraham was a true test, something substantial. **"Some time later God tested Abraham. 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."** The emphasis isn't hard to catch. Your son, your only son, the one you love. It goes without saying Abraham loved Isaac. Isaac was his son. Interestingly not truly his only son, but the only one left. His first son, born to his wife's slave, he sent away because that child would not be the child through which God would bring the Savior. So in essence Isaac was Abraham's only son. And do you remember the backstory on Isaac? Abraham and his wife were unable to have children. God made them wait, and wait...and wait. 25 years after God first said they would have a son, finally at 100 years old Abraham held Isaac in his arms. A miracle baby who brought joy, pure joy, whenever Abraham looked at Isaac.

The test is easy to spot. God promised this boy to Abraham and his wife. God granted this boy by a miracle. God promised this would be the boy through whom the Savior would eventually come. And now God was saying sacrifice him. Not just bring him somewhere and have a special ceremony, say a few words, and then leave. **"Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering"** meant only one thing. Abraham was to kill his own son. And Abraham didn't immediately know how this would end. This was truly a test for Abraham. God's command came and Abraham was torn. Obey God or love his son. He wanted to trust God, he had many times in the past, but this? Kill his own son? Would the test prove too much?

So we want a stronger faith. Are we really prepared for what that might mean? Do we understand the tests God may use to get us stronger faith? Think of all the precious things in your life. Imagine those being taken away. God has ways of stripping things we think are critical. Cars suddenly don't run and getting to work becomes difficult and a struggle. Jobs once considered secure because the economy looked unstoppable can look in danger if we're not already unemployed. Homes are big and important to us but they start cracking because of earthquakes or look very vulnerable to the next major tornado. Still cars, jobs, and homes we understand their nature. They come and go. To lose one or more would hurt, but we work hard so it doesn't faze us too bad. We want to give the impression we're taking it in stride and moving on.

God can strike deeper. It may have already happened. The spouse we think is our whole world, who we give cards and gifts each Valentine's Day and say they'll always be with us, tragically gets killed or has their life altered by a disease that leaves us without them. Or maybe God tested us like he did Abraham. If you have children, picture them, look at them, and think. Ask yourself if you're willing to love God more than this child? Of course you answer yes. But talk needs to be backed by action. If God asked you to kill your child to prove that love, would you do it? To get our faith stronger God sometimes eliminates things from our lives that get in the way of loving him the most. Our kids, our spouse, our jobs, and homes can all become something we love more than God. When God takes those away it can expose our sinful hearts. We have hard times giving them up, much less sacrificing them ourselves. How many of us would have failed the test?

"Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. 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. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son."

He raised the knife, didn't give it a second thought, was going to kill his own son. Where did Abraham's faith come from? How could he do it? God commanded it and Abraham was going to do it. He didn't understand. He may have wanted to scream, why God. But he didn't, and amazing that he didn't. God had worked such a strong faith already in Abraham. A faith that trusted in God. But this isn't a story about how great and strong Abraham's faith is. That won't help us. When tests come and things are being taken away from us and our sinful nature threatens to turn on God Abraham's faith can't help us. So where did Abraham's incredibly strong faith come from?

We don't hear Abraham's inner dialogue. But as he thought about God's command and how it seemed to contradict everything else he may have remembered, maybe Abraham remembered previous interactions with God. Those sounded unreasonable too. But each time God directed Abraham to something better. God promised something better. God moved Abraham away from his hometown, resulted in something better. God left Abraham childless for a time, resulted in a son and ultimately many descendants. Time after time God's promises were better to Abraham. At this strange command the book of Hebrews tells us what Abraham was thinking. **"Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead."** Sacrifice your son, it will result in something better. It still didn't make sense, Abraham didn't see how it would all work out, but he trusted in God's promises.

In the hardest tests, when you come up against something seemingly impossible, your faith will never find security in yourself. Your faith rests in something stronger, the promises of God. Promises like God made to Abraham. **"I will surely bless you...through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed."** Those promises are for you. There is your something better because Abraham would have many descendants. One special descendant of his was the fulfillment of every promise of God. The one many have trusted in. The one many have longed for. The promises of God culminating in the One Substitute.

God's command that Abraham sacrifice his son pictures another father who would sacrifice a son. Abraham answered his son at one point, **"God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering."** Brothers and sisters, God provides the sacrifice for you. His son, his own beloved son, his only son. Jesus couldn't be rescued from under the knife. Rather he was allowed to be crucified. By that sacrifice Jesus Christ stands in place for you. Substitutes himself for your forgiveness of sins. Eternal life is promised in him. Faith is strengthened so no matter what affects you today it cannot take away God's promises. You have something better, even if you're facing difficult tests. You rest secure in Christ.

Come away with an understanding from Abraham's story that God uses tests to strengthen faith. He sends the tests and sends the promises to get you through. Whatever the tests might be they turn us to Christ and God's promises. The more you ponder the promises the more you'll get Lent started with a stronger faith.