**GOD TESTS ABRAHAM**

 February 04, 2018

Genesis 22:1-19 / Key verse: 22:18, “And through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.”

Today in Chapter 22, we are going to learn the climax of Abraham’s faith which brought himself God’s utmost blessing; the promise of Christ. In today’s passage, God tests Abraham to see whether he really loves God more than his only son Isaac whom Abraham loved more than anyone or anything else. Many times, people fail to bear God’s blessings because they love the blessings which came from God more than God himself. Through today’s passage, we can learn what it really means to be a blessing, and how we can be a bearer of God’s blessing. I pray that God may open our hearts and spiritual eyes to see God’s supreme purpose and plan for us to be a bearer of God’s blessing in Christ Jesus.

Look at verse 1. Some time later God tested Abraham. “Some time later” means after Abraham received his miracle baby Isaac and sent away his son Ishmael according to God’s instruction and Isaac grew up to become a teenager. God said to him calling his covenant name, “Abraham.” Abraham replied, “Here I am!”

In verse 2, God said to Abraham, “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.” What a shocking command! I am sure Abraham had never expected such command from God. I am also sure God knew that Abraham would be shocked by this command. However, we know God’s command always have a good purpose because he can never command against his own character which is love. Then what is God’s good purpose giving such command? In verse 12, when Abraham obeyed what God had commanded, God stopped Abraham and 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.” Here, we learn that the purpose of God’s command was to see whether Abraham really fears God. Here, “fear” means “awesome reverence” including supreme love; putting the first priority in life. By God’s grace, after 25 years of life of faith, Abraham had received Isaac from God. He was a miracle baby, the final fulfilment of Abraham’s life-long heart desire. Isaac was the source of laugh and joy in Abraham’s family. By nature, when we are blessed by God, all human beings are vulnerable to be too attached to God’s blessings rather than God himself the Giver of the blessings. Often God-given gifts or blessings can be idols to us. To Abraham, if anything might become an idol in Abraham’s heart, it was Isaac. Now God’s test was to train Abraham to put God first rather than Isaac whom he really loved most in his life.

How did Abraham respond to God’s command? Let’s look at verse 3. Early the next morning Abraham got up and prepared everything for the journey and the sacrifice. Here, we don’t see any hint of Abraham’s troubled heart, or procrastination, or complaining heart to God. He prepared promptly to obey God. How do you think Abraham could obey in such a way? The answer is revealed in what he said to his two servants and his answer to his son Isaac’s question.

In verses 4-5, After 3 days of journey, Abraham reached near the place of sacrifice and then 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 you.” Notice that Abraham said, “We will come back to you.” instead of “I will come back to you.” This reveals Abraham’s resurrection faith about Isaac. Abraham is going to sacrifice his own son. This means to slay him. But Abraham said to his servants. “We will worship and then we will come back to you.” This implies that Abraham believed that even though he would sacrifice Isaac, God could raise the dead Isaac because he believed God would keep his promise which God had said to him in Gen 21:12b. It says, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned (Gen 21:12b).” The author of Hebrews explained Abraham’s reasoning based on his faith in God’s promise in Hebrews 11:19. It says, “Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so figuratively speaking he received Isaac back from death.”

And then let’s see the conversation between Abraham and his son Isaac. In verses 6-8, Abraham carried the fire and the knife. Isaac was carrying the wood for the burnt offering. Since Abraham didn’t tell Isaac, “It is you whom God told to sacrifice,” Isaac would have felt that climbing the mountain with his father together was like a camping trip. But as they went on together, Isaac began to sense something unusual or awesome in his father’s demeanor. He thought about the preparations they had made—he was carrying the wood; his father, the fire and the knife. But where was the lamb for the sacrifice? Isaac had evidently participated in animal sacrifices with his father before. He must have been a teenager since he was able to carry the woods. He knew what was going on. So, he asked, “Father, where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” At this question, ordinary fathers would have become emotional not knowing what to say, broken in tears and have given up the sacrifice. But Abraham was different. In verse 8, he answered calmly. Let’s read verse 8 together. “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son. And the two of them went on together.” Abraham really had awesome faith that God himself will provide and he planted this faith to his son, too. Faith is contagious. I am sure that because of Abraham’s this faith, Isaac was also able to trust in God and co-work with his father.

Let’s look at verses 9-10. When Abraham reached the place God had told him about, he built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and placed him on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. As a father, I cannot imagine how Abraham could do like this. Abraham was not just pretending to slay his only son. He was really about to sacrifice his only son to obey God’s command. To any father, sacrificing our own son will be unthinkable, unbearable and painful thing to do. But here is a message. Loving God as of the first priority is not cheap or easy task. It cost very highly. It may require unbearable pain to sacrifice ourselves and anything we love more than God. But if we really want to love God most, it is unavoidable, unescapable, and indispensable. Most of all, it is the very ultimate purposes of why God calls us to be a blessing. God wants us to grow as men and women who love God most.

Look at verses 11-12. When Abraham was about to slay his only son, just then, the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, “Abraham! Abraham!” Abraham replied, “Here I am.” “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.” Here, let’s think about God’s calling of Abraham and how God had molded Abraham to grow as a man of faith. God had spent 25 years plus more to teach Abraham Who God is – namely - Almighty, faithful, sovereign, caring, and loving God in many ways. Finally, Abraham had a miracle covenant son Isaac and became an influential man almost equal to worldly king. But if Abraham just enjoy all such blessings but fail to fear God, what is the point of being a blessing? Without fearing God, after all, all blessings become meaningless. Without fearing God, Abraham cannot be used as a channel of God’s blessing to bless all people on earth. Without fearing God, Abraham cannot but become just like another ordinary old man who is perishing in this perishing world. So, God’s test was absolutely necessary to Abraham and so is to us as well. God wants each one of us to offer our Isaac -in another word anything that we love more than God, which might become our idols in our heart in order to grow as God-fearing men and women. To each person, Isaac might be different. To some, it can be music. To some, it can be self-honor or self-glory. To some, it can be a career or worldly dream”. To most of us, it can be ourselves because by our sinful nature we all love ourselves more than God if we don’t struggle with God’s word sincerely.

To me, my Isaac was my self-love and love of worldly pleasure; such as spending time in internet unnecessarily without clear purpose especially when I am tired. This is dishonoring God. God gave me my life as his gift and he saved my life from sin and the eternal consequence of sin. I cannot use such precious life for the things dishonoring God. Starting this new year, I had a great hope to grow newly in God-pleasing and seeking faith based on Hebrews 11:6. “Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” But, from the very first week of January, once again I failed to seek God exposing my frustration and impatience. Naturally it is very easy to become self-centered if I don’t keep watch, being aware of God’s presence and his faithful promise. By God’s grace I could restore my patience and made a new decision of faith to trust in God more thoroughly and patiently. And preparing this message, I also newly learned that to learn absolute reverence of God, I must put my old self to death completely. I pray that I may grow as God-fearing man that God can approve like Abraham.

When Abraham offered Isaac to God by faith and obedience, what did Abraham and his son Isaac learn? In verses13-14, 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. What a dramatic scene this is! Abraham had “God provides faith.” And when he offered his only son to obey God’s command with this faith, he learned even more dramatic faith that God is indeed God who provides as he had believed. So, he called that place “The LORD Will Provide.” And to this day it is said, “On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided.” Like Abraham, when we willingly offer our Isaac to God; when we really put aside anything that we love more than God, though it may be very painful, we can truly learn “The LORD Will Provide” faith and with this faith, we can continue to serve God without fear to the end.

In verses 15-18. The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, “I swear by myself, declared the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son your only son, 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, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.” When Abraham did not withhold his only son and willingly obeyed God, God was greatly pleased and honored by Abraham. So, this time God swore by himself to honor Abraham with even greater blessing. This time, God blessed Abraham not only with the same promise as previous ones; the promise about numerous descendants, but also with more specific promise different from earlier covenant promises. It was about the promise of Christ. Notice that in verse 18, God said, “through your offspring (not your offsprings) all nations on earth will be blessed, …,” Here “your offspring” is singular form. It implies a specific person among Abraham’s descendants. So, then who is the specific person? He is Christ Jesus. In God’s previous promise (Genesis 12:3), God said, “… all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” But actually, it is not Abraham but his offspring Jesus Christ who will bless all nations on earth. Abraham is being used by God as the ancestor of God’s blessing plan.

Here, let’s think a little more about Abraham’s sacrifice of his son. When we ponder Abraham’s sacrifice of his only son, we find that this scene is like a preview of God’s sacrifice of his only Son Jesus. Abraham might not know God’s ultimate future plan to sacrifice his own Son clearly but he simply participated in a father’s deep pain when he obeyed God’s command to sacrifice his only son Isaac. But it was God’s plan for Abraham to participate in God’s pain for all perishing sinners and sacrificial love to save all sinners on earth. So, when Abraham offered his son, he participated in God’s sacrificial love in offering his only Son Jesus. And since God blessed him with the promise of Christ, for sure, Abraham lived by faith and hope that someday his offspring who is Christ would come and all nations on earth would be blessed through him. In John 8:56, Jesus confirmed Abraham’s this faith by saying, “Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.”

In light of God’s blessing of the promise of Christ, we learn that the core meaning of being a blessing is bearing the promise of Christ and the requirement of bearing the promise of God is to love God most; more than anyone and anything else. When Abraham offered Isaac to God because he loved God more than Isaac, Abraham participated in God’s sacrificial love by faith and he became a man knowing God’s love.

How can a man grow as a most honorable and great man? It was God’s heart desire and plan when he called Abraham to be a blessing. The answer is here. It is only when he or she learn the love of God who did not spare his only Son Jesus Christ to save sinners. I know one man who lost his little only son through car accident when he was studying in theology seminary in US. He was his only son whom he loved most. But when he lost his only son through tragic car accident, he couldn’t bear the pain. But as he was struggling to accept his reality as it was, he came to think about our heavenly Father’s loss of Jesus on the cross. When he experienced the pain of losing his own son, he came to understand heavenly Father’s pain when he had to sacrifice his own Son Jesus. He lost his son accidently but God purposely sacrificed his only Son to save all sinners on earth. Then finally he was overwhelmed by God’s divine love upon undeserving sinners. After realizing how deep the love of God was, his life was changed. He became a man of passion filled with the love of God. Whenever he serves God’s flock, he always focus his serving on the cross of Jesus; the love of God and God has been using him mightily raising many disciples of Jesus. Later he confessed what really helped him most to help God’s flock was not his Ph.D. in theology seminary but the love of God he came to realize in God’s sacrificial love not sparing his own Son Jesus.

In conclusion, today we learned that God’s test for Abraham was to grow him to love God most to make him as a true bearer of God’s blessing; the promise of Christ. The promise of Christ is the promise of God’s love for perishing sinners like us. To know Christ and the love of God in the sacrifice of Christ is the only way for us to be a blessing. I earnestly pray that we all may grow in knowing Christ and God’s sacrificial love in Christ to be a true bearer of God’s blessing. Amen.