

## **Holy Test Takers**

Genesis 22:1-14

June 28, 2020

Our country loves tests. Every week without fail from first grade through fifth grade, I had a spelling test on Friday for that week's words. Every year from first grade through eighth grade and in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, I had to take state-regulated standardized tests. To get a driver's license, you have to pass a "driver's test." To get into college, a student has to get a certain score on the SAT and/or the ACT. Most graduate schools require a certain score on a standardized test to get in, whether that's the MCAT for medical school, the LSAT for law school, or the GRE for many other graduate schools, just to name a few. To become ordained as a pastor in our denomination, you have to pass a 100-question multiple choice Bible Content exam, three nine-hour written exams, a fourth written exam that takes about a week to complete, and an oral "examination for ordination." This is all in addition to all the chapter, unit, mid-term, and final exams you have to take throughout school on all levels. It doesn't apply to just school, though.

All throughout life, from the day you're born to the day you die, you have medical tests. It might be as simple as checking your vitals or it might be more complicated like blood tests, urinalysis, and stress tests. Plus, there are other "tests" in life that aren't "regulated." In a given lifetime, a person can have their wits, patience, morals/ethics, faith, and various relationships tested. Realizing the consistency of being tested throughout life, it can seem a little overwhelming, especially for someone who has test anxiety like me. However, one piece of advice that helped me pass my last written ordination exam, the one that goes for one week, was given to me by my site coordinator while I was in New Orleans. She told me, "Don't think of it as a test. Think of this as an opportunity to learn something you didn't know before." Initially, I thought she was full of it. Once I put myself in that mindset, though, once I opened myself up to seeing it as a learning opportunity and not just an opportunity to prove my skills, not only was the test more tolerable to take, it also helped me to do better on the test and to pass it finally after three tries. This also is true for the reading for today.

We read the story of the binding of Isaac, and a common topic for looking at this passage is how much such a request must have been a test of Abraham's faith. God promises to make Abraham's descendants as many as the stars in the sky, starting that chain reaction off with giving Abraham and Sarah a son, Isaac, in their old age. Now, he asks Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, the only way this promise to make Abraham the father of all nations can come true. So, for Abraham to go through with this is a true test of his faith because, if he doesn't have faith that Isaac will either be replaced by another son or that God will bring Isaac back from the dead, he wouldn't be able to go through with it, therein disobeying a direct order from God. However, what needs to be noted is that God is not the one learning something from this test. God makes the request of Abraham, but, being that God is omniscient ("all knowing"), God knows what is going to happen, how Abraham is going to respond to such an off-the-wall request. Therefore, it becomes a question of how this is a learning opportunity for Abraham, and the first and foremost lesson learned is that the God of Abraham does not break promises. Isaac, the single means of fulfilling God's promise, is in mortal danger, and God saves him. From God saving him, Abraham learns just how intimately involved God is in the lives of His Creation and all its inhabitants. Argument could be made that Abraham learned just how dedicated one must be to

God, that one must be willing enough to sacrifice that which is loved and cherished most for God, and what the rewards for such dedication will be. These are just a few examples of lessons Abraham might have learned from this experience, even in his old age. However, Abraham is not the only one that learns from this experience.

Remember, Isaac also was there. Isaac was the one who was bound and about to be sacrificed. At this point, Isaac is about twelve years old, meaning he is still impressionable and, for better or for worse, this event in his life is sure to leave an imprint upon the rest of his life. This event, seeing his father hold a knife up to him to sacrifice his life, this is an event that will affect how Isaac thinks, feels, and acts the rest of his life. This event will affect his relationship with his father, whether for good or for bad. So, arguably, Isaac learned from this event. He learned just how dedicated his father was to God, that God requires such deep dedication as Abraham was displaying, and that such dedication would be well-rewarded. At the same time, Isaac learns of God's divine providence, of God's being intimately involved in the lives of all God's children and of God not allowing things to happen that get in the way of God's promises, God's plans, being fulfilled. To not fight back when his father tied him up and put him on the altar to kill him, that too took great faith, faith that God would protect him from unnecessary harm. So, there's argument that this event was a test not only for Abraham but for Isaac, too. This still doesn't cover all the people who can learn from this even, though.

As with all Bible stories, there are lessons *we* can learn from this passage, even though we were not there nor were we even alive to be there. As with Isaac and Abraham, we learn about God's involvement in our lives, which helps us to notice how and where God has been actively playing a role in our life. We learn about the dedication God requires of us, and it causes us to evaluate the dedication we have to God. We learn that we must be willing to lay down that which we cherish most for God, whether that's our life, our relationships, or our interests. We learn that nothing is to come before our dedication to God and that if something or someone does get in the way of that, we must be willing to sacrifice it/them for God. Such a thought gets us thinking about what might be getting in the way of our being more dedicated to God, of our being more responsive to God's callings to us. Like Abraham, we learn that God keeps His promises. We are promised salvation if we do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. We are promised forgiveness of sins so long as we confess our sins and confess our belief that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior. Therefore, we can rest assured that "all's well" with us and God so long as we hold up our end. These are but a few examples of lessons we can learn from this passage and how it helps us reflect on God's testing us in our lives.

The greatest lesson of all that can be learned from this passage, though, is that God does not test us for His benefit, nor do God's tests have no purpose. From the tests God gives each and every one of us throughout our lives, great and small, we find there are lessons to be learned on our behalf, these lessons helping to shape us into better-functioning Children of God and helping to move Creation closer to that reconciled relationship between Heaven and Earth. All of us, myself included, have been tested at some point. Maybe we are going through a test right now. If nothing else, we may face one or more tests down the line. God's testing us and His teaching us through those tests are as inevitable as the spelling tests I faced every week for five years. Therefore, in closing, I invite you all to consider: how might God be currently testing you, and what might it be that God is trying to teach you/get you to learn through this test?