

Testing the Faith of Abraham

Abraham is the patriarch of three of the great religions on earth. Each portrays him as a great man of faith. He is a prominent figure in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Abraham is mentioned 308 times in the Bible, and 74 times in the New Testament. He is described as “God’s friend” in James 2:23, “the father of all who believe” in Romans 4:11-12, and a figure of true faith in Hebrews 11:11-12. As much as we would all like to make a great hero out of him, the Bible pulls no punches, and reveals him to be a flawed, greedy, deceitful, fearful, and impatient man. Abraham had to learn to trust God. This was accomplished over a lifetime of having his faith tested and retested.

We find in the Bible the principle that each character’s faith is tested repeatedly throughout their lives. It is through these tests that their faith is proven and progresses to maturity. Not to say that it is a perfect progression, or that once it is growing there are no setbacks. We will see in the life of Abraham that he passes and fails the tests, but in Genesis 22 he passes the BIGGEE. We will discover what made that test so big that James singled it out, and said Abraham was proven to be justified by this work and his “faith was perfected”.

The Seven Tests of Faith in Genesis 12-22

By comparing the account of Abram’s call in Genesis 12 to Stephen’s sermon in Acts 7 we can see that God appeared to Abram (his name before God changed it) at his family home in Ur which is in modern Iraq near the Persian Gulf. Archeologists have uncovered the ruins of this ancient city and found many idols there, and so they have been able to deduce the polytheistic religion of the area centered around the moon goddess. In Joshua 24:2, we are told that Abram’s family originally “served other gods”. From these accounts we know that while Abram was worshipping the moon goddess, the one true God intervened and revealed Himself to Abram. God gave him a command to leave everything, go to Canaan, and a promise to give him the land of Canaan along with many descendants to inhabit it. This command was Abram’s first test. He was to leave his country, his home, his possessions, and all his relatives and go directly to Canaan. Abram gave a partial commitment to this command. He went about halfway to Haran and settled there, he took his family with him and all his possessions. This commitment was like the kamikaze pilot who flew 50 missions. They stayed in Haran some years till after his father died, then God “removed him” into Canaan. In spite of Abram’s “reluctant faith” and obedience, God greatly blessed him with a great promise to make him a great nation, and much more important to us, “and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen.12:3). If you can’t guess what this means refer to Galatians 3:16, and see that God was talking about redeeming mankind through Abram’s

descendant—Jesus Christ. What did Abram do to deserve such blessing? Nothing, it was purely the free grace of God motivated by God's unconditional love.

Testing the Sufficiency of His Faith

The next test involved trusting God to meet his needs. God commanded him to go to Canaan where God would bless him. When Abram got there, he found a famine in the land. The choices were to stay there and trust God for food, or go to Egypt where there was no famine. Abram did not hesitate to go to Egypt, but the consequences of this choice went down in infamy and affect us all even today. Abram's failure of faith escalated to lying and deceit. Sarai, his wife, was beautiful so Abram rightly guessed Pharaoh would desire her. Therefore to protect himself and enrich himself, he told Pharaoh that Sarai was his sister and proceeded to sell her to Pharaoh for a great deal of property. Abram's reason to his wife was "so it may go well with me", and it certainly did—he left Egypt a very rich man. In spite of his deceit, God blessed him greatly except for a very important detail, Abram took home "female servants" from Egypt, amongst them was Hagar. Remember her name, you are currently paying \$65 for a tank of gas because of her.

Does Money Buy Happiness ?

Genesis 13:2 describes his new wealth, "very rich in livestock, silver, and gold." The next test of faith involved greed, rivalry, and strife in the family. One of his relatives that was not supposed to come with him was Lot, and in Gen.13:7 we find that there was constant strife over land and property, so they had to divide up. Abram passed this test with flying colors by letting the undeserving Lot have his choice of land. Lot surveyed the area and like any good real estate man, he chose the plush green valley with the thriving cities. Lot went east to the area of Sodom and Gomorrah—how do you think that worked out? Abram went west to the uglier arid land of Canaan. God then repeated to Abram the earlier promises of the land and many descendants.

The fourth test involved loyalty and courage in trusting God to help him defeat the larger armies of Chedorlaomer, king of Elam. A group of kings had attacked Sodom and made off with Abram's nephew Lot. Abram successfully retrieved Lot and all the possessions of Sodom against all odds. Abram gave God all the glory and would not keep any of the spoils (Gen 14:22-23). Again God blessed Abram after this test, and it is here in Genesis 15 we are told for sure that Abram is saved by his belief in God, "Then he believed in the Lord; and God reckoned it to him as righteousness."

A Crisis of Faith

The fifth test was the most painful for all the descendants of Abram. God had promised a son

and many descendants, and yet they were getting older with no children to show for it. There could have been no doubt that God was in control, but the desire to manipulate the timing and the means was overwhelming. It is the age old strategy of the “ends justify the means”. We have no children, God has promised children, we deserve children, and time is running out—we are getting past child bearing years. Therefore Sarai implemented the BROOD MARE STRATEGY. They had brought back from Egypt a young attractive servant girl named Hagar. Sarai also masterfully tries to lay the blame for her upcoming sin at the feet of God, “God has prevented me from having children”. Doesn’t God help those who help themselves? Not so fast—let’s be honest they have a lack of patience with the promises of God, so they will RUN AHEAD OF GOD and do things their way according to their timing. Sarai sends Hagar in to Abram to “know him” in a biblical way so that they can then take her child as theirs. In their impatience, using rationalization they run ahead of God and head long into sin. Make no mistake, not only was it a lack of faith, it was adultery. Hagar conceived and bore Ishmael, the father of the Arab race. God showed compassion on Hagar and Ishmael by protecting them, and blessing them with future promises—Ishmael also would be the father of a great nation (numerous), and God would give him and his descendants the land to the east, Arabia. Also the prophecy was made that they (Jews and Arabs), would be contentious rivals from then on. History has proven that to be correct.

The sixth test of Abraham (God changed his name in ch.17), can be found in Genesis 20. Amazingly, Abraham had not learned his lesson well enough because another king, Abimelech wants Sarah (her name got changed too), and sure enough Abraham lies and tells him it is his sister and the king can have her. In spite of Abraham’s sin here, God graciously intervenes to keep the sin from consummating. Once again Abraham walks away with silver and property and livestock. Did Abraham deserve it? No way, he deserved harsh punishment, but praise God that He does not give His people what they deserve.

The Really Big Test

I said earlier that the BIGGEE was in Gen.22, and I would explain why. We know that this was a test of Abraham’s belief, trust, and commitment because the text says, “that God tested Abraham”(Gen.22:1). This was the supreme test because what God asked him to do was unimaginable. No one would possibly do it without the “perfect faith” that James talked about. Isaac was his only son from Sarah (Ishmael and Hagar had left for good). God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, “Take now your only son , whom you love, Isaac...and offer him as a burnt offering”. This was a supreme test of Abraham’s priorities, his commitment to God, but mostly tested whether Abraham fully believed God would deliver on

all his promises. All of God's promises about the land, the descendants, and the blessing of the Messiah, all came through Isaac. Can you imagine the risk, the anxiety? There is no possible way Abraham or you or I could do this without that kind of perfect faith. Read on and you will see that just before Abraham could use the knife, God stopped him and said, "now I know that you fear God since you have not withheld your only son from Me." Of course God never expected Isaac to be sacrificed, but only to prove Abraham's faith and obedience. Then in v.16 God told him that since he had this kind of faith that fully believes and puts God first, God would bless the whole world through his descendant Jesus Christ. Hebrews 11:19 explained that Abraham believed that even if Isaac had died there, "God was able to raise him from the dead". This is saving faith that is tested and true. CHARLIE TAYLOR