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## **Introduction**

A few years ago, in Sydney the State Government built a new bridge which they originally called the Glebe Point Bridge and which is now called the Anzac Bridge. Now I'm sure you've seen it on the TV, or even driven over it yourself but it has two large pylons and the pylons are attached to the span of the bridge by hundreds of high tension steel cables. It's quite a strange design. So strange in fact that one of the first people to walk the bridge, a five year old, while looking around said to her parents I hope the glues been set really well! I'm sure she must have once gone to one of our Kid's Clubs!

But have you ever thought how they test a bridge like that? How do they make sure that it is not going to collapse? Apparently the Sydney Harbour Bridge was tested by driving 96 railway engines onto it at the one time, for a total of 7680 tonnes. When the weight was moved all to one end, the deck moved 64 millimetres, just a couple of inches, which apparently makes it really stable.

Another bridge very similar to the Glebe Island Bridge, the LePont de Normandie in France, was tested in a different way. They filled all the lanes with fully loaded trucks parked nose to tail, and checked the static movement. Then they tied the middle of the bridge to a ship with a cable designed to break at 100 tonnes of weight. The ship then moved, tightening the cable until it broke, when they then measured the vibrations.

And the Anzac bridge? They tested it all out on computer. For the engineers now believe you don't have to do anything with the actual bridge, the computer will predict it all for you. You just have to tap in the data and the computer tells you whether the bridge will stand or fall.

You see anything that is to be trusted has to be tested, to ensure that it won't fail at the crucial moment, so that we can see what stuff it is really made of, so that it can be relied upon by others. So, bridges are tested, diamonds & gold are tested, students at school and universities and colleges are tested. The products we buy in the shops have almost all been tested & the Bible says that even we as humans are tested.

### **1. "God tested Abraham"**

And so when we read in Genesis 22:1 that God tested Abraham, it sets an ominous tone. My initial reaction was hasn't he been tested enough? "God, hasn't he had to wait all his life for his promised heir? He still does not possess the land that he had been promised! Hasn't he already had a gut full of difficulty? And haven't things finally fallen into place - doesn't he now have his son Isaac? Surely can't he enjoy his last few years of life in peace?

But the words stare back at us "God tested Abraham" and we know that whether or not we think Abraham should have it easy, God requires him to undergo one last examination. And what an examination it is. *"Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about"*

Never has there been a harder test. Never has God asked so much of a human being. And what made it worse was that it was God who had promised Abraham that it was through Isaac, that his blessings would come. So had God changed his mind? Had he made a mistake? What on earth was going on here? Abraham would have been totally confused.

In Abraham's time, human sacrifice wasn't as abhorrent as it is to our ears. Many of the current religions did offer child sacrifices as a test of one's faithfulness. But Abraham's God had never asked it before, so Abraham didn't know whether it was a test or not! He didn't know that God wouldn't allow him to do it. For him this is the most frightening thing he has ever heard from God. And so the question we are left to ask ourselves is "Will Abraham put God before his son? Will he love God more than his future?"

God was testing Abraham to see what stuff he was made of, to see if he really trusted his God, if he could be relied upon. Just as we test bridges, God tested Abraham. But the Bible shows us that Abraham wasn't the first person to be tested, nor is he the last. Adam & Eve were tested in the garden, Joseph was thrown into prison for a crime he didn't commit, Moses, David, Solomon, Jeremiah, the apostles. The list of those who are tested goes on and on. For all who claim to be followers of God will be tested. We too will most certainly be tested.

Do you know that? Life as a Christian is not easy. At times things get really tough. And it's at those tough times that God sees if you are really fair dinkum. So the apostle Peter says in his first letter, *"Don't be surprised that you have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith - of greater value than gold may be proved genuine and may result in praise, and glory and honour to God."*

Our testing does not happen by some sort of heavenly computer simulation, where God taps all the information about us into some huge data bank and hypothetically sees what we will do. No, God gives us real life testing. Because it is only when we are tested, it is only when we have to make a choice between God and money, between God and family, between what God wants me to do & what I want to do, does God work out, and do we work out, where our heart is. Where it really is.

For you it might happen when your marriage breaks up. You feel like no one loves you, no-one cares. Do you say at that time that God doesn't care? Or you find someone that you love who isn't a Christian. Do you listen to your heart or to what the Bible says about who you should go out with? Or when someone who means a lot to you dies? Do you blame God? Do you turn away from Him? Or does it bring you much closer to Him?

For it is easy to mouth words about following God anywhere, about being His completely, but it is much harder when the rubber hits the road. It is much more difficult to actually turn our back on the things in this world that we love. Only testing

will show us where our heart really is. And that is why Peter says "*Don't be surprised if testing comes*", for it will come, it is just that testing changes as you get older.

When you are at school the temptation is to put your friend's opinions as more important than God's. Later you are tempted to put sport before Church, or image before faith. When you leave school it's the career that you have started or the money you earn. After that it is putting the family first or your home. And when you retire it is easier to put comfort and security before the Lord.

One of the biggest tests I have faced happened in 1990. I had just come back from 7 months overseas with work and started seriously considering going into the ministry. I had been thinking about it on and off for a few years; but I knew I had to make a decision, it was now or never. After several months I knew what God wanted me to do, it was for me to leave my job and go into theological college.

But the day after I had made my decision in my heart, I was ushered into my boss' office at work. I found out that I and another lady had been chosen from approx. 500 work mates, to undertake a special project in Singapore for the next 6 months. A big promotion. A big pay rise. Time off for overseas travel.

So had I really considered all the implications of going into the ministry, my head asked my heart? Have you thought about the fact that you won't be able to afford to travel as you have been travelling? What about the status you have as a Chartered Accountant? Is God worth more than money, is he worth more than what you are giving up?

Testing comes to us all. It comes to show us what is really important to us. Is it God, is it His ways? Or is it what we can see, smell, touch, taste around us? God tested Abraham. God tests us. To see where our heart are.

So does that change your picture of God? Is your picture of God one that gives his followers only good things? Like good health, and money and happiness? If it is, you need to go back to the Bible. God does indeed give His people good things. But what we consider good is not what God considers the best. He wants to give you a new family, where He himself is your Father, He wants to give you His presence by sending the Holy Spirit. He wants to change you so that you can really love people around you, be patient and kind and gentle, and have others exhibit these same qualities back to you.

To Him, those are the best gifts, and to show you that, he may remove what we consider good and essential like money, career, family, possessions. And to do this he has to loosen our dependence on these things, so that we can trust Him more.

But is asking Abraham to offer his son too hard, too serious, too callous? God didn't think so. For He says we must love Him more than our husband, our wife, our brother or sister, our children. Jesus was to say much later in the NT, "*anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me, and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.*" So God tested Abraham.

## **2. "Abraham reached out his hand"**

And so early the next morning Abraham responds in faith. He saddles the donkey, gets his servants and cuts some wood. That doesn't sound like the logical order to do things, but I'm sure Abraham is at this time pretty confused. He travels with his servants and son, Isaac three days. Boy that's tough, isn't it? Plenty of time to stew over it. Plenty of time to think up a thousand and one logical reasons why he shouldn't do it. And yet he can think of only one reason to do it, because God wants me to.

But they walk along. The longest three days of his life. And then he sees the mountain in the distance, and he knows the moment of truth is near. So he stops, and gets the servants to wait. They will wait here while he and Isaac, his only son, the one he loves, the child of God's promise will go and worship God. In the midst of trial, in the midst of testing, Abraham still desires to worship God. That's faith, isn't it? To Abraham, despite what he has been asked to do, God is still worthy of his worship.

Yet we see also in Abraham's comment to his servants, a hint. A hint, that Abraham knew his God. For he says that "*we will worship and then we will come back to you.*" Abraham knew that God would do something, he just didn't know what.

As the writer to the Hebrews explains, "Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from the dead."

Abraham knew God and he knew that he would keep His promises to him. So they left the servants and started climbing, but then Isaac himself turns to his Father. "*Father, we have the wood and the fire - but where is the sacrifice?*" Can you imagine that scene? Can you imagine Abraham looking into his sons eyes? He sees them - young, trusting, innocent.

But once again Abraham shows great faith "*God will provide one, my son*". God had provided him with Isaac, God may now take Isaac away. But God will provide, for that is His nature. So they trudge slowly up the mountain. Isaac probably now probably knows what is going to happen, and although being young, quick and nimble, he allows his father to catch him in his hands, to bind him, to build an altar, to put the wood there and then to pick up his knife. As each task is completed Abraham realises more and more that time is running out but somehow he goes on. Here is faith and actions working perfectly together.

This is what we often struggle with as Christians. We can believe in God, but it is hard to do what he says, when it seems illogical to our own minds. For it seems illogical to serve others when they are not serving me. It is illogical to come to Church every Sunday when there is a so many more exciting things to do. It is illogical to love when you have been hurt. But our faith must show itself in actions, trusting actions, illogical actions, if we are to follow what the Bible says pleases God.

## **3. "The Lord will provide"**

But when Abraham picked up the knife to slay his son, God stepped in. An angel called out to him, told him not to harm the child, but to untie him. For it was now clear that

God was more important to Abraham than anything else. We now find out that God was never going to let Abraham harm his son after all!

So as Isaac was untied, Abraham saw a ram, a mature sheep, caught in the thicket. And in his son's place, on that altar, the ram was placed. Thus the ram took Isaac's place. It was his replacement or substitute. The Lord had indeed provided. From then on whenever any of Abraham's ancestors, the Israelites, offered a sacrifice, they were to look down at that sacrifice. And realise that that lamb or bull or bird was dying in their place, just as the ram died in Isaac's place. They lived only because something else had died in their place. And they were to be thankful that God had provided a substitute. God had provided a way where they could continue to live, despite their sins.

I think this story is one of the most amazing stories in Scripture, as well as one of the most scary, and yet one of the most meaningful. Where God tested Abraham in a way that I could never handle; but I want to conclude by asking a question. Was God being unfair?

Was He requiring too much of Abraham? It is a hard question that. Until you realise that God doesn't require anyone to do something He doesn't do himself. For when we look at the Bible, we realise that God Himself became flesh, He clothed Himself in a human body. He experienced the highs and lows of living here on earth, He endured the testings of 40 days in the desert, the temptation to walk away from what His Father, God, wanted Him to do.

But God himself did place His son on a mountain one day, He did tie him up, and He did sacrifice him. God was willing to let His son die so that He could be a substitute, a replacement, the one that died in the place of others, so that you and I might live.

For the region of Moriah where Abraham took Isaac, later was to become Jerusalem. The mountain where Isaac was to be sacrificed was within a stone's throw of where the temple was built, where animal sacrifices were offered daily to God. And the place where Abraham picked up the knife? Was most probably the same place where God left Jesus to die. On that hill called Calvary.

So the passage that we have looked at today shows us that God knows how to test. Yet he knows how to provide, how to provide a way out of the testing. That's really important, really important. Because when God tests you and when he tests me there is always a God sanctioned way out, and that way out is found through His son Jesus. For 1 Corinthians 10:13 says, *"No temptation has seized you except what is common for man. And God is faithful, he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted he will provide a way out so that you can stand up under it."*

God may provide the test, no, god will provide the test but he also provides the way out. God may ask us to do hard things, but no more harder than what he did to purchase your salvation. Testing may come, but it comes so that your faith, your trust in Him may grow. So that you can see how real your faith is and so that you can see that you really can't live this life without faith!

Friends, God tested Abraham and God will test us. At present, in our Church, we have a man whose mum is not expected to live for more than a couple of days, and a lady whose son only just survived the last couple of days. We have one couples marriage hanging by a thread and others settled into marriages which are far from ideal. We have those struggling with loss, illness, depression, suicide, unemployment, loneliness and disability. We have those who feel that God is far away from their concerns, who doesn't care, who doesn't seem to understand what they are going through.

But friends he does understand, he does care, he is there. And in this testing, this struggle, this temptation, he wants to join you in the midst of it. He wants to help you go forward. He wants to see your faith and he wants you to grow in your faith!

This time is not meaningless. This struggle is not all pain and suffering. It is a chance to deepen your faith; to seek Him first; to reach out and take his hand of compassion, of love. To feel his presence, his strength and find out his way forward. There are so many times when we put the created things before our creator and often it is in the tough times that we have no where else to turn to but God. And so in desperation, in weakness, in faith we turn to the one who has provided in the past and will provide again in the future.

The apostle Paul, a man who knew this sort of testing, once said, "When I am weak, then I am strong..." because in my weakness, Christ's power rests on me. And because then and only then, I find out that God's grace is sufficient for me. That God's grace is all that I really need in life.

It's not my children or my husband I can't live without. It's not my home or my money or my health that is the most important thing in my life. It is God and his grace. It is his word and his promise. It is his son and his spirit that I can't live without.

So the next time tough times come, the next time testing comes, and it will come, what are you going to do? Trust God! Have faith in His promises. Run into the arms of Jesus. Follow Him. He will always lead you towards the way out. He will always provide.