

Throughout November, we are kicking off our sermons with a few minutes about generosity. Last week we focused on the reality that *generosity changes lives*. Most people don't get excited paying taxes because they don't see the impact, but when you give to God through the church, you're funding changed lives. Today, I want to focus on this central truth: *generosity honors God*. When we are generous with our resources, God is honored. The Bible is filled with instructions to be generous with our money. 1 Timothy 6:18 says, "Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share." In Matthew 6:19-20, Jesus said, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven." No one who reads the Bible walks away and thinks, "I should keep all my money for myself." We know God's Word calls us to be generous. Here's what I want to focus on: **God is honored, not when we *know* what he's asked us to do with our resources, but when we *do* what he's asked us to do with our resources.**

The other day I asked my 6-year-old to run down the basement and bring up a book. He was down there for ten minutes without coming back. I went to the basement and found him playing a game. I asked him, "Do you remember what I sent you down here to do?" "Oh yeah! I got distracted and forgot." How many times has it been clear to us what God has asked us to do with regards to our money, but after we have his clear instructions, something happens, and we don't do what he asked. We don't honor God with good intentions—we honor him with obedience. We want to be the sort of people who do what he says! Proverbs 3:9 says, "Honor the Lord with your wealth." That is one of the reasons we give—giving honors God.

Sometimes a person comes to a moment to which it feels like their entire life was leading. That was the case in 1940 for Winston Churchill. He was the newly installed prime minister of Britain, and it looked like the Germans were going to eviscerate Europe. France was days from capitulation. The German Blitzkrieg strategy of lightning war was decimating their cities. America hadn't yet stepped up to help. The English had to retreat from their last several battles. Hope and morale were at all-time lows. Then Churchill stepped into Parliament and gave a speech that scholars call one of the most electrifying pivots in modern history. He addressed all the difficulties that led up to that moment then summoned the soul of the nation to fight against tyranny. He spoke these rousing words:

We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.

That speech galvanized all of Britain and it changed the course of the nation, of Europe, and of the world. Churchill later reflected that he felt like his entire life was preparation for that moment, as if his entire life pointed to that one speech. As we continue our study in the book of Genesis, we are going to see that like Churchill's life, Abraham's entire life was pointing to this one moment on a mountain. We are going to see three themes in our passage today: God blesses, God tests, and God provides. We'll see that not only in Abraham's life, but also in our lives as well.

God blessed Abraham

God called Abraham to leave his home and his family and set out on a journey to what would become the promised land. When he did, God said to him, “I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” This meant that God promised to give him offspring, a son, and through that son, hundreds of years later, a nation would come into the world, and thousands of years later, Jesus would come to earth through that nation and bless the entire world. God promised to bless Abraham, but Abraham lacked faith and stumbled all along the way. For example:

- Genesis 12 and 20—Abraham allowed his wife to join two harems. There were different times in Abraham’s life, twenty-five years apart from one another, when he had to travel to a different region. Both times, he thought his wife was so beautiful that the local leaders would kill him to have his wife join their harem. To protect himself, he said, “She’s my sister, and if you really want, you can have her in your harem.” He showed no sense of protecting his wife, her honor, her dignity, her safety, or God’s promise to use her to fulfill his promise! Not once, but twice, Abraham compromised God’s plan, and each time, God found a way to restore Sarah to Abraham.
- Genesis 16—Abraham married Hagar to have a son. Once Sarah was past childbearing years, she and Abraham figured the only way to have children was through a surrogate. They did what was culturally acceptable at the time and brought a third party into the equation, showing an enormous lack of faith that caused catastrophic harm for all parties involved.
- Genesis 21:1-3—“Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him.” The name Isaac literally means “he laughs.” They were told they would have a child when Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah was 90, and all they could do was laugh. It seemed ludicrous and impossible. Isaac was the first baby ever born in the geriatric ward of the hospital, paid for by Medicare. They would have diapers and Depends in the same house. They laughed and laughed at the improbability. But then God came through and did what he promised to do. God was faithful, even though they doubted and stumbled all along the way.

This is the asymmetrical nature of grace. God was faithful, even though his people were faithless. This happens all throughout the Bible, not only with Abraham. We see it with Moses, with the Israelites in the wilderness, with Saul, with David, with Peter and the apostles in the New Testament. Repeatedly, all throughout Scripture, and all throughout history, God’s people fall short. But God, in his infinite mercy and patience, doesn’t wash his hands and walk away. He continues to endure with us and bear with us, and though our faith fails time and time again, he never does. God’s faithfulness does not depend on our flawlessness. God always keeps his word. 2 Timothy 2:13 says, “If we are faithless, God remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself.” Abraham learned that lesson throughout his life, and we, too, have learned it time and time again. This sets the stage for the second theme.

God tested Abraham

After Abraham and Sarah had a son of their own, something they had been waiting for all their very long lives, God brought the greatest test imaginable to this man; he tested him in the area of his life

that mattered the absolute most to him. “Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, ‘Abraham!’ ‘Here I am,’ he replied. Then God said, ‘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’” (Genesis 22:1-2). The command was deeply personal: “Take your son, your only son, whom you love — Isaac—and sacrifice him” This is intentional layering of emotional intensity, and we can only imagine how his heart must have sunk. God pinpointed the most precious, the most valuable thing in Abraham’s life, and said, “That’s the very thing I want you to trust me with.” There are times in all our lives when we are called by God to trust him with the one thing in the world that matters most to us. The mountains we must climb may be called by a different name, but they require the same faith!

- There is the 38-year-old single person, wondering how to trust God with his longing for a family.
- There is the same-sex attracted person, weighing a life of celibacy.
- There is a business leader with a successful career who feels called to go into vocational ministry.
- There is the young couple sensing God calling them to a developing world mission field.

Sometimes God pinpoints the one area in life that matters more to us than anything else, then he asks us to trust him and lay it all on the line. When The Bible says “God tested Abraham” in Genesis 22:1, the word “tested” doesn’t mean that God tempted Abraham to induce him to failure, but rather that he examined him to display the true nature and condition of his heart. Not every season of testing is sent from heaven. But when it is, here’s what we need to know: testing comes not for God’s good, but for our good—so we can learn about ourselves and so we can learn about God. When we have to trust God with something that is enormously important in our lives, we discover what we truly love most!

Often times we *think* we fully trust God, but we don’t *know* if we fully trust God until the trial comes. Everyone trusts God when it’s 75 and sunny, the wind is at our backs, and we are coasting downhill. We only really know if we trust God when a price must be paid. It’s a price that will cost us dearly. What we do in that moment reveals where we really are in life, faith, and maturity. I have a friend who was recently studying for several months for a professional certification. A lot was riding on the results. I asked him if he was nervous. He said, “One way or another, we are going to find out what I actually know.” Testing not only helps us discover more about ourselves, but it also helps us learn more about God! It’s often in the fire, in the crucible hour, that we learn more about God than ever before. Because it’s in those moments that we encounter God’s presence and mercy as never before. That was the case for Abraham

God met with Abraham as he climbed that mountain with his son, who was likely in his teenage years at the time. “As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, ‘Father?’ ‘Yes, my son?’ Abraham replied. ‘The fire and wood are here,’ Isaac said, ‘but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?’” (Genesis 22:6-7). Listen to his response: “Abraham answered, ‘God himself will provide the lamb’” (Genesis 22:8). You can already see that his faith is growing from previous seasons in his life, when he would have doubted God and taken matters into his own hands. But instead, he said, “I have no idea how God is going to provide. But he always has. So I know he will.” They continued the journey up the mountain, Abraham’s heart beating faster with every step.

“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” (Genesis 22:9). This was the moment of truth. Not only going to the mountain but also climbing the mountain. Not only building the altar but also laying his son on the altar “Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son” (Genesis 22:10). He prepared to give up the one thing in the entire world that mattered most to him. How could he bring himself to raise the knife? People have been wondering for 4,000 years what was going through his mind at that moment. Hebrews 11:19 tells us! Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, that nothing, not even death, could keep God’s plans from being accomplished. He didn’t know what God was going to do, but he knew that God was good and would be faithful to him. Real faith often looks like obeying God, even without complete understanding.

I recently read the story of John Kavanaugh, a brilliant professor who spent three months serving the poor in Calcutta with Mother Teresa. He was at a pivotal crossroad in his life, and he asked Mother Teresa to pray that he have clarity. She said no. He was shocked and asked why. Her response was, “Clarity is the last thing you are clinging to and must let go of.” He responded, “But you have clarity!” She smiled and said, “I’ve never had clarity; what I’ve always had is trust. So I will pray that you trust God.” Then she prayed this prayer: “Jesus, you love John. He wants to see the road. Take away the need to see. Give him the courage to walk anyway. Let him trust Your heart when he cannot see Your hand.”

That was the trust Abraham had. That is the trust God wants from us. I want to speak to some of you right now that are in the moment of testing. When you trust God when you can’t see or understand what he is up to, it brings your Father deep joy. Nothing in all the world brings God more pleasure than a humble heart that trusts him, even in the dark.

God provided for Abraham

God blessed Abraham, then God tested Abraham in the very area he blessed him, and then God provided for Abraham. Right as Abraham’s hand was raised, knife in fist, to offer his son as a sacrifice, “The angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, ‘Abraham! Abraham!’” (Genesis 22:11a). God spoke and intervened. “‘Here I am,’ he replied. ‘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.’” (Genesis 22:11b-12). Abraham’s obedience and willingness to trust God in this one area of his life that mattered so much to him was proof that, as much as Isaac mattered to him, God mattered even more. The test was never about death; it was about devotion. God didn’t want to claim Isaac’s life; he wanted to claim Abraham’s life. God wanted all of Abraham’s heart. And he got it!

Then God provided. After God told him not to sacrifice his son, “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. So Abraham called that place The Lord Will Provide. And to this day it is said, ‘On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided’” (Genesis 22:13-14). In this moment, Abraham discovered a new aspect of God’s character, and he named that place, “Yahweh Yirah,” which means “The Lord Will Provide.” Every time he remembered that place, every time anyone walked by that place, he wanted them to know that God provides. He doesn’t just test us. He provides for us.

God provided what was needed in the moment, a substitute for Abraham's son, but God didn't only meet the immediate need. This was a foreshadowing of the way he would one day meet the ultimate need. All biblical scholars agree that this is one of the clearest passages in the Old Testament that points to Jesus. When they were making their way up the mountain the servants asked, "Where is the lamb?" That's the question that everyone throughout history asked, until Jesus came—and when the prophet saw Jesus he said, "Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." Like God provided a substitute for Isaac, he has provided a substitute for all of us. Three times in Genesis 22 Isaac is referred to as, "Your son, your only son, whom you love." This is exactly the way the New Testament refers to Jesus. Abraham's son was spared, but a day was coming when God's one and only beloved son would not be spared but would give his life for the entire world. The climax of this story isn't Abraham's faith; it's God's faithfulness, that God loved the world so much, that God love us so much, that he would send his own son to become a sacrifice for us! It's that Jesus would carry the cross to calvary and no voice would shout from heaven, "Stop." God's beloved son really did die, and he died so that we could live. The Bible says he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was on him, by his wounds, we have been healed.

In every passage in Genesis we are not only learning about history, we are not only learning about Old Testament characters, we are not only learning about faith, we are learning about God, we are learning about ways, from the very beginning, that he promised to save the world through Jesus, and we are learning how we can respond in faith. Abraham didn't become a man of great faith overnight. It took years of stumbling, doubting, and learning that God is faithful even when we are not. That's the same journey we're all on. You might be at the beginning of that journey today; others are on the mountain, holding something precious in their hands. No matter where you are, keep your eyes on Jesus, and know beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Lord will provide.