The sermon

Intro

What does the Bible say about trials? How should we think about trials? How should we go through trials? Why should I count something horrifically painful as joy?

We'll start in Genesis 22. Then we'll turn elsewhere.

READ Genesis 22:1-12

Body

Genesis 22:1-12

God tested Abraham: burn up your son Isaac as a sacrifice. God tested his faith, his allegiance, his obedience.

This was major because Abraham's wife, Sarah, was barren and they had waited 25 years for their first child, Isaac. And Isaac was the one whom God said would inherit the promises and result in countless offspring.

It wasn't as if Abraham didn't have a reason to trust God. God had promised Abraham things like blessing and cursing those who dishonor Abraham. God had made good on his promises. Things like cursing pagan kings who attempted to take Sarah. Things like prospering his household with so many goods and servants and soldiers that pagan kings wanted to make covenants with Abraham.

But now a horrific test. Why? To see if Abraham feared God. Fear is a positive term. Meaning an awe and reverence for God that results in obedient, righteous living. *"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge"* says Proverbs 1:7. To fear God is to understand God correctly, respect God accordingly, and submit to his rule faithfully.

Abraham obeyed because he understood God correctly: he's the sovereign LORD who keeps his word. Respecting God accordingly, Abraham submitted to God faithfully. Trusting that God keeps his word, Abraham believed God would raise Isaac from the dead (Heb 11:17-19).

James explains Abraham's response in this way:

Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? [22] You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; [23] and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"- and he was called a friend of God. – **James 2:21-23**

God's test gave Abraham opportunity to exercise his faith. Abraham wasn't justified by works in the sense that he earned his salvation by obedience. No, Abraham's faith came before his works. Abraham's belief is recorded in Genesis 15:6, long before Genesis 22. The works that justified Abraham came long after he was already counted righteous by God and forgiven of his sins (see Romans 4:1-8). Faith came before works!

"faith was active along with his works" = faith moved Abraham to offer Isaac. *"faith was completed by his works"* = Abraham's faith was made complete when he offered Isaac. Our faith reaches its fullest expression (end goal) when we obey God. Abraham was *"justified by works"* in that his works vindicated, proved genuine his faith. Abraham passed the test!

Summary

God tests us to see if we fear him. Tests give us opportunity to demonstrate our reverence for God. Tests give us opportunity to exercise faith.

Psalm 105:16-19

*When he summoned a famine on the land and broke all supply of bread, [17] he had sent a man ahead of them, Joseph, who was sold as a slave. [18] His feet were hurt with fetters; his neck was put in a collar of iron; [19] <u>until</u> what he had said came to pass, the word of the LORD **tested** him.*

Later in Genesis we'll see that God sent a famine upon Egypt. Before the famine, God sent Joseph to Egypt as a slave. Joseph later experienced unjust imprisonment until God's word came to pass. God's word being Joseph's dreams in Genesis 37. That one day his family would bow before him (37:10). While he waited, Joseph experienced a mix of injustice and suffering and God's blessing. Frequently we're told *"The LORD was with Joseph"* (Gen 39:2).

Here ***"tested"*** is a different word than Genesis 22:1 with the sense of refining metal. The heat was applied to Joseph while he waited. While he waited, Joseph was purified. Joseph waited for over a decade (Gen 37:2; 41:46).

Summary

We learn that God tests by delaying fulfillment of a promise. God tests with harsh conditions for lengthy periods of time. God blesses in the middle of suffering. Later we learn that Joseph suffered to preserve lives (Gen 50:20), particularly the lives of Abraham's ethnic offspring.

Deuteronomy 8:1-3

*"The whole commandment that I command you today you shall be careful to do, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land that the LORD swore to give to your fathers. [2] And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, <u>that</u> he might humble you, **testing** you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. [3] And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, <u>that</u> he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.*

"testing" = same word as Genesis 22:1. God tested the people of Israel in the wilderness for 40 years. How were they tested? Hunger, having to eat manna (*"like wafers made of honey"* – Exod 16:31) rather than the things they desired. Why were they tested? To see if they would obey God's word about the manna eating process (Exod 16:4). To teach them existence isn't simply eating food, rather, existence is bringing our life into alignment with God's word. And to humble them through hunger. Likewise, Paul said he was given a thorn in the flesh *"to keep me from becoming conceited"* (2 Cor 12:7). That's hard things to preserve humility.

Summary

God tests to see if we'll obey. God tests us to humble us, to prevent pride. God tests us with his word.

Job 1:8-12; 2:3-9

the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?" [9] Then Satan answered the LORD and said, "Does Job fear God for no reason? [10] Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. [11] But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face." [12] And the LORD said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand." So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD. – **1:8-12**

Satan says Job fears God because God blessed Job. Take away Job's protection, and he'll curse God. God disagrees. God, knowing Job's heart (he knew Abraham's heart before the test too), expresses great confidence in Job! So God permits Satan to do what he wants, except Satan can't harm Job's physical body.

What ensues is a fire, a wind, and two groups of attackers/robbers. The result? Job loses his sons, his daughters, some servants, and some animals.

And the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil? He still holds fast his integrity, although you incited me against him to destroy him without reason." [4] Then Satan answered the LORD and said, "Skin for skin! All that a man has he will give for his life. [5] But stretch out your hand and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face." [6] And the LORD said to Satan, "Behold, he is in your hand; only spare his life." [7] So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and struck Job with loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. [8] And he took a piece of broken pottery with which to scrape himself while he sat in the ashes. [9] Then his wife said to him, "Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die." – **2:3-9**

Job passed the first test saying, *"The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD"* (Job 1:21). Satan demands opportunity to afflict Job physically. The result? Distressing sores/boils from his feet to his head. A disturbing physical appearance. Painful suffering. Black skin/fever (Job 30:30), significant weight loss (Job 19:20), and unceasing pain (Job 30:17). Job's wife then instructs him to curse God. Another test.

Summary

God permits Satan to do extreme things to Job to prove that Job's faith is genuine. Hardship will reveal if Job fears God.

Our faith might be tested by financial loss, loss of loved ones, physical suffering, and people who counsel us to defy God.

1 Corinthians 11:18-19

For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, [19] for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.

No personal agenda here. Not suggesting we have a bunch of fake believers here. Just highlighting the fact that local churches are a testing ground.

The Corinthians were dishonoring the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:17, 20-22). There was division (i.e., rich and poor). So Paul explains that factions are necessary (*"there must be"*) because the presence of factions allows for genuine ("tried and true" after testing) believers in the body to be recognized. Meaning division in the church provides opportunity for faithful believers to rise up in the middle of chaos. Division can reveal sin. Division can reveal godliness.

Summary

One way God tests us is fellowship in the local church. When there's competing factions, it's a test from God that calls for a response. The genuine pass the test by conducting themselves in a biblical, obedient manner.

Redeemed, born again people in the local church remain sinners in need of more spiritual progress. So sin happens. Colossians 3:13 instructs us to bear with one another and forgive one another. Fellowship is a test: will we endure one another and forgive?

God wants his people in local churches so they can be tested by one another!

1 Peter 4:12-16

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. [13] But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. [14] If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. [15] But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. [16] Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. – **1 Peter 4:12-16**

"the fiery trial" is a test. The test/trial is persecution. Things like insults, verbal abuse, slander (false accusations to kill your reputation), rejected by family and friends. Perhaps loss of employment, physical abuse, imprisonment. Persecution stems from allegiance to Jesus. Instead of surprise and shame, there should be joy (I'm a believer destined for glory), an awareness of God's blessing (the Spirit of God rests on me to strengthen and sustain me), and glorifying God (opportunity to live out my faith before a lost world).

Summary

Trials are sent to test us. Persecution, verbal or otherwise, is a test and a consequence of allegiance to Jesus. Opposition to our faith tempts us to be ashamed of Jesus. Peter says instead use the opposition as opportunity to honor God and experience his sustaining grace.

James 1:2-4

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, [3] for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. [4] And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

"when you meet trials" = trials are inevitable. *"various kinds"* = trials take various shapes and sizes. One Christian's experience is vastly different than another. *"Count it all joy"* = rejoice in what the trial can do in your heart. Not rejoice because someone has sinned against you or a loved one is experiencing the effects of the fall. Trials are a test of faith designed to produce *"steadfastness"* = endurance, continuing, not quitting, not giving up when life is hard. As we continue to endure under trial, we move towards spiritual completeness/maturity. God tests us with trials to add virtue that presently lacks in our lives.

Why the fall? One reason. God wanted a world where our faith would be tested and our character would develop over time.

Summary

Trials should be expected. We rejoice in what the trials can do in our lives. Trials vary from believer to believer. Trials, rightly engaged, are opportunity to experience God's transformation in our hearts.

Putting it all together

1. Trials are tests from God.
2. Trials come in various shapes and sizes.
3. Trials include delayed promises, injustice, miserable circumstances, hunger, physical devastation, loss of property, loss of loved ones, fellowship in the local church, opposition to our faith outside the church.
4. Trials can be horrific!
5. God sends trials to test our faith.
6. God sends trials to humble us.
7. God sends trials to further our spiritual growth.
8. God sends trials to prove something to Satan.

9. God sends trials so that we can be used to do good to others.
10. God sends trials to provide us opportunity to honor God in a fallen world.
11. God supplies the grace necessary to endure well. We're not alone in trial!

The Spirit of God rests on the tested believer!

Application

Let's think about the trials of a teenage home-schooler. Like public school kids, there's the trial of peer pressure. The pressure to conform to the behavior of your peers. This can be a problem because some homeschoolers from Christian homes aren't saved. Other homeschoolers are saved, but there's much room for spiritual growth. So there's a good deal of behavior that isn't Christian.

Maybe your peers have a dirty mouth or perverse humor? Maybe your peers are okay with immodesty or dishonesty? Maybe they're content with laziness or gossip? You start to think the behavior of other homeschoolers is normal Christian behavior. You begin to judge Christianity by the conduct of your peers rather than Scripture. The test is, will I conform to Scripture or my peers? Will I speak up and take a stand and even offer correction? Or will I seek to fit in?

In the world, teenagers might be tempted to keep their faith a secret during sports or when they get a job.

Other struggles common to teenagers include, will I submit to my parents? As children age, they might begin to long for that freedom and responsibility that will be theirs when they're outside the home. How will I respond to my parents is test of will I obey God's word? Parents are tested by how will I respond to my teenager?

On the other hand, there's the trials of an 80 year old. Maintaining joy when pain is constant and sleep is hard to come by. The fight for peace because of an unknown condition where a solution evades your doctor. There's the struggle to allow God to humble you by asking for help when abilities you once had have faded away. Accepting your limitations. Adjusting accordingly. Aging humbles!

Declining health might invite comparisons. That Christian sitting over there doesn't have to deal with what I'm suffering through. Does God care about me?

When our health fails we're tested. Will I turn to God for help? Will I see it as opportunity to honor God in suffering? Will I allow it to prevent me from being conceited? Will I begin to question God's goodness?

Regardless of our age and the nature of our trial, trials always demand a response! We respond one way or another.

Practical question: how am I being tested today?

Practical question: how am I responding today?

Practical question: what might God be seeking to accomplish through my test?

Conclusion

The Holy Spirit led Jesus to be tempted by Satan. Satan offered Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. If he'd worship Satan and forego the cross. Jesus passed the test. He went to the cross and died as a substitute such that whoever believes will be forgiven of their sins and have eternal life. Sin meaning doing life our own way. Breaking God's commands.

On the cross, God treated Jesus like he lived your sinful life. If you trust in Jesus, God will deal with you like you lived Jesus' perfect, sinless, obedient life.

On the third day, Jesus rose from the dead, furnishing proof that forgiveness of sins and eternal life comes through trusting in Jesus.

If you wouldn't say, my sins are forgiven, I possess eternal life, then recognize your only hope of God's mercy is through Jesus' death on the cross.

Thank God for sending Jesus to the cross. Confess your sin. Ask God for forgiveness. Trust that God forgives all who come to him through Jesus.

Tell us if you believe.