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Work Station

TWO

Gary B. Swanson

Facing the Gas Chamber

Early October 1969. I had been recently drafted into the U.S. Army, one of the countless thousands of young Americans called upon for compulsory service during the Vietnam conflict. My college deferments were spent, and my number was up.

After processing in at Fort Lewis, Washington, I was shipped to Fort Sam Houston, in San Antonio, Texas, for six weeks of basic training. Each draftee received a copy of the syllabus for basic training, *The Soldier's BCT [Basic Combat Training] Handbook*, a 264-page paperbound manual that we were instructed to commit to memory—and that is still in my library. Sample sections: “Quick Kill Training,” “Counter Signs and Parole Words,” “Determining Azimuths Between Points on the Map,” that sort of thing. Appendix D, on page 228, addressed “Chain of Command.” It contained a blank page to write in the names of all those under whom I directly served and whom I was to salute. In basic training, you salute just about everything that moves, just to be safe. At the top of that chain of command was the U.S. President, where we penciled in “Richard Nixon.”

The process of basic training is to prepare for a variety of

tests, some of them physical, some of them mental, some of them seemingly *experi*-mental. One of these tests was to become familiar with, and prepare for, the effects of chemical warfare. For us, this meant exposure to tear gas and how to react to it.

From the very first few days of basic training, hushed rumors of the “gas chamber” began to circulate. This was the unofficial term given to the place where, sometime during the last of the six weeks, we would be exposed to tear gas and learn how to respond to it.

The day came at last: We marched to a remote area of Fort Sam Houston, where a small clapboard bungalow sat in a clearing. The walls inside had been torn down, leaving the interior of the house as a single room. All the windows had been boarded up, completely sealed. There were two doors: one at the front to enter, the other at the back to exit. Here we were to learn of the effects of tear gas and how to use our gas masks to protect ourselves.

The requirement: Enter the house in groups of six with gas masks on, jog for five minutes in a circle surrounding a sergeant who is wearing a gas mask, until all have worked up a sweat in the tropical, southern Texas climate. Then, when the sergeant points one by one to each individual, the “trainee” has to tear off his gas mask and choke out his full name, rank, and serial number before the sergeant signals permission to exit the gas chamber. (Other sergeants wearing gas masks are stationed at the doors to prevent anyone from bolting before successfully passing the test.)

We quickly learned that this was one of those unusual tests in which it’s best to be first. Otherwise, you are standing in ranks outside the gas chamber, waiting the turn for you and five others to enter, and watching earlier individuals emerge from the test, crimson-faced and perspiring, coughing and retching. The test is truly both physical and emotional. It has begun even before you

enter the house.

Throughout Scripture are examples of ways in which God allowed people to be tested physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Sometimes these tests were self-inflicted; they resulted from poor choices and downright human sinfulness. But some were initiated by God for reasons that will be fully explained only in eternity. It isn't that God is capricious or sadistic. But He does know what's best for us, and sometimes a test is administered for that very reason.

Consider the incident in which God commanded Abraham to offer up his son Isaac. This certainly must be among the most compelling stories in the Old Testament. The King James Version begins the account in this way: "It came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am" (Gen. 22:1).

This verse has led to significant comment and misunderstanding. How could a loving God tempt someone to do something wrong? And how could Scripture contradict itself in such an obvious way. After all, it says elsewhere that God does *not* tempt anyone (James 1:13).

This is one of the places in which it pays to compare other translations of Scripture. The NRSV, the NIV, the NLT, the NASB, and the NKVJ—all translate Genesis 22:1 to say, "God *tested*" Abraham.

Big difference.

I can say with certainty that I would never have been *tempted* by anyone to experience the gas chamber. For most reasonable thinkers, its negative effects are surely obvious. It is not a rational choice. It isn't something that someone would normally do "just for fun."

But I was ordered to walk into that gas chamber. It was my decision, then, to decide whether I trusted the person who was giving me that order. If I were truly motivated to be as prepared

as possible to serve in combat, I would decide, reasonably, I think, to be *tested* to experience the gas chamber with the guidance of someone I had learned to trust, someone who assured me that I could succeed, and that it was in my best interest.

A test—a very unpleasant and uncomfortable experience—was necessary. In the spiritual realm, 19th-century minister and author George MacDonald described God’s tests of us in his characteristically direct language: “We are so full of ourselves, and feel so grand, that we should never come to know what poor creatures we are, never begin to do better, but for the knock-down blows that the loving God gives us. We do not like them, but he does not spare us for that.”¹

Something of this thinking must certainly have been in Abraham’s mind as he set out on the agonizing three-day journey to Mount Moriah. And it surely must have been what motivated him to raise the knife over his son and heir.

The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, however, helps to understand how Abraham could have been willing to do this: “By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, ‘In Isaac your seed shall be called,’ concluding *that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead*” (Heb. 11:17-19, NKJV, italics supplied).

Abraham was tested, not tempted. His Mount Moriah experience was prompted by God’s test, not by Satan’s temptation. And Abraham’s response was prompted by his utter belief in God’s power to raise Isaac, whether that was to be in an immediate, or in the ultimate, resurrection. He “concluded that God could and would resurrect Isaac. He had learned from Isaac’s birth that God could bring life out from death.”²

But this in no way minimizes the difficulty of the test. Raising his knife in the air over the living, breathing, corporeal life

of his willing son—and only true heir—was an act of faith that we can only pray for daily.

REFERENCES

1. George MacDonald, *A Rough Shaking* (London: Blackie and Son, Ltd., 1890), p. 151.

2. *Andrews Study Bible*, Ellen G. White note on Hebrews 11:19 (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 2010), p. 1614.