

Heroes of the Faith

Abraham and the Sacrifice (Genesis 22:1-19)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on June 6, 2021

Introduction

- ❖ This morning we're starting a summer sermon series called *Heroes of the Faith*. Each week we're going to highlight an OT character and preach on the most prominent, most well-known episode in their story. That moment when the character really shines as a hero – as an example of faith and godliness. **But, in the end, we want to show you how that particular OT hero simply foreshadows another hero to come.** How these heroes of the faith point us forward to the real Hero of the Faith, Christ Jesus, the Son of God.
 - This series is inspired by Sally Lloyd-Jones' *The Jesus Storybook Bible*. It's my family's favorite kid's bible because not only does it re-tell the biblical stories in a fun and engaging manner and not only are the illustrations colorful and unique – but each chapter of each biblical story ends making a connection to Christ. The very subtitle of the book hints at this: *Every story whispers his name. In every story, we're shown how Jesus is foreshadowed.* How he is the fulfillment of God's promise to love his covenant people with a “*Never Stopping, Never Giving Up, Unbreaking, Always and Forever Love.*”

- ❖ So that's our goal in this series. **To help you see how all these biblical narratives and characters that we so love are all connected to a bigger story being told in the pages of Scripture from cover to cover.** Like a missing piece in a puzzle, Jesus brings it all together – he completes the picture. He is the key that unlocks the mysteries and brings to light a clearer vision of God and his loving work of redemption.
 - Even though we're highlighting the high points in the stories of these OT heroes – and even though they do set before us a great example and we should be inspired to imitate them in their faith – **but, in the end, our message is not simply to be like Abraham, or Moses, or Ruth, or Esther. It's not simply to do as they did.** But it's to realize that they could only do what they did by faith in the Hero who was to come. Likewise, you can only be like them and do as they did – if you share in the same faith and come to know the True Hero of the Bible and strive to be like him.

- ❖ We're going to kickstart this series with Abraham – the patriarch of Israel and the first recipient of the Old Covenant promises. God promised to bless Abraham and his family that they might be blessing to all the families of the earth.
 - **Now if you're familiar with Abraham's story, you know it's a story is marked by sacrifice.** In the beginning, he is asked to sacrifice everything comfortable and familiar, leaving behind his home, his family, and his land. But at least every sacrifice God called him to make was balanced by a promise of blessing – of a new home, new family, and new land. He was being asked to give up a lot, but at least the Lord was going to make it worth his while.
 - **But in our text, Abraham is asked to make a sacrifice unlike any before – to sacrifice with nothing to gain.** He is faced with a test – a test that will determine if his trust is really in the Lord or merely in the things he promised. **Which do you love more Abraham – the promised blessings of the covenant or the God of the covenant?** The promises or the Promise Maker?

- ❖ So to breakdown this familiar story, let's first consider the nature and purpose of the Lord's rather shocking request. We'll look at **(1) the test of faith**. Then, we'll consider Abraham's response to this test. We'll look at **(2) the obedience of faith**. And finally, we'll consider what motivated Abraham to obey even at such a cost. We'll center our attention on **(3) the Lord who provides**.

The Test of Faith

- ❖ Let's begin by considering this test of faith that God has arranged. Now chapter 22 begins by setting this test within the context of Abraham's larger story. Listen to v1, "*After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said "Here I am."*"
 - The phrase "*After these things*" alerts us that we should consider how chapter 21 concluded. And there, in **Genesis 21:33**, we read that Abraham "*called there on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God.*" *El Olam. The Everlasting God.*
- ❖ Prior to our passage, there was great instability in Abraham's life. Partly due to the drama involving Hagar and Ishmael, and also due to his failure to protect his wife from the advances of Abimelech. For a moment, the future was insecure. The covenant promises looked unstable. **Will Issac – the son of his old age from Sarah his wife – will he be the son of promise through whom the covenant blessings will continue?** It's not yet clear.
 - But by the end of Genesis 21, the LORD has shown himself to be faithful to his promises. His covenant endures in spite of Abraham's faithlessness and failures. That's why he calls on the LORD as *the Everlasting God*.
 - But now this everlasting and enduring God is the one who introduces confusion and chaos into his life. **This God is now testing Abraham to see if he really believes in God's everlasting faithfulness to his promises.**
- ❖ Now the word "*test*" prepares the reader to interpret what follows. **It's a cue that what God is about to ask of Abraham is not something he intends for him to go through with.** That's something we need to be clear about. This passage does *not* suggest, in the slightest, that God condones – much less desires – child sacrifice. This is a test from the start.
 - But Abraham doesn't know that. For all he knows, God is completely serious. He's taking this request seriously. **Now no doubt God's request would have shocked Abraham. But not for the same reason it shocks us.**
- ❖ **We're shocked by the mere mention of child sacrifice coming from God.** We know such a wicked practice is prohibited by his Law. It's opposed to his character. But remember, at this point, Abraham is still getting to know Yahweh. There is no Leviticus 18:21 or Deuteronomy 18:10 where God explicitly opposes the sacrifice of children.
 - **So for Abraham – for a man living in the Ancient Near East – the idea of a god demanding the sacrifice of children would not have been a shock.** The fact that Leviticus and Deuteronomy had to directly prohibit it for Israel tells us that such practices were common enough.

- ❖ **What shocked Abraham was not that God was asking for a child sacrifice in general – but that God was asking him to sacrifice *this* child in particular.** This was the child of promise. This was the child in whom the covenant promises of blessing to Abraham’s family and, by extension, to all the families of the earth depended.
 - Before Isaac was conceived, Abraham had asked the Lord if Ishmael could be the child through whom the blessings flow (Gen 17:18). He was fine with it being Ishmael. **It was God who insisted that the covenant blessings would flow through a son born of Sarah** (Gen 17:19). “Lord, you insisted that the child of promise be Isaac. But now you’re telling me to kill him? Now you want me to sacrifice him to you?” Abraham is understandably shocked. Just for a reason different than us.

- ❖ Now as we mentioned earlier, this was the first time, in his story that the Lord was asking Abraham to make a sacrifice without balancing it with a promise to bless him. **There seem to be no apparent reason for this sacrifice.** No gain. No benefit. In fact, God seems to be erasing all of his plans. He seems to be reneging all of his promises.
 - That’s how Abraham would have interpreted this request. **He’s being asked – not just to kill his son – but to kill all hope in the covenant promises of blessing that he was banking on.** This is a test to determine if his trust is really in the Lord or merely in the things the Lord had promised him.

- ❖ **It’s a test to determine where Abraham ultimately places his trust.** Are you actually trusting in the God of the covenant or merely in the promised blessings and benefits of the covenant? **Do you love your promised salvation more than you love the God who promises to save you?**
 - That’s an important question that each of us needs to be confronted with. We need to be put through a similar test. **To find out whether we love our salvation more than we love the God who saves.** Imagine if you were presented with a choice: Live in a perfect world, with a perfect life, with perfect family and friends, with no suffering or sickness to steal your joy *but without God* – or live in a world of sin and suffering, filled with frustration and disappointment *but with God in your life*. Which would you choose? Some of us just might choose the first option.
 - **Our hope is in heaven and not so much the Lord of heaven.** Would you be content to enjoy the promised blessings of heaven *even if God were not there?* That would be similar to Abraham being content to enjoy being a father, the father of many nations; to enjoy the blessings of the covenant even if the God of the covenant was absent from his life. This was a test to see if that is so.

- ❖ **Now who was this test for?** Who needed this information? Who needed to know how Abraham would respond? **Certainly it was for Abraham.** He needed to know where his trust and his hope ultimately lies. He could be deceiving himself.
 - **This test was also for Isaac.** For him to know that his father loves him. His father had been hoping and praying for him longer than he could imagine. But Isaac needs to know that his father’s hope is ultimately not in him but in the God whom he trusts.

- ❖ **And this test is for us.** For us to know what faith is. That true faith is a living faith, an active faith that manifest itself in works. As we learn in the book of James, Abraham’s faith was active along with his works, and his faith was completed by his works – most notably when he offered up his son on the altar (Jas 2:21-22).
- ❖ **But if we look at v12, it explicitly says this test was for God.** After the angel of the LORD stays his hand, he says, *“Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.”*
 - “Now I know that you fear me.” That’s why God put Abraham through this test. So he can know that Abraham fears him, reveres him, and ultimately trusts in him. But you’re probably thinking, **“Didn’t God already know that? Doesn’t he already know what’s in our hearts? Why did he need to put Abraham through a test?”**
- ❖ Yes, you’re right. God did already know what was in Abraham’s heart, and he knows the future and what Abraham’s response would be. But think about this: **There is a difference between cognitive knowledge and experiential knowledge.** Between knowing something to be true in your head and knowing something to be true through your experience of it.
 - **For example, my wife knows I love her.** Call that a *cognitive* knowledge of my love. **But she also loves it when I manifest my love in actual choices and real life decisions, especially when it involves a sacrifice on my part.** That would give her an *experiential* knowledge of my love. It’s an important and meaningful difference.
- ❖ So apply this to our relationship with God. He knows what we need even before we do, yet he still wants us to pray for it. He knows how we feel about him better than we do, yet he still wants us to praise him in song or thanksgiving.
 - In the same way, God knew that Abraham feared him. He knew how Abraham would respond. **But God also loves it when these inner realities and future realities are manifested in the present in actual choices and real life decisions.** That gives him experiential knowledge of our love. That means your choices matter. Your obedience matters. Though he already knows whether you trust him or not, yet your obedience – especially when it’s costly, when it involves a sacrifice – that well pleases the Lord.

The Obedience of Faith

- ❖ Now let’s turn our attention to Abraham and to his obedience – his obedience of faith. We just looked at the test of faith. Let’s see how Abraham stands up to it. Look back at v2. The Lord is not making it easy for Abraham. Listen to how the Lord presents his request, *“He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.””*
 - **Notice how the Lord stacks these phrases one on top of the other.** Take your son. Your only son. Isaac. The son whom you love. Take and offer him as a burnt offering. Grammatically, that stacking is intended to magnify the intensity of this request.
 - And he’s to offer Isaac as a burnt offering. That was the only kind of offering that was completely consumed by the fire. To be wholly dedicated to the Lord.

- ❖ Now if you keep reading in v3 and on, Abraham doesn't betray any emotions. **We can only speculate what was going on in his mind.** What we see in the pages of Scripture is a man going through the motions the very next day, early in the morning, to prepare for a trip to a far off mountain to build an altar to the Lord.
 - We're told he brought a donkey, two servants, and his son Isaac. And it says it was a three day trip to reach Mount Moriah (cf. 2 Chron 3:1). Imagine having to silently endure, for three days, all of this weighing on your mind and pulling on your heart.
 - We're not given an inside look into his thoughts. That's not how this narrative is told. But we do read his words. **And Abraham's words are revealing of what went on internally.**

- ❖ Look at what he says to his two servants in v5. "*Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.*" **It's obscured in the English, but the verbs for "worship" and "come again" are both in the first person plural.** So a literal translation (which doesn't read as smoothly) would say, "I and the boy will go over there and *we will* worship and *we will* come again to you."
 - It's a clunky sentence, but it's important to stress that. ***We will come again to you. That's what faith sounds like.*** Those are the words of a man who trusts in the Everlasting God to keep his covenant forever lasting. Abraham doesn't know how, but somehow the Lord will stay true to his promises and preserve this child of promise – even if he is offered as a burnt offering on the altar.

- ❖ The author of Hebrews comments on this episode in Abraham's life, and he gives us divinely inspired insight into Abraham's thought process. Listen to **Hebrews 11:17-19**, "*¹⁷By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, ¹⁸of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." ¹⁹He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.*"
 - The author of Hebrews is saying that those words "We will come again to you," illustrate Abraham's faith in the Lord to provide a way to keep his covenant promises – even if it means raising Isaac from the dead. God would make a way. **So just as he treated God's request to sacrifice Isaac seriously, Abraham treated God word seriously when he promised that "*through Isaac shall your offspring be named.*"**

- ❖ Notice more words that are more revealing of Abraham's thought process. Look at v8. Isaac just asked, "I see the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Listen to what Abraham says, "*God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.*"
 - That word for "provide" in Hebrew is literally the word "to see". **Abraham is telling his son that God will see for himself the lamb.** Now according to Scripture, God doesn't see things like a passive bystander or observer. Just seeing but not doing anything. **No, when God sees, he sees in the sense of seeing to it.** He'll see to it that it gets done. That's why we usually translate it as "provide". He will provide the means to accomplish the task.

- ❖ This is where we get the idea of divine providence. **Providence is the belief that God sees us – he sees our needs, sees all events, sees all outcomes – and he sees to it that his will be done in our lives.** So what Abraham's words reveal is a deep-seated faith in God's good providence over his life. God will see to it himself that a lamb will be provided. **Have no fear, son; the Lord will take care of it.** That's faith speaking. And that's why we call his obedience an obedience of faith. It was motivated by his faith in God and his providence.

- ❖ **Commentators have noted how Isaac also exemplifies a faith in God's good providence.** If you think about it, if he is old enough and strong enough to carry the wood up the mountain, then he is old enough and strong enough (and quick enough) to resist or evade his over a hundred year old father.
 - **But apparently the son trusted his father and refused to resist or flee.** He too must have believed that God would provide for himself the lamb. He probably thought that even if I am to play the role of that lamb, then God will somehow see to it that the promises he made with my father will continue through me.

- ❖ **So Isaac let himself be bound and placed on the altar atop of the wood. He lay there silent, as a sheep before its shearers.** But as the knife came down, the angel of the Lord called from heaven and stopped Abraham. He stayed his hand and provided a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham *“took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.”* (22:13) God provided a substitute. This is the language of salvation by substitution.
 - As that ram burned until it was wholly consumed by the flames, I'm certain that father and son both stared in wonder thinking, "That should have been my son. That should have been me. **Thanks be to God for his gracious provision of a substitute.**"

- ❖ Now if we keep reading on in vv15-18, the angel of the LORD speaks again and essentially reaffirms the covenant promises that the Lord first established with Abraham back in Genesis 12. But this time there are two key differences.
 - **First, in v16, the Lord reinforces his commitment to the covenant by swearing by himself.** When people swear an oath, they swear by something greater than themselves. But since God has no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself (Heb 6:13). There was no stronger way for God to prove his everlasting commitment to his covenant with Abraham.

- ❖ **The second difference in our text, compared to his covenant promise in Genesis 12, is that Abraham's obedience is highlighted as playing a crucial role.** In Genesis 12 and 15, those covenant promises are established by God, according to his sovereign grace, without a view to Abraham and his obedience.
 - But notice here in v18. Notice how it says all these blessings will be yours and will flow through you and your offspring to all the nations of the earth, *“because you have obeyed my voice.”* **Abraham's obedience played a key role in the securing of these covenant blessings for his family and for all the families of the earth.**

- ❖ **Once again, the point is being made that your obedience matters.** That's why God will put you through your own trials and your own tests. For you to make the right choices. To choose to trust him even when it's confusing or when it's costly.
 - Your obedience matters. But in the end, you have nothing to boast in if it's the obedience of faith. Where your obedience to the Lord is motivated and sustained by faith in the Lord and in his faithfulness. **All credit and all glory goes – not to the subject of the obedience (not to us) – but to the object of the faith (to the Lord).** Notice he didn't name the place “Abraham obeyed”. No, he named it “The Lord will provide”. Because all glory goes to God and his gracious provision in our lives.

The Lord Who Provides

- ❖ With that being said, let's shift away from Abraham and focus back on the Lord. Let's consider the Lord who provides. That's what Abraham learns about God. Remember, he is still getting to know Yahweh. There is no Scripture yet that he can read to learn about God's character and his ways. Everything he's learning comes from experiential knowledge. **So because of this experience, he now knows God as the Lord who provides.**
 - Listen to v14, "*So Abraham called the name of that place, “The LORD will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.”*” Here we learn a glorious truth about the Lord. **We learn that the God who tests us is also the God who provides.** He's not some cruel taskmaster who tests you with difficult tests just to see you fail. No, he wants you to succeed. So when God tests you, he will graciously provide whatever you need to grow and mature from that test.
- ❖ That's what Abraham could depend on. The Lord asked him to trust and obey. To trust and obey even when it didn't make sense. To trust and obey even without an apparent benefit. **But now Abraham knows, with experiential knowledge, that the God who requests such radical trust and costly obedience is a God who graciously provides.** He will see to it that your needs are satisfied and that his purposes are accomplished in your life.
 - We're told in v14 that, from that day on, there was a saying among Abraham's descendants, among the Israelites: "*On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.*” **They would say that to each other whenever they faced their own tests – whenever they were asked to trust and obey in a costly, sacrificial way.**
 - It was to remind themselves of this highlight in Abraham's story. This key moment when their forefather was tested, when he obeyed in faith, and when the Lord proved himself as a faithful Provider – as the One who will see to it that a way be made for his covenant promises to last forever (everlasting).
- ❖ **But what Abraham's descendants didn't realize, at the time, was the lengths to which God would go to provide.** Many years later on another mount (this one called Calvary), **another Son would climb up the mountain with wood on his back** (cf. Jn 19:17). Like Isaac, he would not resist what was coming. He trusted his Father. As silent as a sheep before its shearers, the Son of God was lifted up on top of the wood to be slaughtered.

- ❖ **But unlike Isaac, there was no voice from heaven saying “Stop.” There was no other ram to be slain.** No, unlike Isaac, Jesus was the substitute – a substitute for us. He was the Lamb of God who was slain to take away the sins of the world. He was God’s only Son, whom he loved, and he sacrificed him for us.
 - What does this mean? **This means when God asks you to trust and obey him – when he calls you to sacrifice something costly, something dear to you – know that he speaks to you as someone who experientially knows what it’s like to do the same.** He sacrificed what was dearest to him, his only begotten Son. Because he is committed to his covenant promises, and he loves his covenant people.

- ❖ So, I ask you: **In what way is God calling you to trust and obey him?** I’m sure, in one way or another, it’s going cost you something. It’s going to be a sacrifice. **For some of you, obedience to the Lord is going to cost you financially.** You may have to make sacrifices in your career or your career aspirations in order to be more faithful to the Lord and to his higher calling on your life to be a disciple, or a good spouse, or loving parent.
 - **For others, to trust and obey might not cost you financially, but it may cost you social capital.** Because you choose to obey the Lord, you may lose friendships and opportunities. Or you may face ridicule and derision.
 - **I believe, for some of you, he’s calling you to be a Christian, to become his disciple.** And that will cost you dearly. You’ll have to deny yourself and take up your cross daily and follow him (Lk 9:23). You’ll have to carry the wood on your back and go up the mount of sacrifice.

- ❖ What will do when faced with such a test? **Know this, that on the mount of the LORD, it was provided.** The Savior, your Substitute, made the ultimate sacrifice, and he will personally see to it that you will receive the promised blessings of your salvation in this life or the next.