

Our Father Abraham: A Series in Genesis (Part 2)

The Sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22:1-24)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on July 9, 2023

Introduction

- ❖ We've been in a sermon series in the book of Genesis, looking at the life of Abraham. And this morning, we've arrived at the pinnacle of his story. **In this episode, we see the high watermark of his faith.** Everything we've read and studied so far leads to this moment. Where Abraham faces his greatest test – and passes with flying colors.
 - **Now I think it's important to address, right up front, what many of us find uncomfortable about this story.** It's the fact that God is testing Abraham. That's how chapter 22 begins, "*After these things God tested Abraham.*" This was a test.
- ❖ And that word makes us uncomfortable. **When we hear the word "test", we instinctively cringe.** The hair stands up on the back of our necks. The terms "test" or "testing" tend to generate fear and anxiety. Because we've grown up under the threat of tests that could result in failure or that were intended to weed people out. **So when we read of God testing Abraham, we have an instinctive negative reaction.**
- ❖ Which is why it's so important to clarify that testing in Ancient Near Eastern cultures was not a term related to academics. **Rather, it was used in contexts such as metalsmithing.** That's where a metalsmith is working with unrefined ore of gold, silver, or copper. And part of the creative process would involve testing the ore.
 - But an experienced metalsmith has enough skill to know if he's dealing with an ore of gold or not. **So by testing it – by placing it in a furnace – he's not trying to figure out if this is gold. No, he's trying to refine what he knows to be gold.** He's trying to burn away the dross. To purify the gold. That's his purpose in testing.
- ❖ **My point is that I think we need to adopt a new perspective of testing.** We have to lay aside our automatic negative attitude and reconsider this idea of God testing us. **Like a skilled metalsmith, when God tests us, it's *not* because he's trying to learn something about us that he doesn't already know.** It's *not* because he doesn't know if we're genuine believers. He's *not* trying to figure out if we have real faith.
 - **No, if the Lord puts you through a test, it's because he's trying to refine your faith.** He's trying to purify your soul. That's his intent. He wants you to come out of that period of testing with greater self-awareness as well as a greater trust in the Lord your God – who should be the very object of your faith.
 - **And that's the same goal I have for this message. I hope you come away with greater self-awareness and greater faith in the Lord.** So to that end, I want to show you three things from our text. I want you to see (1) The God who purposefully tests, (2) The man who obediently trusts, and (3) The Lord who graciously provides.

The God Who Purposefully Tests

- ❖ Let's begin by confronting the reality of a God who purposefully tests his people. Chapter 22 begins by setting this test within the context of Abraham's 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 think about how chapter 21 concluded. And there at the end, in **Genesis 21:33**, we read that Abraham “*called there on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God.*” *El Olam. The Everlasting God.*
 - If you recall, prior to our passage, there was a lot of instability in Abraham’s life. Partly due to the self-inflicted drama involving Hagar and Ishmael, and due to his failure to protect his wife while sojourning in the land of Gerar. For a moment, the future was insecure. The covenant promises that God made to Abraham looked unstable. **Will this promised child ever arrive – this son of promise through whom all the covenant blessings will perpetuate?** 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 God is the One who introduces confusion and chaos into Abraham’s life. **This God is about to test Abraham.** And again, it’s not because God is ignorant of what’s going on in Abraham’s heart. It’s not because he doesn’t already know how Abraham’s going to respond. No, he already knows.
 - But nevertheless, this test is going to reveal a lot. A lot to Abraham. **You see, it’s possible to use your lips to call him Everlasting God but, all the while, never actually experienced his everlasting faithfulness.** Calling him your Merciful God is not the same thing as experiencing his mercy. Addressing him as Lord is one thing; experiencing his lordship is another. **That’s one reason why God puts us to the test – to give us experiential knowledge of the One in whom we confess with our lips to believe.** As we’ll see, that’s why he put Abraham to the test.

- ❖ Now the word “*tested*” in v1 prepares us to interpret what follows. **It’s a cue that what God is about to ask of Abraham is not something he actually wants him to go through with.** Let’s be clear about that. This passage is *not* suggesting, in the slightest, that God condones child sacrifice. Much less desire it. This is a test from the start.
 - But Abraham doesn’t know that. For all he knows, God is completely serious. So he takes this request seriously. **Now I don’t doubt that God’s request shocked Abraham. But not for the same reason it shocks us.**

- ❖ **We’re shocked by the mere suggestion of child sacrifice coming from the LORD.** How could he associate himself with such a wicked practice. It’s opposed to his character. It’s prohibited by his Law. It’s beyond the pale for God to ask for such a thing.
 - But remember, at this point, Abraham is still getting to know the LORD. There is no Leviticus 18:21 or Deuteronomy 18:10 written yet – 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 such a thing for Israel tells us that it was common enough in those days.

- ❖ **What shocked Abraham was not that God was asking for a child sacrifice in general – but that God was asking to sacrifice *this* child in particular.** This was the child of promise. This was the son through whom covenant blessings would flow to Abraham’s family and, by extension, to all the families of the earth.
 - Remember how Abraham had asked the Lord if Ishmael could be that child? (17:18) If God could work through Ishmael. **But God insisted that the covenant blessings would flow through a son born of Sarah** (17:19). So you can understand Abraham’s confusion, “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 different reason than us.

- ❖ So Abraham is faced with a big test asking for a big sacrifice. Now, on one hand, he should be used to sacrificing by now. His story is marked by many sacrifices. **Back in Genesis 12, he was asked to sacrifice everything comfortable and familiar.** He was asked to leave behind his family and his land. But at least those sacrifices were accompanied by promises of blessing – of a new family and a 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 here in Genesis 22, Abraham is being asked to do something different – to make a sacrifice with nothing to gain.** He has everything to lose. You have to understand that he’s not just being asked to kill his son. He’s being asked to kill all hope. To destroy what he perceived to be the source of his hope of a blessed future. There was no apparent blessing to come out of all of this. In fact, God seemed to be reneging his promises. Canceling his blessings.
 - **Abraham faced a test – a test that will determine if his trust is really in the Lord himself 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?

- ❖ **Where do you ultimately place your trust?** That’s what this kind of test reveals. And that’s what God intends to accomplish whenever he puts us to the test. **Like that skilled metalsmith working with an unrefined, unfinished piece of gold, God is taking our crude, unfinished faith and he’s going to put it through the fire to test it.** To refine it. To expose what you’ve been putting your trust in. Have you put your whole trust in the Lord himself? Or is the source of your hope really in the things he’s promised to bless you with?

- ❖ Do you trust in the God of the covenant or merely in the benefits of the covenant? **Do you love your promised salvation more than you love the God who promises to save you?** Imagine if you were presented with a choice: Live in a perfect world, with a perfect life, with a perfect family and friends, with no suffering or sickness to steal your joy *but without God* – or live in a world marked by sin and suffering, filled with frustration and failure *but with God in your life*. Which would you choose? Some of us just might choose the first option.

- ❖ Be honest with yourself: **Is your hope merely to be in heaven one day or is it to be with the Lord of heaven?** Would you be satisfied with the promised blessings of heaven *even if God were not there?* That would be like Abraham being satisfied with being a father – the father of many nations – and being satisfied with 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 was true or not.

The Man Who Obediently Trusts

- ❖ So let's see how Abraham responds to that test. It's encouraging to see a man who responds by obediently trusting the Lord. But first, let's look back at v2 and listen to the parameters of this test. The Lord is not making it easy. 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. According to the Law, that was the only kind of offering completely consumed by fire. It was 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 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 (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 was going 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 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 those plural verbs. **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 gets offered up as a burnt offering.**
- ❖ Notice more words revealing more of Abraham's thought process. Look at v8. Issac just said, "*Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?*" Listen to how his dad replies, "*God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.*"

- Notice how he trusts that God will provide for himself. He will get it done. **Abraham doesn't know exactly how it's all going to work out, but he obediently trusts that somehow the Lord will provide.**

- ❖ **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 meant raising Isaac from the dead. God will make a way. **So just as he treated God's request to sacrifice Isaac seriously, Abraham treated God's Word seriously when he promised that "through Isaac shall your offspring be named."** If God said it, then God was going to do it. No matter how impossible it might seem to me. That's what obedient faith says.

- ❖ Now let's be careful. **That's not to endorse a blind faith that takes any impression of what you might think God wants and blindly believes it shall be done.** No, I'm only suggesting if God's Word says it. If you can find a promise of God in Scripture, then you can bank on it no matter how improbable it might seem.
 - **That's how you please God. That's how you honor him. By taking him at his Word.** We have a lot of parents of young children here. Imagine if your young child kept questioning your word at every turn. Mommy, do you really love me? Daddy, will you really catch me? We would be hurt if our child couldn't take us at our word.
 - **But on the other hand, we would be honored if our child trusted us simply because we promised.** It's an honor when she gladly jumps into your arms because you said you'd catch her. **How much more do we honor our Heavenly Father when we simply take him at his Word?**

- ❖ Now before we move on and focus our attention back on the Lord, it's important to note that there's another man in this story who is obediently trusting. A young man in this case. **You could make the argument that Isaac was exercising great faith.**
 - Think about it. In v6, we read that *"Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son."* And together they hiked up that mountain. Now if Isaac was old enough and strong enough to carry a bundle of wood up a mountain, then he is old enough and strong enough to resist his elderly, centenarian 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. Even if he had to play the role of that lamb, he must have believed that somehow somehow the promises that God made to his father will continue through him.

- ❖ **So Isaac let himself be bound and placed on the altar of wood. He laid 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.”* (v13) So, in other words, God provided a substitute.
 - **This was a perfect example of salvation by substitution.** As that ram was wholly consumed by the flames, I can imagine both father and son staring in wonder and thinking, “That should have been my son. That should have been me. Thanks be to God for his provision of a substitute.”

The Lord Who Graciously Provides

- ❖ With that being said, let’s focus our attention back on God. Let’s consider the Lord who graciously provides. That’s the key attribute that Abraham learns. Remember, there is still a lot he doesn’t know about Yahweh. There’s no written Scripture yet. There’s no way to read about God’s character. Everything relies on experiential knowledge. **But now, because of this particular experience, he 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.””*
- ❖ **What we learn is that the God who tests is also the God who provides.** He’s not a cruel taskmaster who puts you through difficult tests just to see you fail. No, he wants you to succeed. He wants to refine you. **So when he tests you, God will graciously provide whatever you need to grow and mature from that test.**
 - That’s what Abraham discovered. The Lord asked him to trust and obey even when it made no sense. To trust and obey without any 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.**
- ❖ **We’re told in v14 that, from that day on, a saying grew popular among Abraham’s descendants, among Israelites.** *“On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.”* They’d say that to each other whenever they faced a test – whenever they were asked to trust and obey in a costly, sacrificial way. *On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.*
 - **That popular saying served as a needed reminder of this high point in Abraham’s story.** This key moment when their forefather was tested, when he obediently trusted, and when the Lord proved to be a faithful Provider – as the One who will preserve his covenant promises and perpetuate them forever (everlastingly).
- ❖ **But what Abraham’s descendants didn’t realize, at the time, was the lengths to which God would go to provide.** Because, many years later, he would ask another Son to climb up another mount with wood on his back (cf. Jn 19:17). Instead of Moriah, this one was called Calvary. And like Isaac, this Son would not resist what was coming. Like Isaac, he would trust his Father. **As silent as a sheep before its shearers, this Son of God would be lifted up on the wood to be slaughtered.**

- ❖ **But unlike Isaac, there would be no voice from heaven saying “Stop.” There would be no other ram to be slain.** Unlike Isaac, Jesus didn’t get a substitute. Jesus *was* the substitute – for us. He was the Lamb of God who was slain to take away the sins of the world. **God was willing to sacrifice his own Son for us.**

- ❖ Think about what that means. **That means when God asks you to trust and obey him – when he calls you to sacrifice something dear to you – you can be comforted to know that he speaks to you as someone who experientially knows what it’s like to do the same.** God sacrificed what was dearest to him. He gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. He did that out of love for his covenant people and out of an unwavering commitment to his covenant promises.
 - **So just know that God will never ask you to do something that he isn’t willing to do himself.** That’s the kind of God who’s asking you to deny yourself and to take up your cross and follow him (Lk 9:23). He doesn’t ask you to make a sacrifice for him without having first made a sacrifice for you. That’s the logic that led the Apostle Paul to write **Romans 8:32**, “*He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?*”
 - **Since God has already made the ultimate sacrifice in giving up his own Son, how much more confident should we be that he has our back – no matter the sacrifices we’re called to make in following him?** Why would we doubt that he’ll graciously provide in his perfect timing and perfect way?

- ❖ So friends, let me ask: **What is the Lord calling you to sacrifice?** What is he asking you to put to death? Could it be **a relationship** that you’re heavily invested in but you know is not healthy for you spiritually or emotionally? Sacrificing that relationship is going to hurt. It’s going to be hard. But remember, on the mount of the LORD (on Calvary) it *was* provided.
 - What does he want you to sacrifice? Could it be **a dream** you’ve been chasing? Perhaps it’s a career aspiration that’s starting to consume you. You’ve been neglecting responsibilities and letting people down. You’ve been making compromises that you know you shouldn’t. Sacrificing that dream won’t be easy. You’ll find plenty of excuses. But remember, on the mount of the LORD it *was* provided for you.

- ❖ What is he calling you to put to death? Could it be **a cherished sin** that you’ve allowed to dominate your life? Maybe it’s something you’ve struggled with for years. You hate it. But you can’t seem to live without it. Where are you going to find the strength to kill it?
 - **Remember, on the mount of the LORD it *was* provided. Jesus, your perfect Substitute, made the ultimate sacrifice.** And now he graciously provides everything you’re going to need to make that sacrifice. This is the God who is calling you to follow. This is the One who has laid down his life and given you everything you need.