

October 3 - Genesis 22, the faithfulness of God

Perhaps you have heard this story recorded here in Genesis 22, and you have seen a type of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ in the boy Isaac. You may have seen the love Abraham has for his only son, and compared it to God the Father's love for Jesus Christ. You may have heard Isaac bearing the wood of the sacrifice upon his shoulders, as he carries it up the mountain, and compared it to Christ bearing his wooden cross as he dragged it to Calverys hill. You may have seen the ram caught in the bush by its horns, and seen an early picture of substitutionary atonement; the swapping of Isaac's life and the ram, with the life of the sinner substituted by Jesus Christ.

Well, I am here to tell you this morning that you are *right*, this rather strange story told all the way back in Genesis does in fact point to what Jesus Christ has done, but perhaps not in the way we first suspect. And yes, perhaps, Isaac is a type and shadow of the sacrifice of Jesus, but I want this morning to take you a little deeper and perhaps show you a better way to understand this story and how it relates to who God is and what he has done for us.

So, before we begin, to better give us a picture of what we will be unraveling this morning, we must go over the three most important principles of biblical interpretation: context, context and context. So, who is this chapter originally written to? Who is the likely original audience of the book of Genesis? If you answered yourself, then you are wrong. No, the original audience is the exiled Israelite community. When they first hear the story of Genesis the Israelites are probably somewhere in the desert between Egypt and the Promised Land of Israel. Hundreds of thousands of Israelites are camping in the desert following Moses, all who have descended from this one man Abraham several hundred years before the time of the Exodus. So it is important to consider the concerns that this exiled community faced and what they would have been thinking when they heard this story.

The second piece of information I want you to consider is Abraham's background, and what had happened up to this point. If you are familiar with his story, he is first called by God in Genesis chapter 12. God calls to him, and says to Abraham, "Go to a land that I will show you, and I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great". The problem is at this stage, Abraham and his wife are old and childless. However Abraham still goes, and he walks through the land of Canaan, and God says to him, "I will give to your offspring this land". So the story continues through the next 10 chapters, and God is faithful to his promise and miraculously delivers to Abraham a direct heir, a son whom is named Isaac.

So with these two pieces of information in mind, that one) the original audience of this story is the Israelites escaping Egypt looking to enter the promised land, and that two) Abraham has been promised many descendants through his son Isaac, we will look at the text. If you have your bibles with you, lets read the first two verses of Chapter 22 together as we get into the text this morning.

Genesis 22:1-2. **'After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am!" 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."**

What most stands out to you? It's the shocking request that God has for Abraham, isn't it? And it strikes us as a severe and somewhat unreasonable test, doesn't it? To take the life of your own child. Look how the bible records it. "Take *your* son, your *only* son, whom you *love*.'" It does not get any more personal and real than this. And it seems so totally contrary to all that has already happened in Abraham's life. God promised to Abraham offspring, he providentially kept him alive, he miraculously provided for them a son despite their age, and now he calls for his sacrifice, his death. Abraham is not recorded to having done anything wrong here, and knowing so much more of God in other stories of the bible and the New Testament, it just seems out of character for God to do this.

But consider this very first verb in the passage, "God *tested* Abraham." This is the key that you cannot miss in understanding the story. The narrator is taking a step back from the story, and letting the audience know right from the beginning that something different is going on here. Something beyond a normal story telling of events is happening, and God has an ulterior motive to what would appear to Abraham as absolutely devastating and contradictory and wrong.

And this would be helpful in our lives as well, wouldn't it? But it is not unfamiliar to see God testing his people is it? When God gave the 10 commandments to the nation of Israel, and it concluded with crashings of thunder and flashings of lightening the people were afraid. Moses then said to them, "Do not be afraid, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you and that you do not sin'. In this case, he reveals to us his purposes for testing, namely that the people of God should be faithful to his commands.

And what about in the New Testament? We read of the letters to the church in Smyrna, "Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for 10 days you will have tribulation." And what is the purpose of this testing? The rest of the letter says, "Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life." The testing in this case is to evaluate the faithfulness of the Christians in Smyrna to Jesus Christ, and to his church.

But what about the times when we cannot see the purpose of why God is testing his people? No one can forget the story of Job in this case, where he is described as a blameless and righteous man, yet suffers miserably with the loss of his flocks, and family, and livelihood. No immediate answer is provided to him throughout the book for his suffering. And this appears to be the case with what is happening with Abraham here. He is put into this position directly, by God Himself, with no further explanation or clarification.

Perhaps you are feeling a bit like Abraham right now? Perhaps whatever situation or circumstance you are in, you feel like God is testing you and testing your family. Perhaps it is a difficult child, or difficulty having a child. Perhaps it is too much work, the wrong type

of work, or no work. Perhaps it is a difficult part in your marriage, a break up of a marriage, or a desire to get married. You feel like your conscience is clear before God, yet bad things right now seem to providentially hinder what you think you deserve in your marriage, your work or your family.

So is God testing you right now? Maybe. I cannot speak for the eternal counsel of God. I nor any of your elders can stand as an authority over your life like the narrator does in Genesis 22 and say "You are being tested by God." I do not know the will of God apart from what he has already revealed to us in His word. But does God test His people, even now? Yes. And we have seen from the examples I have just described, that God can test a nation, a local church, or even an individual.

Not very comforting is it? But, I can point those who maybe feeling the weight of trials to the book of James, who opens with these very words, "Count it all joy, brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that testing of your faith produces steadfastness." I can't tell you if you are being tested, but I can tell you under the control of a Sovereign God, who ordains all things according to his will, that it has a purpose. There is no purposeless suffering. There are no purposeless trials. And we will see the purpose of God's testing of Abraham a little later on.

Another thing I can say to you who maybe dealing with a difficult situation or trial right now, is to be obedient to the truth of God's Word that you know. And this leads me into my second point for the morning, is Abraham's reaction to God's command. What did Abraham do? So read with me, back in Genesis 22, verses 3-5.

So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place which God had told him. On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you".

Abraham obeyed. We are not given an insight into Abraham's mind or emotions here. Maybe he was awake all night, with God's command to sacrifice his son ringing in his ears. We are not told. But one thing is clear, Abraham does not waver with his obedience to the strange command.

And Abraham, well he is a bit of an anomaly here in the biblical record isn't he. Moses questioned God and complained about his weak voice, Gideon put out the fleece to really make sure God was sure of what he commanded, Jonah did the opposite of God's command and had to be swallowed by a fish to correct him, twice a vision of the unclean animals had to be put before Peter before he would believe, yet Abraham obeyed. And it is not delayed, it is not slow, it is not half-hearted. *The very next morning*, Abraham gets up, and goes about his preparations for the sacrifice. He cuts the wood, organizes his donkey, takes his servants and sets out to Mt Moriah, the location of the sacrifice. Have you ever been in a similar situation like this? I know that you probably haven't been called by God to

sacrifice your child, but I'm sure there are many a situations that come to mind when you have been specifically called to a difficult and costly obedience. Perhaps it could be a large issue at work, where your company expects you to be dishonest when you are dealing with a client. Or it could be on a smaller scale, when someone at school or after church comes to you to gossip and slander someone else. We face hundreds of situations a week, but every now and then, one often stands out as though God clearly calls us to obedience to his Word and his commands. And this is not getting easier. We are now called to obedience to God even against the wrath of the secular culture that surrounds us, who commands us to bow down and swear allegiance to the moral revolution and celebrate the profaning of marriage, the murder of the unborn in the womb and the destruction of family unit.

And as you are thinking of the times God has called you to obedience, if you are like me, the times that most stick in your mind are the times when we have *failed*. We did not arise early the next morning to go busy us with obeying the Lords commands like Abraham. Instead, we stayed in our metaphorical beds, pulled the covers over our heads and wished that God would ask us to do things that arn't so difficult, or hurtful to our pride, or financially costly, or inconvenient. We may even obey, but do so grudgingly. But yet, compared to Abraham in this case, we are often asked less of, and yet we seem to fail more often?

But for these two points of my sermon this morning, I do not want you to dwell too much on yourself, or even Abraham, but on Jesus Christ. Who was tested, in every single way, greater than any way we could have, and yet rendered perfect obedience in every way? It is certainly not us, and it is certainly not Abraham. In the gospel of Matthew, we see at the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. For 40 days he fasted, his body and mind tired, hungry, suggestible. But we know the outcome don't we? Jesus resisted the temptations of the devil and remained obedient. Even when faced with the agonizing prospect of the crucifixion, he cried out in the Garden of Gethsemane, "not my will but yours be done!"

Hebrews 2:18 says,

"For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted."

Do you feel like you are being tested? Well, here is someone who has been made like you in every respect, put in the same situations, yet was without sin. But how can he help? God promises that if you trust in Jesus, he has taken every test and trial for you, and he has passed them with flying colours. He obeyed perfectly where you have fallen short. Think of every test, every situation where God has called you to obedience, and you have failed. Yet if you place your trust in Christ, Jesus' life of obedience is given to you, and your life of rebellion and disobedience is punished by God on the cross so you can be forgiven. God sees Jesus' righteousness covering you and your sin.

This is the heart of the gospel, that your standing before God is not what you have done or haven't done, but on the perfect life and sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. Its not about

where you live, or what denomination you affiliate with, or what you wear or what you eat, but upon your relationship with the only way, the only truth, Jesus Christ the Righteous.

But now you may ask, how do we know? How do we know that God is faithful to what he promises? How are we absolutely sure that this offer of salvation I have put to you this morning is trustworthy and true? We could be following this God, changing our whole lives and the lives of our family to follow after this God and trusting in these promises, and yet by the end of our lives, we could realise that we have been tricked, or lied to. And this is exactly the question that leads us into our third point, and it is exactly the question asked by Abraham, and the Israelites in the wilderness. Remember who is the original audience of Genesis 22? The exiled Hebrews halfway in between Egypt and the promised land. They have seen God's mighty hand bringing them out of Egypt and destroying Pharaoh's army. And now they are faced with another test – to go up, take the sword, and conquer the land of Canaan for themselves, and God has promised to give their enemies into their hands. And imagine what they would have understood when they heard this story? They see their forefather Abraham tested just like them. Abraham was promised a multitude of descendants, but yet he is commanded to sacrifice his only heir, his only hope of children. The Israelites have been promised a land, yet the land is full of giants, of fortified cities, and nations and peoples much greater than they. Both are tested, and called to obey what appears to be impossible. Why should they trust in God's faithfulness, where can the Israelites find comfort in their testing?

Read with me again Genesis 22 from verse 6:

And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am my son." Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering? Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son."

God will provide! He didn't know how?! But Abraham knew that God will be faithful to His promises, even if he obeyed and killed his only hope of having descendants. Abraham believed God was going to be faithful and will ensure what he has promised will come to pass. Hebrews 11 indicates that perhaps Abraham believed God was going to resurrect Isaac from the dead, but we are not really sure.

So what happens next? Let's read on. Abraham built the altar, and laid Isaac upon it, and verse 10:

Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son.

And one of my Old Testament professors pointed out, the Hebrew here captures the tension of the story much better than the English. The next verse in the Hebrew begins with "And he cried out to him!" and you don't know who is crying out! Is it Isaac crying out

to Abraham, or Abraham to God, or Isaac to Abraham – but instead it is revealed as **malach Yahweh**, the Angel of the Lord!! And the Angel prevents Abraham from harming the boy, instead providing a ram for the sacrifice. And now we learn the purpose of this testing don't we. Verse 12. "He said, "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*".

As a side note, we learn here the purpose of the test – to fear God. The fear here is not one of terror or being afraid, but of a reverence and respect, like a child to a father. Interesting to note that this ordeal is for Abraham's sake, not God's. Likewise for us, God does not find glee or happiness when his children are going through trials and sufferings – no rather, he orchestrates them for our good, our sanctification and our holiness and His worship. To quote Dan Allender here, Too many of us suffer for naught, not knowing the real purpose and intention behind it. We often have the perspective that pain must immediately be resolved and relieved as quickly and painlessly as possible, and if this is our attitude we will miss the potential to grasp the true meaning of the event. But hardship and suffering produces endurance, hope, trust, maturity, steadfastness, dependence. What God plans in our lives is for our good.

Going back to the question I asked before I began this point – how do we know God is faithful? One way is by looking back at what he has done in the past. Just as the Israelites looked back on their forefather Abraham, and saw that God faithfully preserved Isaac despite the appearance of the contrary. And we have a record of God's faithfulness much greater than the Israelites do don't we. We not only look back to see what God has done for Abraham and the patriarchs, we see his faithfulness to the nation of Israel throughout the Old Testament, we see the stories of the apostles in the New Testament and the many, many records throughout the 2000 years of church history as well, preserving his people through persecution, and hardship and suffering.

But, if you are a Christian here this morning, then not only do you have a record of God's faithfulness to look upon, but you have an even greater assurance of God's faithfulness to His promises to you; His promises to adopt you into his family, his promises to cleanse you of your sin, his promises to give you a perfect righteousness, his promises to sanctify you and make you holy, his promises to do all things for your good on this earth, his promises to keep you from slipping out of his hand in this life, and his promises to give you the gift of eternal life-for all of these promises are guaranteed by Jesus Christ. God's promises and his goodness to you are not based on you. They're not based on your performance, but upon Jesus Christ.

And I think this story in Genesis 22 is the echo of Paul's discussion on Romans 8. If you have your bibles, turn to Romans 8 if you like. It seems like Paul is using the Angel's discussion to Abraham here as a basis to describe God's faithfulness to his people. Romans 8, from verse 31.

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? *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?*

The words 'who did not spare his own Son' there appear to be very similar in the original languages to the angel saying to Abraham that "you have not withheld your son", and some commentators think that Paul is echoing this story to give an example of how Abraham offered his Isaac, how much more has God offered through Jesus Christ. As Abraham obeyed, God kept his promises to him. When Jesus obeyed, God keeps his promises to all of his people. And if you have got Jesus, you need nothing else. You do not need anything else to stand before God on judgment day apart from Jesus Christ. You have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ Jesus, that all of God's promises find their Yes in Jesus. That every thing that God offers to you, is because of what Jesus Christ has done.

That even when you are faithless, when you fail, when you didn't do what Abraham did in face of a trial or a test, and have fallen short and sinned against God's commands— he will remain faithful, because he cannot deny himself. So even our failures cannot stop God's faithfulness to us in Christ Jesus . Can anything else? Paul continues in Romans 8:35,

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord'.

As Abraham said to Isaac, "God will provide", I am here this morning to tell you that God has provided. And we have more assurance than what Abraham ever saw, or what the Israelites ever saw, as God's promises to us have been guaranteed to us by Jesus Christ.

So as I conclude this morning, I hope I have presented that the God who created you is a faithful God. And to the Christian, to those of you this morning who have tasted of his grace, and have begun to experienced the promises that God has offered to us in Christ, it is a sweet sound of rest and relief. Yes, God sends tests and trials and suffering in our paths in this life, yes he calls us to a costly obedience regardless of the consequences, but he has not left us in despair or hopelessness. His promise to save us from the coming judgment is complete, to forgive us is assured, to clothe us with his righteousness is accomplished.

But a faithful God is terrifying for those who reject Him and reject Jesus Christ. For just as God has promised to rescue those in Christ, so God has promised to punish the wicked. Knowing God is a faithful God is a comfort to some, and terrifying to others depending on your relationship to Jesus Christ. Do not be deceived, neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. Do you suppose

that you will escape the coming judgment? Do you presume on the riches of God's kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? So do not harden your hearts when you hear this call to repent of your sins, and trust in Christ as your only hope of salvation, for each day you remain hardened, you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgments will be revealed.

So flee to Christ, run to him. He is more faithful than you will ever be and can ever be, and God will keep his promises to you.

Let us pray.

Lord, we pray that you would teach and encourage your people this morning to know that you are a faithful and trustworthy God. We ask that you would direct our gaze from ourselves, from our own failures or our own good works, and look instead to the completed work of Jesus Christ, and know that your guarantee of faithfulness is His completed work and not our own. We pray that those who heard this message this morning and do not know you, or your blessings, to come to you in repentance and faith before it is too late, because your promises are clear and your judgment is certain. Amen.