

Genesis 22

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[0 : 00] Let me pray and then we'll look at this together. Thank you so much, Heavenly Father, for your kindness to us, the ways you speak to us, to tell us of your Son and your grace to us in him.

Please, by your Spirit now, open our hearts, open our minds. Help us to see Jesus, to trust him, to follow him. We ask in his name. Amen.

Amen. Well, there may be some chapters in the book of Genesis that are not very well known, some bits of Abraham's life that aren't terribly familiar to us. But as Paul mentioned just earlier, I doubt that's going to be a problem for us this evening, is it?

This famous, some might say infamous, account that we have before us here. What is the Lord doing? How could he ever put someone through something like this?

So let's not miss a round. There's no long introduction this evening. That takes us straight into the first thing for us to see. A huge thing in this passage, isn't it? The puzzle, just the sheer puzzle of God's ways.

[1 : 02] How so often they leave his people, they leave you and me sometimes, thinking, what on earth is he doing? Just one, after these things, God tested Abraham.

So immediately, as is sometimes the case in the Bible, we know more than Abraham does about what's going on in this incident here. God is testing him. He's testing his faith. His fear of God, we find out later.

Not testing in the sense that the Lord doesn't really know whether or not Abraham has faith, or what kind of faith it might be if he does, so he's got to run a test to try to work it out.

Of course the Lord knows. He's God. He knows everything. But testing in the sense of proving it, of demonstrating it for other people.

So you think of engineers, perhaps, piling huge loads onto a brand new, unlikely-looking bridge. Not because they don't know if it's going to work, at least you hope not.

[2 : 02] They've run the calculations. But to try to show people like us, it works, it's safe, you can walk on it. Well, sort of like that here, really. The Lord showing Abraham and us what real faith looks like.

We'll come back to that thought in a few moments' time. Verse 2. He said, the Lord 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.

And there's such a danger we gloss over those words, especially if we're very, very familiar with the story. Just let them land on you for a moment. Imagine being Abraham, hearing God say this to you.

Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him. You notice every phrase kind of deepening the pain of what Abraham realizes he's being asked to do.

Your son, your only son, now that Ishmael's gone, whom you love. Take him, go to the land of Moriah, which we're about to realize is three days' journey away. That is a lot of time to think about what you've just been asked to do.

[3 : 10] And when you get there, sacrifice him. Most parents, including Christian parents, we're super sensitive about our children, aren't we? We really are.

You think very, very carefully, don't you, before you say something critical about someone else's child to their parents, or ask the parent to do something you know their child isn't going to like.

Teachers, if you're any teachers here, you must know this more than any of us, don't you?

You must brace yourselves for some of those conversations you have to have. Probably one of the main forms of idolatry in the Western Church today.

I'll do anything for you, Lord. I'll give up anything for you, so long as it doesn't affect my children. And God just goes straight there. Offer him, he says.

Of course, by this stage in the book of Genesis, it's not just the pain of losing his son and being the one through whom that son will die that is so hard for Abraham.

[4 : 09] There's a real theological problem here as well, isn't there? Because who is Isaac? He's not just a dearly loved only child. He's the child of the promise. So God's great promise to undo the curse of sin by bringing blessing into the world through Abraham's family after Abraham, it all hangs on Isaac.

It rests on him. You lose Isaac at this stage, it's over. And now God's saying, he must die. And you can imagine Abraham wrestling with that, can't you?

You've promised this, Lord, but now you're commanding this. I wonder whether you've ever found yourself thinking you just haven't got a clue what God is doing.

Can't even begin to make sense of something he's commanding or asking you to do or something he's allowing to happen, something you seem to be leading you towards, perhaps.

Maybe showering with blessing and then suddenly he snatches it away. And in our heads, of course, we know moments like that shouldn't be a surprise, should they?

[5 : 21] After all, he's God and we're not. So, you know, just as you wouldn't expect a child in a reception class at school to understand everything their head teacher's doing, it would be ridiculous, wouldn't it? Can you imagine a four-year-old marching into a head teacher's office, demanding an explanation for every decision the head teacher makes?

And of course, the gap between a four-year-old and a head teacher, that is nothing compared to the gap between you and me and the Lord. Of course we shouldn't expect to get our heads around his ways.

But here's a helpful reminder of how painful that can sometimes be. Not just an intellectual puzzle, agony emotionally sometimes.

The puzzle of God's ways. Then the second thing for us to see, the faith God seeks. The faith he seeks. It's the faith he shows that Abraham has.

You see, what is Christian faith, really? What does it look like when we really trust in him? What kind of response does the Lord long to see from people like you and me?

[6 : 30] And you notice a couple of things that we see about it here in this passage. First, real faith is obedient. It does what God says.

So verse three, and don't worry, we are going to speed up considerably in just a moment. But verse three, 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 of which God had told him.

It's very different, isn't it, to how we'd write that today. There's nothing in there about how Abraham's feeling. We'd be full of that, wouldn't we? Although, I wonder whether we get just a little glimpse. He's up early. You sense he's probably not slept.

That night, thinking through what he's been told to do. He collects Isaac, the other things he needs and he heads off just as God has told him to do.

Because that's the point. Real faith does what God says. Martin Luther put it so well, didn't he? We're saved by faith alone.

[7 : 34] But the faith that saves is never alone. So just as Abraham was saved by faith, Genesis 15 told us, Abraham believed the Lord and he counted it to him as righteousness.

But that belief he had that saved him didn't stand alone. He didn't just say he was trusting God. I thought anyone could do that, can't they? All you need is a voice and you can say you're trusting God.

Anyone can say the grief we said together earlier. But he shows it by doing what God says and obeying his commands. Even the things that we wish God hadn't said perhaps.

The commands that we can't understand. The ones that we know will be really painful to obey. Faith God seeks obeys him and that's a very relevant thought isn't it at the moment as just increasingly doing what God says is less and less popular in our society now.

And then notice the other remarkable thing about true faith. It trusts the Lord to keep his promises beyond the grave. You see how does Abraham reconcile those two things he's heard from God?

[8 : 44] So Isaac is the child of the promise. He must live if that promise is going to come true. But here's God asking Abraham to put him to death. God says Isaac must die.

Which is it? How can they both be true? And I think there is a clue to how Abraham is thinking in verse 5. We'll pick it up verse 4. 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. You notice those last few words? Not just and I will come back to you but I and the boy will.

Me and Isaac. Isaac who so far as I know I will put to death on that mountain over there. He will come back with me to see you again.

You see what is that? Is that wishful thinking? Is that refusing to face the facts? It wouldn't be the last time would it in the face of death? Or could it be a deep confidence in God's ability to keep his promises and that not being limited by death but ultimately demonstrated and proven in resurrection life beyond.

[10 : 06] But more simply even if Isaac must die on that mountain Abraham trusts God to bring him back to life as well. God has to do that he knows if this promise of blessing is going to come true and that's certainly what the book of Hebrews says when it reflects on Abraham's life and that great gallery of heroes of the faith that we get in Hebrews chapter 11.

By 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 of whom it was said through Isaac shall your offspring be named.

He Abraham considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead. deep confidence death won't be the end of the story.

It can't be. There must be more if what God has promised is going to come true and so it is of course with you and me and Christian brothers and sisters right back through history and right across the world today God's promises to us in the Lord Jesus just so phenomenal aren't they? Every spiritual blessing ours in him he says and yet our experience of that at the moment so much less in this life suffering and opposition and disappointment and maybe even persecution too and even if we don't personally experience too many of those things even so our experience nowhere near the full expanse of what God has promised.

[11 : 35] We get into so much trouble don't we? We mess ourselves up when we try and convince ourselves no this is it this is as good as it gets now this is everything but it's okay isn't it because this life is not all after death when Jesus returns that's when so many of those things that the Lord has promised really will be felt to be true.

The faith of God speaks obeying him hoping beyond the grave so verses 7 and 8 even when Isaac suddenly realises hang on something's missing and asks that question can you imagine how this must have just cut Abraham to the heart?

Dad where's the lamb? Even then Abraham still carries on treading that path of obedience up the mountain when he gets there verse 9 builds the altar and prepares to slay his son which brings us third to the salvation God provides the salvation that God provides Abraham Abraham this voice from heaven cries and we get the sense don't we it's right at the last minute just as the knife is about to come down really urgent don't do it God says now your faith is clear because you have not withheld your son and nearby there's a ram for Abraham to offer instead to die in Isaac's place which is what happens so verse 14 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 God provides a substitute something to come and die in Isaac's place and it's a pattern we see so often isn't it right across the Old Testament most clearly in that sacrificial system in the tabernacle in the temple at this stage still yet to come the temple you know from later built guess where

I love this detail right here on Mount Moriah where all this happens the place where every day for centuries animals would die just as God commanded in the place of his people when they sinned each of them pointing forward to the sacrifice that this moment is pointing forward to as well Isaac's haunting question there in verse 7 where is the land for the burnt offering one person has said it's as if that question it kind of hangs over the whole of the rest of the Old Testament it's a question the whole of the rest of the Old Testament can't quite answer where is the one who is going to come and really take away people's sins in a way that of course no animal ever could and so even at the end of the Old Testament where is he still to come until that magic moment John's

Gospel John 1 from the Baptist chatting with some of his disciples suddenly sees Jesus coming his way look he says the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world the one who really does take it away there he is the one we've been waiting for the one Isaac was asking about Jesus Christ God's great salvation look to him and then fourth the frailty of God's ways the frailty of his ways it's not a great heading this one but I hope you'll get the sense of what it means it's an odd little postscript to the chapter isn't it verses 20 to 24 don't you think Abraham and Isaac back in Beersheba now Genesis 12 what was one of the things God promised to Abraham I'll make of you a great nation he said it's a promise actually it's reiterated it's underlined in our passage today verse 17 I'll surely bless you and I'll surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore so lots of people due to come from

[15 : 41] Abraham's line so end of the chapter how's it going oh not brilliant is it Abraham Sarah and now Ishmael's gone just Isaac rattling around in the tents at home with the servants meanwhile birth announcement after birth announcement coming from Nahor's line do you notice 12 of them which even taking into account some help from a concubine is a lot of offspring you imagine Sarah I assume it fell to Sarah trying to keep track of all those birthdays birthdays all those cousins birthdays not a problem in our own household though just Isaac imagine the family get together at Christmas the piles of presents for Nahor's clan just the one in the corner Isaac that's yours as if to really rub in the great nation part of

God's promise hasn't yet come true come on Lord you can imagine Abraham thinking can't you well the Lord's people looking so few so often so weak so frail compared to the rest of the world and it's a feeling some of us know really well isn't it think what it will be like tomorrow when you're back at school or dropping off in the playground perhaps with other parents or at work or in our public life at the moment or in the media it's that sense of God's people seeming so few looking so weak numerically I know this says but don't panic that is often God's way often how he works through what looks small and frail so there we are Genesis 22 it is an extraordinary chapter isn't it how could God do this how could he put Abraham through something like this how can that be right how can that be fair it's kind of hard not to ask that question I vividly remember the first time

I preached this passage for two reasons actually the first was it was a Sunday evening almost exactly three years ago the last Sunday evening before Boris told us do you remember you must stay at home so in hindsight such a precious time that last Sunday evening service before we didn't meet for a little bit as a church and you must remember that some of you even you guys didn't meet for a couple of weeks at least did you before things got back together again but the second reason I remember it so clearly is because there sat almost at the front of church was a friend of mine a member of our church family who just a couple of years earlier had lost his own son completely out of the blue 17 years old started to feel a bit ill one evening and a couple of days later was dead and you think how do you help a parent who knows that kind of pain in a way that most of us don't how do you encourage them to keep trusting this God

I mentioned Martin Luther earlier this great 16th century church leader in Germany one of the towering figures in church history and there's another lovely story about Luther in family devotions with his family he reads Genesis 22 to them gets to the end I do not believe it his wife Katie said perhaps feeling what some of us have been feeling a bit this evening the impression family devotions in the Luther household like most things in the Luther household were probably quite plain speaking affairs most of the time I do not believe it she said God would not have treated his son like that but Katie Martin replied he did and of course he did John 3

God so loved the world God gave his only son God the son sent into the world by God the father and gladly obeying as he came to be offered in place of people like you and me not to be saved from death at the last moment kind of whipped away in the nick of time but given completely to death there at the cross the one God provided to take all the judgment people like us deserve for our sins so that that blessing that God had promised and promises again in this passage Genesis 22 really can come flowing into our world to turn back that curse of sin how can you trust a God like this his ways are so puzzling how can I trust him when his commands and the things he allows to happen sometimes seem so so hard how can you when his ways feel like agony as well because as we remember again in just a moment as we share the

[21 : 12] Lord's supper he gave his son for you and for me and that is why we can trust him let's be quiet together for a moment and then I'll pray