

Genesis 22:1-19

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[0 : 00] Please do turn back in your Bible to Genesis 22. And as you do, I'd like you to think back to the last time you watched an episode of Blue Peter. I promise there is a quote to this. If you grew up with British TV any time from around 1958, you would have seen Blue Peter, the BBC's flagship kids show.

Please be located to another channel now. You may have entered one of its competitions, you might even have won a blue badge in which case I'm not going to be judged. But in Blue Peter there were a number of different sections, weren't there? It was a bit like a magazine that showed. And the sections, at least two of them, were distinguished by the catchphrases that accompanied them. One of those sections was the craft section, and you'd be presented with a complete jumble of items, almost always.

A classic box would be told that you were making a pencil case, or a scale replica of a Tracy Island. And at some point, as you were looking at the associated bits and bobs laid out on the table, with Blue and the string and all the other junk, basically, you'd be thinking, how does this edit look like anything? And at that point, the presenter would bring up the catchphrase, and say, here's one I made earlier. And they'd present to you the finished article, an example for you to look at and to imitate.

Something to aim for. So that was one of the sections on the show. But it was very important to distinguish the, here's one I made earlier, quite a lot, from another moment in the show.

[1 : 29] The, don't try this at home. Here's one I made earlier, but don't try these bits at home. There'd be a point in the show where, normally a professional of some sort, or sometimes if they were unlucky and presented themselves, would have to perform a stunt, or do something that was amazing, which you could only do with professional assistance, so you really shouldn't try them yourself. Fire weaving, or sword swallowing, or jumping out an air club, quite a lot of Nelson's collar. The kind of thing you really shouldn't try at home.

And the point of these spots was not to imitate them, very specifically not to imitate them, but to just stand back and to be amazed. To be inspired and to be amazed, but not to imitate.

What's the point of all this? Well, just as it's important to draw that distinction in the episode of Blue Peter, it's important that we do the same as we come to Genesis 22. Genesis 22 is a difficult passage, but it's easier when we realise that there are two different items here on the agenda.

Here's one I made earlier, as God holds out Abraham to us as an example of the man in the face. An example for us to imitate, an example for us to aim for.

But the act which he's called to perform himself is a don't try this at home. Before you start thinking about it, there is definitely no way in which God is expecting parents to go home and try that at home.

[2 : 56] It's a one-time performance, and we're not meant to attempt it. We're meant to stand back and be amazed by them. And what we'll see is that these two items, though they are distinct, they relate to each other.

So, to understand the passage, I'm going to look at these, and we're going to look at these two in turn. I suspect that here's one I made earlier, it's going to take significantly longer than the second one, so if we get halfway through this, it seems like this will go. It's not double the way. So, here's one I made earlier.

Well, Genesis chapter 22 begins with Abraham and his family living in the land of the Philistines. Abraham's made a peace treaty with the local king, and he's living in relative comfort, we assume. They've made wealth through their life, but now Abraham's an old man, somewhere between around 100 and 137 years old at this time. He's well established, he's wealthy, but the family's

small. The family's small is just Abraham, Sarah, and their son Isaac.

Isaac, the son who they were waiting for, weren't they, for years. The long-awaited son, who was ultimately born by a miracle when Sarah was 19.

[4 : 07] He's probably a young man now. And it's in this context that God speaks to Abraham. He speaks to Abraham and he gives him a shocking command. 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 which I shall tell you.

Take your son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, to offer him as a burnt offering. The command is shocking, isn't it? It's a shocking command, and it's also precise.

There's no wiggle room in this for Abraham. Isaac's picked out by name. As if earlier in the book, we could have expected Abraham to try and struggle with this and replace Isaac with perhaps his hot brother Ishmael, or perhaps with one of the higher servants in his family.

But there's no space for Abraham to get around this. It must be Isaac, the son he loves. It's specific and it's shocking, isn't it? You don't have to be a parent to feel the horror of what's been asked for. The shock of it.

There's a moment in our baptism services, isn't there, when infants are born to be baptized. And I don't know if you're anything like that. It shocks you every time. There's a moment when a parent's child is presented for baptism, and they're asked, Do you, with God's help, undertake not to complain against God, should your children die before you?

[5 : 39] It's a gut-wrenching moment in the baptism service, as we're trying to consider the idea that a parent might lose their child before you. That's hard enough to consider. But there's no consideration there that we might be required to take the life of that child ourselves, is there?

That's what Abraham's asked to do. It's a horrifying, a gut-wrenching moment. And it's not only emotionally difficult for Abraham, emotionally difficult probably, I will say that.

It's not just emotionally difficult, it's theologically difficult. God's promised to Abraham that he will be blessed and a blessing through Isaac.

He's to be the father of a great nation. And just as God's been specific about the subject of the sacrifice, he's been specific about how that promise is to be brought about.

Chapter 17, verse 19. Sarah, your wife, shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant with his offspring.

[6 : 53] All of the promises that God's made to Abraham, the ones that have caused him to leave the land of his father, the ones that have been his father, the ones that have been his life's work to try and make for his own.

All of those promises are to be fulfilled through idol. So what Abraham's been asked to do is not just emotionally difficult, it's theologically difficult. Frankly, it doesn't really make sense.

But the next day we went on. Abraham rose early, first to three in the morning. He sat on his donkey and took the two of his young men with him and his son Isaac.

And he cut the wood for the bird off the road, arose and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place for a prophet. Unlike other passages we heard earlier, there's no mention here of Abraham debating with God, or trying to bargain with him, or trying to find another way to do this.

He just seems to get up the next morning and obey. He takes Isaac, two servants, he saddles the donkey, he cuts the wood for the fire, and he sets off on a journey. It's a three day journey, you can imagine it, can't you?

[8 : 05] If they were making a film of it, there'd be big pastiches of wider landscapes, and the music would be somber, wouldn't it? Perhaps it began with some exciting chap, going on a journey, but it would pretty soon trail off into silence.

The sondra looms they walked. And it's not until that third day that Abraham looks up, he raises his eyes from that somber march, and sees the mound where he's to make a sacrifice.

The location here is significant. It wasn't just a three day march, it was a three day journey to the land of Moriah. We learn later in 1 Chronicles that the temple was to be built on Mount Moriah.

Now, it's a mountainous region around there, so we don't know that this is exactly the same area, but we know that it was to be a mountain here around Jerusalem, where the temple was to be built. So perhaps this place where Abraham is built is a temple mountain, or perhaps it was another hill outside the city walls. But they arrive at the foot of this mountain, where the sacrifice is to take

place.

[9 : 16] Abraham loads Isaac up with the wood, he takes the fire for himself down the night. But there's something missing, isn't there? It starts to twig.

My father, my father, behold the fire and the wood, where is the lamb? Where is the lamb that we're going to operate?

Perhaps he's thinking his father's saying, forget for his old age, but perhaps he's getting junky.

What's going on here? We're here to make a sacrifice. Where is the lamb?

Abraham's answer, it's short here. His answer is short, but it explains his actions. Verse 8. God will provide for himself the lamb who have burnt off with his son.

God will provide the lamb. I read from people who understand. He would better leave. The word we have translated here, provide, is actually a broader meaning of that.

[10 : 18] It has a right definition. It's normal use in the Old Testament. It's something more like, the Lord sees. The Lord will see. But it's not seeing in a far off way.

It's seeing in a way that brings action. The Lord will see or the Lord will choose. The Lord sees. The Lord knows. He knows that he's not distant.

He will take action. So what Abraham is saying here is, the Lord will see to him. Don't worry, Isaac. The Lord will see to him. He doesn't know how.

He doesn't exactly know what's going to happen, but somehow, God will make this right. The stereotype activity in a corporate away day is a trust exercise, isn't it?

A horrible, awkward thing where some poor individual has to stand on a chair and fall backwards into their arms of their colleagues who improbably are assumed to be strong enough to hold their weight from the airport from the height of the airport.

[11 : 24] I suspect that there's, in some ways, this has been designed for a Zoom. I'm not sure. Maybe you just have to carry on talking about the various videos on the op-ed, when you're a person. I don't know.

But there are trust exercises on there. And this is exactly one of those. It's a trust exercise.

Abraham has been called on to trust God, even though he can't quite see what's happening.

And the writer to the Hebrews elucidates what's going on in Abraham's mind as he says this short phrase the Lord will provide. Hebrews 11, verse 17, by faith that Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac.

He who had received the promises was in fact the offering, in the end, offering up his only son. Of whom it was said, through Isaac shall your offspring be named.

The writer to the Hebrews acknowledges that theological puzzle, doesn't he? He's being asked to do something logical, the promises to come through Isaac, but how's that to happen? Verse 19, he considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, for which, intuitively speaking, he did receive him back.

[12 : 39] Abraham's a problem, the square needs to be circled, doesn't it, for the promises to be fulfilled. He's also to carry up the command. Abraham can't know how that's being done.

He can't know that he's learned from his experience of the God of the covenant over his 100, 140 year life. He's learned that he can be trusted to keep those promises. Even if it requires a miracle, even if it needs Isaac to be raised from the dead, he will keep that promise.

He'll keep his word. So when that question is asked, the answer doesn't mean the Lord will provide. He knows, he sees, he will deal with it.

We can't hear the tone of Abraham's voice as he speaks to it. It's Isaac and his. How to lose calm, calm confidence. Perhaps it's when the tremor is lost, we fear.

But we know it's set with conviction. Without the conviction in this, there's no way that Abraham would have ever left three days earlier, is there? There's no day where he would have packed the wood and taken the fire to carry out his tubs.

[13 : 50] He doesn't know how, but somehow, God will reconcile that the circumstances he finds himself, that the commands he must obey, and the promise that God has found himself to.

John Calvin, commenting in this verse, helpfully says, applying to our Bible, when all avenues seem closed, when God's promises seem impossible, the only remedy against despondency is to leave the event to God in order that he may open a way for us where there is none.

That's what Abraham does here as well. That's an invention that enabled him to get up early, and leave his hand and set off the ground on a journey.

God will see to him. Somehow, somehow the rule will provide. See, in Genesis 22, Abraham's held out to his, isn't he, as a man of faith. He's an example.

This is a, here's one I made earlier. Here is Abraham. But he has been working on a strong faith, has he? In earlier passages, his confidence has failed him. His courage has failed him.

[15:08] In particular, that's true of the very promise to give him a son through whom the one will be blessed. When he remains a childless in his old age, first he suggests to God that perhaps any aster of Damascus, one of his servants, will be his heir in his place.

When that is accepted, later he commits adultery to find an heir by another name. But where Abraham was faithless through his life, God was faithful wasn't.

And by a miracle at ninety, Sarah bore a child of Isaac. And Abraham, of this, will learn the lesson. The Lord can and will do the seemingly impossible if it's necessary to keep his promises.

He can be trusted. He will see. He will know. He will provide. So, the situation that Abraham faced was emotionally traumatic, wasn't it?

And theologically difficult to make a sense of. The command he was given was hard to obey. But the way he got through it was to remember God's promise and to remember his death possible.

[16:22] If we'd learned anything from 2020, it was that Christians aren't immune from hard times, wasn't it? We're not immune from hard times. For most of us it was a vested year of frustration and disappointment and anxiety, wasn't it?

For many of us it was also your loneliness or isolation or loss as well. It was emotionally difficult and frankly I don't think any of us would make sense of it.

We don't know why. I'm not going to pretend to know why. I'm not going to give any explanation.

But like Abraham we find ourselves as 2020 shifts into 2021 not really understanding the circumstances.

But we're to say with Abraham, whether it's calmly or whether it's with a tremor in our voices, we're to say with Abraham, the Lord will provide. Somehow he knows, he sees, he sees us in our circumstances, and his promises are no less sure in spite of those circumstances.

But not only are Christians not immune to challenges, we're actually specifically called to them as well. We're not just immune to them, we're called to challenge.

[17:37] Jesus teaches us to follow him as to lead a rampant health, cultural life, which he summarizes as taking up your cross, taking up an instrument of execution, dying to save the day.

We're required and commanded, just as Abraham was, to give up and to sacrifice, to give up unhelpful relationships, even if we enjoy them, to turn away from the pursuit of financial gain when it obstructs the pursuit of going to kingdom, to speak up for Jesus, even when it could lead us to a mockery or persecution.

Perhaps you're trying to be January or dry January. But these things that Jesus calls us to do aren't temporary fixes, aren't they? They're not bans for their new year. They're not New Year's resolutions, they're a little toy, but they're new life resolutions.

Perhaps there are some of those that you know you're supposed to be making and you're not. But how can we do these things? How can we be obedient when it's costly?

Like Abraham, we're to say we can trust in his promises. We can trust in the Lord's promises, the promises of the Lord who calls us to do these hard things. We can trust in the promises even if we can't see our children one day.

[18:59] The Lord sees he will provide. That's all we're all saying, sir. We don't have Abraham's miracles. We haven't had for a hundred or so years of personal encounter with God, a personal revelation.

We've not seen the miracles he's seen. How can we have the same confidence that Abraham has? As long as he's been held out for us as he hears what I made earlier, that's why we need to don't try it at home.

We need to don't try it at home, and that's what we come to in the following verses.

The following verses of Genesis. Verse 1. When they came to the place of which God had told them, Abraham brought him into bed, and laid the wood in the river, and bowed Isaac his son, and laid him on the water on top of the wood.

And Abraham reached out his hand, and took the knife and slaughtered his son. And the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, Abraham, Abraham. He said, here I am. He said, do not lay your hand on the water.

[20 : 10] I do nothing for him. Do you? And now I know that you cannot. So you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me. And Abraham lifted up his eyes. The second time he lifted up his eyes.

Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked in the hole. The high-nield was around, a quarter-naked performance. Abraham went over, took the ram, and opened it up. He lifted up to blow the sacrifice instead of his son.

Isaac is bound to the altar. Abraham raises the knife. He's about to deliver the blood. And just in the last moment, God steps in. God steps in.

Just as Abraham had told Isaac that he would, at the last moment, God has seen Abraham's faith. He's seen his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, and he steps in.

He steps in to provide. You can imagine that even as the exemplar of faith, Abraham breathed a big-sided leaf when he saw that lamb.

[21 : 10] And he looked up. Just as Abraham told Isaac he would, God has provided a lamb. God has chosen a lamb for the sacrifice, and another will take Isaac's place. And that trial was not just a test of Abraham's faith, was it?

It was a test of his faith points. I'll get back to our call for an away day. It's not just a trial of whether you are confident to fall into the arms of your own bullies, but as I said earlier, whether they could really hold you up when you fall.

The writer to the Hebrews, when he remembers this event, holds out the example of Abraham's faith. And that's an important part of this passage. But what is it that Abraham wants us to remember in this moment?

Well, he renames the place, doesn't he? He renames the place, and he doesn't call it, I did a really good day. He doesn't call it, this is where I was good and faithful, or this is where I sacrificed Isaac. He calls it, the Lord will provide. The amount of the Lord that shall be provided. King James emphasizes the Hebrews there as Jehovah Jireh, and the son in hymns.

[22 : 22] Jehovah Jireh, that's the name of this place. And it's that same multifaceted word again. The Lord sees, the Lord chooses, the Lord knows, the Lord will provide.

That's what Abraham's faith points in. It's not the faith of Abraham himself, it's the faithfulness of God who will see that his promises can be kept.

And Moses' first readers, when they came to this, would be applying it to themselves, wouldn't they, as they heard that? Having just come out of Israel and experienced the first Passover, they'd be remembering a day when a lamb was slain for their sons, the sons who they are, wouldn't they?

A generation of Jews, as they sacrificed Passover lambs, remembering the sacrifice of one for their sons, remember that too. We have the whole life of the New Testament scripture.

And we think immediately of everyone, we think of every one of those lambs. Every one of those lambs, we think of Jesus, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. See, without the life of the New Testament, Genesis 2, the question is really difficult.

[23 : 32] It seems cruel, but bad. It's perhaps anachronistic, out of character, who God is. One Jewish website I came across researching this, described the passages, problematic but has signs of hope.

And that was the best they could do there. This is a problematic passage. How would God, who later clearly condemns human sacrifice, how would he ask Abraham to do this?

I think he'd find some other way to test Abraham. I'm sure there were other things he could do. But what we see in the light of the New Testament is that this story is not ultimately about what Abraham must do for God, but what God will do for us.

Abraham was called the sacrifice, Isaac was the only son whom he loves. He says, this is my beloved sight, with whom my mom is.

Just as Isaac carries the word, the instrument of his execution, up a hill in the region of Jerusalem, Jesus carried to us on the prophet. Just as Isaac submitted to being bound on the altar, Jesus was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he opened up his mouth.

[24 : 51] Like a lamb that is meant to slaughter, and like a sheep that put all its shears as silent, so he opened up his mouth. The ram of Jehohah is a symbol, isn't it?

The ram of Jehohah is a symbol of Jesus, a token of him. And though it's really unlikely that Abraham fully grasped the enormity of what's going on here, what God is ultimately saying in this ram that he provides is, my son be yours.

I will do this terrible thing, I will do this terrible thing, so you don't have to. My son be yours. The gravity of this is online in verse 16 when God reaffirms his promises to Abraham.

By myself I have sworn it, says the Lord. By myself I have sworn it. Even if it costs me my own son, I will keep my promise to you and to your offspring.

So God says to Abraham, my son be yours. My son be yours. But if we understand our place in salvation history, through this picture he also speaks to us, doesn't he?

[26 : 02] Paul teaches the Galatians, if you are Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, and according to the promise. He says elsewhere, it is those of faith who are sons of Abraham.

With the full logic of the New Testament we know that everyone who is a believer in Jesus is a spiritual descendant of Abraham, one of his offspring. A child of Isaac.

So when God says to Abraham in this picture, my son be yours, he says to us, doesn't he, my son be you? My son be you. John 3.16 is the most famous passage of the Bible, isn't it?

It's over-quoted and overused. You find it on bumper stickers, there's even a rassler somehow made an end-off room. So, it's common to us that perhaps it doesn't have any impact on it.

But that's more or less what's being said in this passage. For God so loved the world, for he gave his only son. Whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have a terrible life.

[27 : 11] My son be you. Perhaps it's lost his gravity. But what Genesis 22 shows us in pictorial form is that these aren't just cold theological words in a group book a long time ago.

It's not just a philosophical principle. The sacrifice of Jesus is real and visceral and felt. When we read John 3.16, that God being his only son, we're meant to have that same lurch in our stomachs that we have during those baptismal panels.

Or at the beginning of this passage, when we hear that command of Abraham, it's that same gut-wrenching feel we should have while we read it. And when we sing, as we just did, how deep the Father's love for us, why we all measure that he should give his only son to make it a righteous pleasure.

See, what we're meant to see here is that God the Father walked the road thinking Abraham did. That awkward long walk we just saw. That painful, horrifying walk.

And we weren't ransomed because we were silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Jesus Christ. God's own son, the Hela. That light out of a man, without a spot or blemish.

[28 : 32] So returning to the analogy, that's why we need to don't try to pray with them. God has made a sacrifice so we don't have to. A once-for-all sacrifice that we're not meant to repeat or attempt, but to look at and marvel.

Where Abraham did see the enormity of what God would do to keep his promises, we have it in Paul Teichon, that promise.

That's a little tweet. Whichever hill Abraham sacrificed around, wherever his Jehovah Jireh was, our Jehovah Jireh, the place where God provided for us, where he saw us and provided, is God of wisdom.

So how are we to follow Abraham's example? When life's hard? When the circumstances make it difficult to believe God's promises?

Or when God requires costly obedience for us? How are we to carry on? What are we to do? Or we to remember the cross? That's what Abraham did. We're to remember the cross as we do, as we walk around at the Lord's table.

[29 : 51] And we're to see at the cross that though it cost him his son, the Lord has provided. He will keep his promises. And if the circumstances, whatever we are called to do, he's swallowed by himself and he is made.

He died. Amen.