

The Father Who Did Not Spare His Own Son: Genesis 22  
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This morning we come to one of the most famous and most moving stories in all of Scripture. It is the story of a father and his beloved son. God commands this father, Abraham, to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac. The passage is Genesis 22, and as we've been looking at Abraham's journey of faith, this brings us to the grand finale. Genesis 12 was the calling and Genesis 22 is the culmination. In Genesis 12 God first called Abraham and told him, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." The destination was uncertain, but Abraham obeyed immediately. He set out from Haran, in obedience to God, but not knowing where this adventure would take him. God promised him, "I will make of you a great nation" (12:2). Later God said, "I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth" (13:16). He said of Eliezer of Damascus, "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir," and He told Abraham to count the stars, if he could, and said, "So shall your offspring be" (15:4-5). Even the name Abraham, which God gave to him, means "father of a multitude of nations" (17:5). And then God made it clear that Ishmael was not the son of promise. But Sarah would bear a son, and his name would be Isaac. And the covenant would be established with him (17:16, 19). Then Isaac was born, miraculously, when Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah was 90. And then Ishmael, the son of the slave woman, was cast out, making it even clearer that Isaac was the son of promise.

That is Abraham's life up to this point. The promise was made back in chapter 12. Abraham and Sarah have gone up and down in their fight of faith, but now the unbelievable, laughable promise of God has come true! Joy has filled their hearts! Oh, the rejoicing and the laughing that occurred in response to God's miraculous fulfillment of His promise.

And that sets the stage for what is to happen next.

### **Abraham's faith**

First, I want to talk about Abraham's faith. Notice the similarities between Abraham's test in this passage and Abraham's call in Genesis 12. There is a clear command that requires supernatural trust. In chapter 12, Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house. In chapter 22, offer your son as a burnt offering. These are difficult commands. They require absolute trust in God. We also notice that in both passages the plan is only partially revealed. In chapter 12, Go to the land that I will show you. In chapter 22, offer him as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you. God will reveal the details of the plan along the way, and Abraham will need to take each step by faith.

And in each passage we see Abraham obey immediately. Chapter 12:4 says, "So Abram went, as the Lord had told him." And chapter 22:3 says, "So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac." Abraham's obedience to these commands is breathtaking, and we ought to stand in awe of this faith, not worshipping Abraham, but worshipping the God who granted him this kind of faith. And it is recorded here to instruct us and convict us and inspire us to exercise this kind of faith. We know that Abraham was not perfect. He had some very low points in his fight of faith. But we can look at these instances of deep trust and

immediate obedience in Abraham's life, and we should be tremendously encouraged to trust the promises of God wholeheartedly. Step out in faith. Trust the promises. Obey the commands. Even when a lot of the details are uncertain.

The other thing we see in each of these passages is God's promise. In chapter 12, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." And then in chapter 22:17-18, "I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice."

There's the command of God and the promise of God, in both of these passages. And at the beginning of chapter 22 Abraham must have felt some major tension in his mind between the command of God and the promise of God. Abraham knew that God had promised to make him into a great nation, and he knew that it was supposed to happen through Isaac. But now God has told him to offer Isaac as a burnt offering. Do you see the tension? How will the promise be fulfilled if Isaac is dead? How will Abraham's descendants become as numerous as the stars or the sand if the son of promise is put to death? Abraham must have wrestled in his mind as he thought about the command of God and the promise of God.

As he walked along with Isaac toward the land of Moriah, he must have recounted in his mind all the amazing things God had done for him. The initial call out of Haran, being rescued from Pharaoh and later from Abimelech, having victory over the armies who had captured Lot, receiving a blessing from Melchizedek, hearing God's great promises to him and then seeing those promises come true. Just think of the highlight reel of Abraham's life as he looked back and meditated on the great things God had done for him. And now as he faces the deepest test of faith imaginable, God grants him the faith to believe in the promises. Even though the command seemed to be against the promises, God gave Abraham a childlike trust that the promises will still be fulfilled.

Before we move on in the story we need to talk about this command. Because we read this story, and the natural response is to ask, Why would God do this? How could He do it? How could God ask Abraham to kill his son?

The first thing to realize is that God did NOT tell Abraham to murder Isaac. The command was to offer him as a burnt offering. It's not about wanting Isaac dead. It's about testing Abraham's faith, asking him to offer to the Lord what is so precious and dear to him. It's not murder that God is calling Abraham to do, it's an offering.

The second important thing to understand is the significance of the firstborn. If Abraham heard a voice telling him to sacrifice his wife Sarah, he would have been confused. God would never give him a command like that. But the command to offer up his firstborn, the son of promise, as difficult as it was, it made sense to Abraham. He understood. Because we see in the Old Testament that the first fruits were to be dedicated to God, and the firstborn were consecrated to God. It's symbolic of God's ownership over all His people. God's claim on the firstborn represented His claim on all His people. Also, when God's judgment came down, it came upon the firstborn. Remember the exodus? God killed all the firstborn of Egypt. The tenth plague. And that

judgment would have come upon the firstborn of the Israelites too, if it were not for the blood of the lamb on the doorposts.

When we see the significance of the firstborn, it helps us make better sense of this command. It's not just a random, outrageous demand. It's a test of faith that demonstrates the sovereignty and justice of God. He owns all things, and He requires a just payment for sin. And Abraham would have understood the command in this way. He understood that he, and his family, belonged to God. And he understood that he, and his family, deserved God's judgment because of their sin. And even though this command to offer up his son as a burnt offering is unique and horrible, it was something that God had the right to do as the sovereign and just God of the universe, and it was something that Abraham understood the significance of. God was testing Abraham's faith. He was refining him and causing him to rest entirely in God's plan rather than his own plan.

Now, the dilemma that did exist in Abraham's mind was how God's command could be reconciled with God's promise. If he obeyed the command, it seemed like the promise would be totally lost. How could Abraham become a great nation if he killed the son of promise? But look at Abraham's faith. In verse 5 he says to the young men, "I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you." Abraham believed that somehow he AND Isaac would return together. This passage doesn't tell us what Abraham was thinking. But the New Testament book of Hebrews sheds more light on this. It says in Hebrews 11:17-19, "By faith Abraham, when 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 considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back." Abraham was committed to obeying God's command, and he believed that God would raise Isaac from the dead in order to fulfill the promises. That's how Abraham reconciled the command and the promise. And, in fact, that's basically what happened. Isaac was as good as dead. But the angel of the Lord stopped Abraham just in time, and it was as though he received Isaac back from death.

Abraham's obedience is such a wonderful example to us here, because he believed and obeyed even though God's command was so difficult and agonizing and heart-breaking. But as we see, God's command did not contradict His promises. Instead, it was a beautiful display of God's faithfulness and provision. The Lord provided the lamb.

There's an important lesson that we need to learn about faith from this passage. It may seem obvious (I hope it DOES seem obvious), but it is something that is often not understood in the church today. The point is this: genuine faith produces obedience. If you really trust God, you are going to obey His commands. Not perfectly. Abraham wasn't perfect. Just last week we were looking at his embarrassing ordeal with Abimelech, which was just like the stunt he pulled with Pharaoh in Egypt years before. It's not perfect obedience. But where there is genuine trust in God, there will be real obedience. This is the point that James makes in James 2, where he is lambasting those who think that there is such a thing as faith without works. There is no such thing. He says, "Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?" This is not a gentle rebuke. James wants us to see how ridiculous it is to think that someone can "believe" without that belief changing who they are and how they act

and what they do. Faith, if it's real faith, will leap into action. It will produce good works. It will generate obedience. And James uses Abraham as an example. "Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works, and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness'—and he was called a friend of God."

This can be a confusing passage because of James's wording, but his point is that our works show that our faith is real. That's what we see in Genesis 22. Genesis 22 is the fulfillment of Genesis 15:6. Abraham "believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness." And the test of Genesis 22 shows that Abraham's faith is a real faith. It's not just words or thoughts or a shallow commitment. It's a profound change of heart that has reached down into his innermost being and is transforming him from the inside out.

This is a time to test ourselves, because so many people give lip-service to Christ and faith. So many people will say that they believe in Jesus. But is there obedience? Are we willing to offer up to God everything that is most precious to us, and trust that He knows best? It will be a fight of faith, with its ups and downs. We're not going to obey perfectly in this life, because we're still sinners. But if there is no obedience in your life, then you cannot assume that you are saved. Real faith will produce real obedience. That's what we see about Abraham's faith in this passage.

### **Where is the Lamb?**

Next, let's look at this question that Isaac asks in verse 7, "Where is the lamb?" In verse 6 the narrative slows down dramatically to capture the emotion of this event. Let's read it again. "And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son." It makes us think of Jesus carrying his own cross to his death. And then in verse 7 we see the tender love between this father and his son. "And Isaac said to his father Abraham, 'My father!' And he said, 'Here am I, my son.' He said, 'Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?'" Just think of the thoughts and emotions and confusion and agony that must have filled their hearts and minds. What is going on here? Isaac wondering what this is all about. Abraham knowing what he has been commanded to do, but not knowing what will happen. And even though his heart must have been trembling and breaking within him, he was filled with faith and said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son."

I read this story and I just yearn for more details. What else did they say? What were they feeling? Did Abraham explain everything to Isaac? Isaac must have been so afraid and confused, but apparently he cooperated. Abraham put him on the altar, on top of the wood. And then verse 10 is like it's in slow-motion. "Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son." But the angel of the Lord stopped him and verse 13 says, "And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering *instead of* his son." And he called the place, "The Lord will provide."

Where is the lamb? God will provide the lamb. In this case he spared Isaac in the last moment, and provided a ram to take the place of Isaac. The ram became Isaac's substitute. What a beautiful passage this is, with such profound pictures of the Gospel.

This is so relevant to each and every one of us, because we desperately need a substitute. We deserve God's judgment, and we need Him to provide a lamb to take our place on the altar so that we can go free. The Lord will provide. He is Jehovah-Jireh. That's the name of God that is used here. The Lord will provide. And He has provided. He provided the ram to take the place of Isaac, but that was just a pointer to something far greater. SomeONE far greater.

John the Baptist announced the arrival of this promised Lamb. He "saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'" (John 1:29). Jesus Christ is the Lamb that God provided to be a substitute for sinners like you and me. It's as though we are on that altar, our lives hanging by a thread, the knife of judgment prepared to destroy us. And God has provided a Lamb. Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. He is our substitute. He is slain in our place.

Someone has to die. Someone has to be punished. God's justice requires it. We have all sinned against God, and not just a little bit, but infinitely. The way we ignore God and dishonor Him and disobey Him and run away from Him, for all of these things we deserve everlasting punishment. Justice demands it.

The Good News, the unbelievably great news, is that God was pleased to crush His own Son in our place. Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, took our place. Let me ask you friend, if you were to die today, what would be your plea before the Almighty God? What would you say to God? No one can say, "I'm good enough, God." Reward me, because I lived a good life. No one can say that, because it's false. We have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God. We have all turned away from God and tried to live our own way. So don't think you have any hope on your own. Our only hope is the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. Throw yourself on Him. Rest in Him. Cling to Him. Is the blood of the Lamb covering your sins? He's your only hope.

### **The Father who did not spare His own Son**

Finally, I want to close by talking about the Father who did not spare His own Son. The angel of the Lord twice commends Abraham for not withholding his son. In verse 12, after he calls Abraham's name to stop him from slaughtering his son, 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." And then in verse 16, "By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you . . ." Abraham's faith in God, which produced such a deep commitment and obedience to God, prompted him to offer up to God even his own son, his only son, his beloved son. Did you notice that emphasis on Isaac as the only son? Of course, there was another son, Ishmael. But it has become very clear that Isaac is the son of promise. Ishmael and Hagar were cast out in the last chapter. Isaac was born to Sarah as a fulfillment of the promise. Isaac is the only son. God commanded Abraham in verse 2, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love . . ." And Abraham did not withhold this son, his only son, his beloved son.

God, through His Word here, is giving us a very tender and tangible glimpse into the Godhead. The love between Abraham and Isaac points to the deep love between God the Father and God the Son. And Abraham's willingness to offer up his only beloved son points to God the Father who gave His only Son. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16). And after Jesus was baptized God the Father spoke from

heaven, saying, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17). Then the words of Romans 8:32 seem to allude back to Abraham and Isaac. Paul writes, “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?”

As we read the story of Abraham and Isaac, and as we feel the inner turmoil and agony and broken-heartedness of that event, we should learn something of our great God. He did not spare His own Son. In this case, no one called out at the last moment and called it off. The Father drove that knife into His Son’s heart. God did not spare His own Son, His only Son, His beloved Son. But He gave him up for US! He crushed His beloved Son on that cross. He poured out His wrath against sin upon His very own Son, so that He can spare us from that wrath. Jesus was not spared so that we can be spared. What a God we serve! Trust in this God. Love this God who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all.