

Please join with me. We are going to be looking at Genesis 22. The question that needs to be kind of set in front of us, a question that will press on your heart, and I mean that, will press on your heart. This is the question and of course it is a question that comes from the New Testament: *“Do you love Me more than these?”* The question here is simply, where are the devotions of our hearts? What is it that grabs us and holds us? Or, conversely, what is it in our lives that we have grabbed and will not want to let go of? For that, of course, is the issue with which Abraham must struggle when God comes to him and says, “Abraham, I want you to sacrifice Isaac.” Join me if you would please in Genesis 22. I am going to read these 24 verses and then I will make a few comments, after which we will share in the Lord’s Supper.

*“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.’ 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. 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.’ 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.’ He said, ‘Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the offering?’ Abraham said, ‘God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.’ So they went both of them together.*

*“When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, ‘Abraham, Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ He said, ‘Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.’ 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. 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.’*

*“And the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven and said, ‘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, 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.’ So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba. And Abraham lived at Beersheba.*

*“Now after these things it was told to Abraham, ‘Behold, Milcah also has borne children to your brother Nahor: Uz his first born, Buz his brother, Kemuel the father of Aram, Chesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlaph, and Bethuel.’ (Bethuel fathered Rebekah.) These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham’s brother. Moreover, his concubine, whose name was Reumah, bore Tebah, Gaham, Tahash, and Maacah.”*

There is the account. How beautifully the lyricist of that song we just sang wove together the statements from this scripture! But, how do they shape us? We have pursued our study of Genesis from chapter 12 on under the theme that Abraham the man learning to walk by faith. That is the constant focus. Some things fall within that focus and other things not so well. In learning to walk by faith, certainly when we come to chapter 22 we recognize that we have reached sort of the climax. This is the ultimate lesson. I believe that that is God’s intent, that we understand it

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this way. We already encountered – last week I touched on this – that the fundamental truth which needs to be driven home to our understanding is simply this: the person who would live by faith must be able to love God the giver of gifts more than the gifts themselves. That is of course the rub, is it not? We are ready to say, “Give up vice. Give up sin. Give up that which is evil and inappropriate and wicked.” That makes perfectly good sense to us, and by the way, it makes perfectly good sense to any fallen person on the face of the earth. But when it comes to something like this – “Give up what God has given me.” – now we are in a different kind of place, and I think we understand this. I made this comment last week as well, “If you cannot give up the gift what happens is you are no longer free to be a servant. Because you are turning to your master and you are saying, “No!”

In this chapter, we have certainly something more than just information about Abraham. It is essential that we grab on to this. This is not just a lesson about Abraham learning to walk by faith. We learn here as well something about God. It is possible indeed, that what we learn about God is more challenging than what we learn regarding Abraham. Walking by faith is after all not just about the one who walks; it is also equally about the One who calls us to walk. So here the lesson I think that is being driven home to us is that to walk by faith is walk with God. You might better put it this way: it is to walk in the conviction and awareness that God is with you.

Let us now go look at Abraham in the context of this chapter. What God asks of Abraham is monumental. Nobody reading his could think anything less. But I think it is necessary for us to put it against the larger background of God’s word and realize that this is not unique. In other words Abraham is not a standalone example of what he must do and no one else will. We all, of course know that God does this with His own Son Jesus, but it is broader than that. The men on Wednesday and Thursday nights are studying the life of Job. What did God ask of Job? [He asked] absolutely everything, including his [own] health; including the friendship with God. There was Joseph. What did God ask of Joseph? As far as Joseph could see he lost his family as well as his liberty and every ceremonial and ritual access to God, and we should not consider those last things inconsequential. What about David? David actually comes closer to Abraham than the other two, at least in this regard. The heart of the test for Abraham is surely this, that God is asking him to surrender the very heart and essence of what God had promised to give him, a son. The promised child had been from the beginning the lynch pin, the key to God’s call to Abraham, that he would walk in faith: walk in faith so I can give you this son; walk in faith so I can bless everybody through you through this son. That was the key. What about David? You might recall that David received the promise from God that he would become the king. But where does David go before he becomes the king? In the event David finds himself as an enemy of the king that he first served and then driven away from the kingdom and virtually forced to live with and at least pretend to be an ally of the king’s enemies. So far from leading the faithful armies of the people of God, David finds himself leading an army comprised not just of noble men, but rather as the scripture described them, wicked and worthless fellows who were not willing to pay their debts or remain under authority (I Samuel 30:22). These are hard assignments. Maybe they tell us something about our God.

Let’s go back again to the account regarding Abraham. It is powerfully dramatic in its simplicity. We are not told the circumstances of God’s call to Abraham on this occasion. We are merely told that God called Abraham. “Abraham!” He says, “Yes Lord.” “Take you son, your only son whom you love and take him to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.” If we reflect on this I would say that God is punishingly clear in His commands. There is no depersonalizing of the child. This is how He spells it out: your son, your only son, the son whom you love. I wonder what that sounded like to Abraham. I imagine it sounding like hammer blows against his heart. I was reminded as I prayed and reflected about this of the Lord’s words regarding the Apostle Paul as we are told them in Acts 9:15-16. The Lord speaks to Ananias, and He says, *“Paul is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”* Paul served the Lord knowing the Lord was leading him into suffering. You know, to put this against the background of where you and I live, our culture offers pleasure. That is what is on offer. God calls us to love from a pure heart, a good conscience

and a sincere faith. If you do not sense any ripping of your life, if you do not sense any inability to connect and comfortably conform, if you do not sense that somehow there is a disjointedness between you and the culture that we are in, then I suspect that you are not listening to God.

Abraham makes no protest, he asks for no clarification, he seeks no way out, no lessening of the severity of God's request. *“So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac.”* When David ran away from Saul he ran for his life and he was chased. When Joseph was cast into the pit by his brothers he pled for mercy but he was sold away by his brothers to the Ishmaelites and after that his journey was first of all one of personal survival. If you think about Job's situation, which comes closest in this regard to Abraham's the struggle that Job has is with the silence of God. Terrible things happen and not a word of explanation comes from God. So when you read the book of Job, it is a long and in some sense plaintive cry, “God, where are you?” But that is not Abraham's problem. No, with Abraham the matter is quite different. Job complains regarding the silence of God, but Abraham has to deal with what God is saying. He has to deal with words he doesn't want to hear. It is commented that Abraham makes no complaint. He cuts the wood for the fire, he takes the embers and they leave. The details are unsparing. They traveled for three days presumably either in silence or speaking of things immediate and irrelevant to the purpose and destination of the journey. On the third day Abraham sees the place. He leaves the young men behind, telling them to wait. I wonder if Abraham at that moment even for a moment considered what he was going to say when he came back alone.

Alone Abraham and Isaac set out to climb the mountain. Isaac carries the wood; Abraham carries the fire and he carries the knife. Here is the only recorded conversation on the trip. Isaac says, “My father.” Abraham says, “Here I am, my son.” Isaac says, “Behold the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” You cannot read this with any degree of intelligence unless you identify with these people. You have got to get inside of Abraham. Attempting that, I thought this was the right question: was this Abraham's Gethsemane? You remember Gethsemane? In the night of His betrayal, before He has actually been arrested by Judas the Betrayer and the guards he brought with him, Jesus goes out and He prays in the garden and we are told that He is in such an agony of apprehension, knowing what is coming, that He cries out to His Father what He knows is not possible: “May this cup pass.” He knows the answer before He asks the question: It cannot pass. Of course Jesus also knew the answer in the deeper sense, didn't He? He had already told His men, “I will be betrayed, I will be crucified and I will rise again.” But that did not lessen the depth of His agony as He considered what it meant for Him to bow beneath the wrath of His Father in order that you and I would be saved. So here is Abraham. He gazes up the slopes of the mountain height, knowing that it is just him and Isaac, father and son, going on together. And Abraham is resolved. He will go as far as he must.

We are told in Hebrews 11:17-19, *“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 considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which figuratively speaking he did receive him.”* So this is his Gethsemane. Abraham has to look with absolute sobriety at the impossibility of what confronts him, and then say, “It will be well; it will be well.”

Scripture rarely gives us the hidden thoughts of the actors, what they fear, what they hope, how they justify what they are doing and so on. We are challenged instead to understand what they have done according to the thoughts and imaginations of our own hearts, our own understanding of the issues involved and the way in which we would be tested under the same circumstances. That is why these things are laid out in front of us. Jesus told a parable at one point, a parable about the wisdom of counting the cost. Count the cost before you take up an action or enterprise, before you make a commitment, before you sign on the dotted line. Be sure you know what you are getting into. What we see here is that Abraham has been learning how to count the cost of walking by faith. He has been learning this slowly for a long time. But was he prepared for this? That is the question. Was he prepared for

this, was this test going to be passed? The next test is always a question. Yesterday's success is not a guarantee of today's. The moment of truth is when you join your will to what you know and you act.

Cost counting is demanding business. Some of you know I have been doing a fair amount of reading in management: such a joy, how to manage both profitable and non-profit organizations. In my reading I came across this interesting concept. It is called “an opportunity cost.” How many are familiar with that. Yes, a few enlightened people. This is the cost you pay for not having resources to spend on some things because you spent your resources on something else. Pretty simple. Ultimately a very simple concept. So for instance, if your wife goes out and spends \$500.00 on new clothes she has lost the opportunity for a lovely weekend with you because she spent the money. Oh, you thought this was going to be highly spiritual. It is! It is extremely spiritual. If you invest in a college education you will have spent away the time and money for training in a trade. If you put your money into real estate you will lose whatever you might have gained from investing in stocks. The principle is applicable to all areas of life. If you devote your free time to one thing you will lose what you might have gained by doing something else. Are we beginning to get nervous? Thinking again of Abraham, he has learned among other things the cost of not trusting in God but putting his resources elsewhere, in other words, trusting in Sarah's plan to find a son through her servant Hagar. Whoops! Wrong object of faith; disastrous consequence. I mentioned to the elders this morning that mistake cost Abraham thirteen years of waiting. How many of us have waited because we made a stupid choice, a faithless choice? What Abraham has learned is that while God's ways are costly, the cost of taking other ways and thereby losing out on the promised returned [from God] is far greater.

Of course under the circumstance what Abraham is actually learning is that there is a real cost to becoming the friend of God. I know full well what I am doing. I am telling the seeker-friendly church movement that they are absolutely dead wrong. Jesus told His disciples that the cost of being His friend was keeping His commandments. How many of us have been raised in the church being told over and over and over, “Salvation is a free gift; salvation is a free gift’ salvation is a free gift.” Beloved, is it a free gift? Yes. Is it costless? No.

Jesus said, *“You are my friends if you do what I command you.”* What was the commandment? [You are to] love one another. Optional? Yes. Costly? Both ways. By the way, that was not all that He said. We are to love one another as He has loved us. Costly? It cost Him His life.

Abraham learned to walk by faith in God some 1400 years before Jesus was born. He did not have the example of Jesus to follow. God used other means to teach Abraham the full cost of being friends with God. Not often but every now and then we are told this about our God. Remember I said that in this chapter the most fundamental teaching is about God, not Abraham. What we are taught is that God is jealous. You do understand that jealousy is the highest intensity of love. When giving the Law to Moses the Lord declared in Exodus 20:5, *“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.”* In His jealousy God seeks from us undivided love and loyalty. That is what He got from Abraham: undivided love and loyalty. Notice the direction of the statement. We are fond of and for good reason remembering that God so loved “ME”. And it is true. But it is only part of the truth. When that love from God is poured into our broken souls and mends our twisted hearts and straightens our twisted minds the anticipation is that love will flow back in an unstinting devotion to God. That is what He is about in our lives, hammering us, knocking us, shaping us, caressing us, comforting us in order that we would love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all your mind and with all your strength. Because when you do you are able to love your neighbor as yourself.

That is the lesson that Abraham is learning as he is climbing the mountain where he is to sacrifice the one thing he is tempted to love more than God. That one thing is the greatest of God's gifts to him. It is his son, his only son, the son whom he loves; it is Isaac. We might pause and wonder whether this is what happened to Adam in the garden. Have you ever asked yourself why did God allow Satan to tempt Eve? Perhaps it was to tempt Adam. “Adam, do you love me more than Eve?” He didn't, which is probably one of the reasons why Jesus makes it perfectly clear that if you are to follow Him you must be willing to go against your children, your friends and even your wife, because there cannot be divided loyalty of the soul's commitments.

Would God command Abraham to violate His own laws against human sacrifice? The answer is no, but Abraham is confronted with a “yes”. That is the whole point of this journey. It is in the face of this impossibility that the author of Hebrews realizes that Abraham was persuaded the outcome could not be as it appeared and therefore would not be as it appeared. In the end Abraham will gain and not lose by the obedience of faith, in the end Isaac will live and not be dead. Abraham answers Isaac's piercing question, “*Behold the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb?*” “*God will provide the lamb.*” And He did. That is why that song we sang said, “Hallelujah!” A sudden burst of light, sudden upwelling of joy, a sudden realization, “It is well, it is well, it is well!” But if we have never come under the burden of God's expectation, if we say “It is well” before we understand the cost, it is not well. We are told that God provided a substitute sacrifice, a ram was caught in a thicket and that become the burnt offering. Obviously God had brought the lamb there ahead of time for this purpose. But we wonder, thinking about Abraham, is this blind faith? How many of us have been accused of that as Christians? Blind faith, walking forward, not knowing what is happening, being stupid, as if people who don't believe anything know anything! It is not blind faith. That is the whole point of this account of Abraham's life. It is not blind faith. Abraham does not know where the lamb is, but he does know God. He does know God and he knows by now that God will not desert him, that God will not fail him, that God will not leave him standing in high water with no hope of finding a way out of the rising flood. It will not happen. He knows his God. The question is, do we? That is the point of this chapter. Abraham is long since resting in the arms of God. But what of us? Do you know God? Can you right now take up in your heart and mind that which is most precious and say, “Yeah, I am willing to sacrifice even this most precious thing, because I believe my God will more than supply what is lost.”

American Christianity is wimpy; we are practically powerless to alter the course of our culture's decline. There are at least two important lessons that come from the end of this chapter. You can read the end. He goes on to speak of things that you wonder why he bothers after the drama of Isaac. They go back to camp and then [Moses] goes through a long list of relatives in Haran. Isn't that a great way to end a good story! But there are just a couple of lessons. First, after the great trials and tests of life, life goes on. It is with life going on that the test becomes essential. Here is the deal: the loss of obedience in the myriad details of life soon erodes the fervor of our love for God and we are once again adrift in the sea of worldliness. Why do you pray every day? Why do you read the Word of God every day? Why do we gather weekly for worship? Why do we encourage one another and remind one another of the basic truths day after day? [It is] because if we don't we forget. And when we have forgotten we are lost and we wander around and we waste a ton of time and we pay a high price because we haven't counted the opportunity costs of just indulging ourselves in boredom or something else instead of staying focused on the Lord. The story of faith does not end with Abraham. Why talk about all these relatives? Why mention Bethuel? Why mention Rebekah? [It is] because the story doesn't end with Isaac, does it? The story doesn't end with Abraham and it doesn't end with Isaac. The promise has to be passed on. Therefore it is extremely important to Abraham that he finds the right wife for his son. Parents, to what degree have we abandoned, simply abandoned the sacred responsibility to ensure that the promise will be passed on to our children?

We are going to celebrate communion. God gave the thing He loves more than anything else, His Son, for us. As we prepare to take the elements, let us be mindful, we must be prepared to give to Him in the same way.