

## *A Walk with Abraham*

Genesis 22:1-19

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So we begin this morning with a walk with Abraham. And of course, originally when we planned this, it was not dawning on me at the time until literally—or if it did, I forgot it—in the middle of last night when I woke up. Sometimes I do that on a Saturday night, and I realize I have to preach in a few hours, and I start thinking through my sermon. I start thinking through all this stuff. And so I suddenly realized, “Oh, yeah, we’re talking about Abraham and Isaac on Father’s Day.” So it’s important that we teach this, because in some ways this passage has been misappropriated. It’s been misapplied.

So how are we to understand the life of faith as we look at this walk with Abraham? So we’ll do so this morning as we look together at Genesis 22:1-19. But as we go there, there are a couple of things that I want you to be aware of as we go through this passage together. You’ll see in your outline, my desire is for us to go, in some degree, fairly swiftly as we look at the broader outlines and some of the beautiful nuggets that come out of this passage, but then look a little deeper in really answering this question: how do we appropriate and apply this part of Abraham’s life, and what does the life of faith and living by faith look like as we read a passage like this? Does it have any application? Where does it not have application? Where is the continuity between who we are and who Abraham was, and where is the discontinuity? Where is the uniqueness? So we’re going to look at that together as we—and I’ll just say, I’ll be driving towards what those principles are at the end. But let’s look together at Genesis 22:1-19.

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 a burnt 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 you 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.  
[ESV]

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me again?

Lord, we now ask by the power and work of your Holy Spirit that you would speak to us by your Word, helping us to understand it, helping us to love you more because we’ve read it and because we’ve heard it, and helping us to apply it. Guide us, then, by your Word as we apply it and as we trust in you. Help the teacher. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

You see in your outline faith when we don’t want to go, verses 1 through 7; faith when we cannot say, verses 8 to 13; and finally, faith in the restoration of hope, verses 14 through 19. So faith when we don’t want to go. When we are honest, many of us could tell stories of when we believe that God was doing something, but we were reluctant. We didn’t want to go. This happened to me in December 1997—rather, January 1997. I was about to graduate from seminary just a few months later. We had put out our applications, and the seminary was responsible for gathering those applications and gathering those churches which had advertised that they needed to hire a pastor. And one of those pastors was coming to the seminary in January. He was a pastor from southwest Florida where it was nice and 78 degrees.

And so the office called me and said, “Randy, would you like to be one of those who are interviewed for this position?” And I said, “Where are they?” And they said, “Southwest Florida.” And I said, “Not interested.” Because you need to know that at that juncture and for the previous two years, Kate and I had been praying faithfully, “Lord, we want to be smack-dab in the middle of a city.” And I was very specific. I do not want a house with a garage and a yard to mow. I want to be surrounded by as much concrete and glass as I can find. I called up every single PCA church at the time that had a church plant in the middle of an urban area. Portland, Boston—New York was an impossibility, because no one from Covenant Seminary had been hired at any of the churches in the PCA in New York. So I thought, I didn’t know anyone there, so I didn’t really go there. It was way beyond my reach. So I just reached everywhere. So I said, “No, I’m not interested in Florida.”

Another week goes by. I get another call from the office. “Randy, here’s the thing. We need people to fill this guy’s schedule. He’s flying up here. Will you just talk to him?” I was like, “Okay fine, I’ll do it.” And so I remember that morning. I got up, and it was a Saturday morning. And I put on my outfit, and I put on my double-breasted nicest jacket. And Kate, in faithful form, said, “Are you not going to wear a tie?” And I said to her, “If this guy is from southwest Florida and is upset by my not wearing a tie, I wouldn’t want to work with him. So I’m not going to wear a tie.”

So I went to the interview, and it was fine. He was a very nice guy. It was cool, and I was thinking of what they were looking for, and I had other people in mind of what they wanted—I think you see where this is going. A week later, he calls me and he said, “Hey, listen, we wanted to call you.” I said, “Hey, I wanted to call you. I got this perfect guy for you. His name is—” And he said, “Wait a second. We want to talk to you.” And I said, “Why?” So long story short, Kate and I are now traveling to Florida to interview. Reluctantly, but we go. And we fell in love with that church. And by God’s grace, before the end of the

weekend, they would not allow us to put our feet on a plane until they extended a call. So we knew that was where God wanted us to be. But we didn't want to go.

How do we oftentimes have that real feeling with what we see here in this text? God has just said to Abraham, "I want you to take your son, through whom I have already promised will come many descendants, and I want you to take him and offer him as a sacrifice." And we read these words in verse 3, "So Abraham rose early in the morning." In other words, he wasted no time. That's the first thing we need to observe about the life of faith in Abraham. Abraham rose early. There was an immediacy to his faith. At least we see the way in which the story is written, it gives us sort of a quick succession of events, but then it slows down right at the point of the sacrifice. But there doesn't seem to be recorded for us that there was much disagreement or much argument. There was immediacy to Abraham's faith.

But also something that we cannot miss, and this is the second point—even though we oftentimes do not want to go, there is oftentimes, when we think about the future and decisions we need to make and the implications of those decisions—we oftentimes struggle, because we lack certitude. How do we sort of in some way pair that with what we see next in Abraham's response? Look at verse 5, "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.'" The words "come back to you" is plural. It's not just Abraham coming back. He's saying, *we're* coming back. So there was—Abraham knew they were coming back. There was not only an immediacy to his faith; there was a certitude of it. He's just been told he's going to offer his son as a sacrifice, but he already knows they are coming back.

And then look at what it says next. Beginning of verse 8, just the first half, says this, "Abraham said,"—this is after Isaac has already put up a protest. "Hey, wait a second. Where's the sacrifice?" And Abraham says to his son, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." Abraham knew God would provide. So this of that crazy faith sandwich that I just gave you. There's an immediacy to Abraham's faith. There's a certitude that they're coming back, even though he knows why they're going on the walk. But he also knows that God is going to provide the lamb. So he puts feet to that certitude by seeking to console his son, who clearly sees what's up. And he says, "My son, God will provide." That is a remarkable statement of faith. And I read that juxtaposed to how often, both in significant and in insignificant ways, I—perhaps like you—don't want to go. There is often a lack of immediacy, a lack of certitude, and a doubt: will God provide? So that's the first thing. Faith when we don't want to go is being juxtaposed to what we see happening in Abraham's life. I will come back around to those details towards the end.

So faith when we cannot see, verses 8 through 13. Notice against verse 8 when he says, "Abraham said, 'God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.'" So he knew that God would provide, though he could not yet see it. But there was also a lack of specificity. How was God going to do it? When I don't see something, I kind of want to know more. I want to know more facts. I want to sort of know, because I want to be reasonable in my strategic planning. I want to know, perhaps, sort of some of the pluses and minuses, the consequences of the decision. But what we see here with Abraham is this desire, even though he can't see the specificity of how God is going to provide the lamb, it doesn't withhold him from following God and trusting in him by faith. That's juxtaposed with the reality that oftentimes, for us, exercising faith when we can't see oftentimes is not the garden of deeper trust. It becomes the garden of anxiety and worry. What is going on in Abraham?

Number two. Abraham, if you look at verse 12, notice what happens. He says—this is as he's about to take not a metaphorical knife but a real knife to a real son. Verse 12 says, "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.'" What's interesting is that often, the life of faith for many of us is that we try to read what God is doing by trying to read the tea leaves of our circumstances. We look at what's in front of us. We kind of see how things are going. We kind of go, oftentimes, with a gut-level perception. "This seems to be going sideways, so maybe God's not in this." When we can't see, that's one thing.

When we can't see and our circumstances seem to be shifting below our feet, it's very hard to exercise trust and certitude and the idea that God's got this. But what we understand in verse 12 is Abraham did the opposite. It's not that he ignored his circumstances; he wasn't owned by them. Because his circumstances were, if not screaming out at him, were certainly making noises. If you've started a fire for an altar and a sacrifice, there's smoke involved. While his circumstances weren't screaming at him, they were certainly giving an odor that things weren't going the way you thought they would go. And you've just taken a real knife into your hand.

And here's where we have to be very careful when we read Scripture—whether it is the walls of Jericho crumbling or it is Abraham with a real knife in his hand. As one commentator said, "We need to be careful not to spiritualize these moments. These are real." Because we believe and trust that the Bible is giving us a historical record of the events which took place. And this particular event, and this particular man happens to be the father of three different world faiths. The vast majority of the world is involved in a faith that looks to Abraham. So this is an important event—one that is recorded for us. And so we cannot be quick to spiritualize it. But what we see is the circumstances are screaming out at him. They must not be going the way at least he thought. But yet, what does he do? He decides to trust God as opposed to trying to discern from his circumstances whether God is trustworthy. Do you see the difference? He's trusting God in the circumstances, not expecting the circumstances to immediately determine whether God is with him.

Friends, how many of us have wondered when our circumstances are going sideways, we've wondered whether God is judging us? Does God love me still? I'm grateful for Abraham, the fact that this story is in here, because—I don't know about you—but I know I would have been asking that question. But Abraham trusted God. And this is important to remember in the life of Abraham. Because many have said—and I don't disagree—that some would say that Abraham had to deal with Isaac. God had to test Abraham at this point in his relationship with Isaac, because Isaac would have likely become an idol for him. But as a read through Genesis 12 to 22, what I begin to see is something that screams out at me louder than I can really relate to. The real idol may not be idol. The real idol may be Abraham trusting in himself. That what he may have been really troubled with and wrestling with: is God someone I will trust more than my own inclinations, than my own gifts, than my own perceptions, than my own perspectives? It is trusting self versus trusting God. But as you know, we see that whether he could see what was coming or not, he exercised this faith, contra to how very often my own circumstances confront me.

But then we see this third point—faith in the restoration of hope, verses 14 through 19. Notice what he does in verse 14. He names the actions of God. That's one of the ways in which the restoration of hope actually happens and our faith is built up. He's remembering the actions of God, and he's naming them. Look at verse 14. He says this, "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.'" It is in some ways remembering and naming the actions of God in our lives.

I have a friend, an acquaintance, who doesn't do it for this purpose, but I've begun to think about it because of his own practice—at the end of each day, he writes down a record of what happened that day. People he met with. Maybe thoughts that he had—something that he was thinking about. Now, out of the box, I'm not that disciplined. But I've begun to think about it in the life of faith. What would it look like for me to register in some way what happened in a given week or in a given day? It's different than a spiritual journal, because we don't have to apply meaning to it. But just remembering. You see, our devices and our technology have become the sources where we're outsourcing our memory and we're living in many moments of distracted immediacy. And it's easy for us to forget, not because our brains are any less able to remember—it's that we've lost the discipline of exercising memory.

Because when we can remember, notice what else he does in verse 17. "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.” Now, this is God speaking to Abraham, but I will say that one who remembers the actions of God also becomes one who can rejoice in the actions of God. What does our worship flow from? Our worship flows from remembering what God has done. This is why we celebrate the Supper. We remember what God has done in this past week. We are remembering how God’s promises have been given. And we rejoice. Why do we sing? Why do we pray? Why do we confess? Because we remember that God has declared, “I am for you, I will never turn away from you, and I have forgiven you.” This is what worship is to reflect.

So we see with the life of Abraham. The restoration of hope, the strengthening of faith, is when we remember and we rejoice and we name. Okay? So there you have it. There’s the text. But I must say this. Recognizing first there is enormous discontinuity between us and Abraham. That is to say this—first, the relationship that God had with Abraham has never been repeated. What we see is such a uniqueness of relationship. Because what we’re reading in Genesis 22 is the end of a story over a number of chapters of what God has done. And this is important to remember because of this—what’s happening with Abraham is a reason-filled faith. Write this down: a reason-filled faith.

What do I mean? Again, I’m grateful for those who have spent their scholastic career in studying these things and understanding them in the context. But I will tell you this, that Kierkegaard wrote in his book *Fear and Trembling* on this very incident, and from it came the incredible phrase “leap of faith.” You know that phrase? Because Kierkegaard believed that Abraham was a madman, that what he was doing is he was doing anything but exercising his reason—he was simply jumping. And so, in the annals of human history and philosophy, we’ve now divided faith and reason. Except that means we haven’t read the Bible faithfully enough. Because what we learn is this:

God appeared to Abraham when he called him to the Land of Canaan, Genesis 12. God brought a miraculous plague that fell upon Pharaoh’s house and that foreign ruler from a different faith affirmed Abraham as a prophet of a powerful God, Genesis 12. Abraham was visited again by God when he was dealing with Lot, Genesis 13. God appeared again to Abraham in Genesis 15 in a dream and a vision. He renamed Abram to Abraham. He gave him a miraculous offering upon which God built his covenant. God appeared to Abraham in the Oaks of Mamre. God promised that there would be a birth of a son through him, not through Hagar but through Sarah. And that even though Abraham disobeyed God and sought to have Ishmael through Hagar, God still promised to care for Ishmael, even though he was no longer under his oversight. And then Sarah would give birth.

All that is to say this. Abraham was absolutely using his reason. But he must remember, he was using his reason based on historical events that happened only to Abraham. God appeared to Abraham in ways he doesn’t appear to us. God spoke to Abraham in ways he doesn’t speak to us. He speaks to us through his Word. He appeared to Abraham in person. He appears to us, really, through the presence of his Spirit. Abraham didn’t have a Bible from which to read. You and I do. God didn’t whisper in the thoughts and imaginations of Abraham. He spoke to him, and he showed up. The Holy Spirit doesn’t whisper to us in the flow and ideas of our imaginations per se, but rather he speaks to us through his Scriptures, and his Scriptures transforms and stretches our imagination.

Do you see? That is, we can’t draw too tight a line between the life of Abraham and the life of us, except for this reality: we are not called to give leaps of faith either. What this text is really about is not about Abraham’s faith. It’s about God’s trustworthiness. It is God who is faithful. So the answer to the text, the application of the text is not, “Be like Abraham. Be really devoted to God. Love him.” No, the life that we are called to is, “See and look and remember that our God is trustworthy and God.” So how do we do that? We take our faith, and we take our reason, and we remember. What do we remember? That God’s actions in our lives is where he reveals his trustworthiness. And when God reveals his trustworthiness, when we don’t know where the next job is going to come from or the next contract or how our children are going to do or how we’re going to live or what life is going to be like—but when we see what God has done and we recognize that the food did come, that that next contract did come, that we had another

place to live, we take the moment and we build, if you will, some kind of altar in our mind and remember: God has been faithful. And based on his faithfulness that is revealed, we then exercise our reason and we trust someone who is trustworthy.

But I end with this. Notice at the end of this text, verse 14, "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.'" On that same mountain space is the place which Abraham could not fully see, but we can now see as we remember that on that same mountain space is a place called Calvary. It is on that same space that Jerusalem would be built. And outside the walls of Jerusalem on the mount of Calvary, the Lord shall provide. It is the Lord who has not withheld his son from us. He has given his son. It's not that we love God; it's that God loved us. It is not that we have demonstrated the fireworks of our faithfulness and obedience; it's that God continues to bust the expectations of our feeble minds to demonstrate that he is a God of faithfulness. This is who he is.

And I end this by drawing your attention, that to take a walk with Abraham is to take a walk not like Abraham but to take our faith and reason and put it in the one whom Abraham also put it in. And we hear these words from Romans 8, when God through his apostle Paul declares to us, "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?" This is Father's Day. Every day is our Father's day, who is trustworthy, who is loving, and who says to us, "Through my son, and by my grace, I have withheld nothing from you, and I will provide." Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we come to you, and I come to you on behalf of my brothers and sisters in Christ and even those who do not know you who may be witnesses to these things. I ask on everyone's behalf that you, O Lord, would demonstrate your faithfulness, enabling us to remember and to rejoice that it is through Jesus Christ your son that you have demonstrated you are worthy of trust. And we are called to recount, Lord, the many small ways and, yes, the big ways in which you, O Lord, have said, "I am with you. I will never leave you nor forsake you." You, O Lord, are worthy of our trust. Build us up. Glorify your name. For you are Lord, who is beyond all writings and beyond all description, who is the Lord of glory. Amen.