

God Provides the Sacrifice

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[0 : 0 0] The story. We're looking this morning at the very climax, really, of the Abraham story. This is an incredible passage that we've just read to us and that we're going to dig into now.

One commentator writes that no other story in Genesis, indeed the whole Old Testament, can match the sacrifice of Isaac for its haunting beauty or its theological depth.

We're in an incredibly rich part of Genesis this morning, the beauty, the depth of this passage. So often the Bible is given to us in narrative.

We're given these true stories, these records of histories, rather than just a list of bullet points about God and what he's done. I think really the reason behind that is that God really wants us to feel these things.

God wants these truths about him to really affect our hearts. And so he gives them to us in these hauntingly beautiful, these theologically deep passages.

[1 : 0 2] And so that's our goal this morning and really every Sunday, not just kind of more information in our heads, but real transformation in our hearts as God works on us through his word.

So then how is this particular passage to be affecting us? In what ways is this passage shaping our hearts? Another author puts it like this, this scene presents the radical nature of true faith, tremendous demands and incredible blessings.

So this is a real high point here of Genesis, as we've said, but it's here to equip us in some ways for just the regular, the day-to-day life of faith and what that looks like.

It's tremendous demands and it's incredible blessings. And we're going to look at both of those. But also what we'd want to add into the middle of that, I think, really the core of this story is God providing a sacrifice.

It's what God provides that makes both the demands and the blessings of faith possible. And so this passage is going to point us to Jesus and to the very heart of the Christian faith.

[2 : 1 4] And again, I hope help us see that, not just intellectually, what the gospel means, but also through that, see more of God's heart for his people, his heart for me and you this morning, the cost God himself paid in the gospel.

And it is with holding on to that, that is that both the motivation and the confidence that it gives us to live out our faith in him. So those are really kind of the three points that we're going to move through, the life of faith, the object of faith, the blessings of faith.

That's our plan this morning. And first up, we see in these verses, in this passage, one of the most incredible, challenging, moving pictures of, in the whole of the Bible, of the life of faith.

And we see this in Abraham's exemplary obedience, the life of faith and Abraham's exemplary obedience. Just before we dig into this and try and really get to grips with this, it is good to note what we're told right at the beginning there in verse 1, that this is a test that God sets.

After these things, God tested Abraham. I think that's to help us just put aside any worries we might have in reading this, where we would say, hang on a minute, how on earth could God require a child sacrifice?

[3 : 34] How could God ask someone to do something like that? That's awful. If we have any concerns of that kind of type, so we're led into the secret really on that that is not God's plan. That is not going to be the outcome here.

And yet we're also shown really clearly that Abraham does not know that. Abraham isn't led into the fact that this is a test. And the Bible is really clear, really deliberate in this passage, to show just how overwhelming, to show just how heartbreaking the task Abraham is given here.

This passage is written in a way, as I said, to help us feel that. So do have a look at verse 2 there. God 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.

Can you even begin to imagine the weight Abraham must have felt bearing down on him as he heard those words? His son, his only son, the son he loves to be given as a sacrifice.

And we almost don't even need to do this, but then add on top of that Abraham's background, Abraham's story up to this point that we've been looking through over the last couple of months. Isaac is the long-awaited son that he and Sarah had thought would never arrive.

[5 : 05] He was the son God had promised, and the son that God had promised through whom to keep all of his covenant commitments that he'd made to Abraham.

And so there's almost this kind of multiplied effect here, the personal pain, but also that sort of theological confusion bearing down on Abraham.

What is God doing here? And again, as we see this being unfolded, I think the story is deliberately told us, slowly building up the tension.

Verses 3 through to 9, just follow these through with me. We're kind of invited to consider, I think, to enter into the story. How is Abraham feeling as he saddles his donkey?

We're given all these kind of incidental details. How is Abraham feeling as he takes the knife in his hand? What must that three-day journey have been like?

[6 : 00] What's going through his mind as he and Isaac alone ascend the hill? How heartbreaking must Isaac's question have been, where is the lamb for the burnt offering?

What is in Abraham's mind as he builds the altar? Is he really going to go through with this? The Bible really wants us to feel that weight. The Bible wants us here this morning to enter into Abraham's experience.

The Bible wants us to weep almost as we read this passage. What could be worse than this challenge laid before Abraham? Nothing. Nothing could.

Perhaps as we start to think that, as we get into that, maybe a question comes to your mind. It came to my mind this week in looking at this passage. Is it even fair of God to put Abraham through this?

This test that Abraham is unaware he's part of, which is so, so hard. Is that fair? If that question comes to your mind, I think that's a good question. Do hold on to that question.

[7 : 04] We're going to come back to that later on. But in following the story here, as it slowly unfolds, having thought through all of that, having even tried to get 1% of the turmoil in Abraham's mind, the focus then turns to Abraham's actions, which, as we've already said, show this exemplary obedience, even in the midst of this heartbreaking trial.

Verse 10, Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son, but the angel of the Lord intervenes.

We'll come to that intervention in a moment. But before that, we see that Abraham was willing to pay that ultimate price, to make that most costly life of obedience.

Into the New Testament, the book of Hebrews gives us really the theological commentary of what is happening here. We read that 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, which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. And so we see here, putting those together, it's Abraham's faith in God's promises, that God could even raise Isaac from the dead in order to keep his promises.

[8 : 41] That is the faith that enables Abraham to do as God has called him to do. And I think often, we're perhaps keen to keep faith and obedience as opposites, almost, aren't we?

You know, is Christianity about faith or is it about obedience? And yet, the Bible really clearly holds both of those together. The book of Romans repeatedly speaks about the obedience of faith.

It's only faith that saves us, that it's not about what we do. But that faith, genuine faith, works itself out in this radical obedience as we see here from Abraham.

And I was really struck by this as I looked at this passage this week. In terms of faith in action, how much does my life look anything like Abraham's life in Genesis chapter 22?

And of course, this is an extreme event. You know, we've said it doesn't get any tougher than this. But actually, how much further back do I so often draw the line?

[9 : 47] You know, this is too much. This is too costly. This is too inconvenient. No, God can't ask this of me. And I'm really keen that we're not here to guilt trip two people this morning.

Again, we're going to see that that's not the motivation here. But I think perhaps a passage like this is really helpful to help us recalibrate our expectations of the Christian life.

Looking at great heroes of the faith like Abraham is a great way to do that. That actually God often does take us through hard times, through testing times.

That actually God often does demand a lot, demand everything of us. Now, when we open the pages of the Bible, whether it's here at Abraham, whether it's at King David, whether it's at Jesus himself, whether it's in the Apostle Paul, countless other places, is rarely, if ever, do we see what could be called a kind of a comfortable Christianity.

Rather, we see heroes of the faith giving everything. But because, as we saw from that passage in Hebrews, they have that faith that God will do as he's promised, that God will see them through, that God will see us through, that God will bring us home, that he is worth giving everything for and can be depended upon.

[11 : 09] That might be really big things. You know, we said, this chapter, this is a big thing, the biggest thing. It might be these huge events or decisions in life. You know, we know and love the Patersons who've moved out with their three young children to Vietnam.

That's not a comfortable, that's not an easy decision to make. For ourselves as a church, as we move forward with the purchase of a church building, that's a very costly thing and in a very literal way.

We've spoken about and we'll speak again about needing to raise significant funds for that, including the people here in this room. That's a big step. That's a significant thing.

We prayed earlier for the persecuted church in places like Turkey and plenty of others. People risking their lives to follow Jesus. That is a big step.

That's not a small or a comfortable thing. But all of those steps are steps of faith that only come through trusting in God's promises to his people that he will do as he has said he will do, that faith that Abraham had.

- [12 : 17] This passage shows us that nothing is too big to be outside of the things that we can trust God for and that God can demand of us. But it's also as well good to remember the small and the day-to-day things of the life of faith as well.

Because maybe this week our obedience might simply be being willing to accept the title of a Christian at work or at school. It might simply be spending time with or sitting next to someone different at church where it's more comfortable to stick with people we know.

It might be having another go at something where we've been hurt before or showing forgiveness to others. And so whatever kind of stage of life we're at, whatever this week throws at us, the life of faith, living this out in practice really kind of applies at every single level, at every single scale that we can be striving after what we see in this chapter.

The life of faith and Abraham's exemplary obedience where no cost is too high for those living in light of God's promises. Because they have faith that God will do as he's promised.

So that is the life of faith saying in this chapter I think just such a vivid, such a moving picture of that. And let's continue then as we see secondly here the object of faith.

- [13 : 43] And specifically we see that in God's sacrificial substitute. Really this is the very heart of the passage as we mentioned earlier. This is where we see God's goodness.

This is where we see that God is not a monster. This is what transforms this story from being one that would have been unbelievably dark without God's intervention to instead being one that points us to joy and hope that he offers.

And we get a hint of this even before God intervenes. Isaac asks about the sacrifice, that really moving question, where is the lamb? verse 8, Abraham said, God will provide for himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.

Again, Abraham's faith in what must have seemed like incredible confusion and uncertainty. But we see exactly that his faith is well placed and that God does provide.

Verse 12, God intervenes, God stops the sacrifice of Isaac. verse 13, Abraham looks up and sees this ram caught in the bushes and there's no doubt that we are supposed to recognize this isn't just, oh that's lucky, there's a ram over there.

- [14 : 59] This is God's provision and that is confirmed, verse 14, after the sacrifice of the ram. So Abraham called the name of the place the Lord will provide.

God himself provides the sacrifice, the substitute that Isaac might go free. The ram dies instead of the son.

God himself provides so that what he has promised will come through Isaac, will come to pass. And we see again that Abraham's faith in God, this kind of extreme faith lived out in action is fully vindicated because God does as he has promised he will do.

And the reason really here that this story in Genesis is so rich and is so significant is that in this heart of it it's pointing us to the very heart of the gospel where God provides the substitute, where God provides the sacrifice who will die in the place of his people that they might go free just as Isaac does here.

This is pointing us to Jesus, the true sacrifice which God provides. Just like Isaac, Jesus goes up the hill with the wood on his back in obedience to his father and yet when we turn into the pages of the New Testament when we see the life of Jesus when we see the crucifixion we see that crucial difference there that at the last moment Jesus is not spared.

- [16 : 33] There is no last minute intervention here. Rather he goes to the cross and he goes to his death. he goes as this offering. Why is that needed?

Well it's because we are all people who have fallen short as we saw in that catechism answer just earlier when we look at the law it shows us that the holy nature of God the sinful nature of our hearts and thus our need for a saviour.

And when we see Jesus going to the cross not being spared we see that Jesus is that saviour suffering the penalty for our sin. He does that not because we deserve it but out of his great love for us.

And so in this passage really as well as being an example to us in his obedience when we see how this is all pointing to Jesus Abraham is also a picture for us of God the father who did not withhold his son his only son but gave him up as a sacrifice that role that Jesus willingly took.

And I think that's how to come back to that question we raised earlier you know is God cruel for testing Abraham this way? How could God ask this? Well the answer to that question has to be that God himself would go through with this.

[17 : 58] God himself would complete this test here that he gives to Abraham. This is not a heartless challenge this is actually a picture of what God will do for his people to rescue them.

And so when we feel as we try to feel Abraham's anguish and his pain we are getting a glimpse into God's heart as he sends Jesus his son.

We're getting a glimpse of what it means to say those familiar words for God so loved the world that he gave his only son. We are seeing something of God's love for broken people people far from him people who've turned their backs on him people who the Bible describes as enemies of God and yet God is willing to go through all of this in order that he might win them back for himself.

If Abraham's actions test and prove his faith God's actions in the gospel test and prove his love for his people the apostle Paul in his letter to the church in Rome deliberately I think echoes Genesis 22 verse 12 where it says he speaking about God here 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 again this theme of assurance we've kept on coming back through in these chapters of Genesis if God loved us so much that he went even beyond what Abraham had to do in this chapter that he would give his own son with that definite proof of God's love and what he has already done Paul's logic and unavoidable logic is that we can be certain that he will not now leave us but will continue to give us all that we need and this is where we loop back to what we were saying earlier about the life of faith how can we display the kind of radical obedience that we see in

Abraham how can that principle of holding nothing back be our attitude in both Jesus as the object of our faith it's knowing that the God who gave everything to rescue us who did not spare his own son will continue to care for and sustain us through that same love he has for us we said earlier God is not in the business of guilting us into doing more for him or putting a guilt trip on us this morning rather he is in the business of assuring us that he will give us everything that we need that he will provide that he has done that through Jesus and so we can commit everything to him knowing that he will continue in his love to sustain us the life of faith is built upon the object of faith which is

[21 : 06] Jesus Christ the sacrifice God provides and finally in these verses we see as the blessing of faith we see this in verses 15 down to the end of the passage in God's certain promises let me read those verses and hopefully as I do that if you've been around as we've been working through Abraham's life what you'll hear will sound familiar to you these are the same promises that God has given and restated a number of times but also notice in this passage that we hear a kind of intensification of them they're here in their fullest form and not least in terms of certainty because God will say something in verse 16 which is the most certain confirmation he can give by himself I have sworn that is the first time God has used that phrase has sworn by himself in the Bible so far it's the only time in the book of Genesis let's read these words and hear that certainty of

God and his promises from verse 15 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 obeyed my voice and this incredible confirmation of the promises that we've heard this incredible commitment from God that he will do as he has said he will do for Abraham and we've spoken before about how these promises flow into the life of Abraham's descendants the people of Israel in the Old Testament ultimately they flow through to Jesus Christ where they find their fulfillment and through

Jesus they flow on into the church today and so we hear here that this confirmation of the promise that God will multiply his church we hear here that the opposition the church faces will not have the last say that even the gates of hell will not stand against it as Jesus says that through the church and the message of the gospel that it shares that the nations will be blessed God will do this as he has to here why does God reconfirm this promise what is his grounds for doing it the very last part of verse 18 which we read there it says because you obeyed my voice and we're back to these twin concepts of faith and obedience here is something that might sound like a shock to us if we've been in and while. Here's something that might sound like a bit of a shock to us if the message of the gospel and grace is something that we're familiar to us. Because have a look at verse 18.

What is the grounds of this assurance? This verse says it's actually obedience. It is obedience which is the grounds of this blessing. Because you obeyed my voice, that radical sacrificial obedience we see here in the life of Abraham. And yet where we perhaps worry, because as we've said, we read this passage and we recognize that our obedience falls short, where our faith is weak, the gospel tells us that it is Christ's perfect obedience in our place in which this is fulfilled and through which this blessing is assured.

And so this morning we want to be challenged in our faith. I really mean that for myself as much if not more than anyone else here, that we would grow more and more into these radical lives lived for God and according to his word that we see here modeled by Abraham.

[25 : 29] But the danger is we kind of gee ourselves up so much and we go away saying, yeah, we'll be saved if we have this kind of extreme faith here of Genesis chapter 22. And then we get to the middle of the week or we get to lunchtime this afternoon and we recognize, hang on, we've fallen short again.

And we start to despair. Our faith and so our obedience is so often weak. But that perfect obedience that brings the assurance of fulfillment has been fulfilled for us through Jesus. And so we can have this certain blessing of faith that God will do as he has said, as he lays out here in these verses. It's not the strength of our faith, but it is the object of our faith that saves us. And as we said, the object of that faith is the sacrifice God provides in our place. The object of our faith is Jesus Christ. I've heard it described in this way before. You know, if you're falling out of a tree and you grab onto a branch, ultimately what is important is not how strong your faith in that branch is. What really matters is how strong the branch itself is.

And so we're called to put our trust in Jesus. But what's fundamentally important is that Jesus is perfectly able to save, perfectly able to ensure that all of God's promises come to pass because he and he alone fulfilled that perfect obedience that we need and went to the cross as that sacrifice in our place. And so as we come to the end of our time in the life of Abraham for a while, we finish here.

We get these two great kind of bookends. God's promises given to Abraham in chapter 12. God's promises confirmed to Abraham here in chapter 22. And we see in every way that they are fulfilled through Jesus. We mentioned that quote earlier. This chapter shows both the tremendous demands and incredible blessings of the Christian life. Now we've spoken about both faith and obedience.

We've thought about living in light of God's promises, that we're to live that out in really concrete ways and yet still to have that complete assurance that God will do as he's promised because it all depends on him. We keep that both and because Jesus has fulfilled God's requirements. Jesus has fulfilled God's promises. Jesus has come as the substitutionary sacrifice God provides and we have complete security in him and it is from that security that we're able to walk this life of faith, that we are able to be bold, that we are able to live distinctively in the big aspects and the day-to-day aspects of life as God's people, knowing that we are his through grace, knowing that he will bring us home.

[28 : 25] And so knowing that we now live for his glory, depending fully on him and knowing he will not let us down. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are the God who has made great promises and that you have kept those promises in Jesus Christ. Lord, we ask that you would help us to be growing in our faith in you.

Lord, as we consider the depth of your love for us, that you did not spare your only son, but gave him up for us. Might that strengthen us to live lives of bold faith, confident that in that same love, you will certainly and graciously give us all that we need. Lord, not that you promise us an easy life, but we ask that you would help shape our expectations of following you around your word, that we'd be willing to make costly commitments to live for you in the present, remembering the perfect inheritance and the incredible promised blessings that will come for all those who trust in you.

Lord, we thank you for how we see in these early chapters of your Bible, how the whole of your word fits together, how your covenant promises run right through scripture, how they find their fulfillment in Christ and how they are the grounds of our hope today. And we thank you that we can have perfect confidence in those promises because you are a faithful God. And in the gospel, you have brought us into a relationship with you that you have promised. Lord, please help us to hope in you. Please help us to help one another.

And please help us to live as your people by faith. We pray all of these things in Jesus' name. Amen.