

The Absence of Fear

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[0 : 0 0] Recently, our kids got smartwatches, and it's really convenient for us to be able to call them and text them, know where they are now that they're a little older. One of the coolest features is that now I can pull out one of my devices, and I can look, and I can see exactly where they are at any given time. Little blue dot. And there's a lot of reassurance in that little blue dot. I can pull it out, and I can look at that dot, and I can say, there he is. And I know where in the world my child is, and that brings me great comfort, until the voice in my head says, or maybe somebody stole the watch. Maybe he's, you know, been kidnapped or in a gutter somewhere, and this isn't him, and then the reassurance evaporates. We live in a time where there's a kind of paradox between safety and anxiety. I mean, on the one hand, we are by far the safest people probably who have ever lived on the planet Earth. Due to all of our advancements in science and technology, medical advancements, the fact that we have done things like remove all lead and asbestos from our homes, the fact that we can...we know so much more about what to eat and ways to keep ourselves alive longer, that we can put

GPS trackers on our children. We are the safest people in history. On the other hand, at the same time, we are by far the most anxious, fearful people ever to have lived. And it is a paradox.

And there's been this promise that many people have held on to since really the Enlightenment, that if we can master our world, if we can gain greater control and greater knowledge through things like science and technology, that the extent to which we do that, the extent to which we will see a drop in anxiety and fear, right, that that control that we will have will lead to a reduction in fear. And people like Bertrand Russell actually said, you know, the reason we have fear is religion.

And if we can abandon all of that superstition and embrace science and technology and reason, fear will go away. Well, turns out we were wildly off base, wildly off base.

It's actually impossible to live life without fear of any kind. And I think that we've come to see that as a society. Fear is unavoidable. The only choice we do get is what to fear. According to Scripture, the choice is really this, fear God or fear everything else. That's the choice.

[2 : 4 1] And in the Scripture, fearing the Lord means trusting Him. It means trusting Him above everything else, ultimately trusting God. And what it says is if you trust the Lord, that actually sets you free from all other fears and anxieties that might plague you. If not, then you will always be afraid.

And we're going to learn more about this by looking at Genesis chapter 22, which is this incredible, mysterious, in some ways beautiful, and in some ways disturbing story about Abraham and Isaac. But it's really about a man named Abraham and how he learns to trust to fear the Lord. Why do we lack trust?

How do we build trust? What makes God worthy of this kind of trust? Let's pray. Lord, we thank You for Your Word, and we thank You that we can come to a passage like this that has mystified people, has challenged people for centuries, and we can come with the trust and the hope that You, in the power of Your Spirit, can use this to speak to us. We need to hear the voice of our Father this morning in the power of the Spirit through the living Word, Jesus Christ. And that is what we pray for, that as we open these written words, we would encounter the living Word. And we ask this in His name. Amen. So, as we look at this story, the first question we want to hold in our minds is, why do we lack trust? The passage opens in verse 1, after these things God tested Abraham. So, that's a clue for us as the reader. We need to understand what happened up until now in the story to make sense of why God would do this now. The reason God tests Abraham has something to do with things that happened earlier. When we first meet Abraham, God calls him to leave his family and his father's house, meaning his inheritance, leave financial security, leave the place where you're known and loved and supported, leave all of that behind, and go to a foreign land, the land of Canaan. And then God makes a series of incredible promises. I'm going to give you land. I'm going to give you a name. I'm going to make of you a generation that will lead to another generation that will lead to innumerable descendants.

I will build a great nation out of your descendants. At this time, Abraham, they don't have kids. Sarah, his wife, is barren. God says, I'm going to give you children, and they're going to become a nation. I'm going to bless you. I'm going to bless the world through you, and I'm going to protect you.

So he gives him all of these blessings and all of these promises, and Abraham goes, but almost immediately, he runs into trouble. He goes to Canaan, but a famine comes. Even though God promised to bless and provide for Abraham and his family, Abraham decides to go find food in Egypt. So they go down to Egypt. Then Abraham worries that the Egyptians will kill him once they see his wife.

[5 : 56] If they think they're married and she's very beautiful, they'll kill him because he's in the way of them having her. And so even though God promised protection, Abraham decides to lie and pretend she's only his sister to allow her to be taken into Pharaoh's house. We don't know enough about the culture to know exactly why this would help, frankly, but we know that he did it to try to save his skin and to try to preserve their lives so they would survive their time in Egypt. And then, of course, Abraham's wife is barren. And even though God promised to give them a child, Abraham decides to sleep with Sarah's servant, Hagar, to produce an heir through her. God had made the promise, but just in case God doesn't come through, this is a bit of life insurance. And it's not that Abraham has no faith. In fact, he's held up as a paragon of faith. It says in chapter 15 that Abraham believed God and God counted his faith to him as righteousness. So Abraham has faith in God.

What he lacks is trust in God. See, again and again, Abraham takes matters into his own hands. He tries to take control. He takes measures to ensure that whether or not God comes through, things are going to work out the way they should. He ends up lying to people. He ends up causing conflict in his own family. Because at every turn, Abraham is hedging his bets. He's hedging his bets.

God has made this promise, but in case God doesn't come through, I've got a backup plan. And what we see here is that there is actually a difference between faith and trust. There's a difference. Faith means believing that God is who he says he is, that God will do what he says he will do. Trust means acting on that belief, actually living as though that is fundamentally true.

You can have faith that an airplane can fly. The laws of physics will kick in, and it will get off the ground. Trust means actually getting on the plane and taking off. It's not trust until you've left the ground. When you're still on the tarmac, it's faith waiting to be acted upon.

The reason this is important for us is because if you're like me, and I think a lot of us, if we're really honest, many of us here have faith in God, right? Some of us are Christians, some of us are not. Those of us who are here who are Christians, we have enough faith in God that we've given our lives to him. We've accepted forgiveness through Jesus. We've been baptized.

[8 : 47] We have faith in God, but some of us have never learned to trust God. We have faith but not trust. So let me put it to you this way. How can we tell whether or not those of us who have faith in God also trust God? And I would say this. Look at your life and look at the places where you struggle most to obey God. I don't know what that is for you. I have some idea of what it is for me, but in your own life, whether it's how you spend your money or your time, how you treat your body or the things that you do with your body or your priorities, or how you conduct yourself in relationships, how you deal with conflict and anger. Behind every disobedience, you will find, if you look hard enough, you will find a failure to trust the promises of God. Behind every disobedience, you will find there is somewhere in there a place where you are failing to trust and act on the promises of God, and you have taken matters into your own hands. You've said to God, I like my plan better than yours. It does a better job of making me feel safe in meeting my needs. So, one example might be work. I say that because a lot of us work in various ways, and work is a gift from the Lord. It is good to work hard and to be ambitious. There is such a thing as godly ambition. But ultimately, God calls us to trust Him to provide our daily bread. He wants us to come to Him as a Father and to pray and to trust that He will give us only what we need for the day. So, when we look at our own lives, why are some of us in our jobs willing to do unethical things or go along with unethical things in order to get ahead?

Why are we willing to tolerate that? Why do we say, well, this is just the way my industry is? There's a certain amount of unethical stuff that you just have to...it just comes with the territory. Why do some of us habitually put work before family and friends? Why do some of us stop coming to church because we work too much on the weekends and we'll just find a sermon online or listen to worship music on our AirPods? And the reason behind this is because we're trusting in success and financial security more than God's promise of provision. We're ultimately saying, this is my plan to make sure that I am okay, and this comes first. And you can really do this with any area of your life where you struggle to obey and prioritize and follow God's will. And the problem with this, aside from the fact that it means we're not following Jesus fully with our lives, the problem is anything that we trust other than God is transient. That's the biggest thing. Money, health, safety, comfort, intellectual ability, achievements, and accolades, any one of these things can be taken away in an instant.

And I have a...I have a...I have a...I kind of a hunch, a suspicion that we all know that deep down, that we know deep down that there is a kind of fragility to our lives, and that any of these pillars that are holding us up at any moment could be swept out and our life could come crashing down.

We know that the things that we trust in are ultimately transient and unreliable. And I believe that's a huge reason why there is so much anxiety in the world. We have the internet, which gives us access to...we can know about tragedies and horrible things all around the world all the time, every minute of the day and night. We can doom scroll and just...and I don't think that we are designed to know that much tragedy all at once. I think there's a major, major overexposure. But I think that along with that, there is a sense that at any time, tragedy could strike. And the things that I'm relying on to keep me safe and make me feel provided for, those could be taken away from me.

The only thing that is not transient is God. Everything else is. Everything else is grass that withers and fades. So, the question is, how do we build more trust in God? This is the second question as we look at this text. And this is really, I believe, the purpose behind God's test of Abraham. We see that at the end of the story. God's purpose here is to refine and strengthen Abraham's trust in God alone. We have after many chapters since the promise was first given to Abraham, Isaac, the child of promise, is born in chapter 21. And it seems as though everything is finally going to work out. And then in the very next chapter, Genesis chapter 22 verse 1, it says, after these things, the child of promise is born, God's plan is being enacted.

[14 : 06] 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. There's an emphasis...in case we miss...there's an emphasis on that. 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. Now, this time, Abraham and Sarah are living in tents in the land of Canaan. And in that culture, child sacrifice was normal. So, we read this and we're shocked by it.

But in this culture, this kind of thing would not have been shocking. It was normal for his neighbors to understand that dealing with the gods meant you had to sacrifice to show your devotion to them.

That's essentially what religion was in this ancient world. Make sacrifices and appease the gods, and hopefully you will have children and copious crops. But Abraham is undoubtedly shocked and heartbroken because he thought his God was different. Up until now, God had blessed Abraham because of his faith, not his sacrifices. And God had made this amazing promise to give them a son and through that son to raise up a nation of people. And now God is commanding him to sacrifice that son. So, the big question in this passage is this, how will God fulfill His promises through Isaac if Isaac is dead?

How can God give a command that would nullify the promise? It seems as though they're working against each other. God promised to do this through Isaac, and now God's saying, kill Isaac. How does that happen? This is the big question. So, what is God doing? This is...and Abraham has no idea how to make sense of this. Why is God doing this? What is God up to? Last year, I read a story that I just...I love this story. It's a true story. It was an interview with a 15-year-old boy named Jacob Smith. And Jacob Smith is legally blind. They've done these recreations of what he can see, and it's just a little circle in the very middle, a kind of blurry circle where he can see light and make out some things, but the rest is dark. And so, he's legally blind. It's like...I think his vision is like 2,800 or something like that.

He...and of all things, he's a free-ride skier. Now, I don't know if you know about free-ride skiing. Most of us, like we went skiing a few weeks ago, and we go on the groomed runs, and it's nice.

[16 : 43] Free riders, they go in the wild, ungroomed part of the mountain that you kind of hike up, and then you're going down through...you know, there's like chutes and, you know, craggy, jagged rocks and steep cliffs and drop-offs. And Jacob Smith regularly competes as the only blind skier in these free-ride competitions. Everybody else is sighted. And so, there's this big question, how does he do it? How in the world does he survive? He listens to the voice of his father. There's a two-way radio, and his dad stands at the bottom of the mountain, and he guides him one turn at a time. And at one point, the interviewer asks Jacob, how much do you trust your father? And Jacob says, well, I mean, I trust him enough to turn right when he tells me to, right?

What you got to understand is when Jacob looks right, he only sees darkness, right? He looks right, and he only sees darkness. His father says, turn right. For him, that means turning into the darkness.

So, what he has to decide is, do I trust the voice of my father enough to turn into the darkness, even though I have no idea if that might take me right off a cliff?

Right? And so, over time...I can't imagine the first time Smith went up the mountain and the first run. That must have been terrifying. Over time, with every turn, every time he's trusted the voice of his father, with every turn, he built trust. And now, he will only ski listening to his father. He doesn't trust anybody else. That's the difference between faith and trust. You know, Jacob has faith in his father. He believes his father can guide him safely down the mountain, but it can only become trust if Jacob goes to the mountain. He has to go up on the mountain, and on that mountain, when his father tells him to turn into the darkness, and he does it, that is when his faith is converted into trust. And so, God is sending Abraham to the mountain because this is the only way that Abraham is ever going to learn to trust the voice of his father. He's telling Abraham, I want you to turn into the darkness, and I want you to trust. I want you to trust in my voice. And you can imagine Abraham looking into the eyes of his son. He has to decide whether or not he trusts his father enough to turn, even if it might take him off a cliff, into hopeless despair. You know, Proverbs 3.5 says, trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. And that is literally what Abraham is being asked to do. By everything that you see, Abraham, everything that you understand, this is leading you straight into catastrophe. Lean not on your own understanding. Trust the Lord with all your heart. You know, I have a friend whose father has been a source of a lot of pain in his life.

Now his father has dementia, and he needs my friend to care for him. And I was talking, we were just talking and praying about this a couple of weeks ago, and he said, you know, I don't know why God is doing this. He says this, he says, you know, God, I don't know why God would do this. I'm being called to care and to love and to, you know, to tenderly care for the person who's probably hurt me more than anybody else in my entire life. And of course, my friend doesn't have to do this, but he feels that God is calling him to do it. And I would say this is a point in his life where God is calling him to turn into the darkness. This does not make sense. This doesn't, this is not right. It is not fair. Are you going to trust the voice of your father? And that's what it means to be on the mountain. I think right now in his life, my friend is on the mountain.

[20 : 59] And for some of us, obeying God means putting ourselves at financial risk to help somebody out, because we feel that that is what God is calling us to do. For some of us, obeying God means embracing unwanted singleness as something that God has called us to either for a season or for our lives.

For some of us, it means giving up a secure job because God is calling us to go somewhere that doesn't feel secure. It feels very dangerous. Or it means being open about your faith in a hostile environment. All right, but in these situations, we find ourselves on the mountain.

That's where God has sent us. For those of us who really struggle to trust God, that is sometimes what God does precisely to do in our lives what He's doing in Abraham's life. And for those of us who struggle to trust God, we need to ask, do I struggle to trust God because I actually live my life in a way that makes trust unnecessary. Right? Maybe every time God calls me to the mountain, I got better things to do. And I've lived a life that makes trust in God unnecessary. I've hedged my bets so well that I've got contingencies for everything. Right? When God sends us to the mountain, we tend to choose safety over obedience. And what that means is we don't realize that the absolute safest place you can be anywhere is in line with God's will. That that turn into the darkness is the safest decision you can make. If Jacob didn't do that, he might go off a cliff. Maybe there have been times for others of us who struggle to trust with God. Maybe there have been times when you did trust God, but things didn't go the way you hoped. You said, well, I did that turn, and it was really, really, really painful.

And this raises a very important point. God never promises that our lives are going to be free from suffering. He never promises that He's going to do what we ask Him to do or what we want Him to do.

What He does promise, and you can read this in Romans chapter 8, is that no matter what happens, nothing can ever separate us from His love. And that no matter what happens, all things work together for good for those who are called according to His purpose. It doesn't promise that we will ever understand God's motives. But the clearest promise in Scripture is that even if we never understand God's motives, we can always trust God's character. We can always trust His character.

[23 : 39] Which brings us to the last question. What makes God worthy of trust? So why do we struggle to trust? How can we build trust? Okay, but why would we? Why would we want to?

Why build trust in God above all else? Abraham arrives at Moriah. Just imagine the scene. He sets the wood on Isaac's back. He begins leading Isaac up the mountain. And you can imagine three days of just uncomfortable, brutal silence. And then Isaac finally asks the question that's been hanging in the air for three days. He says, my father, I see the fire and I see the wood, but where's the lamb for the offering?

And you can imagine Abraham looking into the face of his son, all the confusion raging through him. Abraham can only say, God will provide for himself the lamb for a bird offering my son, which is a way of saying, I have no idea what's going to happen. I'm doing what God told me to do, and I don't know what's going to happen, and none of it makes sense, and I'm terrified, and I'm on the edge of this cliff, and everything is dark, and I have no idea what the next 10 minutes hold, but I'm pretty sure it's going to wreck my life, and it's going to end yours. He says, God will provide a way. He must.

When you're turning into the darkness, that's all you can say sometimes. I have no idea what's going to happen. God has to be able to provide a way. They reach the top of the mountain. Abraham builds the altar. He stacks the wood. He binds his son. He lays him on the altar. He takes the knife in hand, and as he's raising it, at the last possible moment, God intervenes. He says, Abraham, Abraham, do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God.

Abraham sees a ram caught in some thorns, and he goes over, and he takes that ram, and he sacrifices that ram in the place of Isaac, and we see in this moment Abraham has finally learned to trust God. God says, don't do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God. He's learned to trust God with his whole heart. He's learned not to lean on his own understanding. He's learned to trust that no matter what God calls us to do, no matter how impossible or hopeless it might seem, he's learned that God will always provide a way for us. He doesn't promise that it will be easy, but he promises that he will always provide a way for us, and so in verse 14, Abraham calls the name of this place, the Lord will provide, as it is said to this day, on the mount of the Lord it shall be provided. When God takes you to the mountain, he provides a way through. He brings you down to the bottom intact.

[26 : 38] The question that we need to ask, though, last question, why? Why would this matter so much?

Why put Abraham and Isaac through such an ordeal just to teach them this lesson? Why make a promise to Abraham and then tell Abraham to stand in the way of that promise?

It just sounds like a mind job to be given a promise, stake your life on this promise, and then he commands Abraham to stand in the way of that promise being fulfilled. Why would he do that?

The answer is that God doesn't just make promises to Abraham and his children. The very last promise God makes in this passage when he restates the promise is a promise that he makes to all human beings everywhere. God promises to bless all the families of the earth, all the nations of the earth, but we stand in the way of that promise.

We are the ones that stand in the way of that promise being fulfilled. Let me put it another way. How do you bless all the people of the earth if all the people of the earth hate you and reject you and pretend as though you don't exist?

[28 : 10] Right? Blaise Pascal wrote that all people ultimately hate the idea of God. He says, we despise it, but we also fear it may be true. Irreligious people, right? Atheists ignore and reject God.

But he also says, religiously devoted people also hate God. Right? Virtually every religion that exists is based ultimately on what we are willing to sacrifice for this or that God. Now, thankfully, it's not always children, but ultimately all kinds of other things. So, religion, ancient and modern, is essentially a quid pro quo arrangement. It's not driven by love. It's not driven by affection. It's driven by fear and guilt and entitlement. I do this so that God won't punish me, or I do this so that I will be rewarded.

And when I do do the thing that I'm supposed to do, when I sacrifice the thing I'm supposed to sacrifice, then I'm entitled to get what I'm owed from my God. There is no love that enters into the equation. It's fear and guilt and entitlement. And under all of this, there is, as Pascal would say, a bitterness toward God, a bitterness toward this kind of arrangement. And so, for in most religions, the goal of being good is to not have to deal with God, right? It's to get the things that we want and get on with our lives, and to have enough fire insurance to know that we don't have to fear punishment from our God. But there is no love. So, the greatest obstacle facing God's promises is us.

How do you bless and save people who hate you, either by disobeying you or through their obedience toward you? When God restates the promise to Abraham, it's slightly different. Not only does He restate His promise to the whole world, but here He mentions one of Abraham's offspring, one individual singular through whom all of God's promises will be fulfilled.

thousands of years after these events, one of Isaac's descendants, a man named Jesus, would make the same journey as Isaac. Jesus would go to Calvary.

[30 : 39] Right now, of course, before it was called Calvary, before the temple existed, this mountainous region around Jerusalem was known by another name, Moriah. It's the same place. And there, the Father would take the wood, and the Father would lay that wood on Jesus' back, wood in the shape of a cross. And there, the Father would lead His Son, His only Son, whom He loved, up the mountain. And there, the Father would raise the cross, and He would put Jesus on it.

And there, He would raise the knife of His wrath. But this time, there would be no intervention. The knife would fall. The Lamb of God would be slain. And then we would see Jesus do what Isaac never could have done. Through His death, He would atone for all of the rebellion and hatred and sin of the world. And then He would rise to life again to become a blessing to every man, woman, and child on the earth. So, I ask you again, how can God possibly fulfill His promise to bless and save a world that hates Him? He doesn't demand a sacrifice. He provides the sacrifice. He becomes the sacrifice.

And He uses His own death as the means of blessing and salvation. He subverts human ignorance and hatred with sacrificial love. On the mount of the Lord, it shall be provided. The cross is the ultimate picture of that being true. So, to pull all of this together, how do we know that we can and should trust God above everything else? Well, whatever circumstances you are facing, however dark or hopeless or overwhelming tomorrow seems, a God who would be willing to do this for you is a God you can trust.

Through Jesus, He has already overcome the two things that we should fear most, sin and death, the things that separate us from God. And He has secured our future. We know how the story ends.

So, when God calls you to turn right, trust Him, because truly in Him, we have nothing to fear. Let's pray. Lord, we thank You for this.

[33 : 45] Lord, may the weight and the gravity of this not be lost on us, because I know that there are many here, many of us, who are staring into the darkness.

Lord, may the Lord be lost on us, but we thank you for this. And I pray that, Lord, Your Holy Spirit would do in us, through Your Word, what human reason and words cannot accomplish. That as we come around Your table, as we pray and sing, as we confess our faith, that You and Your Holy Spirit would minister to us, minister to those greatest places of fear and anxiety and dread.

Lord, minister to us, heal us, with the strength of Your promises, Lord, with the assurance of the cross.

Help us to trust Your character, that it would glorify You. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.