

What is faith in God

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[0:00] Now, we're going to turn to the book of Genesis, one last time in the life of Abraham, Genesis! chapter 22, which is on page 22. So, we're going to read the first 19 verses, and then we're going to flick over, and I'm just going to read three verses from Hebrews chapter 11, and then we'll come back to Genesis 22 and think about it together. So, let's hear God's Word together.

Sometime later, God tested Abraham. He said to him, Abraham, here I am, he replied. Then God said, take your son, your only son whom you love, Isaac, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain that I will show you. Early the next morning, Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. On the third day, Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. He said to his servants, stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship, and then we will come back to you. Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, father, yes, my son, Abraham replied. The fire and wood are here, Isaac said, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering? Abraham answered, God himself will provide the burnt offering, my son.

And the two of them went on together. When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, Abraham, Abraham. Here I am, he replied. Do not lay a hand on the boy, he said. Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son. Abraham looked up, and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns.

He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place, the Lord will provide. And to this day it is said, on the mountain of the Lord, it will be provided. The angel of the Lord called to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.

[2:57] Then Abraham returned to his servants, and they set off together for Beersheba, and Abraham stayed in Beersheba. And then we can turn over to Hebrews 11. It's on page 1210. I'll read these three verses here from verse 17, as the author of the Hebrews reflects on this story. By faith, Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking, he did receive Isaac back from the dead. Amen. So we're going to be in Genesis 22, and I wonder what you make of this story. Thomas Jefferson was one of the early presidents of the United States when he was reading his Bible.

When he came to a part of the Bible that he didn't really like the sound of, he would take a pair of scissors, scissors, and he would remove the passage that didn't fit. You and I, we might not do it literally, but in our thinking, we might want to take scissors to this story. Philosophers and thinkers have struggled with it over the years. Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish Christian philosopher, wrote a really interesting book called Fear and Trembling, and he really wrestles with what's going on here.

Maybe a more popular philosopher, poet, Bob Dylan, Highway 61 revisited. He begins the song by talking about this story. If you remember, oh, God said to Abraham, kill me a son.

Abe says, man, you must be putting me on. God says, no. Abe says, what? And that what might be where you and I are right now. Here is God speaking, and it sounds like he's calling for child sacrifice, and this is in God's holy book. If you've been here for the last few weeks, we've been saying in so many ways God is personal, and God is good, and God keeps his promises, and God loves people, and God establishes relationship with people. What do we make of this story?

Let me plead with you at the beginning to stick with me, to think through this with me, because genuinely, my hope and my prayer is that this could become one of your favorite chapters in the whole Bible, that this story has the capacity to change your whole life. To understand that, we need to maybe ask another big question, the big question of what is the Bible, and what story is the Bible telling?

[6:01] Maybe for many people, it's really easy to approach the Bible and think, well, it's a moral handbook. Maybe you've heard it spoken of as the maker's instruction manual. Well, if we take that approach to this chapter, we won't get the story at all. What's the moral of this tale? Should we go and do likewise? No, is the obvious answer. But if we read a chapter like this without knowing the bigger story, who the Bible is about, what story it's telling, we will come to certain sections and become really, really confused. It is vital with any story to understand what genre, what kind of story is this?

And that informs how we should read it. And we need to know the whole story if we are to make sense of it. I really like Whodunit, Agatha Christie, I really enjoy. The ABC Murders, I borrowed it from the library, and got as far as the last chapter before I had to return it. I got it on audiobook thinking, I know what I'll do, I'll catch up. I got as far as the second last chapter, and I ran out of listening time.

A whodunit where you don't know whodunit is pointless. You're left with no clue. There is no resolution to the tension. You need the end. You need to know the point that the whole story is driving towards. We need to be able to hear the story in the right way. Maybe you have heard the story of what happened when HG Wells' novel, The War of the Worlds, was first made into a radio serial.

And the opening of that BBC radio production had a news report, breaking news, aliens have invaded the world. And people thought it was really happening. There were people panicking because they genuinely thought we are being told that aliens have landed. If you hear the story in the wrong way, you draw the wrong conclusion. And the same is absolutely true when we come to a chapter like Genesis 22.

What we need to do is first of all to let ourselves be guided by the first people who heard the story. So the first people that heard the story, it was the Israelites in the wilderness. They'd just been set free. God has acted to deliver them. And do you know what? They celebrated this story. And that should tell us something. They understood this isn't a story about child sacrifice. This is actually a story that's telling us about God's love and mercy. They would be able to hear the story and say, I owe my entire existence to God keeping His promises through this promised child.

[9:04] With Genesis chapter 22, we are given a window into God's redeeming love. But only if we allow ourselves to see and to understand the whole story and to get to the end point of the story as it points us towards God's provision, God's grace, God keeping His promises, and that for us will take us all the way to the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

Because when we think about what is the Bible and how we should read it, the whole book in its entirety, in a sense is God's biography. God is wanting to tell us something about Himself, and especially to tell us about His story of redemption. And so to think about the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is inspiring people, inspired people, so that they would give testimony to the truth of Jesus, the Son of God, and His work of salvation. And you know, that's how Jesus read the Bible. Jesus would say to people in His day, all the scriptures, all the Old Testament, they testify about me. The first Easter Sunday, when He met some disciples that were confused and sad on the road, He said, how come you don't understand that I had to die and then rise again? And then He led them on an Old Testament Bible study, in which Jesus was the hero, the climax, the point of God's whole story. And so we come to Genesis 22, or any section of the Bible, we need to read it in the right way. Understanding this is telling us of

God's work, and it's pointing us towards Jesus, the Savior. So I want us to be able to come away from this chapter, able to praise God. Yes, there's a really difficult test, but there's also a wonderful God behind it. There is a God of saving grace and mercy. And the way that we'll get there is if we're able to put away the scissors, and instead if we pull out our magnifying glasses, if we take a look at this text, and if we read it in light of where the story is heading, if we read it in light of Jesus.

So we're going to walk through the story and then think about some of the lessons that it teaches us. So we begin in the first couple of verses with the test of faith. So if you've been here for the last month, we've been following Abraham's story now for 25 years, over 25 years actually. And we've seen these two themes intertwine at every point. Abraham is a man who lives by faith, and God is a God who is faithful to his promises, that he enters into relationship and he's made a wonderful promise to Abraham. And that involved a son. When we pick up the story in Genesis 22, Abraham is now 100 years old.

After 25 years of waiting, Abraham finally has his promised child. This one who would bring blessing to the nations. This one who would be the hope for the world. And then we come to verse one, sometime later, God tested Abraham. Take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the region of Moriah and sacrifice him there. Do we feel the shock of what's going on? This chapter becomes the climax of Abraham's life of faith. Will he be obedient to God in this hardest of tests?

[12:57] We recognize that this is a really intense test of faith here, how it zooms in. Your only son, that son whom you love, it's Isaac. And it's an extreme test.

Abraham's not the one who's going to suffer, it's going to be Isaac. And it's sacrifice and it's death. And remember, Isaac is not just any old son. When Isaac was born and Abraham held Isaac in his arms, he was holding the hope of salvation in his arms. Without Isaac, the promised child, there would be no Israel. And if there's no Israel, there will be no Jesus. And if there's no Jesus, there's no salvation. And if there's no salvation, there is no hope. God knows this.

Abraham knows some of this. But we get to learn that God has a plan. And God's plan for saving the world will involve the sacrifice of a beloved son. And the place of death will be a mountaintop. This region of Moriah that's mentioned, by the time of 2 Chronicles 3, we discover this is going to be the site for Solomon's temple. This is going to be where Israel has to come to offer sacrifices to deal with their sin. And then we fast forward further centuries, it's in those same mountains that we find Mount Calvary. When another beloved son will go to the place of sacrificial death.

Abraham's faith is tested. Faith will be tested by God in order to show his faithfulness when we come to an end of ourselves. The next mention of faith being tested is in the book of Exodus, when the people are in the wilderness and they're hungry and they begin grumbling. And the question there is, will they trust the God who rescued them to provide for them? Or will they look back to slavery in Egypt and all the food they could eat? When our faith is tested, and it will be tested as Christians, can we look beyond our circumstances? Can we raise our eyes? Can we appreciate God's faithfulness to us in giving us Jesus in his perfect life, in his death, and in his resurrection?

[15:42] Well, as the story continues in verses 3 to 10, we see the journey of faith. History records many difficult and dangerous journeys. I remember a few years ago now reading a book called *The Long Walk*, which recounted some prisoners escaping from a Siberian concentration camp and walking 4,000 miles to find freedom.

I remember reading Shackleton's account of the endurance voyage. You're trying to reach Antarctica. Incredibly demanding, difficult, dangerous journeys.

I'd be inclined to put Abraham's journey on the list of most difficult ones in history because of the intensity of this text. But this walk represents Abraham's long walk of faith.

What can we say about Abraham's faith? First of all, verse 3, we see that faith obeys right away. Early the next morning, Abraham got up and loaded his donkey, took his servants and his son Isaac. He makes the preparation. This is something we've seen before. Back in Genesis 12, well, God has said it.

God has called me, and I trust God. I will obey. End of story. It's the wonderful pattern of Abraham's life when we see these high points of faith. But then recognize as well as faith obeying right away, he obeys day after day. Because this isn't a short journey. Verse 4, on the third day, Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance.

[17:30] And he said to his servants, stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship, and then we will come back to you. Now, can you imagine how painful, and no

doubt how prayerful, those three days would have been?

Until they reached the place where now they can see the mountain looming in the horizon, and he turns to speak to the servants. I wonder what we make of what he says to the servants. So some people read it and say, well, here is Abraham, you know, telling a little white lie. He wants to protect the servants, perhaps. He certainly wants to protect Isaac. So he tells a little white lie.

That's not what the Bible says about Abraham, is it? That's why we read Hebrews 11. How does the author of Hebrews understand it? It understands that Abraham trusts absolutely in God being faithful to his promise that even if his son dies, he will be raised from the dead.

This is resurrection-shaped faith, that God will keep his promise somehow. And then we see that faith obeys all the way from verse 6 onwards. Now they're at the mountain.

Abraham takes the wood, places it on his son Isaac, and he himself carries the knife. His own son will be loaded up with the wood for the sacrifice. And then we get this poignant conversation in verses 7 and 8.

[18:59] Father, yes, my son, the fire and wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering? To which Abraham replies, God himself will provide the lamb. God will provide the lamb. His faith does not waver. Somehow a substitute will be provided. Somehow God will act. A sacrifice will be made that everything will turn out okay. He doesn't see how God's going to do it, but still he believes.

And then we get to the moment of truth. They're at the mountain. They're at the mountain top. Verse 9, Abraham built an altar and arranged the wood. He bound his son Isaac, and then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. Abraham, in preparing this altar, is preparing both a place of worship, but also a place of sacrifice. And he binds his most likely teenage son as if he was a sacrificial animal. And he raises the knife. And all the while, Abraham's faith is that Isaac will make it through.

Either he will be spared from death, or he will be raised beyond death, because he knows God cannot fail to keep his promises. It's an example of extraordinary faith. And we need to remember this isn't an isolated story.

Abraham and God have a past. For 25 years and more, God has been speaking to Abraham personally. They have relationship. It was God who acted decisively to save Abraham when he was worshipping idols.

It was God who committed himself to covenant promises and to keep those promises. And it was God who worked a miracle to give Isaac to Abraham and Sarah. We tell our kids wisely that it is not safe to trust a stranger.

[21:23] God is no stranger to Abraham. And so he clings to God and to God's promise.

And when our faith is tested, we recognize that we too have God's Word, and we have God's presence, and we have God's promises, and we have an event that we look back to that reminds us that God does love us and he's faithful. We look to the cross of Jesus and to the empty tomb.

Well, as Abraham has bound his son and he's raised the knife, this moment is preparing us for events that will take place 2,000 years later, of another beloved son who has carried the wood up a mountain for his own sacrifice.

It speaks to us of a loving father willing to place his son there to keep a promise to save and to bless the world. I don't know if you're familiar with Glenn Scrivener. He's a Bible teacher and writer and podcaster and he's got a YouTube channel. He has this great story of sharing Genesis 22 with a group of teenagers. And so he's kind of building to kind of climax and he's saying to them something along these lines, you know, here is Isaac, the only beloved son, the hope of the world, the source of all blessing, and he's trudging up the hill with wood on his back. Does that remind you of anything?

He says it is on a hill near Jerusalem. Does that ring any bells? And he says he can vividly remember seeing in that group of teenagers one friend thumping the girl next to her because she couldn't contain herself. She was like, it's Jesus. It's just totally Jesus. That's how we read the Bible and that's how we read this story. Because when we understand why the Bible is written, that God is giving testimony to his plan of redemption through his son, stories like this one, they don't need to be barriers to faith.

[23:48] Rather, it becomes a bridge to faith. As we see that Abraham represents God the Father, Isaac represents Jesus, the Son of God. That stories like these can be a boost to our faith when we read them in the right way and understand that this is speaking of God's steadfast covenant love

and his commitment to keep those promises.

Well, let's come to the climax of our story where we see the provision and the promises for faith. So, we've been following Abraham's story of faith. Over the years, there were ups and downs.

He was fearful in Egypt and told lies. He questioned, would God ever send a child? And so, he took matters into his own hands. But by chapter 22, we see this mature faith shining through.

But as the knife is poised to fall, I wonder whether we're asking ourselves, well, was his faith in God really worth it? God asked him to do this.

Just pause with me for a moment and pan forward. Earlier, we read a little section of John 8. We could go further in John 8 and we would discover this. Jesus said, Abraham rejoiced to see my day. Abraham saw it and was glad.

[25:25] On that day, on the Genesis 22 day, Abraham was given insights into the saving plan of God he hadn't had before that moment. He was given truths about God's plan of redemption that he saw in a new way and he would never forget. And wonderfully, because God includes it in the Bible, we too have front row seats to God's drama of redemption so we can learn the lessons too.

So, what can we learn? What can we learn about faith in God? Why faith is worth it? How can we say that this story, which begins in such darkness, is absolutely wonderful?

Let's draw three lessons together. First of all, Abraham discovers that God will provide the lamb.

So, remember back in verse 8, Isaac asks, where's the lamb? God himself will provide the lamb.

But did you notice which animal was provided? Look at verse 13? He saw a ram caught by its horns. We're still waiting for the lamb. And look at verse 14. Think about the name of this mountain that Abraham gives it. So, Abraham called that place, the Lord will provide, future tense. And to this day, on the mountain of the Lord, it will be provided. So, there is this understanding from Abraham that there is still a lamb to be provided in the future. When is that? Well, it's in the coming of the Lord Jesus.

And John the Baptist sees Jesus at the beginning of his ministry and describes him this way. Here is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. This is Jesus who is prophesied later in Isaiah 53. The one who would be led like a lamb to the slaughter. That the Lord God would lay on Jesus, the lamb, the iniquity, the sin of us all, so that by his wounds we might be healed. God provides the way of atonement, the way to put right the relationship between us and God. Sacrifice has to do with guilt, our sin against God that we cannot deal with. And the hope that's presented in Genesis 22 is a day is coming when God would provide the lamb. And that lamb wouldn't just be an animal, it would be his own beloved son. On that first Good Friday, we see Jesus, the Son of God, he's carrying a wooden cross up Mount Calvary to the place of his sacrifice. And notice in the story of Abraham and Isaac, verse 11, the angel of the Lord cries out from heaven, Abraham, Abraham, do not lay a hand on the boy.

This great cease and desist message booms from heaven. Abraham, Abraham fears God. He lives with worship and obedience and his son is spared.

[28:41] But on Mount Calvary, when God's own son Jesus is nailed to the wood, to the place of sacrifice, there is no voice from heaven to stop the night. God's judgment falls on God in his beloved son.

So that we could be forgiven. So that God's promise would be kept. So that we can share the blessing of life with God. Genesis 22 speaks to us of God's amazing love. Here's another lesson that Abraham discovered on that day. Relationship is restored by sacrifice. So when Abraham turns around and he sees the ram, he understands God has provided. And in providing that ram that is sacrificed instead of Isaac, a happy reunion is possible between Abraham and Isaac. The ram dies and Isaac doesn't.

That same principle applies to the cross. Our sin, our guilt, our shame, it separates us from God, the life with God that we were made for. And the only way for that to be healed is if God himself provides a perfect sacrifice. And that's what he does in giving us Jesus. And when Jesus dies on the cross, that shows us both that God takes sin seriously, he does holy justice against sin, but at the same time it shows us God's loving mercy towards sinners because he freely gives his beloved son to be our substitute. And then just as Abraham, as it were, Hebrews 11, receives Isaac back from the dead, God the father. Three days after Calvary, we have resurrection and we see that Jesus is back from the dead. God receives his son Jesus to the glory of heaven. He has risen in victory on the third day.

And because that's true, well, you and I, we can share in his resurrection life. Because that's true, we can enjoy eternal life with God. Because that's true, we can live every day knowing Jesus with us personally. Relationship restored by sacrifice. And here's a third lesson that Abraham would have learned on that day, that God's promise through the promised child, that promise holds true. Look at verse 16 to 18.

And see the focus on this son. I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you've done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you. Verse 18, and through your offspring, through your seed, all nations on earth will be blessed. So once more, God's promise is restated, and the promise focuses on Isaac, this beloved son. And because Abraham didn't hold him back, the world could have hope and be saved. On Mount Calvary, God didn't hold his son back.

[32:02] Jesus, the beloved son, the promised seed, he will die and then rise. So that by faith in Jesus, his great promise of blessing holds true in your life and mine.

Genesis 22, in other words, has always been telling a bigger story, a wonderful story of God's redeeming love, of a father giving his beloved son to die to save us. And it is this God who says to us, you can trust me. And he invites each one of us to look at Jesus, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Let's pray together briefly, and then the boys and girls will join us again. Our God and Father, we thank you that the Bible is your story, the story of your commitment to save a people for yourself, to deal with the problem of sin and guilt, to bring us to life with God through Jesus. And we thank you for lessons that Abraham was able to learn about your faithfulness and your love, even in this hardest of times of testing of his faith. Lord, when our faith is tested, help us to look beyond the circumstance to you as Father, to Jesus our Savior, to see that you have provided salvation. Lord, may we love this chapter because we see how it points us to Jesus and to the gospel and to the hope of life and blessing from you. And Lord, as we shortly turn to the Lord's Supper, as we see in the bread and the wine Jesus' commitment to save a people for himself, may you fill our hearts with a sense of thankfulness. We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.