

Sacrifice: Abraham Tested

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[0 : 0 0] Thank you. Thank you for welcoming me this morning. It's great to be with you. I think! I last came to this church about 25 years ago, so it's very nice to be here again. And! I'm Peter King. I'm the church secretary at Chatsworth Baptist Church, so I work a lot with Richard, who you know well, who's your moderator here at the moment, I think. And he's asked me to preach this morning. We have long-standing family links with this church as well. I think about 100 years ago, almost exactly 100 years ago, my wife's grandmother, who was at that time called Irene Briggs, was married in this church. And I think my wife's mother might have been baptized in this church as well. So we have family links that go back a long way on my wife's side. So the passage, what an extraordinary passage, and I'm going to try and do justice to this. There's only a limited amount I could say in the time available, and you could talk about this passage for a very long time. But I want you to think about how you really know what somebody is like. And if you really want to know what somebody is like, you put them under stress, you put them under pressure. You can meet somebody who seems perfectly nice when you meet them. But when you put them under pressure, put them under stress, they turn into some sort of monster. They become angry, they become irritable, they blame everybody else for their problems. But then you also meet people who are calm under pressure. Whatever happens, they seem to remain calm. And they're the sort of people you want around you when you're having some sort of crisis. You want people like that. Now, I'm a retired lawyer, I can say that now, I retired actually two months ago. So I'm a retired lawyer. And one of my lawyer friends is a guy called John. And if you're a lawyer in my line of work, people get very excited about what they're trying to do. You know, if you've ever worked with a lawyer, maybe on buying a house or something like that, that's an important thing for you.

You know, it's going to be it's going to be something very significant for you. And most of the things we worked on as lawyers were significant to the clients. And of course, people get excited and they start raising their voices, they start shouting. And John had a technique for dealing with these people who started shouting. Every time they started shouting, he got quieter.

And he got quieter and quieter, until one could hardly hear what he was saying. And this was a very effective way of calming people down. And of course, he remained calm all the way through.

So it had an effect on the atmosphere in the room. John was someone who always stayed calm and rational under pressure. But having said that, I've never seen John under the sort of pressure that Abraham is under in this passage. This passage is, if you like, the climax of the Abraham story. It's absolutely the most important thing that happens to Abraham at any time in his life. And it's seen by Jewish people as the foundational story about the nation of Israel, about the people of God. They even have a special name for this story in Jewish tradition. They call it the Akadah, the binding, because of Isaac being bound on the altar. And it's an extraordinary story. It really is. We've become quite familiar with it, but we don't realize how extraordinary this story is. It's told in a very, very vivid way. And, you know, the reading, thank you for reading it so clearly, the reading makes that clear. It's a very vivid sort of story. And it raises a lot of questions, a lot of questions about what God is up to. What is God doing in this story? How does he do it? And some of those questions are just too difficult. We will never get to the bottom of understanding this passage. We want to know more, but the narrator wants us to concentrate on what he does tell us. And what I want to concentrate on today is what this story tells us about what Abraham was like under pressure, and what it tells us about what God is really like. And then I want to just take us a little bit forward and look forward into the later history of Israel and the sacrifice of Jesus.

So as it says in verse 1, this story is about God testing Abraham. God puts Abraham's faith under pressure to see how strong it is. And it's the culmination, it's the high point of a journey of faith, which starts when Abraham first comes into the Genesis story many chapters before. When God tells Abraham, leave your country, go somewhere else. And at each stage, God tells Abraham to do something or to believe something which seems in human terms, absolutely impossible or totally irrational.

[5 : 31] Why would you leave a safe and comfortable life to go and become a nomad? God told Abraham to do that, and he did it. Why would anyone believe that God would give a son to someone whose wife is too old to have children? Why would anyone believe that Abraham did? These things are absolutely beyond our human capacity to understand. They seem irrational, impossible to us. But at each stage, we're told, Abraham believed God. He didn't just believe God, he did something about it as well. He left his country.

And now we come to the supreme test. And the narrator's really very keen for you to understand how significant this is. And you can see this in verse 2, the way that God speaks in verse 2.

Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love. Emphasized three or four times, this is the biggest test for Abraham. And it's interesting here, in other parts of Genesis, when God speaks to Abraham, we get a bit of a dialogue. We get a bit of Abraham answering back. Some of you will know the passage earlier on where Abraham talks to God and says, look, if there are still some righteous people in Sodom, will you spare it? And there's like a bargain between Abraham and God. But this time, nothing happens. There's no, God speaks, Abraham just does it. Abraham doesn't say, are you sure? Or, isn't this a bit inconsistent with the promises that you made to me a little while ago?

So, it doesn't say anything like that. We're just told the facts. Verse 3, he got up the next morning and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son. And the whole thing involves a three-day journey. And I'd like to know what they talked about while they were on this three-day journey.

You know, what were they talking about? What was Abraham's state of mind? How was he feeling about it? The narrator tells us none of those things at all. I have loads of questions as well. You know, what about Isaac? Isaac was a teenager by this stage, we think. Did he know what was going on?

[7 : 56] Did his father share anything with him? Perhaps not. Why didn't he just run away? Teenager, he could do that. We're not told any of those things. So, you know, we can speculate as much as we like, but we're not going to know. The focus, the focus here, what the narrator wants us to think about is God told Abraham to do something and he did it. Abraham passes the test because he obeyed.

And this leads to this renewal of the promise to Abraham. And we get this a lot in Genesis. Every so often this promise is renewed. It's renewed to Abraham several times. It's renewed to Isaac and to Jacob and to Joseph. I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sands on the seashore. Every time that promise is given to Abraham, an extra bit is added. This time it's the stars in the sky. The sand on the seashore we've had before, but this time it's the stars in the sky.

So every time the promise is renewed, a bit more is added to it, and it becomes a stronger promise. And even in the face of absolutely impossible circumstances, in the face of a command from God which seems completely irrational, Abraham's obedience is total. He's passed the test.

So God has tested Abraham's faith in the greatest pressure he could think of, and God and Abraham has passed that test. God has seen Abraham as he really is under terrific pressure. But I'm not sure that's the real point of this story. The point is that Abraham has had a new experience of God, not that God has found out something about Abraham. Abraham has had a new experience of God. Abraham has found out something about God that he didn't know before. His relationship with God, which was deep already, has become even deeper. And he realizes something about God. He realizes that God is, as it says in verse 14, the God who provides. Jehovah Jireh, the God who provides. And many of us have experienced the provision of God in our own lives, in our families. Maybe we've experienced it in this church too.

Sometimes it's the provision of money or food just when you need it at the most crucial moment. Sometimes it's the right person being there at that particular time to say the right thing to you.

[10 : 48] God is still the God who provides. And Abraham found that out on the mountain. And we can find it today too. Many of us have experienced it.

But there's even more going on here. Let's look again at verse 14. Verse 14 says, 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. Now, that translation of the Hebrew is a little bit awkward there. But it doesn't just say, On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided. It may also say, On the mountain of the Lord he, that's God, shall be seen. The important thing about this is not that Abraham obeyed God. It's that God saw and God was seen. Abraham saw God in a new way. It's the mountain of seeing. That's what happens here. Where human beings catch a vision of God as he really is.

And God sees human beings as they really are. And this points forward to the later history of God's people. So this mountain, Moriah, is identified with the mountain on which the city of Jerusalem and the temple were built. The place where people went to encounter the God of Israel.

If you go to Jerusalem today, there's a rock, which is said to be the place where this particular incident took place. It's underneath the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.

But in any event, that tradition goes all the way back through the Old Testament. So this mountain is identified with where Jerusalem was, where the temple was built.

[12 : 39] And it's the place where people went to meet the God of Israel. It's the place where the human sacrifices, which were common in other religions round about at the time, where those human sacrifices were replaced by the complicated system of animal sacrifice, which you read about in the rest of the Old Testament.

And as I said before, this is a foundational story for Jewish people. They see in this story the roots of their whole religious system, and also in the binding of Isaac, the binding, the roots of the persecution of Jews throughout the centuries.

In verse 2, Isaac is to be offered as a burnt offering. The word is Holocaust. And Jewish people see here the roots of the terrible suffering they've endured over the ages, particularly in the 20th century.

So that's how significant this story is for Jewish people. What about us as Christians? As Christians, of course, this story looks even further forward, beyond the sacrificial system and the temple.

It looks forward to the cross. It looks forward to God sacrificing his own son, his only son, whom he loves. Breaking the relationship of love, which is at the heart of the Trinity, so that we can be reconciled to God.

[14 : 05] And all this happening near that very same mountain where Abraham was preparing his sacrifice. So this is the mountain where we see God as he really is.

Suffering along with us, bearing our sins, rising to victory on the third day. This is the mountain where God provided the sacrifice in the form of the perfect Lamb of God.

It's the mountain to which we come to see God, and where God sees us. He sees us in all our imperfections, all our failures, and nevertheless accepts us just as we are.

It sounds impossible. It sounds irrational. But we respond. We respond just as Abraham did, in trust and obedience.

And God accepts us as we are, and makes us part of that new people that he's creating. That's the good news we proclaim as Christians. All embedded in this story.

[15 : 10] All in this story. Which is foundational for Christians just as much as it is for Jewish people. Isaac is bound to the altar. Jesus is bound to the cross.

And we are made free. So for Abraham, this story was the ultimate challenge. But a test that he passed.

And the challenge for us is to embrace that way of sacrifice. To be prepared to give up everything that's important to us, knowing that the Lord will provide.

Even when that seems impossible. Even when it seems completely irrational in human terms. And what happens when we do that?

We have that deeper experience of God. That deeper experience which comes as we meet him on the mountain of sacrifice. Now we don't actually have to go to a mountain to do this.

[16 : 11] We don't have to go to a literal mountain anymore. We go to a different sort of mountain. It's more of a sort of metaphorical mountain. It's the one that the writer to the Hebrews talks about when he says, You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire, to darkness, gloom and storm, to a trumpet blast, or a voice speaking words that those who heard it beg that no further word be spoken to them.

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. That's where we've come. We meet with God not just in those mountain experiences, but in the everyday things as he walks with us.

And the walk we take is the walk of sacrifice. It's actually the same walk that Jesus took. I've been thinking about this as I've been thinking about the story leading up to Easter.

Jesus walked the way of sacrifice towards Jerusalem. Just as Abraham took that journey from his home to the mountain, so Jesus journeyed to Jerusalem.

And we take that walk of sacrifice too. And I'm going to close with a quotation from the great German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was also a minister in South London.

[17 : 35] This is what Bonhoeffer said. If you have really handed yourself over to Jesus, you must know that the way of Jesus is not the way of self-assertion or grasping for status, but the way of the cross.

It is a call to abandon security, to embrace humility, and to give oneself fully in love for others.