

An Offering of a Son

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 0 0] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 17th of September 2000. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled An Offering of a Son and is from Genesis chapter 22 verses 1 to 19.

Well, let's pray that God will help us to understand this passage. It's not an easy passage to understand.

And God, we pray, will help us. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you do reveal yourself to us in the words of Scripture, as indeed you revealed yourself speaking to Abraham in the story that we've just heard told.

We pray that you'll give us minds that understand, but more importantly, wills that obey you. For Jesus' sake. Amen. Well, in a few weeks' time, the VCE students will face what, in some respects, is their ultimate test.

[1 : 0 8] They will be under great pressure to show not what they've learned only, but also what they've understood about what they've learned. To go to another end of the age spectrum, a man has a heart condition.

And so his doctor puts him in a situation of great pressure, a stress test, to see more accurately how well the heart is or how bad it is. Eighteen-year-olds can get a driver's license if they pass a test.

But to do so, they actually sit a test under great pressure. They have a police observer in the car, which is not what most of us experience if we're now driving, every day.

An applicant for a job may be given the job, firstly, as a probationary period, where they might work for a month or three months, where, in a sense, they're being watched.

They're under even greater pressure than other workers. It's a test to see how well-suited, how capable and able they are to do the job.

[2 : 1 9] And, of course, we're already inundated with images of athletes in Sydney who are facing a supreme test of their ability in whatever sport they're in.

They're facing the extreme pressure of the opposition, the best in the world. For those who are Australians, they're facing the added pressure of the national expectation that virtually every Australian competitor is somehow going to win a gold medal.

Michael Diamond won a gold medal this afternoon in shooting, but he was under the added pressure of his father having died just a few months ago. And his father was his mentor and coach, the one who taught him how to shoot.

Tests under pressure achieve at least three things. They assess the standards.

So the VCE test or the driver's licence test will see whether a person meets a certain standard to pass. But secondly, tests under pressure also strengthen the person who does it.

[3 : 2 3] The person who passes a driving test with a policeman looking over their shoulder checking every little thing they do probably come out of the test a better driver than when they went into it.

Their skills have been honed in a pressure situation. And thirdly, a test will also inform the examiner or the tester about the person who's being tested or examined.

Each of those things, to some extent, is true in the account that we read or heard read in Genesis chapter 22. We're told in the very first line, God tested Abraham.

But the thing about this test is that Abraham doesn't know that it's a test. God speaks to him. He gives him a command to go and sacrifice his son, as we'll see in a minute. But Abraham doesn't know that the whole point of the exercise was a test of his faith.

We're told that in verse 1. The reader is told that by the person who wrote this. But Abraham wasn't told by God, God, Abraham, I'm going to give you a little test here to see how far you'll go to sacrifice Isaac.

[4 : 32] That's all I want to do, just see how far you'll go. Well, if God had declared his hand like that at the beginning, it wouldn't be a test, would it? So Abraham doesn't know that this is a test. But what an extraordinary test that God gives Abraham to do.

He says to him in verse 2, 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 that I shall show you.

It is not as though Abraham has hundreds of sons, and he's got a few to spare. He has one, in effect, one through his wife, Sarah, and his name is Isaac.

It's not as though Abraham doesn't love Isaac, because God's words to him make it very clear that he does. Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love.

The command actually builds on the love and the difficulty that this test has for God. This is no easy thing.

[5 : 42] And yes, whilst it was relatively common in the ancient world for people to sacrifice occasionally children, it wasn't really that common.

And often the children that were sacrificed were female, not male, and often handicapped rather than not handicapped. This is Abraham's only son.

If you've heard the sermons in recent weeks, you'll know that Abraham has waited years for this son. He's now well over 100 years old. He was about 100 when Isaac was born.

All of Abraham's hopes are pinned on the life of his son Isaac. And what's more, all of God's promises are pinned on the life of Isaac.

Because it's been made clear in the previous chapter, and implicit in chapters leading up to that, that the promise of descendants and a great nation that will come from Abraham depend upon Isaac being alive.

[6 : 43] To this point, he's just a teenager. Probably younger than Anthony, who read his part in the reading tonight. He's not married, and he has no kids.

To that extent, his life is not expendable for the sake of the promises of God. So we could be thinking here, what a strange situation for God to get himself into.

God on the one hand has said that through Isaac all your descendants will come. My promises will be fulfilled. But now he's saying about the boy Isaac, who's not married and hasn't yet any children, Abraham, you've got to go and sacrifice him.

That is, God's put himself in a sort of position of contradiction almost. Are his promises going to be fulfilled through Isaac? Or is he going to be sacrificed, as he's commanded Abraham to do?

Is God being just malicious and cruel here? I mean, it's hardly a pleasant thing to instruct a father to put to death their only son.

- [7 : 47] How could God even suggest the death of an only son? It's a slightly unusual test, that's for sure. Well, amazingly, Abraham, who you may remember last week, bargained with God to have mercy on the evil city of Sodom, says nothing in response to this.
- He obeys without demurring. We're told nothing of his inner turmoil. Well, he doesn't say to God, well, God, why can't you just put all the Sodom people to death after all?
- I mean, they're wicked. Why does it have to be my son? Abraham, it seems, is fully acquiescent. He obeys totally, without even debating the issue with God.
- So verse 3 says, So Abraham rose early in the morning, which at least implies that he's prompt to obey. He doesn't put it off. He doesn't sort of leave late in the morning, because he's umming and ahing, and he's trying to delay the inevitable, hoping that he's got the dream wrong.
- He's not like Gideon, who put out a fleece, and it was wet, and the land was dry, and then did it again the opposite way round. Abraham gets up early in the morning, prompt to obey, and sets off.
- [9 : 11] It's a three-day journey to the land of Moriah, from Beersheva, where he was living, 70 kilometers thereabouts. Three days is probably a reasonable trip.
- He gets ready. We're told that he saddled his donkey. He took two of his young men, his servants, that is, of his extended household, with him, and his son Isaac.
- He cut the wood for the burnt offering, and he set out, and went to the place, in the distance that God had shown him. And on the third day, Abraham looked up, and saw the place far away. So maybe it's even more, than three days journey.
- We're told nothing, of what was spoken about, in that trip. To this point, it's purely silence. We're told nothing, of his turmoil, as for day after day, in this three-day trip, Abraham wonders, what on earth is he doing, obeying this extraordinary command of God?
- The tension in the story, increases from verse 5. Abraham said to his young men, stay here with the donkey, the boy and I, not even my son Isaac and I, maybe he's trying emotionally, to detach himself from his son, by just saying, the boy and I, will go over there.
- [10 : 25] We will worship. Not sacrifice, but just a more general term, worship. And then we, will come back to you.
- Now they're rather ambiguous, or enigmatic words. How do we interpret, what Abraham is saying there, when he says we, it can only be referring to his son Isaac, we will come back to you, the two servants.
- Is he lying, to them? Is he fully thinking, that Isaac will die in this place, and it will be Abraham alone, who comes back to them? But is he lying?
- Or is he perhaps just, being a bit evasive, with what he's going to do, we're going to worship. Which could just mean, bow down and pay homage, without sacrifice. Or is he perhaps making a statement, of great faith.
- We will come back. I fully believe, that Isaac will live. Despite the command of God, to kill him. Maybe it's just wishful thinking. It's left open.
- [11 : 31] I'm not sure, that we can be convinced, either way. If he's lying, or being evasive, or if he's fully, in faith, that Isaac will live, or maybe he's just, trying to keep his options open.
- And so they set off. The father, and the son, walked on together. Alone. Leaving their retinue, of two men and donkey behind. And foreshadowing, putting Isaac, on top of the wood, on the altar.
- The wood is placed, on Isaac's back, to carry up, the mountain of Moriah. And foreshadowing, Abraham killing his son. Abraham carries the fire, and the knife, in his hand.

It's a poignant description. It's full of tension. It's building suspense, to what will happen. And the father, and the son, to this point, still are silent.

At last, Isaac speaks. Who knows, what he's been thinking. Maybe he's naive, and trusting. Oh, Abraham, my father, he's always got everything, worked out.

[12 : 39] No doubt, there's an animal, up there, to sacrifice somewhere. He's probably ordered it, and had it delivered there, by post, or something. Some teenagers, are naive. Maybe he's, he's grown up, with his father doing, you know, providing everything, that is needed.

And so he has no doubt. But now at last, his curiosity, at least, is aroused. And he says, to his father, Father, Abraham says, here I am, my son. He says, the fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb, for a burnt offering?

Where is the lamb? And again, Abraham's words, are enigmatic. He said, God himself, will provide the lamb, for a burnt offering, my son.

And so the two of them, walked on further together. Are Abraham's words, a prayer? That God will provide, a ram or lamb, for an offering?

Is it just wild, and desperate hope, of a man, whose journeys come to an end, God hasn't intervened, and told him, hey Abraham, I got it wrong, you heard wrongly. Or is he even making again, a statement of faith?

[13 : 54] God will provide, Isaac will live. Maybe he's deliberately, evading the issue, not wanting to declare, his intention, and God's command, to his son Isaac, at this point.

Again, we can't be certain, what lies behind, Abraham's words. But the conversation, at least as far as we're told, ends here. And the two, walk on in, pregnant silence.

Now that, they arrive there, the pace of the story, slows a little bit, in verses 9 and 10. It slows, to increase the tension. You know, if you watch a thriller movie, where the goody, is about to be killed, by the baddie, the detail, seems to increase, the closer to the death, you get.

The death becomes, more and more imminent, and so you see, more and more, sort of delay tactics, in the film, because we think, something's got to intervene here, and it's not intervening, and there, he's about to die, and then at last, there is some, salvation or rescue.

Just like, that sort of good film, that is building the tension, so this story here, so they get there, and then we're told, that Abraham, built an altar there, and he laid the wood, in order, on the altar.

[15 : 15] He bound his son Isaac, something you wouldn't normally do, to a sacrificial victim. Normally you would, take your lamb, or bull, you'd slit its throat, and probably chop it up a bit, and then put it on the altar.

So this is an unusual, sort of sacrifice, in that Isaac is being bound, but, I think the binding of Isaac here, implies his consent. It would be easier, for an old man, like Abraham, to just, by surprise almost, jump on his son, and slit his throat.

I mean, you know, you saw from the reading, that we heard today, Anthony could easily, overpower his old man, and flee, so that his life, would be spared. Well, Abraham was even older, older than Paul, and who knows, Isaac could well have been, much fitter than Anthony, but yet his being bound, by him, suggests that, Isaac is actually agreeing, to what's going on.

He's, he's in consent, with the command of God. Though we're not told that, too clearly. And then in verse 10, Abraham reached out his hand.

It's, it's almost words, that convey slow motion. So that as we're picturing the scene, Abraham, who's got the knife, reaches out his hand. And he's got the knife in it, and he's poised to kill.

[16 : 39] That is, these verses have, slowed down the tempo, to increase the suspense, and the tension. What is going to happen here? For many of us, who know the outcome of this story, and of course, we've already heard it, we don't sense the tension, of this story, as it was originally written.

And then at the last possible minute, nothing more could be done. No more delaying tactics, were possible. God intervened, through the voice of an angel. Abraham, Abraham.

Twice it uses the name. It's, it's urgent. It's intervening, before it's too late. It's come at the last, possible moment. Abraham, Abraham, the angel says, Abraham says, here I am.

And no doubt, with some relief. And the angel says, do not lay your hand on the boy. Do not do anything to him. For now I know, that you fear God.

Since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me. That's the climax of the story. Why the sudden change? Why does God now intervene, through an angel, to stop the killing of Isaac, which he, God has commanded, in the first place?

[17 : 53] It's not because God, changes his mind. It's not because God, sort of looked down from heaven, thought, oh, what on earth have I said, to Abraham? I got that completely wrong. I meant a ram, not a son. No, God changes his mind, because now, he knows, what is in the heart, of Abraham.

As the angel reports, in effect, God's words, for now, I know, that you, fear God. God has learned, something in this test.

He's learned, what Abraham's heart is like. Yes, it's true, that God knows our hearts, all the time. But God has put Abraham, under pressure, in a test, so that his heart, will be displayed, evidently, in his actions.

And God, now knows, what Abraham's heart, is like, he fears God. That doesn't mean, that Abraham's scared of God. It's not like, fear of ghosts, or spiders, or something like that, that make us terrified, and run from the room, when we see him.

We know, from last week's story, that Abraham, was quite bold with God. He was bargaining, with God, for the sake of Sodom. To fear God, is a positive thing. It's not a bad thing.

[19 : 07] It doesn't mean, that we're afraid of God, in the sense, that we don't want to have, anything to do with him, that we want to get, as far from God, as possible. To fear God, is to honour him as God.

The sovereign God, who must be obeyed. The God of heaven and earth. The God who's made everything. The God in whose hands, this whole universe, belong. To fear God, is to revere him as God.

To express awe, and wonder, in his sight. To fear God, is to honour him as God. And by consequence, to live an upright life, in his sight.

It is a positive thing. And many times, in the Old Testament, the people of God, are commanded, to fear him. Moses commanded, the people of Israel, in the book of Deuteronomy, many times, to fear God.

The prophets, did similar things. And the wisdom writings, the book of Proverbs, and some of the Psalms, and the book of Job, remind us, several times, that the beginning of wisdom, is the fear of God.

[20 : 09] God discovers, that Abraham fears him. And the reason, that he knows that, is because Abraham, would not withhold, his most precious thing, from God.

That is his only son. The son whom he loves. The son for whom, he's waited years, and years, for his birth. obedience to God, takes top priority, for Abraham.

The thing he treasured most, he was prepared, to yield to God, in obedience to him. Above his family, he obeyed God.

Above having an heir, he obeyed God. Above even reason, and logic, thinking how can God's promises, be fulfilled, if I kill Isaac, he obeyed God's command.

Now this is a very rigorous test. And I suspect, that few of us, will be asked, or forced to face, exactly this test. To offer up a child.

[21 : 07] It's a horrific, sort of test really. It almost, compromises the morality, of God. But God, still tests us, to prove our faith.

The fact that, he may not do it, in this way, and probably won't, doesn't mean, that God does not test, Christian people, for faith. And when he does, sadly, too many Christians, fail the test.

Too many Christians, get angry at God, when things go wrong. Too many Christians, turn within themselves, to find inner strength, and ingenuity, and cleverness, to survive the crisis, and ignore God.

Too many Christians, have their faith, just wither and die up, when faced with stress, or persecution, or strife, or tests. That other Christians, obey, and find God, to be the God, who delivers, and supplies.

How do you shape up, to the tests of God? The tests of obedience? Are you a person, who, for example, gives generously, and sacrificially, of your income, and wealth, to God, trusting that God, will supply, all your needs?

[22 : 23] Are you a person, who, obeys God's command, to put God first, above your families? Trusting that God, will supply, all their needs, and yours? Maybe God, is calling you, to give up, your well paid job, for the sake of, Christian ministry, or missionary work.

Trusting him, that he will provide, for your needs, for your health, or whatever. Maybe God's calling you, to give up your time, that you cling to, maybe selfishly, but for the sake, of other people, and for the sake, of the gospel, to care for the poor, to care for the sick, to serve God's people, and the church, to visit or doorknock, to share the gospel, for example.

Or maybe the test, for you, is a test of morality. God commands us, to refrain from adultery, trusting, that God will provide, all our needs, sexually, and socially.

God calls us, to refrain from stealing, trusting him, to supply, what we need. God calls us, to refrain, from taking drugs, because he promises us, eternal joy, and peace.

God tells us, commands us, to refrain from coveting, what other people have, desiring what is not ours. He calls us, to trust him, that he will satisfy, our desires, and needs.

[23 : 58] You see, tests, strengthen faith, if people, don't capitulate, under them. I've heard of a man, who had it fairly easy, as a Christian, grew up in a Christian family, married a Christian girl, from his youth group, always in church, nice family, good job, nice house, respectable, honourable people, in their mid to late 30s, a model Christian person, knew the Bible, regular in church, involved in the ministry, of the life of the church, and then it seemed, from the outside, inexplicably, had an adulterous affair, and what's more, his Christian faith, just withered and died.

That person's faith, looked quite substantial, from the outside, and yet it had never, ever been tested, in a life that was, rather easy. It was easy for him, to be a Christian, until he faced, that test of temptation, and he capitulated, and his faith, withered and died.

Well the Christian, who's had a comfortable life, again a good family, and they lose a child. What happens then, in that test? Do they get angry, and bitter with God, who's taken their child, in effect losing, their Christian faith?

I know of some, who have. Or the Christian, who never really, gives anywhere near, a tithe of their income, to God's work. But they get very well paid, and they've got a nice house, and they have nice holidays, and they've got nice possessions.

They're very well off, really. Comfortable Christian living, we might call it. There are many in that category. But when his job disappears, and he's made redundant, and he gets bitter with God, for taking his employment away, taking his income away, how can you God do that?

[25 : 51] And his faith dries up. I've met people like that. They fail the test. Their faith has not been strengthened, under a test.

When we pray in the Lord's Prayer, save us from the time of trial, we are at least in part, expressing our fear, that under trial, and stress, and pressure, our faith will be found wanting, and we will fail.

These ideas in this passage are nothing new compared to the New Testament. It's exactly what we find in the words of Jesus. For example, in Luke's Gospel, Jesus tells his would-be followers, in Luke chapter 14, Do we pass the test?

Is obedience to God our top priority? Well, Abraham was right, maybe unexpectedly right, when he said that God will provide.

And his words are amazingly fulfilled in verse 13. Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught in a thicket by its horns, and he went, took the ram, and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.

[27 : 25] You see, the same God who tests also provides. And so Abraham called that place, the Lord will provide. As it is said to this day, on the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.

And again, of course, Jesus says as much, doesn't he? The person who gives up lots of things for the sake of the Gospel will be rewarded a hundredfold, Jesus says to us in, say, Mark 10.

And God provides here a ram so that Isaac is spared. The end of the story is that God reiterates the promises that he's made to Abraham, but with a slight difference.

It's not just God being repetitive. In the light of Abraham's obedience, God now swears an oath that these promises stand. If they weren't certain before, they are definitely so now.

The oath underscores the certainty of the promises of God. The promises are then reiterated in verse 17 onwards. I will indeed bless you, firstly. I'll make your offspring not only as numerous as the stars of heaven, which is what God said in chapter 15, but now also as numerous as the sand that is on the seashore.

[28 : 36] Who can count that? And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies. God's already promised land. Now he makes that promise very vivid and concrete. You'll possess the gate of your enemies.

That is, you'll conquer their cities. Sitting in the gate of a city meant that you controlled who went in and who went out. So it's making concrete the promise of land and territory. And what's more, by your offspring, shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.

The promises of God were initially spoken 30 years perhaps before this episode, in Genesis 12, reiterated several times in the meantime. And now, for the last time in Abraham's life, given to him as a solemn and serious oath, God is guaranteeing what he promises here.

Some have accused God of being rather cruel here, in this test of Abraham. But it's important to get it straight. God asks nothing that he himself is not prepared to do or give.

And just as he asks Abraham to offer up his only and firstborn son, the son whom he loves, so himself God did the same.

[29 : 58] As the New Testament tells us in words well known to us, God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son. But the God who tests also provides.

It's no coincidence that this event happened at a place called Moriah. The only other time Moriah is mentioned in the Bible is to identify it, where it is. It is the temple site in Jerusalem.

The place where Abraham went to offer Isaac for a sacrifice is the same stone or rock on which the temple was built, perhaps eight or nine hundred years after this event, in the time of King Solomon.

And there, animals were sacrificed for the sins of the people of Israel, so that they could be forgiven their sins, and kept alive and in a relationship with God.

And just near there, a five minute walk away, that's all, another sacrificial lamb was slain for our sins and the sins of the world when Jesus died on a cross just near that temple mount site.

[31 : 10] You see, this story hints at what God is like. It's like a concept drawing, the initial sketch plans, if you like, of a building or design.

God is the one who provides a substitute ram to spare Isaac's life. And in the next book of the Bible, we'll read that God is the one who provides a Passover lamb to spare the life of the firstborn sons of Israel as they flee from Egypt.

And two thousand years nearly after this event, God provided the greatest gift, his own firstborn son, again as a substitute, so that we might live forever with God.

Amen. Amen.