

The Ultimate Test

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Preacher: Devin Toh

[0 : 0 0] Let's pray and we'll get stuck into Genesis 22. Heavenly Father, we pray and thank you for tonight, for your word. Pray that you would give us eyes to see and ears to hear your word and be transformed by it.

In Jesus' name, amen. Well, yeah, keep your Bibles open to Genesis 22 and we'll run through it. Well, I think you'd agree with me that children are incredibly precious, aren't they? It's great that at Holy Trinity we've been able to celebrate the birth of a couple of babies recently. And I remember how excited I was to visit two of my really good friends who had just given birth. Especially where I know that pregnancies have been difficult. You realize just how special this baby was. And I remember going to the hospital and seeing probably the smallest person I've ever seen in my life.

So I'm in the hospital and my friends ask me to hold the baby. And inside I'm freaking out. I just lost it. Because I'm thinking the whole time as I'm holding this baby, what is my friend going to do to me if I drop this baby right here, right now?

[1 : 0 5] If I just accidentally drop it. And I'm already planning my quickest exit strategy out of that hospital. I was so tense. I don't think I've ever been more careful holding anything in my life.

It's weird what children do to us, isn't it? When we talk to them, our pitch goes up, for instance. So when I'm talking to a baby, I don't just go, oh, hey, how are you going? I go, oh, hey, how are you going?

How are you going? We treat them with so much care and gentleness, don't we? When we hear about children that got harmed on the news, there's almost universal outrage because everybody loves children.

Which is why I think our passage today that we've just read represents the ultimate test. I mean, how could God ask Abraham to give up his only child?

I don't think there could be any harder or greater test than this. Because if you think about it, up to this point in the narrative, so much, God has already done so much for Isaac.

[2 : 0 5] Back in Genesis chapter 12, God has promised Abraham that he would father a great nation. That through Abraham's son, God would establish his people. But remember that Abraham and Sarah are continually placing this promise under threat time and time again.

You remember that Abraham pawned Sarah off as his sister twice. Firstly to Pharaoh and then again to Abimelech. And each time God rescues Sarah and keeps the promise alive.

Then you remember that Sarah can't get pregnant, so she gets Abraham to make babies with Hagar instead, the Egyptian slave. But God assures Sarah that she's going to get pregnant, even though she's old.

And miraculously, we know that Sarah gets pregnant after years and years of trying. Remember that when she gives birth, Abraham is 100 years old at this point.

And Sarah is 90 when they have their first kid. God has literally done the impossible, hasn't he?

God has overcome every obstacle. He's defied the laws of nature. He's worked through human sin and through human conflict.

[3 : 0 8] He has done everything to secure his promise. So for Abraham, this child is truly a miracle from God. And I mean, Abraham's already lost his first son, Ishmael.

And you remember how heartbroken he was to have to let Ishmael go into the desert. So now Isaac is his only son. You could see why Isaac is the most precious thing he has.

And more than that, in Isaac lies the hopes of an entire nation. I mean, all promises God made to Abraham rise and fall on his son. Without Isaac, there's no great nation with whom God is going to bless this world.

So what we read then next is shocking, isn't it? It's shocking. Have a look at verse 1. Keep reading. There is a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you. Now, to prepare a burnt offering, first you cut the offering's throat, then you cut off its head.

[4 : 32] Then all the body parts are consumed by fire on an altar. What do you reckon is going through Abraham's mind right now? I mean, this is his only son we're talking about.

So messed up, isn't it? I mean, God to this point has protected his promise time and time again. And every time something's about to shatter this promise, God has found a way.

So now why is God the one who's going to take it away? Why would God now command the slaughter of this promised child? Abraham can't make sense of the reality that's facing him, can he? His reality does not line up with what he knows to be true. Now, I should point out at this stage that God is actually not in favor of child sacrifices. We see later that God commands that anyone who sacrifices a child is to be put to death.

See, to God, this is a deplorable act to sacrifice a child. And from where we stand, we know that God never intended to actually follow through on this. First one says it's a test.

[5 : 35] But although we know it's a test, Abraham has no idea, does he? He has no idea. I mean, this is the child he loves more than life itself. God is asking him to act against his common sense, his natural affections, and his lifelong hope.

Imagine, just imagine being asked to give up what is most precious to you. That something or that someone you love more than anything in this world.

I mean, it's hard enough for me giving up soccer on Sunday nights to make it to church. What about if I had to give up what was most important to me? That is what God is asking Abraham to do.

So how would you act? What would you do? Would you lash out at God? Would you turn your back on him? I know I would not have the guts to respond like Abraham does. I mean, Abraham is completely obedient, isn't he?

He doesn't hesitate. He does exactly as what God says. And although the passage doesn't really mention how Abraham must be feeling right now, we get hints, don't we?

[6 : 39] Look at verse 3. Early in the morning, Abraham got up. I mean, maybe he couldn't sleep. He was just so torn up about it. Then he loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac.

And when he cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. It seems illogical, doesn't it, that Abraham loads up the donkey first and then cuts the wood. It's kind of like how I always, you know, jump in the car, forget the keys. And it makes me rage. Abraham is disoriented, isn't he? I mean, he must be so torn up.

Although Abraham responds in obedience, we need to know that this isn't easy for him. Actually, this is painful. This is costly. I mean, he's definitely feeling it here.

So we're starting to get a picture of Abraham's incredible faith here, aren't we? But let's remember that Abraham's obedience here is not a blind obedience. You know, some people think that Christianity is a blind faith.

[7 : 37] You know, just do what you're told. Don't ask any questions. People say to me, Devin, I wish I had your faith. What they really mean is I can't force myself to believe in something with no evidence.

Doesn't this passage only reinforce that point that faith is blind? But isn't it interesting what Abraham says to his servants in verse 5?

Have a look at it. 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. We will come back to you.

See, Abraham seems to expect both him and Isaac to return together. Isn't it strange that Abraham is convinced that even after sacrificing Isaac, that they would return together?

This is actually very revealing, isn't it? About what Abraham really believes about God. Hebrews 11 says that Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead.

[8 : 39] Abraham has confidence that even if he sacrifices Isaac here, God would still fulfill his promise by resurrecting Isaac back from the dead. You see, this faith here, it's backed by reason, isn't it?

Abraham has seen God's character before. He's witnessed God do the impossible time and time again. God has been faithful. He's done everything so far to fulfill his promise to provide Isaac.

Abraham knows what God is like. And he's sure that even if God asks him to sacrifice his son, there is most certainly a way of bringing him back.

See, Abraham's faith is not blind. No, this is a reasonable faith based on how God has acted in the past, based on real historical evidence. That's what true obedience really is.

It is an obedience full of faith in who God is based on what he has done before. So Abraham takes the wood, places it on Isaac, and they go up the mountain together.

[9 : 39] And Isaac has no idea what's coming for him. Look at verse 7. Abraham 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 land for the burnt offering? Abraham answered, God himself will provide the land for the burnt offering, my son. And the two of them went on together.

Do you see in this passage this repetition of son, my son, only son? It emphasizes that this test is painful. It's costly.

But in the midst of all this pain, which is real, Abraham trusts in God. Although Abraham can't fully understand what God is doing here, he trusts that God will find a way, that God himself will provide the land.

See, faith and obedience, they go hand in hand, don't they? You can't truly have faith in God without obeying him, especially when it's hard. Obedience reveals what we truly believe in.

[10 : 41] So Isaac builds an altar on the mountain and places wood on it. And then in verse 9, he bound his son Isaac and laid him on an altar on top of the wood. And this is the crazy thing, yeah?

As much as Abraham needs to trust God, he needs Isaac to trust in God too. Think about it. Abraham's 100 years old. He's so old.

Suffice to say, it was probably a very slow walk up the mountain. And if you think about it, no 100-year-old man is out muscling this teenager and forcing him onto the altar.

If Isaac doesn't want to obey here, he's strong enough, he's fast enough to escape. No, you see, Isaac must willingly give himself up. He shows complete trust in his father as well as in God.

And that just makes me shudder. I mean, Isaac trusts God and his father so much that he's even willing to get on that altar and be slaughtered. I mean, what is that?

[11 : 41] And now comes the moment of truth. And if this was a movie, this scene, I bet this scene goes on for like 45 minutes. It would feel like an eternity for Abraham.

Just because Abraham trusts in God completely doesn't mean that this is just a walk in the park.

Even if I was confident that God was really going to resurrect my child, it would still be a brutal and horrifying thing to have to slaughter him.

See, faith is proved to be real through costly obedience. Then check out verse 10. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son.

And you can almost see the fear in Isaac's eyes now, can't you? As that knife is lifted above him.

But the angel of the Lord called out 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.

[12 : 46] Just before Abraham is about to cut this boy's throat, God intervenes. Abraham has passed the test. Because Abraham obeyed God and was willing to give up what was most precious to him, his faith is proved genuine.

Even when he fully didn't understand. Abraham's faith was in the promise. I'm sorry, wasn't in the promise, was it? But it was in the person, God. See, faith cannot be true faith without obedience.

But this isn't a blind faith, is it? This is a faith which completely trusts in who God is and what he's done in the past. Okay, so we've seen the test and this great obedience.

And now we're going to see God's response. Remember when Abraham says that God himself would provide this burnt offering back in verse 8? Well, these words actually turn out to be prophetic.

Look at verse 13. 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.

[13 : 55] God is so good, isn't he? In response to Abraham's obedience, God provides again for his promise. He provides the ram as a substitute offering instead of Isaac.

And now out of joy and out of celebration, Abraham names the place after the hope he had expressed back in verse 8. The Lord will provide.

And so God affirms this promise again to Abraham in verse 16. 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. So we see that it is actually through Abraham's obedience that God reaffirms his promise.

Although this time, God swears his covenant by himself, not with anyone else, him alone. God alone is going to see this promise to the very end.

[15:04] And in fact, God has seen this promise through to the end. Although Abraham would not see the ultimate fulfillment of this promise, our passage anticipates that this will happen. This blessing won't just stop with Abraham and Isaac, but this blessing is going to go to all nations.

We've seen how God has protected his promise to Abraham in providing the substitute here, in providing the ram. But in order to complete his promise, God needs to go even further than that. Because right now you might be asking the question, why did God need to provide this ram in the first place? I mean, once the test is over, why can't God just go, hey, good job, Abraham, get off the altar, Isaac, let's go celebrate.

Why is this ram necessary? Why is this ram necessary at all? It's because even in Abraham's world, sin was still a reality, wasn't it?

And the burnt offering is still necessary to provide atonement for sin. But even though this ram is sacrificed, Hebrews 10 says that sacrifices by animals, by bulls and by goats are futile.

[16:14] That it is impossible for the blood of animals to take away sins once and for all. So in order for God to complete his promise here, sin must be atoned for once and for all.

A greater substitute than this needs to be provided. See, all of humanity, all of us have sinned and rebelled against a holy and a just God.

But God, in completing his promise to Abraham, has provided the perfect substitute. So that this blessing will surely extend to all nations.

But this time, it wouldn't just be another ram. But it would be God's own son. Look at Hebrews 10, which is on the slide. Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said, Sacrifice an offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me.

With burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, Here I am. It is written about me in the scroll. I have come to do your will, my God. And then verse 10.

[17:20] And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. See, in every way, Jesus is the perfect substitute.

He's the perfect substitute. Why? Well, have a look at the next slide. You'll see, where wood was placed on Isaac to carry up the mountain, a wooden cross was placed on Jesus to carry up to Golgotha.

Where, if you go to the next one, where Isaac willingly offers his life at the altar, Jesus willingly gives his life up at the cross. Jesus says in John 10 that, Where Isaac was placed on the wood and was bound, Jesus is placed on that cross and bound, but this time by nails through his hands and his feet.

And where Isaac was spared, there was no last minute rescue for God's son, was there? No, Jesus is slaughtered. And where God provides this ram as Isaac's substitute, now God has provided his own son as our substitute for sin once and for all.

And now in Christ, God's promise to Abraham is finally complete. God promised all nations would be blessed through Abraham's offspring. Isaac was the start.

[18:45] Jesus is the end. God has gone so much further, hasn't he?

Because it should have been us on that cross. It should have been our death. If we were treated like Jesus was treated on that cross, that would have been right. That is just.

That is the extent of our depravity. But John chapter 3 says that God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son. That whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

God loves you so much. And proof of this love is that God gave up what was most precious to him. For our sake, he allows his son to be treated like a criminal.

Humiliated, tortured instead of us as our substitute. So if you're here today and you do not know this type of love, this is how much God loves you.

[19 : 50] And I can guarantee you that you will never, you will never find a love like this. You can look your whole life. No experience, no person, no possession will ever compare to this type of love.

I remember growing up, I always used to hear people say, Oh yeah, God loves you, God loves you, God loves you. And I used to think, Oh yeah, that's nice. It's kind of cute, God loves me.

But it was really only when I was shown God's love, when I was shown what it actually looked like, that he died as my substitute in my place, then his love became real for me.

I realized that this love was costly. This wasn't someone just saying, I love you, but this was someone nailed to a cross that we deserved, declaring his love there.

And that changed my life. And as we repent of our sins and place our trust in Jesus as our substitute, we are forgiven. Jesus provides atonement.

[20 : 52] No longer do we stand condemned before God. No, we stand forgiven. And for those of us who have already placed our trust in Jesus, I think we need to take heart when our faith is tested.

See, like Abraham, we too have God's promises, don't we? We know what they are. But we've already seen them fulfilled in Jesus. So why are we still being tested today? You remember from our first reading in 1 Peter 1, that trials have come into our lives to prove the genuineness of our faith.

Because you know what? When it's easy or when it's convenient for me to be a Christian, it's hard for me to know what I actually believe in, what I really believe in. Whether we're just Christian because of our friends, because of our reputation or something else.

But it's only actually when our faith is stretched, when we lose our comfort, when we lose our convenience, when we lose our reputation, then we can truly see where our true allegiance lies. Whether we've just been chasing the benefits of being a Christian rather than Christ himself. It's kind of like doing a math test at school, trying to find out who actually knows their math.

[22 : 05] If questions were just like this, imagine if a math test was like this. If questions were just super easy, 1 plus 1, 1 plus 2, 1 plus 3. We'd never actually figure out who was any good at math, would we?

Because I'm pretty sure everyone's going to get that right. But it's only when we do the hard stuff on the next slide. Calculus, hardcore algebra, it's probably not a technical name, but whatever we call this, whoever can solve that, we will know that they're actually good at math.

I see some of you guys solving it right now. Just settle down, all right? And it's actually the same with God, that through painful trials, the reality of our faith is truly tested.

Not that passing a test saves us or brings us into a relationship with God, but they demonstrate that we are saved and really do have a relationship with God. You see, this is actually God loving you. And verse 7 says in 1 Peter chapter 1, that tests and trials have come to prove the genuineness of your faith, which is of greater worth than gold.

[23 : 10] Why is this of greater worth than gold? It's because your perseverance through the test is definitive proof that eternal life is yours.

You know, sometimes we can look around and just see great things happening in people's lives. You know, why is everyone so successful? Why is everyone so happy? And we can conclude that, you know, God really delights in them.

God's so happy with them. But actually, if we take the word of God seriously, we learn that trials are given by God in his love to strengthen our faith and our confidence in our salvation.

I don't know about you, but I find that to be empowering. Very empowering. Because for the most part, life just isn't glamorous. My life isn't just made up of epic brunches or holidays I see on Instagram or Facebook.

Actually, my life is so much more messy. It's so much more ordinary than that. I can feel loneliness. I can feel emptiness. I can feel pain. And I can wonder, why isn't my life like those happy people on Instagram?

[24 : 23] In fact, a large part of my life is just a daily struggle for joy in the Lord. But you know what? God delights in my obedience through the struggle.

Because that's how we grow. That's how we are refined. And I'm sure I'm not the only one. I would say that nearly all of you have at least something right now that's going on.

Even the most successful person in this world has to constantly endure trials and testing. Maybe not massive things, but things that are constantly threatening to steal our joy.

So I want you to take heart. There's nothing wrong with you. Actually, the opposite. God delights in your perseverance through times of testing.

And Peter says that our perseverance results in praise, in glory and honour when Christ Jesus is revealed. And I think that this praise, glory and honour that we've heard actually refers to the praise and glory that we're going to receive one day.

[25 : 26] That day when we stand before God, when we pass the test and we hear Him say, well done, good and faithful servant. So for us to persevere like this, I think we need to be like Abraham who trusted in God's character, especially when we don't understand what God is doing.

Where Abraham reasoned that God could even raise Isaac from the dead and so obeyed God, I think we can do the same. Because from our experience, we know that God can be fully trusted, don't we?

Has there ever been a time in your life where God has not come through for you? Even where things seem to be descending and getting worse, we can trust in God's character and what He has done for us.

Romans chapter 8 says that He who did not spare His Son, but gave Him up for us all, how will He not, along with Him, graciously give us all things?

You want proof that God can be trusted? Just look at His Son. Just look at His Son. God gave up what was most precious to Him to save us.

[26 : 37] And in Christ, we can now find the strength to endure every test. So why don't we pray? Heavenly Father, thank You that You have provided Your Son as a perfect substitute for us.

And because of that, we're forgiven, we're cleansed, we're washed by His blood. Give us the strength to take heart when our own faith is tested, to endure and persevere well as we look to Your Son.

In Jesus' most precious name. Amen.