

Abraham's Greatest Test

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Preacher: Rev. James Maciver

[0 : 00] Well, let's turn back now to Genesis chapter 22. Genesis chapter 22, looking at this passage from the beginning to the end of verse 19 that we read a short time ago.

After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, Abraham, and he said, Here am I. He said, 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 of which I shall tell you.

Well, as we followed Abraham's life in these passages in Genesis, by now his faith is well developed. His life as a believer is well developed.

We have followed him through the things that have shaped his life as he has experienced them in his ongoing relationship with the Lord, with his family, with the people around him.

In some of these circumstances, we have seen that he triumphed. He triumphed magnificently when he had to go and rescue Lot and fight with the kings that supported him against the kings that had taken Lot and others of that area captive.

[1 : 15] We have seen this triumph too in other regards when we could see how he followed the Lord's direction and faithfully obeyed the voice of the Lord.

We followed him into failures as well. We have seen how he failed on two occasions, at least when he passed off Sarah as his sister rather than his wife, in order to preserve his own life in Egypt and then before Abimelech.

And these circumstances of failure and of triumph or success are really repeated in the life of every believer. It's through these ups and downs of life that our life is shaped, that our faith is shaped, that our relationship with God is shaped, that we are brought on in our ongoing dependence upon God to realize on the one hand our own weakness, on the other hand his infallibility and his strength.

We're told these things about these great men and women of God in the Bible so that as you see them in their triumph, you will be kept from any sense of self-sufficiency and realize that it's God who made them great.

And when you see them in their failures and you follow them into their failures and you realize they're failure in our own lives, well the Bible has that so that it will keep us from a sense of despair, a sense of concluding that because we've failed we can't really be much used to the Lord and maybe we're not Christians at all.

[2 : 54] Every Christian fails, every believer has failed, even giants of faith like Abraham have had their times of failure. That's how their life is from day to day through these circumstances.

But now he's coming to face his greatest test. All of these triumphs and these failures were in relation, as we saw, to various tests in the providence of God and the arrangement of God that he had placed in the life of Abraham.

And now he's coming to his greatest test of all. Isaac, his son, the son that God promised, the son he had to wait for, for so many years, he's now in his mid-teens.

And you can just imagine how his father would dote on him, what he meant to him, how many experiences by now they would have shared together.

And here is God saying, Now take him and offer him as a burnt offering for me. That's his test. What a test.

[4 : 03] And you see, he's taking him back, in a sense, to the very beginning of things. Where he's saying, Go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you.

And you remember way back, at the beginning of our studies, when in chapter 12, Abraham was introduced to us there, at the beginning of his life journey. He says there, Get out from your country and your kindred to the land that I will show you.

Here again is Abraham being told by God, Do something. I have not yet revealed to you every aspect of it, but go ahead and do it. Go ahead and prepare for it. God will show him, as he goes on, where this place is, that he's got to, where he's got to sacrifice his son Isaac.

And you see, that's telling us that, as we obediently follow the direction of God, through his voice in the scriptures, through the direction that he's giving us in life, it's only as we step out in faith and follow him, that God then comes afterwards, and we'll see this at the end of our study as well, that God comes afterwards, with more information, with more assurance, with more knowledge of himself, with more of the things that we need to know, in order to take the next steps too.

That's what a believer's life really is about. In other words, here again, Abraham doesn't know exactly where he's going, although God has said to him, go to the land of Moriah, that's the general direction, to a mountain that I will tell you, I'll tell you when you get near it.

[5 : 45] Abraham doesn't know exactly where he's going, but he knows who's going with him. He knows that God is going to accompany him.

He knows that God is going to be there when he gets there. That's what your life and my life, must also be directed by, and have as its conviction.

I don't know what tomorrow brings. I don't know what might turn out to be the case for me tomorrow. It might be very different to today, but I know who's going with me.

I know who's stepping along with me, and leading me in my path. That's the believer's conviction.

That's the believer's motto. That's what Abraham is really saying to us here, or God is saying to us through Abraham's experience here, through this next step, through this great test.

Well, let's look at God setting the test first of all, and then we'll look secondly at Abraham passing the test. It's very simply here, God setting the test.

[6 : 47] And we're told here that after these things, God tested Abraham. It's tempted in the AV, but the word really means testing. God doesn't tempt anyone in the sense of tempting someone to do wrong, but he does test us.

And this is a further test, and it specifically told us here that God tested him, that this really was a crucial test for Abraham at this stage of his life.

You might have thought that, having reached this stage of his life over a hundred years old, that the worst of the testings would now be behind him. But actually, it's the other way about. And that is God's prerogative.

That is God's right. That's why God is God. To us, this might seem to be somewhat severe.

To us, this might seem to be really quite unfair. And you find people saying about life that it's really unfair. And we can understand that. We can understand where people are coming from when they say that.

[7 : 49] When they find things happening in people's lives, or in their own lives that are unexpected, that are filled with grief and with sorrow and with perplexity and with questionings, life is unfair.

We know where that's coming from. But you know, God is telling us, well, if I'm in charge of your life, then I have the right to arrange and to organize your life as I see best for you.

And that's really what he's saying to Abraham here. That's what we're learning from this testing of Abraham. Your life and my life, your faith and my faith needs to be shaped.

And in order to be shaped in a way that's proper, in a way that's acceptable to God, in a way that's pleasing to God, our life needs to be shaped by testings. And it's shaped by testings.

And God is specifically adding another curve, if you like, to the shape of Abraham's life, by testing him specifically in this amazing way.

[8 : 54] And it's going to show, just similar to the way that God showed with Job, if you look at the book of Job. I know it's not an easy book to read or to follow, but one of the things that comes across clearly from it is that God testing Job had this as its purpose, at least this among other things, that Job was going to show that a believer's life does not serve God just so that we can get so much out of it.

A believer's life serves God to serve God, to glorify God, to bring honour to God, to do the things that will indeed bring honour and respect and glory to his name.

You don't serve the Lord as a Christian thinking, how much am I going to get out of this today?

What benefits am I going to get from this today? There may be benefits, there will be benefits, there will be satisfaction, there will be things which you will get out of it.

But if you like, these are the by-products, these are the secondary things. The primary thing is God, the primary thing is his honour, the primary thing is his glory, the primary thing is to put him first. And because of that, here is Abraham going to show us again that serving the Lord is indeed first and foremost for God's benefit, for God's honour, for God's glory, and not primarily for himself.

[10 : 22] Well, here's God setting the test. And you see, there's a double difficulty in this test that God sets for Abraham. There's a difficulty on one level of his natural relationship to Isaac's son.

There's a difficulty, the other side of the difficulty is his relationship to Isaac as the son of promise. The son in whom God's promises are vested for the future.

The son in whom God's church is situated and set. Where is the line of the church going to come from after Abraham? It's going to come from Isaac.

And here is Abraham being told, now take this Isaac and offer him for me. Put him to death as a sacrifice for me.

On the natural level, you see how the text here in verse 2 actually builds up the tension and you can just follow this into the very mind, into the very heart, into the very emotions of Abraham where God said to him, take your son.

[11 : 30] Which son? Your only son. That's the son of promise. Your only son, Isaac. To be absolutely sure that he knew who he was talking about. Take your son. Take your only son, Isaac, whom you'll love.

You see, God is building up for Abraham these elements just so that the test is really made into such a severe test. It doesn't just say take your son or take any son.

It's this son. It's this specific son. It's this Isaac. It's this Isaac whom you love. On whom you love is said. Who you do it on. And offer him up for me.

You try to put yourself into his shoes. It's very difficult. You've watched him grow. You've watched him as he's come into a young man.

You've shared with him so many experiences. You long waited for his birth. Years and years and years waiting for the birth of this son that God promised through Sarah.

[12 : 39] And all of these years Sarah remains barren. She's not able to produce children. And now she's past the stage of life where children are naturally born to her. She's gone beyond that.

She's at an age where children are not normally born to women of that age. And now here comes this miraculous conception and this miraculous birth of this promised son after all of these years. And there he is. The cry of this child fills Abraham's household. He listens to him every night. He goes to bed as he cries as he wakes and as he grows up and as he shares in his development and as he now comes.

Having taught him up all these years. Having taught him the ways of God. Having taught him the things of a decent human life. Having taught him what it is to believe and to trust in God.

Now God is saying you have to end this life. You have to give him to me. You have to bring him to Mount Moriah and there you will sacrifice him. You will offer him as a burnt offering to me.

[13 : 39] Amen. How could God require this of this man?

But he does. And you share in Abraham's sense of his sense of emotional turmoil as he comes to wrestle with this demand of God.

And so it is in life. There are things in life that fill us with emotional turmoil. There are losses in life that we wouldn't have wished for but that come our way.

Is God unwise? Is he not to be trusted anymore? We sometimes come with David in one of the Psalms to say has the Lord forgotten to be gracious?

But then he turns and says well I will now remember the years of the right hand. I'll remember his goodness. I'll dwell upon his wisdom.

[14 : 55] I'll dwell upon his prerogative his right to do with my life as seems good to him. And that's the double difficulty for Abraham.

On the natural level there is the difficulty as a parent. On the spiritual level if you like there's the other side of the difficulty as Isaac is the promised son.

Take this your only son Isaac. Abraham had other children had other sons he had Ishmael but he says here your only son that means he's narrowing it down to the only son in whom the promises of God are actually set.

Here's the future church here's the future development of the line of faith from Abraham down through the future in the history as it stands at that moment and it's in Isaac as God said to him that

your seed is going to be called that your descendants are set.

If there's going to be a church a believing people of God they're going to come from Isaac. That's what God has said about him and now here is God and he wants this Isaac to be killed.

[16:04] where is the future? Where is the future church? How will it be that God's promise will be fulfilled if Isaac has to be put to death?

These you see are the things which human reason even believing human reason had to wrestle with in the case of Abraham here being commanded by God in these terms.

He might well have turned round to God and said but God Lord what's going to happen then to your promise? If I kill Isaac after you saying to me that in Isaac my seed is set what's going to happen to that promise?

Where is your church going to come from if you've said it's in Isaac and I'm going to put Isaac to death what then? You see it's then that faith really comes to show itself in the way it does.

Faith you see is always shown most clearly when reason fails. That doesn't mean that faith doesn't use your reason as well.

[17:14] That doesn't mean that a believer just does away with the workings of your mind and you just go on blind faith. There isn't any such thing as blind faith. Abraham's faith here is not blind faith when he complies with God's requirement.

He knows God. That's what's being thrown at us from the narrative. He knows God so well that he knows God does not make mistakes. And when God has said in this Isaac your seat will be called that's how it will be.

As far as Abraham is concerned God is not going to fail in his promise. And however he goes about it it's Abraham's place to obey. Not to try and reason his way through it.

God will show him and that's what he knows. And that's how he acts. And that's how he gets on with it. Faith is clearest when intellect fails.

You'll see so many people in the world as you know that are atheistic especially in their outlook in life write books about how ridiculous the Bible is. Rubbish the Bible.

[18:21] Rubbish believing in God. A God you can't see and all of this. And of course the background to that or the basic premise of that is you don't believe something you haven't proved for yourself.

And to prove it for yourself you must prove it intellectually to your own satisfaction. You must prove it experimentally in a scientific way. Only then do you believe in something. Well that does away with faith.

Faith is the substance of things hoped for. The evidence of things not seen. by faith we understand. That's how Hebrews puts it isn't it? Hebrews 11 talks about the whole creation the universe around us. Where did it come from? How did it come into its present form? How did these planets and all of these solar systems come to exist and exist as they are in the arrangement that they have in the whole of this universe?

How did that come about? Hebrews 11 tells us by faith we understand that the worlds were made, were framed by God.

[19:33] It doesn't say by our understanding we believe. Because when you look out even at the physical universe there is so much of it that the best scientists in the world and the best physicists in the world are still puzzled over.

But it doesn't mean you don't believe anything about it that's said in the Bible until your understanding is perfect. That's turning things upside down as far as God is concerned.

By faith you understand. That's what again you've got here. Abraham meets the test in faith. And faith is dependence upon God.

Faith is trusting in God. Faith is following this trustworthy God. Even if there are things about following him that presently we don't quite yet understand.

That's what he's saying. That's the setting of the test. Now look at Abraham passing the test. First of all he makes an early start. He rose early in the morning saddled his donkey took two of his young men with him and his son Isaac.

[20:39] And that shows you how eager he was to get on with it. He didn't waste time. He didn't say well I'll think about it for a week. I'll maybe do it next week. I'll be more prepared for it next week.

He got up early in the morning saddled his donkey took two of the young men took Isaac cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went on to the place. It was a three day journey.

It was on the third day that he actually saw the place from afar. The place by then that God had specified for him. And you can just imagine what these three days must have been like.

There's a wonderful silence in this narrative, in this passage all the way through about certain things. There's a wonderful silence as far as the conversation between himself and Isaac goes. There's nothing told us until Isaac raised his voice and asked his father where the sacrifice was, where the lamb was. And there's a silence as well.

[21 : 41] We're told absolutely nothing about what Abraham and Sarah may have discussed. They must have said something about it. He didn't just get up early in the morning without saying anything to her about where he was going and what he was going to have to do.

But we're not told. There's a magnificent silence there. You use your imagination. And imagination can be used for good or ill, I know, but when you look at this and you use your imagination, you just cannot imagine Abraham going along these three days without constantly looking at the wood and looking at his son and feeling the knife bouncing around in his pocket against his skin and the thoughts in his mind.

I have to do this for the Lord. I have to go ahead with this. I have to pursue with this. You might say in some ways it might have been in a sense easier if he had had to do it right there at home and just get on with it and finish it.

But he had to spend three days on a journey towards this place, thinking about it, wrestling with it in his mind, seeing these elements that he would use in the sacrifice, including his son.

And what thoughts and what questions and what exercise of mind he must have had in that journey. But then you see you come to verse 5.

[23 : 05] Abraham said to his young men, stay here with the donkey and I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you. Now that verse is filled with plural pronouns.

We will come. We will go. I and the boy, we will go over there and we will actually worship and we will come again to you.

And that really means that this verse is packed full of what you can see as the workings of Abraham's faith and Abraham's mind. Because when you go to Hebrews chapter 11 that tells us about this event and describes it as things that he did by faith, we are told in verse 19, by faith Abraham offered up his only son Isaac, of whom it was said, in Isaac shall thy seed be called, accounting that God was able to raise him up even from the dead.

Ah, you see, that's giving you the key to unlocking this soulless mind of Abraham as he actually stands there and speaks with his servants and says to them, you stay here, I and the boy will go over there and we will come back.

He's sure at that point he's going to kill them, he's going to slay them as a sacrifice, but he's sure of something else, that the God who demanded this of him is that God is giving him back, he's going to give him back to him alive from the dead.

[24 : 36] He is able to raise him from the dead and Abraham is thinking in his mind, okay, I've got to do this and I will do this for God, I'm going to be obedient for God, I know that this is what God requires and it's the right thing because he requires it, but he's the God who's able to raise the dead, he's able to bring him back to life for me and when he's done that, we will come back to the servants and pick things up again.

Now how could Abraham think that? Because there hasn't been much up to now of resurrection in the Bible. Nobody's actually as yet in Abraham's experience such as Lazarus in the days of Jesus being raised from the dead to inform the mind of this man.

Where did he get this conviction that God was able to raise him from the dead and that that's what would happen and he would come back with him alive then after offering him as a sacrifice?

Well, just think about it. Where did Isaac come from at first? What was he conceived in? Hebrews 11 again puts it wonderfully that Sarah herself as well as Abraham believed.

dead and even though she could say her womb was dead naturally yet Isaac was born from that womb.

[26 : 05] In other words, Abraham received Isaac out of the deadness of Sarah's body and he remembered that and he knew that and as he thought about that he thought well it's no more difficult for God to give Isaac back to me after I put him to death as a sacrifice than it was in the beginning to give him to me as a son out of the deadness of my wife's womb.

He knows God as the God who raises the dead. As the God as Romans 4 then puts it, you see there's a wonderful passage there as well. Read it when you get home, Romans 4, the end of Romans 4 where it talks about Abraham again and his faith.

He did not stagger in unbelief and did not consider his own body or that of Sarah's as now dead, but was strengthened in faith giving glory to God.

But it's the description of God that's important. The God who calls the things that are not as though they were. The God who calls into existence things which exist in his mind but through his word and his power brings them to exist actually.

That's what he did with Isaac. Isaac existed in the promise of God, in the mind of God, in the plan of God, but not in Abraham's life or in Sarah's womb until God actually blessed her and she conceived and then bore a son.

[27 : 44] That's God bringing his mind, his promises, his plan, his purpose to fruition. What kind of God do we believe in? Why are we so often so weak in our thoughts and in our actions?

Why are we so reluctant sometimes really to follow out what the Bible is telling us is what we ought to do as believers in obedience to God? Is it not because we don't really have the vision of God that Abraham had that we ought to have?

The God who calls things that are not as though they were. Do we really have that conviction of God when we're praying that God will bring a blessing that will fill these empty pews in this church? Do we really have that conviction as we seek to pray over lives that are devastated and wasted and caught up in all kinds of addiction and wrong doing? Are we really praying with conviction to the God who calls things that are not as though they were?

All this is telling us in a way that challenges us. That is what Abraham thought as he went to Mount Moriah, as he reached Mount Moriah, as he actually then said to these servants, you wait here and we'll come back to you when all this is finished.

[29 : 08] What made him say that was his view of God. God filled his mind, his heart, his life, to such an extent that whatever God required, God would do out of it what would bring further good.

God and then you see you have this next very poignant part of the passage. Abraham took the wood and the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son and he took in his hand the fire and the knife.

So they went both of them together. I like the way that's repeated as well in verse 8 there, the end of verse 8. So they went both of them together. There's a really wonderful emphasis in that isn't there?

They're just kind of arm and arm or shoulder by shoulder. There's Isaac and he's carrying the wood for the sacrifice. There's Abraham. Abraham's got the fire and Abraham's got the knife.

Everything is there. All the ingredients of the sacrifice are there. But in Isaac's mind something absolutely crucial is missing. The main part of the sacrifice is missing.

[30 : 14] So he says, Father, yes my son, here I am. The fire and the wood, they're all here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?

Now one of the reasons that the passage describes things in a way that says nothing about a conversation between Abraham and his son to this point.

One of the reasons for that is that we will actually see this as such a poignant interruption in the silence.

Just imagine Abraham's emotions at this stage. Here is the son that he knows he has to offer us a sacrifice to God.

And here is that very sacrifice actually asking him, where is the lamb for the burnt offering, father? Abraham knows the answer, but he doesn't say actually you are.

[31 : 28] Look at how wonderful he puts it. God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son. So they both of them went together. Isaac accepted the word of his father so implicitly, so completely.

They went on both of them together. But, think about this, the words of Abraham have echoed down through the centuries from this point onwards until they found their final echoing place amongst the caverns of Calvary.

My son, God will provide for himself a lamb for a burnt offering. And it was John the Baptist who was given the honour.

of almost repeating these words of Abraham when he pointed to Jesus and said, Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

What wonderful words! How supremely true in the case of God's own Son. God will provide for himself a lamb for a burnt offering, my son.

[32 : 41] and if you and I are filled with a sense of wonder and amazement at the fact that Abraham knew that these words would apply to his son, how much more you and I should be filled with amazement and emotional attachment and believing attachment to the fact that God knew that they would apply one day to his own son.

That he would be the Lamb of God, who would be offered up, not very far from this site it appears, where he would be offered up and offer himself a sacrifice for the sin of his people.

And there's something else quite remarkable in this. And that is Isaac's part in becoming the sacrifice. because there's a danger we read perhaps a bit too quickly and reach the point, the climax of it all, where Abraham takes out the knife and ready to kill his son.

But they both of them went on together. They came to the place where God had told them.

Abraham built the altar and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac's son and laid him on the altar on top of the wood.

This is a teenage boy. there's no resistance. There's no further questions of his father now asking where is the sacrifice.

[34 : 13] Obviously his father has told him. His father has told him all about it by now. And the amazing thing is that Isaac is as compliant with God's will as Abraham is.

Now that tells you a lot about Isaac. And in fact it makes Isaac a visible type or representation of Christ who willingly gave himself to die on the cross.

But doesn't it tell you a lot about their relationship? They both of them went together. That word together really comes with force to you when you think about this. These two were so close together.

Abraham had taught his son so well about God and the things of God. And Isaac had listened so well and had learned so well that when it came to his father saying to him now son just lie on top of the wood and I'll bind you and we'll go through with us.

Isaac did it. He didn't question his father's word because he knew his father was doing what God required. There's a remarkable emphasis in that even built into the words.

[35 : 36] And then you find this climax to the whole thing. Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter to kill his son.

But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said Abraham Abraham and he said here am I. Now if ever you can imagine an angel of God shouting from heaven this was surely the moment of it.

It's hard to think of these words to read these words without really seeing that there's almost a hurried response on the part of the angel in heaven.

Abraham Abraham Abraham because at that very moment the knife is coming right up to Isaac's throat. And Abraham is about to do what God has required of him until this angel comes and shouts the angel of the Lord God himself shouted from heaven.

I know God never is in a hurry but as one old minister once put it to me discussing this passage which was a favorite of his when it came to this point he said you would think you would almost think he said that Abraham's faith and obedience at this point made God to hurry up with what he was doing to hurry up to send the message that would stop it you see that brings the wonder of Abraham's obedience the completeness of his obedience it really brings it out clearly that God if you like had to shout from heaven otherwise he would have gone through with it Abraham Abraham don't lay your hand upon the boy for now I know that you fear God and you see Abraham named the place Jehovah Jireh or Yahweh Jireh it's in the

[37 : 36] ESV here put the Lord will provide which is what these words mean in Hebrew the Lord will provide and it became a saying as it is said to this day on the mount of the Lord it shall be provided that's what Abraham took from this moment into the rest of his life God will provide he knew it before it was reaffirmed to him here and he took it with him into the next stage of his life Jehovah Jireh God will provide what are you worried about today who are you worried about today what event in your life is causing you concern somebody close to you is it a friend is it your own life is it something in your own experience is it something in your place of work something in school what is it that's giving you concern what is it that's making you worry here's

God saying leave it with me God because the words Jehovah Jireh the Lord will provide in Hebrew you might have a note in your margin in your Bibles if you've got a margin that the alternative reading of that is it will be seen or will see and what it's really saying to us is this leave it with me I will see to it that's what God is saying that's what Abraham's naming of the place really is about God will see to it God will provide God will look after it the more we try and sort it ourselves the more we'll worry about it and the more likely we are to fail in it and bring further problems to ourselves God is saying leave it with me I'll see to it if you leave it with me I'll see to it I'll look after it for you your own life your own future your family your children your grandchildren your parents your relationships your work whatever

Jehovah Jireh next time you find yourself perplexed next time you find yourself questioning next time you find yourself saying how am I going to cope what's going to happen what's the future think of these words Jehovah Jireh the Lord will provide the Lord will see to it there's the testing of Abraham there is Abraham passing the test and it finishes with verses that affirm to him God's promise and that's so important the order in which things come in the passage God the angel again spoke to him a second time and he assured him almost double fold of the blessing that was going to be his seeing he had gone through with this test and pasted I will surely bless you and I will bless others through you what is that saying to us it's saying if you want to know more about God if you want more of

God's input into your life the way to it is by obeying him here and now don't think you're going to have more input before you obey him do what he requires of you whatever it is to put your confidence fully in him to come out on his side to be visibly one of his people to witness for him whatever it is it's after you do it that God then comes with further affirmation and proof to you of what you mean to him and what he's going to do in your life bless to us your word Lord again we pray and help us to take from it today those things that we learn for the workings of our faith and of our continuing following of you here as we pray and accept us for Jesus sake amen amen amen we you