

Genesis 22

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[0 : 00] We're continuing our series in the life of Abraham this summer, and tonight we come to Genesis 22, which is page 16 in the Pew Bible. I'm going to turn there with me. It would be good to have a Bible open before you as we study this text tonight.

So we've been walking through Abraham's life, thinking about what it means to trust God, and tonight we actually come to the climax of Abraham's story. Everything, in one sense, comes to a head for Abraham right here in Genesis 22.

A number of years ago, when I was studying in graduate school, I remember having some weird chest pains one January. I hadn't noticed those before. I thought that was kind of weird. This was new, so I went to see the doctor.

There's a history of heart disease in my family, so I'm like, oh, this is kind of serious. I should go check this out. So I went to the doctor, and they scheduled a time for me to go to the hospital and have a stress test. Does he ever have a stress test?

So what they do is they hook up all these sensors to your chest, and then they put you on a treadmill, and then they turn the treadmill on, and you have to start running. First they start you out walking. It's kind of nice. You're sort of walking, you're walking, then they speed it up, and you're kind of jogging, and you're jogging a little faster, and then they keep hitting that button, and you're running, and then you're running faster, and then by the time you kind of get to the peak of the stress test, you're sprinting.

[1 : 26] I'm just flat out running. And at this point in my life, I'm a graduate student. I'm not running a lot unless something's chasing me. And I'm just sprinting on this thing.

And it's also one of these where the elevation goes up. And once I'm at peak speed, I'm looking at the tech like, we're good, right? We've got enough data to go on.

And they just sort of let me sit on that thing for what seemed like an eternity. It was probably less than a minute. And then finally, they slowed down the treadmill. They let me off. They let me lay down so that my heart rate could return from the stratosphere where they had sent it.

Anyway, after all that, thankfully, it turned out my heart was just fine. The chest pains were probably indigestion or some just anxiety over the classes I was taking or something.

But the point is that we wouldn't have known the real state of my heart had I not come through the intensity of that test.

[2 : 27] And tonight, we're going to see that the same thing is true spiritually. The climax of Abraham's life, as we've been following along this story, the climax of his life doesn't come when he first receives God's promise to bless him and to make him a blessing in the whole world.

The climax of Abraham's life doesn't come when he and Sarah finally have a son, an offspring in her old age. The climax of Abraham's life comes when God tests him.

When God tells him to actually give up the son that he had waited so long for. When God tells him to give up the son, even when all these promises will be carried forward. So let's read in Genesis 22, verses 1 through 19.

We read this verse, Genesis 22. After these things, God tested Abraham and said to him, Abraham. And he said, here I am. 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 the mountains, which I shall tell you. So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac.

[3 : 43] And he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and rose and went to the place in which God had told him. On the third day, Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. And Abraham said to his young men, stay here with the donkey.

I and the boy will go over there and worship the coming end to you. And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac, his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife, and so they went, both of them together.

And Isaac said to his father, Abraham, my father. And he said to him, here I am, my son. He said, behold the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? Abraham said, God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering to his son.

So they went, both of them together. When they came to the place in which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac, his son, and laid him on the altar on top of the wood.

Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. The angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, Abraham, Abraham. And he said, here I am. He said, do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son from me.

[4 : 56] And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram. He called in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.

So Abraham called the name of that place, the Lord will provide. As it is said to this day on the mouth of the Lord, what shall we provide? And the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven and said, By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you.

And I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you obeyed my voice.

So Abraham returned to his young man, and they rose and went together to Beersheba, and Abraham left at Beersheba. So at the time that we have tonight, I want to briefly look at three things in our text.

First, I want to look at the nature of the test that God puts before Abraham, and then we're going to look at the outcome of that test, and then last, we're going to look at how we can face our own tests, our lives.

[6 : 10] So first, let's look at the nature of this test. You see right there in verse 1, God tested Abraham. God comes to Abraham and tells him to sacrifice his one and only son Isaac, the son that he loves, on the mountain, on the mountain of the land of the ride.

And of course, I think if you're a reader of this text, our first reaction to such a command from God is confusion, and maybe even a little bit of horror or disgust, that God would ask Abraham to do something like that.

Cyril Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, wrote a book in the 19th century called Fear and Trembling, which was about this episode in Genesis. And Kierkegaard decided that the takeaway from Genesis 22, one of the lessons is that faith is ultimately a leap into the unknown.

It's a leap into the irrational, because God is asking Abraham to do something that's completely irrational here. It's acting, faith is acting against all of our better judgments just because God said so.

But actually, as much as Kierkegaard is a great Christian thinker, I don't think that's actually what's going on here. The first thing to notice about the nature of this text is that it's actually not also irrational or illogical.

[7 : 24] Tim Keller, in his book *Counterfeit Gods*, which is a great book, by the way, if you haven't read it, *Stouncers and the Hostal*, he mentions the research of a Harvard Old Testament scholar named John Levinson. And Levinson's study makes the point that in ancient Hebrew thought, the firstborn son was the representative of the whole family.

Think about it. We talked a little bit about this last week. So Isaac has now been confirmed as the heir, as the firstborn of Abraham's family, which meant that all of Abraham's property, his estate, everything that he had, his whole family, was going to Isaac.

And in a familial culture, in a culture that wasn't as individualistic as ours, in a much more communal sense, this firstborn son was the representative for everything that Abraham was.

Isaac, in a sense, was the family. And Levinson goes on to point out in his study that what we see in the rest of the Old Testament is that when God's justice is enacted, when God's just punishment for our sin is expressed, in the Old Testament a lot of times, where does it fall?

Well, he says, naturally, it falls on the firstborn son. If our sin forfeits all of our rights before God, if we're totally accountable to God for our sin, and we stand under his just judgment, and if the firstborn son represents everything that we have, then of course, when God's judgment's come, it will be totally understandable in that culture, for God requires a payment in the firstborn son.

[8 : 57] And if we were going to owe God everything, and if the penalty was going to demand everything, then how would you represent that? It would be your firstborn son. They were your everything. I actually see this in the Old Testament.

You see it in Egypt. Remember the Exodus from Egypt, when the destroyer comes and the tenth plague? What does it come for? It was for the firstborn son. You see it throughout the Pentateuch, because the firstborn sons of every family in Israel have to be redeemed.

They're the ones that you've got to make a payment for so you can keep them. So when God comes to Abraham, long before those events, and says, Abraham, I want you to sacrifice your son to me.

It's actually not some irrational command demanding Abraham to leave in the dark. No, this is God in his holiness demanding from Abraham the just penalty for his son.

Notice God doesn't tell Abraham to murder his son. He says, Offer him as a burnt sacrifice. He uses technical language there. I want you to offer him up to me as a sacrifice. This has to do with sin and with judgment.

[10 : 04] And notice also that God doesn't tell Abraham to sacrifice Sarah or another precious family member. That would have been illogical to Abraham. He wouldn't have understood that. That would have been an inappropriate answer. No, it was only the firstborn son.

It was only Isaac that represented everything that Abraham had to give. Isaac was Abraham's everything. And that brings us to another thing we need to notice about the nature of this test, which is that Isaac is Abraham's everything as we have the story.

As the narrator points out again and again in our text, Isaac is Abraham's son. His only son. The son he loves.

This is Abraham's beloved son. This is the son he had waited years and years ago. This was his treasure. This was his boy.

Now, God was going to test Abraham's heart. He was going to test his faith. Which is to say, God was coming to Abraham to find out, did Abraham love him above all else?

[11 : 08] Did Abraham love God above all else? Or it's something taking the place of God in Abraham's heart. You know, there will come times probably for all of our lives, if we're believers, if we're followers of Christ, if we're faced with similar tests.

A test of where our deep heart and trust really lies. Is it in God, our creator, and our redeemer? Or, is it in some creative thing?

And the fact is that this testing will come not because God is cruel, not because God is ruthless and cold, not because God wants to, you know, unnecessarily punish us.

No. This test comes to us because God loves us. Because God loves us too much to allow us to keep competing false gods in our hearts.

God loves us too much to let us base our lives on lesser things, even good things, even something like an only son who we love more than any other earthly thing. God is saying, Abraham, if you keep your heart stuck on your son, you will run out of you.

[12 : 23] But if you release your grip from him, it will demonstrate being love at the end of all else. Then you'll be free. Abraham, God says, I want you to give up your only son.

And Abraham, even though the test was hard, even though it was the hardest thing, any tests that Abraham had or would experience, what happens? Abraham obeys. He goes.

And amazing too, notice too, that Isaac obeys. At first, Isaac wonders where the lamb is for the sacrifice when they get to the top of the hill.

And Abraham sets up the altar and binds Isaac like a sacrifice. Isaac doesn't turn and run. Now keep in mind, at this point in the story, Isaac's probably a young teen.

And Abraham was probably, well, that's definitely an incredibly old man. Isaac very easily could have rejected his father, split and run.

[13 : 21] No thanks, dad. I'll not take part in this game. And yet Isaac saves. Isaac too entrusts himself with the Lord rather than faith.

So this is the nature of the test. Here God is demanding from Abraham his everything, his only son. He's testing whether Abraham will love God about all else and trust him about all else. But let's look back at the outcome of the test.

And from Abraham's side, the outcome is not just obedience, but it's assurance. Abraham's faith is tested and he comes through the test. In the New Testament book of James in chapter 2, James will look back at this episode in Abraham's life and say, that's when we knew that Abraham's faith was real.

James will say that Abraham's work, his obedience, willingly offering up his son was the evidence that proved his faith to be the real thing. This was the thing that showed Abraham to have a living faith, to have a true faith.

And that would be the outcome of our faith as tested as well. In Romans chapter 5 verses 1 through 5, Paul writes, therefore since we've been justified by faith, we've been put right with God, by faith, we have peace with God for our Lord Jesus Christ.

[14 : 40] Through him, we also have obtained access by faith in the disgrace in which we stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our suffering, as Paul says. Knowing that our suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope.

And hope does not put us to shame because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. Paul says our faith is tested by suffering.

What happens? Does it destroy our faith? Does it disprove God's love for us now? Paul says that suffering produces endurance. We're forced to focus.

We're forced to press in. Hold on. Put first things first and to ignore. And then Paul says that endurance produces character. We're refined. You know, when you mine out of the earth some kind of precious metal out of the ground, what's it like?

It's full of impurities. It's full of dross. It's full of other kinds of rocks and minerals. But when it goes through the furnace, it comes out pure. It comes out stronger.

[15 : 53] It comes out more beautiful than when it went through. In other words, it's character that's refined and displayed. And then Paul says that that character produces hope.

It produces hope that God really does love us. And He really has chosen us. And He's really going to see us through no matter what comes. And He really is all our hearts need and our love need for all eternity.

Amen. Amen. Amen. So what's the outcome of the test? Abraham obeys. And God intervenes. As Abraham reaches with a knife, the angel of the Lord pulls out from heaven in verse 12.

Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, seeing that you have not withheld your son, your only son. And then, in verses 15 through 18, God reaffirms His covenant with Abraham.

It's a very important part of this story. Because you see, when God promised Abraham all the way back in chapter 12, all the way back when Abraham's story really begins, when God promises back there to bless Abraham, to make him a great family, to make him a great nation, to give him the land, and ultimately to bless all nations through him, that promise really seemed to be conditional on Abraham receiving the promise, obeying God, and actually leaving his family and homeland and going to the land that God showed him.

[17 : 20] But here in chapter 22, after that greatest test of Abraham's life after he surrenders completely to God, giving him his everything, God makes that same promise completely and utterly rock solid.

It's utterly unconditional love of fear in chapter 22. The New Testament book of Hebrews looks back to these verses in Genesis.

This is what it says in Hebrews chapter 6, verses 13 through 18. It says, God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by who to swear, God swore by himself, saying, Surely I will bless you and multiply you.

And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. For people swear by something greater than themselves, and all their disputes and oaths is final for confirmation. So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise, the unchangeable character of his purpose, God guaranteed it with an oath.

So by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge by the strong encouragement to hold fast to the most of the forest.

[18 : 37] Now what's the writer of Hebrews saying? Do you see here in Genesis 22, verse 16, I have sworn and I have done it with a soul? God is here making an oath.

Hebrews says, you know, usually when we make an oath we sort of swear by something greater than ourselves, you know. I swear on my mother's grave or whatever, you know. But here, because there's nothing greater than God, God says, I'm giving this oath and I'm swearing by myself because I'm the greatest in the midst that I have to do what I promised.

And Hebrews says that makes two unchanging things. First, God's word itself and second, God's oath. And nothing to be more proximate than that. So Abraham comes through this test with an unshakable assurance that God will indeed do as he does.

That Isaac will finally carry the family line forward, that God will make them into a great nation, that their enemies will be able to stand against them and one day, hope against hope and Abraham's offspring, all the nations of the earth will be blessed.

And interestingly, Hebrews says, you know, that oath wasn't just for Abraham, that was for us too. But God gave Abraham that oath. He was speaking it to him but attending it from all the generations that will come as if to say, my promise is sure.

[20 : 12] That's the outcome of the test. When we go through the fires, we come out with even greater assurance that God is faithful, that he is trustworthy, that he's the only treasure our hearts need.

And that brings us to the last point. How do we go through our own tests? Now, the New Testament is very clear that God tempts no one to sin.

James chapter 1 in the New Testament makes that very clear. God's not in the business of putting temptations before you to sin. Temptations come from our own fallen nature, the flesh, from the world around us, from the devil, the accuser, who seeks to steal and kill and destroy.

So God doesn't come and tempt us to sin. But as we see here, God at times will test us. Seasons will come when following him will not be easy.

When we will need to trust God despite the challenges, despite the cost, despite the fluctuations in our moods, even if it means losing something very dear to us, a job, a friendship, in some places of the world today, perhaps even our physical safety.

[21 : 28] what will help us come through the test? You know, when Abraham arrives at Mount Moriah on the third day of travel, think about that, three long days, just him, his son Isaac, and a couple servants.

And I imagine that was a pretty quiet journey for Abraham and his son. Not a lot of joking if they marched into the mountains. But when they do arrive, this is what Abraham said to his servants in verse 5.

Abraham says, stay here with the donkey. I, the boy, will go over there and worship and will come to you again. In other words, Abraham is going up to the mountain to sacrifice his son and yet he says, I and him, we're going to go and we're going to come.

It's very interesting. And as they ascend the mountain, Isaac turns to his father and says, Father, here's the wood and here's the fire for the offering and where's the lamb.

And Abraham says, God will provide the lamb for the offering. Now, was Abraham just changing the subject because that was an awkward question? Was Abraham just avoiding the real reason that he was headed up the mountain with wood and with fire and with a knife and he had no lamb?

[22 : 45] I think rather than Abraham on that long journey into the mountains was contemplating the promises of God. Again, this is Hebrews.

Hebrews chapter 11 verses 17 through 19 says, By faith, Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son of whom it was said through Isaac shall he have all springy names.

Abraham considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive the back. God had promised Abraham that Isaac was going to be the one through whom the promise went forward.

Through Isaac shall your offspring be named. And as Abraham climbed to the mountain, that was the promise he must have been rehearsing and turning over again and again in his mind.

And he considered, Hebrews says, he was using his mind to think about the word of God. If Isaac was God's promised heir, Abraham was reasoning that no matter what happened on the mountain, God was going to remain true to his word.

[24 : 04] Reason is happening. Praise the dead. You see, friends, faith isn't believing the irrational or believing in the dark. Faith is trusting the word of God.

Trusting God's faithfulness to his promises more than we trust our faith feelings, more than we trust our unfaithful experiences. Abraham had walked with God for years.

God had proven himself faithful again and again, and now Abraham knew that God would remain faithful even in the midst of this most extreme of tests.

Is that true for you, friends? Is that true for me? When the testing comes, is the word of God, God's word of promise, more real to you, more precious to you than the merely human words inside of your head?

Is God himself more precious to you, more lovely, and more worthy to you than even the good things this life can offer? Thankfully, today, we can see something that even Abraham didn't see.

[25 : 24] You know, when Abraham lifted up his eyes, he saw a ram called the thickety. And God provided a ram to be sacrificed instead of Isaac, his son.

God provided a substitute for Isaac. So we're actually later in the Old Testament in 2 Chronicles 3, we're told that Solomon's temple was built on this very spot.

That Mount Moriah of Abraham's day eventually, for history, would become Jerusalem. The temple mountain in David and Solomon's day. So that same mountain, the one that Abraham called the Lord will provide, or Jehovah Jireh, that would be the spot where the temple would be put, where God again would provide, that he would provide sacrifices for his people for years, symbols that their sins could be paid by another.

Substitutes taking their place. But friends, we know there wasn't until years later when there would be another son. There would be an only son, a beloved son, and this son would actually go up that same mountain.

And instead of being rescued in the last minute with a substitute, God the Father would give him up, would give up his one and only son to be in his substitute.

[26 : 46] To die once and for all from our sins, so that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. John's so famous and says. And friends, here's the thing, if you see that, if you see God giving up his only son for you, then you see something that Abraham could only glimpse from far away.

You see that the Lord has really provided in giving Jesus his one and only son. giving the lamb, providing the lamb that takes away the sins of the world, as John's chapter 6 said.

And if you see that, if you get that, then listen to what Paul says, picking up on the same kind of language in this passage from Genesis. This is Romans 8, 31 through 32.

What shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own son forgave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

Friends, no matter what test you're facing tonight, don't you see? No matter what God has asked you to lay down, even if it's the most precious thing in the world, even if it's your everything, it's nothing compared to what God has already given up for you and what he promises to give you in and through his son.

[28 : 24] Do you see Paul's relentless logic in this verse? If God did not spare his own son the most treasured and precious thing in eternity, if God's already given you that, how will he not also graciously with him give us all things?

And what's that? What above all does God promise to graciously give us with Christ his son? Ultimately, is it not the gift of himself?

Jesus said in the Gospel of John, this is a true life. To know God and to know his own son. Ultimately, it's not the all things that God promises to give us his son.

To know God and to be with God forever in the heavens and the new earth. To have and to be with God for eternity who is the all-consuming fire, the God who is the beauty that made the world, the God who is the desire of nations, the real longing underneath all of our longings, the trying of God himself.

love. This is the blessing of Abraham that God promised so many years ago. What is this blessing that keeps running through this book of Genesis?

[29 : 48] Is it not to be right with God? To be in fellowship with God, to be sons and daughters of God, and to know the love of this God, a love that has given up his oldest son for you, to know that love forever.

without restriction. And so friends, I think as we wrap up in Genesis 22, no matter what your test is tonight, remember that the Lord has provided that if he has given his son, his only son, the son he loves for us, how will he not feel gracious and give us all things?

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we confess that a text like this is very challenging to us, Lord, not just for the obvious reasons, but for the reasons that we know how hard it is to give up the things that we love in the face of trial and testing.

Lord, we thank you that you give us so many good gifts, but we also thank you that you love us too much to let our hearts rest in those good gifts without resting in you. So, Lord Jesus, we pray that you would become more and more real to us tonight by your Holy Spirit, that we would see the preciousness of being loved by you and what you've done for us, and the confidence in you, to have an open hand towards everything in this life, because you have wrapped your everlasting arms around us for our journey.

In the promise of Jesus' name, Amen.