

A few weeks ago we walked through the story of Abraham's final test as found in Genesis 22. This morning we will take one more message to reflect upon the meaning of the story as it applies to our lives. We'll also cover the last few verses of Genesis 22 and look forward to how this story so beautifully introduces the Gospel of grace through the atonement for sin. So, please stand and let us read Genesis 22:1-24.

After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."² 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."³ So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him.⁴ On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar.⁵ Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you."⁶ 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. So they went both of them together.⁷ And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"⁸ Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together.

⁹ When they came to the place of 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.¹⁰ Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son.¹¹ But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."¹² 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."¹³ And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught 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.¹⁴ So Abraham called the name of that place, "The Lord will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided."^[a]

¹⁵ And the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven¹⁶ and said, "By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son,¹⁷ 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,¹⁸ and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice."¹⁹ So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba. And Abraham lived at Beersheba.

²⁰ Now after these things it was told to Abraham, "Behold, Milcah also has borne children to your brother Nahor:²¹ Uz his firstborn, Buz his brother, Kemuel the father of Aram,²² Chesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlaph, and Bethuel."²³ (Bethuel fathered Rebekah.) These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham's brother.²⁴ Moreover, his concubine, whose name was Reumah, bore Tebah, Gaham, Tahash, and Maacah.

My message will fall under four subheadings: 1) Testing vs. Tempting; 2) Obedience as Worship; 3) Substitutionary Atonement; and 4) The Universal Blessing.

I. Testing vs. Tempting

I want to begin this morning by asking you a question: What is the purpose of your existence? Thought I would begin with something lite.

Seriously, what is the purpose of your existence? Most of us don't want to tax our minds with deep questions on a Sunday morning, but I would kindly ask that you answer the question. Do you have an answer? What is the purpose of your existence?

So, here's the reason I'm asking: If the purpose for your existence is to have fun, seek pleasure, acquire wealth, and live as comfortably as possible for as long as possible, then this story in Genesis 22 makes absolutely no sense to you whatsoever. In fact, this story is either offensive or simply irrelevant to your life. Why?

Well, think about it: The story begins with these words: "After these things, God *tested* Abraham." If the purpose of our existence is pleasure, fun, entertainment, and comfort, then any "test" from God comes as a rude and unnecessary interruption, and that is particularly true if the test requires us to sacrifice something (or someone!) that we enjoy.

But what if our assumptions are wrong. Let us consider for a moment that the purpose for our existence may be radically other than pleasure, fun, entertainment, and comfort. What if the purpose of our existence is to fulfill our role as image bearers of God within His Kingdom and according to His providence? What if the purpose of our existence requires us to grow in our faith so that God can entrust us with greater responsibilities? What if the purpose of our existence is to bring glory to God through all the circumstances of our lives? You see...if the purpose of our existence is God's Kingdom and God's glory, then being tested by God makes perfect sense, right?

The biblical narrative from beginning to end rests upon the assumption that God created men and women in His image, and that His image-bearers have existence in order to serve out their created purpose and to glorify their creator. This was true for Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Joshua, David and Solomon, and every other character within God's Word—including Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus lived the perfect human life, but as we examine the life of Jesus, what is one of the first stories that we read about? The Spirit led Jesus out into the wilderness where he fasted for forty days and was *tested*! If God thought it necessary to test Jesus through trial and suffering, and Jesus lived the perfect human life, then I think it's safe to assume that God will also put us through times of testing as well.

As we look to Genesis 22, Abraham is our representative, and he will be tested by God. His test will be a call to sacrifice what he loves the most, and although God will stop short of requiring the life of Abraham's son, we saw in our last message that it is Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son out of obedience to God that leads Abraham to pass the test.

Church, we cannot help but accept what is true about God in His relationship with those who bear His image: God will put us to the test; but God will never tempt us. This is an important distinction.

According to a biblical worldview, Satan is the tempter; not God. Satan tempts; but God tests. F.B. Meyer writes:

Satan tempts us that he may bring out the evil that is in our hearts, but God tries or tests us that He may bring out all the good. In the fiery trial through which the believer is called to pass, elements of evil that had counteracted his true development drop away, shriveled and consumed. Meanwhile, those latent qualities produced by grace but not yet brought into exercise are called to the front, receive due recognition, and acquire a fixity of position and influence that nothing else could possibly have given them. In the agony of sorrow, we say words and assume positions that otherwise we should have never dreamed of, but from which we never again recede. Looking back, we wonder how we dared to do as we did, and yet we are not sorry, because the memory of what we were in that supreme hour is a precious legacy as well as a platform from which we take a wider view and climb to the further heights that beckon us. (Meyer, 160).

When we are tempted and we yield to temptation, we inevitably invite all kinds of suffering and trouble into our lives. Let's be clear: The suffering associated with our sinful choices is not a "test from God"; that kind of suffering is the consequence of our sinful decisions. We should learn from those seasons of suffering, but the testing of God is something quite different.

When God tests our faith, we will endure a trial that does not directly result from our sinful choices. In many cases, these trials come upon us in the midst of circumstances that are beyond our control. For instance, when God called the elders at Colonial to risk our property many years ago in order to take a stand on His Word and to leave our former denomination, it was a season of testing in my life and for all who served in leadership during that season. We knew that we might lose the buildings and our properties and be required to start all over again as a church. The possibility of losing everything was daunting, but we knew that God had called us to trust Him and to obey His leading as discerned by the elders. My faith grew immensely in that season of testing, and we saw God work in miraculous ways...but it was not fun. It was brutal—but God was faithful, and our faith grew as a consequence of enduring a fiery trial. I can think of many such seasons of testing in my life—I suspect we all can, but those seasons of trial are not a product of our sinful choices. On the contrary, God entrusts those seasons to us to prove our faith.

Peter writes in 1 Peter 4: ¹² Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. ¹⁹ Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

Though God does not generally inflict seasons of suffering upon us, He allows our circumstantial suffering to serve as a test of our faith. Times of sickness, loss, and God-honoring conflict can be incredibly painful, but those seasons are never wasted. God will allow our times of suffering to test our faith, but God never leaves us to face those tests on our own. In fact, in every trial that we face, we know that God is with us, God is for us, and God is capable of providing all that we

need if we will turn to Him. The question is: will we turn to Him? Will we trust God and obey His Word in the heat of the fiery trial? Will we live out our faith in the midst of our hardship, or will we prove ourselves to be faithless?

That question leads us to our second subheading...

II. Obedience as Worship

One of the most remarkable aspects of this story is Abraham's determination to trust God. At no point does Abraham question, debate, or become angry at God even though his 'fiery trial' is absolutely devastating.

Now, we've dealt with the details of the testing in a former message, so this morning I want us to stop and reflect on the nature of this test. The test that Abraham faces is essentially of this nature: It is a call to worship God while sacrificing what he loves the most.

Think about that for a moment. The test given to Abraham is not first and foremost about the slaying of Isaac. The test is the command to *worship God* under the costliest condition one could ever imagine.

So, what does Abraham do? Abraham worships God through his obedience. Every step Abraham takes following God's command is an act of worship. Abraham rises early in the morning--he does not wait or put off God's command. Abraham gathers the wood for the worship service before leaving in case there is no wood at the location God leads him to. When they arrive at Mt. Moriah, he tells his servants, ""Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and *worship* and come again to you." Abraham takes his only son up the mountain, builds the altar, places his son upon the altar, and raises the dagger...all as an act of worship to the God he trusts.

From the beginning to the end of this story, Abraham is determined to worship God through his obedience to God's command, come what may.

Now notice: at no point do we sense that Abraham is emotionally OK or happy about this assignment. Abraham is a loving father, so his heart is surely shredded at the mere thought of sacrificing his only son. We can assume that Abraham's feelings were all over the map for every minute of this story; but, Abraham's *determination* is to worship God through his obedience, and to trust God with the outcome, regardless of his feelings.

Church, let us learn from Abraham. Fiery trials of many kinds are coming for us all. There is no command in scripture that says we are supposed to feel OK with fiery trials and seasons of testing. Like Abraham, we are going to feel afraid or confused or grieved when those trials come upon us. Even those of us who are the most faithful believers will struggle with how we feel about the situation and even how we feel about God. But listen: The point of the test is not about how we feel, it is about what we do. Will we worship God through our obedience under the most costly condition we could ever imagine? Will we determine to worship God and trust Him with the outcome of our fiery trial, even when we may lose that which we love the most? Or, will we walk away from God and refuse to worship God because we actually love

other things more than we love God? I cannot help but think this is the point of Abraham's trial, and I also think that God only tests Abraham in this way in order to prove Abraham's faithfulness to Abraham, to Isaac, as well as to the God he loves.

What we've already observed bears repeating: Abraham proved his faith in a horrific season of testing through his determination to worship God no matter what. His obedience was his worship; and his worship proved his faith. Abraham has been tried, and his faith has been found true.

I don't know what you are going through right now, but I can tell you this: In the end, you will endure and prevail through this season of testing, and your faith will grow, *if* you will commit to worship God through the fiery trial and trust God with the outcome of your situation. Abraham's story points to our story...it points to your story. Your faith will be revealed in times of trials and testing *through your worship*, and your worship will be revealed in your obedience.

Now, before we move on, give yourself some grace and remember that Abraham did not come upon this kind of faith all at once. We've spent over 25 years with Abraham, and by God's grace, and after many years and many failures of faith, Abraham *finally* learned that He could trust God no matter what. His faith *eventually* grew such that he committed to worship God under any and all circumstances, and his worship was revealed in his obedience. It took some time, but it does seem that this was always God's intent. But why? Well, think about Jesus' words in John 4:23: ²³ The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is *seeking such people to worship him*.

The Father is seeking those who will worship Him and Him alone in spirit and in truth. Only those kinds of worshippers will suffice for the kind of assignments given first to Abraham, and then to his son, Isaac, and many generations of believers to come. The same is true for the assignments that await all believers in the 21st century. God is seeking those who will worship Him in spirit and truth, and the fiery trials will reveal our true worship to the Father...or our lack thereof.

Abraham has been God's man for over 25 years, but once Isaac was born, Abraham could have very easily made an idol out of his only son, just as we often make idols out of our children. Yet when the fiery trial came upon the father of our faith, Abraham's deepest allegiance was revealed because Abraham *truly* worshipped God. How do we know? Because Abraham's worship was revealed in his obedience, even under unthinkable conditions.

Church, God is looking for those who will worship Him in spirit and truth. Perhaps that is always the point of the trials we endure—so let us worship God through our obedience and trust God with the outcomes of our situations. Amen? Let us turn now to our third subheading...

III. Substitutionary Atonement

I want to circle back to where we ended a few weeks ago. Perhaps the most significant takeaway from this story in Genesis 22 is the introduction of substitutionary atonement that ultimately points to the cross of Jesus Christ.

Return with me to Mt. Moriah. The altar has been constructed, and Isaac now lies upon the altar as one who is to be slain. In the ancient mindset of the Canaanites, the sacrifice of a son was the means of appeasing an angry god. Where did they get that idea from? Well, as we touched on a few weeks ago, there is a universal awareness of condemnation that is common among all people. The moral law, God's law, is written upon the hearts of all who bear His image. We know that we have sinned and fallen short of God's expectations and God's holiness. We know that we deserve punishment, and Paul writes that the punishment for sin is death.

So, in many respects, Isaac is our representative. Isaac lies upon the altar as one sentenced to die, and justice would require it. God actually has every right to require the sacrifice of our firstborns. This very act of justice was played out in real life as the tenth and final plague against sinful Egypt.

But note what happens: God spares Isaac by providing His own sacrifice. The ram entangled with a crown of thorns is innocent; but because of God's great love for sinners condemned to die, God provides an innocent one to die in the place of the condemned. And then God speaks through His angel in a way that so clearly points to the ultimate Lamb of God who will take away the sins of the world. In vs. 12: Now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son..." In case we missed it the first time, God states a second time through the angel in vss. 16-18 "By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷I 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, ¹⁸and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice."

The evidence of true love and faithfulness is revealed in Abraham's willingness to give up his only beloved son, and yet God spares Abraham what He is unwilling to spare Himself. God's unmerited love and faithfulness will be revealed in this (John 3:16): "For God so loved the world, that He gave his only beloved Son, that whosoever would believe in Him shall not perish but inherit eternal life."

Paul writes in Romans 5:8, "And God proved His love for us in this: that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

Christ is the true Isaac who was sacrificed by His own Father. Why? So that the Father might prove His unfailing love to His sinful image bearers by satisfying the justice owed to God through the sacrifice He provided Himself--a perfect sacrifice of the perfect Lamb of God, who is Jesus Christ our Lord, amen?

The sacrificial atonement of the Father's only son was always the plan, and that plan is revealed 2000 years before Christ in Genesis 22, on Mt. Moriah, the very same mountain where

Jesus would one day die on a cross to save us all. Church, behold the Lamb! He is worthy to be praised, amen?

Let us now conclude with our fourth and final subheading...

IV. The Universal Blessing

Both Abraham and Isaac have witnessed the miraculous provision of the “lamb” that God supplied for Himself. Isaac, as a teenager, has witnessed firsthand the faithfulness of his father, Abraham, and the faithfulness of His Heavenly Father as well. It is now, at this moment, that God makes His final declaration and promise to Abraham in front of his son, saying: “By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ 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, ¹⁸ and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.”

We get the sense that Abraham’s entire life has led to this moment. All the tests, all the blunders, all the late-night conversations with God...they all led to this final moment on Mt. Moriah. God has accomplished true faith in Abraham, and so it will be that Abraham’s offspring will be as the stars in the sky and the sands of the seashore. More importantly, however, is what God states in vs. 18: “And in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.”

Abraham’s faithful worship and obedience will eventually lead to a descendant who will be a blessing to all nations. The universal blessing will be a “child of Abraham,” from the line of David, conceived by the Holy Spirit, and born to a virgin named Mary. His name will be Jesus, and Jesus alone will bless every nation because only Jesus will atone for the sins of the world.

That day will come eventually; but, for now, Abraham’s time on the stage of life is soon to end. The baton of faithfulness must pass to Isaac and his children, but Isaac has no children! In fact, Isaac does not yet even have a wife! So, as Genesis 22 comes to an end, we get a brief genealogy that prepares us to meet Rebekah, Isaac’s wife to be. We read in vss. ²⁰ Now after these things it was told to Abraham, “Behold, Milcah also has borne children to your brother Nahor: ²¹ Uz his firstborn, Buz his brother, Kemuel the father of Aram, ²² Chesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlaph, and Bethuel.” ²³ (Bethuel fathered Rebekah.) These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham’s brother. ²⁴ Moreover, his concubine, whose name was Reumah, bore Tebah, Gaham, Tahash, and Maacah.

The salvific work of God will continue to work itself out through people, and specifically the family of Abraham. Isaac will eventually marry the granddaughter of Abraham’s brother, Nahor, and we may find other interesting things to note about Abraham’s extended family in the days to come. It’s time to wrap up, but I do think it’s notable that God works through families. The faithfulness of one generation impacts the generations to come, and that is part of God’s plan, according to scripture. Often times the greatest trials of our lives happen in our families, or certainly in front of our families. Our commitment to worship God through our

obedience in the midst of great trials is not just about us passing the test that God has placed before us; it is also a matter of setting a precedent for our children and our children's children, amen? Church, I pray that by God's grace and the blood of Christ, we may be those who commit to worship God and God alone, come what may. And let us always remember the costly sacrifice who gave us His beloved Son, His only Son, the Lamb who takes away the sins of the world. May all glory, honor, and praise be to the Father and to the Lamb. Amen? Let us pray.