

## “What was God Thinking?”

Genesis 22:1-12

June 21, 2015

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What follows in chapter 22 deserves two sermons. After all, the narrative presents us with two radically different life situations: the one that Abraham faced as he prepared to submit to God’s will and obey the bizarre commandment he had been given *and* the one which resulted from the Lord’s intervention at the last minute. Believing life is, in truth, an alternation of those two situations or circumstances and the relation between the two is the secret of the life of faith. So a sermon this morning on the trial Abraham faced and a sermon next Lord’s Day, Lord willing, on the happy outcome. To be sure, the lessons of this chapter have already been taught, and repeatedly, in the preceding chapters – but they are summed up and presented most clearly and emphatically here.

### Text Comments:

Some years have passed since the last episode, the one we considered last Lord’s Day from chapter 21. Isaac was three years of age then; here he is a boy or young man old enough and strong enough to carry a load of wood to the top of a sizeable hill.

v.1 The information that this was a test of Abraham’s faith is communicated to the reader, *but it was not communicated to Abraham himself*. We know from the beginning that God never intended Abraham actually to kill his son and burn his body in the fire atop an altar.

v.2 The repetition of the word “son,” ten times in the chapter, together with “only son” and “the son whom you love” emphasizes the severity of the test.

Although there is precious little evidence to confirm the identification, "Moriah" is identified in 2 Chronicles 3:1 as the place where God had halted the plague visited upon Jerusalem and where subsequently Solomon had built the temple. If this is the same Moriah, that would be further indication that what follows is, indeed, a picture of the sacrifice that Abraham's seed -- not Isaac, but Jesus Christ -- would offer for the salvation of God's people. More on that next time!

v.3 The early start, as in 21:14, signifies the promptness and resolution with which Abraham approached the difficult assignment he had been given. He no longer would debate God’s plans and purposes, as he had about the destruction of Sodom, but simply obey the orders he had been given. It also suggests that the divine communication to Abraham had been in a night vision. [Sarna, 151]

v.4 The slow pace of the narrative – Abraham rose, saddled his donkey, took two servants and Isaac, cut wood, and traveled for three days (or part of three days) – serves to heighten the tension.

- v.4 "On the third day..." suggests Abraham's protracted, sustained obedience under pressure. The narrator doesn't tell us *how* Abraham knew that this was to be the place of sacrifice. Was there some kind of intuition that God granted him? Was there already an altar there? Did Abraham somehow put two and two together that the deed was to be done in that place? We are not told.
- v.6 We cannot avoid thinking of the fact that Jesus was made to carry his own cross. It is fascinating that the *Genesis Rabbah*, the Jewish commentary on Genesis, comprised of materials finally collected some centuries after Christ, speaks of Isaac with the wood on his back as like a condemned man carrying his cross. Further, Abraham walked alongside his son carrying the knife and fire. By fire is meant probably the means of igniting a fire. But see the Father and son together as they approach the time and place of sacrifice. A point is made of them walking together, as the refrain is repeated in v. 8. Again, more on that next time.
- v.7 It was Isaac who broke the oppressive silence. And with his words the narrator emphasizes still more the sacred and precious relationship between father and son.
- v.8 However you imagine Isaac in this scene, either willingly trusting himself to his father's good intentions -- if he had not yet gathered what was about to happen -- or surrendering himself to death in submission to his father and God, the boy or young man is already a man of faith. His submission is nothing short of heroic.
- v.10 Once again the step by step narration heightens the tension.
- v.12 The narrator does not stop to consider the fact that God *knew* all of this already. The test, as we realized at the outset, was for Abraham and for us, not for God himself. Whether you like this or not, whether you understand why this is so or not, God requires that faith be demonstrated and demonstrated under pressure. It is *that kind of* faith that overcomes the world!

We have before us in this text – only a portion of which we have so far read – one of the greatest stories in the Bible. I use the word “story” advisedly, for I do not mean to suggest that we do not also have here true history, an account of what actually happened. Surely we do. But as a narrative, as a story, it is one of the most dramatic and moving in the entire Bible. And why not? It is, as every sympathetic reader of the Bible understands, an enacted depiction of the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ in our place and for our salvation. We will get to that next week. I want this morning to pay attention to something else.

*This chapter is about Abraham and his faith.* It is, to be sure, about God's intervention on Abraham's behalf, but it is first about Abraham's faith. That point is made clear, emphatically clear, in ways that evangelical biblical scholarship largely missed until recently.

*First*, notice the opening statement of the chapter: “God tested Abraham.” The chapter is about Abraham from start to finish; it is about Abraham at the beginning, it is about Abraham in the middle and about Abraham at the end. The test is announced in v. 1, that Abraham passed the

test is announced in v. 12, and Abraham's reward for having passed it is identified in vv. 15-18. Indeed, it is striking that there is no mention of Sarah, who figured so prominently in the previous episode. What is more, though Isaac figures in the account, and we judge him to have performed magnificently under great pressure, little attention is paid to him either. This narrative is about Abraham and about the triumph of his faith.

But more than that, in the *second* place, this account completes and sums up the entire narrative of Abraham's faith. What you probably didn't notice, and what I never noticed before, is that this narrative and the narrative with which the Abraham story begins in chapter 12, are intentionally written to parallel one another. Chapters 12 and 22 serve, if you will, as an *inclusio*, as the bookends between which we find Abraham's spiritual biography.

In chapter 12 we read that God called to Abraham and said, "Go forth to the land I will show you." Here he says to Abraham "Go forth to the land of Moriah...to one of the mountains I will point out to you." The Hebrew phrase, "Go forth," does not occur in the Bible except in these two statements, "a fact that underscores the deliberate...use [of the phrase] in these two passages." [Sarna, 150] But we are just getting started noticing the parallels between that first scene and this last one. In both cases Abraham is called to go but not told precisely where. In both cases the drama is heightened by a series of terms. In chapter 12 Abraham was to leave "his country, his kindred, and his father's house." In chapter 22 Abraham was to take "his son, his only son Isaac, the son that he loves." In both cases Abraham responded in faith and was rewarded with promises of a glorious posterity and the second one, the one we find here in vv. 17-18 has many close verbal parallels with the first. In both cases we have the record of Abraham building an altar.

The author of the Abraham story has made it clear what the story is intended to teach us. He has enclosed the biography of Abraham within a framework of sturdy faith. At the beginning and at the end we find Abraham trusting God and demonstrating the strength of his confidence by his obedience to God's very difficult commands. In other words, this narrative in chapter 22 brings to a close Abraham's spiritual odyssey that began with God's call to him at Ur and then again at Haran. [Sarna, 150] And because in Holy Scripture Abraham is one of the principal exemplars of living faith, the great lesson of his life – that God requires that we should trust in him, that we should invest full and unquestioning credit in his Word – is the great lesson we are to learn from his life. We are to be like Abraham supremely in the way in which he believed God and, in believing, the way he obeyed him.

No doubt you remember that this same narrative is treated elsewhere in the Bible *as a lesson in the nature and the power of faith*. In Hebrews 11:19, Abraham's statement to the servants here in v. 5, "we will come back to you," is explained as an expression of Abraham's confidence that, whatever God was doing, whatever was about to happen to his son Isaac, God would not fail to preserve the life of his son. Indeed, if it came to that, if Isaac actually were to be killed, God could bring him back to life again. Abraham had been told more than once by God that Isaac was the son God had promised to give to Abraham and Sarah, that through Isaac would Abraham's offspring descend, and that through Isaac the promises that God had made would be fulfilled. And Abraham by now was convinced that he could count without reservation on the word and

promise of God. His faith, so we read in Hebrews, was like that of those who believe God raised Jesus from the dead.

Abraham didn't understand what God had ordered him to do. He did not know what was to come to pass. He could not see how God's promises were still to be kept, but he trusted himself to God's faithfulness and went forward in obedience. It is one thing to kill your son if you imagine yourself to be burying all your hopes and dreams with him. It is another thing to kill your son if you are sure you will see him alive again and that all that has been promised to you will still come to pass.

*And that, brothers and sisters, like it or not, is the Christian life! Trusting God to be true to his word, no matter the circumstances of your life, no matter your bafflement at God's management of the world, no matter your inability to explain the whys and the wherefores of God's plans and purposes.*

Scholars have pointed out that Moses' narrative style is strikingly different from that of the writers of other ancient epics. In Homer, for example, every detail of time, place, circumstance, feeling, and motive is made explicit. Sometimes a particular episode in *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey* is lengthened by many lines as Homer labors to make everything – the background and foreground – explicit and clear to his reader. *Economy, however, is the hallmark of Moses' narrative style.* The story is told in the starkest outline and everything else is left to the imagination. Why did God test Abraham? What did Abraham think when this terrible order was given to him? What did he say to Sarah? What sort of conversations passed between father and son over those three days? Exactly what did Abraham have in mind when he said to his servants, in v. 5, "we will come back to you"? All these questions and others are what Homer would have devoted much space to answering: what petty antagonisms of the gods were here spilling over into the life of mankind, with what passion, whether of sorrow or anger, his hero responded, and so on. But Moses said nothing about any of this. We are forced to ponder such questions for ourselves and, in our pondering, we are forced to discover what all of this might mean for us and what is being taught us here about our own life of faith. How much more powerful an account is it because of this understatement, because of the economy of Moses' style. [Cf. G.B. Caird, *Language and Imagery of the Bible*, pp. 93-94]

So consider: it must have been hard enough for Abraham to pick up and leave his life and his extended family behind him to travel to Canaan, to exchange his settled and prosperous existence for the life of a nomad. But this test, so many years later, was of an altogether more difficult kind. The Lord had told him to kill the son of his old age, the son whose birth was a miracle, the son for whom he had waited so many years, the son who was the apple of his eye, the son upon whom rested all of his hopes for the near and the distant future. He had already lost one son – Ishmael – and now it appeared that he would lose the other. Ishmael had had to leave the family circle precisely to make room for Isaac. But now Isaac was to be killed. What on earth was the Lord thinking? We wonder, did Abraham not tell Sarah what the Lord had commanded him to do because he thought the news would have killed her or driven her mad? Not this, not now; not after so many years of waiting!

The text emphasizes the jarring, heart-breaking nature of the test that God posed for Abraham: “Take *your son, your only son Isaac, the son whom you love...*and offer him as a burnt offering.” And add to that the moral dilemma. Can this that God is commanding me to do, can it be right? God was asking Abraham to kill his son for sacrifice -- a thing not done by the people of God, never to be done by them, a thing that was known as a terrible evil, for it was a thing done by the wicked peoples of the world of that day -- a thing, in other words, by its very nature repugnant to a righteous man.

Theodore Beza, first John Calvin’s colleague and then his successor in Geneva, was an accomplished poet. Before he became a Christian he had made something of a name for himself as a writer of love poems. Later Beza wrote a dramatic poem in French on this episode of Abraham’s life entitled *A Tragedie of Abraham’s Sacrifice*. He sought to capture Abraham’s confused state of mind in this verse.

Because, O God, this is thy pleasure, it is sure  
That it is right, and so I shall obey.  
But in obeying shall I not make God  
A liar, for he promised this to me,  
That from my son Isaac there would come forth  
A mighty nation who would fill this land?  
With Isaac dead the covenant dies too!

Now, as any good reader must, we must respect the narrative as it reads. We are tempted to dismiss Abraham’s agony of soul because, of course, we know how the story ends. *But Abraham didn’t*. He had dealt with God for many years and this was not the first time God had seemed peremptory, even cruel in his ways. God had promised Abraham a son and then for years there had been nothing but silence from heaven. And now God was ordering Abraham to kill that same son. No, we have here a man who does not know the end of the story, and to whom this news -- the narrative makes clear -- came as a body-blow.

Those who look very carefully and think carefully about the text of Holy Scripture have noticed that the order of Abraham’s actions is unusual. He saddled the donkey...he took two young men with him...and he cut wood..., the sequence of words in the Hebrew suggesting a chronological order even more than in English translation. Certainly he would have been expected to cut the wood first and then saddle his donkey and collect his servants and son and only then set out for his destination. It is suggested that this order of events may be a window into Abraham’s state of mind: either he was so distraught he couldn’t think straight, or he was trying to keep everyone in the dark about the purpose of the journey until the last possible moment, or he was postponing the most painful part of his preparations until it could be put off no longer. In any case, it seems we are to see Abraham as shattered by the command he had been given.

But, of course, this is the life of faith in Holy Scripture. It is sometimes very dark. Everywhere we look we find God’s people being required to trust him when the circumstances of their lives seem to suggest that God has forgotten all about them and has forgotten all the promises he made to them. Faith isn’t simply confidence in God and counting on his Word when *we cannot prove by sight or sense that God’s Word is true*. Faith, true faith, saving faith is confidence in God

when everything we see and hear *seems to prove that God's Word isn't true!* If you are looking for the obvious, the easily understood, and what is easy to explain, the Christian life is not for you!

It was the impenetrable nature of God's will and ways that was Abraham's test and that is often ours. Here is where we ourselves, *as Christians*, discover, as Paul puts it, that the foolishness of God is wiser and stronger than men. Our faith can seem appallingly foolish, even to ourselves, but it is in those moments that the true nature and power and God-given reality of faith shine the brightest. Abraham had walked with God long enough to have learned some things, some things that he then applied to his circumstances here; several important lessons that every Christian must learn.

*First*, he had learned that God often acts in ways that are not only mysterious to us but defy our wisdom and our understanding, ways that seem virtually to contradict what he has taught us about himself and his character and his plans for our lives. I do not say that they actually contradict the truth that has been revealed to us about God, only that we cannot see how to bring that truth into harmony with what God is doing in our lives or in the world.

In Holy Scripture there is nothing of that chatty certainty about God's purposes that we find in too many modern preachers. His thoughts really are far above our thoughts and his ways really are past finding out, no matter how much faith a man or woman has! God often asks of his children very difficult things that are punishingly hard to understand, and made the harder precisely because of what he has taught us in his Word about himself and about his faithfulness to his people. Again and again we look at *our world* and *the whole world* and wonder, "What in the world is God thinking?" *But to trust him still, to put one foot in front of the other in obedience to God nevertheless: that is what it means to live by faith.*

Will Abraham accuse God of a fault; will he argue with him as he did over Sodom; will he conclude that such a command does not deserve to be obeyed? Or, will this man, experienced as he is in the life of faith, conclude rather that the God he has come to know both knows what he is doing and will always prove faithful to his promises? That was Abraham's test. It was a test of his confidence in God. And, as it happened, Abraham responded to this harrowing demand with a triumphant faith and, as we know, received a remarkable reward.

You and I have an advantage that Abraham did not. We not only know how the story ended, how Isaac was spared, and how Abraham's faith was rewarded, we know what God has done for us in the death and resurrection of *the Lamb of God*, who took away the sins of the world.

The *second* thing Abraham had learned, the second piece of knowledge that he brought to bear on his situation when he was commanded to sacrifice his only son, was that *he should never judge the present without reckoning with the promise of God*. He had done that more than once in his life as a believer in God and had learned the hard way that the present often looks very different, far more dismal and hopeless than it actually is simply because God has yet to disclose *how* he will keep the promises he made and *how* he will bless those who walk with him.

Jeremy Levin, if you remember, was a CNN foreign correspondent who was kidnapped by Hezbollah in Lebanon in March of 1984 and held in captivity for almost a year. Of Jewish descent, Levin was an atheist, but while a prisoner he forsook his atheism to become a Christian through the witness of another captive. Speaking of the effect that his new faith had upon him during his captivity, he wrote, “This meant that despite the chains on my ankles, a lock on the door, and guards with guns, I was free. I joked to myself that all God and I had left to discuss was the exact date.” *That is a picture of true faith at work.* There is the recognition that we can only rightly judge the circumstances of the present by the promises of the Word of God. A captive was actually free in the same way that Abraham knew that Isaac was actually safe.

Pascal in his immortal *Pensées*, puts it more strongly still. “There is some pleasure in being on board a ship battered by storms when one is certain of not perishing.” I don’t know what Abraham would have said, but you know and I know that when all was said and done he would never have traded that experience – his walk with his son to the top of Moriah, his preparing the altar and the wood for its fire, his preparing the knife, and his being interrupted by the Lord himself and provided the ram for a substitute – I say he would never have traded that experience for a few more uneventful days at home. Difficult as they were at the time, they were perhaps the greatest days of his life.

On July 4<sup>th</sup> 1952 the California coast was shrouded in fog. Twenty-one miles to the west, on Catalina Island, a 34 year old woman waded into the water and began swimming toward the mainland, determined to be the first woman to do so. Florence Chadwick had already been the first woman to swim the English Channel in both directions. She would later swim the Straits of Gibraltar, the Bosphorus, and the Dardanelles. That morning the water was cold and the fog became so thick she could hardly see the boats in her accompanying party. Fatigue had never been much of a problem for her, but more than fifteen hours later she asked to be taken out. She couldn’t go on. Her mother told her that she was near land and urged her not to quit, but all she could see was the fog. When she was taken out of the water she was less than a mile from shore.

She said to a reporter later, “Look, I’m not excusing myself. But, if I could have seen land, I might have made it.” It was the fog that defeated her. She couldn’t see her destination. Two months later she swam the same channel and again fog obscured her view, but this time she swam with her faith intact. She said she kept a mental image of the shoreline in her mind while she swam.” She not only completed the crossing, but beat the previous time by two hours! A picture of the Christian life. The promises of God describe our destination. We must, as Abraham did, keep them in view. Or, as Beza has Abraham concluding in his great poem:

If then to borrow Isaac is thy will,  
Wherefore should I complain at thy command?  
For he is thine: he was received from thee;  
And then when thou has taken him again  
Rather wilt thou arouse him from the dead  
Than that thy promise should not come to pass.  
Yet, Lord, thou knowest that I am but man,  
Incompetent to do or think what's good;  
But thanks to thine unconquerable power

He who believes knows all is possible.  
Away with flesh! Away with sentiment!  
All human passions now withdraw yourselves:  
Nothing is right for me, and nothing good,  
But what is pleasing to the Lord himself.  
...O heaven...and thou the land of promise...  
Bear witness now that faithful Abraham  
Has by God's grace such persevering faith  
That notwithstanding every human thought  
God never speaks a single word in vain.