

Good morning. I have been asked to preach this morning on Genesis 22, so let's turn there:

<sup>1</sup>After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."  
<sup>2</sup>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."  
<sup>3</sup>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.  
<sup>4</sup>On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar.  
<sup>5</sup>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."  
<sup>6</sup>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.  
<sup>7</sup>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?"  
<sup>8</sup>Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together.

<sup>9</sup>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.  
<sup>10</sup>Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son.  
<sup>11</sup>But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."  
<sup>12</sup>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."  
<sup>13</sup>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.  
<sup>14</sup>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."

<sup>15</sup>And the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven  
<sup>16</sup>and said, "By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son,  
<sup>17</sup>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,  
<sup>18</sup>and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice."  
<sup>19</sup>So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba. And Abraham lived at Beersheba.<sup>1</sup>

I think it's helpful to think about what happens in the earlier chapters of Genesis before we look more closely at this one, because it lends a weight to this chapter that isn't perhaps there otherwise.

We first encounter Abraham in chapter 11, when he is still called Abram. But we know next to nothing about him at that point, except that his father Terah takes Abram, Sarai (as Sarah was called then) and Lot from Ur to Haran. And then, in chapter 12, we begin a journey with Abram which will eventually lead to salvation for all mankind.

In chapter 12, Abram is 75, and he's called by God:

<sup>1</sup>Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.  
<sup>2</sup>And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.  
<sup>3</sup>I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonours you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 22:1-19 (ESV).

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 12:1-3 (ESV).

Abram leaves Haran, and sets out for Canaan, around five to six hundred miles away, where God appears to him, and says, 'To your offspring I will give this land.'<sup>3</sup>

Famine strikes and he moves to Egypt, and from there back to Canaan once more. He and Lot separate, and as Abram settles in Canaan, God speaks to him:

<sup>14</sup>...Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward, <sup>15</sup>for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. <sup>16</sup>I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. <sup>17</sup>Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you.<sup>4</sup>

The kings of the surrounding cities go to war with each other, and they kidnap Lot and his family. Abram goes after them and frees Lot, and so we arrive in chapter 15:

<sup>1</sup>After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." <sup>2</sup>But Abram said, "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" <sup>3</sup>And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir." <sup>4</sup>And behold, the word of the Lord came to him: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir." <sup>5</sup>And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." <sup>6</sup>And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.<sup>5</sup>

Abram has grown doubtful. God has promised him children three times - but a lot has happened since then, and still there is no sign of God actually *fulfilling* his promise. God makes the promise *again* - and Abram believes him. And he makes the promise *again*, saying 'I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.'<sup>6</sup> In a dream afterwards, God tells him about Israel's future: that they will be captives for four hundred years, but that they shall return to Canaan. Then God makes a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your offspring I give this land.'<sup>7</sup>

Seven times, now, if you count the dream, God has promised Abram that he will have children.

Still, Abram and Sarai grow desperate. They're both getting old. God has made his promise seven times now, if you count the dream, and it's been eleven years. Abram is 86, and eventually Sarai says, 'Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her'.<sup>8</sup> So Abram marries Hagar, and she bears him a son, Ishmael.

We arrived in chapter 17. Another thirteen years have passed, 24 years since God first called Abram. Abram is 99. God says to him, 'Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations,<sup>9</sup> and he makes a covenant with Abraham at length, the sign of which is circumcision. Abraham know that he's too old, and that Sarah

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 12:7 (ESV).

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 13:14-17 (ESV).

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 15:1-6 (ESV).

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 15:7 (ESV).

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 15:18 (ESV).

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 16:2 (ESV).

<sup>9</sup> Genesis 17:4 (ESV). Abram's name becomes Abraham, 'father of a multitude'.

is, as well.<sup>10</sup> But God tells Abraham that the promise will be not be fulfilled through Ishmael, but through a son whom Sarah will bear.

Not long afterwards, God appears to Abraham, and says, 'I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son.'<sup>11</sup> Sarah doesn't believe it.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, when Abraham is 100, and Sarah is 90, Isaac is born. Twenty five years, they have waited for him. Nine times, if my counting is correct, God has promised him. Once they've tried to help God fulfil that promise through Hagar and Ishmael. Once, at least, each of them has laughed and thought it couldn't happen.

And then, Isaac is born. A child of miracle, and of promise. Hagar and Ishmael are sent away. I feel sorry for them, really. It wasn't Hagar's idea to try to help God out. It was Sarah and Abraham's. But God, in his mercy and his kindness, promises that a nation will come out of Ishmael, too. But it's through Isaac that Abraham's offspring will be named.<sup>13</sup>

Abraham loves Isaac. We're told that in chapter 22. Of course he loves Isaac. Isaac is described as his only son. Isaac is the manifestation of the promises of God. Isaac is the impossible made possible. Isaac is the one they had given up hoping for, dreaming of. Isaac entering the world must have been like a ray of light in the darkness. He's a sign of God's love and his faithfulness. But more than that, Isaac is Abraham's *son* - and like every good father, Abraham *loves his son*.

And now God says, 'Give him up for me. Hand him over to me. Lose him forever. Offer Isaac as a burnt offering.'

The way in which Genesis 22 proceeds might lead you to think that this was an easy thing for Abraham. God gives him the command, and in verse three, we're simply told that Abraham rises in the morning and they set off.

What I've tried to do so far is to say, it can't have been that simple. It may be that Abraham would have said to anyone who asked, as Job said to his wife, 'Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?'<sup>14</sup> - but like Job, that doesn't mean that Abraham does not feel the anguish of it. I think he'd doubted in the earlier chapters - perhaps, sometimes, his hope was very, very small - and then Isaac was given to him, and he *loves* Isaac, we're expressly told in Genesis 22.

I was talking with my pastor, Aaron, yesterday, and he pointed this out to me: we know that Abraham was being tested, because it's there right at the beginning of the chapter. Abraham didn't know. And there's nothing earlier in the Bible to suggest that the idea of being tested in this way was at all familiar to him. I don't think Abraham was thinking, 'This is a test; God won't let me go through with it.' I think he might have been heart-broken. And maybe none of it made much sense to him. God had been absolutely clear that it was through Isaac that Abraham's offspring would be named.

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<sup>10</sup> Genesis 17:17.

<sup>11</sup> Genesis 18:10 (ESV).

<sup>12</sup> Genesis 18:11-12.

<sup>13</sup> Genesis 21:13 (ESV).

<sup>14</sup> Job 2:10 (ESV).

And yet, in all of this, Abraham is obedient. And I think there's more. Abraham's place in redemptive history is secured not by his obedience, but by his faith. Hebrews 11 tells us

<sup>8</sup>By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. <sup>9</sup>By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. <sup>10</sup>For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. <sup>11</sup>By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. <sup>12</sup>Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore...

<sup>17</sup>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, <sup>18</sup>of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." <sup>19</sup>He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.<sup>15</sup>

Abraham trusted God, even when God called him to the sacrifice of his son. One thing Abraham knew: God was true to his promises. He had proved himself true. Yes, Abraham and Sarah had had to hang on to those promises for a quarter of a century, and yes, there had been time when their faith in those promises was flaky - but God *had* given them a son, and there was still an open promise about offspring countless as the stars who would come through that son. If that meant God would have to resurrect Isaac from the dead, he would do it. God would be true.

So if we're wondering how Abraham was able to be obedient to an impossible command, the answer is that he had faith in God. Does it mean that it didn't hurt? Or that it wasn't hard? No. I find it very difficult to imagine that this was easy for Abraham. But I do imagine that it was easier for him than it might be for many of us, because although Isaac was his only son, he was his only son who had been born when it was not possible for that to happen - and that was solely because of God's promise. Abraham had seen God do the physically, biologically impossible already.

What can we take from this?

1. God keeps his promises. We don't know exactly how God appeared to Abraham, how he spoke with him, but we know that he did, and we know that he speaks with us now in various ways, including through his word, the Bible. The Bible is full of promises: new hearts and new desires,<sup>16</sup> forgiveness,<sup>17</sup> the removal of sin,<sup>18</sup> provision of food and clothing,<sup>19</sup> the supply of all our needs,<sup>20</sup> wisdom,<sup>21</sup> the directing of our paths,<sup>22</sup> peaceful minds,<sup>23</sup> help in temptation<sup>24</sup> - and so on, and so on. The promises are often attached to conditions, but they're there for the fulfilling, by God, if only we will trust.

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<sup>15</sup> Hebrews 11:8-12, 17-19 (ESV).

<sup>16</sup> Ezekiel 36:26-27.

<sup>17</sup> 1 John 1:9.

<sup>18</sup> Psalm 103:12.

<sup>19</sup> Matthew 6:31-34.

<sup>20</sup> Philippians 4:19.

<sup>21</sup> James 1:5.

<sup>22</sup> Proverbs 3:5-7.

<sup>23</sup> Isaiah 26:3.

<sup>24</sup> Hebrews 2:18.

2. It may sometimes take a long time for those promises to be fulfilled, so that we come to a point where the fulfilment seems impossible. Abraham and Sarah waited a quarter of a century. I don't think they can ever have wholly abandoned hope, even if sometimes they were doubtful, or Hebrews 11 would never have been written and the promise perhaps never entirely fulfilled. Don't give up on God. Remember Habakkuk 2:3:

For still the vision awaits its appointed time;  
it hastens to the end—it will not lie.  
If it seems slow, wait for it;  
it will surely come; it will not delay.<sup>25</sup>

3. There is sometimes a testing which takes place which is part of the fulfilment of the promise. God says to Abraham,

<sup>16</sup>...By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, <sup>17</sup>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, <sup>18</sup>and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.<sup>26</sup>

Abraham passes the test, and God says to him, 'Because you have been obedient and have continued to trust me, because you have continued to believe my promise even when tested to the point where it seemed like the promise would shortly become truly impossible to fulfil, I *will* fulfil the remainder of my promise.'

It is worth remembering Romans 8:28 - 'we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose'<sup>27</sup> - because it means that for Christians, the things we go through, whether they are tests, or delights, or hardships, or seeming devastations, they will, in the end, work together for good. They add up to something greater. Abraham had to go through this test, but it added up to a nation, and, in the end, greater than that, to salvation for all believers.

The only thing God really asks of us is faith - yes, the true faith, the kind which isn't just in our heads, but in our hearts, too, and therefore leads us to obedience - but it is that faith which saves us, and it's that faith which God wants to raise up in us, and to see in us, and which gives him glory, because it says, 'Whatever the circumstances, I will trust God. He is worth that.'

4. This leads us on to a final point, although there are many others you could draw out. Abraham did not love Isaac more than he loved God. I don't believe he was willing to offer up Isaac only because he knew that God could raise Isaac from the dead if he had to. In other words, I don't think that Abraham only cared about having descendants. We know from Isaiah that God is not fooled by outward appearances - it is not enough to honour God with our lips while our hearts are far from him.<sup>28</sup> I don't think that Abraham only cared about whether God was going to fulfil his promise to grant him heirs. I think Abraham cared about being obedient to God, and trusting God, because he wanted to walk with God, because he *wanted God*.

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<sup>25</sup> Habakkuk 2:3 (ESV).

<sup>26</sup> Genesis 22:16-18 (ESV).

<sup>27</sup> Romans 8:28 (ESV).

<sup>28</sup> Isaiah 29:13 (ESV).

Last time I spoke here, I spoke on Colossians 1, and one of the points I made was that Paul was willing to suffer for the gospel because he believed that the gospel was precious, and he believed that the gospel was precious not only because it means salvation from the wrath of God, but because it means *being with God*.

When I first began to think about Genesis 22, one of the first passages my mind jumped to was Habakkuk 3:17-18:

<sup>17</sup>Though the fig tree should not blossom,  
nor fruit be on the vines,  
the produce of the olive fail  
and the fields yield no food,  
the flock be cut off from the fold  
and there be no herd in the stalls,  
<sup>18</sup>yet I will rejoice in the Lord;  
I will take joy in the God of my salvation.<sup>29</sup>

Though I should have to give up my son, still I will look to God, still I will obey him, still he will be my greatest delight. If I lose everything, still I will have everything, because I will have God.

So the final point is this: let's strive to not love the blessings of God more than we love God himself. Let's pray that we can join Asaph in saying,

<sup>25</sup>Whom have I in heaven but you?  
And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.  
<sup>26</sup>My flesh and my heart may fail,  
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Habakkuk 3:17-18 (ESV).

<sup>30</sup> Psalm 73:25-26 (ESV).