

“A PICTURE OF REDEMPTION; AN EXAMPLE OF FAITH”

In the account of Abraham’s life that is told in the book of Genesis, we see him swinging back and forth, time and time again, between acting in faith and acting in expediency. One moment he is leaving everything in order to heed God’s call, but the next moment he is almost losing his wife to Pharaoh because of his lack of faith. One moment he is choosing the Promised Land over the more fertile territory around Sodom that was preferred by Lot, while the next moment he is willing to follow Sarah’s advice of trying to produce an heir through Hagar. One moment he is interceding for the condemned city of Sodom, but the next he is once again lying about the fact that Sarah is his wife. In short, we have seen that Abraham’s walk of faith was very much like ours: there have been ups, and there have been downs. Though he had faith, there were times when he attempted to attain what he desired by pursuing his own course of wisdom. And this was something with which he struggled for all his days, as we can see by the fact that he made the same mistake with Abimelech in his later years that he had made years before in the land of Egypt. But here in Genesis 22, we can see that Abraham has matured in his faith. When the Lord gives him a direct command, Abraham obeys. And this in spite of the fact that his obedience seems to go against everything that God has promised him. Here at last we see Abraham submitting his own wisdom to the wisdom of God.

One of the challenges for us preachers is to look at a given Bible passage and try to discern the one main idea that is being conveyed in that text. A helpful exercise that one

of my seminary professors taught us to use in seeking to discover a text's main idea is to ask two basic questions of every passage that we study: (1) What is this passage talking about? and (2) What is it saying about what it is talking about? This is a very good exercise, and I still do it. However, there are times when it is difficult to distill the point that a passage is making into only one main theme. And such is the case with the text we are studying this evening. Which theme is more prominent in this passage: Is it the faith displayed by Abraham when he obeyed what the Lord had commanded him to do? Or is it the provision that is made by the Lord, the provision that spares Isaac from being put to death? Well, it is hard to say which one is more prominent. Both of these themes stand out. And for this reason, I will expound upon both of them in this sermon.

The story that is told in this chapter is surely one of the literary masterpieces of the Bible. While it leaves us asking a number of questions, it is told in such a way that the reader cannot help but feel something of the agony that Abraham must have experienced as he went through this ordeal. And Moses tells us from the outset the purpose of this ordeal: it was a test of Abraham's faith. The Lord used this episode to discover what was in Abraham's heart. While the Lord does not tempt us to sin, he does test the genuineness of our faith.

The nature of this test was the command for Abraham to offer his son as a sacrifice to God. The Lord tells him to offer Isaac as a burnt offering. This is something that takes us, as it would have taken its original readers, by complete surprise. While human sacrifice was performed by other people in the ancient world, it was something that was

utterly repugnant to the people of God, something that should never be done in Israel. And, as if that were not enough, the command is for Abraham to sacrifice *Isaac*. God calls Isaac Abraham's "only son" because he had just sent his other son, Ishmael, away. Isaac is the only child of the promise. He is the son for whom Abraham had waited for all of those years. All of God's promises were bound up with him. In chapter 21, God told Abraham: "through Isaac shall your offspring be named." But how will that promise be fulfilled if Isaac is put to death? In a poem based upon this text, the Reformer Theodore Beza expressed how Abraham must have felt when he heard God's command:

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!

"With Isaac dead the covenant dies too." It would certainly seem so, wouldn't it? Who could blame Abraham if he had thought this? As one commentator puts it, "Isaac was the son on whose survival the fulfillment of all the promises depended." [Wenham, 105]
How could God fulfill his promise if Isaac was dead?

We know that this was a test. We know that Isaac would, in the end, be spared. But we need to remember that Abraham did not know this. We know how the story ends, but he did not. That is the only way it could be a test of his faith.

But it is a test that raises some unsettling questions for us. In the first place, we wonder how the Lord could give such a command. Doesn't this go against his own law, the law that prohibits the taking of an innocent human life? It seems immoral to us. How could God require Abraham to perform a human sacrifice when elsewhere in his word he describes this practice as an abomination? While this may be our gut reaction, we need to remember one thing: all people are sinners, and are thus under the divine death sentence. God can require the life of any person at any time, because the wages of sin is death, and we are all sinners. The command to sacrifice Isaac, the one through whom the covenant people would descend, reaffirmed God's death sentence upon all of sinful humanity. God used this to show that the covenant people will need to be redeemed in order to be spared from the judgment that they deserve. It shows us that we need a deliverer, a substitute to die in our place. This is underscored by the fact that the sacrifice was to take place in the land of Moriah, the place where Israel's temple would be built many years later. [see 2 Chron. 3:1] And thus the command to sacrifice Isaac foreshadowed the one great sacrifice to which all of the temple sacrifices pointed: the sacrifice of Jesus Christ upon the cross.

Still, we might be tempted to say that God was being cruel to Abraham in requiring him to sacrifice Isaac. God had made him wait for so long before he finally gave him this

son, and now is he going to rip him away from him? What is God doing? Is he toying with Abraham, the way a cat might play with a captured mouse before finally finishing it off? This is something with which we can identify. There are times in our lives when life seems cruel. And if God is sovereign over every detail of our lives, so much so that even the very hairs on our heads are numbered, then we might be inclined to conclude that God himself is cruel. Why does God grant us things, but then sometimes take those things away from us? It is a question that tests our faith. Will we trust God even when we cannot understand him? God's ways are mysterious. They are beyond our comprehension. He stands above history. He sees everything. And thus he always acts with perfect wisdom. But compared to God, we see very little. We stand within history. We do not understand how everything fits together. And for this reason there will be times in our lives when God acts in ways that seem to contradict what the Bible tells us about him. Yet the word of God declares: "Truly God is good to Israel." [Ps. 73:1] The test of our faith is whether we will believe this, even when we cannot see how it is so.

How does Abraham respond to this unthinkable command from God? Will he accuse God of doing wrong? Will he charge him with being cruel? He does no such thing. He wakes early the next morning and proceeds to do what the Lord had told him to do. There is no delay. His obedience is immediate. That is not to say that he was not shaken up. In fact, the text gives us a clue as to how distraught he was by noting the order in which he made his preparations. He saddles his donkey. He takes his two servants. He gets Isaac. They are all ready to go. But wait, he has to cut some wood in order to be

able to offer a sacrifice. Why pack up first and wait until the end to cut the wood? As most commentators point out, the order is strange here. Is this a sign of Abraham's distress? Was he having trouble thinking straight? Or was he just putting off doing the thing that was most directly related to what he dreaded most?

It took three days for Abraham to travel from his home in Beersheba to the land of Moriah. Imagine the thoughts that must have gone through his mind on that journey. Imagine the doubt, the anger, the despair that he would have had to deal with. Imagine what it must have been like to converse with Isaac as they made their way to the place where Abraham would have to sacrifice him. This was a sustained trial.

Yet in his obedience we see Abraham's faith. He did not know what the outcome of all of this would be, but he continued to place his trust in God. We see this in the words he spoke to his servants when he and Isaac separated from them: "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you." In the Hebrew, the verbs "worship" and "come" are both in the plural. Abraham said "*we* will worship" and "*we* will come again to you." Both he *and Isaac* would worship, and both he *and Isaac* would return. The writer of Hebrews tells us that this shows that Abraham believed that God would not allow Isaac to remain dead. Even if he had to kill him, God would raise him from the dead. He had to believe this, because he believed that it would be impossible for God to leave his promise unfulfilled.

We also see Abraham's faith in the response that he makes to Isaac's question: "where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Imagine the anguish that Abraham must have

felt upon hearing this question from his son. Yet he answered, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.”

How could Abraham have such faith in the face of such a dreadful situation? He had such faith because he knew God. He knew God’s character. He believed that God is good. And he trusted him, even though he did not understand him. This is a picture of faith. Abraham serves as an example of how we should respond to the things that perplex us about God’s providential ordering of our affairs. There are going to be times when we simply do not understand what God is doing, but the Lord calls us to trust him and to continue to obey what he commands. It is for us to do what God requires, and to leave the events of our lives in his hands.

Abraham’s faith was not in vain. The Lord did provide. The angel intervened, preventing Abraham from slaying his son. And the Lord provided a ram to be offered in Isaac’s place. The text says that Abraham took the ram and offered it “instead of” his son Isaac. This is a picture of substitutionary atonement, a picture of one creature dying in the place of another. And most importantly, it is not Abraham who provides the ram for the sacrifice, but God himself. God intended that this episode might serve as a foreshadowing, or a type, of how God the Father would give his only Son, Jesus, to die for our sins. God asked Abraham to sacrifice his only son because God was going to sacrifice his one and only Son to atone for the sins of his people. As John the Baptist would later say, Jesus is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” [Jn. 1:29]

Now before I conclude tonight, I want to say a brief word about the last paragraph in our passage, the section in which God takes an oath upon himself, swearing by his own name that he will certainly bring everything that he has promised Abraham to fulfillment. What was it that triggered such a response from God? What was it that secured this pronouncement of divine blessing? It was Abraham's obedience. God said, "because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you." What is going on here? Has Abraham somehow earned favor from God? Is this a picture of salvation by works? Of course not. It is a picture of a faith that has been tested and proven true. As Moses said in chapter 15, it was because of Abraham's faith that God counted him as righteous. But his faith was a living faith, the kind of faith that bears the fruit of obedience. The reason why God responded to Abraham's obedience by swearing that he would surely bless him is because it was by this trial that Abraham was confirmed in his faith.

We have said that there are two main themes in this text: the faith of Abraham and the provision of God. And these two themes are intertwined with each other. It is because of God's character as the One who provides the lamb for the sacrifice that we can fully trust him. As Paul put it in his letter to the Romans, "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" [Rom. 8:32] Abraham trusted God, and he demonstrated that trust by his unquestioning obedience, because he knew God. He did not know how God would see to the fulfillment of what he had promised him, but he believed that he would, because he

had come to see that that is who God is. This is the faith to which you and I are summoned. The faith that says, no matter our circumstances, ‘the Lord will provide.’ Or, in the words of the great 17th century hymn-writer Paul Gerhardt:

God oft gives me days of gladness;

Shall I grieve if he give seasons, too, of sadness?

God is good and tempers ever

All my ill, and he will wholly leave me never.

[“Why Should Cross and Trial Grieve Me?”]