

**The Journey of Faith – Abraham in the Autumn of Life**  
**The Greatest Trial of All**  
**Genesis chapter 22**  
**May 28<sup>th</sup> 2023**

**Introduction to a difficult chapter**

If I were to ask you, What has been the deepest valley of your Christian life so far, how would you answer? Perhaps for one believer it will be a bereavement, for another an injustice; family trouble, serious illness, redundancy, betrayal. “That”, you say “was the greatest trial of my Christian life.” Perhaps you are passing through that test today. If your response is, “I’ve never been seriously tested yet” then let me lovingly prepare you—tests will come (Acts 14:22)

This morning as we conclude our series of sermons on the life of Abraham, we read about the greatest trial of his life, in Genesis 22.

It’s a shocking story - God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son! So that we are not stumbled, let’s say three things about this story.

*First, this is a unique trial for a unique man.* Abraham had a greater, and perhaps a purer faith, than any other mortal recorded in the Bible. He is regarded as the “archetypal” man of faith. I doubt if God would ever ask you or I to undergo such a severe test.

*Second we are told his was a test,* Verse 1, “Some time later God *tested* Abraham.” Abraham did not know that, but we do. It was never God’s plan to allow Abraham to go through with the act, for child sacrifice is abhorrent to God. God wanted a *spiritual sacrifice from Abraham*- he wanted to know if Abraham loved God more than his precious Isaac, and in his infinite wisdom, God chose this particular method to test him.

*Thirdly, let us remember that God’s ways are higher than our ways.* To someone who is outraged, “If that is what God is like I want nothing to do with him!” —let me say this, should we not expect God’s ways to be inscrutable, hard for us to fathom? We’re so small, our minds so finite, would it not more surprise us if we *did* understand God’s ways? “*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,*”

*declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:8-9)*

Who are you or I to judge the ways of The Almighty? Seriously!

## The Story

God called Abraham one day, completely out of the blue. Let's stop right here—that's often how the greatest trials of life come upon us, no advanced warning, "Sometime later God tested Abraham."

*"Abraham!"* (which means father of nations) *"Here I am"*

*"Take your son (but I have two sons, Ishmael and Isaac?), your only son (Sarah and I have only one son between us), Isaac (now I know which one), whom love (well that's true, Isaac is song in my heart and the laughter of my life.)"*

How old is Isaac at this point, strong enough for a three day march and strong enough to carry wood. So a teenager or older.

*"Go to the region of Moriah."* And now the most terrifying request:

*"Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains will tell you about."*  
Can I say it again, so that no-one misunderstands, it was never God's will that Abraham go through with this request, it was a test.

We're not told how Abraham felt, but we can be sure that a sword pierced his heart when he heard the Lord's request. A burnt offering, was one where the lamb was reduced to ashes, completely given up to God. Not only can tests come out of the blue, not only can they be terrifying, they can also be utterly confusing too! "God has just called me "father of nations", how can those nations come about if the son of that promise is dead? And asking me to kill a child is completely out of character with the loving God I have come to know over the years". Some of God's tests are beyond understanding.

What did Abraham do? His obedience was breath-taking.

“Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey.”

**“Early next morning!”** brothers and sisters! You or I would have doubted, dithered, delayed and deferred, but not Abraham. “Early the next morning!”

Can you see the stooping frame of this aging saint as he cuts wood for the fire, prepares a censer of flame, finds the knife, wakes two servants and Isaac, saddles up a donkey. (I doubt very much if Abraham told Sarah what God had told him—what mother would have allowed her son to go on such a one-way journey?)

The four of them set off. For two long days they travel. What went through Abrahams tortured soul? He could not tell Isaac yet, for love always protects; and he could not explain such unfathomable things to his servants. So not only did Abraham have to bear indescribable sorrow in his heart, he could not show it on his face. Some of our deepest trials, brothers and sisters, must be endured on our own, for it is we, not wife nor husband nor friends who are being tested.

*“On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance.”*

There was no way he could allow the servants to witness the terrible deed— if they did become aware, they may well have tried to restrain Abraham, thinking he was suffering a moment of madness—so he says: *“Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.”*

*“We will come back?”* Surely you mean, *“I will come back?!”* Abraham is not tricking his servants, he’s filled with hope, for we read in Hebrews 11, *“Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.”* (verse 19)

Abraham reasoned that even if he had to go through with the terrifying deed, God would raise Isaac from the dead. Abraham was filled with confidence in the promises of God and even hope! *“We will return”* he says to his servants!

Abraham loads the wood onto Isaac’s shoulders, while he himself carries the dangerous implements of sacrifice, the fire censer and the knife.

Can you see this duo in your mind's eye? For sure none of us can imagine the ghastly agony in Abraham's heart, made worse by the fact he must hide his sorrow from Isaac. Does Isaac become suspicious? In an unguarded moment does Abraham's let slip on his face the agony of his soul? *"Father"* says Isaac to the man he trusted most in life. *"Yes my son?"* - what tender words. *"The fire and the wood are here but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"* Isaac is puzzled, something is missing.

Whether Abraham had prepared a response for that question we know not, *"God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering my son."*

Abraham is protecting Isaac all the way until the moment when he *must* reveal the secret, but perhaps he's also revealing a hope whirling around his mind, "Maybe God will provide a substitute, at the last moment, so I won't have to go through with it!"

Abraham's response seems to calm Isaac's young trusting heart and they continue, just the two of them. When they arrive at the mountain, the narrative goes into slow motion, describing each excruciating step, one by one:

*"Abraham built an altar"*—can you see him gathering stones one by one? He *"arranged the wood on it."* And then the dreaded time came for him to reveal to Isaac what they had come to do we read, *"He bound his son Isaac"*—presumably Isaac did not resist, for a lad strong enough to walk three days and carry firewood was strong enough to both fight and flee. *"He laid him on the altar on top of the wood."*

It's terrifying isn't it? And in my mind's eye I imagine heaven gone silent, and all the angels peering down to see what would happen next, because there's one more step to go, *"Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son."*

You and I will never know the anguish of Abraham's heart.

But at this very moment Abraham has passed the test, God knows that Abraham loves him more than Isaac, God knows that Abraham will trust him no matter how confusing the test. There is no need to continue and so at that very moment, an angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven: *"Abraham! Abraham!" "Here I am." "Do not lay a hand on the boy. Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."*

At that very moment Abraham noticed a ram caught by its horns in a thorn bush— so Abraham unbound his son, took the ram and sacrificed it instead, and called the place, the beautiful name, “The Lord will provide.” And then after the ram was sacrificed, perhaps a few hours later, God spoke a second time, verses 15-18. God reminded Abraham of all his past promises—and added a new one, victory over enemies, “because you have obeyed me.”

Test over, now both heaven and earth knows that a mere mortal can put God higher than the most precious things this life affords. And so Abraham returned from the high hills of divine testing, back to the humdrum of ordinary life in Beersheba.

But Abraham was never the same again. His trust in God and his goodness and faithfulness clearer and stronger than before.

Let’s draw out three brief lessons,

### **(1) A Word of Warning - don’t worship idols**

In this great story lies a warning for every believer, don’t worship idols, but only God, for only he, glorious and exalted, is worthy of our adoration and worship! We must ask, had little Isaac, Abraham and Sarah’s only son become too important to him? Was Abraham in danger of loving Isaac more than he loved God? Was that one reason for this divine test?

Recently I was in the car on the way to Wales and one of my sons put on a playlist of acoustic songs, and on came Fleetwood Macs, *Landslide*:

*I've been afraid of changin'  
'Cause I've built my life around you*

We can all understand the human meaning of such words: husband and wife depending on one another, building their lives around one another, but how careful we must be not to build our lives on shifting sand, for human families are shifting sand: “*I love you, O LORD, my strength. The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge. He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.*” (Psalm 18)

Anything or anyone we love more than God, has become an idol to us, and God is a jealous God, and he will not allow his people to worship other gods, whether it be children, husband, wife, house, money, car, sport, hobby, health, reputation, career, pleasure, education.

On Tuesday, Pep Guardiola, said *“My legacy is already exceptional!”* There is an example of the worship of success. I wonder what he thinks about his legacy after Wednesday!

All God’s good gifts have their place but the moment we love them more than we love God, the Lord is displeased. The Holy Spirit says to all of us this morning, “Put God first.”

## **(2) Words of Encouragement**

But there are many words of encouragement here, and especially for those who are passing through trials.

*It’s OK to try and figure things out as long as we don’t lean on our own understanding.* Abraham tried to work things out in his mind, “If Isaac is destined to become a great nation is killed, then God must be planning to bring him back from the dead. That’s how this trial is going to work out. I can just see it. God will raise him from the dead!”

That not what actually happened, but God has given us logical minds, which look ahead and try to work out how things will pan out. That’s OK, that’s human, provided in the end, we trust in God, rather than leaning on our own understanding.

*Tests are designed for our ultimate good.* Satan tempts to destroy, but God tests to make us stronger. *“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete not lacking anything.” (James 1)*

I remember a Christian wife saying to Yvonne how her husband was all of a sudden reading his Bible much more, “Look I’ve found this wonderful truth in God’s word today!” he’d come running to tell her! He’d rarely done that before. The cause of this spiritual renaissance? A life-threatening illness. God tests us to make us better followers of Jesus.

*"When through fiery trials  
 your pathway shall lie,  
 My grace, all sufficient,  
 shall be your supply;  
 The flame shall not hurt you  
 I only design  
 Your dross to consume,  
 and your gold to refine."*

Tests are for our good, though in the moment, they may not feel like that.

*God will never test us beyond our ability to bear.* God knew Abraham could handle this supreme test. After 30-40 years of walking with God, Abraham was ready to bear this supreme test.

*"No temptation (trial) has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will provide a way out so that you can stand up under it." (1 Corinthians 10:13)*

### **(3) A Word of Salvation**

No Christian reading this story can fail to read this story without hearing a faint echo of the greatest story of the Bible. You see two thousand years later there was another Father, who gave up his one and only Son; two thousand years later there was another Son who willingly laid down his life.

But on this occasion, there was no substitute, no ram caught in a thorn bush. This Father had to go through the pain of watching his Son cry out as he died, "My God my God why have you forsaken me?"

This story in Genesis 22, is designed to point us forward to the love of God the Father who sent his Son into the world to redeem us, and to Jesus, the Son of God who willingly laid down his life so that we can be forgiven for all the sin we have done.