The Binding of Isaac and the Faith of Abraham
Genesis 22

I recently attended a conference where Jesus hardly got a mention. Which, if it was a medical or business or research conference, would not have been surprising. But this was a conference for pastors. And I left thinking wow, that's a bit odd.

And I say that because after his resurrection, Jesus met two disciples on the road to Emmaus, and Luke tells us that 'Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, [Jesus] interpreted to them *in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself'* (Luke 24:27). Which means that the whole of the Old Testament, from Genesis on, whether it's the history of Israel, or the writing of the Prophets, or the Psalms and Proverbs, are ultimately all about Jesus.

Which is why Charles Simeon, the great 18th Century preacher, had inscribed on the inside of his pulpit the words of the men who asked Philip to introduce them to Jesus, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus" (John 12:21). It was a reminder every time he got in the pulpit, whatever part of the Bible you're preaching from, it's all about Jesus. Show them Jesus.

So, beginning today, we're taking a break from Mark's gospel and starting our summer series on Christ in the Old Testament. And we're going to look at Melchizedek the priest, and the feast of Passover, and the promises to David, and Daniel's visions, and Isaiah's Suffering Servant, and the Psalms and Proverbs, and hopefully, we're going to see Jesus.

But we're going to begin with Genesis 22 and this event known as, The Binding of Isaac.

The Call
Look at v1, 'After these things…' After what things? The things that happened in chapter 21. And Abraham is old, and so is Sarah, his wife. But after years of being barren, after years of clinging to the promise that God would give them a son, and that through that son the whole world would be blessed, in their extreme old age, Sarah had given birth to that son, Isaac.

Now are you an optimist or a pessimist? Because if you're an optimist, every cloud has a silver lining. But as every pessimist knows, every silver lining also has a cloud, and Isaac's birth set off a conflict. A conflict between Sarah and her slave girl, Hagar, who had also had a son by Abraham, Ishmael. And Sarah demanded that Abraham get rid of Hagar and Ishmael. Which, obviously, deeply upset Abraham. But as he's trying to work out what to do, God speaks to him and tells him to let Hagar and Ishmael go, because he, God, will take care of them. But he also says that the reason Abraham should let them go is "through Isaac shall your offspring be named" (Gen 21:12). That all the promises God has made to Abraham, promises that through him all families on earth will be blessed, that kings will come from him, that his offspring will be as countless as the stars, are all going to come to true through the boy Isaac.

So, back to v1, 'After these things, God tested Abraham.'

And you almost certainly know all about tests. And if you've grown up in Switzerland you definitely know about tests - beginning in primary school, with the 'can you draw a snowman?' test - which one of our daughters failed because she gave her snowman a purple nose rather than an orange one, which as we all know is against the rules. But even if you're not Swiss, you know about tests, pass or fail tests like driving tests. But there are also tests for things like paintings or precious metals, to prove they're the genuine article. And it's that kind of test God is about to put Abraham through.

Verses 1-2, God said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” 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.”

And of the many things that are striking about that, one is the similarity to God’s initial call on Abram back in chapter 12. Because back then God said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house” (12:1). Note the triplet - country, kindred, father’s house. And here he is take his son, his only son, the son he loves - also a triplet - and offer him up. Back then, Abram was to leave his home and go “to the land that I will show you”; here he is to go to Moriah and “one of the mountains of which I shall tell you” (v2). Once again, God is calling Abraham to step into the unknown.

And it’s as if God is deliberately echoing his initial call to Abraham to trust him and obey him in this, his greatest test. But what’s it a test of?

Well, firstly, it’s a test of what Abraham loves most. Verse 2 again, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, *whom you love*” and sacrifice him. And this is the son Abraham had longed for and lived for. So if ever a man loved his son, Abraham loved Isaac.

But, does he love him more than God? Is Isaac the centre of his life, is his life wrapped around Isaac, does he worship him, more than God. In the ordering of Abraham’s loves, who’s at the top, God or Isaac? Well, this test will tell, won’t it?

But it’s also a test of Abraham’s faith. Because this is the boy on whom all the promises of blessing that God has made - to Abraham and the world - depend. And if Isaac dies, the promises die with him. So will Abraham do it, or not? Does he trust that the One who makes the promises knows what he’s doing, or does he trust his own thinking, his own reasoning more? Deep down, does he really believe that when God says ‘through Isaac shall your offspring be named’ he means it and he will do it? Is Abraham’s trust in God all talk, or will it show itself in real, concrete acts of obedience?

But, of course, it’s not just Abraham who faces tests like this, is it? Have you ever found yourself struggling to give something up, even though you know you should, but you can’t because you love it - you want it - too much, more than you should, more than’s healthy, if you’re a Christian, more than God?

It might be some behaviour, or habit, or relationship. And your conscience pricks you, or someone says something, or you read something in God’s word, and you know you need to do it, but doing it will cost you. Or it’ll mean a step out into the unknown. And it’s a test - what do you love more, this or God? Whose word do you trust more, yours or God’s?

But, of course, the circumstances and trials of life can also test your faith. It’s easy to be faithful to God and say you love and trust him when life’s going well, but when it’s not - what then? As Peter writes, ‘*You have been grieved* by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith - more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire - may be found to result in praise and glory and honour.’ (1 Peter 1:7). In other words, stuff can happen to you that leaves you grieving, that’s like being put in a refiner’s fire, and when it happens, it’s a test of the genuineness of our faith.

But notice how God begins this test. Verse 1, “Abraham”. He calls him by name, because this is a God who knows him by name. Who knows you by name. And when he asks you to do something hard, when obedience and trust are costly, he’s not treating you as just another number in the system. He knows you. He knows your situation, he knows your hopes and fears. But he also knows the plans and purposes he has for you.

But however costly any call to trust and obey we might experience is, it’s nothing compared to being told to kill your son, is it?

The Cost

If you were Abraham, how would you have reacted? Would you have dismissed this voice as the devil, or as something bad you ate, or tell yourself you’re overstressed and need a holiday? Because this isn’t just senseless, and it doesn’t just contradict what God has already said, it also contradicts his character.

But would Abraham have known that? You see, the Old Testament Law with its command not to kill, and God’s abhorrence of human sacrifice, had not yet been given. And in Abraham’s day, human sacrifice was commonplace. Plenty of gods demanded it. And people really would sacrifice their children to appease the gods, and win their favour and the prosperous life they wanted.

And we look at that in horror and think, how could people do that? Except, in our culture we still do it, don’t we. Children are still sacrificed to the gods, just not gods of stone. There’s the god of ‘it’s my body, it’s my life’, the god of bodily, self-autonomy, the god of choice - the right to choose the future I want for myself. Or there’s the god of our career. And whether we deliberately set out to or not we can find ourselves sacrificing our kids to our work. I mean, how many times have my girls said, ‘Dad, you’re not listening, shut your laptop.’

And yet, however common human sacrifice was in Abraham’s day, this call was different, because what becomes clear is it’s not Abraham, or Isaac, who are going to pay the cost.

Look at v3, ‘So Abraham rose early in the morning…’ so he’s not spending days deciding what to do, his obedience is prompt, and he takes Isaac and two servants and the wood for the fire and heads for the place God will show him. And then v4, ‘On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar.’ Three days of travelling with this son whom he loves beside him, as good as dead. And then he tells the servants v5, “Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.”

So Abraham intends to go through with this. He’s going to obey God and sacrifice his son, and yet here he is telling the servants they’re both coming back. What is that? Is he just covering himself? Does he know they also love Isaac - this boy they’ve watched grow up - and they’d stop Abraham doing this if they knew the truth?

No. This is Abraham trusting God. You see, he may not know how God is going to do it, but he knows God has said all these promises are going to come to pass through Isaac - so even though Isaac is going to die, somehow he’s going to live. They’re both coming back alive.

Listen to what the writer to the Hebrews says, ‘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, of whom it was said, “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead.’ (Heb 11:17-19). So this isn’t empty talk by Abraham. This isn’t him covering himself. This is the first glimmer of hope in resurrection. That the God Abraham worships, the God who makes promises to bless the world through Isaac, must also have the power to raise the dead.

And so Abraham and Isaac start their climb up Moriah. And v6 tells us, ‘Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac.’ And though v5 calls Isaac a boy, it’s a word that could mean anything up to a young man. And so Isaac, a dead man walking, a living sacrifice, carries the wood he will die on up the hill, while his father carries the knife and fire.

And as they go, Isaac asks his father, v7, “My father!… Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb?” And Abraham replied, v8, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.”

What does he mean by that? Does he mean Isaac’s the lamb? Or that God will provide an alternative? Probably Abraham didn’t know what he meant. He just trusted that somehow God would make life come out of death. That God would be true to his promises.

And sometimes it can be the same with us, can’t it? You may not know how God will turn this situation for your good, but his word tells you he will, so he will.

And from this point on the narrative slows right down. At the start, three days pass in a sentence, now it’s as if we watch every movement in slow motion. Verse 9, ‘Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.’

As you watch that happening, ask yourself, why doesn’t Isaac resist?

He’s likely a young man, able to carry wood up a mountain. Abraham is old, over a hundred years old. Isaac could easily have overpowered him and wrenched his hands free. And yet he makes no protest. Why? Because while this is Abraham’s greatest moment of faith, of trusting God to bring life out of death, it’s also the moment that seems to tell us what it means to be *the* offspring of Abraham, the one through whom the whole world will be blessed: it’s to be a sacrifice, a victim who goes silently and willingly to the slaughter. That the one through whom all the promises and all the blessing will come must first die.

Verse 10, ‘Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son.’ But just as the knife is raised over his son, v11, ‘The angel of the Lord called to him from heaven… “Do not lay your hand on the boy.”’

So, it never was God’s intention that Isaac be sacrificed, because the God of Abraham is unlike all these other gods that demand our children. Instead, v13, ‘Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns.’ And Abraham’s trust was proved right - God had provided for himself a lamb. A substitute for Isaac.

And the writer to the Hebrews is right, Abraham, 'figuratively speaking, did receive [Isaac] back from the dead' (Heb 11:19) No wonder Genesis tells us, v14, '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."

But what will be provided? You see, the name Abraham gives the place is Jehovah Jireh, the Lord will provide. And people have taken that as a promise that God will meet all our material, financial needs - I just have to have faith like Abraham's.

And let's be clear, God *is* our gracious, abundant provider. But that isn't what this means. It means that on the mount of the Lord, a substitute will be provided. That here, in this place, God will always provide for himself a lamb for the sacrifice.

The Cross

And centuries later, David bought this place, Moriah, and Solomon built the temple on it. So it was here, on what is now Temple Mount, that day after day sacrificial lambs were slaughtered as substitutes for the people.

But it was right near here, on another hill, that another substitute was made. And if Isaac's birth was miraculous, born to a barren woman, Jesus was born to a virgin. And God called Abraham to take his son, his only son, the son whom he loved and sacrifice him. And John tells us that 'For God so loved the world, that *he gave his only son*.' (John 3:16) - the Son over whom God the Father said at his baptism and transfiguration, "This is *my* beloved Son."

And here we watch as Isaac carries the wood of the sacrifice up the hill, but in Christ we see him bearing his cross up the same hill. As the wood is laid on Isaac, so the cross is laid on Christ.

But the fire and the knife are in the father's hands. You see, in Acts Peter tells us, that though the crucifixion of Christ was the work of wicked men, ultimately, Jesus was 'delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God.' (Acts 2:23) That what happened to Jesus was 'whatever *your* hand and your plan had predestined to take place' (Acts 4:28). In other words, the fire and the knife were in the hand of God the Father.

And as Isaac's hands are bound and he is laid on the altar, Jesus' hands are nailed to the altar of the cross. But if here, as the knife is raised above Abraham's head a substitute is provided for his beloved son, where is the substitute at the cross for God's beloved Son? There is none. He is the substitute. And as the ram was caught by its head in the thicket, so Christ was crowned with thorns: because he's the lamb God has provided. Because the knife of judgement against sin did not hang over him, it hung over us. And just as it was about to fall, he stepped forward to take our place, and stretched himself out on our altar.

You see, what Abraham is called to do here is just a shadow, it's a sign pointing to what God the Father will do in Christ. And Abraham doesn't have to go through with it, but God does. Because Jesus is the ultimate Offspring of Abraham, the one through whom all the promises of blessing to the world come. And they come through his sacrificial substitutionary death.

But it doesn't end with death. Because if after three days of Isaac being as good as dead, Abraham receives him back from the dead, and Isaac rises from the altar, so on the third day Christ rose from

the grave. And *the* Son, *the only* Son, *the Son whom the Father loves*, *the* Offspring of Abraham lives.

Listen to what God promises Abraham after this episode, v17-18, "I will surely bless you… and your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed." And then listen to how Paul applies that to Christ and to you, Romans 8:31-32: 'If God is for us, who can be against us? 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?'

You see, in the offering up of his Son, our greatest enemies of satan, sin and death have been defeated. Christ has stormed their gates. Which means in him every chain of guilt has been broken, and there is complete forgiveness, even for when we've sacrificed our children to false gods.

And seeing Christ sacrificing himself for you, will cause you to sacrifice yourself for him and for others, in acts of love and service, rather than sacrificing others for yourself. As Paul writes, 'In view of God's mercy, present your bodies as a living sacrifice' (Rom 12:1). So see Jesus, and spend your life serving him by serving others.

And when you see Christ stepping into your place, as your substitute, because he loves you, you'll obey when he calls you to do that hard thing. You'll give that thing up, or you'll take that thing on, and you'll step into the unknown, because you know you can trust him. Because he always keeps his promises. He always bring life out of death. He always provides.