

Genesis 22:1

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[0 : 00] We shall turn again to Genesis 22, reading at the first verse.

And it came to pass after these things that God did tempt Abraham, and said to him, Abraham, And he said, Behold, here I am, and he said, Take now thy son, thine only son, Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah, and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains, which I will tell thee of.

Now, in some ways, Abraham has a strange and almost ambivalent role in the Old Testament.

An ambivalent role because of the ambiguity of the concept of the seed of Abraham.

At the most obvious level, that seed is referenced to the whole community of God's believing people, because all believers are, in that sense, Abraham's seed.

[1 : 40] And if we contemplate Abraham from that point of view, he is, in the Old Testament, a typical believer.

And we can reflect upon his experiences and privileges and problems in the light very much of our own experience. He is a model for ourselves.

He is an example of the way that God deals with his own people. An example also of that people's frailty, of that people's vulnerability and inconsistency.

But there is another level at which we also must reckon with this great figure, because Abraham's seed is also the Lord Jesus Christ.

Not only believers in general, but this one great specific man, the Lord of glory.

[2 : 45] If we go back into Genesis 3, we find that God's gospel takes a form of the promise of the seed of the woman.

There will come one day, God says, a great deliverer, and he is the seed of the woman. And we carry that same concept with us into the life of Abraham.

And find that this woman's seed has become now Abraham's seed. And we find in the New Testament that same thought taken up.

And that seed identified precisely with the Lord Jesus Christ. Now that means that Abraham becomes not simply an example of the Lord's own people.

He becomes involved also in that great moment of typology. In which Isaac represents the Lord Jesus Christ.

[4 : 02] And Abraham stands in the role very much of God the Father. And so we have this great tension between the man who is at one level, an example to all believers.

And yet, at another level, it's used in a very, very sore experience to lay bare to us the heart and the anguish of God himself at the moment when God offers his own son as a sacrifice for the sins of the world.

And as I kind of nervously approach this great narrative this morning, I want to try to embrace its lessons under those two great points of view.

There is a lesson in it, first of all, for ourselves as believers. But there is also for us a great window opened into the transaction of God on Calvary.

And the story becomes a mirror of God's greater love. Let us first of all take Abraham as simply a typical believer.

[5 : 31] And ask ourselves what great lessons emerged from the narrative interpreted along those particular lines. Well, surely the great lesson is that God tests the faith of his people.

God had made great promises to Abraham. And God had made great demands upon him too.

And Abraham responded with a faith which is always in the Bible, a very model of faith. And yet here we find God subjecting the faith of this man to a terrible test.

And in doing so, bringing home to us the truth that God often deals with his own people in this particular way.

There is a suffering in the life of Christians which can only be explained in terms of God testing their faith.

[6 : 52] God subjected them to stress, to pressure, to privation, to deprivation in order to bring out the quality of their faith, in order to purify that faith of all that is base and all that is unworthy.

And God endeavoring through this great means to improve and perfect and strengthen that faith, as that faith is forced to survive and to develop under conditions of appalling stringency.

Under the loss of every comfort and every earthly support, develop strengths and aptitudes of which was previously, I'm sure, totally unaware.

It is so important to note that it was God that tested his faith. It is not simply something satanic.

It is not Satan coming with a soul solicitations and allurements trying to seduce this great man of God. It is God himself.

[8 : 11] It is a demand that comes out of the heart of God. It is God's own concern to test, to probe, to try to purify the faith of this man already.

It is in so many ways a quite exemplary believer. And yet God tests him. There is a suffering that comes not from Satan, that comes not simply from blind providence, but that comes out of the heart of God.

That is all part and parcel of its own saving commitment. That is part and parcel of God's own plan for us.

That is part and parcel of God's own love for us. God tested him. God tested him. And the suffering is not merely a calamity that comes accidentally.

It is not merely a consequence of our own organic connection with an accursed race living on an accursed earth and involved corporately in the entail of sin.

[9 : 34] It is specifically God's suffering. It is specifically God's suffering. And it is specifically testing suffering. And we should also bear in mind that it is not chastisement.

I do not deny but that there is a suffering for the chastisement. It is corrective. It is within the confines of God's family disciplinary.

There is a suffering which is God's direct response to our own sin and to our own backsliding. We find, for example, that on the Old Testament church sins, God chastens that church through the other nations with war and deprivation and exile.

We find that when David sins, God chastens him in a very solemn way. We find in Hebrews 12 that we are told that that is part of God's plan, that he scourges all the sons whom he receives.

As many as I love were told in Revelation, I reprove and I chastened. And I don't at all want to deny that if we do sin, then we expose ourselves to the great risk of the eruption in our lives of the solemn chastisement of God.

[11 : 17] And how marvelous it is that as we pause for a moment to reflect upon the great variety of sources from which our suffering comes. And the great variety of objects which those sufferings are intended to accomplish.

There is a suffering that comes from Satan. We find that in Job. There is a suffering that comes to us simply because we are part of a fallen race in a fallen world.

There is a suffering which is God's punitive reaction to our own sin. But what happened to Abraham doesn't fall under any of those headaches.

Abraham's suffering comes from God. And it comes not in the form of chastening not in the form of mere calamity but it comes in the form of God's specific test.

He is there on trial. He is there to be proven and to be proven not so much to God as to be proven to himself.

[12 : 42] And in that great moment of probation not simply to be proven but to grow and to develop and to make such tremendous progress in the strength and quality of his own faith.

And what I'm saying is that the great emerging lesson is that sometimes God deals with ourselves in the same way. God tests our faith and God does it in a way that is often analogous to the way that he tests in the faith of the patriarch.

We find for example that Abraham was tested at the point of his own affection. And how this marvelous literature that point is brought home so beautifully and so movingly how in every way the uniqueness of the bond between father and son and the glorious intimacy between them and the unspeakable preciousness of this son in a father's sight how all of that is brought home.

Take thy son and offer him for a bird offering. Take thine only son take thy son Isaac whom thou lovest he is Abraham's son he is his only son he is the son whom he loves and he is told to offer him and what is the obvious barbarism of the holocaust is to take the ninth and to slay his own child and we're not talking of some primitive savage we're talking of this man who was this patent on this so eloquently expressed affection for his own offspring and it brings us back almost to that great question asked of the

Lord to Peter Simon son of Jonas love us though me more than these do you love me and it's almost God asking Abraham do you love me more than you love Isaac it is this terrible question whether we love God more than father, mother, husband, or wife, son, or daughter whether God has the place that is preeminent and that is supreme whether God is the treasure whether God is the chief end of our lives our weather our affections are so yielded within the perspectives and parameters of our earthly relationships that these are the place that ought to belong to God alone

[16 : 14] I'm not sure that God is jealous and I'm terribly conscious how close I am to the very borders of morality that's part of the glory of this whole narrative that it is almost burst in the confines of our ordinary perspectives issues but the question is a real one because the problem is a real one that so often there is an affection which involves an alienation of our heart from God so that some person some human being has the place that is properly God's alone something we will not surrender and something we would hate

God for if he asked us to surrender it something in the loss of which we would feel ourselves holly and utterly bereft that is why we cannot simply be humanists because there is this terrible demand thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart with all thy soul with all thy strength with all thy mind this great movement of unqualified devotion so that God is on the throne and there is terrible danger that if God is not on the throne if there is something else more precious if there is even some human being more precious that when that happens we are exposed terribly to the wrath and to the chastening of God and so

I'm saying that here God is searching and here in a way this morning I am searching asking searching myself searching yourselves what is there who is there that we could not surrender that we would not yield to God there are times when God has solely tested the faith of his own people in bereavement and I am not asking at all for stoves in the face of that kind of anguish but surely often that is the only answer to it and the only lunch of it I cannot say it's just one of those things when father and mother are asked in the providence of God to be deprived of a child

I can't say it's one of these things I can't say it's a mere calamity I haven't the heart to say it's a chastening I can only say it is God testing God probing and God asking it may come a less dramatic for us the surrender involved in some kind of missionary service involving sacrifice involving absence and separation God testing your faith of that particular level it is not an unknown thing for fathers and mothers to find it appallingly costly to make that sacrifice and yet surely that is the very question

God has asked what is it that we will not willingly part with what is the thing that most threatens to us to serve the place of God lovest thou me God testing our faith at the point of asking for that kind of sacrifice I have at the back of my mind very much the scenario where in our desolation we are saying we have nothing left to live for and I can imagine that kind of situation quite easily one bereavement one deprivation one terrible question asked my God and his providence and I might say

[21 : 53] I've lost all I had to live for and then I come back to this great and terrible thing that I have God to live for and that was Abraham's position I shall be your God I shall be God for you I shall be your I am your and can Abraham then say I have nothing to live for in the loss in the loss even of Isaac of tomorrow today I can make this reasonable and called illogical I am only due to my obscuring again all the conflicts that are built into this great story but I am saying that whatever the desolation whatever the loss

I have God I may stand with Job and all those multiple bereavements and those tremendous horrors and my faith then strayed to breaking point and my faith brought to the very threshold of blasphemy for my heart wants to say curse God and die and yet my faith says blessed be the name of the Lord our faith tested along the channels of her own natural affection but her faith also tested by being confronted with what is absolutely baffling because for

Abraham it wasn't only that Isaac was so precious and that he was asked to slay his own son it was that the whole situation was full of contradictions because God had said to him and Isaac shall thy seed be called and in that seed all the nations of the earth were to be blessed and you bear in mind we are not confronted with some domestic drama although I wouldn't despise that we are confronted by something that is of enormous moment to God's whole redemption purpose and God's whole purpose for the universe because Abraham was being asked not only to take the knife to his son he was asked to put the promise of

God on the altar he was being asked by God to do something which seemed to be in total contradiction of all that God had said before no more Isaac no more seed no more promise the whole covenant was to be to be thrown away the whole thing was incomprehensible God asking for human sacrifice God asking him to slay the most precious thing in the world God asking him to slay the very one around him the promises of God clustered the very one who was himself God's great promise the one on whom the whole destiny of the human race was suspended the one indeed upon whose life the whole destiny of the cosmos was suspended because had

Abraham offered Isaac you just imagine no Jacob no Israel no Lord Jesus Christ he was being asked to surrender his intellect to surrender his covenant to surrender his hope to surrender all that God had told him the whole thing was buffering I'm not pretending that there there is anything in our lives of such proportions and dimensions as that but one thing I am absolutely sure that sometimes God places us in a darkness in which there is no light light and God says live there and believe there and keep going there and keep your faith up there and

[27 : 17] I say there is no light it was like that for Abraham he had little light it was certainly like that for the Old Testament church time and time again their providence was absolutely buffering and there are situations which you may have faced or which you may yet face which will be absolutely incomprehensible where you will reel and stagger like a drunken man at your woods ends where you cannot understand why why why why there is no ethic there is no logic there is no fruit being born you can't see that you are learning any lessons you can't see there is any profit to anybody else it seems to have no entail but evil entail we're in the darkness and there is no light and all we say is thou art a god that hidest thyself o god of

Israel it may even be today although every one of you looks so calm so calm that one feels almost irrelevant preaching any message suggests difficulty but there is no art by which to read the mind's contrivance in the face and maybe there is somebody who is going through this precise situation where there is darkness and there is no light lord it makes no sense don't know why I'm here don't know why this happened don't know what this is for don't see what it's achieved don't see what good may come don't see how I can endure it it is all darkness and there is no light and yet there your faith must survive let entrust in the name of the lord and stay himself upon his god in the valley of the shadow of death you keep walking walking walking walking and sometimes all you do is hang in there and keep on going weeping may for the night endure and mourn with joy arise peace

I met a man once a great Christian man who said he wants me to hold here without smiling and for that man it would be quite incredible at one point in that pilgrimage when all was darkness to believe what were the facile words of that psalm that 30th psalm that mourn that joy arise but he did smile and he laughed and it may be for you too that it seems today it seems absolutely impossible that you could ever smile that joy could ever come with any mourning one of Abraham felt plodding plodding that terrible journey would the world ever be the same again but he hung in there and for him joy came with mourning

God and God is testing our faith by hiding himself behind the clouds of incomprehensibility let let us hang in there and let's wait I'm going to add a third thing which in some ways has little connection with the text at least indirect suggestion but to me is important and maybe relevant and that is this that sometimes God tests our faith by taking away props on which we ourselves were accustomed to lean and to rely it tests our faith along the line of our affections and tests our faith by putting us in quite incomprehensible situations and it tests our faith about removing the props

I don't know if we're often aware of how numerous the props are that keep us going but if we come back to Philippians chapter 2 for example the apostle Paul says to the church at Philippi work out your own salvation not as in my presence only but now much more in my absence in other words Paul was saying to them look while I was with you that brought some constraint that brought some pressure and you worked out your own salvation salvation but now I'm no longer with you and that prop is gone and you may be tempted to cease to work out your own salvation now that seems to me today to be some of enormous importance to know you to be and

[36 : 09] God is made of and God is asking the question to what extent was that man's religion so sure rather than spiritual and God is asking can we survive without the props without the company without the reinforcement of our own peer group it's a very interesting point too if I can just leave it on this that Abraham is tested as we are told here after these things I'm asking really when does God test and when does God stop testing because there's so much misunderstanding sometimes people imagine well God doesn't test young Christians God gives them time to mature and then God tests them but it's not that we are told

God's test may come to us at a very early point in our own experience we may just have become disciples and then at the very commencement of our faith there is the most insuperable difficulty some tragedy some problem some terrible disappointment it may come in and through the very agent whom God used to bring you to the Lord Jesus Christ I know of one young Christian converted recently through a certain ministry and within two or three days of that conversion that ministry is exposed in a terrible way to the gaze of the world and there is that young faith and it is instantaneously untried at the very commencement of his discipleship

Paul faces persecution not after he said he used to mature but in the very moment of his commitment to Christ and we can never never say look God will wait before he tests on the contrary God matures by testing it is not that God waits until you are mature before he tests but God matures by testing itself but then there is the opposite danger that we assume now we are so mature that we don't need the testing and that I'm sure was Abraham's danger and Abraham's peril until we're told it came to pass after these things here was an old man far older at this point in his life than any of us can ever hope to be and old not only in terms of years but old also in terms of experience and maturity in other words he had been tested and tested time and again he had had to leave his own native land his own people his own kindred all with which was familiar he had become a wandering nomad with no settled abode he had been involved in wars and conflicts and temptations of one kind or another he had to separate from Lot he had come in life with the kings that surrounded him and he had to go to war to rescue Lot he had all these problems he had been through the terrible experience of Sodom and Gomorrah and after these things

God tested him it's one of the great things in this life this Christian life the surprise as if just when he might expect to be sailing home quietly to glory and expecting a few years of calm and repose to prepare himself for death at that very moment there comes the greatest single crisis in his life in his closing years this man has given this terrible mountain to climb that's the way it is so often just when we least expect it and when sadly we may be least prepared for it that's when the test comes so we see that God tested

Abraham's faith but I'm going to move and look very quickly at the other dimension to this great story and that is its parabolic function as a great illustration of the cross of Calvary and all the great lessons it brings out to us let me start at the most provocative point of all and that is this the question of human sacrifice now you pick up any commentator on this great passage and they will say to you especially those who want to moralize the great lesson is that God forbids human sacrifice because God to Abraham down that road as far as he could and then God said no now I believe at once I may have sympathized with that but I feel today that the truth is so gloriously opposite and that what the narrative is saying to me is this great and terrible thing the legitimacy of human sacrifice now bear in mind what

[42 : 56] I mean God commanded a human sacrifice and had that been intrinsically wrong God would not have done so God commands it therefore it cannot be intrinsically wrong but I must go beyond that and say that the great sacrifice which God found was at last a human sacrifice and the only sacrifice for sin acceptable to God is a human sacrifice because the sin is human sin and one day God would find not simply a lamb but God would find a man and that man would become God's great sacrifice the man Christ

Jesus it is in our nature that he suffers it is in our nature that he effects reconciliation and on that great terrible ugly altar at Calvary that cross which in all its horrendousness has become God's holy place the sacrifice there is a man behold the man that is the glory it's not a ram it's not a lamb it's not the blood of bulls and of goats it is the man Christ Jesus in all the glory and all the frailty and all the vulnerability of his humanness he is there as God's holocaust as a human sacrifice another thing pointed to by this great narrative is the affection between the father and the son we take

Abraham's love for Isaac as a parable of it thy son Isaac thine only son whom thou lovest and Christ was all of these things to God he was God's son he was God's only son he was God's beloved son and we're never going to understand the glory of Golgotha until we realize the intimacy and the preciousness until we ask ourselves would we have been prepared to give our son our daughter to the cross and do we dare to think that we love our son or our daughter more than God loved his son have made our

God so much of an obstruction so inert so immobile that he has no passion left he has no wrath he has no jealousy he has no pity and God no pity as he saw his son immolated and whipped and wounded and hung dehydrated on that terrible cross and God no pity would you like to think that God wouldn't pity your son if it was your son on the cross would he not pity his own son I am made in this image that I could not hope apart from grace to retain my sanity the context of such a loss and the

God image I bear loved and pitied and felt because he loved his own son Calvary is not simply a fiction or a collision between abstract principles it isn't a case of justice and mercy having having some kind of fabulous and mythical war it's God's son God's only son God's beloved son God's eye pities and God's heart is close to breaking because there is a forsaking and a desolation in the heart of God the father as there is in the heart of God the son it is a mutual loss it is a mutual deprivation temptation

[48 : 40] I do not think I could love an abstract God I think that the humanity of Christ is the handle by which I lay hold of God and I believe that deep in God himself there is humaneness and that my own vestigial humaneness and humanity is only the image and the vestige of his we have this human sacrifice and we have this tremendously precious relationship between the father and the son we have the marvelous picture which I could have taken in under my other heading possibly two but time doesn't allow they went both of them together the father and the son towards

Mount Moriah they went both of them together and I feel that I see there God the father and God the son on that great road from Beth Rehob to Calvary both of them together I think that they're always talking I see the son carrying his own cross a point at which the gospel is specific and I hear the son saying I am not alone the father who sent me is with me and so they went both of them together at the baptism they are together at the temptation they are together in the desert and the mountains and the lake of Tiberias they are all there together in Gethsemane they are together in the judgment all they are together and they went both of them together and as he mounts the cross they are together

I am not alone but the father is with me and for some hours on the cross they are together I am not alone the father is with me he was being upheld and he was being strengthened by the eternal spirit but a point comes when that ceases a moment it may be I cannot believe it was long but for one terrible moment God the father was not there they were not together my God my God why where why is the forsaking me and if I dared if I dared one could go on to say of course

God the father was there with a knife but there was no comfort there was a presence of God but it was the presence not of consolation but of anathema the presence of his wrath it was a presence which was not togetherness and in which there was no comfort and no relief and no joy but I'm going to close with this you see the glorious words of verse five I and the Lord will go yonder and worship and come again to you come again that was the faith which sustained

Abraham God would redeem and God would salvage his promise and they would come again but I'm taking it in another way they went up that mountain both of them together the father and the son went up both together and they came down together because the cry of dereliction is not the last word my God my God why but the last word is father into thy hands I do commit my spirit and in the resurrection from the dead there is again the restoration of togetherness that Christ who says

[54 : 26] I am going to my father and that is where he is this morning he went up to Calvary with his father at Calvary his father left him and his father sacrificed him and his father did not spare him but they came down both of them together glorify thou me with thy known self with the glory I had with thee before the world was I am pretty sure today that you were left with no coherent impression I am not sure that this can be made coherent I can't pretend that I am all that concerned whether the impression is coherent or not I would normally be very concerned that it should be but there is something here that bombards my intellect much that doesn't fit much that pulls in different directions but if there is no coherence there is surely impression an impression of a god who tests her faith an impression of a god who loved his son yet did not spare a great picture of these two as they move from Bethlehem to Calvary to god's mount

Moriah but a great picture too of the two of them as they return glorify thou me with thine own self with thine own self with the glory I had with thee before the world was at the most the passage must speak to us impression mystically it may be that there itself God may give us food for our souls let us pray oh lord we ask thee to overlook all in us that is unworthy and all in us that is a contradiction of what thou word we bless thee for thy word and pray thee to bless it to us lord we thank thee for giving us some understanding and we thank thee lord for bringing us to a place where we see that there is so much that we do not and cannot understand oh lord for thy son our sacrifice for his loveliness for thy priesthood for thy self-denial for thy help given to him on the road up to

Calvary for the way thou didst talk to him and comfort him and uphold him we bless thee sanctify this day to us for his sake amen to tutto how lucky he what you took him let you Maui 1 2 0 1 2 2 1 2 tous in 1 Truth In 2 2 3 in 2 1 2 3