

The Ultimate Discovery Gen 22:1-14

Call: Ps 36:5-9 (NIV)

Scripture: James 2:21-24 (ESV)

I. Introduction

Good morning! As you know, today we come to the climax of the Abraham story, chapter 22. It is one of the most moving pieces of literature ever written. It is also one of the most wrenching texts ever written. Bruce Waltke calls it the most difficult text in the entire Bible.

Way back in early September, we began this journey with Abraham and Sarah in Genesis, chapter 12. Humanity was on a self-destructive downward spiral since the fall. And, God intervenes to right the ship. His intervention was the calling of retired people, 75-year-old Abraham and 65-year-old barren Sarah out of Ur, promising them if they attach themselves to him, he will bless them, and they will somehow become a blessing to all the families of the earth.

And, wonder upon wonder, they do it. They attach themselves to this mysterious God. We have to remember, especially for our text today, that Abraham and Sarah don't have a Bible that tells them about this mysterious God. For them, it is entirely on-the-job training, which means they are discovering a lot about this God. But, they do throw their entire weight upon this God in trust. And today's text *is* the clearest demonstration of this trust in God, as James pointed out in our Scripture reading.

But, Abraham and Sarah have not been perfect by any stretch. It certainly has been a bumpy ride hasn't it? Out of fear, Abraham lied multiple times. At other times, they took matters into their own hands to help God along. And, out of skepticism, they both laughed at God multiple times. But, they keep coming back to God because they are friends with him, and God, in his grace, keeps welcoming them back. As we have said, grace means that any prodigal can come home.

Through it all, we have learned a lot about God, his grace, his astonishing and unquenchable desire to bless humanity, and his faithfulness to his promises. Along the way, he even promises to be Abraham's God and the God of all his descendants. I think it's amazing that God would link his identity with any one person. But, from this time forward, God is the God of Abraham.

Last week, we saw God finally give the promised boy to barren Sarah, 25 long years after those initial promises were given. Isaac finally arrives. Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?

So we pick up the story today, with Abraham well over 100 and Sarah well over 90. Isaac is probably a young man. And, we come to the unsettling text of Genesis 22. "Whereas in chapter 12, Abraham and Sarah are called to cut themselves off from the past, in chapter 22, Abraham is called to cut himself off from the future" (Von Rad, 239). We have journeyed with

this couple for some 40 years and today, we will journey up Mount Moriah, to what came to be called “the mountain of the Lord’s providing” (Gen 22:14). For it is here that Abraham takes a massive risk with his most treasured possession, his promised son. But, in taking this massive risk, Abraham will make the ultimate discovery of his life.

For what underlies this story is this deeply imbedded feeling within people that there is something wrong between humanity and God, that we humans are to blame for what has gone wrong, and that we need to do something to fix it. As one writer says, “Nearly all ancient religions were built on a narrative that says we have to do something in order to get the blessings of the gods” (Smith, 40). Humanity has felt like they must do something to make peace with God, to earn God’s favor. And, typically the way to fix the problem has been to offer the right sacrifice, typically a painful sacrifice, even a sacrifice of what is treasured most. The prophet Micah articulates this feeling best when he rhetorically asks,

*“6 With what shall I come before the LORD,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
7 Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” Micah 6:6-7 (ESV)*

What shall we bring to the living God to cover the great chasm between our brokenness and his holiness. The fact of the matter is that something *does* need to be done and that something *is* very costly.

So, I invite you into our text today keeping all that in mind. And, this morning, what I want to do is simply tell the story as if we are living it. And, I’ll make comments along the way as I walk through it.

II. The Test (Gen 22:1-2)

One day, the God whom Abraham had come to trust, shows up again and speaks. The narrator tells us that this is a test for Abraham. Abraham doesn’t know that. And, the message from God this time is devastating.

“Abraham” (22:1)!

“Here I am!” Abraham’s words here in the Hebrew mean, “I’m available and at your service Lord.”

“Abraham, Take your son” (22:2). This phrase can literally be rendered, “Please take,” implying that God feels the weight of the words he is about to say.

“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.” (ESV)

This is the scariest verse in the Bible. All Abraham’s adult life, he had hoped for a son to carry on his name. For most of he and Sarah’s married life, they had been unable to conceive. And, for 25 years since those initial promises, they waited and hoped. Finally, Isaac was born. Abraham’s memory goes back to that joyous day.

Then come the devastating words that stab him through the heart, *“offer Isaac as a burnt offering,”* “sacrifice your son.” As Abraham replays the words through his mind, he tries to see if maybe he heard God wrong. Could God have said, Eliezer, his servant? Or, maybe God said, Ishmael, a true son, but not the son of promise. Maybe he heard God wrong? But after replaying the words again and again and again, Abraham becomes convinced that God said Isaac. What did Abraham do at that moment when he concluded that God said Isaac? What would you do?

I’m sure he was shaken. I bet he cried. For one thing though, he was not as surprised as we may be 4000 years later. For human sacrifice and particularly child sacrifice was widely practiced in Abraham’s day, even among his people who boasted of superior cultural achievements. As one Old Testament scholar writes, “One of the sadder aspects of Canaanite archaeology is the constant recurrence of infant skeletons buried beneath the thresholds of city gates and houses, evidence of the tiny lives that had been sacrificed to ward away evil and ensure divine protection” (Vawter, 255).

That a god would command such a sacrifice, Abraham almost expected. Maybe this is why Abraham doesn’t question God? It is curious to many people that he questions God about the destruction of Sodom, but does not question God here. But, I think the real shock for Abraham was probably due to the fact that this God had already invested so much in this specific boy. Isaac was the son of promise. Isaac was the son born by supernatural intervention. Isaac was the son through which the great promise to bless all the families of the earth would be fulfilled. And, *he* is to be offered up on the alter? The whole point of God calling Abraham and Sarah out of Ur; the whole point of waiting and trusting for so long is negated in this one monstrous command!

So what is God doing here? It is a difficult passage, and we struggle to find the right framework to understand it. But, could it be that God is taking Abraham deeper into his character? Could it be that God is teaching Abraham more things about himself? Years before, God had made that incredibly wonderful promise to Abraham, “I will be God to you and your descendants” (17:7). Abraham, I will be God to you! As we talked about when we studied chapter 17, God is telling Abraham that he is placing all that he is and all that he has at Abraham’s disposal. All of his grace, all of his power, all of his wisdom, all of his goodness, all of his mercy - everything that is packed into that word “God” was being given to Abraham.

And, now, *“Sacrifice your son.”*

After Abraham cried, I can imagine him saying to himself in resignation, “I knew it! I knew there had to be a price! I can have God as my God only if I pay the ultimate price of sacrificing my most treasured possession to him.”

Abraham now had to try to sleep. I can imagine all night long, Abraham is reliving all his memories with Isaac. He remembers the day Isaac is born. He remembers how he and Sarah laughed out loud together. Neither of them could contain their joy and wonder! Abraham remembers getting up in the middle of the night to Isaac’s crying. He remembers how he would sit down in the chair and rock him back to sleep. He remembers Isaac’s first day of school. He remembers the first time he had played football with Isaac. He remembers that first time talking with Isaac about girls. Just last week, he had taught Isaac how to drive a car.

“Sacrifice your son.”

Abraham tried but he couldn’t sleep. What was he to do? Abraham had come to trust this God. This God had delivered him out of other difficult and seemingly hopeless situations. Remember Egypt? What was he to do now?

III. The Journey (Gen 22:3-5)

Early the next morning after the sleepless night, Abraham decides to trust this God, or at least begin the journey. He gets up, saddles his donkey, splits wood for the burnt offering, grabs two of his servants and Isaac, and leaves for Moriah (22:3). The narrator is very specific about the actions.

Most commentators agree that he left early in the morning so that Sarah would not know. Can you imagine the mother’s grief if she had known? Standing at the doorway, waving good-bye to her husband and son as they disappear over the horizon?

It is about 45 miles from Beersheba, where they are living at this time, to Mount Moriah. Forty-five miles means it would take 3 days to make the trip. So, for three long days, Abraham and Isaac, father and son, ride together, side by side (22:4).

What did Abraham think about as they rode together? I’m sure that was two more restless nights for him. I bet he had nightmares. He had walked through the entire process of preparing sacrifices many times. He had killed the animals and watched the life drain out of them. He had placed them on the altar and watched them get consumed by the flames. All of that must have been going through his mind as they make this journey. But, what did he feel when he looked over at his son Isaac, the one that he loves, proudly riding on this journey with his father?

The New Testament does give us some insight into his thinking those three days. In Hebrews 11, we read this: *“Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead”* (Heb 11:19, NIV). Abraham “reasoned” that God could raise the dead. In other words, Abraham used his brain in

the face of this monstrous command. He wasn't taking a blind leap of faith here. This God had made a promise of offspring. And this God had actually sealed the promise in a blood covenant (15:7). This God had laid his own reputation on the line. Indeed, this God had laid his life on the line! And, this promise was linked to a son, to a son called Isaac (17:19). God had specifically said, *"Through Isaac shall your offspring be named"* (21:12). Through Isaac! Through Isaac! And, with Isaac's birth, Abraham had seen first-hand that God could bring dead things to life, for God had brought Sarah's dead womb to life. In addition, God and Abraham were friends, as James said in our scripture reading. They have a relationship based on trust. So, for three long days, *"Abraham reasoned that God would raise Isaac from the dead"* in order to keep his promise. Somehow God would give Isaac back! Somehow! Someway!

And, after three long days, they finally arrive at the mountain, Mt. Moriah. Abraham then expresses in words what he has been thinking for three days. He says to his servants, verse 5: *"Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you."* (ESV)

Here is an incredible statement of faith, the fruit of three days of reasoning, of considering and of logically concluding! The ESV doesn't translate all the pronouns, but they are there. Listen carefully, verse 5 says this with the pronouns: *"Stay here with the donkey, and I and the boy will go over there. "WE" will worship, and then "WE" will come again to you."* Did you hear that? *"We" will come again to you!"* Somehow, somehow, somehow, *"we will come again to you!"* Somehow God will make this work to give Isaac back! It's a great statement of faith from Abraham.

IV. The Obedience (Gen 22:6-10)

Abraham takes the fire and the knife, places the wood on his son Isaac and on they go, father and son, together (22:6). Up the mountain they go. And, at this point, you have to feel for Isaac. He is now carrying the wood for his own sacrifice on his back.

Little did he know that he was pre-figuring another Son, who at another time, would climb another hill, carrying the wood beam of his own cross on his back (Jn 19:17).

Together they continue up the mountain. Each step must have felt heavier and heavier, especially for Abraham. What did he say to his son as they climbed on? What would you say?

When they reach the top of the mountain, the question that Abraham dreaded for three days finally comes out of Isaac's mouth, *"Father, behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering"* (22:7)?

Had he not been thinking of this question the entire trip? He had watched his father diligently prepare for this religious ceremony. He had watched his father split the wood. He may have helped. He watched his father gather the hot coals. He had watched his father sharpen the knife. But he noticed his father had not taken any animal along to sacrifice.

“Father, behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb” (22:7)?

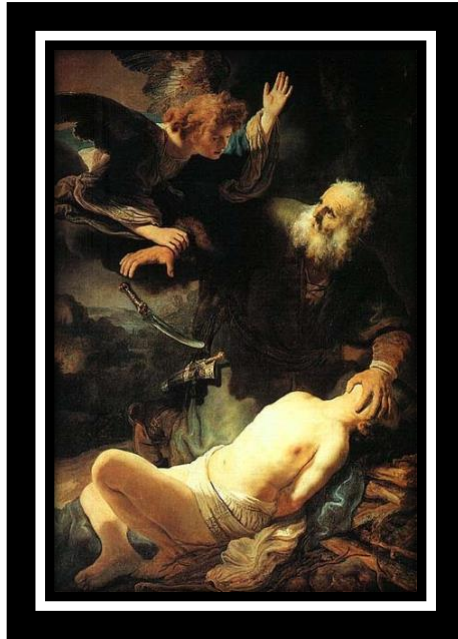
It is then that Abraham makes his greatest statement of faith. He had already reasoned that God would somehow resurrect his son from the dead. But, now, he reasons that God wouldn't make him go through with the sacrifice. In “hope against hope,” as Paul says in Romans 4:18, Abraham dares to trust God at his word. He promises Isaac, *“God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son” (22:8).*

“God will provide Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.”

Unbelievable! Abraham has no clue how God is going to do it. But, he reasons that this God, whom he had come to love and trust, is a different kind of God. He's a different kind of God.

Abraham then makes the final preparations (22:9). The author of Genesis slows down the pace and captures every detail of Abraham's actions. Abraham gathers a few stones and heaps them up to form a makeshift altar. Silently but deliberately, he takes the wood off Isaac's back. He lays the sticks on the stones. He then approaches Isaac. He turns his son around, his only son, the son he loves. He binds his hands behind him. He stoops down and ties a rope around Isaac's feet. Without speaking, he lifts his son up and lays him on the altar. He then picks up the knife and raises it over his head.

His heart beating wildly, tears streaming down his face, the words that he just spoke to Isaac pounding through his head, *“God will provide himself the lamb my son.”*



Over the years, artists have tried to capture this moment in their paintings. Perhaps Rembrandt does it best. I've been told that he took another painting of this scene and altered it in two significant ways. First, he painted Abraham's hand over Isaac's eyes. Of course, he would do that. Who would want their son to see their dad in this moment? Secondly, he painted Abraham's hand open. The knife is not in his hand. It's as if the knife was so loose in his hand, it came out very easily. Perhaps Rembrandt is trying to say that every muscle in Abraham's hand is "hoping against hope." That's the greatness of Abraham's faith. He trusted that this God would not demand this sacrifice. This God is a different kind of God.

So, Abraham raises the knife. I know he's a different kind of God. I must be ready. I must be ready to drop the knife when this God stops me. He begins to move his arm. He's gonna stop me. He's gonna stop me. He's gonna stop me.

V. God Intervenes (Gen 22:11-14)

"Abraham!! Abraham!!" (22:11)

Before the angel finishes speaking, the knife is out of his hand.

"Here I am!!"

"Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him" (22:12).

And, joy flows! I knew it! I knew it! I knew this was a different kind of God! And, Abraham turns around and there caught in the thicket by his horns is a ram (22:13). And, in place of his son, a substitute is provided. Abraham offers the ram as the burnt offering.

VI. Implications

A. The Unconditional Love of God

In that moment of massive risk, Abraham makes the ultimate discovery. He discovers the unconditional, free love of God. For God had told him, *"I will be God to you. All that I am I give to you."* But, lurking in the back of his mind was the feeling that something needed to be done to earn God's favor. Something had to be done to earn God being his God. Something had to be done to make God like him. It's what he grew up with. It's what the culture around him had told him for his entire life. You have to do something to make God like you. You have to do something to earn God's approval. In order for you to have God as your God, you need to offer up that which you treasure most.

And, in radical trust, Abraham went up that mountain ready to make that sacrifice if he had to. He went up that mountain willing to please God by giving God his most treasured possession. And, on that mountain, he discovered that, yes, a sacrifice is necessary. But, what he discovered is that God Himself, out of his great love, provides the sacrifice. God himself provides the lamb.

Abraham discovered that the living God is a different kind of God. God is not a God that demands from us what we treasure most. God doesn't want Abraham's dead son. God doesn't want Abraham's cattle, or money or tent or camels. God put Abraham through this horrific test to teach him one thing: that God doesn't want anything from Abraham. God loves him unconditionally. All God wants from Abraham is Abraham! What we discover in this story is how to please the living God. It's not by sacrificing what we treasure most. It's by throwing all of our weight onto God in love and trust and obedience. All God wanted from Abraham is Abraham. And, all God wants from me is me! All God wants from you is you! And, the fact of the matter is - when he has us, he has everything else. When he has me, he has all my money. When he has me, he has all my time. When he has me, he has all my stuff. All God wants from us is us!

B. God is For Us

In scripture, Abraham is called a prophet (Gen 20:7). Was he aware of the wonder of his words, *"God will provide himself the lamb my son?"* It turns out that in those words, Abraham is prophesying. Those are God's words.

Two thousand years later, the same God, who stopped Abraham from thrusting the knife into Isaac, was born into this world as one of us, as a little baby in a manger in Bethlehem. The boy grows up and when he is around 30 years old, he gets baptized by John the Baptist. At his baptism, these words from his Father, are heard from heaven, *"This is my Son, my only Son, the one that I love"* (Matt 3:17). And, a few days later, John the Baptist sees this beloved Son walking toward him. And, pointing at Jesus, he says, *"Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world"* (Jn 1:29).

A few years later, on another mountain called Golgotha, within eyesight of Mt. Moriah, God the Father delivered up God the Son, but this time did not stop the action. The agony of God the Father had been mirrored in Abraham's agony. And, the submission of God the Son had been mirrored in Isaac's submission.

There *is* a price for having God as our God. A relationship with God is free, but, it is not cheap. It is very costly, for a price must be paid. A sacrifice does need to be offered. But, wonder of wonders, the living God pays the price himself, by offering himself as the sacrificial lamb. *"God will provide himself -- the lamb -- my son."* God will provide himself, the lamb, who takes away the sin of the world, my son.

And, that act eternally declares what Abraham had hoped against hope, that God is a different kind of God, that He is for us! As Paul says, *"What then shall we say to these things, that he who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all? If God is for us, who can be against us?"* (Rom 8:31-32). Abraham did not have to sacrifice his son to enjoy a relationship with God. Abraham did not have to sacrifice his son to enjoy the love of God, because God would sacrifice his son.

C. We say with Abraham, "Here I am"

Paul will also say in Romans: *"1 Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship"* (Rom 12:1, NIV).

A living sacrifice! The only dead sacrifice acceptable to God has been given... AND HE'S ALIVE!

On the mountain of the Lord, it was provided. Everything that needed to be done for us to enter into and enjoy life eternal with God was provided. *"Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world"* (Jn 1:29). *"In view of God's mercy, I urge you to present yourselves as living sacrifices"* (Rom 12:1).

All God wants from you is you. All God wants from me is me. So we conclude our study by saying what Abraham said when the Lord called him, "Here I am Lord. I'm available and at your service."

Amen.

Benediction

Go now in the tracks of Abraham's trust,
trusting in the living God,
who promises to be your God,
all his love and grace and mercy and presence with you forever.
Trust in him with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding,
knowing that he will make all things work for good for those who trust in him.

Resources

Baldwin, Joyce, *The Message of Genesis 12-50 (The Bible Speaks Today Series)*

Johnson, Darrell. Thanks to Darrell and his preaching class for this sermon idea for this difficult text.

Smith, James Bryan. *The Good and Beautiful God*

Vawter, Bruce. *On Genesis: A New Reading*

Von Rad, Gerhard. *Genesis: A Commentary*