

This is one of the stories in the Bible that shows that although the various parts of the Old and New Testaments were written by different people, people from different backgrounds and with different experiences of God and each having his own particular style, despite all these things this book holds together as a complete work put together under the inspiration and guidance of a God in complete control, a God who has planned exactly which words would become known as ‘The Holy Scriptures’.

I want to split this morning’s talk into two, firstly looking at what the **first** readers of this story would have taken from it before Jesus’ birth, lessons they would have learned and which we **also** need to learn; and then secondly looking at it from our standpoint now, having the privilege of living after Jesus’ earthly life, and of having in our hands the **complete** Word of God. From either standpoint there are wonderful messages for us here this morning.

I think this is one of those occasions when we as readers are drawn into the story – we can feel our emotions being pulled this way and that; we feel horror perhaps at what God asks Abraham to do; we feel amazement – maybe disbelief - at Abraham’s response; we fear what is going to happen as the knife is raised; then we are overcome with joy at the final outcome. We go on a roller coaster of a ride. (I don’t really like that expression, because all **I** feel on a roller coaster is very sick! But you know what I mean!)

The effect of this chapter is like when you’re listening to one of those radio programmes telling a story with soft music playing in the background, then suddenly something happens and you hear the scratch of the needle going over the record and the music stops. You say, ‘What’s that? What’s happening?’ Something has spoilt the flow.

Abraham’s journey with God has progressed with only minor hiccups up to now – but this account pulls us up smartish.

You’ll remember how in chapter 12 of Genesis we meet Abram. We see how God tells him to leave Ur, a town in modern day Iraq. When we were learning about this at school when I was little, my teacher asked my friend Ashley why Abram left Ur; he thought for a little while, and then said, “Because he didn’t love her any more”!

No. God tells him, *“Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you.”* Genesis 12:1. And then we follow Abram as he goes where God directs him, and along the way God speaks to him, and promises the land to him and his offspring. He says in chapter 13, verse 15, *“All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring for ever.”*

As Abram continues, as God makes wonderful promises to him and his offspring, Abram wonders how this is going to be, because he is getting old and he has no son. But God says to him one night, *“Look up at heavens and count the stars ... so shall your offspring be.”* Genesis 15:5. Abram believed and later, in chapter 17, God makes a promise to Abram, that he will be the father of many nations, and we see his name changed from Abram to Abraham, which means ‘father of many’.

And this was to begin with a son being born to him and his wife Sarah, although he was 100 and she was 90 years old. (All things are possible with God). Through Isaac God was going to bless many nations. God was going to Abraham’s God, Isaac’s God and the God of Isaac’s many descendants after him. God promised many blessings forever through Isaac.

And so here we hear the needle scratch across the record, the music stops when we read verse 2 of chapter 22, *“Then God said, ‘Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.’”*

‘Hang on’, we think, ‘How can God ask Abraham to sacrifice his son, if He has promised earlier to use him as the father of many descendants. It certainly seems to go totally against **all** that God has promised to Abraham. And apart from that, isn’t it cruel - even barbaric that a father should be asked to sacrifice his long-awaited and much loved son?’ That’s the way **we** feel, don’t we? How can this be right?

But notice, that’s **not** the way **Abraham** responds. We as readers are told that God tested Abraham in verse 1, but God doesn’t tell **him** that. This is a command from God, and Abraham obeys. Abraham didn’t complain, he didn’t argue or bargain with God; we don’t read that he questioned the command or tried to get out of it. No, instead we read, *“Early next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey.”*

His obedience was immediate and full. There **have** been occasions **before now** that Abraham hasn’t obeyed God immediately or fully – but he has learned down the years – God commands, Abraham obeys.

So we see Abraham rising early and journeying for 3 days the 60 miles from Beersheba in the south of the country to the mountains in the region of Moriah, near Jerusalem – following God’s command to the letter. He goes **willingly**, doesn’t tell anyone what he’s going to do – this is between Abraham and his God. There’s no thought of “what am I going to tell the wife when I come home without Isaac” - he **will** obey God.

Well, how about us? (I include myself) Are we as willing to obey God, no matter what he asks of us? Is our response as immediate as Abraham’s? Or do we try to put things off as long as we can? That job to do; that person to have a word with; to read the Bible more; to spend more time in prayer; to do those things we know we should be doing, but we don’t really feel like. Someone once said that ‘Delay is the craftiest net of Satan.’ If Satan can get us to put off obeying God, he’s nearly won the battle – the temptation is to wriggle our way out of it.

Abraham teaches us here that if we are children of God, we should not delay to obey our God – commentator Matthew Henry said, ‘love is the root, obedience the fruit.’ God’s love for us and our love for him should result in trusting obedience. Not even Abraham’s love for Isaac is to get in the way of his unwavering obedience to God. God sees his obedient heart, and in the end does not require him to carry out the sacrifice. We read in 1 Samuel 15:22; “*Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice,*”. God sees our heart, our obedient or disobedient heart. God wants us to have obedient hearts. How is it with you, how is it with me? Let’s respond to God’s voice, let’s apply God’s word in the Bible to our lives, let’s **obey God**.

I said earlier that God tested Abraham, but **he** didn’t know it was just a test. So how was this man capable of such obedience? Even if it meant having to sacrifice his son, his only son, the one he loved?

Well, we see that Abraham has a trusting faith in a faithful God. But even to the extent of sacrificing his son? Yes, Abraham trusts wholeheartedly in God.

Here in verse 5 he says to his servants, “*Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.*” Having been commanded by God to sacrifice his son, does he say this just to keep the servants happy – ‘It’s OK, we’ll be back in a minute’? I don’t think so.

When Isaac asks him in verse 7, “ ‘ *where is the lamb for the burnt offering?*’ *Abraham answered, ‘God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.’*” Does he say that just to keep the boy happy - ‘Don’t worry – everything will be OK’? Again, I don’t think so. I believe his answers go deeper than that.

A couple of verses in Hebrews chapter 11, verses 17-19 help us here; “*By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him ‘It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.’ Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.*”

So you see, Abraham had such intense faith in his God, that he trusted him to provide – although God has promised to bless many nations through Isaac, Abraham doesn’t see a problem with God then asking him to sacrifice Isaac. God is all-powerful – he can provide the solution to any and every problem. What faith! What trust!

**We** need that faith, don’t we? **We** need to know that trust in our lives. Whatever problem we face, we need to know that The Lord will provide. Abraham is asked to give up what he **dearly loved**, and sometimes we’re asked to do the same, and it’s difficult, isn’t it? Sometimes we’re asked to make sacrifices, sometimes our obedience to God means that we may have to give up something we dearly love, and it’s hard. But when we give to God what he asks, we find that God gives us back more than we could ever ask for or imagine. And the eternal benefits of God’s blessings far outweigh the things we have to sacrifice.

Are we holding things back from him? Are we unwilling to make sacrifices for God? Are there times and areas where we say, ‘So far, but no farther.’ Or are we holding back **everything** from God – is it that we don’t want to let him have **any** place in our life? What’s holding us back? Abraham here was asked to sacrifice his only son and **he** trusted God to provide – surely **we** can do the same? Can’t we trust God to provide for us completely? I believe we can.

Trusting faith. The Lord will provide. In Philippians, Paul writes, “*And my God will supply all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.*” Phil.4:19. Let’s **trust God** to provide all we need. We can – our lives are secure in God’s hands.

But there is another person involved in this story – Isaac – what can we learn here from **him**?

Isaac has a part to play in Abraham's act of obedience. If he had refused, or somehow managed to escape from his father's control, then his father would have failed the test, wouldn't he?

Anybody who has tried to get a toddler to lay there having its nappy changed without having to chase them around the room will know that with the best will in the world there are times when the child just won't! Try to cut your child's hair without them fidgeting so that the fringe goes up at one end. Get a teenager to tidy their room? No chance!

Isaac is here probably in his teenage years and what do we read in verse 9? "*He [Abraham] bound his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.*" Abraham is 100 years old - if Isaac had not been willing to go along with what he was doing, I'm sure he could easily have legged it!

I don't believe that Isaac was so naïve not to know what was happening here – he knew alright – and he willingly submitted to his father's will. He **could** have resisted, he **could** have escaped, but no, he surrendered to his father's will.

I'm sure that Abraham will have told Isaac all about his great God, all he has done for them, and the promise of a wonderful future taken care of by an almighty and merciful God. So there will have been conflicting emotions running through Isaac's mind too. But his innocent hands are bound, he is prepared for sacrifice, not knowing what the outcome will be.

Here we see Isaac putting his life totally in his father's hands, knowing that God has promised him a wonderful future but not knowing how he's going to achieve it.

And our lives are like that, aren't they? God has promised eternal life for those who trust in Him, but we don't know what we're going to go through before we get there. We have to submit ourselves to our Heavenly Father, to God, and trust Him for all that's to come.

In Matthew's gospel we read, "*But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well,*" Matthew 6:33. We need to do the will of God, go God's way, and all the other things we need, will be provided by Him. 'Those who abandon themselves to God will never find themselves abandoned by God.'

Abraham called that place 'The Lord will provide'. God gave him a test. In trusting and obedient faith, Abraham passed the test. Abraham submitted to God's will; Isaac submitted to his father's will. **Trust, obedience and submission.** We do well to take Abraham's and Isaac's example here, in order to live fulfilled lives before God.

(Trust and obey, for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus.)

Christians believe that there are references to Jesus Christ in the Old Testament as well as in the New. There are passages, stories, references in the Old Testament which talk about Jesus' life, death and his kingdom. Non-believers would say that with hindsight, it's easy to make things look as though they refer to future events, even though they weren't intended to. Just co-incidence.

But the story we're looking at this morning most **certainly** has a greater significance than just the story of Abraham and Isaac. You can't fail to see it, surely. We see parallels here with the death of Jesus Christ many thousands of years later. Why is this important? Because it helps us to understand what was happening on the Cross at Calvary, that first Easter, when Jesus the Son of God died.

Malcolm Muggeridge, some will remember, wrote of Jesus' death, "It was manifestly the most famous death in history. No other death has aroused 1/100 part of the interest, or been remembered with 1/100 part of the intensity and concern as the death of Jesus of Nazareth." [The Observer, 1967] Lots of people were crucified by the Romans, but we hear nothing about any of them. Jesus' death was different.

John the Baptist refers to Jesus as "*the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*" John 1:29. Sin, the Bible says, is anything which stops us giving God his rightful place in our lives, anything which means we neglect God. If we are not for God, we are against God, because we are going our **own** way, not His.

So how does Jesus **take away** the sin of the world? What does Genesis 22 tell us?

As we look at Abraham, we see God the Father – how willingly the Father goes to sacrifice his son, his **only** son, the one he **loves**. "*God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son,*" John 3:16.

God the Father willingly sacrificed his only Son, to save men, women and children to eternal life. The huge difference between Abraham's action here and God's action is that God **went through** with **His** sacrifice of His Son; Isaac was spared.

As God provided the ram for sacrifice in place of Isaac, the ram hadn't wandered there by mistake, God provided it so that Isaac could be spared. God has provided the Lamb of God – his own Son - for sacrifice so that we could be spared. The Lord has provided. God is a merciful and gracious God, he has provided the sacrificial Lamb, so that we may escape and be made free.

We look at Isaac, and we unmistakably see a foreshadowing of Jesus – the only Son, much loved, unique in His Father's affections. Isaac carries the wood for his sacrifice up the mountain; on the way to Calvary, Jesus carries his own cross (John 19:17). As we have seen, Isaac shows submission to his father's will; Jesus shows perfect obedience and submission to God His Father as he offers himself up to sacrifice, even death on the cross. Jesus' sacrifice was the sacrifice to end all sacrifices – Jesus paid the full price for sin, there was and is no need for more. *"It is finished!"* he cried.

Isaac was spared. The ram provided by God was sacrificed. Jesus **wasn't** spared. Jesus died. The Lamb of God was sacrificed, *"that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life."* John 3:16.

Through Abraham and Isaac and their descendants God has fulfilled his promise and has blessed many nations. Through their greatest descendant Jesus God has brought salvation and eternal life to **all** nations. What a wonderful story.

What about the place? Abraham was asked to sacrifice his son on a mountain in the region of Moriah. In 2 Chronicles 3:1 we read, *"Then Solomon began to build the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where the Lord had appeared to his father David."* This was no ordinary place, it was the place where God appeared to King David, it was the place where King Solomon built his great temple. It was the place, on a hill just outside the city gates, where Jesus was crucified.

The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.

I will sing of the Lamb, of the price that he paid for me.