



The Round Church at
St Andrew the Great
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 25th July 2004
by Mark Ashton

10p

Genesis chapter 22:1-19

Introduction: Testing

Some time later God tested Abraham (v 1a). We might wonder why that was necessary when we remember how Abraham had already had his faith and patience tested through year after year and decade after decade, as he waited for God to fulfil the promise that Abraham would have a son through whom all the nations on earth would be blessed. But then we've all known what it is to have our patience tested, haven't we? How about, for example, telephone calls to businesses and government offices where they make you pass through dozens of automated responses before you can reach a living voice? That tests patience, doesn't it? Perhaps you remember the Warner Brothers at the Grafton Centre system here in Cambridge where they used to promise you that "Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*' would soon become a thing of the past"? It began to feel like 400 seasons sometimes! We have all known what it is to have our patience tested. And Abraham knew that experience to the nth degree. But eventually, after a quarter of a century, and when Abraham was 100 years old, the promised son was born—at the beginning of the previous chapter (chapter 21 which we studied last week).

And now, this far greater test: *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"* (v 2). Shocking, not to say repulsive, to our way of thinking; a demand that went clean contrary both to human reason and to the divine purpose. But if this order from God surprises and appalls us, then all the more reason to ponder it carefully, as we think: what sort of a God is this whom Abraham worshipped? Could He possibly be my God? We've already discovered in this sermon series the

The Promise Tested

reality of the relationship that Abraham had with God: it developed through doubt and testing, far more than through certainty and comfort. And doesn't that sound like you and me? Those of us here this evening who are believers would testify to the truth of that in our own experience. And even non-believers present may have found that suffering and trial raise questions about the meaning of life and make the things of eternity more urgent rather than less. So let's consider first,

1) The Nature of the Test (vv 1-10)

a) Human Relationships and faith in God

It tested Abraham at the point of one of his most intimate human relationships. *Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. 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"* (vv 1-2). And the slow, detailed, almost plodding way the story is told increases the dramatic tension and heightens our sense of how Abraham must have suffered. *Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. He said 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."* *Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife* (vv 3-6a). What

emotional pain there must have been for him as he had to put his trust, not in the promised son whom he had finally received from God and whom he so dearly loved, but in the God who had made that promise to him in the first place! Not in the promise, but in the promiser.

And for how many of us is the greatest threat to our relationship with God our relationship with some other human being! It may be a non-Christian boy-friend or girl-friend; but it does not have to be that sort of relationship, between Christian and non-Christian, it may be any person—children (or the hope of children), parent, friend—who has a place in my affections that should be reserved for God Alone. There is only one place the true and living God can occupy in your and my life, and that is centre-stage, on the throne of my life. Anywhere else and He is not God for me. Once He has that position, all other relationships fall into place and become more healthy. I was once talking about the Christian faith with my mother, and she said to me “If you are telling me that I should love God more than I love your father, my husband, I couldn’t do it.” That conversation was 30 years ago and I have been haunted with regret ever since that I did not give her the right reply: “If you did love God more than you love my father, your husband, you would actually love my father a lot more than you do at the moment”.

Abraham knew there was only one place that God could have in his life. And, if he gave God that place, other relationships would fall into place.

As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, “Father?” “Yes, my son?” Abraham replied. “The fire and wood are here,” Isaac said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them went on together (vv 6c-8). The repetition of that little clause “the two of them went on together” gives a special poignancy to this brief conversation. It is a sort of centrepiece to the story. The route up the mountain is now too steep for the donkey, and so father and son scramble up alone perhaps in an awful silence. Clearly Abraham is still concealing the true purpose of the journey: *Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, “Father?” “Yes, my son?” Abraham replied. “The fire and wood are here,” Isaac said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt*

offering?” (v 7). And we do not know quite what Abraham meant by his reply: *Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them went on together* (v 8). But it is clear that Abraham refused to impose his understanding of how God ought to act on to God. His task was to obey.

b) Human Obedience and Faith in God

“When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son” (vv 9-10). This was not just his dearly loved only son, Isaac was also the incarnate expression of God’s promise. Kill him and Abraham had nullified the purposes of God for the human race. But Abraham did not trust his own understanding of the matter. He trusted God. There are some physical activities that require you to do the opposite of what your natural instinct tells you to do. If you have ever water-skied, you will know the importance as a beginner of keeping your arms straight, even though your instinct is prompting you to bend your arms to pull yourself up. In fact, there are many examples like that. If you have ever rolled a canoe over, you will have known instantaneous, total, blind panic—the one thing that will guarantee you don’t manage to roll the canoe upright again! Faith teaches us to over-ride our natural instinct, to disbelieve what the world tells us we should do, and to trust the word of God instead. So let us consider,

2) The Outcome of the Test (vv 9-12)

In his New Testament letter, James cited this incident as the model of true faith: *Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend* (James 2:21-23). Faith is as much an action as an attitude of mind. The patience Abraham had displayed for those 25 years of waiting was not a complete demonstration of faith. Nor would it have been a mere mental willingness to sacrifice his son. No! Abraham had to journey those 3 days to Mount Moriah, build an altar, bind Isaac, and put the knife to his throat. *But the angel of the LORD called out to him from*

heaven, *“Abraham! Abraham!” “Here I am,” he replied. “Do not lay a hand on the boy,” he said. “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”* (vv 11-12). The matter was safe all the time, though it did not feel safe to Abraham. Forgive me a long quote from Calvin—the very worst thing on a summer evening at this point in a sermon—“Whenever the Lord gives a command, many things are perpetually occurring to enfeeble our purpose: means fail, we are destitute of counsel, all avenues seem closed. In such straits, the only remedy against despondency is to leave the event to God, in order that he may open a way for us when there is none. For as we act unjustly towards God, when we hope for nothing from him but what our senses can perceive; so we pay Him the highest honour, when, in affairs of perplexity, we nevertheless entirely acquiesce in his providence. We dishonour God when we don’t trust Him to work miraculously, if He chooses to do so” Not just in my life, but also in the lives of others, it is when we reach the impasse, the dead end, the cul de sac, that is the destruction of all our hope—then God can work in a unique way when the prospect for us is black despair, He can work—Sorry that is slightly complex, but I think it contains medicine for the trouble Christian soul.

Let us consider,

a) The Provision of a Substitute (vv 12-14)

*“Do not lay a hand on the boy,” he said. “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.” Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place **The LORD Will Provide**. And to this day it is said, **“On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided”** (vv 12-14). The word translated boy can equal ‘youth/young man’. Isaac was by this time at least a lively teenager, and quite probably in his early 20s, well capable of escaping from a man well over one hundred years old who clearly now planned to kill him. So Isaac must have agreed to being bound and laid on the altar. Isaac always seems to me to be strangely characterless among the patriarchs. Doesn’t he to you? When you set him alongside his father, Abraham, or his son Jacob, or even his grandson Joseph. All type ‘A’*

personalities, taking size 10 in character. But in his quiet, passive, undistinguished way Isaac actually demonstrates for us more vividly than any other of these great Old Testament figures the pattern for God’s chosen ‘seed’—to offer Himself as a willing sacrifice. As Isaac carried the wood for his own sacrifice, so Jesus would carry His own cross. He too would go willingly to His death. So Isaac points us to another adored Son who was to be sacrificed. But the One to Whom Isaac points us really did die, so it is the ram rather than Isaac which most truly represents Jesus. The principle of substitution was established here and in the whole sacrificial system of the Old Testament. They looked forward, as we look back to that moment when ***On the mountain of the Lord it [was] provided*** (v 14b).

The God who sees all of the sin of every individual in this building tonight has provided for the forgiveness of that sin, when He laid it on the head of His sinless Son Jesus who died in our place, as the lamb who takes away the sin of the world. Your and my sin has been dealt with, but only in one place. And we must come to that place if we would experience forgiveness.

b) The promise Sealed (vv 15-19)

I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me(vv 16-18). Here is the most emphatic statement of God’s promise to Abraham that Abraham ever received. His obedience has opened the door to this reaffirmation of God’s purposes for him. To obey is to find new assurance. But this is more than just a reassuring repetition of the promises. Those promises had first come to Abraham before he had done anything to please or obey God. They had come entirely by God’s grace, His merciful initiative to reach out into the life of a sinner. But they were now sealed by the response of Abraham. *I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore* (vv 16-17a). God does not drag

anyone licking and screaming into heaven. Why He has given us dignity and freedom, I do not know, but I do know that you and I must respond to His will for us. If we are believers, we must move on in the spiritual life. It is why they say the Christian life is like riding a bicycle—if you try to stand still, you fall off [I love those guys at traffic lights on racing bikes and toe clips who try to balance on their bikes until the lights change . . . but they all fall eventually]. So are we moving on this summer? Will we be further on in grace come this autumn?

If we are not believers, we must realise that we are required to respond. It won't happen to you by accident, or by infection (rubbing shoulders with the CU), or by genetic inheritance (a praying granny). If you don't want to be in heaven, you won't be in heaven. If you do want to know God, you must seize the life He is offering you.

But actually, the people I, as a pastor, worry most about are what I call the 'theostatic'. You know there are satellites circling the earth in a geostatic orbit? They hurtle through space, while maintaining exactly the same position in relation to the earth. Well, there are some folk who, while they may rush through life, are very careful to maintain exactly the same position with regard to God. They get no closer to Him and they move no further away from Him. Perhaps they come to church a couple of times a month, or maybe more, but they are careful not to join a home group. They own a Bible, probably more than one in fact, but they're careful not to start reading it regularly. They put money in the collection or even give by standing order perhaps, but they make sure their giving never hurts them or affects their lifestyle. They would certainly call themselves Christians although there might not be anyone at work who would recognise that fact. And I don't know whether they are Christians or not. What I do know is that it is not possible to be 'theostatic', stationary in relation to God. Every one of us is either drawing closer to our Creator, or we are drifting further away from Him, so may I ask: Which are you?

His blessing is there for you—will you seize it by obedience or neglect it?

I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore (vv 16b-17a).

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)