

The Ultimate Test

Being The Blessing

Tom Yacomeni – Sunday 26th July 2026

Genesis 22: 1-19

Today is the last of a sermon series that we've been doing. It's called Being the Blessing. And we've been looking at the life of Abraham from Genesis in this whole last term. And we've seen some extraordinary encounters that are foundational to our understanding of faith and what that means. We've seen how God took this obscure tribal nomad as he was and made him into the father of nations, and that the majority of the world here knows the name Abraham. And Abraham followed God's call to leave the protection of his father's estate and he stepped out not knowing what his final destination would be. And although he did make some good decisions along the way, he also went through some times of doubts and fears. Sometimes he jumped God's gun or he resorted to half-truths while he waited for the promise that God had given him for a son and an heir. So, this was tricky for him. And yet God remained faithful. And after 25 years, his wife Sarah gave birth to Isaac. Actually, the name Isaac literally means you're having a laugh. He laughs because Isaac was so extraordinary. It's such a miracle that Isaac was born after all that time. And what we often forget, is that these stories of Abraham span about 40 years and they're compressed into about 10 short chapters of the Bible. Most of Abraham's days were very ordinary, ordinary day-to-day life. But he was spiritually alert. He was switched on spiritually and he knew when God was encountering him on a spiritual moment when it was occurring.

And last week, Claire spoke about how God came to Abraham and chose to share his thinking with Abraham about the dire situation in the city of Sodom. You see, God wants people of faith to dialogue with him, to intercede with him, as well as simply praying to him. Faith doesn't just listen out and passively listen for a voice, it also responds. It is a responsive thing. And so that's where we come today with this climactic episode in Abraham's story. It's often described as the ultimate test of faith. It's also fair to say it's one of the

ultimate tests of a preacher, I think, because this passage is somewhat infamous in the Bible. It's both troubling and it's reassuring as well.

Now some people... and some atheists have rejected Judeo-Christian values because of this very Bible passage, because of what they see as the capricious nature of the way God is presented in this passage. But others see it as a beautiful depiction of this deepening connection, a truly trusting relationship growing between early man and his creator. The big question is that after all that he'd been through, after all these episodes of the past years, why would God choose to put Abraham's faith to the test by challenging him to do something that is completely contrary to all reasonable ethical standards and even actually God's own ethical standards? It seems like a complete contradiction. But the opening verse of the chapter says this, sometime later, God tested Abraham. God did it. The Bible is clear. This isn't just Abraham's misinterpretation. It isn't just Abraham making up some crazy thoughts and ideas. This was definitely a unique test instigated by God and so it bears out what was going on here.

Now there is cultural context to bear in mind. It's always worth checking out the cultural context of a passage to understand what's the situation at the time, and sadly... Child sacrifice was practiced in the ancient Near East by many of the peoples surrounding Abraham at the time. Many ancient documents, as well as the Bible, record horrific examples of leaders and kings doing this as a means of winning favour with the gods. And of course, we find that abhorrent. But we find that actually in Moses' law in the Old Testament, just a little while later, this practice was completely banned as abhorrent to God. This is not in God's character. But at this primeval stage of human development, Abraham the Patriarch may have understood this instruction as valid, albeit totally confusing to him what is going on. God has said this, but I don't really understand. Because Abraham knew that Isaac was a gift from God. He was his God-given heir, his long-promised son. All the previous chapters that we've read are all about how Isaac came to be. And through Isaac, all the nations would be blessed. But nevertheless, Abraham chose to obey God's confusing instruction. He set out early in the morning with Isaac. Straight away, there was no ifs and buts. He didn't resist or argue against the Lord, but he set out

early in the morning with Isaac, two servants and a donkey loaded with wood. And the Bible gives us a few clues that actually God was not only testing Abraham, but in a sense, Abraham was also testing God in return. You see, if God was going to fulfil his promise, which was a dead cert, if God was going to bless the nations through Isaac, then how on earth would God solve this apparent conundrum, this strange instruction? But the good thing is that Abraham's faith and his involvement with the Lord had grown so much, to such an extent, that he obeyed whilst believing that actually God would provide a solution and that something was afoot, God would have a bigger plan. That is part of the definition of faith to understand that God has a bigger plan for our lives, even when we find life confusing.

In verse 5, Abraham 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. He was fully expecting both of them to return. And when Isaac asked why they aren't carrying a lamb for the ritual, Abraham answered, God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son. So, he kind of knew something was afoot and he was actually wanting to see how God would respond. And the New Testament book of Hebrews tells us that it's that by faith Abraham believed God would sort it out, or even raise the boy back to life. Hebrews 11, 17 to 19 says this, 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 from which figuratively speaking he did receive him back. And so this is a key thread that runs through the entire Bible from Genesis to Revelation. You see faith doesn't see suffering or even death as insurmountable. Think of death as the final thing but actually faith doesn't see suffering or death as insurmountable and prayer is our privilege that it runs counterpoint to fatalism even though it sometimes it can seem completely illogical sometimes it's really annoying because God only steps in at the very last second as in this story I will have words with him when I reach the pearly gates. Last minute Lord, there you go, you. But actually, if we can trust God and trust that he loves us for our life, our death, and even beyond into eternity, then actually that starts to give us a different perspective. It starts to help us be free from ultimate fear and anxiety. And I don't know if you noticed

that in this story Abraham displayed an incredible calmness throughout this story. He spoke kindly to Isaac, he spoke kindly to his servants. He just methodically got on with the task at hand. And his trust and obedience became the source of his peace.

I don't know if you remember there's an old hymn chorus that says this, trust and obey. for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey. Now it's interesting that when we earlier on in the service, we prayed the Lord's Prayer and we prayed those lines, lead us not into temptation. Do remember that? Lead us not into temptations. But actually some translations of the Lord's Prayer, that line legitimately say this, 'deliver us from the test'. I expect Abraham would have wanted to pray that exact line, deliver us from the test. Because testing times are inevitable. We all go through testing times. And some of those tests, we don't know the source of them, where those tests come from, they are inevitable, but perhaps they are even necessary for shaping our character.

I was interested that in a recent interview on Stephen Bartlett's podcast, the actor Matthew McConachie, he's becoming something of a philosopher these days, he's put it like this, without resistance or testing, we have no shape or form. And the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Rome, suffering produces perseverance. Perseverance produces character, and character produces hope. That is a counterintuitive statement really, that suffering ends up producing hope in us. We can't really get around our heads around that because we hate suffering. We hate being tested. We hate testing times. And yet Paul sees this as a divine progression. Perseverance produces character. Character produces hope. Now suffering can come from all sorts of causes, including, we've written, it's written in the New Testament, sin, the world, the devil, sometimes we just don't know where suffering originates from. But the Lord uses these testing times to shape our character. It says he brings all things together for good for those that love him. And he wants us to build faith, to grow hope. He wants us to be able to impart love. And the Lord disciplines those he loves.

The Lord stretches, as Claire said the other day, the Lord stretches those he loves. Who likes being stretched and tested? Well, not many of us, put it that way. Not many of us like being tested. Now, of course, it is easy to say that we need to apply faith during testing times. Just need to have faith. But actually,

that's a lot harder to actually do it. You know, some of the challenges that you're going through this morning, some of the challenges in our church or our mission partners facing the rigors of the world, they'd probably leave me squirming on the floor. It's tough out there. But I have learned this. I have learned one thing, that God is good and nothing is impossible for him. That is the basis of being able to make it through in a life of faith. God is good and nothing is impossible for him. And I think Abraham had got that. I think Abraham understood that. And so whatever came along, whatever tests were thrown at him, that was his basis of faith. You know, I've learned to be able to get on my knees and ask the Lord for strength and deliverance. And I need it. I need other people to help me sometimes. It's hard work. I need to call on people to help pray when I can't do it on my own. That's what church family is for. That's why it's a blessing for Isabelle (Baby being baptised today in church) to be welcomed into a supportive church family. We need each other. But like so many stories in Genesis, this ancient story, this original story is one of those that ultimately points to a greater story, a greater reality.

Did you notice some of the phrases in this story? Abraham was called to give his only son whom he loved. Does that ring a bell? Isaac carried wood on his shoulders up to the Mount, which was Mount Moriah. And the interesting thing is that Isaac, at this stage of life, was quite an old teenager. He wasn't just a young boy. We always think of him as a very young boy. But he was an older teenager, and Abraham was a very old man, a very old man. Isaac could have resisted. He could have overruled his father physically. But actually, Isaac's obedience in this is the thing that foreshadows Christ's sacrifice for us. Out of love and obedience, Christ willingly offered his own life to God, just as Isaac was willing to offer his life for his father.

Now shortly, we're going to share communion together and through bread and wine will recall the fact that Jesus willingly gave his body and his blood on the cross as an offering in our place to pay for justice in the world, to secure forgiveness of sin for everyone who calls on him. And that was a once for all sacrifice. No more lambs needed, only Christ is needed. Thank God for that. Praise God for that. And for the writer of Genesis, the key point to this story is in its conclusion. God himself did indeed provide the sacrifice just as Abraham had been hoping. Abraham named him, named God Jehovah Jireh, our

provider. And this saying became a benchmark of faith for all God's people from that day on. On the mountain of the Lord, it will be provided. And this is a summary of our faith. It's a summary of Christian faith. On the hill of Calvary, that mountain, God provided all we need for a life of peace and a secure eternity. We can't earn it, we can't make it, but we can receive it by faith. It's a gift, just like Isabel has received today that gift by faith. We trust and obey of the word of God revealed in Christ. And the apostle Paul summed up the entire series really with this phrase, Abraham believed the Lord and it was credited to him as righteousness. He was made right with God just because he chose to believe.

And so 'being the blessing', the title of our series, starts with us believing in our hearts and confessing with our mouths, thank you Lord, thank you for what you've done for me. You rose again from the dead for us and in that way we are made right with God and so we can begin to bless other people. It flows out from us. The blessing that we receive is what we can give away to others. flaws and weaknesses. Abraham's trust in God won him a place in the Hall of Faith as it's known in that Hebrews list of the greats, the great ancients of faith. And we are his descendants. Isabel today is a descendant of Abraham, a person by faith, who believes in the Lord, that God is our provider, that he has a loving plan for our lives, and he gives us grace for the journey. He gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit so that we can bless the nations, we can bless others.

So believe and trust that God is good, that nothing is impossible for him, and you'll discover that he's not only your saviour, but he is your provider, he is your friend. He can do it.

Amen.