

## **Faith and Trust**

### **Genesis 22:1-24**

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Genesis chapter 22 really is the culmination of the journey. It is the apex, the greatest chapter in the story of the life of Abraham. But Genesis chapter 22 is also one of the most intense, most emotional, and most disturbing stories ever written.

#### Genesis 22:

Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." And He said, "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you." So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and Isaac his son; and he split wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from a distance. And Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go yonder; and we will worship and return to you." And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son, and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. And Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." And he said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" And Abraham said, "God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together.

Then they came to the place of which God had told him; and Abraham built the altar there, and arranged the wood, and bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. And Abraham stretched out his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." And he said, "Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me." Then Abraham raised his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the place of his son. And Abraham called the name of that place The LORD Will Provide, as it is said to this day, "In the mount of the LORD it will be provided."

We don't know how much time elapsed from the end of chapter 21 to the events in chapter 22. Most people guess somewhere in the neighborhood of 15-30 years, which means Isaac would have been 15-30 years of age...somewhere in that timeframe.

As far as we know, this was the first time God had spoken to Abraham since the events in the previous chapter. Ishmael and Hagar were now gone. Isaac was the son of promise, and these must have been absolutely glorious days in the home of Abraham and Sarah. The long-awaited promised seed had come. It would be through Isaac that the descendants would come. It was everything that they had waited for by faith for so long. God was pouring out His blessing upon them, and it was everything that they had ever wanted!

Then one day God spoke...and He asked for the most unimaginable thing. As a matter of fact, it's interesting to notice in the text that the writer tells us right from the

beginning: “This is a test”—as if we could not even emotionally process the story if we did not know up-front it’s a test. The book of Job is written in similar fashion. We’re told right up-front what is happening, or emotionally we probably couldn’t process what happens in that book. That is the reason we are told here.

But Abraham isn’t told. God comes along and says to Abraham, “Abraham, I want you to take your son, your only son, the son whom you love, and I want you to offer him as a burnt sacrifice in an act of obedience to Me.” If you notice the way the text is written, there is great emphasis on *son...only son...whom you love*. As a matter of fact, when you read through the story, what you notice is a continual reference to “my son” and “my father”—Isaac his son, and Abraham his father. The writer wants us to enter into the emotion of the text and really come to grips with what’s going on here.

We can’t even imagine what was going through Abraham’s mind. He knew that Isaac was the promised seed. He knew God had promised that the seed would come through him. He knew that the descendants would come through Isaac. None of this could have made even the slightest degree of sense to him. But Abraham had been on this journey of faith, and one thing he had learned is that God can be trusted—no matter what. God can be trusted. God tells the truth.

The story is written in a way that gives us a lot of detail. We are told: he saddled his donkey... he got together two servants. It even says that Abraham, in his old age, a very wealthy man with lots of servants, went out and chopped the wood himself for the fire. That’s a way of slowing the whole story down. Probably for Abraham, it was a way of processing. But for us, it slows the story down so we really can come to grips with what is being asked here.

It was a three-day journey and, over those three days, Abraham had lots of time to think. Somewhere along the way, Abraham came to the conclusion that he believed he would have to literally slay his son, but that God would raise him from the dead and give him back to him. We know that because the writer of Hebrews tells us that. Now Abraham didn’t have the facts quite right; but he did understand that God had made a promise, and that promise would be fulfilled because God tells the truth. Somehow he knew that Isaac had to come out of this thing alive. Notice even what he says to his servants: “*We will go up the mountain and we will return.*” There wasn’t a doubt in Abraham’s mind but that Isaac would come down the mountain with him, because God had made a promise and He would keep that promise.

So they arrive at the destination and they’re walking to this place, just Isaac and Abraham. And Isaac figures it out and says, “Father, you’ve got everything you need for the sacrifice...but where’s the lamb?” That’s a pretty good question. Abraham must have just about choked on the answer: “God will provide the lamb.”

Abraham and Isaac finally get to the spot that God designated. He builds an altar, and he places on top of it the wood. And then he begins to bind the hands and feet of his beloved son. Abraham would have been an old man; Isaac would have been in his youthful prime. There’s no question Isaac could have overpowered his father. Somewhere along the way, Abraham had passed his faith on to his son Isaac. And Isaac, in willful obedience, simply allowed his father to bind him and to lay him on that wood.

By this time, Abraham’s heart must have been pounding through his chest as he pulled out that knife and reached out to slay his beloved son. Then God stops him and says,

“Abraham, I know now that you fear Me (you reverence Me). You have not withheld your beloved son from Me.” Abraham looks up, and in the thicket he sees a ram. And the ram becomes the substitutionary sacrifice on that altar. The place was called The LORD Will Provide—Jehovah Jireh. It is really quite a remarkable story, and we pick it up again in verse 15:

Then the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, “By Myself I have sworn,” declares the LORD, “because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens, and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. And in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.” So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham lived at Beersheba.

God reaffirmed His covenant with Abraham. This wasn't a new covenant. It was just a reaffirming of a covenant that has been reaffirmed a number of times in this story. Go all the way back to Genesis chapter 12, where God had made a covenant with Abraham. Part of that covenant meant, “You will be My people, and I will be your God.” Part of the commitment of that was to get Abraham to a point where he really understood what that meant. What God wanted was to pull out a people who would trust Him by faith, and He would pour out His blessing upon them. And so God had entered into this lengthy commitment with Abraham to get him where He wanted him to be as a man of faith...a man of remarkable faith.

It's important not to just pull this story out of its context and look at it all by itself. It is the culmination of a lengthy journey of faith. This wasn't the first time that Abraham had been tested. He had been tested several times. Sometimes he passed the test and sometimes he failed. Sometimes he had great faith and sometimes he had doubt. Sometimes it's only in those times of failure that we come to grips with what we really believe to be true of God. Those are moments of growth. They were necessary moments to get Abraham to Genesis chapter 22, when he offered Isaac in an act of obedience.

When you think about what God asked of Abraham, and we crawl inside the skin of Abraham, it's hard to imagine his emotions and what he would have been processing. As a matter of fact, we find it somewhat disturbing. More than that, we maybe even find it somewhat appalling. Even if Abraham did not have to slay his son, just the emotional trauma of what he was asked to do, and how far that went, seems appalling to us.

Hold that emotion right there, and then remember that about 2000 years later, on that same spot, there would be another Father who loved His Son more than Abraham could have possibly loved Isaac. And He would lay His only Son on an altar...only in that case the execution would *not* be stopped. Rather, it would be completed; and there that Son would die and His blood would be shed. The substitutionary Lamb would be placed on that altar called the cross. And there God the Father would see His Son, His beloved Son, executed.

Do you know why God did that? He did that because you offended Him...and you offended Him...and you offended Him. He did that because I offended Him. That was His response. I offended Him, so He gave up His Son to die on a cross as the substitutionary Lamb for my sin.

As we go through the book of Genesis, I've tried to highlight those words which appear in the book of Genesis for the first time in all of the Bible. And you have a lot of those, of course, because it's the first book. But they are significant. In Genesis chapter 22, for the first time in the Bible, you have the word "test." For the first time in the Bible, you have the word "love." And for the first time in the Bible, you have the word "obedience." In Genesis 22 we see: *test...love...obedience*. That's the theology of this text. God is testing our faith by asking if we're willing to take that which we love most and, in an act of obedience, sacrifice it to God.

This is the first place in the Bible where the word "love" appears. But, do you know where the first place is in the New Testament that the word "love" appears? In Matthew, God the Father is saying, "This is My Son, whom I love." In Mark: "This is My Son, whom I love." In Luke: "This is My Son, whom I love." In John: "For God so loved the world that He gave His Son."

Does this sound like a God you cannot trust? A God who would sacrifice His own beloved Son because you offended Him, so that you might know forgiveness of sin...does that sound like a God you can't trust?

What, then, would be your "Isaac"? What is it that you love more than anything else? Are you willing to put that on the altar and say, "God, if you want it, you can have it"?

For some of you, it would be your spouse. Are you willing to put your spouse on that altar and say, "God, if you want him, if you want her, you can have them"?

For some, it would be your children. Are you willing to put your children on that altar and say, "God, if you want them, you can have them"?

For some of you, it might be your possessions, your bank accounts, your properties. Are you really able to say, "God, take my properties, my bank accounts, my investments, everything that I have—I'm putting them on the altar. If you want them, you can have them"?

For some, it would be your health, because that's what you think about all the time. Are you willing to put your health on that altar and say, "God, if you want it, you can have it"?

For some of you who are single, maybe it's just your hope to have a partner. Are you willing to say, "God, you can have that"?

Maybe it's all your hopes and dreams. Maybe it's your career. What is it? What is your Isaac? And are you willing to put that on the altar?

You know, it's one thing to talk about faith. But let's be honest: this is very hard. As soon as I mention those things, it strikes a nerve, doesn't it? It's not easy to put "Isaac" on the altar. It's possible some of you are thinking, *You know, this is easy for you. I mean, you just kind of float on a cloud all week; and you glow in the dark and you're just kind of pastoral. But we live in the real world. This is hard!*

I want you to know that this is one of the hardest things I have ever had to face in my life. I grew up in a home where my father was confined to a bed. I never saw him walk; I never threw a ball to him. He had rheumatoid arthritis and was crippled and gnarled. My dad was totally blind; I never got the chance to look my dad in the eye. But that wasn't the worst

of it. The worst of it was that every day was a day filled with excruciating pain for him for 20 years.

It wasn't until later in life, after I was married and had children, that I understood some of the ways that affected me. I could take almost everything that this life offers, and without hesitation, put it on the altar. But I could not put my family on that altar. I couldn't! For 20 years I had seen what God allows...and I did not trust Him. In my heart I said, *God, I have seen what you allow. I will not let you do that to my own family.* I had endured it for 20 years, and I could not go through it again. So I was unable to put my family on that altar.

But God, in His gentleness, just kept moving me down the path of faith, until I knew Him better. There came a day when I was able to put Patti and the girls on the altar and say from the deepest part of my heart, "God, if you want them, you can have them." At that point, I finally believed God would not take advantage of my faith. I believed He wouldn't turn around the next day and "lobber" my family. I can tell you today, without hesitation, that I can say I have put Patti and the girls "on the altar" and I don't have the slightest anxiety with that. But I also want you to know that was a long, difficult journey for me.

So let me ask you again: What is your Isaac? What is it that you're not sure you can trust God with? What is it that you need to put on that altar?

We need to be reminded that not only are there individual Isaacs, but there are also corporate Isaacs. Not only do we take a journey of faith individually, but we take a journey of faith corporately. What I am about to share with you, I had no intention of sharing, until Friday. God just seemed to lay it on my heart—so much so, that I contacted the elders and said, "Just pray. This is what I think God is leading me to share and I just want to make sure." And I can only say the conviction became stronger after I did that. I also want to tell you I'm not very good at beating around the bush. I'm pretty much a straight shooter, so I'm just going to lay it on the table. But I want you to understand my heart in saying this.

God is doing significant things through this church. As a matter of fact, I would say I see more of a moving of the Spirit of God now than I've seen since I've been here. It's very exciting. I think if you talked to any of our ministry staff, they'd tell you that. From children through adults...from youth to college to singles...God is at work here. But with that has come significant growth, and with that growth has come significant change.

I know there are some who are waiting for the changes to be completed, because they're tired of change. But I have to tell you, that's not going to happen. It is not a case where we're going to change and we will have arrived. It's going to be a way of life. With the pace of the culture and what God is doing in our midst, change is just going to be a way of life, and that's part of what we have to accept.

But I also understand that, with change, there sometimes comes anxiety and sometimes fear. And when there's anxiety and fear, there is sometimes insecurity, which creates a negative heart. When we have a negative heart, it becomes a critical spirit—which is what starts to come out of our mouths.

Now, I have to preface this by saying this church has responded remarkably to the changes we have experienced. Remarkably! This is a special group of people. And I'm not making these comments because I think we have a big problem. I'm making these comments

because I don't want us to have a big problem. I can feel the anxiety level and I want us to remain focused and not go down the wrong path.

In a marriage, sometimes one partner starts to look at something negative in the spouse. Then, pretty soon, they notice something else...then something else. And before long, everything that person does bugs them. If that isn't corrected, it will absolutely destroy that marriage.

The same thing can sometimes happen in a church. Anxiety, fear, and insecurities that come when changes are taking place can sometimes produces a negative, critical spirit. Pretty soon you start to notice this...then you start to notice that...then you start to notice something else. "I don't like this...I don't like that...I don't think I like that." "I don't like that music... don't like that instrument... don't like this in the youth ministry." Before long, that is just the path you're going down—that path of destruction.

Now, I have to be careful to say there have been those of you who have come to speak to us as leaders, to share your concerns, and I want you to know that's exactly what you should do. Thank you for doing what we ask you to do. If you have a concern, by all means, come talk to us. We always want to have that channel open. But, that's not what I'm talking about at all. I'm talking about the little critical comments that might go on out in the hall over a cup of coffee, over the dinner table at home, or when you get together with some friends. Critical comments are made to people who have no power to make any changes, so it can't do any good. It can only cause division; and it is wrong. It's sin.

So maybe this is our Isaac and here is the question: Are you willing to trust God with His church? Do you believe that Jesus is the head of the church? Do you think God is powerful enough to lead His church? Do you believe that enough that you can get on your knees and place the church before God and say, "God, I trust you"?

If you have a concern with the leadership, then get on your knees and ask God to correct that. Ask God to change that. Do you believe God is big enough to do that? Do you believe God cares enough about His church to do that? If you have a concern about the worship, then get on your knees and ask God to correct it. Do you believe He is big enough to do that? Do you believe He's powerful enough to take care of that?

Critical speech in little pockets doesn't change anything. It just sends us down a negative path. But if you get on your knees before God, God will be faithful. God loves His church. God loves His worship. He'll do what He has to do. Can't we trust Him with that? And if we do that, then there's no need for that critical speech. There's no need for that critical heart. There's no need to go down the negative path.

It's the same thing in a marriage. I don't need to correct things in my wife. I just pray and let God do His job. I need to love her, and I need to be her partner and her encourager. God will do His part.

Again, let me reemphasize, lest you didn't hear it: I'm not saying this because we have a big problem. I'm saying this because I don't want us to have a big problem. I want us to be focused on the mission of the church. I want us to be focused on God. I want us to join in the celebration of what God is doing in changing people's lives. You start going down that critical path, and pretty soon that's all you notice. You're going to miss everything that is happening.

The reality is, we don't have time to be critical. We don't have time to pick at all this stuff...because our neighbors are dying and going to hell, and that's what ought to concern us. Instead of picking at all kinds of things, we need to be passionate about building the kingdom. That's where we need to focus our energies. That's what this church has always been about, and that's what it needs to continue to be about.

Yes, things are changing. And yes, we have to continue to move ahead. But let's be about the mission of the church. Do you realize how many believers in the world would give up everything they possess to experience what you experience just one time in worship? If we get in a critical frame of mind, we no longer can even see that.

So do we trust God with the church? Can we put the church on the altar and say, "God, I trust you. And because I trust you, then I'm going to focus on the mission...I'm going to focus on my calling...I'm going to focus on kingdom building. I'm going to get off a critical path. I'm going to celebrate what you're doing here"?

Just one more thing. If you were to get on your knees before God and ask Him to change something that you're concerned about in the church, and God would choose not to change that, would you be willing to consider that maybe it isn't the church that needs to change? Maybe it's your heart that needs to change. You need to be willing to consider that, because that's an act of faith.

We have covered all kinds of ground—from the corporate Isaac, to each of our individual Isaacs, whatever it might be. I don't know what your Isaac is, but I'm sure you do. I'm sure the Holy Spirit has done His job and you know exactly what your Isaac is.

Are you willing to put your Isaac on the altar? Take some time to bow in prayer and process this before God. What is your Isaac ... and what are you willing to do with that?