

Last week we began a series of messages that we're calling *The Family of God*, and we had the opportunity to hear John share the story of Abraham and Sarah. We learned about the significance of their names and the heritage of faith they set into motion.

Each week of 2016 we are making our way through the Bible as a part of a year-long journey that we're calling Garden to City. In these pages of Scripture we learn about our Creator and we discover His great love for us- how He designed us to be- and who we are in Him. It's within God's story that we find the meaning and the purpose in our own stories.

This section of our journey has us learning about our spiritual Family- the forefathers of our faith (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob & Joseph). As we do, we'll see how God uses real people, just like you and me (people with faults, and insecurities, and mess), and He brings about beauty and restoration and hope through their lives.

People are a part of God's great plan for addressing the brokenness in this world and in our lives. If you're like me, you'll find that both encouraging and frightening at the same time. Frightening because I'm a mess sometimes, and I can't imagine how God would ever want to use me in any significant way. And yet I'm encouraged when I consider that the heroes of the faith in Scripture, for all they accomplish and all the faith that they display, they weren't bullet proof- they weren't superhuman- they were flesh and blood just like you and me. If God could use them to accomplish His purpose and plan on this earth, then He can use us too.

Today we continue the story of Abraham and we are introduced to his son Isaac. Turn to Genesis chapter 22 and let's read this account together.

1 *Some time later, God tested Abraham's faith. "Abraham!" God called.*

"Yes," he replied. "Here I am."

2 *"Take your son, your only son—yes, Isaac, whom you love so much—and go to the land of Moriah. Go and sacrifice him as a burnt offering on one of the mountains, which I will show you."*

Stop there for a moment. What?! What is God doing here? He tells Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac as a burnt offering?

If you were here last week you know how long Abraham and his wife Sarah had to wait before they had Isaac. John spoke last week about how challenging it must have been for Abraham, whose name means "father" to go childless. These two waited faithfully for God to fulfill His promise to them that would be parents.

God promised Abraham that he would have a son and that his offspring would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. God promised Abraham that He would bless him and that through him He would bless all nations. Isaac is the fulfillment of that promise, and now God is asking Abraham to sacrifice him as a burnt offering? Is this some sort of cruel joke? Why is God challenging Abraham's faith like this?

This text, like so many that we have studied during this series, is troublesome for us, and in the history of the church it has caused difficulty for a couple of reasons. First, what it says about the nature of God. Second about what God requires from His people. We can't spend too much time here but I want to briefly address both.

First, let's clear up any confusion this text presents about the nature of God.

Does God tempt humanity? Is He up there somewhere devising scenarios with the intent of catching us in mistakes so He can drop the hammer? Is God like this? Many of us have this view of God. He sets up

all these rules, this morality that's hardwired in us, and He's just waiting for us mess it up. I want you to know that's not the God we learn about in Scripture. It's not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Scripture assures us that God doesn't tempt humanity. We read about this in James' letter to the church. (James 1:12-15)

12 *God blesses those who patiently endure testing and temptation. Afterward they will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. 13* *And remember, when you are being tempted, do not say, "God is tempting me." God is never tempted to do wrong, and he never tempts anyone else.*

14 *Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away. 15* *These desires give birth to sinful actions. And when sin is allowed to grow, it gives birth to death.*

James tells us that God is not the author of temptation in our lives. That's not how He operates. It's not in His character. He is holy, without blemish or defect. James tells us "*God is never tempted to do wrong, and he never tempts anyone else.*" But if James is right, then how do we understand what God is doing in Abraham's life here in Genesis 22?

It's important to note the difference between tempting and testing. In our text we learn that God *tests* Abraham's faith, and this is not just a matter of semantics (you say tomato I say to-mah-to). Tempting or testing, what's the difference? Well there is a difference.

A temptation is designed to establish a pattern of disobedience in your life but a test is designed to strengthen and mature you. A temptation is meant to bring you off the rails, to destroy you, to leave you wallowing in the mud. A test is designed with your best in mind.

Think back to your time in school. A test is given out by teachers not to cause you to fail, but to demonstrate what you know. (Some of you might have had a teacher that you thought had it out for you, but we're not talking about that.) Tests are not designed to destroy your grade, discourage you, and shipwreck your future. Tests are designed to show what you've learned, to reinforce a concept that you've been taught. They present an opportunity to demonstrate a skill or an area of learning that you've already acquired.

That's exactly what's happening in our text. God is not tempting Abraham- He doesn't want him to fail and fall into disobedience. No, God is testing Abraham- He wants to reinforce and strengthen his faith. It is not in God's nature to tempt us because He loves us. He doesn't want us to fall. He's a good and loving Father who wants to see us grow and mature.

But that brings us to the second concern this text raises- what exactly does God require of us? Ok, so this isn't a temptation- He doesn't want Abraham to fail- got it. But how can He test him with this request? He asks Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. Is this a reasonable expectation? Is this the type of thing God requires of you and me? How can He ask for so much? Let's read on in the text.

3 *The next morning Abraham got up early. He saddled his donkey and took two of his servants with him, along with his son, Isaac. Then he chopped wood for a fire for a burnt offering and set out for the place God had told him about. 4* *On the third day of their journey, Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. 5* *"Stay here with the donkey," Abraham told the servants. "The boy and I will travel a little farther. We will worship there, and then we will come right back."*

6 *So Abraham placed the wood for the burnt offering on Isaac's shoulders, while he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them walked on together, 7* *Isaac turned to Abraham and said, "Father?" "Yes, my son?" Abraham replied.*

"We have the fire and the wood," the boy said, "but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?"

8 *"God will provide a sheep for the burnt offering, my son," Abraham answered. And they both walked on together.*

9 *When they arrived at the place where God had told him to go, Abraham built an altar and arranged the wood on it. Then he tied his son, Isaac, and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. **10** And Abraham picked up the knife to kill his son as a sacrifice.*

God asks something of Abraham that is just unthinkable. It's horrific. He asks him to take Isaac, the promised son, the one who was so late to arrive in Abraham's life and so greatly cherished as a result—take this boy and sacrifice him as a burnt offering.

What's almost as unimaginable, is the fact that Abraham obeys, without hesitation, without question. (read verse 3 again)

3 *The next morning Abraham got up early. He saddled his donkey and took two of his servants with him, along with his son, Isaac. Then he chopped wood for a fire for a burnt offering and set out for the place God had told him about.*

None of us would fault Abraham for saying, "Timeout, God! Hold on a second. This is too much. You're asking too much." I don't know about you, but if I'm in Abraham's shoes, there's no way I'm letting this stand without some type of discussion, without pleading and tears. "God, not my son. You can't ask this of me."

I can't tell you how many times I've prayed those very words about my own daughter, Meira. When Meira was born she flunked the apgar test that they give in the hospital after the first and the fifth minute of a newborn's life. The test is meant to quickly determine the health of the baby, and Meira was not in good health. She had surgery the very next day to save her life, it was nearly a month before we were able to bring her home, and in the years since, she has been in and out of the hospital. Our first year here in Massachusetts Meira went into Children's hospital 12 different times. The shortest stay was 7 days and the longest was 24. My wife and I prayed over and over for God to spare her life.

Anyone here with kids knows how relentlessly protective you are with your children. We'll guard their lives with all we have. My question in response to this text is not just, "How can God ask this of Abraham?" (and we'll get to that in a bit), but how is it possible for Abraham to respond the way he does? How can he obey this request without pushing back, or even hesitating?

I mentioned earlier that one of the encouraging things about looking at the lives of these men and women of faith in Scripture is their humanity— the fact that their lives reflect the same doubts and missteps that make up our own. And yet here in this moment I find it very difficult to relate to Abraham.

Consider where Abraham's behavior places him on the spectrum of obedience for just a moment. When you're asked to do something there's spectrum of obedience— a range that consist on the one end of stubborn/reluctant obedience (like a child who begrudgingly refuses to obey until the absolute last moment and only after repeated demands and only does as little as possible— this is not something I have any experience with as a parent because my kids would never behave this way), and in the middle there's sort of a delayed, forgetful obedience (there's follow through, but it's careless and doesn't really show any attentiveness to what's required), and then on the opposite end there's complete and immediate obedience (like an army cadet who drops and gives the drill sergeant 20 as soon as the order is given). Abraham obeys God at that end of the spectrum. Immediately. Completely. Without question.

I marvel at that kind of faith. I wish I could say that my level of obedience to God was always on that end of the spectrum. It is not.

And yet, I don't think Abraham's life always displayed this level of faith either. In fact we know it didn't. Last week we learned about Abraham's missteps in Egypt (telling everyone Sarah was his sister instead of his wife), of his circumventing God's plan by sleeping with Sarah's maidservant, Hagar, and all the difficulty that created. Abraham was not always completely and immediately obedient to God.

So why do you think Abraham was able to muster such courageous obedience in this instance? I think it was because, through personal experience, Abraham had learned that God was faithful. Abraham had learned, through personal experience, that God could be trusted. Some of those experiences were hard lessons. They didn't come easy, but over time they formed and shaped Abraham's willingness to trust God no matter what.

I love the exchange that is shared between Isaac and Abraham in verses 7 & 8.

7 Isaac turned to Abraham and said, "Father?"

"Yes, my son?" Abraham replied.

"We have the fire and the wood," the boy said, "but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?"

8 "God will provide a sheep for the burnt offering, my son," Abraham answered. And they both walked on together.

"God will provide." Abraham's faith in God had grown to such an extent that he was willing to trust in His provision no matter what- even if that meant laying his own son down on an altar and preparing to offer him as a sacrifice. The strength that Abraham was drawing upon as he and his son walked on together- take note of this- was not based upon his own understanding. Abraham wasn't trying to impress God by manufacturing a macho performance. He wasn't trying to prove anything to God. Abraham's strength was a direct response and in proportion to the way God had proven Himself faithful, time and time again. Abraham believed God would provide.

Some of you are probably thinking, "Yeah right? No way. If God asked me to do something that radical to show my obedience, the answer would be, 'no!'" Listen, I can identify with that. It brings us back to the question at hand: what does God actually require from us? What does He expect? Read the rest of the story with me.

9 When they arrived at the place where God had told him to go, Abraham built an altar and arranged the wood on it. Then he tied his son, Isaac, and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. 10 And Abraham picked up the knife to kill his son as a sacrifice.

11 At that moment the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!"

"Yes," Abraham replied. "Here I am!"

12 "Don't lay a hand on the boy!" the angel said. "Do not hurt him in any way, for now I know that you truly fear God. You have not withheld from me even your son, your only son."

13 Then Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught by its horns in a thicket. So he took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering in place of his son.

14 Abraham named the place Yahweh-Yireh (which means "the Lord will provide"). To this day, people still use that name as a proverb: "On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided."

In wrestling with the question of what God actually requires from us, here in Abraham's story, we see a glimpse into God's graciousness.

We spoke just a few weeks ago about the difference between justice, mercy and grace. You remember that justice is getting what you deserve (if you break the rules you receive punishment). Mercy is not

getting what you deserve (if you break the rules you do not receive punishment). And Grace is getting what you do not deserve (if you break the rules you not only avoid punishment but in addition you receive favor).

Here's the thing, when we ask that question, "What does God require of us?", there's a scary answer. He requires justice. And what is justice? What do we deserve? The penalty for sin is death. It was made plain in the garden with Adam and Eve and stretching forward through Abraham and Isaac right up to today the penalty remains the same.

As Abraham was about to deliver the death blow to his son Isaac- as he raised the knife over his head and prepared to bring it down, he was bringing about the justice that sin requires. But in that moment a voice spoke. *"Abraham! Abraham!"*

"Yes," Abraham replied. "Here I am!" "Don't lay a hand on the boy!"

Please take note, God not only intervened- this was not just a reprieve- God provided the ram for the offering. **13** *Then Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught by its horns in a thicket. So he took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering in place of his son.*

Abraham had no way of knowing at the time, but we will later find out that God was going to have to find a way to pay the price for sin and to be the God of grace not only for Abraham, but for everyone. This theme is a thread that carries throughout the Bible. Look at what the writer of Hebrews says about this in chapter 10 as he looks back, not only to this passage in Genesis 22 but to some of the passages we will be looking at in the weeks ahead.

He writes, *"1 The old system under the law of Moses was only a shadow, a dim preview of the good things to come, not the good things themselves. The sacrifices under that system were repeated again and again, year after year, but they were never able to provide perfect cleansing for those who came to worship.*

4 *For it is not possible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. 5 That is why, when Christ came into the world, he said to God,*

"You did not want animal sacrifices or sin offerings. But you have given me a body to offer."

God's will was for us to be made holy by the sacrifice of Christ for us on the cross.

Listen to me. God wasn't just gracious with Abraham and Isaac. God not only provided a lamb stuck by it's horns on that day, but centuries later, He provided His only Son, his head caught in a crown of thorns. He was innocent and blameless and yet Jesus took upon Himself the sins of the world- your sin and mine- He was sacrificed on our behalf on that wooden cross.

God was not content to allow Abraham to lose his son Isaac, and yet when it came to His own Son He did not call out to stop the execution. God remained silent and Jesus took the nails, He bled and died so that we might receive forgiveness for our sin, so that we would not have to pay the price. He is gracious with us. So very gracious.

When we consider the lengths to which God was willing to extend Himself on our behalf, how can we respond in any way but worship? When we recognize the depth of love He has for us, how can we do anything but grow in faith and gratitude. Our obedience to God is a direct response to His grace.

Jim Elliot was one of five missionaries killed while participating in Operation Auca, an attempt to evangelize the Huaorani people of Ecuador.

"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."

-Jim Elliot (from his journal entry October 28th, 1949)

