

Genesis 22:1-19 - Williams

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Preacher: Tad Williams

[0:00] Well, the piano is gone. The piano was owned by the church that used to meet here.

And this week they took it to their new building. And so I texted a picture. I was in here and I texted a picture of this area to the other pastors. And I said, bye-bye, piano.

And Dan Godoy replied very quickly, very quickly. And he said, good, more room for cellos. And he was not messing around.

I mean, look at this, look at this. I hope your Bible is opened. Keep it there to Genesis 22.

Let me direct your attention to the first phrase of the passage. Genesis 22, after these things, God tested Abraham.

[1:01] God tested Abraham. And I want to suggest that that word, tested, is the key word to understand this whole chapter, this whole story that's just been read. God tested Abraham.

This is a story of God testing Abraham. And this is why we're preaching this passage this morning. If you were here last week, we started a new series where in the weeks leading up to Easter, we are looking at passages where God tests his people.

And last Sunday we started with what's called the temptation of Jesus in the desert. Dan preached that for us. And Dan made an important distinction where he said the devil tempts us to sin, to do what is evil.

That's rightly understood as a temptation. God tests us. God tests us. It's a different thing. God tests us.

God tests us. God tests us. God tests us. God tests us. God tests us. That's different than temptation.

[2:28] And so God is testing Abraham. Here's what I'd like to do in our sermon this morning. I want to spend most of our time doing a close reading of the passage.

Just go through this story and notice details. Beautiful, incredible story. And then after we do that, I have four principles for us that emerge from this story that we can emulate.

Four principles for us to apply for when we experience testing. So principles, I think, of testing. After these things, God tested Abraham and said to him, Abraham, and he said, here I am.

Abraham hears the voice of God. We read two Abraham passages in our readings today. The first from Genesis 12 where a voice calls to Abraham and says, I'm the God, the Lord.

Go. Leave your country, your family, and go. And Abraham follows a voice. Abraham doesn't have the Bible.

[3:48] He doesn't have anything to read about God that we know of. He doesn't know the stories of the patriarchs. He is the first patriarch.

The Israelites, the Exodus. He doesn't have the law of God, the revelation on Sinai. He has not heard the prophets. None of this.

He hears a voice. And he says, okay. And he follows the voice. In verse one, he says, here I am. He hears the voice again.

This is the voice he's been hearing now for decades. He says, here I am. And he, God said, verse two, take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love.

There's a three-part description of Isaac. There's an emphasis here. God says, your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love.

[4:54] God is setting Abraham up and the writer is setting us up now for what comes next. God says, your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love. And go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.

That's horrifying. God demands a human sacrifice. God demands a human sacrifice. This God that I guarantee you, Abraham immediately starts thinking, how much do I actually know about this God?

Abraham's heard the voice. The voice has told him some things. He's acted on some things. Abraham has nothing close to what we have that we use to put together our doctrine of God. Right? We talk about doctrine of God, the nature and character of God. Who is God? What is he like? And so we have all of scripture, all the stories to formulate our doctrine of God. Abraham has nothing like that. Abraham actually lives at a time in the world when child sacrifice is a thing. When the God or the deity.

[6:18] When the God or the deity could demand that you sacrifice one of your children in order to be close to the God and attain the power of the God.

And so all of a sudden, as we're reading the story. And if you can imagine all of us reading Genesis for the first time, all of a sudden we would start thinking, okay, maybe this is like one of the gods that demands child sacrifice.

So, okay, we're learning about God here. I want to read you.

This is a longer, kind of a longer introduction to this story. A wonderful comment, I thought, from a scholar named Robert Davidson. Listen to this.

He says, This story has captured the imagination and haunted the conscience of both Jews and Christians across the centuries.

[7:23] As a piece of literature, it is remarkable for its restrained economy of words. Its ability to depict with a few deft touches a scene almost unbearable in its emotional intensity.

We may admire the literary skill of the narrative, but do we not at the same time recoil from its content?

Was the God of Abraham really a God who demanded human sacrifice? If so, must we not then dismiss this story as an unfortunate hangover from a primitive barbarism offensive to our moral sensitivities?

What criteria are we to use in interpreting this narrative? Yeah, no kidding. Oh, I was struggling earlier this week quite a bit, actually, with this story.

And I read that, and it really connected with me. It's like, what criteria are we to use to interpret this narrative? Because God tells Abraham, take your son, your only son, the son you love, and go kill him.

[8:49] And not just kill him, burn him. Burn him up. Look at verse 3 and understand how remarkable this is.

Verse 3, so Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, took two of his young men with him and his son Isaac, and he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went. The next morning, early.

Abraham just decided to obey and do that. Made some preparations. Cut the firewood.

Can you imagine a more gruesome chore? Maybe Sarah said, Abraham, what are you doing? I'm just going to cut some firewood. Abraham, we have servants for that. Why don't you let the servants cut the firewood? No, I'm going to cut this firewood myself.

[10:01] Oh, okay. Loaded on the donkey and they start off.

It's not clear, actually. The text does not say that he talked to Sarah. So, I just made that up. That whole little thing I made up. Okay, but Josephus, actually, the Jewish historian, says the, he says, the man of righteousness at this time does not consult with his wife.

And I thought that was funny. That, real tough conversation to have with your wife. I don't want to make light of it, you know, but think about it. Think about it. That's what he's doing.

Notice at the end of verse two, God, God says, go to this land, Moriah, and you're going to offer the sacrifice there on one of the mountains, of which I shall tell you.

God doesn't tell him which mountain. He just tells Abraham, start walking in the direction of this region called Moriah, and as you walk, I'll tell you which mountain.

[11:12] So, Abraham doesn't actually know exactly where he's going. But he starts walking that way. And on the third day, verse four, Abraham lifted up his eyes.

He saw the place from afar. And then Abraham said to his young men, stay here with the donkey. And I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.

A lot of people have said, ah, he's, he either knows he's not going to end up killing the boy, or he's completely assured of God's power to raise Isaac from the dead, or something like that, such that Abraham is totally confident that he's going to come back with the boy.

It's not clear to me that he is totally confident at this point. He says, we'll go and we'll come again to you. He could just be saying, hey, we're going to go, and then we'll see you in a little bit, something like that.

So I think we should be careful to make too much of this statement. He says here that we will come again to you. But that is what he says. And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac, his son.

[12:28] And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. And so they went, both of them together. Abraham takes the instruments of destruction, the dangerous things, the fire and the knife, and the load of wood he puts on Isaac.

This would have been a big, heavy load of wood probably. Enough wood that it required a donkey to carry up to this point. And this gets a little gruesome.

Enough wood to burn up the body of the boy. Not two or three pieces of firewood, but... It's a load of wood he puts on Isaac.

This has led most commentators to think, okay, Isaac must be fairly strong. Not a little boy. The word that's used, boy, can be a 10-year-old.

It can also be a 25-year-old, a young man. So... Isaac's strong enough to carry a heavy load of wood up a mountain. And father and son start off walking.

[13:37] And as they walk, verse 7, Isaac said to his father, Abraham, my father. And he said, here I am, my son. I want you to notice that what Abraham says is the exact same thing Abraham said to God in verse 1.

God spoke to Abraham, and Abraham in verse 1 said, here I am. And now Isaac speaks to Abraham, and Abraham says, here I am, my son. Abraham is attentively listening.

He is attentively listening. He hears Isaac. We can well imagine his thoughts are racing. I think we can well imagine that Abraham's thoughts are racing, that his heart is pounding.

This is his son, his only son. The one he loves. The one he prayed for for decades. The miracle son born to his 100-year-old wife.

He had had another son that at the demand of his wife, he had disowned and set off into the desert, perhaps to die.

[14:51] Like, this has already happened once, God. What are we doing? And Isaac says, Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?

Isaac is old enough to be aware of what sacrifice is, and how it goes, and what's required. And so we ask a very perceptive question. Where's the lamb?

And Abraham, verse 8, says, God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son. So they went both of them together.

It's an incredible statement any way you read it from Abraham. Some say, well, he's just sort of, well, God will provide.

Have you ever noticed when people don't know what the plan is, they tend to say that? Where are we going to get the money to do that? Well, God will provide. Normally that means they don't have a plan.

[16:07] They don't actually know. So it could be that's the sense of verse 8. Abraham says, God will provide, because he really doesn't know. Or it could be that he, at this point, has such conviction, and he even has a vision of what must happen.

It could be something like that, but it's not clear, but it's such a fascinating statement. Abraham says, God will provide for himself the lamb for the burnt offering. When they came to the place, verse 9, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac, his son, and laid him on the altar on top of the wood.

Incredible. It does not say they had a big fight. It does not say Abraham knocked Isaac out in order to accomplish this. And so we presume that Isaac, this son who's strong enough to carry this wood and perceptible enough to ask these good questions, that Isaac goes along with this.

Maybe they talked it out. Maybe they had a long conversation. We don't know. But because there is no record of a struggle or a fight between the father and the son, we presume that Isaac is a willing sacrifice, that he is aware of exactly what's happening here, that he is strong enough to stop this if he wanted to.

And then so fascinating, we see here that Isaac is a mute sacrifice. Mute in that he does not oppose this verbally.

[18:05] We have no record of him speaking out against this. Quiet, strong Isaac is laying there on the wood, bound, and his father approaches with the knife.

This is very unusual sacrifice. Okay, this gets gruesome. Normally with a sacrifice, you would cut the throat of the animal and kill the animal and then dismember the animal and lay pieces of the animal on the altar.

You would not normally put a whole living animal on the altar, but in this case, the whole living offering is placed on the altar, and so Isaac is a living sacrifice.

He's a living sacrifice on the altar. And here comes his father. Verse 10, Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son.

The narrative slows way down. We get this whole verse on just these tiny little motions because this storyteller knows exactly what's going on right now in Abraham, but also in us as the reader.

[19:33] Like, no, don't do this. This is not good. And so it slows down to this moment.

But verse 11, But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, Abraham, Abraham.

And he said, again, now the third time, Abraham says, Here I am. Because Abraham is listening to the voice of God.

Abraham is attentive to the word of God. He has tuned his ear to this only thing he has.

He's banked his whole life on this, hearing this voice. Right? And getting it right, what this voice is telling him to do.

And he has not always gotten it right. But boy, he's listening. And he says, Here I am. In verse 12, He, the voice from heaven, says, Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him.

[20:41] For now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son for me. And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram caught in a thicket by his horns.

And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of that place, The Lord will provide.

In Hebrew, that's Jehovah Jireh. You've maybe heard that phrase. That's a, sometimes a name of God, sometimes an expression people use, Jehovah Jireh. The Lord will provide.

As it is said, To this day on the mount of the Lord, it shall be provided. And then we get sort of a, a little add on here.

That's the, that's the height of the drama of the story and the resolution of the story. But these final verses give us a clarifying add on. The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven.

[21:42] So he hears the voice again from heaven. And the voice repeats this blessing, this promise of blessing that Abraham has heard now multiple times that this son, the son he was willing to kill.

We have to read the story that way, that Abraham was willing to kill his son. Abraham was not pretending all along knowing, ah, this is all a joke.

That's not the way to understand it. He was willing to kill his son. And this proves the veracity of his faith.

Now look so closely, verse 18, this voice from heaven says, your offspring, in your offspring, shall all the nations of the earth be blessed because you have obeyed my voice. So Abraham returned to his young men.

They arose and went together to Beersheba and Abraham lived at Beersheba. I'm going to read you a quote from that same scholar, Robert Davidson.

[22:53] Hear this, quote, to see Abraham as the model for faith does not, however, deal with all the difficulties in this story. Abraham's faith speaks to us from an alien world.

What to us is unthinkable that God would demand human sacrifice is not unthinkable to Abraham.

He makes no protest. He gets up and starts doing it. Abraham comes from an alien world.

That was a helpful phrase for me. A world that has not been shaped and formed by the Bible, by all the teachings, all the stories, all that he has heard, little bits of this voice from God.

Okay, that's the story. Here are four principles that emerge from Abraham's test of faith for our application as we think about the reality that God will test us, that we will experience tests.

[24:11] Number one, Abraham listens to the voice of God. He is attuned to the word of God and in the crucial moment, it is his attentiveness to the word of God that constrains him.

His attentiveness to the word of God is what keeps him from doing this thing. Now, certainly, it is his attentiveness to the voice of God that brings him to the very brink of doing this thing.

But in that moment with the adrenaline and all the emotions and the heart racing and he's determined to do it and the voice speaks and he hears, he's so attuned to it and the voice constrains him, do not do this.

And that is enough for Abraham. Abraham because he is so attuned to the voice of God, to the word of God. And so that's lesson number one for us.

We need to be attuned to the word of God. We need to know the word of God. Now, here, let me talk about hearing voices.

[25 : 31] Abraham hears a voice. We don't know if it's an audible voice that others can hear or we don't know if this is like just an inner monologue kind of voice thing.

But Abraham hears a voice. He hears voices. And in this case, the voice tells him to kill his family member with a knife. And we have, what do we call that, right?

In our day and age, we call that mental illness. That's what we call that. So I want to celebrate, really celebrate with all of you that we do not have to rely on audible voices or inner monologue voices in our walk with God because God in his graciousness has given us his word.

We have the written scripture. We have the Pentateuch and the revelation of the law at Sinai and the prophets and the greatest revelation of all, Jesus Christ and the gospels that tell us all about that and the epistle.

You know, we have the word of God. The voice of God is in this book that we can read. And so we are not left to discern for ourselves the veracity of the voice that may or may not be God.

[26 : 55] So let us be attuned to the word of God and let the word of God constrain us when we experience times of testing because like Abraham, when we experience times of testing, it is confusing.

We do not have all the answers. We don't even know which mountain we're supposed to walk to. We start walking.

I'll tell you the mountain. What? Number one, Abraham listens to the voice of God. Number two, Abraham immediately begins moving in the direction of obedience even though he does not have all the answers.

Right? So he immediately begins moving in the direction of obedience. He starts taking action, does not call a committee meeting, does not even talk with his wife, we think, which, you know, that's a tricky one.

Very tricky. But the key, I think, in this is to recognize how immediately he begins to obey. He begins to move in the direction of obedience, the direction God's told him to go.

[28 : 16] We need to do that when we are experiencing these times of testing. These times of testing happen often when we're young, but notice in this story that Abraham's very old.

This is near the end of his life. So it's not like just when we're young we have these tests. We can have this kind of crisis of faith and these sort of tests that are filled with doubt and emotion and uncertainty even when we're old, mature.

But Abraham immediately begins moving in the direction of obedience, acting on what he knows, acting on what he's been told, just doing what he knows to do, trusting that God's going to tell him along the way what the next step is, which mountain.

Abraham begins to obey. here's principle number three for us to think about in times of testing. Number three, God will push us to the limits of our vision of God and our vision of what God is capable of doing.

[29 : 39] Times of testing push us to the limit of what we think we know about God. what? Well, I didn't realize this was one of the gods who requires human sacrifice is undoubtedly what Abraham said.

Whew, okay. Right? So he's pushed to the very limit of what he thought he knew about God or what God had revealed, you know, and he starts walking and as Abraham walks, his vision of God expands.

His vision of what God is capable of doing expands. It enlarges. He learns more about God. He learns a great deal more about God actually.

And so this is what happens. This is what happens when we're tested and we come to the end of ourself and these doubts and questions and struggles and we walk in obedience in step with the

word of God.

God actually enlarges our vision of himself and our vision of what he's capable of doing in our lives and the lives of others. And so our vision of God enlarges when we respond in testing and obedience and faith.

[31:04] May that be so of us. One more time from this same scholar. This guy was very helpful for me.

Listen again. He says, a deeper insight and a fuller knowledge of God however only come to those prepared to live to the limits of the vision they possess however imperfect that vision may be.

So you want to grow in your knowledge of God. You want to grow in your faith. You want to grow in your confidence in life. You have to do what God tells you to do. You have to and then it gets real scary because you've never done anything like that before.

You've never experienced. You don't know how this is going to go. So you have to live at the limit of the vision you have of God.

Here let me a word of caution. Don't do this alone. God's given us his written word and he's given us his church a community of believers that we can be a part of and we can do this together and we can ask for wisdom from pastors and elders and from our parents and from wise mature friends.

[32:21] Maybe don't ask for wisdom from certain friends right? Think about that you know and but we don't have to do this alone. Finally number four this is our fourth and final.

Abraham believes in God's resurrection power. And this comes from Hebrews chapter 11 verse 19 it says this he Abraham considered or the word could be concluded he came to the conclusion I think he came to this conclusion somewhere as he was walking here's the conclusion he came to Hebrews 11 he concluded that God was able even to raise him from the dead from which figuratively speaking he did receive him back.

So I think Abraham was committed to doing this thing killing his son because he had come to the conclusion that God was going to raise Isaac from the dead. And as he worked out this puzzle what a puzzle he had to work out.

This is a tricky math problem. He said okay the only way all these things can be true that God will keep his promise that this son this son this named boy this one will produce many.

The only way is God's going to raise him from the dead. And so Abraham came into this insight of the possibility of resurrection. Jesus in John I think it's John chapter 8 speaking to the Pharisees says your father Abraham understood something about me.

[34:06] I think that's what he's talking about. Abraham understood the power of God to bring life from the dead. Resurrection.

resurrection. I think Abraham is able to understand this in part because Isaac the little boy Isaac came from the dead womb of a hundred year old woman.

So Abraham has already experienced God miraculously bringing life from a dead womb impossible and so he says okay such is the power of God.

If we believe in the resurrection power of God that's a big game changer. That changes all the rules. God has the power to raise the dead. Death is not the end. death isn't the boundary of the game.

[35:15] Whoa. Abraham believes in God's resurrection power. If we believe in God's resurrection power when we are tested it will completely change the range of possibilities we are willing to entertain.

let us believe in God's resurrection power. Okay four lessons I'll go through them again real quickly. Number one Abraham listens to the voice of God. Number two he immediately begins moving in the direction of obedience even though he does not have all the answers.

Number three God will push us to the limits of our vision of God in times of testing and he wants us to go further than we've gone before.

God will push us to the limits of our vision of God. Number three and number four Abraham believes in God's resurrection power. I want to conclude I wrote a note for myself this is what I do I write little notes to myself right here I highlighted it in green all caps it says Tad you must preach Jesus from this text exclamation point you must preach Jesus from this text you've heard right the echoes of this already Jesus the son who carried the wood of his cross up the hill who willingly gave his life as a living sacrifice in substitute for us to pay the penalty for our sin so we do not have to endure the separation from God the darkness that descended on Calvary and this is such an incredible story that points to that reality that great hope that great source of our confidence the

resurrection power of God and the power of Jesus

[38:01] Christ let's pray Lord we thank you for your beautiful word this challenging story help us in times of testing help us to trust in you and grow in you we thank you for Jesus our companion we thank you for the near presence of your Holy Spirit would you encourage and comfort each one here I pray in Jesus name amen