

The Only Son

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[0 : 01] Good morning. My name is Matthew Capone, and I'm the pastor here at Cheyenne Mountain Presbyterian Church. And it's my joy to bring God's word to you today. A special welcome to those of you who are visiting.

We're glad that you're here, and we're glad that you're here not because we're trying to fill seats, but because we're following Jesus together as one community. And as we follow Jesus together, we become convinced that there's no one so good.

They don't need God's grace, and no one's so bad that they can't have it, which is why we come back week after week to hear what God has to say to us in his word.

We're continuing our series for Advent in the book of Genesis, and you'll remember that Advent comes from a Latin word that means to come or to arrive. And so during this season, we celebrate the fact that Jesus came.

He arrived here on this earth, and we do several things. First, we celebrate that, what has happened in the past. The fact that Jesus came, that he died, that he rose from the dead.

[1 : 01] We also look forward with longing to what he's going to do in the future. His first coming reminds us of his second coming. And then third, we live faithfully now in the present.

We do what the entire Christian life is, not just in the month of December, celebrating what God has done in the past, looking forward to what he will do in the future so that we can follow him and live faithfully now in the present.

We are moving on from Genesis chapters 11 and 12, where we were last week, to Genesis chapter 22. You'll remember our first week, we were in Genesis chapter 3, and we talked about the fact that Jesus is the one who ends shame.

He destroys evil forever. Our second week, in Genesis 12, we looked at the fact that Jesus is the one who brings the ultimate blessing to the nations, the blessing that God promised that Abraham would develop through his offspring.

And now, this week, we're looking at Jesus as the final sacrifice, and God is the one who provides him for us. If you're familiar with this passage of Scripture, Genesis 22, you know it's actually one of the most controversial stories in the entire Bible.

[2 : 07] And it's cited by those who have doubts or objections about Christianity as one of the reasons that they're not Christians. And so, instead of shying away from it, we are going to go dive headlong into this and see what it is that God has to teach us in his word.

We're going to see God's provision for us, his provision for Abraham in providing a sacrifice, his provision for us providing a sacrifice as well. And so, I invite you to turn with me now to Genesis chapter 22.

You can turn there near the end of your worship guide. You can turn in your Bible, or you can turn on your phone. No matter where you turn, remember that this is God's word. And God tells us that his word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, which means that God has not left us to stumble alone in the dark, but instead, he's given us his word to show us the way to go.

And so, that's why we read now Genesis chapter 22, starting at verse 1. After these things, God tested Abraham and said to him, Abraham, and he said, Here I am.

He said, Take 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.

[3 : 23] So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and 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 to the place of which God had told him.

Verse 4. On the third day, Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. Then Abraham said to his young men, Stay here with the donkey. I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again 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 they went, both of them, together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, My father.

And he said, Here I am, my son. He said, Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? Verse 8. Abraham said, God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.

So they went, both of them, together. When they came to the place of which God had told him, 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.

[4 : 34] Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. The angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, Abraham, Abraham. And he said, Here I am.

He said, Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from 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. As it is said to this day, On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided. And 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 and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you.

And I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.

[5 : 49] So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba. And Abraham lived at Beersheba. I invite you to pray with me as we come to this portion of God's word.

Our Father in heaven, we thank you again that you speak to us, and you teach us by your word, and we ask simply that you would do that this morning, that you would show us our need for you and your grace, and you would also show us that you come, and you do more than we could ask or imagine, that you meet us at that very same point of need, that you came and died for us, even when we were still sinners.

We ask that you would use your word this morning to challenge us and also to encourage us. Most of all, you would use it to transform us, that we would be people who look more and more like your son.

We thank you that we don't have to worry this morning about whether we've earned or deserved these things, but instead, we simply ask them in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Okay, last week in Genesis chapter 12, we saw this great promise that God gave to Abraham.

We might even think of it as a little bit over the top. He tells him at the very beginning of chapter 12, verse 2, I'm going to make of you a great nation. And then in verse 3, in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.

[7 : 17] So he's going to have all these offspring, except there's only one problem, right? He's talking to a 75-year-old man who happens to have an infertile wife who's also his half-sister.

So we have this great promise on the one hand. We have incredibly bleak odds on the other. And so there's this huge gap between the promise that God gives Abraham and the reality that he's living in at the moment.

Now, we've skipped a bunch of chapters between 12 and 22. A lot happens in those chapters, but we're just going to focus on the parts that relate to this promise that God's given. In Genesis 15, he makes a covenant with Abraham.

He repeats this promise again. In fact, he tells him, not only is he going to have a son, verse 5, he's also going to have offspring that are as numerous as the stars. So it's not just that Sarah's going to have a child, but his offspring are going to be more than he can possibly count.

Genesis 17, he repeats this promise again. I'm going to give you a son. We find out that time has passed. Abraham is no longer 75. He actually says, how are you going to have a child born to a man who's 100 years old?

[8 : 25] Shall Sarah, who is 90 years old, bear a child? We found out later in that chapter, Abraham is rounding up. He's actually 99 years old. That doesn't necessarily change a lot.

It's getting harder and harder, right? The odds are getting lower and lower. Remember, Genesis 18, God shows up again and says, this time next year, you will have a son.

Then the previous chapter before this one, chapter 21, it finally happens. After all these promises and all these repetition, after 15 years have passed in Abraham's life, finally God's promise comes to fruition.

And we've been on this story, if you've read the book of Genesis, with Abraham feeling this longing and this conflict, wondering if what he wants is finally going to happen. If you've ever known someone who has longed for a child and not been able to have one, you understand what this journey is like.

It's one of prayer and heartache. It's one of hoping and longing, right? You're joining with them in that. We've done that together as a church in the past.

[9 : 32] And so you know the joy, you know that feeling of what happens when it finally comes to pass, when the child is finally born. That's the joy that Abraham and Sarah are feeling.

That's what we're supposed to be thinking about as we enter into this chapter at the beginning of Genesis chapter 22. And so that's why what comes next, one and two, is so shocking.

I want you to look there with me first at verse two. Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, 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.

Can you imagine a greater reversal? Can you imagine something more shocking than that? I've been promising to you for 15 years that I'm going to give you a son.

And not only that, you are going to have offspring that are more than the stars. And now that this has all happened, the son has been born, it's time for you to go kill him.

[10 : 35] If there's a shock to it, it's because they're supposed to be. There is a whiplash here for us as we read this story. We've been building for 10 chapters to this moment.

We should expect Abraham's line to continue, but instead we see this threat that it's going to end. What in the world is going on? We'll look first at verse one.

It tells us that God tested Abraham. We have to understand that in the Bible, this idea of testing was where God would take someone and he would present a choice.

God presents a choice between obedience and disobedience. And the point, the goal of this test is twofold. First, it's supposed to reveal the character of the one tested.

It's their chance to demonstrate the faith they have. The other one is it's supposed to result in blessing. This obedience is a chance for them to appropriate the blessings that God offers.

[11 : 33] And so that helps us maybe a tiny bit to understand that this is a testing narrative. By the way, we already saw one in the Gospel of Mark when Jesus is in the desert. That's a testing narrative. We're seeing if he's going to remain faithful to God in the face of the temptations of Satan.

It also clarifies for us what God is asking here. God is saying, do you really love me more than anything else? I'm testing you.

I want to know if you're going to remain faithful in the face of an obstacle. That solves part of the problem for us. It doesn't solve the whole problem.

We still have this story in which God has just asked a man to sacrifice his son, right? Which raises all kinds of questions and objections in our mind. This is something for those people who have doubts or questions or objections to Christianity that rises to the top of the list of reasons they wouldn't believe or have faith.

How could we worship a God who chooses to ask someone to kill their own son? What kind of crazy deity is this? There's a scandal to it, right? And so instead of shying away from it, instead of ignoring the question, this morning we're going to dive head on into it.

[12 : 46] And the reason we're going to do that is because we have confidence in God and his word. We don't need to shy away from the hard questions that we encounter as we study the Bible. In fact, we can have faith knowing that God provides answers for us.

We can ask hard questions and not be afraid of it. We can bring our doubts into the light and not be afraid of them because we believe that God is big enough and great enough to handle them.

So you might be familiar with an atheist named Richard Dawkins who wrote a book called The God Delusion and he points to this story and says, this disgraceful story is an example simultaneously of child abuse, bullying in two asymmetrical power relationships and the first recorded use of the Nuremberg defense.

This is a reason not to believe in God. What are we going to do? How would we answer someone whose objection to the Bible is that?

Well, I want you to think for a second about eating food, okay? There are different cultural practices around how you handle your plate when you're eating with someone.

[14 : 00] So if you are in India or Japan, you're expected to clean your plate. If you don't clean your plate, that's a sign that you didn't enjoy the food. It wasn't very good.

And so it's an insult to someone to leave food on your plate. If you're in China, you want to do the exact opposite. You want to leave food on your plate because you're saying I've had enough to eat.

If you finish all your food, what you're telling your host is that they didn't feed you well. Okay? Different cultures, opposite messages. In Egypt, apparently, it's rude to ask for the salt.

And it's rude to ask for the salt because the person who's prepared your meal has decided exactly how they want it to taste and they put the perfect amount of salt on it. So if you ask for salt, you're telling them you're not a good cook and you don't know what you're doing.

Now in America, right, if you ask for the salt, someone just thinks, well, they need some salt. Right? No one thinks anything of it. The point I'm driving at is this. Different cultures have these implicit messages that are hidden in different actions.

[15 : 05] Now we're doing something, we're talking about something here that's much more serious than food, but my point is this. Often it's what you do, not what you say. Okay?

So track with me here. When we're talking about child sacrifice in the ancient Near East, this was a cultural form that was well understood in that time.

If you ask someone to sacrifice their child, what you were saying implicitly was, is your loyalty to me above everything else?

Is your loyalty to me above everything else? Do you trust me more than anything else? Okay? So track with me here. Cultural form, there's an explicit action with an implicit question.

Is God being crazy and deranged here in this passage? No, because he's using a well-known cultural form that Abraham would have understood.

[16 : 06] And this is in fact the way the entire Bible works. God always comes to us, he always comes to the characters in the Bible in ways that they can understand. That's the reason why the Bible is written in different languages, because different audiences speak different languages.

Okay? That's the reason why Jesus came, part of the reason why Jesus came as a man. He's translated into our form. God always meets people where they're at.

In this story, God is asking for a sacrifice because he is meeting Abraham as an ancient Near Eastern man where he's at. He is speaking in a way that Abraham can understand.

Okay, I'm not sure what this form would be in America. I'm not quite sure how you ask for someone's total allegiance. My guess would be it would be this. Are you willing to go bankrupt?

Are you willing to lose all your money? Right? That's the American way of asking for total loyalty and obedience. If you're talking to an entrepreneur and they say, I'm giving everything that I have in on this, then you know they're committed above everything else.

[17 : 15] Right? So this is the ancient Near Eastern way of saying, I'm willing to go bankrupt. I'm willing to sacrifice my son. Of course, Jesus asks a question like this.

He makes a statement like this in Luke 18. Remember, he talks to the rich young ruler and he tells him, one thing you still lack, sell all that you have and distribute to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven and come follow me.

As you track Jesus in the Gospels, we know he doesn't ask that of everyone, but this is his way in that instance with that man of asking him, do you love me more than anything else? Is your loyalty to me greater than anything else?

And so as we wrestle with this difficult passage, I can tell you with great certainty this morning that if you hear a voice telling you to sacrifice a child, that is not from God.

Okay? And I have great confidence about that for many reasons. One of them is that's not a cultural form that we recognize. Okay? Another reason is you're not Abraham, you're not the founder of God's people.

[18 : 21] And a third reason would be Jesus is the final sacrifice, right? This points towards something that now has been fulfilled. And so we don't need to shy away from these difficult questions about Scripture and so we can dive into them and say, yeah, we have an answer for this.

We understand that God speaks in specific ways to specific people honoring their cultural context, honoring the time and place in which they live. Finally, I would say you can remember this.

Isaac isn't actually sacrificed, right? At the end of this narrative, Isaac is still alive. If God is not going to ask you to sacrifice your son, what does this passage have to do with us?

And how does it apply to us in any way? If this is something, a cultural form that we don't recognize, if Abraham has a role that we don't have, does it have any relevance for us right now?

As we read this passage as people living in Colorado Springs in 2021, near the end of 2021, the point for us is this. Sometimes obedience to God's commands doesn't make sense.

[19 : 42] sometimes obedience to God's commands does not make sense. Sometimes it looks like God is threatening the blessing and goodness in our life, not giving it.

Sometimes it looks like God is threatening our blessing, not giving it. Sometimes we're afraid that God wants to destroy us rather than save us.

us. Sometimes we're afraid God wants to destroy us rather than save us. As Americans, it might look like this. God tells us to be unified and be in community with people who are radically different than us.

Our culture tells us that people who disagree with us are evil because they disagree with us. We actually are called by God to associate with people who are weird, outcast, marginalized, socially awkward, people like us.

Our culture tells us that's not going to save us, that's going to destroy us, that's social suicide. It looks like God wants to destroy us, not save us.

[20 : 57] God tells us we need to trust him for justice, that vengeance isn't ours. And the world tells us that we're alone and we have to defend ourselves. we need to vindicate ourselves and gossip about others.

If someone offends us, we can ruin them on social media. And so it feels like God wants to destroy us, not save us. God still tells us today to trust him more than our money.

And the culture tells us that we will have lost if we miss out on certain experiences and lifestyles. God wants to destroy us rather than save us.

God calls us to be faithful to him in the midst of persecution and we know that that means the world will reject us. And so it feels like God is threatening our blessing, not giving it to us.

God still tells us that our bodies are sacred and we need to be stingy with them. And the world tells us there is nothing that's more important than sexual freedom.

[22 : 10] And so it feels like God wants to destroy us rather than save us. Of course we have the words of our Lord Jesus from Mark chapter 8.

If anyone would come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life would lose it but whoever loses his life for my sake in the gospels will save it.

And so the question this passage presents us with is this. What do we do when we hit up against these places where God's commands in our lives feel like death rather than life?

we we need to look to Abraham and his example to see how he responds. Just like in chapter 12 without hesitation Abraham obeys right away we see in verses 3 and 4 that he prepares and sets out.

In verses 5 through 10 Abraham and Isaac go by themselves they leave the others behind. And so Abraham here serves for us as an example of faithful obedience.

[23 : 18] He hears God's command he feels the threat of it and he moves forward knowing that he does trust God more than anything else. The answer to the question of whether Abraham is loyal to God more than anyone else is yes.

The answer to whether Abraham trusts God and his promises is yes. Abraham is able to obey because he has seen God's faithfulness to him in the past and he trusts God's promise.

On the one hand we've just come off of chapter 21 it seems shocking that he would ask this child to be sacrificed. On the other hand we've just come off chapter 21 Abraham has seen that God can provide a child to a 99 year old man and a 90 year old woman.

He knows how great and how powerful God is. He knows that there is nothing that can stop God or thwart his plan. He knows that God will provide for him no matter what.

And so he's able to move forward in obedience. We see his faith here in verses 7 and 8. His son Isaac asks him where is the lamb for a burnt offering?

[24 : 28] Abraham said God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering my son. Abraham knows somehow somewhere God is going to do what's needed to protect him and his family and the promise that God has made.

He knows that God will never leave him nor forsake him. And so the New Testament presents Abraham to us as this great model of faith. Hebrews 11 mentions something that we're not told in this passage.

Hebrews 11 says one option that Abraham was considering was that God was going to raise Isaac from the dead. So that's one way that maybe he thought God was going to show up.

It says 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 James chapter 2 also commends Abraham to us.

[25 : 37] It tells us Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness. Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?

In other words, Abraham is able to obey God no matter what because of God's promise and his faithfulness. Abraham obeys in faith.

He knows that he can trust God no matter what. Brothers and sisters, when we find ourselves cutting up against the sharp edge of God's commands in this world, we know because of God's faithfulness to us that he will protect us and he will care for us no matter what.

Abraham could only look back to the miraculous birth of a child to a 90 year old woman. Brothers and sisters, we can look back to something much greater and more powerful.

We look back not to Isaac being born, we look back to a different son who was born. We look back to Jesus Christ who came into this world as God and as a man was born, also a miraculous birth, but even greater so because he was not only man but also God.

[26 : 53] He came not through natural reproduction through Abraham and Sarah but through divine reproduction with Mary. We know more than Abraham could ever dream how faithful and trustworthy God is.

And so just like Abraham we can follow him in faith. True faith leads to obedience.

And the New Testament presents Abraham as a model for us of this type of faith. And so we see in our final scene here God's faithfulness to Abraham.

Verses 10 through 13 this angel intervenes and provides another sacrifice for him to use. Verse 12 Abraham hears the words of God's approval.

Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him for now I know that you fear God seeing that you have not withheld your son your only son from me.

[27 : 57] In other words I asked a question do you love me and trust me more than anything else? And you by your actions gave the right answer yes.

And so we see these promises here at the end. Verse 16 because you have done this and have not withheld your son your only son I will surely bless you and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of the heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore and your offspring shall possess the gates of his enemies.

God requires an offering from Abraham. God provides the offering for Abraham. All Abraham brings with him is his faith.

All Abraham brings with him is his trust and his obedience because God gives him everything that he needs. God provides for us, his people, in miraculous ways even as he brings us through trials and difficulties that he's ordained for us.

God provides for his people in miraculous ways as he brings them through trials that he has ordained for them. Trials that he brings to test to reveal our faith like he reveals the faith of Abraham, to bring us blessing like he brings blessing to Abraham.

[29 : 28] And so the point is this, it may not make sense in the moment or right away, but eventually obedience to God's commands will make sense. God will vindicate us and provide for us.

We may not see it fully now and we know that we will one day. And so we obey and trust God no matter what because we know that he is faithful to his covenant.

And of course we know ultimately his faithfulness because of his provision of his son. And so that's part of our celebration of Advent. That's why we look at these passages from Genesis during this month so that we can cast a spotlight on Jesus and see how great and glorious he is.

That we can understand how much hope and confidence and peace that we take from the fact that he came to this earth as a man. We can look and see and understand more than Abraham did how much God will himself provide the sacrifice.

And God continues to provide for us even now today. He provides for us in the way that he provided for the Israelites in the wilderness whose shoes didn't wear out.

[30 : 42] He provides for us by the power of his Holy Spirit, changing our tastes and our desires. God provides for us through his word and the wisdom and counsel and support of the church and Christians around us.

It at times feels like God is asking the impossible of us and he provides everything we need to obey him and to follow him. God provided everything Abraham needed to obey.

He provides everything that we need to obey as well. And of course, ultimately, he provides the greater and greatest sacrifice.

He provides his own son, Jesus Christ, as the ultimate proof of his faithfulness to us. That there is nothing greater or more powerful that we can look to to see God's love and his authority in this world.

It's like Paul tells us in Romans 8, verses 31 and 32, if he gave us his son, how will he not also give us everything else? Why would he not also give us everything we need to follow him and love him and obey him?

[31 : 59] And so even in the most trying situations, we remain faithful because we know that God remains faithful to his covenant. He will not leave us and he will not forsake us.

And so we can take the words of verse 14 as our own. So Abraham called the name of that place, the Lord will provide. As it is said to this day on the mount of the Lord, it shall be provided.

Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we thank you for the hope and the confidence that we can take in your love and your provision for us. We thank you that you never ask us to do something without also providing the resources and power that we need to do it.

And we thank you that we see that in this story of Abraham and we see it as you work in our own lives. We ask that you, by your spirit, would grow our faith more and more, that we would trust you, and we would love you and believe you no matter what.

We ask these things in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. Amen.