

- All of God's written Word is powerful when we understand it and it and receive it as it was intended by its divine author. In that sense, all of God's Word is beautiful. However, some portions of God's Word are beautiful to me in special ways—more beautiful if you must assign a ranking.
- Since we started in *Genesis*, I have been looking forward to us studying the portion of God's Word in *Genesis 32* where Jacob finds himself trying to fight a battle he cannot win. That passage has been especially beautiful to me for decades.
- A New Testament example for me would be the section of *the* Apostle Paul's Letter to the *Philippians in chapter 2* in our Bibles. The humility of the Lord of the universe leading to sacrificial love never fails to teach my heart when I consider it.
- Another set of beautiful passages for me in God's Word are the proclamations of the resurrection of Jesus. "**He has risen! He is not here!**" has to be written and spoken with exclamation points. For me, these are beautiful because they tie it all together—the promises of God's gracious redemption cannot be thwarted by centuries of attack by humans or principalities and powers of spiritual darkness. The Lord Jesus Christ will prevail and we will share life with him eternally if we will simply believe.
- This morning, I have the privilege of speaking about another one of these "beautiful" passages for me. I think of it as the *Easter*—the "resurrection" passage of the Old Testament.
- This beautiful passage ties together for me the Old and the New Testaments. It does that by helping me think about how human beings then and now, as different as the circumstances of life may have been, are still like each other as human beings.
- We all, then and now, have struggles of tough times and confusion. We all sometimes must make choices in what feels like darkness and contradiction rather than light and clarity.

- We all love our kids and want them to grow up and be who they were meant to be by God.
- We all face tests of our faith and our obedience. Do we truly trust God as much as we say we do—as much as we like to think we do?
- Are we truly willing to obey God! Do we fear God correctly due to his awesome nature? This means we know he loves us dearly and gave his son for us but we also know He is the God of the universe. He is the Creator God who has commanded us how to live as creatures in light of that love.
- How far would we go to obey God even when obedience didn't make sense and in our abilities **to do, fix and control life** we can see another way that seems better to us—certainly less painful to us?
- C. S. Lewis, in a little book he wrote while walking through the death of his wife Joy Gresham—with whom, by the way he had not had very many years to enjoy together as husband and wife—wrote some very clear words as he faced confusion and doubt...
- *"You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you. It is easy to say you believe a rope to be strong and sound as long as you are merely using it to cord a box. But suppose you had to hang by that rope over a precipice. Wouldn't you then first discover how much you really trusted it?" (A Grief Observed pp. 22-23)*
- How much do I truly trust God so that I will truly obey God no matter the command? In one of those beautiful passages of God's Word for me, Abraham is about to find out as he faces this ultimate life and death test of his trusting to obey God.
- Probably most all of us know the story of *Genesis 22* as well as we know the story of the resurrection of Jesus in the Gospels. However, *Genesis 22* with the telling of the "sacrifice of Isaac" is beautiful because I cannot read it and consider it without it asking me some of the most important heart questions for a trustor of God to ponder.

- As always happens when I read it, the passage raises some questions for me that it does not answer. Remember, *Genesis* is dealing with theology so foundational—so broad—Moses often is not led to include all the details we, in our leisurely time to study would like answered.
- Just one example, and not even the most important question for me, is: "How old was Isaac when his dad tied ropes around him and told him to climb onto the altar of sacrifice to be a burnt offering to Yahweh?"
- Some of the rabbis of old conclude he was nearly 40 because they attribute his mother Sarah's death to her hearing what Abraham intended to do in obedience to God. Maybe he was as young as 8 or was a teenage boy.
- No matter, he was old enough to say "no" and run from a 100 year-old man. So, is this story as much about Isaac's faith and resultant obedience as it is about Abraham's? This was not the point so we are not told the details here.
- As we re-read the story and consider its implications this morning, I will try to focus on what *Genesis 32* does say and answer rather than on what it does not. The story is told in three parts: **first**: The Description of the Test to Abraham...**second**: Abraham's Perfect Obedience to the Test...**finally** God's Control of and Conclusion from the Test and Response.
- Already, before we have read the first verse of what feels like, as someone called it, a "*monstrous test*"—already I feel myself asking: "*Why does God do this? Why would God do such a thing to a believer?*"
- Already I must answer. We are not yet told specifically. We have been told so far in *Genesis* that among other things, God is merciful and powerful, and good and that God blesses those who trust him to empower them to accomplish his good purposes for the world.

- What we are told here is that God does indeed **test** the obedience of his people. That is a good truth to know lest we think all tests—especially confusing, painful tests such as this one—are out of God’s control or come from the anger of God. This one did not. Ours do not either.
- Lets’ read the description of the test of Abraham in *Genesis 22:1 & 2*.
READ Genesis 22:1-2
- Time has passed since Abraham watched Abimelech and his troops leave him in peace to enjoy living more safely in their land as God provided water wells in the desert.
- “**God tested Abraham.**” As far as we know, Abraham was not told that this was “just a test” like the ones that seem to interrupt so often when I am watching TV telling me what I should do if the situation were real and danger were imminent.
- Thus, it is easy and likely correct to assume this command of God raises some big contradictions for Abraham’s understanding of God and God’s plan—confusing contradictions. Child sacrifice? Was this God’s new way like the pagans? Sacrifice of the promised son who was meant to carry on the lineage of Faith in God and be part of his redemptive plan? This didn’t make human sense!
- The emphasis on “take your son **your only son**” and sacrifice him is as strong as it can be especially after Abraham has been made to send his son Ishmael away from the family. You can see why this mattered so much. The imagery was to be the sacrifice of his “only” son the “only” means of the promise being fulfilled.
- And of course the imagery was going to become perfectly instructive centuries later when God himself would do the same—sacrifice his only begotten son.
- The command to go to the “**region of Moriah**” was important. It was on Mount Moriah that the Temple of God would someday be built. It was on this mountain that the nation would worship God with

countless sacrifices. It was upon this mountain that the ultimate sacrifice of the Messiah would bring about the ultimate fulfillment of the promise of redemption Abraham was just beginning to help fulfill.

- There is one more question or even objection we might have to applying any of the truths of this story to the tests of God in our lives life. God clearly spoke to Abraham. Abraham heard him clearly speak as revealed in his immediate and straightforward reply.
- As far as I know, God has never *directly and aloud* spoken to me to command me to do something very specific as he did here to Abraham. I would like to think that, if he did, I would answer as quickly and as obediently as Abraham did.
- But, is this an out? Is this an excuse for failing tests of obedience from God today? Hardly! It is not cliché or pressing things too far to say that God has spoken to us often and clearly in his beautiful Word. Brothers and sisters, this is one very important reason why we must learn Scripture and be saturated with its truths. It is loaded with clear understandable tests of obedience from God to us.
- God kindly gave me a timely example by placing me in 1 Peter 2:13 and following in our study with the "Yutes" for today. After Peter tells us who we are and why we are here—***to declare the praises of God***—that is to make God's glory known—to lift up his name in the world to bless the world as we image him—after telling us our reason for being he gives us some clear commands of God that might test our obedience in doing this.
- The first clear Word from the God in his word that tests our obedience without having to say it aloud to us in a miraculous mystical way is in verse 13 and it reads clearly: ***"Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and commend those who do right."***

- There is more to that testing command in 1 *Peter* but talk about confusing and objectionable to my way of thinking about those who govern us. It's not as monstrous a test as "kill your only son promised to be your heir," but the test is still confusing for me. How am I supposed to honor governors who don't do their job?
- Peter thought believers living under the power of Rome which would one day wrongly take his life in a failure to punish wrong and honor right—Peter thought somehow in this confusion the test to obey could be answered correctly.
- This is a tough test of obedience to the God we say we trust for some of us today!
- Of course, there are other examples I could give. Some we could claim are not as clear-cut such as the command given by God through the Apostle Paul that **tests** my obedience daily... "**offer your bodies as living sacrifices...do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world...**"
- No, I think God does indeed speak to me clearly and often with tests of obedience through his Word. The problem is likely not with the speaking but rather the hearing.
- So let's set that desire for direct, mystical revelation aside and recognize that even if we have not heard words with our physical ears we have been give clear words from God that ask us if we trust him enough to obey even when the commands don't fit our logic and feelings.
- The description of Abraham's obedience is written in a way that emphasizes immediate and exacting obedience from Abraham by his own choice--alone. Look at verse 3 and following...**READ Genesis 22:3-14**
- "**We will worship and then we will come back to you.**" We know those "we's" are not meant as singular, royal "we's" by Abraham. Is he already expressing something marvelous because of his faith even

as his obedience seems to work against how that marvelous ought to happen?

- Isaac is not the focus of the narrative, as he will become soon in *Genesis*. However, he can see what is happening and make sure we do as well.
- We have wood and fire, stuff for a proper offering to our God but what about the offering itself—the sacrifice that will give its life? If we haven't felt it yet, this is where C.S. Lewis' observation kicks in with full force. Obedience always involves some form of sacrifice even if it is only the tiny sacrifice of some of my remaining sense of autonomy or maybe of my personal comfort. But ultimate tests of obedience coming from faith in God—tests like this one—always involve sacrifice of life.
- They always involve what is most precious to us. In this case Isaac's life was more precious to Abraham than his own. The test...would he hold on to that or obey God?
- Abraham's faith in God as the provider God shows up in his statement replying to his son about the missing piece of the puzzle. ***"God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son"*** Some like to exegete the English word order here and find some relief for Abraham by reading it "God will provide himself as the lamb."
- Of course that is ultimately true in history as the Lamb of God is provided by God to take away the sins of the world as a sacrifice for all humans.
- But that is not the case here. Abraham is not expecting a miraculous escape from this horrible test—we know it will be the "ram caught in a thicket" as we have come to say it. Abraham, because of his faith in God has committed fully to obediently slay his only son of the promise as a sacrifice to the God of the promise.

- Praise God for verse 11 of *Genesis 22*! At the same time praise God with tears in your eyes that there was no verse 11 escape for Jesus on Mount Moriah
- The knife is abruptly stopped here. The crown, the spikes and the sword were not stopped on Calvary. God the Father gave **his** only begotten son that whosoever simply believes in him for life would not perish but have his everlasting life.
- And here... is the point of this test written clearly after the knife is stopped: ***"Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your only son."***
- For Abraham, it was that promised son that was the most precious thing he thought he possessed. For Abraham, was his most precious possession in this life more precious than God? That was the test. The answer was God truly mattered more—more than anything or even anyone in this world to Abraham.
- This treatment of God was not simply words or simply a possibility with Abraham. It was no real in time and space—as real as real human choice can be as part of God's redemptive plan.
- We get some cheating help from the author of *Hebrews* once again in *Hebrews 11: 17-19* ¹⁷ ***By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, ¹⁸ even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." ¹⁹ Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.***
- In his heart, head and actions Abraham sacrificed Isaac. He held back nothing from God. Absolutely nothing. He would obey God even if it cost him his most precious son.
- Again, questions! Didn't God already know what would happen? Yes. But God has invited humans somehow to be a real part of an eternal plan even limited as we are now by time and space.

- Abraham's choice to obey was real and it really mattered, by God's design, that it actually happened not just as God knowing it would but that Abraham would act on faith and obey in the Created world.
- "**To fear God**" is not a phrase we all like and enjoy. That is probably because we don't understand it or if we have understood it we tend to lose that meaning until we pause to think about it.
- We don't fear God because he is a capricious ogre who takes joy in hurting us just because he can. More people than I would like to think have that sort of a picture of God but it is not correct and not complete.
- We "fear God" means we recognize the truth of who he is in a full-orbed way. He loves us but he is not simply another social media BFF. He is the creator God who made us, sustains us, and gives us purposeful life when we trust him.
- To fear God, meant Abraham so that obeying God, because of who he is, was more important than the most precious thing to a man in this world.
- I suppose one could love God, or actually more *appreciate* God for what he does without fearing God for who he is.
- The way One knows if they fear God is if they obey God even when it doesn't make sense and their most precious thing in this world is on the altar to be sacrificed.
- Ultimately, in this case, God did provide the sacrifice—that ram that got itself caught in a bush. But ultimately as well, Isaac was indeed sacrificed by Abraham.
- An overall message for Abraham, for the Israelites and for us is revealed in the naming of the place "**The Lord Will Provide.**" Mount Moriah will always be the place that reminds humans first, that they need provision—they need something for life that they cannot create or find or invent on their own. Mount Moriah—Mount Calvary will be the place that will always remind humans that only

God can provide what they need and—joy of joys—God will provide it if they will obey the call to trust him instead of their own ways to make life work.

- The final part of the story is the ultimate stamp of “tested and found obedient” on Abraham’s life. I’m sure Abraham will make more mistakes and sin more times after this but the pronouncement is finalized here. Abraham will participate in this blessing that gets bolder and broader each time he passes a test and hears it anew.
- Look at the last verse in the chapter starting with verse 15 where a second message comes from the Lord in response to obeying the first one. **READ Genesis 22:15-19**
- The abundance of the promises is full in these descriptions. Importantly for that generation of Israelites about to enter the Promised Land, there is an increase in the assurance that Abraham’s descendants—that was these guys for who Moses is recording this—his descendants will triumph and take possession of cities of their enemies. Abraham’s obedience has won them victory generations after his death!
- Along with Alan Ross in his commentary on *Genesis*, I am reminded of that passage in Romans 8 that I memorized and have relied upon for many years now. I have often recited part of it with thanksgiving as we have shared the Lord’s Supper. **³¹ What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?**
- Abraham’s fear of the Lord, that resulted in obedience by faith, brings a celebratory promise of ultimate victory from God for his people that is passed through the generations.
- Abraham’s obedience truly mattered. Our obedience truly matters. Sometimes we who believe the Bible teaches a theology of free grace are accused of teaching fear of the Lord and obedience of God don’t matter since it’s “all about grace anyway.”

- That is a "strawman" criticism. Apart from the grace of God I cannot do anything. Because of the grace of God I can even obey God.
- I do not earn my identity and acceptance by God. That is a gift of grace through faith alone in Christ alone.
- However, that gift, and the sphere of grace from God in which I now exist, empowers me to know the fullness of God, to fear him in the right sense and then to obey him so that I am truly, actually, really a part of his eternal redemptive plan even though I have been around all that long in terms of eternity.
- My obedience and your obedience when God tests us allows us to participate in the victories of God's people for generations to come.
- We should keep in mind that we face tests of obedience daily. Some of them are relatively easy tests but let's not forget even for those we need the God who "provides"
- Some tests can appear monstrous. God knows what we can handle and does not test us beyond what we are able to bear—even if sometimes it does seem to us the test is unbearable.
- These tests are often confusing because they involve "good things" maybe even the sacrifice of things we have come to think of as God's will—God's plan—God's answer as Isaac was for Abraham.
- God tests in this way to show if we are trusting him or the answer—if we fear him or the loss of the solution and control he seems to have given us instead.
- Then, when it comes to these hard, confusing tests, we must also keep in mind a principle of sacrifice for God's glory because we fear him properly. God never tests us like this by asking for our leftovers or asking for what matters little to us. God always asks us to sacrifice our best or most important—our most precious in this world to him.
- God doesn't always take it from us. Sometimes he holds back the knife as we plunge. However, in the toughest test of obedience that stopping hand never comes until we have already made the sacrifice.

Series: *Genesis...The Beginnings Continued*

Sermon: *"The True Test of Obedience"*

Text: *Genesis 22*

RGGJR/FBCCS/8-15-21 UNEDITED

- ***The true, hard test of obedience is: Will I sacrifice to God what I love the most because I truly fear God rightly and truly trust God fully.***