**THE LIFE OF ABRAHAM**

**THE LORD WILL PROVIDE**

**Genesis 22**

**INTRODUCTION**

Today we come to our ninth and final message on The Life of Abraham. Genesis 22 has been called “the aesthetic and theological summit of the whole story of Abraham” (Wenham). It is admired both by the beauty of its narrative and the depth of its theological significance. Many, including myself, consider it to be one of the most gripping and powerful chapters in all of Scripture.

That’s not really a surprise, because out of all the chapters we’ve looked at about this Jewish Patriarch, it is here that the gospel comes out most fully. Up to this point, we’ve heard whispers and seen glimpses of the gospel, but here we see it on full display as Abraham and Isaac essentially act it out. This story is precious because it points so vividly to the greatest story, the gospel story that God gave his only Son out of love for us.

The other reason why this chapter is so powerful is because we get the privilege of seeing just how far Abraham has come in his faith. We first met him as a sprightly seventy-five year old in Chapter 12, and since then, we have walked with him through both his triumphs and failures.

We’ve seen him believe God’s promise that he would have a son with his barren wife Sarah, but we’ve also seen him submit to her worldly, impatient plan to have a son through her maidservant Hagar. We’ve seen him charge boldly into battle against some fearsome warlords, but we’ve also seen him cower in fear at the prospect of foreigners coveting his wife. We’ve seen him believe God, question God, and doubt God, but through it all, God was with him, shaping him and molding him into a man of faith so that we could look at his life here in Genesis 22 and marvel at what God has done.

How has God done this? By testing him. Like a master craftsman testing the purity of his metals in the heat of his furnace, God has tested Abraham’s faith, not just by calling him to believe, but by calling him to act. “Leave your family and go to the land I will show you” (Genesis 12). “Circumcise every male member of your household” (Genesis 17). “Say goodbye to your beloved son Ishmael and send him away to wander in the desert” (Genesis 21). For the most part, despite his failures and sins, Abraham has passed these tests. He has obeyed, he has trusted God, and he has walked by faith.

Today, we’re going to see the Lord bring Abraham through one final test, but this test is very different from the previous ones. The previous ones all came with the incentive of reward. This one comes with no promise of reward at all. Abraham stood to gain everything by obeying the previous commands, but obeying this one would mean losing everything – everything he had waited for, fought for, struggled for. It would mean losing his son, his only son, the son whom he loved, and all the great promises of God that came with him.

It is in the midst of this test that we learn not only what it truly means to walk by faith in the promises of God, but that we come to a deeper and fuller revelation of God’s love for us in Christ.

The title of this message is **The Lord Will Provide.** My aim today is to show you that **Walking by Faith Comes from the Testing of Faith.**

We will have three points today:

1. Abraham’s Faith
2. Isaac’s Submission
3. The Lord’s Provision

(1) **ABRAHAM’S FAITH**

Verse 1 begins by introducing what Genesis 22 is about. “After these things God *tested* Abraham.” This is no doubt to soften the blow to the reader of what’s to follow. The command that God is going to give Abraham is so outrageous that we need to know that this is just a test. It’s not to be taken literally. God has a deeper purpose here.

But Abraham doesn’t know that. He doesn’t know he’s being tested. So when God calls out, “Abraham!” and he replies, “Here I am”, he’s ready and willing to submit. But as ready as he was, he wasn’t ready for this: “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.”

How could he do that? How could he give up his son, his only son, whom he loved? Now, we know that Isaac wasn’t his only son. He had Ishmael as well, but in Genesis 21 God told him to do what Sarah wanted and send Ishmael out into the desert. That would have made this command that much harder. Abraham already had to say goodbye to one son. Would he now have to say goodbye to the other? How could he do that?

The more important question, however, isn’t how he could do that. It’s why would he do that? God told him repeatedly that it would be through Isaac that his offspring would be named, the offspring that would multiply, and become kings, and bless the nations. He was to be Abraham’s heir, the one to inherit the promises and see them continue to be fulfilled through him and through his offspring. So why would Abraham kill him? Killing him would cut off the stream of God’s blessings at the source, to crush the seed of God’s plans of salvation before it had a chance to sprout. So why would Abraham kill him?

Abraham didn’t know why, but remarkably, he didn’t feel that he had to. He had finally learned the lesson that walking by faith means trusting God even when it doesn’t make sense. It meant trusting God’s Word more than his own understanding, to submit to God’s will rather than pursue his own.

That’s why we see Abraham take immediate action in verse 3. He doesn’t procrastinate. He doesn’t ponder whether or not to obey. He “rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac” and set off for the land of Moriah. And though he has two young servants with him, verse 3 says that this elderly patriarch cuts the wood for the burnt offering himself. This is intensely personal for him. This is *his* son he’s preparing to sacrifice in obedience to *his* God, and that meant that no matter how hard it was for him to obey, he would be the one to do it, and not his servants.

Verse 4 says that Abraham saw the place that God was leading him to on the third day. Three days of travelling with his beloved son, talking, perhaps even laughing, as they enjoyed the journey together. As far as Isaac knew, they were just heading out together, father and son, to offer sacrifices to God. They were going to church to worship. He thought they were going to offer sacrifices when in truth they were going to offer him as the sacrifice. That’s something only Abraham knew, and that meant that every step he took must have been agony. Every step was an intentional choice to obey God, to choose God’s will over his own.

Where did he get the strength to do this? Verse 5 gives us some insight. As they approach Mount Moriah, verse 5 says that Abraham instructs his young men to stay with the donkey while he and the boy go over there and worship before they “come again to you”. Don’t miss the significance of this last statement. Abraham is fully expecting that somehow, in some way, both he and Isaac will come down from the mountain. How?

We need another Holy Spirit-inspired writer of Scripture to tell us. The author of Hebrews, commenting on Genesis 22, wrote this:

“By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead...” (Hebrews 11:17-19)

Abraham knew that Isaac’s death could never derail God’s plans because he believed in the power of resurrection. Not even death could threaten God’s promises. If God said that Isaac would be the one to inherit the covenant, then Isaac it would be, even if it meant that he had to die and rise to receive it.

Which of God’s promises are you doubting today? Which of God’s promises feel precarious, uncertain, or threatened? Is it the promise to provide for your needs? Is it the promise to satisfy your soul? Is it the promise to wash your sins away and make you white as snow? Is it the promise to free you from the slavery of your sin? Perhaps you look at your circumstances or your abilities and think, “Nothing’s ever going to change. I’m never going to be free. I’m never going to be clean. I’m never going to be satisfied.”

You’d be right, if you were left on your own abilities and efforts. But thanks be to God, you are not on your own. God is on your side, and he doesn’t operate within the same rules and limitations that we do. He is the God of resurrection. He can bring life out of death, victory out of defeat, joy out of sadness, even when it seems impossible.

It seems strange to say, but we often forget about the true nature of God. We lose the “God-ness” of God. We who say we believe can live as functional atheists, and we forget that he is the God of resurrection. He does the impossible. He can take us out of the filth and stench of our sin and make something beautiful come out of it. His promises are never threatened, not even by death. He will keep his promises even though we have no idea how he will do it.

Abraham finally believed this after walking with God for twenty-five years. After all his failures, he finally believed that God was faithful to keep his promises even though his own senses and understanding told him it wasn’t possible.

And so, when Isaac asks where the lamb is for the burnt offering in verse 7, Abraham tells him, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” All of what he learned about God, about his promises, about his faithfulness, is summed up in this simple phrase: God will provide.

Even when he built the altar where his beloved son would be sacrificed; even when he tied dear Isaac upon that altar; even when his hand reached out to take the knife to slaughter him; he knew that God would provide.

That’s what true faith looks like. It’s child-like and absolute, undefiled by our doubts and unlimited by what we perceive to be possible. It’s believing that God’s Word is true and his promises are trustworthy even when everything else tells us otherwise.

You may be thinking, “If that’s what faith looks like, I’m never going to have it, because I could never trust God like that.” But you know what? Neither could Abraham. That’s why his story is so powerful and relevant to us. Abraham wasn’t a man of faith. He was a doubter. He wasn’t a man after God’s heart. He was selfish. More often than not he walked by sight and not by faith. But God turned that man into the man we see here in Genesis 22, full of faith and trust even in the midst of the most difficult of trials.

If God could do that for a man like Abraham, he can do that for you and me. It won’t be easy. At times it will even be painful, because God doesn’t just strengthen our faith by pushing a button. He strengthens our faith by testing us, and he often tests us by taking away the things we love most. There is no greater test to our faith than when our greatest loves are threatened. Your health. Your career. Your autonomy. Your child. That’s how God tested Abraham, and that’s how God tests us, that we might learn what it means to truly walk by faith in the promises of God to the glory of our God and Saviour.

(2) **ISAAC’S SUBMISSION**

What about Isaac? We’ve seen that, although Abraham has been the main human character in these last ten chapters, Genesis has always made time for the supporting cast as well. People like Sarah, Hagar, Lot, and even Abimelech King of Gerar have made brief appearances to teach us their own lessons about faith. Now it’s Isaac’s turn, leading to our second point: Isaac’s Submission.

It’s important to note that, even though Isaac was just born one chapter ago, he’s a young man by the time of the events in Genesis 22. We know that because Isaac was able to make the three day journey to Moriah on foot, rather than riding on the donkey. He was also able to carry the wood for the burnt offering all the way up the mountain on his back. Abraham also calls him “the boy” in verse 5, which can also be translated as “young man”. Based on these factors, we can safely imagine Isaac as a thirteen or fourteen year old young man.

Isaac is one of the central figures in the chapter, but the text only records him speaking once. That’s in verse 7 where he respectfully addresses Abraham as “My father” before he asks, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Isaac knows what making offerings to God entails, presumably because he was used to it back at home. He’s an active participant in the worshipping community led by his father and is genuinely concerned about doing it right.

The response Abraham gives him in verse 8 that God would provide the lamb could have been less than satisfactory, but Isaac doesn’t let it bother him. Instead, he trusts his father, and he trusts the God his father worships, and leaves the matter at that.

Considered together, we see Isaac being portrayed as a respectful, submissive, and trusting young man who wants to worship God, and nowhere is this clearer than in verse 9. When Abraham and Isaac finally arrive at the top of Mount Moriah, Isaac finally learns the truth. *He* is to be the burnt offering made to God in worship. *He* is the one who is about to die. But rather than run away, or protest, or fight against his father (which he could have clearly done given how old Abraham was), he humbly permits his father tie him up and lay him on the altar.

This is a heartbreaking scene. Not only is Abraham about to sacrifice his son, but his son is a good kid. This gentle, innocent child was willing to lay down his life, trusting his father and worshipping his God even to the point of death. He was like an unblemished lamb that Abraham’s descendants would one day offer to God in worship.

Isaac wasn’t perfect. Later on in Genesis we find out that he would lie about his wife Rebekah the same way that Abraham lied about Sarah, saying that she was his sister so that no one would hurt him in order to get to her. Like his father, he “submitted to the prostitution of his wife” (Calvin). And like his father, he would reject God’s promises as he would prefer Esau over Jacob, even though God’s promise was that the older would serve the younger.

Isaac wasn’t perfect, but here in Genesis 22, he sets an example for all of us as one who trusted God completely, an innocent lamb in the arms of his shepherd, trusting completely in his protection.

(3) **GOD’S PROVISION**

This leads to our final point: God’s Provision.

As Abraham is about to take up the knife to slaughter his innocent, beloved son, God calls out his name twice in verse 11 to communicate the urgency of the moment. “Abraham, Abraham!” And just like he does in verse 1, he responds immediately and submissively. “Here I am”. And what does God do? He lifts the curtain, reveals that it was all a test, and explains why he was testing him. “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.”

Note the language God uses in verse 12. He doesn’t say that the purpose of the test was to see if Abraham would trust God or love God. It was to see if Abraham *feared* God. We know what the fear of God isn’t. It’s not like the terror you might feel watching a scary movie or experiencing a nightmare. That kind of fear leads you away from the thing you’re afraid of. The fear of God draws you closer to God. We often hear it described as an experience of reverential awe.

That’s true, but it’s only a part of what it means to fear God. The fear of God isn’t just an experiential sensation. It includes both trust and obedience as well. God knew that Abraham feared him not because he fell to his knees in worship, but because his love for God led him to trust in God in such a way that it resulted in obedience to God. Kenneth Mathews puts it this way:

“ ‘Fear God’ describes the man’s obedience and trust motivated by his love of God” (Mathews)

We see this combination of love, obedience, and trust in Deuteronomy 10:12-13 as well:

“And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him…?” (Deuteronomy 10:12-13)

God isn’t just looking for love by itself, or trust by itself, or obedience by itself. He’s looking for love that leads to trust that leads to obedience even when it doesn’t make sense to obey. He’s looking for the *fear of God*. That’s why God gave Abraham this test. It was to reveal the fear of God in his heart.

As a result of this fear, God rewards Abraham with a number of wonderful and precious promises in verses 15-18. The interesting thing about these verses is that none of these promises are new. They’re the same promises that God had been giving to Abraham throughout the years. The only difference is that God communicates the promises to Abraham in a way that makes him absolutely certain that they will be fulfilled.

God gives these promises by swearing *upon himself*, an act that Hebrews 6 explains was meant to show even more convincingly that he would keep his promises. The language of the promises communicates this as well. I will *surely* bless you. I will *surely* multiply your offspring.

In other words, Abraham’s obedience didn’t earn him the promises. They only earned him greater certainty that the promises would be fulfilled. The promises would always rest on grace, and grace alone, not because of Abraham’s righteousness or works, but because of God’s sovereign choice. But the fruit of Abraham’s obedience would be that he would experience a greater degree of certainty, a stronger belief, that God would do all that he promised.

That’s essentially the end of Abraham’s story. It ends with God’s definitive Word that he would indeed do all that he had promised to do for this doubter who became a believer, this disobedient man who became obedient in impossible circumstances. That’s meant to inspire us to want to become just like him, believing that if God could do that in Abraham, then he can do that in us.

But as valuable as those lessons are, that’s not what Abraham’s story is ultimately about. Abraham’s story isn’t ultimately meant to point us to himself. It’s meant to point us to the one who was greater than him, the one who would walk by faith without fail with the perfect fear of God in his heart.

It’s no coincidence that these events in Genesis 22 took place on Mount Moriah. That’s where the Jewish Temple would later be built in the times of Solomon hundreds of years later (2 Chronicles 3:1). It would be there, just outside the Temple walls, where another innocent man would carry wood on his back up a hill called Calvary; where another son would willingly submit to his Father in absolute obedience; where the Lamb of God himself would not only be willing to die, but actually die to take away the sins of the world.

Abraham may not have known this, but his story was setting the stage for the greatest story of all, when God the Father would give his son, his only son, the son whom he loved, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

The fact that the Father was willing to do what he would not require of Abraham in the giving of his Son to death should leave us breathless with wonder. God didn’t just travel three days to get to the place where he would sacrifice his son. He travelled thousands of years through all of salvation history until the moment when his Son would be crucified. Every single one of those days over thousands of years was an intentional choice, a step closer to the day when he would pour out his wrath against us on *him*.

God did not spare his own Son for us. He did not hold back. He gave what was most precious to him for wretched sinners like us, not because we deserved it, not because we worked for it, but because of his grace. And now, because of that grace, all who call upon the name of Christ for the forgiveness of their sins become God’s children, sons and daughters of God the Most High, to the praise of his glorious grace.

Abraham lived his entire life without knowing the fullness of God’s plans, and yet his words hinted at those plans in verses 13-14. As he looked upon the ram caught in the thicket by his horns and offered it as an offering instead of his son, he declared, “*Jehovah Jireh*”, “The LORD will provide”, a saying that became so powerful and widespread that verse 14 says that “it is said to this day, ‘On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.’” That is what the Lord has done in the giving of Jesus Christ. On the mount of the Lord, the mount called Calvary, the Lord has indeed provided, not just a ram, but a perfect Son who alone could make atonement for our sins.

**CONCLUSION**

As we draw this sermon and series to a close, I want to end by leaving us with five lessons about the promises of God.

1. **Certainty**: we don’t need new promises; we need greater certainty about the old promises. All through his life, God spoke to Abraham multiple times and gave him numerous sets of promises. Sometimes he worded them a little differently, or he gave a few more details, but in essence, they were all the same. Even at the end of his story here in Genesis 22 God doesn’t reward Abraham’s faith with a whole new set of promises, but with a repetition of the old ones. We don’t need new promises, we need greater certainty about the old ones, and one of the ways we grow in our certainty is by our obedience. Obeying God’s commands doesn’t qualify us for new promises, but it does give us a greater degree of faith to believe that those promises are true.

2. **Waiting**: the fulfillment of God’s promises takes time, because God doesn’t operate on the same timeframes as we do. Often he waits to fulfill his promises until conditions are met that will put the rightness and goodness of his promises on full display. We saw that in Genesis 15 when God told Abraham that neither he nor his descendants would see the promise of land for hundreds of years because the people they would clear out of Canaan had not yet become sinful enough to be driven out and destroyed. We need to wait for God’s promises, and the way we do that is to grow in our love for the one who has given us the promises. That was Sarah’s problem. She arranged for Abraham to marry Hagar because she loved the idea of having children more than she loved God and trusted his promises. The more we love God, the more we will be willing to wait.

3. **Cherishing**: I hope that this series has taught us all to cherish the promises, to see how God uses them to propel us to obedience. As Calvin said,

“God stimulates us more powerfully to the performance of duty by promising than by ordering.”

One way our series has taught us to cherish the promises is by showing us the consequences of *not* cherishing them through the story of Lot. His decision to abandon God’s promises by leaving Abraham in the pursuit of wealth and prestige in Sodom had *devastating* effects, not just on his faith, but on his life. This man who once had everything is last seen lying naked in a cave with nothing but two incestuous daughters to keep him company. We cherish the promises of God by studying them, memorizing them, praying them, and believing in them in part so that we might avoid falling into the same traps as Lot.

4. **Celebrating**: we need to celebrate God’s promises, even when they’re only partially fulfilled. That was the lesson of Beersheba in Genesis 21. Abraham knew that he wouldn’t see the promise of land fulfilled in his lifetime, but when he received ownership of that little well in Gerar, he celebrated. He didn’t pout and complain that it was only a little well, and it was nothing compared to the entire land of Canaan that he would one day possess. He rejoiced by planting a tree to mark the occasion, and he *worshipped*, calling on the name of the LORD, calling him “the Everlasting God”, the God of eternity who works all things in his own way and in his own timing.

5. **Fulfillment**: most importantly, we need to remember that the fulfillment of God’s promises doesn’t depend on us, but on Christ.

“All the promises of God find their Yes in him” (2 Cor. 1:20).

Christ, and Christ alone is the only reason why we can say “Jehovah Jireh” with confidence, “The Lord will provide.” This ought to be the anthem of all who walk by faith. Abraham knew that God would provide because he could look back at that ram caught in the thicket by its horns. How much more should we when we can look back to the Son, nailed to that tree and crucified for our sins? We can have confidence that the Lord will provide, because the Lord has provided, not just for some of our needs, but for our greatest need, our need for a Saviour. And if he provided us with a Saviour, his beloved Son, how will he not provide us with all that he has promised?

“He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Romans 8:32)