

The Altar of Surrender

Genesis 22

Abraham has been on quite a journey – about 40 years since he arrived in Canaan, which was also the time when his relationship with God began. Throughout those 40 years we've seen his faith in God grow through a wide variety of situations. He's seen incredible highs and terrible lows; mountaintop experiences and difficult valleys. And all of these helped prepare him for what we'll read about today.

God has given us many wonderful gifts in this life – good things that we enjoy. He's given us family, marriage, children... homes, land, possessions... health, work, hobbies, entertainment... all kinds of good things. And among all these good gifts there are some that rise to the top of the list – things we love the most. It may be your children or your spouse, or your home, or land, or health. These are the things that we love the most, but these are also the things that we have the hardest time surrendering to God. God wants us to surrender everything to him so that he is in control and we bring glory to him in every area of our lives, but when it comes to the things that are most important to us, this can be very difficult.

One of the things that's very important to me is financial stability. I have a wife and four kids and I have the responsibility to provide for them. I don't ever want to be in a situation where we don't have what we need, so I'm very careful with managing our finances. I want to be in control to make sure we have what we need. And because of that, I have a real hard time surrendering that to God – to let go of the reins and say, "I trust you to take complete control – whatever you want to do." In the back of my mind I'm afraid of what he'll do. For some reason I feel like if I surrender our finances to him he's going to take them away – remove our financial stability so we learn to trust only in him or something like that.

And that's the way I think a lot of us think about the things that are really important to us – that if we surrender them to God, he's going to take them away. For you it might not be finances, but it might be your children... you're afraid to surrender them completely to God because in the back of your mind you're afraid he'll take them away. Or maybe you feel that way about your hobbies – maybe God wants you to spend all your time in prayer or reading the Bible or serving in ministry, so if you surrender your hobbies to him, he'll take them away. We can feel that way about anything that's really important to us – your house, land, job, health... God can probably find a problem with everything we love, so if we surrender them to him, he'll take them away. We're afraid, so we don't surrender;

rather we withhold them from him and try to keep control for ourselves. It's almost like we're in a tug of war match with him.

This morning I want to break through these fears so we begin to change that kind of thinking and are much more willing to surrender everything to him. And to do so we're going to look at a story in the life of Abraham where he was faced with this very same thing. Would he surrender what he loved most to God?

Last week we saw that Isaac was born – the miraculous son of Abraham and Sarah. And we saw how Ishmael, Abraham's oldest son, was sent away, but then protected and blessed by God. After that, Abraham made a treaty with the King of the Philistines in whose land he was living. So Abraham was all set – more prosperous than ever, at peace with the people around him, and enjoying watching his son Isaac grow up. Several years went by like that and Isaac was probably about 12-15 years old when God spoke to Abraham again.

Read Genesis 22:1-2.

After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ²He 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."

Now, many of you know this story and I want you to forget about the ending for a little bit. It's easy to skip to the ending and never really think about what happens at the beginning. Here we see God tell Abraham to do the worst thing a parent could imagine. Imagine you're a dad and God visits you in a dream and tells you, "I want you to go on a father-son road trip to the mountains and when you arrive I want you to pull out a knife, kill your son, cut him into little pieces and then burn his body in a campfire as an offering to me..." That's what God told Abraham to do. *"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."*

This is exactly why we're afraid to surrender the things we love to God. We think he's going to do the same thing to us, so we withhold them from God. We try to protect them from him. If I was in Abraham's shoes, I'd be freaking out. I'd be terrified. I'd grab my son, hold on to him really tight, and start heading the opposite direction. I'd do like Jonah and jump on a ship to get as far away from Moriah as I could. "I don't care what you do to me, but there's no way I'm going to do that to my son." And that's what we often do with the things we love – we protect them from God because we're afraid of what he might do to them. I think

that's a pretty normal response, which makes Abraham's response really surprising.

Read Genesis 22:3.

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" ... took off in the opposite direction...? No... "...he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him.

First God seems to have gone off the deep end, but now Abraham has gone off the deep end too. Not only does he not run the opposite direction, but he gets up early, seemingly eager and ready to head to Moriah. Moriah was about a 2 ½ day journey from where Abraham lived – most think it was the same mountain on which Jerusalem was built. Certainly at some point Abraham will snap out of whatever trance he was in and come to his senses and turn around.

Read Genesis 22:4-5.

On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. ⁵ 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."

So apparently he didn't come to his senses; he didn't turn around; he kept going and when he got near the mountain he told his servants to wait there – he and Isaac would go ahead to worship and they were to wait there until they returned. So now it looks like he's lying. If he's going up to the mountain to sacrifice his son, "they" wouldn't be coming back, only he would. And that doesn't seem to phase him one bit. So he doesn't turn around yet, but maybe, once he was alone with Isaac, his fatherly heart would awaken and finally they'd turn around.

Read Genesis 22:6-8.

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. ⁷ 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?" ⁸ Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together.

Not only did Abraham not turn around, but he made Isaac carry the firewood that he was going to burn him with and when Isaac asked him where the lamb was for the sacrifice, he told him what looks like another lie – "God will provide the

lamb.” What do you mean, “God will provide the lamb”? God told you to sacrifice your son, not a lamb. It’s almost like he’s luring him up the mountain so he doesn’t have to carry him. But certainly, once they made it to the place of sacrifice and Abraham had to tie up his young, teenage son and lay him on the altar – certainly then he would be overcome with grief and put an end to the whole thing.

Read Genesis 22:9-10.

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. ¹⁰ Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son.

You have got to be kidding me. He’s actually going to go through with it. God’s told him to do the impossible, but somehow it seems like Abraham is just fine with it. He’s going to do it.

How are we supposed to surrender the things we love to God after reading something like this? Apparently if we do, he’s going to do exactly what we fear the most – he’s going to strip them away from us. And apparently, if we’re going to be people of faith we’ll have to respond like Abraham did and walk away without being phased in the least. If you look at the details of this story up to this point it brings up all kinds of difficult questions and problems. But it’s not the end of the story. It’s at this point that things take a turn in another direction. And it’s the second half of the story that helps us understand what God is up to and why Abraham did what he did.

Read Genesis 22:11-14.

But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” ¹² 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.” ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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.”

So at the very last moment, God stopped Abraham from going any further and provided a ram for him to sacrifice instead of his son. The test was complete and apparently Abraham had passed. So what’s going on here? It says here that the test was to see if Abraham truly feared the Lord, which is strange because fear isn’t the

thing that makes us want to surrender things to God; it makes us want to withhold them. That's why we withhold the things we love from God – because we're afraid. But in this case it was the fear of the Lord that allowed Abraham to do what he did. You could look at it like he was so afraid of what God would do to him that he was willing to do anything God told him to do – even kill his very own son, but that just doesn't add up. If that was the kind of fear that Abraham had, he'd be a different person than the man we've gotten to know over the past 11 weeks, and God would be no different than a pagan Canaanite demon-god.

So it has to be a different kind of fear. I did a word study on the word for fear that's used in this passage and I found some eye-opening things. When that word is used in the Bible, it doesn't lead to people being terrified and afraid. It leads to people being filled with joy, and hope, and blessing. One place this word is used is in Psalm 25:12-15 where it says this: *“Who is the man who fears the LORD? Him will he instruct in the way that he should choose. ¹³ His soul shall abide in well-being, and his offspring shall inherit the land. ¹⁴ The friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him, and he makes known to them his covenant. ¹⁵ My eyes are ever toward the LORD, for he will pluck my feet out of the net.”* The fear of the Lord in this passage is a fear that consists of faith and hope and confidence in a friend who will protect and provide. Their soul will abide in well-being, their offspring shall inherit the land, God's friendship belongs to them, his covenant is with them, and he is their security and protection... That's a different kind of fear than what we're used to.

Another passage that speaks of this kind of fear is Psalm 128. *“Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD, who walks in his ways! ² You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you. ³ Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table. ⁴ Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the LORD. ⁵ The LORD bless you from Zion! May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life! ⁶ May you see your children's children! Peace be upon Israel!”*

This is a wonderful kind of fear – it's the kind of fear that I want to have, and that's the kind of fear that God was testing Abraham for – to see if he trusted him completely for blessing and goodness and the well-being of everything in his life, including what he loved most, his son Isaac. From God's perspective, I can see how there's no way he would have ever had Abraham go all the way to the point of killing his son and the reason he told him to do so was to test and see if Abraham really knew who he was and could really trust him completely for everything. And from Abraham's perspective, because he did have that kind of fear and completely

trusted God for goodness and blessing, he was able to do what God told him to do, probably not knowing what was going to happen, but knowing that the Lord had no intention of killing his beloved son and taking him away. You see this about the Lord in the final verses of this story.

Read Genesis 22:15-19

And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven¹⁶ and said, "By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son,¹⁷ 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,¹⁸ and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice."¹⁹ So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba. And Abraham lived at Beersheba.

God is not the kind of God that wants to take away the good things he's given you that are deeply important to you. He's the kind of God that wants to bless you abundantly with them. And the way that he blesses you with them is by bringing you to the place, where you no longer withhold them from him, but joyfully surrender them to him. A good gift from God that you love and surrender to him is a gift that he delights to bless you with. A good gift from him that you love and withhold from him is an idol.

It's ironic to me that fear is what keeps us from surrendering the things we love to God, when it's actually the fear of God that allowed Abraham to do that very thing. We have the wrong kind of fear and along with that the wrong kind of idea of what God wants to do with the things we love.

So, I think what God wants us to do today is bring the things that we love – the things we may be withholding from him – and lay them on the altar of surrender, like Abraham did. The only way we'll be able to do that is if we see God for who he really is – a God who can be trusted with the things most precious to us because he doesn't want to take them away, he wants to bless us with them. That's why he gave them to us in the first place.

Maybe it's your children; maybe it's your finances; maybe it's your health or your job or your hobby... Take a moment to bring that before the Lord and surrender it to him. Let him have control and trust him and his goodwill and kindness toward you.