

January 3, 2010

Welcome to 2010! Glad to see you made it through the Christmas snow storm of 2009. My family and I went to St. Louis for Christmas to be with family hoping to get a lot a snow, and sure enough it hits here while we were gone. But it is good to see you this morning. I hope you had fun in the snow but also a safe and joyous holiday.

This morning we are going to look at a text that is very well known in scripture. There are some stories in scripture that are told many times over and which we have known since we were kids. So, this being the first Sunday of the month, we have a lot a kids in here...so kids, to get us started this morning, I want you to help us out...if you recognize the story I am referring to, then just yell out what it is. – That’s right – you get to yell out during a church service! Alright, here we go. How about the story of the first man and woman to be created...(Adam and Eve), okay how about a man that got in trouble for praying and was thrown into a pit with hungry cats (Daniel and the lions den), okay how about a man told to build a boat because it is going to rain a whole lot (Noah and the Ark), good...how about a boy who fights a huge man and wins (David and Goliath)...ok and how about a man that is told by God to go and sacrifice – to kill his own son... (Abraham and Isaac)...great job! And that is the story that we are going to look at this morning. If everyone would take your Bibles and turn to Genesis 22, we will begin.

We are going to look at this amazing story of faith and God working in the life of this man, Abraham, who God chose to be the father of a great nation leading to the birth of His Son, Jesus. So lets begin reading at Genesis 22 verse 1.

READ Genesis 22:1-5

The rest of this story is very well known. Isaac carries the wood for the sacrifice, Abraham carries the torch and the knife and they head to the place where the sacrifice is to take place. Along the way, Isaac, recognizing that something is missing, says “Father, we have the fire and the wood but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Abraham responds, “God himself will provide the lamb for the offering.”

When they reached the spot which God had directed, Abraham built the altar, arranged the wood, tied up Isaac and laid him up on the altar. He reached for the knife to sacrifice his son when an angel of the Lord called to him from heaven saying “Abraham! Abraham!” Abraham says, “Here I am.” The angel tells him to not lay a hand on him. He says “now I know that you fear God because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”

And then, at just the right time, Abraham looks up and sees a ram caught in a thicket. He takes the ram and sacrifices it instead of His son and Abraham names the place “The Lord Will Provide.”

This morning, there are a couple of specific areas that I want to focus on that I believe God wants us to see from this text dealing with tests and trials.

First, is that when we are in a relationship with God, **He will not test us beyond what we can handle.** We see in verse one that it says, “Some time later God tested Abraham. This testing had a purpose. When God tests us He has a purpose. There is a reason for it.

James 1: 2-4 states:

²Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. ⁴Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

God uses trials and tests in our life to strengthen us and to make us strong, so that we will become mature in the faith. We know this concept very well. Athletes push their bodies to extremes so that they can do what they have never done before. Musicians practice endless number of hours in order to perform flawlessly. Children are taught what is right and disciplined when they do wrong in order to grow into respectable, prepared adults. Testing is a good thing that helps us achieve goals and makes us into what we are supposed to be.

Our faith in God is the same. Our faith has to be challenged and struggled with in order for us to become what God intends for us to be. And God, in His sovereignty does that according to His will and determines those trials. Genesis 22 is a great account of Abraham's amazing faith, but this is not the first interaction for God and Abraham. This was not the first thing God asked of Abraham. It's not the first test that Abraham was given. God had given Abraham promises and instruction of which Abraham was required to follow. These promises, and instructions became increasingly harder to follow, but Abraham's faith grew also.

Turn back with me to chapter 12 of Genesis as we look at **Abraham's walk of faith**. Chapter 12 is an account of when God first called Abraham. Here you will also see that Abraham's name is still Abram. Verse 1...

Read Genesis 12: 1-4a.

Abram left! God spoke. Abram was given a promise and he left. He got up and left, moved everything based on the promise given. And then in verse 8 it says that he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord. He is interacting with and praising God based on the promise given him.

Then in Genesis 13 God tells Abram to look to the north, to the south, to the east, and to the west. He says that all of this will belong to your offspring forever, an offspring that will be too numerous to count. In verse 18 it shows that Abram believed God, he believed the promise given, he walked through out the land and built an altar to the Lord. Abram is acting on the promises given.

And then in Chapter 15, Abram says "Lord," here I am without a child...I have this promise but a servant in my household is to be my heir because I have no children. And then God says in verse 4...

READ Genesis 15:4-6

Abram believed the promise given and God found him to be righteous based on his faith. Notice what is happening here. God is building a relationship with Abram. He is walking with him giving him promises and increasing the trials as they move along together so that Abram will grow in his faith.

Now look at chapter 17 where Abram is much older. Look what God says in verses 1-7.

READ Genesis 17:1-7

So God has changed Abrams name to Abraham, He has reaffirmed his promise, and in verses 9 – 14 God goes on to provide a physical sign of this covenant between Himself and Abraham requiring all males 8 days and older to be circumcised. And then down in verse 16 God says that Abraham's wife, Sarah, who was 90 years old, is going to have a son. Abraham and Sarah have passed child bearing age. Even for that biblical time period they have definitely passed the time for their bodies being capable of having children. Yet, the promise still exists. And verse 17 says that Abraham fell facedown and laughed talking to himself saying is a baby going to born to a man that is 100 and a wife who is 90? The promise is getting to be a little more difficult now.

But God tells him yes, your wife Sarah will bear a son and you will call him Isaac and God says that He will establish His covenant with him. Does Abraham believe? Absolutely, Chapter 17 ends by Abraham taking all the males in his household over the age of 8 days old and circumcising them. The physical sign of the covenant, a covenant which Abraham believed.

Abraham was given a promise. A promise of ancestors and land. He believed and grew in his faith as he trusted God to bring about this great nation that was to begin with him. As Abraham walked with God, God challenged and tested him in order to mature Abraham in his faith.

And then in chapter 21 we see it happen. God is gracious to Sarah, she becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son when Abraham is 100 years old. Abraham experiences the promise coming true. He was told something would happen that was physically impossible, he believed and it happened. The faith that Abraham has now, is changing from the faith he had when he started this journey. Abraham has grown in his faith. When he started he was given a promise, he believed and acted on that promise. Then in God's sovereign plan, God chose to bring about this promise in a way that stretched Abraham's faith and caused him to trust in God.

Is this not much different from our walks of faith in Jesus Christ? We face trials that move us to a place of trusting in Him. A place where we cannot do everything on our own and we have to walk in faith and seek Him. Often we think our trials are overwhelming and that they will swallow us up, and yet when we look at the things Abraham went through and what he was told to do, they too would be overwhelming if it were not for the faith Abraham had in God, and God developing that faith.

Okay, so lets now look a little more closely at chapter 22 and the second thing we need to see from this passage, and that is **God wants us to move past just following based on promises.**

Abraham began this journey trusting God in the promise He had given. Some of those promises would not be fulfilled till long after Abraham was gone. Others, however, were fulfilled in his lifetime. In chapter 15 verse 15 God tells Abraham that he will die in peace at a good old age. That is exactly what happened. Throughout the 10 chapters we just touched on there were opportunities for things to go very bad. Abraham was a foreigner in a strange land, meeting new people. He had two different confrontations over his wife who scripture says was very beautiful and which others quickly noticed. And he battled a local king who had taken his nephew, Lot and his family captive. But in all of these times of conflict and challenge God took care of Abraham and continued to mature him in his faith as Abraham saw and experienced God's work in his life.

It's sort of like this. When Danette and I got married, we made vows to each other. We vowed before God to love, to respect, to honor and cherish one another, we committed our lives - having committed our lives to God individually, then we came together as a couple committing ourselves together to Him and to each other. And over the past years we have grown in that relationship with each other. My love and respect for Danette began over 13 years ago. And I made a vow, a commitment of that love on our wedding day. But just think of how shallow our relationship would be our love was just based on those vows? If Danette would have to think back to our wedding day to know I loved her, I guarantee we would not be together very long. Danette, does Bryan love you? Oh yeah! I remember...April 26, 1997 he promised to love and honor me. If that's it, we would have a weak relationship.

Danette and I have come a long way since 1997. Those promises we first made were important but they were just a beginning, a first commitment - and our love, honor and respect for each other has grown through our experiences, our challenges, our failures, our victories and through having and raising children. We know we love each other based on so much more than a promise made 13 years ago.

Abraham experienced tangible things that he could look back on and say, "God protected me here" and "I saw God's hand working here" and "Look, I have a son. I am 100 years old and I have a son. God has blessed me with a son. Look, look what He has done." **God was moving Abraham passed just following promises and moving him toward recognizing His work in Abraham's life. By doing this He was forming Abraham into a man of faith who not only knew God's promises but who also knew God based on who He is and what He does.**

And this is very significant as we come into chapter 22 because now we are dealing with a test that directly affects the promise - we are dealing with Isaac - the heir in which the promise is to come.

Chapter 22 verse 1 ...God says "Abraham." Abraham responds, "Here I am." God speaks, Abraham is listening. Here I am. I'm ready.

And God says, and He is very specific here in verse two, "**Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love**, Now, first of all, Isaac was not Abraham's only son. Back in chapter 16, Sarah, distraught that God had not given her any children, gives her maid servant to Abraham as his wife. Abraham lays with her and she becomes pregnant with Ishmael. However, Ishmael was not the one through which the promise to Abraham would be fulfilled. So when God says "your only son", He is referring to the promised son, the true heir and the path by which Abraham will be blessed and his offspring will multiply.

What I think is interesting here is that God could have just said, "take your son" but instead He adds three qualifiers: your only son - the one who was promised, Isaac - the one you and Sarah waited so long for and were finally given in your old age, and whom you love - emphasizes how hard this was going to be for Abraham. God shows here that He knew what he was asking of Abraham was not going to be easy. Yet, it was the test given.

So here is a man of faith. One who has grown to trust God over the years and who has been blessed by his Holy God. He has a choice. Obey or disobey. That's what this test comes down to. Abraham obeys. He rises early the next morning, saddles his donkey, cuts some wood, and takes two servants with him along with Isaac and they head to the region of Moriah. Now, as

they got close, and Abraham could see the mountains ahead of him, he says this, look at verse 5.

READ Chapter 22:5

Did you catch the pronouns Abraham used there. He said “We” will worship (meaning Abraham and Isaac) and “we” will come back to you. He could have said “you wait here while we go and worship” and left it at that. But instead Abraham shows his faith in the very words he chooses to speak. You see, what Abraham believed was that if he sacrificed Isaac to God, then God could raise him back to life, give him back to Abraham and complete the promise. How do we know this? Look at Hebrews 11:17-19 where the writer of Hebrews tells of many men of faith.

READ Hebrews 11:17-19.

Abraham had experienced God’s blessings. He had experienced God’s promises. He saw those promises come true in his life. He had faith. He was trusting God. Look, he’s like, “it is God who is God. It was God who created me. It was God who promised to make me into great nation. It was God who gave me Isaac. If God says to sacrifice my son, I will obey and I believe God will give him back to me because it was God who promised me and it was God who gave me Isaac in the first place.” Abraham had faith not just on God’s promises but on who God was and what He had done.

And here is my third point. **We are to handle what is to come based on where we have been with God and what He has done.** Do you know what God has done in your life? And by that I mean do you acknowledge what He has done? I mean, I know it is your life so, you know what is happening and whether it is good or bad, easy or hard, but do you recognize and know in your heart what God has done for you and where He has been working? We have got to be at place where that is very evident in our life. **Our faith is built on God’s promises and what He has done in our lives so that our faith in the past builds to our faith in the present.**

I would love to have an open share time right now and hear of how you have been tested in the past and how you grew from that experience. How you have been moved toward maturity in your faith because of what you endured? What examples or times of faith could you reveal right now? And maybe you don’t have grand examples where you came through mightily as Abraham did. Maybe you struggled and doubted more than trusting but were able to see God’s hand in the end after this trial had passed. Tell those stories.

What has God done in your life? What can you reveal of His working, His love, and patience? What tangible things can you remember and point too acknowledging God’s work in your life? Recount what God has done. Remind yourself and others of God’s work.

You know at one time the Messiah coming was a promise yet to be fulfilled. Now the Son of God has come, and He is a Gift, a work of God that we can recognize and say “Yes!, God sent His Son for me!!” He has conquered sin and death so we no longer have to be buried in darkness and evil enslaved to the sin of this world. We have the precious gift of God’s Son. We have faith in Him and we grow in Him. We have to be sure and not take the greatest gift we could have ever been given for granted. God is faithful in His promises and in His works.

As you head into 2010, don’t forget 2009. Don’t forget who God is and how He has shown His glory. Don’t forget where you were and where God has brought you now. You may be in the

midst of a trial right at this moment and God is bringing you out of it. Maybe there is a new job right around the corner, or a new relationship. Maybe the mending of an old relationship or a physical, emotional or mental healing is coming.

Or perhaps you are just entering a trial. Maybe there are greater tests to come in 2010. **Are you ready?** Are you looking to Him in faith trusting Him in whatever trial that comes? Knowing what He has done for you in the past, makes you stronger in the present and prepared for the future. Hear that again. Knowing what God has done for you in the past, makes you stronger in the present and prepares you for the future. We see it with Abraham. Learn from the text. Recognize God's hand, trust the one who created you, who has brought you to this point and walk in faith with Him.

And please know. If you are here this morning and the Holy Spirit is convicting, working on your heart – to deal with sin or to believe in Jesus as your Lord and savior, respond to Him. And believe me, if the Holy Spirit is working you will know. Others around may not but you will know because there will be a battle going on inside of you. The old nature is selfish and fights for you to stay enslaved to this world. And the evil one sure doesn't want you to be transformed into being like Christ. My encouragement to you is to not delay. Respond to Him today and begin to recognize Christ's work in your life.