

The Story of a Substitute

Genesis 22:1-18

By [David Felker](#)

You may be seated. If you have a Bible please turn with me to Genesis chapter 22. Tonight we are starting a new series. We're going to take a little tour this summer through the Old Testament. Before we read, to introduce this series, just consider this with me.

A Tale of Superlatives

Something that I've noticed about myself, I've noticed about even friends of mine, is that I'm prone to overuse superlatives. I've talked about this before. I can't just say that something is good, but I have to say it's like the greatest ever. I think for young husbands that's a great thing. You know, if your wife cooks a meal and asks how it was that it was the best pot roast ever, best asparagus I've ever had. I remember, I have a picture of my dad. My dad's a football coach. When he was coaching at Mississippi State they went to Tennessee and had a big win. It was in 1986. They beat a top ten Tennessee team at Tennessee. And this picture is of my dad. And some of the players picked him up and he's got so much joy on his face. And I love the picture, but I've got a friend who saw the picture one time and said that his dad had told him that that was the best game ever, that it was the best football game ever. I mean it was a 6 and 5, Mississippi State team. It was a big win. I love my dad, but it's not the best football game ever. We're prone to talk like that.

The Greatest Bible Study Ever

I think going in a different direction about what was the greatest Bible study ever. What was the greatest Bible study ever? And I think that we can answer this one. The language professor out at RTS, at the seminary, that I had when I first started—this was five or six years ago in a Greek or a Hebrew class—talked about that he was sitting in on a translation committee meeting. And, so, he was sitting with some of the best Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic scholars in the world, people that are reading those languages like we read the newspaper. And they're asking questions like, "How can we render this phrase most faithfully?" And this professor, he, of course was joking, but he said, "I went to the best Bible study ever." I'm going to use a superlative. I think this one is accurate. In Luke 24, we find the greatest Bible study ever. It's the road to Emmaus, Jesus and two

disciples, and it says that Jesus right there on the road said to these two disciples, “You don’t understand the Scriptures.” And in verse 27, Luke tells us that Jesus said beginning with Moses and all the prophets that Jesus interpreted the things concerning himself. And so this would be the definitive explanation of what we call the Old Testament. And so with Moses--you know, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy--the Prophets—which is a way of referring to the Old Testament—so Moses and the Prophets, he’s saying that Jesus is teaching that all of the Old Testament, all of the Scriptures, it’s all pointing to him.

Now, I don’t know what you think when you think about the Old Testament. I think that we’re prone to think that it’s a random collection of narrative, poets, prophets, parables, kind of pieced together. And Jesus is telling us in Luke 24 that it is all one story. It’s a variety of different human authors written over the course of centuries. But the true, ultimate author is God and he’s telling one story and the story is about Jesus. The hero is Jesus. And what we’re going to do this summer on Wednesday nights, we’re going to start a series. We’re entitling it *Gospel Pattern: Old Testament Stories and the Grace of God*. In that passage, in Luke 24, there’s a verse, verse 32, and the disciples comment in Luke 24 after Jesus unlocks the Scriptures that their “hearts burned within them” as Jesus revealed the Scriptures and pointed to the suffering of the Messiah and the glory of the Messiah. It says that their hearts burned within them. And I think, Lord willing, that is our hope for this summer series, that as we unpack passages in the Old Testament that our hearts will burn within us. As we see these Old Testament stories are pointing to Jesus. Now, we don’t know exactly what stories Jesus would have pointed to on that road, but I think it’s a pretty safe guess that he would have looked at Genesis 22, that he would’ve looked at Abraham and Isaac up on the mountain. And, so, we see in this passage, Genesis 22, we see the footprints of Jesus all over this passage.

And, so, let’s give our attention to Genesis 22. Before we do, let’s look to the Lord in prayer. Let’s pray.

Father, we thank you for your word. It is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. It’s living and active. You promise that every bit of it teaches us about Jesus. And, so, when we read this passage about Abraham and Isaac, there are some confusing parts, there are some big questions, but we know that you are our God, that we are your creatures. And, so, we pray that you would grant us grace as we look to your Word. Help us to cling to your promises. We pray all this in Jesus’ name, Amen.

Genesis 22, beginning in 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.” 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. 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?” 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. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. But 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.”

Amen.

We’re going to tonight just at three things in this text. First, the command of God. Second, the faith of Abraham. Then, third, the provision of the substitute.

1. The Command of God

First, the command of God. God says to Abraham in verses 1 and 2, “It came about that after these things God tested Abraham. ‘Take your son, your only son

Isaac whom you love. God to the land of Moriah. Offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall tell you.” And, so, verse 1 begins with “after these things.” And that phrase is calling you to remember that where we are at has a history attached to it. That God burst onto the scene in Abraham’s life in Genesis chapter 12, that he called him out of a life of idolatry. He called him from his family, from his home. And for at least twenty years now, Abraham trusted the Lord. He loved God. God had called him out of a pagan nation and Abraham loved him. And, at this point, God is now going to put Abraham through the test of his life. He’s testing Abraham. And it sounds, at first glance to us, that he’s trying to entice him to do something wrong, that he’s trying to set up a roadblock in Abraham’s life, that he’s almost playing games with Abraham. I think one false way that we can look at this test is to abstract God’s love from the test. And that’s false. I mean, we know that James says in James 1:13 that “the Lord never tempts us so as to cause us to sin” and that God’s purposes in testing are to “refine” his people. They are to refine his people.

The People of God: Tested and Refined

This past Thursday, I was speaking to the Young Adult group at the Story’s house and I started talking about my son Marshall. Marshall is now, he’s almost three month old. He was born March 25. Marshall is not experiencing really any testing in his life right now. He eats and sleeps and everything is going pretty easy in his life. But, when I think about what I want Marshall to be one day—I mean, the things that I was talking to that Young Adult group—I want Marshall to be a man of godly character. I know for Marshall to be a man of godly character that he’s going to have to go through testing. I want him to have a tender heart. I want him to have thick skin. I know that in order for him to have that, he’s going to have to go through testing. I want him to be a man of integrity. I want him to exude the fruit of the Spirit. And in order for him to be that man, he has to go through testing. He has to be refined. And, the metaphor of testing is most often to refer to the refinery of metals. As you know, if you stick a precious metal in a fiery furnace that the pressure, that the high temperatures the metal can withstand, but it will burn off the impurities. That’s like what God is doing with his people. The purpose of the testing is not to destroy us, but to save us. It’s not to destroy our faith but to actually strengthen to where we’re more useful. 1 Peter says that trials test the genuineness of your faith that you may be found in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

And, yet, then, when we come to a passage like Genesis 22, I think we know that to be true, but when we come to a passage like this, our first reaction is aversion. Surely God must’ve made a mistake. How can God do this? How can he ask Abraham to offer his son? This passage really is a test of faith. Abraham has—the tension is that Abraham has been promised these things and now he’s been commanded to offer his son and they seem to be in contradiction. Because Isaac was the child of promise. Isaac—you know, God had told Abraham that Isaac was the one through whom blessing would come to the world. So the command

and the promise seem to be in contradiction. There's no doubt that this is one of the most difficult texts in the Bible. How can God command me to offer him, my son of promise? And so, I think we need to feel that tension. It's hard for us not to cheat the story; it's such a familiar story to most of us. But, let it kind of unpack itself.

2. The Faith of Abraham

The second thing that I want to look at: What does the test reveal of Abraham's faith? Okay, we see something about Abraham's faith here. God comes to Abraham if you look in verse 2. It almost sounds like repetitive language. It's very pointed language. But he doesn't just say offer you son; he says "offer your son, your only son, your son whom you love, Isaac." The son you absolutely cherish, you delight in—offer him. And so, God says, "Take Isaac. Offer him as a burnt offering." If you look at the end of verse 2, God says, "Take him to one of the mountains which I shall tell you." That is, earlier in Abraham's life, if you turn back to Genesis chapter 12 in verse 1, the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country, your kindred, your father's house to the land that I will show you." And so, God is saying leave your comfort, leave your security, leave what you know, leave what you most love and cherish and follow me. And not knowing where it will lead, not knowing how it will turn out, God wants Abraham, he really does want to refine him. He wants to be Abraham's ultimate treasure.

Now, there's a television show. I have no idea how I bumped into this show before. It's called the Antique Roadshow. And I don't normally try to watch shows like that, but I've watched it just a few times. And in the show you'll have these characters come and they'll bring some antique that they found in a grandparent's house in the attic and they'll come and get it appraised. And, you know, they'll find out how much maybe a painting is worth, how old it is. And, sometimes you'll have someone come on that show and they'll bring maybe a painting from grandma's house that's been there for decades and they'll bring it onto the show just to find out its value. And someone will find out that this random piece of art is worth \$50,000. But, it really is cool and it's surprising sometimes when someone will find out the value of something but then they'll say, "I don't want the money. I just wanted to know the value. This is precious to my family. This is a treasure." The monetary value is just a reaffirmation of the value of the treasure. The treasure for its beauty alone, what they adore, what they brought to find out its value. They would never think of selling it.

Well-Founded Trust in the Promises of God

God wants Abraham and I think God wants you and me to know and to feel deep in our bones that he is the ultimate treasure. Abraham loved Isaac. He loved his son. That's very clear in the text, but Abraham clinged to and he treasured God's promises. That he doesn't let go of them. And if we looked carefully, I think we

see that this is not just a blind faith. This is not an irrational leap in the dark. If you look in Romans chapter 4, Paul says that Abraham is fully persuaded, that he's fully convinced that God could fulfill his promises. In Hebrews 11 when it talks about this passage it says that "Abraham reasoned," that Abraham considered. And so, he's using his mind. This is not illogical. This is not irrational. He's thinking things through. "God, on the one hand you've said my son is the child of promise and on the other hand you're calling me to offer him as a sacrifice." And so Abraham concludes that if he must offer up his son, God has the power to raise him from the dead in order to fulfill the promise.

And if you look at verse 5 when Abraham leaves the two men before he and Isaac go up on the mountain together, he says, "I and the boy will go over there and worship and will come back to you." The NIV is actually more explicit. The NIV says, "We will go. We will worship. And then we will come back." And, I don't think Abraham is being deceptive. He believed that to be true. He didn't exactly know how, but he knew somehow, somehow, God will be faithful to his promises. That he would maintain his promise. And so, we see the faith of Abraham.

3. The Provision of a Substitute

And then, the last thing, he does it through—we see here the provision of a substitute. Okay, I want you to notice in this passage how many verbs of seeing there are. That so and so—almost every verse someone is seeing something. If you look, the most horrible example, verse 7: "Isaac said to his father Abraham, 'My father.' And he said, 'Here I am, my son.' And then Isaac said, 'Behold the fire. Behold the wood. But where is the lamb for the burnt offering?'" Abraham responds in verse 8, this remarkable statement, he says, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering." And so sure enough Abraham build the altar. He lays the wood. He binds his son. He takes the knife to strike his son. In verse 11, an angel shows up and calls out to Abraham and tells him not to touch his son. And, then, in verse 12, Abraham—look at the verbs. Verse 13: "He lifted up his eyes. He looked and, behold, behind him was a ram caught in a thicket by his horns. Abraham went, took the ram, offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son." And so, what is God doing here? God wants Abraham to see something and he wants us to see something. I think he wants us to see what's happening. He wants us to see where it's happening and why it's happening. And we'll close with this.

Note *What Is Happening*

And so, what's happening here? Look again at verse 13. Notice that the very end of the verse that "he offered it up as a burnt offering" and then notice the phrase "instead of his son." Okay, so we see here in Genesis 22, this is the first explicit mention in the Bible of substitution, of one life being sacrificed for another. There's a passage in John chapter 8 when Jesus is being confronted about his

identity and he has this phrase that we kind of don't know what to do with. He says, "Abraham rejoiced to see my day. He saw it and was glad." And that's the kind of verse I read and think, "I'm going to ask David Strain what that means." What does that mean? "Abraham rejoiced to see my day. He saw it and he was glad." This is what he's talking about. Genesis 22. He realized that the Lord would provide a substitute, that God would bear the punishment himself, that God would pay the price of sin himself. That's why John the Baptist sees Jesus. He says, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." There's a substitute. Behold the Lamb of God who's the substitute. What Abraham saw, what caused him to rejoice was substitution that God would see to it that God would provide himself a substitute. And so, we see substitution, but I think also in this text we see resurrection. Okay, the author of Hebrews tells us, "Abraham expected God to raise his son from the dead." This is in Hebrews 11:19. That, "In Isaac your descendants shall be called." Abraham considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead from which he, figuratively speaking, also received him back. And so, you that Hebrews is telling us that figuratively speaking, Abraham received his son back from the dead. That his resurrection hope that he had going up the mountain is not unfounded. And so, we see in this text both substitution and resurrection. And so, you see the suffering of the Messiah and the glory of the Messiah, the humiliation and the exaltation.

Note *Where This Is Happening*

Second, where is this happening? Verse 2 tells us that it's in the land of Moriah. Abraham refers to this spot, verse 14 as "*Jehovah Jireh*" which means "the Lord will provide." The next time that Moriah is mentioned is not until 2 Chronicles chapter 3. I know that y'all read that this morning. That's the text, in that passage, we're told Solomon, King Solomon, decided to build his temple at Mount Moriah. And so, this is the place where substitutionary sacrifices would be offered. And, then, this is also—this is the mountain that Jesus would climb with the cross, the mountain that he would climb up together with his father where he would willingly submit himself to death. And then the last thing, third, why is all of this happening? Of course, I think the text shows us something about Abraham's love for God, about his willingness to obey, about his commitment to the Father. The angel of the Lord says in verse 12, "I see that you fear God." And that's important, but that's not the main point. The main point is not to show how much Abraham loved God, but to show, verse 14, that the Lord will provide a substitute. In verses, you know, 9 and 10 especially are excruciatingly slow.

Pointing to Calvary: The Provision of a Substitute and Savior

One commentator, Derek Kidner, said that verse 10 "captures even the single movements of the father." That in verse 10 you see Abraham reached out his hand and he took to the knife to slaughter his son. And we see here that God tells Abraham, "Take your son, your only son whom you love, Isaac and offer him up." But, of course, the point is that Abraham in the end didn't have to. That

Abraham in the end didn't have to. When Abraham raises the knife in verse 12 an angel shouts out and stops him. And, yet, when Jesus was on the cross that no one stopped the Father. There was not a voice when Jesus said, "Why are you forsaking me?" that stopped the Father from killing his son. You see the Father did what Abraham didn't have to do. And even as Kevin prayed, John 3:16 tells us that the intention, the purpose of that is that God so loved the world that he gave his only son. That's the motive.

I was thinking the other day about this story. A couple of years ago, y'all have heard this, when Steven Curtis Chapman, when one of his children died in a horrific accident. And one of Steven Curtis Chapman's sons was driving a car and backed over his daughter. And Steven Curtis, when that happened, he took his daughter and immediately left and rushed her to the emergency room to try to save her. And months after this happened, Steven Curtis Chapman and some of his children were being interviewed and said that Steven Curtis, he said that he rolled his window down but he couldn't remember what he said to his son that had run over his daughter. But, one of the other children remembered it and said that he rolled his window down and he said to son, Will Franklin, he said, "Will Franklin, your father loves you," and then they left.

I mean, you just think about your most desperate moment, your darkest moment, your loneliest moment, and to hear your father loves you. When Jesus says that Abraham rejoiced to see his day, what Abraham saw was the pronouncement that the Lord will provide a substitute because he loves his people, that your Father loves you. The cross means that every minute of the day, on your worst and wounded days, on your best and brightest days, it's a pronouncement that your Father loves you. You see that here in Genesis 22. Calvary is the pronouncement of "I love you." Genesis 22 is a story of God's rescuing love through a substitute, that Abraham and Isaac going up on a mountain together provide us with a picture of what it was like for Father and Son to climb the mountain of Calvary for us, that God can turn to Abraham and say in verse 12, "Now I know that you fear me." How much more can we say to God, "Now I know that you love me because you did not withhold your Son, your only Son for me"? That Paul's words in Romans 8:32 are true. And we'll conclude with this. Paul says, "He did not spare his son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also graciously give us all things?"

Let me pray for us.

Father, we thank you for your Word to us. I pray that you would work through my lisping, stammering tongue. Father, this story of a substitute for us is what our hearts long for. And so, give us thankful hearts as we see this sacrifice and as we see this substitute. We pray this in Jesus name, Amen.

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