

Can God Be Trusted?

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[0 : 00] So this morning I've been asked to come and speak to you from the Bible and when thinking about a passage which I could go to, the one that sprung to mind, the one that came to me was Genesis 22 and that's the passage we find ourselves at this morning.

The narrative we are talking about today will most likely seem a bit bizarre and raise all sorts of questions about who God is if you're new to church or unfamiliar with the Bible. And even reading up to the narrative of Genesis up until this point it seems a bit of a strange diversion from God's plan. It seems in fact as if God is doing a complete 180 degrees turn from the promise he makes earlier on in the narrative. I think this text is one that raises big questions about one that supplies glorious answers. I've entitled this afternoon's sermon Can God Be Trusted? I think that is a question that religious and irreligious people alike ask or have asked or will ask in one way or another throughout their life. Whether it's reading something in the Bible and thinking can I really believe this? Can I really take God at his word? Or maybe there's a catastrophe in your life and you pray for the first time ever asking God would you help in thinking I wonder if God can be trusted with this situation.

So tracing through the life of the man who is key in this passage Abraham is a fascinating one. At the end of Genesis chapter 11 we are introduced by name this man Abram in a genealogy and a family line. And then immediately in the beginning of chapter 12 which we read earlier it records God calling Abram to leave his homeland to go to a land that God will show him with a promise to bless him and the families in him. Fast forward a few chapters and we see God making a covenant with Abram in which God promises a child to Abram, his very own child, his wife Sarah and him struggle to conceive and time's getting on a wee bit and they think right we'll make it our own way and so Sarah gives Abram her slave and they conceive and have a child. But that wasn't the promised child that God had promised. But despite Abram's disobedience God does not give up. But actually further emphasises his promises to Abraham.

Read in Genesis 17, Behold my covenant is with you and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram but your name shall be called Abraham.

[2 : 51] For I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful and I will make you into nations and king shall come from you and I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for a never-lasting covenant to be God to you and your offspring after you. And then I'll go on to say no but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son and you shall call his name Isaac. I'll establish my covenant with him as a never-lasting covenant for his offspring after him. And right enough God's promise comes to pass. Abraham and Sarah had a son who was called Isaac just as God said it would happen. The son through whom God would bless the nations. The son to whom God would be his God and his descendants God after him.

So were we set up then for God and his people to enjoy all the promised blessings uninterrupted, yes? Well in the chapter we come to today God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son. But what about the promises that he'd made? That blessing would come through Isaac and through his descendants. Why is God requesting something that's not only nonsensical but it seems to be going back on his word? He told Abraham that the nations would be blessed through Isaac. Now he wants Abraham to sacrifice him? There's an American TV show that I love called Designate Survivor which I've really enjoyed watching and it's set in the context of falling a terrorist attack on the captain of the building during the State of the Union. And the new president Tom Kirkman now has the task of rebuilding the US government. And part of that is assigning a vice president. Now this vice president as does every vice president and every president he had to make a promise. Several promises but one of them was to defend and uphold the constitution of the United States. But as the

series goes on we actually see he's not working to uphold and defend the constitution he's working to tear down that very constitution which he promised to uphold. Here you have someone making a promise but not sticking to their promise. And here we're forced to ask the same question of God is he going back on his promise that he made? In short not as all as it seems which I hope we'll see through three headings this afternoon. The promise at risk, the promise kept and the promise fulfilled. So we'll begin in verse one with the promise at risk. After these things God tested Abraham and said to him Abraham and he said here I am verse two 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 which I shall tell you.

So at least we have as a reader we have a preface to this account. We know that God was testing Abraham. Abraham didn't know that at the time. He was without that knowledge he was just told go and sacrifice your son. And the reason for testing isn't really fleshed out at this point and this sort of raises questions we know what Abraham is to do but how is this to be a test? Does God want to test Abraham to see what you'll give up for God? A sort of do you love Isaac more than me? Or is it a test to see if Abraham still trusts in the promises of God? As time goes on I hope we'll see that scripture warrants the latter interpretation rather than God testing Abraham and see who he loves more and it's to see if he still trusts in the promises that were made. So how is God to test Abraham? It says in verse 2, 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. Now we have the call of obedience in Genesis chapter 12 1 mirrored here again in 22 verse 2. A call to a land which God will show Abraham and then in 22 verse 2 we've got the same thing at play here again. Throughout the Abraham narrative his faith is tested a number of times and this is another one with such an immense unthinkable command to offer Isaac as a burnt offering.

Now this seems a bit bizarre, I mean for starters human sacrifice was not hugely common in the ancient Near East and as time goes on in the biblical story like you see it's not a practice amongst God's people either, we see that God does not advocate this. To all people this is a strange command from God, not only command to kill someone but consider God had specifically promised Isaac to Abraham but now he wants Abraham to kill Isaac. And so specifically for the Israelites who read this it must have been ludicrous. Bible commentator Gordon Wendham says at all times an Israelite reader would regard God's demand as extraordinary, not simply morally or theologically because Isaac was the son on whose survival the fulfilment of the promises depended. So not to mention Abraham's anguish at the situation as well, I mean the author does not give insight into Abraham's thoughts, his emotions or even much of his words is cancelled out in the account. But if you imagine it you're 99 years old, the wife is 89 years old, think you're unable to conceive and God promises you a son. This child comes, this child through whom the nations will be blessed, the joy, the elation, the very comes just as promised, your wife no longer childless, God is faithful to his word, but then God comes and tells Abraham to sacrifice the child. Not only a child but looking verse 2 the weighty language, take your son, your only son, Isaac whom you love. This was the son that Abraham delighted in. This was the son he loved, his only son. I can't imagine what must have been going through the mind of Abraham at that point. Giving his only son whom he loves. What father would give his own dearly loved son I wonder.

And into verse 3 the narrative does not slow down at all, it says the next morning that Abraham left with his son Isaac, with his two young men and with the donkey. And they set off and in verse 4 we see it's taken three whole days to reach the location that God had called him to. Three whole days. Now as if the initial pain was not enough, as if the initial obedience was not great enough, Abrams had to settle this for three whole days. Three days to mull this one over to think. Way up the cost to consider the promises of God yet in balance to what God has asked them to do. What faith in the promises of God it must have taken Abraham to take this three day long journey and to remain obedient for the time. Then in verses 5 to 8 we see the men have reached the foot of the mountain. [10:25] And Abraham tells the young men that they are to wait here with the donkey because Isaac and him are going to go up to the mountain to worship. But an interesting comment that they will return later. So we're going to get into that in a little while. We're told the wood for the burnt offering is placed on the back of Isaac his son. Abraham has the fire and the knife to execute the burnt offering. And then as the beginning of the ascent, Isaac is asking his father Abraham, innocently maybe naively, Father, I've got the wood, you've got the knife and the fire, where's the lamb for the burnt offering? And then comes a very interesting comment again from Abraham. God will provide the lamb for the burnt offering. So between his comment in verse 5, assuring the men

that both him and Isaac will return to Versaic saying to Isaac that God will provide a substitute lamb.

I think we're beginning to see a different picture now. Up to this point it could be understandable to think that God's promises are in jeopardy and he is in no way to be trusted. However, Abraham begins to paint a new picture for the reader. Could it be that the test was not just about Abraham's obedience to the Lord, though it was, but about the faithfulness and trustworthiness of God to be true to his promises. About God being trustworthy on his word. We see up until verse 8 the radical obedience of Abraham and we will continue to see it. Oh that we would have faith in the word of God such as Abraham did. Faith that but takes God at his word. And we see between verses 5 and 8 and we'll continue to see that maybe all is not as it seems and maybe just maybe God will remain true to his word. Then verse 9 describes once they reached the top of the mountain where God has shown them Abraham was preparing the wood, setting the altar in place, binding Isaac to the altar. What is running through Abraham's mind at this time? It's not told but you could just imagine what's going through his mind at this time.

But imagine God has made these promises to you about this son on whom the survival of the promise depends and then you're binding your son to be killed. Your own son whom you love, whom you cherish and you're binding him to be offered up. That leads us on to the second point the promise kept. In the next few verses we begin to see the story change dramatically. As Abraham lifts his knife to put his son to death the angel speaks to him and commands him not to harm the boy. Imagine the relief that Abraham must have felt. Not to mention Isaac. For us as the reader we're almost gasping at this point. A sigh of relief comes over us. The son was spared. The boy on whom the promises of God depend lives.

The promise kept. The promise continues. Through Abraham, Isaac and Isaac's descendants the promise will be kept. Blessing will come to God's people through the son. Then following this conversation with the angel of the Lord, Abraham looks up. How do you know? A ram caught in the bushes which God has offered up instead of Isaac. Immediately we look back to verse 8. We remember when Isaac asked Abraham where's the lamb for the burnt offering. And Abraham tells him the Lord will provide a lamb for the burnt offering. There's been a bit of discussion over what Abraham meant by this but I think Hebrews 11 shed some light on this. By faith Abraham when he was tested offered up Isaac and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son of whom it was said, through Isaac shall he offspring be named. He considered that God was able to even to raise him from the dead from which figuratively speaking he did receive him back. As I mentioned earlier I think this is Abraham's faith and trust in the promises of God. Because as Hebrews states here that even if God did allow Abraham to strike Isaac he believed that God would resurrect Isaac.

That he would still remain the source of future blessing in Israel. It was that faith which took Abraham on that three day long journey. It was that faith which led him to the top of the mountain. It was that faith which led him to bind his son to the altar and to raise the knife. It was that faith that even if Isaac was killed that God would resurrect him in order to remain faithful to his word and to his promises. So how do we make sense of this story? Earlier I said I gave the title of my sermon can God be trusted? In this narrative we see that God has kept his promise. Though it was seemingly a threat in jeopardy, at the end of the day in risk we see God made a way. He kept his promise and he did provide the substitute ran. I love when you see a friend or someone at church with their young child especially when you try to talk to the young child and interact with them and they become a wee bit shy. I myself have vague memories of going with my dad to the local co-op when I was grown up and as happened in the local co-op my dad bumped into someone he knew and after some pleasantries my dad turned to me and says well this is the youngest, this is Jeff which warranted the response no way that can he be your youngest already?

[16 : 20] What size he's getting? And as he would then his friend would then come down and try to talk to me I would shy away and turn to my dad because I knew that I could trust my dad.

Even though I didn't know this person in front of us and all the fear that that brings I knew I could be safe with my dad I trusted him completely. Many things people, trends, religion, philosophical thought will be that strange in the supermarket. You're not really sure if you can trust this person but I want to say your heavenly father is someone that you can trust. Someone you can trust with everything with the seemingly unimportant and with the things that you think are just so big so beyond you you can trust him with strength for this day with your troubled relationships with everyday tasks even with your biggest need. Jesus says in Matthew's Gospel therefore I tell you do

not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink nor about your body what you will put on is not life more than food and the body more than clothing look at the birds of the air they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns and yet your heavenly father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field how they grow they neither toil nor spin yet I tell you even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these but if God so clothed the grass of the field which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven will he not much more clothe you

O you of little faith. Therefore do not be anxious saying what shall we eat or what shall we drink or what shall we wear for the Gentiles seek after these things and your heavenly father knows that you need them all but seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you. What the scripture teaches us is that God our Father can be trusted just as he kept his promise to Abraham and Isaac and therefore to the whole of God's people God can be trusted in your life. Now it may not work out the way you thought it might it may not work out the way that you wanted to but we can trust our heavenly father because we know that he cares for us that he has our best interests at heart and this leads us on to the last point the promise fulfilled. We'll pick it up again in verse 14 of chapter 22 falling on from the sacrifice of the ram Isaac's place Abraham renamed the mountain the Lord will provide Abraham told Isaac the Lord would provide as he took God at his word and indeed God did provide indeed he was faithful to his promises we see the Lord providing immediately in that context yes but the storyline of the Bible does not end on a mountain with Abraham and Isaac but it continues and then the subsequent verses in verses 15 to 19 we see God reaffirm and reestablish his covenant promises to Abraham and to Isaac his son it says 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 and the really wonderful thing is we begin to see a bit of a progression here so Genesis 12 God comes to Abraham and promises offspring Genesis 15 says that there's going to be offspring as numerous as the stars in the sky and then we see in Genesis 22 not just as numerous as the stars in the sky but as every grain of sand on the seashore so not only have we seen come through seeing the promise at risk and the promise kept but we're also beginning to see now the promise being fulfilled at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel there's a long family tree called a genealogy which leads all the way to Jesus Christ the hoods that start with Abraham and then on to Isaac and so on now beyond this list of names is the greatest story of rescue ever known because as has often been spoken of in this sermon we know that to Abraham he made promises not only a promise to bless Abraham but for all his descendants after him that through him through his descendants all the nations of the earth would be blessed you have this promise made to Abraham which would take thousands of years to find fulfillment but eventually it did and many times it seemed like God had given up on his promises that he had abandoned and forgotten his people but he remained faithful to them and to his promises there would be one from the line of Abraham through whom all the nations would be blessed can God be trusted with your life I think the answer is absolutely yes we have at the end of Matthew 1 Jesus at the end of the genealogy sorry in Matthew 1 Jesus Christ son of Abraham son of David the fulfillment of all of God's promises it may be thought how are all the nations blessed in the seed of Abraham that is Jesus Christ this afternoon

we have been looking at the narrative of a father who led his son up a mountain carrying wood on his back to a place of sacrifice we also see in the person of Jesus someone being led by his father with wood on his back up a hill of sacrifice this one called Calvary he went silently obediently as did Isaac but this time there was no substitute ram for the sacrifice Jesus was the substitute ram and so we see God is faithful to his promises what God says he's going to do he will do what he promises he keeps so therefore we can trust God with what he has promised in his word it can be easy to feel so discouraged so disheartened sometimes in the Christian walk lacking assurance perhaps of God's love for us as children of God God's promises that just but however God promises that just as he began the good work within you he's going to see that through to completion just as he is freed you he's also going to keep you just as he has welcomed you into his family so that relationship will remain do you struggle to rest in the fact that you're loved this afternoon do you think okay God is patient perhaps but surely I've tested his limits something that many people have

many people do many people will struggle with the assurance of God's love child of God rest in his promises today just as Abraham took God at his word so too can we because God has proven himself so reliable so trustworthy therefore we can take God at his word we can have that assurance of his love why because he has promised it to us and remember the first time reading the account of the sacrifice of Isaac and

Plinkton how can a father possibly do this to his son and then a few months later I read Paul's epistle to the Romans and in chapter 8 it reads what then shall we say to these things if God is for us who can be against us 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 who shall bring any charge against God's elect is God who justifies who is to condemn Christ Jesus as the one who died more than that who was raised who is at the right hand of God who indeed is interceding for us who shall separate us from the love of Christ shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword and then it will go on to say no in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us for I'm sure that neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything else in all of creation will be able to separate us from the love of God and Christ Jesus rest in that receive that today that nothing will be able to separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ if that is not good news for the weary burden so I don't know what is this is your first time in church or you're still trying to understand what Christianity is all about I just want to draw your attention back to the text briefly in verse 7 Isaac asked Abraham where is the lamb for the burnt offering and after that Abraham says God will provide the lamb for the burnt offering and indeed God does there we see a substitute taking place the Ram in place of Isaac Isaac does not need to be sacrificed because God has provided a ram in his place the Bible talks about Jesus as a lamb because like Isaac in this account we are bound for the flames however God has intervened God has come down in the person of Jesus and taken our place becoming the substitute sacrifice taking the suffering and the punishment that is due to us on himself why so that we could be reconciled to God you see we deserve punishment we deserve a strange man from God but Jesus our substitute took our place so that we could go free there's a verse in the Bible which will most definitely be known to most of you this in John's gospel says for God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life I invite you now to take God at his word the trustworthy God that says if you believe in him you will not perish but have eternal life let's pray God our Father thank you so much that your promises are not empty words that your promises are not just mere sentences that come out of your mouth but the promises that you make you see it through to completion thank you that in the story of Abraham and Isaac we see potentially from the beginning that the promises at risk however God nothing can deter you from your promises and so thank you that we have this account so that we can know that you are trustworthy thank you that we can look back and see you've kept your word I pray now for all of us that we would trust in and rest in your promises

[28 : 12] this morning not because anything within us but because you are trustworthy because you have shown yourself to be so reliable so trustworthy and so Lord as we conclude our worship together or may we be reminded that we can trust in you that you are reliable that you are trustworthy help us to rest in that this day and for the week ahead in Jesus name amen.