

West Van Baptist, June 21  
**Family Foundations – The Worst, and Best, Fathers’ Day**  
Genesis 22:1-19

I. Father’s Day with Father Abraham

It’s Father’s Day! So, a special “congratulations!” to all our fathers, grandfathers, great-grandfathers, and everyone who plays a fatherly role in the lives of others. We appreciate you all so much!

We’ve been studying families in Genesis. I can’t think of a more appropriate subject on Father’s Day than the life of Abraham—the central father in this book. When we first meet him in Genesis 11-12, his name is “Abram,” which means “exalted father.” This was a painful name, since Abram had no children. Yet God promised him a family, and in Genesis 17 God said: *No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations* (17:5). It came true! Abraham had several sons who multiplied into several nations. Most importantly, his heir Isaac launched the nation of Israel, from which Jesus our Savior was born.

So it makes sense to look at Abraham today. But there are 13 chapters on Abraham, each with good lessons to teach us. Which one should we explore? After some thought and prayer, I felt led to one of the most famous stories—and definitely the most puzzling. It’s the account we read this morning from Genesis 22.

What a story! God tells Abraham to offer his son, Isaac, as a burnt sacrifice. They head to the mountains with a donkey, 2 servants, and all the necessary supplies. Leaving servants and donkey behind, Abraham loads the wood on Isaac, picks up the knife and fire-making tools, and they climb to the summit. The wood is prepared, Isaac is tied and laid on top, and Abraham pulls out the knife.

Suddenly—to everyone’s great relief!—God calls out and stops Abraham. (The expression “Angel of the Lord” is often used in the Old Testament for God when He appears or speaks aloud, as it is here.) It’s not necessary to go through with the sacrifice; Abraham has demonstrated his willingness to surrender his son. Instead, Abraham finds a ram caught in the bushes nearby, and offers it in worship. God reaffirms His promises to bless Abraham’s family, then the group return home.

You can see where I got my sermon title. If we stopped at the first part of this story, it would be the worst Father’s Day sermon ever. “Happy Father’s Day, Abraham! Today we remember how you killed your son and heir.” Yuck! But in the end, we have a joyful Father’s Day message. Abraham’s son is spared, which is good. God is pleased, which is very good. Abraham learns, again, that he can trust God to guide and care for him and to unfold a wonderful plan to bless the world.

II. The elephant in the room

The story finishes well. But it’s definitely uncomfortable. Before we go further, we need to take a few moments to address the “elephant in the room.”

(For some of you who are still new to English, “the elephant in the room” is an expression for situations where there’s an awkward problem no one wants to talk about, even though everyone

knows it's there. Imagine old Uncle Carl forgets to wear his wig and false teeth to the family dinner, and no one is comfortable mentioning it even though it's obvious to everyone. That's an "elephant in the room.")

Genesis 22 has a big elephant. God forbids murder and child sacrifice; yet here God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son.

This is an example of a wider puzzle in the Bible. Sometimes good Bible characters do things we *don't* do—and *should not* do. In fact, sometimes *God tells those people* to do things we don't do, and should not do. God instructs Noah to build an ark. None of us is supposed to build an ark and fill it with animals. God commands Israel to destroy the pagan Canaanite nations and take over their land. That's not something we should do to the Canaanites or anyone else today. At one point, Jesus tells a young man to sell everything he has, give all the money to the poor, and come follow Him. Jesus doesn't command everyone else to do this, and we're not all required to do it.

And God instructs Abraham: "*Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering....*"

Passages like this make some people very confused and upset. Just this week I saw an article complaining about how horrible the Bible is because it instructs Israel to stone rebellious children to death (in Deut 21:18-21). They ask: "How can you claim the Bible is God's Word when it commands such things?" And "How can you say the Bible is your authority when you don't do these things it says people should do?" Sound familiar?

Like many complaints, this rests on a false understanding of what the Bible is and how it works. The Bible is *not* an encyclopedia of moral to-do's, arranged alphabetically and dropped from heaven on a golden parachute. God's Word was given to us through prophets, priests, kings, and apostles who wrote specific messages for specific people in specific situations. It's inspired by God's Spirit, and is filled with truth that He wants us to know. That truth is for everyone, all the time, everywhere; and we need to apply it to our lives. But exactly *how* the truth applies isn't always the same in every situation. If there's a flood coming, then yes, build an ark! But we don't need one here today. It's always right to prioritize Jesus over our stuff; but not everyone needs to sell *everything* to live by that priority.

The Bible itself often applies the same truths to different situations in different ways. That's why we need to study *the whole Bible* to understand its message, rather than picking out pieces and reading them in isolation from the rest. This is a skill we all need to grow at. We're all called to become increasingly competent in interpreting and applying Scripture as we walk with God together.

This is a subject that deserves a much longer discussion, but that will have to wait for another time. For now, I simply want to remind us that for Genesis 22 and all Bible passages, we need to read in context and to recognize the difference between the truths in this passage and the historical particulars. We're *not* supposed to celebrate Father's Day by taking our kids up Grouse Mountain to sacrifice them. That was never the point. We do need to learn lessons from Abraham about walking with God, being godly parents, and raising godly families.

Three lessons stand out in this passage, all of which are repeated over and over throughout the Bible.

### III. Lessons from Abraham in Genesis 22

#### **(1) Abraham listened to God**

This is the very first thing we learn in Genesis 22. *God ... said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied.* Then God gave the instruction: *"Take your son ... go to the region of Moriah ... Sacrifice him there"* (22:1-2). God spoke, Abraham listened, and did what he was told.

We see this throughout the Abraham story. It began like this (at 12:1-3): *The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you ... and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."* So Abram went, as the Lord had told him.

Later God spoke again, reaffirming the promise of a son, a family, land, and blessing (15:1-5, 17:1-22; 18:10-14). God conversed with Abraham about the problem of sin in Sodom (ch 18). This didn't happen every day, but God did speak repeatedly. Generally, Abraham listened. Sometimes he obeyed immediately; sometimes he didn't follow instructions so well. But little by little, Abraham became more attuned to God's voice and quicker to do what he was told.

In this morning's passage God spoke 3 times. He gave the instruction to sacrifice Isaac (22:1-2). At what seemed like the very last possible moment, He halted the sacrifice: *"Abraham! Abraham! Do not lay a hand on the boy!"* (22:11-12). After Abraham obeyed, God reaffirmed all the promises He had made earlier: that Abraham's family would be blessed and multiply and be a source of blessing to the world.

In short, Genesis 22 teaches us that God speaks, and we need to listen.

The God of the Bible isn't silent. He is constantly communicating: revealing Himself, guiding and encouraging and sometimes challenging and convicting us. He speaks through creation, which shows His glory and wisdom. We learn about His character and His ways through the events of history and our own life circumstances. He sometimes speaks through prophets, apostles, and other Spirit-anointed brothers and sisters. He has given us His Word, which His Spirit makes clear and alive for us. He can speak in other personal ways: in dreams and visions and impressions. He regularly communicates through a sense of agreement among God's people. The God of the Bible is personal, and He desires personal relationship with us, which involves communication.

Now, we need to be discerning. Not every interpretation of the Bible is equally accurate. Not every voice I think I hear in my head is actually the Spirit of God. There are false voices as well as true, and we're all capable of misunderstanding. We need to grow in our knowledge of Scripture and in listening to God together as a community. God has promised to help us with this, and He does. But it's a growing process.

Genesis 22 offers a helpful insight for this. The chapter reminds us that God—who sees more than we do, whose ways are higher than ours—sometimes says things we don't fully understand and that we may even dislike. Sometimes God tells us: "Leave your home and move to a new place I'll show you." Or "give away some of those things you enjoy." Or "help that person who you'd rather avoid." Or "you need to change this habit." Or "you need to apologize," or "to forgive."

God is in the business of growing us, so He has a habit of saying things that surprise and challenge us. This is a useful caution. If I only ever hear God saying things that I like, or expect, or *want to hear*, it's very likely that the voice in my head is not God's. It's just my own desire talking.

We need to be discerning. We also need to be listening. Expecting that God will speak to us. Wanting to hear what He has to say. Wanting to respond, as Abraham responded. This is how we come to faith in Jesus in the first place. We follow Him because we have a sense that He is calling us, inviting us to come. Jesus said, *My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me*" (Jn 10:27). Once we begin this walk of faith, we need to keep on listening for God's voice—for His encouragement, His instruction, His direction, His words of correction. We need this as we make big decisions in life, and as we manage the little day-to-day things. We need it as individuals, as families, and as a church community.

Abraham didn't always listen perfectly. Yes, he left his home and came to Canaan; then he wandered down to Egypt. Yes, he believed he would have a son; but when it took a long time he got in trouble by having children with his wife's servant. He wasn't always perfect. Yet step by step he got better as he walked with God and learned to hear His voice. By the time the big test happened in Genesis 22, he was listening pretty well.

## **(2) Abraham trusted God**

Listening is a crucial first step. Abraham didn't say, "Lord, I don't think I heard you right." He knew what God was telling him to do in this chapter.

But obedience required more than clear hearing. This command made no sense. How could God multiply Abraham's family through Isaac if Isaac was dead and burned up? How could anything good come from this? Abraham needed to trust that God was wise and good, that He would turn this situation to good, even if it wasn't clear how. Abraham listened ... and he trusted!

Of all the qualities in Abraham's life, this is the one the New Testament celebrates most. Earlier in chapter 15, Abraham complained: *"You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir."* God reaffirmed His promise: *"A son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.... Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.... So shall your offspring be."* Then *Abram believed the Lord, and He credited to him as righteousness* (15:3-6). It was years before Isaac was born, yet Abraham kept trusting. The boy grew, then God dropped the shocking command to "sacrifice him." Still Abraham kept trusting.

The New Testament looks back at all this and honors Abraham by repeating that wonderful phrase: *Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness* (Rom 4:3; Gal 3:6; James 2:23). Hebrews goes a step further, highlighting Abraham among the heroes of faith.

*It was by faith that Abraham offered Isaac as a sacrifice when God was testing him. Abraham, who had received God's promises, was ready to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, even though God had told him, "Isaac is the son through whom your descendants will be counted." Abraham reasoned that if Isaac died, God was able to bring him back to life again. (Heb 11:17-19)*

The Bible treats Abraham as an example of faith for us all. God calls us to hear His word, and to obey it because we trust Him. Sometimes He tells us to do things we don't understand, perhaps things we don't like: leave home to follow Me on a new venture; give away those things you enjoy; help that person; change that behavior; apologize; forgive. God isn't going to ask any of us to sacrifice our children on the mountain. Yet He will almost certainly "test" each of us by putting us in hard situations where we can only be obedient if we trust Him. He doesn't do this to be unkind. He does it to help us learn and grow.

Here again, Abraham didn't always trust perfectly. But he grew. He learned by experience that God is faithful and wise. Little by little his faith became stronger until he was ready for this final, hardest test—and it strengthened his trust even more.

We're called to grow in faith, too. The Christian life begins as a decision of faith. But trusting God is a way of life. It deepens in our hearts and minds as we learn more about God from His Word. It's encouraged by the stories of others, and by our own experiences of God's faithfulness over time. It grows as we build the habit of focusing on God's presence and care rather than on our problems and questions. It grows as we meet each new challenge with prayer.

God speaks, and we need to listen. God is trustworthy (even when we wonder what on earth He's doing), and we need to trust Him, like Abraham did.

### **(3) Abraham earned the trust of others**

Finally, Genesis 22 teaches us that Abraham earned the trust of others. This isn't the loudest lesson in the story, but it's important too.

Abraham's servants trusted their master. They probably wondered what was going on as they traveled to Moriah together with the supplies, and why Abraham told them to stay behind at the end: *"Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you"* (Gen 22:5). But they didn't object or complain. They did what they were told. They'd served Abraham long enough to trust him.

Isaac *really* trusted his father. We don't know exactly how old he was at this point, but he was big enough to carry a heavy bundle of wood up a mountain slope. Abraham was now an old man (Gen 21:1 says he was 100 when Isaac was born). Isaac could easily have overpowered his father and walked away. Instead, he carried the wood. He allowed Abraham to bind him and place him on the alter. We don't know what he was thinking, though I'm sure he was very uncomfortable when the knife came out. Still, his father had told the servants, *"We will worship and then we will come back to you."* And when asked about the missing lamb, Abraham had responded, *"God Himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son"* (22:8).

How would this work? Isaac didn't know. But he had learned that his father, and his father's faith, could both be trusted.

Isaac had watched Abraham worship in every place their family lived. No doubt he had heard how his own birth was a God-promised miracle. I'm sure he listened to many other stories of God's guidance, help, and care. He had also seen Abraham deal honestly with his neighbors (as in chapter

21), and he had heard his father acknowledge his failures when he slipped up. Over time, Isaac had grown to trust Abraham, and to respect Abraham's faith in God.

Abraham earned the trust of others—and this was important. It was Abraham's faith in God, not his consistent life, that received God's approval. However, if we want to pass our own faith on to anyone else, being trustworthy is essential. No one respects a preacher who lies, cheats, and swindles. Our friends won't listen long when we try to share the love of Jesus if they look at our speech and behavior and decide they can't trust us. And nowhere is this truer than in the family. We hope and pray that our faith in God will pass to our sons and daughters and spread to parents, siblings, and others. Yet our family members know us well, and they aren't likely to trust our God if they don't feel that they can trust us.

The first message in this series talked about how human beings were created to image God—to reflect and be like Him. This is one of the ways we image Him. We're called to be trustworthy, in part because that's the only way we can help others to have faith in our trustworthy God. Here too, we need to keep on growing, as Abraham grew.

#### IV. Lessons for fathers and families

It's Father's Day. Like many of you, I receive a selection of Father's Day cards every year. The ones from my parents, in-laws, and older relations were usually dignified—they had thoughtful verses and inspiring pictures. Cards from my kids almost always have cartoons and comical sayings about me. Cards from Diane are sometimes funny and sometimes romantic. I appreciate them all, because it's great to be loved and remembered.

What would the "perfect Father's Day card" be like? I don't know. I don't think there is a "perfect" one. But when my family and friends remember me as a father, I hope several things come to their minds.

***I hope and pray that they would say, "Ken listens to God."***

This really needs prayer, because it doesn't come naturally. In a lot of my life situations, people listen to me. They did when I was teaching. Sometimes people listen here at church. As a dad I expected the kids to listen to me. I *like* being listened to. I'm not always so good at listening to others, not even when it's God who speaks. Like most men—like most people—I need to grow as a listener.

I know this is important. God speaks, and He does so for my good. I need to learn to listen for Him, to discern which voice is His, to understand clearly and respond well. I need this. And my family needs to see me listening to God: engaging His Word, living in community, listening in prayer. They need to see what a blessing it is, so they will be encouraged to listen, too.

I pray that I will be someone who listens to God. I pray it for myself, for Diane, for our family, and for all of us here, because it's important for all of us.

***I pray that people would also say, "Ken trusts God."***

All the time. When God answers my prayers with a “yes,” when He answers “no,” when He makes me wait. When things go well, and when they’re hard. When I understand the path I’m on, and when I’m completely puzzled—like Abraham must have been in today’s story.

Again, this is a matter of prayer, because it doesn’t come naturally either. I was raised to be self-sufficient. I like it when others feel that they can rely on me. I’m not so good at relying on others—and sometimes that transfers to trust in God.

So I need to keep growing in this area. I need faith if I’m going to walk with God at all; and I need ever-deepening ability to trust Him as I follow Him on life’s path. I need this myself, and I need to model it for those I love.

I pray that I will be a person who trusts God. I pray the same for Diane, for our family, for our church.

***And I pray that people will find me trustworthy.***

Someone who is consistent, honest, and reliable in my actions and my words. Someone they can trust, who in turn, helps them to trust my Lord.

This isn’t easy, either. It takes time to build confidence, while trust can be lost in a moment through one careless mistake. So this, too, is a place where I need God’s grace and help. I pray that He will work in me, and in my family, and in our whole church family, to make us people who others find trustworthy.

Galatians 3:6-7 tells us: *Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham.*

Abraham set a great example. I’d be happy with a Father’s Day card that simply says, “Ken is a child of Abraham, who follows that good example.” May all of us—fathers, mothers, aunts and uncles and cousins and siblings and friends and brothers and sisters in Jesus—may we all be children and imitators of Abraham who listen to our Lord, trust Him, and reflect His trustworthiness to others.

That’s my Father’s Day prayer for us today.