

All you've ever wanted

Gen 22:1-19

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It would be about ten years ago now.
Our family was on holidays,
just like we have been for the last couple of weeks.
We packed up our camper trailer and went visiting.
We visited one of my old high school friends, Matt.
At the time,
he was head of intensive care at the Shepparton Base hospital.
Matt is very hard working.
You have to be to head a department in a hospital.
He had nine kids at the time,
you'd think that would keep him busy.
But he still found time to read serious theology
and of a kind that is a little bit high brow for me.
He's read the entirety of Barth's church dogmatics.
It makes my head hurt just thinking about it.
And it is somewhat humbling as a professional in a certain area
to have friends who do more reading of serious texts in your area
than you do yourself.
I mean I read quite a lot of fairly popular level Christian stuff
that I think will encourage and strengthen my faith.
But I don't read much of the kind of stuff
that you would name drop at clergy conferences
to flex on your colleagues.
So I'm at Matt's place.
He's at work.
Cherida is chatting to his wife.
The kids are playing.
And I'm at a bit of a loose end.
He'd mentioned to me the night before
that he'd just read 'Fear and Trembling'
by the 19C Danish Philosopher Soren Kirkegaard.
It was sitting on the table and I had nothing to do.

So I picked it up and read it.
It was only a bit over 100 pages.
I could manage that.
Kierkegaard is regarded as the father of existentialism.
If you don't really understand what that is, join the club.
But he'd been mentioned often in lectures at Bible College.
I'd never read anything by him.
So I thought,
it can't do me any harm.
Well the entire book is devoted to Genesis 22.
He's trying to make sense of God's command to Abraham to kill Isaac.
In the end, he can't make sense of it.
And he decides that faith in God is blind.
You just have to do what he says.
There's no point trying to make any sense of why.
So while you like me may not have much idea about Kierkegaard.
You've heard the phrase 'blind faith'.
It's used all the time.
And it's profoundly unhelpful.
Blame Kierkegaard for that, even if you've never heard of him.
Christian faith is not blind.
It's a reasonable faith.
And when God asks his people to do something,
there are good and reasonable grounds for God's request.
God doesn't just ask people to do something
to test out if they will do as they are told.
He asks people to live according to his good and perfect will.
He asks us to live in the way that he as our creator knows is best.

And then there's Genesis 22.
And it would have to be the biggest challenge in the Bible
to that way of viewing faith.
Because it does seem rather hard to give reasonable grounds
for God telling Abraham to sacrifice his son.
The very thought of it makes me shudder.
As I'm sure it does for any parent.

What was God thinking?

Well a better theory than Kirkegaard's is given by Keller in our book "Counterfeit Gods". Keller says that it wasn't about God giving Abraham a random difficult instruction to see if he would obey, it was about destroying the idol in Abraham's life. God wants us to worship him. God wants us to worship him alone. We know the great command. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your strength. That is, don't put anything else up there with God. We know the first commandment of the ten commandments. You shall have no other gods before me. It's the first commandment because it's the most important. And all the others hang off it to an extent. You will remember the Sabbath Day to worship God if you don't have other gods before the one true God. You won't steal if you aren't putting stuff up there with God as something you worship. Idolatry is at the heart of all sin. That's why God wants to put to death the idols in our lives.

What do you think are the things we are most likely to worship instead of the true God? Would it little statues that we have made or good gifts that God has given us? We are far more likely to worship the good things God has given us. Over the coming weeks, we will be looking at some of the main examples of things people worship instead of God. Love, money, success, power. But in Abraham we see something else that people are tempted to worship.

Their kids.
We see it all around us.
People deriving so much of their sense of self worth from their kids.
It's rare these days for people to have 5 kids like we have.
Most people only have one or two.
And so on those one or two kids,
parents sometimes load all of their hopes.
All of the things they missed out on when they were a child
get poured into these children.
And then they hope that the lives of their children
will blossom and flourish in a way that their life never did.
And the pressure of that expectation leads their kids towards rebellion.
Or they've invested so much in their kids,
that they can't bear to discipline them,
and so the kids become little terrors.
There is lots of idolatry of kids around us.

Could it be that God was putting to death
the idolatry of kids in Abraham?
Well Abraham was in a position
that would lead you to the temptation of idolising your kid.
Years earlier,
God had told him to leave everything.
Gen 12:1 "The Lord had said to Abram,
"Go from your country, your people and your father's household
to the land I will show you."
Now we view leaving home today with some excitement.
It's the beginning of making your own mark in the world.
But in Abram's day, you didn't leave home at all.
Your entire identity was wrapped up in your tribe,
your extended family.
Things went well for you if they went well for your tribe
because you never left your tribe
and the fortunes of your tribe were your fortunes.
So God had told Abram to do the unthinkable.
Leave his entire identity,

and follow the command of God.

But there was a promise attached to the command.

Gen 12:2 "I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you."

Abram left his entire identity.

But he did it according to a promise
that he would be granted a new identity.

He would be the father of a great nation.

But here's the problem.

To be a father of a great nation,
you've got to have a kid.

In those days, you had to have a son.

Now for years, until his wife Sarah was 90 years old,
they had been unable to have a child.

Abram's obedience to God's command
was looking like it might not pay off.

He might have left his father, Terah
and all he knew and loved for nothing.

But then Sarah conceived and they had a son Isaac.

Abraham was 100 years old when Isaac was born.

Well you can imagine the expectation
that lay on the shoulders of that son.

He was the son of promise.

He was the one through whom Abraham
could become the father of a great nation.

And he was the one that Abraham and Sarah
had longed to have for decades.

It would hardly be a surprise
if Abraham had made Isaac into something of an idol in his heart.

What does that mean?

It means he might have started to look to Isaac instead of God
for his future.

Instead of seeing God as the gracious giver
who will fulfil all his promises,

he might have begun to look to Isaac

as the one who could make him happy in his old age

by continuing on the family line.

Now I can't see anything in Genesis that would tell me that Isaac had become an idol for Abraham. But there's no doubt the possibility was there - as it is for every parent who has a child in their old age. But even more for Abraham because this child was the beginning of the fulfilment of the promise that he'd based his whole life around.

So what did God ask him to do?

19:2 "Take your son, your only son, whom you love - Isaac - and go to the region of Moriah.

Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you."

Well there's plenty of evidence in that verse that God is destroying even the possibility of an idol.

He doesn't just say, take your son, Isaac, and sacrifice him.

He double underlines how much Isaac meant to Abraham.

Your son, your only son, whom you love.

Only son - if this son dies, there is no great nation, just an old man and his wife.

whom you love -

well there's nothing wrong with loving your son.

But there's just the hint there that Abraham's love for Isaac might have been competing with his love for God.

Maybe. At least the possibility was there.

But by the time that Abraham has Isaac tied up and he's laid him on the altar.

He's got the wood for the fire already on the altar.

And his hand is reaching for the knife,

well Isaac is not dead yet.

But any idolatry of Isaac in Abraham's heart is definitely dead.

God can proceed with making Abraham the father of a great nation with a clear demonstration

that Abraham loves God above everything else,

even his own dear son Isaac.

Now I said at the start of the sermon,
that Christian faith is not blind.

It's reasonable faith.

How on earth is it reasonable

for God to ask Abraham to sacrifice his son?

OK it's fair for God to want us to worship him and not anything else.

But how is it fair

to ask someone to prove that they are not worshipping something else
by asking them to do something that is forbidden?

The ten commandments hadn't yet been given yet,

but you can be sure that 'you shall not murder'

was already well understood to be God's command.

God had already punished Cain for killing his brother Abel.

Well the key is to understand the word sacrifice.

"Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you."

Sacrifices were made from the time of Cain and Abel.

In Exodus we find that the life of the first born son belongs to God.

That's why the lamb had to be sacrificed at Passover,

as a substitute for the life of the first born son.

When God asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac,

he was only asking for what already belonged to him.

There needs to be a sacrifice

so that a holy God can live among a sinful people

without destroying them.

God's command to Abraham was reasonable.

But how could Abraham carry out that command?

The only way that Abraham could go up the mountain to sacrifice Isaac
was to believe that God is both holy and gracious.

Abraham had to believe that God is holy

because otherwise he would never agreed that his son's life is forfeit.

He had to believe God is gracious,

or he would not have believed that God could work things out.

Keller puts it this way.

"If he had not believed that he was in debt to a holy God, he would have been too angry to go.

If he had not believed that God was a god of grace, he would have been too crushed and hopeless to go."

Well we can't finish looking at Gen 22 without thinking about it from a specifically Christian perspective.

Abraham was a Jew,

and God expected the Jewish people to worship him alone.

He expected the Jewish people not to have idols.

But what do we see in this as Christians that a Jew could not see?

How does this story point us to Jesus?

The clue is in verse 2.

19:2 "Take your son, your only son, whom you love - Isaac - and go to the region of Moriah.

Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you."

The region of Moriah is what we would call Jerusalem today.

And Abraham was not the only father

who was asked to sacrifice his son at Jerusalem.

God the father offered his own son

as a sacrifice for the sins of the world at Jerusalem.

Unlike Abraham who was given a reprieve -

he only had to show that he was willing to show

that he revered God with everything that was dear to him.

And then God provided a ram to be sacrificed.

God the Father's son, the Lord Jesus was the Lamb of God

who takes away the sins of the world.

It's by faith in him and only by faith in him

that you are I are able to be saved.

That's the gospel.

The good news that God is both holy and gracious.

As Paul says to the Romans,

Rom 3:26

"He did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time,

so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus."
If he had left sins unpunished, he would not have been just.
But by sacrificing his son, his justice is satisfied,
and by justifying us, he is eternally gracious.

That's why we worship him alone.

As the one who paid the ultimate price for us,
he is worthy of everything.

And like Abraham who received his son Isaac back again,
God often allows us to keep the good things he gives us.

So long as we demote them from competing with him for our worship.

There's nothing wrong with loving your kids.

Or enjoying your job or some time off.

Nothing wrong with being devoted to your spouse
or following your favourite sporting code.

You can do any and all of those.

So long as they don't compete with God for your worship.

How will you know if you are doing more
than enjoying God's good gifts?

How will you know if they have crossed the line into becoming idols?

One test is to ask yourself the question,

"Could I live without?"

If you've got to the point where you think,

"Life just would not be worth living without ..."

Then it may well be the case

that whatever it is has become an idol for you.

Abraham had to get to the point

of knowing that he could live without Isaac

before he could tie him up on the altar.

And if God does force you

to do without something that had become an idol for you,

that's not God being cruel to you.

That's God freeing you from slavery to your idol.

Idols are not benign.

They are cruel masters.

They will make you sacrifice more and more to serve them.
And they will never give you the joy and the happiness they promise.
I had a friend who was devoted to girl guides.
She had come up through the guides herself,
and then been a leader.
She'd served on regional committees,
I'm not sure exactly what.
But it was enough for her to be given the emu award,
the highest recognition in guiding.
One Sunday we were celebrating with her in church
about her receiving this award.
And then it was only a few weeks later,
that God took guiding out of her life.
I can't remember exactly what happened.
But there was some kind of relationship breakdown.
And she just walked away from it.
She'd invested decades into it.
You'd think there would have been great grief.
You know, I'd never seen her looking happier.
It was like she'd been released from something that had enslaved her.

When God takes away our idols,
he is being kind to us.
And he is releasing us to serve in his kingdom.
What's the last thing that God says to Abraham in our passage?
Gen 22:16-18 "I swear by myself declares Yahweh,
that because you have done this
and have not withheld your son, your only son,
I will surely bless you
and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky
and the sand on the seashore.
Your descendants will take possession on the cities of their enemies,
and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed,
because you have obeyed me."
God's blessing will flow through us to others
when we are released from being enslaved to our idols.

Let me finish with Tim Keller's conclusion to this chapter.
"Like Abraham, Jesus struggled mightily with God's call.
In the garden of Gethsemane,
he asked the Father if there was any other way,
but in the end, he obediently walked up Mount Calvary to the cross.
We can't know all the reasons
that the Father is allowing bad things to happen to us,
but like Jesus did, we can trust him in those difficult times.
As we look to him and rejoice in what he did for us,
we will have the joy and hope necessary -
and the freedom from counterfeit gods -
to follow the call of God
when times seem at their most dark and difficult."