

A Shadow of the Cross

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[0 : 0 0] Tonight we are continuing our study into the life of Abraham and we've come to the passage which we read in Genesis chapter 22. We're going to look at the whole of this section, but we can read again together from verse 6. Abraham took the wood of the burned offering and laid it on Isaac his son and he took in his hand the fire and the knife and they both went on 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 and so they both went on together. Two or three weeks ago we were looking at Genesis chapter 15 and we said that chapter was quite possibly the strangest and coolest chapter in the whole of the Old Testament.

Genesis 22 is possibly the most distressing yet at the same time the most comforting chapter in the Old Testament. It's distressing because it is a difficult chapter. The whole idea of Abraham sacrificing his own son is awful and it just seems unthinkable. But as I hope we're going to see this evening this chapter is also a powerful picture of the incredible love that lies at the heart of the Christian faith. In order to understand this specific chapter in the book of Genesis, I think it's important to understand the wider question of how the Old Testament and the New Testament fit together. The Bible is split into two big parts, Old Testament and New Testament.

And the theme that runs across both of these is the theme of covenant. That's really what Testament means. We could just as easily say Old Covenant and New Covenant. Covenant is the Bible's term of describing the relationship between God and humanity. And the whole message of the Bible is how the relationship between God and humanity was created, broken and then restored.

Now the first two of these are described to us in Genesis chapter 1 to 3. So those arrows in the diagram are not to scale in terms of length of the Bible. Genesis 1 to 3, a very short section, describes two of the biggest events in terms of the relationship between God and humanity. The relationship is created, the relationship is broken, but then the rest of the Old Testament and the whole of the New Testament describe how that relationship is being restored. And the way in which the Old Testament and the New Testament fit together is in the sense that the Old Testament is a shadow of the full reality that is revealed in the New. So it's not that the Old is completely undone and abandoned by the New. Some people think that, but we don't. We believe that the Old Testament gives us a shadow of the full plan of salvation that's implemented in the coming of Jesus in the New Testament. So if you imagine it in terms of buildings, we mustn't think that the

[3 : 25] Old Testament is a kind of old building that gets tented and then a new one is built in its place. That's not how to understand it at all. Instead, when we look at the Old Testament, we are looking at the shadow that the New Testament building is making. And these two are inseparable, but one is just an outline of the real thing. So the Exodus is a shadow of the full reality in the New Testament, whereby God delivers us out of slavery to sin. The temple in the Old Testament is a shadow showing us the New Testament reality that God wants to dwell within us. King David in the Old Testament is a shadow showing us the New Testament reality that the kingdom of God has come and Jesus is king. And exactly the same applies to Genesis 22.

This chapter is a shadow. It's a shadow of what is happening on the cross. As we look at this passage, I want us to notice three things. The first two will be a wee bit longer. The third one will be very short. We see a shadow of a son who is precious.

We see a shadow of a substitute which is provided. And we see a shadow of a blessing which is poured out. At the start of Genesis 22, we read that God tested Abraham and said to him, Abraham. Abraham says, here I am. And God says, take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, go to the land of Mariah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you. In these verses, Abraham is commanded to offer his son Isaac. And as God gives that commandment, there's one key truth that is very strongly emphasized. That key truth is that this child is precious. You can see that in the words God uses in verse two. He says, take your son. Doesn't say take the boy or take Isaac. He says, take your son. This is Abraham's very own child. Not only that, he is his only son. Isaac is unique. There is no other child that's been born to Abraham and Sarah. They'd waited 25 years from when God first spoke to Abraham back in Genesis 12 to when Isaac was born in Genesis 21. Abraham has been asked to offer something that is utterly unique and utterly irreplaceable. And that's reinforced by the third thing we see, where it says, take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love. For Abraham, Isaac is not just a unique child.

He's an utterly cherished child. Abraham loves his son. For Abraham, there is no one in the world like Isaac. And the father-son relationship between them is a bond of the deepest love.

So from the very beginning of Genesis chapter two, it's made absolutely clear that Isaac is precious. Now at this stage of the chapter, all of that just reinforces how difficult and distressing and shocking God's command to Abraham is. It all just seems unthinkable.

[7 : 09] But the question we have to ask is, well, is God being horrible? Or is God trying to show us something? And the fact that the Old Testament is a shadow is telling us that it's the latter.

God is showing us something. Isaac is a son who is incredibly precious, but he is actually a shadow of the son who is the most precious son of all, Jesus Christ. If you go forward into the New Testament and read about Jesus in the life, read about the life of Jesus in the Gospels, there's two crucial moments when God the Father speaks from heaven. One of them is at Jesus' baptism. The other is at the transfiguration when Jesus goes to the top of a mountain and his glory is revealed to the disciples who are with him. At each of these crucial moments when God the Father speaks from heaven, he says the same thing, you are my beloved son. This is my beloved son. And in John 17, Jesus himself speaks about the Father's love for him. He says, Father,

I desire that they also whom you've given me, maybe with me where I am, to see my glory that you've given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. So in Genesis 22, Isaac is maybe about 12 years old and for every second of those years that Isaac has been alive, he has been utterly loved by Abraham. But God the Father has had God the Son with him forever and for every second of that eternity, the Father has poured his love into his precious son.

So here in Genesis 22, we're getting a shadow and a glimpse of the intimate beautiful bond that there is between God the Father and God the Son. To God the Father, there is none like Jesus.

He is the Father's one and only, he's the Father's beloved, he has been the object of the Father's love forever. So when the Bible says that God is love, that's not just kind of vague mystical niceness. It's actually a logical fact arising from the fact that from forever until forever at the very heart of the being of God is a Father who loves his beautiful, precious, treasured Son.

[9 : 58] And this is one of these situations where exaggeration is actually understatement, because I could try to use every single superlative I could think of to describe the love that God the Father has for God the Son. And yet no matter how much I say, I wouldn't even come close to conveying the fullness of what it means when God says, this is my beloved Son.

And for those of us who are parents, every ounce of love that we have for our children is a glimpse into this. In fact, that's part of what it means for humanity to be made in the image of God. We love our offspring. And the uniqueness of that is especially true, I think, in terms of fatherhood. I'm from the Isle of Lewis and there's a lot of sheep there in the Isle of Lewis. And I've seen sheep all my life, seen them many, many times. But I have never, ever seen a ram looking out for his offspring. I may be wrong, but I'm not even sure a ram is even aware that he has offspring. And certainly they don't treat their offspring as though they're precious. And even the expressions of care that we do see in the animal kingdom around us, they're temporary. Humans are different. That's why when fathers fail to love their children, it's because we're failing to be the fathers that God wants and expects us to be. And that's an awful thing and a really, a really hard thing to experience. So, father, please guard against idolizing your children, because that obviously dishonors God, but also please make absolutely sure that you pour your love into your children, because that is to God's glory.

All of this means that when you think of Jesus, alongside recognizing the fact that he's our King, our Teacher, our Savior, our Guide, we must also always remember that Jesus is the precious, unique, beloved Son of God. In Isaac, we see a shadow of Jesus, the Son, who is incredibly precious. The second thing we see, though, is a shadow of a substitute which is provided.

As described in detail in these verses 9 to 13, the tension builds up in the chapter and Abraham takes his son, he binds him, he lays him on the altar, and he takes the knife in his hand to kill him. And at that moment, God calls out and says, stop, do not lay a hand upon him. And instead, a ram which is caught nearby is offered in Isaac's place.

I'm not sure if any of you are reading Genesis 22 for the first time tonight. Maybe you are, maybe for many of us, it's a passage we've read several times before. But even as I read it now, I try to think as though I didn't know the outcome. And reading through the verses, the tension builds up as the chapter goes on, and you think, what is happening here? And there's such a sense of relief when you come to verse 12, and God says, stop. And even though I know the outcome, and I've known the outcome since I was a child, I am still always relieved to reach verses 12 and 13 when God provides a ram to die instead of Isaac. Two key things that emphasized here. The first is that the ram is provided by God. So even as they were walking to Mount Moriah, Abraham was looking to God to make some kind of provision. And at that moment, when it looked like the worst was about to happen, everything changes because of the provision that God makes. And in response,

[14 : 31] Abraham names the place the Lord will provide. The second key point is that the ram is a substitute who is offered instead of Isaac. Those two words in verse 13 instead of are so important. They're showing us the reason why God makes this provision. The ram is provided so that Isaac is protected.

The ram is the substitute who takes his place. And again, in all of this, the key thing that we need to recognize is that God is showing us something. This is a shadow of a substitute being provided.

All of this, of course, raises the whole issue of sacrifice. Isaac is almost offered as a sacrifice, and the ram is offered in his place as a substitute. And if you go on to read the rest of the Old Testament, there's a huge emphasis on sacrifices. Why is that? Well, central to the emphasis on sacrifices is the fact that as far as the Bible is concerned, death is a massive problem.

Humanity was created by God to live, but sin has ruined that and has put us on a path to death. And to God and to us, that is a massive problem. And it's a reminder, if you're wondering whether the Bible is relevant to you or not, well, ask yourself the question, is death a problem to you?

And if it's not, then the Bible is probably not going to do much for you. But if death is a problem for you, then the Bible is exactly what you need. The Bible tells us that death is a problem, and that problem is caused by sin. So the way to get rid of death is to get rid of sin.

[16 : 32] But the only thing that gets rid of sin is death. So let me try and illustrate what I'm saying here. Imagine my heart, and I mean the physical organ inside me, imagine my heart was contaminated with radiation. So every time my heart beats, it produces radioactiveness that goes into my blood, and that radioactiveness in my blood is slowly killing me. The only way to stop my heart from producing that radiation that will kill me is to stop my heart from beating. But if you stop my heart from beating, I'm still going to die. That's the situation that sin has left humanity in.

Humanity needs to get rid of sin to avoid death, but the only thing that gets rid of sin is death. That's why sin has created an unstoppable path to death in the experience of humanity.

And that's why we all die. And of course, this is why God hates sin, and this is why God judges sin because it is so utterly horrible. And radioactiveness is a good illustration for sin, because if something is radioactive, then you can't un-radioactive if I it. All you can do is get it away from you and put it somewhere else. That's exactly what sin is like, and that is exactly what the Old Testament sacrificial system is pointing us towards. It's grounded on the principle that the death that sin makes inevitable needs to be diverted off us onto a substitute.

And Genesis 22 and the whole of the Old Testament sacrificial system is a shadow of that. Ultimately, it wasn't effective because ultimately the blood of bulls and goats can't take away sin, as Hebrews 10 tells us. Animals can't be an adequate substitute for humans. But the whole of that system was never intended to be effective. It was intended to be a shadow. A shadow of the sacrifice where a perfect substitute would take the death resulting from our sin instead of us.

So in Genesis 22, we see a shadow of a son who's precious and a shadow of a substitute which is provided. And the key point is that on the cross, both of these come together.

[19 : 26] On the cross, the precious Son of God becomes the perfect substitute provided for us.

On the cross, Jesus dies in our place as our substitute. In doing so, all our sin is placed on him and his perfection is placed on us. If we go back to the radioactive heart illustration, our broken contaminated heart is transplanted to him. And his healthy, righteous, perfect heart is transplanted to us. And the result is that we are saved. And the fact that Isaac was saved because the ram took his place is a shadow of the fact that we are saved because Jesus takes our place. But the key point of Genesis 22 is that the magnitude of what Abraham almost had to do is giving us a glimpse into the magnitude of what God actually had to do in order to save us.

In Genesis 22, there's massive relief when Abraham's precious Son is spared. But when God when God saw Abraham take that ram out of the thicket in place of Isaac, he knew that when it came to his own precious Son, Jesus, there would be no ram to take his place.

In Genesis 22, the Son is replaced with a ram. And that's the pattern for the rest of the Old Testament shadow. But at the cross, all the bulls and goats and rams of the Old Testament shadow come to an end. And in the New Testament, it's not that a Son is replaced with a ram, it's that the rams are replaced with a son. And Abraham's statement, the Lord will provide ultimately means far more than Abraham himself perhaps ever realized. And it's summed up beautifully in the verse we read at the beginning of the service in Romans 8:32, where it speaks of God as the one who did not spare his own son, but gave him up. This is where we see the massive cost of the cross.

The awfulness of Genesis 22 is a glimpse into the awfulness of the cross. It's no wonder that Jesus was in agony in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before the cross. It's no wonder he prayed that this cup might pass from him if there was somehow a possible way for that to happen.

[22 : 32] It's no wonder he needed to be strengthened by angels. The cross costs God everything. His Son is not spared. The Father has to give him up. At the cross, God provides a substitute.

And that substitute is his very own beloved precious Son. And in the midst of all the agony, pain and distress that that causes, we have to ask the question, why? Why would God do that? And the amazing thing is that you can answer that question in one word. Why is God doing this? The answer is because of you.

If you look at the next three words in Romans 8:32, it says, He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all.

All of this is so that you can be saved through faith in Jesus Christ. And if you can see how precious Jesus the Son of God is, and if you can see just how perfect the provision that God made is, then you will see just how much you are worth in the eyes of God. The massive cost of the cross is paid in full because of how precious you are to God. This is summed up beautifully by Eric Alexander, who is a retired minister who preached in Glasgow for many years. And I would wholeheartedly recommend listening to his sermons. Talking about Genesis 22, he said, when you look at Abraham, you think, wow, see how much Abraham loved God. But when you look at the cross, you say, wow, see how much God loves me.

And the preciousness of the one on the cross and the perfection of the provision God has made there tells you one of the amazing truths that lie, that lies at the heart of the gospel.

[25 : 12] Here are two very simple questions. What is space worth? What does space have to do to be worth something? And you need to put your own name in the gap. So what does Thomas worth?

What does Thomas have to do to be worth something? And you can put your own name in that place. Humanity's instinctive answer to question one is usually nothing. Deep down, I think almost everyone struggles with self-worth. I know that that varies a lot to different degrees.

But I think everybody deep down feels a need to do something to prove that they are worth something, whether that's in terms of your work or your looks or your experiences or whatever.

And these things can give us self-worth. So if we achieve something in our career, if we do well at uni, if we get on well at school, or if we have a good reputation among our friends or our colleagues, these things can give us a sense of self-worth. But the very fact that we need things to give self-worth is because we on our own, when everything else is stripped away, we don't feel worth very much.

Humanity's answer to the second question is usually everything. That's why every man-made religious system involves doing stuff in order to be worthy of a deity. And even non-religious people feel the need to do stuff in order to find wholeness and peace in their lives. People will say, I need to find myself, or I need to do this or do that. I need to be this or be that. So for us, the instinctive answer to the question, what am I worth is nothing. And often the instinctive answer to the question, what do I have to do to be worth something is everything. The amazing truth of the gospel is that if you ask these two questions to God, the answers are the other way around. So what are you worth to God? You're worth everything. And the cross proves that because Jesus is so precious. And what do you have to do to be worth something in the eyes of God?

[27 : 58] Nothing. And the cross proves that as well because Jesus has done everything needed in order for you to be God's precious child forever. All of that brings us to our third point, which is very brief.

We see a shadow of the sun who's precious. We see a shadow of the substitute which is provided. But in Genesis 22, we also see a shadow of a blessing which is poured out. We see that at the end of the passage, when an angel comes to the Lord a second time and says to him, the angel of the Lord comes to Abraham a second time and says, by myself I've sworn, declares the Lord, because you've done this and 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 sun 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. The key point here is the fact that as a result of the fact that Abraham did not withhold his son, blessings were poured out upon Abraham and upon others. So there's a blessing of family. His offspring are going to be greatly multiplied. There's the blessing of security. Enemies are not going to be a threat.

That's what's conveyed by the phrase, your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies. And there's a blessing for all people, all the nations of the earth are going to be blessed.

And what I want us to see is that this too is a shadow of the cross. Because the fact that God did not withhold his son has meant that incredible blessings are being poured out upon humanity.

If you are a Christian or if you become one through faith in Jesus Christ, we have the blessing of a beautiful family. God is our father. We are his children. And we are all brothers and sisters as one family in Jesus. We have the blessing of unshakable security. Sin and death cannot threaten you anymore if you are trusting in Jesus. Nothing can snatch you out of the father's hand.

[30 : 28] And we have an amazing blessing for all nations. And the good news of Jesus is transforming lives across the world. And we have the amazing privilege of continuing to spread that message and to share that good news. And again, it's all summed up perfectly in the verse that we read at the very beginning of our service. We were in Romans 8:32 where it says, He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all. What does it say next? It says, How will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Genesis 22 gives us a shadow of a precious son. It gives us a shadow of a substitute provided. And it gives us a shadow of amazing blessings being poured out.

And the amazing thing about the cross is that there, all of these shadows become a reality.

The last thing I want to say is this. In the Old Testament, we have shadows. In the New Testament, we have the reality.

But today, we have pale limitations. Now, what I mean by that is the fact that today, people are looking for peace and joy and hope and self worth and love in stuff, in their health, in their possessions, in their social media profile, in their work, in their sex life, in their status, in their reputation, in their political party and in hundreds of other places.

And the thing I want to say is that all of these are just pale limitations of what God is offering to you in Jesus Christ. And if you are not yet a Christian, all I ask you to do is compare.

[32 : 48] Compare what the stuff in your life is offering you with what God is offering you.

And compare what you are worth in the eyes of all that stuff with what you are worth in the eyes of God.

I hope you can see the difference. And I hope that you can hear God's voice calling you to trust in him today. Amen. Let us pray.

Father, we thank you so much for what you've done for us in Jesus. That you gave your precious son and you did not spare him but gave him up for us all.

And we just thank you so much for doing that. And we thank you that with him and through him you have poured out so many blessings upon us. Help us all to see that and help us all to share that amazing news. In Jesus' name, amen.