

# The God Who Gives

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, let's look at it together, and as always, I think we'll have a question time afterwards if we have any time, so feel free to bring up any of your questions there if I don't get to them.

There's heaps in this glorious passage, isn't there? It is one of the highlights of the Old Testament, majestic and famous for good reason. And we're finishing off our series in Genesis this morning. We've been following the story of Abraham for a couple of months now. Now, there have been some ups and downs. Abraham has come a long way since Ur, but in at least some of the episodes over the last few weeks, it's been clear that he still has a long way to go, if you know what I mean, in his heart.

You can take Abraham out of Ur, but God hasn't quite taken Ur out of Abraham yet. Remember, Abraham wasn't born into a Christian family. He didn't grow up in Sunday school or even in a Christian culture.

Abraham was a moon-worshipping pagan idolater when God first called him back in chapter 12. And the Lord said to Abraham, Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you, and I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing.

[ 1 : 17 ] I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. And of course, you'll remember that Abraham did what God called him to do.

He left behind his homeland, and he headed off to take hold of that which God had promised him. So that was when God called Abraham out of Ur. But as we come to chapter 22 this week, and we see God call Abraham again, and we're meant to see, I think, the parallels between this chapter and chapter 12.

But this time, if I can put it this way, I think the point is that it's not so much about getting Abraham out of Ur, but about getting Ur out of Abraham. You see, in verse 2, when we hear about God's test for Abraham, how God calls Abraham to sacrifice his only son, our immediate reaction, I think, which is a good reaction, is what kind of God would ask someone to do this?

Isn't that right? What kind of God would ask someone to do this? It seems so obnoxious, so morally wrong. And then, on the other hand, what kind of person would obey such a God?

I mean, if God spoke to me and told me to kill one of my daughters, I wouldn't do it. I'd check myself into a psych ward. Wouldn't you? That's not the kind of God I worship or could worship.

[ 2 : 53 ] But what I think we need to realize as we come to this passage, as we ask these two questions, is that, in fact, in Abraham's day in the ancient Near East, the answer was actually lots of gods and lots of people.

I mean, what kind of God would ask someone to do this? Well, Molech did. Chemosh did. And, of course, lots of people willingly heeded their call. The gods around and about Abraham, the gods of the Canaanites and the Chaldeans, were exactly like this.

Listen to one scholar writing about the royal tombs in Ur. The royal tombs in Ur, which is Ur, right, specifically where Abraham was from. Inside the tomb, they found lots of dead bodies alongside the royal family.

These sacrifices were deliberately staged to reflect specific social roles. Cattle were placed in teams in front of vehicles, accompanied by soldiers with their helmets and weapons.

Court ladies in all their finery were arranged in neat rows, and musicians placed with their instruments still in hand. This carefully organized display prompted Woolley, now Leonard Woolley was the archaeologist who originally excavated these tombs, prompted Woolley to suggest that the human victims had voluntarily gone to their death, collectively drinking poison from a centrally

placed cauldron.

[ 4 : 13 ] But new research on some of the few preserved skulls has revealed a more sinister scenario of blunt force trauma as the cause of death. Although Ur is not the only site with evidence of human sacrifice in the ancient Near East, it is by far the most evocative.

Other possible sites include Jericho in the Levant, and Tel Am El Mara in Syria. Now, I think then that's important context when we read this chapter. What kind of God would ask someone to do this?

Well, in Abraham's day and age, lots of gods. Is Yahweh a god like that? That is the key question. Is Yahweh like all the other gods? Now, as we dive into the details of Abraham's call then, first of all, notice that we're told from the very beginning that this is a test.

Now, Abraham didn't know that, but I think right from the very beginning as the readers, we are being alerted to the fact that this call is not quite all that it seems. God is staging something here, setting something up.

[ 5 : 21 ] God is trying to teach Abraham a lesson. So he is going to put Abraham under unusual pressure to refine his faith. God's plan is to draw something out here, to expose something.

And of course, whenever God tests us, it's not really so that he can learn something. But so that we can learn something. And Abraham presents himself as a willing servant when God calls.

Abraham responds, Here I am. This is a model for us to imitate, isn't it? In fact, we see this exact phrase on the lips of Moses, if you remember the burning bush.

And Samuel, when God calls to him, he's lying on his bed. And Isaiah famously responds to his vision of God in chapter 6, when God, the holy, holy, holy God, asks the question, whom shall I send and who will go for us?

Isaiah responds, here I am. Send me. So again and again and again, we're being challenged by these men about our own obedience to God and our commitment to serve him faithfully.

[ 6 : 21 ] Are you ready and willing to do all that God might ask of you, even if it involves great sacrifice? What if it means giving up your cherished ambitions, that promotion that you've been working towards for years?

Here I am, Lord. What if it means giving up your hopes of a husband or a family? Here I am. What if it means giving up your financial security or comfort?

Here I am. And is God really the God of your life, of your whole life? What if obedience to God means giving up the approval of your friends or neighbors?

Here I am. Will you sacrifice your hopes and aspirations and wealth on the altar of wholehearted obedience to God? Now for Abraham, of course, the sacrifice God is demanding from him could not be more painful.

Notice then in verse 2, Isaac is described as Abraham's only son. We know Abraham had other sons.

[ 7 : 29 ] He had Ishmael. But Isaac is Abraham's only son, according to Genesis 22. And he is the singular offspring, as it were.

The true son. The son of promise. The supernatural son God gave him. And God, as it were, twists the knife, doesn't he, when he says to Abraham to give up his only son.

And Isaac is the son, remember Abraham, whom you love. Of course, that is how child sacrifice works. If you want to placate the gods, appease the gods, or whatever, you need to offer your very best, that which is most precious to you.

If you want your crops to flourish, you dare not risk the wrath of the gods by offering up some leftover, you know, lesser sacrifice, some blemished goods. You've got to give your very best.

In Greek mythology, if you remember the story of Troy and the wooden horse, you might remember that as King Agamemnon sets out from Greece towards Troy, his ships are trapped in bad weather.

[ 8 : 37 ] The wind just won't blow the right way. So what does he do? Well, Agamemnon is told that he must sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenia, to appease the goddess Artemis, who has caused this unfavorable weather.

Agamemnon lures his daughter to the place of sacrifice. Once she learns the truth, Iphigenia begs for her life, but eventually she goes willingly to her death.

I mean, of course, that's another culture, and it's a long time away from Abraham, but it is just the kind of thing that the pagan gods required. So God calls Abraham, take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah.

Now the location here is very important. Later on in 2 Chronicles chapter 3, we're told that Solomon built the house of the Lord, that is the temple, in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah.

So we'll come back to that, but it's just worth taking note for now where Abraham is called to go. And that what Abraham is about to do is going to have massive symbolic significance for the nation of Israel going forward, for the temple and the sacrificial system, etc.

[ 9 : 49 ] And God is expecting Abraham to make a burnt offering. A burnt offering. Now, we've only seen this language come up once before in the book of Genesis. It was in chapter 8, just after the flood, when Noah offered up a burnt offering to soothe God's anger.

And that's what burnt offerings are about. Placating God's wrath. Propitiation. It was said, back in chapter 8, that the fragrant smoke of the burnt offering that Noah made rose up to God's nostrils and quieted his anger at human sinfulness.

And if you compare that later on to the smoke rising up from Sodom and Gomorrah, perhaps you can see the connection. The point is that sin provokes God's furious, fiery wrath.

God's righteous wrath. And either we have to burn for our sin, or we can rely on a sacrifice in our place, a burnt offering. That's what God is calling Abraham to go and do.

So, in verse 3, Abraham responds promptly. He rose early in the morning. I'm guessing he probably didn't sleep well that night anyway. And the narrator gives us lots of little details just to make the story gut-wrenchingly poignant.

[ 11 : 13 ] It's almost excruciating, really. It's heartbreaking as Abraham saddles his donkey and carries, cuts up the firewood. You know, you can't help but imagine just how painful that must have been for him, every activity preparing for this awful trip.

How heavy everything must have felt. How lonely he must have felt. There's no mention of Sarah. And by all accounts, it looks like no one else knows what's going on. You can imagine Abraham going over and over and over, God's command in his mind.

And it's not as if he just sort of, in an instant, can bite the bullet. It takes him three days to get to the land of Moriah. So, in verse 4, 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. Now, this line is absolutely crucial. Let me just point something out that's subtle in the English but crystal clear in the Hebrew.

Abraham says, I and the boy will go over there and worship and we will come again to you. And it's in the plural. The verb to return there. So, Abraham is not expecting to leave Isaac dead on the altar.

[ 12 : 31 ] So, even though he's expecting to kill him, he's not expecting him to stay dead. Because, of course, he knows God's promise that through Isaac shall your offspring be named.

This is what the author of Hebrews picks up on in Hebrews chapter 11. So, let me read it out for you. Hebrews chapter 11, verse 17. 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 your offspring be named. He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead.

From which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. You see, Abraham wasn't lying or just being loose with his language when he said, We will return.

Abraham believed God's promise that God would make him into a great nation and bless all the families of the earth through Isaac. And he considered that God was able even to raise Isaac from the dead if he sacrificed him.

[ 13 : 32 ] I think it's particularly important here to point out that word considered. It means to calculate or reckon. to get the sort of brain matter working. So Soren Kierkegaard famously takes this whole chapter of Genesis chapter 22 to be a demonstration of how faith is irrational.

Faith is about doing crazy things for a crazy God, as it were. A crazy leap into the dark. And thanks in large part to Kierkegaard, that's what many people now think that faith is.

It's something irrational. It's something personal and private. There are public facts, like science, and then there's private faith, which is fundamentally not based on evidence or reason, but just a strong feeling, a kind of unexplainable sense of the spiritual, a direct encounter with the divine that is beyond words or explanation or justification.

But of course, faith in the Bible is not like that. Abraham's faith was considered. It was thought through. It was reckoned. It wasn't reckless.

And of course, if you've been following the story of Genesis so far, you'll know that Abraham has plenty of reasons to trust God. In fact, we've been wondering at times, haven't we? Why hasn't he been trusting God?

[14:54] His faithless behavior in chapter 12 and chapter 20 with Pharaoh and then Abimelech doing the same thing again seemed completely irrational. So, we need to be careful, I think, not to be led astray by Kierkegaard's mistake here.

Genesis 22 is not about crazy, irrational faith. It's just the opposite. It's at this point that Abraham's behavior finally starts to make sense.

Abraham is responding reasonably to the God who made the universe just by speaking, who promised to make children for Abraham as many as the stars in the sky, which, of course, he also made.

And God did give Abraham a son at the ripe old age of 100. In other words, if there's anything we know about God at this point in the Bible story, it's that God can bring life out of death.

He is the author of life. He can bring supernatural life into hopeless situations. And so back to the story, Abraham, verse 6, 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.

[16:04] 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. Now, if there's a key verse in this passage, I think it's that one.

It's verse 8. Abraham said, God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son. Again, some commentators sort of seem to suggest that Abraham was kind of lying or just bluffing.

You know, he can't admit to his son what's about to happen. Because that misses the whole point of the story, doesn't it? The question we should be asking ourselves is, how does Abraham keep getting it exactly right?

How does Abraham seem to know ahead of time what is going to happen? And the answer is faith. That's what living by faith and not by sight enables us to do.

[17:13] Abraham is putting two and two together based on God's promises and what God has called them to do in that moment. And again, this is how Hebrews 11 describes faith.

Faith enables us to see the unseen. Just as Noah, as it were, saw the flood beforehand. And was therefore motivated to build the ark. Everyone else is thinking there's no flood coming.

He can see it beforehand because he trusts God's word. And Joseph saw God's people living in the promised land hundreds of years after his death. And so he gave instructions for his bones to be carried up out of Egypt and brought there.

Faith is like a telescope that enables us to see over the horizon. It enables us to see far beyond our present circumstances into the future that God has promised for us.

And that is what Abraham is seeing. I think Abraham knows a couple of things. Number one, he knows that there will have to be a sacrifice.

[18:20] You see, because the leftover lingering problem in Genesis of God's wrath against human sinfulness still hasn't resolved. I think Abraham is expecting to sacrifice his son in other words.

If you go all the way back to the beginning of the book, to the first 11 chapters, you might know that there's a repeating cycle in Genesis. It goes like this. Sin. Somebody sins. Judgment.

God steps in with a punishment. And then grace. God spares or saves someone. That cycle repeats three or four times, escalating each time. So in the first cycle, Adam and Eve sin.

They're kicked out of the garden, but God shows them a little bit of grace in that he makes coverings out of animal skins for them. Then in the second cycle, Cain kills his brother Abel and God punishes Cain by sending his brother off into exile.

But then you see just a little bit of grace. Cain gets a mark, a sign on his forehead to protect him from those who might want to kill him. Next you get the flood story.

[19:26] All of humanity is described as completely corrupt. God sends a flood to wipe them off the face of the earth and yet there's a little bit of grace Noah and his family get to survive on the ark.

Now the final cycle in Genesis revolves around the Tower of Babel. First, humanity sins by building the Tower of Babel in defiance against God. Second, God steps in to punish them by confusing their language.

And then thirdly, and here's the trick, there's no grace in the Tower of Babel episode. Except for the fact that as soon as it's concluded, this man Abraham is introduced, or Abram.

And Abram comes from the region where the Tower of Babel is built. And God makes a promise to him that through him all the families of the earth shall be blessed. In other words, what Genesis is teaching us is that this whole sin, judgment, grace cycle is not going to go on forever, repeating itself.

No, finally, through Abraham God is going to show so much grace that he is going to resolve humanity's sin problem once and for all. And what Abraham knows is that the only way to do that is to provide a sacrifice, a burnt offering, just like Noah had to provide one, a sacrifice to deal with his wrath.

[ 20 : 51 ] So Abraham said to his son, God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son. And you see, that is the main point of this passage in a nutshell, that God is not like all the other gods who require us to placate them with various sacrifices, with what's most precious to us.

No, God is the kind of God who provides the sacrifice himself. See, this is why Abraham passes the test because finally he's come to understand, obviously, what kind of God God is.

He's a God of grace. He's a God who keeps his promises. He's a God of righteous wrath, absolutely. But he's a God also of relentless love who will provide his own sacrifice to deal with sin and to deal with his righteous anger at our sin.

And of course, ultimately, that will come through a child of Abraham. Abraham, the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the lamb provided to take the place of all the other sons of Abraham.

He is the burnt offering whom God set forth on Mount Moriah as a propitiation for our sins. So Abraham and Isaac walk on together and we see the scene play out just as Abraham predicted or foresaw in verse 9.

[ 22 : 21 ] 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 and 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.

Again, of course, it's not really that God has learned something but in real time in sort of space-time history as it were in this live interaction with Abraham he has proved something.

He has shown something and what he has proved, notice, is that Abraham fears him. That is to say Abraham takes God very seriously. such that Abraham has been careful to obey God to the letter.

Again, this poses the challenge of the passage to us, doesn't it? We who know far more than Abraham about God's wrath and God's grace, God's wrath against those who continue in sin, God's grace toward those who trust him, do you fear God?

[ 23 : 44 ] Some people treat God a bit like a philosophical play thing, don't they? to be considered at arm's length. I have a friend like that who none of you know, but she seems to me to treat theology just like one of the other sciences, which it seems to me is tragically unscientific, really, because it assumes the conclusion from the outset, doesn't it?

that there really is no God. I would think that if she was open to the possibility that God might be watching her as she investigates him, that she would speak and talk and seek him rather differently. But she doesn't fundamentally fear God. Some people think of God a bit like a genial grandfather, you know? It's his job to forgive.

So far in their lives, they haven't met anyone they couldn't charm or come across any situation they couldn't talk their way out of. But of course, God is not like that.

God sees the truth and he shows no partiality. He cannot be corrupted. He will not be even a bit indulgent. So friends, we ought to fear God.

[ 25 : 07 ] And the thing is that fearing God is the gateway to his grace. Fearing God is the gateway to his grace. What I mean is that when finally we do learn to fear God and throw ourselves on his mercy, we find that God provides, that he is not another one of those taking gods, but he is a God who gives.

And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked and behold, behind him was a ram caught in a thicket by his horns, just as it happens, by God's providence there.

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 so in verses 15 to 19, God reiterates his promise to Abraham. As this kind of climactic moment in Abraham's life comes to an end, God stamps it with an oath.

And again, this is one of those passages picked up in the New Testament, this time in Hebrews chapter 6. Listen to what the author of Hebrews says. For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, Surely I will bless you and multiply you.

[ 26 : 37 ] And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise, the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath.

So that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.

We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

So in other words, in Hebrews, the author just makes the point that, picking up on this idea that God makes an oath and swears by himself. He's saying it was to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise, the unchangeable character of his purpose.

It was to give us strong encouragement to hold fast to the hopes set before us. So of course God never lies and he doesn't need to swear an oath. His yes is always yes and his no is always no.

[ 27 : 48 ] And it's not as if there's any higher court anyway that could hold God accountable. But he's spoken this way to reinforce in the strongest possible terms his unchangeable commitment to Abraham.

And you'll notice again that the logic of this passage is conditional. It is because Abraham was obedient, even to the point of being willing to offer up his son, that God will surely bless him and multiply his offspring and so on.

And this is sort of the unusual thing we've seen all the way through the story of Abraham, that at one and the same time God's promises seem to be unconditional and conditional.

And this is only finally resolved in Jesus, where God provides the sacrifice himself to meet the conditions.

Again, it reinforces the fact that we do need a son of Abraham to go willingly and obediently to his sacrificial death. And yet, in Abraham's weakness, none of his sons could ever be that perfect sacrifice.

[ 29 : 04 ] And so God himself needed to send his one and only son, the son whom he loves, to be the son of Abraham that we need.

God. So it's time to wrap up. As we began, I mentioned two questions that I think this passage raises for us. First, what kind of God would ask this of someone?

And then what kind of person would obey such a God? In the first place, all sorts of wicked and evil gods have asked this of their devotees.

devotees, and not just the idols of the ancient Near East, but even the kind of gods of Western society, like money and career and pleasure, often require that you sacrifice your most treasured possession, even your kids, on their altar.

Men and women across our country being told to put career first, career first, career first, you know, just to wake up when it's too late, finding their lives are empty. They didn't realize how much their careers would require them to sacrifice, you know, that kind of thing.

[ 30 : 16 ] And just sort of as a little plug, I think one of the most helpful books that really unpacks all of this is Tim Keller's book. It's called Counterfeit Gods. And I don't agree with everything in that book, by the way, which I just have to say because I think he gets Genesis 22 wrong, unfortunately.

But apart from just, you know, a couple of minor things, it's a really helpful book to get you thinking about how love and money and power, when we worship these things, the gods of Western society,

when we worship these things above the true and living God, these things end up disappointing us and destroying us.

They end up taking, taking, taking, until they've taken everything from us. And in the end, the only God who is the giving God is the true and living God, the creator of all things.

And what this test in Genesis 22 is about is the fact that God in the end is the God who provides for himself a lamb for a burnt offering. That is the God who calls us to fear him.

And we must fear him, and we can fear him because we can trust him. We can trust him with ourselves. We can trust him with our children. We can trust him with whatever things we hold most dear.

[ 31 : 36 ] When we lay down these things on the altar, as it were, what we will find is that God is not a taking God, but a giving God.

He will provide. In fact, he has already done so by sending his one and only son, the one he loved. And he made him climb up Mount Moriah with the wood on his back and take our place. Isaac was only ever a flawed son of Abraham like we all are.

He could never have been the perfect sacrifice, the burnt offering that we needed to take God's wrath for us and rise from the dead to bring us new life.

life. But Jesus, the son of God, the one and only beloved son, the true son of Abraham, his sacrifice was enough so that through him all the sons of Abraham might die and rise from the dead.

[ 32 : 42 ] Let's pray. O God, give us faith like Abraham to trust you with all that we hold dear.

Trust you with ourselves. Trust you with our children. Trust you with everything. Help us to fear you rightly, to tremble at your word, to be obedient servants, always saying here I am.

whatever it is that you would have us do, that we would be ready to do it. We thank you, Father, that you are not a taking God like all the other gods. You're a kind, generous, giving God who provided your only son to be the sacrifice, to turn away your wrath.

All of our sins might be dealt with, forgiven, done away with, so that we wouldn't have to pay the price. But in Christ, it would all be swallowed up and we could enjoy the new life that you have won for us through his resurrection.

We pray that you'd help us to keep trusting him, to hold on to him, and to take us to the glorious home, the promised land where all of Abraham's sons will get to dwell.

[ 34 : 03 ] We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.