

Now I Know

The Gospel According to Abraham, Pt. 7

We've been looking at the life of Abraham in the book of Genesis. And this is the climax of his life. This is the most famous of all the incidents in his life. This story is just generally acknowledged to be one of the high points of ancient narrative, one of the best-told stories in all of ancient literature. It's infuriating. It's absorbing. It's riveting. And because of that it has become a subject of all kinds of art – not just the literary.

During our Italian sabbatical this summer, we visited a number of the finest art museums in the world. And during our whole trip, I was especially on the lookout for one artist in particular – my favorite painter – Caravaggio. I have a couple copies of his work hanging in my study across the way. And Italy did not disappoint. I found Caravaggio's all over the place – many still hanging in the churches for which they were commissioned. But this one hangs in a museum – the world-famous Uffizi gallery in Florence. Caravaggio is known for his groundbreaking use of light, and you can certainly see that here. But you actually don't need much embellishment to make this scene any more dramatic. What's going on here? The story itself is one of the most compelling in world history. So let's read it.

Genesis 22:1–14: *Sometime later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. 2 Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about." 3 Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about.*

4 On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. 5 He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you." 6 Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, 7 Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?"

"Yes, my son?" Abraham replied. "The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" 8 Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together. 9 When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.

10 Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. 11 But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. 12 "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."

13 Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. 14 So Abraham called that place "The LORD Will Provide." And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided."

There you go - a dramatic story to be sure - but what does it *mean*? Scholars and theologians have spent centuries debating all the various levels of meaning in the text. So here *we* are going to figure it all out this morning! No, probably not, but I suggest we *can* get close to the heart of what is being addressed here. And most importantly, we can be changed by this story if we attend to three features of the narrative. Let's attend to the *essence of the call*, the *horror of the test*, and the *wonder of the Lamb*.

Number 1, The Essence of the Call. Here's the call. **V.2**, "Then God said, 'Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and **go** to the region of Moriah. **Sacrifice** him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I **will** tell you about.'" Now notice the resonance with all the other calls God has given to Abraham, including the original, the first one we looked at weeks ago in Genesis 12.

The similarities are remarkable. Then and now, Abraham is called to "go". See? "Go". Leave the familiar. Leave the comfortable. Go." Secondly, he is called then and now to "a place I'll tell you later." Even here, it says, "I want you to go to the region of Moriah on one of the mountains I'll tell you about later. I *will* tell you about." Future. In other words, he is not only called to go, but he is called to launch out and go *without* knowing where he is going, without knowing - obviously - how it will end.

And then thirdly, as always, he is not just called to go and to go to "a place I'll show you later," but he is called to make a sacrifice, to offer up. In the very beginning, he was called to sacrifice...well, a lot. He was called to leave civilization, to leave the *safety* of it, and his *status* in it; to leave his culture, his family. And now, of course, he is called to offer up his son.

And when God says, "Your only son, whom you love," He is not just rubbing it in. "Only son" means this is the only one left. Ishmael - that's another story which we can't recount now - his older son, is gone. This is his *only* son. This is the only bearer of the family inheritance. And therefore, in a sense, "the only son" means, "This is your only social hope." We'll get back to that, but that's how families looked at things then.

But not only that, “your only son, *whom you love*” means Isaac had become - not surprisingly - Abraham’s emotional center. And so what God again is asking is that every source of finite **security and significance** be offered up. Now in a minute, we’re going to take a look at how unique this *particular* call was.

But it seems like it would be fair at the end of this series that we’ve been doing on Abraham to stand back for a second and say, “What have we learned about the call of God? What does that *mean*? What have we learned about the call of God in general? What is the essence of the call?” And the reason we need to ask that question is because, for example, Saint Paul, in Romans 8, says God only justifies those He *calls*.

And in Ephesians 1, he says to Christians, “The way you’re going to grow into maturity and greatness is to come to know more deeply the riches of your *calling*.” “The hope to which God has *called* you.” Now what is Paul claiming? Nothing less than this. First of all, Paul is saying - and the Bible says - that a Christian is not somebody who is just trying to live according to a certain ethical pattern. You’re **not a Christian** unless you’ve heard God’s call.

God justifies those He calls. You’re not a Christian unless you’ve *heard* the call of God *and*, more than that, it’s not just - Paul says and the Bible says - the call comes once and that somehow gets you related to God. The call *keeps* coming. And that’s not only how you *get in*, you might say, to God’s presence, but it’s how you *grow*; by rehearsing the call and re-coming to grips with it and to go deeper and grasp it more deeply. So the call is what *makes* you a Christian. The call is what *grows* you as a Christian.

Well then what is the essence of that? What does it *mean*? What does it mean to hear the call, and what does it mean to rehearse the call? One of my favorite illustrations of this - and I’ve shared it before - is the testimony of Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. He became a very prominent London pastor, but the “Dr.” part of his name was not theological. My parents have two kids, and they are both “doctors”, but my sister is a *real* doctor. And so was Lloyd Jones.

Back in the 1920s, he was a rising young medical doctor. His future looked great. He was the assistant to the most prominent physician in the entire country at the most prominent hospital in the country, Saint Bartholomew’s Hospital in London. His star was on the rise. He had tremendous prospects...and he was religiously indifferent.

And then one day, his mentor - the chief of medicine of that hospital - a man who, in a sense, had everything the world could offer; economically, socially, in every way. But this man had been dating a woman who recently died. And he happened by his young protégé's apartments and asked if he could come in a sit by the fire.

Which he did for two hours, just dazed and stunned. He said nothing, just looked like an empty vessel. And Lloyd-Jones said it shook him, not because the man was acting inappropriately. I mean, it was perfectly appropriate. Grief is devastating. There was nothing wrong with what the man was doing, but Lloyd-Jones was shaken because he looked at a man who had *everything* the world had to offer, and he suddenly realized even the most powerful, even the most prosperous, no matter who you were, the foundations of your security were radically vulnerable and radically fragile. He suddenly realized the vanity of all human greatness.

And when Lloyd-Jones watched that man stare into the fire, he *heard the call*. Because what is the call? The book of Hebrews tells us this is the call of Abraham. In **Hebrews 11:8-10**, it says, "*By faith Abraham, when called to go...obeyed and went...For he was looking forward to the city **with foundations**, whose architect and builder is God.*"

Now let me define the call. Let me give you the essence of the call. You begin to sense the call of God when you realize without God there are **no foundations**. This world gives you no foundations. I've been thinking about the movie *Oppenheimer* – have you seen it? It's on the short list for God at the Movies. But Robert Oppenheimer, in the 1920's he dabbled in Marxism – he was at Berkeley, *everybody* was dabbling in Marxism. But by the late 1930's this hurt him, because the war was coming, and communism was seen as anti-patriotic.

And so Oppenheimer overcame the stigma and reinvented himself in the 1940's – he developed the atomic bomb. He became a war hero, because he ended World War 2, brought the troops home. But then in the 1960's he became a villain – perhaps *the* villain – because he was the father of the atomic bomb that ushered in the Cold War. Whatever he did, there was no lasting foundation.

And that is true for all of us. *Every* person, whether you think you're religious or not, has something or some things that are so profoundly important to your self-image, your hope, and your joy that they can be said to be foundational - the object of your soul's faith. No matter who you are; there's no such thing as a *truly* non-religious person. There is a certain thing (or things) in your life that if you don't have it, you cannot receive life joyfully. You have no meaning in life. You have no significance. You have no security.

That's the object of your soul's deepest faith, but when you begin to realize *whatever* that is...it's passing away. It's fragile. Life will come for it eventually. It doesn't matter if it's my career – economies change. It doesn't matter if it's my family - I can't keep my family together. It doesn't matter if it's my sex appeal. I can't hold onto that. It doesn't matter what it is.

And when you begin to realize that whatever is giving meaning and purpose to your life...*none* of it has any lasting foundations. Well, you're hearing the call of God. And *until* that begins to dawn on you, you haven't. It doesn't matter if you're nice. It doesn't matter if you go to church or synagogue. It doesn't matter if you're religious. It doesn't matter if you believe the Christian doctrines. Have you sensed that? Abraham went *out* when he heard the call, not knowing where he was going, because he sought the city with foundations whose builder and maker was God. The essence of the call is there is **no security** without God.

So we said that's what *makes* you a Christian. But it's also what *grows* you as a Christian. And here's why. After you've been a Christian for a little while, you'll come to realize something. That maybe when you gave your life to Christ, you acknowledged *in principle* that God was your only foundation. But you come to realize as you start to live the Christian life that *functionally* your heart hasn't changed too much.

Functionally, you may say, "Oh, God's love is my foundation," but actually the way you live, certain forms of human approval, status, or power are your real functional foundation. And the fact is, you can never live the *big life* that Abraham lived that we've been talking about these weeks. You can never live a life of justice and of courage and of wisdom and of self-control if you're always being *devastated* by criticism or *devastated* by failure or always living in fear because you're going to lose this or you're going to lose that.

And here's what's going to happen. In a way, over and over, even if you have a fairly good life, life is going to come stripping away. Life is going to eventually come and take away *everything* that you put your hopes in. And every time something like that happens, every time a difficulty comes, it's God saying, "Listen to the call. Your heart says you *have* to have this to be happy. Your heart says you *have* to have this to be important. Your heart says you *have* to have this to have meaning in life...but all you need is Me. Am I enough?"

That call will come back every time there's a difficulty in life. And when you answer that call and you shift your heart's functional rest and trust truly and you *offer up* the thing that life is pulling from you...You don't just say, "No, no, no! Mine, mine, mine!" It's going to be ripped away from your hands *anyway*. Your looks are going to be ripped away. Your friends are going to be ripped away. *Everything* is going to be ripped away. It's going to go *anyway*. Why not offer it up?

Why not say, “My heart says I’ve *got* to have this, but you know, what I really need is You, God”? And as you offer it up, more and more you will find nothing can push you around. You see? You have *His* approval. You have His status. You have His love. And then slowly, more and more, you turn into a man or woman of greatness, a person who masters life instead of being mastered *by* life.

And therefore, what does it mean to be a Christian? To hear the call of God, that there are no foundations here without God. And what does it mean to grow as a Christian? To continually rehear and engage that call by offering up and making Him first, and slowly, bit by bit, you become a person of greatness. That’s the essence of the call. That’s how the Christian life works. And that’s what this test in Abraham’s life is trying to show us. But *what* a test??? I mean, there are tests and then there’s murdering your son! And there have been a lot of people who have really wrestled, deeply wrestled, with this particular test. And that leads us to our next point...

Secondly, The Horror of the Test. See, the traditional approach of the church has been like this. In fact, this story is also in the Qur’an – but it’s *Ishmael* who is the favorite son who’s sacrificed, not Isaac. And the traditional approach of the church, or the synagogue, or the mosque, is that the moral of this

story is no matter how outrageous and how crazy God’s command, *do it*. The moral of the story is obey perfectly. Obey God completely and no matter how crazy and how immoral and how stupid the command, do it anyway.

By the way, I’m all for unconditional obedience. But there’s a *problem* with reading the text as that only. It’s a problem with reading the text only horizontally as if basically the moral of the story is always obey God no matter how crazy and how outrageous it is. It’s *all* about Abraham’s obedience. If the story is *only* about Abraham’s obedience, we have a problem. The Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, brought this out powerfully in a famous little book he wrote in 1843 called *Fear and Trembling*.

Soren Kierkegaard was very irritated that everybody around him would always say how inspiring the story of Abraham and Isaac was when it just terrified him to death – thus the fear and the trembling. And to show why he felt people weren’t really listening to the story, in the book he imagines a minister preaching a sermon with the emphasis we’ve just mentioned - that the *most* outrageous, the most horrific commands of God, you do them no matter what as a demonstration of your faithfulness.

And he imagines a man is sitting out there in the congregation listening to the sermon and says, “Okay,” and goes home and kills his son. And Kierkegaard imagines the next Sunday, that same minister thunders against “the terrible, wicked deed that’s happened in our town this week. What kind of father, what kind of *monster*, would do such a thing?”

And Kierkegaard wants to know if *that* man is condemned, why wasn’t *Abraham* condemned? If that man is put in prison for what he did, why wasn’t Abraham put in prison for what he did - at least what he was attempting to do? And Kierkegaard is right. He is showing that at the strictly ethical level, the story doesn’t actually work. And ever since Kierkegaard, there have been an awful lot of people who say, “I can’t handle this. I hate this story.”

But I have to say, the people who say, “This is a terrible story,” – and I get that – but they haven’t *really* grasped the *true* horror of the test. And the reason they haven’t grasped the true horror of the test is they don’t know what this command actually meant to Abraham in his historical context. Theologians have just recently begun shedding light on what this command would have meant to Abraham. It did not mean to Abraham what it tends to mean to us. Why? What the commentaries are telling us is two things.

First of all, God does *not* tell Abraham to murder his son. If God basically says, “I want you to just do the most outrageous thing. I just want you to murder your son,” why didn’t he just walk into the tent and stab him? God *didn’t* ask for that. God calls him to offer Isaac up as an *sacrifice*. Secondly, we have to realize *because* God asks him to offer up his firstborn as a sacrifice, the command, to Abraham’s ears, was *not* incomprehensible and crazy and outrageous.

If you want to understand the true horror of this test, you have to understand the meaning of the firstborn. What do I mean? Jon Levenson, a Jewish scholar, professor of ancient Near Eastern Religion at Harvard, wrote a book called *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*. And in it, he explains how we individualistic, modern people have trouble understanding the spiritual, symbolic significance of the firstborn.

First of all, if you want to understand how Abraham heard this, you have to understand ancient cultures were *not* individualistic. Our hopes and dreams tend to be of *individual* success, of *individual* prosperity. Back then, nobody thought that way. Your hopes and your dreams were for the *family’s* success, the *family’s* prosperity. They didn’t think as individuals. They thought as a family.

The second thing is you have to know something about is the iron law of primogeniture. The law of primogeniture was something that was *universally* practiced by ancient cultures. The law of primogeniture means the oldest, the firstborn *male* (sorry ladies, I didn't make the rules) got all the marbles. The firstborn got virtually the entire inheritance. And here's why.

Because a family's wealth was not held in cash and stock options – it wasn't liquid – it was in land and animals. This was an agrarian society. And so if the family wealth was divided – among however many kids there were - the family would immediately lose its status and its place in the community. And therefore – to protect the family - it was the firstborn who got *everything*. And then that firstborn had to be a benefactor for everyone else in the family. And that's how the family kept its place in society.

Now what's intriguing about this - as some scholars have pointed out - in the book of Genesis, God is continually *undermining* the law of primogeniture. Thank about it. God works with Abel, not Cain. He ends up working with Isaac, not Ishmael. He ends up working with Jacob, not Esau. So the Bible is actually subverting this kind of hierarchical understanding of society. Young people, if you *really* want to be a rebel, be a Christian!

But all ancient cultures did look to the firstborn as the ultimate hope of the family. And therefore, God laid down a symbolic structure, building it on the firstborn to say something that all ancient cultures can understand and, if we do a little bit of work - which we're doing right now - we can too. Because what God says over and over to the Hebrews, over and over in the Scriptures - Jon Levenson points this out - is, "The life of the firstborn is mine."

The firstborn *cattle* are always sacrificed to God. The first-fruits of the *produce* are always sacrificed to God. But more amazingly, God over and over and over in the Scripture says, "The life of your firstborn is forfeit." For example, at the climax of the first Passover. God brings down this sort of judgment on the Egyptians for their oppression and their wickedness and the enslavement and so on. Whose life is forfeit in that act of judgment? The firstborn!

And yet, *during* the Passover, the Jewish firstborn's life is *also* forfeit. The oppressor *and* the victim. God says, "They're going to die too. If I bring my judgment down, they're going to die too...*unless* a lamb is slain." Okay? You say, "Okay, but that was very unique and symbolic." But after the Passover, God continues to say it. It's in Exodus 22 and in Numbers 3, and in Numbers 8. Over and over God says the life of the firstborn is forfeit unless you redeem it, unless there's a sacrifice made, unless there's a payment made. What *is* all that?

Well, you see, the ancients would understand what we don't. Abraham realized, everybody understood, that every time God said the life of the firstborn is forfeit, what He was really trying to say is, "There is a debt of sin that every family owes to Me." If this makes no sense to you, if this command makes no sense to you, I want you to realize it *did* make sense to Abraham. Listen carefully. If Abraham had heard a voice that said, "Abraham, go kill Sarah. Then I'll know you obey me," he would have never done it. He would have said, "I'm hallucinating."

And God wouldn't have *said* it, because it *would* have been asking him to do murder. But when God says, "Abraham, offer up your firstborn," what He is saying to Abraham, Abraham would have understood. That's what the scholars are saying. This was not incomprehensible, because Abraham knew what the ancient Hebrews knew. And that is, there is a God of justice. *All* human beings fail to live according to that law of justice. We all live self-centered lives. It's the reason why the world is the mess it's in.

And a God of justice can't overlook it. So there's a debt every family owes to justice. There's a debt every human being owes: the debt of sin. And in a family-oriented - not individualistic - society the forfeiture of the firstborn was God's way of saying, "No one is righteous. No, not one." There's a debt of sin everyone has to pay. And when God says, "Offer up your son Isaac," Abraham realized that God was simply calling in his debt.

And therefore, he realized the *real* horror. See, now here's the problem. People say, "Well, what did Abraham feel as he was going up the mountain? Was he saying, 'Well, this is fine'?" No! Absolutely not! Was he being torn apart? Yes. Was he terribly confused? Yes. Was he in infinite pain and agony? Yes. But why? Now you're in a position to know the real horror.

Because **Hebrews 11**, explains it. It says, "*By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.'*" Are you starting to get it? Listen. The horror was this. The command of God apparently contradicted the promise of God. The command of God is just. There's a debt of sin that needs to be paid, but the *promise* of God was that through Isaac the world would be saved.

As one commentator says, "The problem of this narrative is to hold together and embrace both the dark command of God and his high promise...Martin Luther is correct to say that no human reason or philosophy comprehends these two marks of God. Faith is the readiness to answer to this strange contradiction in God." [Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 189.]

And so what is Abraham thinking? He is saying, what? “How could a God of command also be a God of promise? How could a God of holiness also be a God of grace? How can God, who *rightly* can call in this debt of sin, also be the God who says, “Through Isaac, all the nations of the world will be blessed”?” How is this going to happen? How can the contradiction be resolved? *That’s* the horror.

In fact, the old German scholar, Gerhard von Rad, puts it pretty interestingly when he says, “Unfortunately, one can only answer all plaintive scruples about this narrative by saying that it concerns something **much more frightful than child sacrifice.**” It has to do with a road that God is calling Abraham onto.

He is calling Abraham into utter God-forsakenness. Because in this test, God is confronting Abraham with the question of whether he is willing to give up God’s very gift of promise. God appears to want to remove the salvation that He Himself had promised at the beginning of the narrative. So what’s actually happening, what’s the real horror of the test, is how can a holy God be gracious? How can a gracious God be holy?

If God is not just, what hope is there for the world, because what are we going to do about evil? If God *is* just, what hope is there for *us* - for me and you, Abraham and Isaac? The real horror! How will God be both just and justifier of Abraham? How will God be both the holy God of the command - because that’s why Abraham is going up the hill; he knows he owes this - *and* the gracious God of promise? What’s the answer? The answer is, as we said...

Third and final point, The wonder of the Lamb.

Every commentator, everybody who reads this thing says the emotional peak, the most poignant spot in the whole narrative, is this fascinating place where the narrator slows down the action. Do you know how fast it’s going? “Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go...Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him ...”

Then suddenly in **verse 6**, it slows down. “*Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife.*” Did you notice that all the dangerous stuff Abraham keeps for himself? See the tenderness? “As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father ...” And this is the only place in all the Bible we hear Abraham and Isaac speaking to each other.

“Father?” Look how slow the narrator makes the conversation. Slow motion. ““Yes, my son?” Abraham replied. ‘The fire and wood are here,’ Isaac said, ‘but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?’ Abraham answered...” Now what did Abraham answer? What pushed Abraham up that mountain? Was he going up the mountain saying, “I can *do it*, because this is all about my obedience. I can do it. I *must* do it. I *will* do it”? No.

That’s not in his heart. That’s not what’s driving him up that terrible mountain. What’s giving him the ability to go up? “God Himself will provide the lamb.” “God will do it. God will see to it.” What is he saying? He is saying, “I don’t know, Isaac.” The word for “provide” there is a Hebrew word that literally means “to see or to see to”. Here’s what Abraham is saying.

“My son, you can’t see the lamb. And oh, my son, I can’t see the lamb. But *God* will see to the lamb.” And what he is really saying is, “I don’t know how God is going to be both holy *and* gracious. I don’t know how God is going to have the debt of sin paid - that’s why we’re going up this mountain - and *still* be the God of promise who says, ‘Through Isaac will the world be saved.’ I don’t know, but He’ll do it. God will see to it.”

See, *that’s* what’s getting him up the hill. Not, “I can do it. I must do it. I will do it.” “*God* will do it. God will provide,” not, “I will provide.” The name of the mountain is not, “On the mountain of the Lord it will be *obeyed*.” The name of the mountain is, “On the mountain of the Lord it will be *provided*.” On the mountain of the Lord, not, “I will do it.” On the mountain of the Lord, “God will do it.”

He doesn’t even know what it could possibly be, but he says, “God will have to find some way to both pay the price of sin and be the God of promise and grace.” Well, we know what Abraham could only grasp at. What do we know? Well, first of all, we know Abraham’s lamb could not pay the price of sin for his family. Abraham’s little lamb, Isaac, couldn’t have really paid the price of sin for the family.

And then, of course, we have the ram that’s caught in the bushes. Well, common sense could tell you this, but we also have the Bible. What does the book of Hebrews say? **Hebrews 10:4**, “It is *impossible* for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” Well, then why did Abraham have to do it? There is this fascinating little spot in **2 Chronicles 3:1**, where it tells us, “Then Solomon began to build the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem **on Mount Moriah**, where the Lord had appeared to his father David...” Ah, but before God appeared to David there, He appeared to Abraham there. And so Jerusalem was built on these very mountains of Moriah...

It means the temple, it means Calvary, was part of the mountains of Moriah. So here's what we know. The question is... Why did Abraham not have to bring the knife down on his son? How could God be both a God of justice and command *and* a God of grace and promise? Because centuries later, the Father led His beloved Son up into *the same* mountains. And the one and only Son was put on the wood again. Think about that.

And when the ultimate beloved Child cried, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" No voice from heaven cried out, "Stop!" The ultimate Father paid the price in His silence." You know, Paul deliberately applies the words of Genesis 22 to Jesus in **Romans 8:32**, where Paul says, "*He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?*"

And here is the real answer, not just to the theological issue but the practical issue we started with. Not just to the theological issue of how is it that God could be both the just God of the command *and* the God of the promise. This is how it was done. First of all, this is the answer to that. Abraham could *not* have walked up that mountain as a traditional moralistic person. Traditional moralism says, "If you obey perfectly, God will bless you."

If he believed He was a God of justice *only*, a God who was not a God of grace but a God of justice *only*, Abraham would have never gone up. He would have just given up. "I have to kill my son?" He would have given up. You know that. He couldn't have gone up the mountain without hope, *but* on the other hand, a modernist, a person who doesn't believe in the depth of sin, if he believed only in a God of love but not of holiness, he would have never gone up that mountain. He would have said, "I don't owe you this."

If he believed in a God of love but not of holiness, he would have never gone up the mountain. If he believed in a God of justice only and not a God of love, he would have never gone up the mountain. You need hope *and* duty. You need a sense of, "This is what I owe," *and* a sense, "This is a God of *incredible* love and incredible hope." You need *both* to be a great heart. And it's only in the cross that God could be both. Do you understand that?

If you don't believe in the cross, if you don't believe in what Jesus Christ did, if you don't believe in that ultimate sacrifice, you're not going to go up all the mountains. And there are going to be a lot of mountains in front of you over the years. You have to have both a sense of duty that the moralist has but the modernist doesn't, and a sense of love and grace that the modernist has but the moralist doesn't.

But it's only in the cross that you can become a great heart. Not only does the Lamb, the *true* Lamb - the Lamb that Abraham knew must be out there somewhere that God would provide – it's only there that we see answer the theological issue. But it also answers the practical issue. Here's the practical issue. How can you *really* become this great person?

Over and over again, I said, life is coming at you. It's already happening. If you're old enough, you certainly see it. And if you're unlucky enough, it happens even when you're in your teens. But eventually, the world comes and takes away everything...everything that you say, "This is my worth. This is my significance. This is my joy." Everything will be taken from you bit by bit by bit. My wife is not here today because she went out to spend the weekend with her sister who *did* lose her beloved son a few months ago. That's reality.

And I said what you have to do is you have to turn to God and say, "*You* are my hope. *You* are my love. *You* are my approval." Right? Well how do you do that? I mean, that sounds great. The preacher tells you, and you say, "Ok, that's nice." How do you really do that? It doesn't happen by telling yourself, "I have to trust God. I *can* get up that mountain. I *will* get up that mountain. I will be perfect in obedience." That's not how it works.

Let me show you how it works. Why do we have this story? We have this story - that's pointed back to in Hebrews and Romans - so we can have some true human understanding of what *the* Father did with *the* Son. If Abraham had been at the foot of the cross the moment Jesus died, do you know what he would have done? He would have taken the words of God to him in verse 12 and turned them around.

He would have looked up at the Father, and he would have said, "*Now* I know! Now I *know*! Now I know that you love me, because you did not withhold your Son, your only Son, whom you love, from me." How do you know that God loves you and values you and delights in you *so much* that you can really rest in that and be free from the enslavement to people, enslavement to situations, enslavement to circumstances? How can you know? How can you know God loves you like that?

Not abstractly. Not by saying, "I'm just going to trust in Him." By the Spirit, you have to see that Abraham and Isaac going up the mountain was a picture of the price the Father paid at Calvary. It has to *move* you, and it has to *change* you. And *you* have to, from the bottom of your heart by the power of the Spirit, say, "*Now* I know. Now I *know*! Now I know that you love me, because you gave your Son. You did not withhold your Son, your only Son, whom you love, from me."

You'll never be able to live like Abraham by trying. You have to first believe in the one to whom Abraham points, the one who went out into utter God-forsakenness. You'll never be like Abraham, saying, "I'm going to offer up all these pseudo salvations" unless you see the ultimate offering up for you and it move you and it change you organically. Now you know. And knowing is *all* the battle.

Let's pray...