

“Do I trust God?”

Genesis 22

9/13/98

I would like to introduce Paris to you. Many of you know of this little boy, but some of you may not. Paris is seven months old. He was born February 8th and Barbara and Stephanie went to Denver General hospital on February 10th to bring him home.

A couple of weeks earlier Paris' mother, then in a Denver jail, asked a mutual friend if she knew of anyone who might care for her child from when he was born until she was released.

The friend called and Barbara and me and the rest of the family agreed that we would take the baby in for the next 5-6 weeks until his mother was out of jail.

There were some very real concerns about the baby's health since his mother was HIV positive and had several other drug and sexually related diseases. Paris was quite small when he was born and he tested positive for some of the diseases.

Barbara immediately enrolled him in Children's hospital's special program for AIDS babies.

Over the next several weeks, through visits with Paris' mother in jail and through conversations with her grandmother and sister, we began to learn more about the life this 26 year old woman had been living. Drug addiction, drug dealing, abandonment of her first child, and probably prostitution were all part of the lifestyle.

Her father had walked out of the family when she was a little girl. When she was just 15 her own mother had died of a drug overdose. And now she was in jail, finally convicted of selling drugs. Paris' mother is now in the state prison in Canon City.

As we visit her now she is an emotionally and physically scarred young woman - she is angry, unrepentant, uneducated, unskilled and what's left of her family - wants nothing to do with her.

We have offered her help, offered her options but she refuses them - wanting instead to just get out and make it on her own.

We have asked if, for her sake and Paris' sake, she would consider putting him up for adoption to a young family. She angrily refuses to even think about it.

She was recently denied her second opportunity for parole BUT the expectation is that she will be released in December.

As you would expect, we have grown to love this little boy as if he was our own. And the mere thought of his leaving causes many tears many times a week.

But when we think of the future that is likely to be his - the world into which he will likely be taken - the cheapest day cares available, a tired, probably drug-taking mother, live-in boyfriends for whom Paris is a nuisance at best - we can hardly tolerate the thoughts.

Many is the night I have walked to his crib as he has been sleeping and with tears asked God,

“What will become of this precious little boy?”

“Will he be loved or just owned?”

“Who will take care of him?”

“Will anyone tell him of Jesus?”

And in those moments I find my own faith in God wavering as I ask with more doubt than I want to admit: “Will you take care of him God? - Will you?”

I read the papers. I hear what happens to too many children.

Paris' future is out of our control. How do we respond? Do we become fatalistic and try to shield ourselves from feeling anything? Do we rage against God about how unfair it is? Or do we somehow learn to trust him even in the pain?

What does it mean to trust God when you can't see the outcome? Even more - what does it mean to trust God when the way seems impossible? Even more - what does it mean to trust God when you know obedience to him means pain - even great pain for those you love?

I am not attempting to be dramatic when I say that nothing in my experience has more seriously tested my faith than these months of uncertainty with Paris.

I tell you about Paris and us because of the chapter in the Bible I want us to look at this morning. The chapter is Genesis 22 BUT I DON'T WANT YOU TO LOOK AT IT YET!

Many of you know the story well but there are some of you who don't remember it and I don't want to spoil the ending for you.

Instead, just listen to the beginning of the story. "Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," Abraham replied.

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"

James Crenshaw calls it "A Monstrous Test". (Whirlpool of Torment) What kind of God would ask a man to do such a thing?

"Abraham, I want you to travel about three days from where you are to a place I will show you and there I want you to kill your son as a sacrifice to me."

What must Abraham have thought!!?

This week I begin a series of sermons from the book of Genesis. And probably somewhat oddly to you, I begin by starting in the middle of the book.

I do so because I believe Abraham's experience in this chapter marks the apex, the high point of the book. In this incident we will see if God is able to do what this whole book is about – what the whole Bible is about.

Because we are so familiar with the book, we are tempted to think Genesis is little more than a collection of stories that give a brief history of the origins and early years of the Jewish people.

Now certainly Genesis does do that - but it does so much more.

Genesis was written during the life of Moses - probably near the end of his life - he wrote it along with the other four books that are commonly referred to as the Pentateuch - the first five books of the Bible.

Moses wrote these books just before the Israelite people, the Jewish people, were about to enter the land of Canaan.

They had escaped from Egypt, they had survived the 40 years in the desert, they had defeated enemies much stronger than themselves, and now they were prepared to take the land that had been promised to them centuries before.

If they were going to accomplish this - they would need to be a people who would trust God even more than they ever had before.

So Moses sets out to remind them of the story of God - what God had done and was doing - so they would trust God and obey him.

Therefore Moses carefully selected certain events out of the past to make the point that he was making.

And what is that point?

I believe it is that God is recreating a people - a people who will be what he originally intended.

A people who will trust him, obey him and thereby enjoy his love.

After the introduction in chapter one, Genesis is divided into two unequal parts:

chapters 2-11 and chapters 12-50

In chapter 1 we have the very brief account of the creation of the world - God made this world and mankind - and God pronounced it "good". God created a universe, a world and a people that were in harmony with each other and with God.

The next section of the book (chapters 2-11) demonstrates the undoing of that creation. In these chapters we see mankind taking what God had made and abusing it and misusing it. This section contains the accounts of the sin of Adam and Eve, the killing of Abel, the destruction of most people in the great flood, and finally the tower of Babel - mankind's futile attempt at life without God.

What we see in those first chapters is the desecration of the creation. There is a downward spiral from creation to catastrophe.

And then in chapter 12 God reaches into that mess and takes one very unlikely man to begin a whole new creation. God is going to re-create mankind - He, God, is going to recreate a people who will know him, love him, trust him and obey him.

And the rest of Genesis and for that matter the rest of the Bible, OT/NT, is the history of God re-creating a people for himself. We are part of that process - but it begins with Abraham.

Listen to God's earlier words to Abraham (he was called Abram then):
Genesis 12:1-3

"The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

God promised Abraham that he would get a new land, a new country. God promised him that God would do a new thing in that new land - a new people would grow into a great nation of people who would be blessed and would bless the rest of the world.

In chapter 15 God promised Abraham that the new people in the new land would come from him and his wife Sarah. Now that is incredible because Sarah couldn't have children.

But years later when Abraham was nearly 100 and Sarah was 90 -Sarah became pregnant and bore a son - and they named him Isaac - which

means laughter - and what a delight he was - the son of promise - the son through whom all the promises of God would be fulfilled - Abraham's family now could live on, children/grandchildren/great-grandchildren would be born, a new people would arise, many people, and they would live in the land of promise.

Oh, what heady days those must have been. Isaac grew. He was healthy and strong. With his own eyes, Abraham could now see how God was going to do what he has promised.

And then THIS! - This command of God for Abraham to take the life of his only son - 'Wake your son, your only son, Isaac, **whom you love** and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering...'

It is no mistake that Abraham's affection for Isaac is especially noted. He loved that child.

But not only does he love him, but Isaac is Abraham's future. Abraham had it all worked out in his mind and now it appears it is all coming to a crashing halt.

If there is no Isaac - then there is no son, no family, no nation, no land, no future.

Was the plan of God for Abraham now nullified?
Had God gone back on his word?
Would Abraham trust God?

If God is going to re-create a people in his own image - they must be people who trust him wholly.

If Abraham is going to be the father, the model, the prototype of a recreated people then Abraham must be a man of real faith - trust in God - complete trust - trust that results in obedience.

If the command itself (to kill his son) was shocking I can only imagine how painful the next three days must have been.

Listen to the story:

“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. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance.

How many times was Abraham tempted to tell God he couldn't find the place?

What was the conversation like during those three days?

How heavy could a father's heart get?

We read on: “On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. He said to his servants, “Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We, Isaac and I, will worship and then we will come back to you.

What was Abraham thinking when he said “We will come back to you?”

Did he think God would change his mind?

I can't tell you how many times Barbara and I, in these last seven months, have imagined all sorts of scenarios for baby Paris' future. Hoping against hope that something would change and that the future we fear wouldn't happen. That his mother would radically change, that she would somehow instantly become the mother she needs to be, or that she would give him up for adoption to a young Christian family.

We find ourselves wanting desperately to believe anything except the future we fear. We naively hope for a change - intentionally denying the likely.

Is that what Abraham's doing?

Apparently not. Here Abraham and I part company - I can't yet identify with the strength of his faith.

In Hebrews 11 we are told that Abraham believed that God could raise Isaac from the dead. Abraham told his servants that he and Isaac would return because Abraham believed God would do something even if it meant raising Isaac from the dead.

But look what happens next:

“Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself cared the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, “Father?” “Yes, my Son?” Abraham replied. “The fire and the wood are here,” Isaac said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them went on together.

I imagine in these verses a tremendous struggle in Abraham’s heart. It is almost to poignant for words when the author twice says, “the two of them went on together.” Can you imagine walking those last few hundred yards to the appointed place? Can you imagine the thoughts in Abraham’s mind.

And yet there are once again glimpses of Abraham’s faith in God. When Isaac asks where is the sacrifice - Abraham says again, trusting God - “that God will provide”.

Isaac is thinking of an animal but Abraham is intentionally affirming his trust in God. Somehow God will provide, whether Isaac lives or dies.

What happens next is beyond me!

“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. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son.”

Wait a minute. Could he actually do it?

Had Abraham truly come to the place in his relationship with God that he would defy logic, overcome his affection for his son, abandon his conception of the future and trust God even when he had no idea what God would do?

I probably project my own spiritual immaturity onto Abraham when I say I can imagine that tears are nearly blinding Abraham as he raises that knife.

There must be a part of him that wants to abandon God.
There must be a part of him that says, - NO!
A part of him that says, my way is better than God's way.

There is coming a day when Paris' mother will come to our door and want her son. Can I hand him over to her? Can I watch him crying for the only family he has ever known as she drives him away to an uncertain future?

I'm standing here today not certain what I will do. Could I swing the knife?
Do I trust God?

Let me be extremely honest with you because some of you have been where I am or maybe you are in the situation now.

Many will say to me, as I have said to many others, "God is faithful. He will see to it that good comes out of this situation. Remember, God loves Paris more than you do."

Part of me wants to scream at that - "Is that God's love - to let a precious little boy be neglected and probably abused. Even if he lives - is that love - to let him go through that hell?"

Something in me rebels and says - I want him loved my way. God says, Will you trust me?"

God has not asked you to kill your child.
God has probably not put you in the position where you have to hand over a baby to a drug dealing mother.
But some of you have been in situations every bit as hard or harder.

What has God asked you to do that you are not certain you can trust him for?

Has God prodded you a dozen times to confess your need for him and turn your life over to him - ask his forgiveness and follow Christ whatever it may

mean? But you aren't sure you trust God - you fear that what he will ask you to give up is greater than anything you'll get.

Had God asked you to change the way you earn or spend your money or how you use your time. But you aren't certain that God's plan for your life is better than your plan for your life? You don't know if you can trust him?

God has asked you to reorient your entire life to make it your life's aim to love him, serve him and give yourself to expanding his kingdom. But you have given your life to pursuing other goals, your goals and you don't trust him.

What is it for you? Has God for years been prodding you about your life, your goals, your money, your giving, your relationships, your commitment to him AND you have been ducking him because you aren't convinced he knows what he's talking about - you aren't convinced that what he wants for you is better than what you want for you.

And God calls out, "I am re-creating a people who will trust me. I love you!"

Again I ask, What must have been happening in Abraham's mind as he swung that knife down to take his son's life? All three days' journey he had been hoping that something would change. As he built the altar he hoped God would intervene. As he bound his son and put him on the wood he must have pleaded with God to do something, anything else. I can imagine him arguing with God – even angry with God.

But as he moves that knife I imagine him spiritually and mentally collapsing into the arms of God -

God I trust you.

Help me God.

Love my son, God.

Take care of him, God.

With his trust in God, Abraham swung the knife -But God stopped him.

Abraham. . .took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, "Abraham" Abraham!"

“Here I am,” he replied.

“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.”

And the epilogue to the story is that God provided a goat caught in a bush and told Abraham to sacrifice it instead of his son. And God reiterated his promises to Abraham.

God saw Abraham’s obedience as evidence of his faith - real faith - raw faith - faith based only on God’s promises. Faith in the unseeable, faith in God in the face of the unreasonable. Trust.

God, in Abraham, was re-creating a man who would live in humble dependency on God.

God was taking out of Abraham all the rebellion, all the attitude of self-sufficiency and self-service that is in every person and re-creating a man who would trust God in every circumstance of life - a man who would follow God even blindly.

The author of Genesis wants every person who reads the book to see Abraham as the example we are to follow. A man who will trust God with the most precious thing in his life - and will act out that trust in obedience.

I want God to grant me that kind of faith when Paris’ mother stands at our door. I feel much like the father in Mark 9 when he said to Jesus, “I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief.”

I want God to grant you that kind of faith as you act in obedience to what he has called you to do.

Will you trust him?