

“After These Things”

“After these things, God tested Abraham.” I’m not sure how Abraham could do it. God’s Word had promised him that he would be the father of many nations and that he would have descendants more numerous than the stars in the sky. Then that same Word of God comes and tells him to offer up his son Isaac, the son of the promise, as a sacrifice. But unlike the bargaining he did when it came to the destruction of Sodom, Abraham doesn't argue with God; he doesn't resist. He wakes up early, grabs Isaac, a couple of servants, a donkey, some firewood, and heads to the mountains. When they arrive at the base, Abraham tells the servants to wait there. He gives the wood to Isaac, grabs the fire and the knife, and they head up the trail to follow through with God’s command.

You know, right before Pastor Puls left for his vacation, we were talking about this sermon series on Abraham, and he told me to “bring it home!” “Bring it home,” I said. “We’re ending with one of the most difficult texts in the entire Bible! It’s weird and offensive. It’s unsettling and scary. And honestly, talking about human sacrifice on Labor Day weekend is not the kind of thing I’m really looking forward to.” Bring it home...

But here’s the thing. Even though Genesis 22 might make us uncomfortable and even question a lot of things, the truth is this account does make a claim on us. Abraham had grown to understand that everything he had or would ever have ultimately was a gift from God. None of it belonged to him. Not the covenant, the promises, the future, or even Isaac. The thought of sacrificing his son must have been excruciating. But ultimately, Abraham believed and trusted that God would be present; that he would provide beyond what Abraham could see or even comprehend; that God was on his side even when it didn't seem that way. So you want me to bring it home? Follow Abraham’s lead and trust that God always has

the final word—that his word is his action in our lives, even when it's hidden. Remember that God's ways are not our ways, and most importantly remember that God doesn't lie and always keeps his promises! Now go in peace and serve the Lord!

If it was only that simple. You see, something I expect we all wonder about when we hear this text is that it seems to suggest that God has had second thoughts about his promise of blessing Abraham. I mean, after all these things we have heard about and talked about over the past few weeks, which are rooted in God's word of promise, He now seems to stand in opposition to Abraham. "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love," and I would add the one whom you and Sarah rightly thought to be an impossibility—take him and "go to the land of Moriah to a mountain I will show you, and offer him to me as a burnt offering." It seems so contradictory. It seems so strange. But the crazy thing is that Abraham actually does it. And even crazier, I think, he seems to do it willingly. I mean, he doesn't skip a beat. He gets everything ready and is out the door at sunrise prepared for the three day journey! How does he do that? What does he trust in when God seems to stand against him?

These are questions that beg to be answered. Because even though none of us have any experience with an extreme situation like this—at least I assume that's the case—we all have, in one way or another, experience dealing with pain, tragedy, confusion, and loss. And just like Abraham, there are times when we feel like we're dealing with those things in light of a God who seems to stand against us. We try and figure it all out. Maybe we did something or forgot to do something that really made God mad and he's getting us back we might think. We beat ourselves up trying to understand God's ways, and when we don't get any answers, we ask ourselves "where is the hope?" For a father who loads wood on the back of his miracle son and treks up a mountain ready to offer him as a sacrifice, he might have asked the same question: Where is the hope?

The truth, and this is really important, is that there is a side of our God that we simply cannot know. It's a part of him hidden from our view, hidden from our

understanding, hidden from our comprehension. It's the God, that even though he doesn't cause bad things to happen in our lives, allows them to happen. It's the God who is silent when we cry out, "why is this happening?" It's the God who commands us to have no other Gods, commands us not to lie, steal, or commit adultery. The God who commands us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. The God who commands these things and then demands our complete and total perfection in keeping them all if we are to be saved, even though he knows we sinners have zero chance of succeeding. It's the God who calls Abraham to sacrifice his own son. And this side of God is really hard for us, isn't it? It sure had to be for Abraham.

But we must remember that even though God did not reveal this part of himself to Abraham, he did reveal to him over and over again his promises. "Abraham, I will bless you." "I will make your name great." "I will make your very own son your heir." "I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars." And Abraham believed this. So by faith, as the writer of Hebrews reminds us, "When he was tested, offered up Isaac just as God commanded. Why? "Because he considered that God was able to raise him from the dead." Even though it was counter to everything his sinful mind was telling him to do, Abraham, by faith, trusted in what God had revealed about himself.

And so it is with you and me. You see, the more we attempt to probe into the hidden ways of God—the more we try to figure him out and try or even demand that he fit our agendas, answers our questions, accomplishes what we think we need—the more it causes us to doubt and question our own faith because it never works out. The truth is there will always be aspects of our all-knowing, all powerful and all-loving God that we will never understand. But he calls us to trust in his love and believe in his promises even when things seem like they don't make sense. And his love and promises are not hidden in any way.

Abraham was this close from fulfilling God's command. But at the last moment, the God of mercy called out and told him to stop. Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And he

offered it as a substitute for Isaac. The Lord had provided. He kept his promise to bless Abraham. Sound familiar? It should.

Because after these things when Abraham's offspring were in fact as numerous as the stars, we see a similar scene. But this time God's own son would walk up a mountain called the Skull, willingly carrying the wood for his own sacrifice. And this time, God wouldn't stop it. He loved his world too much for that to happen. So he gave his only Son. Gave him, not hidden away for us to try and figure out what he's up to, but gave him up, nailed to a cross where he suffered and died for your sins and mine as our substitute. And as crude and bloody as this sad scene is, it's God's gift and his promise that "whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life."

This is what we cling to each and every day. Because life is still hard and unpredictable. Things still happen and we will feel like God has turned against us. But we don't have to spend our time questioning the hidden things of God. Our hope is in what we know—what has been revealed to us.

My friends, Christ died for you! Christ died for you! And he continues to rescue you from your brokenness, your heartache, and your pain. Because "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." That's what we know.

So, the next time you see Pastor Puls, tell him I "brought it home." Not because I wowed you with my words, or shared with you some hidden reason God tested Abraham with the almost sacrifice of his son. But because we were directed back to the one place God has shown himself to us all—the one place we see no love greater. And that place is the cross. Amen.