

Abraham's supreme test

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 January 2000

Preacher: Rev J.M.Macpherson

[0 : 00] And it came to pass after these things that God did test Abram and said to him, Abraham, and he said, Behold, here I am.

And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah, and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains, which I shall tell thee of.

In this old story, the focus of attention, I think you'll agree, is on Abraham, the father.

It's certainly true that Isaac, the son, is involved. Indeed, there would be no story if it were not for Isaac, and for the sacrifice that was demanded of Isaac, Abraham's only son.

But as you read through the incident, you find very clearly that the focus of the writer's attention and of our attention is on Abraham, who received this command to offer his only son.

[1 : 14] It is he particularly whom we watch as he saddles his ass, as he makes the preparation that is necessary for the tremendous command that God has given to him.

And undoubtedly, as we read the story, it is in a measure at least into his thoughts that we enter, as he bears this terrible knowledge in his heart, that Isaac, his only son, is to be offered up as a sacrifice on Mount Moriah.

And then we leap over the centuries, and we come to what is undoubtedly typified in this old story of Abraham and Isaac.

We come to Calvary, and we find there another father offering up another son. And there, although undoubtedly, there is much in the old story in Genesis that is fulfilled in the new story in the Gospel, there the focus of attention is obviously rather different.

There we are shown particularly the experience, not so much of the father, but of the son. It is the son who is the sacrifice whom we see.

[2 : 39] We see him as he goes up to Jerusalem. We see him in the agony of Gethsemane. We see him in the suffering of the trial, and then being brought through the streets to the place called Calvary.

And it is he whom we see nailed upon the cross, and suffering the agony of our sins in his own body on the tree.

But although there is this very definite difference of emphasis between the old story, or the Old Testament story, and the new, it obviously would be totally false to say that there in the New Testament the father was not involved.

But after all, God the father was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself. And today as we seek to understand afresh something of the sacrifice of Calvary, which we will see in symbol when we come to the table of the Lord.

I'd like us to try and consider, although it's so little that we as limited human beings, even taught by the Spirit, can understand of this.

[3 : 58] But I'd like us to try and enter somewhat into the Father's heart. The heart of God the Father, who too was involved there in Calvary, who was vitally concerned in all the agony and in all the substitutionary atonement that took place there on the cross.

And perhaps it's particularly significant that we should try and do it through the light of this old story in Genesis. Because we read that Abraham took his son and went into the land of Moriah.

And there on Mount Moriah, he was to offer him as a sacrifice. And if you go a few hundred years on in Israel's history, and come to the days of Solomon, you will read there that it was precisely on Mount Moriah that Solomon received the command to build the temple.

On the hill, says God, that I showed to David, your father, on Mount Moriah in Jerusalem. And so this very place, where God called on Abraham to offer his son Isaac up as a sacrifice, was the place

that down through Israel's history, knew of the repeated sacrifices.

It was there that daily the lambs were offered, symbolizing the Lamb of God who was to come. It was there on Mount Moriah, in this very place, that the Israelite worshiper would come.

[5 : 33] And dimly it is true, but nonetheless he would appreciate that without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sin. And if you go on a few hundred years further, and come to the days of our Lord, although no one can be absolutely certain where exactly in Jerusalem the crucifixion took place, if it were not in this identical spot, and we cannot tell, it was at least extremely near.

It must have been in the vicinity at least of this same Mount Moriah, virtually the identical spot, that the Lamb of God laid down his life, a sacrifice for many.

And so surely it's appropriate that you and I this morning turn to the story of Abraham and Isaac. We see much foreshadowed, and we see it taking place in that very self-same spot where the Son of God was to lay down his life.

And I'd like to look at it in this way. I'd like us to try and imagine Abraham with his father, with his son Isaac, making, particularly for Abraham, their weary way up the slopes of Mount Moriah.

And I'd like us to ask some questions that Abraham himself might well have asked. He may not have voiced them, for after all, there was only Isaac and the servant with him.

[7 : 11] But in his heart, Abraham may well have been turning over questions such as these. And our prayer is that through these questions in Abraham's situation, some light would be shed for us on the significance of Calvary and what it means that Jesus died for us.

So the first question that Abraham might well have asked as he made his way up Mount Moriah was perhaps this. Is it necessary? Is it necessary that I sacrifice my only son, whom I so deeply love?

Do I have to go through with his order from my God? And as perhaps Abraham turned this question over in his mind, I feel that father of the faithful, though he was, a man of outstanding faith, though he was, Abraham was, after all, human.

He was a father with a father's feelings. And thoughts such as these must have been turned over in his mind and the turmoil of his thoughts on that day.

So as he asked, is it necessary, do I have to offer my only son in this terrible way as a sacrifice? We could answer that, and perhaps Abraham, in his thoughts, turned this over too.

[8 : 41] we could answer that from one angle it was not necessary. From one point of view, Abraham did not have to go through with this sacrifice.

Abraham could have said, no, that this was impossible. And he could have found arguments to support such an answer. He could have turned to the very commands of God himself.

For God, on more than one occasion, and you'll find it through the Old Testament, God had characterized one of the differences between his people and the pagan nations round about, in this, that they did not offer up their own children in sacrifice to their gods.

The pagan nations to their god, Moloch, and other gods, bloodthirsty gods, they offered their own children, they passed them through the fire, we read, and offered them in sacrifice, but God said, you shall not be like them.

Abraham could have said that God had never commanded human sacrifice of his own people. Or he could have looked at it from another angle.

[9 : 45] He could have said that God, the God in whom he trusted, had made a promise to him. And God had said, swearing by himself, for there was none greater, in Isaac shall your seed be called, and your seed shall be as numerous as the sand by the seashore, and as the stars in the sky.

You shall be the father of a great multitude, and they shall come from this son of the promise from Isaac. And Abraham could well have said, how can I sacrifice my only son Isaac?

How can the promise of Almighty God be fulfilled if my son lies dead and bleeding there on an altar on Mount Moriah? And so there were many reasons, no doubt, that Abraham could have adduced to give a resounding no to this question.

Is it necessary? Do I have to go through with this thing, the sacrifice of my only son? But you and I know that there was another angle from which this question could be viewed.

And we know that Abraham, however much he may have felt these things, that Abraham saw it in another light. And in that light, Abraham's answer could only be, yes.

[11 : 01] it is necessary. I must obey. I must offer my only son in sacrifice. And it wasn't through the logic of human reasoning.

It wasn't through thinking out how or why this should be so. It was rather this, that Abraham knew his God. And Abraham's trust was placed in the living God who did all things well.

And Abraham himself had heard the words from the lips of God, Shall not the judge of all the earth do right? And Abraham knew that though he failed perhaps by human processes of reasoning to comprehend, he couldn't understand maybe why this should be demanded of him.

But he knew that what God required was right. And Abraham laid hold on the living God, on the God in whom he trusted. And Abraham said, If God has said it, it must be so.

let every man be a liar, yet God be true. And I will, I must, offer my only son in sacrifice at the command of the God in whom I trust.

[12 : 17] And so as you and I look beyond the sacrifice of Abraham and Isaac and look to Calvary, which has brought us here today and united us in our worship, we could ask the same question.

Was it necessary? Was it necessary that the Son of God should undergo such agony in Gethsemane and on Calvary?

Was it necessary that the pure and spotless Son of God should undergo the suffering and the shame and the scoffing of men created by God his father and of whom he was the eternal judge? Was it necessary? Well, again, if we care to argue as Abraham might have argued, we could say that from one angle it was not necessary.

And this is true. God was under no obligation to save guilty sinners. God had said to Adam in the garden that were he to eat of the fruit of the tree he should surely die.

[13 : 31] And the sentence of death passed from Adam and through him to all his descendants. And were everyone to die for all eternity, there would be no reproach on the justice of God.

There was no obligation on God in his holiness or in his love to save Adam or to save any of Adam's sinful descendants. There was no obligation on the Son of God to leave the glory of heaven.

It was not necessary in that sense that the Son should come and die a ransom for many. No, not at all. So long as God had made no promise, then his character was not at stake and God would have been eternally just in the eternal condemnation of every sinner.

But thank God today that there is another angle from which we can view the question. Thank God that we can see it in another light because as God's sentence of death was executed upon Adam and through Adam on all his sinful descendants, the love of God came into play along with the justice of God, not competing the one with the other, but in beautiful harmony as is true of all the attributes of God.

God and there we find God in his love determined to find a way whereby sinful men and women could be brought back into fellowship with their maker.

[15 : 13] His justice permitted no other way than what we see foreshadowed on Mount Moriah and taking place on Calvary. He had said the soul that sinneth it must die, and the justice and the truthfulness of God could allow no sidestepping of that divine verdict, but thank God for that love that came into play and thank God that in the eternal counsel of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit it was decreed that the Son of God would come, that he would bear that sentence, that he would know the fulfillment of that condemnation, that there would be redemption for those whom God in his mercy chose to redeem.

And so as you turn to Calvary you see that it is God the Father who raises the knife, even as Abraham raised the knife to plunge it into the heart of his own son.

It is God the Father who raised the knife that condemned and brought the suffering and the agony of death on his own son.

Let us never feel that even though in the narrative as we have it in the New Testament the focus is on God the Son, let us never feel that God the Father was absent.

He was truly involved in all his love and in all his grace as in all his justice and therefore the prophet tells us that God laid on him. God the Father laid on him God the Son the iniquity of us all.

[16 : 59] And we read of how the Lord Jesus in the agony of Calvary after those three hours of darkness when he bore the pains of hell on behalf of all who trust in him we read of God the Son crying out my God my God why hast thou forsaken me?

God the Father involved in the chastisement of God the Son. But of course we must remember that even as you and I can imagine faintly something of it even as Abraham must have agonized going up Mount Moriah even as we can scarcely comprehend the feelings that Abraham must have had when he raised the knife on his own son.

Even so God the Father suffered in his own soul in the agony of God the Son. Think of it in Gethsemane.

Think of our Lord crying out my God my God if it be possible take this cup from me. And don't you think that God the Father must have been pierced by the cry of God the Son?

God as we have said God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. And for this Father for the Eternal Father there was no ram to take the place of his Isaac.

[18 : 36] At the precise moment Abraham was freed the supreme sacrifice of his son and a substitute was found. the knife was averted but not on Calvary.

There was no ram. There was no other substitute. The Eternal Son of God who had dwelt throughout all eternity in loving fellowship with the Father knew the Father's wrath descending on him and doing it for us.

So there was the first question that Abraham might well have asked himself as he trudged up Mount Moriah is it necessary? But then he might have gone on thinking along these lines he might have asked himself is it just?

Is it truly just that such a sacrifice should be carried out? Is it fair that I should have to offer my son? He might well have asked why me?

I'm sure if many of us were in Abram's position we would not have failed to ask such a question.

Why do I have to go through with this?

[19 : 50] Abram might well have said after all was I not taken out of out of the Chaldees? Was I not brought here with a divine purpose? And has God himself not said that he has chosen me out of the mass of humanity that I should be the father of a great nation and who knows how much Abram might by faith have been able to penetrate the mists of time and recognize something of the fulfillment of that promise in the universal church of Jesus Christ.

And so he could well have said well why me? Why should I be chosen out of others? Why when there are so many who have disobeyed the voice of God who have gone their own ways why should God take the one who has obeyed the one who has proved faithful?

Or he might have asked this is it just that I should have to take my only son? We know of course that Abram had another son but where the promise was concerned this was his only son.

Why my only son? Why the only son of my wife Sarah? If we had other children surely it would be easier but why the only son?

Or again he might have gone on asking why does God wish to make me the slayer, the murderer of my own son? Or what value will there be in an innocent's death?

[21 : 20] What has Isaac ever done? Why should he, this young lad, why should he suffer in this way? Now I can't guarantee that all these thoughts went through the mind of Abraham but it would not surprise me if they did because Abram was a man of like passions with ourselves as are all the creatures whom God has created.

And so Abram, wondering about the justice of it all, I'm perfectly certain that if he asked these questions he couldn't find answers to them all.

He couldn't logically give reasoned answers that would satisfy his mind. Ah, but this too I know. I know that Abraham saw the justice of it and he saw the justice of it solely in this, that God had commanded it.

And as the writer to the Hebrews you remember tells us, Abram by faith offered up his only son Isaac counting that God was able even to raise him from the dead, he didn't know how.

But he trusted in the command of his God and he knew that if God had commanded it, it was just. He couldn't comprehend the justice of it, but he knew and he laid hold upon his God.

[22 : 44] And again as we take this and its foreshadowing as I'm sure we're meant to do, its foreshadowing of the greater sacrifice of Calvary, you could argue that viewed objectively it was doubtless not just that the Lord Jesus Christ should die, because after all he was innocent, he did no sin, neither was any guile found in his mouth, no one could accuse him, not even amongst his bitterest enemies of the slightest sin, and if anyone ought not to have died as a criminal on Calvary's tree, it was Jesus Christ of Nazareth, totally innocent, the spotless one, as Peter himself recognized, far be it from thee Lord, let others die, or does the thief on the cross say we indeed

justly, we deserve to die, but if ever there was a man who did not deserve to die, who in the line of human reckoning and ordinary human calculation ought not to have died, it was the Lord

Jesus Christ, or again there might be those, we hear their voices often, who would say to us that of course he should not have died, and of course it is not just to consider that he died the one for the many, and so one might hear and sadly from many a pulpit that we cannot today accept that one should take the place of the many, that the death of one should somehow avail for the salvation of the many, and we hear such phrases scoffing at the theology which we hold so dear, such phrases as a butcher shop theology, that's what you have in Calvary, or at least in your understanding of it, and so there are many voices that would say no, it's not just, he ought not to have died there on Calvary, well what do we say?

Well we do what Abraham did, we do not seek to be wiser than God, for God himself and his divine wisdom has proclaimed that there is no other way to reconcile sinful men and women to himself, the whole sacrificial system proclaimed it, were this not true you could throw away the whole of the history of Israel for there at the heart of it is the sacrifice of the innocent in place of the guilty, there at the heart of it there is the reminder that without the shedding of blood, the blood that will be symbolized in this feast which we shall observe in a few moments, that without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins, and we remember, as we have already noticed, that God's holiness abhorred sin, that God's honour was at stake, for he had said that the sinner would die, the soul that sinneth it shall die, and therefore that God more than any other was vitally concerned that what happened at

Calvary should be just, indeed as Paul puts it, God there in Calvary was declaring, showing forth his righteousness, and showing that in that act he was just, even as he was also the justifier of those who believe in Jesus.

But I think we could also remember this, when we ask about the justice or the fairness of what happened there at Calvary, of the Son of God being sacrificed for others, we could remember that it was just because the victim himself was willing, he willingly went to that place of suffering and of death.

[27 : 04] Now this is quite contrary to what you find particularly in medieval art and theology, if you see some of the medieval pictures that try to portray something of God the Father and the coming of God the Son, or if you read some of the theologians of the Middle Ages, you'll often find this concept that God the Father drove God the Son unwillingly here to earth to die.

You have the picture of the stern, unbending judge, and then of the Son unwillingly, grudgingly leaving the courts of heaven's glory.

Ah, but thank God that's not what happened. Thank God for what we sing so often, to do thy will I take delight, O thou my God that art.

And there at Gethsemane, don't we find the Lord Jesus Christ saying, Father, I know the agony that awaits me, and were there another way, how gladly I would choose it, how I would long not to drink this cup, for I know what it means.

I know the agony of hell that is contained in this cup, but Father, not my will, but thine be done. it is my desire, willingly, to perform what I have promised.

[28 : 30] And we see it too in the first supper, of which ours today is a continuation. There in the upper room, the Lord Jesus Christ takes the bread, and he takes the wine, and before ever he had gone through with the sacrifice of Calvary, he says, this is my body, which is broken for you, willingly, knowing that I could avoid it, if I so desired, knowing that legions of angels could come and take me away from hence, knowing that there is no obligation in men, or in anything that men may desire, or men may have done, knowing all that, still I give this body to be broken, and I give this blood to be shed.

It was just, the justice of God was manifest, as nowhere else, in the atoning death of our Lord and Calvary, and the love of God was poured forth to all who trust in Christ as their Redeemer.

So Abram might well have asked these questions, was it necessary, was it just? But then I'd like to suggest a final question that perhaps he might have considered, and this, after it was all over, when the sacrifice of the ram had taken place, when all the poignancy of questions such as Isaac's, my father, here's the wood, here's the fire, but where's the sacrifice?

sacrifice? And you can imagine how cut to the heart was Abram the father as he said, my son, God will provide his own sacrifice.

But all that is past. The sacrifice of the ram has taken place. They're making their way down Mount Moriah, Abraham with Isaac his son at his side.

[30 : 37] And he might well have asked this. Was it profitable? Was it worthwhile? Was all that agony which I endured, was it worth it?

Did it have meaning to it? Why? Why did I go through with all of this? And certainly we have not been permitted to see into the mind and heart of Abraham, but we do have the revelation of God's word, and surely we can say this, that this confirmed as nothing else had ever done, Abraham's faith in the promises of God.

He had believed the promises of God before. He had believed that Sarah's wife would have a son when she was past age. He had believed, strange though it seemed, when he didn't own a square foot of Canaanite soil, he had believed that his descendants would have this land and that they would be numerous as a sand by the seashore.

He had believed it all, but surely never with the depth of faith and of understanding with which he believed it now, because reminding ourselves again of the words of the writer to the Hebrews, as he went up Mount Moriah, he couldn't comprehend what it meant.

He couldn't understand how his dead son could be the father of many nations, but he counted that God in some mysterious way would be able even to raise him from the dead.

[32 : 09] And Abram went down that mountain side, rejoicing anew in the reality and the assurance of the promises of God. And don't you think that all that happened there on Mount Moriah must also have given him a new insight into the meaning of atoning sacrifice, into what it meant that one should die for many.

You remember how our Lord Jesus on one occasion said to the Pharisees, Abraham saw my day and was glad. I wonder if you've ever asked yourself what exactly was our Lord referring to there? How was it that Abraham was able to see the day of the Lord Jesus Christ and rejoice in it? Well, no doubt there were many ways. No doubt he was given many a glimpse of the coming glory of the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But I doubt if there was ever in greater fullness an understanding or a vision of the day of the Lord Jesus Christ than there on Mount Moriah when Abraham was permitted to see that one, would take the place of many.

That the innocent would die for the guilty. And that while the one to come would truly be the Messiah, the glorious King, he would also be the suffering servant.

[33 : 45] He would also be the one nailed to the cross, dying, the righteous for the unrighteous. God's death. And so we can thank God today that what happened on Calvary, all the agony of it, all the blood of it, all the cruelty of it, we can thank God that it was gloriously profitable, gloriously worthwhile.

Didn't the death of our Lord Jesus Christ there on Calvary, didn't it vindicate the glory of God, apparently tarnished by sin and by Satan? It seemed that the purposes of God had failed there in Eden, but there on Calvary it was revealed for all the world and all the devils of hell to know that God's glory had been vindicated in the death of his son there on Calvary.

And didn't it accomplish the purpose of God? Our Lord himself tells us that way back in eternity in that great council of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit of which we read in John 17, that the Father had given to the Son those whom he should redeem, that he might give eternal life to as many as thou hast given them.

And it was accomplished, it was fulfilled there on Calvary, he died their death, he wrought out their atonement. Oh, what glorious profitability and fulfilment there was there at Calvary.

And so as we close this meditation and turn our minds from the one sacrifice to the other, let's close with this thought.

[35 : 35] Let's think of the tremendous joy of that Father Abraham as he went down the slopes of Mount Moriah. Moriah. He had thought that he'd go down alone.

He'd thought that he would either have buried his son there on Mount Moriah or taken a corpse down to the valley below. But it wasn't like that.

As he went down the hill, there was his son standing, walking beside him. And I can't help feeling that Abraham, many a time, must have been casting a sidelong glance there at his son Isaac and lifting up his heart in gratitude to God.

He's still there. My beloved son is with me and God's promise will be fulfilled in him. And you and I know, even though we have only the merest glimpse as it's permitted in Revelation, you and I know, that the father rejoiced in the sacrifice, in the resurrection, and in the return of his beloved son. How he delighted to honor him. How he delighted to bring him again from the dead. How he delighted to meet him as he ascended up into glory.

[37 : 02] How the father delighted to seat his own son at his own right hand in glory. And how he will delight when that son returns and when every knee shall bow.

Don't we so often sing of this? Sing something of the rejoicing of God the father and all the hosts of heaven. As our Lord having accomplished what he came to do, ascended again into the presence of his father.

Ye gates, lift up your heads on high. Ye doors that last foray, be lifted up. And so the king of glory enter may. Was it profitable?

I'd brought all that. I think that in the Lord's supper, as we shall celebrate that supper today, it's all seen. Was it necessary?

Well, as you sit at that table, you know it was. You know that were it not for Calvary, you would be lost. You would be still under the wrath and curse of God, but you'll be there at that table rejoicing that this way, the only way whereby sinners could be reconciled, was indeed opened through the necessary death of the Son of God.

[38 : 21] And was it just? Well, you can rejoice in that, that God's justice was vindicated both for him and for you, and that you can challenge all creation, all the hosts of hell, with the justice of it, because you now are clad in the righteousness of Christ, and none can accuse you, for God's justice has been vindicated in your salvation.

And if you ask yourself, was it profitable? Was Calvary worthwhile? Well, I know that every child of God today will say that it abundantly was.

It transformed you, and you know it with every fiber of your being. Perhaps like Abram, you can't explain it all, but you know it.

You know that there is nothing in all the world that means so much to you as the death of your Savior and Calvary, that brought profit and blessing to your soul.

people. And so as we meet together at his table, we will thank him for the death of our blessed Savior foreshadowed on Mount Moriah, and which took place on Calvary for us.

[39 : 40] Let us pray. O Lord, our God, we give thee thanks for Calvary. We confess that there are times when we think of the sacrifice of our Lord there.

There are times when we read it in the scriptures, and our hearts are so strangely cold and unmoved. But we do give thee thanks that recognizing our frailty, recognizing our weakness, thou dost give us helps that we might understand and appreciate anew the heart of the love of God manifest in the death and resurrection of thy Son.

We thank thee for the particular help that is given us today as we take these emblems of his broken body and his shed blood, and as our gaze is once again directed to Calvary's cross where Jesus died, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God.

Continue with us as we further worship thee, adoring at thy footstool, cleansing us from all sin and unworthiness in our approach, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.