

**SERMON TITLE-** "Worst Case Scenario"

**TEXT-** Genesis 22

**PREACHED AT-** Neighbourhood Church

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On one of my birthdays I received a book entitled, "The Worst Case Scenario Survival Handbook." The authors decided that the market was right for a book that would prepare people for the worst possible events that even their nightmares could conceive. It includes things such as-

- surviving a sword fight or shark and bear attacks,
- jumping from a cliff,
- moving around on top of a moving train,
- performing a tracheotomy
- escaping from quicksand.

As far as I know it is a book that did very well for the writers. After all, it hits on two very big industries- the novelty market and the paranoia market.

All of us have some scenario that finds its way into our consciousness and often by way of a bad dream. With September 11 the thought of being trapped on top of a burning skyscraper has been added to that list but it could be anything. But each of us have our- "what ifs?"-

- you awoke to find your house on fire.
- someone attacked you in a dark alley.
- the steering in your car failed on the freeway.

For some people, just thinking about such worst-case scenarios can actually immobilize them.

Today we are going to look at a Biblical story that sticks in our minds because it is just such a worst-case scenario when it comes to our relationship with God. It is the story of Abraham and God's request that Abraham take his only son- the son that God had promised to him- and sacrifice him. The story is told in Genesis 22.

**Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he 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." Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey . . . he set out for the place God had told him about. Genesis 22:1-3**

It is a story that makes us all cringe. For normal people the thought is as repulsive as any that can be imagined. Not only do we cringe that God would even ask such a thing- we also imagine the kind of insane people who might just do something like this. And for those who watch the history channel, you will know that sacrificing one's children is actually not uncommon. All of this makes the story that much more disturbing.

I remember how, as a child, I processed that story. I imagined how I, as a child would react if my father, whom I loved, would be in the place of Abraham. To this day I remember thinking about what a confusing set of feelings that brought up for me.

That is a very appropriate reaction to the story- and from the place from which I read Scripture means that we are supposed to respond with that confusion in

mind- and read it carefully because this is a story at the center of the Bible's teaching about the relationship between God and His people.

It is a powerful story and reinforces some very important principles-

### **#1. God Really Does Have the Right To Ask Anything Of Us**

For moderns this is a very difficult concept to grasp. We are used to looking at the world around us and judging it and then deciding which slot it fits into. Religion has its place along side of a whole lot of other issues in life.

Having different aspects of life find their right place is not a bad thing- in fact it is a good thing that Jesus talked about-

#### **Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's. Luke 20:25**

The running of countries belongs to Caesar but the running of my life and priorities belongs to God- Jesus reminded His critics.

But this latter point is a really big one and one that collides with almost everything within us- especially in our modern world. It is fine to have a God out there who cares for us and created everything BUT what does that mean for me in the daily choices of life? In those the limits of where we see God having a "veto" are actually much narrower than we want to imagine.

In what sort of things do we really give God the place of veto? One of the toughest areas is relationships. The NT is pretty clear that God's people should be very careful about relationships, particularly marriage between Christians and non-Christians. This is a rule that makes a whole of sense to everyone- until an attractive relationship shows up. Suddenly the limits are easy to see and in my observation it seems that most people put the new relationship higher than their obedience to God's laws.

But in far less dramatic ways we also have limits on what we actually give God the "right" to direct us.

At the most extreme place, that God should have the right to ask Abraham to sacrifice his son is a good example of something that we all know is wrong. By extension then, we conclude that God has no right to ask Abraham to do such a thing.

The first concept that this story challenges us with is that God has the right to ask ANYTHING of anyone. On this point the Bible leaves no room for compromise. This story allows us to come to no other conclusion- it puts the "Worst-Case Scenario" onto the table right in front of us.

God has the "right" to ask this of Abraham. That is as bad as it gets. There is no way to dodge the impact of this and if we read the story of Abraham and Isaac and somehow evade this point we have missed a central Biblical principle.

However this principle is put out in a context that needs understanding as well and filling out the context is as important as understanding the principle.

While "Worst-Case Scenarios" are wonderful for getting people talking and making us think- if we are careful we will miss the point that they are there to illustrate principles that apply in our everyday lives.

### **#2. It Has To Be About Our Real Daily Life**

As extreme as what it was that God asked of Abraham was an issue that came directly out of Abraham's life. When you and I think about hear this story and apply it- we need to bring it into the actual issues of our lives.

A very important point- Abraham was the only person in the history of the world who has been asked to make this particular choice but you and I all know about trying to limit God's rights to direct our lives- and those seldom involve extreme situations. In fact most often they are the issues of our daily lives.

I distinctly remember the issues I struggled with in my youth- would the temptations of society win over God's call for morality? It was a really tough call and one in which I for a time decided not to obey God. Who was God to tell me what was right and wrong? By my actions I demonstrated that God did not have such a right.

The battles of youth are not the same as those facing me now- but the question of God's right in my life has not changed. It is the question that you and I will face as long as we are alive. God wants to be Lord. Will we let Him? We have all kinds of ways of trying to limit what God should be able to ask of us. It is convenient to look at the worst-case scenarios but the reality is far more ordinary.

The story of Abraham makes us answer the question- what actually are the limits of what we will give God the right to ask of us?

And by the way- God has absolutely forbidden human sacrifice and He did so in a society in which it was commonly practiced. This was Abraham's test and you and I can rest assured that the God of the Bible will not ask His people to kill their children or blow up buildings full of people.

So why did God ask this of Abraham and how does He want us to personalize the story for ourselves? To answer this question we need to go back to the Babel sermon and the problem of language. Not only is it difficult to make ourselves understood to other and to God- we also need to discover what we really want. This is something that every parent will understand. Children, having acquired language now struggle with sorting out their own conflicting desires. It is a shock to discover that what we have been demanding is not actually what we want. And this is just the beginning of the human trait of "conflictedness."

One of the areas that God begins to work on in His people is helping them sort out what life's priorities really are. The way that this often happens is when we are asked to choose between different options. Then we discover what we really want or believe.

### **#3. God Helps Abraham Clarify His Priorities**

It should be noted that the choice between obeying God and his son was a choice that Abraham was called on to make when he was over 100 years old and had served God in an exemplary way for nearly his whole life. If you and I think that all of the challenges of our faith are confined to a single and hopefully early decision to follow Jesus, we will have come interesting surprises along the way. I have had the privilege of knowing truly godly people- among who I number my own father. The trait of these people is not that they have smug self-satisfied attitudes about their relationship to God but rather that they have a sense of urgency and expectancy about it. This could sound as if they are constantly feeling inadequate but it is not that simple. They have a peace about them but also a profound appreciation that challenges remain. Abraham at 100 years old was asked to make a terrifying choice.

But this choice was as much for Abraham as it was for God. When Abraham was asked to choose between obeying God and pursuing his dream- Abraham chose to obey God.

This choice is far more ordinary than we might think. As people we are dreamers. We dream and plan our educations, our holidays, our homes, our careers, and innumerable other things. These are good things and the highest of them are our families. But the question we will face with some regularity, is- are we willing to let go of those dreams for the sake of the Kingdom of God?

God made humans with- eternity in our hearts-

**He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men . . . Ecclesiastes 3:11**

God has designed us to have an eternal perspective- but this comes into conflict with the daily working out of life. We will regularly need to reset our orientation in this conflict. It is not about ignoring the daily- any more than it is about placing our families on a lower priority- but it is also about remembering that at the most basic level of our existence we need to be people of the Kingdom of God.

And so God asked Abraham to decide between Himself and the next most important issue of life- his family. And Abraham chose God.

And in that Abraham became the first of a lineage of people, to whom all who choose God belong, the people of the Kingdom.

Abraham, for non-Semitic people, as most of us are, Abraham is not our father in any genetic sense- but in a spiritual sense we have a direct link to him. And that link was established in this obedience.

This is a powerful story and also a story that can strike fear into our hearts. Many Christians have looked at this story with deep anxiety. In fact Christian writers through history have used this story many times when dealing with losses and choices in their lives.

In many cases, I think, the story has been misused as a result a misguided fear has overtaken us. In my own life when I faced the choice of giving mastery of my life over to God, after having taken it away from Him, I imagined the things that I most loved and was sure that these were what God would surely take away. I also thought about the things I most did not want to do and was sure that God would make me do these.

It was not a bad exercise but as I look back it came out of misunderstanding God's plan for my life. I did not know that-

### **#4. God Is Not Trying To Make Us Miserable**

I am not sure why so many people struggle with this concept of God- it certainly does not come from the Bible. It certainly does not come from this story. God did not take Abraham's son from him- though he did have to face a very tough test. A happy and blessed family was part of God's plan for Abraham and the conclusion, which is summed up in God's response to Abraham makes this very clear-

**The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me." Genesis 22:15-18**

There are times when what we thought were worthy goals and dreams- do need to be changed by God. There are times when we, like our children, are driven

to pursue goals that neither ultimately satisfy ourselves nor are good. God, as Lord in our lives has been given the right to help us not only to understand this, but also to redirect our course of action.

There are times when circumstances bring changes to our lives that are painful and these circumstances should not automatically be seen as God's message to us but rather simply one of the twists that life does send our way. They are times when we do well to listen even more carefully to God's voice in our lives.

But through all of this we must understand that God's plan for us is not to make life miserable but rather to bring blessing to our lives and the lives of our family- blessings that we can hardly even imagine.

God took great pleasure in blessing Abraham's life.

But there is one more thing that needs to be taken from this story-

#### **#5. God Wants to Use Our Obedience To Bless Others**

When we first looked at the story of Abram, we looked at his obedience in leaving the land of his "comfort" and following God's direction to a whole new world. We discovered in that story that God is the God of new challenges.

But we also discovered that when we obey God- He uses that obedience to bless others. Abraham left a legacy of faith behind and Abraham left a nation behind.

You and are need to be reminded over and over again that God is in the business of building legacies- legacies that can begin with you and I.

It is easy to look back on the story of Abraham and be awestruck by the legacy of obedience that grew out of his actions 4000 years ago. But while Abraham was walking around on the earth- he was walking around in the present just as you and I do today. Abraham had no more ability to see 4000 years ahead than do you and I.

You and I have the same opportunity to begin a legacy of obedience that Abraham did. Abraham stepped out into a new land when God asked him to and Abraham put God before everything else when God placed that choice before him.

That is the same choice you and I face today. It's best we learn from this story and not let the fear of a "worst-case scenario" blind us to what the real choice is.