

GENESIS 22:1-19 THE LORD WILL PROVIDE

By 1889, they were ready. With new technology at hand, they were prepared to build the first true skyscraper.

It was in New York City, and it was called the Tower Building. It was not so tall by our standards - about a dozen stories. But it was bigger than most people had seen, and bigger than most people could imagine.

Just before the Tower Building was completed, a hurricane hit New York City. Several buildings around the Tower Building were evacuated, and a big crowd gathered (at a safe distance) to see if the new skyscraper would blow over in the wind.

As they watched, two men named Gilbert and Stearns approached the Tower Building. One historian writes,

“Gilbert grabbed a plumb line and began climbing a ladder left in place by workmen when they had quit work the evening before. Stearns followed at his heels. From the crowd arose screams: ‘You fools! You’ll be killed!’”

“(The men) could barely hear them above the shriek of the hurricane. Stearns’ courage gave out when they reached the tenth floor. There he sprawled full length on a scaffold and held on for dear life.

“Gilbert...continued to climb the ladder, rung by painful rung, his knuckles whitening with strain and gusts of wind battering him unmercifully. When he reached the thirteenth and top floor, he crawled on hands and knees along a scaffold.”

Can you imagine? Maybe not, but maybe you do not have to imagine, to know what it is like to hold on for dear life, as the winds of life batter you unmercifully.

As we start 2007, we are reading through the Old Testament, and much of our preaching will be from the reading of the previous week.

We do this in the spirit of our 2007 theme verse - Colossians 3:16:

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.”

This week, we spent much of our time reading about the life of Abraham. As we learned last week, none of these Old Testament “heroes” are close to perfect. They are all sinners who need God’s mercy.

Abraham needs God’s mercy, for he gave himself to a woman who was not his wife, and had a son whose presence led to family trouble.

Abraham needs God’s mercy, for he deceived people twice about his wife’s identity, because he was afraid.

Yet as we enter Abraham’s story in Genesis 22, we wonder about the Lord’s mercy. He comes to Abraham and whips up a hurricane in his life.

Genesis 22 is about faith and obedience in the midst of a storm.

What storms blow for us today? How are you being challenged to hold on for dear life and obey the Lord?

Is it overwhelming temptation? Is it shocking loss? Is it an unsettling sense of emptiness?

Is it a challenging decision? Is it an impossible relationship? Is it God’s call for you to serve, when you believe you cannot?

Let’s work our way through this storm by asking two questions, and letting God’s Word give us the answers.

Here is the first question: **WHAT DOES ABRAHAM PROVE?**

We read in verse 1: “Some time later God tested Abraham.”

What is happening here? Maybe we need to start with what is not happening here. God is not tempting Abraham to sin.

In James 1, we read of believers facing the winds of trials. James writes, “...God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone.”

Satan tempts. But God does not. God tests. Satan tempts for our harm, and God tests for our good.

The idea here is that of “proving” something. God wants Abraham to demonstrate or prove his faith in him, and his willingness to obey him.

So what does Abraham prove here?

To start with, he proves that **HE DOES NOT KNOW MUCH.**

God says, “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.”

What? This is a shocking command. We might say it blows us away!

Think about it. God has promised to bless Abraham, and the generations to follow. He will do this through a son.

Abraham has sinned by seeking that son from a servant named Hagar. But God has patiently stuck with Abraham, and has told him that his wife Sarah will bear him another son, even though they are both very old.

Finally, the son is born. His name is Isaac. Abraham loves him. God promises again to bless the generations to come, through Isaac.

Now God says to kill him.

Why now? This command is sudden. It is out of the blue. We have no indication from anything else in these chapters, that this is coming. This is unexpected.

Why at all? This command is strange. It is way out of the ordinary. Why would God ask anyone to do this, and why would God ask this man, to sacrifice this son, with all of the promises he has made to them? This is unexplainable.

As one pastor writes, "For the first time in all Abraham's experience with God he is confronted by a conflict between God's command and God's promise."

He does not know much.

BUT HE KNOWS THE LORD.

"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."

What is he thinking? We wonder, as we read of a three-day journey to the mountain. But God gives us all we need to know.

Abraham does not know much, but he knows the Lord, and he knows God's power.

When he sees the mountain, he tells his servants to remain there. He and Isaac will go to the mountain. "We will worship," he says, "and then we will come back to you."

Why does he say that? The writer to the Hebrews tells us. "Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead..."

How can God raise the dead? Because he has the power over life and death. Abraham knows this. He knows that even should he have to plunge that knife into Isaac, God can raise him from the dead and still fulfill the promises he has made.

He does not know much, but he knows God's power, and he knows God's provision.

As Abraham and Isaac continue on the journey, Isaac begins to wonder what is happening here. He knows a burnt offering is being planned, but he does not see anything to offer.

Abraham assures him, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son."

What does he mean by that? Is he expecting to actually sacrifice Isaac? Or does he know God will provide an animal? We don't know.

But he knows that if God can raise the dead, God can provide an animal.

He has seen God's power and provision, in giving Isaac to him. So he knows God will somehow provide. So he keeps believing, and he keeps obeying, despite the unexpected and the unexplainable.

Why is faith so hard? Why is obedience so hard? Why is it so hard to believe and obey God? We find lots of reasons in lots of places in the Bible, but here we discover that faith and obedience are struggles, because we live before a God who sometimes blows into our lives, with the unexpected and the unexplainable.

We want predictability. We like good surprises, but we don't like bad surprises, and this is the worst of all surprises.

We want rationality. We want to be able to explain everything. We want to know why this is, or why that is not.

But we live before a God who has ordained what we cannot foresee, and who has ordered us to obey, even when it seems to make no sense to us.

You marry, and your spouse turns into a very different person than the person you thought you were marrying. Unexpected. Unexplainable.

You go for a routine checkup, and your doctor tells you that you have a condition that you have never even heard of. Unexpected. Unexplainable.

You walk into work, and your honesty and integrity are being challenged, in ways you never thought would happen to you. Unexpected. Unexplainable.

You raise a child for one day. Unexpected. Unexplainable.

You are now confronting the burden of caring for parents, who seemed to be doing so well. Unexpected. Unexplainable.

You see God pushing you into a new opportunity for ministry, which you never would have sought. Unexpected. Unexplainable.

How do we believe? How do we obey? The answer for us is the same as for Abraham. We believe and obey despite what we have not expected, and despite what we cannot explain. We cannot know the unknowable, but we are called to know the One who knows all, and to believe and obey him.

We do not believe and obey because we can predict the future or explain the present. We believe and obey because we know the One who knows what is to come, and knows why it is coming.

He knows the future. He knows the reasons. We know him, and his power and his provision, so we believe him and obey him.

The story is told of a missionary to China named Gladys Aylward. She once had to flee with a hundred orphans, from an invading army.

She was sleepless. She was hopeless. She was in despair.

One of the orphans reminded her of how the Lord helped Moses and the Israelites cross the Red Sea, when all looked lost.

Gladys responded, "But I am not Moses."

"Of course you aren't," said the girl. "But Jehovah is still God."

He is still God today, even in the unexpected and the unexplainable.

The wind blows, and we look only at the wind. But we must look at the One we know, who is powerful to provide.

We learn more about him with our minds, as we read about him.

We live more with him in our hearts, as we worship and pray.

We hunger and thirst to know him, and to be with him, because we need him firmly in our gaze and fully in our hearts, when he brings the unexpected and the unexplainable.

We do not know much. But we know him.

In that hard marriage. In that doctor's office. In the workplace. In the home. In your parents' home. In the church.

We do not know much. But we know him.

And we learn more of him, and grow in believing and obeying him, when we let this story answer a second question. **WHAT DOES THE LORD PROVIDE?**

In this chapter, there are the words "Jehovah Jireh": the Lord will provide. What does he provide here?

For one thing, he provides **THE BLESSING OF GRACE**.

We start to see this grace in the provision of a ram.

Abraham builds the altar, arranges the wood, binds his son, takes the knife, and prepares to slay his son.

Then an angel calls out and stops him, and he looks and see a ram in the thicket. So he sacrifices the ram instead of his son.

But wait! Why in the world is anyone being sacrificed here? Better a ram than a boy, but why anyone or anything?

This is an early hint of what we will learn more about as we read through the Old Testament. God is establishing a system of sacrifice, where animals will be given over to death.

But why? As we read in the book of Leviticus, the purpose is to "make atonement" for the sinner.

God responds to sin with holy, righteous, and pure anger. Abraham has sinned. That sin must be paid for. Justice must be handed out for sin.

"Atonement" refers to the receiving of wrath, for wrong. If sinners are to be free of their guilt before God, and free of their "spiritual debt" to God, atonement must be made for their sin.

In his grace, God provides for someone else to atone for the sins of the sinner. In the Old Testament, it is animals. The animal will die "instead of" the person. The animal will be a "substitute" for the one who has sinned. I have sinned, but someone will suffer for my sin, in my place.

But it will not always be that way. This blessing of grace is here, through the provision of a ram, and through the provision of a Savior.

All throughout this chapter, this story hints about the Savior promised back in Genesis 3 - the Savior we believe to be Jesus the Christ.

* The Lord describes Isaac to Abraham as "your only son." Issac is the only son remaining with Abraham, now that Ishmael has been sent away. In the New Testament, we meet Jesus, who is the "One and Only" Son of God, fulfilling the promise made to Abraham.

* The Lord describes Isaac to Abraham as "your only son, whom you love." In the New Testament, when Jesus comes and God the Father speaks of him, the Father describes Jesus as the Son

whom he loves.

* The Lord commands Abraham to take Isaac to the region of Moriah. Later, that would be known as the region of Jerusalem. Abraham went to sacrifice Isaac in the region, maybe even to the same mountain, where the Son of God would die.

* Abraham sacrificed the ram, "instead of" Isaac. God provided Jesus as a substitute for our sins. Jesus suffered, instead of us. He made atonement for our sins. As the writer to the Hebrews declares, the blood of bulls, rams, goats and other animals could not finally take away sin. But this substitute, a substitute sacrifice named Jesus, has done it.

What would Abraham have understood of all this? Not as much as us, but maybe more than you think. Jesus declared to Abraham's descendants, "Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad."

Do you know how the Lord has provided grace? How we throw the word around, in our culture and in our churches! But is this grace yours? Do you know it is yours?

How can a guilty sinner live before a holy God? Only if his sin is atoned for. Who can atone for your sin? Only a perfect sacrifice. Only a perfect substitute. Only Jesus.

He is God's great provision of the blessing of grace.

If you wonder if you need grace, you do. You need the grace of Jesus.

If you wonder if you have grace, you can. You will have the grace of Jesus, if you look in faith to him, as the substitute sacrifice, for your sin.

The Lord provides the blessing of grace. Then the Lord provides THE BLESSING OF BLESSING.

Through the angel, the Lord says, "...through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."

Abraham has believed and obeyed God. So God will bless him, and make him a blessing to all nations. Just as Abraham believes and obeys God, they will believe and obey God, through the grace of Jesus, the son of Abraham.

I don't know about you, but as I read that, I am challenged! Do we want to be part of the blessing of Abraham? The son of Abraham, Jesus, calls his people to carry that blessing to the nations. Is that what you want?

If you know the blessing of grace, how can you want anything else but the blessing of blessing?

If you are here this morning, and you never have any interest in being a blessing to the nations with the gospel of Jesus Christ, I would ask you to be sure you know that blessing of grace. If you know the blessing of grace, you will long for the blessing of being a blessing.

But how will it happen? Could it be the same with us, as with Abraham? Could it be that God blesses the nations, as his people believe him, and obey him, and follow him with faith in his power and provision?

I believe so. I believe this "test" of Abraham, is a "test" for us. It is the Lord's challenge to us, to prove the genuineness of our faith, as we trust his power and provision, and join in obeying the call to be a blessing.

We will all bless in different ways, and we will all bless in different places. But if we know the blessing of God's grace, through Jesus Christ, we will follow his call and be a blessing.

Maybe you will follow his call and help in the education of our young people. As we learned last week in Sunday School, what could be more important as we seek to bring the blessing of Abraham to the nations?

Maybe you will follow his call and embrace your deeply needy neighbor. If the kingdom of God is built one person at a time, how can you bring the blessing of Jesus into the life of this one person?

Maybe you will follow his call and give generously and sacrificially to the work of the church. When you enable others to continue in blessing, are you not yourself being a blessing?

Maybe you will follow his call and do what it takes to bring glory to the Lord in your home. Might regular discipleship or wise counsel help you grow more into a man or woman who blesses others in your closest relationships?

Maybe you will follow his call and share in a new way, in the work of worldwide missions. What do you have, and what can you do, that will be useful for blessing the nations?

We do live with the unexpected and the unexplainable. The winds of life do batter us, yet we strive to hold on, and to believe and obey the Lord who has given us grace. Yet even in that, even as the winds blow, we want to be used by God to give the blessing given through Jesus, to others.

So who were those two men, who in the face of hurricane winds, climbed the ladder toward the top of the Tower Building?

Gilbert and Stearns were the men who had designed and built the Tower Building. After Gilbert

reached the top story, he pulled the plumb line from his pocket, held tightly to one end of the cord, and dropped the weight down to the sidewalk. He did this to show that even though the winds were strong, the building stood firm.

How could he do this? He knew the building. He knew it would stand firm. So he dared even to do what people thought was crazy and foolish, so that he could prove that he was confident in the building.

What do we know? We live with the unexpected and unexplainable.

But we know this. We are confident of this. Through the grace of Jesus, we know the Lord. We know his power, and we know his provision. We know his grace, and we want to offer the blessing we have received.

God tested Abraham. He tests us. Jesus has passed the ultimate test for us, but now, even as the winds blow, he calls us to believe and obey.

How blows the wind for you? How is he calling you to believe and obey?