

Foundations

The Book of Genesis

Can We Trust This God?

Genesis 1 – 22

Spoken Word Piece by Minje Shin:

Take a moment and think about the single most important thing you've ever said. Maybe it was an I love you, Thank you, Congratulations, Will you go to prom with me, etc... How did you express it? With a text message? An e-mail? A wall post? I think it is without question, that the most important things we can say, we say in person, we say through the spoken word.

So I don't think that it should come as any surprise, that Christianity is fueled by the spoken word. Consider Christ himself; Perhaps the most eminent person to ever walk the earth; yet, I find it interesting that, as far as we know he produced no literature; wrote no treatises, no books or essays. Everything he had to say, he said it in person, because it was that important, that profound. I think the Apostle Paul understood this as well. Maybe it's a legitimate question, whether Paul would have ever written what he did if he wasn't locked up in prison. In his letter to Galatia, Paul expresses disappointment that the congregation there has suddenly lost faith in the gospel, the spoken word about Christ, as their path to salvation. Given the nature of the message, Paul's written words could come across a bit harsh, but in 4:20 he explains "How I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you!" - How I wish I could speak to you face to face, so you can hear the intonation and inflexion of my voice, see the heights and depths of my expression in my gestures, and through perceptual interaction truly grasp every little aspect and nuance of my rhetoric so that you can understand with no mistake or confusion that what I am trying to say to I am saying ultimately out of love. But instead I have to resort to these mere letters, symbols and syntax on this piece of paper that could convey any other tone than what I intend. Paul recognizes the importance of spoken word in ministry, and human interaction in general. Often, we discredit the spoken word, fail to realize how truly powerful and incendiary the spoken word is.

In Luke chapter 5, Christ heals a leper, and specifically tells him not to tell anyone and to immediately show himself to the priest. Yet verse 15 says that the "News about him spread ALL THE MORE". Despite the efforts of Christ himself, we see that the exact opposite happens. I think it's somewhat funny, and almost Ironic, the fact that Christ can do all these things: Walk on water, turn water into wine, heal the blind, mute, deaf, lame and raise the dead. Yet, this suggests that there is something that he couldn't do: and that's stop the word about him from spreading. We see several instances in the NT where Christ performs a miracle, and a witness "spreads the word all over town". Can you imagine the sense of urgency?- when you see something so incredible, so amazing that you just have to somebody. Anyone and everyone who will listen. Word of mouth -It's the only way you can release the excitement you just experienced.

Now, this wasn't attention that Christ necessarily wanted, but for better or for worse this demonstrates the sheer power and capability of the spoken word. If we can harness this gift for the use of the ultimate good, in the highest truth and utmost sincerity, then we have something special. When I think about what keeps me going when it comes to this faith, I realize that it is the things that I hear people say. The stories, the testimonies, the witness accounts - These are the things that sustain my faith and empower me to speak words of my own. Speaking and listening, God has blessed us with these incredible means to manifest his love. And I think for all of us, there comes a moment when we must ask ourselves: What do I have to hear? And what do I have to say?

Introduction: Who to Trust?

(SLIDE 1) Well we have a little bit of time together this weekend. My main hope for you is what I think is Jesus' main hope for you. That hope involves an encounter with him where you hearing him speaking, and you trust him. Regardless of who you are or where you're at, whether you are exploring Jesus for the first time or whether you grew up in the church, I hope that you'll learn something about trusting Jesus. I want to tell you up front that you'll have the opportunity to make a commitment this weekend in response to

what you hear and learn. So the question we're asking is: How you trust this Jesus? Can you trust his word?

One of the most important questions in life is, 'Whose word can you trust?' I was 21 years old when I realized that my mom lied to me. For 21 years of my life, my mom told me that she did not fart. In fact, I thought that girls did not fart, because I had never heard a girl fart. I had heard my little sister fart, but she didn't count, somehow. I knew my dad farted *a lot*. And I farted a lot. My guy friends farted a lot. So I knew that guys farted. But women? I honestly was not sure. When I was 21, my mom, my sister, and I took a short summer vacation to Puerto Vallarta, in Mexico. One night, we came back from an awesome dinner, and we were hanging out in our hotel room. Then my mom let out this loud fart. My sister and I stopped. We looked at each other, to make sure that it wasn't one of us. Then we realized that it was our mom. Our eyes got really big and we both burst out laughing. And then we said, 'Mom, you lied to us. You do fart!'

Relevance:

Now that's a funny example that raises much more serious questions. Whose word do *you* trust? Who do you depend on? Who tells you about reality? All of us, in some way or another, have had to question the trust we put in other people. Maybe you trusted a boyfriend or girlfriend who promised you a lot and then disappointed you. As Dumbledore said, 'Oh to be young and to feel love's keen sting.' That is a hard thing. And trust is not easy to do after you've been through something like that, yet Jesus calls you to trust him. Maybe you trusted in your family to always be there for you, and then your parents got a divorce. Trust is not easy for you, and yet Jesus calls you to trust him. Maybe you trusted in a friend to support you, and you know how that can go. Now whose word can you trust, totally?

The problem gets deeper the more we look around. In a world like ours where words are used to deceive and cover up the truth, can you trust words? North Korea is called the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Really? Is that what it is? *A democratic people's republic?* China is called the People's Republic of China. Really? *The people's republic?* The United States has been called 'the land of opportunity.' Really? For who? For which ethnic groups? This is one of the main reasons why Americans are cynical about politics – because spoken words mean so little.

In fact, this is why many of you talk about social justice but when push comes to shove, you become a careerist, where what really matters is your own paycheck. You have a hard time being idealistic about anything higher than yourself, because you distrust other people's words as politicians' words, as marketing's words, as fundraising words. One social commentator said: 'But the new rebel is a skeptic, and will not entirely trust anything. He has no loyalty; therefore he can never really be a revolutionist. And the fact that he doubts everything really gets in his way when he wants to denounce anything. For all denunciation implies trust in a moral framework of some kind; and the modern skeptic doubts not only the thing he denounces, [but the words by which he denounces it].' That was written by G.K. Chesterton in his book, *Orthodoxy*, in 1909. He then lists some examples that were pertinent back then, but I'll give you some examples pertinent now. *We denounce marriage as a lie, and then we denounce Tiger Woods for treating it as a lie. In a social justice meeting, we denounce Nike for treating Third World people as if they were animals, and then in a science class, we prove that they are animals. In an international studies class, we denounce war as a waste of life, and then in philosophy class, we denounce life as a waste of time. We denounce a white policeman for beating a black man, but we denounce any moral framework by which white bankers are really responsible for black foreclosures.* Let me resume with Chesterton: 'In short, the modern revolutionist, being an infinite skeptic, is always engaged in undermining [himself]. In his book on politics he attacks men for trampling on morality; in his book on ethics he attacks morality for trampling on men. Therefore the modern man in revolt has become practically useless for all purposes of revolt. By rebelling against everything he has lost his right to rebel against anything.'

After a hundred years of distrusting words, no wonder when someone says, 'I have a truth,' most people say, 'Don't oppress me.' When someone says, 'I have a vision,' no wonder most people say, 'It's just words.'

Now part of life is coming to terms with the imperfection of other people. But the most important issue remains: When we start talking about Jesus, how can we trust him? That is the incredible thing. In the midst of all the bendable words of other people, in spite of all the broken trust we've had with other people, still the invitation to us is to trust Jesus with our whole lives. What basis do we have? On the basis of a pattern set long before the coming of Jesus: Whatever God says happens, happens as He says.

Overview

(SLIDE 2) What I'm going to do is to trace through one of the most important themes in the opening book of the Bible, Genesis. I'm going to summarize a large chunk of material, starting from the story of creation in Genesis 1 to the famous sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22. This is the characterization of God. (SLIDE 3) And I'm going to give two concrete reasons to trust this God. First, this God is true to His word, especially His spoken blessing on humanity, so trust Him. Second, even this God's *commandments* to us – even when they are hard and challenging – are for our life and blessing, so trust Him.

This God is True to His Word, So Trust Him

Let's look at the first reason. (SLIDE 4) First, this God is true to His word. In the very beginning of Genesis, the Bible opens with a God who brings everything into being by His spoken word. 'Let there be light,' He says, and there is light. 'Let the dry land appear,' He says, and there is land. Ten times this God says, 'Let there be...' and ten times it happens:

1. ^{1:3} Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light.
2. ^{1:6} Then God said, 'Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.'
3. ^{1:9} Then God said, 'Let the waters below the heavens be gathered into one place, and let the dry land appear'; and it was so.
4. ^{1:11} Then God said, 'Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees on the earth bearing fruit after their kind with seed in them'; and it was so.
5. (SLIDE 5) ^{1:14} Then God said, 'Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night, and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years; ¹⁵ and let them be for lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth'; and it was so.
6. ^{1:20} Then God said, 'Let the waters teem with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth in the open expanse of the heavens.'
7. ^{1:22} God blessed them, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.'
8. (SLIDE 6) ^{1:24} Then God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures after their kind: cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth after their kind'; and it was so.
9. ^{1:26} Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.'²⁷ God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.
10. (SLIDE 7) ^{1:28} God blessed them; and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.'

Those are the original Ten Commandments. There are funny stories where you can make a wish by your spoken word, but if you don't phrase it right, the whole thing goes wrong. In one joke, someone says, 'Make me a banana.' What he means is, 'I'd like a banana to eat.' But instead, the guy gets himself turned into a banana. Or, what if God said, 'Let there be light,' and then a light flares up and goes out, so God says, 'Let's there be light...again!!' But we see none of that here. This God is so powerful that, even when He says a bare minimum of words, He creates exactly what He intends. That is how we are introduced to this God who ultimately makes Himself known in the person of Jesus. His word is precise.

But more seriously, if God were not true to His word, then He could say one thing and do another. He could say, 'Let there be blessing on humanity...ha ha!' and create mischief and suffering instead. He would therefore be a deceiver and not trustworthy. But this God is not like that. What He says happens, happens just as He says. This God is absolutely true to His word.

Furthermore, what we see here is that God's first spoken word to humanity was a word of blessing. So often I think we suspect that God's first word to us is a word of condemnation. For some of us, our parents said things like this, so we assume God will say this: 'You're not good enough.' 'Let me test you, because I know you suck.' 'Don't you know how much I sacrificed for you?' 'Don't you know how much your existence *pains* me?' But that's not what we see here. God's first spoken word to us is a *blessing*. Blessing in the older, Hebrew context is a word that gives you identity and empowerment in the context of relationship with Him.

Illus: The closest I can come to understanding this is by thinking of how my wife and I got our house ready for our two kids. We bought our house in January of 2000, and our first child was due in September of 2000. Now, our house is in a lower income, high crime area of Boston, so it's a simple house. When we moved in, there was so much work to do. On one floor, we had drop-ceiling panels that we wanted to take down, but above them, the ceiling had big holes that needed fixing. We had that fake wood paneling that was popular in the 1970's. We took that down to find that someone had used it to cover up a window that had a crack in the glass, and water had seeped in and caused some water damage. We also had to steam off old wallpaper. There was ugly vinyl tiles over a hardwood floor. So we peeled that off. We put in a new ceiling and new sheetrock in some places. We resanded the floor, repainted the walls. We brought order out of chaos! Our floor needed a lot of cleaning up, too, and we had a lot of help painting and cleaning. We childproofed our floor with those plastic cover for electrical outlets. Then in the kids' room, we set up the crib and the changing table. We put down that colorful spongy mat with the letters and numbers on it. Finally, when our son was born, and then our daughter was born 2 years later, we brought them home to enjoy the house. Now, would it have made any sense for me to just kick back on the couch once the kids got here, and say, 'Go ahead, enjoy yourselves.' Or perhaps, 'Don't you know how much work I've put into this house just for you?' No way!!! The house provides the context for us to relate to them, and to bless them. So for the last 9 years, this has been the place where we have related to them, raised them up, helped them grow, and blessed them.

There's a lot I could say about this, but I'll restrict myself to one thing: God's blessing is also God's promise. The original blessing happens before the original sin. And God is absolutely committed to restoring His blessing, and even making it bigger and better. Why? Because He is true to His word! That is why He ultimately comes in the human man Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus, in his resurrection, becomes the truly blessed human being. He becomes the way that God overcomes the biggest obstacle to His blessing of humanity – which is, humanity!! More specifically, a fallen human nature!! God respects you, and wants to give you blessing, and invites you to trust Him for it.

But is God really good? Does He really love us? Is He really trustworthy? This pattern here in Genesis answers that as well. The pattern of God speaking and then acting is one of the dominant patterns of the entire Old Testament. This pattern helps us know what God does and what people do, and how to separate them. (SLIDE 8) This God acts by *speaking*. He *said*, 'Let there be light,' and there was. Later He *says*, 'I will redeem my people Israel from bondage,' and then it happened. Every time God acts, He *speaks* about it first. As God engages with human beings, He always speaks to some human beings, who then pass on that word, and eventually God would fulfill that word. This gave rise to what we call 'prophecy.' The Israelites noticed this, and so Amos said in Amos 3:7, 'Surely the LORD God will do nothing except that which He reveals to His servants the prophets.' Most of you ignore that verse. Notice that it does not say, 'Surely the LORD God is causing everything to happen that does happen, so that everything is a reflection of God and God's character.'

(SLIDE 9) This is absolutely important, because we have a tendency to attribute things to God that He has not *spoken* about. If someone were texting while driving around campus, and hurts someone in an accident, you would probably not say, 'It was God's doing.' Why? Because you can see that the driver was negligent. There was a clear causal factor. But when it's less clear to you who caused what, you tend to say, 'It was God's doing.' So, mass poverty – we don't understand what really causes it, so we blame it on this God, as if God causes or allows evil. But God is not CAUSING human evil – abuse, negligence, or whatever – of any sort, in any way. In fact, in Genesis 3:14 – 15, God says that He will crush evil and defeat it, and rescue humanity from it, and this what He is doing right now through Jesus.

Let me put this in the strongest possible language I can: This is the doctrine of the sovereignty of God's *word*. God's *word* is sovereign. God is sovereign *through* His word. There is nothing that can stop God from fulfilling His *word*. But sometimes you speak of God being 'sovereign' as if He *causes* everything, including the earthquake in Haiti, the Holocaust, 9/11, your parents' divorce, and the abuse you suffered. *He does not*. (SLIDE 10) How can you read Amos 3:7 and say that??? 'God does nothing except that which He *speaks* about beforehand.' What you are doing is taking Aristotle's philosophy of cause and effect and trying to fit the biblical evidence into it, but it doesn't work. (SLIDE 11) Why? (SLIDE 12)

Because we *human beings* have refused to listen to God's word; we have become *an irrational, independent cause*; we brought about evil into the world and into our own hearts, tarnishing the image of God in us. (SLIDE 13) So, it is a mistake to say that God caused evil back then, or that He causes the evil now. Why? Because if God says He *is* good in His very being, yet *does* evil, then He is actually arbitrary, because He can do both good and evil. Furthermore, He would be a liar, because if He can do evil, then He is not good in His very being, because there would be evil in His being, too; and so that 'god' would not be trustworthy. (SLIDE 14) If you assign evil to God's causality, then you have assigned evil to God's character. And if you do that, then you have made God arbitrary and evil. And if that's the case, then why pray? Why pray to someone you can't depend on to keep His word? Why trust? Why trust someone you can't depend on to keep His word? Why not just give up in despair?

Thank God that He is powerful enough to fulfill His word of blessing to us despite us, despite any other force. He has said – through His spoken word – that He will win, that He will save, that He will redeem us through it all. And He is doing that now, in powerful ways that are sometimes hidden and sometimes obvious. That is the *sovereignty of God's word*. That is why we can pray in hope. That is why we can wrestle to figure out how to pray...because He is trustworthy to fulfill His word, especially His word of blessing on us and the world.

There are real things that we all wrestle with, and it is a sacred journey. And a lot can be said about that. But at the end of the day, unless we want to surrender in absolute hopelessness, we must also listen to God's sacred journey. There is something this God is doing to share in our pain, and to renew humanity in spite of the crap that we have inflicted on each other: for the victim and the victimizer. God does not cause evil. In a very real sense, He is not allowing it either, but that is a longer conversation. He is completely *against* it, and He is working to *heal* it. That is why not everything is *caused* for a reason, but, everything is being *redeemed* by God for a reason, and we can have real hope in the character of God. The question about evil is not for God to answer; it's for us to answer: Why do we do evil? Why don't we receive God's spoken word?

God Commandments for Us Are for Blessing and Life, So Trust Him

(SLIDE 15) And that brings us to our second section: God's commands. One of the ways that Jesus is healing us, transforming us, and transforming the world is by his commands, his spoken word to us. Jesus has said, 'Whoever follows me must take up his cross and deny himself, and then he will find life' (Mt.17, Mk.8, Lk.9). In Luke 14:33, Jesus says, 'No one can become my disciple unless they give up all their possessions.' The call is to give your entire life to Jesus. Yes, that includes your relationship with your parents. Yes, that includes your future paychecks. Yes, that includes your dreams for yourself and your future. Yes, that includes the way you treat people. But why does Jesus ask so much of you and me? Why does trusting this Jesus seem so scary?

(SLIDE 16) No other single story prepares us to understand this than Abraham's binding of Isaac in Genesis 22. Now many of you are surprised by this. By now you have come across this famous story in Biblical Heritage class, Christian theology class, or whatever: the *Akedah*, as it is called in Jewish tradition. The story is famous because it raises the question, 'Can God call us to do something that is really evil but then He calls it good?' God says, 'I bless human life,' but then commands Abraham to kill his own son, and Abraham is held up as a hero for being willing to do it without question. If God can just shift the meaning of the words 'good' and 'evil' on His own whims, then there really is no such thing as 'good' and 'evil' and you're really left with a God who is quite simply 'evil.' And this brings up the same questions. Isn't this God just out to use us? Why are His commandments so challengign? Let me remind you of the story of Abraham's binding of Isaac from Genesis 22.

(SLIDE 17) ^{22:1} Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' ² He said, 'Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you.' ³ So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and Isaac his son; and he split wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. ⁴ On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from a distance. (SLIDE 18) ⁵ Abraham said to his young men, 'Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go over there; and we will worship and return to you.' ⁶ Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son, and he took in

his hand the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. ⁷ Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, 'My father!' And he said, 'Here I am, my son.' And he said, 'Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?' ⁸ Abraham said, 'God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.' So the two of them walked on together. (SLIDE 19) ⁹ Then they came to the place of which God had told him; and Abraham built the altar there and arranged the wood, and bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son.

Well that's terrifying, isn't it? Soren Kierkegaard, in his book *Fear and Trembling*, believed that this story should be compared to that of Agamemnon, one of the Greek heroes of the Trojan War. Agamemnon believed that he needed to sacrifice his daughter to the Greek gods in order to obtain a favorable wind for the Greek fleet. He had a moral duty as a father and a moral duty as leader of the army. He chooses one moral duty over another. Abraham, however, is another case. It is not a moral dilemma, according to Kierkegaard. There is no ethical principle that overrides his love for his son. It's just because God required proof that Abraham loved God more than Isaac. So what characterization of this God do you get? He is arbitrary. He tests you arbitrarily. And even though He says He values humanity, what He really values is Himself. That's why He can say one thing and virtually do another. But heck, He is all powerful so you'd better do whatever the hell He wants. Be like Abraham. That's the moral of the story. That's the characterization of God. Case closed. That is why some of you who are not Christians continue to be non-Christians: You have a hard time believing in a God like this. And that is why some of you who are Christians believe you're tough, because you can stomach an ugly truth – you can stomach a God who is arbitrary, as long as you're on his good side. And then, some of you who are Christians are embarrassed about this story and you can't believe I'm saying this.

But Kierkegaard made a mistake when he read this story. And probably all of you make the same mistake. And that is you ignore the literary context of the story. Before Genesis 22 is Genesis 21, and the context of the binding of Isaac is the expulsion of Ishmael! Let me give you a quick background on Abraham. (SLIDE 20). Abraham was married to Sarah, and God told them that they would be a blessing to the whole world through the son they would have. But they were old and didn't have any children. It was impossible for Sarah to have children at her age. So Sarah tells her maidservant Hagar to be a surrogate. That was culturally permissible back then, so Abraham sleeps with Hagar, and she has a son, Ishmael. This was not God's will, however. Then, fourteen years later, Sarah miraculously conceives and Abraham and Sarah have a son, Isaac. But as you might imagine, this is not an easy family situation. Let me read that to you.

(SLIDE 21) ^{21:5} Now Abraham was one hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. ⁶ Sarah said, 'God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.' ⁷ And she said, 'Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.' ⁸ The child grew and was weaned, and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. ⁹ Now Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, mocking. (SLIDE 22) ¹⁰ Therefore she said to Abraham, 'Drive out this maid and her son, for the son of this maid shall not be an heir with my son Isaac.' ¹¹ The matter distressed Abraham greatly because of his son. ¹² But God said to Abraham, 'Do not be distressed because of the lad and your maid; whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her, for through Isaac your descendants shall be named.' ¹³ And of the son of the maid I will make a nation also, because he is your descendant.' (SLIDE 23) ¹⁴ So Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar, putting them on her shoulder, and gave her the boy, and sent her away. And she departed and wandered about in the wilderness of Beersheba. ¹⁵ When the water in the skin was used up, she left the boy under one of the bushes. ¹⁶ Then she went and sat down opposite him, about a bowshot away, for she said, 'Do not let me see the boy die.' And she sat opposite him, and lifted up her voice and wept.

Ishmael at age 14 mocked Isaac as an infant. Sarah then wanted to throw out Ishmael and Hagar. There was tension between Sarah and Hagar before. Sarah underestimated her own emotions, her jealousy of Hagar because Sarah didn't have a child but Hagar did have one, and the tension that would tear their home apart. And now, after 14 years, Sarah has had enough. She sees Ishmael, a teenager now, mocking Isaac for whatever reason. And that is the straw that breaks the camel's back. 'Get them out!!' she says to Abraham. Hagar and Ishmael have to go, now.

That is a death sentence. To be sent out into the wilderness – a mother and young teenage boy, alone? That's crazy! Sarah is angry and she wants a murderous revenge. It later takes God's intervention so that they don't die of thirst. The thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight, says the Scriptures. Why? Because Abraham knows that this was a death sentence. And, he probably felt a great deal of care for

Hagar and Ishmael. So this is not a moral dilemma for Abraham: It is very clear what he should do. When Sarah comes to him, angry and frustrated, he should calm her down. He can empathize with Sarah, but he should say: 'Honey, I know, but we can do better than that. We can't leave them alone in the wilderness. They'll just die out here.' That's what he should have done.

Yet at this point, in Genesis 21:12, God comes to talk to Abraham. God breaks the deadlock, by siding with *Sarah, not Hagar!!* Now that seems weird. How can God tell Abraham to side with Sarah when her motives are so evil? That seems to confirm everything we might think about how arbitrary this God is. And, it makes us look at Abraham and say, 'Sure! Nice way out for you! Just choose the easy path. Just make your wife Sarah happy. You don't have to challenge her. You don't have to live in the tension. And you can use all this God-talk to justify it. God tells you to agree with Sarah. Sure. Pretty tough for Hagar and Ishmael!!'

So why does God side with Sarah, not Hagar? It's not because God agrees with Sarah's motive. But God can ensure Hagar and Ishmael's safety, and even more, their flourishing. God promises that the boy Ishmael won't die; instead, he will be the father of a whole people. And this situation, even though it is a bad situation filled with evil motives, can be used by God to bring good and life and blessing. God can speak into it to redeem it. Besides, God did want to separate the two boys so that Isaac would inherit the land that God wanted him to, and Ishmael another land God intended for him. God's spoken word relieves Abraham. Abraham is not guilty of doing evil. He is not guilty of conspiring to kill his son Ishmael and the boy's mother, the family maid, Hagar. Abraham is not betraying his son's trust because God Himself is guaranteeing Ishmael's thriving. Abraham is not victimizing a child, and God is not allowing a child and his vulnerable single mother to die. He is bringing forth life and blessing.

(SLIDE 24) ^{21:17} God heard the lad crying; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, 'What is the matter with you, Hagar? Do not fear, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. ¹⁸ Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him.' ¹⁹ Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water; and she went and filled the skin with water and gave the lad a drink.

But the question does remain for us: 'Did Abraham really believe God would sustain Ishmael and Hagar? Wasn't he just a little too quick to jump on the opportunity?' As soon as God spoke to Abraham, Abraham jumped on it! 'Sure, Lord, I'll send them off!' Well, that is a good question. And that is where the binding of Isaac comes in. The next episode is where God says to Abraham in Genesis 22:2, 'Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you.' Even though the Lord had said, 'your only son,' we all know that Abraham would also have thought of Ishmael, too. Isaac was his only son insofar as God was making Isaac an ancestor of Jesus. But Isaac was not his only son in a genetic sense. What's more, it's very possible that Isaac at this time was about 14 years old, the same age as Ishmael. He seems to be physically capable enough but a little confused and slow to catch on. So the sacrifice of Isaac was a reenactment of the exile of Ishmael. It meant death for both, at least on the surface.

But Abraham knew about God's spoken word. He knew that God gave His word to bless the world and bring forth many descendants from Isaac. And he knew that God keeps His word. So he knew that God must have the power to raise Isaac from the dead. That is what Hebrews 11:19 says. If Abraham hesitated here, at all, in the slightest, then that means that his trust in God earlier, with Ishmael, back in Genesis 21, was not full trust. That means that Abraham was not really sure that God would take care of Ishmael and Hagar. That would mean that Abraham acted in his own self-interest, just getting rid of the boy and his mother so that he could have just have a little more peace at home with Sarah. If Abraham doubted God back then, then Abraham's motives were evil. But now we know that he didn't doubt God back then. How do we know? Because Abraham didn't doubt God here, with Isaac, in Genesis 22. Abraham knows – and perhaps in Genesis 22, he *knows* that he knows – that this God brings forth life out of death, life in the midst of death, life in the place of death. Let's go back to Genesis 22:

(SLIDE 25) ^{22:11} But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' ¹² He said, 'Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.' ¹³ Then Abraham raised his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram and offered him up for a burnt offering in the place of his son. ¹⁴ Abraham called the name of that place The LORD Will Provide, as it is said to this day,

'In the mount of the LORD it will be provided.' (SLIDE 26)¹⁵ Then the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven,¹⁶ and said, 'By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son,¹⁷ indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies.¹⁸ In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.'

And so Abraham experiences again that this very unusual God is on the side of life and blessing. The moral of the story, when we read it this way, is not: 'God can tell you to do whatever the hell He wants, even things that are wrong, to test your obedience, and you'd better do it, damn it, and don't ask any questions!' No, NO, NO!!!! The moral of the story is that God – *in His very nature and character* – is on the side of life and blessing. Even His commandments are about that. That is why we can trust Him.

Abraham even has a window of insight into the day God would come in Jesus. The ultimate descendant of Abraham and Isaac is Jesus. On that day, another Father and Son will walk on together. On that day, that Son would place his trust in his Father, the greatest Father, to not just let him escape death at the last moment, but to pull him out of death on the other side of it. He will enter death, and go out through death, in order to bless all humanity as a fresh, resurrected, God-drenched human being. Abraham gets an insight into that. For now he knows that he knows that this God is on the side of life and blessing.

Let's pull this back to us in the present. Jesus calls us to sacrifice things that are dear to us. Love your enemy. Love the person down the hall who annoys you. Give to those who ask, even if it affects your grades. Give to the poor, even if it makes you poor and even if you have to be that person that says to your friends, 'Maybe we shouldn't spend money by going out; I want to give more money to the poor.' Pray for those who hate you, even if Jesus makes you unable to gossip with your friends about those other people. Jesus will deal with you on heart level issues like anger, anxiety, fear, lust, jealousy, your hunger for respect, your need for approval. Jesus wants to root out those sins as if they were cavities in your teeth. It's time to rip those suckers out!!! When we sit before Jesus and hear these things, we ask, 'Are you really on the side of blessing, and life? How can I trust you?'

All of us in some way or another say this: 'Okay Jesus, I believe that you exist. But I don't want to do anything more with you. I don't want to trust you with my future. I don't want to trust you with my romantic hopes. I don't want to trust you with my time, my money, my future security, my direction in life, my love for others, my lack of love for others, my passions. I just want to acknowledge that you're real, so you can make me feel better about my life when I need a little pick me up.' But a full commitment to Jesus is an act of trust and dying to yourself to live with him. Jesus really does give us life and blessing. Not just for others but even for us. And not just for us, but even for others. On this side of your decision, it feels like a paradox, like how the sacrifice of Isaac might have felt to Abraham on one level. 'How can God ask me to give up the very thing that He wants to bless me through?' It's very simple. On the other side of that decision, Jesus will give you life. You can trust him.

Conclusion

What are the reasons to trust Jesus? Well, as we have looked at how God has revealed Himself before Jesus, we find two major reasons. First, because this God is true to His Word, so you can trust Him. Especially because His first word to us was a spoken blessing, and God is committed to blessing us in spite of our sin and failings; that is why He comes in the person of Jesus. Second, because even the commandments of this God are for our blessing and life. They are for us, and they are for others. I think this lays a decent foundation for us to move forward together. We will look tomorrow morning at what it means to trust Jesus and entrust our lives to him.

For now, I'd like you to have some time in small groups to get to know each other and also to discuss your responses to this material. There are two questions I'm recommending that you talk about.

1. Describe an experience of trusting someone? Did that go well or not?
2. What makes it challenging for you to trust Jesus?