

The Life of Abraham

The Call to Sacrifice Isaac

Genesis 22:1-14

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August 13, 2017

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Scripture

When Abraham was seventy-five years old, God called him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and promised that he would make him into a great nation. That promise was repeated and enlarged a number of times during the next twenty-four years. But in all these years, Abraham only had one son, Ishmael, by his wife's Egyptian servant girl, and his family grew smaller, not larger. His father, Terah, died, and his nephew, Lot, abandoned him to live in Sodom.

When Abraham was ninety-nine years old, God appeared again and promised Abraham a son by his wife, Sarah, the following year. By now Abraham was long past the age of producing children, as was Sarah, who had also been barren all her life. However, Abraham believed God, and a son was born to Sarah and Abraham. They named their son Isaac (which means "laughter"), and he was born when Abraham was one hundred years old and Sarah was ninety years old.

God specifically confirmed Isaac as the son of his promise in Genesis 17:19b, "I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him." Abraham loved Isaac but, more importantly, all of Abraham's hope of God fulfilling his promise to make him a great nation were centered in his son, Isaac.

All went well for many years, perhaps as many as three decades. Then, suddenly, one day Abraham's peaceful world was shattered. God appeared to Abraham again, and put him to a great test, "probably the greatest test any of God's servants have ever endured."¹ God called Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac.

Today's text is very meaningful to me, as I shall explain later.

¹ James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 684.

Let's read about the call to sacrifice Isaac in Genesis 22:1-14:

¹ After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ² He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." ³ So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. ⁴ On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. ⁵ Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you." ⁶ And 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 they went both of them together. ⁷ And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" ⁸ Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together.

⁹ When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. 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 lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." ¹³ And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴ So Abraham called the name of that place, "The Lord will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided." (Genesis 22:1-14)

Introduction

The account of God calling Abraham to sacrifice Isaac is widely known in world literature. It is one of those stories that is so unique that it captures the imagination of all people in all ages. As one Bible commentator wrote, “So long as men live in the world, they will turn to this story with unwaning interest.”²

The questions that many people ask are these: “How could God ask Abraham to sacrifice his son? What kind of God would ask anyone to sacrifice his son? What could possibly be achieved by God asking Abraham to sacrifice his son?”

Well, I hope to answer these questions in our lesson today.

Lesson

The call to sacrifice Isaac in Genesis 22:1-14 shows us that God provided a sacrificial lamb so that his people may live.

Let’s use the following outline:

1. The Scrutiny of Abraham (22:1-8)
2. The Submission of Isaac (22:9-10)
3. The Substitution of God (22:11-14)

I. The Scrutiny of Abraham (22:1-8)

First, let’s look at scrutiny of Abraham.

Merriam-Webster’s dictionary defines “scrutiny” as “a searching study, inquiry, or inspection: examination.”³ Abraham most certainly went through a searching study, inquiry, or inspection by God. God wanted to examine the genuineness of Abraham’s faith. I want to draw your attention to three aspects of the scrutiny of Abraham.

² James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expository Commentary*, 683.

³ Merriam-Webster, *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003).

A. *The Order (22:1-2)*

First, notice the order.

Verse 1a begins with these words, **“After these things....”** What things? The things that had taken place in Abraham’s life, but especially the events recorded in Genesis 21, namely, the birth of Isaac, the sending away of Ishmael (who was Abraham’s son by Hagar), and the treaty with Abimelech. **“After these things”** implies that some time had passed so that, according to verse 6, Isaac was now old enough to carry “the wood of the burnt offering.”

Verse 1b says, “After these things **God tested Abraham....”** The Hebrew word for **“tested”** (*nāsâ*) “has the idea of testing or proving the quality of someone or something, often through adversity or hardship.”⁴ This was not like Satan tempting Job, for that test was designed to bring about his failure and downfall. God’s testing of Abraham was designed to show the faith and faithfulness of Abraham. God gave this test to Abraham to see if he would follow his instruction. But, what a test it was!

Genesis 22:1c-2 says, “... God tested Abraham **and said to him, ‘Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ He said, ‘Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.’”** God was aware of the excruciating test he was putting before Abraham. Notice the buildup of the phrases in verse 2, **“Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love..., and offer him....”** Ten times in our text the word **“son”** is used to indicate the enormous sacrifice that God was requiring of Abraham.

This order must have seemed so contradictory to Abraham. After all, Isaac was the son God had *promised* to him. Yes, God had given Isaac to Abraham. Yes, Abraham loved Isaac. Yes, his hopes

⁴ Marvin R. Wilson, “1373 נִסָּה,” ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 581.

were centered on Isaac. But, to offer him as a burnt offering?

Commentator James Montgomery Boice notes at this point, “Had Isaac grown perhaps too dear to Abraham? Had he begun to take God’s place in the patriarch’s thinking? We cannot be sure of this, but if it was the case, this should remind us of many things that become too precious for us.”⁵

I should note one further important point. God told Abraham in verse 2 to **“go to the land of Moriah”** to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. The only other time in the entire Bible where Moriah is mentioned is in 2 Chronicles 3:1, where we read, “Then Solomon began to build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem on *Mount Moriah*.” The temple was built on Mount Moriah. We shall come back to this shortly.

B. *The Obedience (22:3)*

Second, observe the obedience.

Do not miss that Abraham did not say a word to God. You may recall in Genesis 18 that Abraham debated back and forth with God to save Sodom. But, here Abraham does not say a word. Presumably, he did not even say anything to Sarah. Verse 3 says, **“So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him.”**

What was going through Abraham’s mind? Why was he able to obey God promptly and sincerely? James Montgomery Boice has a very helpful answer. He writes:

How could this problem be resolved? There were only two ways. Abraham could have concluded that God was erratic, wavering from one plan to another because he did not know his own mind. This had not been Abraham’s experience of God. The long

⁵ James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expositional Commentary*, 684.

wait for the son had taught him better than that. Or Abraham could have concluded that, although he—being finite and sinful—was unable to see the resolution of the difficulty, God could nevertheless be trusted to have a resolution, which he himself would certainly disclose in due time. This was the harder of the two solutions to accept, but Abraham’s experience of God led in this direction.

Abraham acted in a manner consistent with his knowledge of God. That is, he trusted him, concluding that whatever God’s purposes may or may not have been in this situation, God had at least shown that he could not be his enemy. God was his friend. When the command to sacrifice Isaac was first given, Abraham did not understand how, if the command were carried out, the promise could be fulfilled. But that was all right. Abraham left the difficulty with God, which is the essence of true faith. What is faith? Faith is believing God and acting upon it. This is what Abraham did. God had shown that he could be trusted, so Abraham believed God and acted, even though he could not understand the solution to the difficulty.⁶

We don’t receive verbal commands from God like Abraham received from God. However, there are times when things seem to go wrong in our lives. In every instance, we should always trust God. God can be trusted, and even though we don’t understand what God is doing, we should believe him and walk in obedience to his Word.

C. *The Ordeal (22:4-8)*

And third, look at the ordeal.

The Bible does not tell us what Abraham was thinking as he, Isaac, and the young men went to Moriah. Verses 4-5 say, **“On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. Then Abraham said to his young men, ‘Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship**

⁶ James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expository Commentary*, 685–686.

and come again to you.” The *New International Version* says that Abraham explicitly stated, “*We* will come back to you.” Abraham fully intended to sacrifice Isaac, as God had commanded him. But by now, he was sure that the outcome would not be the end of Isaac, since he told his young men that they would worship God, and then both of them would return back to the young men. What was Abraham thinking here? Hebrews 11:17–19 tells us, “By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, ‘Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.’ He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.” By now, Abraham had faith to expect a resurrection.

Pastor Donald Grey Barnhouse suggests that Abraham reasoned as follows:

[Abraham] ultimately came to the calm conclusion that he was going to see a miracle. The method of his thought was as follows. God is not a liar. He cannot be mistaken. He told me, beyond question, that I should have a son, and there he walks before me. God has said that this son would be the one through whom he would fulfill all of his promises. Therefore, the son must live or God would be found false. And yet God commands that this son be put to death. Here, humanly speaking, is contradiction. But there is no contradiction in God. That is the foundation fact. There is power in God; there is wisdom in God; there is majesty and glory in God; but there is no contradiction in God. But what is to be done with God’s command to sacrifice my son? Since there is no contradiction in God, there is only one answer that my mind can fathom. God is going to perform a miracle and raise Isaac from the dead. Doubt may say that this is foolish, that there has never been a resurrection in the history of the world. That doesn’t make any difference. A resurrection is compatible with the nature of God, but a contradiction is not compatible with the nature of God. God is life and the author of life. It would be a small matter for the God who created the universe, including the first

man, to bring life back into a dead body. So the one, clear, logical conclusion is that God is going to raise Isaac from the dead.⁷

Verse 6 says, **“And 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 they went both of them together.”** They probably had not gone far, when Isaac said to his father Abraham, **“My father!”** And he said, **“Here I am, my son.”** He said, **“Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?”** (22:7). This question must have pierced Abraham’s heart. How would he answer his son? **Abraham said, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son”** (22:8a). One commentator writes, “Abraham refers Isaac to God as the one who will answer the question. He does not deceive him, but simply opens up to him as a possibility what for himself (since God gave his command) is a fact. He throws the ball back into God’s court, so to speak: ‘God will provide.’”⁸ **So they went both of them together** (22:8b).

II. The Submission of Isaac (22:9-10)

Second, let’s look at the submission of Isaac.

When Abraham and Isaac came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood (22:9). Isaac’s submission is astonishing, isn’t it? It appears as if he willingly, voluntarily allowed himself to be bound and laid upon the altar to be sacrificed. This is one of the reasons I do not think that Isaac was a young child. Even though the word “boy” is used to describe Isaac in verses 5 and 12, the Hebrew word can also refer to a young man. Genesis 23, the very

⁷ Quoted in James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expository Commentary*, 687.

⁸ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 209.

next incident following our text, tells us that Isaac's mother Sarah died at the age of 127. At this point Isaac would have been thirty-seven years old. The call by God to sacrifice Isaac obviously occurred before he was thirty-seven years old. Since a considerable period of time occurred between Genesis 21 and Genesis 22, it is reasonable to conclude that the incident on Mount Moriah took place later in Isaac's life rather than earlier. Furthermore, a young man rather than a young boy is more likely to be able to carry the wood for the burnt offering. So, I tend to agree with James Montgomery Boice, who asks, "Was he perhaps thirty-three, the age of the Lord Jesus Christ at the time of his crucifixion?"⁹

Then, after Isaac had been bound and laid upon the altar, Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son (22:10).

III. The Substitution of God (22:11-14)

And third, let's look at the substitution of God.

Just as Abraham was about to strike and call his son, his only son, Isaac, whom he loved, **the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" (22:11a).** Abraham paused, **and he said, "Here I am" (22:11b).** The angel of the Lord said, **"Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me" (22:12).** "Fearing God" does not mean that Abraham was afraid of God; it means that he has obeyed God.

Verse 13 says, **"And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son."** The ram died in the place of Isaac.

⁹ James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expository Commentary*, 707.

Verse 14 says, **“So Abraham called the name of that place, ‘The Lord will provide’; as it is said to this day, ‘On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.’”** There on Mount Moriah the Lord provided a substitute to die in place of Isaac.

Centuries later, God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, and he died on Mount Moriah as the substitute lamb of God. Earlier I mentioned that one commentator said, “So long as men live in the world, they will turn to this story with unwaning interest.” He went on to say, “There is only one scene in history by which it is surpassed: that where the Great Father gave his Isaac to a death from which there was no deliverance.”¹⁰

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the call to sacrifice Isaac in Genesis 22:1-14, we may be assured that our faithful God can be trusted to provide for our redemption.

About twenty-six years ago I preached on this text. One day I had a fabulous day of preparation in Genesis 22. I went home at the end of the day, and picked up my three-month old son, and the phone rang. Our attorney said that our son’s biological father wanted him back. I immediately thought to myself, “Will I be able to trust God as did Abraham? I am being asked to give up my adoptive son, my only son, whom I love. So, will I be able to trust God?” Obviously, we were able to keep our son (although it is a long story). The point is that God calls us to trust him. He calls us to trust him for our redemption. He calls us to trust him in our day-to-day living. He calls us to trust him when things go wrong.

Abraham’s trust and obedience are important. But far more important is God’s faithfulness to provide everything for our salvation. Amen.

¹⁰ James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expositional Commentary*, 683.

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and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

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