

22 November, 2009

The Ultimate Test of Faith (The Sacrifice of the Son of Promise)

Reading: Genesis 22:1-19

How *could* God do such a thing? How could he ask anyone to sacrifice their son? Yes, in the debased heathen religions of the day, human sacrifice was carried out in a misguided attempt to placate vengeful deities. Life may have been cheap for them, but God has always been opposed to killing creatures made in his image. This was clear from the beginning and God repeated it in unambiguous terms to Noah (Genesis 9:6). Later he would enshrine it in the sixth commandment, “You shall not murder” (Ex 20:13). He expressly warned Israel not to emulate the Canaanite practice of child sacrifice (Lev 18:21). He said, “When you have settled in their land . . . you must not worship the LORD your God in their way . . . they do all kinds of detestable things the LORD hates. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods” (Deut 12:29-31). But for Abraham there was no mistaking the voice of God.

Let’s set the scene. This is the culmination of a long journey. When he was seventy-five God called Abram to leave his country. An indispensable part of God’s promise to him and his sixty-five year old wife was that they would have a son. Well . . . it didn’t happen!

I. HAPPINESS IS . . . ISAAC! (LAUGHTER APLENTY)

Not Eliezer

The years pass by. Their biological clocks keep ticking. Abram begins to lose hope. One day, when God speaks to him, he raises his complaint: “O Sovereign LORD . . . you have given me no children; so a servant born in my household will be my heir” (15:1-3). But God repeats the promise. “This man will not be your heir, but *a son coming from your own body will be your heir*” (15:4). God takes him outside and tells him to look up at the heavens and count the stars if indeed he can. Then he says, “So shall your offspring be!” Abram believed the LORD and he credited it to him as righteousness (15:7).

Not Ishmael

But the years pass by. Now what was at first *highly improbable* has become *totally impossible*. But Sarai has an idea. Surrogate motherhood! They can bring the promise back into the realm of possibility. Sarai’s young Egyptian maid can be the biological mother . . . *Bad idea!* Ishmael is born. Relations in the home become strained. Eventually, to Abram’s dismay, the maid, Hagar, and Ishmael have to leave.

Isaac—“He laughs”

Now Abram is about a hundred and Sarai is ninety. God meets with Abram and tells him that his name is to be changed from *Abram* (Exalted father) to *Abraham* (Father of many). And *Sarai*’s

name (Princess; looking back on her noble descent) is to be changed to *Sarah* (Princess; looking forward to her noble descendants). The reason: the promise will now at last be fulfilled: she will be a mother of nations!

The old man cannot help himself. He falls face down in a posture of reverence, but he laughs at the sheer impossibility of it all (17:15-18).

Sarah's reaction is similar when she hears the news. She too laughs (18:10-12). She had wanted a child so badly, but resigned herself to the fact that it wasn't going to be. Not improbable; not just mildly impossible (if there is such a thing), totally, totally out of the question. No wonder they both laughed!

But a year later, Isaac was born, just as God said he would be. Imagine how Sarah felt when she saw her own son for the first time. And how did Abraham feel? All children are special, but this little boy was unique. They had waited so long for him. If ever there was a miracle child, this was it! He was the embodiment of God's faithfulness and the focal point of God's promises.

His name (*Yitzchak*) means "he laughs." Indeed, laughter surrounds the events. Abraham laughs; Sarah laughs; and some commentators have even suggested that in inserting a syllable (ha) into Abraham's name and changing the sound of Sarah's name (ah), God built laughter into their very names (onomatopoeia).

What joyous years they must have been and Isaac passed through childhood into his teens. Father and son would have worked together, played together and worshipped together. Everything was good: a settled life in Beersheba, access to a copious supply of water (21:2-33), and no more battles to fight. Abraham had known God as *El Shaddai* (God Almighty); he calls upon him now as *El Olam* (the Eternal God). This is another of the compound "names" of God. If the name, *El Shaddai* places the emphasis on God's care and provision, *El Olam* underlines his constancy. He never changes (Num 23:19; James 1:17). Not only can he do the impossible; he is constant and true to his word. They had good reason to laugh!

II. THEN SUDDENLY, IN ONE STROKE, GOD WIPES THE SMILE OFF ABRAHAM'S FACE AND PLUCKS THE LAUGHTER FROM HIS HEART.

We are told it was a test, but *Abraham* wasn't.

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, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you" (22:1-2).

Radical obedience

That divine word must have come with a thud and dragged his heart into his ‘boots’ (sandals?). In terms of the words chosen, God says: “Please take your son (*qah-nā*).”¹ It is a tender instruction, but it is an instruction nonetheless. It is not an option to be considered or a request to be refused. And the terms used when God says “Go to the region of Moriah” are the same as he used when he told Abram to leave Ur (*Lek l^ekā*).²

What a test! A burnt offering totally consumed the sacrifice. God asks Abraham to turn “Laughter” into smoke, to burn his bridges in front of him as he had burned his bridges behind him. There would be nothing left. It would be as if Sarah had never given birth to Isaac. Abraham’s lengthy journey with God would have come to naught. His future would go up in smoke--literally.³

Iain Duguid employs a different metaphor: “Killing Isaac meant kissing God’s promises goodbye. In the space of three short imperatives—‘Take Isaac . . . go . . . sacrifice him (v.2)—Abraham’s whole world came crashing down around him.”⁴

We can understand why F. B. Meyer says:

Nothing else in the circumference of (Abraham’s) life could have been such a test as anything connected with the heir of promise, the child of his old age, the laughter of his life . . . So he put him to the supreme test that all men might henceforth know that a mortal man could love God so much as to put him first, though his dearest lay in the opposite scale of the balance of the heart.”⁵

And it almost seems as though God is rubbing it in: “Take now your son, *your only son*, whom you love, Isaac . . .”

III. WHAT A RESPONSE!

¹The particle of entreaty (*qah-nā*) can almost be translated “please.”

²This could be translated, “Go (by) yourself.” The point is its radical nature. It is a call for unquestioning obedience.

³Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 208.

⁴Iain M. Duguid, *Living in the Gap between Promise and Reality: The Gospel According to Abraham* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1999), 130.

⁵F. B. Meyer, *The Life of Abraham*. Ed. Lance C. Wubbels (Lynwood, WA: Emerald Books, 1996), 161-2.

Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded 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.

He doesn't say a word! I don't know how well he slept that night. Previously he had voiced his objections. "Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless?" "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing." "Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city . . . Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" Presumably he never even informed Sarah. How could he tell her such a thing? *Abraham doesn't say a word; he simply obeys!*

He responded without hesitation. But he had three days to change his mind. It must have been the most difficult journey of his life.

This is a brief account. We don't know what conversation passed between father and son and the two servants as they travelled. No doubt Isaac had worshipped with his father in the past. He knew why they were taking wood and he understood why Abraham had both a knife and a torch. Perhaps he wondered why they had not brought a lamb with them, but he probably assumed that his resourceful father knew where to obtain one at the point of destination.

It would be both presumptuous and foolish to try to dramatize this account. We are not given information about the conversation as the party of four travelled northwards toward what is now Jerusalem. And we are in no position to say with certainty what was going through Abraham's mind. But he did not "switch off." Possibly he mulled over the repeated promises God had made to him. He would have replayed the events, perhaps going right back in his mind to Ur. This may well have added to his trauma, but it is reasonable to assume that it did something else as well. We *can* deduce from two recorded statements here and a New Testament comment that he had come to an important conclusion.

IV. "GOD HIMSELF WILL PROVIDE THE LAMB."

"On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place (God had told him about) in the distance" (22:4). The moment of truth has arrived. The little party stops. Abraham turns to the servants: "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you" (22:5).

Seems strange! The servants were brought along to be left behind. They have been introduced into the narrative to play no part in it. This only compounds the sense of Abraham's isolation. He has travelled with three other human beings, but, in a sense he has been alone. In his heart he carries a secret about which he cannot breathe a syllable.

The mystery deepens

The servants can only watch as the old man takes the wood from the donkey and lays it on the back of his son. (Isaac is described here as a *na'ar*, not a *yeled*. While *yeled* means child, *na'ar*

can refer to a teenager or young adult). He must have been in his late teens (at least) to be able to carry sufficient wood for a sacrifice on his back up steep incline (22:2). Abraham himself carries the torch and the knife.

If Isaac thought that his father knew some place in the region from which he could procure a lamb, his puzzlement increases as they begin to ascend the mountain. There is no one in sight. So he asks the obvious question.

“Father”

“Yes, my son,” Abraham replied.

“The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”(22:7)

What a moment that must have been as Abraham replied: *“God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son”* (22:8).

Isaac seems to have accepted that reply without question. He knew how much Abraham loved him and it wouldn't have entered his mind that he was to be sacrificed! *“The two of them went on together.”*

V. THE MOMENT OF TRUTH

They reach the place God had told Abraham about. The narrator slows down and deliberately records every action of Abraham. Isaac, no doubt, lays down the wood at the chosen spot. Abraham builds an altar. That must have taken a while. He then carefully lays the wood on the altar. At what point Abraham broke the fatal news to Isaac, we do not know.

Meyer comments appropriately: *“Inspiration draws a veil over that last tender scene—the father’s announcement of his mission . . .”* He comments on *“the instant submission of the son who was old enough and strong enough to rebel if he wanted.”*

Finally, Abraham binds his son Isaac and lays him on the altar, on top of the wood, and reaches out his hand and takes the sharp knife. He does not hesitate. He is going through with it! Once he has slit Isaac’s jugular, he will set the wood alight.

At that very moment a voice rings out:

“Abraham! Abraham!”

“Here I am,” he replied.

“Do not lay a hand on the boy,” he said. “Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son” (22:11-12).

What a moment that must have been for Abraham--*and for Isaac!* *“Abraham looked up and there in the thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. We can imagine the two of them standing side by side,*

perhaps arm in arm as they watch the smoke ascend from the burnt offering. Talk about a poignant moment! So Abraham called the name of that place, *Yahweh Yireh* (“Jehovah Jireh”)-- “The LORD will Provide.” And to this day it is said, ‘On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided’” (22:13-14).

God renews and extends the original promise.

The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time¹⁶ and said, "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son,¹⁷ 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,¹⁸ and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me" (22:15-18).

VI. SO MUCH CAN BE SAID ABOUT THIS ACCOUNT. THERE SEEMS TO BE LAYER UPON LAYER OF MEANING, BUT I SHALL FOCUS ON THREE CRUCIAL OBSERVATIONS.

The first involves Abraham.

As we have followed Abraham’s life, we have come to see why he was called “the friend of God.” He had remarkable trust in God and demonstrated this by his obedience, in the most difficult of circumstances.

But we have seen that he, like us, was only human. And I’m so glad. Otherwise I could place him on a pedestal and admire him from a distance, but I could derive little benefit from his example. We have seen him falter in the famine. We have noticed that even he could compromise. We have sensed his despondency. We have watched him do what we are inclined to do as he has tried to bring the stupendous promise of God within the bounds of possibility. We have heard his laughter of disbelief. We have listened to him lie about Sarah to save his own skin.

But look at him now! He is worshipping *El Olam*: the faithful God, the God who can be trusted to keep his promises no matter what! He has grown. On more than one occasion he has either taken the law into his own hands. He now knows that he *need not*, indeed, he *dare not* attempt to do anything to help God out!

Hear the Writer to the Hebrews:

By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son,¹⁸ even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned."¹⁹ Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death (Heb 11:17-19).

He believed that if he slit Isaac's throat at God's command, watched the blood drain from his son's body, lit the wood and saw Isaac's body burn to a cinder, God would raise him from the dead. Why? Because Isaac was the son of promise! The faithful God had said: "Your wife Sarah will bear a son and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him" (17:19; Gen 21:12). **If God was going to keep his word, Isaac could not die and remain dead!** Perhaps he remembered as he travelled and thought, as he laid the wood in place and raised his knife that *Isaac shouldn't have been there in the first place!* This had been God's doing from the outset.

Now it is interesting to see what commentators do with two of the statements Abraham made on the way to Moriah. Some suggest that he was simply evading the issue. He was either delaying the inevitable moment or using a smokescreen, telling white lies to keep his servants and Isaac from knowing what he was really about to do. Whatever else we say, I think the comment in Hebrews gives us the real reason that he said to the servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the lad go over there; *we* will worship and then *we* will come back to you."

And when he said to Isaac: "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son," he meant it! He didn't know how but he had got the roles right. **It was his business to obey and God's business to keep his promises.**

Listen to James' comment:

Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²² *You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.* ²³ *And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend (James 2:21-23).*

The second comment involves Isaac.

Interestingly, this account is read in synagogues at *Rosh Hashanah*, the Jewish New Year's Day. But it is described not the testing of Abraham, but as *The Aqedah (Yitzchak)*, "The Binding of Isaac." That, to quote Sidney Greidanus, is because "When Israel heard this narrative of Isaac on the altar, it heard the story of its very existence hanging in the balance . . . Isaac is only a knife-thrust removed from death."⁶

We have to be amazed at his submission. What must have gone through his mind as he lay there? And then, for the rest of his life, he would know that he existed because of God's gracious provision. What a reminder!

⁶Greidanus, *Genesis*, 199-200. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*. Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 2. Ed. Bruce M. Metzger (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1994), 109.

The third and last involves another sacrifice at a place very close to Mount Moriah.

It too involved a Father and a Son. Abraham could not have realized at the time that his actions were anticipating a far greater drama. Remember, the God who instructed Abraham to take his son and sacrifice him on Mount Moriah is the God who knows the end from the beginning. One writer portrays the reality in graphic terms:

The demand that rang through the soul of Abraham on those Canaanite hills was but an echo of the greater demand made by God on those everlasting hills—a demand met within sight of Moriah itself.”

But this time there was no voice to put a stop to proceedings. There was no stay of execution. This time there could be no substitute caught in a thicket for *he was the one and only Son of God to whom all substitutes point*.

It seems very likely that Paul had this account in mind when he wrote. Think of God’s word of commendation to Abraham: “You have not withheld your son, your only son . . .” and then listen to Paul: “He who did not spare his own Son but delivered him up for us all, how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (Rom 8:32)

And the Son? Like Isaac, he willingly submitted! He had said, “The reason the Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father” (John 10:17-18).

Conclusion

Bruce Waltke describes ‘the binding of Isaac’ as “the decisive moment in Abraham’s relationship with God.”⁷ It tells us so much about faith and obedience and the inextricable relationship between them. It shows us what lengths a person will go to when God is first in their life. The account is full of pathos and high emotion. Love can be determined but it cannot be dispassionate. We may well be amazed that a man would be prepared to go to such incredible lengths because of his love for God. But there is something even more amazing: the lengths to which God has gone because of his great love for us!

⁷Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 309.

