

Abraham's Sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Genesis

I. Overview of this Lesson and the Approach We Will be Taking

- a. This is a lesson I have been looking forward to teaching for quite a while. **Genesis 22**, where Abraham is told to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac on the mountain. This is a famous Old Testament story, very well known, yet I believe you may find some surprises in it!
- b. As we have done throughout this **Genesis** expository series, we will take a three-step approach in studying this story:
 - i. Understand the basic storyline and details (First level)
 - ii. Consider moral lessons applicable to us, especially if highlighted by Jesus or the apostles in the New Testament. (Second level)
 - iii. Consider if there may be prophecies about Jesus within this story. Are there any allegorical foreshadowings of elements of the life, passion, death or resurrection of Jesus here? (Third level)
- c. Also, consider if Jesus, the apostles or early Christian writers shed any further light on understanding the passage we are studying.
 - i. In the New Testament, this story is discussed in **Hebrews 11**, **James 2** and **Galatians 3**.
 - ii. In my opinion insights from the early Christian writers (first three centuries), although they were not writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, are worth considering. They have advantages over modern writers: early Christian writers are closer to the time of the apostles (some personally knew the apostles or the apostles' direct disciples); many of them spoke the common Greek that the Scriptures were written in; and they are not tainted by some of the doctrinal fads and agendas that have arisen since that time.

II. Abraham Called to Sacrifice Isaac – the Basic Storyline (Read **Genesis 22:1-19**)

- a. Summary of elements of the story:
 - i. God tells Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac.
 - ii. Abraham obeys. He rises early the next morning, takes his son Isaac as well as two servants and a donkey.

- iii. Splits firewood and takes the wood with them as well.
 - iv. On the third day they see the mountain. Abraham leaves the two servants with the donkey. He tells his servants that he and his son will go to worship, and then both of them will return.
 - v. Isaac and Abraham head up the mountain. Abraham puts the wood on Isaac, who carries it up to the place of the sacrifice.
 - vi. Isaac asks his father, "Where is the sheep for the whole burnt offering?" Abraham replies, "God will provide".
 - vii. When Abraham arrives at the place God told him, he builds an altar. He places wood on the altar, binds his son hand and foot, then places Isaac on the wood.
 - viii. Abraham raises the knife to slay his son, but (the) Angel of the Lord intervenes and tells Abraham not to harm his son Isaac.
 - ix. Abraham then finds a ram caught by its horns in a thicket, and sacrifices the ram in place of his son.
 - x. The Angel of the Lord tells Abraham that because he was willing to obey God and sacrifice his son, he would be blessed abundantly:
 1. His seed will be multiplied exceedingly, like sand on the seashore and like stars in the sky.
 2. His descendants will inherit cities of their enemies.
 3. In his seed, all nations of the earth will be blessed.
 - xi. Abraham and Isaac return to the servants, and go on.
- b. Some observations and questions regarding details of the story.
- i. Basic question: If God knew beforehand that he wasn't going to make Abraham actually kill his son, why did God tell him to do that, and go through this gruesome ordeal?
 - ii. Observation: the wood that they take on the journey is more than a bundle of twigs (as depicted in some artistic renderings). This is wood that Abraham has to split. (**Genesis 22:3**).
 - iii. If Abraham was planning all along to sacrifice his son (slay with knife and then burn him to ashes), why did he tell the two servants, "We will come back to you"? (**Genesis 22:5**)
 - iv. It says that Abraham "took the wood...and laid it on Isaac his son" (**Genesis 22:6**), when the two of them were ascending the mountain.

Why didn't Abraham carry the heavy wood himself, or put it in Isaac's arms to carry? Or why didn't he just ask Isaac to take pick it up and carry it?

- v. The ram is caught in a thicket "by its horns" (**Genesis 22:13**). Why doesn't it just say that Abraham found a ram nearby? Is there some significance to that detail being included in the story?

III. Lessons for Us in this Story

- a. "Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham." (**Genesis 22:1**) In fact, many of God's people in the Scriptures underwent significant tests (Abraham, Joseph, Job, etc.). If you want to follow God and live by faith, don't be surprised if you are tested too!
 - i. **Hebrews chapters 10-12** (actually the entire book of Hebrews, in my opinion) is a call to live a life of faith, persevering through the various trials and tests we will face in this life.
 1. "But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, you endured a great struggle with sufferings." (**Hebrews 10:32**)
 2. "You...joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods" (**Hebrews 10:34**)
 3. "Now the just shall live by faith; but if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him." (**Hebrews 10:38**, quoting from **Habakkuk 2:3-4** in the LXX)
 4. **Hebrews 12** concludes the argument by calling us to run with perseverance the race marked out for us. We are admonished to follow the example of Jesus enduring the cross; to expect painful chastening from God as from a father who loves his sons, in order to train us in righteousness.
 5. Within this context, we find what has been called "the hall of heroes of faith", in **Hebrews 11**. This "great cloud of witnesses" (**Hebrews 12:1**) in chapter 11 consists of men and women of faith in the Old Testament who are given as inspiring examples for us to imitate.
 - a. Read **Hebrews 11:17**. "By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son."
 - b. In context, we are reminded of what Abraham did when he was tested (he obeyed even at great personal cost

and sacrifice). This is intended to show us how we need to respond *when we are tested*.

- ii. **James 1:2-4** says, “My brethren, consider it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.”
- iii. On the night he was betrayed, Jesus warned Peter that later on, he would be tested.
 1. “And the Lord said, ‘Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may *sift you as wheat*. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren.’” (**Luke 22:31-32**)
 2. Some Christians have the attitude that while Satan put Peter and Job to the test in the past, we should not expect the same today. Versions of the modern ‘prosperity gospel’ teach that God wants to prosper us; they falsely promise people that if they become Christians and put their hope in Christ, they will be blessed with a good and abundant life here. Did the apostles understand Jesus’ message that way?
- iv. Peter clearly explains that he is not the only one who would be tested. All who are serious about following Jesus should expect to be tested. In his first letter, Peter encourages us with these words:
 1. “Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings...” (**1 Peter 4:12-13**)
 - a. The term Peter uses “trial to try you” (here, in noun form) is the same root word in Greek that is used in **Hebrews 11:17** (God tested Abraham) and **James 1:2** (the testing of your faith), where it is in verb form. First time this word appears in the LXX is in **Genesis 22:1**.
 - b. Word is generally translated ‘to try, to test or to tempt’, depending on context.
- v. The false ‘prosperity gospel’ teaches people that if they put their trust in Christ, he will give them ‘life to the full’, an abundant life. It claims that God wants to prosper us now, in this life. It somehow tries to convince people that although virtually all the godly people in the past (Job, John the Baptist, Jesus, Peter, Paul, Stephen) were put through

trials, today Christians will be blessed with comfort and prosperity in this life. What an outrageous, self-serving lie.

- vi. Jesus said it would be a narrow and difficult (but not impossible) road. James and Peter said we should *expect* trials of various kinds to continue until we are dead. To echo Peter, why should you think it strange that God is bringing trials into your life?
- vii. Trials you may have faced, or could face between now and the time you die, include:
 - 1. Being abandoned by family members, even your spouse;
 - 2. Persecution from the world, or from the government;
 - 3. Being sinned against by other Christians, even church leaders (with the temptation to become bitter);
 - 4. Temptation (from Satan) to fall into: sexual sin, lying, materialism, pride, arrogance or other sins; and
 - 5. Suffering in marriage, family, job, health or finances.
- viii. God tested Abraham, the “father of faith”, to see if his faith was genuine. He passed the test. You have been tested, and can expect more tests to see if your faith is genuine, and to refine you. Will you pass the test?
- ix. A few personal observations:
 - 1. Throughout history, it seems that those God wants to use to accomplish the most critical things, He puts through the toughest tests. (That is a pattern I see, anyway.)
 - 2. The tests come over time, and the road can get steeper the farther along you go! This ultimate test for Abraham came late in life, after he had been walking with God for decades.
- b. Another important lesson for us: Real saving faith must include *obeying* God, not just believing Him.
 - i. Read **James 2:14-24**.
 - 1. James calls anyone who thinks they can be saved by just believing, without obeying (works) a fool. Even the demons believe!
 - 2. James points to Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac in **Genesis 22** as the definitive proof of his point. Abraham’s faith was made

perfect (complete) by his works, through what he did (obeying God by going to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac).

3. What James teaches here is seamlessly consistent with what Jesus taught. For example, consider Jesus' conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount (**Matthew chapters 5-7**):
 - a. To those who believe in Jesus and call him Lord but do not live lives of obedience to God's will, Jesus said he would declare on the Day of Judgment, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness." (**Matthew 7:23**)
 - b. Jesus said that whoever hears his teachings and does them will be like "a wise man who built his house on rock; the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock", while the man who hears but does not obey Jesus' teaching would be like "a foolish man who built his house on the sand: and the rains descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall." (**Matthew 7:24-27**)
- ii. What James (and Jesus) taught on this directly contradicts Martin Luther. Luther's 'Protestant Reformation Theology' claims that all we have to do in order to be saved is to believe and accept what Jesus did for us. It asserts that nothing we do (works, obedience) has anything to do with our salvation.
 1. The founder of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther, wrote in his Preface to the New Testament (1522; revised 1545): "In a word, St. John's Gospel and his first Epistle, St. Paul's Epistles, especially Romans, Galatians and Ephesians, and St. Peter's first Epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and good for you to know, even though you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine. Therefore St. James' Epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to them; for it has nothing of the nature of the Gospel about it. (*Works of Martin Luther* , Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1932, copyrighted by the United Lutheran Church in America, vol. 6. pp. 363 ff., tr. C.M. Jacobs pp. 443-444.)
 2. If what James and Jesus are saying is correct, then Martin Luther and Reformation Theology (that obedience is not necessary) are clearly in the wrong. No wonder that Luther

had the audacity to trash James and relegate the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke to “the back of the bus”.

3. It is Luther’s theology that is a theology of straw. James was right; he understood Jesus’ teaching, and the lesson of Abraham’s obedience in **Genesis 22**.
- c. Another lesson for us: God can, and will, raise the dead.
 - i. Why did Abraham sacrifice his son? What was he thinking?
 1. Abraham was told two things by God, which at first glance would seem contradictory:
 - a. Abraham would have many descendants through Isaac, the heir of the great covenant; and
 - b. Abraham must kill Isaac as a boy, before Isaac had any children.
 2. When told two things by God that are hard to reconcile initially, most will choose the one they like and explain away the one they do not like! Abraham held on to both. It stretched him in the process.
 - a. Challenge for me: God says to be separate from the world and live holy lives, yet ALSO says we must make disciples of all nations, and become all things to all men. We can’t just hold onto one and neglect the other. Need to stretch our understanding to somehow embrace both!
 3. Read **Hebrews 11:17-19**. Abraham reasoned that God would raise up Isaac after he was slain. Concluded that God could raise the dead (figured it out long before the rest of us!)
 - a. In light of what it says in Hebrews here, it makes sense why Abraham told the two servants that after he and Isaac went up to worship, “we will come back to you”. (**Genesis 22:5**)
 - b. For more on foundational Christian teaching on physical resurrection of the body after death, read **1 Corinthians 15**.

IV. Foreshadowings of Christ in this Story?

- a. At least three early Christian writers (ante-Nicene, before 325 AD) saw this story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac as foreshadowing Christ's passion and death on the cross.
 - i. Irenaeus (c. 130-200 AD, overseer of the church in Lyon, in modern-day France; taught by Polycarp, who had been a disciple of the apostle John)
 1. "Righteously also do we, possessing the same faith as Abraham, and taking up the cross as Isaac did the wood, follow Him....Abraham...with a ready mind delivered up, as a sacrifice to God, his only-begotten and beloved son, in order that God also might be pleased to offer up for all his seed His own beloved and only-begotten Son, as a sacrifice for our redemption." In *Against Heresies* (Book 4, chapter 5, section 4; in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1 p. 467)
 - ii. Tertullian (c. 160-230 AD, writer who lived in Carthage, North Africa)
 1. "What had formerly perished through the 'tree' in Adam should be restored through the 'tree' in Christ....This 'wood' again, Isaac, the son of Abraham personally carried for his own sacrifice, when God had enjoined that he should be made a victim to Himself. But, because these had been mysteries which were being kept for perfect fulfillment in the times of Christ, Isaac, on the one hand, with his 'wood' was reserved, the ram being offered which was caught by the horns in the bramble' Christ on the other hand, in his times, carried His 'wood' on His own shoulders, adhering to the horns of the cross, with a thorny crown encircling his head." In *An Answer to the Jews*, chapter 13; ANF vol. 3, p. 170)
 2. (After explaining why the crucifixion of Christ was chiefly hidden in types in the Old Testament rather than being set forth in 'bare' or straightforward prophecies) "First, then, Isaac, when he was given up by his father as an offering, himself carried the wood for his own death. By this act he even then was setting forth the death of Christ, who was destined by His Father as a sacrifice, and carried the cross whereon he suffered." (*Against Marcion*, Book 3, chapter 18; ANF vol. 3, p. 336)
 - iii. Melito of Sardis (d. c. 190 AD; overseer of the church in Sardis, in Asia)
 1. "In place of Isaac the just, a ram appeared for the slaughter, in order that Isaac might be liberated from his bonds. The

slaughter of this animal redeemed Isaac from death. In like manner, the Lord, being slain, saved us; being bound, He loosed us; being sacrificed, He redeemed us. For the Lord was a lamb, like the ram which Abraham saw caught in the sabel bush. But this bush represented the cross, and that place Jerusalem, and the lamb the Lord bound for slaughter.

2. For as a ram was He bound, says he concerning our Lord Jesus Christ, and as a lamb was He shorn, and as a sheep was He led to the slaughter, and as a lamb was He crucified; and He carried the cross on His shoulders when He was led up to the hill to be slain, as was Isaac by his father. But Christ suffered, and Isaac did not suffer but was a type of Him who should suffer. Yet even when serving only for a type of Christ, he smote men with astonishment and fear.
 3. For a new mystery was presented to view: a son led by his father to a mountain to be slain, whose feet he bound together, and laid him on the wood of the sacrifice, preparing with care whatever was necessary for immolation. Isaac on his part is silent, bound like a ram, not opening his mouth, not uttering a sound with his voice. For, not fearing the knife nor quailing before the fire nor troubled by the prospect of suffering, he sustained bravely the type of the Lord. Accordingly there lies Isaac before us, with his feet bound like a ram, his father standing by, with the knife all bare in his hand, not shrinking back from shedding the blood of his son." (From *The Catena on Genesis, in Remains of the Second and Third Centuries, Fragments*, chapter 5; ANF vol. 8, p. 759-760)
- b. Elements of the foreshadowing of crucifixion of Christ (pulling it all together)
- i. Father willing to sacrifice his beloved, only-begotten son.
 - ii. The son carries the wood himself (as in **John 19:17**) up the hill upon which he will be killed to the place of sacrifice. Abraham literally places the wood upon his son. The same word for 'placed upon' that is used in **Genesis 22: 6** in the LXX is also used in **Luke 23:26** when cross is 'placed upon' Simon the Cyrenian (who, along with Jesus, carries it part of the way to Golgotha).
 - iii. The son who is to be sacrificed is then placed on the wood, bound hand and foot. (Jesus nailed hands and feet to the wood: **Psalm 22:17, Luke 24:39-40, John 20:25, Acts 2:23.**)
 - iv. No account of the one to be sacrificed protesting; he is submissive to his father's will (**Isaiah 53:7**).

- v. The father is confident that his son will be raised from the dead, and he does in fact receive him back from death. (**Hebrews 11:19**)
 - vi. The one sacrificed is a male sheep, who serves as the substitute, taking the place of another (**Isaiah 53:4-5**).
 - vii. Something caught on the top of the head of the sheep that is sacrificed; possibly foreshadowing crown of thorns? (**Mark 15:17**)
- c. One more element of the foreshadowing.
- i. Read **Galatians 3:6-8** and **3:16**
 1. Promise made to Abraham: “in your seed” (singular) all nations will be blessed. It does NOT say, “in your seeds” (plural).
 2. Paul uses this detail in the LXX account (one word, ‘seed’ being singular rather than plural) to make the point that this promise referred to one specific descendant of Abraham, the Christ.
 - a. Notice how Paul treats the Scriptures. He considers the Scriptures to be inspired down to the word (here he is quoting from the LXX). Gives me great confidence in inspiration of the Scriptures down to the details.
 - b. Also consider what Jesus said when quoting **Psalms 82**, making his point based on one word in the Old Testament and concluding, “and the Scripture cannot be broken”. (**John 10:34-35**)
 3. In Abraham’s seed (one man) all the nations of the earth would be blessed.
 - a. Note that ‘nations’ = ‘Gentiles’. It is the same word in Greek (*ethnos*, from which we get our English word ‘ethnic’, in both the New Testament and in the LXX, the Greek Old Testament often quoted by Jesus and the apostles).
 4. God preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand: the offer of salvation to all nations through one of his offspring.
 5. So after the sacrifice, the gospel was first proclaimed. The blessing through one man’s death and resurrection would go out to all nations! (This foreshadows the Great Commission of **Matthew 28:18-20**; **Mark 16:14-20**; and Peter’s message to the multi-nation crowd at Pentecost in **Acts 2**).

V. Why this Lesson (Foreshadowing) Matters

- a. This story (**Genesis 22**) lays out in allegory virtually the entire gospel: the passion, crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Jesus; and that one man, descended from Abraham, would be proclaimed as a blessing to all nations afterward.
- b. This story happened 1800-1900 years before the birth of Jesus.
 - i. Written down by Moses about 1400 years before Jesus.
 - ii. Even the LXX translation into Greek (quoted by Paul in **Galatians 3**) was made by the 70 Jewish scholars about 200-250 years before the birth of Jesus.
 - iii. So no way that the Christians could have tampered with this story. It is unassailable evidence, based on Scriptures in the control of the Jews (the Old Testament).
 - iv. Evidence like this (prophecies fulfilled) persuaded many thinking people in the early years of the church that Jesus was indeed the Son of God.
- c. This is powerful evidence that we can use today to persuade truth-seekers from all backgrounds, including:
 - i. Jews, who have a hard time accepting that the Messiah (= Christ) could have been crucified on a cross. And who have a hard time accepting that the Gentiles are God's special people today, also.
 - ii. Muslims, who claim that Jesus was not really crucified, and did not in fact rise from the dead.
 - iii. Christians who may have been brought up in the faith, but who have doubts regarding whether it is really true.
 - iv. Atheists, agnostics, and others...
- d. The challenge: dig deeply into the Old Testament, master the prophecies, and use them to persuade others and spread the gospel all over the world.