

Genesis 22:1-19  
Psalm 127  
Hebrews 11:1-22

“Life from the Dead, Part 2”

August 9, 2009

What do we do with this?

God commands Abraham to kill his son.

It is true: God was not going to let Abraham go through with it.

But that doesn't change the fact that God commanded it.

And apparently Abraham was going to do it.

And God praises Abraham for being willing to do it.

We have a problem here.

How could God command Abraham to kill his son?

If God had sent marauding bandits to kill his son,  
we would sympathize with Abraham.

After all, many fathers have lost their sons:

to the battlefield, to accidents, or to disease.

And many fathers have had to trust God in the midst of their grief,  
knowing that somehow God knows what *he* is doing.

But not Abraham.

Abraham must take the knife in his own hand and slaughter his son for a sacrifice.

Soren Kierkegaard says well on this point,

“But he did not doubt, he did not look anxiously to the right or to the left,  
he did not challenge heaven with his prayers.

He knew that it was God the Almighty who was trying him,

he knew that it was the hardest sacrifice that could be required of him;

but he knew also that no sacrifice was too hard when God required it –  
and he drew the knife.” (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*)

Many people have tried to explain the psychology of Abraham as he goes to Mt. Moriah.

Was he angry?

Did he doubt?

Did he wonder if God really said...?

But the text does not answer those questions.

Instead, Genesis 22 paints a picture of faith

that make you wonder if you really *want* to have faith.

We like to think that faith is a nice, tame, positive attitude.

We like to think that faith makes us feel good.

But Abraham's faith is a truly shocking thing.

Faith is what enables a man to take his only son, whom he loves,  
and prepare to slaughter him in cold blood.

Are *you sure* that you want to have faith?

Jesus once said to the rich young ruler,  
“sell all that you have, give to the poor and come follow me.”

Would you be willing to do this?  
If Jesus called you to do this,  
would you?  
Would you leave everything behind to follow Jesus?

Few of us are ready and willing to do this.  
But even this pales in comparison to what God calls Abraham to do.  
What is money compared to your son?  
If someone today said that God had commanded him to sacrifice his son,  
we would say that he is nuts – and certainly that he is *wrong*.

But what do we say of Abraham?

If we would understand this,  
then let us respond to God’s word by singing Psalm 127 –  
a Psalm that echoes God’s promise to Abraham  
*your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies,  
and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed,  
because you have obeyed my voice.*

Read Hebrews 11

Hebrews helps us understand something of what Abraham is thinking.  
How does Hebrews know what Abraham was thinking?

Because the author of Hebrews understood Genesis.

Genesis has been showing us a pattern of how God brings life from the dead.  
God is the one who brought life to the *tohuvo* (the barren wasteland)  
in the beginning.  
Indeed even in the previous chapter  
Abraham has seen how God brought life from the dead womb of Sarah.  
Abraham believes God’s promise.  
God has promised that Isaac will be his heir.  
Now God has commanded him to sacrifice his son.  
Therefore, Abraham concludes,  
God’s purpose must be to raise Isaac from the dead.

Notice that Genesis 22 is structured by three dialogues:

In 22:1 God calls, “Abraham,” and he replies, “Here am I”

In 22:7 Isaac says “My Father,” and he replies, “Here am I, my son.”

In 22:11 the angel calls, “Abraham, Abraham,” and he replies, “Here am I.”

This is important because of what these dialogues tell us.

All three dialogues point to the fact that God is the main actor in the passage.

In the first dialogue, God is the one who tells Abraham to go.

In the second, Abraham affirms that God will provide.

In the third, God stops Abraham from acting and provides the sacrifice.

### 1. God’s Call (22:1-2)

*After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, “Abraham!”*

*And he said, “Here am I.”*

*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.”*

“Go” (v2) – same word used in Gen 12 –

the only two times that this phrase occurs in the OT.

In chapter 12 Abram was told to leave his country, his kindred, and his father’s house.

God had promised him an inheritance.

Now in chapter 22 Abraham is told to destroy his inheritance.

What do you love, Abraham?

Do you love the gift?

Or do you love the Giver?

Further, in chapter 21 God has sent away Ishmael, the “backup” heir.

All of Abraham’s hopes are pinned now on Isaac.

And God highlights this by using *four* terms to speak of Isaac,

“your son” – the son of promise

“your only son” – now that Ishmael has been sent away,  
all the promises now rest upon Isaac.

“Isaac” – the very name reminding Abraham of the promise:

“in Isaac shall your offspring be named” (21:18)

“whom you love” – as if the rest wasn’t enough!

God knows that Abraham loves his son.

And this is crucial to the story.

You love your son.

But what matters more to you?

Your son?

Or your God?

You have accused Abimelech and the Philistines of not fearing God.  
But do you?

The story of the binding of Isaac – or perhaps better,  
the story of the testing of Abraham –  
is a warning to us lest we ever love the gifts more than the giver!

Think about it.

Israel is just about to enter the Promised Land.

In Deuteronomy Moses will tell them that they are about to receive  
houses they did not build, and wells they did not dig,  
and vineyards they did not plant.

And Moses will tell them that if they forget the Lord,  
if they ever forget to love the Lord their God with all their heart,  
if they ever think that their inheritance is more important than loving their God,  
then they will be cast out of the Promised Land.

In other words,

if Abraham responds in any other way,  
then you never would have heard the story of Abraham!

God tells Abraham to go the land of Moriah.

In 2 Chronicles 3:1 we are told that Solomon built the temple on Mt Moriah,  
which intentionally connects the building of the temple with the binding of Isaac.  
God will have the Son of David build the temple  
where the Seed of Abraham was laid upon an altar.

Which means that this same place is again the general location  
where the Son of God himself will be offered as the once-for-all sacrifice  
that will take away the sin of the world.

## **2. Abraham's Obedience (22:3-10)**

*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.*

What remarkable confidence.

I and the boy will go over there and worship

and *we* will return.  
The verb is first-person plural.  
WE will come again.

Is Abraham lying?

He knows that God has told him to kill his son.  
And yet he tells the servants that “we” will return.

Abraham does not know exactly what is going to happen.  
But he believes that God will do what he has promised!  
This is why Hebrews tells us that Abraham believed that God would raise Isaac.  
He knew that Isaac was going to die.  
And therefore, since God had promised that Isaac would inherit the promises,  
God must raise Isaac from the dead.

You also see Abraham’s faith in the central dialogue of the passage:

*7 And Isaac said to his father Abraham, “My father!”  
And he said, “Here am I, my son.”*

The language of father and son is everywhere in this passage.

The word “son” is used 10 times –  
and appears prominently in all the key moments:  
v2 – “take your son, your only son...”  
v12 – “now I know that you fear God,  
seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.”  
v16 – “because you have not withheld your son, your only son...”

But the word “father” is everywhere in the passage as well,  
not least in Abraham’s own name,  
and especially in the poignant verse 7,  
“Isaac said to Avraham aviv, saying, ‘avi?’”

But now the son says to his father,

*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.*

Literally,

God will *see* to himself the lamb for sacrifice.

God will see.

Why does it get translated “provide”?

Think about where the word “provide” comes from!

It comes from the Latin root “vide” – to see.

To “pro-vide” means to “see before.”

Because when you “see before” an event,  
then you know how to “provide”!

We still have this idea of “seeing.”  
If you say, “I’ll see to it”  
you do not mean that you will look at it.  
You mean that you will get it done.

God will see to it.  
He will *pro-vide*.

I highlight this because this same word “to see”  
was also used in Genesis 16,  
when Hagar was alone in the wilderness and God spoke to her.  
If you recall, Hagar is the only woman whom God addresses by name.  
She is also the only woman who gives a name to God.  
What name was that?  
“You are a God of seeing”  
It’s the same word.

The point for Hagar – and the point for Abraham –  
is not simply that God “sees.”  
God is not merely an observer who casually watches events unfold.  
The God-who-sees is a God who acts.

So when Abraham says, “God will see for himself the lamb for a burnt offering,”  
he *is* saying that God will provide.

*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.*

How many thousands,  
how many millions of people have wished that there was one more sentence here!  
What did Isaac say?  
What did Isaac do?  
Did he protest?  
Did he submit?  
Did he understand?  
Or did he rebel?

Every detail in this story is carefully selected.  
There are a thousand things that we wish we knew.  
But we are told the things that we need to know!

The point here is not the emotions of Abraham or Isaac.

The point here is not their psychological states.

The point is that Abraham believed God.

And therefore Abraham obeyed the voice of the LORD –  
even to the point of binding his son, laying him on the altar,  
reaching out his hand, and taking the knife.

And we are left with the undoubted conviction that Abraham would have done the next thing too.

What kind of monster would kill his own son?

What kind of deity would command it?!

Now, there is something that you need to understand at this point.

The Israelites who are listening to this story in the wilderness (or later in the land)  
would have been just as horrified as you are!

God has forbidden them in the Law of Moses to sacrifice their children.

They would be listening to this story in utter bewilderment  
saying, “How could God command Abraham to do what he forbids us to do?!”

The story of the binding of Isaac is *supposed* to repulse you.

You are supposed to say, “How could God command this?”

You are supposed to wonder, “How could any man do this?”

And you are *not* supposed to come away saying, “I want to be more like Abraham!”

You are supposed to come away saying, “There is *no one* like Abraham!”

Because that is where the third dialogue of our story takes us:

### **3. The LORD Will Provide (22:11-19)**

*11 But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!”*

*And he said, “Here am I.”*

*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.”*

How ironic!

Last time we saw that Abraham thought that Abimelech did not fear God,  
but now Abraham discovers what it really means to fear God.

The fear of God is not some generic respect for God and his law.

The fear of God means that you are more concerned with what God thinks  
than with what anyone else thinks.

Ed Welch has written a great book entitled,

“When People are Big and God is Small.”

Too often we care too much about what people think – what others say –  
and we fear man more than we fear God.

Jeremiah says “cursed is the man who trusts in man.” (Jeremiah 17:5)  
When people are big and God is small,  
then we make our decisions based on what will profit us.

But if you love the Lord your God with all your heart  
then you live day-by-day with a sense of the glory and majesty of God...

It's easy to say this stuff.

But then you come back to Abraham.  
Abraham, who had his son tied up on an altar,  
a knife in his hand,  
ready to slaughter his beloved son...

because he feared God...

And you wonder...

“Do I really want to fear God?”

*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.*

Nowadays if they made a movie about this,  
there would be a climactic scene where Abraham and Isaac have a dramatic encounter,  
wrestling with the moral and philosophical implications of all the options.  
Isaac would, in the end, heroically lay himself on the altar  
and insist that Abraham do what God had said...

No.

Don't go there.

You will find only death and despair down that path.

In Genesis 22 there are no heroics.

There is only faith –  
faith that hears the Word of God and obeys.  
And if you are willing to set aside all the Hollywood questions,  
and listen to this story, by faith,  
then you begin to see what God is doing.

Because while we *must* wrestle with Abraham and God's call to radical obedience,  
we must chiefly identify with Isaac:

we are the sons who are doomed to death.

Among the first hearers of this story are the eldest children in the wilderness.  
They hear this story and remember the night in Egypt,  
when all the firstborn of the land died.  
And as the angel of death passed through the land  
they knew what Isaac had known as he laid there stretched upon that altar:

If God does not provide, we are dead.

Because of Abraham's faith –  
because of his once-for-all act of obedience,  
all Israel will live.

God will go on to say that it is because of Abraham's obedience  
that Abraham's seed will inherit the promises.

We are not Abraham.

We are Isaac.  
We are lying there helpless.  
God has decreed our death –  
the death of the firstborn son.  
We can only live if another dies in our place.

And in the end, Abraham is not called upon to sacrifice his own son.  
But God will go through with what he would not expect of anyone else.  
For God thus loved the world,  
that he gave his only Son, his beloved Son,  
that whoever believes in him might have eternal life (John 3:16).

Or as Paul puts it,  
“He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all,  
how will not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Rom 8:32)

So you can see that in one sense,  
you can see Christ in Abraham, the one whose obedience causes us to inherit,  
but you can also see Christ in Isaac, the Son who was offered for us,  
and for that matter,  
you can see Christ in the ram, the sacrifice – the substitute – that took our place.

*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."*

So Abraham calls Mt. Moriah "The LORD will provide."

It is not clear whether Jerusalem is located on exactly the same place.

But 2 Chronicles 3:1 shows us that David's heirs

made the connection with the place where Abraham had bound his son.

The Seed of Abraham, the Son of David, and the Son of God

would all come together in this place.

And on the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.

But again, as we said earlier,

this is the word, "to see."

You could translate this,

The LORD will see.

For on the mount of the LORD, it will be seen.

And indeed, on the mount of the LORD it has been seen,

because on the mount of the LORD it has been provided!

And we see Jesus, who has passed through death and hell

and has been raised up in glory to the right hand of the Father.

And this is what God had promised to Abraham in verses 15-18:

*15 And 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 and have not withheld your son, your only son,*

*17 I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring*

*as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore.*

*And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies,*

*18 and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed,*

*because you have obeyed my voice."*

I want you to see three things here:

1) the promise confirmed by oath (v16-17)

God swears by himself (because there is no one else by whom God can swear)

that he will do what he has promised.

God will be faithful.

Nothing will prevent God from doing what he has said.

And if you needed more than the voice of the LORD to guarantee it,

now you have God's own solemn oath.

2) the offspring is singular (v17)

"Your offspring shall possess the gate of *his* enemies."

Of course, in one sense the reason is simple:  
Abraham has only one heir: Isaac.  
Therefore “your offspring” means Isaac!  
But of course, Paul in Galatians 3 will point out that there is another sense to this:  
Jesus, the Christ, is the promised seed.  
After all, Isaac never possesses the gate of anyone!  
He wanders in the land as a sojourner, like his father.  
Indeed, Isaac is the most passive, boring character in the whole of Genesis!  
He never really does anything interesting.  
His father’s servant goes out and finds him a wife.  
His wife takes care of arranging the inheritance properly.  
And then he dies.

But the seed of Abraham will possess the gates of his enemies:  
Think of Samson who literally carries the gates of his enemies several miles!  
But think especially of Jesus who stormed the gates of hell  
and overthrew his foes through the cross.

But as Origen said so well in the third century:

“But what does it profit me, if the seed of Abraham, which is Christ,  
should possess the cities of his enemies for an inheritance,  
and should not possess my city?  
If in my city, that is in my soul, which is the city of the great king,  
neither his laws nor his ordinances should be observed?  
What does it profit me that he has subjected the whole world  
and possesses the cities of his enemies  
if he should not also conquer his enemies in me,  
if he should not destroy the law which is in my members  
fighting against the law of my mind  
and which leads me captive in the law of sin?” (Homilies on Genesis 9.3)

It is not enough that the Seed of Abraham subdue his foes “out there.”  
He must also subdue *me*.

And while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.  
While we were aliens and strangers – enemies of God –  
Christ came and took possession of *us*.

And finally,

3) all this is because Abraham obeyed God’s voice.  
Twice, in verses 16 and 18,  
God says that he will do this because “you have obeyed my voice.”  
Abraham’s faith is a living and active faith.  
As James says in James 2,  
“Was not Abraham our father justified by works  
when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?  
You see that faith was active along with his works,

and faith was completed by his works;  
and the scripture was fulfilled that says,  
    ‘Abraham believed God,  
        and it was counted to him as righteousness’—  
and he was called a friend of God.” (2:21-23)

Notice that while James deals with the events of Genesis 22 (the binding of Isaac),  
the quote, “Abraham believed God” is from Genesis 15.  
James says that Genesis 15 “it was counted to him as righteousness”  
was fulfilled in Genesis 22.

What does this mean?

Justification is a singular act.

From God’s perspective Abraham was justified back in Gen 12!

But this one singular act of justification is applied to us throughout our lives.

After all, justification consists in the forgiveness of sins  
and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness.

In other words, in justification God forgives our sins  
and declares us righteous in Christ.

And from God’s perspective, this is a once-for-all thing.

As Paul says in Romans 8, those whom God predestined,  
he also called, justified, and glorified.

But this once-for-all act is applied throughout our lives.

And you see this clearly in Abraham.

Abraham believed God in Genesis 12 –  
and so we have to say that he was justified then,  
because Abraham was justified by faith.

But in Genesis 15, when Abraham believed God’s promises,  
God declares him righteous again.

And James says that in Genesis 22 God declared Abraham righteous again.

It is not as though there are different justifications.

Rather, God applies that *one* justification to you over and over.

Indeed, every Sunday when you hear the declaration of pardon,  
you are hearing God’s justifying proclamation:  
“Your sins are forgiven.”

And when James says that Abraham was justified by works along with faith,  
he is not saying that we are justified by works

in the same way that we are justified by faith.

Faith is the instrument by which we receive justification.

Works are the demonstration that our faith is a true and living faith.

And, as James puts it, faith without works is dead – and therefore, not true faith.

There is a sense in which Abraham's obedience is absolutely unique:  
no one else will ever be called to sacrifice his son.

But there is another sense in which James says that Abraham becomes the model for us:  
namely, in the principle that a living faith, a justifying faith,  
is a faith that works by love.

Israel belongs to God because Abraham obeyed,  
and yet Israel is still called to obey God.

In a similar, but far more powerful and glorious way, we belong to God because Jesus obeyed,  
and yet we are still called to obey.

But God's covenant promise does not depend on Israel's obedience – nor ours.  
Rather God's covenant promise depends upon the Seed of Abraham –  
the offspring who will possess the gates of his enemies –  
who will subdue even our wayward hearts,  
and in whom all nations will be blessed –  
even our Lord Jesus Christ!

(concluding song is “We Believe” on faith and works)