

Sacrifice
Genesis 22:1–19
Sunday, June 21, 2026

Great story for Father's Day, huh? If nothing else, it should be reassuring for those of us who *are* fathers, because no matter how many mistakes we have made, we've probably never done *this*!

This is a difficult story. It raises a lot of questions for us, about Abraham *and* about *God*. First among them, *why would God ask Abraham to kill his son?* I get that God was testing Abraham to see how faithful he was. But that's the best test we can think of? I mean, if someone told you that God wanted them to kill their child, you would have them arrested or committed. The idea that God would ask anyone to *kill their child* makes us really uncomfortable. We confessed earlier that "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them." How does *this* reflect the love of God?

And just as troubling is the fact that Abraham does not even *question* it. God says, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love...and offer him as a burnt offering," and the very next thing it says is, "So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, took two of his young men and Isaac, cut wood for the burnt offering, set out, and went." Back in chapter 18, God tells Abraham that God is going to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because of their grave sin, and Abraham tries to talk God out of it! He goes back and forth with God: "If I can find 50 righteous people there, will you spare the cities? What if I find 45 righteous people? What about 40? What about 30? What about 20? What about 10?" And each time, God agrees to it. Abraham spends more time and energy bargaining over the lives of *guilty people* that he *does not know* than he does for his own son, who has done *nothing wrong*.

Did Abraham *know* that God would not actually make him go through with this? And if he *did* know that, was that *really* a test of Abraham's faithfulness? In the New Testament book of Hebrews, it talks about all these examples of Abraham's faithfulness, and at one point it says, "By faith Abraham, when put to the

test, offered up Isaac...He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead.” Well, we have no evidence in the story itself that Abraham considered this. It’s a part of the ancient oral tradition surrounding this story. But is that just a way to make it more palatable for ourselves? “Oh, Abraham knew that God would raise Isaac from the dead.” Did he? Because that had never happened before.

Abraham is standing there with the knife raised, ready to kill his son, when an angel of the Lord says, “Stop! Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son from me.” *Now* you know? You didn’t know that Abraham feared God when God told him to leave his home and travel 400 miles to a place he had never been before, and he *went*? You didn’t know when you told him to send away Hagar and Ishmael, and he *did it*?

And that’s another thing. Three times in this story, God refers to “your son, your *only* son, Isaac.” Except he *wasn’t*. Abraham had *another* son – Ishmael. And while God had promised that God’s covenant would be carried on through *Isaac*, not Ishmael, God *also* said that Ishmael would be made into a great nation, because he is *also* Abraham’s offspring. But now it seems like we’re just ignoring the fact that Abraham *does* have another son, writing him out of the narrative wholesale.

At the end of the story, God says to Abraham, “Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you and make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sand on the seashore, and by your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.” But God had *already* promised to do this, *multiple times* before now. In chapter 12, when God first calls Abraham. Again in chapter 13. Twice in chapter 15. Chapter 17. Chapter 18. And chapter 21. Seven times God reiterates the promise to bless Abraham and make him the father of a great nation and bless all the other

nations of the earth through him. Did God not mean it the other times? *Only now* has Abraham truly proven himself faithful?

You see, there are *all kinds* of problems in this story. What can we possibly learn from this? That God will ask us to do unspeakably horrible things, and we should *do them* to prove our faithfulness? That God tests us to see if we really are faithful? What about *God's* faithfulness? God can make a promise to Abraham seven times, but he still has to *prove himself* in order to earn it? This story seems to raise more questions than it provides answers. What do we *do* with this?

As Christians, we cannot make sense out of this story apart from Jesus. It's not that this story is *predicting* Jesus. But that we, who live in the light of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ *look back* and see how this story is *fulfilled* in Jesus. This story is *made complete* in Jesus. Only by looking at Jesus can we look back and say, "Oh, okay! That makes more sense now!" So how does Jesus help us understand this story?

Well, it starts off with a big flashing red light for us. God says to Abraham, "Take your son, *your only son* Isaac, whom you love...and offer him as a burnt offering." Where have we heard *that* kind of language before? Jesus is God's only Son. John 3:16 famously says it, "For God so loved the world that he gave his *only Son*, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." In the first chapter of John's gospel, in talking about Jesus it says, "It is God the *only Son*, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made God known" to us. In the first letter of John, which we read earlier as the Affirmation of Faith, John writes, "God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his *only Son* into the world, so that we might live through him." It is not about Abraham or us having to sacrifice *our* sons anymore. God's only Son Jesus Christ has become the sacrifice *for us*.

As Abraham and Isaac are going to the mountain where God told him to do this, it says that “Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife, and the two of them walked on together.” Isaac was made to carry the very wood on which he would be sacrificed. Just like *Jesus* was made to carry the wood on which *he* would be sacrificed – the *cross*. Jesus is forced by the Roman soldiers to carry the cross on which he will be crucified, until he can’t carry it anymore. And then a man named Simon of Cyrene is made to *help* him carry it. In the same way, Jesus calls *us* to bear the cross, too. Multiple times in the gospels, Jesus says, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” “Whoever does not bear his own cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” Following Jesus does not assure us of an easy life free from pain and suffering. It is a call to *bear* the suffering of the world, as Christ did; to *enter into it* so that we might help *transform* suffering into salvation.

As they are walking along, Isaac says to Abraham, “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” To which Abraham says, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering.” And God *did*. Not just for Isaac at the end of *this* story, but for *us* in *Jesus*. When Jesus is first starting out in his ministry, John the Baptist says of him, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” When the people of Israel had to atone for their sins, one of the things they would do is sacrifice a lamb. But *before* they would sacrifice it, they would press their hands on the animal’s head while reciting an audible confession of their sins. Some theologians talk about this as a way of transferring *their* sin to the lamb. The lamb would then be killed while bearing their sin. In the same way, Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, took on *our* sin, the sin of the world, in his crucifixion and asked God to forgive us. The Lamb of God bore our sin and was sacrificed for our forgiveness. Just like Abraham told Isaac, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering,” God provided the lamb that would be sacrificed for *us* in Jesus Christ.

The place that Abraham and Isaac went to do this was a mountain in the land of Moriah. While we don't know *exactly* where that is, it has been associated with a place called *Mount Moriah*. Mount Moriah is what we know today as the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. In the book of 2 Chronicles it says, "Solomon began to build the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem, on Mount Moriah." The Temple is where sacrifices would be made to the Lord to atone for sin. What Abraham and Isaac did was the *first* sacrifice on that spot. And *Jesus* is the *final* sacrifice; the *ultimate* sacrifice. The New Testament book of Hebrews says that we have been sanctified or made holy through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all; that Christ offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, and that by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified, so that there is no longer any need for sin offerings or sacrifices.

That is why we do not have an *altar*, we have a *table*. An *altar* is where sacrifices are made. We don't *need* to make any more sacrifices to atone for our sin. Jesus has already done that for us. A *table* is where you sit and eat with a friend. When Jesus is at table with his disciples, he says, "I no longer call you servants but friends." And *at* this table, we share in the bread and the cup, the broken body and shed blood of Christ, through which we are forgiven.

So we are not called to make sacrifices for sin anymore. Because *God* made the *ultimate* sacrifice for sin in Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, the only Son of God. God does not *demand* sacrifices from us. God *became* the sacrifice for us. When we look back at this story of Abraham and Isaac in light of the death and resurrection of Jesus, we see that it is not about the sacrifices that *we* make. It is about the sacrifice that *God* made *for us*.

That is where we find *love* in this story. It is unthinkable to us that Abraham would sacrifice his son. We can't imagine having to do that. We probably *wouldn't* do that. But God *did*. Because that's how great God's love for us is. God did not want sin or *anything* to keep us from God. So God's only Son Jesus

was sacrificed so that we could be *at one* with God now and forever. We struggle to imagine doing this, but God did it for us.

And this sacrifice, this atonement was not just for the people of Israel. Like God promises to Abraham at the end of this story, “by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.” If we trace the family tree of Abraham and Isaac all the way down, we get to Jesus. Jesus is the offspring of Abraham. And Jesus took the covenant that God made with Abraham and opened it up to the whole world. So the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is not just confined to a particular group of people. *Salvation* is not just confined to a particular group of people. Jesus has opened it up so that *everyone* can know God and experience God’s love and forgiveness and grace and peace.

In Jesus’ death on a cross, you have already been forgiven. You don’t have to do anything to earn it. All you have to do is *live into it*. And here’s the irony. Because living into the salvation of God in Jesus Christ means that we have to make sacrifices. Not *so that* we will be forgiven but *because* we are forgiven. And not burnt offerings. We are called to sacrifice the things in our lives that keep us from loving God and our neighbor and living life fully with them.

Sometimes we have to sacrifice our comfort and safety and security if that keeps us from really following Jesus and loving God and loving our neighbor.

Sometimes we have to make sacrifices of time for God and other people.

Sometimes we have to sacrifice habits or addictions that keep us from God and our neighbor.

Sometimes we have to sacrifice control over our own lives or other people; our will and our plans, because God has something else in mind for us, something that we can't see yet is *better*.

Sometimes we have to sacrifice our egos and pride.

Sometimes we have to sacrifice our *certainty* and our sense of what is right, because God is showing us something *new*.

We have to sacrifice anger and grudges that keep us from loving and forgiving other people as *we* are loved and forgiven.

Like Abraham was called to let go of Isaac, this person who meant the most to him, sometimes *we* are called to let go of the things that mean the most to *us*; the things that we think we can't live without. Sometimes we have to sacrifice the things that provide us with a sense of fulfillment and purpose and security and love, so that we can truly rely on God to provide those things for us. And God *does* provide. That is ultimately what this story teaches us. God provided for *Abraham*. God provided for *Jesus*. And God provides for *us*. So we don't have to hold on to our lives or to the things that we think mean the most to us. No matter what we have to let go of, no matter what we have to sacrifice, we can trust that God will provide a way for God's blessing and promise to keep going. *That* is where we find *love* in this story. The love that God has for *us*, in Jesus Christ. Amen.