

Genesis 22: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Genesis chapter 22 And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and rose and went to the place of which God had told him.

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 and come again to you.

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.

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?

Abraham said, God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son. They went both of them together. 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.

[1 : 3 4] Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, Abraham, Abraham. And he said, Here I am.

He said, Do not lay your hand on the boy nor do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.

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.

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. And the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven and said, By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, 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. And in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice. So Abraham returned to his young men and they arose and went together to Beersheba.

[2 : 5 4] And Abraham lived at Beersheba. Now after these things it was told to Abraham, Behold, Milcah also has borne children to your brother Nahor, Az his firstborn, Buzz his brother, Chemuel the father of Aram, Chesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlaf and Bethuel.

Bethuel fathered Rebekah. These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham's brother. Moreover, his concubine, whose name was Rumah, bore Teber, Geham, Tehash, Amarachah.

The story of Genesis chapter 22, The Binding of Isaac, is perhaps one of the most poignant yet pregnant stories of the Old Testament. It is an event that is profoundly troubling, that has inspired some of the deepest ethical reflection, a lot of outrage and scandal from various people.

How can God ask Abraham to sacrifice his son? How can Abraham be praised for seemingly going through to the extent that he does with God's command? And these are questions that we might ponder as we go through this chapter.

The chapter begins with the statement, After these things, 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.

[4 : 20] In chapter 12, when Abraham is first called, we read, Now the Lord said to Abraham, Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.

The similarity should be immediately noticeable. God sends Abraham forth from the land of Ur of Chaldees to a land that he will show him, and he sends Abraham forth to a mountain that he will show him.

In the first case, he's called to sacrifice his past, his connection with his father's house, his land, his kindred. And in the second case, he's asked to surrender his future, the son that all his hopes and legacy depends upon.

God is testing Abraham in both of these cases. According to traditional Jewish numbering, the first account is the first test of ten that Abraham receives, and the final account is the final of the ten tests that Abraham receives.

These are events that define Abraham's life, both the sacrifice of his past and the sacrifice of his future. We've already noted in chapter 21 that there are a great many similarities between the sending out of Ishmael and the seeming sacrifice of Isaac.

[5 : 37] One lad parallels the other. Their identities are entwined. There are parallels with the Exodus narrative and connections with the Exodus narrative in both occasions. And together, they might relate to the ritual of the Day of Atonement.

When we're reading these stories then, we're dealing with something that has to do with the deep structure of Scripture. And there are echoes and resonances throughout the Old Testament that connect to these events.

And as we read the story of the cross, we're reading a story that has all sorts of resonances with the events that we see in this chapter in the story of Abraham and Isaac, the one sacrificing his son.

The story hinges in many ways upon the key expression, the key term that plays throughout the story. Hineni, the here I am answer that is given on a number of occasions.

God calls to Abraham and Abraham's response is, Here I am. Then we see Isaac speaking to Abraham, his father, and his father answers, Here I am.

[6 : 40] And then the angel of the Lord calls from heaven and says, Abraham, Abraham. And Abraham says, Here I am. The economy of the brushstrokes in the narrative of this account add considerably to its power.

We read the conversation between Abraham and Isaac, for instance. Isaac speaks to his father, 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? Abraham said, God will provide for himself a lamb for a burnt offering, my son. So they went both of them together.

And that silence that follows is one of the most powerful and poignant aspects of the story. The son seems to know what's going on. He seems to have a sense that something's amiss.

There is one thing that they need that they do not have. All the other things that will enable them to burn up and prepare the sacrifice are there, except the sacrifice itself. And he realizes, presumably, that his father knows something that he does not.

[7 : 44] His father is bearing a deep burden that he is not yet privy to. And the response of Abraham is again to make known his presence to his son.

Very interesting contrast with the story of Hagar. Hagar sees her son about to die and distances herself from him, going off at a bow shot so that she will not have to see him die.

But Abraham's response to his son is to say, Here I am. Just as he says to God later on, there's no departure from his son or emotional distancing. He's present with his son, even as he's bringing him to the point of sacrifice.

A very powerful part of the story. The emotional power of the narrative is also underlined with the threefold repetition at the original command.

Take now your son, the first description. Your only son, Isaac, the second description. Whom you love, third description. And each one of these is an accumulation of the weight of the action that Abraham is being called to do.

[8 : 45] It would seem that this is the one thing that he could never sacrifice. In the earlier part of the story, in Genesis chapter 12, there is a threefold repetition of him having to leave behind his father's house, his kindred, his land.

But this is a far more weighty, threefold, intensified statement. We should consider what has happened in the story to this point. In the first few chapters of Abraham's narrative, it would seem that Lot was the heir apparent.

He was the son of Abraham's brother, the one who had died, and he would be the one that would continue Abraham's name. But yet, Lot leaves him, divides from him in chapter 13.

In chapter 14, even though he's rescued by Abraham, he goes off his own way. In chapter 19, he ends up living in a cave in the mountains, and there's no hope for Lot at that point, really.

We see, then, Ishmael has gone. In chapter 16, Ishmael comes on the scene, the child of Hagar, and in chapter 21, he has to be cast out.

[9 : 48] Eliezer is not going to be the one who inherits. He's just a man from the house, a home-born slave, as we see in chapter 15. Isaac, his only son, that is the one, however, that God calls for him to sacrifice.

And the request is devastating for this reason. His whole narrative to this point has been one lost hope after another, leading to this great promised son.

All his expectations and hopes and everything else is resting upon this child. Think about what else he represents. He is the promised child given to Sarah.

How could Abraham ever relate to his wife again after this? How could he relate to the Lord if the Lord required from him this son that he has given? Abraham has negotiated or interacted with God on earlier occasions, such as in chapter 18.

In chapter 18, God talks to Abraham concerning what he's about to do, and Abraham at that point intercedes and deliberates with God. But here in this chapter, there seems to be a more absolute command.

[10 : 54] He has to obey this. He has to go through with it. God doesn't seem to be setting things up for a negotiation and a discussion. And for Abraham to go through with this, there needs to be an absolute sense of loyalty to God.

But not just loyalty to God. This text sets up the emotional weight of what's taking place. God is not unmindful of the weight that he's putting upon Abraham. And the subtlety and the attention with which the emotional dimensions of the event are described suggests that it's important.

It's important that Abraham is able to say, here I am, to his son, and truly mean it. That he's not forsaken his son. He's not just closing himself off to his son.

But yet, to do that, he has to have an absolute confidence in God's promise, in God's commitment, in God's goodness. And at many times, we may find ourselves in the darkness of a decision, in wrestling through some issues, just not knowing how can God be good and yet lay this burden upon us.

Or how can God be true and yet this thing or this statement also be true. And that wrestling with God in the darkness is something where we find Abraham really providing a pattern for us to follow.

[12 : 14] Within the New Testament, in the book of Hebrews, we are told that Abraham was confident that God would even raise Isaac up from the dead. He had received Isaac as if he were from the dead and now he hopes that whatever he does with his son, that God will fulfil his promise whatever it takes.

God had promised that in Isaac your seed will be called. And so, he could account that God was able to raise him up even from the dead because he had received Isaac as if he were from the dead in the first place.

Now that's one suggestion of how to read the text. He expects that God is telling him to go through with the action and as he goes through with it, God will be faithful to his promise even to that uttermost position.

God was symbolised in that flaming torch and furnace that went through the pieces and the promise was there that God would be cut off, that God would be cut up into pieces in the same way if he did not keep his covenant.

And so, he has to fulfil what he has promised to Abraham. And even if that requires the raising of Isaac from the dead, God will do it. And so, Abraham's confidence is one that occurs even in the midst of deep blindness.

[13 : 31] He does not know where God is leading. He cannot see the way he will go. He cannot see a route through this. But he's confident in God's provision. And he answers to his son, My son, God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering.

There may be a sort of double entendre here that what may be provided for the burnt offering is the son himself. My son, God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering.

That it's the son that's going to be provided. And he's not just addressing the son but rather it is the son who will be the provision that God gives. As we read this story alongside other stories in scripture, I think we can see further things taking place.

The story of the Shunammite woman, for instance, in 2 Kings chapter 4 involves a woman being given a child in her old age according to the messenger of God that visits her.

And there are so many linguistic and other parallels with the story of the promise of the birth of Isaac. But then the child dies. And the woman saddles her donkey, goes out early in the morning, sees the mountain afar off, lays the wood, the staff, upon the child.

[14 : 42] And then later on there is the prophet and the child being joined together as the prophet lies down on the child in a way that creates some connection between the two. And the woman receives her child back.

She was given the child by promise and when the child is lost she insists that God give the child back. And that is something that I think will help us to read this chapter to understand that there is a reason justice by which Abraham and Sarah could appeal for their child back, could appeal for Isaac to be restored to them even if he were killed.

At this point in the story it's likely that Isaac is in his 30s. He's going along with it. He's not just someone who is being forced to do this. He's not going to be tied to that altar without his own will being involved.

He submits. He is a son who follows with his father who does not rebel against his father's call. And this is one of the powerful aspects of the story and helps us to understand what we see in the New Testament.

The relationship between the father and the son in the death of Christ. Christ is the one who willingly accepts the will of his father. He struggles with it, the cup that's given to him, yet declares yet not my will but yours be done.

[16 : 00] And that submission to the will of his father, the loyalty, the trusting that God will raise him up, that God is faithful even at the point of deepest darkness and death. When God seems to come as an enemy, that is the confidence that we see in the story of Abraham and Isaac and the confidence that we see in the story of Jesus Christ.

Abraham's confidence that God will provide is something that leads to the naming of the place later on when God does in fact provide. A ram caught in the thicket by its horns. He goes and takes the ram, offers it as a burnt offering instead of his son.

Abraham. And here I think that God's intervention should not be read as a statement that human sacrifice is wrong. That's how many people read it but that's not actually what follows.

God says, now I know that you fear me. He doesn't say, you should never have done this. I would never have required this of you. Rather, this is a movement into a deeper relationship between Abraham and God.

Abraham has related to God as a friend. He has related to God in hospitality for instance by his faithfulness in building up the name of others in elevating the name of God in establishing sites of worship in the land.

[17 : 12] But now there is something here that goes further. He enters into a greater fearing of God an awe and a reverence of God seen in his submission to God's will even in the deepest darkness even when he does not know where it will lead him.

And this is part of what I think is emerging through Abraham's test. This is the result that we will see at the end. And God sees at this point. God provides.

Maybe remembering Hagar at this point and the way that she speaks of God in chapter 16 would be helpful. This mount is a significant place. Why this particular mount?

I believe because it's the temple mount. It's the mount upon which all sacrifices will occur. Later on in 2 Chronicles 3 verse 1 Solomon builds the house of the Lord at Jerusalem on Mount Moriah where the Lord had appeared to his father David at the place that David had prepared on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite.

So this is a place where many things had occurred. It's the place where Abraham sacrificed Isaac. It's the place where the angel of God stayed his hand of judgment in his judgment after the census of David.

[18 : 25] It's a significant site then and it is the foundation of the sacrificial system more generally. Part of its deeper meaning. What is ultimately being sacrificed at this site?

Not just animals. What's being sacrificed is the son. The future. The identity. The people of Israel are sacrificing themselves. And the sacrificing of the firstborn son.

The only son. The only begotten son. is something that is connected with the event of the exodus as well. As there is the setting apart of the firstborn through that.

And so all these deep themes of Israel's worship of its temple are found present in this event. This is the event that provides the source of these later systems.

And every one of these later sacrifices draws our attention back to that sacrifice at the past. Now it also draws our attention forward to the sacrifice of the future.

[19 : 26] If it is the father Abraham sacrificing his only begotten son that the whole sacrificial system looks back to, it is the sacrifice of Christ as the son of the father that is everything that it looks forward to.

Caught between these two great covenantal events, the sacrificial system takes its significance meaning. Many people read this story as if it were just sacrifice narrowly averted.

But something more is taking place here. There is a substitution of a ram, but there is a genuine sacrifice occurring here. The blessing that comes afterwards is a blessing that amplifies the previous blessings.

It's a statement that because Abraham has obeyed God's voice, he has heard and obeyed and submitted to the word of the Lord, he has feared the Lord, that God has claimed him on a deeper level.

In this sacrifice of his son, Abraham is giving himself to God in a new way. It's a child that is being given again to God after he has been given in the first place.

[20 : 36] And maybe an example of this can be seen in the story of Samuel. The child that is received by grace as the womb is opened and then the child that is given to God and Isaac is given to God here.

Abraham is dedicating as it were in this sacrifice all of his offspring to God. God claims Abraham's son for his own.

In the story of the Exodus, we're told that Israel is my firstborn son. That statement that God makes concerning Israel I think is founded in part upon what takes place here.

Israel is God's firstborn son as Abraham gave up his son to God. God's name, God's claim is placed upon this child above Abraham's own.

There's a way in which this child now bears the name of God in a way that he did not before. It's a new sense of that child's identity. He's ascended to God and God takes Israel as his inheritance.

[21 : 39] They are his people. They belong to him. They have been dedicated to him. Not merely by claiming them for himself but by Abraham's willing giving up of his son. This then is an absolutely foundational event for all that follows.

And ultimately all sacrifice is human sacrifice. We offer up ourselves in worship. We offer our bodies as a living sacrifice singular all together bringing ourselves together in the body of Christ.

And that is what Paul talks about in Romans chapter 12. It's founded upon the offering of Christ and then it looks back to the offering of Isaac. These stories are all bound together in a deep logic of sacrifice that we should never forget.

That sacrifice is always ultimately human sacrifice. We belong to God. We offer ourselves up to God. Whether in symbols or whether in other ways.

In baptism for instance our bodies are sacrificed to God. They're washed as the sacrifices were washed. Our members and our limbs and organs like sacrifices cut up.

[22 : 46] They belong to God now. We are set apart as the temple of the Holy Spirit. As we descend from Mount Moriah with Abraham and his son we should come away from it with a profound realization of what the fear of the Lord means.

Of what the logic of sacrifice points towards. and ultimately of what occurs in Christ. Something to meditate upon.

This chapter ends with Abraham receiving the news of children being born to Nahor, his brother, by Milcah. Milcah was the daughter of the dead brother Haran and also some children by the concubine and Four children by the concubine,!

Eight children by his wife. We can see this pattern elsewhere in Genesis where the wife has twice as many children as the concubine. Altogether this makes twelve children of Nahor.

What are we to make of this? Abraham will one day have twelve tribes descending from him. Ishmael will be the father of twelve princes. What are we to make of the fact that Nahor receives twelve offspring a generation before Abraham's line does?

[24 : 03] ■