



Genesis 22:1-19

Isaac's Substitute Lamb

Genesis 22 is a picture of bold faith in action. The supreme test of Abraham resulted in the supreme triumph of faith in God.

The Jewish tradition calls the story in Genesis 22 the "Binding of Isaac," and the writer of Hebrews refers to Abraham's faith that God could raise *Isaac*, implying Abraham's faith that God could raise *the dead*.

All of the promises God made to Abraham depended on the survival of the promised son (Genesis 12:7; 13:15; 17:9; 18:10, 14; 21:1-12). Ishmael and any other sons of Abraham did not count (21:8-13). The covenant promise was clearly stated to Abraham that "through the line of Isaac your posterity shall be traced" (v. 12, NEB). Isaac was exclusive and unique as far as the covenant was concerned. The fulfillment of God's promises depended on Isaac's survival. If Isaac was to die, how could these promises be fulfilled? The extinction of Abraham's seed, Isaac, would be the end of the promise in Genesis 12:1-3. But as we shall see in Genesis 22 Abraham had no doubt that God required the sacrifice of the son of promise. How then could Abraham reconcile the promises of God and the command of God to put him to death? For Abraham, the problem is not really his, but God's so he decided to trust Him.

Abraham had waited a long time for the son of the promise. When he was finally born, Isaac was nothing short of a miracle. He was born to Abraham and Sarah when it was humanly impossible for them to have children because of their age. Abraham was one hundred years old, and Sarah wasn't too far behind!

Moreover, all of the great promises God had given Abraham were linked to the son of promise. God would make Abraham into a great nation and "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3).

Could Abraham's love for that son crowd aside his love for the LORD God? As Isaac grew into manhood, Abraham would have been increasingly attached to this special son. Would he love his son of the promise more than his God?

The "Binding of Isaac"

When Abraham was 115 years old and Isaac was a mature young man, "the One true personal God," *Ha Elohim*, tested his servant. He said to Abraham, "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you" (Genesis 22:2).

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God's message was specific. There was no doubt as to whom God meant when He said, "Your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac." Not Ishmael, but Isaac, is clearly indicated.

I doubt if Abraham slept much that night. He had a personal intimate walk with God. He had claimed by faith the great promises God had made to him. This was an agonizing decision. The Hebrews always considered human sacrifice wrong. Neither Abraham nor his community practiced human sacrifices.

Therefore, how could a holy God ask for a human sacrifice? God was asking Abraham to give a *spiritual* sacrifice of his promised son. God asked him to give back the gift which He had made possible. The emphasis on the spiritual sacrifice is made clear by the fact that God Himself prevented the completion of the physical sacrifice.

The sacrifice itself places emphasis on complete surrender to God. Abraham is to give Isaac back to the LORD without any reservations.

"God put Abraham to the test." This is the "supreme test and the supreme victory." The test originated with the one true personal God (*Ha Elohim*).

Abraham responded quickly to God's call for absolute obedience. Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and woke up Isaac and two of his servants. They piled wood on the donkey for a burnt offering and began their slow three-day walk.

When they arrived at the foot of the mountain God had chosen Abraham parted company with the servants. By faith, he told the servants, "stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go yonder; 'and we shall worship and we shall return to you'" (v. 5). Then he and Isaac walked on alone. It was a statement of faith, "Accounting that God is able to raise up, even from the dead" (Hebrews 11:19). He was arguing with himself, literally, "considering" and coming to a definite conclusion. He was saying I will obey regardless of the cost. He believed that God's promise could not fail.

"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 the two of them walked on together. Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." And he said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" (vv. 6-7).

God will provide.

Abraham responded, "God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together" (v. 8).

This is the high water-mark of Genesis 22, and the climax of Abraham's life of faith in God.

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"God will provide." "God will provide for Himself." "God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." Faith talks. I think it was talking a lot as they walked together. Abraham is confident that the LORD God knows what He is doing. He will provide His own lamb in due time.

When they arrived at the place for the sacrifice Abraham built the altar, arranged the wood, and bound his son, Isaac, and laid him on the altar on top of the wood (v. 9). Note the complete confidence and submission of Isaac to his father. He has confidence in his father, and an understanding of his father's love and faith in Yahweh. It is an act of supreme faith Isaac has in God, too. It echoes with the confidence of another son who prayed, "Not my will, Thy will be done." "God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering my son" must have echoed in the minds and hearts of both father and son.

Abraham stretched out his hand, and took the long sharp knife and raised it slowly above his head. Just as his arm began the downward descent in a swift movement toward Isaac there was an urgent shout from "the angel of the LORD" saying, "Abraham, Abraham!" (vv. 10-11). The urgency restrained him on the spot. There had been complete surrender and submission to the will of God. Abraham was obedient and had walked by faith trusting God completely. Abraham put God first in his life and love. He would let nothing stand between himself and God (Deut. 6:4-5; Matt. 6:33).

The angel of the Lord said to him, "Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me. Then Abraham raised his eyes and looked, and behold, behind *him* a ram caught in the thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram and offered him up for a burnt offering in the place of his son" (v. 12-13). "The angel of Yahweh" is the divine person who later assumed the form of man (cf. Gen. 16:7-11; 21:17). God provided the lamb in place of Isaac.

Abraham called the place, *Yahweh-jireh*. It means, Yahweh sees, or Yahweh provides, it shall be provided. Yahweh sees and provides. "The LORD will provide" (v. 14). That mountain became a testimony. Every time someone passed by it he said, "In the mount of the LORD it will be seen and provided."

Isaac's Substitute

This mountain later became the site of the Temple and the center of Israel's sacrificial worship (2 Chron. 3:1). The very heart of Israel's religion centered in the Temple on Mt. Moriah. However, these animal sacrifices were only a shadow of something to come; they were not the Lamb of God (Heb. 10:4). God commanded animal sacrifices to teach His people the principle of substitution so that in due time He would provide the perfect substitutionary atonement for our sins.

Another son of the promise came to that mountain two thousand years later, but there was no substitute lamb for Him because He was the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

God provided the lamb for the burnt offering. God alone can supply that which will satisfy His holy demands. Nothing on the part of man can meet the Divine requirements of a righteous God. God did what sinful man can never do. God supplied the perfect Lamb for the substitutionary atoning sacrifice for sin (cf. Ex. 12; Isa. 53:6-7). The claims of Divine holiness and justice were perfectly met in the atoning death of Jesus Christ that God "might be just, and the justifier of him who believes in Jesus" (Romans 3:26).

The Hebrew scholars Keil and Delitzsch note "in the fullness of time, God the Father gave up His only-begotten Son as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, that by this one true sacrifice the shadows of the typical sacrifices might be rendered both real and true." Moreover, God spared not His only Son, but gave Him up to the real death, which Isaac suffered only in spirit, that we might die with Christ

spiritually, and rise with Him to everlasting life (Rom. 8:32; 5:6-8).

God's own Son was also lifted up on "the mount of the LORD" and became our substitute. "They took Jesus, therefore, and He went out, bearing His own cross, to the place called the Place of a Skull, which is called in Hebrew, Golgotha. There they crucified Him, and with Him two other men, one on either side, and Jesus in between" (John 19:17-18).

Indeed, Jesus said, "For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again. No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father" (John 10:17-18).

The only sacrifice God accepts for our sin is the sacrifice that He has provided. Abraham's near sacrifice of his son Isaac was a prophecy of the actual sacrifice by God of His Son, Jesus Christ.

That day the lamb became Isaac's substitute. God rescued Isaac with a substitute ram. Our substitute saved us from the penalty of the wages of sin. The Apostle Paul wrote, "He (God) made Him (Jesus) who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21). That is also the way Peter understood it. "He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed" (2 Peter 2:24). See also John 3:16; Romans 3:21-26; 4:4, 25; 5:6, 8, 15; 6:8-10; 8:32; 1 John 3:16; 4:9-10.

Abraham learned that in His perfect timing, God would see and provide His own Son as a substitute to die for our salvation.

"By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; it was he to whom it was said, 'In Isaac your descendants shall be called.' He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type" (Hebrews 11:17-19).

Genesis 22:5 is a strong affirmation of faith in a time of testing. "Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go yonder; and we will worship and return to you." "We shall worship and we shall return to you." Abraham believed in God's ability to raise the dead. He could trust God to solve His own problem as to His promises and His command to sacrifice Isaac. "We will return back to you." The simplest meaning of Abraham's words is that he fully expected to come back with Isaac. How is it possible if Isaac is offered up as a burnt-offering? It was possible only if Isaac was to be raised from the dead after being sacrificed. That is the clear understanding of the writer of the book of Hebrews. Abraham's faith reasoned that the fulfillment of the promises depended on Isaac's survival, and since God was bound to them, He would restore Isaac's life. Evidently for Abraham, the resurrection of Isaac was no great thing. Since God created him, He could raise him from the dead. The author of Hebrews says Abraham received Isaac back from the dead, "in a figure," meaning in a manner that prefigured the resurrection of Christ.

Isaac is therefore a type of Christ's substitutionary atonement for sin. Early Christians treated the sacrifice of Isaac as a detailed parable of the sacrifice of Christ." For Irenaeus and many other early Christian writers, Isaac carrying the wood is a type of Christ carrying His cross to Golgotha. Isaac was figuratively speaking dead, or as good as dead. It was as though Isaac really had died and had been raised up to life again. It is not surprising that from the earliest times this event has been seen by the church as parabolic or typical of the death and resurrection of Christ.

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John Calvin said interestingly, "Isaac is not to be thought of as simply one of the common company of men, but as one who contained Christ in himself."

The key to Genesis 22 is the fact that "Abraham accounted that God was able to raise Isaac back from the dead." Abraham trusted God believing he would see God perform a miracle and raise Isaac from the dead. The son must live or God would be found a liar. There is no contradiction in God. The one, clear, logical conclusion is that God is going to raise Isaac from the dead.

The Puritan theologian John Owen wrote: "The ultimate object of Abraham's faith was the power of God. Abraham firmly believed . . . the resurrection from the dead. This was we see clearly from what is said of him in this text. Abraham still firmly believed the accomplishment of the great promise, although he could not discern the way whereby it would be fulfilled. Abraham reasoned within himself as to how the power of God would fulfill the promise, and he accounted that if there were no other way, yet after he had slain Isaac, and burnt him to ashes, God could raise him again from the dead."

From that experience, Abraham had a clearer understanding of God's eternal plan of redemption. In the substitutionary ram was prefigured the work of the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world. Abraham's experience foreshadowed Christ's atoning death and anticipated His victorious resurrection.

Hebrews 11:19 tells us Abraham "considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type." The author of Hebrews regarded the incident as a *type* (*en parabole*) of the violent death and resurrection of Christ. The sacrifice of Isaac was a type of our Lord's crucifixion. This ancient patriarch's faith was able to reach the wonderful heights of the resurrection and for this reason Isaac was restored to him as one from the dead. Isaac was as a type of the death and resurrection of the Son of God who was not spared His life (cf. Rom. 8:32; Jn. 8:56).

Perhaps Abraham understood better than we realize the wonder of the Lord's provision when he said, "in the mount of the LORD, He will appear." Jesus told the Pharisees gathered about him, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw *it* and was glad" (John 8:56). And we are, too!

Abraham had desired to see "the day of Christ." He had the privilege to stand on Mount Moriah, the same spot later called Calvary. He saw the day of Christ —the day of His extreme humiliation and extreme exhalation. He saw the day clearly.

F. B. Meyer said, "There is only one scene in history by which it is surpassed: that where the Great Father gave His Isaac to a death from which there was no deliverance."

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Wil is a graduate of William Carey College, B. A.; New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, Th. M.; and Azusa Pacific University, M. A. He has pastored in Panama, Ecuador and the U. S, and served for over 20 years as missionary in Ecuador and Honduras. He had a daily expository Bible teaching ministry head in over 100 countries for ten years. He continues to seek opportunities to be personally involved in world missions. Wil and his wife Ann have three grown daughters. He currently serves as a Baptist pastor and teaches seminary extension courses in Honduras.

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