



THE ULTIMATE SACRIFICE

SERIES: THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS

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Genesis 22:1-19

15th Message

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Mountain climbing is one of my passions. I am drawn by the lofty heights of peaks that seem to touch the heavens. The climb can be dangerous, but taking in the view is enough to make me forget the danger. When I was nineteen, I hiked to the base camp of the Matterhorn, in the Swiss Alps. My sense of excitement was tempered when a graveyard came into view. Buried there were the bodies of the many climbers who had not conquered the mountain but had been conquered by it.

In our studies in the life of Abraham today we will ascend a far more dangerous mountain. The patriarch will take us up the treacherous slopes of Moriah, an arduous journey for a man who was old enough to be retired. Yet, Moriah will prove be the summit of his devotion to God. Israel's destiny will be shaped by what will happen there. In our text from Genesis 22 we will discover what supreme devotion to God looks like.

I. God's Terrible Request (Genesis 22:1-2)

Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." (Gen 22:1, NASB)

Considerable time has elapsed since Abraham sent Ishmael and Hagar off to the desert. Once more now, God speaks to Abraham. We know from the outset that what God is about to ask of him is merely a test designed to find out what lies within his heart (Dt 8:2). Though this softens the full impact of God's horrific command for us, it certainly doesn't for Abraham. He will embark on a journey that will rip his heart open. In typical fashion, he responds with that obedient servant's ready reply, "*Hinenni*" ("Here am I," or, "Behold me"). His keen expression of availability will expose him to a vulnerability heretofore unknown to man.

And He said, "Take now your son, your only son, the one 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." (22:2)

The English translation misses some of the subtle nuances of the original. God's request opens with the polite "*please take.*" This is very unusual for a divine command. It is a "hint that the LORD appreciates the costliness of what he is asking."¹ The fourfold description of Isaac is dense with emotion. The rabbi Rashi beautifully captures the resonance of Abraham's inner dialogue as he contemplates each term:

'Your son.' He said to Him, 'I have two sons.' He said to him, *'Your only one.'* He said, 'This one is an only one to his mother and this one is an only one to his mother.' He said to him, *'Whom you love.'* He said to him, "I love both of them." He said to him, *'Isaac.'*²

Once there is no doubt concerning whom he is referring to, God issues the command, "*Go by yourself.*" This was God's original command spoken to Abraham decades earlier on the occasion when he asked him to leave everything familiar — father, family, and country — in order to worship God in a new land. Those same feelings reemerge now as Abraham is asked to take this very boy whom he had placed all his hopes in and go to the land of Moriah, where he is to worship God on a mountain to be specified later.

Moriah is near Jerusalem. The very mention of its name gives the first hint that God may intervene in the story. Alter states, "There is an assonance between 'Moriah' and *yir'eh*, 'he sees,' the thematic key word of the resolution of the story."³ Some versions paraphrase Moriah as the "land of vision." But again, this subtlety is lost on Abraham, who can only feel the sheer gravity of God's request. Once they arrive in that place, Isaac is to be offered as a burnt offering.

The burnt offering normally consisted of a sheep or a bull. After it was cut in pieces it was placed on an altar, to be consumed by fire. The Hebrew term '*olah*' comes from the verb "to ascend," signifying the whole sacrifice is consumed by fire and thus "*goes up*" in smoke. It was an apt symbol to express one's complete dependence on God. But placing those two terms, Isaac and '*olah*,' together is beyond comprehension. Thus we can appreciate the horror descending on Abraham as he tries to come to grips with what "*complete dependence*" means. As the poet explains, "In the twinkling of an eye dawn can go dark."⁴

II. The Journey to Moriah (Genesis 22:3-10)

A. The Morning Departure (22:3)

So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and Isaac his son; and he split wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. (22:3)

In typical fashion, Abraham does not debate or delay when obedience is demanded. Early in the morning he rises and prepares for the painful departure. We don't know his inner feelings, but the brief details of his actions betray something of his confused state of mind. Gathering all that he needs for the trip, donkey, servants, and son, Isaac's name is mentioned last, "thus sharpening the edge of anguish that runs through the tale."⁵ Abraham's swinging an axe and cutting things apart draws out our deepest fears. Finally, the fact that he cuts the wood after saddling his donkey shows his torn state of mind. As Wenham remarks, "Is he so bemused that he cannot think straight. Is he quite collectedly trying to keep everybody in the dark about the purpose of the journey till the last possible mo-

ment, or is he trying to postpone the most painful part of the preparation till last?"⁶ Whatever his state of his mind, we are awed that Abraham simply did as he was told.

B. Separation at the Foot of the Mountain (22:4-5)

On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from a distance. And Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go yonder; and we will worship and return to you." (22:4,5)

Abraham treks for three days with his beloved Isaac before their destination comes into view. Finally, on the third day (Exod 2:18; 5:3), Abraham raises his eyes and sees that dreaded place from afar. "We are left to imagine the pang that shot through the father's heart when he caught sight of it (Skinner)."⁷ At this point Abraham leaves his donkey and servants to travel the rest of the journey alone with his son. Was the ascent too steep? Did God tell him to go it alone? Was it too painful to have witnesses present? The text does not say.

But now we hear Abraham's first words in the story. They conceal almost as much as they reveal. He asks his servants to remain at the foot of the mountain while he and Isaac go into the unknown beyond. He refrains from using the personal name "Isaac," or the more intimate term "son." Instead, he merely calls him "the lad." This may suggest that he can do what he is about to do only by turning off his affections. Like a good surgeon, he must turn a deaf ear to his emotions in order to successfully perform an operation on a family member.

Abraham's next statement, "we will worship and return to you," is the center of the story. It can be interpreted either as the apex of his faith or as a cover to prevent his servants from knowing what is about to take place. The author of Hebrews says this is a sign that Abraham holds onto the promise, "through Isaac your descendents shall be named," with such tenacity that he believes God will raise the boy from the dead (Heb 11:19).

C. The Journey Up the Mountain Alone With Isaac (22:6-8)

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 the two of them walked on together ("as one"). And 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?" And Abraham said, "God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together ("as one"). (22:6-8)

Abraham and Isaac, father and son, climb the last and steepest part of their journey alone. During this most difficult ascent, Abraham can no longer maintain emotional distance from his son. He places the wood on Isaac's back, while he carries the more dangerous objects, the torch and the sharp-edged butcher knife (E. A. Speiser translates it as "cleaver").⁸ As he straps the wood to Isaac's back, he must have envisioned the terrible moment when Isaac would place his back upon the wood. With that, Abraham is seized by silence. The *Genesis Rabbah*, the Jewish commentary on Genesis, collected some centuries after Christ, views Isaac "like a condemned man who took his cross

upon his shoulders" (56:3).

As they walk, Isaac breaks the silence with the affectionate, "my father." The pathos of the dialogue is incomparable. Abraham answers with his characteristic "*Hinneni*" ("Behold me") and answers the son's affectionate "my father" with the equally endearing "my son." Then we hear the inquisitive curiosity of the boy who points out the missing ingredient for worship: "Behold the fire and the wood, but where is the sheep?" But, as Alter remarks, as he questions his father, "he passes in silence over the one object that would have seemed scariest to him, the sharp-edged butcher knife."⁹

Once again, Abraham's reply is one of faith wrapped in ambiguity, designed to protect a son from things much too heavy to carry. "God will provide for himself," is literally, "God will see for himself." Just as Abraham was to "go for himself," now God will "*see for himself*" or "*see to it*," meaning, he will provide the necessary sacrifice. Here Abraham's faith presses to see beyond what he cannot see, into a future that outlives death itself. The answer must have satisfied the son, for the boy inherently trusts his father. They continue the rest of the way up the mountain. The scene is framed by the phrase, "*So the two of them walked on together.*" The haunting refrain pictures a father and son walking on in silence, united in one purpose, perhaps for the last time, into the awful obedience of God.

III. At the Summit of Moriah (Genesis 22:9-19)

A. The Preparations for the Sacrifice (22:9-10)

Then they came to the place of which God had told him; and Abraham built the altar there, and arranged the wood, and bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. And Abraham stretched out his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. (22:9-10)

The moment they arrive at their destination, Abraham immediately goes about his assigned tasks. With actions that are swift and deliberate he builds the altar, arranges the wood, and most poignantly, binds his one and only son. One senses that during the long hike he steeled his resolve, refusing even to speak to his son lest he be deterred from his terrible task. Was he able to look Isaac in the eyes as he laid him on the altar? What amazing resolve! But Isaac's silent submission is equally remarkable. This vibrant young man is so trusting of his father's love that he allows himself to be bound and laid upon an altar, without resisting. The uniqueness of the event is highlighted by the fact that this verb "*bind*" is used only once in the Old Testament. The Jews memorialized it calling this story "The Aqedah" ("*the binding*" of Isaac).

Once the sacrifice is prepared, Abraham hurriedly reaches for the cleaver lest his emotions get the better of him. But, as he stretches out his hand to perform what would be his last act as Isaac's father, a voice calls out from heaven.

B. The Angel Speaks to Stop the Sacrifice (22:11-12)

But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." And he said, "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.” (22:11-12)

At the last moment Abraham hears his name echoing like thunder from the sky, “Abraham, Abraham!” “Father of the multitudes, father of the multitudes!” The same angel who had called out to Hagar and saved her son, now calls out to Abraham. Alter observes the similarities in the two stories:

The angel calls from heaven just as he called out to Hagar. Each of Abraham’s sons is threatened with death in the wilderness, one in the presence of his mother, the other in the presence (and by the hand) of his father. In each case the angel intervenes at the critical moment. At the center of the story, Abraham’s hand holds the knife, Hagar is enjoined to ‘hold her hand’ on the lad. In the end each of the sons is promised to become progenitor of a great people, the threat to Abraham’s continuity having been averted.¹⁰

For a third time in the story we hear Abraham’s “*Hinni*.” But for the first time, his words resound with relief. He learns what we already know: this was merely a test. Now the angel of the LORD says he knows Abraham’s fear of God is supreme in that he has not withheld anything from his devotion to God, not even his son. Abraham draws back his hand and puts away the dreaded cleaver. Looking up, he beholds the provision of God.

C. The Provision of the Ram (22:13-14)

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. And Abraham called the name of that place The LORD Will Provide, as it is said to this day, “In the mount of the LORD it will be provided.” (22:13-14)

Abraham sees a ram caught in a thicket. Ironically, the symbol of the ram’s strength, its horns, becomes the very means for its sacrifice. Quickly, Abraham offers up the ram “*in place of his son*.” Never was the scent of a sacrifice sweeter to a father than on that day. For this reason, every firstborn son in Israel was dedicated to God and redeemed with an animal sacrifice (Exod 22:29; 34:20).

Once the offering goes up in smoke, Abraham eternally sanctifies the place with a name. What was earlier known in our story as that unknown “place” of dread is now named as the high place of vision. The place name means, literally, “the LORD sees.” The phrase at the end can mean either, “On the mountain of the LORD he sees,” or “he will be seen.” The ambiguity allows us to adopt both ideas, since on the mount the LORD was seen in the provision of the ram.

As the smoke ascends into the heavens, the angel of the LORD speaks to Abraham a second time.

D. The Angel Speaks a Second Time (22:15-18)

Then 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 thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens, and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. And in your seed all the na-

tions of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.” (22:15-18)

Now the LORD seals Abraham’s worship with an oath. This, the only divine oath in the patriarchal narratives, shows how deeply our obedience moves the heart of God. Yet we must not confuse Abraham’s obedience of faith with salvation by works. While the promises of God were originally given to Abraham by grace alone through faith alone, they are now sealed by his obedience on Moriah. This act is the demonstration that Abraham’s faith was real; and in the act of obedience his faith was perfected.

Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself...Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” and he was called the friend of God. (Jas 2:17, 21-23)

In response to Abraham’s obedience the covenantal promises are now reiterated and amplified. The certainty of the blessing is stated as emphatically as is possible in Hebrew (“*blessing I bless you*”). Abraham’s fertility is so magnified it can only be described in metaphors so large that they overwhelm his visual senses: whether the sand by day or the stars by night. For the first time we learn that his descendants’ possession of the land will come about through a great military victory, for they “*will possess the gates of their enemies*.” And, lest Abraham have any doubts about his significance in history, God concludes by saying that his seed will be the spiritual center of the universe. Some future descendant of Abraham’s will be the source of all blessing to all nations. All of this is given to Abraham for the devotion he showed to God that day . . . “because you obeyed My voice.”

IV. Descent Down the Mountain (Genesis 22:19)

So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham lived at Beersheba. (22:19)

After this event, Abraham returns to the young men, exactly as he said. What was the return trip like? Did they speak, father and son? Could their eyes even meet? Was Isaac weeping that his life was spared? Surely Abraham was. Tears of gratitude and devotion flowed all the way down the mountain. No words can describe it. The narrator leaves it to our impassioned imaginations to fill in the details of a love that is better than life. He concludes that in their next journey, to Beersheba, the father and son were united in purpose as in their journey to Moriah. And there, in Beersheba, Abraham settles down.

This text describes the height of devotion, the very summit of worship. Here at the highest peak we gain a clear vision of where our journey of faith is going to lead each of us. It is at once terrible and supremely wonderful. This is the paradox of true spirituality: the cost is terrible, the blessing indescribable.

V. Lessons On Our Journey to Moriah

A. The Terrible Cost of Obedience

We observe three characteristics of the terrible cost of

obedience. First, after years of walking by faith, Abraham is given a command that takes him right back to his very beginnings: “*go by yourself.*” The command shakes us to the core. It evokes all those initial sacrificial steps of faith that cost Abraham dearly. He left father, family, and country to go to a place he had never been. Now, after some forty years, he is told to do the same thing all over again. Obedience can be a lonely road. Even in our old age we can never become complacent. At the age of retirement we may be making our most lonely yet faithful journeys for God.

Second, God doesn’t tell Abraham exactly where, but he is to walk by faith until God reveals that place to him. So he journeys not by sight but by faith. Once God reveals the exact mountain, he will ascend it and worship the LORD. Obedience is a lonely, uncertain road.

Third, God asks Abraham to sacrifice the very gift he had invested all his hopes in. This is not Ishmael, whom he had created in his own strength, but Isaac, the gift of God whom he had received by faith: Isaac, the gift that came out of his weakness and represented God’s future kingdom on earth. Now God commands him to kill the dream.

That is the terrible cost of obedience. It is a lonely road, because at times we have to travel it alone. It is an uncertain road, because we don’t know where we are going. And it is a painful road, because God asks us to give up the very thing we love most. But, if the cost is great, the blessings are supreme.

B. The Blessing of Obedience

First, we discover Abraham’s loneliness is met by God himself. If Abraham goes “*by himself,*” then God “*provides for himself*” and “*swears by himself.*” This is what God has for each one of us. We reach a point in our destitute isolation when we find God, and he alone is more than enough. So don’t run away from your loneliness; run up the mountain to Moriah.

Second, when Abraham walks by faith, not by sight, he ends up seeing everything. He raises his eyes and sees the ram. He sees the God who sees, the God who provides. In that moment the dreaded mountain becomes the place of vision, sanctified forever as the place where God sees and will be seen. According to tradition, this mountain became the place of Israel’s altar. All Israel’s sacrifices took place on Mount Moriah. Each morning and night, the Israelites could see the flames of the sacrificed animals being totally consumed on that altar.

Third, when Abraham is willing to give up his most precious possession to God, he receives him back with a new appreciation and a richer love than if he had tried to possess him for himself. His obedience is built into the very fabric of the promises of God, and shapes history forever. Such is the irony of our devotion to God. By giving up the things we love we lose nothing; we gain God, and a richer, more satisfying love for those we care about. It is a love that does not possess or control but gives grace to each person out of supreme devotion to God. Our devotion to God thus enlarges our capacity to love others.

C. The Greatness of the Father’s Love

But, finally, there is one more important lesson for us in this journey. Though it is hidden beneath the surface it is probably the crux of the whole story. Many people have a hard time believing that God really loves them. How does that truth move from the head to the heart? The answer is, go to Moriah. Take the boy’s hand and travel three days with Abraham. Climb the steep terrain in awful silence, holding the butcher knife in your hand. Look into the eyes of the son you bound, mute, willingly lying on the altar. Can you feel the father’s heart exploding in horror? How can you not weep? Then you come to appreciate the greater horror of the story’s glow: the son that was spared was you, and the ram that took your place was his son, his only son, the one he loved, Jesus. The Father never tells us how much it cost him, but he does tell us the ancient story.

If you don’t know the love of the Father, I can only ask you, Have you never been to Moriah?

He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? (Rom 8:32)

1. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Texas: Word, 1994), 104. I have depended heavily on Wenham’s excellent insights for many of my observations in the text.

2. Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: Norton, 1996), 103.

3. Alter, 104.

4. John Felstiner, *Paul Celan, Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 34.

5. Alter, 104.

6. Wenham, 106.

7. Wenham, 107.

8. “*knife*” - “Ironically, in every occurrence of the nominative in the OT, it is used (literally or metaphorically) on human victims. In biblical use, then, the tool seems to carry the same ominous connotations as does the ‘butcher knife’ in some modern contexts.” Anthony Tomasino, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis, Vol. 2*, William A. VanGemeren, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 831.

9. Alter, 105.

10. Alter, 106.

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