

## **A Sacrifice Prevented/A Sacrifice Completed**

**Genesis 22:1-14**

**June 20, 2021**

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God had called Abraham (at the time he was called Abram) out of the land of Ur when he was 75 years old. Ur was a seaport near the Persian Gulf in Mesopotamia on the banks of the Euphrates River. It was a magnificent city; a center of manufacturing, farming and shipping; a metropolis of fertility and wealth. Abram's father, Terah, was a highly successful and wealthy business man. But Ur was also a pagan land; many beliefs and many gods. Human sacrifice, particularly the killing of children, was common and part of the fabric of the culture.

The Holy Spirit had prepared Abram's heart. He looked at the world about him and he looked within himself and he reasoned in his heart that there had to be something better. He was prepared by the Holy Spirit to hear God's voice.

Scripture tells us that, "The Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation. I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing.'" In fact, God would later tell Abram that his descendants would be as the stars of the sky and the sands on the seashores. In order for that to happen, Abraham would have to have a son.

Scripture says, "So Abram went as the Lord had told him..." And Abram took his wife, Sarai, and Lot, his brother's son and all their possessions and people they had acquired over their life time and set out for the land of Canaan.

Hebrews records Abram's response this way, "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going."

With his wife, Sarai, Abram left the wealth and comfort of his father's house and went as the Lord instructed. And time went by, in fact 25 years went by. Scripture says that Sarai was barren. They had no children. They were losing all hope.

During that 25 years Abram obeyed God and God continually renewed His covenant with Abram. When Abram was 99 years old, God changed Abram's name to Abraham and Sarai's name to Sarah. Then at the age of 100, Abraham and Sarah, probably 95 or so the miracle happens. Scripture says that "God was gracious to Sarah...and she became pregnant and bore a son." Can you imagine how amazed and joyous and thankful Abraham was? The promise could now be fulfilled. He named his son Isaac and watched him grow into a young man. He loved him and taught him and envisioned

the blessing God had promised through this 'son of promise', Isaac. I'm certain that as Isaac grew Abraham's expectations of God's promise grew as well. But when Isaac was probably but a teenager, God asked of Abraham the unimaginable.

#### SCRIPTURE

After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 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." 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. 7 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?" 8 Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together.

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. 11 But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 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." 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. 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."

Abraham must have shuddered in disbelief as he heard God's words:

- Take your son
- Your only son, Isaac
- Whom you love
- Offer him there
- As a burnt offering

When I was young I struggled with this story. I don't know many parents who read this Bible story to their kids. I remember asking my dad how God could ask Abraham to kill his son. I don't remember what he said. I do know that his answer did not help me much. When I grew up, I still struggled with this passage despite hearing lots of different explanations of God's command and Abraham's response. They helped a little.

Let's think about it. God had promised Abraham that he would have descendants as the stars of the heavens, as the sands on the seashore. He promised that through Abraham and his son, Isaac, all families and nations of the world would be blessed. The miraculous birth of Isaac was evidence of God's faithfulness and the beginning of Abraham's legacy. But then God instructs Abraham to do something truly foreign to the character of the God Abraham had come to know. It was, in fact, unimaginable.

Just for a starter, we know God hated human sacrifice. We know he abhorred the practice of child sacrifice. He called Abraham out of that culture. How could He now ask Abraham to do the very thing he hated?

Secondly, God had promised Abraham, and it was a covenant promise. If Isaac is sacrificed, it appears impossible for God to fulfill his promise? If you were Abraham, how would you have responded to God's command?

There are at least four responses Abraham could have considered. Let's reason together.

Abraham could have said that

1. "God has forgotten His promise." After all, men forget things, don't they? But when Abraham considered who God is, he had far too high an impression of God's glory and character. God would never forget such a promise. It was impossible for Him to forget. In Stephen's account of this passage in Acts 8 he says that "The God of Glory appeared to Abraham." When the God of Glory appears and makes a promise, not only would you never forget the experience, you realize that the God of Glory could never forget His promises. No.....God did not forget and Abraham knew it.
2. Abraham could have thought to himself that "God has changed His mind." Perhaps Isaac was not turning out to be what God had hoped for and expected. Maybe God was just going to look for someone else. But Abraham had already seen too many miracles and had come to trust God too much to even consider that He'd changed His mind. Abraham has already said earlier in Genesis, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" No..... God had not changed His mind and Abraham knew that as well.
3. Perhaps, Abraham just said to himself, "I don't know how the promise can be fulfilled if I offer my son as a sacrifice but if God commands, I will do it in obedience to His will. Let Him resolve the dilemma." This is kind of like the approach that says, "If the Bible says it, I believe it and don't need to think about it." Well, God didn't give us the ability to think and reason and analyze in order that we might put our brains on the shelf when it comes to matters of God. If we simply put our minds in neutral and proceed without considering what God's purposes are we are walking in the blind faith of fatalistic resignation. We are refusing to inquire or discover the will of God in accordance with His faithfulness.

Abraham had followed God's commands for 25 years....but this was different. This was God calling Abraham to do something that seemed to contradict the very words and promises God had made. I don't believe for a moment that Abraham simply shrugged his shoulders and said "If God says it I'll do it." This was his son, his only son, Scriptures says, "his son whom he loved." It wasn't just the promise of God that was at stake here, it was the very life of his only son whom God had given him.

No, I don't believe Abraham's faith was like this at all. So let's dig in.

The Scripture says in v.3 that "Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac." Abraham demonstrated an immediate response of faithful obedience. But the mountains were not just around the corner. The passage says in v. 4 that "On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar." On the third day! Does that have significance? Maybe, maybe not. But during those three days, Abraham had time to think through all of this. He had time to wrestle with God. He had time to challenge God. And I'm certain he wept and inquired of God and anguished over God's command to sacrifice Isaac. Charles Spurgeon said of this three days that it was "to have the heart hour by hour pressed as in a vice". Abraham prayed desperately to understand. What father wouldn't? But Abraham continued on this journey in faith and demonstrated faithful obedience.

Scripture teaches clearly that Abraham had come to believe God always to be faithful to His promises. Somehow over this three days, he had come to believe that there was only one way that God's promise could be fulfilled through Isaac if he was sacrificed. There was only one way that God could fulfill His promise to Abraham that he would have descendants and would be a blessing to peoples of all nations; that one way was for God to raise Isaac from the dead.....

Listen to the Apostle Paul from Romans, Chapter 4:

"For the promise to Abraham and his offspring, that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith..... in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist."

Abraham considered that, if God could give life to a dead womb so that a child could be conceived by a woman who was 90 years old and who had always been barren, He could also raise the same child from the dead.

Why else would Abraham say to the two servants in verse 5, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you"? How could he expect to come back with Isaac after he had sacrificed him? If he knew in advance that God would prevent him from sacrificing Isaac, it would be no test of his faith at all. Abraham intended to sacrifice Isaac and he believed that God would raise Isaac from the dead. We will come back to this but I want to bring to your attention that

this is the first time 'worship' is mentioned in the Bible. And it's mentioned in the context of human sacrifice.

Scripture makes it even clearer that Abraham believed God would raise Isaac. Listen to the writer of the Book of Hebrews:

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son,<sup>18</sup> of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named."<sup>19</sup> He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.

Hebrews 11:17-19

Faith and obedience begin in the heart? The heart is where decisions are made? Outward actions and words reflect the inner heart attitudes and decisions. We read from the account in Genesis;

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. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son." Genesis 22:9-10

He made the decision in his heart and reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. It was a done deal. Abraham obeyed God's command in his heart. This is why the writer of Hebrews says "figuratively speaking he did receive Isaac back from death". Isaac was as good as dead. Yes, God prevented Abraham from slaying his son but Abraham had already slain Isaac in his heart. Make no mistake, Abraham was going to kill Isaac. He raised the knife to slay his son.

And it was through a risen Isaac that the descendants would come. Abraham had reconciled the apparent contradiction with God's character. It was through the lineage of a risen Isaac that the blessing would come.

Now, if that were all that Scripture tells us, we would do well to marvel at it. But.....there is more! Hang in there with me.

Scripture teaches that this experience of Abraham's was only a foretaste, a shadow of what God the Father was going to do through the sacrifice of HIS son.

As we interpret Scripture with Scripture, God gives us a glimpse of what happened during that three day journey. What we will see is that somehow God revealed to Abraham His plan to sacrifice his son for the forgiveness of sin and then to raise him from the dead. I don't know with what clarity Abraham saw it. Charles Spurgeon says that it would have been through a "fog-filled vision" but a vision nevertheless. I don't know the details of the revelation God made to Abraham. They aren't recorded. None of Abraham's protestations are recorded either. But during that three days, Abraham had come to believe that God would fulfill His promise through a risen Isaac. Abraham saw the divine parallel and the Divine Parallel was this:

The Father was to have a Son born in this world, born in unusual, even miraculous circumstances by the intervention of the Holy Spirit. That through this son the Father would have descendants, however he was first to be offered as a sacrifice to God, struck down by the hand of his own Father. Then he was to be raised from the dead in order to fulfill the original promise of God, the Father.

Abraham believed he would have physical offspring through Isaac but he would also have spiritual offspring through the one that Isaac was representing.

Over that three days journey to the mountains, Abraham worked his way from God to man and man to God, from God to man and man to God, and He was blessed beyond measure with the realization of what God was showing him.

This was the divine parallel!

When Isaac looked up at his father and said, "Father we have the wood and the fire but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham responded how? "God will provide for himself the lamb." God will provide Himself the lamb some translations say. On the way to Mt. Moriah and even perhaps when he saw the place at the end of his journey, Abraham saw Good Friday. He saw God's plan. Just as John the Baptist was able to say when he saw Christ, "Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

And even with all of this, you've got to believe that as he raised the knife to slay his son, his heart cried out in desperate faith for God to stop him. When the angel of the Lord did stop Abraham from slaying Isaac, what did Abraham find caught in the thicket? "A ram caught in a thicket by its horns." Not a lamb but a ram!

Abraham had another lamb in mind; the worthy lamb, the only Son of God, the son whom God loved.

In the Gospel of John when Jesus responded to the Jews who had asked him if He was greater than Abraham:

Jesus answered, "If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, 'He is our God.' But you have not known him. I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word. Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad."

John 8:54-56

How Abraham must have marveled. He foresaw that the eternal God would give His only son to be crucified and resurrected. That this Son, Jesus, would become the ultimate sacrifice for sin and that through him the blessings promised to Abraham would become real to men of all nations who would have the same faith as Abraham and trust in the same promise of resurrection.

Listen again to Scripture from Galatians Chapter 3:

..just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”?

<sup>7</sup> Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, (in advance) saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.  
Galatians 3:6-9

In the mid 1800's Catherine Mumford married William Booth, a Methodist minister. The two of them began the Salvation Army. She became known as the Mother of the Army. She had this to say about Abraham:

Abraham might have been willing to give up every other thing he possessed, but if he had not been willing to give up Isaac, all else would have been useless. It is your Isaac that God wants.

This all happened 4,000 years ago. What does God want us to learn from it? Just this. It was not Isaac that God wanted. It was Abraham's Isaac that God wanted. God didn't need Isaac. God wanted Abraham's heart, completely, totally and without reservation. And God wants your Isaac because God wants your heart; completely, totally and without reservation.

God revealed himself as the merciful, gracious and loving God who would provide the Lamb of the ultimate sacrifice for sin, His Son. God revealed that He was not like the pagan gods who demanded the sacrifice of children to gain favor. He is our loving God who did for all of his people what they could not do for themselves.

Listen to David in Psalm 51: “For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

We can marvel in the details of the sacrifice. Both Isaac and Christ were only sons. Both were loved by their father. They each were willing to be sacrificed. They both carried the wood up the hill for their sacrifice. In fact, they were both sacrificed on the same hill. Both were delivered from death on the third day.

But in his obedience in sacrificing Isaac, as horrifically painful a test as it was, Abraham was giving himself to God; completely, totally and without reservation.

God does not want us to make blood sacrifices or burnt offerings. God wants us. God does not want your money or your time or your talents. He wants you. When you give yourself to God, your money and your time and your talents are part of the package. God wanted Abraham. God wants you; completely, totally and without reservation.

2,000 years after Abraham, Paul gets to the heart of Abrahams sacrifice in Romans Chapter 12 this way:

“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies (yourselves) as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”

Romans 12:1

There is that word ‘worship’ again. Abraham gave his son Isaac thereby giving himself, to God. He did it as an act of faith. He did it as an act of worship, the first time worship is mentioned in Scripture. Here in Romans 12, we see that our faith is the same faith as Abraham’s and we are to present ourselves (completely, totally and without reservation) as our act of faith and our act of worship. That is what is holy and acceptable to God. We offer ourselves in response to God the Father offering His Son: completely, totally and without reservation.

Christ died once for all. There is no further sacrifice required. The penalty for sin has been paid. We can only offer ourselves in grateful response to what God the Father has done through Christ on our behalf. Amen!