

RUF Bible Study – The Gospel in Genesis

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Genesis 22 – The Sacrifice of the Son

Doug Serven, RUF Campus Minister

Most of us know you have to make sacrifices in order to get something, or to be good at something. It will take time, energy, money; blood, sweat and tears.

My daughter Anna is just now learning this. She's been taking piano lessons from our very own Katie Tracey and loving it. But – she doesn't practice. She seems to have a good ear for music, so she can pick out and then play over and over again the first few lines of Ode to Joy and a few other of her piano book songs. However, she doesn't get the connection between the notes on the page and the keys on the piano.

She needs to practice. She needs to sacrifice her time playing, coloring, harassing her siblings, scrounging for food and sit down for fifteen minutes a day in order to get better. We know that if she would do this, it will become a joy to her. A musical world will open up in freedom not in bondage. That's what sacrifice does – it frees us to love something or someone.

That is just a tiny example of what we have in this passage. It's a text of a much bigger sacrifice, and one that points to the biggest sacrifice in the whole world.

Our passage today is one of the greatest stories in the Old Testament. Many have said that this is the high point in ancient literature because of the story's passion and detail, its agony and its amazing conclusion. In looking at it, we'll have a really close look at a picture of the gospel, a foretaste of things to come. May we see the parallels with the death and resurrection of Christ.

The Call of Sacrifice

Let's look at the call first. It starts off, "*After these things,*" and that should point us back to chapter 21. In chapter 21 we finally get the birth of Isaac, something that has been promised since chapter 12 and which, when he finally arrives, is sort of a letdown in the text since we don't get a huge party or big banners or anything. Isaac was born. Of course. What did you expect? Hum.

The child of promise has arrived though! Great news! Sarah has borne a son in her old age! This is big stuff.

Then we immediately get this eerie story about the casting out of Ishmael and Hagar. Yet again we see the coldness of Sarah and Abraham in treating people with disrespect and cruelty. With Isaac now on the scene, Ishmael is persona non grata, so he and his mom have to hit the road. Even though that causes pain for Abraham, he doesn't do anything to stop it. But God again intervenes to provide for these two. Amazing is God's love for these, who aren't of His covenantal promise. An example for us to love those who are outside of the church, who are hurting no matter where they are in life or what sort of spiritual state they are in. It's a reminder that Abraham and Sarah are not perfect people by any means.

Then we see a short story that illustrates Abraham's successes. Things are going so well for him that others start to get afraid of his power and they seek to make a treaty with him. Finally, Abraham is on top of the world. He and Sarah have a son, and he is a successful businessman. What could go wrong?

After these things, God tested Abraham.

Uh oh. Testing isn't the same as tempting. It means that God is about to show or prove to Abraham the full extent of his faith. Gordon Wenham puts it this way: "testing shows what someone is really like, and it generally involves difficulty or hardship... The use of the term here hints that Abraham will face some great difficulty but that he will ultimately benefit from it."¹ We're tipped off here that things are probably going to go well, but we should be worried. What kind of test? Will Abraham succeed? What will the test show about the reality of Abraham's faith, something that has waxed and waned from time to time?

God again calls Abraham, and Abraham responds. What God asks though is this: "*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.*"² Can you imagine what Abraham must have thought when he first heard those words?

It is almost impossible for me to think of such a thing when I apply this to Ruthie or Cal, just one of my children. But if I only had one? My only son? The one I loved? Too much.³

What exactly was God asking? Some have thought this completely insane and irrational. That God has lost it here. I just read in a book by Madeleine L'Engle that she thinks, along with many others, that Abraham was *disobedient* by going through with it. That God was testing him and wanting him to say no instead of yes.⁴ There's no way the text reads that way, so it has to be forced to come

¹ Wenham, *Genesis*, vol. 2, p. 104.

² Notice too, that God calls Abraham to go to place that He will show him later. In the interim three days, God must have spoken to Abraham in a conversation that isn't recorded for us, since Abraham "saw the place from afar" and apparently knows where to go.

³ The matter had come to this; that God would appear to have done nothing but mock him. Yet not only is the death of his son announced to him, but he is commanded with his own hand to slay him; as if he were required, not only to throw aside, but to cut in pieces, or cast into the fire, the charter of his salvation, and to have nothing left for himself, but death and hell. Calvin, p. 563.

⁴ A story I found especially troublesome was that of Abraham and Sarah and Isaac. How could a God of love demand a sacrifice of the son he had promised to Abraham and Sarah? What kind of cold-blooded testing was that? Did Sarah know about it? Surely not! No mother would let her husband take her child to be used as a holocaust... Sarah would say, "No, Lord, there are things that even you do not ask"... The next day she [a woman in her writing class] came in with a dialogue between God and the archangel Raphael, the physician of God. Raphael is very pleased with Abraham's response to God's demand, and begins extolling Abraham's virtues to God. And God is not enthusiastic. The more Raphael praises Abraham, the less enthusiastic God gets. Finally, Raphael says, "But God, you put Abraham to the test and he passed." God replies, "He did not pass. He failed. He chose law over love." And all kinds of lights flashed on for me. L'Engle, *The Rock That Is Higher*, pp. 130-131.

up with something like that. Though it is awful and terrible, it also makes sense to Abraham, for Abraham seems to understand it right away.⁵

God is not asking Abraham to *murder* Isaac – to go immediately and slit his throat – but to *sacrifice* him in worship. There's a huge difference.

The controlling principle is this: God owns Isaac's life. The life of the firstborn son is forfeited to God as a picture of God owning everything. Since the firstborn is the ultimate in ancient culture (and in cultures still today) for provision and status and continuation of the family, God says that it is his (realize too that he doesn't woodenly condone this picture – in fact, he continually works to undermine it). In addition, this is a picture of God calling in his debts for the sins of the family. So this is a picture of justice. It is entirely appropriate for God to do so; it's just that He is asking for it immediately and without a substitute. Each firstborn of every womb is to be taken to Him for a sacrifice. Each firstborn son's life is considered forfeit, but is to be redeemed by the sacrifice of an animal, picturing the reality of God's ownership of the boy.⁶

So if God had asked Abraham to sacrifice Sarah (of course he wouldn't have), Abraham wouldn't have done it. That wouldn't make any sense. It wouldn't have been God's voice that he had heard, so he would have refused. But taking Isaac, as painful as that was, was something that Abraham knew was just and right and due God.

Do you think you could have done it? Do you understand that level of sacrifice?

We're no longer talking about fifteen minutes of piano are we? We're not even talking about hundreds of hours. Author Malcolm Gladwell, in his book *Outliers*, claims that it takes 10,000 hours of doing something to make you an expert at it. If you did something over and over again 8 hours a day for 40 hours a week, that would be five full years to be really, really good at it. Most of us don't do the same thing for 40 hours a week.

We're talking about sacrificing your child. What if you were down in a hidey hole and the Nazis were going to get you if they even hear so much as a peep out of anyone? Your baby is in your arms. Your baby is fussing. He has a cold. He's been coughing. But if he coughs even once more, not only will your child die, but you will die and everyone will die.

Would you sacrifice your child so others could live? Would you kill your baby, your only son or only daughter?

It's a devastating choice.

I want you to feel the weight of it here. And I also want you to see that there is the principle of substitution present in this situation. It is possible for someone to die so that others might live. There can be a life given up so other lives can be gotten. Isaac would be giving his life to God for a payment for his family, a debt owed to God for others.

The Mark of Obedience

And Abraham obeyed the test. "*So Abraham rose early in the morning...*"

We don't get any hint of hesitation; though we will later see anguish and struggle, we watch Abraham immediately obey God. The narrative slows down at this point, focusing on each detail of the story instead of giving us a sweeping overview. He saddled his donkey. He took two servants and Isaac. He cut wood. And he went.

Three days passed on the journey, the time set aside for preparation for important things. Finally Abraham had arrived to the place where he and Isaac would have to go alone. He tells his servants to wait there and "*I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.*" Is Abraham wavering? He didn't say that only he would return, but that both of them would. Is he saying he's not going to through with it? We're not sure. But feel the pain.

Understanding the sacrifice that God was requiring, Abraham – and Isaac – went through with it.

God calls to Abraham, "*Abraham!*" Abraham answers, "*Here am I.*" He responds to God's call quickly and willingly.⁷

Abraham also pursues obedience to this sacrifice in a sustained, persistent way. It would have been easy for him to dilly dally. He could have been thinking, "Well, God didn't tell me *when* I should do this." He could have put it off. He could have delayed and waited. So many of us do. We duck from doing what we know we should do. We don't put the porn blocker on our computer. We don't have the conversation we need to have. We don't say *no this time*. We keep forgetting to start to do the thing we're supposed to do.

Abraham gets after it. He starts right away – the next morning.

When he goes, he goes willingly with a settled demeanor. He doesn't seem to be wavering in any way. Yes, he is thinking about it. Yes, he's mulling this over, but he is steadfast in his faith and commitment.

His obedience also appears to be contagious. Isaac and the servants who are with him all comply with his wishes. They don't argue with him. They follow him as he leads them to the mountain to give the sacrifice.

Do you follow God like that? Are you willing, quick, sustained, persistent, settled and contagious in your zeal and love for God? Do you do what he tells you to do?

The Hope of Resurrection

They walk together. Isaac carrying the wood and Abraham the fire and knife.

Look closely, however. There are some odd things in this passage.

⁵ This is one of the most theologically difficult texts of the Old Testament. God's command did not contradict moral law because the firstborn always belongs to the Lord (Ex. 13:11-13); however, the command is extraordinary both morally and theologically. Kierkegaard wrestles with this text and finds God's command illogical and absurd (irrational)... Perhaps one can make a stab at justifying the command on the basis that the Lord owns Isaac's life. Nevertheless, the command teeters on the edge of morality. We are left with the inexplicable and exacting realization that faith demands radical obedience. Abraham is asked to behave in a way that is illogical, absurd, and to say the least, nonconventional from the human perspective. With the biblical world view, however, such radical behavior proves the true nature of biblical faith. Walke, p. 306

⁶ Think about the reality of this in the Passover story.

⁷ These adverbs come from Boice.

When they get to the mountain, Abraham dismisses his servants so he and Isaac can go the rest of the way alone. He says this: *“Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.”*

It sure seems like Abraham is saying that both he and Isaac will be returning from this trip. He has been thinking about this dilemma for some time now on his journey. He’s been mulling it over and over in his mind. He thinks that somehow Isaac is going to return with him.

Isaac isn’t a little kid. He’s old and big enough⁸ to carry the wood on his back.⁹ He asks this question: *“Behold the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?”*

What does Abraham say to answer this question? – *“God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.”* What is this? A lie, a dodge? We’re not exactly sure, but what we later learn in Hebrews 11 is that Abraham thought that God was going to bring Isaac back to life.

You see, the issue here is that God seems to be contradicting himself. God had told Abraham over and over again that he would be the father of many nations. That Isaac was the child of promise. That all of God’s promises would be fulfilled. This had been drilled into his brain by life and experience.

And yet he knew God wasn’t only the God of grace and promise, but also of truth and judgment. God had shown himself to be serious about the covenant, so serious that he would die if he broke it (see Genesis 15).

So how can God be both the God of justice *and* the God of grace? How can he be the God of command and the God of promise? How can Isaac be sacrificed and dead *and* also be the father of many nations? What is going to happen?

It seems like Abraham had figured out that somehow there had to be a resurrection. He didn’t think Isaac was going to escape. He wasn’t planning on tricking God with a straw dummy or a switcheroo at the last second. He thought Isaac was going to have to somehow come back from the dead. Up until the last second, Abraham believed in the resurrection.

He knew he was going to embrace his son again. He knew his son would be restored to him. And Isaac must have known that too. This is an amazing passage about resurrection, the first we hear of it in the Bible.

Listen to Hebrews 11:17-19: *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, of whom it was said, ‘Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.’ He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.”* That is a passage about resurrection. Abraham had figured out how God’s grace and justice were going to be reconciled. Resurrection!

I think all of us long for resurrection in our own lives. This is when justice is ultimately completed, and things are set right in the world. We don’t want to die and have that be it – we want to live forever. Resurrection says that that will happen. We will be reunited to our own bodies and reign and serve on the new heaven and the new earth (which will be this heaven and earth but perfect).

Richard Dawkins (author of, most notably *The God Delusion*) has no answer for this. He recently spoke here at OU to a packed house of very religious atheists. Dawkins said there was purpose built into evolution – the purpose of survival. We humans seem to create another purpose, one that isn’t really inherent in our beings, in order to cope with things.

But what if there is a purpose? What if it is relationship with God forever? Maybe you have these feelings for God, this concept of God, this longing for God – because it was put there because God is there. Maybe there *must* be a greater purpose than just the strong survive and the weak die off. Maybe you were created for resurrection, and you want it so badly.

That moment when you get something back that you thought you lost – it is glorious. You don’t want a replacement. You want *the thing*. Our beloved dog died a few weeks ago. His name was Happy, and he was a long-haired black poodle. We loved that dog. He loved us. He was the best dog ever. So patient, kind, generous, loving and, well, happy. When Julie and I took him to the vet to put him down, we cried and cried. I held him in my arms and HATED death. I hated losing him. I couldn’t believe it was happening. We looked into his eyes and told him how much we loved him and would miss him.

I’m sure that we’ll get a new dog someday, but honestly I want Happy back. I want to see him again.

That is what resurrection is, and it comes up all the time in movies, books and stories. Look for it.

The Provision of a Lamb

So we have the call of sacrifice, Abraham’s obedience and the hope of resurrection. What about Isaac?

In verse 10, we have the horrible hanging moment. Abraham stretches out his hand to slay his own son, and an angel of the Lord says, *“Abraham, Abraham. Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God”¹⁰, 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 the 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 the place, “The Lord will provide: as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.”

Though death was due, God provided a substitute. Isaac was a good as dead, and then we see how something/someone else paid the penalty for the sins of the people.

Remember when Isaac had asked him about what would happen? Abraham had said, *“God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.”* He had not been lying, but he had seen ahead. He had figured it out. He figured out that God, in his obedience, God would provide a substitute, and that would be a lamb for offering.

⁸ In his commentary, Boice wonders if he might even have been in his thirties, even 33.

⁹ The narrator includes enough information to depict Isaac as having a habit of obedience, trust in his father, and trust in God’s provision. A son strong enough to carry a load of wood sufficient for a sacrifice on his back is certainly able to resist an aged father if so minded. Instead, Isaac freely consents to Abraham’s will. Walke.

¹⁰ The narrator does not wrestle with God’s omniscience, which entails that he knew Abraham’s faith commitment beforehand. Instead, he focuses upon the reality that God does not experience the quality of Abraham’s faith until played out on the stage of history. Walke, p. 308.

Flip over in your Bibles to John 8. Jesus is talking to the Pharisees, the leaders of the Jews who have started opposing him at every turn. In their discussion about genealogies and lineages, Jesus starts to talk about Abraham. In 8:56, he says, “*Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.*”

Did you catch that? You might want to read it again. Jesus says that Abraham wanted to see Jesus. And he did see Jesus, and was glad about it.

How could he have seen Jesus’ day? Because he saw this provision, this substitutionary atonement and this resurrection. Do you remember in John 1, what John the Baptist said when he saw Jesus for the first time? He said, “*Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*”

There is something about the lamb in the Scriptures. It’s a major theme that crops up again and again. Where is the lamb? Who is the lamb? The lamb of God is a steady theme. We should be looking for it.

It is fulfilled in Jesus. He is God’s substitute for his people. He is slain so we could live.

Surely we cannot fail to see the connections of this passage in Genesis 22 with Christ.¹¹ This is a picture of the gospel if there ever were one, a foretaste of things to come. Jesus went willingly to the cross though He could have escaped. He carried his own wood. He lay to be sacrificed. But in his case, it was a debt that wasn’t owed; it was a sacrifice, not for himself, but for others. In his case, there was no ram substitute at the last minute to save his skin. He was the sacrifice. He was the lamb. He was the ram in the thicket.

Notice also where these two events took place. Moriah means “the appearance of the Lord.” “The Lord appeared there as himself, for he provided the sacrifice in a much more wonderful way than Abraham had foreseen or described to Isaac. The sacrifice provided by the Lord took the place of Abraham’s own sacrifice. If only we would realize that the Lord has sacrificed His own Son, His most precious possession, for us, we would follow Abraham’s lead in trusting the Lord in everything. We would then be ready to do whatever he asks of us and follow him always, however dark the way, believing that he will surely find a path to the fulfillment of the promise he has made to us.”¹²

Moriah later came to be called by the name we know – Jerusalem. Isaac’s sacrifice was a precursor of the temple sacrifices and of the ultimate sacrifice.” There is no need to doubt... that Abraham’s sacrifice took place on the site of later Jerusalem, if not on the Temple hill.”¹³

When Jesus would have entered Jerusalem, there would have been thousands and thousands of lambs around him – the Jewish people were preparing for Passover when these lambs would be slaughtered and sacrificed to picture the atonement for their sins. Jesus would have been surrounded with the picture of his very self, in this very same city.

So we can speculate that if Abraham had been there on the day Jesus was crucified, he would have said something like, “Ah... yes... I understand now. Justice and mercy together. Law and grace. Duty and promise. Your son in my place. Your beloved son, whom you love sacrificed for me. I bet He’ll rise again.” Or something like that. It would have made sense, since he had lived out the picture that was a precursor this ultimate event.

Abraham “saw the day of Christ – the day of his humiliation and triumph – not darkly and dimly as others then saw it, but clearly, distinctly, vividly. He saw the very way in which the salvation of man was to be accomplished, and the blessing purchased for all the families of the earth, by the atoning death and glorious resurrection of the beloved Son of God. And seeing thus gladly the day of Christ, he saw Christ himself as the Living One – dead indeed, and sacrificed once for all, yet still living and by his very death enabled to be the author of life to the ‘many sons whom he bringeth into glory.’ (Hebr 2:10)¹⁴

Do you see it? Can you picture it? Are you ready for it?

So great. What are we to take from all of this? How can we make application to this story? I think we must seriously consider following all that God has commanded us. That we should each make a commitment that would go like this: Lord, I commit to following you and your commands no matter what the cost. When I hear your voice telling me to do something, no matter how crazy it seems, I will do it. I will do it because I know you are a good God who seeks the best for His people and even though I don’t understand it, I will obey and trust you to work it all out.” As Tim Keller puts it, God must be the non-negotiable. He must be the foundation for everything you do and everything you stand for. Anything else is susceptible to the altar. Everything else must be taken and sacrificed before Him. That’s the kind of God He is. The Alone kind. The jealous kind. The unsharable kind.¹⁵

How will that feel? Honestly, sometime it will feel like you’re dying. What is best for you isn’t always what feels best for you.

Mike Biggs tells about his kids getting shots and how awful it is to have these big blue eyes staring at you because YOU ARE HOLDING ME DOWN AND LETTING THIS STRANGER HURT ME! It is a terrible thing to see your child hurt, but sometimes it is for his or her best.

Elizabeth Elliot tells about watching sheep getting dipped in a vat of medicine to prevent diseases. The sheep is convinced that the shepherd is out to kill it. He’s even sticking my head under water to drown me! And the sheep fights with all its might the very good that the shepherd is working for it. Without the medicine, the sheep will be bitten by a tiny bug and die a painful death.

That’s the way it will feel sometimes when God is asking you to sacrifice things. Your career. Your idea of a spouse. Your dating relationship right now. Your sexual lusts. Your pride. Your car. Your possessions. Your time. Or He may ask you to sacrifice

¹¹ If the Messiah be anywhere symbolized in the Old Testament, He is certainly to be seen upon Mount Moriah, where the beloved Isaac, willingly bound and laid upon an altar, is a lively foreshadowing of the Well-beloved of heaven yielding His life as a ransom. Charles Spurgeon, *Christ in the Old Testament*, p. 39.

¹² DeGraaf, p. 140.

¹³ T.C. Mitchell, “Moriah,” NBD, 794, found in Waltke, p. 306.

¹⁴ Robert S. Candlish, *Studies in Genesis*, 380-81, found in Boice, Genesis Volume 2, 698

¹⁵ At the same time, also, we may observe, that God tempts his servants, not only when he subdues the affections of the flesh, but when he reduces all their senses to nothing, that he may lead them to a complete renunciation of themselves. Calvin, p. 564.

your LACK of a relationship because He's calling you into one. Your me-first attitude with your friends and parents. Your woe-is-me attitude which prevents you from a joyful life of community and fellowship. It's all open before Him.

So we need to be obedient Christians. But what gives us the push to get up that mountain? What makes us sacrifice those things? To prove ourselves to God? To be a man or woman of integrity and obedience? Because we must obey in order to be accepted? No. A thousand times no.

We obey because it has been provided. We obey because we believe in the hope of resurrection. We obey because there has been a lamb who has been slain for us – and raised again from the dead! That gives us a hope outside of ourselves. It gives us a motivation to trust in God, that he is good, powerful, loving and right.

Keller points this out and it hit me hard. The text doesn't say, "So Abraham called the name of the place, 'The Lord will be obeyed.'" Yes, Abraham obeyed, which is great. But *why* did he? Because of his hope in the promises of God. Because of his trust in the goodness of God. Because he knew that God would work it out. *So Abraham called the name of that place, 'The Lord will provide.'* And then who gets the glory? GOD does. The Lord will provide. You see, your sacrifices to God will merit you absolutely nothing. You can not earn God's praise for you. You cannot earn God's goodness. So why do it? Why sacrifice these things. Because you trust in God alone for your salvation and your whole life. Because you rest and lean on Him for everything you do. Because He is your foundation, He is your non-negotiable, He is your rock, He is your security and significance. Because "He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all – how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things?!" (Romans 8:32)

Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.