

Foundations: Prelude For A Suffering Savior
By Jason Huff
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Hebrews 11:17-19; Jeremiah 32:26, 30-35; Genesis 22:1-19

Our final Scripture reading today is Genesis 22:1-19. May God bless the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. “Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” “Here I am,” he replied. Then God said, “Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.” Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. He said to his servants, “Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.” Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, “Father?” “Yes, my son?” Abraham replied. “The fire and wood are here,” Isaac said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them went on together. When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, “Abraham! Abraham!” “Here I am,” he replied. “Do not lay a hand on the boy,” he said. “Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.” Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, “On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided.” The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, “I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.” Then Abraham returned to his servants, and they set off together for Beersheba. And Abraham stayed in Beersheba.”

Sometimes, there’s far more to a story than what we think. This week, I found an archive of thousands of recordings of broadcaster Paul Harvey’s famous radio show, *The Rest of the Story*. Through them I learned a few things you’d never expect – for example, Alexander Graham Bell hated the telephone he’d invented. The bark of the willow tree, prescribed for over 2000 years by ancient physicians, has the same active ingredient as what we call aspirin. The waltz, the oldest of modern ballroom dances, was banned by a Pope and considered sinful. Paul Harvey had a way of helping us look at famous people, inventions, and practices in a new light beyond what we might see on the surface.

That's the kind of outlook we need when we start exploring one of the most famous biblical moments of all time – what has become known as “the binding of Isaac.” The way the Bible tells the story ratchets up the tension; you can really feel the pathos of the moment. It's brilliantly written and recognized even from a literary standpoint as a high point of the Old Testament's telling of ancient history.

But if we read the story without any additional context – without “the rest of the story,” as Paul Harvey would have said – we might make some grave misassumptions about what is going on. This story is taught in Sunday school and was on my old record of Bible stories for children. But it opens up questions about who God is that could break us if we're not careful. Is God actually commanding the killing of a child? Is this the God of love we believe in? We need to answer that question. We also need to look at this story in the light of Jesus – and when we do, all sorts of big-picture ideas should light up in our minds. Because when we understand this story, we will understand Jesus and what He did for us nearly two thousand years later.

Before we even get into the text proper at all, we need to address some cultural issues that are in the deep background. Otherwise, we might make some false assumptions about what God is truly doing here. In the ancient Near East, in the land where Abraham is from, throughout Canaan, even amongst the people groups where Abraham is living at the time of the story, child sacrifice was common. It was the norm.

We might ask why, because to us sacrificing your child to a god is a murderous, disturbing, devilish practice. That's because we live in a society so deeply rooted in Judeo-Christian values we don't even know where those values came from. Throughout Scripture, God absolutely condemns the peoples of the ancient Near East when they make human sacrifices. It's part of the reason that God gives the land of Canaan to Abraham's people – because of the wickedness of the Canaanites. One of our Scriptures today shows God condemning His own people for joining in the practices of their neighbors; it's one of the reasons they were exiled for 70 years in Babylon.

But ancient cultures regularly practiced it. Was there a demonic element in their worship? Yes, absolutely. But for many cultures, it was also a way to get rid of extra mouths to feed. Until recent times, food supply has been a common human concern. Children take an enormous amount of resources, providing little in return, for some time. A couple of children could mean the difference between wealth and starvation. Other cultures viewed children as a curse. In comparison, God taught the Israelites that children were a blessing from Him.

All of this means that we need to look at this story through an ancient lens. As this story was passed down through the generations, as it was read and shared in this part of the world, they wouldn't have blinked twice about God asking Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. That was normal stuff the gods asked of human beings. The shocking twist to them was that God spared Isaac's life. What kind of God stops the hand of Abraham? What kind of God spares the children and calls them blessed? What kind of God accepts an animal He Himself has provided in place of the child? We look at the story and say, “God seems pretty messed up to ask Abraham to sacrifice Isaac.” That's because we have always lived with the belief that God does not want this sort of thing ever to happen. But it's through this incident that we learn that to be true.

A key element here, one we saw with Noah back in our study six months ago and repeated again here, is that *God takes us through trials and tests, not around them*. Right from the start, this is framed as God testing Abraham. God does not change His mind at the last minute; saving Isaac was the plan from the beginning. But there is a key difference between saying, “I don’t ever want you or your descendants to sacrifice your children,” and proving it through a trial. When we hear a law, we say, “Yeah, OK,” and we don’t think about it unless we want to break that law. But when an incident proves it to us, we think about it very differently.

Ten years ago, we went through a life-changing car accident. I shattered my kneecap, but everyone was otherwise OK in an accident the paramedics told us we were blessed to live through. Now, when I have some residual arthritis in it, I can be a little grumpy, but I am also very thankful to God for the life we’ve had. I learned God’s protection on us that day in a way I’d not experienced before. I knew God’s protection in my head, but now I’d experienced it.

When God tests Abraham, it is to show Abraham His mercy in the midst of a very deep, very dark place...and to teach Abraham through experience that He is different from all the other so-called gods. What is so stunning about this passage is how much God’s fulfillment of the promise of Isaac has changed Abraham. We’re seeing a different man. Abraham has questioned God in the past – will my servant Eliezer of Damascus be my heir? Will you spare Sodom for 50 righteous people? And Abraham has put faith in himself above faith in God on more than one occasion, and each time it backfired spectacularly. Here, though, God has transformed Abraham.

Here there’s no reluctance or rebellion on Abraham’s part. He knows Isaac was a miracle from God. He does not question; he obeys, knowing that God would provide the rescue. Notice what he tells the servants – “we will go make the sacrifice, and then we will come back to you.” He is confident that God will intervene. How else can God’s promises come true? As Hebrews 11 told us this morning, Abraham believed that in some fashion, God could raise Isaac from the dead...and while God stops his hand, Abraham does receive Isaac back from the dead metaphorically. But what we see is an Abraham who has finally and fully accepted the promises of God through the birth of Isaac, and he will obey God when there seems to be no way out.

Because of this incident, all those who came after Abraham would know that God does not desire their children as a sacrifice but to love and bless their children. While God wants our full devotion, it is shown in love, mercy, and self-sacrifice, not in a bloody pagan ritual of death. And because of this incident, we see the final place of Abraham’s faith...his faith did not fail him in his greatest test, and so he would become an exemplar of faith for all generations.

For us, we may wonder why we have the trials we do. Does God really want His people to be sick and in pain? Does God want His people living paycheck to paycheck or worse? Does God want these terrible things that sometimes we experience? I am reminded that in Hebrews 2 that Jesus was made perfect through His suffering. Jesus was literally the perfect man, yet He was made more perfect by what He went through for us. We who are imperfect learn a great deal through our trials. Why do we go through what we go through? We’re not going to get very many answers about that this side of heaven. Yet I am confident that God grows us through them. And like Abraham, we learn through experience far better than we learn from a lesson. You might not remember this sermon tomorrow, but you’ll remember what you go through.

So God is not a moral monster. God will stay the hand of Abraham. Abraham goes through a test of faith, showing he will do whatever God asks of him, but God proves His love for Abraham and Isaac and, really, for humanity by stopping Abraham. What I want to dive deeper into now for a minute is Isaac. Because again, we need to go past the surface to realize what is going on here. In Isaac, we see distinct parallels to the coming of Jesus.

We can get tripped up by the language of the passage that calls Isaac a “boy.” The word in Hebrew has many different ideas tied up in it. We think of “boy” as probably younger than a teenager, maybe? We wouldn’t consider a “boy” as a term for someone 20-30 years old. But it has a broad range of meaning. And paying close attention, we have some idea that this is Isaac the young child here.

First, while we don’t know where Moriah was, a young child would not be on a three-day journey through the mountains. Moreover, a burnt offering took a considerable amount of wood. All of that is placed on Isaac, who carries the wood up the mountain. No young child could possibly do that. What we have is a picture of a young man, probably late teens, strapping, prime of life. And he’s not stupid. He lives in this culture. A sacrifice on a high mountain without a lamb? Traveling three days to get there? The writing is on the wall.

This is not a surprise or trickery on Abraham’s part. Isaac goes willingly. Isaac has learned his father’s faith. He knows he is the son of the promise; there were celebrations that he could remember. Isaac believes that whatever happens, he is in the Lord’s hands. Because let’s be honest – Abraham is closer to 120 than not, Isaac is close to 20. Abraham is no match for Isaac. There is no way Abraham could have bound his son had Isaac not been a willing participant. It is clearly weighing heavily on Abraham, but Isaac trusts in his father and trusts in God. This is the reason in Scripture that we hear that God is the God of Abraham, *Isaac*, and Jacob.

We can start to see the parallels when we look closely, right? Jesus goes to His death in obedience to His Father’s will – the will of His Father who deeply loves Him, who is giving up His only Son, so that the world could be saved. Just like Isaac, Jesus carries the wood for the offering up the hill to the place of sacrifice. He’s deeply involved personally in the process.

And it’s not the strength of the Father, the strength of Abraham, that makes this happen. As Jesus Himself said, one word and twelve legions of angels would have been there to protect Him from His arrest in Gethsemane. It wasn’t brute force that put Isaac on that altar; it wasn’t brute force that got Jesus crucified between two criminals. It was love, trust, and faith – love of God, trust that God has a greater purpose, faith that God is a God of rescue and deliverance who would make things right.

I look at this and I’m like, wow! This is almost two thousand years before Jesus, and yet the parallels are staggering. The sacrifice on the mountains of Moriah and the sacrifice on the hill of Calvary. And yet it’s there that we also see the staggering difference between the two stories. Abraham is ready to kill Isaac, has the blade ready, and the angel of the Lord calls out to him twice, a sign of intensity – “no, don’t do this, I see your faith, I see you fear God, spare your son.” God provides the sacrifice that Abraham offers in place of Isaac. Isaac is spared death.

What God will not ask of Abraham, He asks of Himself, for our salvation. This is so mind-blowing. This is the place where I just want to give God all the glory and honor and praise, and Jesus all the honor and worth due to Him, and the Spirit all honor due Him. What God will not ask of Abraham, He asks of Himself, for our salvation. God says to Abraham, put that knife down, free your son from his shackles, in fact, through this know that I will never ask you or your descendants ever to make the sacrifice of your son or daughter. They are a blessing from me. I want you to believe me; I want you to trust me; I want you to obey me even when what I ask doesn't make sense to you; it will all work out. I will not ask your son of you.

But what God will not ask of Abraham, He asks of Himself. This is the power behind John 3:16, "for God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son." It is not that God gave Jesus to us as a wise teacher, as a faithful example, as a moral template, even though those are all true. He so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son. He sent Him to us to die for us, to clear out the wickedness of His people, to be able to forgive what we call unforgivable, to cleanse stains even the strongest bleach could never touch.

Like Abraham, the Father gives up His beloved Son willingly, though it costs so very much. The communion they had from the creation of the world is different. Jesus comes as a man, spends thirty-some years with us, lives perfectly, then is handed over to be crucified though He did nothing wrong. Jesus is willing, but unlike Isaac, He comes a servant, as much despised as beloved by those He came to save.

And when the time comes, because justice demands punishment for sin, Jesus does not get up from the wood of the sacrifice. He is not unbound. He spends the last day of His earthly life in agony, giving Himself up so that we might not face what is due us for the wrongs we have done. Jesus dies so that every person God has called His own will come into the Kingdom of God, forgiven and freed from sin and made whole.

A pastor friend of mine recently spoke a great truth: God isn't in the business of behavior modification. He is in the business of soul transformation. That's because God's not in the business of making bad people good people. He's in the business of bringing dead people to life. That's exactly what Scripture tells us: we were dead in our sins and transgressions (Colossians 2:13). Yet God has made us alive in Christ, forgiving us our sins.

That's ultimately why there's no huge moral lesson for us in this passage, just a huge truth we should cling to. God transforms the culture of the ancient Near East in one moment, establishing a new order, a new way to do things, one that abhors the ancient sacrificial practices, one where God says, "Obey me and I will bless you," one where God says, "I will not make your children go through the fire."

And it's a transforming moment for us, too, when we realize that God doesn't want us to be good people. We're dead people, dead in sin, dead to the things of God. God raises us to life in Christ. We are brought to new life in Him. Once God has transformed us, given us new life through Christ, then we can see a full transformation happening, when the things of God take root in us and we genuinely start to be transformed into righteous people. All because God did not withhold His Son but gave Him for us all.

The best news, the news we'll end with, is that God resurrects the dead to everlasting life. God gave Abraham back Isaac, but in the fullness of time, a true resurrection takes place. Jesus returns to life, and the world changes. No longer is death the end. What Jesus has experienced, we will experience too. Death has no permanent hold on us. Because for all those who believe and trust in Christ, we will experience the blessings made to Abraham, both now and always. Because the Father did not withhold the Son but gave Him to us for our salvation, as the passage says, "through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me." For that, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit deserve our praise and worship forevermore. Amen!