

The Ultimate Sacrifice (Genesis 22:1-19)

When we sacrifice for others it shows how much we love them. What are we willing to sacrifice for God? In this story Abraham's love for God is tested in a profound and powerful way. Yet his faith holds firm.

What sacrifices are you willing to make?

The big news of the week is the war in Ukraine. It is a tragedy and Russia has been rightly condemned by the international community. But the question is what else are we prepared to do to stop them?

The imposition of sanctions is the major weapon being used. But although these are designed to damage the Russian economy, they also involve sacrifices for our economy. For example embargoes on Russian oil or gas will cause them a lot of damage, but will also push up the price of oil and gas for the rest of us. Are we willing to make that sacrifice in order to discourage Russian aggression in Eastern Europe?

For the people of the Ukraine the issue of sacrifice is far more profound. Are they willing to fight on against overwhelming forces, potentially giving up their lives for the sake of preventing Russian control of their country? Clearly many of them are. One group of border guards on an island in the Black Sea refused to surrender to a Russian navy vessel and all 13 of them were killed as a result. They sacrificed their lives for the sake of resisting Russian occupation of their country. They loved their country more than they loved their lives.

In the end, sacrifice is about what you love more. Sacrifice tests where our true love lies. If you are willing to sacrifice something for the sake of something else, then you love the something else more.

- If you are a child with a Kit Kat and your friend offers to swap it for a Mars bar, then your willingness to give up your Kit Kat shows you love Mars bars more than Kit Kats. You are willing to sacrifice the Kit Kat for the Mars bar.
- If Harry has to choose between going abroad to pursue his career or staying at home to be with Helen whom he loves, then choosing to stay at home shows he loves Helen more than his career. He is willing to sacrifice his career for the person he loves.
- If someone without health insurance in the US has to sell their house to pay for lifesaving treatment for their child. It shows that they love their child more than their house. They are willing to sacrifice their house for their child.

What is the cost of being a disciple?

When it comes to being a disciple of Jesus, the command is that we should love God with all our soul, mind, strength and heart. It's a command we repeat most weeks, but do we think about its implications? Would we pass the test if we had to sacrifice something for God?

Or to put it another way, what would we not be willing to sacrifice for God? Is the reality that we love that thing more than we love God? Are we really willing to pay the cost of being a disciple?

Would we be willing to give up our money for God's sake?

What about using our free time for him?

Or even giving up our career to serve him if he called us to do that?

Those are challenging enough questions. Yet, Jesus puts it even more profoundly with a very challenging statement. In Matthew 10 he says:

"Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me." (Matthew 10:37-38)

In other words Jesus is saying that to be a follower of him we need to love him more than our own parents, our own children or even our own lives?

Are we willing to sacrifice our parents, children or lives for the sake of Jesus? Would we pass that test? Do we really love God that much? Can we really love God that much?

Does loving God that much really make sense? Is the sacrifice worth it?

A tense story:

Our Old Testament reading was Genesis 22, it is the climactic story in the Abraham saga and a story all about sacrifice. If you have been following the story with us, you will know that Abraham left his home with his wife Sarah, because God told him to go to the land of Canaan. He did so because God made some amazing promises that he would become a great nation. However, the problem was Abraham and Sarah had no children and for years Abraham lived in the promised land with no children of his own and the possibility of having children becoming more and more incredible. Until finally, a miracle happened and Sarah had a son, Isaac.

Their only son! God's promises and blessings were proving true after all. Isaac was the miracle child of promise and in 21:12 God says to Abraham:

"... it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." (Genesis 21:12)

- **Testing Command** - vs. 1-2

Then at the start of this chapter, when Isaac is probably a teenager, God commands Abraham to do something truly shocking:

He was to sacrifice Isaac as a burnt offering.

This is a shocking command for a whole host of reasons:

Firstly, later on in the Old Testament God would make it clear that child sacrifice was utterly abhorrent to him!

Secondly, for Abraham, Isaac would have been the most precious thing to him. No parent wants to lose a child, it is probably the most tragic experience that any parent can go through. But this is even worse, it was Abraham and Sarah's only child, the one they had longed for for so long. God seems to acknowledge all this in the command and yet still he commands Abraham to sacrifice his son.

Thirdly, we might ask doesn't this contradict God's promise? How can Abraham's seed come through Isaac, if Isaac dies so young?

Yet, we are also told in verse 1 that this is a test. God wants to see whether Abraham will obey, whether he loves God enough to sacrifice his only son. In other words, whether he loves God more than he loves his son.

So as we start reading this story there is a real tension created at the outset. We feel for Abraham and we long that he does not lose his son Isaac, but we are also aware that this is a test. We don't want Abraham to fail the test.

How can Abraham pass this test and keep his child?

- **Hard Obedience** - vs. 3-6

That is the tension created by the testing command and it is a tension that the story builds as Abraham and Isaac travel towards the place where God has said the sacrifice should take place, Mount Moriah.

We hear of Abraham setting out with the wood needed for the sacrifice his son Isaac, a donkey and two slaves. They travel for three days to Mount Moriah. All this time Abraham could turn back, but he continues on. We don't know what turmoil was going through his mind, but we see his obedience to the command.

On the third day they reach the foot of the mountain, and he leaves the donkey and servants, puts the wood on Isaacs, back, takes the fire and knife in his hand and the two of them head off up the mountain alone. Abraham's grim determination to obey continues.

- **Uncertain Faith** - vs. 7-8

Then Isaac notices something and asks his father, Abraham. Where is the lamb for the sacrifice he asks?

Is Isaac realising what is about to happen? How would Abraham had felt about this question?

Abraham's response is simple:

"God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering."

he says.

Is this a white lie to hide from his son what is really going on? Or does this show something of Abraham's faith? Does it give us a glimpse of how he is trying to reconcile the conflicting ideas of God's testing command and the promise that Isaac would be the one through whom his offspring would come? Does he somehow trust that God will sort it all out? Is this a statement of Abraham's faith?

- **Abraham's Ultimate Obedience** - vs. 9-12

Finally, they reach the top of the mountain and the telling of the story almost goes into slow motion as we are told of every detail of the preparation for the sacrifice...

Abraham builds an altar,

Isaac is bound, probably by now he knows what is going on, yet like his father is also obedient...

He is laid on the wood, that he has carried up the mountain,

Abraham takes the knife,

he stretches out his hand to slit his sons throat and...

Just as he does the angel of the LORD calls from heaven: "NO!!"

"Do not harm the boy!"

"You've passed the test!" "I know that you love me more than the boy, more than anything else."

God has no intention of harming the boy, of destroying the promise.

Finally, the tension is resolved, Abraham passes the test and Isaac goes on to live!

- **God's Wonderful Provision** - vs. 13-14

More than that God provides just as Abraham had said he would.

There is a ram stuck caught by its horns in the thicket.

The ram is sacrificed in place of the boy.

Abraham is confirmed that his faith in God was correct. God would provide. No matter how hard the sacrifice he demanded,
God would provide what was needed to turn it into a deeper blessing!

So, Abraham named the place, "The LORD will Provide" to make the point.

This is the God worth trusting and obeying no matter what sacrifice he asks of you.

- **God's Reaffirmed Promise** - vs. 15-18

But, not only is Abraham's faith in God's provision and goodness re-affirmed, but God's promises to Abraham are re-affirmed and made more emphatic because of Abraham's obedience.

Now Abraham's descendants will be numerous not just as the stars, but as the sand on the sea shore. Now they will not just inherit the land, but defeat their enemies and once again we are told that through Abraham the man of obedience all nations on earth will be blessed.

This is an amazing story that surely encourages our total commitment and obedience to God. To see that if we love him he will always provide for us and our children no matter what sacrifice we are asked to make.

Yet, perhaps we are still left with a question. Clearly God never intended Isaac to be sacrificed, but how could he even ask Abraham to do it? There's no easy answer to that question. But as Christians we come to this story with a whole other perspective.

Was it right of God to pit Abraham's love for his own son against his love for God?

God's Greater Sacrifice:

Much of the story finds powerful echoes in the Gospels.

- **Jesus, the one and only Son**

Jesus is described in John's gospel as God's one and only son. Surely, God loves Jesus more than anything else, yet, God sacrifices him for the sake of the world.

That most famous verse in the Bible says:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16)

How could God the Father give his one and only Son as a sacrifice for the world? Does he love the world more than his Son?

- **Jesus, obedient unto death**

And Jesus like Isaac who allowed himself to be bound by his father, goes willingly and obediently to the sacrifice that God calls him to. Like Isaac he carried the wood to the place of sacrifice. Like Isaac he was placed on the wood. But unlike Isaac, God allowed the sacrifice to go ahead. There was no ram to replace Jesus, rather Jesus was the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Did God love the world more than his Son? Does he love us even more than Jesus? How could Jesus agree to die like this? Has God abandoned his faithfulness to his one and only Son?

- **Jesus, resurrected to life**

In Genesis 22, the resolution of the crisis comes on the third day and in the gospel the resolution to these problems also comes on the third day. Jesus was resurrected from the dead.

Just as God had saved Isaac from death, he also saved Jesus from death, but through his resurrection. Like Isaac, Jesus is both obedient to death and yet lives!

It says in Hebrews 11:17-19:

"By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death."

In a sense Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac, because he believed in God's power of resurrection. In the same way Jesus goes willingly to the cross because he believed in the power of resurrection.

God loves his Son and the world, the seeming tension is only temporary.

What will you withhold from God?

So what would you withhold from God?

Abraham did not hold back even his one and only son and found that God provided for both his Son and him in amazing ways. When we make sacrifices for God we will never lose out, because God is the God of resurrection the God of life.

And remember what God has sacrificed for you. He gave his one and only Son so that you might also become his child and receive eternal life. If he has given so much for you, how can you hold anything back from him?

Yes to follow Jesus is a call to sacrifice. For some people it does literally mean rejection by their family, because of their faith. For a few it can even mean losing your life because of being a Christian. Yet, God will provide and from the perspective of the resurrection, it makes perfect sense to be willing to give up anything for him.