

The Sacrifice of Isaac

I. INTRODUCTION

In some ways, the birth to Abraham and Sarah of Isaac, the long-awaited son of the promise, seems as if it could be the end of the story we have been tracking through the last ten chapters of Genesis.

A. Ups and Downs in their Faith Journey

After many ups and downs, Abraham and Sarah appear to have settled into the life that God had called them to so many years before. They have never turned their backs on God, never packed their bags to return to Haran.

- There have been moments of great faith in their story, and
- Moments of weakness and imprudence.

Previously, we saw in Abraham a strange combination of service to God and man (his prayers for Abimelech's healing) and a suggestion of presumption (being less than honest about his relationship to Sarah).

B. Consequences of Polygamy

We also observed that Abraham had a lingering fondness for Ishmael, in spite of the word God had given him that his heir would be Isaac.

- Because the two sons have two different mothers, Abraham cannot make a single family for both of his sons - a consequence of polygamy.

Sarah gave godly advice to Abraham, urging him to send the boy and his mother away; it was a severe but necessary move to protect Abraham's fidelity to God's plan for him.

[Note: While the patriarchs practice polygamy, there is no sympathy for the practice in Sacred Scripture. Rather the author of Genesis shows how polygamy has contributed to the suffering of the human race].

With Ishmael gone and Isaac secure as Abraham's heir, perhaps we could conclude that all the drama of God's plan to bless Abraham and, eventually, all mankind is over.

C. Is God Finished with Abraham?

After all, the birth of Isaac was what Abraham and Sarah were waiting for. If God would grant them the gift of a son, even after Abraham's failures, then maybe Abraham was right in thinking his covenant with God was a done deal.

And if God took the initiative to send Ishmael away from Abraham, thus protecting his heart from defection, then maybe God will make it impossible for him to fail in the future.

D. Can Abraham Still Fail?

Recall that in Genesis 15 we wondered whether Abraham's experience of having his faith reckoned to him as righteousness (Gen. 15:6) made him **permanently** pleasing to God [justified – in the state of grace].

E. Once Saved, Always Saved?

Many non-Catholic Christians believe that's exactly what happened. They draw a parallel between that moment in Abraham's life and the moment when a person places his faith in the promise of God to save him through the work of Jesus.

They believe that with one act of faith, a person is "saved" or justified (in a state of grace). Nothing can happen to change that status. It is a done deal.

F. Then why is Abraham Tested Again?

If we are thinking that way, then Genesis 22 will catch us by surprise. Abraham is about to undergo the severest test of his life.

- What kind of test is it?
- Why does God need to put him through it?
- What are the implications of this test for our lives with God?
- Remember, Abraham has already “sacrificed” his first-born son, Ishmael, for the sake of peace in the family. It crushed Abraham’s heart to do so.
- Abraham also gave up his father Terah, in order to follow God.

What more will God demand? The drama is far from over; in some ways, it is only just beginning. The third and final promise God made to Abraham to bless "all families" of the earth through him hangs in the balance, as we shall see.

II. A SHOCKING COMMAND

Read: Genesis 22:1-8

[1] After these things God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I."

[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 upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you."

[3] So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his ass, 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 afar off.

[5] Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the ass; I and the lad will go yonder 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 am I, 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 himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together.

A. "These Things"

"These things" in verse 1 may refer to the events recorded in the previous two chapters. That would include:

- Abraham's dishonesty regarding his relationship to Sarah, and
- His love for Ishmael; wanting to hold onto him instead of letting him go.

Perhaps "these things" are serious enough in his life for God to examine Abraham's faith. Although he has not repudiated God or forsaken the covenant, is he still willing to walk before God and "be blameless"? (Gen. 17:1).

A test should make this clear.

B. God’s Command

"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 upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you."

Imagine the poignancy and the gravity of God's command to Abraham in vs. 2. It appears to have come to him in the night, so he had to sleep on it.

How do you think Abraham must have felt?

We have no record of how Abraham reacted to this command from God. Did he walk out and take a look at the stars again, seeking some kind of reason to put his trust in God?

C. Dark Night of the Soul

Think of the questions that may have raced through his head. "You can't possibly mean this! The boy is everything to me. Have I lived with You so long, only to be required to do something worse than giving up my own life?"

- Who are You, anyway?
- I thought You were better than the gods to whom people sacrifice their children.
- Has all this 'covenant' talk about descendants and a great nation and blessing the whole world through me just been a hoax?
- Why are You doing this to me?
- Is there any way I can change Your mind?"

Abraham could have had an outburst of emotion like this, directed towards God with the intention of negotiating a way out. He could also have decided that by no means was he going to lose another son to the whim of this God.

He could have awakened the household, packed up, and fled with the boy. "Forget all Your promises; they don't mean anything to me if I have to lose my son. You've asked too much this time."

Another possibility is that Abraham, shocked by God's command, could have begun a time of serious recollection of his friendship with God up to this point.

"I am stunned by what You are asking of me. But during all the years I have lived with You, I have had many experiences of your love, goodness, protection,

faithfulness, mercy, and justice. You have asked me to do difficult things before, but no matter how hard they were, You always used them as occasions to bless me and my family.

Leaving Haran and my father's house was no picnic, but You were with me every step of the way. Getting circumcised was painful and risky, but Sarah conceived and gave birth at the precise time You promised.

- But this! - offering up my son, my only son whom I love dearly! I cannot see how anything good can come of it.
- I'm afraid."

What a long, dark night of the soul that must have been for Abraham.

D. Abraham’s Response to God

By early the next morning, no matter what thoughts may have kept him awake all night, what is clear is Abraham's final response to God's command.

Abraham decided to obey God. He must have gotten to the point of believing that God knows what He is doing, no matter how bad things might look.

- He trusted God more than he trusted himself, which is the essence of humility (and the opposite of presumption).

He must have decided that it was better to let go of Isaac than to disobey God, in spite of the dread he must have felt at what lay ahead. As much as he loved this boy, he must have decided to love God more.

He held nothing back.

E. On the Third Day

On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place afar off.

"On the third day" is a phrase associated with the Resurrection of Christ and the redemption of the world. In this context, the phrase should alert us to an event which will in some way be a foreshadowing of the Resurrection.

The Letter to the Hebrews shows that Abraham believed that God was able to raise Isaac from the dead.

Read Heb. 11:17-19.

[17] By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son,

*[18] of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your descendants be named."
[19] He considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead;
hence, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.*

So when Abraham says to the young men with him (vs. 5) that he and Isaac will go worship and "come again to you," what does it appear he was thinking would happen on Mt. Moriah?

The Hebrews reference and Abraham's word to his men about going to worship and returning suggest that Abraham expected God to raise Isaac from the dead after he had killed him.

How could he have come to a conclusion like that? Perhaps he reasoned along these lines:

"God is asking me to sacrifice my son. I do not understand why, but I know I cannot refuse Him. Whatever God's reasons are, they must be good. Whatever happens, I know I can trust Him to keep His Word to me to give me descendants through this boy. Even if God has to raise Isaac from the dead, I know I will not return from Mt. Moriah alone."

F. God is in Charge

Abraham's focus is entirely on God. He does not appear to be thinking sentimental thoughts about Isaac. He does not break down in sobs, crying out: "Don't ask! Just don't ask!" He resolutely anchors everything that is about to happen in the will and action of God.

It appears that all the possible jumble of emotions and questions that any normal person would experience in a situation like this have all been reduced to a single conviction: God is in charge here.

G. Isaac Carries the Wood for his Holocaust

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.

Imagine the emotions of Abraham as he walked beside the unsuspecting Isaac, the tools of sacrifice in his hand and his beloved son, under a load of wood, asking him the inevitable question in vs. 7: "*[Isaac] said, "Behold, the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"*"

Note that Isaac carries the load of heavy wood up the hill. Isaac was a young man by now – probably in his twenties – and strong enough to carry the wood. Isaac is a type of Christ who carried his wood – the Cross – up the hill to Calvary. Calvary and Mount Moriah are near each other.

H. Abraham’s Answer: God will Provide

Abraham said, "God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together.

What is the prophetic irony of Abraham's response to him in vs. 8?

Abraham prophesies that not only will God provide a lamb for the offering in question (at this point, Abraham probably assumes that Isaac is the lamb) but also that in the future, on that same Mt. Moriah, God will provide a "lamb" for the worship of God by Israel.

In Israel, this offering was foreshadowed in the building of the Temple in Jerusalem, on Mt. Moriah; it was fulfilled in the sacrifice of Jesus on Calvary, which was also located on Moriah.

[Note: " Mount Moriah is the place where Solomon (king of Israel in about 950 B.C.) set about building the house of the Lord, the temple that contained the Holy of Holies. Mount Moriah wasn't out in a remote desert; it was located where the city of Salem was situated in Abraham's day, which later became known as Jerusalem (see Ps. 76:1-3).

Moriah is identified in 2 Chron. 3:1 as the mountain on which the temple of Jerusalem was built, during the reign of King Solomon, many years later.

One final point: Notice the sequence of words of Abraham’s reply, *"God will provide himself the lamb . . ."* Some translations read, *"God will provide the lamb himself. . ."* or *"God Himself . . ."*

The first translation suggests that God Himself will be the Lamb [in the Person of Jesus Christ]!

III. THE BINDING OF ISAAC

Read: Genesis 22: 9-14

[9] When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid

him on the altar, upon the wood.

[10] Then Abraham put forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.

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

[12] He said, "Do not lay your hand on the lad 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."

A. Isaac Finally Understands

When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar, upon the wood.

By the time his father was tying him up, Isaac knew what was happening. Remember that Abraham was already an old man. How was he able to tie up a strong young man and lay him on the altar?

There can be only one explanation: Isaac himself cooperated. The sacrifice was not only Abraham’s; Isaac himself was a willing participant.

As for Abraham, he could only have faith. If God chose, He could raise Isaac from the dead [see Heb 11:19]. Meanwhile Abraham could only resign himself to the will of God.

But the story has a happy ending.

Abraham raised the knife to kill his son, but the Angel of the Lord stopped Abraham from carrying out the sacrifice, commending his fidelity to God; *"I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."*

B. The Lord Will Provide

Abraham substituted a ram for Isaac, and named the mountain, “*The LORD will provide*” [in Hebrew “Yahweh yireh” of “Jireh”]. These words may have been combined with Salem to form “*Jireh-Salem*” or Jerusalem [meaning “he (Yahweh) will provide peace”].

How strange that Abraham names the mountain “the Lord **will** provide,” after God provided a ram that, if young enough, could have been classified as a lamb.

Abraham told Isaac that God “will provide” the lamb, and yet, after the Lord provided a ram to sacrifice instead of Isaac, Abraham still named the mountain, “the Lord will provide” not “the Lord did provide.”

In the very next line Genesis adds with apparent emphasis: “*[A]s it is said to this day, “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided”* clearly conveying an expectation that God would one day yet provide a lamb.

IV. GOD SWEARS AN OATH

Read: Genesis 22:15-19

[15] And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven,

[16] and said, “By myself I have sworn, says the LORD, because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son,

[17] I will indeed bless you, and I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore. And your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies,

[18] and by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.”

[19] So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham dwelt at Beer-sheba.

Because of Abraham’s fidelity, God swore one final oath with the patriarch, first reaffirming that his descendants would be numerous and conquer their enemies.

God then elevated his final promise from Genesis 12:3 to covenant-oath status.

[B]y your descendants shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.”

C. A Real Test

God's test of Abraham appears to be a real test.

In vs. 12, the angel of the Lord says, *"For now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son."* It seems that it would have been possible for Abraham to decide not to sacrifice Isaac. His choice to obey is truly his own choice. It is his response of faith in the goodness of God, even though the circumstances strongly suggested otherwise.

D. God's Oath is Irrevocable

When God swears an oath to fulfill all His promises to Abraham ("I will indeed bless you") in vs. 15-17, He does so because Abraham has obeyed. This final test is a crucial part of God's willingness to swear by Himself to keep the covenant.

Once God swears an oath, nothing can revoke it.

Far from being a "done deal" in Genesis 15, when God reckoned righteousness to Abraham for his faith [justification], the promise of universal blessing only becomes permanent and irrevocable when Abraham demonstrates that after so many years, he is still willing to live by faith.

V. JUSTIFICATION IN ABRAHAM'S LIFE

According to the New Testament, justification is something that happened more than once in Abraham's life. There is no other conclusion that will satisfy the biblical data.

Read James 2:21-24. See that James says that the offering of Isaac was an occasion of "justification" in Abraham's life. St. Paul says, in Romans 4, that when Abraham *"believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness"* in Gen. 15:4, it was an occasion when he was justified.

These are two different occasions of justification.

This fact presents serious difficulties for many non-Catholic Christian explanations of how justification works. Indeed, at the time of the Reformation, it was such a major obstacle to Martin Luther's doctrine of salvation by faith alone that he refused to consider the epistle of James to be inspired Scripture.

Modern day non-Catholic Christians never go that far, but when they hold Luther's doctrine, they are forced to produce interpretations of James that simply do not address what the words actually say and mean.

VI. CATECHISM ON JUSTIFICATION

I. JUSTIFICATION

1987 The grace of the Holy Spirit has the power to justify us, that is, to cleanse us from our sins and to communicate to us "the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ" and through Baptism.³⁴

1988 Through the power of the Holy Spirit we take part in Christ's Passion by dying to sin, and in his Resurrection by being born to a new life; we are members of his Body which is the Church, branches grafted onto the vine which is himself.³⁶

1989 The first work of the grace of the Holy Spirit is *conversion*, effecting justification in accordance with Jesus' proclamation at the beginning of the Gospel: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."³⁸

- Moved by grace, man turns toward God and away from sin, thus accepting forgiveness and righteousness from on high. "Justification is not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man."³⁹

1990 Justification *detaches man from sin* which contradicts the love of God, and purifies his heart of sin. Justification follows upon God's merciful initiative of offering forgiveness. It reconciles man with God. It frees from the enslavement to sin, and it heals.

1991 Justification is at the same time *the acceptance of God's righteousness* through faith in Jesus Christ. Righteousness (or "justice") here means the rectitude [integrity, goodness, principle] of divine love.

- With justification, faith, hope, and charity are poured into our hearts, and obedience to the divine will is granted us.

1992 Justification has been *merited for us by the Passion of Christ* who offered himself on the cross as a living victim, holy and pleasing to God, and whose blood has become the instrument of atonement for the sins of all men.

- Justification is conferred in Baptism, the sacrament of faith. It conforms us to the righteousness of God, who makes us inwardly just by the power of his mercy. Its purpose is the glory of God and of Christ, and the gift of eternal life.⁴⁰

VII. DEFINITION OF JUSTIFICATION / SALVATION

Justification: The event by which God, acting in Jesus Christ, makes us holy (just) in the divine sight. The immediate effect of justification is sanctification. The ultimate effect is salvation. The foundation of justification is the redemption.

Salvation: It is the goal and end-product of creation, the incarnation, the redemption, conversion, justification, and sanctification. To be saved is to be fully and permanently united with God and with one another in God [*Catholicism by Richard P McBrien*].

VIII. ARE YOU SAVED?

Sometimes non-Catholic Christians ask Catholics if they are "saved," if they know for sure that they are going to heaven. They call this the "assurance of salvation." Based on the example of Abraham, what do you think is an appropriate response to this question?

The simplest answer a Catholic can give to this question is, "I am being saved." Or we can give a three-part answer: "I have been saved;" "I am being saved;" and "I hope to be saved."

- We know with confidence that God will not fail us.
- In addition, we can count on His grace to help us in the tests He sends us.
- But we want to avoid the presumption that assumes that our salvation is a "done deal."

We want always to acknowledge our own responsibility to respond to and cooperate with the grace God gives us to obey Him. This is the kind of humility that will keep us vigilant to resist sin, out of a proper fear of the Lord.

- The final reward of heaven remains in God's hands alone.
- Our job is to live by faith throughout our lives, as Abraham did, always ready for the test.

Summary

1. God put Abraham to a severe test, asking him to offer up his son, Isaac, as a sacrifice. Although Abraham had lived faithfully with God for a long time, with relatively few lapses, God wanted to see if Abraham was humble enough to continue to obey Him, even when asked to do the most difficult act imaginable.
2. Abraham decided to obey God, confident that somehow He would make everything right. He set out with the boy for Mt. Moriah.
3. Isaac questioned Abraham about the lamb for the offering, seeing that they had everything else necessary for a sacrifice. Abraham gave a prophetic answer: "God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering."

This answer reflects Abraham's trust in God to participate in this act of worship. He did not feel alone and abandoned by God.

4. At the final moment, the Lord prevented Abraham from sacrificing his son. Satisfied that Abraham's faith was strong and true, He provided a ram stuck in a thorn bush for the burnt offering. Abraham named that place "The Lord will provide." The name itself became prophetic. Abraham could see ahead to a day when God would indeed provide a Lamb for the proper worship of Him by Israel and by the whole world. It became the site, later in the history of Israel, of the Temple in Jerusalem. The Temple was the place where Israel sacrificed animals to God; the Temple was a foreshadowing of Jesus, the Lamb God provided for the final and eternal sacrifice.

5. God, seeing that Abraham did not withhold anything from Him, swore an oath that He would bless all the families of the earth through Abraham. This oath made the covenant irrevocable. This was the moment in human history when God ratified His plan to restore the human race to Himself, to overcome the rebellion in Eden, to replace the curse with a blessing.

6. Abraham's act of obedience transformed him into a man who, in his human life, bore the likeness of God Himself. God would one day give up His own Son to ransom the world. Abraham is an example of what obedience to God produces in humans - the glory of the divine nature. As a result of his encounter with God on Moriah, Abraham's heart was set on heaven. He understood that on this earth, he was a stranger and sojourner. Those who set their sights on the "better country" of the city of God become His friends, just like Abraham.