

Genesis 22:1-19 – The Sacrifice of Isaac

Review

Last time we finally read about the birth of Isaac – Abraham’s heir through whose line God had promised Abram twenty-five years before that all the families of the earth would be blessed. About a year later, at Sarah’s urging and with God’s reassurance, Abraham sent his son Ishmael and his mother Hagar away into the desert where God found them and rescued them. Finally, we looked at the covenant between Abraham and Abimelech King of Gerar that Abraham formalized with the gift of seven ewe lambs. Therefore, the well where the two swore the oaths of this covenant was called Beersheba (בְּאֵר שֶׁבַע *bə’ēr šeba* - well of the seven-fold oath).

God Calls Abraham to Sacrifice Isaac

We now come to one of the most well-known and controversial stories in the entire Word of God – God’s call upon Abraham to sacrifice Isaac his promised heir as a burnt offering to the LORD. We are all naturally repulsed by the idea of child sacrifice, especially in the light of God’s promises to Abraham regarding Isaac. To better understand the meaning of this story, let’s look at the lessons it has to teach the interested parties – Abraham, Isaac, and us.

¹After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” ²He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah [מֹרְיָא *môriyâ* - chosen by Jehovah], and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.” Genesis 22:1-2 (ESV)

The first thing that springs to mind as we read this story is the fact that Isaac was definitely **not** Abraham’s only son. There is no Biblical record of how long it had been since Abraham cast out Ishmael and Hagar into the desert. But certainly Abraham couldn’t have believed that Ishmael had perished in the desert, because we know from [Genesis 17:20](#) that God had promised that Ishmael would beget twelve princes and that God would make Ishmael’s descendants a great nation. What God is saying to Abraham here in [Genesis 21:2](#) is that Isaac was the only one of Abraham’s sons who factored into God’s plan of salvation.

Recall that the purpose of God’s Word is to reveal and clarify His plan of salvation through the birth in the flesh, perfectly sinless life, sacrificial death on the cross for the remission of sin, and resurrection to life on the third day of the **מָשִׁיחַ *māšîaḥ*** Jesus – Savior of Israel and of all mankind. Furthermore, we know that Genesis gives us the hereditary line of Jesus starting with the first promise of the coming **מָשִׁיחַ *māšîaḥ*** given to Eve in the Garden of Eden, through Noah to his son Shem, then through Abraham, and now to Abraham’s promised son – Isaac.

Why then would God call upon Abraham to sacrifice Isaac – the promised heir for Abraham, and forefather of Jesus the **מָשִׁיחַ *māšîaḥ***? First of all, many of the aspects of the sacrifice of Isaac are symbolic and prophetic as we shall see – beginning with the place where the sacrifice was to be carried out.

Look at the [Patriarchs in Canaan map](#). Recall from our [study of Genesis 19](#) that after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham moved his tent from the Oaks of Mamre in the Judean mountains near Hebron to Kadesh in the southern Negev. From Kadesh, God called Abraham to journey northward to a mountain God would specify and there sacrifice Isaac to God as a burnt offering.

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Look at the [Jerusalem Topography Map](#).

NOTE – The topography of Jerusalem has been greatly modified during human habitation. In Abraham’s time, many of the structures and even the topographical features would have been very different from the way they are depicted on this map.

The land of Moriah referred to in [Genesis 21:2](#) later became the site of the city of Jerusalem upon which God would place His Name as His dwelling place on the Earth ([1 Kings 11:36](#)). The mountain God showed to Abraham was almost certainly Mt. Moriah (מֹרְיָה *mowriyah* – chosen by Jehovah). In Abraham’s time, there were two separate peaks – Mt. Moriah the northernmost and Mt. Zion to its south (labeled the City of David on the [Jerusalem Topography Map](#)). Later, the shallow depression between these separate peaks was leveled with a great earthwork – the Millo (מִלּוֹ *millow*) ([1 Kings 9:24](#)), and the Ophel (עֹפֶל *ōpel*) was fortified with stone walls ([2 Chronicles 27:3](#)). Upon the top of Mount Moriah, Solomon built the first Jewish temple. That temple was later destroyed by the Babylonian army of Nebuchadnezzar. King Herod the Great greatly expanded the level foundation of the temple – the so-called Temple Mount remains today the largest man-made platform in the world (over 37 acres). The second temple – built after the Jews returned from the Babylonian captivity – was replaced by the magnificent temple built by King Herod the Great which was standing on the Temple Mount during the time of Jesus. That temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD just as Jesus had foretold to His disciples in [Matthew 24:2](#).



Dome of the Rock



Foundation Stone

Although the temple itself has been destroyed, the great platform – The Temple Mount – upon which it was built remains in Jerusalem today. On the top of the temple mount, there are two locations where the bedrock of the mountain protrudes through the man-made platform. One of these lies inside the Dome of the Rock. This building which is a Muslim shrine today was constructed by the Crusaders as a Christian Church. The so-called “Foundation Stone” within the Dome of the Rock is one possible location for the base for the Most Holy Place in the Jewish temple where the Ark of the Covenant was placed. The other flat protrusion of bedrock on the Temple Mount is underneath the Dome of the Spirits – a much smaller shrine about 100 meters northwest of the Dome of the Rock.

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Dome of the Spirits



Dome of the Spirits Floor

One of these two flat protrusions of bedrock on Mt. Moriah may also have been the location of the threshing floor which King David purchased from Araunah the Jebusite for the construction of an altar of burnt sacrifice before Solomon's temple was built ([2 Samuel 24](#)). The winnowing of grain in the ancient world was done by pouring out the grain onto flat rocks and beating it with winnowing fans. The grain was then gathered into baskets and thrown up into the air so that the wind could blow away the chaff, and the winnowed grain would then fall back onto the rock to be gathered up and stored.

One of the two flat spots at the top of Mount Moriah was very likely the place God showed to Abraham here in [Genesis 22](#) upon which Isaac was to be sacrificed, and which later became the location of the Most Holy Place where the Ark of the Covenant was placed.

3So 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.

Genesis 22:3 (ESV)

Abraham's response to God's call for the sacrifice of Isaac is noteworthy. Notice that he didn't object or even question God's command. He simply obeyed. Recall from [Genesis 15:6](#) that Abraham's faith in the LORD was credited to him for righteousness. But faith isn't just a passive emotion. Faith in God is demonstrated by obedience to His calling and commands just as Abraham did unquestioningly here in this story.

18But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.

19You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and

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shudder! ²⁰Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? ²¹Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? ²²You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; ²³and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God. James

2:18-23 (ESV)

¹⁷By 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, ¹⁸of whom it was said, “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” ¹⁹He 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 (ESV)

NOTE – God didn’t need to give Abraham detailed instructions for the preparation of the burnt offering. Although the Law concerning offerings to God was not given to Moses until hundreds of years later, Abraham needed no directions. There was already a tradition of burnt offerings among the Hebrew people during the time of Abraham which would later be formalized in the written Law given by God to Moses.

⁴On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar.

Genesis 22:4 (ESV)

Much has been written and preached about the significance and symbolism of the fact that Abraham first sighted Mt. Moriah on the third day after setting out from Kadesh. We won’t add to that speculation here except to say that the journey by donkey through the mountains of Judea is a little over 75 miles and would take about 25-35 hours in that rugged terrain. Thus, the journey would have taken a little over two days of steady walking during daylight.

⁵Then Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy ^[נַעַר na`ar] will go over there and worship and come again to you.”

⁶And 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. ⁷And 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?” ⁸Abraham said, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So they went both of them together. Genesis 22:5-8 (ESV)

The Word of God does not say exactly how old Isaac was when God called Abraham to sacrifice him. The Hebrew word נַעַר *na`ar* translated into English as “lad,” “youth,” or “boy” can mean any male person from a young boy who hasn’t yet reached puberty, to a young man in his twenties. We know from [Genesis 23](#) that Isaac’s mother Sarah died sometime after this at the age of 127. Recall that Sarah was 90 when Isaac was born. So, Isaac could have been no older than about 37 years old when God called Abraham to sacrifice him. Certainly, Isaac was not an infant or toddler, since he was able to ask his father quite grown-up questions along the way and was able to carry the fuel for his own burnt

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offering – a considerable weight of wood. Very likely, Isaac was in his teens at the time of this story, but there is no way to verify this Biblically.

The fact that Isaac carried the wood for his own sacrifice is significantly symbolic, reminding us that Jesus was also made to carry His own cross from the Praetorium where He was condemned to Mt. Calvary where He was crucified ([John 19:17](#)). Clearly Abraham either truly believed that God would somehow intervene or at least told Isaac so as they went. As we have seen, the Hebrews writer tells us that Abraham believed that God would raise Isaac from the dead following the sacrifice.

9When 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. Genesis 22:9 (ESV)

A great deal has been said over the years about the faith of Abraham proven by this event. But what really strikes me is the faith of Isaac. Even if Isaac hadn't caught on before, when Abraham bound him and laid him on the altar, the purpose of the journey certainly came into crystal clear focus for him. Yet as we have seen, Isaac was not a small child, but a youth, probably at least in his early teens. His father Abraham would have been at least 110 years old by this time. If Isaac was not yet strong enough to overcome his father, he most certainly could have outrun an old man Abraham's age. Yet we see Isaac willingly allowed himself to be bound and placed onto the altar. If Abraham demonstrated his faith by obedience to God, how much more did Isaac do the same, not only obeying God but also his earthly father.

In this, Isaac typifies Jesus. Let no one try to say that the Jews killed Jesus, or the Romans killed Jesus, or even that we ourselves killed Jesus due to our sins which required Him to be sacrificed for our redemption. Jesus willing laid down His life for us as He Himself said.

14I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. 16And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. 17For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. 18No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father. John 10:14-18 (ESV)

Significantly, Jesus gave His life on the cross as an act of obedience to His Father just as Abraham obeyed God's call for a sacrifice and Isaac in turn obeyed his father Abraham.

10Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. 11But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 12He 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."

Genesis 22:10-12 (ESV)

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Once again, we see that God calls Isaac Abraham’s “*only son*.” In this too, we see Isaac as a model of Jesus.

16“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 17For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. John 3:16-17 (ESV)

Before we move on, remember that God certainly didn’t need to “prove” Abraham’s faith in this way to learn that Abraham would obey Him. The angel of the LORD may indeed have told Abraham “...*now I know...*” but that figure of speech was for Abraham’s and Isaac’s (and our) benefit. God knows all things. He always has and He always will. The lesson being taught by this testing was for Abraham, Isaac, and us – not God.

13And 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. 14So Abraham called the name of that place, “The LORD will provide” [יהוה יראה - Y’hōvâ yirah]; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.” Genesis 22:13-14 (ESV)

Recall from verse 8 that Abraham had told Isaac that God would provide the lamb for the sacrifice while they were still journeying to Mt. Moriah. Hence, the name which Abraham gave to that place.

The sacrificial animal that God provided is not insignificant. Of course, the ram which Abraham sacrificed in Isaac’s place is symbolic of the Lamb of God – Jesus – who takes away the sins of the world. It was necessary that this ram be sacrificed, and it was also necessary that Jesus was sacrificed.

As the Hebrews writer reminds us...

22Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins. Hebrews 9:22 (ESV)

But why? Couldn’t the God of infinite mercy simply have saved us without requiring the blood of Jesus in our place? Indeed, many in the modern church profess that Jesus’ sacrifice was neither required nor sufficient for our salvation. This is the universalist claim – that all paths lead to God, and therefore belief in Jesus’ birth, sacrificial death, and resurrection isn’t necessary for our salvation. Those who utter such blasphemy fail to grasp just how deeply God abhors sin, and just how holy He is by contrast. Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross was **absolutely** necessary to bring remission of the sins of mankind and restore us into fellowship with God. Therefore, it was necessary that the ram – which symbolized for Abraham and Isaac the coming **מָשִׁיחַ māšîaḥ** – be sacrificed in **Isaac’s** place just as Jesus whom the ram symbolizes had to be sacrificed in **our** place.

15And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven 16and said, “By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, 17I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring [זרע zera` - seed] as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall

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possess the gate of his enemies, ¹⁸and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.” Genesis

22:15-18 (ESV)

Here God once more reiterates the promise He made to Abram when He first called him to leave his father’s house (Genesis 12) – to multiply Abraham’s descendants innumerable. More importantly though, in verse 18 God renewed His promise of the מָשִׁיחַ *māšîaḥ* – Jesus – who was to come from Abraham’s line, and specifically through Abraham’s son Isaac. Paul speaks of this magnificent promise in his letter to the Galatians.

¹⁶Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, “And to seeds,” as of many, but as of one, “And to your Seed,” who is Christ. ¹⁷And this I say, that the law, which was four hundred and thirty years later, cannot annul the covenant that was confirmed before by God in Christ, that it should make the promise of no effect. ¹⁸For if the inheritance is of the law, it is no longer of promise; but God gave it to Abraham by promise. Galatians 3:16-18 (NKJV)

¹⁹So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba. And Abraham lived at Beersheba. Genesis 22:19 (ESV)

So, what lessons should we take away from this story?

- **The lessons for Abraham** – In return for his obedience in faith, Abraham received the blessing of the promise of the coming מָשִׁיחַ *māšîaḥ* through his descendants. More than this though, Abraham witnessed the miraculous intervention of God almighty into his affairs. Abraham learned to trust in his faith by which God had brought him through this moment of crisis. The whole episode reminded Abraham (and us) that God is ever faithful to fulfill His promises.
- **The lessons for Isaac** – As a witness to his father Abraham’s obedience in faith, Isaac also heard the blessed promise of the Savior to come from his own seed as Abraham’s heir. He too learned that God’s promises are true, and that God’s mercy is infinite.
- **The lessons for us** – With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that God has fulfilled His promises to Abraham by bringing forth Jesus our LORD through Abraham’s seed – Isaac. From the examples of Abraham’s and Isaac’s obedience to God even in the direst of circumstances, we are strengthened in our own faith and obedience.
- **The lessons for God?** – Of course, God did not need to learn if Abraham would obey His call to sacrifice Isaac. God has known everything altogether since before the beginning and is in fact the inventor of them all. God is utterly incapable of learning anything new or of ever being surprised. This test of Abraham’s faith was for the benefit of Abraham, Isaac, and all mankind, not for God’s benefit. God had already long since credited Abraham’s faith as righteousness. No further “test” was needed. For God, this episode was a teaching opportunity, not a learning one.

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Looking Ahead

Next time, we'll read about Sarah's death, and Isaac taking a wife – Rebecca – from among Abraham and Sarah's relatives in Paddan-Aram.