

Lesson14

Genesis 22

In some ways, the birth to Abraham and Sarah of Isaac, the long-awaited son of promise, seems as if it could be the end of the story we have been tracking through the last ten chapters of Genesis. 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, packing their bags to return to Haran. There have been moments of great faith in their story; there have also been moments of weakness and imprudence. We saw in Abraham a strange combination of service to God and man (his prayers for Lot and his family) and a suggestion of presumption (his willingness to be less than honest about Sarah). 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. 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.

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. 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 seeming presumption in being dishonest, 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. We wondered whether Abraham's experience of having his faith reckoned to him as righteousness (Gen. 15:6) made him permanently pleasing to God. 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. 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.

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? 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.

A Shocking Command Read Genesis 22:1-8

Look at 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. Describe all the possible reactions you think Abraham could have legitimately had to such an idea as this.

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? Think of the objections 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. I cannot see how anything good can come of it. I'm afraid."

What a long night that must have been.

By early the next morning, no matter what thoughts may have kept him awake all night, what is clear about Abraham's final response to God's command? How do you think he was able to do it?

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.

Reading this passage through the lens of the New Testament, what should the phrase, "On the third day," (vs. 4) alert us to?

"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.

Read Heb. 11:17-19. 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."

Imagine the emotions of Abraham as he walked beside Isaac, the tools of sacrifice in his hand and his beloved son, under a load of wood, asking him the penetrating question in vs. 7. When Abraham answers (vs. 8), what do we learn about the focus of his mind and heart at this moment?

[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). Why the name change? An old rabbinic tradition attributes it to Abraham, based on what he said after sacrificing the ram: '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 (Gn 22:14). The Hebrew word for 'provide' is jira, which was then prefixed to Salem, thus making Jeru-salem.'" (A Father Who Keeps His Promises, by Scott Hahn; Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1998; p. 108)]

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.

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. Isaac asks about the lamb for the offering. 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.

This scene is painfully slow and graphic ("Then, Abraham put forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son..."). It's almost as if we are watching it in slow motion. Do you think there is a reason for that?

Responses will vary. It seems that the slow, detailed account of this episode is meant to give anyone who hears or reads it plenty of time to comprehend what a difficult, radical sacrifice Abraham is offering to God. The pathos of the scene has lots of time to build. Reading it with the benefit of New Testament revelation, we are able to experience its double significance. Not only can we enter into Abraham's mind and heart (as well as Isaac's), but we are also able to look into the heart of God Himself, Who gave up His only beloved Son to a brutal death on our behalf (see Rom. 8:32).

When the Lord prevents Abraham from sacrificing Isaac, He gives the reason for such an extreme test. He tells him that it was to test his fear of God, whether he would hold back anything from Him. The severity of this test seems disproportionate to Abraham's relatively minor lapses. What do you think explains it?

When we compare the severity of this test to what seem like minor imperfections in Abraham, we ought to be curious about it. It should make us wonder, "What does God expect from His chosen ones - perfection?" Actually, that is exactly what He desires for them. Why? Because a life of perfection is a life of perfect happiness. God's command to Abraham in Gen. 17:1 to "walk before Me and be blameless" was not simply a requirement. It was a description of how the members of God's family ought to live so that they can know the joy and fulfillment of living in perfect harmony with the end for which they were created, which is to be pleasing in God's sight and blessed by Him.

The test that God gives Abraham is so severe that it presumes an advanced level of knowledge and experience of Him. Compare it to the relatively simple test that God first put Abraham through, back in Gen. 12:1-4. There it was simply, "Pack up and go." Here, at least thirty years later, the test is staggeringly difficult. It builds on everything that has gone before in Abraham's life. For Abraham to endure the test, he will have to act on all that he knows about God, and he will have to be willing to mortify even the smallest weaknesses and imperfections yet remaining in his character.

This is what we call "purification." It is the final step in Abraham's life that establishes him as the Father of faith, both for Jews and Gentiles (Rom. 4:11-12). His obedience burned away the dross of even relatively minor imperfections. Interestingly, the test of Abraham gives us a dramatic demonstration of why God tests men in the first place. Men must freely choose to lay down their own wills in order to serve God. When they do this, they are conformed to the likeness of God. They participate in self-donation, which is the essence of the life of the Blessed Trinity. Abraham not only obeys God, but he becomes a living example of the character of God; he is a human being who reflects both the image and likeness of God. As the Catechism says, "As a final stage in the purification of his faith, Abraham, 'who had received the promises,' is asked to sacrifice the son God had given him...And so the father of believers is conformed to the likeness of the Father who will not spare his own Son, but will deliver him up for us all." (2572)

Picture what Abraham saw when he lifted his head from Isaac on the altar: a ram caught by his horns in a thorn bush ("thicket"); it was a sacrificial animal with a "crown" of thorns. Read John 8:52-59. What was it, in this scene, that Abraham "saw," causing him to rejoice, as Jesus says?

The reference in John is a wonderfully mysterious allusion to that dramatic moment on Mt. Moriah, when the angel stayed Abraham's hand from sacrificing his son. When he lifted his eyes, was he able to "see" the day when God would provide the perfect sacrifice, His own dear Son, for men to offer in worship of Him? Was it a mystical vision of future glory that he "saw"? The words of Jesus point in that direction. Mystics in the history of the Church have spoken of episodes like this in terms of a "transforming union" with God. It is an experience of union with Him so complete that it establishes one in the life of perfection, producing the fullness of joy mentioned by Jesus. Perhaps that is what happened to Abraham on Moriah.

God swears an oath to Abraham, transforming the promise He had made to bless "all families" through him into a covenant. What connection does there appear to be between Abraham's obedience and the fulfillment of this part of the promise? Was it all a "done deal" from the beginning?

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.

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, 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.

Points to Ponder

The typology of this third covenant God made with Abraham is unmistakably familiar to us that read the story through the "filter" of the New Testament. The parallels to Jesus' passion and death on the same Mt. Moriah show us how God will reconcile man back to himself.

God tells Abraham that through this son he will father a nation of descendants that will be as numerous as the stars. Through Jesus, God the Father will father a nation of descendants that too will be as numerous as the stars.

Isaac is lost to his father for three days. After Jesus' death, He too was lost to the Father for three days.

Isaac, the obedient son, carries the wood of the holocaust up Mt. Moriah to the altar. Jesus, the obedient son, carries the wood of the holocaust up Mt. Moriah to the altar on Calvary.

Abraham anticipates that his son Isaac will be returned to him, and so he is after three days, just as Jesus is returned to the Father, on the third day.

Abraham builds the altar on the same spot that Solomon will later build the Temple, anticipating the blessings that God will pour out on the nation of Israel, Just as Jesus's redemptive sacrifice on the altar of the wood of the cross will pour out blessings on all humanity.