

The Binding of Isaac

Genesis 22:1–19

Turn to Genesis 22 please. Genesis 22 tells how God tested Abraham by commanding him to sacrifice his son Isaac. It is a haunting story, and a wonderful story. It is the most powerful story in the Old Testament.

The Jews called this story “The Binding,” *akedah* (ah-KEE-dah), because Abraham bound Isaac and put him on the altar. So I call this “the binding of Isaac.” The story has a brief introduction, and then seven scenes. Let’s begin.

Introduction (22:1a)

After these things God tested Abraham.

After these things. Important things happened in Genesis 21. First, something delightful. Sarah gave birth to Isaac. After years and years of waiting, and against all human possibilities, Abraham and Sarah finally produced a son.

Then Abraham had one of his most bitter experiences. Abraham had to expel his older son Ishmael from their family. Sarah insisted that Abraham expel Ishmael and his mother. God told Abraham, “Do what Sarah wants. I will take care of the young man.” Ishmael would have been 17 or 18 at that time. So Abraham sent them away. You can see how sacrificing Isaac seemed a lot to ask.

God tested Abraham. This cushions us a little from the horror of this story. It changes the question. With this heading, the question becomes, “will Abraham pass the test?” Which is not as bad as “will Abraham really sacrifice Isaac?”

Scene 1: God’s Command “Sacrifice Your Son” (22:1b-2)

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” “Here I am,” he replied. Then God said, “Please take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.”

People in the ancient world sometimes sacrificed their children. Abraham will have known that some gods asked for this. It was not out of the question that Abraham’s God would require this.

In the Bible, worshipping idols is wrong because we’re worshipping an idol, not because the worship actions themselves are sinful. The exception is child sacrifice. That is wrong twice. It’s wrong because we’re worshipping an idol, and it’s wrong for any reason.

Three times in Jeremiah God tells the Jews, “*you have sacrificed your sons and your daughters in the fire, which I did not command nor did it enter my mind.*” (7:31; 19:5; 32:35). It never crossed God’s mind to actually ask this of his people. He tells us he never even considered it. But in a test, he asked this of Abraham.

This command reads differently than the other times God tells Abraham to do something. Here God calls his name, “Abraham,” and then waits for Abraham to answer before he tells him what to do. In other places, God just tells Abraham what to do. It seems that God hesitates for a moment, because he can hardly bring himself to say what he’s going to say.

“Please take your son.” Please? God does not begin commands with “please.” In Hebrew there is a little particle before “take your son” that most translations ignore. My commentary, which is the best one there is (Gordon Wenham), says here it likely means “please.” God does not use it in other places where he commands Abraham (12:1; 15:1; 16:8; 17:2). In my Hebrew lexicon, “please” is the first meaning they give for this little word. God knows how much he is asking of Abraham, and he is doing it as gently as he can.

“Your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac.” Again, God wants Abraham to know that God knows full well how much he is asking. He knows what Isaac means to Abraham.

The request is awful, and once God gets to it, he is direct. Sacrifice him as a burnt offering. It is also baffling. Just before this, in Genesis 21, God promised Abraham that all his descendants would come through Isaac. Now God wants Isaac sacrificed?

And now we go forward 2,000 years to the Jordan River. After Jesus was baptized, the voice from heaven said, “You are my Son, whom I love.” God told Abraham, “Take your son, your only son, whom you love, and sacrifice him as an offering.”

Bible websites make it so much easier to check these things out. So I checked out “your son, whom you love,” and “my son, whom I love,” to see how often either of those occurred together in the Old Testament. Guess what? Genesis 22 is the only place. So Jesus hears God say to him, “you are my Son, whom I love.” It won’t have taken Jesus long to know that those words come from Genesis 22, where God told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac as an offering to him.

So that is scene 1: *“Please take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.”*

Scene 2: Departure Next Morning (22:3)

Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded 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.

This scene is remarkable for what it does not say. The whole story is remarkable for what it does not say. Not one word about Abraham's thoughts or feelings. Abraham says nothing to God, or to anyone else. All of that is left to our imagination. Nor does Abraham procrastinate. Early the next morning Abraham goes into action.

A burnt offering required quite a bit of wood, because the whole sacrifice was burned. When that was cut and loaded, they set out.

Scene 3 Third Day at the Foot of the Mountain (22:4-6a)

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.

Abraham said to his servants, "I and the boy will go over there." The Hebrew word *na'ar* generally means a young man between youth and adulthood. In this story, that's the Hebrew word for the servants, and also the Hebrew word for "the boy," that is, Isaac. So a more accurate translation would read, "Abraham said to his *young men*, 'I and the *young man* will go over there.'" Right through this story, the servants and Isaac are all referred to as *na'ar*, "young men" or "young man."

I suppose translators find it confusing to use the same English word for *na'ar*, but the original Hebrew writer was fine with that. My point is that Isaac is not eight or ten years old. He's a young man, and Abraham is an old man. Isaac carries a significant load of wood up the last part of the hill, while his father carries the fire and the knife. In the previous chapter, Ishmael was 17 or 18 when he was called a *na'ar*, and we should assume something like that for Isaac.

We will worship and then we will come back to you. That's too ambiguous. He does not say "we'll offer a sacrifice," he uses a more general term, "we will worship." "The two of us will worship, then the two of us will come back to you." Is Abraham refusing to say the truth? Is he avoiding the matter at hand? Or is this Abraham's raw faith that the terrible thing will not happen? We don't know. Perhaps Abraham himself is in turmoil.

Scene 4 Journey Up the Mountain (22:6b-8)

As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?" "Here I am." 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.

"Where is the lamb?" Abraham has to know that sooner or later Isaac will ask this question. He does not want to hear this question, and he knows he will.

Three times in our story, someone calls Abraham, and he answers “Here I am” every time, exactly the same Hebrew words. He answers Isaac the same way he answers God: “I’m here.”

“God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” Isaac still does not know what God told his father to do. What does Abraham mean by “God will provide”? He could be just avoiding the truth a little longer. Keeping the conversation vague. Or it could be real faith. “God will have to provide something here, my son, and he will.” Or it could be a desperate prayer: “Oh God, please provide.” We don’t know.

Scene 5 Preparation for Sacrifice (22:9–10)

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.

Abraham went to the place God had told him about. Abraham still obeys. And he binds his son Isaac and lays him on the altar, on the wood. Abraham will go through with this. Whatever else we may not know about Abraham, we know he keeps obeying.

He bound his son Isaac and he laid him on the altar. Isaac is a young man, the same age as Abraham’s two servants. Isaac is sturdy enough to carry a substantial load of wood up the hill on this third day. His father carries little. If two people have about the same strength, for one to tie up the other unwilling person with ropes is very difficult. The victim has to be nearly unconscious. Isaac is more than a match for his father.

Isaac has watched his father build the altar, and there was still no lamb. Even if Abraham had said nothing, Isaac will have figured this out. For Abraham to bind Isaac and lay him on the altar, on the wood, Isaac has to have submitted to this. He has had plenty of time to run away. Abraham has explained to Isaac what God said, and Isaac consented. That Abraham bound Isaac makes this particularly clear. The binding tells us a lot about both of them. And then the knife.

Scene 6 The Angel Speaks to Stop the Sacrifice (22:11–14)

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.”

When Abraham told Isaac, “God himself will provide,” it was not just avoiding the question. There was faith there, or at least a prayer.

I spoke here on this chapter about 5 years ago. In the response time we agreed that this was a painful story to read. Mike Thiesen was still here then. He's a capable student of the Old Testament. He said to us, "if you were a pagan in those days, and you heard this story, you would have loved it. It would have been such good news, because Abraham's God would not let him sacrifice his child. When their gods said to sacrifice their child, they had to go through with it. Their gods never stopped them at the last moment. Abraham has a wonderful God, because he would not let him sacrifice his child."

Scene 7 God's Solemn Oath to Bless Abraham (22:15–19)

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, with blessing I will bless you and with multiplying I will multiply your descendants to be 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."

We must include this last scene, God's oath to bless Abraham. God saving Isaac does not complete the story. Abraham has passed an unbelievably difficult test. In response, God gives Abraham an unbelievably great blessing. God blesses Abraham several times in Genesis, but this is the strongest.

God explains this blessing at the start, "because you did what I said, Abraham, because you did not withhold your only son." And again at the end, "because you obeyed me. That is why I bless you like this."

The blessing has three parts. First, an incredibly fruitful race. I have translated this line literally: *With blessing I will bless you, and with multiplying I will multiply your descendants, as the stars in the sky and the sand on the shore.* A fruitful race.

Second, *your descendants will take over the cities of their enemies.* They will conquer their enemies. Third, in a different direction, *through your offspring all the nations on earth will be blessed.* Your offspring will conquer their enemies, and they will bring blessing to all nations. Immense blessings to Abraham, though none of them in Abraham's lifetime.

All this God guaranteed with an oath. God made Abraham promises before this, and God keeps his promises. But now he takes it to another level. He guarantees with an oath, because of Abraham's exceptional obedience.

Three Applications

First, God tests us as well. *“Count it all joy, my brothers and sisters,”* says James, *“when you meet many kinds of tests.”* Peter says, *“you rejoice in your great salvation, even if for a little while now you suffer grief in many kinds of tests.”*

Here’s the thing: when we are faithful when God tests us, God blesses us to reward us. I don’t know how he will bless exactly, but he will bless. God was moved by Abraham’s faithfulness. Abraham was not always faithful, but he was here. God was stirred as he watched Abraham obey. He immediately poured out the best thing he could give Abraham. God blesses us when we are faithful in our tests.

Two, God himself did what he would not ask Abraham to do. He offered his only Son, whom he loved, as a sacrifice. 1 John 4: *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.* Romans 8: *He did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all.* Genesis 22 gives us a human window into what God did when Jesus was crucified.

In Genesis 22, Abraham never said what this was like for him, to take Isaac up that mountain and bind him. The writer does not tell us what that was like for Abraham. We read and from a distance we feel the things that were not said.

In the same way, God never tells us what it was like for him to offer his Son as a sacrifice. The Bible does not tell us what it was like for God to not spare his Son. We are told none of this. But in Genesis 22 we get a better window into God offering his Son than we get anywhere else.

Three, John baptized Jesus in the Jordan River, the very start of Jesus’s ministry. Jesus heard these words from a voice in heaven. “You are my Son, whom I love.” In Genesis 22 God said to Abraham, “take your son, your only son, whom you love.” The Old Testament does not use words like that anywhere else.

It will not have taken Jesus long to connect what God told him at the Jordan River with what God told Abraham in Genesis 22. God was telling Jesus, “you are my Son, whom I love, and you are going to be my Isaac. I’m going to offer you as a sacrifice.” So Jesus knows where this goes.

PRAYER: God our Father, we bow to you. We’re not sure we like this story, but we need it. May this story shape us. Thank you for Abraham’s example. Help us in our tests. We see how Abraham pleased you. Help us. Thank you for the indescribable gift of your Son. Amen.

BENEDICTION: To him who is able to keep us from falling, and to present us before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Saviour be glory, majesty, power, and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. Go in God’s peace to love and serve the Lord.