

Lesson 7

The Present

The story of Abraham and Isaac, from Genesis 22

The Jesus Storybook Bible - pgs.62 - 69

Some readers will have understandable objections to this story, especially as it is often interpreted. Some people have interpreted this story as: “God called Abraham to murder his son, and Abraham showed his faith and submission by getting ready to do it. So we should do whatever God calls us to do.” But this is to misunderstand the meaning of the firstborn son in Jewish thought and symbolism.

God over and over again told the Hebrews that because of their sinfulness, the lives of their firstborn are automatically forfeit. The only way to change this was for the firstborn to somehow be redeemed with sacrifice or ransomed with payment. When God said that the firstborn child’s life belonged to him unless ransomed, he was saying in the most vivid way possible that every family on earth owes a debt to eternal justice — the debt of sin. The firstborn was, in traditional cultures, the bearer of all the family’s hopes for a prosperous future. That is why God’s call to Abraham to sacrifice his son was enormously painful; it appeared that he was abandoning his promises to Abraham.

But the charge was not incomprehensible. God was not asking him to murder his son. He was calling in Abraham’s debt. It is hard not to notice the resonance of this call to Abraham with all the others, especially the first one in Genesis 12. Then and now he was called to “go,” leaving all his security, comfort, and everything his heart rested in. Then and now he was called to make his heart’s dearest objects into an “offering” to God.

In Genesis 12, those things were more general. He was giving up his friends, most of his family, life in a civilized, safe place. These are major sacrifices. God was asking Abraham to trust in God’s promise as his security and significance, not these other things. That is what God is doing again now, as Abraham is called to offer up Isaac, the dearest thing in his life.

In every case, God is saying, “Don’t look to anything but me. Make me your ultimate security, worth, and hope. Don’t trust in anything but me. Don’t rest your heart in anything more than me for your significance and acceptability.” But the ultimate nature of this test is summed up in the term God deliberately uses with emphasis in Genesis 22:2: “your son, your only son.”

It is not literally true that Isaac is Abraham’s only son. But Isaac is Abraham’s only son in that all his hopes are focused on Isaac: he is the promised son, the one through whom God promised to rescue his people. Did Abraham push himself up the mountain simply saying, “I have to obey God perfectly! I can do it! I must do it!” and so on? No, Genesis 22:8 shows that Abraham had decided to cling to the goodness and promises of God despite all appearances. He says, “God himself will provide the lamb.”

Abraham could not have known exactly what God would do, nor does it seem likely he believed specifically that a ram-substitute would be discovered. He was simply saying, "God will provide . . . somehow." Verse 5 also seems to be an indication of Abraham's hope, because he tells his servants that "we will come back to you."

In other words, he did not go up the mountain saying, "I can do it"; rather, he went up the mountain saying, "God will do it . . . but I don't know how." Somehow God would remove the debt on the firstborn and keep the promises he'd made. Abraham had his eyes fixed on a provision that he could not even imagine, but he knew was there. We, this side of the cross, can truly see the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Memory Verse

Genesis 15:6

"Abraham believed the Lord."

***Lesson taken from *The Jesus Storybook Bible Curriculum*, written by Sally Lloyd-Jones and Sam Shammas.

If you do not have a copy of The Jesus Storybook Bible, we will have them for purchase in Cranmer Hall for \$10.