

THE BLOODY BIBLE 3: THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC

Today we finish this short series by looking at the idea of sacrifices in the Bible, particularly, one story that is troubling, the sacrifice of Isaac. It's contained in the very first book of the Bible, Genesis. **¹ Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham! Here I am," he replied. ² Then God said, "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."** Genesis 22:1-2.

So, right from the beginning of this story we are told that God tested Abraham. God is giving Abraham a chance to prove himself. When God tests someone, it's usually aimed at fleshing out their loyalties and commitments. It's a situation that is given to show who they really are, and what they really believe. However, I still find this text troubling. That's a little disturbing, isn't it? Why, of all the tests, did God want Abraham to sacrifice his son? I mean, isn't that wrong? Warped, bent, even evil? What kind of God would put anyone up for that kind of test? Whatever God is testing is going to be stretched to its limits.

It goes without saying that Abraham would have been utterly distraught at the prospect of losing his son Isaac. However, it makes perfect sense for God to test Abraham this way. Isaac was at the heart of Abraham's trust relationship with God. Let me explain. Here's the background: In the culture of that day, a son was everything. They carried your name and your family line. Further, if you died, it was your eldest son's responsibility to care for your wife as a widow, for your children, all the possessions went to him. Everything. If you didn't have a son, it was as if you didn't live. No legacy. No heritage. No future. Everything you had, your wife, your belongings would just go to someone else.

Also, God had called Abram, **¹ The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. ² "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."** Genesis 12:1-3.

So, Abram obeys God and God even changed his name. His name used to be Abram, meaning father of one, to Abraham meaning the father of many. Then we find that Abraham and his wife Sarah could not conceive. They could not have children. Yet God had promised him that he would be the father of many nations. You know when they had their first child? In their nineties! When they had pretty much given up on having any children, God gave them a son. You can imagine how they felt.

After all these years God was faithful and gave them a son. Then this test comes along. God says I want you to give up your son. It's as if God was saying, you had faith that I would give you a son,

now do you have faith that no matter what happens to that son, I will fulfill my promise to you? Let's keep reading. 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.** ⁴ **On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance.** ⁵ **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."**

⁶ **Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together,** ⁷ **Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?" "Yes, my son?" Abraham replied. The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"**

⁸ **Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together.** ⁹ **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.** ¹⁰ **Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son.** ¹¹ **But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied.** ¹² **"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."**
Genesis 22:3-12.

Verse four says this, ⁴ **On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance.** So, Abraham and Isaac had been traveling for three days. We don't know what they talked about or felt during these three days. John Walton in his commentary of Genesis says this, **however saddened he may have been he is not dumbfounded by the macabre or peculiar nature of Yahweh's demand, despite being emotionally harsh and baffling in light of the covenant promises. There is no discussion in the text about informing Sarah, no exportation of Abraham's feelings, and no heart rendered father-son exchanges. Abraham appears almost artificial in the subdued matter-of-fact way he moves from one step to the next.**

The answer lies in verse five, ⁵ **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."** Genesis 22:5. Abraham had faith to believe that God would intervene, and he would not have to offer up Isaac. WE WILL come back to you. Not I, but we. Not maybe, but will. Abraham believed in the absolute goodness and faithfulness of God.

Then, did you notice, so did Isaac! Isaac asked about the lamb, Abraham said God would provide it, and for Isaac, that was enough. We're told in the scripture that Isaac was big enough and old enough to strap on and carry all the wood needed for the sacrifice. That would have been heavy. Isaac was big enough and strong enough to do that (and his father was in his late nineties, so it

wouldn't have exactly been a contest). There's no indication he fought with his father when being bound, or that he tried to run away, or that he fought for his life. A fight he would have won. Even as the knife was raised, Isaac was trusting his father.

Pastor James White comments, **In fact, in Jewish culture, there's this idea that when you talk about submitting to God, it's binding yourself to God. They use the language of binding yourself over to God. It's a direct tie back to this story where Isaac willingly allowed himself to be bound knowing what it was all about.**

There have been many reasons suggested for Abraham's test, but I suggest that the answer is in the story. Verse twelve, ¹² **"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." Genesis 22:12.** It was for God's benefit. Verse twelve makes this clear. God himself focuses on what he gains from the test. Now, we can acknowledge that God knew ahead of time what Abraham was going to do. However, there is ample evidence throughout Scripture that God desires us to act out our faith and worship although he already knows our hearts.

We should pray even though he knows what we are going to say and may already be setting the answer in motion. He wants us to praise him even though he knows how we feel about him. God asks us to express our faith and love by actions not just words. Here I love the quote of John Walton; **it is honouring him for us to demonstrate those things that he knows exist because it pleases him. That is what I mean when I speak of God's benefit. We all know that as much as our parents, spouses, children know we love them, it is important that it be said and demonstrated.**

Just when Abraham thought his life was going along normally, he finds himself in the middle of a crisis. Wow, isn't that the reality of life on this planet. When something disrupts our calm stability of life; we begin to wonder why God has done this to us. After the terrible Canterbury earthquake in 2011, stories began to circulate under the heading, "A New Normal". When our circumstances change, we need to adapt and adjust to a new normal. This is because we live in a fallen world. This is clearly presented in the famous section of Ecclesiastes chapter three where we are told that there are times in life for all sorts of experiences, many of them less than pleasant.

It's like a rollercoaster. Normal is not like the smooth, gliding monorail; it's the rollercoaster with life's ups and downs. I get anxious and a little bit queasy and worry about not being in control and wondering if those cars will hold onto their tracks. In contrast, Viv feels exhilarated, welcoming the thrill of not being in control. When we are not in control, it is easy to become anxious and fearful.

Again, I like how John Walton puts it, **God does not promise a smooth ride, he only promises to hold us in his embrace. That is our only guarantee and is the basis of our expectations. The euphoria and exhilaration do not eliminate the pit in our stomach; they are the response from relinquishing control to another. In that sense, we can say the life of faith is often not characterized by a calm sense of well-being; it's a thrill ride.**

Jesus challenges the rich young ruler on this, ¹⁸ **A certain ruler asked him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"**¹⁹ **"Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone. ²⁰ You know the commandments: 'You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honor your father and mother.'"**

²¹ **"All these I have kept since I was a boy," he said. ²² When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."** ²³ **When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was very wealthy. Luke 18:18-23.** This young man was being asked to sell all his goods and his land. The land is the covenant shared by all the people of Israel. Possessions represent prosperity that was believed to come to those who earned the favor of God. By asking him to sell all of this, Jesus is asking this man to be willing to jettison all those things in his life that he considers the perquisites of God's favor. This test would have turned this young man's world upside down. Again John Walton, **This is exactly the type of test before Abraham. Are you willing to follow God when there is nothing in it for you? God tests us not by trying to make us miserable but by disrupting our comfort zones, thereby making us to rely on him.**

I can think of no better way to end than by celebrating the sacrifice of Jesus. We call this communion or the Lord's supper. It's also known as the Eucharist. There's an old hymn that I love that says: "What can wash away my sins, nothing but the blood of Jesus; "what can make me whole again, nothing but the blood of Jesus; O, precious, is that flow, that makes me white as snow, no other fount I know, nothing but the blood of Jesus". Our eyes can become so closed to this, and we can take it for granted. We can stop seeing the incredible act that was done on our behalf, the incredible gift that was given. Let's take a moment in silence to examine ourselves. Maybe a time of confession. God will forgive you all you have to do is ask. Maybe it's a time of thanksgiving and praise which he will accept graciously.