
SERMON NOTES

Genesis #20: Sacrifice (22:1-19)

Have you ever had to give something up, something that you really did not want to part with? When missionary/martyr Jim Elliot was in college, he fell in love with a young woman, Elizabeth. Through the course of time, Elizabeth also expressed her love for Jim. On the face of it, it appeared a simple enough situation. They loved each other, they were both single and Christian – marriage ought to have followed directly. But Jim wanted to be sure that he loved Jesus more than *anything* – even more than Elizabeth. He felt the Lord telling him to give her up. Nothing if not determined, Jim told Elizabeth that they could not marry. Elizabeth also wanted to follow the Lord, and she agreed to Jim’s decision. They both gave up their deep heart-wish to be united in marriage. After a period of time, God *did* make it clear to them that they should marry, and they did. Jim, who was later killed trying to tell others about Jesus, wrote:

“He is no fool, who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

He put this into practice, even to the extent of giving up the one he loved, and losing his own life.

Many, many years before Jim Elliot, Abraham lived out the same lesson in a slightly different context. From Genesis chapter 12 on, we can see that the burning desire of Abraham's heart is to have a child of his own, who will inherit his possessions, and his faith – and by faith, inherit the promises of God. Abraham’s longing for a child was fueled not only by his own wish, but also by the words of God, in which God had promised Abraham the very thing he most yearned. When Abraham and Sarah’s son Isaac was born (Genesis 21:1-7), it must have been the crowning moment of his long life. At last, God had granted him the desires of his heart.

Abraham loved the very *idea* of Isaac, long before the child was born. From the time God first promised him a son with his wife Sarah, Abraham waited *twenty five years* before it happened. He may have wanted a child even longer than that. His life for those decades was marked by the hope of a son through Sarah. When Isaac was born, everything indicates that his father not only loved the *concept* of son, but he loved the boy himself as well. We can imagine Abraham’s delighted laughter at the child’s first steps. Long after the boy was in bed, we can picture Abraham walking under the stars, repeating the precious first words his son had spoken. Having made his fortune, and reached an age that grants one perspective, Abraham must have doted on Isaac. It is easy to imagine him teaching the youngster the basics of animal husbandry, and how to manage many flocks and a large household. Perhaps they hunted and fished together. Certainly, it appears that they had worshiped together, for when we reach the crisis of chapter 22, it is clear that worshiping with his dad is not new to Isaac. I can see Abraham and Sarah, laughing in delight, holding hands, and thanking the Lord, saying, “At last, at last, at last!”

It is into this kind of blissful joy that God speaks. God’s meaning to Abraham is very clear: he is to go off and offer his one beloved son, source of joy and happiness, as a burnt offering. To put it bluntly, he was supposed to kill Isaac, and then burn his body, in an act of worship to God.

We cannot begin to imagine how Abraham must have felt, yet he does not rebel in anger. Incredibly, he obeys. For two days, Abraham lives in an agony of grief, hiding it from his wife, his son and his servants. We have only one glimpse into his heart during the time before the offering. When Isaac asks about the lamb that is the normal burnt offering, his father replies:

“God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” (22:8)

In this moment of extreme pain, grief and bewilderment, Abraham holds to one thing: the faithfulness of God. It seemed to him that God was taking away what had already been provided. It seemed cruel that such a beautiful child should die at the hands of a loving father. And yet, **Abraham trusted, even when he did not understand**. Abraham’s trust went far beyond his feelings, and far beyond his comprehension. He could say with Job, “Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him,” (Job 13:15). He could also say, with him:

Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will leave this life. The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. (Job 1:21)

We can be sure that Abraham did not *like* it, but his commitment to the Lord went far beyond his personal likes and dislikes. In fact, his commitment to the Lord went beyond even his earthly aspirations and loves. **He withheld nothing from God**. Now of course, God did not allow him to kill his son. In fact, the point of the

whole exercise was for Abraham's relationship with Isaac to be brought into proper perspective. Nothing, *nothing* is to come before Abraham's relationship with God – not even his own son. Once it is clear that this is indeed the situation with Abraham's faith, God stops the sacrifice, and provides a ram in place of Isaac. God did indeed provide a lamb for the burnt offering.

There are two basic applications of Genesis 22, both of them equally valid. The first application is that Genesis 22 is a picture of how much God loves us. While God spared Abraham the agony of sacrificing his own son, God did not spare *Himself* that agony. We will never understand the Trinity while we are this side of heaven, but scripture indicates that the suffering of God on the cross was not only the suffering of God the Son (Jesus), but also the suffering of God the Father who was sacrificing his one and only Son. The Father did not stop the knife in mid-air when it came to His *own* Son. Abraham's words echo down the centuries as prophecy: God *did* provide the perfect Lamb, the only sacrifice that was sufficient to pay for our sins and purchase our salvation. It was not by accident that John the Baptist was inspired to say: "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world," (John 1:29). Once again, God took the place of Abraham, to do what Abraham could not, just as He took our place at the cross and did what we could not. In fact through Jesus, God shows us that *He* will withhold nothing from *us*. He will let nothing stand in the way of His relationship with us – not sin, not the devil, not *anything* (**please read Romans 8:31-39 to see how strongly God feels about this**).

The second application of Genesis 22 has to do with *our response* to God's unconditional love. Jesus must have been fondly recalling Abraham when he said:

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:26)

Of course, Jesus did not intend for us to *literally* hate these people in our lives – he was using hyperbole to make a point. In comparison to our love for Jesus, it will seem at times as though we hate our loved ones. It must have seemed for a time as if Abraham hated Isaac. Certainly, he did not, but in his obedience to the Lord, it almost seemed that way. Matthew records it this way:

"Anyone who loves his father or other more than me is not worthy of me. Anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 10:37).

God has one burning passion – you. And he wants you to have one burning passion – Him. He wants everything that may get in the way to be removed. He wants every dream, every relationship, every possession and every goal to be laid on an altar, ready to burn as a sacrifice to Him. The concept of the burnt offering is that the thing that is burned is given completely over to God. There were other types of sacrifices where those who offered them got to keep a portion of the animal to eat for themselves. A burnt offering, however, keeps nothing for self, and gives all to God. And once something is burnt, there is no way for a human being to put it back together. If and when God chooses, he can resurrect your burnt offering and put it back together. But what he wants is for you to put it beyond your own control.

Is there anything in your life that gets in the way of your relationship with God? Anything that is a higher priority than him? Is God calling you to give up anything in your life right now (Like: a dream; a relationship; control; a lifestyle; possession, etc.)? Another way to approach it is this: Think of something or someone that is very important to you. Would you be willing to give it up, if God asked for it?

There may be times when God asks you to go ahead and light the fire – to actually go through with giving something up. Sometimes the thing God asks you to give up is a *good* thing, perhaps even something that God gave to you in the first place – after all, that was the case with Abraham. Even *good* things (like family love, honor, or loyalty) can interfere with our relationships with God, if they are given a higher priority than he is.

There may be other times when He is simply asking you to put action to your faith, and He will not make you give the thing up entirely, - similar to His dealings with Abraham. Even in such instances however, the point is that nothing comes before Him in your life. No matter which it is, the key is that God wants everything in your life to belong to Him, to have Him use, burn, or give away as He pleases. He wants nothing in your life to interfere in His relationship with you.