

Offering Isaac, Offering Christ

Genesis 22: 1 – 19

Hebrews 11:8 - 19

Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church

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The story of Abraham has fascinated and horrified people through the centuries. I remember as a teenager listening to an album by the folk singer Judy Collins and suddenly realizing that the subject of the song she was singing was Father Abraham from Genesis. But the words of her song were condemning and dismissive, portraying Abraham as a misguided fanatic. In college I read, (and reread!) Soren Kierkegaard's book '*Fear and Trembling*:' an entire book of philosophy written exploring this one story. As part of the work, Kierkegaard rewrites the story of Abraham and Isaac, experimenting with different outcomes to it. Outside of the main library on the Princeton University campus is a large, life size sculpture depicting this story. The sculpture was originally commissioned for another institution, but it was considered to stark and horrifying and was rejected. It is ominous and menacing.

What is the meaning of this biblical story? What are we to make of it? What spiritual truths are the scriptures offering us?

The first thing to be said is that it teaches us something of what God requires of us. God requires everything.

What Does God Require? -- Everything – Genesis 22:1 – 2

After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ²He said, "Take your son,

your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.”

What does God require of us? What does he expect from us? Well, the answer to that question depends in large part upon the God whom you wish to serve.

When it comes to serving the gods we want to serve, men and women have very little trouble in meeting the expectations of these little gods. As John Calvin observed, the human heart is an idol factory. It is a very easy thing to make a god in our own image. Little gods made in our image are always affirming, non-threatening. Such gods are not too demanding. Such gods – the ones we make in our own image – are always satisfied with what we are willing to give. They never ask more of us. Whatever we commit to do or to give: it is enough.

Of course, the god we make in our own image is not the God whom we meet in the Bible. The story of Abraham’s offering of Isaac is shocking to us. It is compelling. In hearing it, we marvel at Abraham, Isaac and God himself.

What does God expect of us? What did God expect of Abraham? He expected everything. God has asked of Abraham *everything* that he holds precious and dear. God had already asked a lot of Abraham, instructing him to leave his family home, the home of his father and family, and travel on to an unspecified region. Abraham was willing to do so, in part because of the promise given: that he, Abraham, would be given a son. Abraham waits twenty-five years for the fulfillment of that promise. Isaac arrives. The promise is fulfilled. Abraham has all that he wanted.

Time passes. Years pass. Isaac grows. And then we read: *Sometime later God tested Abraham.* God had asked Abraham to give up his father and his family. Now he would ask Abraham to give up his son as well. God must be greater in Abraham's eyes than anything else: father, wife, even the cherished son of his old age. God says, *"Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering."*

What does God require? He requires everything.

Can you imagine that moment on Mt. Moriah? This is how Matthew Henry describes it. *But with what heart could tender Abraham tie those guiltless hands, which perhaps had often been lifted up to ask his blessing, and stretched out to embrace him, and were now the more straightly bound with the cords of love and duty! However, it must be done. Having bound him, he lays him upon the altar and his hand upon the head of his sacrifice; and now, we may suppose, with floods of tears, he gives, and takes, the final farewell of a parting kiss: perhaps he takes another for Sarah from her dying son. This being done, he resolutely forgets the bowels of a father, and puts on the awful gravity of a sacrificer. With a fixed heart, and an eye lifted up to heaven, he takes the knife, and stretches out his hand to give a fatal cut to Isaac's throat. Be astonished, O heavens! at this; and wonder, O earth! Here is an act of faith and obedience, which deserves to be a spectacle to God, angels, and men. Abraham's darling, Sarah's laughter, the church's hope, the heir of promise, lies ready to bleed and die by his own father's hand, who never shrinks at the doing of it.*^[1]

What does God require of us? Everything.

And if the god you claim to serve does not require

everything of you; if the god you serve is oh so sensitive, oh so affirming, oh so politically correct: then tear down the idolatrous idols of your heart for he is not the God of the scriptures. He is not the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He is a god of your image and making: one that looks like you, acts like you, thinks like you and is no more worthy of true worship and adoration than you are.

The God of the Bible demands our all, our everything.

At the same time, what does God give? He gives everything.

What Does God Give? -- Everything - Genesis 22:8

⁸Abraham said, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So they went both of them together.

The story of Abraham offering Isaac is a biblical *cliffhanger*: we worry on behalf of Isaac; we fear for the danger he faced; but in the end we know that God never intended for Abraham to complete the sacrifice of Isaac. Now, Abraham did not know that. Therein lies the power of the story. Abraham acted in complete sincerity, faith and obedience. He did what God expected of him. In Hebrews 11:19 we are told that Abraham reasoned that God was able to raise Isaac from the dead. Abraham knew that Isaac was the son of the promise. Abraham knew that God’s promises would not and could not fail. Abraham obeyed, believing that God would be at work. His promise would not be thwarted.

But then the question naturally arises: Why did God ask this of Abraham? On one level, we might answer that this test of Abraham showed to him the depth of the level of faith that had grown in his life. His obedience is remarkable.

This tells us the significance of the event personally for Abraham, but it does not tell us the significance of this story for God's people, the people of faith. Abraham's story is unique. God does not require faithful fathers to offer their sons as sacrifices. Why this story included in the story the Bible tells? If we are not supposed to mimic or emulate Abraham, then what is its larger meaning and significance?

There are multiple layers of answer to that question. We will look at them. First, this story teaches us that the role of Isaac in this story is to be understood as a type of Christ.

Isaac is a type of Christ – Isaiah 53:10

“Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer.”

Part of the fun of the story of Peter Pan is when Peter loses his shadow. A shadow is supposed to stick with its owner but, at least for a while, Peter Pan's shadow is off independently on its own. ☺ Typically our shadow follows after us. It goes where we have been. In the biblical story, we find a different type of shadow, a *foreshadow*. A foreshadow comes before, not after. It points to what will come later. When we say that Isaac is a 'type' of Christ, what we mean is that he is a foreshadow of Christ. The story of the offering of Isaac is a foreshadowing of the story of Jesus Christ. It suggests what will unfold at the close of Jesus' earthly ministry when he is offered as a sacrifice on the cross. The offering of Isaac points to the future sacrifice of Jesus Christ upon the cross.

Note that Abraham travels three days from Beer Sheba, where he has received God's command, to Mt. Moriah, where he will carry it out. The significance of the three days is **not** to symbolize three days in the tomb.

Rather, the three day journey emphasizes the deliberate nature of Abraham's sacrifice. This was not an impulse action. Abraham thinks about it. He ponders it. He has purpose and intentionality in his heart. He has embarked upon a 'holy willfulness.' This, in turn, points to the same truth regarding God's purposes in sending Jesus Christ. As the prophet Isaiah (53:10) puts it, "*Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer.*" Christ's suffering was planned and intentional. God had a purpose in it. There was a holy willfulness in God's intent in the passion of Jesus.

Isaac is a type of Christ. Next, Christ is loved by the Father as Isaac is loved by Abraham.

Christ is loved by the Father as Isaac is loved by Abraham – Genesis 22:2

"Take your son, your only son Isaac, *whom you love,*

Secondly, Christ is loved by God the Father as Isaac is loved by Abraham. We read this story and we understand the depth of the sacrifice being offered by Abraham. Isaac is his son, his only son, the son he has waited for all his married life. Isaac is the son of the promise. We can sympathize with the depth of the loss that would be felt in Abraham's offering of Isaac upon the altar of sacrifice. We can comprehend this. We know the terribleness of what God has asked of him. In comprehending this we can also begin to perceive the depth of the love between the Father and the Son, for their divine love is greater than the human love of father and son. Abraham's love for Isaac is a mirror, a dim mirror, of God's love for Christ.

Isaac is a type of Christ. Just as Abraham loved his son Isaac, so God loved Jesus Christ. Next, Christ is the only begotten son of the Father, just as Isaac is the only

begotten son of Abraham and Sarah.

Christ is the only begotten of the Father as Isaac is the only begotten son of Abraham and Sarah

“Take your son, *your only son*

Thirdly, there is another sense in which Isaac is a type of Christ. Jesus Christ is the only begotten of the Father as Isaac is the only begotten son of Abraham and Sarah. There is a special preciousness that comes in being the only one. Isaac is the only begotten son of Sarah and Abraham. He is the child of the promise. He is the child they waited for patiently for twenty-five years. There is no alternative. He is unique. There is no other. He is the one. We confess of Christ in the Apostle’s Creed that he too is ‘the *only* begotten’ Son of God. He is unique, unprecedented, unequalled in value and importance.

Sometimes people talk as though there are many ways into God’s presence. Some believe that all spiritual roads lead to God: Primitive Religions, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism, Shinto, Native American Spirituality, Sikhism, Jainism, Secularism, Atheism, and the rest. Each of these religions offers a different understanding of the nature of the world, of truth, of wisdom and of spiritual understanding. To say that they all teach the same thing, or that they all lead to the same ending, is spiritually disrespectful. Doing so fails to take into account the various teachings of each religion. There is good to be found in each of the religious traditions I have named. There is truth and wisdom to be found in each. But as Christians, we declare that the fullness of truth is found in Jesus Christ. Jesus himself said it (John 14:6), “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. Other religious traditions offer a way of life; but

only Jesus Christ is the way. Other religious traditions offer aspects of truth; but only Jesus Christ is the truth. Other religions offer insight, understanding, and improvement; but only Jesus Christ offers life. Only Jesus offers a way to God the Father.

Isaac is a type of Christ. As Abraham loved Isaac, so God loved Jesus Christ. Isaac was the only begotten son of Abraham and Sarah; as Christ is the only begotten Son of the Father. Next, Christ is the promised one; as Isaac is the child of the promise.

Christ is the Promised One as Isaac is the child of the promise – Genesis 3:15

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”

Abraham is given the promise and then waits twenty-five years to see its fulfillment. Nonetheless, the promise is fulfilled: the promised child arrives. That promised child is Isaac. Part of the purpose of God in giving a promise to Abraham is to make clear that the unfolding of his life is according to the purposes of God. God is not powerless. God is in control. Sarah’s pregnancy is impossible, on a horizontal human level. God must be behind Sarah’s pregnancy. Isaac is the child of the promise.

In the same way God gives the promise that one day the Messiah would come. The hope of the Messiah is that his arrival would reverse the effect, the impact, of Adam and Eve’s fall from grace. The promise of a Messiah is first given in Genesis 3:15, in the words spoken by God to the Serpent. This promise is then repeated, reaffirmed and amplified throughout the Old Testament until, in the fullness of time,

Jesus Christ is born of Mary in a stable in Bethlehem.

Next, we see Isaac as a type of Christ in that Christ carried his cross as Isaac carried the wood for the sacrifice.

Christ carried his cross as Isaac carried the wood of the sacrifice

⁶And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together.

At first glance it is an odd, small detail. We are told that, upon leaving the servants behind, Abraham carries the knife and the fire up Mt. Moriah, leaving Isaac to carry the wood for the sacrifice upon his back (v. 6 – 7). Isaac, like the perfect one to whom he points, carries the wood of his own sacrifice. Christ carries his cross as Isaac carried the wood of the sacrifice.

The next point focuses upon the attitude of the one being sacrificed. Christ goes willingly, as does Isaac.

Christ goes willingly, as does Isaac – Genesis 22:8 – 9

So they went both of them together. ⁹When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.

The text does not tell us when it dawned on Isaac the full implication of what his father intended. At some point it became clear. Yet in brave obedience and trust, Isaac does not run; he does not fight; and he does not attempt to escape the fate before him. Again, Isaac points us to Christ and his sacrifice.

We are told in the New Testament that Jesus set his face towards Jerusalem. He knew what it meant to go there. He knew that it would be his death. Yet he went, willingly. On the night of his betrayal, the Lord Jesus struggles. He does not want to die. On a human level, he rightly fears the suffering he is about to face. Jesus prays (Luke 22:42) “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.” Yet, nonetheless, when Judas comes to betray and the soldiers lay hands upon him to arrest, Jesus is led meekly to his fate. Christ goes willingly, as did Isaac.

Next, Christ goes to the place of sacrifice at the will of his Father, as does Isaac.

Christ goes to the place of sacrifice at the will of his Father, as does Isaac – Genesis 22:13 - 14

¹³ And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴ So 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.”

Christ’s death was not an accident. It was not a plan gone wrong. It was not a mistake. It was not unexpected. His sacrifice was the will of the Father. It was the purpose of God. Isaac, in this sense, is also like Christ to whom he points. Isaac travels to Mt. Moriah because it is the will of his father, Abraham. He climbs the hill of Mt. Moriah because it is his father’s will that he do so. He allows himself to be bound and laid upon the altar of sacrifice; because it is his father’s will that he do so. All along he trusts. He trusts in his father.

When Jesus was arrested, Peter and some of the other disciples attempted to fight back against the Roman guards who were sent to do the deed. The Lord Christ stops them, telling them that he could command the armies of heaven to prevent what was about to happen from happening. Yet he does not. Why not? Because, like Isaac, he trusts in the will and purpose of the heavenly Father. Trusting in God the Father Jesus allows himself to be arrested. Trusting in the heavenly Father, Jesus allows himself to be humiliated. Trusting in the heavenly Father, he allows himself to be whipped, mocked and nailed to the cross. Then, after all the suffering has been endured, trusting in his heavenly Father, he gives up the spirit of life within him, entrusting it to God's care on the other side of the doorway of death.

Let me offer a brief review. How is it that the offering of Isaac is a type of Christ, a foreshadowing of what God would do in and through Jesus Christ? The three day journey to Mt. Moriah tells us that the sacrifice of Isaac was intentional and deliberate: as was the sacrifice of Christ on Golgotha. Isaac is loved by his father Abraham; as the Lord Jesus was loved by God the Father. Isaac is the only begotten son of Abraham and Sarah; Jesus Christ is the only begotten Son of God. Isaac is the child of the promise; Jesus is the promised Messiah. Christ carried his cross as Isaac carried the wood for the sacrifice. Both Christ and Isaac went willing to their fate. Both are offered because it is the will of their father to do so. In each of these ways, the offering of Isaac points us to the greater offering of Jesus Christ.

One last question: what do we learn of God the Father from the story of the offering of Isaac?

What do we learn of God the Father from the story of the

offering of Isaac? Genesis 22:14

“On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.”

It is one of the distinctive marks of the Bible that it is, more than anything else, a book of history, of narrative, of story. God reveals himself to our world in history. Precept, law, prophecy and proverb have their place in the Bible, but their place is embedded in an unfolding story. That story, in one sense, begins with Abraham. He is the ‘father’ of faith. It is from him that the line of God’s people, the elect, will be traced.

I once heard Francis Schaeffer say that you cannot judge an artist by looking at a single work. It is important to look at the corpus of an artist’s output broadly, judging and evaluating based upon overall accomplishment. This is true and important. At the same time, in the work of a life time, an artist may sound important, foundational themes early on: themes he returns to again and again, perhaps with increasing power, clarity and impact.

This is how I think we must understand the role of the story of Abraham and Isaac in the full sweep of the narrative the Bible tells. It sounds a theme; a key theme, to which the Bible will return again and again, until it reaches its crescendo and zenith in the person of Christ himself. That theme is seen in the name for God Abraham confesses as he names the place of sacrifice: Jehovah-Jireh: God will provide.

Jehovah – Jireh: God will provide

“By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on

the seashore.

Isaac asked the question as they climbed the mountain: 'Father,' he said, 'we have the wood and the fire, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?' Prophetically Abraham confesses his faith telling Isaac that God himself will provide the lamb. Then, after the angel has stayed his hand from the sacrifice, Abraham sees in the distance a ram caught by its horns in a thicket. God has provided. He is Jehovah Jireh.

The message is clear and unambiguous. God has provided another sacrifice in the place of Isaac. God himself provides the lamb. The ram is sacrificed in the place of Isaac. The ram dies, so that Isaac might live. The message of Christ is the same. Christ is sacrificed in our place, in Isaac's place, in your place and in my place. He died so that you and I might live.

My friend, I am speaking to both your heart and your mind today. To your heart, I am challenging you to let go of the easy and false gods we so naturally construct for ourselves: gods who demand little and deserve less: the gods that bless us in our foolishness and encourage us on the road to perdition. I am challenging you to turn away from them and turn to the God of the Bible. He is a tough God, who demands from us everything, and nothing less. He demands everything from you.

And I am speaking to your mind this day as well, asking you to see what is so clear in the story of Abraham's offering of Isaac. The story is noteworthy, memorable, and inspiring to us in and of itself. But the story's message is deeper. In the end Abraham does not offer Isaac because the sacrifice of Isaac would not, could not, have been

enough. It would not pay the debt of sin or wash the stain of guilt. Abraham's offering of his son, his only begotten son, the son of the promise, points forward to a more perfect offering that one day would be made: the sacrifice of Jesus Christ upon the cross. His is the perfect sacrifice. He is the perfect substitute. His is the sacrifice that overcomes the reality of sin. His is the sacrifice that can wash the stain of guilt. His is the sacrifice that breaks the power of death. His is the one sacrifice that accomplishes what is needed.

His sacrifice is the one that has been made for you. I invite you to come to Christ today. Turn in faith to him, embrace him and believe in him.

Say "Amen!" Somebody!

Genesis 22:1 – 19

22 After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ²He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." ³So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. ⁴On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. ⁵Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you." ⁶And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. ⁷And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He

said, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” ⁸ Abraham said, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So they went both of them together.

⁹When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. ¹¹But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” ¹²He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” ¹³And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴So 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.”

¹⁵And the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven ¹⁶and said, “By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, ¹⁸and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.” ¹⁹So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba. And Abraham lived at Beersheba.

Hebrews 11:8 – 19

⁸By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and

Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. ¹¹By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. ¹²Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

¹³These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. ¹⁴For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

¹⁷By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, ¹⁸of whom it was said, “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” ¹⁹He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.