

Genesis 22

Killing the Goose that Lays the Golden Egg

Introduction

A 22-year-old suicide bomber killed 21 Israelis at a Tel Aviv discotheque. Afterwards, his father announced: "I am very happy and proud of what my son did and, frankly, am a bit jealous ... I wish I had done it myself." Some Palestinian fathers even publicly announce a hope that their children will kill Israelis in suicide operations. These fathers voice such sentiments because of their intense hatred for Jews.

Something is terribly wrong if a father takes pleasure in the death of his son. Genesis 22 seems to be even worse. It is the story of a man who sets out to kill his dearly loved son. Is this madness? Is Abraham a monster? Is God a monster for requiring this of him? Is Abraham a blind religious fanatic no different from those Palestinian fathers I've just described? What possible reason could there be for killing Isaac? It seems such an utter waste?

In Genesis 22 the sun hides behind dark, menacing clouds in embarrassment and confusion. We enter, it seems, an evil shadow-land of insanity and sadism. To Abraham God's command must have seemed absurd. For God is asking him to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs. In Genesis 21 God promised in no uncertain terms, "*it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned*" (v12). God guaranteed that Isaac himself would live to father descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and the dust of the earth. Isaac is the goose that lays the golden eggs. Now God commands Abraham to kill the goose. Isn't Abraham himself acting like a goose when he proceeds to obey this seemingly ridiculous command?

Just Testing

The very first thing we encounter are the words, "*After these things God tested Abraham.*" The reader knows God is not really going to require Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. God is not a sadist. He is just testing. But as readers we know something Abraham didn't know. Abraham didn't know he was being tested and he didn't know how it was all going to work out.

God simply says, "*Abraham!*" Abraham immediately knows that God is about to tell him to do something. So he replies like the prophet he is, "*Here I am*", meaning, "I'm ready, Lord, to do whatever you ask of me." Then God says something that must have struck horror into the heart of Abraham: "*Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about*" (v2).

There are two corresponding statements that hold the key to understanding this chapter. The first is this one which describes the test. It is matched by the statement in verse 12: "*Do not lay a hand on the boy. 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.*"

A work colleague separated from her husband but later reunited with her husband. It seemed so encouraging. Yet about a year after this came the terrible news that her husband had killed himself. I saw her again a long time after this. She told me that she

refused to believe in a God who would let her husband commit suicide. Many people blame God for such tragedies. If this lady has any cause to be bitter against God surely Abraham had far greater reason to curse God. Many ask, "How can a God of love allow such terrible things to happen to our loved ones?" Abraham might have said, "Only an evil God would command me to kill my dear son. I refuse to have anything to do with such a God."

Gypsy Rose Lee once quipped, "God is love, but get it in writing." Perhaps she was reading Genesis 22 at the time. For here God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son. But God tells Abraham to "sacrifice" his son, not to murder him. There is a difference. God claims the right to the life of Abraham's son. The life of Isaac belongs to God, not Abraham. "*The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised*", declared Job, when he lost all his children. Isaac's future is in God's hands, not Abraham's.

What about your children or the children you will one day have? What about my children? To whom do they belong? What about your own life? Does it belong to your parents or to God? Christian parents find it difficult to let God be God in the lives of their children. It is the ultimate test of faith for a parent to entrust dear children into the hands of God, especially when God seems to be leading them into dangerous waters. Many Christian parents react strongly when their children want to go into full-time Christian service or on to the mission field. But, of course, this is all small bickies compared to the test that stands before Abraham.

Test Case

We know God was testing Abraham, but what exactly was God testing? Go back to verse 12: "*Do not lay a hand on the boy. 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.*" And run this alongside verse 18: "*and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.*" What is tested? To what extent Abraham fears God, that is, to what extent Abraham will obey God. God is testing the faith-obedience of Abraham.

God's command and God's promise are on a collision course. God cannot fulfill his promise to give Abraham innumerable descendants through Isaac if Isaac dies before he even gets married. Yet God commands Abraham to kill him. Abraham did not know how God was going to resolve this conflict. But he trusted God somehow to solve this problem. That is what is meant by Abraham's fear of God. That is, Abraham had an extraordinarily high view of God. His faith in God was so great that he believed that even if he killed his son, as commanded by God, nevertheless somehow God would honour his promises and cause Isaac to live to be the father of innumerable descendants, as he had promised.

The writer to the Hebrews captures the inescapable sense of Genesis 22: "*By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.'* Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death" (Heb 11:17-19).

During World War II, one of America's great naval vessels, *The Wasp*, caught fire and began to sink. The sailors were ordered to abandon ship and swim away from the vessel immediately. They jumped overboard, but many did not obey the command. They thought they would be safer if they clung to the sides of the ship. When the ship plunged beneath the surface, those sailors were sucked down with it.

Look at God's horrifying command to Abraham once again: "*Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.*" The wording takes Abraham back to God's very first command in Genesis 12 when God told him to leave his country, his people and his father's household. In telling Abraham to sacrifice his son, his only son, the son he loves, God demands that nothing stand between him and absolute obedience. Abraham is commanded to jump into a world of utter chaos and to swim away from the very thing he longs to cling to. If you want God to use you greatly, as he used Abraham, then be prepared. The time will come when he will command you too to jump ship and swim away. God may ask you to give up something you long for with all your heart, not because he is a sadist, but so that he might have an unblocked pipe through which he can run his endless stream of blessing.

The links with Genesis 12 go beyond the continual need to sever those precious links that stand between us and pure devotion to the Lord. Just as at the beginning God called Abram to go a land that he would show him, now again he calls him to go to a mountain he will tell him about. Once again, Abraham finds himself not knowing where God is leading him. How fully can he trust this God, a God who now seems to be leading him into unspeakable horror?

In this frightening context Abraham says, "*God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son*" (v8). Abraham is not lying to his son, Isaac. He is convinced that God will provide. Literally, the Hebrew reads, "*God will see for himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.*" This is Hebrew idiom for God will provide, as the NIV renders it. Just as the key statement in verse 2 is matched by verse 12 so too this major statement in verse 8 is matched by verse 14: "*So Abraham called that place The Lord will Provide [Yahweh Yireh/Jehovah Jireh]. And to this day it is said, 'On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided.'*" But remember that the word "provide" is literally the Hebrew word for "seeing".

Abraham once announced to Isaac he had decided to upgrade their family computer to Windows 2000. Isaac said, "But father, we don't have enough memory!" To which Abraham replied, "Don't worry, my son, the Lord will provide the ram." That's exactly what happens in Genesis 22. The Lord provides the ram: "*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*" (v13).

We know of another Father who provided a lamb as a substitute. Indeed, many believe that Paul has Genesis 22 in mind when he says: "*He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all - how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?*" (Rom 8:32). God was only testing Abraham. In the end Abraham was allowed to spare his own son. But unlike Abraham, God did not spare his own Son. In order that the promises to Abraham might be fulfilled it was necessary that Jesus be sacrificed and for God there was no way out, no ram in the thicket, just the agony of seeing his

only Son tortured on the hideous cross.

C.T. Studd was an outstanding batsman who played for the English cricket team near the end of the 19th century. He graduated from Cambridge University with a law degree. But he was challenged to take the gospel to the nations. So, turning his back on cricketing glory and a career in law, he followed Hudson Taylor to China. He returned 21 years later, broken in health, after serving in China and India. But at 53 he set out again for Africa. His answer to all who questioned the wisdom of his action was found on a postcard on his desk: *If Jesus Christ be God, and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for Him.* Abraham was prepared to make any sacrifice before Christ came and died. How much more should we be prepared to make any sacrifice God calls on us to make!

Test Results

In 1770 Captain James Cook in HMS Endeavour landed in Sydney. He desperately needed a source of fresh water. In Port Jackson, that is, Sydney Harbour, he found a cove with a good source of drinking water from a stream. The cove, of course, was Circular Quay and the stream that supplied fresh water was the "Tank Stream" which passes, for example, under the Commonwealth Bank in Martin Place. Yet in only a few months this pure source of fresh water became polluted. Wherever people go, they pollute. The Tank Stream now sadly serves as a "stonewater drainage corridor" under the City of Sydney CBD.

Every Christian drinks from a stream that has its source in the faith of Abraham. In Romans 4: 11 Paul says, "So then, he is the father of all who believe." He adds, *"Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring - not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all"* (v16). Abraham is our water source. If the water at its source is polluted then we have major problems.

God does tell Abraham to sacrifice his son. But this is an utterly unique event in history. God will never ask you to kill a dearly loved relative. God is making sure that the water is pure at its source. Abraham went through this ordeal for you and for me. That's why this story ends the way it does. Read verses 15-18: *"I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous 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."* In other words, God says, "Now that you have proved the purity of your faith-obedience I will proceed to fulfill the promises I made to you."

God wants to use you and he wants to use this church community as a pipeline through which he can bring the blessing of eternal life to many people. If many non-Christians are to experience the blessing of life in Christ then all of us are going to have to make some sacrifices, some more than others. Are you challenged by the faith-obedience of Abraham which made him prepared to sacrifice anything, even his own son, in order to express his reverence for God?

When you read Genesis 22 do not see merely the agony of Abraham, but see the agony in the heart of God who so loved the world, so loved you and me, that he allowed his son, his only son, the son he loves, to be brutally killed that you and I might pass safely over into his eternal kingdom. If Jesus Christ be God, and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for Him.