



## Sacrifice and Substitute

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The Patriarchs | The Gospel According to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob

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Genesis 22.1-19

9.23.12

*Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 2 He said, "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you." 3 So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and Isaac his son; and he split wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. 4 On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from a distance. 5 Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go over there; and we will worship and return to you." 6 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 the two of them walked on together. 7 Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." And he said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" 8 Abraham said, "God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together. 9 Then they came to the place of which God had told him; and Abraham built the altar there and arranged the wood, and bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. 10 Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. 11 But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 12 He said, "Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me." 13 Then Abraham raised his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram and offered him up for a burnt offering in the place of his son. 14 Abraham called the name of that place The LORD Will Provide, as it is said to this day, "In the mount of the LORD it will be provided." 15 Then the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, 16 and said, "By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done*

*this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, 17 indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. 18 "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice." 19 So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham lived at Beersheba*

We're looking at the world of the PATRIARCHS in *The Book of Genesis, The First Book of Moses*. Jewish people trace their lineage to these three generations, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the Patriarchs.

And Christians are told in the New Testament to think of themselves as true children of Abraham, as the seed of Abraham...his spiritual ancestors, *because Christians are to live by faith* as Abraham did...we're cut from the same cloth, hewn of the same stone (Isa. 51; Gal. 3.7,29).

Maybe, this week you saw our Jewish neighbors celebrating the Jewish New Year (if we have any Jewish visitors today – Happy Rosh Hashanah!) In the synagogue liturgy, this passage is read. The shofar or ram's horn is sounded to commemorate this ram, from this story. It's one of the most famous texts from the whole Bible. Depicted MANY times in great art-works over the centuries. (See the Caravaggio on our site...and Sunday Class). It's a strange text; *leaves us with a lot of unanswered questions*. It leaves us wondering how to respond...is there something I should imitate here? It seems more reprehensible than exemplary (to modern hearers). BTW, if anyone tells you that God told them to sacrifice their children, please hang up the phone and dial 9-1-1.

It's also a very moving story... because we feel for Abraham...certainly for Isaac. If you believe in God there will be times when His ways don't seem to make sense...and we feel the angst of the characters in this story. So let's just let the story *sweep us UP into itself*...the story, the characters and the big take-away.

The story starts, "after these things", after Abraham is settled. He HAS the long awaited son of promise. He has dealt with that domestic strife (or...God actually took care of it...in caring for Hagar and Ishmael – last week) and he's ok with his neighbors. Abraham is satisfied in God...worships. All is calm all is bright...well, well well. Until God tested Abraham – God has been working on Abraham and God *had made this sword* (We saw with Peter: God bent and broke and melted and tempered and now sharpened it – let's see how sharp it IS! God wants to assess His own work and say as at creation, "it is good...it is very good...it is sharp and very sharp!")

And next episode...some years later when the child of promise is a teenager (?) ...old enough to carry wood and to ask questions, *God comes to speak again with Abraham*. Calls him by name (17.5) and the believer responds, "Here I am" (3 x) "Take your son ...and travel three days and offer him back to Me...a burnt offering." Isaac is the embodiment of hope and now all hope will be incinerated...and even though child sacrifice was practiced in the ancient Middle East, it's still gruesome ..."the son you love".

But now there's no negotiating. No questioning. Only trust...leading to the obedience that comes by faith. God has patiently formed the man *into a believer*. He trusts God. So...he gets right to it. Rises early...packs the car (donkey) takes a couple young employees/ranch-hands and the beloved son, Isaac.

He heads to Mount Moriah, which is where Solomon built the Temple (1000 years later; 2 Chr 3.1)...a 3 day walk.

Then *Abraham* sees "the place" (4x – *important!*).

They leave the young workers with the donkey and the father and the son he loves set out alone. And that's when the beloved son asks that heart-rending question "Dad, you're carrying the fire and I have the wood (he can't even bring himself to mention the knife!) but where's... the main thing? Where's the sacrifice, the lamb?"

The NT says, "Abraham considered that God is able to raise *people* even from the dead" (Heb. 11.19). So, he's not lying when he tells the servants that "WE" will return and not lying when *he makes this tremendous statement of faith* to the puzzled child, "God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son". Literally, "God will *SEE* to the lamb Himself". Last week "God hears"...this week "*God sees*" (Through the text, the word provide is lit. God will *SEE to it* Himself).

So, "the two of them walked on together". (Also 3x) And they come to "the place" and the action slows down. The worshiper builds an altar. Then he piles it with the wood. Then, binds the beloved son atop the wood. Then he raises the knife... BUT as the angel spared the son of Hagar (last chapter) by giving the mother to see a well (saving them from dying of thirst) SO NOW, the angel saves the son of Sarah. "Abraham, Abraham..." (a way of saying, "dear Abraham!") "Here I am."

"Don't harm the lad...for now I know that you fear God (i.e. *you obeyed out of trust*), since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me." (v.12) THEN, as God SEES, NOW Abraham (v.13) SEES behind him a ram, tangled in the thorns, and "Abraham went and took the ram and offered him up for a burnt offering *INSTEAD* of his son."

God did indeed "SEE to it" and provided, a substitute, the lamb for Himself. And "Abraham called the name of that PLACE, YHWH will see to it...the Lord who Provides." And Moses adds, "In fact, people still say it to this very day, 'on the mount of the LORD...in God's place it will be seen to...will be provided'".

Then a final speech to Abraham, the 35th recorded speech from God to Abraham, (v.16) "I have sworn by Myself...with no help from YOU dear Abraham...and have given the biggest collateral that could ever be given...I have put My own existence behind the promise...as YOU have not withheld your son so I will not withhold My blessings from YOU...I will fulfill all My

promises to YOU and to YOUR SEED...I will multiply YOUR SEED beyond what you could count and I will bless all the Nations...through your SEED. You have trusted Me and that's how you were able to obey My voice."

Then they went home.

Now, when we think of the characters in this story we naturally identify with Abraham. We all know what it's like when we're called upon to do something that has to be done...but that we don't understand. If you believe in God (as most of us do) you may find yourself asking, "why is God requiring this of me? I don't get it...it seems ludicrous!"

And there are times in the Bible when believers are wondering about those very things. Many of the "Psalms of disorientation" (as in Sunday Class) have to do with what Abraham must have felt...At least what we think he felt.

Truth is though...we don't really know what was going on INSIDE Abraham...because he just got up early (maybe because he didn't dare hesitate or give it a second thought) and with no swerving AT ALL... He just obeyed...because he believed...he trusted.

So, we're trying to identify with Abraham and he is used (as in Hebrews 11) as an example of a believer. It helps me to see him as a piece of work... God (as with Peter and all God's people) God took the raw materials and turned that iron-ore and coal into a razor sharp sword...God refined the man's faith...

He was a pagan...when God found him. The whole system of paganism is founded on quid-pro-quo (this for that): you better take care of your gods if you want them to take care of you. You better see to it!

And at the end of the story, Abraham believes in the God who provides, the God who keeps covenant. He makes big promises and then refines our faith so we can trust those promises. We don't feed this God like a pet, or like a drug-habit. He feeds us. He will see to it... Abraham is now a believer – no longer a pagan who works the system. So that helps me identify with Abraham...even though I don't believe or obey as well as he did. At least I see where God is taking me (the trajectory of belief.)

You wonder though, as Moses was writing these words, you wonder who Moses wanted his readers to identify with.

My thought is that it wasn't so much... "Hey...be like Abraham! Give up what's most precious to you! Show that you really believe by making big sacrifices and by being ABSURDLY OBEDIENT...C'mon, Abraham was able to part with his beloved son...so can't you just put a little more in the collection plate...or stop complaining as we wander through the desert? Can't you DO a little more?!"

I wonder if Moses' real target wasn't the other character - Isaac. Moses wants the Israelites to identify with Isaac, to know, "Hey, we were dangling by a very fine thread. If Isaac had died, none of us would ever have been born (because we all came from Isaac - the child of promise!) Our people were teetering on extinction from the very start!...But from the very beginning of God's church - HE HAS ALWAYS SEEN TO IT! He has always provided for our redemption!

In the garden, He covered their shame/nakedness, with the skins of animals. Abel saw it when he offered a sacrifice for his sin - a substitute to stand in his place and take what he deserved.

"This", says Moses, "is why we offer these sacrifices in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple...in our place. This is why once a year, the Scapegoat is driven in to the wilderness wearing our sins to perish in our place."

This is how God will always deal with us - as He dealt with Isaac. See yourself in Isaac's place...with judgment and justice over your head...dangling and doomed...and see that God has always seen to it and that God has provided the Lamb.

And see...in the fullness of time...when God...with no help from us...because He has sworn by Himself... that He will become the Lamb. His own Sacred Head will be caught in thorns...and He will see to it...

On the Mountain of the Lord, in the Place of Moriah and in the shadow of Solomon's Temple, the final sacrifice will be offered and Jesus Christ, the Incarnate God will take the place of Isaac once and for all. What relief for Isaac that the knife will not fall and that the provided Lamb will be offered in His place.

In this story, we have to identify with Isaac. And in some sense, Abraham is to remind us of the Covenant-Keeping God whom we call Father. As Abraham did not withhold his son, his only son, his beloved son... SO ALSO, OUR GOD has not withheld His Son - the eternally begotten perfect image of the Father was not spared... unlike Isaac, the knife came down and the Father was pleased to crush Him for every sinner...desperate enough to TRUST (Isa. 53.10).

God has sworn by His own self. This sacrifice, this substitute stands IN YOUR PLACE...if you simply come out with your hands up and receive it.

And when all Hell fell on the Substitute, the true Lamb, Jesus Christ...when all the sins of all God's people were charged to Him and He was made to pay... the Father raised Him...and presented Him to hundreds of eyewitnesses. God was saying, "See?! I have seen to it. The payment is accepted. Redemption is accomplished for everyone who believes! As Isaac was spared, Jesus Christ was raised."

Now what's the big take-away from all this: well, the Swiss theologian Karl Barth was asked, "what is the most important concept for understanding the whole Bible?" and Barth said, "It's the phrase, 'on behalf of' or 'in place of'."

That's what separated Abraham's former life of religion/idolatry/paganism from his later life. That's what God was showing Him all along. That's what Moses wanted his generation of the church to see and every subsequent generation – the most important thing is that God will see to it and in fact HAS SEEN TO IT in Jesus Christ.

Is our obedience important? Definitely! St. John wrote (we declared it earlier) "Everyone who has this hope fixed upon Jesus Christ purifies himself". It worked that way in Abraham. Because he was believing in the God who provides, Abraham came to that place of rest...and the obedience that comes BY grace and through faith.

But it didn't work the other way. God wasn't saying, "Just do your part and then I'll repay you" – THAT'S HOW RELIGION and idolatry work...and even true Christians can return to it (Abraham didn't come to trust like this overnight...a lot of relapses into pagan thinking). But the way the Gospel works is, "See! I have given you the reward – I have kept My covenant and YOU HAVE THE CHILD OF PROMISE, Jesus Christ.

And it's as you hold Him, as you take stock of Him, and SEE Him, the Lamb crowned with thorns, as you continue to rely on Him when you see your sin and need...it's as you are filled with grace that you can overflow with obedience.

See yourself...as Isaac...and feel the sense of infinite relief because the Lamb of God STANDS IN YOUR PLACE... on Mount Calvary...where Jesus Christ was slain...in that place, "The LORD will provide!"