

# The Binding of Isaac

Matt Farey

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Genesis 22, Matthew 14

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### A Story of Child-Abuse?

Because of our brother's prayer about the young people struggling to believe, I'll slightly change the beginning of this talk, because my talk today is on the true story of God calling Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac in Genesis, Chapter 22. It's one of the foundation stones of our Judeo-Christian world-view and, by extension the whole of the Western world. But it's also one of the major stories used by secularists and atheists as their justification to dismiss the idea of an all-knowing, all-loving God. It's just to them another incomprehensible story, a barbaric act of child-abuse by a capricious god. Another reason to cast the Bible out of the public square. And I suppose if God were to interact with his sons and daughters today in the way that he did then, and if believers were to do his will as Abraham did, the authorities of our world would throw them into prison and take away their children.

So why then, should we consider this story? If it is indeed just another incomprehensible story of the Old Testament? How can a thoughtful or ethical person today possibly build anything morally firm on such an ancient and shaky storey? That's the bit that I'll add in to set the scene for anyone who might be struggling with this story. What has the account of God requiring Abraham to sacrifice the son he loves, got to do with us?

So I thought to start with we'd go verse by verse in that small account, and just look at the life of Abraham at this time through his eyes just highlighting a few little thoughts, and then take a different perspective before we remember Jesus, and as we go through this, there are seven things I suppose that I have in mind.

The fact that Abraham was:-

- *called out*, he's chosen
- the fact that he was *promised* something
- that he was then *trained*
- *tested*
- *provided for*

- *justified*
- and in the future will be *glorified*

### Training - Abraham's Life so Far

So this brief look at some of the bullet points of Abraham's life in Genesis is to as it were, highlight the training that he received.

- As a young man he travelled with his family, working with them to hunt and overcome the lack of water, he endured intense heat, constant temperature changes, unpredictable sandstorms.
- He married but was childless.
- He later saw the death of his father and now looks after the family.
- God appears to him in a vision, and Abraham speaks with God and receives the promise "I shall make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven", and he's invited to stare up at the heavens and count the stars if he can.
- He's survived famine venturing to and from Egypt, pitching tents, keeping his family safe.
- He's been in fear of his life and losing his wife. In his mind, a stark choice between the wife he loved or putting his entire family at risk if he's killed. In the end, he angers Pharaoh thought of as a god by Egyptians.
- He's settled family disputes.
- He's received a confirmation of the prophecy promises: "I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth".
- He went to defensive war to to rescue Lot.
- Negotiated with kings.
- God again confirms the promises, naming Isaac as the child through whom it would happen and Abraham is guaranteed peace in death and shown a miracle at his sacrifice.
- He had a child with his Sarah's Egyptian slave girl and lost him and got him back.
- He received another confirmation. This time he falls on his face at the sight of the Lord, and he receives the circumcision covenant, and acts immediately.
- He met again with angels and spoke to them and received again the promises through his son, he negotiates with the angels, trying hard to imagine how many righteous there are left of Lot's family.
- He shows how highly he esteems God's judgement and goes early in the morning to see whether indeed there were *five* righteous people in that city.
- Again, Abraham is overcome by fear and hides his marriage to Sarah, who is by now beginning to be rejuvenated in preparation for having Isaac, and is even more beautiful and therefore dangerous to him.
- He has to pray for the king and his family for them to be healed, and
- Isaac is born and weaned to much joy. But then Sarah sends Hagar and Ishmael away and Abraham is distressed, and God has to intervene to give him advice, and finally,
- He makes peace with the surrounding kings in the land of the Philistines.

That's a bullet point list of what Abraham has been through to set the scene.

So here's a man who's been *called out* of the nations and been *given specific promises* to him and his sons, led by God through life until he becomes the friend of God, a chosen and righteous man, a conciliator, a peacemaker, a strong and responsible protector and negotiator.

Humanly speaking, his life is one of dwelling without walls or bars or gates, a prosperous man but a potential target in godless lands. But after all the things he's been through, he is, as we find him in Chapter 21, finally, at peace, past the drama of the anger and whims of dangerous kings, his heart-wrenching family difficulties have subsided.

### The Sudden Test

But it's easy to be a person of faith if faith means wide recognition of your greatness. If you're considered blessed by God, and if Kings search you out to make treaties with you, if faith means receiving good gifts, then 'Lord increase my faith.'

So the question then is how deep is Abraham's faith, and what is it based on exactly? Is it, as people say, like a crutch to get through the difficulties of life, something you have purely for comfort? Or is it a real faith in a real God. In which case, what are you prepared to *do* to show that faith? How powerful is this God of Abraham? You think if he's not powerful than Abraham won't need to put too much effort in? So then it's not an academic question.

How deep is *your* faith? How deep is *mine*? How worthy to be worshipped is our God? Is it even possible for us to judge how well we're doing, or how much faith we have? Well, we're *not* the judges, and even it seems angels need to test us to find the answers to these questions. So sometime later, God tested Abraham. Note that God did *test* Abraham but did not *tempt* him. He may experience temptations later, but it's perfectly legitimate for God to test and try our faith. "God said to him, 'Abraham', 'Here I am', he replied", still an idiom today, in Jewish circles for "I'm ready to serve". Then he replied, God replied,

take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the region of Moriah, and sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.

Abraham was old and had settled down, enjoying many years of peace, and this sudden and familiar instruction, to 'leave your family and go somewhere I will show you' would have come as a shock to an old man. But to be told to 'take the son you love and offer him as a burnt offering' to God... We remember how distressed Abraham was when Sarah and Hagar fought over Ishmael, even the thought of losing that son was so painful that God intervened.

We think of how devastated David was over Absalom, but Isaac hadn't betrayed anyone.

Remember to how hard Jacob found it to allow Benjamin to travel to Egypt.

If an accident happens to him on the journey you have to make, then you will bring down my grey hair in sorrow to the grave.

But Isaac's demise was to be no accident.

And Abraham had already lost one son on God's advice.

But what made the command startling was the *language* God chose to use. ‘Take your son, your *only* son whom you *love*, Isaac.’ God is clearly saying to him, I know the depth of your love for Isaac, but you want to kill him and burn him as a sacrifice to me anyway. He could have just said, “take Isaac” or “take your son”, but he didn’t. This was the language of *clarity and severity*. So he’s faced with a choice, remembering the *clarity and severity* of the warning to him if he failed to obey the law of circumcision; remembering the smoke rising over Sodom and Gomorah, and now here’s get more *clarity and severity* God’s command to kill your only son that *I am aware you love*. Do you obey or not? God’s language seems designed to prevent Abraham from attempting fruitless negotiation. He’s forced instead to negotiate internally, and we ask, is this why he *didn’t* argue with God like he did when the Angels came to destroy wicked Sodom. After all, then his argument was that a righteous and a just God, wouldn’t allow “friendly fire” to kill the righteous people along with the wicked. It was an *unfairness*, perhaps the most primal and the earliest expressed emotion we have as Children.

But perhaps there’s another reason, and in his Bible commentary on Genesis, *Prager* writes the following

the command to sacrifice his son probably did not strike Abraham as unjust, even though Isaac was an innocent, because in the ancient world, child sacrifice was universally considered acceptable, even admirable, insofar as it showed devotion to one’s God, and because children were regarded as *possessions* of parents. So Abraham understandably may not have perceived the command to sacrifice Isaac as morally wrong, but rather as a command from the Lord God he believed in. What might have puzzled Abraham most therefore, was not his being told to sacrifice his child but being told to sacrifice the child that God had promised would be the father of a nation. How could the commandment to sacrifice Isaac be reconciled with God’s promise of a future nation emanating from Isaac? In not fully understanding God’s ways, Abraham represented every believer who came after him.

To put it another way, God is asking ‘Abraham, are you willing to do for me what parents in every culture around you are willing to do in worshipping their gods? After all, you’ve already killed people before, when it was morally justified - to rescue a lot and his family - is it not moral to obey now, when your God commands it?’

So Abraham *did* obey.

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.

Given that this command was to kill his beloved son, it’s hard to imagine he was raring to go. So why the early morning? Perhaps Abraham couldn’t sleep at all that night, or wanted to avoid Sarah. Maybe he just wanted to leave at the break of day to avoid the danger that lurks in darkness, Abraham had no intention of putting either himself, his son or servants in any danger that was not commanded by God.

On the third day, Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance.

Notice how far Abram had to travel. The killing Isaac couldn't be an impulsive act, done behind a tent or in a wooded area nearby quickly but in bitterness of spirit towards God. Abraham was being asked to walk with his son for three days, then climb up the huge mountain he could see in the far distance. For Abraham an old man this would be physically exhausting. He would have to sit and catch his breath. He would need the help of his son, who was quite capable of either outrunning him or overpowering him. So while his son carried the wood, he would end up bound to and sacrificed on, Abraham carried the burden of intense loneliness and sorrow, perhaps even guilt in accepting Isaac's help, perhaps even as he built the altar.

It was slow and deliberate, a death that would take every ounce of what remained of Abraham strength.

[Abraham] 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.

It says something about the confidence we have in the transmission of the Scriptures, that Abraham lived so long ago that the North Star was different then, and yet we can notice that first person plural *we* and we can gain a lot about it. We're told about it in Hebrews, that Abraham was considering how these things that God had said could make sense, and he thought that God would be able to *resurrect* Isaac. But we don't quite know when he reasoned that, it's a beautiful thing to come up with, a beautiful thing to rely on because it's not something you might ever see. Did Abraham expect God to save Isaac at the last minute? Or was he merely trying to keep up the pretence for Isaac's sake? Had he already won the mental battle? After all, a God that would spare an *entire* city of wicked people if only *five* righteous people live there, which surely save this innocent boy rather than enforce the obedience of an old man.

Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. This knife is known in Hebrew as a 'feeder' knife, it's a butcher's knife used to butcher animals to feed the family. And the Hebrew doesn't spare our blushes, it uses words in this context, which are rarely used elsewhere.

So I'm going to read the remainder of this account now.

As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father", "Yes, my son", Abraham replied. "The wood and fire here", Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering my son", and the two of them went on together. 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, and he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son.

That word slay is in Hebrew 'slaughter'

but the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven. “Abraham, Abraham!” “Here I am”, he replied. “Do not lay a hand on the boy”, he said, “do not do anything to him! Now I know that that you fear God because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son”. 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. So Abraham called that place ‘The Lord Will Provide’, and to this day it is said on the mountain of the Lord ‘It will be provided’. The Angel of the Lord called Abraham from heaven a second time and said, “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 of the earth will be blessed because you have obeyed me.

Throughout the human race, historically and globally, human sacrifice was normal, and yet here, at the very start of the chapter, we are explicitly told that this was only a test for Abraham, that God had no intention of requiring Isaac as a sacrifice. In stopping Abraham’s hand, God makes it clear that he, in contradictions of the norms of the gods of the rest of the world, finds human sacrifice morally reprehensible. “Do not lay a hand on the boy, he said. Do not do anything to him.” We all made in the image of God.

But why make Abraham go through that trial? Are we seeing a new side to God? The order to circumcise and the order to offer up Isaac, both given with that *clarity but severity* of language.

Well, it’s precisely because Abraham carried out both of God’s commands despite any reservations he might have initially had, that fulfilled God’s promises through him. Even though Abraham himself was unaware perhaps of the full significance of what he was acting out.

Do we always have to understand?

Would we expect to have God’s perspective? Then what is there left to do but to obey? What’s our other option? Do we grumble? Do we murmur? Do we protest?

By acting out circumcision the salvation of the world has shown not to be a matter of ethnicity. It’s open to *everyone* as a moral pathway for those willing to circumcise their hearts, cutting off from their daily life and thinking, anything that would cause them to be cut off from God. It’s a moral covenant. If we obey God from where all righteousness springs then we are all accepted regardless of any blood and soil connection to the Holy Land. In a world full of tribal conflict, accepting the stranger as an equal, as a co-heir in God’s family is exceptional.

To make it possible for us to be saved by faith Abraham and Isaac had to prefigure the sacrifice of Jesus the Messiah. By acting out the sacrifice of Isaac while they walked up the mountain on the one side, the sacrifice provided by Yahveh walked up *straight* the other side of the mountain towards the place where it would be caught in the thicket - in the curse - by the two horns of spiritual and natural Israel.

Abraham looked up, and there behind him, was his way of escape.

No wonder the language God used left no room for negotiation. What appeared merely as a test for Abraham's faith was in fact the essential centrepiece of God's grand plan for everybody. It *had* to happen just as God wished to fulfil the promises through Isaac.

Angels don't know everything, but God does. "They don't know the hour or the day", the father *does*. In the story of Job and Abraham we see investigations and tests, and in them we see the key to our *own* trials, our own suffering and transformation. Abraham is not, after all, the only one who is predestined, called, given promises, trained, provided for and justified through faith.

Are times easy for us? Surely anyone can love God in the good times. Are times hard? Often so hard it takes everything we have? So hard we don't feel we can even open our mouths to negotiate? We are firmly caught and right where God wants us. Now, when those times are hard is the time to show that we understand what's happening: that God is either being kind in refining us with great patience, in offering us repentance, or our faith is being tested and proven for reasons we cannot know.

We *need* our characters to be moulded and tempered, to bring us the qualities required for us to fit in with his plan. We need the correct shape, the hardness, the elasticity and many other characteristics to become, as God wishes us to be. The hardness of faithfulness and self-control so we can cut away and cut off and circumcise all the wrong in us, leaving only right, and the elasticity of humility and forgiveness, mercy and patience to be prepared to faithfully obey, even if we don't understand how we fit into his plan.

### **Yahveh Provides**

'Yahveh Yireh' means 'Yahveh Sees' or 'Yahveh Provides' because God *fore-sees*, he has provision and he makes provision long before we know we have the need. He knows what we need ahead of time and along with the test will provide what we need: that sacrifice. Along with the test, he provides the sacrifice.

The sense of foreboding, the worry whether we will make it up the mountain, the terrible fear to lose or sacrifice that which matters most to us... it turns out *those* are the things we should lose: our worry, our fear, the sense of foreboding!

We're required to be willing to do it, to hold the knife with intent. It is real to *us*, but the sacrifice has already been provided.

The sense of foreboding as the scene is set around him. All the magnitude and weight of the sinfulness of the whole earth bourne, bound to that beam that would later lift him up, he did not open his mouth.

When we were asked to go through something extremely painful in our lives that we can't negotiate away, we just *have* to come back to this:

God is love

and

all things work together for good to those that love him  
and, God has *already* provided.

How can we have it any other way? We simply don't have the right to challenge God because we lack perspective.

We consider ourselves to be suffering, but in fact, God 'meant it for good', and if we should want a better deal, couldn't God require then that we actually provide the sacrifice ourselves? 'Get your own lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world!'

Is this how we sometimes reason when we're suffering? Is our vision limited to how unfair it is that we suffer in ways others do not? "Look at them! They're okay because they've got what we haven't got". Do we forget that God ensures their trials are suited to them? And that, instead of unfairness or resentment leading to jealousy, we could turn and give thanks to God for his kindness in leading us to repentance in the way he's chosen for us.

Yahveh provided the sacrifice as well as our test. All we need to do is pick up the sword of the spirit and use it to divide what is flesh from what is spirit.

So why does God *do* all these things? Why was it necessary to have *actual* circumcision? Why was it necessary for Isaac to be bound to the wood *physically*? Why not just have a scribe make up convincing history where nobody has to go through anything nasty and no bad words get said? That's the zeitgeist of this world isn't it? "Protect everybody from everything, including speech. It's better that way." Because God is writing spiritual truths into the real flesh and blood of your heart, into people that really existed, really felt, the mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers and friends and captains and kings and shepherds that loved and feared like you and I. Without burning these truths into the fabric of humanity, those made in his image, it would just be so many unconscious animals or so many words on a page signifying nothing. The *fact* that the towns are next to the cities, which were built by the rivers that flow between the mountains and that the people who lived there worshipped and then turned away from God, were conquered by invaders and returned, the *fact* that they were judged, that they were forgiven, that all prophecy springs from real life, should give us confidence that we too, here today, are in the story spiritually and physically. We *matter* to God and to each other in ways that we cannot comprehend. What we say matters. Our decisions matter. Choosing to obey. Being patient and suffering too. It all means something *real*, and it's part of that world God is making for us, that we cannot step into without being curious enough to find out what it's like to try it God's way. We already know what it looks like when we try our way.

## Justified

Today's world is frenzied, and there's precious little time to think. We don't set off on foot to lead a donkey to a mountain for 72 hours. We don't pass through hostile territory with our little ones at the whim of kings for weeks because we're starving. And at the end of history we don't repeatedly get visions from God laying out our life's purpose and the purpose of our sons and daughters for the next few thousand years, or how we'll die or where we should live. Instead though, we have a book that governs our consciences and rules over every single



passing thought we have. The list of Abraham's life contains about 20 items of note, and we wonder how many lessons, should we care to notice them, are contained in our lives. In other words, the discriminator of the sword of the spirit is so sharp, there must be *millions* of lessons should we care to go looking for them.

The word of God is living and active and sharper than any double-edged sword, piercing even to the point of dividing soul from spirit and joints from marrow, it's able to judge the desires and thoughts of the heart.

Now we will give an accounting for the things we thought and the things we did, so perhaps when we in our lives going forward briefly recognise something important that we learned, we could write that down, we could note down the observation, the thoughts, appraise, not our sins, but the lessons learned and the progress made. In other words, a diary, not an Abrahamic Diary of grand archetypical, historical sweeps, but a Word of God Diary, a Jesus Diary, a diary of the tiny things that helped us learn obedience through the things we suffered. It's just an idea.

The reason we listed Abraham's life story was to see in him the reason that he was able to become the man he was. So what lessons have we learned? As we are tested in all the smallest possible ways, how have we become the men and women we are today?

Well as Christians were committed to following Christ and it isn't obvious what that means day to day. Abraham's example teaches us we're supposed to act out the highest good of which we're capable, within the confines of what we're capable of and what God brings to us, and that this will transform our lives. As we attempt to climb a higher mountain or focus or aim at a distant target, and really commit to working on it, our life will become increasingly difficult and profound. But in this we are *given* what we need to overcome the implicit, the, implicit limitations that face us: leaving our fathers and mothers and lands or going to a place far away to join with our husband, worshipping along the way, ruling over sin and subduing the curse, it's what we're *made to do* Whatever comes as a result of obeying Yahveh is his business.

We have joy or *should* have joy in the presence of God with humility, with real peace, that Hebrew word 'shalom', which means an unbroken wholeness of peace, where everything comes together, and you know that it fits, it's the *truth*, knowing that God will provide, not just the test but the means to overcome it.

Well, you might be worried about whether we will ever be called on to suffer as Abraham did.

Don't be.

We will experience what God knows is loving for us to go through. It's only as much as we're able to bear and it's the perfect thing sent by him for us.

As we come together to remember Christ, let go of all thoughts of your sinful failures, all that ties us down and the worry of it all that will prevent us from acting.

We can never be good enough. That's why Yahveh *has* provided, *is* providing, and *will* provide.

All were asked to do is incline our ears, incline our hearts, lean not on our own understanding, be prepared to obey.

At the moment of *truth*, Yahveh provides our *way* of escape that we might have *life*.

The way is open.

### **Glorified**

Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

Romans 8

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