

Please note: This background information is being included in the materials about Abraham and Sarah even though it's focus is on the next part of their story that follows our particular study at Gloria Dei. It's great information and supports our learning.
- Beth Tobin, January 2015.

Rotation.org Writing Team

ABRAHAM & ISAAC: GOD WILL PROVIDE BIBLE BACKGROUND

SCRIPTURE

Bible Story:Genesis 22:1-18

Key/Memory Verse:Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." Genesis 22:8a (NRSV)

SUMMARY

The story of Isaac's near sacrifice at the hand of his father, Abraham, is a troubling story. What is the echoing theme? God will provide! Abraham trusted in God's love and promises and obeyed God even when it was hard.

Objectives for the Rotation

After completing this Rotation, participants will be able to:

- Children will locate the story in the Bible, Genesis 22:1-18.
- Children will retell the story in their own words.
- Children will understand that Abraham trusted in God's love and promises and obeyed God even when it was hard.
- Children will explore the concept of Old Testament sacrifice and how it relates to Jesus being the "Lamb of God."
- Children will understand that God willingly sacrificed his only Son, Jesus, for us.
- Children will discuss ways God provides for us today.

BIBLE BACKGROUND

The story of Isaac's near sacrifice at the hand of his father, Abraham, is one the more familiar yet troubling ones in the Old Testament. It is beyond modern comprehension that an all-merciful, loving father God could ask one of us to kill a child. The thought is

even more dissonant when one considers trying to tell that story (let alone explain it) to groups of children. Certainly some reflection and information is in order to help us better understand what God would have us know from this account.

Story Context

To briefly place this story in context, we must remember that its events come after years and years of Abraham, formerly Abram, and Sarah, formerly Sarai, waiting for God to keep his promise to them by giving them their own biological child. They were both very old when God made a covenant with Abram, changed his and Sarai's names to signify the change he was working in and through them, promising them not only one but many sons, more descendants than the stars in the sky! It was many years after that before Sarah finally conceived and bore Isaac.

What was God asking?

The story, as most of us remember it or remember hearing it, has God coming to Abraham one day, seemingly for no particular reason, and telling him to take Isaac to a mountain, three days away, and offer him as a burnt offering sacrifice. For most of us this part of the story is the part we hurriedly pass through to get to the next covenant promise on the other side. We need to spend some time here to better understand what God was truly doing and asking of Abraham.

Burnt offerings - history

First, we need to revisit what burnt sacrifice meant in ancient Israel. Later on in the Bible, in Leviticus, we read about the rules and regulations prescribed for making burnt offerings, but not what it meant. It's been suggested that the two major interpretive keys to the meaning of the burnt offering are found in the "burnt offerings" of Noah (Genesis 8) and here with Abraham.

Deffinbaugh suggests that the sacrifice Noah offered "was the basis for the covenantal promise of God that He would never again destroy every living thing by a flood again (Genesis 8:21). This promise was not due to the fact that all sin had been destroyed from the face of the earth. The fact of man's depravity (as will soon be manifested in Noah and his family) is still present, for God can still say, 'the intent of man's heart is evil from his youth' (Genesis 8:21), a statement very similar to that of Exodus 32:9, where God told Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, they are an obstinate people."

The basis for God's promise to Noah is not the goodness of man, for man's depravity is specifically stated. This basis for God's covenant promise is the result of the burnt offering offered up by Noah. Thus, the Israelites saw that the burnt offering was a means of avoiding God's wrath and of obtaining God's favor. God's blessing was the result of a burnt offering, not of man's good deeds. The purpose of the burnt offering was to make atonement for the sin of the offerer and thus to gain God's acceptance. The offerer laid his hands upon the animal, identifying with it. More specifically, he identified his sins with the animal. Thus, when the animal was slain (by the hand of the offerer) it died for the sins of the offerer. It is not so much for the offerer's specific sins

(which are dealt with by other sacrifices), but rather for the offerer's general state of sinfulness." (<http://bible.org/seriespage/la...ings-leviticus-11-17>)

Back to Abraham and Isaac

So what of Abraham and Isaac? What sin or state of sinfulness might need atoning for here? If we go back and look at the first two verses of the text with the help of Strong's Hebrew and Greek Dictionary (available through <http://www.e-sword.net>) we find some intricacies of wordplay that begin to open possibilities.

These two verses (NIV) are offered here with the Strong suggested expansion in parentheses.

"Some time later God (*elohiym: the plural, superlative one*) tested (*tempted, assayed*) Abraham. He said to him, 'Abraham!' 'Here I am,' he replied. 2 Then God said, 'Take (*carry away*) your son (*builder of your family name*), your only son (*self*), Isaac (*laughter, mockery*), whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice (*offer, ascend*) him there as a burnt offering (*holocaust, up in smoke, ascending steps*). There are also references to another Hebrew word which means *iniquity, perverseness* ...".

Was God asking Abraham to kill his son, or is it possible that what God is asking is for Abraham to offer up some area of sin Abraham holds, related to relationship with Isaac?

God's nature

In his commentary on Genesis, John Walton suggests there is indeed much going on and being worked through within these verses of scripture, having to do with the nature and names of God, and what he asks of Abraham, and all of us, in relationship with him.

Walton begins his discussion by pointing out that God is referred to in verse 1 as "Elohim," not the more usual Yahweh or El Shaddai used in Genesis. He also points out that there is only one other place in the Pentateuch (Exodus 20:20) that combines this reference with the same verb used here for "testing."

Here, in verse 22:1, Elohim refers back to "that God," the one that Abraham had just referred to as Yahweh as El Olam, "the enduring God," in Genesis 21:33. While it's not meant to imply that this is a different God, it does mean that Abraham had a developing awareness of another, specific attribute of God's nature. It would seem that Abraham and Sarah are not the only ones receiving new names to signify changes in them, or their understanding of their relationship with and to God, within the Abraham narrative. Walton suggests that it is in the context of this attribute, it is this form of God, which tests Abraham.

A test?

The other word of significance Walton illuminates is the one translated as "test." In Hebrew, this word is used with God as subject and a person as object. What is tested is always some value, quality or attribute of that person, and the test is always designed to

stretch that to its limits. Walton points out that in no other instance does God give this kind of testing command, then rescind the order before it is carried out.

Some have suggested that part of what God (Elohim, El Olam) is trying to establish is the difference between other gods of the time and God. The request for child sacrifice by a deity would not have been unknown to Abraham or any other person of the region at that time. Walton, however, rejects this view, reminding that God never intended for Abraham to carry out the act. What is really being tested here is about what Abraham was willing to give up.

The test gets to the heart of Abraham's relationship with God and what his motives are in it. Prior to this, God had asked Abraham to make other kinds of sacrifices, but there was always the promise of something better on the other side. There was always something in it for Abraham. This test asks Abraham to put his trust in God, not in what God promises.

Three days...

Walton says there is something significant in the place where the sacrifice is to occur, in terms of the time it would take to get there. The scripture tells us it was a three-day journey (verse 4). Abraham cannot simply react to God's command. He has time to think about it. We can only imagine what those three days were like, what mental gymnastics Abraham might have gone through trying to make sense out of what he was being asked to do. By the time he gets to the appointed spot, he is making conscious decisions, both about what he is willing to do and about what he believes about the nature of God.

God will see to the details

When he leaves his servants, he tells them "... we will come back to you" (verse 5). When Isaac asks where the sacrificial animal is, Abraham tells him "God (Elohim, El Olam) himself will provide ..." (verse 8). The word translated as "provide" is the Hebrew verb "to see". It is the same sense as when we say we will see that something gets done. What Abraham is asserting here is his belief that God will see to all the details, that all will work out, and when it does, Abraham names the place "The LORD will provide" (Yahweh Yireh, Jehovahjireh, verse 14).

Walton suggests that this whole test was done mainly for God's benefit, to increase his experiential knowledge of Abraham as Abraham acts out his faith, to give Abraham a chance to say and demonstrate the true nature of his belief and relationship with God. Walton says it best: "This test allows the patriarch to demonstrate to himself, to Isaac, to the whole world, but most of all to God that his faith is not driven by what he will receive out of it but by his commitment to God. ... It is important to understand that he has not arrived at his confidence because God somehow informed him of the outcome. These statements (verses 5 and 8) echo his faith." (p. 515)

A renewed promise

God's response to Abraham (verses 15-18) is a reiteration of the earlier covenant, with some important twists. God swears the oath on his own name, further strengthening obligation and level of commitment. It also promises that Abraham's descendants are clearly favored by God and will take possession of the lands (verse 17) and bless all nations (verse 18). Verse 18 also clearly states that this will all happen because of Abraham's obedience. Previous to this, all covenant agreements were made simply because of God's grace. It does not say that the promises made here are contingent on Abraham's continued obedience or that of his descendants. It does state that this one act of Abraham served as the catalyst for these additions to the previous promises of God.

The message for today

Walton suggests that the take home message from this story is the discovery of the motivating factor in our relationship with God. Are we in it for the benefits, or simply for God, himself? While we are unlikely to be asked to literally give up a beloved child as Abraham was, we may well be asked to give up metaphorical ones. God will push us to the limit of our comfort zones so that we too can understand and prove to ourselves, the world and to God, what truly motivates us in our relationship with him, and learn to rely on him.

Walton asks, "Would we give God a chance if there was nothing in it for us? Would we give God our lives if he gave nothing back but himself? Would our lives have a place for God if we were 'living for today'?"

Abraham answered those questions when he bound Isaac and built the altar. He said "yes" to God, accepting him as everything. It is the same kind of acceptance Jesus answered with in the garden and what he calls us to today.

SOURCES

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