



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Various Scripture Passages

"The Sacrifice of Isaac"

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] The theme of our series of studies is "The Old Testament Anticipation of the Messiah". And the subject for today is "The Sacrifice of Isaac" or "The Old Testament's Greatest Scene". We're turning to Genesis chapter 22 verse 1 through verse 19, and I hope you'll open your Bibles and be looking at the text as we study the text together today.

"Can there be any doubt about this scene? That of the sacrifice of Isaac by his father Abraham is one the greatest in the history of the salvation of God. It lays solid claim to being the greatest scene recorded in the Old Testament and in fact may be surpassed in the New Testament only by the sacrifice of the Son of God at Calvary. When the greatest father offered up his Isaac, the real lamb of God, the scene pictured in the 22nd chapter of Genesis found its proper climax and antitype, that the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the offering of Isaac surrounds the latter with a reflected glory. It is therefore one of the most famous types, if not the most famous in the Bible. Abraham with whom God had made his fundamental covenant of salvation was tested at the point of his trust in God and that's the ultimate test. That he succeeded in the test is remarkable indeed."

"Here was one proof," one commentator writes, "of how much mortal man will do for the love of God. Here was an evidence of childlike faith, which much have thrilled the heart of the eternal God, and moved him in the very depths of his being. Do you and I love God like this? Is he more to us than our nearest and dearest. Suppose they stood on this side and he on that side, would we go with him though it cost us the loss of all? You think you would." the author says. "It's a great thing to say. The air upon this height is too rare to breath with comfort."

One explanation of it is to be found and the words of our Lord, "He that loveth father or mother, son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." Well, perhaps we would fail the test at this stage our Christian experience, but the work of God is not yet completed in our case.

Dr. Leon Tucker, a gifted preacher and teacher of another generation has told the story of a woman who had been broken by a great tragedy in her life. She had lived under the crushing weight of the burden for so many years that praise had been replaced by complaint. Finally she cried out in bitterness of soul, "Oh, I would to God I had never been made." And friend who was with her in response to the rebellious words replied truly and wisely, "Why my dear child, you're not made yet. You're only being made and you're quarrelling with God's process."

There are other things that come before us and the chapter which are important for the study of the word of God. This chapter forms an important link in the developing typology of the lamb of God, which reaches its climax, and the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ in the New Testament. In the opening two verses of Genesis chapter 22 we have the preparation for the sacrifice and the specific command that was given to Abraham. In the beginning of what someone has called perhaps the profoundest personal experience in all the recorded history of the patriarchs is introduced by Moses in this way, "Now, it came about after these things that God tested Abraham and said to him, 'Abraham'. And he said, 'Here I am.' And 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."

At this point we must make note of a bit of chronological information given us in chapter 23 verse 1. There we read, "Now, Sarah lived one hundred and twenty seven years. These were the years of the life of Sarah." Sarah, the only woman whose age is given in the word, someone has referred somewhere to the seven ages of woman; the infant, the little girl, the miss, the young woman, the young woman, the young woman, and the young woman. Well, in chapter 21 verse 8 Isaac's weaning is mentioned. When she was between 93 and 95 years of age. Thus, the events of chapter 22, the chapter which records Isaac's sacrifice, occurred during the intervening period of about 35 years. A comparison of chapter 21 verse 34 with the phrase, "after these things" in chapter 21 verse 1 leads to the conclusion that Isaac's offering up took place quite a time after his birth. He was no longer a child, perhaps being at least in his teens and possibly older.

It's true that he is called a lad in verses 5 and 12, but the Hebrew word *na'ar* is rather flexible in meaning and could refer to a young man in his 20s. We should bear this mind as we study this the account. According to the record Abraham had not heard from the Lord God in some years, but suddenly the blow fell. And when it fell like a bolt from the blue it brought him the severest test of his life and perhaps the severest test that a mere man has ever been called to make. The patriarch was told to take Isaac and offer him as a burnt offering on Mount Moriah. There are three ways of looking at the command. Some feel the demand was for a human sacrifice similar to the human sacrifices in Old Testament times that were practices of Israel's neighbors. Others have contended that God never meant for Abraham to offer up Isaac literally but only to dedicate him completely. This view if carried to its logical conclusion would appear to compromise the necessity of the sacrificial death of our Lord Jesus Christ. And in addition, why did Abraham gather together all the material for a literal offering if he never intended to offer Isaac in this way. It's therefore best to see God as intending an actual

human sacrifice of Isaac as a test of Abraham's trust in the promises given him by God and of his affection for the God of the promises.

Later in the Mosaic Law human sacrifices were specifically forbidden. The phrase "God tested Abraham" is important. The Hebrew word order here is inverted in the original text for emphasis and an article is used with God for further heightening. The test, of course, was not intended to bring out the evil in the man of faith but to bring out the good that God had wrought in him. Those qualities in him produced by divine grace are to be brought into exercise. All of the experiences of the Christian life are similarly occasions in which God works to produce the fruit of his divine enablement in our lives. The test was therefore a test of trust as over against common sense, against human affection. Will Abraham believe the promises and love the God of the promises sufficiently to do his will even if it means parting with his dearest divinely promised possession who was the only link with the far off goal to which Abraham's life was dedicated. It was the severest of tests. Sometimes it's said that trials are God's vote of confidence in us. I don't doubt that. But in the actual undergoing of them it's not always easy to rely on that truth. We're not all Abrahams, although we might wish to be.

Every syllable of the command of verse 2, "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," is calculated to excite his affection for Isaac to the highest pitch. As Spurgeon says, "If George Herbert were speaking of it he would say the words are all a case of knives cutting at Abraham's sole." There is scarce a singly syllable of God's address to him in opening of the trial but seems intended to pierce the patriarch to the quick.

It is first, "Take now your son." A father slay a son? Of all the possessions of Abraham, and he had many, why his son? And then adds, "your only son". The Hebrew word rendered "your only son" is not the usual expression for only son but a noun that means "the unique one", "the one and only". Actually Isaac was not Abraham's only son

but he was the one in whom the promises centered, born by promise to the aged couple and thus preeminently loved.

[Greek indistinct], the Greek translation of the Old Testament renders the words well "your beloved son whom you have loved". The word only takes on a special meaning for Ishmael has just recently been sent away to the wilderness. The words "whom you love" remind Abraham of his great love for his unique son just at the moment when he is to lose him. "Oh stern words," Spurgeon exclaims, "that seemeth to have no bowels of compassion in it." Was it not enough to take away the loved one without at the same instant awakening the affections, which were so rudely to be shocked. Each of the opening phrases then heightens the tension of the surprising command another degree.

We have here the first mention of the word love in the word of God. Does it not suggest that the love of a godly father for his son is familiar to a picture of the love existing among the persons of the holy Trinity, and particular the love of the Father for the Son of God? If Abraham loved Isaac, how much more deeply and fully did the Father love his Son?

In the Gospel of John the first occurrence of the word love is found in the great verse of God's love for the world of Jews and gentiles. John 3:16, "For God so loved the world." The love of the Father for the Son is mirrored in the love of the Father for the world. "He who loved him loved us." How fortunate we are.

The trial touched Abraham at his tenderest spot for it touched Isaac, the apple of his eye. Nothing could have been a greater test than that which involved the heir of the promises, the child of his old age, the laughter of his life. Isaac's name, remember, means laughter. The question that faced the patriarch is not simply, "Do I love God more than this, my greatest human life? But must I give back to God the long delayed gift of Isaac, the only one through him so far as I understand the promised greatness of my seed can come? Must I give Isaac back to God in sacrifice? Does this not mean the sacrifice of the

far off glorious future for which my whole life has been lived? I gave up my past in leaving [indistinct] and shall I now give up my promised future?" The tension of the developing story is unrelieved.

Abraham was told to go to the land of Moriah. Moriah was the place upon which the later temple would be built. Calvary could be seen from Mount Moriah as they were of the same elevation. It was a beautiful suggestion that later readers would follow out to its conclusion. It was to foreshadow the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ. The sacrifice of God's son on Calvary.

Myer comments, "Tradition, which seems well authenticated, has always associated that mountain in the land of Moriah with the place on which and after days stood the threshing floor of Arona the Jebusite and the sight of Solomon's temple. And there is wonderful appropriateness in the fact that this great act of obedience took place on the very spot where hecatombs of victims and rivers of blood were to point to that supreme sacrifice which this prefigured."

Now, notice the response of Abraham in verse 3. The struggle in the heart of the aged man of faith was no doubt a hard one, but the issue was resolute quick obedience. There were many ways in which God might fulfill the promises in Isaac to him but only one way by which he might do his part and that was to obey the command. That's what he did, reckoning that it was not for him to reason out the how of the matter but simply to do the will of God. There was one primary thought in the old man's mind and the writer of Hebrews tells his readers about it. "He accounted that God was able to raise him up even from the dead," Hebrews 11:19. God is able. That's the thing that strengthened and motivated him. A faith like this, one that simply believes the word of God. Being confident that he will do exactly what he says is the faith that overcomes. May we obtain it. It resulted in quick obedience or what someone has called the habit of instantaneity.

Isaac must live dominated his thinking. The agonizing ordeal begins in silence and the trip to Moriah is taken in silence. The matter of factness of the preparations with no insight given into the emotional state of the principals is striking. There is a *chesed redesense* on the part of the story, which shows the authors great skill in telling it. The ascent to Moriah is recorded in verses 4 through 8 of Genesis 22. "Abraham left the young men who accompanied the principals at the foot of Mount Moriah with the words, 'I and the lad will go yonder and we will worship and return to you.'" They would worship, that is, recognized the worthship of God on the mountain.

What a magnificent word and how remarkable that at the moment of the greatest test of his life the patriarch was occupied with the excellencies of his great God. In the midst of the greatest sorry and struggle he was undergirded by the knowledge of the holy on that he had learned through the years. It was, of course, one of the secrets of the successes of the past. And is it not the secret of the success that any saint has in the trials of life. It is the knowledge of God that sustains us in trials. And if that's so then how important it is that we obtain this knowledge through the doctrinal study of God's word.

The care of the father is seen in the division of burdens. The father taking the dangerous objects: the knife, and the fire, and the son the wood for the trip to the top of the mountain. The two young men who accompanied Abraham and his son cannot go with them to the top of the mount suggesting that in the final analysis it's only the Father and the Son of God who can really know the awful experience of the payment of the penalty for sin. When he said, "We will return to you," he was affirming his faith in the resurrection power of God as the writer of Hebrews has reminded us.

Isaac has been dead for three days in his mind, the three days of the journey to the mountain. But he expects him to be given back to him as one raised from the dead. The reference to the great antitype the Lord Jesus Christ is plain. On the way to the top of the mountain the oppressive silence is resumed. Twice it is said that the two of them walked on together. It reminds us of the beautiful harmony that existed between the

Father and the Son the Lord Jesus Christ as the mediatorial work was carried out by him. The silence is broken briefly as the son asks, "My father behold the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" The old man answers ambiguously. He says that his God is going to supply the offering.

The answer comes close to the ultimate solution, which he apparently did not yet know. The answer finally to Isaac's question is that given by John the Baptist in his reference to the Lord Jesus, "Behold the lamb of God." The profound silence returns as the two arrive at the top of the mountain. "The loading of the wood onto Isaac," one writer has pointed out, "brings inevitably to mind the detail in John 19:17 concerning the Lord Jesus. He went bearing his own cross."

But the fire and the knife are in the father's hands. Victim and offerer walking, both of them together, a poignant reframe that foreshadows the greater partnership expressed in the New Testament of our Lord's walking with the Father on the way to Calvary.

Important also in the picture is the willingness seen in the submission of Isaac to his father's will, one of the preeminent features of the sacrifice of the Son of God. The account again slows down as the altar is built and the details are given with frightful accuracy. One commentator says, "With the speechless concentration of a sleepwalker, as if thus to hold off by every possible means the fate that he has no hope of averting, Abraham carried out his activity. It had been three days of agony with Isaac dead in his own mind all the time, but now the struggle reaches its climax." "Can you not see the old man slowly gathering the stones," another writer adds, "bringing them from the furthest distance possible, placing them with reverent and judicious precision and binding the wood with as much deliberation as possible? But at the last everything is finally complete and he turns to break the fatal secret to the young lad who had stood by wondering. Inspiration draws a veil over that last tender scene: the father's announcement of his mission, the broken sobs, the kisses wet with tears, the instant

submission of the son who was old enough and strong enough to rebel if he had the mind, then the binding of that tender frame which indeed needed no compulsion because the young heart had learned the secret of obedience and resignation. Finally, the lifting him to lay upon the altar on the wood. Here was a spectacle, which must have arrested the attention of heaven. Here was proof of what mortal man will do for the love of God. Here was an evidence of childlike faith which must have thrilled the heart of the eternal God, moved him in the very depths of his divine being. Do you and I love God like this?" we are asked.

This is the section, verses 10 through 13, where the substitution takes place that records the patriarchs passing of his final exam in submission to the will of God. It is magnificent in its picture of Abraham's obedience and glorious in its depiction of the divine grace and mercy in the provision of a substitute, which to dullest of spiritual minds portrays the supreme substitutionary sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ the Lamb of God.

As Abraham is about to slay his son he is interrupted by the angel of the Lord and then allowed to see a ram caught in a thicket, which he offered up for Isaac. On the human side the will of God is done. On the divine side mercy is poured out and suffering of death avoided by the sacrifice of a substitute. Almost all of the great truths of divine redemption are found here. The voluntary nature of the sacrifice, the penal nature of it. It's a slaying. The effective substitutionary character of it, the ram takes the place of Isaac. The definiteness of the propitiatory work, it is for Isaac. The completeness of the divine provision, Isaac is completely delivered. And the sufficiency of the work for the resting of the soul, we resting upon what Christ has done for our deliverance.

When we read in verse 12, "For now I know that you fear God since you have not withheld your son, your only son from me," we remember that Paul uses the words in Romans 8:32 in a verse that convincingly teaches the definiteness of the saving work of Christ. If one will simply reflect upon that verse's meaning.

One incident point that should be noted here is the fact that the distinction between the angel of the Lord and Yahweh himself seems almost completely removed. And we learn again that the angel of the Lord in the Old Testament and Jehovah are really the second person of the trinity, the covenant keeping God.

The angel has been speaking to the patriarch but he says that, "Abraham has not withheld his only son from me." And then in verses 15 and 16 the identification seems clearly made. The account moves on with no mention of praise and thanksgiving from Abraham in keeping with the sense of the awful solemnity and seriousness in which Abraham's trial is depicted. The name given to the place is sufficient indication of the depth of gratitude felt by the patriarch and his son. He gave the name "the Lord will provide" to the place. The reader is left with a sense of the never failing provision of deliverance by a faithful promise keeping God highlighted by the offering of the antitype of Abraham's offering, the Lord Jesus Christ on Golgotha.

For the first time the Lord swears and it is to confirm the promises made to the patriarch so long ago in which the patriarch has manifested such a deep faith by his offering up of the one of whom his seed was called. The best comment on the meaning of this is found in Hebrews chapter 6 verse 13 through verse 18. The triumphant outcome of the promise program is stated here, "The seed of the patriarch being victor over all its enemies" This is a new promise but it's implied in the others. It's clear from this section that one of the chief purposes of Abraham's test was the specific one of testing his faith in the Abrahamic promise program. He passed it with flying colors and a new feature is added to it, the victorious nature of that seed through the Lord Jesus Christ the messianic seed to come.

A final historical note is a description of the return to Beersheba. I wish more had been given. For example, wouldn't it be interesting to know Sarah's response to all of this? Well, a late Jewish tradition has offered some speculation. It is said in this tradition

that Sarah, when Abraham returned and told her what had happened, uttered six cries and died.

Let me in conclusion return to the point of the text of Abraham, God's friend. There can be little doubt that on one level it was Abraham's faith in God that constituted his test, and specifically his faith in God who made the messianic promises to him. Isaac was the child of the promise. Would Abraham sacrifice the son who was necessary for the fulfillment of the promise and apparently forgo the divinely stated long-range goals of the history of salvation? Every saving blessing lay ultimately in the son of his old age for Christ would come from him. Shall the old man give him up on a bare word of God? Reckoning that God has infinite methods at his disposal for accomplishing his purposes but there is only one way to obey him and that is the way of implicit faith and obedience. The patriarch did just that. From that time on Isaac was a child of a resurrecting God to him.

Second as a product of Abraham's faith was his love for a God who had made such magnificent promises to him. That love implanted in his heart by the prevenient grace of God proved itself invincible too just because it was divine love ministered to him in the spirit. The patriarch was thus carried to victory by electing grace, divinely implanted faith, and responsive love for the God of the messianic promises carried to victory by a sovereign master while on the mount. He stands as one whose life and trials illustrate most nobly our Lord's dictum, "He that loveth father or mother, son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." Abraham was worthy.

Perhaps then it was on the Mount of Moriah that the patriarch had the experience that our Lord referred to when he said, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day and he saw it and was glad. And having seen it with a new joy in his heart and a new brightness upon his face, Abraham returned to the waiting men communing with Isaac over the glory of the Lord that had touched their lives and the memorableness of the experience of the place he called 'the Lord will provide' lit up all the common places of

his life in the days that were to come. Such are the rewards of the experiences of God.

May they be ours.