



## Binding of Isaac

“WHAT’S YOUR  
ISAAC?”

GENESIS 22:1-14

What in the world could God be thinking? How could a loving God ask an old man to commit such a horrible act?

CCUMC

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I hate that story. Not really – but sometimes I wish that wasn't even in the Bible! I mean what kind of God tests a man by asking him to offer up his son as a burnt offering? It's appalling! Why is this even in there? God certainly seems to be out of line here asking an old man to do that. Not to mention the lasting trauma for Isaac!

Most of us have heard the story – God tells Abraham to go to a far off mountain, and kill his son Isaac for a burnt offering. Abraham, without question, makes all the arrangements, and sets out on the three-day journey. Isaac finally puts two and two together asks, "Where is the animal we'll be sacrificing?"

"God will provide," Abraham says and on they go in silence. No one speaks; not Abe, not Isaac, not even God. In a very dramatic turn, just in the nick of time, when Abraham is at the top of his backswing, knife in hand, seconds from the bloody slaughter of his only remaining son, an angel stops him.

How could a loving God put an old man through that kind of excruciating torture? Only an evil God would ask a father to do that; only a bad father would be willing to do it. Ellen Davis in terrific book on the Old Testament, "Getting Involved with God," writes, "If this is a test, then...both have failed miserably, both the One who devised the test and the one who submitted to it."

Could God be out of line? God appears to be contradicting some pretty well-known laws when he makes this request, and if Abraham had followed the laws of Moses he would have refused because, "Thou shalt not kill." Child and human sacrifice was not unheard of during the Old Testament period. In Micah 6:7 we read "Shall I give my first-born for my transgression?" And In Jeremiah chapter 19 God says, "...they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent, <sup>5</sup> and gone on building the high places of Baal to burn their children in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, which I did not command or decree, nor did it enter my mind." Leviticus is also pretty specific about it: "You shall not give any of your offspring to sacrifice them <sup>[a]</sup> to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord."

Maybe we should give Abraham a break here, though. Abraham did live about 700 years before Moses, and none of these laws had been written yet.

But... God did hand down laws to Noah strictly forbidding murder. After all, human life was sacred because humanity was made in God's image. There's a confusing

law in Genesis 6:9: “Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person’s blood be shed.” Which kind of seems to go around in circles.

But the most important conflict here is that God’s command to Abraham is in direct conflict with God’s earlier promise. God promised Abraham that his descendants, as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand of the ocean, would – through Isaac – become a great nation. In other words, It as though God said, “Isaac will have many descendants, -- Kill him.”

There are three major players in this story: Abraham, Isaac, and of course, God. But by his silence and his apparent lack of attention to detail, the narrator himself almost becomes a fourth character. Usually the writers of the Hebrew Bible provide some background or conversation; but all we get here is “After these things God tested Abraham.” This forces us to focus on Abraham and his commitment to obey, and his faith that no harm would come to the boy. I suspect that like today’s writers, the author wants the reader to be shocked and appalled. One reason this passage is so fascinating and terrible – like a car accident, we can’t take our eyes away - is because we insert our own feelings into the empty spaces where Isaac and Abraham’s feelings and conversation have been left out. What if it had been me? And thank God it wasn’t...

The first real character in the story is, of course, Abraham. Abraham has been pretty intimate with God for a long time, ever since he was still called Abram and God told him to leave his home and his family and go west in Genesis 12. IN Genesis 15 Abraham basically tells God “Prove it,” when God promises him Canaan. He doubts God’s promise to give Sarah a child, and in chapter 18 he actually haggles with God over how many righteous people it would take for God to spare Sodom and Gomorrah. He is known as ‘God’s friend.’ This guy is not afraid to argue and debate with God. So what happened to this outspoken guy? Why is it that he travels in silence for 3 days with his son Isaac, two servants, and a donkey, and all he says is basically, “You stay here with the donkey – we’ll be back.” It just doesn’t seem very likely that he and Isaac would then walk for another several hours together in complete silence.

Now, Isaac, Abraham’s pride and joy, seems awfully quiet. He can’t be a child like we see in all the paintings. He’s old enough to ask questions. He might be teenager because he hardly says two words to his father. He’s old enough to know what’s needed for a burnt offering, and he’s strong enough to carry enough wood for it, which would be quite a pile, I think. And while we’re on it, if he’s strong enough to carry all

that wood, he must be strong enough to fight back when his old father ties him up for the altar. So why doesn't he? Did Abraham explain the whole thing to him before they left or did he just tell him to trust in God?

So Abraham is faithful and loyal, and Isaac is willing; but what about God? I really like passages like this that give us more insight into the character of God. Is this just another example of the tyrannical God of the Old Testament, dangling Abraham, watching him squirm and then letting him go, expecting a great big 'thank you'?

Scholars have differing ideas of the omniscience of God in this passage. God seems to know more than God is telling in this passage, but you can feel the relief when God says, "...now I know that you fear God..." God seems to have learned something. Maybe God knew it all along but needed or wanted proof. OR, and I tend to agree with this school of thought, maybe free human response cannot be known in advance; God can only know what can be known.

One of the things I love about this passage is that it shows us that God is vulnerable. Let that sink in for a second – a vulnerable God? Again and again the Bible tells us that God is love. But ordinary experience teaches us that love and vulnerability are inextricably linked. In other words, love IS vulnerable.

The bond between humanity and God – the bond that can't be broken – is one in which both parties must be willing to be vulnerable, not just us (humans). Other passages that demonstrate God's vulnerability are John 21:15 where the Lord asks Peter, not once, but three times, "Do you love me?" And Matthew 16, in which Jesus tells Peter that he is the rock that the church will be built on, and trusts him with the keys to the Kingdom. Think about the last time you gave someone the keys to your car.... When we trust someone with something important to us, we become vulnerable. God was depending on Abraham.

So how do we as 'civilized' and reasonable, 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians, make sense of this awful story. How do we discuss it with our friends, or even our challengers? How do we make sense of a story in which the main character is commanded to do something that if anyone else did it they would be utterly condemned? Could a loving God be so terrifying that a man would rather kill his own son than face God's wrath?

This is what I think: It's a story about willingness. God never wanted Abraham to kill and burn his son on an altar. God only wanted Abraham to be willing to surrender

everything. And there's no way to really accomplish that other than to actually go through with it. And as I mentioned earlier, Abraham doesn't even question God anymore, he just gets up and does it: "Okay, God." I wonder if he rolled his eyes.... one author writes, "By the end of the test, the sacrifice had already been accomplished in his heart....," and Abraham passed.

It's a story about provision....It's a story about faithfulness...but mostly I think it's a story about the willingness to sacrifice, or to surrender to God the very thing that makes you who you are. Family? Spouse? Possessions? Pleasures? Career?

If we take a look at the bigger picture we see that God had big plans for Abraham and for Israel. God had told Abraham to 'get up and go' before, remember? In Genesis 12 God tells him to pack up his stuff and leave his home, leave the land of his birth and his ancestors, and God would give him descendants, as numerous as the stars in the sky

Now, God is asking him to sacrifice his son – the son who is supposed to provide all these descendants – the son Abe and Sarah waited so long for. What happened to Abraham's great nation? In leaving his homeland, Abraham was asked to give up his past for God's promise. Now he's being asked to give up his future.

What else are we supposed to give up? A couple months ago we looked at Matthew 10:37, where Jesus says that we're supposed to love Him even more than we love our parents or our children. In John 15:13 we read, "No one has greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." It sounds like God just wants me to give up everything that makes me who I am! How could God ask me to do that? I can't do it!

Or maybe...maybe God wants me to give up everything that I THINK makes me who I am. Remember last week's video. What I think makes me who I am isn't necessarily what God created me to be.

Sometimes we think our vocation makes us who we are. Sometimes we think it's our kids or our partners. Think of Jeremy's Mom! When I was using, my whole identity was wrapped up in my addiction. It made me cool. Not really, I just thought it made me cool.

God wants us to give up all of that. Every bit of it. "You shall have no other Gods before me." That's what that means!

What's your Isaac? What is God asking you to give up – sacrifice -- so that God can make good on the promise of abundant life. I don't know whether the story of Abraham and Isaac actually happened. Maybe it did. Maybe it's just an allegory. It doesn't matter.

What's your Isaac? What is that thing that you have your past and your future, maybe your very identity tied up in? What is that thing?

The story teaches us that God is faithful. God's word is good. Better yet, the story teaches us that even God is vulnerable. The story teaches us that God will provide, and that we have to be willing to step out in faith – to be willing to make the big sacrifice. For Abraham – and maybe for God – it was Isaac. For me it was booze and drugs and the identity that I found in them, that I found comfort in. God only knows what that is for you, that's between you and God -- but it is food for thought...

As the song says – that we're not singing today for some reason.... "All to thee my blessed savior, I surrender all."

What's your Isaac?