



The Essentials Series

Week 5 – The Sacrifice of Isaac Gen 21-22

St. George's Episcopal Church

Spring 2015

Abraham and Isaac

- Abraham had a son through Hagar named Ishmael. Hagar was the servant maid of Sarah.
 - Although God had promised Abraham that he would be a great nation, he was childless.
 - Yet when Abraham questions God about this, God restates his promise, and that Abraham's heir and inheritor of the covenant will be his own son. Abraham believes/trusts God and the Lord reckoned (or credited, or imputed) that faith as righteousness (Gen 15:6).
- *Simul iustus et peccatore*: 'at the same time justified and a sinner'
 - Although by faith Abraham was justified and received the promises of God, and in many ways obeyed God (as the fruit of faith, cf. Romans 1:5), he was still a sinner and his behavior was not always righteous.
 - Abraham, at the request of Sarah, has a child with Hagar – but the result of this 'mixed' family is strife; Abraham took it upon himself to fulfill the promise, and listened to his wife instead of God.
 - Thus the polygamous families of the patriarchs are not the model for biblical marriage. Yes their marriages and family life were far from perfect, but God's plan for marriage is not based on the patriarchs, it is based on creation, going back to Adam and Eve.
 - God must later clarify to Abraham (17:15-19) that the child of promise shall be through Sarah, his wife! Both Abraham's and Sarah's reaction to this declaration from God is laughter, and in time when their son is born to her, he is named Isaac, which means "laughter".
- When Isaac is born we note the obedience shown by Sarah and Abraham: they give the son the name God told them to give him, he is circumcised on the 8th day as commanded, and he is the legitimate biological son of Abraham through Sarah (not Hagar).
 - Tension arises when Isaac is weaned and Ishmael mocks him during the celebration Abraham throws. This, naturally, incurs the defensiveness of Sarah, and Hagar and Ishmael are sent away.
 - While Ishmael is clearly, and repeatedly identified as NOT the son of promise, God still blesses him and his mother on account of Abraham. God reiterates his promise originally given in ch 16.
- The narrative focus on Sarah's significance is repeatedly given (17:15-16; 18:9-15; 21:12), and Isaac's status as the promised son is dependent on his mother being Sarah. In other words, Ishmael can claim Abraham's paternity, as can Isaac, but the distinction is made by maternity: one is Abraham's wife, the other is a servant.
 - The NT is very aware of this significance, and in Galatians 4 Paul utilized this maternal distinction for theological purposes in describing the two covenants that God makes with humans – a covenant of works (law, represented by Hagar) and a covenant of grace (promise, represented by Sarah). Furthermore, for the Jews in the first century whose claim of righteousness before God was derived from their paternity claim on Abraham was tenuous because, as Paul points out, Abraham had lots of descendants through Ishmael, but they were not counted righteous before God. Thus righteousness can and never has been a function of genealogy or ethnicity or law obeying, but has always been based on promise and received through faith.
 - What are other ways that we claim righteousness apart from faith in our day and age?

God and Abraham

- Genesis 22 gives us the ultimate test of faith. Throughout his life, God has tested Abraham, and sometimes Abraham acts on this faith wonderfully, and sometimes he acts badly.
 - Now God has given to Abraham a son, and with that son, joy. However one last test remains: Does Abraham trust and love God more than the blessings of God, even the blessing of his son.
 - The story of the sacrifice of Isaac is a difficult one to read. After all, what God would request a father to kill his own son? What father would obey!?

- We must remember that many deities in the ANE demanded child sacrifice. The “abominable practices” of the Amorites and Canaanites, a term frequently used in the OT, often refers to their practice of burning alive or throwing their children (usually infants) off cliffs to appease their deity. Molech in particular was known for this demonic practice.
- Abraham, who was raised in a pagan culture, would have been familiar with gods and goddesses demanding such things. However, throughout his life God has been showing Abraham that he is very different from the pagan gods of his upbringing.
- The definitive moment of the story is found in verses 7 and 8, when Isaac pointedly asks where the lamb of sacrifice is, and Abraham (knowing that God has asked for Isaac to be that sacrifice) makes the ultimate statement of faith: “God himself will provide the sacrifice.”
 - In the final climactic moment an angel stays Abraham’s hand, Isaac is spared, and in his place God provides a ram.
 - Isaac is spared, and restored to his father, and they return to their people.

The Substitute and the Resurrection

- In addition to demonstrating God’s radical difference from other pagan gods, this story profoundly prefigures Christ’s sacrifice and is built upon two powerful biblical concepts, namely, substitution and resurrection.
- Prefiguring Christ’s ascent to Calvary
 - The symbolic and typological imagery in this story is profound
 - Abraham (the Father) carries the knife and fire, the symbols of judgment; Isaac (the son) carries the wood on his shoulders (v. 6). Typologically, one day another Son, the True Son of the Father, would walk up a hill carrying wood on his shoulders and be himself the Sacrifice provided by God.
- The Substitute: The ram becomes the substitute for Isaac, and sets the typology for the sacrificial system of the Temple, which itself is intended to be a temporary template under the Law until the coming of Christ, who is the final, complete, substitution sacrifice.
 - The removal of sin requires death. The concept of substitutionary sacrifice (atonement) is God’s means of removing sin justly (via death) while allowing the sinner to live.
 - The sacrificial system of the Temple was established under the Mosaic Covenant at Sinai, wherein via a system of sacrifices administered by priests ensure the people’s atonement before God through ongoing removal (expiation) of sin and transference of judgment (propitiation). This Temple sacrificial system was temporary, and points to the full atonement and perfect sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross.
 - Thus the NT see’s the cross in the context of the Temple, but it is not the blood of bulls and goats that finally restores God to his people and removes their sin, but God’s own blood!
- Resurrection: The writer to the Hebrews expounds on Abraham’s faith in this story (Heb. 11:17-19)
 - Although Isaac was as good as dead, by faith Abraham brought him to sacrifice, trusting that even if Isaac died, God could bring him back.
 - And in a figurative sense, Abraham did get Isaac back from the dead.

Next Week: Jacob – Genesis 27-28, 32-33

Additional Resources

Hughes, Philip Edgcumbe. *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977.