

Genesis 22 Part 2: A Living Sacrifice

By
Peter Martin
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“Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham, and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” Then He said, “Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.” So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son; and he split the wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. Then on the third day Abraham lifted his eyes and saw the place afar off. And Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey; the lad and I will go yonder and worship, and we will come back to you.”

-Genesis 22:1-5

In the previous paper we took a look at this often misunderstood passage and tried to understand it in light of how ancient man viewed sacrifice. From this perspective we can see that this story doesn't outright condemn pagan sacrifice, in fact, the Bible acknowledges the underlying wisdom behind the pagan rituals. Pagans acknowledged that the divine is most worthy and therefore he, (or they) are owed the most valuable sacrifice. However, since no human life could ever be worthy of God, God holds Abraham back from sacrificing Isaac, and instead offers up a ram that foreshadows the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus that would satisfy God. He does this to demonstrate His supreme worth, to foreshadow the cross, to end human sacrifice among His own people, and to show God's deep concern for us.

However, we also talked about the modern misunderstanding of the cross. Since we are a culture that no longer practices ritual sacrifice, it is easy for us to make the mistake of thinking that we don't owe God anything, and instead that Jesus offered Himself up *to* us instead of seeing His sacrifice as being *to* the Father and *for* His people. We are not the ultimate end of Jesus' actions, God Himself was the cause and the purpose of this sacrifice, the effect is the redemption of those who would believe in this ultimate sacrifice. By making ourselves the ultimate end of the cross, we have, unintentionally, become puffed up with pride and believe it is God who owes us, and not we who owe God. The modern west thinks that being righteous means living in self authenticity towards our own goals, while ancient man believed that righteousness was living in submission to the highest good, namely God. And it is this principle that I wanted to flesh out in this paper.

While Genesis 22 does foreshadow Christ, that doesn't mean that its importance stops there. While ritual sacrifice ended with the cross, sacrifice as a principle has not ended for the Christian. This means that when we read Genesis 22 we are not only seeing the future sacrifice of Christ, but we are seeing a pattern of faithfulness that we are called to follow.

Offering Up Ourselves

"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God."

-Romans 12:1-2

Far from the self-serving mantras of our day, the Bible teaches us that the goal of our lives is not to satisfy ourselves, but instead to offer ourselves up to God. To die to ourselves that we might live lives that please Him and not us. However, this principle can be taken too far, or exist only in Christian platitudes so it would be good to really meditate on this idea and seek to live it out in our own lives.

Why Should We Offer Ourselves?

While this question would seem odd to our ancestors, in our modern age this is a prime obstacle that we have to overcome. What our modern culture has issue with is the idea that God would demand such sacrifice from His people. It seems antithetical to God's loving nature that He would be so focused on His own glory and not on the prosperity and well-being of His people.

While it is easy to criticize the selfishness of our current culture, it is also important to acknowledge that this modern concern, while misguided, is not far from the truth. For ancient man, their ultimate goal was to bear the heaviest possible burden and sacrifice that which was most valuable to that which they saw as the highest possible good. While this mentality shielded them from narcissistic self-interest, it also created a self-debasing attitude and brutal hierarchical structures. The reason for this was the gods that they were emulating were not loving deities seeking the good of their people, but self-interested deities who needed to be coerced into hearing them. Look at the way that the priests of Baal tried to gain his favor in 1 Kings 18:

“So they took the bull which was given them, and they prepared it, and called on the name of Baal from morning even till noon, saying, “O Baal, hear us!” But there was no voice; no one answered. Then they leaped about the altar which they had made. And so it was, at noon, that Elijah mocked them and said, “Cry aloud, for he is a god; either he is meditating, or he is busy, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is sleeping and must be awakened.” So they cried aloud, and cut themselves, as was their custom, with knives and lances, until the blood gushed out on them.”

-1 Kings 18:26-28

Notice that the priests originally try to gain Baal's favor through sacrifice, but when this doesn't work, they begin to brutally mutilate themselves. This shows the attitude of sacrifice for pagans. While it is good they understood the concept of offering themselves up to their gods, they did not have gods of goodwill and kindness. Instead they had bloodthirsty and selfish gods. Their relationship with these beings was purely transactional, they performed bloody rituals, and in turn they indebted their gods to act on their behalf. But how does Elijah, the prophet of God, get God's attention?

“And it came to pass, at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that Elijah the prophet came near and said, “LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that You are God in Israel and I am Your servant, and that I have done all these things at Your word. “Hear me, O LORD, hear me, that this people may know that You are the LORD God, and that You have turned their hearts back to You again.” Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood and the stones and the dust, and it licked up the water that was in the trench.”

-1 Kings 18:36-38

While Elijah submitted to the will and power of God, their relationship was not transactional. He did not perform his duties out of a sense of fear or compulsion, he instead served God out of a genuine love and trust in the faithfulness of his God. So instead of sacrificing in order to earn the approval of his God, Elijah assumed the favor of his God and simply prayed to him and waited for His response. This quality in God was one that confounded the prophet Isaiah when he wrote:

“For since the beginning of the world Men have not heard nor perceived by the ear, Nor has the eye seen any God besides You, Who acts for the one who waits for Him.”

-Isaiah 64:4

No man could possibly conceive of the great love of God, the God who acts, not for the one who serves Him the best, but for the one who simply waits on Him. This doesn't remove responsibility away from God's people, it only establishes the truth that we

explored in the last paper, we don't possess anything that could actually satisfy our God. Instead, our God offers to Himself the ultimate sacrifice and instead desires of His people supreme trust and submission to His perfect will. The false gods that man has created in our image are brutal and selfish, but the God who made us in His own image is the God of love and goodwill. He is the One who spares our firstborn, but offers up His own. This is the God that we serve and it is always important to remind ourselves of that. However, just because God loves us and seeks our good does not diminish His own glory and infinite worth. This is why Isaiah follows up the previous verse with this statement:

“You meet him who rejoices and does righteousness, Who remembers You in Your ways. You are indeed angry, for we have sinned— In these ways we continue; And we need to be saved. But we are all like an unclean thing, And all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags; We all fade as a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, Have taken us away.”

-Isaiah 64:5-6

Our God does act for the one who simply waits upon Him, but He is also a God of holiness and justice. In fact, He is so holy that even our righteousness appears as filthy rags to Him. While modern Christians understand the care that God has for us, they have failed to reckon with His holiness and His glory. When God works ultimately for His own glory, this is not a failure of love, but a completion of it. To put it more simply, if God's worthiness is really that high, what better thing could we offer ourselves up to?

Losing Our Life to Find It

As we talked about in the previous chapter, sacrifice is an unavoidable concept in the present age. Since we are limited, our lives consist of daily sacrifices. Any decision to positively pursue one thing, is a decision to sacrifice all other pursuits. If I choose to be a doctor, I have to sacrifice all other career paths, if I choose to marry someone, I must sacrifice any potential romance with any other partner. In fact, the most costly sacrifice is unintentionally performed by those who are unwilling to sacrifice what they should. So, if someone doesn't want to sacrifice the potential for other romances and refuses to marry the person that they are with in order to keep their options open, that indecision will cost them the relationship that they have as well as all other future relationships.

The decision that we have to make is not whether or not to sacrifice, the decision is instead *what* we should sacrifice, and to whom? If we sacrifice the wrong things to the wrong person, or if we refuse to sacrifice at all, we will find ourselves regretting our decision. Instead of sacrifice, all we will experience is loss. But if we can figure out the

right sacrifices, to the right source, we will experience incredible gain. This is one way to interpret Jesus' statement in the gospels:

"Then He said to them all, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. "For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it."

-Luke 9:23-24

When Jesus invokes the image of the cross, He was not offering His followers a self-help formula designed to maximize pleasure in the here and now. Instead, He is saying that the cost of following Him is the most extreme version of self-sacrifice imaginable, but since the sacrifice is made to Him, it is a sacrifice of the finite, for the infinite. This makes our decision to offer ourselves as living sacrifices to God not as a pursuit of loss, but of infinite gain.

And what is most incredible, is that God actually receives this sacrifice with joy. As we spoke about in the last chapter, the reason why God does not command us to sacrifice our children to Him, is not because these sacrifices are too high, but because they are too low. God instead makes the sacrifice that we never could in the form of His Son, that by faith in that sacrifice we can be made right with Him. But by receiving this sacrifice, we who are by nature unworthy, become worthy and acceptable to God.

"For you are a holy people to the LORD your God, and the LORD has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples who are on the face of the earth."

-Deuteronomy 14:2

The reason why it is so important to glorify God above all else is because, though we are not worthy in ourselves, the sacrifice of God *makes* us worthy through the work of Christ. Though we could never, in ourselves, be worthy of God, God's sacrifice is not only one that forgives us, but is also one that unites us to Him and makes us into a special treasure fit for the king of the universe. So in every action of self-sacrifice, we are both becoming worthy of God, and offering up that worth to the One who has loved us so much.

Offering Up Our Children and Ourselves

"But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased."

-Hebrews 13:16

This principle still might sound a little ethereal to us, so let's look at the concrete example of Abraham to see this truth in practice.

The Danger of Idolatry

"Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you."

-Genesis 22:2

One of the greatest dangers that we face as Christians is falling to the sin of idolatry. Idolatry is not necessarily taking an image of wood or precious metals and bowing down before it, it is instead any act of the heart that places something above God. This might sound strange, but look at how the apostle Paul defined idolatry in his letter to the Colossian church:

"Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry."

-Colossians 3:5

Paul wrote this at a time when literal idolatry was rampant in the Greco-Roman world, and yet Paul does not specifically condemn the behavior of literally bowing down to an image. Instead he widens his focus and, by linking idolatry to covetousness, locates the actual sin within the heart of man. Certainly bowing down to an idol is an expression of idolatry, but like all other sins, the starting point for the expression is always found in the heart. When man elevates any material thing above the true and living God, this is the heart of idolatry.

The ancient gods that man worshiped were simply representations of the true idolatry happening within the heart of man. If someone worshiped sex in the ancient world, they could worship Aphrodite, if someone worshiped pleasure, they could worship Dionysius, if someone worshiped the weather, they could worship Zeus, if someone worshiped nature itself, there was Gaia. For every good thing, there was a "god" that allowed people to ritualize their worship of that thing. Just because the modern west has gotten rid of these ritualized expressions, don't think we have actually healed the heart from our idolatrous inclinations. And the better something is, the more it resembles God's glory, the more likely we are to turn it into an idol. Especially if our idolatry is wrapped in virtue.

The Idolatry of Love

He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

-1 John 4:8

Since God's most definable characteristic is love, love is the easiest form of idolatry that we can fall into. I think that C.S. Lewis explained this form of idolatry best in his book "The Four Loves":

"Every human love, at its height, has a tendency to claim for itself a divine authority. Its voice tends to sound as if it were the will of God Himself. It tells us not to count the cost, it demands of us a total commitment, it attempts to override all other claims and insinuates that any action which is sincerely done "for love's sake" is thereby lawful and even meritorious."

-C.S. Lewis - "The Four Loves"

Think about all of our most famous love songs that speak of the beloved in divine terms. Songs that call for total sacrifice and commitment and express eternal significance. Beyond that, there is a conflation of "love" with expressions of virtue. I think the Beatles expressed this idea most clearly when they famously sang "All you need is love". And now, people proudly proclaim the phrase "love is love" to justify all forms of sexuality. Parents also justify all forms of controlling and even abusive behaviors towards their children because they are trying to "love" their kids.

It reminds me of an episode of the show Friends in which Monica and Chandler are trying to adopt a child. In their increasing frustration to find a child they can adopt they find themselves lying to a young woman about who they are in order to be considered to adopt her child. When Chandler tries to tell the woman the truth, Monica argues with him that they should be allowed to lie because "No one will love this child more than us." In her mind, the fact that they love this child justifies the deception and is proof that they are the parents best suited to raise the child.

I don't say this to mock love or to claim that it is unimportant, actually I am making the opposite case. Love is so good, it is so reflective of God's glory that it actually takes the most intentionality to not idolize it. The Christian must strain to remind themselves that our love is a reflection of divine love, it isn't love itself. To the level that we see our love as a participation in God's perfect love is the level that we can love in cooperation with God and worship God as the source and the end of all our affections. But when we forget this, the greatest gift that God has ever given us, can turn against us and become nothing more than a dumb idol that corrupts and disappoints the ones who offer themselves up to it. Going back to Lewis, this is how he describes the true danger of this form of idolatry:

“We may give our human loves the unconditional allegiance which we owe only to God. Then they become gods: then they become demons. Then they will destroy us, and also destroy themselves. For natural loves that are allowed to become gods do not remain loves. They are still called so, but can become in fact complicated forms of hatred.”

-C.S. Lewis - “The Four Loves”

There is a reason why the people that we have loved the most can become the people that we hate the most. When we idolize a relationship, we place upon it a weight that only God can bear. When that relationship fails to meet our needs, we can turn against it and resent the one who has let us down. This is not to say that genuine abuse can't occur in these relationships, only that the sin of genuine hatred forms most readily from the roots of love that has become a fallen idol.

“Then Amnon hated her exceedingly, so that the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love with which he had loved her. And Amnon said to her, “Arise, be gone!”

-2 Samuel 13:15

Parental Idolatry

“Now when Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister, and said to Jacob, “Give me children, or else I die!”

-Genesis 30:1

While idolizing romance has always been, and will always be, a large source of idolatry, it is even easier, and more dangerous, to idolize children. This was especially true in the ancient world where arranged marriages were the norm, but it still remains true today. The reason for this is fairly obvious, while romantic love is a powerful form of love, it is still between two adults who can survive independent of one another. Children represent a helpless object of love that genuinely needs their parents to survive. For this reason, many parents, especially mothers, find themselves idolizing their children and sacrificing everything in order to love and care for them.

Once again, this doesn't represent a bad thing in itself, but because it is so good, and because it reflects God's love for us so strongly, it is far easier to make children the source of our value and begin to place our love for them above all else, even over God Himself. And, since kids are helpless, it is also easy to justify this idolatry in your heart, and even feel that this level of care is necessary so that your child will always know that they are loved and cared for.

This temptation was especially deadly for Abraham given his situation. First, Isaac was the child of promise that his covenant with God was based on. Also, he was an only child since Abraham had just lost his other son Ishmael in the previous chapter. I think the late Timothy Keller put this point best in his book “Counterfeit Gods”:

“The years of agonized waiting had taken their toll, as any couple struggling with infertility can attest. The nearly endless delays refined Abraham’s faith, which was crucially important. However, the years of infertility had also had another effect. No man had ever longed for a son more than Abraham. He had given up everything else to wait for this. When his son came, he felt, then his community would finally see he hadn’t been a fool to give up everything to trust God’s word. Then he would finally have an heir, a son in his own likeness, the thing all ancient Middle Eastern patriarchs wanted. He had waited and sacrificed, and finally his wife had a baby and it was a boy! But the question now was—had he been waiting and sacrificing for God, or for the boy? Was God just a means to an end? To whom was Abraham ultimately giving his heart? Did Abraham have the peace, humility, boldness, and unmovable poise that come to those who trust in God rather than in circumstances, public opinion, or their own competence? Had he learned to trust God alone, to love God for himself, not just for what he could get out of God? No, not yet.”

-Timothy Keller - Counterfeit Gods

On top of this, he and Sarah were elderly and wealthy at this time. For most parents, this form of idolatry can be mitigated by the fact that they have their children young, when they are not well off, and they have many of them. Having many children makes it less likely for you to idolize your children in general since you will be so busy trying to balance everything in the household. Also, if your resources are limited, you will have to constantly let down the expectations of your child and you will have limited time to spend with them given your rigorous schedule. But, when parents are older, have more resources, and fewer kids, it becomes incredibly easy to slip into idolizing your children.

This is why in modern times parents seem to be far more obsessive about parenting than they were in the past. Parents today are far better off financially than their parents were, they have far fewer children, and they have them later in life. Parents also spend far fewer time with friends and family in person than they used to. Putting all this together, it is easier than ever for parents to place their children at the center of their lives and make idols of them.

All of this put together hinders us from realizing the simple, yet agonizing truth that Jesus taught His disciples:

“For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it.”

-Luke 9:24

The Successful Parent

The more a parent tries to hold onto their children, the more they try to protect them from any and all harm, the more they will lose them. The most successful parent is unfortunately the one who fails to protect their children. They are the one who can fight their idolatry and let their kids go into a world that will harm and batter them, in the same way that life has harmed and battered us. And we do all of this believing that if we don't, we will devour our own children.

This is the lesson given to us in the story of Hansel and Gretel. The parents in the story are suffering from a famine and the mother orders the father to abandon the children in the forest for them to die. They then encounter a house made of ginger bread and find within it more sweets than they could ever hope for. However, within the home is also a hungry witch that wants to fatten the children up so that she can devour them.

In symbolic language, the witch represents the “devouring mother”. The parent who puts all of their hopes and dreams into the children, to the point where they would build a house of sweets just to keep the child from leaving. But in their attempts to hold onto their children, they end up “devouring” them. Meaning that they place all their value in their parenting and as a result they steal away all of their child's hopes and dreams and they cripple them so that they can never go out into the world to learn how to be independent within it. C.S. Lewis described the devouring mother who sacrifices all for her children this way:

“She continued all these practices because if she had dropped them she would have been faced with the fact she was determined not to see; would have known she was not necessary. That is the first motive. Then too, the very laboriousness of her life silenced her secret doubts as to the quality of her love. The more her feet burned and her back ached, the better, for this pain whispered in her ear ‘How much I must love them if I do all this!’”

-C.S. Lewis - “The Four Loves”

More and more parents today are becoming devouring parents. With the best of intentions, they have made their kids the center of their universe, and so they can't let them go. They instead insulate and control them in an attempt to desperately hold onto the dependence that makes them feel so necessary and loved. But, as Jesus warned,

the more you hold onto anything, even your kids, the more you will lose them, the more you lose them for His sake, the more you will find them.

“So Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife, and the two of them went together. But Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, “My father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” Then he said, “Look, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” And Abraham said, “My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering.” So the two of them went together. Then they came to the place of which God had told him. And Abraham built an altar there and placed the wood in order; and he bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, upon the wood. And Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son.

-Genesis 22:6-10

We don't want to believe this, but what Abraham is called to do here, in a metaphoric sense, is what all parents are called to do, to offer up our children. Or to put it another way, the parent must orient their child's lives towards that which is most valuable. Just like our lives as a whole, the choice is not whether or not to offer up our children, but who or what we will we offer up our children to. Will we offer them up to ourselves to devour them? Will we offer them to education, financial success, romantic pursuits, fame? What the pagans of old figured out was that if you offer up your children to a false god you would lose them permanently, but to offer your children up to the true and living God will give you the opportunity to receive your children back.

But the Angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” So he said, “Here I am.” And He said, “Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.” Then Abraham lifted his eyes and looked, and there behind him was a ram caught in a thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram, and offered it up for a burnt offering instead of his son. And Abraham called the name of the place, The-LORD-Will-Provide; as it is said to this day, “In the Mount of the LORD it shall be provided.” Then the Angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time out of heaven, and said: “By Myself I have sworn, says the LORD, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son— “blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies. “In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.” So Abraham returned to his young men, and they rose and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham dwelt at Beersheba.

-Genesis 22:11-19

Our Ultimate Example

This is the same lesson that Mary had to learn with her Son. From the moment Jesus came into the world, Mary was told in more ways than one that she would have to offer up her Son to the purposes of God. And the reason why we honor Mary is because she heeded the call of God. And this decision is what allowed her to sit at the foot of the cross and be there for her Son at the moment of His death.

“When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing by, He said to His mother, “Woman, behold your son!” Then He said to the disciple, “Behold your mother!” And from that hour that disciple took her to his own home.”

-John 19:26-27

This scene is the most painful possible reality for a parent. It is this fear that keeps us from letting go of our kids. We want to protect them from the world and prevent them from being abused and killed. Mary didn't seek her Son's death, but by offering Him up to God, she relinquished her right to His life and entrusted God's will for her Son. This is the goal and the mission of every good parent. We don't want to cripple our children, nor do we want to expose them to more danger than they are ready for. But a good parent knows that their greatest mission is to work hard every day to eventually prepare their children to not need them anymore. And everyday to do what Abraham did here, and offer up our children to the will of God, trusting that He knows what is best for our children.

If we can learn from Abraham, if we can learn from Mary, we can know that by offering up our children to God we can save ourselves from idolizing our children, we can save our children from being devoured by us, and we can receive our children back. By placing God first in our own lives, we are preparing our children to do the same. We don't know what path God has for our kids, we don't even know how much time God will give our children, but what we know is that through the power of the resurrection and the goodness of our Lord, if they are prepared to receive Christ as their Lord, we will receive them again in His presence. This is the harsh lesson that King David had to learn when his own son was passed away as an infant:

And he said, “While the child was alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, ‘Who can tell whether the LORD will be gracious to me, that the child may live?’ “But now he is dead; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me.”

-2 Samuel 12:22-23

The hardest thing about being a parent is knowing that we can't possibly protect our children from the worst. But, through accepting the sovereignty of God in our kids' lives, we can learn to find peace in His purposes and hope in His plans.

“For this cause everyone who is godly shall pray to You In a time when You may be found; Surely in a flood of great waters They shall not come near him. You are my hiding place; You shall preserve me from trouble; You shall surround me with songs of deliverance.

Selah”

-Psalm 32:6-7