

Introduction:

A. *Illus.*: I first got to know my friend Muhammed in the summer of 2001. I'd stop at the Mobil station near our house on Sunday mornings to get a cup of coffee. Muhammed had just started working there behind the counter. He was about my age, a native of India, and a civil engineer by training. He and his wife had four children. His eldest son, Abrar, worked at the station sometimes so I got to know him as well.

On the Sunday after 9/11 Muhammed was devastated. He also worked as a security guard at a bank and he wanted to tell his co-workers how terrible he felt about what had happened. But he wasn't sure how to say it. So he asked me. I wrote out a statement for my Muslim friend explaining his feelings. It was a strange experience.

Some time later I helped Abrar with a paper he was writing for his high school class about what it meant to be a Muslim. He just needed me to help him clean up his English a bit. But in that paper I learned that Muslims have the same story we have about Abraham's great sacrifice. Only for them, Abraham sacrifices Ishmael, who gladly prepares to give his life.

A week or two later, when I was standing at Muhammed's counter chatting, I mentioned that story. I told him that Jews and Christians had the same story only with Isaac as the sacrificed son. But when I told him that Christians saw in that story a kind of prophecy of the death of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, in our place, well, Muhammed was speechless. Silent. He'd never heard anything like that before.

- B. I realized in that moment what an enormous step it is for people to grasp the workings of our salvation. Paul wrote in **1 Cor 1:18**, *“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”* The first really vivid premonition of the salvation Christ offers comes in that story of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac, as recorded in **Gen. 22**. Please turn there.
- C. This one of the greatest and most important stories in the Bible. We spent last Sunday looking at it, so if you weren’t here I’d encourage you to read or listen to that sermon at our website. I talked then about God’s test of faith and also about how the Jews see Isaac as the center of this story, because they as a nation were *in him*. They call this story Akedah—*The Binding*—from Abraham binding Isaac.
- D. Today I want to focus on the latter part of the story. This is a story meant to transform us by drawing us into the radically different way God wants us to see our relationship with him. It is as if God says, *“Here, read this story. Meditate on it along with the rest of Abraham’s life and the rest of Scripture. Here is how I operate. This story, foreboding as death, carries the secret of life.”*

Let’s look for a moment at a famous painting by the 20th century master, **Marc Chagall**. Notice the colors. Why do you think Abraham is washed in red? Look in the background. There by the tree. And over there in the far distance.



Now let’s begin with God’s dreadful requirement of the sacrifice of Isaac. God is good and loving, always, so rather than see this story as a repudiation of God’s goodness we need to consider this story in light of it. The good God required this costly sacrifice.

I. GOD REQUIRES A SACRIFICE THAT WILL BE THE DEATH OF US

A. **V.2...** A burnt offering was a two-part sacrifice. First, the sacrifice was to be killed by the shedding of blood. The reason was that sin against God is a capital offense requiring a death sentence. The Bible says, *“Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.”*

Then after the blood was drained, the body was burned completely on an altar, indicating total dedication to God.

There’s no doubt that it is an awful picture—bloody and fiery. And that’s what God commanded Abraham to do to his beloved son Isaac.

B. It was terrible enough that Abraham was commanded to bring such a heart-wrenching burnt offering but Isaac was not just his beloved son. Isaac represented the hope of the world! God gave Abraham and Sarah only one son, born miraculously, and promised that only through that son’s descendants would the world receive God’s blessing. If Isaac died it would be like God brushed his hands off and walked away from us all, done with the world forever. God had no other plan. Yet that’s what God commanded.

C. As we saw last week, Abraham proceeded to obey God. He and Isaac, along with two servants made a three-day journey to the region of Moriah where God told him to go. Abraham brought all he needed to offer the sacrifice—kindling, hot coals, the knife. And when they arrived at the mountain he bound Isaac, laid him on the altar, and raised his knife. There was no question he was ready to strike. **Isaac was as good as dead.** But then God stopped Abraham. **Vv.11-12...** God saw in Abraham’s heart the dedication God required so he halted the bloodletting. It was as if the fire of dedication had already risen to God.

Abraham had given his son, along with all his hopes, entirely to God and God accepted that sacrifice.

- D. **Allen Ross** writes, “*Isaac would be brought twice from the dead, once from Sarah’s dead womb and once again from the high altar.*” [p.398] Isaac’s spiritual descendants had that double-death-defying spiritual gene. Born again, resurrected people. **A birth only God could give and a rescue from death only God could provide.** One day, Isaac’s great descendant Jesus the Messiah would offer those who put their faith in him new birth. Furthermore, when Jesus died and rose again, those whose faith put them in him died and rose as well, a new race of people, descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jesus; the Immortals.
- E. No one else sees life this way. Other people might read this story and imagine this dramatic picture, just like my friends Muhammed and Abrar. The Jews see themselves in Isaac. But they all dismiss Jesus’ death on the cross for us. For us, like Isaac, God provided the Lamb, but also God, like Abraham, truly and completely gave his one and only Son.

The pivotal word in this story is *provide*, occurring three times.

That phrase is found here in **v.14**. Maybe you remember the song we sing sometimes, “*Jehovah-Jireh, my Provider, his grace is sufficient for me.*” The Heb word literally means *see*, as in *see to it*. So *The Message* translates v.14, “*Abraham named that place God-Yireh (God-Sees-to-It). That’s where we get the saying, ‘On the mountain of God, he sees to it.’*” All because, when Isaac was about to die, God *saw to it* that there was a ram tangled in a thicket, which God gave to be sacrificed in Isaac’s place. **It is, of course, a story with a great future, a prophecy story!**

II. ON HIS MOUNTAIN GOD PROVIDED THE LIFE THAT SAVES US

A. In God's command to Abraham in **v.2** our focus is on the heart-stopping command to Abraham to sacrifice his son, but God was as specific about the place as the sacrifice: *"go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you."* In **v.4**, *"On the third day Abraham looked up and saw **the place** in the distance."* **V.9**, *"When they **reached the place** God had told him about..."* And finally in **v.14**, *"And to this day it is said, '**On the mountain of the LORD** it will be provided.'"* By the end of this story, that mountain became holy—the *mountain of the LORD*.

The region of Moriah was about 45 miles north of Beersheba where Abraham lived—the better part of a three-day journey. The region of Moriah is where Jerusalem is today. Melchizedek, the mysterious high priest, came from that area. The one other reference to Moriah in the Bible is in **2 Chron 3:1**, *"Then Solomon began to build the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where the Lord had appeared to his father David. It was on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite, the place **provided** by David."* God had stopped his terrible and deadly judgment against David and Israel there. David had paid for that place because he said, *"I will not sacrifice to the Lord my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing."*

So the near-sacrifice of Isaac—the place where it is said, *"On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided,"* was quite possibly on the very place where the Temple would eventually be built. *And* the very hills where Jesus was crucified and buried, the Lamb of God, *provided* by God as a sacrifice in our place.

- B. It was wonderful, of course, that God provided the ram as a substitute for Isaac. But there is something wrong with that picture. Do you see it? The sacrifice is *for* God so how can God provide it. **It isn't really a sacrifice if God provides it to himself.** What would have cost Abraham everything ended up costing him nothing. He sacrificed *nothing*.

Illus.: Back in 1999 the Christian band, *Sixpence None the Richer*, appeared on the David Letterman show. They'd had a big hit song so they were the featured music that night. Before they played, Letterman invited the lead singer, Leigh Nash, to chat for a moment. He asked her about the band's name.

"It comes from a book by C.S. Lewis." she said. *"The book is called Mere Christianity. A little boy asks his father for a sixpence, which is a very small amount of English currency, to go and get a gift for his father. The father gladly accepts the gift, but he also realizes that he's not any richer for the transaction because he gave his son the money in the first place."*

"He bought his own gift," Letterman clarifies.

"That's right. Pretty much," replies Nash. *"I'm sure it meant a lot to him, but he's really no richer. C.S. Lewis was comparing that to his belief that God has given him and us the gifts that we possess, and to serve Him the way we should, we should do it humbly, realizing how we got the gifts in the first place."*

That's what God did for Abraham. God gave him the sacrifice to give back to God. Abraham was prepared to give his only beloved son but instead he gave nothing of his own. Not even the ram was his. **God was none the richer but his holiness was satisfied nonetheless and Isaac lived, redeemed by God.**

- C. In **Rom 8:31-35** Paul wrote, “*What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? **He who did not spare his own Son**... [God had said to Abraham, “You have not withheld your son, your only son.”] **He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all**—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one **Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?**”*
- D. When Leigh Nash told that story to Dave Letterman he replied, “*Well, that’s beautiful. When you hear something explained that’s so obvious... if we could just keep that little sliver of enlightenment with us things would be so much better.*” But, of course, Letterman and most of his applauding audience missed the bigger point. God provided us with his greatest gift in Jesus and, in effect, it is Jesus who we present back to God as our sacrifice, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

The story ends with **vv.15-18**, which could be Abraham’s epitaph...

III. GOD HAS VOWED TO BLESS THE WORLD THROUGH JESUS, THE OFFSPRING OF ABRAHAM

- A. God has made this promise before. Here he adds a kind of extra stamp: *I swear by myself.*” He reaffirms this extraordinary promise because Abraham trusted God so much that he surrendered the life of his son to God. God, in turn, will use that son’s life as the seed of all he would do in the world.

- B. **V.17** begins, “I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore.” The fulfillment of that promise is not in the census of all Jews born since then. It is picture in the book of Revelation 7:9-10:

“There before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice:

*‘Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.’”*

- C. **V.17** continues, “Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies.” There were great battles to come, especially under David, when Israel’s enemies were conquered, but this promise looks far into the future. **Rev. 19:11-16** describes the day:

I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and wages war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Coming out of his mouth is a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. ‘He will rule them with an iron scepter.’ He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written:

KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.

D. God's great promise to Abraham concludes, as it did the first time he spoke it, "And through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed." Jesus was that offspring. Through him the gospel of salvation and peace with God is being preached throughout all the world, just as explained in **Gal 3:8**, "*Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: 'All nations will be blessed through you.'*"

Conclusion

One time at family devotions Martin Luther told this story to his family. He painted the picture: "*Then Abraham bound him and laid him upon the wood. The father raised the knife. The boy bared his throat. If God had slept an instant, the lad would have been dead. I could not have watched.*" His wife, Katie, was aghast. "*I do not believe it,*" she said. "*God would not have treated his son like that!*"

"*But, Katie,*" Luther replied, "*he did.*" [PT.com, Abraham's Faith]

This story of Abraham, Isaac and the LORD runs completely counter to all our human instincts. It is a confounding—foolish—literally unbelievable to many. But what is foolish to men is the wisdom of God. These truths have remade the way we as God's people see our lives and our future.

- God requires a sacrifice that will be the death of us.
- On his mountain God provided the life that saves us.
- God has vowed to bless the world through Jesus, the offspring of Abraham.

My sin—oh, the bliss of this glorious thought—
My sin—not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!
It is well, with my soul, It is well, with my soul,
It is well, it is well, with my soul.