

SERMON

Sacrificing Our Future (Genesis 22)

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Introduction

Not inappropriately, the story of Abraham being called to sacrifice Isaac is titled by Elie Wiesel "Isaac, a survivor's story."¹ If we were to question people in the pew concerning the ultimate value in life, after the expected pious answers, many would finally (and perhaps most honestly) answer: life itself. Survival is a dominant factor in our modern world. However, the importance of survival is not a new phenomenon. In one of the better known wisdom tales from Egypt *The Dispute of a man with his Ba*, we overhear a dialogue between a man contemplating suicide and his inner being. As the man marshals arguments favoring suicide, the inner being counters with arguments against suicide. After extended discussion, the debate is finally won by the inner being with the argument that life, namely this life, is a known entity--and the known is always preferable to the unknown! Even we who claim a confidence regarding the future can understand such thinking, for in our lives we have known that anxiety concerning the future. For many of us, to survive is preferable to loss of life. Because of this, Genesis 22 makes us uncomfortable, for it presents us with a reality at odds with the dominant world view.

However, this passage may also make us uncomfortable because of its disharmony with modern religion. We live in a religious society in which virtually all talk centers on what God can and will do for us. God the giver dominates our religious scene. (This is most clearly manifested in the popularity of such programs as PTL and the 700 Club.) Little, if any, talk discusses the demanding God. In response, modification of a famous charge is most appropriate: "Ask not what your God can do for you; ask what you can do for your God."

In this context, the message of Genesis 22 must be heard. The passage throbs with drama, for it contains the stuff of which life is made. It treats fear and faith; it pulsates with conflict--conflict of the past, present, and future; of faith and justice; of obedience and defiance; of freedom and sacrifice.

¹ Messengers of God (Summit Books, 1976), p. 69.

The Old Testament Setting

We cannot help being struck with the pathos of this account. If we are honest, we read this account with fear and anxiety (even though we know the outcome), for it raises nagging questions which continue to haunt us. What kind of father would seriously consider killing his son? What kind of God would ask of a father the murder of his son? The pathos is heightened as the account progresses. Three times the term "together" (vss. 6, 8, 19) appears. Each successive movement is charged with drama, from the saddling of the pack animal to the splitting of the wood to the long, wordless trip. The anguish comes to a crescendo as the son and his father journey alone the final leg of the trek, the son with the wood for his own sacrificial fire and the father with the flint and knife. As E. Speiser has so aptly stated, ". . . 'and the two walked on together,' (8) covers what is perhaps the most poignant and eloquent silence in all literature."² Never was so much and so little said. Soren Kierkegaard, in *Fear and Trembling*, attempts to delve into the "conversation" (or lack of it) between Abraham and Isaac as they journeyed on alone to Mt. Moriah. Kierkegaard struggles with the dilemmas presented in this story and rightly concludes that we too quickly solve the dilemma through abstraction and moralization. To say "the great thing was that Abraham loved God so much that he was willing to sacrifice to him the best remains a problem when we concretize the account once again and realize that the best is his own son!"³

And yet, if we can get beyond the initial repulsion of a father being called to sacrifice his son, we discover that this passage involves in reality a much larger issue. For in ancient Hebrew mentality, Abraham is being called to sacrifice more than just his son; he is really being called to sacrifice himself, his very future. For Abraham, this was a call to end his story, to end the promise he had embraced in faith. Isaac was more than just the child of Abraham's old age; he was the only link to that far-off goal to which Abraham's life was dedicated.⁴ And so, if we read the story aright, we can only agonize with Abraham as he comes to grips with the reality that the God in whom he has put his hopes is in fact calling in the very substance of his hope. For some inexplicable reason, God is recalling the heart of the promise.

² *Genesis* (AB Doubleday, 1964), 164-165.

³ As Kierkegaard (*Fear and Trembling* [Princeton Univ. Press, 1941], 36) states: And there he stood, the old man, with his only hope! He knew that God Almighty was trying him ... and that it was the hardest sacrifice that could be required of him ... but that no sacrifice was too hard when God required it-and he drew the knife.

⁴ Speiser, *Genesis*, p. 164.

And yet as we shrink back at the intensity of this account, we remember that in a very real sense this issue has been central to Abraham's life from the beginning. The issue of obedience (or as Breuggemann would call it, "embracing the promise")⁵ is central in the accounts treating Abraham. Whereas this incident is the climax of the issue, in a sense Genesis 22 simply epitomizes the extended relationship of God and Abraham. We see in Verses 1-12 a movement in the relationship between God and Abraham, a movement revealed in two ways: (1) "take your son, your only son Isaac" ... (vs. 2) "you have not withheld your son, your only son. .."(vs. 12) (2) "God tested Abraham ..." (vs. 1) "for now I know that you fear God" (vs. 12). At the center of this movement is the affirmation in Verse 8 ("God will provide"). Verse 8 provides both movement and disclosure.⁶

The New Testament Perspective

We may be tempted as New Testament Christians to smugly dismiss this ancient text as a somewhat embarrassing reminder of an era plagued with barbarity. However, if we are honest, there are passages in the New Testament which should terrify us as much as Genesis 22. Mark 8:31-38 is such an example. Surely we shrink back as we seriously contemplate the call to follow and to emulate a crucified Messiah!

In Mark 8,⁷ we see the question of Jesus' identity intimately related to the question of his disciples' identity and call. In the confrontation between Peter and Jesus, Peter rebukes Jesus for his inappropriate definition of Messiah. Jesus responds that to profess "Christ" is to relinquish any right to define what "Christ" means. Disciples are not to guide, protect, or possess Jesus; they are to follow him. Thus we see a movement in this passage from the issue of "who Jesus is" to "what being Christ means" to "what being a disciple means."

This passage demands the utmost from us, for we are called to sacrifice everything that would insure our own vision, our own sense of our future. Just as Jesus left (sacrificed) everything (his family, possessions) for the cause of God, so we are called to sacrifice our future. The invitation of Jesus to us strikingly resembles God's call to Abraham. The call to deny ourselves, take up the cross, and follow Jesus is a call to give up our future.

⁵ *Genesis* (John Knox, 1982).

⁶ As Breuggemann (*Genesis*, p. 187) states: We do not know why God claims the son in the first place nor finally why he will remove the demand at the end. Between the two statements of divine inscrutability stands verse 8, offering the deepest mystery of human faith and pathos.

⁷ I am indebted in the following comments to the excellent exposition of Mark 8:27-9:1 by James L. Mays, "Mark 8:27-9:1," *Interpretation* 30 (1976): 174-178.

The call is not to deny ourselves something, but to deny ourselves. This is the great paradox of the call. It attacks the fundamental assumption of our human existence. We can never possess our own life! The significance of the passage lies in its paradox. I learn who I am by discovering who Jesus is; the way to self-fulfillment is the way of self-denial. As D. Bonhoeffer so aptly stated, "When Jesus calls a man, he bids him come and die."

He [Jesus] begins with a condition: "If anyone wants to come after me . . ." The condition is gracious in its openness.... It is expressed in three phrases: "let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." The symmetry of this offer with the vocation of Jesus is obvious. His vocation must become the vocation of those who name him "The Christ," . . . Taking up one's cross is not a pious interpretation of the usual woes of mortality as "the cross we have to bear." All these notions can be thought and enacted apart from Jesus. The call rather means that Jesus is to become the disciples' passion. It is the exposition of the only authentic sense in which one can say to him, "You are the Christ." It is the possibility of a new state of being in which one can say, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me ..." (Gal. 2:20)

The cross in the call of Jesus makes it a contradiction of the best human wisdom and a threat to the basic human instinct. Who can want to choose crucifixion of the self, when the will of man is set on saving his own life from whatever threatens or on finding some savior in whose power to take refuge? In four interdependent sayings Jesus attacks the essential assumptions of human existence in an appeal to the will of those he confronts. Expressed in each saying is the core wisdom of faith in God: A person can never possess his own life. One cannot enact or fulfill it as an expression of the sovereign self.⁸

Conclusion

Genesis 22 deals with something much larger than child sacrifice. It treats the issue of response to a giving God who also demands. It issues a call to Abraham to relinquish the gift of promise. The call to sacrifice goes to the core of Abraham's existence. It is a call to see the gift of promise for what it truly is--pure gift.

⁸ Ibid.: 177-178.

However, this passage is not simply about God and Abraham. In it Israel , saw the story of her own relationship with God. Israel could see her own existence as solely a gift from her gracious God. She who had been "no people" had been brought from death to life by a freely saving God. However, Israel learned that the God who is graciously faithful is also incredibly demanding, and she was forced repeatedly to renew her commitment to this demanding God who allows no rivals. In hearing Genesis 22, Israel was reminded that her giving God was a God demanding undivided loyalty.

In like manner, we are called by the same God. The God who gives us a future in the miracle of the resurrection is the same God who calls us to sacrifice our future. As we sacrifice our future, our very selves, we are given a "future" by God. And yet, the only thing going for us is our conviction (faith) in our God's ability to recreate that miracle in us (1 Cor. 15). In an age of self-fulfillment, the call of Jesus remains resolutely firm and radical: He who would save his life must lose it and he who would lose it for my sake will find it.

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