

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The New is in the Old concealed: They went both of them together

I'm not a gardener though I appreciate that some of you may well be. I cut the grass and my wife sees to the rest. That suits me fine! She does it very well, I might add! But I do like to see things growing – first the tiny seed is planted, then eventually the first green shoots appear to be followed later by the flower. “First the blade, and then the ear, then the full corn shall appear” as the harvest hymn puts it.

The book of Genesis has been called ‘the seed plot of the Bible’. By that is meant that in its pages we find pictures and foreshadowings of truths that will burst into full flower later in the New Testament. We also find that in other books of the Old Testament, but it is especially marked in the book of Genesis. Today, we begin a series of four talks entitled ‘The New is in the Old concealed’. That's the first line of an old couplet that runs,

*The New is in the Old concealed;
The Old is by the New revealed.*

Our talk this morning is based on Genesis 22, that very moving story of how God tested Abraham as to whether he would offer up his son, Isaac. Subsequent talks will look at other Old Testament books. We'll take as our first heading

Abraham's test

We'll begin by reading Genesis 22:1-2: “Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham, and said to him, ‘Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ And 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.’”

Why did God test Abraham? It certainly was not that God did not know what was in Abraham's heart! God's words to the prophet, Samuel, many years later are appropriate here: “The LORD does not see as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7). Yes, God knew what was in Abraham's heart, but Abraham himself needed to learn how deep was his trust in God.

It is lovely to notice Abraham's response to God's call: “Here I am”. So responded young Samuel when God called him in the temple (1 Samuel 3:4). So responded the prophet Isaiah in the temple when God asked, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?” (Isaiah 6:8). So responded the disciple, Ananias, when God called him to seek out Saul, later called Paul (Acts 9:10). If God was to call you this morning, what would be your response? Would you be too busy to listen? Or too occupied with yourself to have room for God? It is lovely when we can respond like Abraham, “Here I am”.

But as God spoke to Abraham, Abraham must have felt as if a knife was being thrust deeper and deeper in his heart. “Take now your son, your only son Isaac.” When God first called Abraham to leave his home in Ur of the Chaldees, God promised Abraham, “I will make you a great nation”. But years had gone by and Abraham's wife, Sarah, was still childless. At Sarah's suggestion, Abraham had a son, Ishmael, by Sarah's handmaid, Hagar – a not uncommon practice in those days. God's promises, however, were not to be fulfilled in Ishmael, the child of the flesh, but in Isaac, the child of promise, the child of faith. When Abraham was 100 years old, Sarah bore him a son, Isaac, just as God had promised (see Genesis 21). By that time, Ishmael would have been about 14 years old.

But before God, Abraham had only one son, Isaac, in whom all the nations of the world were to be blessed. And so God says to Abraham, “Your only son”. And not only that, but God adds, “Whom you love”. Sadly today we read all too often of family breakdown, of children being abused by parents. But not so with Abraham and Isaac!

It is worth noting that here for the first time we have mentioned the word ‘love’. Here is another of those seeds planted in this book. That does not mean that Adam did not love Eve or his sons, Cain and Abel, but simply that that love was not noted in Scripture at the time. The words of Scripture have literally been ‘God breathed’ as Paul reminds us: “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God (or literally, is God breathed)” (2 Timothy 3:16). In His wisdom, it would seem that God waited for a suitable moment to introduce this word ‘love’. What better moment could there be than here in this picture of the love between God the Father and God the Son!

In the New Testament, the Lord Jesus is often described as God's only Son. So John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son". God knew the pain that His words would cause Abraham because the pain was already in God's heart for that time when His only Son would die on Calvary's cross. So His words to Abraham continue, "Offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you".

But was this to be the end of all Abraham's hopes? How could there be a promised nation if Isaac were dead? How could all the nations of the earth be blessed through Abraham's seed if the child of promise was gone?

Abraham's trust

We'll read the next four verses: "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.' 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." (verses 3-6).

What do you feel like when you know you have a bad day in front of you – perhaps a visit to the dentist, or a nasty job that can't be put off any longer? Perhaps like me you would rather stay in bed and wish the whole thing could just go away! Not so Abraham! In total obedience to God's word, Abraham rises early in the morning. Everything required for the sacrifice was to be taken. Abraham might have pretended to leave some crucial part at home. But you can't pretend with God! It can't have helped either that the journey took three days and only then were they able to see the place afar off. That solemn moment of sacrifice slowly drew nearer and nearer!

God's giving of His Son, Jesus, to die on the cross of Calvary was no last minute thought in the ways of God. The apostle Peter describes that sacrifice as of a lamb "foreordained before the foundation of the world" (1 Peter 1:18-20). I cannot understand those words. God has caused them to be written and I bow in worship before Him for them. Before ever sin had come into the world and spoilt God's perfect creation, before ever man's sin had separated him from God, it was part of God's plan that one day His beloved Son would come into that creation and die for man's sin, my sin and yours! Down through the long centuries of man's sin and disobedience, Calvary's cross was there in the heart of God!

But notice Abraham's words to his young men, "I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and we will come back to you". How could Abraham be so sure? The New Testament gives us the answer: "By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son ... accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead" (Hebrews 11:17-20).

Before we leave this section, please notice the words at the end of verse 6: "...the two of them went together". They are repeated for emphasis in verse 8. The journey to Calvary's cross was indeed one in which the two of them, God the Father and God the Son, went together. True it was, as John tells us, "The Father has sent the Son as Saviour of the world" (1 John 4:14). But that same love that moved the Father to send His Son found an equal echo in His Son's heart. Paul writes, "The Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). In perfect accord with His Father, the Lord Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will" (Matthew 26:39).

Isaac's question

We'll read verses 7-8: "But Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, 'My father!' And he said, 'Here I am, my son.' And 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.' And the two of them went together" (verses 7-8).

In the past, Isaac must often have seen his father offering a sacrifice to his God. But this situation was clearly different. Everything was here except the animal for sacrifice. Abraham's confident answer, "My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering" rings down through the centuries of man's waiting until that day when, on the banks of the River Jordan, John the Baptist stood and, pointing to Jesus, said, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). John had been by the River Jordan and the people had gone out to him, confessing their sins. What a sorry catalogue of human failure and misery John must have had to listen to! That must have been like a daily diet of all our most sensational daily newspapers. Can you imagine, then, the tremendous relief he must have felt on seeing in the Lord Jesus the answer to Abraham's prophetic word some 1,900 years earlier? How appropriate it was that this testimony to the Lord Jesus was given at the outset of His public ministry. In that ministry, He would say and do some wonderful things but His prime purpose in coming was to deal with the question of your sins and mine at Calvary's cross!

Isaac's obedience

We'll read verses 9-10: "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, on the wood. And Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son" (verses 9-10).

By this time, Isaac would have been a young man in his teens, at the peak of his strength, and Abraham an old man of about 120 years. Had there been any conflict at all between the two, Isaac would have been an easy winner! But no! Just as Abraham and Isaac had travelled that long road together, so they would act together at the place of sacrifice. We have already noticed the obedient response of the Lord Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Not as I will, but as You will".

God's answer

We'll read verses 11-12: "But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' And 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'" (verses 11-12).

Abraham had fully shown his deep trust in his God. God would not allow him to be tested one moment longer than necessary as all the urgency of this double call, "Abraham, Abraham", clearly indicates. Incidentally, only 7 people in Scripture are addressed by God in this urgent fashion. In addition to Abraham, there are Jacob (Genesis 46:2), Moses (Exodus 3:4), Samuel (1 Samuel 3:10), Martha of Bethany (Luke 10:41), Simon Peter (Luke 22:31) and, last of all, Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9:4). Take time after this broadcast to look at each of these incidents.

God's call to Abraham was all the more urgent because of the pain that He knew was in Abraham's heart. But God also knew that when the time came when His beloved Son would hang upon Calvary's cross there could be no delivering cry. When His enemies came to arrest the Lord Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, He said to them, "Do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels? How then could the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must happen thus?" (Matthew 26:53-54). But no such cry for deliverance escaped the Saviour's lips! Nor was deliverance sent from His Father in heaven! One of the criminals crucified alongside the Lord Jesus mocked Him, "If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us" (Luke 23:39). Yes, He had the power to save Himself, but in the purposes of divine love, He would not do that. As the hymn so movingly puts it:

*Himself He could not save,
Love's stream too deeply flowed,
In love Himself He gave,
To pay the debt we owed.
Obedience to His Father's will,
And love to Him did all fulfil.*

For Abraham's sacrifice of his son, Isaac, there was a substitute – "a ram caught in a thicket by its horns" (verse 13). But for the Lord Jesus on the cross, there could be no substitute, for He was there as our Substitute! The apostle Peter writes of Him: "Who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree" (1 Peter 2:24).

Out of that very special experience, Abraham was moved to give that Mount Moriah (the name means 'seen of Jah (or Jehovah)') another name, "The LORD will provide (or will see)" (verse 14). The only other time Moriah is mentioned by name in Scripture is in 2 Chronicles 3:1: "Now Solomon began to build the house of the LORD at Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where the LORD had appeared to his father David, at the place that David had prepared on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite". In the Lord's day, the place of crucifixion, Calvary, was just outside the walls of the city of Jerusalem. That would not have been very far from the Temple. It is indeed striking that what took place on Mount Moriah some 1,900 years earlier should find such a sequel in the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus on Calvary's cross. Here in Genesis 22, then, in Abraham being called to offer up his only son, we have indeed a seed that bursts into lovely flower in the New Testament!

May our time together this morning lead us to appreciate in fuller measure the wonder of our salvation worked out for us between God the Father and His beloved Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

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