

Our Covenant God – Part Twelve

Abraham's eighth encounter with God

Today's study is very exciting! We are looking at Genesis 22, where God asks Abraham to offer Isaac up as a sacrifice on a mountain in a land called Moriah. This encounter between God and Abraham is number eight. The first seven encounters were all related to the covenant. At this stage, the covenant is a done deal. It is complete, as represented by the number seven (seven encounters). Nothing further would be added to it. Nothing could be changed or taken away from it. The terms and conditions of the covenant were set in stone. The only thing that Abraham had to do was believe God. God would do everything He had promised to do. He would make it all happen.

Eight is the number for a new beginning. This encounter speaks of a new level of trust and intimacy in their relationship. In this chapter we will see God asking Abraham to give Him his son, Isaac. This encounter is not about the covenant. It is all about a test of friendship... and Abraham passed it with flying colors!

Firstly, compare the first encounter with this last one and notice the similarities:

Genesis 12:1 (NKJV) "Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you.

Genesis 22:2 (NKJV) 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."

These two encounters, being the first and the last, are almost mirror images of each other. In both, God told Abraham to leave the country that he was living in. Both times, God told him to go blindly to a land that God would show him. Both times God was to sacrifice his family.

Framing

We find very interesting patterns in the Bible. Those patterns are hidden in people's lives. They are hidden in the stories. They are even hidden in the wording of the text. These patterns illustrate and echo the themes in the Bible. One theme is that the end will be like the beginning. Things will end up like they started (except they will be vastly improved!). In the beginning of the Bible we read about the Creation of the whole universe and at the end of the Bible we read of the Recreation of the whole universe. So it ends up like it all started – only better. We often see this same pattern hidden throughout the Bible where the first line of a block of text is the same or extremely similar to the last line. This is called framing and is a typical Hebrew literary technique. The first and the last lines are then like a picture frame and whatever is in between is the picture inside the picture frame. Whatever is outside of the frame may belong in a bigger or a different picture frame but it doesn't belong in that specific picture.

We will see examples of framing later on in the study when we take a closer look at God establishing His covenant with Noah and when we study Exodus 34.

And so we see that the first and last encounters between Abraham and God are a frame which contains the picture, being the Covenant.

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However, this time Abraham had experiences with God that he didn't have when his adventure began. By the time of the 8th encounter:

1. God had cut covenant with him.
2. Through experience, Abraham knew that God was devoted to him.
3. Abraham now had God's Word – His Covenant Promises – to hold on to.

God's Word and His friendship would be the two things that Abraham needed to pass this test in Genesis 22! And so let's take a look at what happened in this chapter:

God said "Please"

Probably the most important thing about this whole chapter is that God said please!

One day I was watching a television program called "Jewish Voice". The host was interviewing Israeli Hebrew Professor Dr. Danny Ben-Gigi who explained that when you translate from Hebrew into English word-for-word, you miss out on many of the shades of meaning of the Hebrew. He gave Genesis 22:2 as an example and explained that in the Hebrew God did not command Abraham to offer up Isaac as a sacrifice. In fact the best way to capture the nuance of the Hebrew would be to use the word 'please' in that scripture because it was a request, not an order.

Robert Alter's translation of Genesis is the only English translation that I have found that brings out the nuance of the Hebrew in this scripture. He uses a writing style similar to the King James Version. The more modern way of speaking would substitute the word 'pray' in this passage with 'please'.

Genesis 22:1-2 (Robert Alter's translation) And it happened after these things that God tested Abraham. And He said to him: 'Abraham!' And he said: 'Here I am.' And He said: 'Take, pray, your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac, and go forth to the Land of Moriah and offer him up as a burnt offering on one of the mountains which I shall say to you.' And Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey and took his two lads with him, and Isaac his son, and he split wood for the offering, and rose and went to the place that God had said to him. On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from afar.

Homework Question #1: Why is it important to know that God did not command or order Abraham to sacrifice Isaac to Him?

It is all about friendship

We must remember that covenant is all about friendship: two becoming one life. When two people entered into covenant whatever belonged to the one now automatically belonged to the other. If one died then the other would take on the responsibility of raising his friend's children and providing for the widow as if they were his own family – because they were! Thus, all that God was asking Abraham to do was give Him what was His anyway. If Abraham did give Him Isaac then he would have proven his friendship to God.

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Leave Gerar and go to Moriah

God told Abraham to leave Gerar, which is where he had lived ever since Sodom and Gomorrah had been destroyed some decades before. Gerar was Abraham's comfort zone. He was safe there. The king of Gerar, Abimelech, was in covenant with him. Isaac had lived there all of his life. But now it was time for Abraham to leave that place. He had to go up a mountain to sacrifice Isaac. A mountain is a high place. God was calling him to go up higher. After going to Moriah, Abraham never lived in Gerar again.

The word 'Moriah' is a very interesting word. It means 'to see' in the largest and deepest possible sense of the word. See doesn't just mean to look with physical eyes. In the same way that we often say "I see" to indicate that we understand something, Moriah also means to examine, perceive, and understand. It also means to experience something, just as we would say "I saw" because we experienced it ourselves. As we say "I will see to it", Moriah also means 'provide'.

Thus, Moriah means to see, perceive, examine, understand, experience, and provide.

Two of the Hebrew names used for God are Elohim and YHWH. Elohim is the name used for God during the Creation in Genesis 1. YHWH (Yahweh) is the Name used for the same God in Genesis 2 when the author retold the story from a different perspective, zooming in on the Creation of Man. Elohim is the Almighty Omnipotent Creator of this universe seen from a distance, while YHWH is a close and personal God who takes the time and interest to lovingly touch and form clay into a human being. They are the same God viewed through different lenses and revealed in different ways.

Moriah is where YHWH has personally seen, perceived, examined, chosen, experienced and provided. God was not sending Abraham to a bad place. Instead, He was sending Abraham to a place where His Presence and His Face were in a very personal way.

Homework Question #2: Why do you think that Abraham never lived in Gerar again after this last encounter with God?

Isaac, a willing sacrifice

I have seen many pictures of Isaac bound, with Abraham over him, knife upraised, about to slay his son. In all of those pictures Isaac is depicted as a young boy. This is probably because he is referred to as being a lad in this chapter. However, it is the same word used for the two young male servants who were left to take care of the donkeys and personal belongings. They were young men, not children. Also, this happened after Ishmael married so that also tells us that Isaac was no longer a child at this stage. According to Josephus, Isaac was twenty-five years old at the time of the sacrifice, while the Talmudic sages teach that Isaac was thirty-seven. Because Isaac was a type of Christ, I believe that he was thirty years old and there is a hint that Paul may have believed that too. Either way, he was certainly no child victim. He was well able to overpower his elderly father to save his own life. He was an adult who willingly laid his life down in obedience to his father!

Homework Question #3: What difference does it make if Isaac was a child instead of an adult?

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Abraham did as God had asked him. When he could see the mountain he gave the servants who were with them very interesting instructions:

Genesis 22:5 (NKJV) 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.”

“The lad and I will go yonder and worship”. Abraham identified this as an act of worship. Worship is intimate communion with God. It means to prostrate oneself as they did to honor royalty in those days.

“And we will come back to you.” Abraham stated that both he and Isaac would return to the servants. This in itself is profound. On their way to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham stated that both he and Isaac would return. He did not expect to return with Isaac’s dead body because there would be no body left after a burnt offering! He fully expected to return with Isaac alive and well.

Hebrews 11:17-19 (NKJV) By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten *son*, of whom it was said, “*In Isaac your seed shall be called,*” concluding that God was able to raise *him* up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense.

Homework Question #4: This was the same Abraham who was so scared of death that he misrepresented his marital status to prevent people from killing him to have Sarah. Explain how he was able to face the pending death of his beloved son, Isaac, so easily.
