

The True and Greater Sacrifice

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[0 : 00] Father, we just recently sang to you as an act of praise that when Satan tempts us to despair and tells us of the guilt within, and the hymn invites us to remember Jesus and his death upon the cross for us.

Father, we ask that your word would come very deeply into our hearts and into our minds and into our lives, that the gospel will be more real to us.

So, Father, that we will learn to live day by day out of your great promise to us and the great gift that you give us in the death and resurrection of your son, Jesus Christ.

Pour out the Holy Spirit. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Please be seated. I'm still sort of all hoarse from singing. After those things, God tested Abraham and said, said to him, Abraham.

And he said, here I am. And God said, take 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.

[1 : 19] You know, when they teach preaching, one of the things that they try to tell you is to try to come up with a story or a line or something to grab people's attention right at the beginning.

And it's probably harder to come up with a better line than just reading the scripture where God tells Abraham to go and kill his son Isaac. The temptation for us as Christians is to read that part really quickly, hoping that nobody really notices it, and try to get on to better stuff.

Excuse me. If there's somebody watching, either now, live or downstream, maybe you're a skeptic trying to examine the Christian claims, but hoping that you'll find something that will, in a sense, nail Christianity to the wall in such a way that it's just revealed to be a hateful, murderous religion that's bad for you, and you hear, take 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, and you feel, there you go.

I've got the smoking gun. What possible, who could ever believe a religion or follow a religion that would tell you to murder your only son? For the curious, it's a bit of a shock.

I've talked to people who sort of have been part of the visible church for quite a while but aren't very knowledgeable of the Bible, and when I've mentioned that there's a story like this in the Bible, they say, really?

[3 : 06] Like, that's in the Bible? For obvious reasons, it's a Bible text that often doesn't show up in church services. In fact, for Christians, we're probably a bit shocked and embarrassed.

Our worst fears are realized. Why read it? So, one of the things that we do at this church is we preach through either whole books of the Bible or chunks of the Bible, and one of the reasons we do it is because, of course, that's how it's written.

These stories from chapter 12 to chapter 22 were written one after another as a story after story after story, part of a bigger story in Genesis and part of the bigger story in the first five books and part of the bigger story of the Old Testament and part of the bigger story of the New Testament.

And, well, it's good for us to read texts like this together on one hand, even though it's a very sort of shocking text to many who aren't familiar with it.

And so what we're going to do is we're going to, we're going to walk towards it. We're going to look at the story very carefully and see what it is that it teaches. So just read it again.

[4 : 15] If I was to do this in terms of scenes, which I've done for a couple of these last sermons, verses one and two, scene one, could be called the shocking command. I'll read it again. After these things, God tested Abraham and said to him, Abraham.

And Abraham said, here I am. And by the way, in the original language, here I am implies that he's making himself available to God, ready to do what God is going to ask him to do.

Verse two, and God said, take 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. A burnt offering, as you'll discover as the rest of the Bible unfolds, is it's a Bible, it's a complete sacrifice.

Some of the other Old Testament sacrifices, either the priest or the community or the offerer would get to keep some of it, so to speak, and eat some of it. But a burnt offering, it's a complete offering to God.

[5 : 23] It's an offering to God with nothing left over, a complete and utter offering to God. God. So, I mean, in our day and age, if somebody told us that they'd had this message to kill somebody, we would know, we would suspect that they were probably mentally ill.

what happens to Abraham after he gets this shocking demand request, I should say, from God.

Well, let's look at scene two, and if we had a name for it, it would be thoughtful and prompt.

Verse three, so Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and his son Isaac, and he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him.

The writer of the story actually almost does it in slow motion. He doesn't just say, well, they took off. Part of the thing which is shocking about this is that Abraham acts very promptly. He doesn't say, well, I've got to think about this for a week.

You know, it's a three-day journey. It's going to require lots of planning, et cetera, et cetera. No, he begins to answer what God has asked him to do right away. But he doesn't do it in a half-assed way.

[6 : 44] He does it in a thoughtful way. He gets the donkey. He makes sure there's enough supplies for the journey to go there and back. There's a possibility that there'll be no suitable dry wood for the offering, so he gets that.

And as you'll see later on, he makes sure that there's the knife. And he makes sure that there's fire that he can bring with him so he doesn't have to worry about trying to start a fire from fresh. He does all of the things. He does them quickly and promptly, and deliberately.

In fact, actually, that helps to show, especially this next bit, that he's not being rash. Look at scene number three, verse four, and it could be called, if it was a movie or a book, Time to Reflect.

Verse four, on the third day, Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. So what's going on here is he gets this specific request from God.

He acts promptly the very next day to act on it. He acts with deliberation, and he has three days to think about it as he walks. In those days, of course, he doesn't have iTunes.

[7 : 47] He doesn't have podcasts. All he has is the walk and his thoughts and the three younger men with him. And so, it doesn't necessarily mean 72 hours. Let's say he left on a Monday morning.

He's walked all day Monday, all day Tuesday, and sometime on Wednesday, the third day, three days of walking all towards this destination where God has asked him to do this thing, which we all understand to be horrific, that Abraham would kill his son Isaac.

Now, as you can well imagine, there's been lots of philosophical and theological and commentary reflection on this story. And one of the common things of all the stories is what was Abraham thinking for these three days.

And lots of pages have been filled with writing as to what Abraham might be thinking about during these three days. But what they all often miss, not all of them, but many of these things miss, is we don't have to guess as to what Abraham was thinking.

We know what Abraham was thinking because the storyteller tells us what he's thinking. So the next scene, which would be verses five to eight, if it had a title, it would be The Mirror.

[9 : 05] Look at what it says. Then Abraham said to his young men, stay here with the donkey. I and the boy will go over there and worship.

And note this, they're going to go there to worship and then they're going to come again to see the two young men. In verse six, and Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac, his son.

Isaac's going to carry the wood that will be lit under him to burn him. And Abraham took in his hand the fire and the knife, the instruments of death.

So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, my father. And Abraham said, here I am, my son. And Isaac said, behold the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for

burnt offering?

And Abraham said, God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son. So they went both of them together. Over the last year or so, I've often said about different Bible stories that the story is both a window and a mirror.

[10:25] I should give credit, I think I got the phrase from Jackie Hill Perry in her most recent book, and it's a wonderful, a wonderful image, just as both of her books are wonderful books.

And the Bible stories are a mirror because if you read them, there's the possibility by God's grace that they'll reveal to you, they'll help you to see yourself as you really are.

Not beneath your appearances, beneath the things that you do to try to sell yourself and cover yourself up. It'll reveal who you are at the level of your heart, the real you.

In that way, the Bible stories are a mirror. They're also windows often. They help you to see the real world. They help you to see the triune God and what the world is really like. And this story here is a profound mirror.

And it's a mirror because when we first hear the shocking thing in verse 2, take 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.

[11:29] we hear this. Well, our reaction reveals what we usually think about God.

And if you're watching this, you know, maybe you're a Buddhist or a Hindu, maybe you're just one of our many secular Canadian friends. This might surprise you about Christians.

but we Christians share something with you, is that beneath the piety, we actually sort of worry that God just wants to hurt us, that the true God wants to belittle us or harm us or keep us down.

There's almost always a small, still voice within us that says, be careful, don't get too close, don't get carried away, don't be too religious, don't be too Christian, don't pray too much, it'll get in way of other things.

Like, don't really listen to what the Bible has to say about money and generosity. If you listen too much and you get carried away, it'll just make you poor. Don't listen to what the Bible says about sexuality and identity, it's just going to make you lonely, it's just going to hurt you.

[12:48] don't listen to these concerns about humility, it'll just make you weak. Other people will get the promotion.

Be careful, don't get extreme. Before we know it, unrecognized, but now maybe beginning to be recognized, we hear the voice that says, did God really say that you should be generous?

Did God really say that you should be chaste? Did God really say you should be humble? Listen, nothing bad will happen to you if you don't do those things.

Be careful because God knows that if, God knows you have the possibility to be great and to be like God and he wants to keep you down. And we hear God out of this perspective and so when we hear the opening word of verse 2, our basic fears about God hurting us come to the fore.

But the shocking thing about Abraham's answer in verse 5, and it's really shocking, look at it again, verse 5, then Abraham said to his young men, stay here with the donkey, I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.

[14:18] Like that's a shocking thing for Abraham to say. You see, you and I hear verse 2 and we interpret it from our fear that God will harm us, that he will belittle us, that he will make us less.

but Abraham hears it in the context of promise and miracle. God's free, loving, generous promise that he will make Abraham not just great, not just a, but that, not just that Abraham will be blessed, but that he will be a blessing.

And Abraham himself has seen time and time and time again how God has acted miraculously on his behalf to uphold his word. And the story that just goes before this and right from chapter 11 all the way through to chapter 21, the story time and time and time again makes it clear that if Sarah is going to have a son, that son is going to have to be a miracle of God.

Only a miracle of God will produce that son. And that's what immediately just happened before it.

That God has kept his word. He visits Sarah as he promised and as he promised he has kept his word and a miracle is performed and the baby is there, the seed, the offspring is born.

And when Abraham hears God's command to go and do this, you and I hear it out of our flesh, he hears it out of God's promise.

[15:56] Now, how's God going to keep his promise? Abraham doesn't know. What Abraham does know is that they're going to worship, they're both going to come back and as he says to Isaac, God

will provide for himself.

How does it go again? God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son. He doesn't have a lamb with him, doesn't know how it's going to go, but he interprets God's command in light of his promise and in light of his love.

So what will God do? How does his story go? Well, if we had another thing for the next scene, it would be called, verses 9 and 10 would be the next scene and it would be prepare to die or maybe in light of, what is it, from Star Trek?

Is it the Vulcan war cry? It is a good day to die? Some of you who are more, eh? Klingon. I always get them all mixed up.

You can just show that I'm not really a science fiction type of guy. A Klingon war cry. It is a good day to die. Verses 9 and 10. When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac, his son, and laid him on the altar on top of the wood.

[17:22] Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. Once again, note all of the detail and the deliberation.

But then God intervenes. Next scene, verses 11 and 12. Faith's fruit. But, verse 11, the angel of the Lord called to Abraham from heaven and said, Abraham, Abraham.

And Abraham said, here I am. And the Lord said, do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.

This is a story which is talked about a great deal in the New Testament. And the reason I called it Faith's Fruit is this. I'm not very good, anybody who knows me know that I'm not very good at trying to figure out plants and stuff like that in the garden or trees.

But if I go up to a tree and I see an apple on it, I know it's an apple tree. I'm an Einstein when it comes to that. I can pick out, that's an apple tree because it has an apple on it.

[18:39] And what we see here is it Abraham's great faith that whatever it is that God has told him to do, God's promise and God's miracle and God's grace and God's generosity is that Isaac will be the means, he will be that seed, that ongoing offspring or seed that will be a blessing, that will be blessed and that will be a blessing.

And he's living and acting out a promise that God will keep his word, that God is a God that's sovereign and can do miracles. And so what you see in all of this is like you can't see what's going on inside Abraham, what you can see is what he does.

I can't, I'm not good at recognizing trees but if I see an apple on a tree I know it's an apple tree. If I see a pear on a tree I know it's a pear tree. And when God sees this he knows and sees and we see because the text is written not so much for us as it is and not so much for God as it is for us. See, one of the things about this when Abraham enters into a covenant with God and God enters into a covenant with him in a very very real sense Abraham now belongs to God.

And when Isaac is circumcised and brought into the covenant Abraham is saying in a sense that not only do I belong to God but Isaac belongs to God.

[20:14] One of the ways to understand what it means to become a Christian is and we're going to celebrate the Lord's Supper in a sense the covenant meal where we remember what Jesus did for us on the cross and we also remember his resurrection and the fact that he will come again is that when you ask Christ to be your Savior and your Lord he hears your request and he says yes or when you recognize that you've given your life to Christ but you've given your life to Christ.

Jim Elliott was famous for the quote he is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose. He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep.

None of us can keep our lives or our possessions or our reputations. We will lose them all but when we give ourselves to Christ he gives us something that we cannot lose which is that we will be his forever.

God not only now sees in a sense the apple but he provides. The next scene verses 13 and 14 the Lord's provision and Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked and behold behind him was a ram caught in the thicket by his horns and Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.

So Abraham called the name of that place the Lord will provide as it is said to this day on the mount of the Lord it shall be provided. And so what we see here is there's a short-term provision but

there's also a riddle which is posed.

[21 : 57] But the really big thing in this look at verse 13 again it's just a very very little tiny word which is very important.

And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked and behold behind him was a ram caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.

Instead of his son. and this is the first time in the Bible where this idea of a sacrifice an offering in the place of or instead is introduced.

And as the rest of the story unfolds and the rest of the Pentateuch and the rest of the old what we call the Old Testament and our Jewish friends call the Tanakh and we see it unfold in the rest of the New Testament is this idea of one dying on behalf of another.

Now one of the things which makes the Christian faith so beautiful so emotionally beautiful is it touches on something that human beings recognize as being deeply beautiful.

[23 : 13] It's not that great a movie but there's a movie on Netflix called The Last Full Measure and it's based on the true story of a fellow by the name of Pitts who was a medic with the Air Force and in the Vietnam War in one of the bloodiest battles of the Vietnam War he continually left the safety of his helicopter to go down to help and bring back the wound to care for the wounded and to bring them up into the safety of the helicopter and at the height of the intensity of the battle his commanding officers order him to come up with the last patient leaving the soldiers on the ground to have to deal with no medical help to a very fierce battle and in the movie the true story he refuses to go up to the safety of the helicopter and he stays on the ground 60 different soldiers lives are ultimately saved that day by his heroism and he dies and the story is told later on for political reasons he was never given the medal of honour and the movie which is a so-so movie tells a story of how he eventually gets the medal of honour for his great courage one of the interesting things about the movie is that they show or portray some of the men who were saved and their struggle coming to terms with the fact that they live because he died so on one hand you see here something which is very beautiful you recognize this profound beauty that this person would act in such a way that these many people's lives are saved and you can we all understand on one level that it makes us a bit uncomfortable if we're the recipient of such profound love so on one hand we see the beauty of it and the beauty of it is made even more clearly if you think of the opposite it

I don't know how to pronounce it I never listen to the news on the radio and I never watch the news on the radio it means there's one of my problems and is I don't know how to pronounce a whole pile of things but that terrible school shooting in Texas where the police armed with automatic weapons and bulletproof vests didn't go in to save the children they didn't go in to save the children that's the opposite and when we look at that we realize there's something we see the beauty of the sacrifice in the case of the fellow pits and there's something not right there just over ten years ago the Concordia cruise ship hit a rock began to sink one of the very very first people to come to land safely was the captain who fled the ship and 32 people died you see at a very very deep level there's this mystery of a person who would sacrifice himself for another and that mystery of the beauty of it and the power of it is seen even more clearly when we see the opposite but there is a mystery

I'll tell you just one more story about it somebody that Louise and I know we didn't meet the person but we met the people after this was over there was a couple they fell in love they married they wanted to have children she got pregnant and after she got pregnant she discovered that she had cancer so the doctors told her she needed to take the cancer treatment immediately if she wanted to have any chance of surviving and living she asked what the cancer treatment would do to the baby in her womb and they said well the baby will die but you might live so as we've been told she thought about it and she thought about it don't know all that went on in her thought and I know this is actually one of those cases that when people discuss abortion are complicated but for her she chose the baby she didn't take the cancer treatment the baby was born and after the baby was born she took the cancer treatment and I think it was about a year later she died part of the reason that's complicated of course is because we have a complicated relationship with seeing what's in the womb it would be a simpler thing in a sense for us to see if it was a little baby held in the arm and we would all understand why a mother might go into a burning building even if it meant her dying if she was able to have the baby live and we recognize there's something emotionally powerful and beautiful about sacrifice here we see this very very two little tiny words instead of this insertion it's

the crack the lifting of the curtain in the window for we as the reader to begin to see into the heart of God and what the triune God is really like you see it's really only truly the case that the triune God the gospel Christian faith is a religion of love in the short term the ram dies in the place of Isaac and Abraham and Isaac return to the two young men and go home after they have worshipped but the same story poses a bit of a riddle which points into the future I'm not going to read the verses 15 to 19 but if you go back and look at them later the word offspring I haven't commented on this throughout the 11 chapters that we looked at the word offspring is a very unusual word sometimes in the King James version it's translated as seed it's called in Hebrew a collective singular and that means that sometimes it's understood as referring to a collective but it's a singular it's a singular it's a he and the

New Testament writers realize that it's this prophecy not just of a line of the seed but that out of the Jewish people there would be a savior who would be born and Emmanuel would come and so much of what happens in verses 15 and on corrupted so aware man could be uniting taks uniting stone or a woman. An animal ultimately isn't a proper substitute. If it was to be a human being who would be volunteering to die for the person on death row, well, that's a very problematic thing.

[32 : 14] We would worry that there was some type of coercion or mental illness on the part. It would be too easy for a rich criminal to hire some poor man or some poor woman to die in their place so that they could walk free. There is no true sacrifice, and there is no true love.

And the Bible closes the door with this story and with the stories that continue on about any type of thing of human sacrifice. In Psalm 40, it recognized that the blood of bulls and goats ultimately can't satisfy and die in the place of a human being, leaving behind a mystery and a riddle as to how God is going to provide for himself the sacrifice for Isaac, and ultimately not just for Isaac, but for Abraham and for you and me. Only God can die in the place of you and me. You don't have to worry. You can't possibly cajole him, force him.

Bribe him. He's God. And it's very, very interesting. If you go back and you look at how it develops, that God's revealed as being a God of relationship, of Yahweh, of the Lord. He's a relational God. And God is revealed in the story of Hagar as the God who sees, the God who sees me. And God in the story just before this is revealed as the everlasting God, the God who is from all ages and in all places and in all times. And here God is revealed as Jehovah Jireh, the God who will provide. And since only God could die a death instead of human beings that could cover me and you, and you on you, you who are watching.

And then given that there is a beauty and a power to sacrifice the woman who died for her baby, the man who died, that 60 soldiers would live. And that God, the Son of God, would die for you and for me.

[34 : 33] One of the things that the people in the movie, the last full measure, wrestle with is whether or not their lives have been worthy of the sacrifice made by pits. And one of the things which makes the gospel even more beautiful is that we know that our lives aren't worthy. I mean, one of the things which so bedevils us as human beings is that we want to maintain our fronts. We worry that if people were to see behind our appearances and to know us as we really and truly deeply are, if they saw those things for which we are ashamed and of which we have done that are wrong, that people wouldn't want to have a relationship with us. And the God who sees me sees both your excellencies and your virtues and your uniqueness and your beauty, but he also sees your shame and your wrongdoing. He sees the worst about you and still seeing the worst about you, he dies for you instead of you.

And so it is that the gospel has this power and profound sacrifice at the very heart of what it means is that we receive what he has done for us, that we enter into that and that enters into us. And there is this, the beginning, the dawning of the possibility of a secure identity and a secure place to love and to be generous and to forgive and to give and to serve and to pursue justice and creativity, not just out of our accomplishments that make us feel very, very confident, but those things can come crashing down. There can be that tweak that we made five years ago that could get us cancelled or that thing, that momentary act of temper or selfishness or something that reveals that there's something within us that's not just as good as all of our accomplishments seem to have been and that at some point in time we come face to face with the hurt that we might have done or that the good that we failed to do. But there's this begins as we not only receive Christ as our Savior, but to understand that he died knowing the worst about us.

But still he died instead of that I could belong to God. And he did it out of just out of love and out of grace and out of mercy and out of kindness.

And so the gospel begins to change us that we can live out of promise. That we can live secure, begin to learn to live secure out of an identity rooted in his sacrifice. The God who sees me, the everlasting God, my provider, has died for me.

And I can live out of the promise of his blessing. And that's why we open the word and that's why we remember his sacrifice for us.

[37 : 58] And then it becomes a place that we can stand where we can begin to come face to face with the fact that there's still part of us deep within.

We've been clothed with his righteousness, we are his, but we still need to die to our sin, to our lack of living out of promise, and our fear that if we pray, that we could pray too much, or be too generous or we're too loving or too just.

The gospel opens up to us as the gospel opens up within us, a place to live out of, a place to stand and truly be healed.

Please stand. Let's bow our heads in prayer.

Father, we thank you that Jesus died instead of each one of us. We thank you, Father, that because he is God, he can die not just for one person, but that he can be the one who is instead of every one of the elect, everyone who puts their faith and trust and confidence in Jesus.

[39 : 24] We thank you that he did this as the God who sees me, the God who is my provider, and that there is in fact, Father, a beauty and a power in the gospel.

And we thank you, Father, that you're not a God who desires others to die so that you might be exalted, but that you have died so that we might be exalted to your presence.

So, Father, we ask that you help us to receive the gospel, to trust this promise of life in Christ. And we ask, Father, that the Holy Spirit, as we sing, as we pray, as we celebrate the Lord's Supper, that the gospel will become more real to our hearts so that day by day we live out of your promise to us in Christ.

And we ask this in the name of Jesus, your Son and our Savior. Amen.