

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Old Testament Types of the Lord Abraham & Isaac - Genesis 22 The Death of the Lord

*[Please note : sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
English Standard Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Introduction

Today's talk is part of our series on what are called the Old Testament "types" of the Lord Jesus. And if you've not come across the word 'type' being used in the way we're using it today, all will be explained a bit later.

Before I launch into a fairly lengthy introduction to today's talk (including more on the word 'type') let's read the scripture on which the talk is based. This is the first 14 verses of Genesis chapter 22:

"After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here am I.' He 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. 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. On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. 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.' And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, 'My father!' And he said, 'Here am I, my son.' He said, 'Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?' Abraham said, 'God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.' So they went both of them together.

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. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' And he said, 'Here am I.' He 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.' 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. 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.'"

When I was a teenager I attended a Bible Class. One thing my Bible Class leader said has always remained with me. He said that we should look for 3 things when we read a passage of scripture. These are the Primary Association, the Prophetic Anticipation, and the Personal Application.

What he called the Primary Association probably doesn't need a lot of explanation. He meant we should look first for the immediate and obvious meaning of the passage. The other two ideas, Prophetic Anticipation and Personal Application, may seem rather fanciful to anyone who has not (as yet) appreciated that the Bible is far more than a human book, and that, whilst it was written, over the space of many centuries, by a very diverse collection of individuals, it is, at one and the same time, the word of the living God. Despite its many differences of style and format, the Bible speaks as one harmonious whole, and anyone who sets out, with an open mind, to study it, usually discovers that it abounds in examples of both of these other two things.

As to what my Bible Class leader called "Prophetic Anticipation", the Bible contains not only much that is direct prophecy, in the sense that it foretells events which lie in the future, or in many cases which did lie in the future when the scripture in question was written, but also much of what is known by the technical term of typology. It is typology which we are concerned about today, because this talk, which is about a quite amazing incident in the lives of Abraham and his son Isaac, forms part, as I mentioned earlier, of our series on Old Testament types of the Lord Jesus. Typology is of course the study of types.

What, then, is a type (using the word in this unusual sense)? If you've listened to the first talk in this series, you will have heard an excellent introduction to the idea of what we mean by a type, from the speaker on that occasion, Stephen Thomson. For the benefit of those who haven't, and for those who want to hear it explained again, here's my shot at explaining what a type is.

A type is something (possibly a person, or an object, or an incident) which had a real existence at some point in history, and which also has a hidden meaning, in that it represents or symbolises something else, usually (but not always) something which is going to have a real existence later. It is a kind of clue or hint pointing to the real thing which it represents. When the real thing, or person, comes along, we say that the type has been fulfilled. Grasping this hidden meaning requires some discernment on the part of the reader, or hearer. Sometimes, as Stephen pointed out in that previous talk, we may imagine that we can see a "typical" meaning in something which perhaps isn't really there.

In other cases, however, the Bible explicitly spells it out, so that there can be no doubt. An example of this is the Passover Lamb, the lamb which was killed, one lamb for each family, on the Passover night in Egypt, recorded in Exodus chapters 11 and 12. A crucial part of that story was that when God's destroying angel passed through the land of Egypt, slaying the firstborn in every family, the Israelites were told to stay in their houses, with the blood of the lamb daubed onto the lintel and the side posts of the door. God promised them, in Exodus 12 verse 13:

"...When I see the blood, I will pass over you."

This is where the word "passover" comes from. The Israelites inside their houses were sheltered by the blood of the lamb, and escaped the judgement of God.

Now to the Christian, to one who has accepted Christ as Saviour, the One who died for our sins on the cross, this is a very beautiful and obvious type of how we are sheltered from God's judgment by Christ's blood shed for us. But the New Testament actually states this explicitly, in 1st Corinthians chapter 5 verse 7, which reads:

“For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.”

The passage we are going to look at shortly involves two historical characters, Abraham and Isaac. As we go through the story in detail, I hope you will agree that Abraham is a picture, or type, of God the Father, that Isaac is a type of God the Son, that is, our Lord Jesus Christ, and that the whole incident is a type of His death, and also in a sense of His resurrection.

Before we get into the details, what about the third of my Bible Class leader’s headings, the Personal Application? The personal application of any passage of Scripture is just that. It is personal. In other words, the way in which you may hear, as it were, the voice of God speaking to you by the words of a particular verse of the Bible, may be very different from what God may say to me from that same verse. This is all part of the mystery and the supernatural quality of the Bible itself. It is the very word of God, and it does speak to us if we will allow it to.

We are now going to look at this passage of Scripture in detail, under those three headings that I’ve been talking about. But when we get to the third part, the Personal Application part, I will have less to say than in the other two sections of the talk, because it is to God Himself that you must listen, asking what it is that He would say to you from it, rather than to what any teacher or preacher may have to say about it.

The Primary Association

Let’s begin, then, by looking at the immediate and literal meaning of the passage. In the first 2 verses we are told that God tested Abraham - and what a test it was! God tells Abraham to take his son Isaac and offer him up as a burnt offering on a specific mountain which God will show him.

I hardly know how to start to comment on, and in any way explain, these opening verses of today’s passage. This is both because of the detail which is packed into them, but also because of the utterly shocking nature of the command God gave to Abraham. We will come back in part 2 of the talk, “the Prophetic Anticipation” part, to the detail that is found in the verses, but here we will just focus on the command itself, and Abraham’s reaction to it.

Later on in Old Testament history, several mentions are made of the abominable religious practices of the nations round about Israel, and one of these was the offering up of their children as sacrifices to their gods¹. Whilst the earliest reference to this is in the book of Deuteronomy, written approximately 400 years after today’s incident, it doesn’t seem unreasonable to assume that it was already an established practice in Abraham’s day.

Abraham had grown up as a citizen of one of those nations, and at first sight we might suppose that, being used to such practices, he would not necessarily be as appalled as we would be on being given such a command.

But Abraham had lived his life in deep communion with God for many years now, and we can say that He was one who truly knew God. God even calls him “my friend”². And so I am fully persuaded that Abraham must have been horrified beyond anything we can imagine when he heard God telling him to do something so utterly at variance with all that he knew of God’s nature and God’s ways. But the scripture doesn’t tell us what he felt in his heart on receiving this command. It tells us what he did, and that was simply to obey!

Abraham’s prompt, unquestioning and unhesitating obedience is astonishing. The scripture even records that he got up early in the morning, in order to get on with obeying God’s command as quickly as possible.

And as if being commanded by God to sacrifice your son was not bad enough, there was another, hugely important, reason why God's command must have seemed completely incomprehensible to Abraham. Isaac's very existence was a great miracle. Despite God's promise to him that his offspring would be as numerous as the stars³, Abraham had remained childless into his old age, and his wife Sarah was long past childbearing age, when Isaac was finally born. God specifically promised that it was with Isaac that He would establish His future covenant⁴, so Abraham knew that all of God's promises for the future were bound up in Isaac.

And yet, no matter what questionings may have been racing through his mind, we see Abraham, with Isaac and their two servants, or "young men", setting out on this journey to the place of which God had spoken.

I don't think we should assume that Abraham was being to the least degree untruthful when he told the servants to wait until he and Isaac returned after worshipping God. The New Testament list of the heroes of faith, in Hebrews chapter 11, contains, in verses 17 to 19, the following highly significant reference to this incident:

"By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, 'Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.' He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back."

This clear New Testament comment shows that Abraham was able to reason from what he knew to be true, and come to its logical conclusion. He knew that God never breaks a promise. He knew that God had promised that those descendants, as numerous as the stars, would be Isaac's descendants. And now he knew that God had commanded him to sacrifice Isaac as a burnt offering, and he had every intention of obeying that command. Therefore, he reasoned, God must be going to raise Isaac from the dead.

During the final walk to the mountain, after leaving the servants and the donkey, the scripture records a question-and-answer dialogue between father and son. We will return in part 2 of the talk to the significance of those words, "God will provide for Himself the lamb", but to me Abraham's answer to Isaac's very reasonable question suggests that by now God has given him some inkling of what is really going to happen when they get to that mountain top.

As it is, however, God waits until the very last moment, with Isaac bound to the altar and the fatal blow just about to fall, before He intervenes and Isaac's place on the altar is taken by the ram which God had indeed provided. As far as the "Primary Association" is concerned, then, the whole point of the incident was that God wished to test Abraham, as to whether his faithfulness to God would go to the extreme length of being willing to sacrifice his son, and Abraham passed the test with flying colours.

The Prophetic Anticipation

But let's now look at the whole account again from the point of view of its place as one of the most outstanding types to be found in the Old Testament. Earlier, I referred to the detail packed into the first two verses. There are two things said in them about what Isaac was to Abraham, which I believe have much to teach us.

For one thing, God speaks of Isaac as "your son....whom you love." I am a strong adherent of the idea that the first mention of something in the Bible is often an important guide to what God would have us, first and foremost, to understand about it. This description of Isaac is the first mention of love in the Bible.

So what kind of love does God tell us about first? It is the love of a father for his son. And viewing this as a type, it becomes a picture of that most sacred of relationships, the eternal divine relationship between God the Father and God the Son. Modern man has swallowed, amongst so many of Satan's lies, the notion that we humans have observed the relationships that we experience, and the emotions which accompany them, and have then imagined that these things must also be true of God. Let us say, loud and clear, that we repudiate such ideas, and rejoice in the truth that it is we who have been made in the image of God⁵, and not the other way round.

In creating us in His image, God has provided us with the capacity to experience, in our human lives, relationships such as that of a father and a son, which are modelled on eternal divine relationships, so that we might in some small degree understand what it meant for God to send His only Son on that journey which would lead ultimately to the cross.

The second remarkable detail in these opening verses is the description of Isaac as "your only son", or, more literally, "your son, your only." At this point in time, Abraham did have another son, Ishmael, who was 13 years older than Isaac, and born to Abraham's servant woman Hagar. This description of Isaac as Abraham's "only" can be understood as consistent with his unique position as the only one who had been born according to God's promise, as the only one through whom those glorious promises for the future were to be fulfilled, and as the only one born to Abraham's wife Sarah. Also, Hagar and Ishmael had been sent away after the birth of Isaac, so Isaac was indeed the only son who was still part of Abraham's household.

But, transcending these considerations, what this expression "your only" underlines in my mind is the connection to the fulfilment of the type, and to what is perhaps the most quoted, and for so many people the most dearly treasured, of all the verses in the Bible, the 16th verse of the 3rd chapter of the gospel by John:

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

This verse is often described as "the gospel in a nutshell" and so it is. It is sublime in its simplicity, but it encompasses in its few simple words the vast extent of the love of God.

In verse 8 is Abraham's answer to Isaac's question in verse 7, which was, in essence "Haven't you forgotten something dad? Where's the lamb?" Abraham replies, "God will provide it for Himself." How perfectly the type fits the reality to which it points! God is not only the Provider of the lamb ("God will provide") but also the One who requires the lamb ("God will provide for himself"). Our sins demand that our lives be forfeit, because we are in debt to God and have no means to pay, yet God has Himself, entirely at His own expense, provided for the settlement of that debt. And the cost to God, beyond all our power to understand, let alone adequately respond to, was the giving of His only Son.

On either side of the question and answer we've just been talking about, is the statement, "So they went both of them together." And just as these telling words help us to picture those two, the venerable old man, no doubt burdened with a deep sense of the painfulness of the task God had laid upon him, and the boy by his side, moving on to the mountain top ahead, so it teaches us that the divine Father and Son likewise walked together, as it were, to the cross. The Son ever did that which pleased the Father⁶, even though it involved laying down His own life.

Some may dismiss what I am about to say as hair splitting, but we should never gloss over the precision of the actual wording of Scripture. The Bible never says that on the cross the Father forsook the Son. Throughout His life, Jesus had always referred to God as "My Father", and yet on the cross, quoting from the Psalm⁷, He says, "My God." What the Gospel writers depict is the perfect, sinless Man, laying down His life for the sins of the whole world, and sustaining on our

account the full weight of the wrath of a Holy God. But I believe it is right to say that the communion between Father and Son was never interrupted. They went “both of them together!”

God’s last-minute intervention, staying Abraham’s hand and revealing to Abraham the ram which He had provided, further enhances the accuracy of the type, provided we slightly change the metaphor. Instead of seeing Isaac as a type of the Lord Jesus, he now becomes a type of you and me, saved from the judgement of God because One has been found to take our place. It is the ram who is now a picture of Christ, offered up as our substitute.

May I now just draw attention to the words, “Abraham, Abraham!” This is the first of what I call the “double calls” of scripture. In the entire Bible, there are just seven people who share the distinction that they were called by name, by God, and that their name was repeated. I believe there is a significance to these seven double calls, and that they can be seen as spanning the whole of God’s message to mankind. If that idea is valid, then it must be that God’s message to mankind begins with the prophetic application of this story, namely the death of Christ in our place.

The Personal Application

Finally we come to the Personal Application of these verses. For the very reason that we are talking about what God might say to you personally through this message, I can say very little here. But I will say this. Perhaps for many of you listening today, the truth in that much loved Bible verse, John chapter 3 verse 16, which I quoted earlier, has already touched your heart, and brought you to a personal knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, your Saviour and your Lord. For you, it may be that the Personal Application lies in the wonderful example of Abraham, and the desire to emulate his astonishing, unquestioning obedience to God’s will.

But I feel sure that there are also those listening for whom this is not yet the case. My sincere wish, and my prayer, is that the Personal Application for you will be that this great Old Testament story will point your gaze to the fulfilment of the type, to the cross where Jesus died for you.

May you be able to say, in the words of a grand old hymn:

“At the cross! at the cross! where I first saw the light,
And the burden of my heart rolled away;
It was there by faith I received my sight,
And now I am happy all the day!”

Isaac Watts 1674-1748

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk on Genesis chapter 22, in our series on Old Testament types of the Lord - talk number 1247. Scriptures were quoted from the English Standard Version.

¹ Deuteronomy 12:31 ² Isaiah 41:8 ³ Genesis 15:5-6 ⁴ Genesis 17:19 ⁵ Genesis 1:26-27 ⁶ John 8:29
⁷ Psalm 22:1

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