

Jesus and Isaac: God is For Us

The story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac (Genesis 22), the son of the promise, has long been seen as a prefiguring of God sacrificing Jesus, His unique Son. There are similarities often enumerated: the uniqueness of the son, the seed of Abraham, the submission of the son to the father, the willingness to sacrifice, the belief in resurrection, the son carrying the wood on which he would be sacrificed, etc. While some comparisons are legitimate, others may be a bit forced if not careful. Some are natural lessons found in many events. There are obvious limitations in the comparisons. For example, whereas Isaac did not know he was supposed to be the sacrifice, Jesus knew exactly why He came in the flesh, what was going to happen, and why it would happen (cf. Matt 16:21).

In counting up the similarities between Isaac and Jesus, we can miss another significant point of the story. Recall what happened when Isaac asked his father where the lamb for sacrifice was: "Abraham said, 'God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son' (vv. 7-8). ... Abraham's faith was full on display here, and God did provide an initial answer for him: "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' (vv. 13-14). It's about God providing.

If we are to make sense out of the comparisons, then we also need to see this one: in this story there is a sense in which **we** are Isaac under the knife of death, and Jesus is the lamb prefigured by the ram. God would indeed provide a sacrifice for us. "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!" (John 1:29)

Of course, analogies should not be taken further than intended and I am in no way trying to come up with a one-to-one comparison of events. However, we do know that Jesus is the lamb of God, provided by our Creator in order to bring about forgiveness and reconciliation. . We do know that Abraham's faith drove his actions, and that he was fully convinced that God would raise Isaac from the dead if indeed he were put to death (Heb 11:17-18). That kind of faith is what God calls on us to imitate. By following in the footsteps of Abraham, we are trusting in the promise of God, which rests on His grace, to bring us the hope of future resurrection (see Romans 4).

There is another contrast to be made. In the great passage of Romans 8, Christians are given the promise of God that He will help them to the end. No matter what obstacles may be in the way, no matter what the world may do, no matter how much adversity is there, God's love has forever been demonstrated in the cross. Notice, in particular, this amazing passage: "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (vv. 31-32)

Think again about the Isaac account. "He who did not spare his own Son" contrasts with the fact that Isaac was spared. Even more, we are spared. The faith demonstrated by Abraham, knowing that God would provide the lamb for sacrifice, is finally fulfilled in the Son of God, who was not spared for the sake of all humanity. Without the sacrifice of Jesus, we would be forever without the hope of life. Were Jesus spared, we could not be.

If God is willing to go to this length (even extreme) to save us, why would we ever doubt His desire and ability to help us achieve the purpose for which He first made us, then remade us in Christ after sin had devastated us? Remember that He did this, not after we became good (which could not just happen), but even while we were ungodly sinners and enemies who were hostile to Him (Rom 5:6-11).

It may well be, then, that one of the greatest lessons to learn from comparing Isaac with Jesus is not so much in the similarities of the events, but in the great contrast: "He who did not spare His own Son..."

"He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls" (1 Pet 2:24-25).

If God did all of this for us, why would we ever doubt His desire to help us through the process to achieve the end goal of glorification? Be comforted by the fact that God is for us.

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