

Opening Blind Eyes
Genesis 22:1-14
(Nominated by Jeri Jackson)

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If the text from Genesis 22 does not make you recoil, then you may need to read it again. When we first heard the story of Abraham and Isaac in Vacation Bible School or a Sunday School class or from a parent, we probably did not see the incredible horror in it. When we come back to it as adults, though, possibly with children of our own, we can hardly believe what we're reading. What kind of God would command a father to sacrifice his only son as a burnt offering?

Jeri Jackson nominated this text. She is particularly interested in the interpretation of this text by a man named John Claypool. Dr. Claypool was one of the great thinkers and preachers produced by Southern Baptists. He occupied some of the most prestigious pulpits in the Southern Baptist Convention until he could no longer stand the narrowness and quarrelling. He left and became an Episcopalian serving St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Mountain Brook until his retirement. He died a couple of years ago. One of the books he wrote is titled *Opening Blind Eyes*. That's the way he describes his experience of coming to understand the grace of God. It was like having his blind eyes opened. Like many of us, he was driven to compete and achieve. He became a well-respected pastor and an activist for racial integration and ecumenism, yet he admits that he felt terribly lonely and empty. He believed that strenuous effort and achievement would eventually fill the emptiness, but it never did. He finally discovered that worth does not come from the outside in. It's the other way around. By "the grace of creation," he says, worth is planted within us by our Creator.

All this came crashing in upon him in 1968 when his ten-year-old daughter Laura Lue was diagnosed with acute leukemia and died. He says that experience plunged him into "the deepest abyss of sorrow and darkness" he had ever known (p. 70). Some days he raged, wanting to know why God could allow an innocent little girl to suffer and die. And then some days he felt nothing at all, as if most of him had died too. Believe it or not, what pulled him out of that abyss is the Abraham-Isaac story in Genesis 22.

First of all, let's go back a few chapters. Remember, God established a covenant, a special relationship, with Abraham and his wife Sarah. God promised that this covenant relationship would be "everlasting." Their children, their children's children, and their children all would be the bearers of this covenant relationship with God. God told Abraham and Sarah that they would be the parents of a "multitude of nations." However, there was a little problem. They had no children. Abraham was ninety-nine years old, and Sarah was ninety. If this covenant promise was to be realized, it would be God's doing. I want to read to you Abraham's response to God when he learned that he and Sarah at ages ninety-nine and ninety respectively were going to have a baby. Surely humor is intended with these words: "Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed...."

Guess what? They had a baby. They had a baby boy and named him Isaac, which means, "he laughs." So Isaac was the first of what would become a multitude of nations. Isaac was the link to the promise. He was the hope of their future. Doesn't that make the command from God in verse two of our text even more puzzling? "Take your son," God told Abraham, "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 that I shall show you."

We don't know Isaac's age in chapter twenty-two. His trusting, agreeable nature makes me think that he may have been young, maybe seven or eight years old. Notice two things about this commandment from God. First of all, God does not command Abraham to kill or murder Isaac. He is told to present him as an offering. "What's the difference?" you may ask. "The end result certainly is the same." Not exactly. God's command places this event within the context of Israel's faith, their sacrificial system. This becomes a religious act, an act of faith, where Abraham is called upon to surrender to God something he dearly loves. It couldn't be called a sacrifice otherwise.

The second thing to notice is that Abraham didn't object. He didn't even ask a question. He says only, "Here I am." And then the next morning he's up early putting a saddle on his donkey. Maybe this text is expecting us, the readers, to raise objections and ask questions.

Once the donkey was ready, Abraham summoned two servants and Isaac. They split wood to fuel the fire for the burnt offering and then set out for Mt. Moriah. When they drew near, Abraham told the servants to wait, saying that he and Isaac would go ahead and worship. Unsuspecting Isaac carried the wood on his back, reminding me of another who walked to a mountain carrying wood upon his back. Abraham carried the torch and the knife. As they approached the place for the burnt offering, Isaac asked a question. If there was ever a pure, innocent question, this is it: “Father...the fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?”

The text tells us nothing of Abraham’s emotional state. I imagine tears flowing gently down his face as he answers, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.”

The tension of this text is almost too much to bear. When they came to the place for the sacrifice, Abraham prepared the wood. Perhaps Isaac stood to one side and watched—a dutiful son. At some point Abraham reached out and took Isaac, his only son, whom he loved, by the arm. He bound Isaac, the text says. It must have become apparent to Isaac then that he was the answer to his question. He was the lamb for the offering. Abraham laid his son on the wood and took out the knife. We don’t know if Isaac resisted or cried. Maybe they both cried. In an act of absolute faith in God, Abraham raised the knife. But before he could plunge it downward, he heard his name called: “Abraham, Abraham!” For the third time in this text he responds, “Here I am.”

It was a messenger from God who called to Abraham. The messenger told Abraham not to hurt Isaac. Abraham, he said, had proved his loyalty to God. He was willing to give everything to be faithful to God, even his son, the link to the future. Then Abraham looked up and, perhaps through tears, saw a ram caught in the bushes. The ram became the sacrifice rather than Isaac. And Abraham named that place on Mt. Moriah “the Lord will provide.”

This was a test of Abraham’s faithfulness. The readers know that and God knew it. Abraham didn’t, or it wouldn’t have been a real test. It was a test to see if Abraham was the faithful one to carry out God’s plans, or did God need to find another? Abraham proved to be faithful.

Now John Claypool, who had just lost his ten-year-old daughter to leukemia, took this text in a completely different direction. Drawing upon the research of a German theologian, Claypool says that this text reminded Abraham that God, not Abraham, was in control of events. The covenant relationship was offered to Abraham and Sarah out of God's grace. It was a gift, not something Abraham had earned by sheer drive and achievement. That was true of all God's gifts, including Isaac, the link to the future. Since Isaac was so important to the future, it would have been easy for Abraham to cherish Isaac more than he loved God. It would have been easy for Abraham to clutch Isaac and treat him as his own possession. On Mt. Moriah that day, Abraham proved that he understood where Isaac came from and to whom he really belonged. Isaac was not a reward. Isaac, his beloved son, was a gift.

Here are Claypool's own words:

Who was Laura Lue, really? She had been a gift—not something I had created and therefore had the right to clutch as an owned possession, but a treasure who had always belonged to Another. She had been with me solely through the gracious generosity of that One. (p. 69)

He continued with these words:

Had Laura Lue been my possession by right, then God would, in fact, have been a thief, and anger on my part would have been justified. But on the premise that nothing actually belongs to us—that all is given—anger seemed inappropriate. (Ibid.)

He says that Genesis 22 was just what he needed just when he needed it.

I think of our own precious Leigh Anna Jimmerson and her companion Tad Mattle. I don't think a day has passed since April 17 that I haven't thought of them. That's probably true for many of you too. They were taken from us much too soon. Claypool is right. They were a gift. We didn't earn them. They were not our reward for being smart and creative. They were gifts who always belonged to Another.

That is true of your children, too. And mine. Your grandchildren. Your spouse. And your friends. They're gifts. Imagine the difference it could make if we could each see each other as gift. If our blind eyes could be opened to that truth, imagine the difference it could make in our world. Thank you, Jeri, for calling this to our attention.

Closing Prayer

God of Abraham and Isaac, God who calls to us all, do open our blind eyes. By the grace of creation, help us to see the worth you have planted in every person. Amen.