

Introduction

So what are you giving up for Lent? Maybe you didn't even think about that question this past week. Or maybe during Lent you sacrifice some bad habits—like eating too much chocolate or too many sweets, or drinking too much beer or alcohol, or using your phone for too much screen time or social media, or raiding your pantry to get rid of all the cookies and junk food, or even something more sophisticated like eliminating all the complaining and gossiping you do—all things you probably should address whether it's Lent or not. Lent is the time of the year that Christians have historically given something up. Those personal sacrifices are meant to focus your attention on God more, but when you think about it, sacrificing things like food, phones, or phony attitudes is pretty small, and it doesn't disrupt your life all that much.

But what about giving up the most precious thing you could ever imagine? What about sacrificing your entire college education, your entire house, or your entire family? What about sacrificing your own son? Now it's not fun and games anymore. Now it's getting down to business. Now it's going for the jugular and cutting right to the heart. In today's First Reading, we take the concept of giving things up for Lent to a whole 'nother level when we read about Abraham sacrificing his own son Isaac. Genesis 22 is all about:

The Greatest Sacrifice of All

There is no one greater in the book of Genesis than Abraham. This towering Old Testament figure is the one whom God called to leave his country and move to the land of Canaan. To this father of the Israelites God promised that he would make him into a great nation. To this foreigner God promised that he would give him the land he is standing on. To this patriarch God promised that he would bless all people on earth. All those promises sounded grand and glorious, but there was one big problem. Abraham did not have any children. God, where are these descendants that you say will possess the land of Canaan and bless all people on earth? So God reiterated his promise. "Yes, Abraham, all those promises still stand. In fact, it's going to happen through a son from your own body." After twenty-five years of waiting, after disappointment after disappointment, after seeing all his contemporaries have children and feeling left out, one day God promised to give Abraham a special son in his old age. When Abraham was one hundred years old, God gave him a special child, a miraculous child. Through it all, God was teaching Abraham to trust in him, even when things seemed humanly impossible.

That is what makes this test from God so painful. ***"Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you."*** As one commentator said, God spoke these words to Abraham "with heart-rending precision."¹ The emotion builds with each of the four descriptions—your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac. After all, this is the child he never thought he would have, the son he held in his arms, the miracle baby he received in his old age, the only hope for continuing his family line into the future. What's more, this is the son of the promise, the one through whom the promised Savior would come. So to put it bluntly: God, how can you tell me to sacrifice my own son? Isn't murder a repulsive thing to you? What's more, if I sacrifice Isaac, the son of the promise, how will you fulfill your promise to send the Savior from his line? How will anyone of us have any hope of heaven? Won't we all just suffer in hell for all eternity? Everything you

¹ K. A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, NAC 1B (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 289.

have promised me would go up in smoke once the smoke from that sacrifice would blow away! Now you can see why Martin Luther said that, to human reason, this command did not seem to be a test from God but a temptation straight from the devil.² The purpose of a test, in biblical terminology, is to refine faith by melting out all the impurities and human things we rely on, so that faith puts God first, above all else, and relies on him and him alone, even when things seem absolutely impossible. Abraham's test comprised the greatest sacrifice of all.

So what did Abraham do? I'm sure he lost a lot of sleep that night with a million things running through his head. Personally, I would want to sleep in or sort some things out or ask God some pointed questions, but Abraham wakes up early the very next morning and gets ready to head out for this journey. He even cuts up the wood for the sacrifice, knowing full well he would sacrifice his son on it. Just imagine looking at these two heading off into the distance. This is just excruciatingly painful at this point! Every step of the journey Abraham has to think about making the greatest sacrifice of all, sacrificing his only son who's walking right next to him. For three days in a row! But along the way, Abraham gives two clues as to where his mind is really at. First, once he sees the mountain off in the distance, he tells his servants, ***"We will worship and then we will come back to you."*** Now wait a minute. *We* will come back. Not *I* will come back. Abraham is prepared to make the greatest sacrifice of all, but as the book of Hebrews explains (11:19), Abraham knows God could even raise his dead son if need be. Second, once Abraham starts to hike up the mountain, Isaac asks where the lamb for the sacrifice is. I mean, this is just unbearable at this point! We have the wood and the fire, Dad, but where's the sacrifice? Well, Isaac, you're it! You're the one being led like a lamb to the slaughter! This must have felt like five thousand darts fired right into the heart of Abraham. Yet he still tells Isaac, ***"God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son."*** This is not just an evasive response. This is the essence of faith to trust that God will provide, some way, somehow, even if Abraham has absolutely no idea how. Once they arrive at their final destination, everything goes into slow motion,³ as time seems to stretch out for eternity. First, build an altar. Then put wood on top of it. Then bind Isaac. Then put him on top of the altar. Then reach out your hand. Then grab the knife. I mean, you just got to cover your eyes and turn away. Abraham, are you really going to go through with this? Abraham, are you really going to kill your own son? Abraham, are you really going to offer up the greatest sacrifice of all? No! Don't do it!

Right then, in the most dramatic part of the story, the angel of the Lord swoops in to stop Abraham's hand from falling down to kill his son. ***"Abraham! Abraham! Do not lay a hand on the boy! Do not do anything to him!"*** The test has reached its goal. It has refined Abraham's faith through this most severe trial of making the greatest sacrifice of all, and it has demonstrated that Abraham places God first in his life. This also demonstrated that Abraham was right to give hints that, some way, somehow, both Abraham *and* Isaac would return home because God would provide the sacrifice. ***Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place The Lord Will Provide.*** Thousands of years before Christ was born, thousands of years before the Lamb of God was sacrificed, thousands of years before the New Testament was written, this Old Testament event clearly teaches the doctrine of the substitutionary atonement. Substitutionary atonement means that sin needs to be paid for, but we need someone to do it in our place. We need a substitute, one who would die so we could live. Finally, at the end of this story about the greatest sacrifice of all, God repeats his original

² See John C. Jeske, *Genesis*, 2nd ed., The People's Bible (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2001), 182.

³ K. A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 296.

promise to Abraham once again, ***“Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore, ... and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed.”*** This is the third time God gives Abraham this grand promise that determines the entire trajectory of the rest of the Bible. God would bless Abraham and would make him into a great nation and would give him countless descendants. But through one descendant in particular, through one special son of Abraham, all nations on earth would be blessed. So this powerful, emotional, and moving story ends with a giant deep breath that Abraham’s son was saved, but it also ends with a hint about a greater son of Abraham to come.

Abraham made the greatest sacrifice of all. So ... could you do it? Could you make the greatest sacrifice of all? Honestly, the answer is no. I can sacrifice an hour or two on Sunday mornings for God. I can sacrifice some of my personal convenience to get involved in the Lord’s work in his kingdom. I can even sacrifice my reputation and self-esteem when people at school or at work blow me off or make fun of me for being a Christian. But could I sacrifice my own child whom I’ve held in my arms? My own spouse whom I married on the happiest day of my life? My own best friend whom I treat like family? No, I can’t do that, because I could never dream of living without that person! I wonder how many of us would fail the test of making the greatest sacrifice of all, because at the end of the day we would withhold things from God. After all, deep down in our hearts, our actions show there are certain things and certain people who are more precious than God himself. So ... could God do it? Could God make the greatest sacrifice of all? Here the answer is yes. God did not just sacrifice an hour or two one day a week for you. He did not just sacrifice some of his personal convenience living the high life up in heaven. He did not just sacrifice his reputation and self-esteem when our world would blow him off or make fun of him. God made the greatest sacrifice of all—his Son. Who is the ultimate fulfillment, the one to whom all these hints in the story, the sacrificial ram and the seed of Abraham, were pointing to? It is none other than the greater Son of Abraham—God’s Son, his only Son, his Son whom he loved, Jesus (Mt 3:17, Jn 3:16)—the one standing at the very end of this messianic line of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Like Isaac, he was the son of the promise, who was born in a miraculous way. Unlike Isaac, he was not spared and God did not dramatically intervene to prevent his death. As the apostle Paul says in today’s Second Reading, God did not spare his only Son but gave him up for us all (Ro 8:32). Jesus trudged up a hill not far from Mt. Moriah, a mountain called Calvary, where he died so we might live.

That makes this story of the greatest sacrifice of all even more powerful, even more emotional, even more moving. Once you are moved by the greatest sacrifice of all—not Abraham’s, but God the Father’s—once you see God’s immense love this Lenten season all over again, once you realize that he did not withhold his own Son but sacrificed him on the cross so you could live, then you are prepared to give up anything for him. In the great magnitude of his love for us, all our sacrifices seem so small, and they pale in comparison to the greatness of his sacrifice to us. So sacrifice your time on Sunday morning to come to church. Sacrifice your convenience to get involved in our ministry outside of Sunday morning. Sacrifice the esteem of your classmates and professors, your coworkers and supervisors, your friends and neighbors, to boldly live out and witness to your faith in your every day life. And why make all those sacrifices? Because, like Abraham, sacrifices drive us all the more to God’s gracious promises that sustain our faith in trials. Because we want to know Christ and the power of his sufferings and to make his sacrificial love known to others. Our sacrifices are never ways we earn his greatest sacrifice of all, but our sacrifices are simply ways we thank him for it.

Conclusion

Maybe you will give up something for Lent, or maybe you won't give up something for Lent. Both are just fine. But whatever you do, I want you to make Lent the time that you think, not so much about what you are giving up for God, but about what he gave up for you. He gave up his own Son. He sent his Son into this world to be tested in the most severe way in the wilderness, before he would be sacrificed on the cross for all of your sins. You may make sacrifices for him, but he is the greatest sacrifice of all. Amen.