

# CHAPTER 12

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## GENESIS 22: HOW GOD FELT

Empathy can be defined as “the capacity to understand or feel what another person is experiencing from within their frame of reference, that is, the capacity to place oneself in another’s position.”<sup>1</sup> It is an important quality to possess. Without it, we can’t comprehend the level of pain someone else may be feeling or understand their actions. Their actions won’t make sense to us since we don’t feel the same pain they are feeling. While we can have some empathy for other people without going through the same circumstances they are, there is no better way to understand how someone else is feeling than to somehow experience some of what they are going through. There is an old saying that goes something like, “Don’t criticize someone unless you first walk a mile in their shoes.”

For example, I had witnessed other people who had a child die when I was younger and had no children of my own. I thought I understood how they hurt and grieved. However, it was not until I had children of my own that I could start to grasp how deep and painful that hurt and grief could be. Fortunately, I have not had the experience of losing a child, so I still don’t fully know what it would

be like, but I can better understand it now as a parent compared to when I was a childless young adult.

I've started out this chapter discussing empathy because it is huge in understanding what takes place in the Bible, and probably no more important than here in Genesis 22.

Genesis 22 starts out with a shocking request that God makes of His friend Abraham: "After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' 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.'"<sup>2</sup>

How could God request something like that of anyone, let alone Abraham?! He knew Isaac was Abraham's only son, didn't He? He knew how long Abraham had waited to see his son Isaac become a reality, didn't He? Of course, He did! He states, "take your son" and then adds insult to injury and adds, "your only son Isaac." How could God do that? God even adds the words, "whom you love" as if putting one final stake in Abraham's heart was needed because the earlier words didn't do enough to pierce Abraham's heart.

To my surprise, Abraham doesn't question God at all. The next verse says that "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." If Abraham is like me at all, one of the reasons he rose early was because he didn't get an ounce of sleep after that conversation with God. He had to have had a thousand questions with no acceptable answers going through his mind.

- Why would God ask him to sacrifice Isaac? Abraham loved Isaac! He was his son!
- Why did God make all these promises about Abraham becoming a nation through Isaac if he now had to sacrifice Isaac? God had recently clarified to him that it was through Isaac that his descendants would be as numerous

as the sand by the seashore. He had him send his other son Ishmael away after God told him that Isaac was to be his only heir through which the promise would be fulfilled. Ishmael was now gone and out of the picture. God giving Abraham another son wouldn't help because the promises were tied to Isaac. Isaac was it. Only Isaac.

- What would he tell Isaac? Could he somehow keep this from Isaac, or would Isaac find out?
- What would he tell Sarah when he comes back without Isaac? Isaac was her only son too.
- Does God realize that by sacrificing Isaac, Abraham will be childless again? He has no other son to take Isaac's place! He had waited so long to have God's unbelievable promise fulfilled to him, and it came true! Now this!
- Had he or Isaac done something wrong? God seemed to be pleased with him, but maybe God was angry with him and had not told him yet? Had Isaac done something wrong?
- If someone had to die as a sacrifice, why couldn't he [Abraham] die instead of Isaac?
- If Isaac had to die, then why did Abraham need to be the one to kill Isaac? Couldn't God do this Himself if this had to be done?

I am sure Abraham struggled with all of these questions all night as he would have tossed and turned, hoping that if he turned on his other side that the circumstance God just put him in would somehow change back to the wonderful way things had been with his son of promise, Isaac, in his life. However, with more and more thought, he must have come to the realization that there was no way out of this box. All of God's promises to him were to have their fulfillment in Isaac's life, and yet God now not asked, but commanded him to offer Isaac to God as a sacrifice. This required Abraham to put a knife into Isaac and end his precious son's life! And then not even

be able to hold him one last time before burying him, but instead to burn him on an altar of sacrifice!

Yet somehow, Abraham chose to believe God to the extent that he would obey God even with sacrificing his and Sarah's one and only son. He had an absolute faith that God would somehow keep His promise, by what means Abraham didn't yet know. Abraham didn't have to know as he trusted God absolutely, believing God would raise Isaac up from the dead somehow in order to keep His promise.

So, Abraham rises early in the morning, with a firmness in his steps and actions. He can't allow himself to question the insanity of what he was about to do, because if he did, he may instead waiver and not do what God had told him to do.

If only the place where God wanted him to do this was close by, but it wasn't. They had to set out on a journey not knowing where he was going, but God would show him. It was not until the third day of their journey that Abraham's eyes saw the place where God told him that He wanted this to happen:

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."<sup>6</sup>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 (Genesis 22:4–6).

Can you imagine the conversations they had those three days on the way there? It must have been hard for Abraham to keep his emotions restrained all that time. Three long days to comprehend the loss of Isaac. The awkwardness of all that time must have weighed on not only Abraham, but also Isaac, as he notices that his father is not as talkative as he was usually. Normally, they would talk about what they are seeing as they walk, as any father and son would. Not this time. Isaac can sense something is different.

Finally, once the servants have been left behind, Isaac can ask his father something that has been bothering him ever since they left home. Now he can ask the question without embarrassing his father in front of his servants. Isaac finally blurts out, “My father! Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham replies, “God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” With that simple answer, Isaac continues on and carries the wood for the offering, not realizing he is carrying the wood on which he is going to be sacrificed.

Abraham and Isaac finally reach the place and stop their walking and begin the work of preparing to offer the sacrifice. Both Isaac and Abraham begin gathering large stones to build the altar. With Abraham’s age now well over 100 years old, I picture Abraham picking out the stones and Isaac doing the heavy lifting of building the altar. How ironic and sad it is that Isaac is building his own altar! Not only did he carry the wood, now he is building the altar too! Abraham finally arranges on the altar the wood Isaac had carried.

Finally, all the preparations had been made. Isaac probably expected to wait now for God to provide the lamb, as his father had said. But instead of resting and waiting, his father begins to bind him with rope! Abraham would not have been able to bind him in one or two seconds. This would take probably at least a minute to do, and maybe longer if Isaac resisted. Can you imagine the hurt that Abraham must have felt looking into his son’s beautiful eyes, seeing the fear that Isaac must have felt come through them as Abraham began to bind Isaac and put him on the altar, as Isaac now realized HE was the sacrifice his father said God was going to provide?

Oh, how hard that must have been for Abraham to block out his emotions in order to continue to bind Isaac! But Abraham had chosen to believe and trust God. What else could he do if he were to continue to believe and trust God? Nothing else. The only thing Abraham could do now if he wanted to remain obedient to God is described in a simple sentence: “Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son.”<sup>3</sup>

Abraham had offered many offerings to the Lord before when he had to kill an unblemished animal he had raised from its birth and have it all consumed before him on an altar to the Lord. While that may have hurt some to be so ruthless with an animal in taking its life, he had done it so many times and understood this was just an animal that would eventually be killed for its meat and hide. But this was his son, his one and only son, by which God had promised many great things for him, and none of them could come to pass except through Isaac! This was what he was now sacrificing to the God that he obeyed.

Thankfully, God does intervene in this story! At the very last second, God stops Abraham from sacrificing Isaac. God says to him, “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.”<sup>4</sup> Abraham is found faithful in God’s eyes. God knows that Abraham would not hold back his son, his only son from God. God then provided the sacrifice by showing Abraham a ram caught by its horns in a thicket which Abraham took and offered as the sacrifice instead of Isaac.



I started this chapter explaining empathy in order to help you understand the emotional pain and internal conflict that Abraham must have gone through during those three long days in his life. Yes, he believed God that somehow the promise of all of Abraham’s descendants coming through Isaac would be fulfilled. But how? Abraham didn’t have this story in front of him so that he could quickly read the ending and see that everything works out fine. He was living this story and did not know how this would turn out! Those three days must have been agonizing for Abraham. Abraham was a human being with affections, emotions, fears and dreams, just like you and me. These were probably the three longest and hardest days of Abraham’s life. We can read this story in a matter of a few

minutes and not comprehend the enormity of all that took place in those three long days. Hopefully, you've been able to empathize and identify with Abraham, seeing things from his point of view.

Because of Abraham's faithfulness, he is mentioned in what some call the "Bible's faith hall of fame," which is Hebrews 11. It says the following about Abraham's actions:

By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death (Hebrews 11:17–19, NIV).

However, this book you are reading isn't about Abraham. This book is about God the Father. So, what was God the Father's role in this story? Is He somewhat of a twisted villain, after being the one to cause such emotional pain and distress for Abraham, but makes up for it by providing the ram for the sacrifice? If you are like me, you are probably asking why God put Abraham through all of that only to provide the sacrificial ram at the last minute?

God does speak after all of this happens:

And the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven and said, "By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice" (Genesis 22:15–18).

If you look at what God told Abraham, it is pretty much the same as what God had told Abraham previously several times. It wasn't

that by Abraham obeying God this time, it set him on a new level with God that He had not attained before. So, what purpose was accomplished with God telling Abraham to do this and Abraham doing what God said to do? Did God need to see if Abraham was the real thing and really believed God? I don't think so, because in an earlier chapter of Genesis God says, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him?"<sup>5</sup> So, why would God put Abraham through this emotional trial?

To me, the answer is that God was wanting us to understand what He (God the Father) was going to go through when He sent His Son, His only Son, Jesus to die on a cross for the sins of you, me, and the whole world. You see, God the Father went through the same things that Abraham went through when He sent Jesus to die on the cross for us. Just like Abraham was offering up his only son,

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so was God the Father. Except God the Father did not have anyone to say, "Stop!" and to provide a substitute. It was His Son, Jesus, the Son of God, who actually became the ultimate sacrifice. And if we are able

to empathize with Abraham and understand what he must have gone through emotionally to offer up his one and only son, then perhaps we can now identify with God the Father and what He must have gone through in offering up His one and only Son for all of us. So, I believe God had Abraham go through this horrible experience in order for us to understand what God the Father would go through when He offered up Jesus.

Just like Isaac left his home to go with Abraham to be the sacrifice, Jesus had to leave His place in Heaven to come to this earth where His Father had led Him to die for our sins. Like Isaac, Jesus also carried the wood that was to be used in His sacrifice. In Jesus's case, this was a wooden cross that He carried. Since Jesus created



the world, He actually also built the stones that created the mount upon which He would be crucified. Instead of building an altar from stones, like Isaac, He actually built the mount. In fact, Mount Moriah where Isaac was offered is part of Jerusalem, so God had Abraham travel for three days and about 50 miles in order to link the sacrifice of Isaac and Jesus geographically.

Jesus was bound like Isaac, but Jesus was not rescued at the last second by someone providing the real sacrifice. Jesus was the real intended sacrifice. God intended for Jesus to die to pay the penalty for all sin.

I also believe that one of the reasons Ishmael was sent away from Abraham before all this happened is that God didn't want Abraham thinking it would be OK to offer Isaac as a sacrifice because Abraham still had another son, Ishmael, through which God could give him descendants. God wanted Abraham to understand that he was offering to God his *only* son through which Abraham would ever have descendants. By Abraham understanding that Isaac was his only son, the parallel of Abraham sacrificing Isaac and God the Father sacrificing His one and only Son Jesus is perfected.

I don't know if we will ever grasp how much pain and hurt was going through God the Father's heart as He heard His only beloved Son say, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" How hard it must have been for God the Father to turn His face away from Jesus and resist saving Him from the death that He did not deserve. Ponder this! Think about it! God the Father must have experienced tremendous hurt in seeing His one and only Son beaten, mocked and then crucified. Somehow, He held Himself back from rescuing Jesus because there was no other way for Him to save us if He did!

Now, like was said by God of Abraham, may we say of God the Father, "Now I know that you [love me], because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."<sup>6</sup> And now we understand more fully the love of God the Father that Jesus was describing when Jesus said in John 3:16, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but

have eternal life.” The word “so” needs to be emphasized somehow, because He didn’t just love the world some, but He “SO” loved the world if He was willing to put Himself and his son Jesus through that for you and me.

With this in mind, it means a lot more when we read in I John 4:19, “We love him [God], because He first loved us.”<sup>7</sup>

I hope you will not just simply turn the page to start another chapter but will pause for a minute to think about what physical and emotional pain both God the Father and Jesus the Son went through for you. May the reality of that sink deep into your heart. May the love of God for you that drove God the Father to offer His one and only Son fill your heart and capture it. You were the object of that love. Don’t let that love be in vain. Return that love to Him.