

Responding to the New Atheists' attacks on the God of the Old Testament-12: "Child Abuse"(Part 1, The divine command for Abraham to murder his own innocent child)

The narrative of God commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son is poignant:

Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 2 And He said, "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you." 3 So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and Isaac his son; and he split wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. 4 On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from a distance. 5 And Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go yonder; and we will worship and return to you." 6 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 the two of them walked on together. 7 And Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." And he said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" 8 And Abraham said, "God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together. 9 Then they came to the place of which God had told him; and Abraham built the altar there, and arranged the wood, and bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. 10 And Abraham stretched out his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. 11 But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 12 And he said, "Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me." 13 Then Abraham raised his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the place of his son. 14 And Abraham called the name of that place The LORD Will Provide, as it is said to this day, "In the mount of the LORD it will be provided" (Gen. 22:1-14).

This incident raises profound philosophical and theological questions. Why should God ask Abraham to sacrifice his own son? After all, wasn't the practice of child-sacrifice one of the chief reasons God had the Canaanites exterminated? Why should God command something that seems so immoral? Just because God says to murder your child, does that make it right? Did the fact that God commanded it somehow *suspend* typical ethical obligations? (Calvinists and other divine command theorists would unhesitatingly say, "yes").

Furthermore, what is laudatory about Abraham's willingness to murder his own child? In other words, why should Abraham's consent to murder his own son make him the father of faith as so celebrated in Romans 4? Does this sound a bit like a news story where a certain deluded person murdered someone because "God told me to do it"? Do the New Atheists have a point in charging God with child abuse in commanding a father to murder "your only son, whom you love"? Since child sacrifice was one of the horrible practices of the Canaanites for which He judged them, and child-sacrifice was prohibited in the Mosaic Law, does it not seem that God is a bit whimsical and capricious in Genesis 22? Can God just as well command murder as prohibit it? After all, it looks like He is doing just that to Abraham. What a monstrous test for "virtue"! How can one man, Abraham, be celebrated for willingness to murder his own son, yet if another man does the same, it is a heinous sin? How in the world can a test to commit murder serve as a test for godliness? Should Abraham be loved or hated for what he did? How can the willingness to violate basic morality make Abraham such a great believer? Does trusting God involve doing such immoral things as murdering your own children for God's glory? Have we not seen many instances of child abuse "for the glory of God" throughout history?

How are we to respond to atheists who charge that *serious* belief in God is what leads to such gross immorality—to what Dawkins (in speaking about the binding of Isaac) calls "child abuse and bullying"? There are two basic ways a believer can approach this whole issue: the anti-intellectual/religious/emotional or the philosophical/theological/biblical method. The anti-intellectual religious method is to offer superficial pat answers (for example, "It is a mystery," "God knew he would not do it," "God's ways are not our ways," or "Who are you to question God about commanding immorality?")—that are really no answers at all. The philosophical way is to do the hard work of understanding the *reality* of what is going on—reality as such. As you can see with all of the questions, we have our work cut out for us. This series is going to take a while for us to answer all of the questions and get to the truth underneath it all, a truth that will give us a whole new appreciation of Abraham and God. It is unfortunate that we live in an age of such anti-intellectualism in Christianity that would preclude a true understanding of God's command to Abraham. We live in a time where Christians are unable and unwilling to develop capacity for sustained thinking required for true biblical insights and wisdom. While anti-intellectual Christians deserve blame, the lion's share of blame belongs to pastors and ministers who give into believer's desires for childish big-picture ideas or disdain for teaching that is over their heads. It should be no surprise that Christianity has become so pathological in "thinking." Some Christians will actually get upset because of too much information on the overhead—**WHAT IN THE WORLD HAS HAPPENED TO CHRISTIANITY?**

Consider some of the comments from one of the greatest educators of all time, Mortimer Adler, regarding teaching subjects which include high abstract thinking (like Christian theology):

Thinking about such subjects can seldom be done well in concrete terms; what is worse, such thought is often distorted or confused by appeals to imagination or to concrete examples that tend to obscure rather than clarify the ideas involved. It is, therefore, necessary to lift the minds of your listeners to levels of abstraction that exceed the reaches of their imaginations. . . . Always risk talking over their heads! . . . It will not hurt if some of the things you say may be beyond their reach. It is much better for them to have the sense that they have succeeded in getting some enlightenment by their effort to reach up (even if they also have the sense that some things to be understood have escaped

them) than it is for them to sit there feeling insulted by the patronizing manner in which you have talked down to them.¹

The fact that so many churches have become little more than giant nurseries filled with Christians who are content to be spiritual babies is not only a pathology, but a horrible blot on the name of Christ and Christianity. It is why scholars note frequently that we live in the most anti-intellectual period of Christianity. I take comfort in the fact at Faith Bible Church we still have believers who really are interested in Truth and loving the Lord with all of their *minds*. For a pastor, it is the single greatest blessing of Christian ministry.

Another day closer to being with Him,

Pastor Don

Matthew 22:37 And He said to him, "'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' 38 "This is the great and foremost commandment.

¹Mortimer J. Adler, *How to Speak How to Listen* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 60-61.