

Responding to the New Atheists' attacks on the God of the Old Testament-15: "Child Abuse"(Part 4—3rd context: Abraham's Call)

Context is everything in understanding God's command for Abraham to murder his son. The anti-intellectual nature of the New Atheists is reflected in their superficial treatment of this event and trying to portray it as some random event where God capriciously ordered human sacrifice. Failure to grasp the multilayered contexts will lead to the distortion of the whole incident in Genesis 22 as well as loss of the rich Christological lessons embedded in the story. In the last two DDRs we noted the context of the *reiterated promises* made to Abraham regarding a son and the context of *faith vs. the Mosaic Law* throughout the Pentateuch. Today we look at the context of Abraham's call.

The first time God told Abr(ah)am to "go" (literally, "going up" [לֵךְ-לְךָ, *lek-leka*]) was when he left home in Ur of the Chaldeans (Babylonians) to go "to the land [‘el-‘erets, אֶל-הָאָרֶץ] which I will show you" (Gen. 12:1). This remarkable act of trust was based on this promise: that God would make through him and his descendants a great nation (12:2-3). But in Genesis 22:2, God commanded Abraham once again to "go," using the *same* construction (literally, *going up* [לֵךְ-לְךָ, *lek-leka*]) followed by familiar-sounding to "one of the mountains of which I will tell you." Indeed, he is to go to the *land* (אֶל-הָאָרֶץ, 'el-ha'arets: "region") of Moriah. This time Isaac, the covenant son of the promise, is involved. Abraham couldn't have missed the connection being made. Bells are going off in Abraham's mind. God is clearly reminding him of his promise of blessing in Genesis 12 and 15 even while he is being commanded to do what seems to be utterly opposed to that promise.

In chapters 12 and 15, God not only *promised* that He would make Abraham's descendants numerous as the stars, He outlined their subsequent history:

Genesis 12:1 Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go forth (לֵךְ-לְךָ) from your country, And from your relatives And from your father's house, To the land which I will show you; 2 And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; 3 And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." 4 So Abram went forth as the LORD had spoken to him; and Lot went with him. Now Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. 5 And Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his nephew, and all their possessions which they had accumulated, and the persons which they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan; thus they came to the land of Canaan. 6 And Abram passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. Now the Canaanite was then in the land. 7 And the

LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your descendants I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him.

Genesis 15:1 After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great." 2 And Abram said, "O Lord God, what wilt Thou give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" 3 And Abram said, "Since Thou hast given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir." 4 Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This man will not be your heir; but one who shall come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir." 5 And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." 6 Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness. 7 And He said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it." 8 And he said, "O Lord God, how may I know that I shall possess it?" 9 So He said to him, "Bring Me a three year old heifer, and a three year old female goat, and a three year old ram, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon." 10 Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, and laid each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds. 11 And the birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away. 12 Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror and great darkness fell upon him. 13 And God said to Abram, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. 14 "But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve; and afterward they will come out with many possessions. 15 "And as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age. 16 "Then in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete." 17 And it came about when the sun had set, that it was very dark, and behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces. 18 On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I have given this land, From the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates: 19 the Kenite and the Kenizzite and the Kadmonite 20 and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the Rephaim 21 and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Girgashite and the Jebusite."

After Abraham's obedience in chapter 12, God *confirms* his promise that he will make his offspring as numerous as the stars and the sand of the seashore in chapter 15. Genesis makes a connection between Abraham's *call* (Gen. 12) and his subsequent *obedience* (Gen. 22). The firmness of faith of Abraham, the father of Israel, was being tested, and this moment was designed to shape the identity of all subsequent generations of Israelites, indeed the whole Jewish race. Any Israelite who heard this story would take it to mean that his race owed its existence to the mercy and grace of God and its historical identity to the obedience of their ancestor Abraham.

Abraham had left his home in Ur and given up his *past* for the sake of God's promise. Now he was being asked if he would trust God by apparently surrendering his *future* as well. Everything Abraham ever hoped for was tied up in this son of promise.

In Genesis 22, Abraham was absolutely confident that God's promises would be fulfilled. In the first verse, the reader is tipped off to the fact that God never intended for Abraham to sacrifice his son: "Now it came about after these things, that God *tested* (נִסָּה, *nisah*, piel stem indicating the testing/proving of character) Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." God doesn't intend for Isaac to be sacrificed. No, Abraham is not aware of what the reader knows—namely, that this is only a test. The issue in every believer's life is trusting in the faithfulness of God. Only by passing the tests of life by applying the promises of God to the problems of life can the believer grasp the certainty of God's faithfulness. There are certain spiritual realities that are impossible for any believer to enter apart from the testing of faith in those realities. It took many years, but Abraham finally go to the point where he knew with certainty that God was faithful and that the promises would be fulfilled *through Isaac*. He knew with apodictic certainty that God meant what He said and if necessary God would raise Isaac from the dead:

Hebrews 11:17 By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac; and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; 18 it was he to whom it was said, "In Isaac your descendants shall be called." 19 He considered that God is able to raise men even from the dead; from which he also received him back as a type.

On the Glory Road,

Pastor Don

2 Corinthians 4:17 For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison,