

THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC

The Story: *Primary*

At the time when Abraham lived, people made offerings of animals and fruits to their gods. They believed that their gods were pleased with such sacrifices, and sometimes they even offered their children in their worship. There were such customs in the land from which Abraham had come, and with the people of Canaan, among whom he was living. Abraham had not yet learned better than this. In his mind the greatest service he could do for the Lord would be to offer to him Isaac, his son, whom he so dearly loved. Would the Lord be pleased that Abraham was ready to give to him the thing that he loved best? Would he really wish him to sacrifice his son? I will ask you these questions again when we have read our story.

Abraham was living in Beersheba when the Lord told him to go into the land of Moriah and offer Isaac to him there. He started early in the morning, with two young men to help, and an ass, taking wood and coals to kindle the fire on the altar. Their road was toward the north, and on the third day, when perhaps they had reached the hills of Bethlehem, they saw the place afar off. Moriah was a hill that afterward became a part of Jerusalem—the hill on which the temple was built. But when Abraham came to it, it was a wild hill with ledges of stone and thickets. We see in our little picture the top of the hill, which is protected under a pretty building—the Dome of the Rock. The young men and the ass must wait while Abraham and Isaac went on alone. They were very solemn moments for them both, as they walked on together. Read the story and what they were saying (Genesis 22:1–8).

Read a few lines more and hear the voice from heaven that Abraham heard, and see the ram caught in the thicket to be offered instead of his son (verses 9–14). Now I will ask you again: Was the Lord pleased that Abraham was ready to give to him the thing that he loved best? Did he wish him to sacrifice his son?

Another beautiful promise was given to Abraham: of increase and blessing that would come to his family. Then Abraham and Isaac went back to the young men and the ass that were still waiting, and all went home. Where was their home from which they had gone for this sacrifice to the land of Moriah?

Junior

We had a little talk the other day about the offerings of animals that people used to make in their worship. We asked ourselves whether the Lord really enjoyed such sacrifices. The Scriptures answer in many places. Let someone look up and read to us Micah 6:6–8; and other members of the class, Psalm 51:16, 17; 1 Samuel 15:22; Jeremiah 7:22, 23; and Hosea 6:6. “Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression?” Did people really in those days sacrifice their children to their gods? They did sometimes in the nations among whom Abraham was living. The motive of utmost service to the Lord was right. This way of showing devotion to the Lord was wrong. Our story shows us how the Lord taught Abraham this lesson. He accepted the spirit of devotion, but he would not allow the sacrifice of the boy. We are taught that in general the sacrifice of animals was permitted to prevent the sacrifice of children (*Arcana Coelestia* #2818).

Can you follow the journey on a map from the home in Beersheba to the hill Moriah? How long do you estimate that the journey was? Look at the old rock in our little picture, the top of the hill. This was perhaps the place to which Abraham came, and it was in later days probably covered by some part of the temple.

Read carefully the story. It tells of a deep trial that came to Abraham, and in the deeper sense it describes one of the severest of the Lord’s temptations.

1. Where was Abraham living in the South Country? What was the name of his dearly loved son?
2. Where was Moriah? What stood on that hill years afterward?
3. How could Abraham think that the Lord would be pleased by the sacrifice of his son? What did the Lord allow him to do? What did he forbid?
4. How was an offering provided for Abraham to offer?

Spiritual Study: *Intermediate*

Abraham's trial was in relation to his son Isaac. The trial of the Lord that is described in the deeper sense was in relation to the rational power, which Isaac represents. It must be submitted wholly to the divine will. In this trial it seemed to the Lord that he was giving up the sole means by which he could save mankind. (*Arcana Coelestia* #2773.) Did the child Jesus perhaps suffer something of this trial at twelve years old in the temple on this very hill Moriah, when after conversation with the doctors, in which all who heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers, he went down again to Nazareth for other patient years of working out the truth in a life of loving service?

What spiritual thought is contained in rising up early to do a hard duty?

The ass and young men must represent lower faculties that can help part way, but in a deep trial we must go beyond them. For example, we may in some trial help ourselves with reasons why it must be best and useful. It is right to find help in such considerations as far as they go; but often we must go beyond them, trusting where we cannot by natural reasoning explain. Compare the Lord's going beyond the disciples in his trial in Gethsemane.

Isaac's question, "Where is the lamb?" expresses touchingly the fear of the Lord that even if he should endure to the limit of temptation and make every sacrifice, there might not be those who could be reached and saved. The answer, "God will provide," expresses the assurance that in the divine mercy there would be those who could be saved. They are further represented by the ram caught in the thicket by his horns—those capable of the life of charity but entangled by ignorant and natural thought. (*Arcana Coelestia* #2805, 2830.)

The wood of the altar is a subject inviting careful study. Read carefully *Arcana Coelestia* #2798, 9812. The wood from the yearly increase of a tree, which serves on the altar to catch the fire and hold it in contact with the sacrifice, may be thought of in a simple way as representing the good that has already been experienced and become a part of character, and is helpful in catching the divine fire and kindling the new offering. In the fullest sense it represents the good realized in our Lord's human life, in which the divine fire was brought to earth—and is still on earth within our reach, for the kindling of our lives.

You will note at verse 11 the change of name from God to LORD (Jehovah). The name God makes prominent the divine truth, and Jehovah the divine love. The name prevailing in a Psalm or chapter often gives the keynote of truth or love. The sudden change at verse 11 is beautiful. In temptation the Lord is with us in his truth. After victory come consolation and consciousness of his love.

Notice the closing verses of the chapter (verses 20–24). They tell of increase in the family of Nahor, the brother of Abraham, who still lived in Haran. Why mention of Nahor's family in this place? A natural answer is that it tells us of the relatives to whom Abraham presently will send to find a wife for Isaac. Spiritually, these verses extend the promise and blessing just given, declaring that the help of the Lord's victory will reach even to remote and gentile people (*Arcana Coelestia* #2765, 2861).