

Transcript of Sermon By
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First Baptist Church
Rome, Georgia
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Isaac On the Altar

Genesis 22:1-14

Meditation Text:

The religion that costs nothing, that demands no hard sacrifices of other things, that does not lift the life out of low-level motives, is worth little and makes little difference to the life. The type of religion on the other hand, which costs the all, which makes the cross the central fact that dominates the life as its one driving power, becomes an incalculable force and turns many to salvation.

—Rufus M. Jones in *The World Within*

When I was a child, our family went on a vacation. At that time, in the part of the country we lived in, there were no McDonald's. If we were going to stop for lunch, we did one of two things. Either we packed a lunch and stopped at a roadside park, which always seemed like a great adventure, or we stopped at the one restaurant that you could count on in those days which was Howard Johnson's. Those of you who are old enough to remember know that Howard Johnson's was a sit-down, order-from-a-menu place. They were all along the major highways. They had orange tile roofs. About the only thing left over from the great Howard Johnson's empire today are some motels and hotels. I don't think I have seen a restaurant in many years. As a kid, one of the great things about eating at Howard Johnson's was that they had 28 flavors of ice cream, and that was stated on the sign out front.

On this particular trip, I can remember that at the conclusion of lunch, I got the great gift of being able to order ice cream. What do I order? Twenty-eight flavors! When the waitress came back to the table, I asked her what the 28 flavors were. She began to list them. I knew about chocolate and vanilla. I knew about all the typical sherbet flavors and butter pecan, but by the time she got past the first seven or eight, she was talking about combinations that I had never heard of in those days. She talked about flavors that overwhelmed me. There was something with peanut butter, something with caramel, and by the time she got done with all 28 flavors, I was overwhelmed. I was on overload. The waitress was looking at me, my parents were looking at me, and my sisters were looking at me. Under pressure, I caved. There were just so many choices and I didn't know what to do so I just said, "I'll take vanilla."

I learned a valuable lesson about making choices in that experience. Sometimes the difficulty in making a choice isn't about the thing that we want to choose. I knew I liked vanilla. We know the thing we are about to choose is something that appeals to us. Where the problem comes is if I choose vanilla, there are 27 other flavors I have not chosen. Who knows? If I were

to pick the right one, maybe it would wind up being one that I liked even more than vanilla. The problem with making a choice is you choose one thing, but you don't choose a number of other things.

If you will think about times where you have had difficulty trying to make a decision, typically it is not, *Do I like this or not?* It is, *I like this, but is there something else I might like better?*

Where are we going on vacation this year? Disney seems like a great choice. We know the kids will have a great time and everybody will be satisfied, but we have never been to Washington, D.C. Do you think we would have a good time there? I guess we might have a good time there.

Doesn't your brother-in-law have a place on the Outer Banks? That would be less expensive. We could probably go and have a wonderful time.

It is not that there is anything wrong in choosing Disney, but you start thinking about the other options that you are leaving off. Maybe that would be better. Maybe everyone would like that more. Maybe that could become a place where we could go back to every year. Maybe that would be less expensive. It is not the choice. It is the things that we don't choose. What if something I don't choose winds up being the very best?

Have you gone to shop for a car, shoes, or a wedding dress? How many people buy the first one, even though it may appear to be the best car, the best shoes, or the most beautiful wedding dress? If we choose that one first, we don't know what all the other possibilities might be. This one may be everything I was looking for but there might be something else.

A commitment is really nothing more than a choice with lasting ties. Commitments are a choice when we choose to tie ourselves to something, and when we choose to tie ourselves to it, it lasts—sometimes for a long time. Our fear is that we may make this choice and commitment and that there may be something else we like better. There may be something else that gives us more happiness or more joy.

For years, the few cell phone companies that do not require you to sign a contract have said, *Sign up with us and there is no commitment. Sign up with us and you can choose again down the road very soon. Sign up with us and you are not tied to us. Sign up with us and you can do whatever else you want.* People don't like to make commitments. We live in a world of choice, and if we make a choice that ties us to someone, to some organization, to some principle or some belief, something else may come around the bend that we will want more than what we have committed to.

The next time you are faced with a choice or commitment ask yourself, *Is the problem that I really don't like this or really don't believe in this or is it that I am really thinking about what else there may be?* I think you will find that is true.

The story of Abraham being led to almost sacrifice his son is one of the most premiere stories in the Bible about choice and commitment. The story lasts more than ten chapters in the Book of Genesis. It expands over decades. The voice of God comes to Abraham when he is far away in the area that would probably be present day Iraq. The voice comes and says, "Follow me and I will give you a great promised land and I will make you the father of a great nation." Thus begins the pilgrimage. For decades, as we are reading along, Abraham and his wife, Sarah, are doing their best to be faithful to God. They are doing their best to follow God who has promised them a land, which they come to in fairly short order, and a nation, which seems to be far off in the future.

In order to be the father of a nation, Abraham has to have at least one son. The decades are passing. Abraham and Sarah are getting older. It seems that the possibility of having this son is long gone. They try a number of things to help God along in this, believing that somehow God has missed the mark and they need to do something on their own but every time they are brought back to wait. Just wait.

Finally, when Abraham was about 100 years old and Sarah was about 90, Sarah found herself with child. People ask about years of age in the Bible. I don't know, but I do know this, the point of their age is that they are well passed the years of having children. When the baby was born, they named him Isaac which means *laughter* because this baby boy that they have waited on with such hope for such a long time brought so much laughter to the tent of Abraham. Joy was everywhere so they just named him *laughter*.

Most first children born to couples late in life often get special attention, often get spoiled, and often get extra protection in certain things. We can see this in Isaac's life when they go to find Isaac a wife. They don't even send him to find his own wife. They send a servant to go do it for him. They were a little over protective at that point.

The time comes where we encounter the story today. Abraham who had followed God all these years, and who certainly had grown to love his son, was put to the test to find out if he loved the gift of God more than he loved the giver. He was put to the test to find out if he loved the promise of God more than the one who promised. It was a very pointed thing.

In the Jewish tradition of commenting on this text, the story is expanded a little bit. If you remember, Abraham had an additional son, Ishmael, the one he tried to help God along with. The way the story is told is that God speaks to Abraham and says, "Take your son."

"I have two sons."

"Take your only son."

"Well, this son is an only son to this mother and that son is an only son to that mother."

"Take the son you love."

"Well, I love both my sons."

“Take Isaac.”

There is no way of avoiding it. “Take your son, your only son whom you love.” It is very direct. “Take this son and offer him as a sacrifice to me on Mt. Moriah.”

We know that he obeys, and as he gets to that moment, the divine hand intercedes, stops him, and provides the ram. But this is a hard story. If we don’t admit this is a hard story, we are really not reading very closely. How do we understand this? From God’s side, we know that God never intends for Abraham to slay his son, but he needs to find out if Abraham still chooses God first now that he has everything that he wants.

From Abraham’s side, we know that Abraham does not have the advantage of knowing that he is not going to have to follow through with this. But we know that Abraham learns how serious faith is. Choosing God is not a casual thing. Choosing God does mean that when I choose God, there are lots of other things that I don’t choose. Even though God does not take his son, he knows just how serious it is to follow the living God.

What about us? God and Abraham are in the story. We are reading the story and as we observe it, how does this affect us? What is our reaction to this? Quite honestly, most of us are lost right off the bat. Almost at the point where he said, “Take your son, your only son, and make him a sacrifice to me,” we are lost because we think, “This is an ancient thing. God does not ask that any more. This is not about me. I don’t have to worry about this text.” We are lost because we cannot fathom any choice in our lives that would require those of us who are parents to choose between God and our children. We are lost because we cannot conceive any circumstances whatsoever where God might ask us to do a thing such as this. We think it is a nice Old Testament story. We can choose to ignore it and not really have to deal with it. That’s what we get out of it. No way that would ever happen.

But the truth is we are people of the New Testament. We are really people of the Bible but we tend to think about the New Testament and we try to exclude ourselves from the Old Testament because of stories just like this one. But we really don’t get it any easier in the New Testament. What is it that Jesus says: “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.”

What does he say to Peter on that shore after the resurrection? Peter’s past life is all around there on the Sea of Galilee, and as they sit on the beach eating breakfast, Jesus asked Peter, “Peter do you love me more than these?”

“Yes, you know I do.”

“Peter, do you love me more than these?”

“Yes Lord, you know I do.”

He asked him a third time to the point where Peter is beside himself. It doesn’t get any easier in the New Testament. We cannot escape the story because we think it is about the

ancient world and it doesn't apply to us. If we really follow Jesus Christ, we find ourselves confronted with the same type of decision.

Before we throw it away and think it doesn't apply to us, let's recognize and admit that there has never been a generation of followers, a generation of disciples of Jesus Christ who have not had to answer, "Is there something in my life that I love as much as I love God." There has never been a group of believers who have not had to answer the question, "Has my choosing gotten blurred? Do I think I can choose God and everything else and really let my love for God slide?"

Instead of asking ourselves, "Would I sacrifice my child," and get lost in some debate that just seems to go on where we disagree with other people in our Sunday school class or whatever, maybe the right question to ask would be, "What is it in my life that now competes with God and I haven't even noticed it?" Maybe at this point, I need to come back and choose God again.

This is the place in the sermon where I often give examples. It could be like this or it could be like that, but I want to offer a challenge to you. My guess is that as we all sit here, we think up the best illustrations in our own minds. The spirit convicts us and we recognize those places where we admit, "Yes, this does now compete with my affection for God. Yes, that does now really take the place of God sometimes." I would like for you to tell me what these things might be. You give me the illustrations. This is an invitation to you sometime in the next week or so to call me, e-mail me, stop by and see me, or have a conversation with me. Just let me know what it is in your life that sometimes competes with God. It might require you to make a new choosing or a new commitment, where you come to a place where you have to recognize that, "I really do love God above all, and therefore that means I can't love this as much. I choose God. I un-choose this." Would you do that? Would you come by and talk to me about that so that we might understand our faiths better and that I might grow from you and that you might grow from me?

I will say this: When we think about the story of what God asked Abraham to do, we have to remember that God does not ask him to do anything that God is not willing to do on his own.

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