



The Sacrifice of Isaac A Symbol of the Resurrection (Genesis 22:1-19)

Introduction

During the Holy Fifty Days after the Feast of the Resurrection, we ought to focus on two dimensions on our spiritual life: joy and hope. The Church is very joyful during these Fifty Days as is reflected in her hymns and processions. The joy of the resurrection is the cornerstone of our faith. Otherwise, we would have been left with the story of a great teacher who performed some miracles, died a brutal death on a cross, and would have remained buried in a tomb until this day. The joy comes in knowing that Christ is indeed risen from the dead. By His death, He trampled over death. This is joy. This also a source of hope for us, that one day we will rise with Him (we have in fact already risen with Him in baptism), and ascend to the heavens and live eternally with God.

Many prophets and righteous men desired to see this day; the day that Christ would come and offer Himself as an acceptable sacrifice on the Cross and bring life where there was death, hope where there was despair, and light where there was darkness.

Our Lord Jesus Christ told the Jews: *“Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad”* (John 8:56). When did this happen exactly?

Saint John Chrysostom answers our question: “Again He shows that they were aliens from the race of Abraham if they grieved at what he rejoiced in. ‘My day’ seems to me to mean the day of the Crucifixion, which Abraham foreshadowed typically by the offering of the ram and of Isaac” (Homily 55 on the Gospel of Saint John).

Today, we will read the story of the sacrifice of Isaac as a symbol of the Resurrection. The Church reminds us during the Fraction Prayer of Holy Thursday: “And as Isaac carried the firewood for the burnt offering, likewise Christ carried the wood of the Cross. And as Isaac returned alive, likewise Christ rose alive from the dead and appeared to His holy disciples.”

We will contemplate on this story and then conclude with a brief word about obeying God’s commandments as a way to experience the resurrection daily. Obedience can lead us to the joy of the Resurrection as it lead to Abraham’s joy that He was able to see the Resurrection thousands of years before its occurrence.

The Sacrifice of Isaac

While there are many lessons from this story, I want to primarily focus on the struggle that Abraham must have experienced, but how he constantly countered that with obedience, hope, and trust in God's promises. Underlying all this is the symbol of Christ's death and resurrection as the source of our hope and joy. We rely heavily on the Early Church Fathers for commentary and contemplation.

God Tests Abraham (Genesis 22:1-2)

Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." Then He said, "Take now your son, your only (LXX: your dearest) 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" (Genesis 22:1-2).

It says, "*after these things, God tested Abraham.*" What things? God appeared to Abraham and made promises to him regarding Isaac. God promised Abraham and Sarah a son in their old age. God also promised, "*...for in Isaac your seed shall be called*" (Genesis 21:12). Then God ordered a great command: "Take now your son...and offer him as a burnt offering." It is as if God, through His previous promises to Abraham, was preparing his heart to receive this commandment and to execute it.

First, we must understand that when the devil tests us or tempts us, he wishes to lead us into evil. But when God tests us, He does this to bring out good in us, and perhaps, as in the case of Abraham, to show us as living examples of faith and piety.

Second, how do we know the greatness of the test? Saint John Chrysostom says, "What terrible burden in the command, a task beyond the powers of human nature! 'Take your beloved son Isaac, whom you dearly love.' See how by these very words he kindles more ardently the fire and stirs more brightly the furnace of affection the good man had for Isaac...Each phrase by itself was sufficient to move the good man's soul: He did not simply say 'Isaac', but added, 'your son,' whom you have gained in defiance of every expectation and have succeeded in having even in old age – 'your beloved,' the object of your desire, whom you love in surpassing degree, whom you look to having as your successor; from whom also I promised to multiply your descendants, and to multiply to such extent as to rival the number of the stars and the sand on the seashore" (Homily 47 on Genesis). Origen of Alexandria echoes the same contemplation calling the use of each phrase as a 'torment' to father Abraham (Homilies on Genesis 8.2).

So we see the greatness of this test, and yet Abraham did not question God. The heathens used to offer their firstborn as sacrifices to the idols, not out of love, but out of despair wishing for the forgiveness of their sins at any price, pleasing their blood-thirsty Gods. How could Abraham believe that God would want such a sacrifice? As Blessed Augustine says, "Abraham never believed that God would accept a human sacrifice. Yet, once he heard the divine command for offering his son Isaac, he instantly obeyed" (City of God, 16:32).

Abraham could have asked a series of questions when He heard this command from God. How, after all, could Abraham bear to hear such a commandment? Saint John Chrysostom continues, "So what did the good man do? His thinking was not deranged; his mind not confused; he was not at a loss to cope with the strangeness of the command; he sought neither rhyme nor reason within himself, What does this mean? He who granted me offspring contrary to all expectation, He who in His

characteristic love brought to life the infertile womb of Sarah, now after the child's suckling and growing and finally coming of age bids me have him put to death and sacrificed as a burnt offering; He who a little before said, 'Your descendants will be called after him,' now gives a contrary command. How could his promises ever be fulfilled? I mean, how is it possible for the branches to flourish if the root is cut out, or fruit to be produced if the tree is cut down, or rivers flow if the source is dried up? By human logic these things are beyond possibility, but if God wills it all things are possible. This good man, however, entertained none of these thoughts; instead, like a dutiful servant he set aside every human consideration and had one single concern, to put into effect the command..." (Homily 47 on Genesis).

Isaac on the Way (Genesis 22:3-8)

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 the wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. Then on the third day Abraham lifted his eyes and saw the place afar off. And Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the lad and I will go yonder and worship, and we will come back to you." So Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife, and the two of them went together. But Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." Then he said, "Look, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" And Abraham said, "My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering." So the two of them went together (Genesis 22:3-8).

How do we know that Abraham obeyed God without questioning Him? Abraham rose early in the morning. Origen of Alexandria says, "He did not deliberate, he does not reconsider, he does not take counsel with any man, but immediately he sets out on the journey." Consider yourselves, when you resolve to do something first thing in morning. If you wait and delay, many thoughts will come to you that will prevent you from carrying out your task. But if you arise early, undistracted, you will carry out the task at hand.

Next, the mystery of the Resurrection is revealed. We imagine that on his journey, Abraham was truly struggling with himself. Isaac is with him as they journey toward the mountain. Origen of Alexandria says, "But a journey is prolonged for three days, and during the whole three days the parent's heart is tormented with recurring anxieties, so that the father might consider the son in this whole lengthy period, that he might partake of food with him, that the child might weigh in his father's embraces for so many nights, might cling to his breast, might lie in his bosom? Behold to what an extent the test is heaped up" (Homilies on Genesis 8.4).

Saint John Chrysostom also echoes the same sentiments as he considers how Abraham must have endured the struggle during those three days, calculating the meaning of the command, as he was about to offer his own son to death.

Furthermore, Abraham must have considered his wife Sarah, whom he left back in the tent unaware of his departure or his intentions. Nevertheless, he does not stop the journey and turn around, but continues toward the mountain.

As Abraham reaches the mountain, his eyes which were previously lowered down and humbled, are raised. Here, Abraham sees a sign of the resurrection. He who struggled was like Christ crucified and buried in the tomb. Then he tells his servants, *Stay here with the donkey; the lad and I will go yonder and worship, and we will come back to you.*" Origen of Alexandria asks, "Tell me, Abraham, are you saying to the servants in truth that you will worship and return with the child,

or are you deceiving them? If you are telling the truth, then you will not make him a burnt offering. If you are deceiving, it is not fitting for so great a patriarch to deceive... I am speaking the truth, he says, and I offer the child as a burnt offering. For this reason I carry wood with me, and I return to you with him. For I believe, and this is my faith that 'God is able to raise him up even from the dead.'"

Also, Caesarius of Arles says, "Blessed Abraham could reply: I speak the truth. I am offering my son, and I will return to you with him. So great is my faith that I believe that he who deigned to give him to me of a sterile mother could raise him from the dead. For this reason I say with truth, 'When we have worshipped, we shall come back to you.'"

The wood is laid upon Isaac's shoulders as Christ carried the wood of His own cross to Golgotha.

Then Isaac calls upon His Father, "Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Saint John Chrysostom says, "Consider, I ask you, the torture in this for the good man: how he put up with hearing the words, how he had the strength to reply to his son, how he did not fall apart, how he managed to conceal the truth and not reveal to his son what was about to happen, and instead with noble demeanor and brave spirit, 'God Himself will see to a sheep for a burnt offering, my child.' See here too how he unwittingly foretells what was due to happen" (Homily 47 on Genesis).

Abraham foretells the Sacrifice of Christ, for it would be He, who would lay down His life, and not Isaac, for the redemption of all.

We see Abraham and Isaac going to the sacrifice together. This is a symbol of the God the Father and God the Son setting forth together to offer the sacrifice of the cross; One the Offeror, the Other, the sweet-smelling Offering.

Setting the Altar and Offering the Sacrifice (Genesis 22:9-14)

Then they came to the place of which God had told him. And Abraham built an altar there and placed the wood in order; and he bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, upon the wood. And Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the Angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" So he said, "Here I am." And He said, "Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me." Then Abraham lifted his eyes and looked, and there behind him was a ram caught in a thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram, and offered it up for a burnt offering instead of his son. And Abraham called the name of the place, The-LORD-Will-Provide; as it is said to this day, "In the Mount of the LORD it shall be provided" (Genesis 22:9-14).

Which is more marvelous: the strength and obedience of Abraham or the obedience of his son, Isaac?

Saint John Chrysostom says, "Once more I am amazed at the good man's fortitude in being able to build an altar of sacrifice, in having the strength, in not collapsing under the anguish. Instead, he both built the altar and piled the wood on it...Let us not idly pass by these words, dearly beloved, but wonder how his soul did not part his body, how he managed to bind him with his own hands and place on the [bundle of sticks] his beloved, his graceful, his only begotten son...What a godly spirit! What a valorous

attitude! What extreme love! What purpose overcoming human nature! 'He took the sword,' the text says, 'to sacrifice his son.' What amazes and astounds me more – the valorous attitude of the patriarch or the obedience of the son? or the fact that, far from shrinking back or protesting against the deed, he submitted and yielded to what was being done by his father; and, like a lamb, lay on the altar without resistance, awaiting his father's arm?"

When God stops Abraham, He shows His true intention which was not that Isaac be sacrificed but that Abraham's good virtue be revealed. Abraham gave a living and real testimony of his love for God and his true obedience. God repeats Abraham's name twice to arrest his good impulse (St. John Chrysostom).

In taking the ram as a replacement for Isaac, Abraham fulfilled the sacrifice.

What does the Ram represent? It also represents Christ. Origen of Alexandria sees how Isaac and the Ram both represent Christ. Christ as man endured suffering in the flesh. The ram is a type of this. But the divinity of Christ sees no corruption and death has no dominion over Him. Here, Isaac is a symbol of Christ having returned alive (Homilies on Genesis 8.9)

Caesarius of Arles says concerning the ram, "The ram that was stuck among the briars with its horns also seems to represent the Lord, for Christ as it were stuck among thorns with horns when He hung on the beam of the cross, fastened with nails."

Also Saint John Chrysostom Says, "All this, however, happened as a type of the Cross. Hence Christ too said to the Jews, 'Your father Abraham rejoiced in anticipation of seeing my day; he saw it and was delighted.' How did he see it if he lived so long before? In type, in shadow: just as in our text the sheep was offered in place of Isaac, so here the rational lamb was offered for the world...Notice, I ask you, dearly beloved, how everything was prefigured in shadow: an only-begotten son in that case, an only begotten son in this; dearly loved in that case, dearly loved in this. The former was offered as a burnt offering by his father, and the latter His Father surrendered. [Saint] Paul too shouts aloud in the words, 'He who in fact did not spare His own Son but handed Him over for the sake of us all – how will He not also grant us every gift along with Him?'"

Renewal of the Divine Promise (Genesis 22:15-19)

Then the Angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time out of heaven, and said: "By Myself I have sworn, says the LORD, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son-- blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice." So Abraham returned to his young men, and they rose and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham dwelt at Beersheba (Genesis 22:15-19).

Here, the Lord renews the divine promise He gave to Abraham. Imagine how much God will reward us in the age to come if we obey and follow Him as well. Let us be zealous like Abraham in practicing the very deeds that God commands us. What benefit will it be to us if we only listen to God's commandments but fail to practice them?

Saint John Chrysostom exhorts his listeners, "Is it not the cause of countless blessings for us that we obey the Lord, respond to his commands, and, like the patriarch, far from prying into what is required by him, fulfill his directions like dutiful servants and leave to the Lord the reason for them? So if we school ourselves in this way, we too will be able to give evidence of the same obedience as the good man and attain the same crown. But how will we obey? If we carry out his commands in practice. 'After all, it is not listeners to the law that will be declared righteous,' Scripture says, 'but doers' (Romans 2:13). I mean, what benefit is it if while listening each day we yet neglect the practice of them."

Saint Athanasius writes in Paschal Letter VI, no.8: "And, in offering his son, he worshipped the Son of God. And, being restrained from sacrificing Isaac, he saw the Messiah in the ram [lamb], which was offered up instead as a sacrifice to God. The patriarch tried, through Isaac, not however that he was sacrificed, but He who was pointed out in Isaiah; 'He shall be led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before his shearer he shall be speechless' [Isaiah 53:7 LXXX]...Thus God accepted the will of the offerer, but prevented that which was offered from being sacrificed. For the death of Isaac did not procure freedom to the world, but that of our Saviour alone, by whose stripes we all are healed."

Lesson Learned: How Can You Experience the Resurrection Daily? Obey God's Commandments.

Obedience to God's Commandments

Do we boast that we are Christians? "I go to Church every Sunday," "I fast during times of fasting," "I read my Bible daily." But where are our hearts? Would we obey God's commandments to the extent that Abraham was willing to carry them out? God desires the heart. He does not want an emotional outpouring of our love. He did not tell us to worship Him with our emotions. He asks us to worship Him in Spirit and Truth. Whenever you question your love for God, do not rely on your emotional feelings as the indicator of your relationship with Him. Our Lord Jesus Christ said to His disciples, "*If you love Me, keep My commandments...He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him*" (John 14:15, 21).

What gives us the ability to obey God's commandments? The Resurrection. In the Resurrection we share in Christ's power over sin and death. We have been buried and raised with Him in baptism. We have put off the old man and have put on a new and superior one. Whenever we say that we can't possibly obey God with all the temptations that surround us, He gives us the power to tread on serpents and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy. We must not only obey by listening, but also in practice.

Why was Abraham able to carry out such a difficult command? Abraham had an eye towards the Resurrection and believed. Will you hope in times of despair? Can you lift your eyes and behold the Resurrection? When you chant in the Divine Liturgy, "We look for the Resurrection of the dead and the life of the coming age," does this reflect your thoughts and your confidence in eternal life and in the power over sin and death? Do you trust God as Abraham trusted in His promises?

Let us spend these Fifty Days recalling and experiencing the inner joy of Christ's resurrection, and live in the hope and the promise that we will also resurrect one day and live eternally with Him.

**May the Blessings of the Feast of the Resurrection and the Holy Fifty Days be with us and
Glory is due to God Forever. Amen.**

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“Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad.” + **John 8:56**

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“And as Isaac carried the firewood for the burnt offering, likewise Christ carried the wood of the Cross. And as Isaac returned alive, likewise Christ rose alive from the dead and appeared to His holy disciples.

+ **A Fraction to the Father about the Slaughter of Isaac for Covenant Thursday**

God Tests Abraham (Genesis 22:1-2)

“What terrible burden in the command, a task beyond the powers of human nature! ‘Take your beloved son Isaac, whom you dearly love.’ See how by these very words He kindles more ardently the fire and stirs more brightly the furnace of affection the good man had for Isaac...Each phrase by itself was sufficient to move the good man’s soul: He did not simply say ‘Isaac’, but added, ‘your son,’ whom you have gained in defiance of every expectation and have succeeded in having even in old age – ‘your beloved,’ the object of your desire, whom you love in surpassing degree, whom you look to having as your successor; from whom also I promised to multiply your descendants, and to multiply to such extent as to rival the number of the stars and the sand on the seashore”

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“Where is the sheep for a burnt offering?’ Consider, I ask you, the torture in this for the good man: how he put up with hearing the words, how he had the strength to reply to his son, how he did not fall apart, how he managed to conceal the truth and not reveal to his son what was about to happen, and instead with noble demeanor and brave spirit, ‘God Himself will see to a sheep for a burnt offering, my child.’ See here too how he unwittingly foretells what was due to happen.”

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Lesson Learned: How Can We Experience the Resurrection Daily?

Obedience to God’s Commandments

“If you love Me, keep My commandments...He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him.” + **John 14:15, 21**



Glory is due to God Forever. Amen.