

View from the Altar

From the moment I awoke that morning, I could tell something was wrong. Nothing *sounded* right. It wasn't so much what I heard as what I *didn't* hear. You see, ours was always a very happy family. Usually I awoke to the sound my mother singing or humming contentedly as she prepared our breakfast, or as she kneaded the dough that she would bake into bread for our main meal at noontime. Other mornings she'd be talking with my father. They'd be teasing each other and laughing. They were always laughing. That was the sound I was most used to hearing: the rich, rolling sound of my parents' laughter.

And I suppose that's fitting since they had named me Isaac, which means *laughter*. I had been born to them when they were both well past the age for such things. My father, Abraham, was one hundred years old, and my mother, Sarah, was ninety. They often told me the story of how, many years before, the Lord God had spoken to my father. The Lord told him that he would become the father of a great nation – so many descendants that they couldn't be counted. And he promised them a land of their own: the whole land of Canaan. And so, trusting in the Lord's promise, my parents left their home in the land of the east by the great river Euphrates, and they came to live in this county near the vast western sea. They found it to be a good, spacious, and prosperous place just as the Lord had said. And seeing that it was everything that they'd been told, they looked forward to the rest of the promise being fulfilled – the part about having a great big family; but that, unfortunately, was going to take a lot longer than they expected. Though they had wanted to have children for many years, it never happened. Everyone said it was because my mother was barren. They said that she just wasn't meant to have children. And it seemed that they were right, because she passed beyond her childbearing years and well into old age without ever having experienced even the slightest hint of becoming pregnant.

And that's when the Lord returned to tell them both that the time had come for him to keep his word. Now they were going to have a son. When my father heard it, he laughed so hard that he fell down and rolled on the ground. He thought it was an enormously funny joke that a man his age might become a father. My mother was a little more reserved. She just giggled to herself – and then tried to deny it when she got caught; but neither of them could believe it. To them it seemed impossible. To them it *was* impossible. And that, my father told me, was the Lord's purpose in making them wait so long. He wanted them to learn once and for all that what is impossible for us is easy for him, and that whatever he says will happen, will indeed happen no matter how impossible things may appear. A year later, I was born. After so many years of disappointment, I became their little miracle, the crowning joy of their old age. They were so happy that they named me laughter, which was something of a joke to them: they had laughed in disbelief, but it was the Lord who had the last laugh on them – and they joined him in this laughter.

But today no one was laughing. There was instead an eerie silence. In my thirteen years I couldn't remember such a quiet morning. It disturbed me. I left the tent where I slept and saw my mother working as usual. She seemed very upset about something. I asked her what was wrong; but she didn't know. She told me that my father had been agitated all night, and that he had woken very early and gone out. She knew that something very grave must be weighing on him; but she couldn't imagine what it was. "Go see if you can find out", she told me. "Ask him if there's anything you can do to help."

I found him not very far away from our encampment. He was hacking away angrily at the branches of a desert scrub-wood tree – the kind that burns hot and long because it's filled with sticky pitch. His back was toward me, and he must not have noticed my approach. I called to him several times as I came closer; but he must not have heard because he didn't stop his furious attack with the

axe. When he stopped swinging to catch his breath, I startled him by speaking up. “Father”, I said, “are you all right?” He turned to look at me just briefly. It was long enough for me to see that there was a deeply pained expression on his face. His eyes were red and his face was soaking wet – with sweat, or tears maybe, I couldn’t be sure. It could have been both. He turned back immediately and resumed his enraged chopping with renewed vigor. He acted as if this poor scrubby tree was his most hated enemy.

I wasn’t used to speaking forcefully to my father; but now I was really worried. I said, “Hey, this is no job for a man your age. If we need firewood, why don’t you have one of the servants get it? Or you could have told me to fetch it. You shouldn’t be working so hard. You’re going to kill yourself if you keep at it like this. Here, let me do it.” At this he paused. He placed a hand on my shoulder and said, “No, my son, this is a job that I must do myself. I’m the only one who can do it. Now please, go. Leave me alone.”

“What’s going on?” I demanded. “You’ve got Mother all upset. And now you’ve got me scared too.” He looked away. I could see him thinking about what I said, how his behavior was unsettling us. And then his shoulders slumped in resignation. “I’m sorry,” he said. “You mustn’t be frightened. I must ... no, *you* and I must take a journey together. The Lord has commanded us to offer a sacrifice at a place that he will show me.” His answer didn’t make sense to me. We always enjoyed our times of worship. It was the Lord’s mercy that he forgave our sins on account of the sacrifices we offered to him. It was a relief knowing that we stood before him guiltless for the sake of the lamb’s blood shed to atone for us. So there must have been something else about this trip that upset him. I asked, “Will it be a very long journey?” Again he put his hand on my shoulder. “No, my son,” he said, “Not very far; but I’m afraid it will be very hard. Now why don’t you go get the things you’ll need together. Tell your mother we’ll be gone a week, maybe ten days. Ask her to pack some food for us. There will be four of us: you, me, two servants. I’ve already told them to get a donkey ready.”

We set out later that morning after an unusually tearful farewell to my mother. Father held her for a long time and kept saying, “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” She didn’t know what he was talking about; and he wouldn’t tell her. From our encampment at Beersheba on the edge of the southern desert we followed the trail that led northeast toward the mountains – the same mountains to which we migrated every summer to find pasture for our flocks. There we’d set up camp by the great oaks of Mamre. It was our second home. From atop any one of the mountains near there you could look west and see all the way to the great sea, and to the east you’d be overlooking the vast salt lake in the desert. Near the south shore of that lake was where my cousin Lot once lived. My father told me that there had been five cities down there on the plain. They’d been destroyed by the Lord on account of the people’s wickedness. Fire from heaven fell and consumed them. Nothing is left. My cousin was rescued at the last minute by angels sent by the Lord. Only he and his two daughters escaped.

My father was full of stories like that. He loved telling them as much as I loved hearing them. He would tell about all the things that happened since the Lord first called him, and how he hadn’t always fully trusted the Lord’s promises. He had made many mistakes over the years by trying to take things into his own hands in order to force the Lord’s promises to come true. He found that it never worked. He said often that it took a long time for him to learn; but now he knew for certain that when the Lord asks one of us to step out in faith, that we ought to do it. No matter how hard or impossible things seem, the Lord will always keep his Word. He said that I was the proof of it. And that through me the Lord was going to give him the land of Canaan and countless descendants – including one who would be the Savior of the world promised to our first parents when they fell into sin. I can remember wondering about that when I was younger. “How can I be a father?” I asked him. “I’m just a boy.” He told me that I wouldn’t always be a boy, and that even though we couldn’t yet see any children, he was sure they would come. We had the Lord’s Word on it.

But a dark mood had fallen on my father. As we walked along, it was clear that he wanted to be alone with his thoughts. From time to time I heard him mumbling, like he was arguing with himself.

Several times I caught some of the words. He would ask passionately, "But why? I don't understand! How could you ask such a thing? Have I done something wrong? Are you taking back what you said?" But then he'd say, "No, no, it can't be. There must be a reason. You must have a way in mind. I only wish you'd show me what it is."

That evening we made our camp at the foothills of the mountains. After supper, I asked my father to tell one of his stories. I thought it would take his mind off of whatever was troubling him. But this time he said, "No, Isaac, my son, my soul is empty. I've run out of stories to tell you. And I fear that what we're doing now will be the last story." I asked him what he meant; but he just said it was time for us to sleep. We had a long way to go yet.

I can only say that my father's depression made the trip seem a lot longer than three days. Even the servants who were with us sensed his mournful mood and mirrored it. I think they were afraid that he might lash out at them if they so much as smiled. So they kept their distance and spoke as little as possible – and only to each other. The result was that I too was forced to be all alone with my thoughts. Something strange and mysterious was happening, I was sure. I tried to guess; but I never came close to what it was.

On the morning of the third day we were following a stream up a valley. We came to a fork in the water way. And up on the end of the ridge that sat in between the two streams there was a walled settlement of fairly good size. I knew better than to ask my father, so I asked the servants if they knew the name of it. One of them whispered that it was called "Salem", which means "peace". I remembered my father having spoken of it. The king of the place was a priest named Melchizedek – or at least he had been many years before. My father met him as he was returning from a battle in which he'd led a force of just a few hundred men against the combined army of four kings from the east. They had raided the cities of the plain and taken many captives as slaves, including my cousin Lot. My father pursued them. His force attacked at night, taking them by surprise. It was an incredible victory – surely the work of the Lord. In the end they managed to rescue all the captives, and they collected a good deal of wealth in the form of plunder from the battlefield. And so, to give thanks to the Lord for the success of the operation, my father had given Melchizedek, the priest of God Most High, a tenth part of the spoil.

The place where the Lord was directing my father to make our sacrifice was maybe a half mile farther up the same ridge on which Salem was built. From the valley below we could see a "bald spot" up there, where the soil had eroded away leaving an exposed stone surface. That, my father said, was the spot the Lord had chosen. He told the two servants to wait by the stream. He said, "The boy and I are going up there to worship. We will return here when we're done." We unloaded from the donkey the large bundle of fire wood my father had cut. He said, "I'm sorry, Isaac; but you will have to carry this." I lifted it up on my shoulders and found that it was very heavy. One of the servants offered to help. I looked at my father pleadingly; but he said, "No, my son must bear this burden alone, just as I must bear the burden the Lord has placed upon me."

He took out the razor-sharp knife he used when offering sacrifices to the Lord, and he also carried the clay pot that contained live coals from the morning's cooking fire packed in ashes. It was too hot to hold, so it hung from a chain he held in his hand. He led the way slowly up the hill. The climb was very difficult for me with the weight of the wood pressing down on my shoulders. It kept digging into the skin on my bony frame. Before long I was bleeding from several places where it poked and rubbed on me. But as difficult as it was for me, it seemed that my father carried an even heavier load – except his was being carried on the inside, as if his heart had become a massive lead weight. Several times I had to stop. When I did I was able to set down my load to recover my strength; but I remember thinking that whatever it was that he was carrying couldn't be set down. It just kept getting heavier with every step he took.

We were about halfway up the hill when it hit me. We'd forgotten the most important thing needed for our worship. I thought, "I'm doing all this work for nothing." "Father," I said, "I've got the wood here, and you've got the fire; but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" He looked at me with the same pained expression he wore when I found him cutting the wood three days earlier. This time I was sure: tears were streaming down his face. It was a long time before he could say anything. When finally he spoke, his voice was choked and strained. He said, "Oh, now son, don't you worry. God will provide *himself* a lamb for the burnt offering. I'm absolutely sure of it." I didn't reply. All I thought was, "He sure does have a lot of faith to believe that." Little did I know at the time.

At length we arrived at the stone slab we had seen from below. I practically collapsed. I don't think I could have gone another step. We gathered stones and built a waist high altar, and we carefully set the wood I had carried in place upon it. My father lingered and fussed over every detail. I thought that maybe he just wanted everything to be perfect; but it eventually it dawned on me that he was stalling. He was deliberately putting it off. But finally the altar was ready. There was nothing more to do. And at that point he surprised me. He leaned forward on the altar and spread his hands across the wood where the sacrifice would be laid. And he just stood like that sobbing for a long time. I didn't know what to do. I placed my hand between his shoulders and said, "Father, whatever it is that's bothering you ... I know it's going to be all right. The Lord has made great promises to you and to me. You told me yourself that his Word cannot be broken. Whatever it is, it's going to be all right."

With a great deal of effort, he managed to compose himself. He cast his eyes toward heaven as if asking for strength and then turned to me. He looked into my eyes as if he were apologizing for something and said, "Isaac ... I ... I mean, the Lord has ..." And in that moment, I understood what had been causing him so much misery. I was to be the lamb for the burnt offering. Strangely, I wasn't afraid. Seeing his anguish, I wanted to do anything I could to ease his burden. So I simply held out my hands for him to tie me with the cord – just as he would have done with a lamb. After all he suffered on my account for these three days because of his love for me, could I do any less for him? He laid me gently on the altar. No more words were spoken between us. They didn't need to be. We both understood. And we both believed that somehow, even if I was to be raised from the dead, somehow the Lord would keep his promises to my father and to me. My father raised the knife. I closed my eyes.

I had never heard the voice of the Lord speaking as my father had several times before. It had a wonderfully resonant quality to it; but as pleasing as his voice was, I was even happier with what he had to say. I was not to be the lamb after all. It had all been an elaborate test of my father's faithfulness – and I suppose of mine too. And we passed the test together, father and son.

As you know, we offered the sacrifice that the Lord himself provided. As we did our hearts were overflowing with gratitude and relief. That night as we sat by our campfire, I asked my father why he thought the Lord had asked such a difficult thing of him. He thought about it for a long while and said, "The Lord knows all things. He doesn't test us to learn something that he doesn't already know about us. He tests us so that we will learn things we don't know about *ourselves* and about *him*. Now I know what kind of faith he has been in building in me for a lifetime. For a father to be willing to sacrifice his only son is the ultimate test of faithfulness and love. A father who would do *that* to prove his faithfulness to someone he loves, would be willing to do anything at all for that person. I think the Lord is telling us that that's the kind of love he has for us." "He really is a very great and wise God, isn't he?" I asked. My father put his arms around me, gave me a giant bear hug and said, "Amen to that!" And we both laughed and laughed.

Soli Deo Gloria!