

A Living Sacrifice

Genesis 15
(Romans 12:1)

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After reading Genesis 15 one day, I prayed, "God bless this church and help us be all that you want us to be—a living sacrifice with your presence in us." Where did that come from? Why did this chapter lead me to pray that way?

Once in a while, you hear a sermon that really sticks with you. I hope that happens often here. Mostly, they sort of blend together. But, occasionally, the experience and the content of a particular message stay in our minds and hearts.

Where I went to college, Oral Roberts University, we had twice weekly required chapel. A couple of my mentors and favorite preachers were regular speakers in chapel. We also heard many guest speakers. Some were really good and some were not so great. One of the really good ones was a man named James Forbes. He had grown up Pentecostal and was then teaching at a mainline Protestant seminary in New York. I think the dean of ORU's seminary was trying to recruit him. He later became pastor of the prominent Riverside Church in New York City. He didn't join the faculty at ORU, but he made an impression that stayed with me.

I was a theology major and was planning to go into ordained ministry. So I may have paid more attention to preaching than some others did. And Forbes was an amazing preacher. He's African-American. He would start slow and quiet, but the energy and excitement would build throughout his sermon. He preached in chapel on the Lord's Prayer. I still have notes I took and a tape recording of that sermon. But that's not the message I'm referring to today. Besides required chapel, we had optional Friday night Communion. James Forbes was going to bring the message that night, so some of my friends and I went to hear him again.

I can't find any notes from that evening, but the overall message and some specific moments in it still stand out to me. He preached on this account from Abraham's life. He described the covenant sacrifice and ritual

and he applied it to our own commitment and consecration to God. He made the connection with Romans 12:1—"Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship." He told some of his own story of his call from God and his commitment to God. His message that night gave me a way to think about and pray about Abraham's experience that I haven't forgotten.

Let's look at this chapter and hear God's call and promises, receive God's covenant, and renew our commitment to the Lord.

At this point, Abraham was still called Abram and his wife was called Sarai. Later, God would rename them Abraham and Sarah. Abram is introduced in Genesis 11, where we read his genealogy. But his story starts being told in chapter 12. That's when God calls Abram and he goes. God promised Abram and Sarai that he would give them a land of their own and that they would become parents and would be the ancestors of a great nation. All peoples on earth would be blessed through them.

By the time we get to Genesis 15, many years have passed since that initial call and promise. God again speaks to Abram and reaffirms the promises of descendants and land. Abram is like a prophet here. "The word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision." After the events of chapter 14, when Abram had rescued his nephew Lot from kings and armies that had captured him, God tells Abram not to be afraid. "I am your shield, your very great reward." God would guard and protect Abram. God would provide for him. God is sovereign and God is all Abram needs.

In this chapter, God makes a promise, Abram questions it, and God reaffirms it. This sequence happens twice. Here at the beginning, God says Abram will be provided for. But Abram is struggling. How can God's promise come true? What good will these things be if he doesn't have an heir to pass them on to? Having someone to carry on your family name and inherit your property was very important in that culture. Abram says, "I still don't have a child. My servant Eliezer will have to inherit my possessions."

But God says, "No, your own flesh and blood will be your heir." Then God says, "Come on outside, Abram. Look at the stars. Can you count them?" Have you ever been away from city lights and seen how many stars

are visible in the night sky? Abram saw a multitude of stars. And God says, "That's how your descendants will be—too many to count!"

Rich Mullins had a great line in one of his songs:

Sometimes I think of Abraham
how one star he saw had been lit for me
("Sometimes by Step")

Abram believed the Lord. And God counted that believing as righteousness, right standing, right relationship with God. God wants the kind of relationship with people where we trust him and believe his promises. God's more interested in relationship with us than he is in all the things we do. God wants us to walk with him. As we walk with him, we arrive at the place he wants us to be. God's will and vision for us are wrapped up in the relationship he wants to have with us.

In verse 7 God confirms the promise of the land. "I brought you out of your homeland to give you this land." But Abram still has questions. Even after he believed and was counted righteous by God he still wondered and asked questions. "How can I know that I will possess this land?"

God doesn't answer Abram's question directly; instead, he orders him to bring some animals to him. Abram understands that these animals are to be sacrificed in a covenant ceremony. In the ritual of "cutting a covenant," animals would be cut in two and laid out. Then the people making the covenant would walk between the halves of the animals, making pledges and promises to each other, taking oaths that if they broke the agreement, they would be slain like those animals.

That kind of covenant ceremony was common in Abram's day. Various cultures practiced it. So God took something that Abram understood and used it to affirm God's promises. God is so merciful to stoop down to Abram's place and time and help him have confidence in the promise.

God does that for us. He starts where we are. He speaks to us in ways we can understand. He leads us on from there until we make the full commitment God wants from us.

God's *promises* to Abram led to this covenant with its sacrifices. In Romans 12:1, Paul speaks of the *mercies* of God. That's what he's spent the previous eleven chapters telling them about. Now, in response to and on the basis of God's mercies, we are to present our bodies to God as a living sacrifice. "Bodies" there means our whole self. But it's the whole person from the perspective of living in this present real time and place (see N. T. Wright, "Romans," *The New Interpreter's Bible*). Abram slaughtered animals and brought them to God. Later, the priests of Israel would sacrifice animals in the temple and offer them to God. But we offer our lives. We give ourselves as a living sacrifice to God. Living a life of walking with God, having our minds renewed and being transformed, is our worship. That's the kind of worship that makes sense for people who are in Christ, who are filled with God's Spirit, and who walk by the Spirit (see Gordon Fee, *God's Empowering Presence* 601).

Abram laid out the sacrificed animals and then he waited. Birds of prey, vultures (?), came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away. What interferes with our giving ourselves to God? What distracts us from our commitment to God? We may have to shoo it away like Abram driving the buzzards off of his sacrifice. Maybe it's pride, maybe it's needing to be in control, maybe it's lack of trust in God, maybe it's seeking power or pleasure. Whatever tries to steal our commitment to God, we need to drive it away.

Now something unusual happens to Abram. The sun sets and it grows dark. Now, that's not unusual. But Abram falls into a deep sleep. This is a clue that something big is about to happen. The last person in the Bible who experienced such a "deep sleep" was Adam, right before Eve was formed from his side (Gen 2:21; Sandra Richter, *The Epic of Eden* 78). God puts Abram into this deep sleep where he experiences the terror of great darkness. Often deep darkness accompanies God's appearance in the Old Testament. In this trance, in this deep darkness, Abram hears God repeat promises and he has a vision.

What darkness do you face? What dark times do you go through? Can you believe that God can come to you in the darkness? Can you look back on dark times and see that God was there?

“When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot [or oven] with a blazing torch appeared and passed through the pieces” of the animals. God’s presence is often represented by fire. Again, these images would have been familiar to Abram. What’s significant here is that God is the one who walks in the midst of the sacrifice. Abram can’t; he’s in this deep sleep that God put him in. God’s presence is in the midst of the sacrifice. God takes on himself full responsibility for this covenant. The covenant is God’s promise to Abram.

What does it mean for God to pass between the pieces of the slaughtered animals, saying, “This is what will happen to me if the covenant is broken”? It wasn’t the weaker party in the covenant who announced, “May what has happened to these animals happen to me if I fail to keep my oath.” It was the Lord God of the universe who “traversed the bloody alley in order to announce to Abram and his offspring that he would not fail.” How amazing that God would meet Abram’s need for reassurance in such a way.

And then we look at this from the viewpoint of the Bible’s whole story. And we realize that the God of Abram never failed in his promise, but the children of Abraham certainly did. And we have to ask, whose flesh was torn to pay the price for this broken covenant? Who was slain, who died to fulfill this covenant and to make a new covenant?

At this point during that Friday night Communion years ago, in an auditorium at ORU, James Forbes turned toward the table, pointed to the bread and the cup, and announced: “Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world!”

Sandra Richter, an Old Testament scholar writing about Genesis 15 says, “Indeed it was the God-man, Jesus Christ—the representative of humanity and the embodiment of Yahweh—whose flesh was torn to appease the broken stipulations of the oaths taken” (79).

I was in tears as I typed those last few paragraphs. These Bible stories will grab you and break your heart—in order to bring us back to God, to restore us, to lead us into covenant relationship with the Lord God. So that we could know God as our shield, our protector, our benefactor, our great reward, so that we could know God’s promises fulfilled, God came to us in

Jesus Christ. He lived the life of God's kingdom among us as one of us. He taught us and showed us the truth. He leads us in God's truth. He gave himself for us, dying on a cross in our place so we could return to God and be forgiven, set free. So we could believe and be restored to right relationship with God. After he died for us, Jesus was raised to life so that we could walk in newness of life, so we could follow him in the power of the Holy Spirit, walking in the paths of righteousness for the sake of his name.

Therefore, "with eyes wide open to the mercies of God" (J. B. Phillips), in light of all that God in Jesus Christ did for us, we offer our bodies, we give ourselves as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. As we offer ourselves a living sacrifice, God's own presence is in us, in the midst of our commitment. We live filled with God's Spirit. Our commitment is empowered by the Holy Spirit. We live with a renewed mind. We live a transformed life.

And the Lord God of Abraham and Sarah is faithful. He keeps promises. He gives the blessings of the covenant. He shows us his covenant loyalty, his lovingkindness, his faithful love. We submit to God as our covenant partner, we choose him as our Lord. That's what it means to love the Lord our God.

So we pray, "God bless this church, bless us and help us be all that you want us to be: a living sacrifice with your presence in us."