



# Beginnings

## *A Look at Genesis*

The Book of Genesis is a book of beginnings, it reflects on the human struggles that we all encounter. During this month of June we will be looking at situations in Genesis that reflect on our present existence. There is a temptation to believe that the people of the Bible did not struggle with the same problems we struggle with. But just because they did not have the same cultural reality or technological advances it does not mean that they did not experience the same kinds of questions and problems.

During the late 1500s to the early 1700s the subject of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac appears quite often in paintings. This is during the post Reformation period with its religious wars and the rise of the Enlightenment with its skepticism. It seems strange that this story from Genesis would capture the popular imagination during this critical age in Western history. Each artist presents a different thought process. In the painting *Isaac contemplates the ram caught Abraham's Sacrifice of Isaac* by David Teniers, the Younger made in the late 1600s, Isaac stares at the lamb caught in the bushes.

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# Wood & Fire

## *Genesis 22:7-13* [Matthew 15:32-38]



*“Abraham's Sacrifice of Isaac”* by David Teniers, the younger [1610-1690]

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*Genesis 22:7-13* [Matthew 15:32-38]

On his face is an almost bemused if not bored expression. Abraham is clueless with his face turned away as he prepares to deliver the death blow. The arms of an angel arrest the blow in mid-air. While in surreal addition a window frames the event happening opposite the sacrificial altar. It seems to say this is not the event but a window on the event. In a lower corner, servants cringe and turn from the event playing before them through the window. The scene leaves you with strange eerie feelings. The text of Genesis 22 is also a bit strange. The strangeness is captured with Isaac's question in verse 7.

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## Genesis 22:7-13

7 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?” 8 And Abraham said, “My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering.” So the two of them went together. 9 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. 10 And Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. 11 But the Angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” So he said, “Here I am.” 12 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.” 13 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.

In a 2018 article by John A. Johnson called “The Psychology of Expectations” he explains the struggle of unrealistic expectations. This article spoke to me about my own foolish expectations in life. Often I get angry because someone I expect to do something disappoints me. Usually, the expectation is based on an assumption that the person should know what I want. Worse, that person sees circumstances the same way I do. And the monster of all frustrations that I have asked clearly but my expectation does not line up with their expectations so the request is ignored. Can anyone say “Kids!”.

The upshot of this article is that we should not have unrealistic expectations.  
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*Genesis 22:7-13 [Matthew 15:32-38]*



“The Psychology of Expectations - Why unrealistic expectations are premeditated resentments” by John A. Johnson, Ph.D., Psychology Today, Feb 17, 2018

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But what are realistic expectations?  
When I was a teen going to camp and later as a member of the jaded camp staff I would hear numerous guest speakers challenge us to “radical faith” among other unclear spiritual goals. Generally, from their vague descriptions I came to assume that “radical faith” meant doing something edgy like wearing blue-jeans with a suit coat or getting a faith tattoo. Perhaps it was more rebellious like marrying a non-christian just to get them saved. Or some reckless action to prove my faith, like moving to a desert commune. Unfortunately, I had friends that tried all 3 of these expectation paths to “radical faith” and in the process lost their faith. **Luke 14:27-32**

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## ***Luke 14:27-32***

27 “And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.

28 “For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has *enough* to finish *it* – 29 lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see *it* begin to mock him, 30 saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish?’

31 “Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? 32 Or else, while the other is still a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks conditions of peace.

In Genesis 22 God challenges Abraham with to a truly overwhelming act of obedience. He is asked to sacrifice his son. Abraham had already sent away his eldest son Ishmael. Now Isaac was his only heir. Isaac is likely above the age of 12. The Hebrew word translated “lad” is most often used for a young man still under the authority of another. This would place Isaac between the ages of 12-18. He is strong enough to carry a large amount of wood, so we can assume he is in his early teens. The 2 servants that accompany them on the journey are also identified with the same word and are likely in their late teens. The whole incident takes on a strange and surreal tone. Abraham first splits a large quantity of wood, carefully arranges a firepot to carry live coals. The distance from Beersheba to Mt. Moriah is around 60 miles. They, likely made about 15 miles a day and the last day Abraham and Isaac traveled by themselves.

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## *Genesis 22:7-13*

### *[Matthew 15:32-38]*



A fire-pot from around 1500 BC. It was used to carry live coals on long journeys.

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With them went a donkey to carry the wood and provisions, they probably alternated carrying the clay firepot and stopped occasionally to feed it with small pieces of brush.

It must have been a gut-wrenching journey for Abraham because he concealed the purpose of the trip from his son and the servants. They certainly, would not have understood. There was the curious lack of a sheep or goat for sacrifice. Perhaps they all thought that Abraham would buy it along the way from a shepherd or perhaps he had sent it ahead by messenger. Abraham's traveling companions were not aware of the act of obedience Abraham had agreed to. Sarah, his wife, nor their household at home would have had a clue. It was a terrible alone moment for Abraham. What I have discovered is that most "Radical Faith" moments are indeed lonely decisions that few would understand. The firepot and its feeding over those 4 days would have been a constant reevaluation of the commitment.

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## *Genesis 22:7-13*

*[Matthew 15:32-38]*



A fire-pot from around 1500 BC. It was used to carry live coals on long journeys.

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Jesus uses the hyperbole of taking up our cross to demand of us a “radical faith” commitment. The image could not be more stark for the Jewish people following him. They knew about crucifixion, they witnessed many during their lifetimes. It was the Romans favorite terror tactic to keep rebellious subjects in line.

And the Jews were considered rebellious subjects. In addition culturally the death of crucifixion was humiliating in every respect. It was a slaves’ death. In addition, the book of Deuteronomy pronounced cursed any who were gibbeted on a tree [21:22-23]. That would get your attention. But Jesus went on to clarify what he meant by calling on his disciples to think clearly about their expectations when entering this life of discipleship.

Radical faith is not rebellious, edgy or reckless, it is carefully considered and rests on an assurance of God’s will. 1 Kings 17

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## *Genesis 22:7-13 [Matthew 15:32-38]*

In 1 Kings 17 Elijah is asked to do several things that are radical:

1. He is declare to King Ahab many years of drought that would only end at his pronouncement.
2. He was to hide so King Ahab couldn't find him and force him to end the drought.
3. He was to trust God for provision.
4. He was to go and through his actions save the life of a Phoenician widow and her son who were of the same people as wicked Queen Jezebel.
5. He was to demand the same kind of radical faith from this woman that God demanded of him.
6. He was after 3 years to challenge Ahab and face the angry nation.
7. He was to stand against well heeled and well educated religious leaders by himself.

Elijah speaking to the woman of Zarephath, Sunday School illustration.

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## *Genesis 22:7-13 [Matthew 15:32-38]*

It is hard to imagine the thoughts that would race through the heads of Sarah, Isaac, the servant lads, the members of the household in the days following this radical faith event. The results do not seem to have been good between Sarah and Abraham. Chapter 23 begins with the death of Sarah over 20 years later. What is striking in the account is that she is living in what is now Hebron while Abraham lives in Beersheba nearly 30 miles away, a 2 day journey. Their separate living situation is not explained in Scripture, but may well have been the result of Sarah's misgivings following this event. Isaac lived most of the intervening years with his mother and became quite close to her while only visiting Abraham on occasion.

**“The Sacrifice of Isaac” (1638) by Jan Lievens.**



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## *Genesis 22:7-13 [Matthew 15:32-38]*

It is one thing to understand an act of radical faith with your mind, it is another to experience it for yourself. Jacob, Abraham's grandson, would later be marked with a limp to remind him of his acceptance of God's radical call of faith in his life.

Isaac, unlike his son Jacob, seems to have spent most of his life avoiding any radical encounters of faith like he had experienced on Mt. Moriah. Sometimes it is difficult to trust God when all we see is the fire pot and the wood and we are not sure what God expects next. This painting of the sacrifice of Isaac by Jan Lievens catches the fear and terror in the mind of Isaac and the struggle in Abraham. A radical faith commitment will not always make sense to friends or family. It is radical because it trust in the character of God. **Hebrews 11:17-19**

**“The Sacrifice of Isaac” (1638) by Jan Lievens.**

## *Hebrews 11:17-19*

17 By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten *son*,

18 of whom it was said, “In Isaac your seed shall be called,”

19 concluding that God *was* able to raise *him* up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense.

In the account of the feeding of the 4000 plus women and children in Matthew 15:32-38 I have always had some glaring questions. Jesus in Matthew 14 has just fed 5000 miraculously, why did his disciples seem to doubt his ability in Chapter 15 just weeks following? Why does he upbraid them for their lack of faith in chapter 16 based on these 2 incidents? It is only when I did an in depth study of these events that this made sense. It had to do with the disciples expectations of Jesus and God. In chapter 15 Jesus leaves Galilee and remains in Gentile lands [Phoenicia and the Decapolis]. The messages are placed against the mixed Jewish and gentile audiences. The feeding of the 4000 takes place in an unclean land and is directed toward unclean people like the healing of the Syrophenician woman's daughter.

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*Genesis 22:7-13 [Matthew 15:32-38]*



Jesus feeding the thousands by James Tissot.

The lack of bread in Chapter 16 comes as they enter an unclean area [the Decapolis] where they are unsure of finding kosher food. Their expectations of who Jesus was and who God was colored their faith and for some disciples led to discouragement. We are told in John's gospel following the feeding of the 5000 and just before the trip to gentile lands, that many disciples turned away from Jesus because he did not meet their expectations and their desires.

In faith God makes the rules and we trust him because we know his character and have counted the cost of our radical faith commitment to Jesus Christ.

**Psalm 112:6-7**

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**Genesis 22:7-13** [Matthew 15:32-38]



**Jesus feeding the thousands by James Tissot.**



*Psalm 112:6-7*

6 Surely he will never be shaken;  
The righteous will be in  
everlasting remembrance.

7 He will not be afraid of evil  
tidings; His heart is steadfast,  
trusting in the LORD.

The strange and eerie story captures our heart because it demands that we look squarely at God's command for radical faith in our lives. This should not be an unexamined or unrealistic faith but a solid and sure commitment to God trusting in his power and his character.

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