

**Growing in Wisdom**  
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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. (*Genesis 22:13*)

Genesis 22 appears to be a story of God testing Abraham's faith. It seems to describe a God who would ask Abraham to make the most horrifying sacrifice that he could possibly be asked to do. Then when God sees that Abraham has passed the test, He intervenes and prevents Isaac's death at his father's own hand. Understood on its surface this story presents a terrifying experience for Isaac and leaves most of us very uncomfortable about both God's and Abraham's role in it.

But consider the reverse perspective which would be that the Lord expects us to use our own judgment to decide whether what He has said is true and good really is true and good. Doesn't this lead to us deciding at times, "The Lord really didn't understand the particular situation I'm in when He revealed the truth that is supposed to guide our lives." Or, even more blatantly, "The Lord got it wrong when He taught us this or that true idea." This translates to "I know better than the Lord does what should or shouldn't be done in the situation immediately before me."

Look deeper at this story and consider the idea that it presents a reality that is not genuine but rather the reality that will appear to a flawed and short-sighted human being. This reality is that God seems to ask things that are bad and wrong, that will cause unhappiness, but in fact, the problem isn't with God, but with our understanding of what He is really asking for. In this story, the only sacrifice that was made was that of a ram caught by his horns in a thicket, but Abraham would not have seen this ram, if he had decided "I'm not going to follow what God asks of me."

This sermon is the final in an intermittent series. It has focused on events in the life of Abraham starting when the Lord first called him to leave his home and travel to the land of Canaan up to the story of the near-sacrifice of Isaac. Each step of these events can be seen, when considered as a parable, to describe part of the progression each of us need to make many times over in our lives. It is a progression from ignorance and flawed natural motivations and goals, to wisdom and love. It is a progression that has pitfalls and potential disasters inherent within it, but these disasters never come to pass because of the Lord's guidance and loving care.

The progression begins with a subtle recognition that something needs to be different in our lives. Specifically, that the Lord is calling us to recognize that a pattern of concern, thought, and life from these is harmful to ourselves and the people around us. It is harmful to the useful things we seek to accomplish in our lives. The Lord is calling us on a spiritual journey.

This journey involves learning and over time seeing the implications of what we've learned ever more clearly. It involves making choices, some of which are unpleasant and seem counter to the happiness that we want or counter to the goals we seek to accomplish. Sometimes the Lord wants us to see that what we call happiness is really a source of misery. Sometimes the Lord wants us to see that the goals we seek aren't good for us or the people around us.

The spiritual journey described within Abraham's saga includes our realization that fundamental choices are required of us--choices between what is and isn't to be done. It describes the

development of a person whose early efforts involve following relatively simple and clumsy “rules for life” represented by the battles of the Chedorlaomer and the other kings of the north against the kings of south including those of Sodom and Gomorrah. Then a progression to a much greater level of understanding is represented by the birth of Ishmael, the son of Abraham and Sarah’s servant woman, Hagar.

Understanding itself isn’t the goal. The rite of circumcision that Lord commanded Abraham to begin after Ishmael’s birth represents a person using his or her initial adult understanding to consciously recognize and shun evil loves and false ideas as sins against the Lord. This takes effort and attention. It takes giving up some things that we have previously believed to be desirable and justified. When we are willing to follow what the Lord teaches and leads us to do, it will bring about a profound change in our perspectives, beliefs and motivations.

The new wisdom and love that the Lord would have guide our lives is represented by the birth of Isaac. After many decades of being childless, Abraham and Sarah finally had a son of their own. This child represents the gift of growing wisdom within our hearts and minds. With it comes tremendously more useful ideas and choices. With it comes a greater confidence in the Lord and peace.

Isaac represents the culmination of a huge spiritual progression. What then of this final story? Why does God seem to ask for his sacrifice? In the chapter just previous, the Lord had told Abraham that he should send away Hagar and his first born child, Ishmael because Isaac was to be the future of Abraham’s family line. But in this chapter the Lord seems to change His mind and asks Abraham to sacrifice all of this future.

Even when we have progressed considerably up the spiritual path toward heavenly life, there will still be times when important ideas and concerns seem to rebel at what the Lord says is good and true. In this spiritually advanced state these parts of our mind rebel not from sheer perversity, but rather because of our growing understanding of what is true and love for what is good.

Picture the example of a parent one of whose children has reached full adult age. The parent, in talking with this adult child, gets a sense that he or she is leaning towards making a choice that is incompatible with long-term happiness. The parent may firmly know from what the Lord has taught that this adult child has to make this choice in freedom from his or her best understanding of what is true. The parent can share the best wisdom he or she can give to the adult-aged child, and the child may still be heading towards what seems like a terribly dangerous choice in life. Part of a wise and love parent would desperately want to prevent this choice in any ways possible. The parents love for the long-term welfare of the child would make this a very high priority, a strongly driving concern. But a wise parent would realize that his or her own immediate peace of mind and even the near-term happiness of the adult child aren’t the most important priorities. There will come times in which these need to be sacrificed for the sake of the free choice of others.

In reality the voice that says “You can’t let your son make this choice” is the problem. It seems what has to be sacrificed is the desire for happiness for the adult child, and the parent’s own happiness. But this is a false appearance, just as the Lord never wanted Isaac sacrifice. Sometimes it seems as though we have to make others do the right things for their own happiness, but this isn’t the true source of lasting happiness. People need to choose the wise course of action from their own understanding and their own motivation or the choice and the

behavior won't really feel like it is their own. This is a very hard lesson that the Lord would lead us to recognize. It goes counter to a fundamental perspective of our own perception of reality. We read:

People who are spiritual, meant by "the ram", were entangled in natural knowledge with all their power in relation to what is the truth, and that as a consequence they were deprived of the power to perceive truths. For the more people rely on natural facts and keeps their mind and thought fixed on these in relation to the truths of faith, the more they lose the light of truth. (*Arcana Caelestia* 2832:1)

The Lord would have us realize, if we are willing, that our minds, no matter what our effort is, will inevitably be limited in our ability to know and understand what is really true. But the Lord can help us with this. He calls us to a deep and abiding trust in His guidance.

Note that in this story, the moment the angel called to Abraham even as he is just about slay his son, Abraham stopped and listened. We likewise need to continue to pay attention even as we are doing what we've understood to be the Lord's will.

The Lord wants more than anything else for us to grow in wisdom and a life guided by this wisdom. At every moment of every day He is working to lead us to see more clearly what we should and shouldn't love, think, say, and do. We can count on the Lord's ability to lead us to an ever better life, providing we seek the wisdom and love only He can bring us. We seek it by returning over and over again to consider the ideas that He has revealed in His Word. We seek it by conscious efforts in the large and small decisions of life to be guided by the principles and motives that He calls us to be led by. We seek it through prayer, both asking for the Lord's help in being guided by this light and paying careful attentions to the thoughts He guides our minds to in response.

This story also describes the severest and deepest temptation that the Lord experienced while in the world. His greatest love was for the salvation of all of us. He knew that this required us to have the freedom to choose between heaven and hell. Apparently all of heaven and hell doubted that any of us would choose heaven if we were free. All attacked the Lord's love for us with the idea that He needed to tamper with or withdraw our freedom if any of us would choose heaven. The Lord knew that heavenly happiness is impossible without free choice. He resisted the overwhelming spiritual force to compromise that freedom and accomplished His life's work.

Each of us is on our own spiritually pathway. We are at different places on this path. We can even be said to be at differently places on the path depending on which aspect of our life we're considering. In some areas we may have traveled far and in others we've yet to begin. In one sense we have little understanding of the path ahead of us or even where we are on the path. It isn't necessary. The Lord doesn't ask us to get to heaven by our own strength. He offers His to us. He asks us to cooperate with Him, to be led by Him, to seek His help. The saga of Abraham's life is not a simple one and yet we have good reason to know that the reality of our own spiritual journeys contain details far more complex than could be expressed in the volumes that might fill a library. We need not understand all of this to move forward. We need to seek the Lord and He will guide us forward from where we are to a better, more useful, and happier life than we could possibly imagine. AMEN.

Lessons: *Genesis* 22:1-13, *Arcana Caelestia* 2832:1

### **Genesis 22:1-13**

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 *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."

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.

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.

### ***Arcana Caelestia* 2832:1**

People who are spiritual, meant by "the ram", were entangled in natural knowledge with all their power in relation to what is the truth, and that as a consequence they were deprived of the power to perceive truths. For the more people rely on natural facts and keeps their mind and thought fixed on these in relation to the truths of faith, the more they loses the light of truth; and when they lose this light they lose the life of truth as well. All people may recognize this, if they stop to reflect, from their experience of others who say they are unable to believe anything unless they grasp that it from the evidence of their own sense or through "solid" facts. If you probe into what they are really like you will discover that they believe nothing at all, and what is more that to them nothing seems wiser than to ascribe every single thing to natural forces. There are also many who say that they believe even though they do not understand. But secretly within themselves these reason just as much as others from the evidence of their senses and a knowledge of various facts when they consider the truths of faith and whether they really are true. These either possess a kind of persuasive belief infused into them from self-love and love of the world, or else they do not have any belief at all. Their true nature is evident from their life. Both groups of people are indeed within the Lord's spiritual Church, yet they really belong to the Church. They do belong to the Church however when they live a good life and they have faith in what is true. But spiritual people have faith in no other true ideas than those which have been impressed on them from early childhood and which after that they have confirmed for themselves from doctrine or some other source. Such is the state of those who are spiritual, a state which is described here by "a ram caught in the thicket by its horns."