

SACRIFICES FOR THE LORD

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Lessons: Genesis 22

The story of how Abraham almost sacrificed his son Isaac on Mount Morrah is one that is hard for us to read about. It is so horrible to think that a father would be willing to sacrifice his son in this way, and that the Lord seemed to desire it, that we are at first struck with horror.

We know that Abraham was a good man. And so we ask ourselves, how a good man could possibly imagine that the Lord wanted him to do such a terrible thing as to sacrifice his son.

Before we examine some of the things the Lord is teaching in this story, let us note a few things that the Writings say about sacrifices.

Sacrifices were unknown in both the Ancient and Most Ancient Churches. The worship of the people of the Silver and Golden age was so internal that they never thought of the Lord either needing or wanting to have sacrifices. Sacrifices arose when the Ancient Church came to its end, and the knowledge and love of spiritual things perished.

Sacrifices therefore arose, along with different forms of idolatry, with the Hebrew Church—certainly hundreds, but perhaps even thousands of years before Abraham's time. The more external and worldly people became, the more they developed false ideas about the Lord. They not only began to worship many gods instead of one, but they built altars, and began to sacrifice animals and eventually even their own children.

Abraham grew up among such people in the cities along the Euphrates River. He was an idolater, and was used to the idea of sacrifices—even human ones.

When the Lord asked Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, Abraham would have been grieved about the request, but not shocked, for this was a familiar thing to his people.

What Abraham did not know and could not yet understand, was that the Lord was trying in every possible way to stop and prevent human sacrifice. The main reason the Lord permitted the Israelites to sacrifice animals and birds was, indeed, so that they would not sacrifice humans.

As the Hebrew Church people turned to the use of sacrifice, the Lord then not only permitted this to prevent a worse thing from happening, but He made sure that the sacrifices they performed could be used to represent heavenly things.

So the Lord not only commanded them when to sacrifice, but what animals and birds to use. And He did this so that whatever they did do, even if it was not the Lord's desire, would still serve Him, so that His Word would bring together heaven and earth by means of representations.

New Church people are so fortunate, because we now know from the Word of the Lord's Second Coming that there is a beautiful and secret message in the story of Abraham trying to sacrifice his son Isaac. We know that the Lord was prophesying in this story about part of His life when He was in the world. He was talking about the temptations He would have, and how He would have to sacrifice His own life to save the human race.

We cannot very easily understand the Lord's temptations, but we can understand the idea of sacrificing something we love, and how hard it is for us to do this. When we give up part of our selfish and bad desires and feelings, it seems like we are giving up part of our very life. And it's not easy, is it? The stronger some ugly love or thought has a hold of us, the harder we have to fight it—the more of a sacrifice we have to make.

Giving up such things from our life seems like a sacrifice, because we don't feel or sense what will take its place. We know from the Lord's teachings that good loves, feelings, and thoughts will come to us, but only after things that are against them, things that are evil and false, are driven away.

When Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac, he did not at first see the ram stuck in the thicket. In the middle of our feeling sorry and sad about the things we are giving up, the Lord is providing good things to bring us truly heavenly and happy states in their place.

More than a thousand years after Abraham lived the Lord spoke about sacrifices to a prophet named Micah. We should memorize these words, and remember them whenever we are confused or mixed up about our sacrifices, and what the Lord expects from us. The words are so simple and so beautiful:

“With what shall I come before the Lord,
And bow myself before the High God?
Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings,
With calves a year old?

Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams
Or ten thousand rivers of oil?
Shall I give my first born for my transgression,
The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

He has shown you, O man, what is good;
And what does the Lord require of you
But to do justly, To love mercy,

And to walk humbly with your God?”
(*Micah 6:6-8*)