

Service in the life of Isaac

BIBLE BASICS

Who Was Isaac?

Isaac, the son of Abraham and his wife Sarah, was born as a result of God's promise to Abraham that he would have countless descendants, and his birth brought great joy to his parents, particularly Sarah, whose laughter upon hearing the news earned him his name, which means "he will laugh." He holds, till today, a significant place as one of the patriarchs and is revered by both Jews and Christians alike. Unlike his father Abraham and his son Jacob, whose names were changed by God, Isaac's name remained unchanged throughout his life. Additionally, he was the only patriarch who never left the land of Canaan.

Isaac's role in the Old Testament extends beyond his historical significance. He serves as a representation of Christ, foreshadowing the sacrifice of Jesus. In the book of Hebrews, St. Paul draws a parallel between Isaac and Christ, emphasizing that Abraham, in faith, offered up Isaac as a sacrifice, just as God the Father offered up His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ: "by faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, 'In Isaac your seed shall be called,' concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense." (Hebrews 11:17-19) This comparison highlights Isaac's role as a type or symbol of Christ. Isaac's faith and trust in God are exemplified in the story of his near-sacrifice on Mount Moriah. "Isaac, with perfect confidence, as if knowing what was to happen, cheerfully yielded himself as a sacrifice. (Clement of Rome) " Isaac's obedience and devotion to his father and to God, mirrored the obedience and humility of Jesus Christ, who willingly laid down His life, carrying his own cross, for the salvation of humanity. (Hebrews 11:17-19).

"Accordingly, to begin with, Isaac, when led by his father as a victim, and himself bearing his own "wood," was even at that early period pointing to Christ's death; conceded, as He was, as a victim by the Father; carrying, as He did, the "wood" of His own passion." - Tertullian

Carry the Cross of Service

As Abraham prepared to offer his son as a burnt offering, Isaac willingly carried the wood for the sacrifice, demonstrating his commitment to serve his father and fulfill God's command. "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." (Genesis 22:6) This act of service represents more than just a physical burden. It symbolizes the spiritual cross that we are called to carry as servants of Christ. When we engage in service, we embrace the responsibility of bearing the burdens of others, even if they are not our own. This requires a spirit of selflessness and a willingness to put the needs of others before our own.

Moreover, the cross of obedience comes into play when we respond to the requests of our spiritual fathers, service coordinators, or our heavenly Father. By submitting to their guidance and direction, we acknowledge that their wisdom and experience can help us grow in our faith and become better disciples. In our own trials and challenges, we are called to carry our wood or cross, just as Isaac did. This means embracing our responsibilities and obligations, even when they seem difficult or overwhelming. It requires perseverance, resilience, and a deep trust in God's plan for our lives. We are called to carry our wood/cross in order to be true disciples of Christ: "and whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple." (Luke 14:27)

Isaac's obedience led him to gain the honor of being a symbol of Christ. In the same way, our service to others can make us living symbols of Christ's love and compassion. However, there may be certain aspects of our character or shortcomings that hinder us from carrying the wood effectively. These could include pride, selfishness, or a lack of humility. What things about our character or shortcomings may hinder us from carrying the wood? Will we be symbols of Christ in our own service?

Origen elaborates on this matter by comparing Isaac's carrying of the wood to Christ's carrying of his own cross. He emphasizes that Isaac's willingness to participate equally with the priesthood in this act signifies his role as both victim and priest: "that Isaac carries on himself 'the wood for the burnt offering' is a figure, because Christ also 'himself carried his own cross,' and yet to carry 'the wood for the burnt offering' is the duty of a priest. He therefore becomes a victim and priest. But what is added also is related to this: 'and they both went off together.' For when Abraham carries the fire and knife as if to sacrifice, Isaac does not go behind him but with him, that he might be shown to contribute equally with the priesthood itself." (Homilies on Genesis 8.6) This foreshadows the dual nature of Christ, who offered himself as a sacrifice for our sins while also serving as our eternal High Priest.

St. Clement of Alexandria further expounds on this typology, drawing parallels between Isaac and the Lord. He notes that Isaac, like Christ, was a son, a victim, and a bearer of wood. While Isaac's sacrifice was not consummated, it prefigured the ultimate sacrifice of Christ on the cross: "Isaac is another type too (he can easily be taken in this other sense,) this time of the Lord. He was a son, just as is the Son (he is the son of Abraham; Christ, of God.) He was a victim, as was the Lord, but his sacrifice was not consummated, while the Lord's was. All he did was to carry the wood of his sacrifice, just as the Lord bore the wood of the cross. Isaac rejoiced for a mystical reason, to prefigure the joy with which the Lord has filled us, in saving us from destruction through his blood." (Christ the Educator 1.5-2.3)

By reflecting on these ancient interpretations, we gain a deeper understanding of the significance of service and obedience in our Christian walk. As we carry our own crosses, we participate in the redemptive work of Christ and become living witnesses to his love and grace.

One Mind Submission

In the narrative of Isaac and Abraham, Isaac demonstrates profound submission to his father's will. Faced with an enigmatic inquiry about the whereabouts of the lamb for a burnt offering, Isaac trusts in Abraham's response, "God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering." This exchange underscores Isaac's unwavering faith and willingness to accept his father's guidance without question or hesitation. "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. (Genesis 22:7-8) Isaac's submission extended beyond this particular incident. Notably, his wife was chosen for him by his father, further emphasizing his commitment to his father's desires. This level of submission is a powerful example for those seeking to serve in any capacity.

In the context of service, submitting oneself to the will of the Father is paramount and by extension to the spiritual father of the church. We may encounter tasks that challenge our understanding or appear nonsensical. However, like Isaac, we must trust that God's plan and purpose are for the greater good of all involved. By submitting ourselves, we not only honor His sovereignty but also recognize that His wisdom and perspective far exceed our own. This act of submission allows us to surrender our limited understanding and embrace a deeper level of faith. Moreover, the submission fosters unity and harmony within the service. When servants collectively align their hearts and minds with His purpose, we create an environment where everyone's gifts and talents can flourish. Those who serve and those who are served alike benefit from the transformative power of submission.

The example of Isaac's submission serves as a reminder that true service begins with humility and trust. By surrendering our agendas and preconceived notions, we open ourselves up to the work of the Holy Spirit. It is in this spirit of submission that we discover the fullness of our purpose and make a lasting impact for the Kingdom of God.

Resorting to Prayer

When observing Isaac's behavior and devotion, Origen illuminates the profound significance it holds for our understanding of both Isaac's relationship with our Lord and his father, Abraham. At a pivotal moment, Isaac addresses Abraham, his father, uttering a single word, "Father." This simple word, spoken by the son who is about to be sacrificed, pierces Abraham's heart like a sharp blade. Despite Abraham's unwavering faith, his paternal emotions surge within him as he responds with tender affection, "What is it, son?" In his reply, Isaac raises a question that cuts to the core of the situation, "Behold the fire and the wood. Where is the sheep for the burnt offering?"

Origen draws our attention to the importance of prayer in the midst of suffering and service. He suggests that when we find ourselves in the thick of challenging circumstances, we should emulate Isaac's example by lifting up our hearts in prayer each step of the way and say “Father”. Through prayer, we can connect with our Creator and seek His guidance and strength. God's provision is always available to those who trust in Him and seek His will. Just as Abraham and Isaac trusted in God's plan, we too can have faith that God will provide the solutions and resources we need to navigate difficult and demanding situations.

Shining Example of Faithfulness

Isaac stands out among the heroes of the Old Testament as a shining example of faithfulness. In an era when polygamy was prevalent, Isaac remained devoted to his wife, Rebekah, never taking any concubines. We hear of David and Solomon who had many, even Jacob, Isaac's own son. This unwavering commitment to his family serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of faithfulness in our own lives.

St. Ambrose, in his treatise "Isaac, Or the Soul," eloquently expounds on Isaac's faith and its profound significance. He describes Isaac's faithfulness to his being "full of grace and a fountain of joy", a source of spiritual blessings and joy. To this fountain, Rebekah came to fill her water jar, symbolizing the soul's thirst for wisdom and knowledge of God. To this fountain of faithfulness, the served child will roam towards the faithful servant. Even the soul of the prophets, like David, yearns for this fountain, seeking to quench its thirst with the richness of God's knowledge. Through this spiritual refreshment, the soul can wash away the impurities of foolishness and embrace the transformative power of divine wisdom.

“and so Isaac is good and true, for he is full of grace and a fountain of joy. To that fountain came Rebekah to fill her water jar. For Scripture says that “going down to the fountain she filled her water jar and came up.” And so the church or the soul went down to the fountain of wisdom to fill its own vessel and draw up the teachings of pure wisdom, which the Jews did not wish to draw from the flowing fountain. Listen to him as he says who that fountain is. “They have abandoned me, the fountain of living water.” The soul of the prophets ran thirsting to this fountain, even as David says, “My soul has thirsted after the living God,” that he might fill his thirst with the richness of the knowledge of God and might wash away the blood of foolishness with watering of spiritual streams.” (Isaac, Or the Soul 1.2)

The Church, or the individual soul, seeks to "fill its vessel" with this wisdom. In contrast, the Jews who "did not wish to draw" from this fountain, rejected of divine wisdom. Isaac's faithfulness serves as an enduring testament to the strength and beauty of true faithfulness. By emulating Isaac's faithfulness, we can bring joy and fulfillment to our own lives and the lives of those around us.

The Impact of Conduct

The story of Isaac in Genesis 26:6-9 teaches the servant mindfulness of our conduct, lest we inadvertently become stumbling blocks to their spiritual growth. While dwelling in Gerar, Isaac, fearing for his life, misrepresented his wife Rebekah as his sister to the men of the place. He harbored the misconception that his wife's beauty would incite the men to murder him in order to possess her.

“so Isaac dwelt in Gerar. And the men of the place asked about his wife. And he said, “She is my sister”; for he was afraid to say, “She is my wife,” because he thought, “lest the men of the place kill me for Rebekah, because she is beautiful to behold.” Now it came to pass, when he had been there a long time, that Abimelech, king of the Philistines, looked through a window, and saw, and there was Isaac, [a]showing endearment to Rebekah, his wife. Then Abimelech called Isaac and said, “Quite obviously she is your wife; so how could you say, ‘She is my sister?’” Isaac said to him, “Because I said, ‘Lest I die on account of her.’” (Genesis 26:6-9)

However, Isaac's deception proved short-sighted and ultimately futile. King Abimelech of the Philistines, observing Isaac's affectionate behavior towards Rebekah through a window, confronted him, exposing his lie. Isaac's fear of death, rather than protecting him, had led him to compromise his integrity and betray his wife's trust.

This incident serves as a reminder that our shortcomings can have far-reaching consequences, not only for ourselves but also for those around us. When we yield to fear or temptation, we not only damage our own spiritual well-being but also potentially hinder the spiritual progress of others. Moreover, as leaders in the church, we must be especially vigilant in guarding against any conduct that could potentially harm or mislead those under our care. This includes not only avoiding blatant sins but also being mindful of our words, attitudes, and actions, ensuring that they are always in line with the teachings of Scripture and the example set by Christ.

Strive to Persevere

In the days of Abraham, the Philistines stopped all the wells and filled them all with earth. The Philistines' actions in stopping the wells was a strategic maneuver to assert dominance and control over Abraham and his people. By limiting access to vital water resources, they sought to weaken them, making them vulnerable and dependent. However, Isaac did not just settle to the circumstance as something beyond him. Yet, rather, in perseverance, Isaac dug wells serving as a profound inspiration to our spiritual journey towards personal growth and transformation.

“Now the Philistines had stopped up all the wells which his father’s servants had dug in the days of Abraham, his father, and they had filled them with earth. And Abimelech said to Isaac, “go away from us, for you are much mightier than we.” Then Isaac departed from there and pitched his tent in the Valley of Gerar, and dwelt there. And Isaac dug again the wells of water which they had dug in the days of Abraham his father, for the Philistines had stopped them up after the death of Abraham. He called them by the names which his father had called them. Also Isaac’s servants dug in the valley, and found a well of running water there. But the herdsmen of Gerar quarreled with Isaac’s herdsmen, saying, “The water is ours.” So he called the name of the well Esek, because they quarreled with him. Then they dug another well, and they quarreled over that one also. So he called its name Sitnah. And he moved from there and dug another well, and they did not quarrel over it. So he called its name Rehoboth, because he said, “For now the Lord has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land.” (Genesis 26:15-22)

The Philistines, symbolizing the obstacles and challenges we encounter, had stopped up the wells dug by Abraham, Isaac's father, filling them with earth and cutting off the life-giving source of water. This act represents the ways in which our spiritual wells can be blocked by negative influences, hindering our spiritual progress.

Isaac's response to this challenge becomes a model for us. He does not give up or become discouraged. Instead, he sets out to dig again the wells that his father had dug, demonstrating his determination to reclaim his spiritual heritage and restore the flow of living water. Isaac's perseverance is not without its obstacles. He encounters opposition from the herdsmen of Gerar, who quarrel over the water and attempt to claim it as their own. This conflict parallels the internal struggles and external pressures we may face as we seek to deepen our spiritual understanding.

Isaac's response to these challenges is instructive. He does not retaliate or engage in conflict but instead continues to dig new wells. Each well he digs represents a deeper level of spiritual insight and

understanding. The names he gives to these wells—Esek ("contention"), Sitnah ("hatred"), and Rehoboth ("room")—reflect the journey of spiritual growth and purification (Genesis 26:15-22) .

Origen, a renowned early Christian theologian, interprets Isaac's story as a metaphor for spiritual transformation. He emphasizes that when we faithfully perceive the message of the wells, Isaac works within us, cleansing our hearts from earthly perceptions and opening us up to spiritual understanding. "If therefore you also hearing these words today should faithfully perceive what is said, Isaac would work also in you; he would cleanse your hearts from earthly perceptions. And seeing these mysteries that are so great to be lying hidden in the divine Scriptures, you progress in understanding, you progress in spiritual perceptions. You yourselves will also begin to be teachers, and "rivers of living water" will proceed from you. For the Word of God is present, and this now is his work, that he might remove the earth from the soul of each of you and open your spring. For he is within you and does not come from without, just as "also the kingdom of God is within you." Origen's words remind us that the journey of spiritual growth is an internal one, requiring our diligent effort to remove the "earth" from our souls and allow the living water of God's Word to flow through us.

St. Ambrose, another early Church Father, further expands on this allegory. He views Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as fountains of faith and devotion, symbolizing the potential within each of us to become sources of spiritual nourishment for others. "For Abraham dug wells and Isaac too—that is, the mighty patriarchs—and Jacob also, as we find in the Gospel, as if they were fountains of the human race, and specifically fountains of faith and devotion. For what is a well of living water but a depth of profound instruction? On this account Hagar saw the angel by a well and Jacob found his wife Rachel by a well; Moses too earned the first rewards of his future marriage beside a well . Therefore Isaac undertook to open wells out of a depth of vision and in good order, so that the water of his well might first wash and strengthen the reasoning faculty of the soul and its eye, to make its sight clearer." St. Ambrose draws a connection between the wells and significant biblical events, such as Hagar's encounter with the angel, Jacob's meeting with Rachel, and Moses' courtship of Zipporah. These examples highlight the transformative power of spiritual wells, which can provide clarity, guidance, and refreshment on our spiritual journeys.

Isaac's perseverance in digging wells invites us to reflect on our own commitment to spiritual growth and renewal. It reminds us that the journey of faith is not without challenges but that through perseverance, we can uncover the hidden springs of living water within ourselves and become channels of grace for others.

Embodying the virtues of Isaac

In essence, we should all endeavor to embody the virtues that characterized Isaac, becoming a "type of Christ" in our own lives. This transformation begins with carrying our cross, a symbol of embracing the challenges and difficulties that come our way. By submitting to the will of God, we surrender our own desires and ambitions, recognizing that His plan is perfect and ultimately leads to our greatest good.

Prayer becomes a vital tool in this journey, as we seek communion with God and align our hearts with His. Regular and heartfelt prayer allows us to express our gratitude, confess our sins, and receive divine guidance. Being a shining example of faithfulness becomes, to others, a fountain of

nourishment. is another essential aspect of following Christ's example. Whether it's through acts of kindness, serving, or simply being a listening ear, our actions should reflect the love and compassion we have received from God.

Recognizing and acknowledging our shortcomings is also crucial for spiritual growth. It's not about self-condemnation but rather a humble understanding of our limitations and need for God's grace. As we embrace our flaws, we become more dependent on His strength and forgiveness. Finally, perseverance is a hallmark of Isaac's devotion and should be ours as well. The narrow gate that leads to eternal life requires sacrifice, discipline, and unwavering commitment. It's not a path for the faint-hearted, but for those who are willing to endure the challenges, the rewards are unimaginable.

The journey of becoming a "type of Christ" is not without its trials and tribulations. There will be times of doubt, temptation, and suffering. However, we must remember that God's grace is sufficient and His love knows no bounds. By carrying our cross, submitting to His will, praying often, serving faithfully, acknowledging our shortcomings, and persevering through adversity, we can experience the transformative power of Christ's love and become shining examples of His light in the world.



Review Questions

1. List three of the many qualities we should try to learn from Isaac. (A: Carrying the cross of service, praying, and persevering.)
2. Who were Isaac's children and father, respectively? (A: Jacob, Esau, and Abraham.)
3. List one instance of Isaac's perseverance. (A: He persevered during the incident with the wells and the Philistines.)
4. Who are two sources for in depth analysis of father Isaac? (A: Origen and St. Ambrose.)
5. True or false? Isaac was an independent person and married who he chose for himself. (A: False)