

Stories From The Stable *Christmas Series*

Genesis 15, 22

Written By

©Pastor Marty Baker

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Who doesn't know the lyrics of *Away in a Manger*? You could probably cite the first two verses without even looking, right?

Away in a manger, no crib for a bed,
The little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head.
The stars in the bright sky looked down where he lay,
The little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay.

The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes,
But little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes.
I love thee, Lord Jesus! look down from the sky,
And stay by my cradle till morning is nigh

The wonderful Christmas melody, written in stages in the later 19th century, is built off Luke's narrative which discloses that the birth of Jesus occurred in a stable. The lyricists of the song rightfully deduced if you have a stable out back behind an inn, it's probably a safe bet to surmise you have animals. The only problem is we don't know exactly which animals might have been present for Christ's arrival; however, we can make some educated guesses.

In our 2016 Christmas series *Stories From The Stable* we posited the possible presence of four unique animals: a donkey, goat, camel, and a lamb. We also probed into the theological import of

these particular animals based on the premise that God, who is providential, plans things to the nth degree to achieve magnificent theological purposes. The divinely inspired Scriptures teach us this much:

¹⁵ Do you know how God controls the clouds and makes his lightning flash? (Job 37).

¹⁷ And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights. (Jonah 1).

And who can forget the fact God sent birds to feed the prophet Elijah while he remained in seclusion from wicked King Ahab. Yes, every morning and evening, like clockwork, they brought him bread and meat (1 Kings 17:4-6). Makes you wonder where those birds secured the gourmet meal? Ah, but I digress. The point is clear: *God employs even the use of animals to accomplish His goals at key points in redemptive history.*

Ostensibly, this means the animals in the stable did not just happen to be there on that holy evening. Based on their use in God's salvific plan throughout the Old Testament, each had, as we have seen thus far in this series, a unique typological message and meaning if one is paying attention. Sure, we can debate all day long exactly which ones were possibly present; however, in the heat of the discussion we can be tempted to miss messages God would have for us from these little creatures.

For our purposes this holy season, I propose we consider four more creatures God could have providentially placed in the stable that starry evening to showcase spiritual truths as they relate to the promised Messiah, Jesus. Which four are possibilities? Here are my considerations: A ram, a turtle dove, an ox, and, well, a lion. I know. This last choice has just set off your hermeneutical alarms because there is no way a lion would have been there. You are right, but I think from what I know about the theology of lions in the Old Testament, there are great grounds for digging into this concept a little further. We'll do that for our final sermon prior to Christmas.

To being our exciting and instructive Christmas journey, I invite you to first consider the lowly ram. We will commence our study with a concise question.

What Do We Learn From The Ram? (Genesis 15; 22)

Plenty.

Message and Meaning From Its First Usage (Genesis 15)

The first time the word ram appears in the Old Testament it is in relation to God establishing the unconditional Abrahamic Covenant with Abraham.

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great." ² And Abram said, "O Lord God, what wilt Thou give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" ³ And Abram said, "Since Thou hast given no

offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir." ⁴ Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This man will not be your heir; but one who shall come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir." ⁵ And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." ⁶ Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness. ⁷ And He said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it" (Genesis 15).

As an old man, Abraham wondered how God would fulfill His promises from Genesis 12 and make him the father of a mighty nation who had their own land, and who, in turn, would be a spiritual blessing to the world. In Genesis 15 informs him that, despite his advanced age, his trusted servant Eliezer would not, according to custom, become his heir. On the contrary, God would give his faithful servant a miracle son.

Abraham believed God's promise about the son, but he, like any man, had a question.

⁸ And he said, "O Lord God, how may I know that I shall possess it?"

Or in other words, "Lord, what is the proof I, along with my progenitors, will inherit all the things you have promised?" With that, God stated,

⁹ So He said to him, "Bring Me a three-year-old heifer, and a three-year-old female goat, and a three-year-old ram, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon." ¹⁰ Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, and laid each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds.

There it is. The first appearance of the word *ram*. What is its purpose in this narrative? Read on and see.

¹² Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror *and* great darkness fell upon him. . . . ¹⁷ And it came about when the sun had set, that it was very dark, and behold, *there appeared* a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces. ¹⁸ On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I have given this land, From the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates . . . (Genesis 15).

What just happened? God, who was denoted the presence of the fiery pot which floated between the divided pieces of the sacrificial animals, just definitively stated to Abraham and his descendants that the Abrahamic Covenant rested solely upon Him and His nature. In other words, God just said in so many words, "If this covenant is not fulfilled, then may I be divided like these animals." This is how ancient contracts worked (Jeremiah 34:18), and by not permitting Abraham to personally walk between the slain creatures, God underscored that His desire to ultimately bring the Messiah through the Abrahamic line to bless the world rested solely upon Him.

No wonder, then, a ram was probably close at hand in that warm, cozy stable. The One who would fulfill the magnificent essence of the unconditional Abrahamic Covenant had, in fact, arrived in the most unexpected way. That little innocent ram was a silent testimony that God's purpose to bless the world with THE Son from the loins of Abraham had arrived based on God's promise and character.

But all of this merely sets the stage for the grander message imbedded in the concept of the ram when we come to Genesis chapter 22.

Message and Meaning From Its Second Usage (Genesis 22)

Genesis chapter twenty-two contextually occurs years after God's promise in chapter 15. It also occurs after several steps of bold faith by Abraham, coupled with moments of unbelievable disobedience to God. Abraham sinfully slid into darkness when he produced a child through his servant, Hagar (Genesis 16), in contradistinction to God's promise that a son would come through him and Sarah. He also, as we are prone to do in moments of spiritual weakness, went off the spiritual reservation (*again . . . in in the same sinful way, cf. Genesis 12:11-13*) when he lied to Abimelech, king of Gerar, that Sarah was his sister in order to protect his life. God, however, remained true to His promise and continued to work with his chosen man, despite his moments of spiritual assertion or desertion.

Are you not thankful for the grace of God? He specializes in using broken, dysfunctional people who desire to follow Him. This does not, however, mean He will not test their spiritual mettle. This is what we encounter in Genesis 22, but more than that we learn some rich spiritual truths from the presence of an unassuming, insignificant ram. To isolate the theological significance of the word *ram* from this highly instructive chapter, I propose we, for the sake of time, divide the lengthy text into two distinct quadrants.

The Story's Construction. First, we encounter what I will call **The Request** (vv. 1-2).

¹ Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."

The Devil tempts saints to get them to spiritually fall, as the Puritan Thomas Brooks notes, "He that will play with Satan's bait, will quickly be taken with Satan's hook."¹ The Father, on the contrary, tests saints in order to move them onto deeper maturity. The words of Tozer are most fitting, "God cannot use you greatly until He has first hurt you deeply." Such are the ways of God. He refines and teaches the best in the midst of adversity. The stuff of life teaches us this much. For instance, the difference between fine china and normal, everyday plates are the number of times they have been in the white heat of the kiln.

For Abraham, the most challenging spiritual test he would ever encounter started when he was well over a hundred. Don't think for a minute God is ever finished refining you. At twenty, He is just getting going. At sixty, He still has much work to do, regardless of what you think. At ninety, He knows a finer edge can be given to the faith of a faithful servant like Abraham. For

¹Mark Water, compiler, *The New Encyclopedia of Christian Quotations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 1034.

Abraham, the spiritual honing began with a familiar word: *lek leka* (וּלְדָלְקָה אֶל-אֶרֶץ הַמִּרְיָה) He had heard this from God when He was commanded to leave his home in Ur of the Chaldees: *lek leka* (לְדָלְקָה מֵאֶרֶץ); Genesis 12:1-3). He knew that when he heard this specialized term, God was up to something big. He, also, knew when he heard this term God was going to examine his faith by challenging him to do something that might seem inexplicable and highly illogical, even emotionally painful.

God did not let him down.

With each phrase don't you know Abraham's heart sank just a little deeper?

² And He said, "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you."

God, who was against human sacrifice because this is what the Canaanites did, asks Abraham to willingly offer his long-awaited, much loved, miracle son of promise as a burnt offering. I'm sure the sacrifice was first and foremost that of Abraham's joy of who Isaac was and what he represented covenantally. Don't you know his head must have been swimming with questions? "God, you want me to do what to who?" May God is testing you and your head is swimming too with questions. What will you do? Will you go where He is leading you? Abraham did without question. We see that in . . .

The Response (vv. 3-14). God called Abraham to a test of staggering proportions. From the beginning of the narrative, we see Abraham did not question God for one moment. His faith in God and God's provision was so strong, the writer of Hebrews says in the Hall of Faith chapter, chapter 11:

¹⁷ By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac; and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; ¹⁸ *it was he* to whom it was said, "In Isaac your descendants shall be called." ¹⁹ He considered that God is able to raise *men* even from the dead; from which he also received him back as a type (Hebrews 11).

This was some kind of faith. Even though God indicated the long-awaited son would be the focus of the burnt offering, Abraham did exactly as God commanded. He loved Isaac, but he relinquished him to the perfect will of God and thereby showed he trusted and loved God more than anything, more than life, and more than a miracle son he never dreamed he and Sarah would live to see. Is this not amazing? One godly father was willing to give up his very best for the will and mysterious purposes of the living God.

We see his obedience played out in the ensuing narrative:

³ 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 wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. ⁴ On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from a distance. ⁵ And Abraham said to

his young men, “Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go yonder; and we will worship and return to you.”

Do you see the faith even in this last statement? Even prior to the sacrificial action, Abraham believed that he and Isaac would return to the servants. Do you flinch when God tests you? Do you waver when He challenges you to do the hard thing, to walk down a difficult, demanding path? Or do you move boldly ahead knowing that God’ omnipotence can make any crooked path straight as an arrow?

Verse 6 tells us what happened on Mount Moriah when Abraham and Isaac arrived with the split wood:

⁶ And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son, and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together.

Isaac, like any inquisitive boy who had seen his father offer sacrifice to God before, asked the logical question:

⁷ And Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, “My father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” And he said, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”

Abraham, at this juncture, still couldn’t tell his son what God has commanded, so he merely point Isaac to God’s unquestioned ability to always provide perfectly for His people.

⁸ And Abraham said, “God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” So the two of them walked on together.

God would provide, but it wouldn’t be how Isaac had anticipated.

⁹ Then they came to the place of which God had told him; and Abraham built the altar there, and arranged the wood, and bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar on top of the wood.

There is conversation missing between the word “wood” and the coordinating conjunction “and.” As some point as they quietly built an altar with the wood they had carried up the hill, Abraham told Isaac the essence of God’s command. On Isaac’s part there was only inexorable faith in God and obedience to God’s command. Even though he was, in fact, *the* son of promise, the miracle child designed to be the progenitor of God’s people Israel, who, in turn, would bring the Messiah to the world (Genesis 49:11ff; 2 Samuel 7; Psalm 89), he willingly and without argument laid down on the wood to become the burnt offering sacrifice.

Then, with a glittering, sharp knife in his age-spotted, weather-beaten hand, Abraham commenced to offer to God his costliest and dearest treasure:

¹⁰ And Abraham stretched out his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.

In that precise moment, Abraham showed he loved God and God's way more than anything else. In that precise moment, Abraham had, from God's perspective, passed the divine test of a lifetime. Makes you pause this Christmas season and ask yourself: Will I pass the test God has me in right now? Will I walk the hard, costly road to give Him the glory? Will my gift to Him be my unwavering, unflinching obedience?

In the third movement of the narrative, we readily see God had no intention of sacrificing Isaac. I call this section **The Revelation** (vv. 11-14). Breaking through from His dimension into ours at just the right time, we read what God said:

¹¹ But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ¹² And he said, "Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me."

Who is the angel of the LORD? He is the pre-incarnate form of Jesus. Concerning His identification, Dr. John Walvoord observes:

- Christ as the Angel of Jehovah is identified as Jehovah in numerous Old Testament passages. When the Angel of Jehovah spoke to Hager (Gen. 16:7-13, ASV), He was identified as Jehovah (v. 13, ASV). The account of the sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22:15-18, ASV), affords the same identification. . . .
- The Angel of Jehovah is also revealed to be a distinct Person from Jehovah, that is, a Person of the Trinity. In Genesis 24:7 (ASV), for instance, Jehovah is described as sending "his angel." . . . An instance which is clear is that found in Zechariah 1:12-13 (ASV), where the Angel of Jehovah addressed Jehovah.
- The Angel of Jehovah is the second Person of the Trinity . . . a. The second Person is the visible God of the New Testament. Neither the Father nor the Spirit is characteristically revealed in bodily or visible form. . . . b. Confirming this induction is the fact that the Angel of Jehovah of the Old Testament no longer appears after the incarnation. . . . c. The similarity of function between the Angel of Jehovah and Christ can be observed in the fact that Both are sent by the Father. . . . By the process of elimination, it can be demonstrated that the Angel of Jehovah could not be either the first Person or the third Person. According to John 1:18 (RSV): "No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known." This passage seems to imply that only Christ could be visible to man and that the first Person and the third person did not reveal Themselves in visible fashion. As the Angel of Jehovah is the sent One, He could not be the Father for the Father is the Sender. As the Angel of Jehovah characteristically appears in bodily, usually human form, He could not be

the Holy Spirit who does not appear bodily, except in the rare instance of appearing in the form of a dove at the baptism of Christ. It may, therefore, be concluded that the Angel of Jehovah is the second Person of the Trinity.²

Abraham had told Isaac God would provide, and He had. First, God provided revelation to show that the sacrifice of a promised son was not what He desired. He was more concerned about His saint learning, again, the value of following Him without question, even if it did not make logical sense. God's way is always the better, wiser way. Second, God provided a proper and perfect animal sacrifice:

¹³ Then Abraham raised his eyes and looked, and behold, behind *him* a ram caught in the thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the place of his son. ¹⁴ And Abraham called the name of that place The LORD Will Provide, as it is said to this day, "In the mount of the LORD it will be provided."

Ah, there it is; the ram, which was the perfect sacrifice to cover sins (Leviticus 5-6). No wonder Abraham called the top of Mount Moriah: *Jehovah Jireh* (יְהוָה יִרְאֶה). God had provided a ram to be the substitute for his promised son. God had also provided a test whereby ol' Abraham had learned much about himself and his walk with God. Through this test God had taken him to the limits of his emotional make-up, but, in the end, Abraham's rock solid trust in God's leadership led him to a whole new spiritual plateau he had never known in his 100 plus years. Yes, this whole emotionally charged story turned on the obedience of a father and his son, the voice of Jesus, and the noise of an innocent ram providentially caught in some thick brush.

The instructive narrative closes with a statement about **The Reward** (vv. 15-18).

¹⁵ Then the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, ¹⁶ and said, "By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens, and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. ¹⁸ And in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice" (Genesis 22).

Note well how the Angel here speaks as God. This is Jesus letting Abraham know this has been the test of a lifetime, and he had passed. Jesus also informed Abraham that there should be no doubt that every facet of the Abrahamic Covenant would be fulfilled. This is most interesting because Jesus would be, 2,000 years later, the One who was equipped to put in motion this fulfillment. But we get ahead of ourselves. We draw all of this thematic threads together in what I'll label . . .

² John Walvoord, *Jesus Christ Our Lord* (Chicago: Moody, 1979), 45-46.

The Story's Instruction. What do we learn from the ram? Better yet, why would it have been logical for a ram to be a resident in the stable Christ was born in on that starry, crisp evening?

One, the ram logically and biblically points us back to this redemptive story of all redemptive stories. Who cannot but help to see the correlation between the mission of Jesus and that of Abraham and Isaac. Typologically, Abraham stands for God the Father who was, out of love for sinners, willing to sacrifice His only Son for our sin so we could find and secure eternal forgiveness. And Jesus is the greater Isaac who not only carried heavy wood to the place of sacrifice, but He was actually nailed to the wood and became the perfect sacrifice, one most certainly greater than the little ram of Abraham's day (John 10:14-18 denotes how He willingly laid his life down for sinners).

Two, the ram reminds us that our Father in heaven sent His only promised Son, Jesus, on a redemptive mission involving sacrifice. As we read in 1 John chapter 4,

¹⁴ And we have beheld and bear witness that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world" (1 John 4).

All throughout the book of John we read from Jesus's lips how He was sent on his redemptive mission by the Father (John 1:33; 3:34; 4:34; 5:23, 24, 30, 36, 37, 38; 6:29, 38, 39, 44, 57 to cite some of many examples). As Isaac and the ram were both sent to that hilltop, Jesus was sent there as well, but His work would accomplish the complete defeat of sin and death

Three, the ram pointed forward to the greater ram, Jesus, who would also die on Mount Moriah. Where was/is Mount Moriah? The Chronicler gives us the much needed answer:

¹ Then Solomon began to build the house of the LORD in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where *the Lord* had appeared to his father David, at the place that David had prepared, on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite. (2 Chronicles 3).

Jaw dropping, isn't it? The very same place Solomon built the temple, wherein sinners could find forgiveness and cleansing for sin by means of offering the correct blood sacrifices (Leviticus 1-7), was the same rock upon which Abraham had sacrificed the ram God had provided some 1,000 years prior. Almost another 1,000 years later, the perfect, sinless Son of God would die in this same vicinity as the ultimate burnt offering sacrifice for sin. How intricate are the ways of the living God. In Jesus's life and sacrifice we clearly see that Jehovah does provide. He provides life for sinners.

The story of the ram in the stable reminds us of this truth this Christmas season. It also stands as a challenge to those who have yet to experience His perfect, eternal provision for their sin. That provision is but a short prayer away. Who will pray it this day?