

Worship and Sacrifice

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Then Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.” (Gen. 22:5)

After almost 20 years of service in a particular country of Sub-Saharan Africa, the Lord has led me and my family to transfer to a different country in Africa. While that might sound exciting, there have definitely been some challenges. We are going through the entire process all over again—new place, new people, new language, new culture, new everything. While we have years of African experience to lean on, we have still experienced loneliness, culture shock, and a variety of challenges that caught us completely unaware.

One of the greatest areas of struggle we have faced has been in the area of worship. There are local churches all around us, but we are realizing that they are a good bit different than the ones we had grown accustomed to in our former country of service. The music is really loud and painful, with PA systems that often leave my ears aching and ringing at the end of the day. We have realized that our former country was fairly unique with the incredible giftedness of its singers and choirs. Here the singing is often off-key, off-beat, and with a confusing rhythm that can leave you bewildered at times. Neo-Pentecostalism is infecting the churches, and at times the

sermons are theologically suspect and smack of the prosperity gospel. Then, to top it all off, this often happens in a language that we haven't yet learned, and with cultural cues that we don't yet understand.

Yet, despite our struggles with worship, we are falling in love with these people. There is one particular little church nearby that has graciously and warmly received us. They have been so kind and welcoming, and I am beginning to enjoy the fellowship, the friendships, and the community. I can sense the Lord drawing me into them and joining my heart with theirs. I rejoice in that and thank God for that. Yet, while I love being with them, I do not always love worshiping with them; and that pains me deeply. We have to sit in a strategic place so that we won't lose our hearing, and I have to constantly pray through my attitude when showy worship or misinterpreted Scripture makes me cringe. It has caused me to ask some serious questions about myself, my own culture, and my perspective on worship. I am not suggesting that distorted, reverberating speakers in a tiny space is the way to go, but perhaps I have missed an aspect of worship that our Western culture often overlooks.

When I read the story of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22, I am struck by verse 5. Many people are familiar with this text, and we often remark on the significance of God testing Abraham or the foreshadowing of God's sacrifice of His Son for our sins. However, we often fail to recognize that this was an act of worship on Abraham's part. Also, when you read the writer of Hebrews' commentary on this very event (Heb. 11:17-19), you get a glimpse into Abraham's thoughts as he climbed that mountain. He never expected God to stop him. . . he knew God would work things out, but he truly thought he was going to have to sacrifice his own son . . . and he called it "worship."

This tells me that worship is not about me; it's about God and His glory. It's not about my preferences, or where I am comfortable. It's not about what I can get out of the worship or what I find enjoyable. It's not even about what is most beneficial for my children. It's about God's glory . . . about my obedience and my sacrifice . . . and sometimes that is difficult and painful

for me. Abraham walked stoically up that mountain, determined to worship the Lord with all of his heart, no matter what it cost him. I am sure he walked down that mountain, hand in hand with his son feeling the greatest joy and peace he had ever felt. The blessings came, but they were on the other side of great sacrifice and ultimate obedience.

And so, I have purposed to root myself deeply in this local congregation. Whatever it takes, regardless of how uncomfortable I am, I will invest in them, not just Monday through Saturday but on Sunday as well. There are at least four important reasons why I think this is right not only for me and my family but also for others who serve as missionaries in places like this.

Perhaps God will give me the opportunity to affect change.

There are definitely things that are broken in the local churches here. There are issues concerning leadership, worship, church planting, discipleship and so many other things that need to be addressed. How can I address them effectively and see deep-rooted change if I have an aloof relationship with them? In the past, I have tried strategies that involved us living away from the people, driving in to do some programs, driving back out to our more comfortable surroundings, and then lamenting the lack of progress we actually saw. Eventually, I learned that any lasting success would be built on a foundation of long-lasting relationships and doing life with people.

This new city will be no different. If I don't invest in local churches here in a sacrificial way, I will never see genuine change. They will receive the teaching and thank me for my efforts, but at the end of the day, it will still be business as usual when I am not around. My colleagues and I have been lamenting about the state of the worship in local churches in this country that goes beyond simple African cultural forms and is more about Neo-Pentecostalism and African Traditional Religion. However, I am not content to just complain about the problems and find places to attend on Sunday where I can avoid them. Instead, I want the privilege to address the problems and to bring the truth of God's word to bear on them. That will

never happen unless I am embedded in their lives and in the local church, for better or worse.

Perhaps they will have an opportunity to change me.

I constantly ask myself, “Is this about me and my preferences, or is this about truth and God’s word?” I think that is a healthy question to ask because I know that we are all prone to gravitate toward what we know and enjoy. I look around and see Africans who are very comfortable doing things that make me uncomfortable. I don’t want to assume that they are wrong and that I am right, without clear biblical evidence that supports my assumption.

After these years of service on this continent, I have learned so much from my African brothers and sisters, and I am a better man for it. Seeing the world through their eyes, looking at the word from their perspective, and experiencing life in community with them have made me a stronger, more effective Christian and missionary. I don’t want to ever take that for granted. I believe that if I am committed to covenant fellowship with this group of people that I am growing to love, regardless of how I feel about the church services, I will have a chance to address certain issues and they will have an opportunity to expose some of my own shortcomings and make me better.

One thing this whole process has revealed to me is how “me” centered our Western worship is. We approach churches like a buffet and we pick the ones that have the best worship teams, the best preacher, the best location, the nicest gym, the prettiest carpet, and so on. We join churches based on what they offer us. We rarely walk in and join churches based on the things that drove Abraham up that mountain to worship: obedience, faith, sacrifice, and God’s glory. Sometimes, the most God-honoring thing you can do is worship where you are most uncomfortable, instead of where you enjoy going!

Perhaps this is the best thing for my children.

I have determined that the best example I can give my kids is for us to be in worship together with local African churches, regardless of what that costs us. I realize that might sound counterintuitive since people often select churches based on their children's needs. Yet, if things are lacking in the worship or if my kids aren't getting every word of this language we are still learning together, that is okay because as their father I can make that up at home in our family worship. There are more important lessons I want to teach them.

I want them to learn to love Africans and to joyously cross cultural boundaries with a zeal that pleases God. I want them to see that in me and to hear that in my voice on Sunday and every day of the week. I want to set the tone that we worship as a family and that means we go together because of Jesus, not for ourselves. I want them to learn that worship is about God and not about us, or what pleases us and makes us the most comfortable. Many ex-pats mitigate the problem by connecting at a local English service of a non-denominational Western church, or by staying home and worshipping as a family. I realize that in some parts of the world, there are no local churches, or if there are, they are not Baptist. That, however, is not the case here. I want my children to see lived out before them that church is local, it is covenant community and it is vital . . . and it doesn't always have to be fun.

Perhaps God will be honored and my worship will be more meaningful.

Finally, I pray that through this commitment to do what is often uncomfortable, it won't always stay that way. I pray that like Abraham, I can go up the mountain to worship out of love and obedience, ready to make the sacrifice that I am not happy about, and then come down the mountain joyful, relieved, and changed, having met the Lord at the top in a way I never

expected. I don't want to transform this church into my image, but I do want to invest in them outside of the worship service and inside as well. I do pray that God will give me a chance to speak truth into issues that bring genuine transformation in this small local body, which will in turn begin to shape and affect other congregations that they touch. I pray that my eyes will be opened and if the local church is right and I am wrong, that God will reveal that to us all as we dialogue together around His word. I pray that God will be honored by my willingness to sacrifice personal preference and comfort in order to go deep with these precious people.

I am often amazed at the willingness of myself and my colleagues to leave home, leave all to serve Him, and willingly sacrifice to reach these people with the gospel Monday through Saturday, but then live as if the sacrifice ends on Sunday. I think each of us, even those who live in the West, should ask ourselves this question: when did Sunday stop being about worship and sacrifice, and start being about what benefits us, or what we find most enjoyable? Let the example of Abraham drive you back to the real heart of worship.

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