

Caught in the Thicket

Finding God's Love in Our Misunderstandings



The Presence Network

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A Reflection Guide
by
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Introduction

This reflection guide is an invitation to slow down, to question honestly, and to encounter love more deeply.

The story of Abraham and Isaac has stirred discomfort for generations. Rather than rushing past it, we pause here—allowing the tension, the questions, and the deeper invitation to surface.

This is not a book of answers.

It is a space for reflection.

Take your time.

Return to what resonates.

Let love be your guide.

Table of Contents

Chapters

1. The Atrocity That Isn't Ignored
Facing Abraham's test honestly.
2. Perfect or Inspired?
Why scripture as "inspired" opens us to deeper truth.
3. Greater Things
4. God or Projection?
Human violence laid at God's feet.
5. The Ram in the Thicket
Provision over sacrifice—mercy instead of blood.
6. The Judgment of Love
If it's not love, it cannot be of God.
7. When God Put On Flesh
God robes Himself in humanity to reveal true love.
8. A Tattered Yet Honored Faith
God honors faith—even when human understanding is flawed.

Chapter 1: The Atrocity That Isn't Ignored

The story of Abraham and Isaac is one of the most unsettling passages in scripture. It refuses to be softened. It does not bring comfort; it stirs unease. It asks us to stare directly into the horror: Why would God ask Abraham to sacrifice his son?

For centuries, many have offered explanations. Some say it was a test of obedience. Others argue it was a foreshadowing of Christ. Still others dismiss it as an allegory. Yet none of these answers erase the tension. If God is love, how can this request—even as a “test”—fit His character?

This story is often preached as a triumph of obedience. But imagine Isaac—bound on the altar, staring into the eyes of his father. Imagine Abraham—knife in hand, heart torn between devotion and love. If we dismiss this too quickly, we risk ignoring the human ache and the ethical atrocity at the heart of the narrative.

But then—the ram. Caught in the thicket, waiting. It was not Isaac's blood that would be spilled. The story turned. Violence was interrupted. Provision stepped in.

Perhaps this is the real heartbeat of the story: not God demanding death, but God revealing mercy. Not the glorification of blind obedience, but the unveiling of divine provision. Abraham thought faith required violence. God revealed that faith rests in trust—that even when we misunderstand, He provides another way.

We are, all of us, Abraham at times. We lift the knife of misunderstanding, mistaking fear or duty for God's voice. And then we discover the ram in the thicket—the provision already waiting, the mercy already given. That's the story worth remembering: not Isaac bound, but the ram caught. Not horror triumphant, but love intervening.

Journal Prompts

1. What emotions rise in you as you sit with the story of Abraham and Isaac?
2. Have you ever rushed past the hard questions in scripture, afraid of what they might reveal?
3. Where in your own life have you discovered a “ram in the thicket”—a mercy waiting for you in the midst of fear?
4. What does it mean to you that God provides not only for Abraham, but also for you in your own thickets?

Chapter 2: Perfect or Inspired?

The story of Abraham and Isaac opens a larger question: how do we read scripture itself? For many, the Bible is considered flawless, perfect, inerrant. It is held up as a book without mistake, without contradiction, without error. But if we are honest, this claim does not hold under the weight of the text itself.

There are scribal errors, differing accounts of the same events, and even contradictions about God's nature. Place names shift. Numbers don't always agree. Prophets see from different angles, sometimes even correcting one another. When we insist that the text is flawless, we demand from it something it was never meant to give.

The Bible is not perfect—it is inspired. That is what makes it holy. The Spirit breathes through the writers, but they remain human. Their language is limited, their cultural lenses imperfect, their knowledge incomplete. They were not dictation machines. They were poets, storytellers, prophets, letter-writers, witnesses. They were like us: moved by God, yet human all the same.

If we treat scripture as flawless, we risk placing it above the very God it reveals. We forget that Jesus said, "Greater works shall you do, because I go to the Father." If the Spirit continues to inspire, then revelation did not end with the ink on the page. Inspired words can emerge in every generation, through hearts moved by love.

Canon itself reminds us of this truth. What we now hold as sixty-six books once existed as a wider collection. At one time, more than eighty writings were considered. Councils debated, argued, and voted. Even now, Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox Christians cannot agree on the exact number of books. If the Bible were "perfect," wouldn't there be perfect agreement?

The danger of perfectionism is that it can lead us away from love. A "flawless" scripture can be used as a weapon to justify cruelty. But inspired scripture—like inspired people—must always be tested by love. If it breathes love, it carries God's breath. If it reeks of hate, domination, or violence, it cannot be from Him. For God is love, and love must be the final judge.

Journal Prompts

1. How were you first taught to view the Bible—as perfect, inspired, or something else?
2. How does it change your reading of scripture if you see it as inspired rather than flawless?
3. What dangers do you see in insisting the Bible is "perfect"?
4. How might love serve as the lens through which you test and interpret inspired words—both ancient and modern?

Chapter 3: Greater Things

It seems almost preposterous that we elevate the biblical writers to a plane of holiness or perfection that we can never attain. To imagine that the Old Testament prophets or the New Testament apostles had a kind of inspiration unavailable to us today is to miss the very heart of the gospel.

If the writers of scripture were inspired, it was not because they were flawless, but because they were human vessels yielded to God's Spirit. They were not exempt from error, culture, or misunderstanding. Their greatness was not in perfection—it was in surrender.

Yet we often imagine that Isaiah wrote with a divine authority that no poet today could ever carry. Or that Paul's pen was guided in a way that makes every modern reflection pale in comparison. This thinking does violence to Jesus' promise: "Truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father."

Greater things. That is the expectation, not lesser. Inspiration did not freeze in time when the canon closed. The Spirit who breathed into Ezekiel, Mary, and John of Patmos is the same Spirit who breathes in us. To say otherwise is to deny Christ's words. The truth is, inspiration continues. It has to—because God is not a monument of the past but the Living One. To canonize the writers as unreachable is to silence the Spirit in our own generation. But to open ourselves to inspiration is to trust that God still speaks, still writes, still moves in the hearts of His people.

The earmark of inspiration remains the same now as it was then: love. Not accuracy, not perfection, not flawless theology. Love. If it breathes love, it carries God's Spirit. If it reeks of hate, fear, or control, it does not. So we must not ask, "Could I ever be as inspired as Isaiah?" Instead, we must ask, "Am I willing to love enough to let the Spirit breathe through me?" That is the greater thing Jesus promised.

Journal Prompts:

1. Have you ever been told that inspiration "ended" with the Bible? How did that shape your faith?
2. What does Jesus' promise of "greater works" stir in you—hope, doubt, possibility?
3. Where in your life have you sensed the Spirit breathing through you, even in small ways?
4. How might you live differently if you truly believed you could be inspired as deeply as the writers of scripture?

Chapter 4: God or Projection?

The Old Testament often paints pictures of God that are difficult to reconcile with the God revealed in Christ. We read of entire nations wiped out, enemies struck down, and violence credited to the hand of the Almighty. How do we make sense of this?

One possibility is that humanity—still growing, still stumbling—confused its own impulses with the voice of God. When tribes went to war, it was convenient to declare, “God told us to do it.” When leaders felt threatened, they invoked divine judgment to justify their actions. God became the banner under which human anger and tribal vengeance marched.

But does this reflect God’s heart—or our projections?

When Jesus came, He unsettled the religious establishment precisely because He did not look like the God they imagined. He ate with sinners, embraced the unclean, forgave the guilty, and refused to call down fire on His enemies. In fact, when His disciples wanted to summon fire from heaven—as Elijah once had—Jesus rebuked them. He would not allow God’s name to be used as a cloak for human destruction.

If God is love, then anything that reeks of hatred, domination, or annihilation cannot be His voice. Instead, those stories may reveal how limited humanity’s vision was, and how willing they were to drape their violence in sacred garments.

The truth is, God has never changed. What has changed is our perception. The God of Abraham and the God revealed in Christ are one and the same—but Abraham saw through a glass darkly, while in Christ we see face to face. Jesus did not arrive to change God’s character; He came to correct our vision.

Perhaps the harshest portraits of God in scripture are less about who God is, and more about who we were. They are mirrors of humanity’s projections—our fears, our tribalism, our bloodlust—placed on the canvas of divinity. Christ comes, not to condemn us for this distortion, but to peel back the veil and say, “This is what God really looks like.”

Journal Prompts

1. Have you ever struggled with the violent portrayals of God in the Old Testament? How have you reconciled them in the past?
2. Can you think of moments when people—including yourself—gave God credit for something more human than divine?
3. How does Jesus’ life and teaching challenge the older images of God as vengeful or violent?
4. What would change if you read scripture through the lens of God’s unchanging love, rather than human projection?

Chapter 5: The Ram in the Thicket

The turning point in Abraham's story is not the knife, not the altar, not even the raised hand—it is the ram caught in the thicket. That image, tangled in branches, waiting, becomes the heart of the story.

Abraham thought obedience meant offering violence. He believed faith required him to surrender his son. But God had already prepared another way. Provision was waiting before Abraham even lifted the knife. The ram was no afterthought. It was already there, caught in the thicket, hidden until the right moment.

This is the God revealed in Christ—the God who provides mercy before we even know to ask. The God who interrupts violence with substitution. The God who whispers: *“Not your son. Not blood. Not destruction. Here is another way.”*

The ram is more than an animal. It is a foreshadowing of Christ. Just as Abraham's son was spared, so humanity is spared. Just as the ram took Isaac's place, so Christ takes ours—not as a demand of divine cruelty, but as the unveiling of divine mercy. This was always the plan: not annihilation, but love. Not sacrifice upon sacrifice, troughs of blood and endless rituals, but one clear revelation—*God provides*.

How many of our own stories mirror this? We walk toward what feels like unbearable loss, convinced we must surrender everything in a way that feels like death. We mishear God, thinking He requires suffering. Yet at the last moment, we find it: mercy waiting, provision caught in the thicket.

Faith does not mean we always understand. Faith means that even in our misunderstanding, God has already provided. Abraham's knife never fell because God had already supplied the substitute. And in the same way, our fears, our shame, our misunderstanding never have the last word. Mercy does.

Journal Prompts

1. When you picture the ram caught in the thicket, what emotions stir in you? Relief, gratitude, confusion, something else?
2. Have you ever been walking into a situation that felt like loss or destruction, only to find God had already prepared a way out?
3. How does the image of substitution—mercy standing in your place—change your understanding of God's love?
4. In what “thickets” of your life do you most need to believe that God's provision is already waiting?

Chapter 6: The Judgment of Love

If there is one lens through which all scripture, all theology, and all experience must be judged, it is love. For God is love. Not sometimes, not occasionally, not when it fits our doctrines—always.

This simple truth becomes the key that unlocks the entire story of faith. If an action, a command, or a teaching does not breathe love, then it cannot reflect God’s heart. If it reeks of hate, vengeance, or cruelty, it must be a projection of human misunderstanding. Love is the measure. Love is the standard. Love is the judgment.

This is not a sentimental love, soft and shallow. It is a love fierce enough to lay down power, humble enough to wash feet, strong enough to absorb violence without returning it. It is a love that forgives when betrayed, welcomes when excluded, and weeps when others weep.

When Abraham raised the knife, he thought obedience was the highest form of faith. But God revealed that love outranks obedience. The ram in the thicket was more than provision; it was a declaration: I do not delight in blood. I delight in mercy.

Later, the prophets would echo this: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” Jesus would embody it: “By this everyone will know you are my disciples, if you love one another.” Paul would confirm it: “The greatest of these is love.” Over and over, the Spirit reminds us—love is the heartbeat of God.

So when we encounter passages of violence, laws of exclusion, or teachings that dehumanize, we must ask: Does this align with love? If not, then we are free—even compelled—to say, This is not the final word of God. The final word of God is Christ. And Christ is love.

Love is not the soft option; it is the truest option. It is the most demanding path, the most refining fire, the most costly obedience. But it is also the only way that reveals the face of God.

Journal Prompts

1. How do you typically measure whether something is from God—by tradition, authority, scripture, or love?
2. What does it mean to you that love—not obedience, not sacrifice—is the final judgment of truth?
3. Have you ever experienced a situation where obedience to rules conflicted with the call to love? Which did you follow?
4. How might your reading of the Bible change if you tested every passage through the lens of love?

Chapter 7: When God Put On Flesh

The prophets had cried out for generations. The altars overflowed with blood. The troughs ran red with sacrifice, yet the hearts of the people remained unchanged. God looked upon it all and said, in essence: You are not getting it.

And so, Love did what love always does—Love came closer. God robed Himself in flesh. He did not arrive with armies, crowns, or thrones. He came wrapped in swaddling cloth, laid in a feeding trough. He slipped on the servant's robe, the sandals of humility, and stepped into our dust.

We often say, "God sent His Son." Yet if God is One, what happened in the incarnation was not divine outsourcing. It was God Himself—choosing limitation, choosing vulnerability, choosing to show us in human form what love truly looks like.

This raises the mystery: Was Christ limited? Yes. He hungered. He thirsted. He grew weary. He wept. He could be wounded, and He could die. This was no accident. It was the point. For love is not domination. Love does not force its way. Love is revealed most clearly in weakness—when it chooses to be vulnerable.

The life of Jesus did not match our philosophies of success. He lived in obscurity for thirty years before stepping into public ministry. His ministry lasted just over three. He never wrote a book, never built a kingdom, never held political power. Instead, He healed the broken, fed the hungry, touched the untouchable, and lifted the fallen. His reward was betrayal, abandonment, and crucifixion. By the world's standards, it was a failure. But by heaven's standards, it was fullness.

The cross was not defeated. It was God's exclamation point: This is what love looks like. Gentle. Kind. Patient. Long-suffering. Willing to endure suffering rather than inflict it. Willing to embrace death rather than demand another's.

And here lies the paradox: by limiting Himself, God revealed His limitless nature. By choosing weakness, He showed the strength of love. By dying, He revealed the life that cannot die.

"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." These words from James echo the very life of Christ. Perseverance is not glamorous. It is not easy. But it is the soil where love grows deep.

The incarnation, then, is not a theological puzzle to be solved. It is a story to be lived. God came to show us what love looks like. And He still does—through every act of humility, every quiet kindness, every patient endurance, every life willing to be robed in love.

Journal Prompts

1. How does it affect your view of God to imagine Him “slipping on the servant’s robe” and entering our dust?
2. What does it mean to you that God chose limitation in Christ?
3. Where in your life do you feel weak or limited—and how might that be a place for love to shine through?
4. How does Jesus’ quiet, short, and humble ministry challenge your own ideas of what success looks like?

Chapter 8: A Tattered Yet Honored Faith

Faith has never been perfect. Abraham misunderstood. The disciples misunderstood. We misunderstand. Yet God honors faith, even when it is tattered.

A mustard seed of faith is enough—not because the seed is strong, but because God is faithful. Our doubts, missteps, and projections do not disqualify us. They only highlight the mercy that meets us.

Abraham left Moriah not with Isaac dead, but alive. Not with obedience glorified, but with mercy revealed. And so do we. The last word over us is not failure, not misunderstanding. The last word is love.

Journal Prompts:

1. How would you describe your faith right now—strong, weak, tattered, hopeful?
2. How does it feel to know that God honors even imperfect faith?

Closing Word

We are all, in some way, caught in the thicket. Bound by fears, trapped in misunderstandings, tangled in our projections of God. Yet hidden in the branches is mercy—already waiting.

The God revealed in Christ is not a destroyer, but a provider. Not a taker, but a giver. Not vengeance, but love. That is the God who calls you. That is the God who provides for you.

That is the God who loves you.

And love, always, is the final word.