

# “Spiritual App of Reflection”

Romans 12:2 and Genesis 22: 1-14

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This weekend we continue our summer series on spiritual apps. We began it a couple weeks ago with the explanation that just like people download an app on their smartphones, so we can access certain spiritual apps to connect us to God in various circumstances. On our cellphones we may not need a GPS app to help us get from home to the office, but GPS is very helpful when navigating through construction and detours or to unfamiliar locations.

Today we are exploring the spiritual app known as reflection. It assumes we already practice Bible reading and even Bible study. We know how to access information about Bible stories. We can go online and learn plenty of facts, history, regarding Bible passages. Reflection invites us to go beyond reading and study.

Reflection as a spiritual app is less about how much we read, study, or research and more about how much we reflect on what we have read and studied. Abraham Lincoln might be an example for us today. I have always thought of President Lincoln as a voracious reader. I pictured him reading numerous books throughout his life. His law partner, William Herndon, gives a very different perspective on Lincoln. Lincoln was never a particularly good reader. Herndon enjoyed reading many different books in various fields, and often suggested good reading materials to Lincoln. Lincoln would scan a page or two then hand it back and ask Herndon to summarize what was in it. You see, Lincoln read slowly, out loud, his entire life.

Lincoln was never a very good reader, but he was a deep thinker. Herndon concluded that Lincoln may have read less and thought more than any man of that day in America. In other words, Lincoln mastered the app of reflection because he thought deeply about the information he received.

This spiritual app of reflection can be particularly helpful when it comes to going deeper into Bible stories. Often a common interpretation of a familiar Bible story misses some important deeper insights. For instance, let's take the well-known Bible story of God asking Abraham to offer his son on the altar.

## Genesis 22: 1-14

Early in my ministry I arrived home one afternoon to the laughing eyes of my wife, anxious to tell me about our three-year-old son's day. Nate had led a group of dolls in a worship service. He lined up the toys and then pretended to be a pastor leading worship. He announced the numbers of each hymn twice, just like he had heard his dad do. Speaking distinctly, he said, "We will now sing hymn number two four. That is number two four in the hymnbook." After he sang a song, he led his congregation in a prayer. Then he preached a sermon to them. His text was Genesis 22, Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac. (I had recently preached on this text.) Reflecting on the story, Nate had a very different take on this Bible story.

Nate explained to the dolls that Isaac, Abraham's son, had argued with God over the need to present a sacrifice. Isaac explained to God that he did not want to sacrifice his father. But God announced to Isaac, "I know that you love your father very much, but you must place him on the altar and sacrifice him to me." In Nate's rendition the son finally placed his father on the altar as a sacrifice. Just as he raised his knife to take the man's life, an angel stopped him and explained that God would accept a ram in place of the father. It had simply been a test of his love for God.

Do you see what he did with this Bible story? He took it beyond the actual original story, and with reflection moved it into the feeling level of the story. How did Abraham feel? How would a three-year-old feel at being asked to sacrifice his father?

Most of us are familiar with the traditional spiritual practice of Bible study. We gather with a group to read the Bible and discuss its meaning. If a pastor is present, we often defer to their seminary education to explain it. This is fine as far as it goes. It increases Bible knowledge. However, this alone does not lead to transformation and discipleship. The spiritual app of reflection starts where Bible study leaves off.

Let me show you what I mean. The most common problem with Bible studies in most churches is that it limits us to conversations and reflections from those who are already similar to our experiences and lifestyles. Privileged white Christians gather with fellow privileged white Christians to fit the Bible into their experiences. Black congregations hold Bible study with fellow black congregants. Poor white churches do Bible study with each other. Rural Christians with rural neighbors, City with City neighbors, etc. Most Bible studies don't create much opportunity to be surprised, to develop curiosity, to experience cognitive dissonance. Yet cognitive dissonance is a key ingredient in personal transformation.

I have here a brand-new Bible fresh off the printing press. It was published just last week. It is titled **THE NEW TESTAMENT IN COLOR: a multiethnic Bible commentary**. The target audience is North American Christians. The point of this new resource is that it brings together

African-American scholars, with Asian-American scholars, with Indigenous-American and Latino-American scholars. Thus, diverse Christian American voices engaged in more than mere siloed studies, but commentary that reflects various cultural interpretations. It invites us into humility and curiosity. This is a starting place for the spiritual app of reflection.

Let's take the story of Abraham called to sacrifice his son Isaac through some Bible study into reflection. Bible study begins with research into background of the Bible story. Cultural anthropologists recognize that many of the surrounding cultures of Abraham's day practiced infant sacrifice. The sacrificing of a newborn promised greater fertility for the worshipper. It was not an uncommon custom in ancient fertility cults to require parents to sacrifice their first born. If the parents gave up their first-born child, then the goddess of fertility would give more children as well as assuring the flocks and herds would grow. Thus, many of the Canaanite cultures practiced sacrificing a first-born son.

So, the idea of sacrificing his son was not the unusual or shocking part of the story. There are however, two shocking aspects to the story. The first is that the Hebrew God of Abraham encourages and accepts animal sacrifice in place of the first born. This Hebrew God reverses the common fertility rituals. Instead of sacrificing the first-born child to assure increased flocks and herds, this God asks for the sacrifice of an animal in place of the child. This God discontinues human sacrifice and replaces it with animal sacrifice as a substitute. The substitution of an animal in place of human sacrifice is new and unique to the Hebrew religion.

For me, however, the more intriguing aspect of the story is the age of Isaac. I wonder about Isaac's trust in his aged father as he was allowing his father to bind him to the altar. Isaac, a young man perhaps in his early teens, must climb up on the altar himself and allow himself to be bound. He is a living sacrifice! Here is the problem with living sacrifices: they keep climbing down off the altar. A sheep or goat would have known enough to climb down off the altar and scurry away to safety. Isaac could have opted out. He could have rejected his father's faith and his father's God. But he presents himself as a living sacrifice. The apostle Paul reflects on this story by inviting the church to follow in Isaac's footsteps and present ourselves as living sacrifices as well. Are we ready to do this? Doesn't this move us past Bible knowledge into curiosity, humility, fear, and wonder?

See what is happening as we spend some time with this story? Most of us had our initial reaction of horror and disgust at God asking for the sacrifice of Isaac. What kind of god would demand a father sacrifice his son?! But the longer we explore aspects of the story, the more we see other features of the story. We begin to see things we hadn't paid attention to before.

What we are really talking about is the old-fashioned Bible word "repentance." We are repenting of our assumptions about this familiar Bible story. We often think of repentance as having to do with feelings. We tend to think that repentance means feeling bad about something we did wrong. Actually, the Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*, means, "to change

one's mind." We repent when we learn to think differently about something. Healthy spirituality involves the ongoing process of re-examining what we thought we already knew. Repentance means looking at things from a different perspective than we had before. We change our framework, our angle, our viewpoint. The spiritual app of reflection is actually the invitation to repent.

How does this work? A couple weeks ago when we began this summer series on spiritual apps one of you shared with me a way you use art to connect with God. Spending time with a piece of art can open us to new perspectives. We take an art piece and spend time with it, enjoy it, let it speak to us. Notice what jumps out at us. What in the art stretches our thoughts and feelings? How do we feel as we sit with it? Take enough time to turn our minds over to the Holy Spirit and wait for the Spirit's nudging us.

For instance, please take a moment now to look more deeply at the art piece John Robinson has chosen for today's bulletin cover. This art is definitely not from our Protestant, or Presbyterian tradition. What is the artist saying to us? Who is the focus in the picture? What do the facial expressions say to us? What moment in the story is this reflecting?

See what we are doing? We are using art to move beyond Bible reading and Bible study, with information and facts, into the realm of the Holy Spirit whispering to our hearts. Welcome to the spiritual app of reflection.