

# *Thus Saith The Angel of the Lord*

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So one day, a day pretty much like any other day, I am admiring the beauty of creation from afar when I get this summons from The Lord Himself. He has to see me, immediately.

Oh, first I should identify myself. Hello, I am The Angel of the Lord. I am what you might term God's right hand angel, His number one seraph.

So I go to Him, and let me tell you, I've never seen Him quite so upset, not even back in the days of the Garden of Eden, when all the trouble began. I say, "Lord, you look a little perturbed. What's going on?"

He comes right out with it, which is His way. He tells me He's recently given a divine directive to His faithful servant, Abraham.

I say, "And?"

I wait and watch weather from above the Earth. You can't rush The Lord, ever. Besides, it's wonderful to bask in His presence, no matter what His mood. I have to say, clouds are one of His softer yet most artistic touches, especially these puffy, fluffy white ones, the perfect convergence of warm and cool air. Only He could know exactly how picturesque they would look against the blue sky background. So well composed. So moving.

Finally, He tells me the whole story and, quite frankly, I cannot believe what I'm hearing. Rather than recite the entire God/Abraham conversation line for line as He conveyed it to me, let me quote the part that has Him so upset:

[The Lord, to Abraham]: *Take thy son {Isaac}, thine only son whom thou lovest, and get thee to the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains I will tell thee of.*

I say, "Wait—what?"

He looks kind of sheepish. As sheepish as The Lord of all that ever was and ever will be can look.

I have to admit, at this point I'm a bit dumbfounded. I thought the whole human-sacrifice-to-appease-the-gods concept was primitive, voodoo, passé. So I say to Him, "Lord, begging Your pardon, but perhaps I heard You incorrectly. You actually told Abraham to sacrifice his own son?"

He nods.

"Forgive me for seeming a bit perplexed," I go on, "but correct me if I'm wrong here: Hasn't Abraham been Your number one man on the planet for what, eighty years or so, the one You worked out all those covenants with, correct? Circumcision and all that? And now You've ordered him to sacrifice the son he waited a lifetime for, the one You just recently blessed him with, the boy in line to be the next chief of Your chosen people? Really?"

He shrugs. Well, that's kind of a metaphor, since God doesn't shrug in the way you might imagine God shrugging, but you get the point.

This is confusing on so many levels, I don't even know where to begin. However, He is The Lord, He is Who He is, He does what He does, and even though I am The Angel of The

Lord, who am I to judge? “All right,” I say, “I understand, but I’m not sure why You’re telling me all this.”

He says, *I want you to stop him.*

I say, “Stop him? Me? With all due respect, Lord, why don’t You just stop him Yourself?”

He frowns. *You know I can’t go back on My word.*

This is true.

So. We have on our hands a full-blown moral and metaphysical crisis. It’s not just the boy’s life that’s at stake. It’s the future of the Hebrews, as well as the foundation of the Man/Creator of the Universe relationship which, at times, has been a bit tenuous—to wit, some of you non-believers still choose to worship lesser gods, i.e., trees and animals and the elements, or nothing at all. In any event, things could get very messy very quickly.

However, as I mentioned, I am The Angel of The Lord, His very special angel. He keeps me around for precisely this kind of thing. So I tell Him, “Relax, Lord, don’t even think about it. I’ll take care of it for You.”

He seems to brighten a little. It’s so wonderful to be with Him when His mood changes to brightness, you can’t even imagine. I could take hours to describe it but you still wouldn’t understand. You’d have to know The Lord like I do, but of course, for you, that kind of intimacy is quite impossible.

I say, “Before I go, Lord, I do have a couple of questions. When is this, well, for lack of a better word, event supposed to take place?”

*Any time now.*

I ask if He could be a bit more specific, but at this point His presence has begun to fade. But before He's completely gone, I hear Him say, *Angel, I know you will not fail Me.*

I know you will not fail Me? Is that a vote of confidence or a threat? I'm not sure. But what I do know we're talking about a crisis of biblical proportions, literally. Which I need to handle. Right now.

The Judean desert isn't one of my favorite places on Earth, not by a long shot, never has been. Too scruffy, too monochromatic. If I had to live among you, I would live in the ocean, where all the really colorful, intelligent creatures are.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that this drab landscape is totally without merit. The occasional lush oasis, the deep wadis lined with cobalt and rust-colored rock outcroppings, and the hillsides in the spring, blooming with coral peony, purple marjoram, and yellow hyacinth have their own particular kind of beauty. As I say, it's not my cup of ambrosia, but if you're a minimalist and like your canvas austere, with a splash of color here and there to relieve the mesmerizing sameness, the desert is the place for you.

Just out of curiosity, I decide to drift by Abraham's village. I should mention that I use the word "drift" only in a metaphorical sense to describe angel "movement." Sorry to disappoint you, but we don't float or flap on feathered wings from place to place, as you might think; rather, we kind of appear at one place or another, independent of time, as you know it. Sorry if I've confused you, but you'll have to take it on faith that some things angels do may be beyond your understanding.

As I pass over Abraham's shabby little house, I see an old woman, ancient really, sitting naked in the tiny front yard. Her white hair splays over her shoulders and down her back. Grey ashes and mud cover most of her wrinkled body. Her eyes look as if they've been bleeding from the sockets. She's screaming her head off, too, something about Abraham and his murdering one-god. Two young girls are trying to cover her up with a blanket and pull her into her house.

She has to be his wife, Sarah. Obviously, her husband has told her the harrowing narrative regarding himself and Isaac and their journey to Moriah.

Poor woman. I've half a mind to appear before her in all my angelic glory and tell her, "Don't worry, dear, help is on the way, courtesy of yours truly." But of course, I can't do that. God doesn't allow it. Why? You'd have to ask Him, but if I were to guess, I'd say that if these people saw me, they'd be so awestruck by my beauty, they'd start worshipping me as if I were Him, and that would not go over very well with Him, I can assure you.

As I hear her wail, I wonder if The Lord had given any thought about her feelings before He gave Abraham his marching orders. After all, with every divine directive there are side effects, as we can see all too plainly. Not that it's any of my business, but I hope the girls milling around her calm her down before she really hurts herself.

Goodbye then, Sarah, I must be on my way. I drift—there's that word again—through a landscape that seems eerily familiar. Now I remember. This is the Valley of the Great Deluge.

Now *that* was a touch and go situation. God was so fed up with those He had created in His own image that He decided to wash His hands, literally, of all of them. When He told me of his intentions, I must say I was taken aback. It didn't seem very sensible. His concept of collective punishment, to paint everyone—the chaste and the adulterer, the child and the child molester, the hunter and the hunted—with the same broad, wet brush, if you will, seemed like

overkill, pardon the pun. However, as I mentioned before, I know better than to argue with Him outright. So before His plan went active, I said to Him, “You know, Lord, I understand Your disgust and outrage. I feel the same way myself. The way these people carry on half the time with their self-possessed debauchery, it’s as if they don’t appreciate the blessing of life, and it’s understandable why You’d want to wash them out of existence. But here’s the thing,” I told Him. “Your plan, as currently conceived, may be a bit unfair to Yourself.”

He raised a divine eyebrow, so I continued. “What I mean, Lord, is that it seems like a shame for all that beauty You labored so hard to create, all that magnificent flora and fauna, the mango trees and the monkeys and the mosquitoes, and so on, not to mention the babies and the old women and the cripples, all to be wiped out in one fell swoosh because of the indiscretions of a relative few. Surely there must be at least something worth saving, worthy of Your grace. But then again,” I told him, “You know best.”

I could tell I had His Ear, symbolically of course, so I continued. “Lord,” I said, “I’m not saying the evildoers shouldn’t suffer consequences for their sinfulness and blasphemy—not that I am passing judgment on them, that’s Your province—but all that glorious creation, it’s such a nice reflection on You, and I, for one, certainly would miss it if You choose to blot out all of it.”

I think you know the rest of the story, how He spared Noah and all the rest. Believe me, I am not trying to take credit for saving the human race and planet Earth. I’m only saying it’s a good thing I was there to give Him something to think about.

I feel a sudden, familiar Presence. Hold on, it’s Him.

I say, “Hello.”

He wants to know how things are going. Of course, He knows exactly how things are going, but He wants to hear it from me.

I mention that I just passed over the Abraham abode, and that Sarah looked pretty awful. *Sarah?* He asks.

“Yes,” I say. “She’s going through quite an ordeal here. Which is understandable. You know how a mother fears for her child, her only child whom she lovest, as You might say. She looked as miserable as Eve did when she realized she’d lost Paradise.”

*Are you blaming Me for that?*

“What? No, of course not.”

*Then why bring it up?*

“Excuse me,” I say, “I was just feeling sorry for the woman.”

*Which is all the more reason for you to stop Abraham.*

“No doubt,” I say. “You are absolutely correct. It’s just that I can’t help thinking about the repercussions. It’s not every day a man is told to kill—make that *sacrifice*—his son. I’m only wondering how Abraham will patch this up with his wife once this business is concluded. You talk to Abraham all the time. Maybe You have some words of advice for him.

*Words of advice?*

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to imply that You should be Abraham’s marriage counselor, nothing like that.”

*It seems you are very concerned about Abraham and Sarah. Are you not concerned about Me?*

“No. I mean yes, of course, I am, You know that.”

*Fine. Then stop Abraham. Do not fail me.*

Before I can say another word, He's gone.

Mount Moriah isn't much of a mountain, not when you compare it to, say, the big one on Mars that comes in a shade under seventy thousand feet. This one is barely two thousand, five hundred. To its credit, though, it does have a signature quality, a quirky eeriness, a sort of "watch yourself" tone to it. The black rock faces, the jaggy sub-peaks, the bramble bushes, the snakes, the thorn trees—let's just say I wouldn't recommend it for a family picnic.

I arrive at the top of the mountain. The air is sticky and still. The sky is an ominous grayish green. Large, ugly black crows perch in the thorn trees. As you know, they're carrion eaters.

Ah, here come father and son, slogging up the mountain, with Isaac toting a bundle of wood over his shoulders. The boy is a mess. He sweats profusely and bleeds from a variety of cuts and scrapes all over his body. Judging from the scowl on his face, he is none too pleased with dear old dad.

Abraham points to a clearing in the rocks and instructs Isaac to lay down his burden. The boy does as he is told and slumps on the ground, swigging from a water skin, wiping his forehead. Dad starts building an altar with stones and the wood. Clearly he's done this before, as evidenced by the dexterity with which he crisscrosses the branches to form a lattice pattern. Precisely ventilated, no doubt it will ignite in a flash. From the way his forearms shake, it must be hard work, physically and emotionally.



Isaac makes no attempt to help. He scowls ear to ear. He wipes dried blood from the scratches on his neck and forehead. The annoying black birds screech a few times. He tosses a rock at them, but they barely move.

They're shifty, these ugly birds. I don't think they're birds at all. Most likely, they're other angels, come to watch me work. I wouldn't be surprised. A lot of them are envious of me, what with my special relationship to The Lord. They'd love to see me fall flat on my figurative face.

Isaac gets to his feet and brushes dirt and twigs from his robe. He says, "Hey Dad, like I asked you before, where is the lamb or chicken for the offering supposed to come from? Don't tell me I broke my back all the way up here with a load of wood and you forgot to bring the sacrifice. That would be a total wase."

Abraham looks up at the greasy sky. He says, "As I told you, God will provide."

Isaac pulls a splinter from his palm. He says, "Fine, whatever, but listen, can we get out of here soon? This place gives me the creeps."

Any moment now, Abraham is going to bind his son and lower the blade, which is when I will intercede in the nick of time. I know exactly what I'm going to say. In my humble opinion, I've prepared a beauty of a speech.

However, calling off the sacrifice isn't the hard part of this little morality melodrama. It's the aftermath that's going to be, well, thorny. You have to wonder: What will this test have done to the Abraham/Isaac relationship? If I were Isaac, I'd be dazed and confused, not to mention royally ticked off. I would have serious doubts about many things, starting with Dad's motives. The old man would have a lot of explaining to do, i.e., what lesson will have been imparted here on this barren mountain? Never trust anyone over one hundred? That to know The Lord is to

know the fear of death? It's a rather strange way to introduce the presumptive next head of the Hebrews to God's lovingkindness.

And what about sad Sarah who, when we last saw her, was naked and crazy? Yes, she'll be overjoyed to see that her son is alive and well, at least physically. Can you imagine the ear-beating she'll give Abraham when they get back home? Can they really go on as if nothing happened? For Abraham, the other side of the bed will be mighty frigid.

Then there's the aforementioned God/Man relationship. How will Abraham feel about being a test case? Will he feel angry? Disillusioned? Duped? Manipulated? Will he think, This is no way for The Lord to treat His favored, loyal son? One could reasonably expect any or all of the above.

Bottom line: Will his faith be renewed or eroded? This whole deal is as puzzling to me now as it was when I first heard about it from Him.

Abraham continues to tinker with the altar. I get the feeling he's kind of dragging it out, trying to postpone the inevitable. Which is impossible, since the inevitable is inevitable.

As I watch him bend a branch here, tweak a twig there, I can't help but wonder the unwonderable: That is, what if I did not intercede? What if I let the sacrifice happen?

From a selfish perspective, there is a certain attractiveness to the idea that I, The Angel of The Lord, could for once be the one calling the shots. I could change everything, couldn't I? God has asked for a sacrifice. He gets it. Now what? What does that make Abraham—a murderer? What does that make God—an accomplice? What does it do for the future of His chosen people, and the validity of the Covenant?

Oh, the deliciousness of temptation.

*Angel.*

Oops.

“Oh, hi, Lord, I was just thinking about You...No, just random thoughts, pure conjecture, really...No, I am not judging You...No, I wasn't playing God...Well, maybe I was a little...No, I am perfectly content to be The Angel of The Lord...Now that's being a bit unfair, You are the One that created the situation...What do You mean, maybe You should have asked another angel... Yes, I know there are lots of other angels that would do anything to be in my place, I think half of them are here right now...Now that's being personal...Wait wait wait, have I ever let You down? You remember the time when...right...right...right...well no, of course not, I don't want to argue, either...Yes, I do agree, Abraham is a fine fellow, none better...Well, of course, I am going to carry out Your wishes...Yes, I believe in the order of things, I was just thinking out loud...Don't let's get into that again...yes yes yes yes yes...of course...yes. I love You, too.”

If angels could sweat, I'd be soaked.

But back to Abraham. He's finished with the altar. From inside his robe he uncoils a long leather strap. He walks behind Isaac and before the boy knows what's hit him, he's bound him hand and foot. It must be the swiftness, the unexpectedness of the assault, but the normally chatty Isaac is speechless, except for rabbit-like squeaks.

Now Abraham lifts his son—I'm guessing the boy weighs at least a hundred and thirty pounds—as easily as if he were made of breath. He lays him on top of the altar and lashes him down. Tears roll down the fleshy gutters on Abraham's face. He pulls out a long, shiny dagger and lowers it to the boy's white, pulsing throat.

Ah, my dear Isaac. Just last night, you probably were enjoying a nice, juicy piece of roast ibex around the campfire, sipping wine and trading stories with your dad. Your future seemed so

promising. You could imagine, with perfect justification, that some day, not too far off, you would be king of the Hebrews with a beautiful queen at your side, with land and power and lots of little Isaacs running around, too. But alas. Now you are bent before the blade, those happy thoughts perished.

Isaac cries out in fear and confusion, but Abraham is set to the task.

Well. I guess I've waited long enough. I cry out in my best celestial baritone, "Abraham! Abraham!"

He stops the blade an inch from the boy's throat. He looks up and says, "Here am I."

I continue. "Lay not thy hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him, for now I know that thou art a God-fearing man, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from Me."

Well, that certainly stopped him. The language is a bit formal, yes, flowery even, but I think you'd agree, entirely appropriate for the situation, since I am speaking for The Lord Most High.

Oh, I also should mention here that yes, I have taken the liberty to imitate God's voice. Under the circumstances, no less a voice would do.

*That was nice, angel.*

I say, "Thank You, Lord." It feels wonderful to be back on His good side.

Even though it wasn't in the script, Abraham takes it upon himself to unbind his son. That's all right, nothing wrong with a little improvisation here at the Mount Moriah Passion Playhouse. He hugs the boy to his chest. Isaac doesn't hug back. His arms hang limply at his father's sides. It could be he's stunned. Personally, I think he's fuming.

Immediate crisis over, there's no sense in letting a good altar go to waste. Let's see: What would be an appropriate sacrifice on this momentous occasion?

A rustling noise comes from a nearby thicket. It's a ram, caught by its horns. Funny, I didn't notice it a moment ago. Oh wait, I get it. Abraham had said, The Lord will provide, and behold, He has. The Lord's good, isn't He?

This ram is a beautiful creature. However, Abraham is on top of it and in an instant cuts its throat. Isaac is crying. He probably thinks, with good reason, it could have been him.

*Call out to him again.*

Yes, Lord, I was just about to do that.

If you're going to be God's proxy, you'd better be on your cues.

I say, "Because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son (I know it sounds redundant, but that's the way He talks), I will bless thee, and will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven and the sand which is upon the seashore; and thy seed shall possess the gates of their enemies."

*All right, angel, that's enough.*

But Lord, I say, Abraham did exactly as You commanded. I should think he's deserving of all this and more.

*More?*

This will be the end of it, I promise, and anyway, if You don't approve we can always change it, all right?

*Go ahead, then.*

I address Abraham again: "And in thy seed shall all the nations of the Earth be blessed, because thou hast hearkened to My voice."

I turn to Him. “What do you think?”

*I couldn't have said it better Myself.*

He gives me His glow. It's ecstasy.

Meanwhile, back at the sacrifice, Abraham has taken the ram by the horns. It looks as if having his son back has infused him with strength, because he tosses the ram's carcass on top of the altar as easily if it were a dead mouse. He strikes his flint and in seconds, the fire roars.

Isaac sits with his arms wrapped around his knees. The smoke from the burning ram floats by him, around him. Abraham sits next to his son and together they watch the flames consume the animal. After several minutes, most of the hide and flesh has burned away. The black birds rustle their feathers. They're getting ready for a hot meal.

Isaac says, “So why didn't you kill me?”

Abraham looks at him, amazed. He says, “Son, did you not hear the voice of The Lord?”

Technically, it was my voice, but we'll let it go.

Isaac says, “What? I didn't hear anything. What are you talking about?”

“The voice of The Lord. The blessings he has bestowed upon us because I did not withhold from him... Isaac, you are saying you heard nothing?”

The boy gets to his feet. “I'm leaving.”

“Isaac, please. We have just witnessed the grace of The Lord.”

Isaac says, “Yeah, well you did.” With that, he starts down the hillside.

I am thinking that Abraham ought to tell his son, “Isn't it wonderful that in the last moment, God saved you?” However, Isaac is already stomping through the brush.

Abraham sits on his haunches. Rather than being elated by The Lord's last-minute rescue, he seems a) crushed b) depressed c) hurt d) angry e) dazed f) all of the above, as if someone has dumped a bucket of cold confusion on his head.

He should be happy. He passed The Lord's test with flying colors. But from the way his son has reacted, he thinks he's failed. Not to be flip, but it just goes to show you, when you please God, you can't please everyone.

The altar continues to smolder. The black birds peck at the blackened ram's carcass, pausing occasionally to peck at each other. Abraham thrusts his dagger into the dirt, wipes it on his robe, and then holds it against the red and orange coals. He calls out "Isaac, wait."

Father and son edge their way down the mountain. Isaac stumbles and Abraham tries to help him up, but he twists away from his father. He says, "You are a crazy old man, do you know that? First you try to kill me and now you're trying to help me. I don't get it."

"Don't you see?" Abraham says. "Just as God has delivered you from my dagger, so will He deliver our people from our enemies and into the promised land."

Well-spoken, Abraham. Bully for you. That's a revelation if I ever heard one.

*You see, angel?*

"Yes, Lord, indeed I do. By the way, have I told You lately how wonderful You are?"

*No.*

"Well, You *are*."

Isaac turns his back to his father. "Please don't talk to me." He walks toward the mules.

Although this is disturbing, every teenage boy must at some point rebel against his father to assert his manhood. This situation certainly has exacerbated the process here.

*Worry not, angel. The son, in time, will understand.*

Despite his son's sullen behavior, Abraham now seems rejuvenated. His faith has been affirmed, and his loyalty will be rewarded over and over, thanks to the Lord's generous new covenants, suggested by yours truly. The road ahead won't be all milk and honey for subsequent Hebrew generations, but I do think we'll see them prosper in the fullness of time.