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MINISTRIES

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Parashah Points: Vayera – Abraham’s Ethical Dilemma

Welcome to another episode of Parashah Points—short thoughts from the weekly Torah Portion.

This week’s Parashah Point comes from Vayera, which is Hebrew for “He appeared,” and it goes from Genesis 18:1 to Genesis 22:24.

This parashah tells the stories of Abraham’s three visitors and his bargaining with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18).

It also speaks of Lot’s two visitors and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19).

Abraham travels to Gerar and he once again tries to pass off his wife, Sarah, as his sister (Genesis 20).

Then there’s the story of the birth of Isaac and the sending away of Hagar and Ishmael (Genesis 21).

Finally, the parashah concludes with the powerful story of the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22).

There’s a lot we can talk about in this Torah Portion. Today we’re going to talk about one way we might understand God’s command to Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac.

Perhaps one of the most controversial stories in Scripture is the binding of Isaac. This is the story of Abraham preparing his son to be a burnt offering to YHWH. YHWH Himself commanded Abraham to offer up his son as a “test” of his faith. And Abraham apparently passed the test with his intention to carry out this difficult command. Right as Abraham picked up the knife, an angel stopped him:

Genesis 22:10-13

[Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the angel of the Lord \[YHWH\] called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And](#)

Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.

While this story is rich with prophetic symbolism of the Messiah, on a basic level, it raises some ethical questions: How could God issue such an immoral and cruel commandment? After all, as we read later in the Torah, God utterly detested child sacrifice—in fact, it was among the several reasons He judged the Canaanites. So what’s up with this? But maybe even more troubling is why Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his own son is presented as a “good” thing?

So, how do we understand this difficult narrative, especially when we consider the fact that Abraham is offered to us as a model of faith throughout the Scriptures?

The key is to see this narrative in light of the broader story of Abraham. When we’re introduced to Abraham, we see that God promised him that a great nation would be brought forth from him and that his descendants would be blessed and be a blessing to the nations (Genesis 12). In order to receive this promise, Abraham had to leave everything behind—his home, his former life, everything. When God appeared to Abraham again, and asked him to offer up his son, Abraham was essentially being asked to surrender everything once again. This time, it meant surrendering the very promise of God, because that promise was embodied in Isaac.

Abraham had faith that the Lord would fulfill His promise to him—and, by the way, Abraham’s faith wasn’t blind. He had already seen God’s intention in keeping His promise by bringing forth a miracle child from Sarah. God also demonstrated His compassion to Abraham by assuring him that He would care for and protect Ishmael, Abraham’s other son, as well as Hagar, when Abraham had to send them away in the previous chapter.

So this test doesn’t occur in a vacuum. Abraham knew that YHWH is faithful to keep His promises. And Abraham also knew that He had mercy and compassion for those whom Abraham cared for. While Abraham didn’t know exactly *how* YHWH would fulfill His promise to him, he had every reason to trust that He would be faithful to His word.

With that in mind, there are several things in this narrative that are worth pointing out. The very first verse in Genesis 22 tells us that this whole thing is a “test.” That is to say, we as readers know something that Abraham doesn’t know: God doesn’t actually intend for Isaac to be sacrificed.

In the second verse, God says, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love” (Genesis 22:2). It wasn’t a secret to Abraham that the only way the promise could be fulfilled was through Isaac. So in saying this, YHWH is essentially reminding Abraham of His faithfulness. Isaac’s miraculous birth was a testament to the fact that He intends to fulfill His promise.

Third, while it’s difficult to see it in the English, Hebrew scholars have pointed out that this command to Abraham is written as a plea rather than a demand, demonstrating that God appreciates the difficulty of what He’s asking Abraham to do. As Paul Copan explains:

The hard command to Abraham is cushioned by God’s tenderness. God’s directive is unusual: “*Please* take your son”—or as another scholar translates it, “Take, *I beg of you*, your only son.” God is remarkably gentle as he gives a difficult order. This type of divine command (as a plea) is rare [...] God understands the magnitude of this difficult task.

-Paul Copan, “*Is God A Moral Monster?: Making Sense of the Old Testament God*”

In light of this context, we can see, as Copan writes...

...God's faithful tenderness cushioning the startling harshness of God's command. It's as though God is saying to Abraham, "I'm testing your obedience and allegiance. You don't understand, but in light of all I've done and said to you, trust me. Not even death can nullify the promise I've made."

-Paul Copan, *"Is God A Moral Monster?: Making Sense of the Old Testament God"*

So Abraham *knew* that, no matter what, God would fulfill His promise through Isaac, his only son. According to the author of Hebrews, Abraham knew that God could even raise Isaac from the dead (Hebrews 11:19), which might explain why Abraham told his servants this:

Genesis 22:5

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.**"

It seems that Abraham fully expected to return *with* Isaac. Even though he didn't know the details of the plan, he was confident that God would keep His promise no matter what. Isaac embodied the promise, and God had already demonstrated that He fully intended to keep His promise. Therefore, Abraham knew what the outcome would be—that Isaac would grow up and have descendants in accordance with God's promise, even though he didn't know how it was all going work out.

With that context in mind, we can perhaps better appreciate everything going on in this story.

Still, some might object that what Abraham did was immoral. After all, wasn't he commanded to kill an innocent person?

Well, a thought experiment could maybe help us wrap our minds around this. As Copan outlines in his book:

What if God rearranged the world so that it had different features and thus different ways to apply moral principles? Say that God willed that at the age of eighteen, humans should kill each other but that God would immediately bring them back to life and in robust health. In that case, killing people at this age wouldn't be a big deal—or *that* big a deal.

-Paul Copan, *"Is God A Moral Monster?: Making Sense of the Old Testament God"*

Now, this is not the world in which we live. If we kill someone at eighteen, they don't immediately come back to life. Thus, given the facts of *our* world, and since the facts of our world partly shape our ethical framework, we know that killing innocent people is wrong. But if the facts of our world were different, as in our thought experiment, our ethical framework would be different.

Now suppose that God exists and that He sometimes, but very rarely, gives extraordinary divine commands to specific people in specific situations—as He did with Abraham. Given who Abraham was and what he *knew* about God—and given that Abraham *knew* God intended to fulfill His promise through Isaac, even if He had to raise him from the dead—it isn't unethical that Abraham would trust God in this extremely unique situation.

Absent God's divine command, Abraham would be wrong to sacrifice his son, obviously. But the narrative teaches us that YHWH went to some length to prove that He was determined to fulfill His promise. It teaches that Abraham knew YHWH was trustworthy. It teaches that Abraham knew Isaac was the appointed vehicle for the promise, and that nothing—not even death—could stop God from creating a nation through Isaac.

While this is certainly a difficult story, hopefully the insights offered here will help you as you wrestle with God's Word over these important questions.

Thank you for joining us for another Parashah Point!

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything.

Shalom!

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Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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