

Are God's Commands Capricious?

Why would God tell Abraham to sacrifice his son?

Is God a Moral Monster—part 3

April 22, 2018

DAY 1: Genesis 22, the story

1. This week we'll look at one of the most head-scratching stories in the Old Testament.

Genesis 22:1 Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied.

² *Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about."*

³ *Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about.*

⁴ *On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance.*

⁵ *He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you."*

⁶ *Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together,*

⁷ *Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?" "Yes, my son?" Abraham replied. "The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"*

⁸ *Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together.*

⁹ *When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.*

¹⁰ *Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son.*

¹¹ *But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied.*

¹² *"Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."*

¹³ *Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son.*

¹⁴ *So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided."*

¹⁵ *The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time*

¹⁶ *and said, "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son,*

¹⁷ *I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies,*

¹⁸ *and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."*

2. Before we look more intently at this story, what thoughts initially strike you about it?

DAY 2: Abraham and the importance of faith

1. The story of the people of Israel has its narrative beginning with the story of Abraham, the father of the Jews.

2. God's essential dealings with Abraham sets a pattern for future generations: the people are to build their lives and hearts around God, as they love God, by trusting His promises as God brings about a fundamental change in human nature.

3. The role of faith is to be the new driver of human nature, that energizes a person away from what comes "naturally"—making life about us and our "needs." The history of mankind, as seen in the bible is that this causes all kinds of unnecessary heartache, misery and suffering.

4. In Genesis 12, God told Abraham to leave his homeland and move to what we call modern day Israel. The command to move also included a central promise to Abraham—that his descendants would multiply and that through his descendants "all nations would be blessed." Abraham obeyed God, through faith.

5. God restates the promises made to Abraham earlier. This time, something happens in Abraham's heart that is more than just a mental assent of God's promise.

Genesis 15:6 Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

6. This becomes the fundamental way that sinful man can be made right with a holy God! If we come to God in simple repentance and faith, God will pay the penalty for our sin.

7. This is a tough lesson for proud human nature. Dependence on God's grace and sufficiency doesn't "just happen." We may think we're walking by faith, but it's not until our faith is tested that we see the actuality of our faith. The testing of our faith exposes the reality of our faith, and allows our faith to grow.

8. Moses tells the people to expect times of testing!

Exodus 20:20 Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning."

9. What two outcomes does Moses tell the people to expect from testing?

DAY 3: A comparison of Abraham's call and the command to sacrifice Isaac

1. There is an amazing parallel between God's call to Abraham in Genesis 12 and God's challenge to Abraham in Genesis 22 to sacrifice Isaac.

Genesis 12:1 The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you."

Genesis 22:2 Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about."

a. "Go" in the Hebrew language is literally, "going go." It occurs in both passages.

b. "the land" (Genesis 12) in the Hebrew is, "el-erets."

"the region" (Genesis 22) in the Hebrew is, "el-ha-arets."

c. "I will show you" (Genesis 12) is a promise that Abraham saw that God fulfilled. Abraham's call to leave his homeland did not include a specific destination. Abraham was just told to pack up his family and move. When Abraham reached what is now called Israel, God communicated to Abraham that this was his new home, and God made a way for Abraham to live there. (The non-specific promise had a specific fulfillment to that promise).

d. "I will tell you about" (Genesis 22) is a parallel to the Genesis 12 promise. Like the Genesis 12 promise, God does not specify a particular place, only a general region.

2. There are several important parallels to observe about these two seminal moments in the life of Abraham.

a. The parallel challenge and the parallel language is so stunning that Abraham must have been stunned.

b. The Genesis 12 challenge involved the promise of descendants, while the Genesis 22 challenge appeared to involve the death of the line of descendants.

c. In Genesis 12, God promises his descendants would be as numerous as the stars while the Genesis 22 incident reaffirms the same promise only *after* the Isaac incident.

d. Genesis bookends the call of God in Genesis 12 with the obedience of Abraham in Genesis 22.

e. In Genesis 12 Abraham was asked to surrender his past to leave his homeland. In Genesis 22, Abraham was asked to surrender his future to God. The center of Abraham's life and hope was the promise related to Isaac.

"Any Israelite who heard this story would take it to mean that his race owed its existence to the mercy of God and its prosperity to the obedience of their ancestor." –J. B. Phillips (Your God is Too Small)

DAY 4: 4 clues in Genesis 22 you don't want to miss!

1. We will likely misunderstand the significance of Genesis 22 unless we highlight four important clues in the text.

2. FIRST, as the readers after the fact, we are told that this was a test. God is testing Abraham.

*Genesis 22:1 Some time later God **tested** Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied.*

3. We can clearly see that God's intent was not for Isaac to be killed. It is true that Abraham has yet to realize this.

Genesis 22:2 Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about."

4. SECOND, the language of the text is insightful. Notice the language of tenderness. In the Hebrew it reads, "Please take your son...." or it can be translated, "I beg of you..."

5. I can't think of any other time in scripture where this is true. It's as if God knows the severity of what's He's saying.

6. THIRD, the predominant character quality of God that is highlighted in this passage is the faithfulness of God. God is communicating to Abraham that He understands all the nooks and crannies of what He's telling Abraham to do. (your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac).

7. This is important because Abraham finds himself in what looks like an impossible paradox. On one hand, he has based his entire life and future legacy on the promise of God over the course of multiple decades. On the other hand, the very son that was finally born to Abraham and Sarah is the one that is being called upon to sacrifice.

8. FOURTH, the faithfulness of God is seen in the where of this story. God is sending him to Moriah. The root word for Moriah is "ra-ah" which means "provide, see, show, provision." T's as if God gives Abraham a strong hint of what's coming--"salvation."

9. The place, as God says, "the place that I will show" hearkens back to Genesis 12.

10. These four items act as reminders to Abraham. It's as if God is saying to Abraham, "I know what I am asking you to do. I know the seriousness of this, the stakes that are involved, and the personal love and heartache this causes. But in light of all of my leading in your life, the promises I have given you and kept for you, trust Me again. Not even death can foil My promise."

11. What strikes you most from today's devotional?

DAY 5: This story foreshadows an even greater story!

1. One of the most stunning aspects of this story is what it foreshadows, coming about two thousand years after Abraham!

John 3:16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

2. What parallels do you see between what Abraham offered up and what God offered up?

3. There is a contrast in this story. We don't know Isaac's age or response to what was happening in Genesis 22, though biblical scholars all believe Isaac to have at least been a teenager.

4. With Jesus, there no "pushback" on accepting this mission. Instead, He willingly chose this mission!

John 10:15 ...just as the Father knows me and I know the Father--and I lay down my life for the sheep.

*John 10:17 The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life--only to take it up again.
¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father."*

5. Instead of Abraham having a crisis of faith over this event, God sent His Son!

John 3:17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

2 Corinthians 5:19 ...that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

6. The story lets us see God's prime devotion to us!

Romans 8:32 He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all--how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

7. The very dedication God commanded and expected from Abraham was demonstrated by God Himself in the devoting of His dedication to us.

8. Whereas God intervened to keep Abraham from sacrificing Isaac by providing a substitutionary ram, God intervened in us paying the due penalty for our sin by providing the spotless Lamb!

9. What is your biggest takeaway from the Genesis 22 story of Abraham offering up Isaac?

Extra material:

Occasionally hear of some nut case who who's murdered someone and tells us that "God told me to do it." We dismiss that rationale as ludicrous, but I've heard plenty of people use that same justification to rationalize an unbiblical divorce, and a host of other clearly unbiblical actions.

When we come to Genesis 22, we are stopped in our tracks, because God Himself tells Abraham to offer up his only son Isaac.

Genesis 22:2

Clearly, child sacrifice was abhorrent to God and was often seen as the bottom of the cultural barrel sin. So, is God capricious?

Several prominent atheists have jumped on this passage with disdain. How could suffering be a test to see whether or not one would obey God? Another atheist says that Abraham failed the test by taking Isaac to be sacrificed. Is Abraham to be admired or ridiculed?

Abraham vs. Moses; Pentateuch

The first five books of the Old Testament make up what we call the Pentateuch. The word is a compound word. Penta means five and teuch is the Hebrew word for law. Thus, the five books of the Law.

The two major characters are Abraham and Moses. The Old Testament story plays out largely in contrasts of these two men. Abraham, in spite of several slippages of faith is hailed as a man of faith, while Moses, in spite of several heroic acts of faith is portrayed as a poor example of faith.

What's curious about this is that Abraham's faith was exhibited long before God gave the Ten Commandments and the rest of the Law, while Moses' faith was not so hot in spite of having the Ten Commandments and the Law of God in his hands!

Genesis 26:5 ...because Abraham obeyed me and kept my requirements, my commands, my decrees and my laws."

Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws.

Notice the language. And notice the time frame. God had not yet given the Ten Commandments and the Law, yet Abraham believed, and essentially obeyed God, largely through his faith. What do we learn? Abraham didn't need the Law in order to please God through his faith.

The contrast with Moses is depicted in an episode regarding providing water for the people as they were traveling between Egypt and the Promised Land.

Numbers 20:12 But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them."

Deuteronomy 32:51 This is because both of you broke faith with me in the presence of the Israelites at the waters of Meribah Kadesh in the Desert of Zin and because you did not uphold my holiness among the Israelites.

What are we to remember, today? We are to center our lives in dependence on God for His sufficiency and grace than put our confidence in our assumed “goodness” or religiosity.

TESTING:

Two words parallel with Genesis 22: “test” (v. 1) and “fear of God” (v. 12).

What does this say for our current episode? To single out this one episode and not see how it fits into the overall narrative is to surely miss the meaning of the event.

THE NEARER CONTEXT: HAGAR AND ISHMAEL

As Sarah advanced in age past child-bearing years, the hope of having a biological son seemed to disappear. Both Sarah and Abraham took matters into their own hands and had Abraham take a second wife, Hagar, who did produce a son named Ishmael.

Eventually, the drama between the two wives and the two sons became intolerable. God had another plan for Hagar and Ishmael, which meant Abraham having to send them away, and to entrust them into God’s care. This was not an empty statement, as God had specifically told Abraham that He would personally see to their needs. Without that promise, Abraham would have been wrong to send them away. But with the promise, it was another step of trusting God’s word and promise by stepping out in faith.

Day 4:

As Wenham observes, “Salvation is thus promised in the very decree that sounds lie annihilation.”

- With Sarah
- Not Ishmael
- Isaac

Could it be that even if Isaac died, God’s promise could still come true?

Hebrews 11:17 By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, ¹⁸ even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned."

Hebrews 11:19 Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.

Day 5:

Elie Wiesel survived the Nazi death camp at Auschwitz. In his book, *Night*, Wiesel tells of a profoundly stunning event.

“THE SS HANGED TWO JEWISH MEN AND A YOUTH IN FRONT OF THE WHOLE CAMP. THE MEN DIED QUICKLY, BUT THE DEATH THROWS OF THE YOUTH LASTED FOR HALF AN HOUR. “WHERE IS GOD? WHERE IS HE? SOMEONE ASKED BEHIND ME. AS THE YOUTH STILL HUNG IN TORTURE IN THE NOOSE AFTER A LONG TIME, I HEARD THE MAN CALL AGAIN, “WHERE IS GOD NOW?” AND I

HEARD A VOICE INSIDE MYSELF ANSWER: “WHERE IS HE? HE IS HERE. HE IS HANGING THERE ON THE GALLOWS.”

What does this mean for us? In the worst of circumstances, we take comfort that God enters into our suffering with us, and we know and have seen this very thing at the cross of Jesus Christ. God is truly NOT indifferent!

God Himself will offer up His “one and only Son.” But this “second Isaac” is not forced into this sacrifice, but voluntarily takes it on Himself!

Abraham’s inner battle of sacrifice lets us into the inner recesses of the heart of God.

Prime devotion is confirmed in Abraham’s response.

Scottish theologian Thomas Torrance went so far as to say, “God loves us more than he loves himself.”

Richard Dawkins considered what God sent Jesus to do as divine child-abuse.

“Mia” story. I’d never give up one of my sons for anyone! I consider that not love but hatred!”

John 12:31 Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out.

Colossians 2:15 (RSV) He disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him.

JESUS’ MOMENT OF BEING “LIFTED UP” OR “GLORIFIED” COMES IN THE HOUR OF GOD’S GREAT HUMILIATION. RATHER THAN THINKING OF THE CRUCIFIXION AS THE ABSENCE OF GOD—WITH THE DARKENING S AND THE CRY OF DERELICTION (“MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?”)—THIS IS ACTUALLY THE MOMENT WHEN GODS PRESENCE IS MOST EVIDENT!”

GOD SHOWS HIMSELF IN THE CRUCIFIXION THROUGH A PALPABLE DARKNESS, AN EARTHQUAKE, AND THE TEARING OF THE TEMPLE CURTAIN IN TWO.... GOD’S GREATEST MOMENT IN HISTORY COMES WHEN ALL SEEMS LOST, WHEN GOD SEEMS DEFEATED. GOD’S GLORY IS REVEALED IN GOD’S SELF-HUMILIATION.