

Finer Grounds

Genesis Lesson 12: Sacrifice and Death

Read Genesis 22:1-14

At the end of chapter 21, we left Abraham in the land of the Philistines raising his promised son, Isaac. Abraham has shown great faith, but most of chapter 22 will be devoted to the further testing of that faith. In verse one of this chapter, the text plainly states that, “God tested Abraham”. There is always ample debate about why God would want or need to “test” Abraham if He is omniscient. Plausible reasons could include that it was for the strengthening of Abraham’s own faith, it was a shadow of God offering up His Son as a sacrifice for us, and/or merely a way to teach further generations what faith looks like and how genuine it needs to be. I am fairly certain we could come up with even more possibilities, but ultimately it must be conceded that God does “test” our faith.

Let’s take a moment to break down this test of faith. In verse 2 God tells Abraham to take his “only son” qualifying it with “whom you love”. First of all, Isaac obviously is not Abraham’s “only” son and God certainly is fully aware of that fact. Well, once again, there are several possible answers to this conundrum. Some would argue that Ishmael is no longer with Isaac and therefore not really his son any longer. Some would key in on the phrase “whom you love” in the text and say Isaac is the only son that Abraham loved. Still others would say that Ishmael is not counted among Abraham’s true sons because he is the son of Hagar, not Sarah. Although there may be some merit to each of this culturally, and possibly even scripturally for the last one (if you consider

Abimelech not being considered a direct descendant of Gideon’s in Judges 8:30-31 because his mother was only Gideon’s concubine). However, it is also possible that the word for “only” could have a broader meaning than just “only”, and in fact it can. The Hebrew word is YACHIYD and means “united, sole, beloved, only, or lonely”. If we further link that to Hebrews 11:17, we see the terminology “only begotten son” used in reference to Isaac. The Greek word in this passage is MONOGENES and means “single of its kind”. As Jesus is called God’s “only begotten son” in John 3:16 and yet we have several references to “sons of God” in other passages like Genesis 6:2 and Romans 8:14, we can undoubtedly deduce that the meaning can be defined as “unique” instead of “only” at times. Based on his origin, I think we can all agree that Isaac was definitely unique.

Moving on in the text, we see God appointing a specific location for Abraham to travel to in order to offer up Isaac. He is to go to a specific mountain in the land of Moriah, which means “chosen by Jehovah”. Knowing that when he gets there he must sacrifice his son, verse 3 says that Abraham “rose early” and set out to do just as God had told him. There is so much faith packed into just these last two verses. Abraham does not even try to negotiate with God for his son’s life and he obeys quickly. Could we have such a faith? Could we submissively and speedily go about the task of executing and burning our child on an altar? Would we not question our sanity? I am not going to lie, calling this hard is a tremendous understatement. However, I

personally take some comfort in knowing that God Himself spoke to Abraham when He asked this of him. Abraham had been in communion with God for years and God had proven Himself quite real and faithful by this point, but it still had to take a lot of faith to obey this one. It makes me realize that we often expect God to “prove” Himself, but I wonder how willing we really are to “prove” our faithfulness.

When they get close to their destination, Abraham and Isaac go up the mountain alone. The text does not tell us how old Isaac was, but the context may help us narrow down his age. We know that Isaac has to have some age on him as he is physically able to make the three-day journey and converse readily with his father. We also know that it is before he is thirty-seven years old because that’s how old he is when Sarah dies later in chapter 23. The Hebrew word for “young man” that is used in reference to Isaac in verse 5 is NA’AR and can mean anything from a baby to a young man, as well as a servant. In fact, it is the same word used in verse 3 to describe the men who accompany them. The text may help us a little more when we contemplate the amount of wood that would be required for a sacrifice. It would take a considerable amount and Abraham has Isaac bear that heavy load in verse 6. So, it is probably safe to assume that Isaac is anywhere from a teenager to a young man in his twenties.

The text does not give us much dialogue between Isaac and his father other than his question of where the lamb was for the offering, but it is hard to imagine that Isaac would completely hold his tongue while Abraham bound him and laid him on the altar. Did Isaac display great faith of his own by willingly being sacrificed because Abraham explained it all to him or did he

cry and plead for mercy from his father? He may have gone silently, but he had to be extremely frightened. What a relief it must have been for both of them when the Lord spoke and told Abraham to stop. Abraham had told Isaac that God would provide the lamb in verse 8 and in verse 13 He does provide one stuck “in the thicket by his horns”. God had lived up to the meaning of Moriah and once again provided all that his servant needed.

Think About It

What has been the most difficult test of your faith?

What other things will end up taking place on Mount Moriah? (See II Chronicles 3:1)

Who does Abraham tell the young men will return to them in Genesis 22:5?

What does that tell you that Abraham believed according to Hebrews 11:17-19?

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Why do you think God says, “now I know that you fear God” in Genesis 22:12 if He is omniscient?

Read James 2:19-24

- How was Abraham justified according to verse 21?

- What was “reckoned to [Abraham] as righteousness” in verse 23?

- Is belief enough according to verses 19-20?

- Is your faith alive?

Read Genesis 22:15-23:20

The Lord again makes His promises to Abraham in Genesis 22:15-18. As there can be nothing greater to swear by, verse 16 says that God swears by Himself that He will bring these promises about. God seems to be fully pleased with Abraham almost like an overwhelmed father who wants to shower his blessings on a son who has just made him immensely proud. Hebrews 11:19 tells us that Abraham “received [Isaac] back as a type”. Obviously Abraham’s willingness to

sacrifice Isaac on this fateful day was a shadow of the ultimate sacrifice that God would make for all of us when He offered up His Son to be the sacrifice for our sins.

Chapter 22 finishes off with some genealogy that includes Rebekah, who will become the wife of Isaac and chapter 23 begins with the death of Sarah. The word for “mourn” in Genesis 23:2 is CAPHAD and means “to tear the hair and beat the breast, to wail, lament, or mourn”. Tearing their clothing, cutting their beards, and throwing dust in the air were common mourning rituals in this culture and time. Abraham and Sarah had been through a lot together and he surely felt the loss keenly.

The rest of chapter 23 is about Abraham buying a grave for Sarah. He approaches the “sons of Heth”, who are descendants of Ham and also known as the Hittites, to buy a burial place. In verse 6 they refer to Abraham as “a mighty prince” so they know he is fairly wealthy. After some conversation, Ephron, in a veiled manner of generosity, suggests four hundred shekels of silver to be the value of the cave and the field. It was not uncommon to sell the surrounding property with the cave. If we consider that Jeremiah pays a mere 17 shekels of silver for a field in Jeremiah 32:9 many years later, it would appear that the price for the cave and field of Machpelah is exorbitant. It is difficult to determine how much this is worth by today’s standards, but it certainly was not cheap. However, Abraham seems determined to buy the land and bury Sarah in Canaan. This is the only recorded ownership of the promised land that we see by Abraham. He will end up being buried in the same cave with Sarah (Genesis 25:9) and Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Leah will also make the cave of Machpelah

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their final resting place (Genesis 49:31-33). There is a place near Jerusalem that is believed to be the location of the cave of Machpelah. Its history is vast and fascinating to say the least as Jews and Muslims have fought over the site for centuries.

Think About It

Why do you think people tore their clothes, cut their beards, and threw dust in the air for mourning?

What are our mourning rituals today?

Why do you think such a lengthy passage is recorded about the purchase of the cave and field of Machpelah?

Do some research and see if you can get some estimation of the value that 400 shekels would be today.

Go online and read up on the cave of Machpelah.

We only have one more lesson in this series of studies left in which we will look at the end of

Abraham's life and look toward the next patriarch, Isaac. Hang in there and let's finish this study up strong and more like Abraham in our faith! God bless.