

What is Jesus Doing?

DEALING WITH THE ISAACS IN OUR LIVES

Today we are going to take one of the most compelling and well-known stories of the Torah and extend its lessons to our lives in a way, hopefully, that will give us a fresh perspective on the blind spots, or idols, if you will, which can hinder our obedience and thereby block the movement of God's power in our lives. Our goal today is to address these issues and give them to God, surrendering our will to His.

The story of Abraham and Isaac, specifically the command that God gave Abraham to sacrifice his son in Chapter 22 of Genesis, contains one of the most important lessons in the Old Testament, which we can only fully understand in the light of the Gospel. It is often said that the New Testament is "concealed" in the Old Testament, and the Old Testament is "revealed" in the light of the New Testament.

In this story in Genesis 22, we see one of the clearest examples of the Torah, written by Moses, pointing the way to the coming of Jesus Messiah, including a glimpse at God's purpose and plan as to how He was going to ultimately deal with our sin issue, an issue that before Jesus, kept us from experiencing a full and beneficial relationship with God the Father.

The Pharisees, who supposedly were more learned of Torah than anyone living at the time of Jesus, and who were certainly aware of the nuances of this story, apparently missed it. Let's make sure that we don't make their mistake.

The passage we will study today begins with the words "After these things". Therefore, we should start with a quick overview of what "these things" are, described in Chapter 21, the previous chapter. Let's read the part of this chapter that precedes the story of Abraham and Isaac in Chapter 22...

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And Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him—whom Sarah bore to him—Isaac. Then Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Now Abraham was one hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.

- Genesis 21:3-5

So the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the same day that Isaac was weaned.

- Genesis 21:8

And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, scoffing. Therefore she said to Abraham, “Cast out this bondwoman and her son; for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, namely with Isaac.” 11 And the matter was very displeasing in Abraham’s sight because of his son.

- Genesis 21:9-11

But God said to Abraham, “Do not let it be displeasing in your sight because of the lad or because of your bondwoman. Whatever Sarah has said to you, listen to her voice; for in Isaac your seed shall be called. Yet I will also make a nation of the son of the bondwoman, because he is your seed.”

- Genesis 21:12-13

So Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water; and putting it on her shoulder, he gave it and the boy (Ishmael) to Hagar, and sent her away. Then she departed and wandered in the Wilderness of Beersheba.

- Genesis 21:14

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There is another part to this chapter that describes a covenant that Abimelech, King of the Philistines, had made and maintained with Abraham. This is interesting, but the phrase, “after these things” at the beginning of Chapter 22 most surely refers to the casting out of the “illegitimate” son Ishmael for “scoffing” or ridiculing Isaac, the child of promise, on the day of his weaning celebration.

Now it may seem that Ishmael was a baby or a child when Abraham ordered him and his mother Hagar out of his house, but in reality he (Ishmael) was about 17 years old and Isaac was about three years of age, which was the typical age of weaning in Biblical times. We know the timeline because Abraham was 86 when Ishmael was born according to Genesis 16:6, and Genesis 21:5 that we just read, tells us that Abraham was 100 years old when Isaac was born.

As we know, Ishmael, the illegitimate child, was also blessed by God to become a great nation, but that nation would ultimately become an enemy of the children of Israel even until the present day.

Let’s go on to the main story which we will read in its entirety and then break down...

Genesis 22

1 *Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham, and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.”*

2 *Then He said, “Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.”*

3 *So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son; and he split the wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him.*

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4 Then on the third day Abraham lifted his eyes and saw the place afar off.

5 And Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the lad and I will go yonder and worship, and we will come back to you."

6 So Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife, and the two of them went together. **7** But Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." Then he said, "Look, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"

8 And Abraham said, "My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering." So the two of them went together.

9 Then they came to the place of which God had told him. And Abraham built an altar there and placed the wood in order; and he bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, upon the wood. **10** And Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son.

11 But the Angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" So he said, "Here I am."

12 And He said, "Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me."

13 Then Abraham lifted his eyes and looked, and there behind him was a ram caught in a thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram, and offered it up for a burnt offering instead of his son. **14** And Abraham called the name of the place, The-Lord-Will-Provide; as it is said to this day, "In the Mount of the Lord it shall be provided."

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15 Then the Angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time out of heaven, **16** and said: “By Myself I have sworn, says the Lord, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son—
17 blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies. **18** In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.”
19 So Abraham returned to his young men, and they rose and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham dwelt at Beersheba.

We are going to go back and unpack these verses in the light of the Gospel, but the main points of the story are that God speaks to Abraham commanding him to sacrifice his son and he sets out to do so but God, through His Angel, stops the process.

Surprisingly, some of the Rabbis of the Middle Ages who wrote and commented on Torah in the Talmud, questioned God for “testing” righteous Abraham, and some of them questioned Abraham for his willingness to obey God’s “wicked” command. Clearly, they didn’t get it.

Let’s look at this story through the lens of the Gospel.

In the first chapter of Hebrews, we see God’s promise to Abraham that through Isaac many offspring would be born. As the writer of the Book of Hebrews tells us...

Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born as many as the stars of the sky in multitude—innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore.

– Hebrews 11:12

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Before Abram, who became Abraham and Sarai, who became Sarah made the bad decision to use Sarai's maidservant Hagar to "push" God's promise, the Lord had promised a child would come from Abraham's own body and his marriage to be his heir.

And behold, the word of the Lord came to Abraham, saying, "This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir." Then He brought him outside and said, "Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." And he believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.

- Genesis 15:4-6

So we might ask... why did God test Abraham? Most biblical scholars place Isaac's age at between 15 and 20 years old when the Lord gave his command. Perhaps Isaac, as the child of promise, had become the main focus of Abraham's attention and he had begun, after a number of years of God's silence between Genesis 21 and Genesis 22, to worship the gift, and not the Giver (Yahweh).

I know that we have all been guilty of this at some point. Perhaps we have a child who is the apple of our eye, who we feel can do no wrong, and we do not intervene with sound counsel when we know better. Or we remain too long in a job that was clearly a God-send at one time but that has now become unethical (I did this), or we maintain some pharisaical mindset because we think it is our duty as Christians, when in fact it is not our calling as followers of Christ at all.

The first verse of Genesis 22 gives us some insight into Abraham's level of desire to please God and gives us some insight into the power of his faith...

Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."

- Genesis 22:1

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Abraham may not have heard from God (that we know of) for a long time since the end of Chapter 21, but he is quick to respond “Here I am”.

In the 2nd verse God gives His command to sacrifice Isaac (who since Ishmael’s departure is the “only son whom he loves”), and Abraham’s immediate response at the beginning of verse 3 is to “rise early in the morning and saddle up his donkey”.

Abe doesn’t argue, he doesn’t hesitate. He simply obeys. It is interesting that in Chapter 21, which we just read, when The Lord tells Abraham to cast out his other son Ishmael, he also “rose early in the morning” to do what God called him to do.

This is the first lesson for us. When God speaks, respond IMMEDIATELY. Don’t argue, don’t hesitate, just do it. How do we know when we hear from God? We will discuss that in a minute... But for now let’s talk about why we respond IMMEDIATELY in OBEDIENCE.

In Psalm 119 David shows that he understood this...

I made haste and did not delay to keep Your commandments.

- Psalm 119:60

In 1 Samuel we see this scripture where Samuel the Prophet of the Lord tells Saul why the Lord is angry with him...

“Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices,

As in obeying the voice of the Lord?

Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice,

And to heed than the fat of rams.

- 1 Samuel 15:22

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This scripture also gives us some insight into the overarching narrative of this story. Abraham is between a rock and a hard place in that he would have known that God's command to sacrifice his son seems contrary to everything Abraham knows of God's character, yet he recognizes God's voice and authority in his life and knows that obedience to God's command is Job One.

This is Lesson two for us. Although it may be counter-intuitive to the lifestyles and choices we might make for ourselves, God's Word and the commands He gives through His Holy Spirit and the Scriptures are to be our true guideposts and must be obeyed.

Through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord said this of Himself

*For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
Nor are your ways My ways," says the Lord.
"For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are My ways higher than your ways,
And My thoughts than your thoughts.*

- Isaiah 55:8-9

The big picture here is that even if Abraham had begun trusting in his understanding of the promise that God had made concerning Isaac, he trusted in God Himself more.

The key to this is found in Verse 4 and 5.

*Then on the third day Abraham lifted his eyes and saw the place afar off. 5
And Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the lad and I will go yonder and worship, and we will come back to you."*

– Genesis 22:4-5

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This is where much confusion came in for the religious Jews of the 10th Century and for their forefathers the Pharisees at the time of Jesus... Their limited understanding was this... Either their righteous Father Abraham was lying when he told the young men with him that he AND the boy would return, OR Abraham, who believed that God's promise to use Isaac to bless the world, knew that this was a mere test of his faith. What they missed, apparently, is that Abraham had such unparalleled faith in his God that he knew in his spirit that test or not, even if God allowed Isaac to die, He would raise him to life again so that the promise would be fulfilled.

As believers in Jesus Christ, we generally presume the latter. Furthermore, we see Isaac as a type or foreshadowing of Jesus in that, as a nearly adult man of about 17, he allowed his 117 year old father to bind him to the altar when he clearly understood, just by the act of binding, that he was to BE the sacrifice. As a young man, surely, he could have overpowered his father and escaped this fate. Like Jesus, however, he laid down his life to the will of his father.

The story ends happily in that the Lord stops Abraham's hand and Isaac is returned to his father. Abraham's act of obedience has now apparently sealed the promise made in regards to Isaac as we see in verses 15-18.

Then the Angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time out of heaven, and said: "By Myself I have sworn, says the Lord, BECAUSE you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son— blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice."

- Genesis 22:15-18

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Now I find myself asking only this question... Would God's promise to Abraham that through Isaac would come a great nation, Israel, have come to fruition had Abraham NOT been obedient? That, I think, is only a mystery which we must accept as unknowable.

Now we come to the biggest question for US...

How do YOU hear from the Lord so clearly that you are compelled to action? If you don't know the answer to that question you may be missing out on the power of God in your life. It is not a salvation issue perhaps, but it is a quality of spiritual life issue. How can you sensitize your inner person to "hear" from the Holy Spirit?

First, In Hebrews Chapter 11, which we call the Hall of Faith, we see a clue as to how Abraham was able to hear from God with certainty...

But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

- Hebrews 11:6

Paul tells us, and we know that we have all been given a measure of faith. That faith should give us the earnest desire, like Abraham, to WANT to hear from God and to please Him with our obedience.

Secondly, remember what the Apostle James tells us...

[2b] *Yet you do not have because you do not ask. [3a] You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss.*

- James 4:2b-3a

Surely walking out the will of God is His desire for our lives and thereby a prime example of asking rightly of God. This scripture indicates that we can ask to be made sensitive to God's Will and His quiet voice in our spirit.

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This scripture in Red, directly from Jesus, underscores this point...

So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.

- Luke 11:9-10

Clearly if Jesus tells us this, then He will see it done by the power of His Spirit. My personal daily prayer is that the Lord would make me sensitive in my (small 's') spirit to what His Holy Spirit IS DOING and align my (small 'w') will with His perfect Will.

I always quote this next scripture whenever I teach, because it is fundamental to our daily walk, in hearing from and being obedient to, His purpose for our daily lives.

“You are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works which He has prepared beforehand, that you should walk in them.”

- Ephesians 2:10

There is no doubt that when Abraham understood that the Lord was asking him to sacrifice Isaac, there could have been other ways for him to react. Fight or flight, the natural order of human reaction could have certainly kicked in. However, Abraham did not REACT to his fear, but rather RESPONDED, in his spirit, to what God was asking him to do. This only works if we have no other idols before God.

If we are wholly and completely surrendered to God, we will do what He asks of us as Abraham did. Sometimes He will accept our obedience from the heart in saying “yes Lord” to giving up something that has become an idol to us, and then He may allow us to keep that thing anyway, only because it is no longer a priority.

Other times He will demand the sacrifice. Either way, it is always for our own good and for His glory. In fact, I maintain, that anytime God is glorified, we are joyful.

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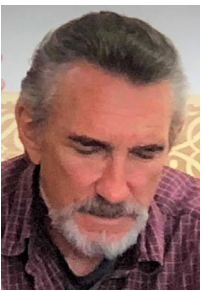
James tells us this in regards to testing and trials...

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

- James 1:2-4

I asked our brother Kai if I could use him as an example of this today and he agreed. When I met Kai, he was a self-professed “lifetime smoker” and swore he not only couldn’t quit but had no desire to do so. After several years of friendship and discipleship, and much submission to the Word of God and seeking direction through the Holy Spirit with prayer, Kai heard from the Lord that it was time to quit, which he did, in obedience, and God made it not only possible, but easy for him to do so. God was glorified and Kai was and is still joyful because of the way he dealt with this idol in his life.

So... The biggest question to ask ourselves today is... “Do we want to hear from God and take on the idols in our lives. I hope that your answer today will be a resounding “Yes, Lord”.



- John Henry Raskin, Roadhouse Rabbi