

TORAHSCOPE: Vayera (And He Appeared)

by Mark Huey posted 26 October, 2007 www.outreachisrael.net

Genesis 18:1-22:24
Isaiah 40:27-41:16

“A Faith that Works”

“Then the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, ‘By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed 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).

The Torah portion *Vayera* continues to develop some of the challenges that have been recorded about the life of faith exhibited by Abraham, the father of faith. The Jewish Sages have determined that during his lifetime, Abraham was given ten extremely difficult tests. But no test could ever be more difficult than the one that brings this Torah reading to a close. Here we discover that Abraham has been commanded by the God of Israel to offer up his son as a sacrifice:

“Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, ‘Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ He said, ‘Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you’” (Genesis 22:1-2).

No parent could ever imagine a greater test than to be commanded to offer up his or her own child, or for that matter, any child, as a burnt offering. Just the thought of human sacrifice is abhorrent for many of us to consider. And yet, we are told in this *parashah* that Abraham reacted to this command with almost immediate compliance. The very next day, “early in the morning,” Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. With his son Isaac in tow, he departed for the place where God had commanded him to make his offering:

“He said, ‘Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you.’ 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 wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him” (Genesis 22:2-3).

As you read this account, you have to ask yourself what it was about Abraham that would have him respond so positively to this request. After all, was not Isaac the promised child of his old age? Was not Isaac the child considered to be the promised seed through whom all of the nations would be blessed?

By the time of the binding, often referred to in Jewish circles as the *akedah*, Abraham had already been through the great trials of his life. His first son, Ishmael, the premature product of his fleshly relations with the Egyptian handmaiden Hagar, had already been sent away from the family compound. Even though Abraham was somewhat concerned about the harsh treatment of his son, he obeyed the demand from Sarah to banish Hagar and Ishmael, especially when God reiterated the request with further:

“The matter distressed Abraham greatly because of his son. But God said to Abraham, ‘Do not be distressed because of the lad and your maid; whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her, for through Isaac your descendants shall be named. And of the son of the maid I will make a nation also, because he is your descendant.’ So Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave *them* to Hagar, putting *them* on her shoulder, and gave *her* the boy, and sent her away. And she departed and wandered about in the wilderness of Beersheba” (Genesis 21:11-14).

A number of years later, when the command ushers forth from the Lord to take his only recognizable son Isaac, and offer him up as a burnt offering, you can imagine how perplexed Abraham could have been. And yet, Abraham complied without hesitation.

What had happened over the years to make Abraham such a compliant and obedient follower of the Living God? It is through the blessing of progressive revelation that we discover some insight into why Abraham was willing to faithfully execute this command without even questioning the wisdom of the Almighty. The author of Hebrews further amplifies our understanding of Abraham's thinking when the request came forth:

"By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten *son*; *it was he* to whom it was said, 'IN ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS SHALL BE CALLED.' He considered that God is able to raise *people* even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type" (Hebrews 11:17-19).

Here it is declared that Abraham believed that God was able to raise men from the dead in order to fulfill His word to Abraham. We need to remember that, by the time Abraham was asked to offer up Isaac, God had already told him that through him all of the nations of the world would be blessed. Isaac was the son born of promise:

"But God said, 'No, but Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him'" (Genesis 17:19).

By the time of the request to offer up Isaac, Abraham had seen the Holy One perform His promises without any deviation. First, Abraham obeyed the command to circumcise himself and his household. Then over the next number of years, he had been contacted by messengers of God who had forewarned him about the judgment that was coming to Sodom and Gomorrah. He had debated with them in order to try and save any righteous men, and had been instrumental in helping his nephew Lot avoid the devastation of fire and brimstone.

As the author of Hebrews again clarifies, Abraham had for many years, throughout his tests, been convinced that the Creator in whom he placed his faith **could not possibly lie**:

"For when God made the promise to Abraham, since He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, saying, 'I WILL SURELY BLESS YOU AND I WILL SURELY MULTIPLY YOU.' And so, having patiently waited, he obtained the promise. For men swear by one greater *than themselves*, and with them an oath *given* as confirmation is an end of every dispute. In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us" (Hebrews 6:13-18).

We are reminded in this statement that God could swear by no greater than Himself:

"Then the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, 'By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed 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 22:16-18).

This reminds one of the event years earlier when God made a unilateral covenant with Abram, before Ishmael was born, and promised Abram the land of Canaan for his descendents. At that time, all Abram could do was offer up the animals for sacrifice. Because Abram was a mere man, God Himself executed the covenant, in the image of a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch, by Him alone passing between the animal parts:

"Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete. It came about when the sun had set, that it was very dark, and behold, *there appeared* a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates: the Kenite and the Kenizzite and the

Kadmonite and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the Rephaim and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Girgashite and the Jebusite” (Genesis 15:16-21).

Apparently, Abram/Abraham had so many personal encounters with the Lord that he had witnessed that He alone was capable of honoring His promises. Abraham was absolutely convinced that this incredible test to offer up Isaac was another opportunity to exercise his faith in the Creator. Here, after all these years of testing, Abraham was able to be an example to all of his descendants that would follow after him by his obedient works.

James, as he is attempting to encourage his audience about the relationship between faith and works, uses the instance of Abraham’s offering of Isaac as a prime example of how different works reflect true faith:

“Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, *being* by itself. But someone may *well* say, ‘You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.’ You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, ‘AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS,’ and he was called the friend of God” (James 2:17-23).

James had already been witnessing how different people in his generation were exercising their purported faith. Apparently, some were claiming a belief without exercising any works. He reminded them that even the demons believe that God is one. **He said faith without works is really *not* evidence of the faith that reckons righteousness and ultimately saves one from judgment.** As he concludes his exhortation, he makes the direct connection between faith and works:

“You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For just as the body without *the* spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead” (James 2:24-26).

The ultimate summation is very concise: **faith without works is dead.** Giants of the faith like Rahab and others listed in Hebrews 11 have had the faith that brings life. **But sadly, many have declared a faith that is without works. But that faith without works is as dead as the body without spirit.**

As we reflect on the faithful works of Abraham this week, we might ask ourselves if we indeed have a faith that works. In other words, are we obeying the words of the revelation that we have received by faith? None of us will probably be asked to offer up one of our children as a burnt offering. But on the other hand, have we not all been asked to offer ourselves up as living sacrifices by the Apostle Paul in his epistle to the Romans?

“Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, *which is* your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:1-2).

When we read these words, do we understand what Paul is urging his readers? Is he not saying that we should offer ourselves up on the altar as living and holy sacrifices that will be acceptable to God? Would not that offering be our own personal spiritual service of worship, living for His works during our sojourn here on Earth? That certainly sounds like an opportunity to work as unto the Lord. After all, Paul further states that we should ***not*** be allowing ourselves to be conformed to this world, but rather, by the renewing of our minds, we are to be transformed in order to be able to obey the good, acceptable, and perfect will of God.

If you think about it, if you were doing just that, your faithful works would be clearly evident, not only in your own heart, but also to those with whom you experience life. Perhaps then, at the end of your life, you also could be considered a **friend of God**, all because you

exercised faith through works. This is certainly not a bad result of following in the footsteps of Abraham—who definitely had a faith that worked!

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