

Episode-210

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions Podcast, joining me today is Kevin, the managing editor of GotQuestions.org, and Jeff, the managing editor of BibleRef.com. Today, it's kind of part two of our difficult passages, difficult topics in the Bible. The first one we covered was about why did God order the Israelites to completely wipe out the Canaanites.

Shea Houdmann

Today, we're going to be discussing why did God command Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. So this is in Genesis chapter 22 is the passage you want to look it up. We'll be going through the passage and some other related scriptures. But to me, I mean, I get it. I truly do understand why this is difficult. I mean, God never blessed me with the privilege of being a father, but I cannot imagine God making that request to me and let alone to me agreeing to do it. So it's very difficult to understand the passage. But ultimately, we know in the end, when Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac, God stopped him. So this is not an actual incident. God knew all along that he was not going to allow God to sacrifice Isaac. So the Bible is very, very clear that God does not, he hates child sacrifice, that child sacrifice is taking place in all the cultures around in and around Israel. So very familiar to the people, but God actually never desired child sacrifice. So that's not what was happening here. We can be very clear about that.

Shea Houdmann

But ultimately, why did God command this? And then why was Abraham willing to do it? So Kevin, why don't you start us off as you've been studying this passage? What are some of the things that stood out to you about this difficult to understand passage?

Kevin Stone

Yes. Well, I'll just stick with the question of why God actually commanded this type of sacrifice. And at any time, if you guys want to jump in and add to what I'm saying, feel free.

Kevin Stone

But I came up with three reasons why God commanded this sacrifice. First, to test Abraham's faith. And we see this right in Scripture, as Hebrews chapter 11 deals with this very story. It says that God tested him. God tested Abraham. So trials, tests, strengthen our faith, and they also prove our faith. They don't necessarily prove our faith to God, he already knows.

Kevin Stone

But it proves our faith to us, and it proves our faith to others. So that is one big reason why this command was given, was a big test of faith for Abraham, but also to provide the world with a prime example of faith, faith in action, what faith looks like. Genesis 22 and verse 12, when all this is over, God says, now I know that you fear God because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son. And again, to reiterate, God never intended for Isaac to actually die. This was a test, and Abraham passed the test with flying colors. Abraham showed faith, and the fear of the Lord, and love for the Lord, and obedience to the Lord, all of these things.

Kevin Stone

God knew about what the outcome was going to be before it ever happened, but in this act, Abraham gives the world unforgettable evidence of his faith and evidence of his fear of God, and that has become our example. Do I love and honor God to the point of actually being willing to part with that which is dearest to me? Do I fear God to the point of obeying him when it means doing without everything, my dearest possession? Can I do without that out of fear of God, out of love for God? I mean, what does faith look like?

Kevin Stone

As we ask that question, we can look back at this story in Genesis 22. Faith looks like Abraham and Isaac climbing Mount Moriah with the wood and the fire. What does the fear of God look like? Well, it looks like Abraham raising that knife over his son Isaac, and I say, wow, how does my faith measure up to that? Do I fear God that much? This is an amazing example of faith and obedience to God. Romans 4 and verse 16 says that we today who have faith, if we have the faith of Abraham, then he is the father of us all, says Romans 4. It's through this trial that Abraham endured, he passed, that he becomes the father of faith.

Kevin Stone

I think also another reason why God commanded this was to issue a prophecy. This is a special kind of prophecy that is acted out. Sometimes we call these sign acts, that is a sign that is given through an action that is performed. God does this several times with different prophets in the Old Testament. It's pretty obvious that sometimes in the past, God has told some of his prophets to do some outrageous things. He tells Ezekiel to lie on one side for 390 days, and then lie on, roll over, lie on his other side for 40 days. He tells Isaiah to walk naked and barefoot for three years. He tells Jeremiah to buy a new linen sash and then hide it in a crevice until it's ruined. These are crazy things. They seem like crazy things, but all of them had a point. All of them were communicating something like an object lesson for people to understand what was coming up in God's future.

Kevin Stone

Here, God tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. This is an outrageous thing on the surface, but what does it communicate? What is it prophesying? Doesn't it wonderfully illustrate the substitutionary death of Christ? In this illustration, Abraham is God, Isaac is Jesus, the son who willingly offers himself. He willingly submits himself to the will of the Father, even though it's going to mean his own life. He carries the wood. Isaac carries the wood up Mount Moriah, and Jesus carries the cross up Mount Calvary. Isaac lives in this illustration. Abraham receives him as a figurative resurrection, and that's another thing that comes from Hebrews chapter 11. Jesus, of course, his resurrection was literal, but we have the illustration of resurrection here in Genesis chapter 22.

Kevin Stone

So, this could be considered a sign act, something that God commanded Abraham to do that, seemingly outrageous and crazy, was actually communicating some event in the future, the sacrifice of Christ on our behalf as Jesus laid down his life for us.

Jeff Laid

I'm often reminded of how important context is when we look at all of these issues or any of these issues, and the thing that tends to happen with a story like this is it's famous enough that it becomes sort of boiled down to something too simple, and then people use it as sort of like a cartoon or a caricature. So, when we talk about Abraham and Isaac, people tend to think of

it as there's this middle-aged guy standing there next to his toddler, and he hears this disembodied voice say, this is God, go kill your kid. And he says, oh, okay. And then he walks five feet away and throws the kid up on a table, and he's about to stab him. Then he hears the same voice say, just kidding, don't do that. And he stops. That's sort of the level of ridiculousness people kind of treat it with. And it's not like that.

Jeff Laird

When we actually look at where all of these things were and what everybody was doing, there's more happening there. First of all, Abraham is very old at this point, and he spent a long time following God. There's many stories that come before this about how he has expressed doubts, he's expressed concerns, but he's seen God fulfill promises. Every time God says he's going to do something for Abraham, it actually does happen.

Jeff Laird

We see that at this point in time, Isaac is probably in his late teens. He's not a little kid. He's old enough to be weaned. He can travel for a few days on his own. The text actually says that he was the one who carried the firewood up to the top of the mountain to do this. So you've got a relatively old guy and a very healthy teenager. This was not somebody who was going into this literally kicking and screaming. Isaac had to have been willing to cooperate with this to some extent.

Jeff Laird

We've got the expressions that we've talked about where Abraham says, assuming, hey guys, we're going to come back. And when Isaac asks, where's the thing we're going to sacrifice? Abraham says, oh, God will provide. There's a lot more going on there than that.

Jeff Laird

The other thing is that there is a cultural aspect to this. At that time, a lot of other deities around there did expect human sacrifice in some way or some form. We have to remember that at that point in time, Abraham was the first who had this level of communication relationship with God since Noah. So it's possible that when God said, I want you to go sacrifice Isaac, that part of what went through Abraham's mind was something like, oh no, he does expect me to do something like this. That's possible that that might've been what was going through Abraham's mind or something like, I didn't think that this was

the way Yahweh was going to be. We don't really know exactly what was going through his mind.

Jeff Laird

What we do know is that Abraham looked back at all the things he'd experienced and said, because of what I know, I know I can trust God. And this God told me that Isaac, this Isaac was going to be the child of promise. He told me that this boy was going to be where all of these prophecies will be fulfilled and everything that was going to happen. So I don't understand it. I don't get it, but I will cooperate with it because I have no reason to doubt that God knows what he's doing. That's the faith that God was looking for. It was not him saying, yes, I think what God is doing makes sense. It's not, yes, I think it's moral. Yes, I think it's okay. It was Abraham saying, I have learned that when God says something, he means it. He promised Isaac was going to be the future. So even if he tells me to do this, I trust that it's going to be okay, that there's a reason for this and it's going to be all right. And that's the faith that God rewards there.

Jeff Laird

So it gets back a little bit to something we talked about in our previous discussion on difficult passages, where we talk about the whole narrative concept that according to the story, this is an all powerful, all knowing creator who gives an order to somebody knowing what he's going to do. So this is again, not just some random person saying one day for the first time ever, I heard from God, and this is what he told me to do. All of these things factor into it. And that's what makes all the things Kevin was talking about poignant and important is knowing that there are things that we can learn and that we can see from this. It's not just something strange and impressive that Abraham did. It's something that sets up and fulfills God's will.

Shea Houdmann

Well said Jeff. And thank you also, Kevin, for breaking the passage down and how it points to Christ. Jeff, you alluded to this, but in Hebrews 11, I think it gives us maybe a little bit of insight into what was going through Abraham's mind. And Hebrews 11 verses 17 to 19 says, by faith, Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promise was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said, it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. Abraham reasoned that

God could even raise the dead. And so in a manner of speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.

Shea Houdmann

So like Jeff, as you said, Abraham knew that God had promised Isaac was the promised son, that through Isaac, I will fulfill my promises. And so, well, you're telling me to sacrifice it. Well, then somehow you're going to have to do some sort of miracle here. So Abraham was assuming that God was going to bring Isaac back from the dead should he actually sacrifice him. So I think that helps to understand. Abraham was trusting God's promises so much. He said, well, even if I do this, I know God's going to fulfill his promise. So he's going to have to do something miraculous.

Shea Houdmann

I don't know that that makes it easier. Again, I can't imagine being in that situation, but Abraham is constantly pointed to in the Bible, in Hebrews, in Romans, as having such an amazing faith. Abraham trusted God so much that even something that completely didn't make sense, that seemed to contradict God's promises, Abraham was willing to do it because he trusted God that much.

Kevin Stone

I like how we can kind of summarize Abraham's thinking as far as we can tell from what scripture says. And the first thing that I think we need to point out is that he knew God's character. And this goes along with what Jeff was saying about this wasn't just out of the blue kind of command from an unknown God. Abraham knew God. Abraham had been walking with God for years and he knew God's character.

Kevin Stone

In fact, earlier in Genesis, Genesis 18, verse 25, Abraham speaking to the Lord says, will not the judge of the whole world do what's right? And so he understood this about God. God does what's right. And so when he gets the command to sacrifice Isaac, even if he kind of understood that this was not right to sacrifice his son, he must have known that God had some type of a plan. There was something that was going to happen other than Isaac actually being put to death. Didn't know what that plan was yet, but he went ahead and started with the obedience. The ball was rolling.

Kevin Stone

Abraham also believed God's promise. The promise that God would raise up a great nation through Isaac. And because of God's promise, again, Abraham reasoned that God must have a different plan. There must be something, some result other than Isaac dying at the end of this. And Abraham's faith actually shows itself on the way up Mount Moriah as Isaac says, you know, we've got the fire and the wood, but where's the lamb for the sacrifice? And Abraham says, verse 8, God himself is going to be providing the lamb for the burnt offering, my son. And so Abraham believed that there was a plan, that he just didn't know all the details yet.

Kevin Stone

And then we also know that Abraham was considering God's power through all of this, that God was able to do absolutely anything. And that God's plan to save Isaac, to spare Isaac, was going to involve God's power somehow. This is Hebrews chapter 11. Again, that same passage that harkens back to this story says that by faith, Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. And skipping down to verse 19, Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead. And in so manner of speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death, that figurative resurrection again. So Abraham said, well, you know, God's going to provide a lamb. And even if that is not the plan, even if I'm mistaken about that assumption, I know that God can even raise the dead. And so even if I have to go through with this sacrifice in obedience to God, the God whom I love, the God whom I fear, I know that my God is powerful enough to raise the dead and he will raise Isaac as well. Abraham's faith was on full display here as he said yes to God.

Jeff Laird

There's a lot of this that involves that lesson of what is the response to this? What is Abraham choosing to do? We've seen some parallels in this. I heard one story, I don't know that anybody meant this as a parallel to Abraham and Isaac, and I frankly don't even know if it's true. So I am not claiming that this is an actual legend. But the story was about a Native American boy who was raised in a tribe that said, if you want to become a man, when it's time for you to become a man, you have to pass the test. And the test is you have to sit on a tree stump in the middle of the woods all night long with a blindfold on. You can't get off the stump and you can't take off the blindfold. If you can do that, then you're a man. And obviously he's

petrified, but he goes out to do this and his dad puts a blindfold on him, takes him out there, sets him on a stump. And then the kid sits and waits and he's terrified, but he stays. And then in the morning, when he knows he's allowed to take the blindfold off, he does and sees his father sitting cross-legged across from him with his bow and arrow and his knife, and realizes that his father was actually there the entire night. He wasn't really going to leave him there all night long. But the point was, do you have the bravery? Do you have the courage to sit here and do that?

Jeff Laird

Obviously, God was not just seeing if Abraham's intent was to be brave, but you can see that in the story with the boy and his dad, there's this sense of, I want to see if you're going to follow the path that you're supposed to. Are you really willing to do this? He was never going to leave the kid out there literally all night long. Well, God was never going to actually allow Isaac to be sacrificed. And Abraham, strictly speaking, did not know that. He just obeyed. He trusted enough to say, I have no idea how this is going to turn out or what, but I've seen enough of God to know that he keeps his promises. So I'll do what he tells me and trust him to see what happens. And that's when God steps in and goes, there is faith. And that's what makes Abraham the ultimate example of faith. Everything that we believe about our faith in God comes that way. I've seen enough to trust. And on the basis of that trust, I will obey even when I don't understand that is what saving faith is. That is what day-to-day faith is. That's how it's supposed to work.

Shea Houdmann

Jeff, I love that illustration. Like you said, you don't know for sure if it's true, but it does picture, in a sense, anytime God asks us to step out in faith, we're ultimately blindfolded in the sense that God is always with us. And God would never, it's hard to say, I can't say God would never command us to do something that would contradict his character, but this did. But even in that, God is faithful to his promises and wouldn't allow us to carry it through. So it's a powerful reminder to trust God, even when we don't understand, and to obey God unconditionally.

Shea Houdmann

But then also, there's really some beautiful pictures in this passage that I don't want us to forget. First of all, it's possible, likely even, that Mount Moriah,

where this occurred, was the place where Jesus was crucified. There's a lot of linkage in the Bible. The Bible doesn't explicitly say that, but that seems to be the case.

Shea Houdmann

And secondly, in the passage where Abraham and Isaac are walking up Mount Moriah, Isaac asks him, where is the lamb for the sacrifice? And Abraham says, God will provide the lamb. So after the angel stopped Abraham from sacrificing him, a ram was caught. Abraham sacrificed this ram. Well, Abraham had said, God will provide a lamb, not a ram, different things. But in the New Testament, Jesus is referred to as the lamb of God. John the Baptist twice refers to him, look, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, in John chapter one. So yes, God did provide the lamb for sacrifice. He provided his one and only son. And unlike Isaac, Jesus was not saved from being sacrificed. But similar to Isaac, he willingly went. He willingly, like you were saying earlier, Jeff, as a teenage boy versus a hundred-year-old man, Isaac could have prevented this if he wanted to. It's like Isaac was sacrificing himself just as Jesus was.

Shea Houdmann

So many beautiful pictures of God never asked Abraham to do something that he wasn't willing to do himself, that God later did sacrifice his only begotten son for the sins of the world. And this whole incident with Abraham and Isaac foreshadows that and pictures that, also displays Abraham's amazing faith that we've discussed again and again. So in the midst of trying to wonder why would God command such a thing and why would Abraham be willing to do it, let's not forget ultimately what this picture is. The death of Jesus Christ on the cross is the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the whole world.

Jeff Laird

We also need to remember that this was something that was used by God to explicitly explain to Israel that he was not in favor of them bringing him human sacrifices. It was a very dramatic way for him to make that point, but as he continued to reveal himself to Abraham's ancestors, that became more clear until it was explicit when he gave the law to Moses saying, I don't want you doing the things that these other cultures do and these other people do. So we don't want to make the mistake also of pretending or assuming that

this was some sort of a wink or a nod to human sacrifice. This was part of how God explained that it's something he didn't support and he didn't want.

Shea Houdmann

God later makes that very clear in the Mosaic law. Anyone who sacrificed a child was to be put to death. God made this abundantly clear that child sacrifice is not what he desires and sacrifices to Molech and some of the other gods of the Canaanites, repeatedly referred to as detestable, the things that they were doing, that eventually some of it infiltrated and made its way into Israel and that resulted in Israel's destruction, them following the practices including child sacrifice.

Shea Houdmann

So no, God never desired this. It was never part of his plan and the only reason God commanded in this sense was for, as we've talked, to demonstrate Abraham's faith, an example that we can follow, to foreshadow the sacrifice of Christ, which demonstrates the ultimate act of God's love for us. So no, child sacrifice, that's what makes this passage difficult, but that's what it's about. But ultimately, it was never going to happen. God was never going to allow it. And as a result of this, we have so many beautiful pictures of God's love, of what faith is, of what sacrifice means. That needs to be our focus when we study this passage, not getting hung up on why did God command this or why was Abraham willing to do it, instead let's focus on what it points us to, which is ultimately the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Shea Houdmann

So this has been the Got Questions podcast on why did God command Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Difficult topic, difficult issue, difficult Bible passage, but ultimately beautiful in what it points to. Hope our conversation today has been edified and encouraging to you and helps you understand Genesis chapter 22. Got questions? The Bible has answers and we'll help you find them.