



May 4, 2025
The Binding of Isaac

Group Study: The Binding of Isaac (Genesis 22:1-19)

Group Activity

1. A number of artists have depicted the Binding of Isaac (see Rembrandt's *The Sacrifice of Abraham*, Caravaggio's *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, Salvador Dali's *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, Marc Chagall's *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, Karoly Ferenczy's *Isaac's Sacrifice*, Laurent de La Hire's *Abraham's Sacrificing Isaac*, Alfred Hallet's *Abraham Sacrificing Isaac*, and Cigoli's *The Sacrifice of Isaac*).
2. Share select at least two images with the Bible study group. You might use an iPad, projector, prints, or another way to display the images. Most of the images can be found on Wikipedia.
3. Depending on the size of your Bible study group, divide into smaller groups or discuss the images all together. After studying the biblical text, study the images. How do the artists use light, shadow, texture or color in different ways? Notice facial expressions, the placement of bodies and hands. Is God/God's voice represented? How? Can you see the ram? Where? How clearly? Do you see all the elements mentioned in the biblical text – the knife, wood, etc.? What emotions are depicted? Do they match what you expect? How do they, or how do they not?
4. Reflect on the artistic interpretations of this text. How do they inform our interpretation of the text?

Discussion Questions

5. How does God's provision of a ram shape our understanding of divine mercy?
6. How do we wrestle with difficult passages like this in faith?
7. How do Jesus' death and resurrection echo themes from this story?
8. What does it mean for us to trust God when faced with uncertainty?

Good Faith Bible Study

Kathy and Nathan Maxwell

May 4, 2025

"The Binding of Isaac"

Genesis 22:1-19

<https://goodfaithmedia.org/bible-studies/>

Alright, so for this passage, we're mostly interested in talking about ... well, how to talk about passages of this kind. In other words, how in the world does a study group go about having a fruitful Bible study discussion when the selected passage seems like a bad apple? The lesson acknowledges that this passage has a reputation for being difficult, and also tries to recognize that it's normal to feel some unease about the story. But then of course we hurry along with an optimistic invitation to engage the passage anyway. "We've saved you a spot at the discussion table," so the lesson goes – but if you're a Bible study facilitator, there's a pretty good chance you wondered, "Okay, but how am I supposed to do that, exactly?"

I spent a number of years as a Bible teacher in a variety of classroom settings, and in that role the tricky bits of scripture tend to stick to you like magnets. It's like you're wearing a t-shirt that says, "Ask me about blasphemy of the Holy Spirit." Anyway, not that it's like what preaching pastors encounter every Sunday, of course, but you get the idea – it's not my first rodeo, and I've been bucked from the saddle by Genesis 22 plenty of times.

With traditional college students, you can't really avoid this text because it makes a pretty important contribution to the "covenantal metanarrative" on which we've been focused throughout this lesson series. With seminary students, you can't really avoid Genesis 22 either because those folks need all the practice they can get helping others engage troublesome passages in an honest but productive way. The funny thing is, our situation isn't all that different. Set within the covenantal metanarrative, the "binding of Isaac" story really does reveal something good to us about God. And for many people, a caring Bible study group is the best, safest and sometimes only place where they can experience a fruitful encounter with such a challenging passage.

Often, the real rub for people isn't really on the surface. Essential to the process is getting to the bottom of things – peeling back the layers, and finding the underlying inconsistency that's bubbling up into what we end up labeling a "problem of interpretation." This is true even for passages that are simply confusing or hard to understand. Such passages collide with our expectation that all scripture has something to teach us, something that we can readily access and use to grow in our faith. It's no different in Genesis 22.

What sets the needle on our faith compass spinning lies below the surface of the text, and it takes some steely patience to get to the bottom of it. For many believers, it's not really all that far-fetched that God would test Abraham. The trials that test one's faith is a recognizable part of the Christian experience. The underlying problem is that the "flow of the narrative," as the interpreter Walter Brueggemann puts it, "accomplishes something in the awareness of God. He did not know. Now he knows." In this way the test seems totally out of bounds, given our very established sense of divine omniscience – the idea that God is "all knowing." Especially for Western Christianity, we consider omniscience to be essential to what makes God, well, God.

Divine omniscience is also pretty well established elsewhere in the Old Testament. It's a good exercise for a Bible study group to consider such passages such as Psalm 139, Proverbs 15:3, or the first six verses of Jeremiah 1. New Testament passages are also plentiful, but one relatively straightforward example is 1 John 3:20. In any case, notice that in Genesis 22, there's no direct or explicit reference to God's omniscience. It just

doesn't come up. It takes a few probing discussion questions, and maybe an awkward silence or two, for a group to recognize that it's our strong sense of divine omniscience that makes this passage so difficult to understand.

Even though human sacrifice is the reason behind the passage's infamy, it's actually the divine testing issue that really sinks its teeth into faithful Bible readers, and can even precipitate a crisis at some level. The more seriously one takes God's all-knowing character, the harder Genesis 22 hits. In the lesson, we tried to redirect attention to the role the passage plays in the covenantal metanarrative – namely, that Abraham and God have a “define the relationship” moment where Abraham commits to a covenant that runs on God's wisdom and power, rather than Abraham's. Even here I'm admittedly reluctant to mention the ways interpreters have gone about addressing the issue itself – not only because I haven't found anything like a satisfying answer to share, but also because every response, in one way or another, ends up speculating about “what it's like for God,” about what God knows and when God knows it. But one of the more lucid treatments of this issue comes from an Old Testament interpreter named Robert Chisholm, in an article entitled, “Anatomy of an Anthropomorphism.”

So “anthropomorphism” in this context refers to using human attributes to characterize God – like when 1 Peter 5:6 refers to “the mighty hand of God.” In that verse the human hand is an analog – a metaphor, essentially – that maps to divine ability and power. Anthropomorphism is an important theological mechanism in scripture, because it leverages things we readily understand in order to reveal the character of God. Chisholm essentially treats Genesis 22 as a relational anthropomorphism. In other words, God interacts with Abraham in a way that accommodates a human relationship, in order to reveal to Abraham God's dynamically relational character. Rather than imposing a limit on divine omniscience, Genesis 22 enlarges Abraham's perception of God's relational nature.

Divine omniscience is a really, really big deal to us – and for good reason. But in the context of the story you actually find in scripture, God's relational character is the deeper current. The core biblical thesis is that God loves and intends to put our broken relationship back together. Divine omniscience simply ensures God's victory in that quest.

It's a similar situation with the issue of human sacrifice. The cultic practice of animal sacrifice may seem alien to our experience, and we grimace at the thought of human sacrifice. But what really twists us into a pretzel is the divine command for human sacrifice, which is so jarringly inconsistent with the rest of the biblical portrait of God's character. It would be such a relief if there was just an extra verse, one where Abraham said: “‘My Lord, my face is a shocked emoji, for this command seems so contrary to everything I know about you.’ But the Lord replied and said, ‘Do not freaketh-out Abraham, although that is totally understandable for you and anyone who might hear this story. For this command is a test of the extreme, meant to demonstrate the full capacity of our relationship.’ And Abraham answered and said, ‘But Lord, have you not read the last ten chapters of Genesis? You know that I've learned the hard way to trust you completely.’ And the Lord said, ‘Yes, I know. But do you? Is your faithfulness really a known quantity between us? Is it to be counted among the facts of our covenantal relationship?’” But of course we have no such verse, and we have to fill in the gap by discussing the issue with our trusted partners in exploring scripture.

So, when a group considers a difficult passage together, it takes a bit to figure out what's really behind our reactions. If you want to have an authentic conversation, you have to allow enough room for the group to come to terms with whatever makes a given passage challenging. This is, of course, easy to say and very uncomfortable to do. If you're a facilitator, don't be afraid to acknowledge that you're scratching your head over

these verses as much as anyone else; doing so will usually be a relief for most groups, and give its members permission to explore the passage honestly.

Often you'll have to resist the overwhelming impulse to rush past the problematic parts of a text, and instead camp out on them. One of the best ways to dig deeper is to ask "characterization and context" questions.

"How does this text portray God, or this-or-that person, or this idea or behavior?"

"How does that portrayal compare with other parts of the Bible, or with the shared beliefs in your family or community of faith?"

"Why do you think that portrayal appears here, in this passage – what does it do in the text?"

These sorts of questions are great starting points in any case, but for difficult passages they often help a group get to the crux of what's unsettling us.

For the most difficult passages, however, there is some risk of being too patient. What I mean by that is the underlying issues in a passage like Genesis 22 can seem so large, can have so much mass and gravitational pull, that they consume the entire conversation. The record of interpreters struggling with the "binding of Isaac" is thousands of years long, and you don't want your study group to wander into that cave and never come out. If you want to have a fruitful conversation about a difficult passage, you'll have to look for that moment when the group is ready to consider what the passage – warts and all – actually reveals about the character of God and the nature of the divine-human relationship.

Nearly always, the best way to shift gears is to reconnect the passage to its biblical context.

"How does the story of the Binding of Isaac connect with what comes before and after?"

"If you deleted Genesis 22, what's missing – what's wrong with the story?"

"How does this passage advance or contribute to the covenantal metanarrative?"

In the case of Genesis 22, you can see how these questions lead headlong into the relationship that's been evolving between God and Abraham. Challenging as it may be, without the binding of Isaac, Abraham's covenantal fumbles in the previous 10 chapters go unanswered. And on the other side of that troublesome passage, we finally see the man whose faithfulness will end up re-writing the story of humanity, leading us headlong back into an evolving relationship with God, and eventually lead us to a cross and an empty tomb.