

Last week we learned about how God spoke creation into being with the Word. That was chapter 1 and a little bit of chapter 2 of Genesis. Today we are all the way up to chapter 22, though we did read a little bit of chapter 21 where we hear about the birth of Isaac to Sarah and Abraham.

Quite a lot has happened in between, and we don't have time to cover it all, but I will hit a few highlights. First, things go wrong almost from the start with the sons of Adam and Eve when Cain murders his brother Abel out of jealousy. While that probably was not the first murder in human history, it unfortunately wasn't the last either. Still, humans were fruitful and multiplied, but they became increasingly corrupt and sinful until we get to the time of Noah and the ark, when God destroys most of the people and starts over. The descendants of Noah went on to form many nations, and it is at this time we get the account of the Tower of Babel when all the people were scattered by the Lord and their languages confused so they could not understand one another.

Finally, we get to Abram and Sarai, who would become Abraham and Sarah. Abram is a direct descendant of Noah, though there are many generations in between. Abram first hears God's call in Genesis 12, where the Lord tell Abram that a great nation will be made from him, and that in him all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Abram, Sarai, and his nephew Lot travel to the land where God tell him to go, and so shows that he is trustworthy. During a famine they travel to Egypt, but eventually they return to the land around the Jordan, where Abram and Lot separate because both of their households are so large. For the first time, the Lord tells Abram that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars, and again Abram believed the Lord. However, since Sarai knew that she was barren, she and Abram took matters into their own hands and arranged for Abram to have a son with Sarai's slave Hagar. This was not God's intention, but since

their son Ishmael was Abram's child, the Lord also promised that Ishmael's descendants would also become a great nation.

The Lord again visits Abram and repeats the promise that his descendants would outnumber the stars, giving him the name Abraham and his wife the name Sarah, along with commands for keeping the covenant, which Abraham follows, again showing that he is trustworthy. Finally, the Lord tell Abraham that Sarah will bear a son in due season, though Sarah still has doubts. In the meantime, we get the account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham argues with God that the cities should not be destroyed if even 5 righteous people can be found. However, only Lot and his family are accounted as righteous and they alone are spared, though Lot's wife does get turned into a pillar of salt for looking back while they escaped.

So now we are caught up, and the Lord gives Abraham his greatest test. He is to sacrifice his son Isaac as a burnt offering. When we first read this without knowing the outcome, we are rightly horrified. Why would a good and loving God ask such a thing?

So what is Abraham to do? Should he have done anything differently?

Scholars have debated this particular text for a long time. Some argue that in the historical context, child sacrifice was not unheard of, and that ancient believers considered this to be the ultimate act of worship. Some Biblical laws mention that the firstborn are owed to God. It is always important to remember that we cannot judge an ancient culture by our modern standards, whatever those may be. Nor can we simply apply ancient laws to our modern society. The time and place matters.

Other interpreters claim that Abraham should have at least argued with God, as he did when he asked that Sodom and Gomorrah be spared. One scholar, J Richard Middleton, argues that Abraham actually failed the test by remaining silent.

In any case, Abraham showed that he completely trusted the Lord, and did indeed take his son and prepared to offer him as a sacrifice as God had commanded.

So, when is it actually ok to intentionally harm another human being, to kill another person? Of course we know that it is never really “ok”, so we use different words like “necessary” or “justified”. Most people would probably agree that killing in self-defense, or in defense of someone else, is justified. Soldiers killing enemy soldiers while fighting in a war is another example that most would agree is acceptable. However, unless you work in a profession where violence is expected to be encountered, or you go out of your way looking for trouble, the likelihood of ever needing to use deadly force against another person is very low. Yes, it does happen, but like getting struck by lightning, it probably won’t happen to you.

Pretty much everyone also agrees that the murder of innocent people, particularly children, is never justified. The fact that this happens so frequently that many have lost their sense of horror about it shows that we as a society are unable to agree on what should be done to prevent it, let alone make the necessary sacrifices.

In between these two extremes there is a lot of wiggle room.

What about assassination? The dictionary defines assassination as the killing of an important person for religious, ideological or political reasons. Four U.S. presidents have been assassinated while in office, as were Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr, and a long list of lesser-known people. On the other hand, there were 42 known attempts on Adolf Hitler’s life between 1932 and 1944. But, is assassination ever justified? It’s hard to argue that the world would not have been better off without Hitler. At best, this should be exceedingly rare, and it has absolutely no justification in our country today.

And yet, there have been at least 3 high profile assassinations in the United States in the last year. First, Brian Thompson, the CEO of UnitedHealthcare was killed last October. Just 3 months ago, Minnesota state representative Melissa Hortman, along with her

husband were killed in their home, and another representative, John Hoffman and his wife were shot in their home, but survived. And of course we all know that last Wednesday, political activist Charlie Kirk was killed at a rally in Utah. The amount of coverage you saw and remember about the first two probably depends on what news sources you use the most.

How are we to respond to events like these? We should be horrified every time. And yet, we only have so much capacity for horror. So, how did we each respond to the first two murders? What is our reaction to the most recent one? I suspect, if we are completely honest with ourselves, our response, and who we blame in each case depends at least in part on our political affiliation relative to the victim. Even worse though, some elected leaders, activists, and other “influencers” spread misinformation and outright lies, both about the victims, and the alleged perpetrators, in order to score political points. We have to be better than this. As Christians we are called to speak the truth, uncomfortable as that may be. We are called to hold at least our elected leaders accountable for their words and actions, or lack thereof, and particularly those leaders of our own political party, whatever that may be. We are even called to stand up to our “friends” on social media if they try to justify hate and murder. There is already too much hate in our country, but we can’t kill hate with more hate. Perhaps, like Hitler, we will just have to live with hate until enough people wake up and recognize it for the evil that it is.

In the end, God stopped Abraham from actually sacrificing Isaac, providing a ram instead. Perhaps this even set a precedent that animal sacrifice is an appropriate substitute. Because Abraham trusted the Lord, God did indeed bless him and his descendants, so that they may be a blessing to all the world. May we also, as the spiritual descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and as children of God and followers of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, be ourselves a blessing to our families, our nation, and to all the world.

Amen