

**Vayera**                      **And He Appeared**  
**Torah:**                      Genesis 18:1-22:24  
**Haftarah:**                  2 Kings 4:1-37  
**Brit Chadashah:**        Luke 1:26-38; 24:36-53

This week's Torah Portion is actually five stories which cover the events leading up to the birth of Isaac through to his eventual binding and nearly being offered as a burnt offering.

When the promises of G-d are given, there is usually a series of tests which are intended to humble us and help us to see that God can do whatever He wants to whomever He wants, whenever He wants to do it. He is a person who makes personal decisions and is neither a force which can be manipulated, nor a weapon that can be aimed at our adversaries.

The previous portion ends with Abraham circumcising all the males in his extensive household, which numbered several hundred individuals. He did this at the age of ninety-nine, after he had lived in Canaan for some twenty-nine years. G-d is never in a hurry when it comes to fulfilling His promises because everything has to be set in place before He intervenes.

Without seeing anything happen, Abraham firmly believed in the promises of G-d and obeyed all the instructions He received from G-d. This is the faith/obedience model which all believers should follow, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile. The Eternal Kingdom has been coming ever since our resurrected Messiah ascended back into Heaven, from which He will one day return. We need to have faith and obedience and not given in to impatience.

In the face of the escalating folly and growing darkness of our world, my heart yearns for the Kingdom more and more intensely with each passing year. But this kind of spiritual yearning should cause our faith and our obedience to deepen and to intensify.

Today's portion takes us from the angelic visitation to Abraham at the oaks of Mamre, through to the mighty destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, to the actual birth of Isaac and ends with Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his miracle son as a burnt offering to YHVH. After 29 years of relative peace and silence, events begin to move very quickly because the timing was right.

Much has been written about the angelic visitation and we must learn not to go beyond that which is written when we discuss it and attempt to better understand it. Three angels in human form show up at Abraham's camp and two of them end up heading for Sodom and Gomorrah. YHVH spoke through one of the angels and did not appear in His fullness. He ate cream with lamb and did not violate the stipulations of Kosher because the mixing of meat and dairy only became forbidden by the traditions of men and not by the Word of G-d.

He got His feet washed, either by Abraham himself or by one of his servants and announced that Sarah would give birth at this same season next year. Sarah is not punished for initially doubting that an eighty-nine year old, post menopausal woman would still be able to conceive. After their initial surprise, both she and Abraham believed.

The prophetic mission of the seed of Abraham is outlined. It is to become a great nation that teaches all nations the path of righteousness in following the ways of YHWH. This is the means whereby all nations can be blessed and all of the promises could be fulfilled.

What follows is an intercession by Abraham for the wicked people of Sodom and Gomorrah. It is also a clear statement of how extensive the sinful darkness in these two cities had become. There were not even ten righteous people in both communities.

In Noah's day, eight were spared when they boarded the ark. In Lot's case the angels tried to rescue six people, but only three complied with the angelic instructions. After the arrival of the two angels, the male inhabitants of Sodom were blinded after an unsuccessful attempt at a homosexual gang rape. Then Lot was told to pack up and get out of town. His sons-in-law refused to come and I wonder if they had not been part of the attempted gang banging.

After leaving with her husband, Lot's wife turned back and perished in the general destruction of the valley. She was likely a citizen of the twin cities and was terrified about leaving.

There is a time lapse after the cities are destroyed and Lot's daughters raise the sons they conceived through incest with their father. No detail is given about the circumstances surrounding this sexual immorality and after this incident there is no further mention of Lot. His seed was still blessed and eventually formed two new nations from the various fragments of former people groups who had been defeated and were scattered among the Canaanites.

We need to resist the temptation of adding detail where none is given, because a summary account does not have to have extensive details, in order to be inspired. The Bible is full of selective accounts which are given so that we can follow the redemptive purposes of G-d as He continues to impact human history.

In the portion, a famine occurs and Abraham takes refuge among the early, Semitic Philistines, and even when he again tries to pass his wife off as his sister, the blessing of G-d follows him and causes him to get even richer and richer.

The birth of Isaac is recorded in chapter twenty-one and we learn that he is the first Jewish baby to be circumcised on the eighth day. The promises made to Abraham were to be fulfilled through Sarah's son and she becomes concerned when she saw Ishmael laughing at and mocking the baby Isaac.

Hagar and her son are sent away, and after getting lost in the wilderness, the provision and protection of G-d also follows Abraham's first son. He dwells in the wilderness as a hunter and Hagar obtains an Egyptian wife for her son.

As this is happening, the Philistine King concludes a treaty of peace with Abraham and the place where this occurs is called Beer-scheba or the well of the oath.

Chapter twenty-two deals with one of the most troubling events in the life of Abraham. His son is growing into a man and Abraham is instructed to take him and offer him up as a burnt offering to YHWH. They take off and are eventually guided to Mount Zion. There, Isaac is bound and is about to be killed before his body is offered up as a burnt offering. There is no record that Isaac put up any resistance to what his father was doing.

Just before Abraham is about to plunge his knife into his son, an angel tells him to stop. It is the voice of YHVH and Abraham is told that by not refusing his son, Abraham has passed another test. By this strange devotional act of obedience, Isaac is confirmed as the heir whose descendants will become as numerous as the stars above and as numerous as the grains of sand on the shores of the sea.

Human sacrifice was not uncommon among the Canaanites and Abraham was fully prepared to follow through with this act of obedience. A lot of theological speculation swirls around this final test of Abraham's faith. It did not waiver and being prepared to do whatever G-d tells us to do, is a sign of complete obedience and complete confidence that all believers should emulate, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile.

The portion ends with an update on Nachors' family and it is the first time we are introduced to Rebekah. We see that Abraham was patient when it came to watching the promises of G-d begin to be fulfilled. During the long period of waiting, his obedience did not waiver because it was based on faith in YHVH and not on the promises being fulfilled.

It took thirty years for the promised heir to appear and over time, it may have looked more and more like an heir was no longer possible. With the great joy of the heir of promise, Abraham settled down to enjoy great wealth and a series of years where peace reigned. It was another thirty-seven years before Sarah died and the next stage of the story could begin.

### **Sermon: Ephesians 2:1-10: the Demise of the Dark Side**

Paul begins this section by describing the wilful, total depravity which mankind has sunk into. He says first that we are spiritually dead because of our offences and our sins. It is a spiritual death, devoid of any light and filled with the darkness of sin and death. He says that we have all passed the point of no return and are firmly entrenched in the darkness which was inspired by the prince of the power of air and which is also active in the sons of rebellion.

He is making a powerful global statement about the pitiful spiritual condition of mankind. It is not portrayed as a condition which we were born into, as if we had no choice in the matter. He is describing the wilful rebellion which once completely covered the world in darkness just before the days of the flood. Even though we should have known better, and have always been repeatedly warned, too often we have joined with the sons of rebellion whose lives are driven by the lusts of the flesh. In so doing, we have become children of wrath by nature, both by the actions of our flesh and the darkness of our thoughts. We have willingly and intentionally become children of wrath.

Paul is making a general statement about the global condition of mankind which has completely fallen under the power of the dark side. This is not to say that human goodness and kindness have been fully extinguished, but they are no longer that which drives or motivates the average person.

It is strange that so much evil and injustice blanket the affairs of mankind, despite both the Law of G-d which is written on our hearts and the incessant calling of G-d's Spirit which will not be ignored. You see, it is very hard work to become so evil, but even so, there are few who are willing to resist this rising tide of evil. And come to faith in YHVH.

The age old theological question rises up to ask whether we were born sinful by nature, or become sinful by the choices we make and the lifestyle we adopt. Human history can be seen as a massive generational chess board struggle where the light and the darkness are engaged in a generational battle to the death.

History does reveal that at various times in human history, great violence and evil have prevailed and the righteous core of mankind, became an endangered species and too frequently nearly dissolved.

It is true that most of mankind possesses a sinful nature, but it is never something we are born with. It is a progressive degradation where our negative choices enchain us to the wiles of the enemy, until it seems like we have always been like this – and that the image of G-d which we were created in, has been smashed beyond repair.

Too often, mankind has been overpowered by the total depravity which the enemy wants us to sink into. The tendency to feel that this depravity is both universal and inevitable, gives us a very dark view of mankind, as if sinfulness was something which our species always develops and can never escape from.

Sinfulness is something which we have never been able to fully defeat, but G-d will not yet permit it to totally dominate the entire human race. It is more like a plague which has raged since our first ancestors ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When a plague strikes and does not go away, it is called endemic, and though it may sometimes diminish, it always flares up again when the conditions are right. Diseases like rabies and cholera never really fully go away and can sometimes claim new victims in their tens of thousands.

G-d violently uprooted sinfulness when Noah and his family were spared as they floated above the total destruction brought on by the waters of the flood. However, by the time the tower of Babel was completed, sinfulness began to gain another universal grip on the nations and generations of mankind. The dispersion slowed down this horrible process considerably.

Paul's view of sinful humanity is not so much pessimistic as it is realistic. Civilizations may grow corrupt and crumble, but every new civilization carries the seeds of its own destruction when it begins to give into sinfulness of any kind.

Left to its own devices, the overpowering influence of sin would require another divine intervention on the scale of the flood. With all the amazing technical advances of our modern world, we may have finally overcome many of the problems which plagued our ancestors. But we are just turning into a global community of sinners with lots of toys and an increasing ability for total, global annihilation of all life on our planet.

Where does this leave mankind? I have always taught that the human race is broadly divided between a righteous core and a wicked core. In our generation we may see the final descent of mankind into the horrors of global sinfulness. But G-d has not given up on us yet.

Just as YHVH provided a ram to die in Isaac's place, He has also provided our Messiah, whose death and resurrection opened a straight and narrow path back to the Father for all of those who respond to His persistent call. The world is filled with increasing spiritual tension – I want to give in to the spiritual tension of G-d's Word. How about you?

Paul agrees with Moses that YHVH is rich in mercy and that, despite our voluntary, total depravity, He has loved us with a great love. He does not hover over us like some kind of angry avenging angel, ready to strike us down and smash us into pieces because of the universal folly we are stuck in.

In our pitiful state of spiritual death, He has called us back to life in our beloved Messiah. When we come to faith in Yeshua, three marvellous spiritual realities become our own. First, we are delivered from the power of death and are granted spiritual life. Then we are all spiritually resurrected together in our beloved Messiah. This inner, personal and corporate reality will one day burst forth upon the world at the return of our Saviour.

Until then, our spirits are resurrected and we carry this light inside us and among us, until the bright and Morning Star bursts forth and forever banishes all darkness and death.

Finally, in a real sense, our spirits (souls) are even now seated in Heavenly places with our Messiah. We are no longer citizens of this fading world, we are joyful citizens of the world to come and we can hardly wait for it to arrive. YHVH did this to show future ages the infinite richness of His grace through His goodness to us in the sacrifice of our Messiah.

This is not something which we did for ourselves and no amount of obedience and good works would make us eligible to deserve His mighty love and powerful grace. Our deliverance from this current age and into the age which is to come, is an unwarranted gift which we have received. It is not something which we earned and it is certainly not something which we deserve. We are saved by grace through faith and it is not something which we have earned or done for ourselves. It is entirely the work which YHVH executed through His Son and which is offered to us when we come to faith in Him and surrender all that we are to Him.

This marvellous freedom is totally an act of love and is never something which we earn on our own merits. G-d has always been full of mercy and has always been slow to wrath and rich in goodness and faithfulness. In His mercy, He called our father Abraham out of Ur and into the Promised Land. In the patriarchs, G-d began to weave the scattered remnants of mankind back into a single fabric – even if so few want to abandon their darkness and spend their lives actively resisting the light.

When we come to faith, He begins to mould us from in the inside out and releases our inner man from the chains and the ravages of sin. Our calling is to obedience and to the performance of good works. However, it is not an attempt to gain divine favour, so that we earn our place in the world to come. It becomes an expression of gratitude.

It is both a reshaping of how we think and how we behave, as we wander through this darkening world towards our true spiritual home in glory. He prepares acts of obedience for us to complete which reflect the wonder of the new inner man which we have become.

Truly, we become clay in the hands of the Divine potter, who both removes the damage and the ravages of sin and also begins to fashion us back into the image of G-d we were created with. It may be a slow process, but it is a thorough process and leaves no part of our lives unaffected.

Just as we were created before the foundation of the world to have free will and to make choices, in Messiah, as well, also before the foundation of the world, He prepared specific good works for us to fulfill. These are geared to both our temperaments and to our abilities.

Don't get me wrong, all the events of our lives and everything which happens to us was not decided before the foundation of the world. We were created with the specific spiritual ability to respond to the whatever's which He allows to wander through our lives. He wants to guide our spiritual development so that who we are, more closely reflects the image of G-d we were all created with.

In this amazing epistle, Paul is dealing with some pretty powerful spiritual concepts as he describes the incredible wonder and power of the Messiah. This is also what the Torah describes. In the Scriptures, and before the arrival of our Messiah, we were told what He would be like and what He would do for us. We were even told when this marvellous Saviour would arrive and walk among us.

And, if we have eyes to see, we are also told when He will return and set up His everlasting Kingdom over all the nations and the generations of mankind, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile. We need to learn not to take away from what the Scriptures teach and also never to add to what they teach. We are given enough detail to know when all of these things will come to pass and it is never the intensity of our desires for the Kingdom which will make it come any more quickly. All things have to be set in place.

Being saved by grace and not by works has always been the consistent teaching of the Scriptures. It is described equally in both the Old and the New Testaments. We ere saved for good works, and never by good works.

Having faith in the redemptive work of the Saviour and learning to obey the stipulations of His Word, has always been the double duty of every nation and generation of mankind, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile.

In many respects the will of G-d for our lives is not complicated for us to understand. We are His workmanship, not created to show off any aspect of His creating genius, but to perform the good works He has always called us to perform. The Ten Commandments and the Gospel tell the same story, along with the prophets and the writings.

We were excluded from the garden for our own protection. We were scattered into nations and who speak different languages for our own protection. Israel came home to the original site of the Garden of Eden to shine as a beacon in a darkening world. The Messiah was born to accomplish the perfect sacrifice which grants us salvation.

As we speak, He is interceding for us in the true Holy of Holies and behind the scenes, He is diligently working to set all things in place for His eventual return. Rather than focusing on the spiralling global darkness which is filling our world once gain, we need to focus on the coming Kingdom. We need to let Him mould us so that we can perform the good works He has prepared for us to perform. This is what our lives should all be about as we learn to do what we were created for. Are you letting Him work in you and mould you, so that you can perceive and perform the good works which we were created to perform? It is the only show in town worthy of our attention, nothing more, and certainly nothing less.