

"Sometimes I'm afraid of God."

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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"Sometimes I'm afraid of God when I read the Bible."

The statement came from my son after he had spent a bit of time wandering around in the delights of [Genesis 19](#) for an assignment. It's quite the passage. You have a guy voluntarily sending out his daughters to get raped in order to avoid the apparently more odious prospect of having the men of his town sodomize a couple of angels who had paid him a visit, you have people being struck blind and being turned into salt, you have God raining down sulfur and fire in judgment of the Sodom and Gomorrah, you have two young women getting their dad plastered in order to have sex with him and produce children, and generally an overall scene of depravity and sex and violence that would make Quentin Tarantino blush. Well, maybe not. But still, it's not exactly PG material.

"Why do stories like this make you afraid," I asked, with no small amount of trepidation. "Well, God seems so angry... He tells them not to look back at Sodom, but we have our own brains and we're curious, right? I would look back. But then they get turned to salt. And why would those girls want to have sex with their dad?!"

I love words—words are my life—but it never ceases to amaze me how quickly questions about the Bible from my kids can seem to drain the words right out of me. At least all of the good and helpful ones. All of my theological education and hermeneutical sophistication and contextual sensitivity seems to go out the window when a kid encounters some bizarre passage in the bible and wonders, quite logically, "what on *earth* does that mean and why is it in the Bible?!"

How *does* one "explain" Genesis 19 to an eleven year old? Or a twenty-five, fifty, or seventy-five year old for that matter? There was plenty of umm-ing and ahing and "well, you see" and "things were quite a bit different back then" and "human beings can be quite awful" and "are you *sure* it was Genesis 19 that you were supposed to read?!" But I'm not sure there was much light shed on the matter. I think my son

walked out the door to walk the dog thinking something like, “man, the Bible is one *weird* book.”

And it is. Very weird indeed. We force musicians who throw the odd swear word into their songs to have warning labels for their albums. I often think that the Bible should have a similar (or more explicit) warning on its cover.

As I mentioned in a [previous post](#), our Mennonite denomination is currently engaged in a process of discerning together how and why we interpret Scripture. It is a process that has yielded some deep wisdom borne out of many hours spend wrestling with and delighting in Scripture. It has produced some wonderful guidelines that we have collectively discerned and articulated. These guidelines are profoundly helpful, if followed, and give us some good tools for knowing how to handle tough passages, what to prioritize and why, etc. Good stuff, all of it.

But eleven year olds don’t talk about “interpretive frameworks” or “narrative trajectories” or “Christological lenses” or anything like that. They just read. At face value. And the Bible can be a very scary thing for young hearts and minds whose faith and hope are still taking shape, still being formed. I feel very strongly that followers of Jesus should have good tools for interpreting the Bible and a good understanding of the kind of book that it is (and, more importantly, *isn’t!*). But even this conviction can seem comfortably abstract and generic, like something you would find on a mission statement or something like that. A kid saying, “sometimes the Bible makes me afraid of God” sharpens and personalizes these matters on an entirely different level.

My son and I didn’t *just* talk about Genesis 19 this morning. We also talked about Jesus (what else could we do, as Anabaptists?) and about how even though there are parts of the Bible that make us scratch our heads or cringe or that even *frighten* us, we have to always remember that Jesus is the best picture of God that we have. You know, [Colossians 1](#) and [Hebrews 1](#) and all that.

I don’t know what my son thought about this move. Maybe he thought his dad was trying to change the subject or that he was contrasting the nice New Testament God with the nasty Old Testament God in a kind of quasi-Marcionism. Maybe he just thought that his dad didn’t know what else to say. And he would probably be partly right. But only partly.

Because however confusedly and incoherently and partially I may have expressed it, I really *do* believe that Jesus and reshapes and reinterprets Scripture and our understanding of who God is. I really *do* believe that Jesus is the trump card and I do not apologize for this. I really *do* believe that when I come across horrifying passages in the OT, that rather than trying to rationalize or spin or defend, my only recourse is to turn to the Crucified One who shows me, in the truest and most complete way, what God is like—who shows me that we do not have to be afraid.

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