



Abraham and the Aqedah... Genesis 22:1-19

Now we started our study on covenant theology a few weeks back and I wanted to take a minute or two this morning and remind you of why we are doing that and not just diving into another straight forward exposition of a biblical book or some other historical or theological study.

The reason we are taking the time to study the Reformed understanding of the covenant is because it shapes so much of our thought and theology and practice. Now I am not arguing that I want to take our understanding of how to interpret Scripture and doctrine and force it on you. Rather, I am arguing that the natural interpretation of Scripture...the interpretation that comes up from Scripture itself in an inductive study of the whole of God's great redemptive work in the Bible and in history is the very same one found in covenant theology.¹

Now because that is true, I'll be arguing later on for things like infant baptism and the significance of taking the Lord's Supper regularly and often. But I didn't want to start there. Rather, I wanted to start with the rudimentary matters.

That means, of course, that I had to define the word “covenant”. There are a couple of definitions that I think work very well. First, I started on by O. Palmer Robertson:

“A covenant is a bond in blood that is sovereignly administered.”²

I like that definition very much and it works really well except in a couple of instances. Still, I decided because of that to start with an even simpler definition. This one comes from Dr. James Montgomery Boice:

A covenant is a solemn promise confirmed by an oath or sign.³

I pointed out that typically, Reformed theologians talk about three different covenants: (1) the Covenant of Redemption, (2) the Covenant of Works⁴, and (3) the Covenant of Grace⁵. The Covenant of Redemption is the covenant in which the Father and the Son counseled together in eternity past to bring about fallen man’s salvation. The Covenant of Works is the covenant in which God promised life to Adam in the Garden of Eden on the basis of uninterrupted obedience.

And then finally the Covenant of Grace is the covenant in which the Father covenants with the elect to receive them on the basis of their faith in Christ’s redemptive work on the cross.

I then turned to talk about the Covenant of Grace and how that it is made of different administrations. Another way to say that is to say that the Covenant of Grace looks like it is made of a number of covenants but that really and truly it is not. It is really and truly only one covenant. Nevertheless, it was presented in

slightly different ways dependent upon the time and the place and the people to whom it was being administered.⁶

I think it is wrong to think of the various covenants of the Old Testament as a series of different covenants; rather, it is better to think of the various covenants of the Old Testament as sequential steps of one single pathway called the Covenant of Grace. When we arrive, at last, at the last step, the New Covenant prophesied in Jeremiah 33 and fulfilled in the New Testament, we arrive at the fulfillment of the one Covenant of Grace itself. That is one of the reasons why some of the names of these various Old Testament covenants are used interchangeably. But we'll talk more about that next week.

Now that brings up one other question. Why start out with the Abrahamic Covenant? I have done so because all of the other administrations of the covenant of grace allude back to it and flow out of it. We'll see that in much clearer detail next week as I begin to try to trace out for you the many, many references back to the covenant with Abraham.

Now what we have seen thus far is that called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldeans and promised him a land of plenty as an inheritance. He did that in Genesis 12.

Then in Genesis, God reappeared to Abraham in a vision and unilaterally confirmed His covenant with him in a solemn rite called the "blood covenant". If you missed that lesson I would like to recommend that you go back and listen to it not because I do it justice but rather because it is so pivotal to understanding the graciousness of God's promise to Abraham.

And then last week, we saw that God confirmed His covenant with Abraham again by giving Him a sign of His covenantal promises and by explaining what He required of Abraham. The covenant was not conditional upon Abraham's obedience. Nevertheless, Abraham was expected to follow in obedience not so much out of fear as out of gratitude.

Now this morning we are turning to God's great culminating word regarding His covenantal promises to Abraham. Other than the scene portraying the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Himself, there is no scene in the Bible with which to compare it. It is at the same time the most wonderful and most terrible Bible story there is. In Jewish literature it is simply known as "The Aqeda"...the "Binding of Isaac".⁷

It occurs in Genesis 22. But rather than come at the scene from the Book of Genesis, I want to come at the scene from the New Testament because it is alluded to rather clearly there, I think, in John 8.

Let me set the scene in John 8 for you.

The Jewish religious leaders were after Jesus for the things he had been saying...for all the things He had been doing. They were hounding Him...trying to trip Him up...trying to get Him to say something...anything by which they could condemn Him.

They even insulted Him by drawing attention to His mysterious birth...hinting that He was illegitimate...while they were...were properly born sons of the covenant...sons of Abraham. So the Lord Jesus picked up their argument and

turned it against them. He said to them, **“If you were the sons of Abraham, you would do the same sort of works as Abraham...but you don’t. Instead, you want to kill me and you want to kill simply because I have told you the truth...that is not the sort of thing Abraham would have ever done.”**

And then right there in the midst of their argument, Jesus said the strangest thing...something so profoundly wonderful and strange that it startled the Jews.

What He said was this...

^{ESV} **John 8:56**...Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad."

Now I want you to think about what He said for a moment. He didn't say, **“Abraham wished he could have seen my day...wished he could have seen all that you Scribes and Pharisees have seen...but never got the chance.”**

No, what Jesus said was strange. What he said was, **"Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he did see *it* and he was glad."**

The Greek is even stronger than that. It is something like, **“Abraham rejoiced in the idea that he might possibly get to see my day and he did see it and was glad.”**

It was a remarkable thing to say.

Now the question is, and it is an important question I think, what does that mean? What does it mean and when did it happen...that is, when did Abraham see Jesus' day?

Now in our last two lessons I covered the early part of the life of Abraham. Now just in case you missed those lessons or just in case you are not really up on your Bible stories and characters, let me remind you that Abraham was the Father of the Jewish nation. He was the first Jew. He had originally lived in what is modern day Iraq and then he was called by God to leave his homeland and to go to the land of Canaan, modern day Palestine, where God promised to build a nation out of him...to make him the father of multitudes...and when He made that promise He gave Abraham a sign of His covenant with him...the sign of circumcision...so Abraham as an old man circumcised himself and his whole household.

So Abraham was the first Jew...he was the father of the nation of Israel.

Now it ought to be obvious to you but in case it's not let me remind you that Abraham lived a long time before the Lord Jesus...a little less than two thousand years before Jesus. Think about that...there was about as much time between the lives of Jesus and Abraham as there is between us and Jesus...a little less than two thousand years. And yet, Jesus said to the Scribes and the Pharisees, Scribes and Pharisees who claimed to be the rightful heirs of Abraham that "**Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he did see *it* and he was glad.**"

Now some scholars...indeed some very good men...think that the reference here to seeing Jesus' day is a reference to just some sort of general idea or notion

about a coming Messiah. That is, they think that all that Jesus meant is that Abraham realized that he was not the hope of the nation...that he was not Messiah...that he was not the redeemer...that one day, later on...perhaps much later on, a redeemer would have to come to redeem His people.⁸

But I have to tell you I don't think that is right. Rather, I agree with commentators F.F. Bruce and James Montgomery Boice that Jesus had in mind here a specific instance...a specific situation...a specific moment in time when Abraham saw Jesus' day and was glad...very glad indeed.⁹

Now in order for you to understand how this passage in John hangs with the passages we read earlier, let me just take a minute or two and quickly paint a thumbnail sketch of Abraham's life. I know this is repetitive but I want to make sure you have it.

God called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldeans, modern day Iraq, when he was already an old man. In fact, Abraham was seventy-five years old when God called him and when God called Abraham He told him to go to a land he would show him and that once he was there He would make a great nation out of him.

It was a remarkable promise. It was remarkable because Abraham and his wife Sarah had no children of their own. They had no children...were too old to have any children...and yet God promised them that they would have a child and that He would make a great nation out of the child and that through that nation all the people of the earth would be blessed. Now the story of Abraham...and his waiting for God to make good on His promise to give him a son goes on for nine chapters in Genesis...it runs from chapter twelve through chapter twenty and as

it does it covers a period of some twenty five years...and then at last, in chapter twenty-one, Abraham's wife Sarah did indeed have a baby...a baby they named Isaac...his name in Hebrew means **"laughter."**¹⁰

And they did indeed laugh...first because of the utter ridiculousness of a hundred year old man and a ninety year old woman having a baby...and then secondly...and more appropriately because the baby was the fulfillment of God's great, covenantal promise to them. They reasoned, I think, that if God could actually...really and truly give them a baby when they were so old...that He might also give them the rest of the promise that He had made regarding the baby and the baby's future...that is, that the baby might grow into a great nation and be the source of great blessing to the whole world. I think they may have been thinking, **"If God could do something some profoundly wonderful as in giving us this child when we are old, might He not also go all the way with His promise."**

Still, it was not the birth of Isaac that Jesus was referring to when He spoke of Abraham seeing His day...and being glad. It was a great day...a great day indeed...a glorious day...but it was not that day.

Now chapters twelve through twenty cover twenty five years in the life of Abraham. Chapter twenty-one starts with the birth of Isaac...the promised son...and it ends with Abraham digging a well at Beersheba...

Now the story of Abraham digging a well at Beersheba is not simply put there in the story to fill space. It is put there for a purpose. You see the name Beersheba means **"The Well of Seven"** and the idea was not so much that there were seven

wells there but rather that the place was a wonderful place of abundance and prosperity. It was a little bit like saying, **"I live in the 'City of Roses.'"** It is not the idea that there are only roses there but it is a way to emphasize the beauty of Tyler.

Anyway, Abraham and his wife and son and servants lived there and prospered...and yet we don't know any details about what went on there in their time at Beersheba. Now quite a few years passed between the end of chapter twenty-one and the beginning of chapter twenty-two. There is no way to know exactly how several years passed...perhaps as many as fifteen or twenty. And then all of a sudden God spoke again to Abraham...but His words were not words of promise or of blessing, they were not the words of a friend...they were words filled with darkness and thunder and despair.

Look at verses one and two.

^{ESV} **Genesis 22:1**...After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, **"Abraham!"** And he said, **"Here am I."** ² He said, **"Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you."**

Now the verses are extraordinary in their simplicity and in their starkness. There is no explanation to Abraham as to why what is being commanded is being commanded. Oh the reader is told...told that God was testing Abraham...but not even the reader is told why he is being tested. There are only those words...those terrible dark words...**"take, go...sacrifice."**

Calvin would later say that there was a sense in which Abraham's obedience called for the destruction of his faith. That is, the command itself called for the destruction of every visible sign of God's promise to him.¹¹

Luther would later say of the passage that the command was God contradicting Himself...that it was God taking away the very thing He had promised.¹²

In fact, there is wonderful story about the first time Luther read the story at home during family devotions, his wife Katie shouted at him, "**I don't believe it. God would have never treated his son like that.**"¹³

That is, of course, the very emotion we are meant to feel when we read the passage. It is an outrageous command and contrary to everything we know or think about God...and yet there it is, "**Go, take, sacrifice.**"

Now as modern Christians, we are shocked by God asking Abraham to do something so horrific and yet we are also inclined to want to know what Abraham was thinking...what he was feeling...and yet as Moses relates Abraham's story he chooses not to fill in the gaps...instead, he simply lays out the facts...leaving them plain and bare and stark and the story is all that much more powerful because of it.

I remember when Beverly and I were first married, we were watching the movie "**The Bible**" in which George C. Scott portrayed Abraham...and I remember when the Lord gave Abraham this horrible command in the movie she started weeping...not crying...but weeping out of deep sorrow and bitterness...and I

realized of course that she didn't know the story...that she wasn't aware how it turned out and my heart ached for her.

But that is what the Holy Spirit writing through the hand of Moses intended...and it works doesn't it...it moves us because of the pathos...because of the innate understanding each of us has with losing something we have waited for so long...something so precious...something irreplaceable.

So here in verse one and two we see the terrible command of God Almighty to his friend Abraham.

Now in verses three through five we see Abraham's unswerving obedience to God's command and we catch for just a fleeting moment the first hint of hope.

Look at verse three with me.

^{ESV} **Genesis 22:3**...So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. ⁴ On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. ⁵ Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you."

Now I want you to notice that Abraham obeys almost instantly. It must have been a horrible night for him. Still, he rose early the next morning and set out. And he left nothing to chance. He even cut and collected the wood he would need to make his burnt offering. He loaded the donkey and he and his servants and his son set out.

It was a three day trip from Beersheba to Moriah...about forty five miles...over rough hilly terrain.¹⁴ I imagine that it was an awkwardly silent trip. Verse four tells us that on the third day they were able to see the mountain God had in mind. And then Abraham tells the servants to stay where they are and then...then there is this extraordinarily strange and cryptic word...spoken by Abraham to his servants, **"Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you."**

I think it is an expression of faith. Some commentators think Abraham was simply trying to put the best face on things...some think he was saying whatever it took to get Isaac to go with him but I think what Abraham said was more than that. I think it was an expression of hope.

Anyway, what we see in verses one and two is God's terrible command. What we see in verses three through five is Abraham's instantaneous, unswerving, uncomplaining obedience.

In verses six through eight what we see is an insightful question by Abraham's son Isaac. Look at verse 6 with me.

^{ESV} **Genesis 22:6**...And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. ⁷ And Isaac said to his father Abraham, **"My father!"** And he said, **"Here am I, my son."** He said, **"Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"** ⁸ Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together.

Now Isaac's question adds to the pathos of the story doesn't it. **"Father, we have the fire and we have the wood...but we do not have the most important thing...we do not have the lamb for the sacrifice. Where are we going to get the lamb?"**

How difficult it must have been for Abraham to answer his son. I imagine that Abraham was tired...that the trip had just about done him in...he was somewhere between a hundred and fifteen and a hundred and twenty years old and three days of riding and of walking and grieving would have had to have taken a toll on the old man...Abraham's answer must have hung in his throat for a moment.

You see his answer probably ought to be understood as something like this, **"The Lord will provide the lamb for the sacrifice and in fact has already done so...it is you my son."**

And you know I do not think that is forcing anything upon the text. I think Abraham really believed that he was going to have to do what God commanded. And yet the text is remarkably clear at the end of verse eight, **"And the two of them went on together."** Of course, the question is, **"How? How could they go on? How was he able to go on knowing that God Almighty...the great God of the everlasting covenant was asking him to snuff Isaac...to snuff 'Laughter' out of his life?"**

Well, I have to tell you...Abraham did so not out of emotion, or out of fear or even, I think, out of love. No, the New Testament tells us that he pressed on out of logic...out of reason. You see the New Testament through the witness of the

holy Spirit tell us what Abraham was actually thinking. It does that in Hebrews chapter 11, verse 17.

^{ESV} **Hebrews 11:17**...By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, ¹⁸ of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." ¹⁹ He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.

Do you see what the verse is saying?

It is saying that although Abraham really believed he was indeed going to have slay his son...he also really believed that God was able to raise him from the dead. You see he reasoned that God would do so because he had come to understand that God could be trusted to keep His promises...and that since God had promised him that he would obtain many descendants...he would do so even if it meant God had to raise him from the dead.

Now when Abraham said, **"God himself will provide the lamb for the sacrifice"** he was speaking prophetically. He was speaking prophetically even though he had no idea that he was.

What we are going to see in verse nine through fourteen is God's provision for a substitute for Isaac. In other words, we are going to see God Himself provide a ram to take Isaac's place on the altar and He is going to do so as a foreshadowing of the sacrifice He would ultimately provide to redeem His chosen people from their sins.

^{ESV} **Genesis 22:9**...When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "**Abraham, Abraham!**" And he said, "**Here am I.**" ¹² He said, "**Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.**" ¹³ And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴ So Abraham called the name of that place, "**The LORD will provide**"; as it is said to this day, "**On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.**"

Now that mountain of the Lord...that Mount Moriah is a real place...a place known to everyone of you here.¹⁵ Today there is a Muslim mosque there...a very famous mosque called the Dome of the Rock. Now the "**rock**" that is referred to in the phrase the "**Dome of the Rock**" juts up through the soil and is considered by almost all Jewish, Muslim and Christian scholars to be the very rock on which Abraham bound and laid out his son. In Jesus' day, it was the site of the Herod's Temple...perhaps even the site of the Holy of Holies.

But the interesting thing about Mount Moriah is that this famous rock is not the highest place on the mountain. You see the mountain has a rather long ridge and to the north and to the west of the temple mound the backbone or ridge of the mountain juts up another ninety to hundred feet and that high spot which would have been outside of the city wall in the time of Jesus is traditionally believed to be another important biblical site...a site we know today as Golgotha...as Calvary...as the place where the Lord Jesus Himself was crucified.

Now I have to tell you, I think that was the real place where Abraham prepared to offer Isaac...I think that was the real place where God provided a substitute

sacrifice for Isaac...I think that was the real place and the day where Abraham saw Jesus...where he saw Jesus' day and was glad.

You see, he was glad because he saw God provide an offering to take the place of his beloved son...he saw God provide a way to meet own His terrible demand and to fulfill His Covenant of Grace with Abraham.

And you know, as Christians, we see the same thing when we look to the cross...because there on the Mountain of the Lord He provided a substitute for us to bear the penalty of our sin. It was there Abraham saw Jesus...it was there he saw Jesus day and was glad...let us do the same.

Now at the end of section in Genesis 22, God reaffirms His promise to Abraham.

^{ESV} **Genesis 22:15**...And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven ¹⁶ and said, "By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, ¹⁸ and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice." ¹⁹ So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba. And Abraham lived at Beersheba.

I love that ending. It is hard to imagine that he ever felt much fear again in his life. Certainly, I doubt he ever worried much about Isaac. He had seen God's promises work themselves out in the midst of difficulty and trial. He had been given wonderful and precious promises...promises based on God's faithful, loyal covenantal love and he had believed God and God has counted it to him as righteousness.

Now there is one other thing I wanted to share with you. Do you remember that story about Katie Luther? That is, do you remember that story about her shouting out at her husband, Martin Luther, **“I don’t believe it! God would have never treated his son like that?”**

She meant, of course, that she did not believe that God would have ever treated Abraham’s son like that...but the way she said what she said left it unclear as to whose son she was actually talking about.

So Luther seized upon the idea and turned it around and looked at his wife and said, **“But he did Katie...didn’t He?”**

He did indeed and Christian He did so for you and for me in the Covenant of Grace. Let us rejoice like Abraham that we see that...let us rejoice and be glad.

Let’s pray.

¹ WCF 7.1... The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto Him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of Him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which He has been pleased to express by way of covenant.

² O. Palmer Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishers, 1980), 4.

³ James M. Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1986), 6.

⁴ WCF 7.2...The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.

⁵ WCF... Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace; wherein He freely offers unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ; requiring of them faith in Him, that they may be saved,

and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life His Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe.

⁶ WCF 7.6... There are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations.

⁷ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Vol. Two Translated by Shlomo Pines University of Chicago Press, 1963 Book III, Chap. 24.

⁸ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John Rvd.* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), 418.

⁹ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John: An Expository Commentary...Five Volumes in One* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1985), 572.

¹⁰ BDB...יִצְחָק: Isaac, son of Abr. and Sarah (he laugheth, cf. play upon name [Gn 18:12](#) f.

¹¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, 22:1.

¹² Martin Luther, *Commentary on Genesis*, Vol. 4. 22:1.

¹³ Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1950), 370.

¹⁴ B. W. Johnson, *The Christian International Lesson Commentary for 1887*, Lesson 10 dated March 6th. See also Derek Kidner, *Genesis* in the Tyndale Old Testament Commentary Series, (Downer's Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1967), 143.

¹⁵ <http://www.templemount.org/moriah2.html> This site contains a topographical map showing the connection of Golgotha with the rest of the ridge on which the temple was built.