

The Beginning of All Things – Genesis through Deuteronomy Fall, 2015

The Beginning of All Things – Genesis through Deuteronomy Have you ever wondered what the scriptures teach about the origin of the universe? What about the patriarchs, who were they, and why are they important? What relevance does the account of the exodus of the Hebrews from the land of Egypt have for Christian growth? What can the seemingly tedious ceremonial laws of Leviticus as well as the long list of names in Numbers teach us about godly living? How should a believer read and reflect on the five books of Moses collectively called the Pentateuch (or Torah)? How do these five books “fit in” to the over-arching story of scripture? These questions and more will be explored as we seek to understand this section of God’s Word.

The objective of this class is: to gain an overview of the first five books of the Bible (otherwise known as the Pentateuch), and understand the relation between these foundational books to Christ and Christian living.

Genesis 4 through 21 explores the state of man’s unfaithfulness and God’s faithfulness. As the sun sat on the Garden of Eden, God promised that he would send the *seed* of the woman to crush the serpent’s head. From that point forward his redemptive, historical plan began to unfold. We saw last week how this unfolding included a world-wide, devastating flood as well as the gracious selection of one man: Abraham. God made a covenant with every living thing to preserve all of creation (seedtime and harvest, cold and winter, day and night) and in so doing to restrain the effects of man’s sin on the world. With Abraham, God covenanted to bless him and make him a great nation, and to make his name great, and give to his seed after him the land of Canaan. This promise was microcosmically fulfilled with the coming of Isaac, the heir of the covenantal promises. Today we shall witness the great trial of the prophet and understand more clearly what God is doing in Genesis and continues to do throughout the Torah (Pentateuch).

Point One: The Tempting of the Prophet – At this point in covenantal history, Abraham has been particularly pruned and shaped by God both through promises as well as providence into the father of faith. There remained one final test to be given, one final trial noteworthy in scripture. You might well say that what ensues in Genesis chapter 22 is the climactic moment in the story of the prophet for there is no greater event prior to this moment, and the details of Abraham’s life after this moment fall silent. We are not told whether God appeared to the patriarch any more, perhaps there was no need. The nineteen verses which collectively make up what is known as the “Akedah” or “binding” in Hebrew tell the true story of what God intends to do through the promised *seed* of the prophet.

In what manner might we say that Abraham is being tested, and is it true that he is being tested by God? The nature of Abraham’s testing is neither that circumstances or providence are contrary to the received promises of God as was the case when God promised Abraham a son and he was ninety-nine years of age and still childless, rather what is being asked of Abraham by God is to take the very fruit of God’s promises, the object of God’s covenantal designs and offer him up as a sacrifice. This testing had at its very core the question of God’s character as well as God’s covenantal commitment. After all, had not God walked through the two pieces of meat as an attestation that he would be faithful to his covenantal promises (Genesis 15)? Had God not pronounced a self-maledictory oath if he failed to keep his part of the covenant? Now, it would be easier to explain this passage of scripture by saying, Abraham got it wrong. In his old age his spiritual hearing was waxing dim and he heard the sub-conscious voices of his past demanding the life of his beloved son. Then, at the eleventh hour the voice of the one true God intervened and prevented Abraham from doing the act. However, such an interpretation ignores the

The Beginning of All Things – Genesis through Deuteronomy Fall, 2015

infallibility of the text. Either God sought to test Abraham as mentioned in verse one or he did not. We cannot make the text mean whatever we think it should mean in an attempt to protect God's character, rather we must let God's character speak for itself. Such a test or command does indeed at cursory glance appear to be uncharacteristic of God, and apart from the knowledge of the substitutionary atonement of Christ offered to us in the New Testament we lack the hermeneutical lens through which we can understand this final testing of the aged but faithful prophet. To establish the first point of this lesson we can say with emphasis that, "...*God tested Abraham...*"

Point Two: *The Nature of the Test* – So, what exactly was the command of God, and what was the nature of Abraham's testing? According to verse 2, God 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.*" The command was short, and lacked as much information as it provided. Much like his original call (12:1) the exact location of God's providential leading was not disclosed to the prophet nor was any indication given that would lead Abraham to believe that God intended to save his son from death. Instead, God focused on the solitary nature of Abraham's son Isaac, "...*your only son...*" and the great love between the two, "...*whom you love...*" The true test of God's command was whether Abraham loved this son of the covenant more than he loved the God of the covenant. Would Abraham be willing to give back to God what God had graciously given to him?

As we take a step back for a moment and consider the context of the Torah, let us call to remembrance that nearly every other idolatrous cult that the nations and tribes surrounding Abraham worshipped involved the sacrificial offering of their firstborn son. We cannot remove from the backdrop of Abraham's testing the temptation to see God as unfaithful to his revealed character. Through God's call of the prophet to leave the land of his nativity and his providential protection of Abraham and his household throughout their journeys, God had differentiated himself from the gods of the nations. However, he is here seemingly asking the prophet to make a sacrifice similar to the demands made of worshippers of false gods. Abraham did not have the Torah to read. He did not know with certainty how this debacle would end. Nonetheless, there is no record of struggle nor sign that he argued with his Creator, rather he, "...*rose early in the morning...and went to the place of which God told him*".

Point Three: *The Faith of Abraham* – The author of the book of Hebrews informs us, "*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, of whom it was said, Through Isaac shall your offspring be named. He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which figuratively speaking, he did receive him back*" (Hebrews 11:17-19). The author of Hebrews here tells us that Abraham was willing to offer his son to God through faith, knowing that God's character was such that He would bring him back from death (if necessary) in order to fulfill his covenantal commitment to Abraham. Such a statement is profound for two reasons: 1) it shows that Abraham had an unwavering faith in God's character, and 2) such a faith was not unreasonable (or in spite of reason), but was a *reasonable* faith informed by the many years of relational experience with God. It is noteworthy that God did not appear to Abraham making this demand in chapter twelve. At that early stage, there was adequate faith to leave his father's house and go to an undisclosed land of promise, but (I suggest) not enough experience with the one true God to know that God would never truly require the birth of his firstborn son. Therefore, it is safe to say that Abraham had faith in God's character, a faith forged from the fire of experience and the many years of walking with this one true God, so that he knew God would fulfill his covenantal promises made to the prophet even if it meant he would raise his son, offered in the fires of sacrifice, from the

The Beginning of All Things – Genesis through Deuteronomy Fall, 2015

dead. There is one other aspect of the test which must here be discussed before moving forward. According to Christ, Abraham actually saw the “day” of the Messiah. Such a phrase as *Day of the Lord*, *Day of the Messiah* or “my day, when uttered by Christ is indicative of the covenantal fulfillment of the coming of the promised seed (Genesis 3:15). In **John 8:56** Christ told the Jewish leaders of his day, “*Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad*”. The question is presented, when did Abraham see the day of Christ? I suggest that he saw the day of Christ when a substitutionary offering was provided by God through a ram caught in the thicket (22:13). As a result he named that mount of sacrifice (where later the temple would be constructed), Jehovah Yireh, which can be translated, *God will be seen*.

Point Four: Isaac’s Consent – The truth remains that Abraham is not the only faithful figure in this story. The biblical text does not provide the details of the conversation between father and son when Isaac finally realized that he would be placed on the altar as a sacrifice to God. For all the years that Abraham had walked with God and became intimately aware of his character, Isaac had not been afforded the same luxury. Even the miraculous occurrence of Isaac’s birth was an account relayed to him by his parents and not witnessed first-hand. We do not know the exact age of Isaac at the time, but assuming chapters 22 and 23 to be chronological, he may well have been in his middle twenties, making Abraham more than 120 years old. Therefore, the “binding of Isaac” mentioned in verse nine of the text doubtfully means Abraham bound him so that he could not break free from the restraints of his father. There are few men in their mid-twenties who could not break free from the grip of an aged man of more than 120 if they really attempted to do so. Instead, I suggest we can accurately read the acquiescence of the son from this passage. Further, Isaac would later be a worshipper of the one true God (25:21) as well, an unlikely scenario if he offered himself unwillingly in sacrifice.

Point Five: The Oath of the Lord - Throughout the book of Genesis, and indeed throughout the entire Torah, there are at least three consistent themes that continue to arise: 1) the land, 2) the seed, and 3) blessedness. These three themes are first made as covenant promises to Abraham: the promise of blessing was provided in 12:1, the promise of blessing and land was made in chapter 15 and the promise of seed and land was made in chapter 17. However, for the first time in the Abrahamic covenant, we have all three blessings, (seed, land, and blessedness) pronounced here after Abraham’s testing and God’s provision of a substitutionary sacrifice. In this instance, these three blessings are not simply promised as before, but God swears by himself. Verses 16 -18 state, “*...By myself (Godself) I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, 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, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.*”

So what are we to make of this passage (Genesis 22:1-19)? It would seem based on the statement of Christ referenced above, that to Abraham was being revealed the mystery of God’s covenantal design – the sending of Christ God’s only Son to die as a substitutionary atonement for all of his elect children, and through his death the three-fold blessing of the Abrahamic covenant would be realized. If this is indeed the text from which the apostle Paul makes his claim regarding the centrality of Christ in the Abrahamic covenant (Galatians 3:16), then we have every reason to believe that the substitutionary atonement of Christ, albeit known only through types and foreshadows until his appearing, is central to the covenantal message of the Torah, and indeed all of scripture from this point forward. For this reason, God reminds Isaac of this event (the testing of his father and subsequent oath) when

The Beginning of All Things – Genesis through Deuteronomy Fall, 2015

commanding him not to go into Egypt stating, *“And the Lord appeared to him and said, Do not go down to Egypt; dwell in the land of which I shall tell you. Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and bless you, for to you and to your offspring I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father. I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and will give to your offspring all these lands. And in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed...”* (Genesis 26:2-4).

The event of God testing Abraham or more specifically, God disclosing his true covenantal agenda to the prophet becomes the most critical for understanding the remainder of the Pentateuch. It is this primary covenantal objective that adds meaning to the deliverance from Egypt (in which the judgment of God against the firstborn sons of the Egyptians becomes the context surrounding the redemptive act of the exodus) and the subsequent ceremonies of redeeming the first born (Exodus 13:1).

Conclusion: When we examine the context of the original recipients of the Torah, second generation ransomed slaves encamped at the doorstep of the land of promise, we see a direct tie between the land they are about to possess and the oath God swore to Abraham their forefather. Once again faith becomes the prerequisite of their conquering armies, faith in God’s character, faith in God’s promises, and faith in God’s redemptive acts. This will change the vantage point from which God relates to his people, the backdrop of which is the testing of the patriarch Abraham and his covenantal oath confirmed during the event.