

## Lord's Supper Meditation

October 2, 2016

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[prayer] Father we are grateful, indeed. Grateful for your immeasurable glory, your abounding grace, your never ending love, your provision—from our daily needs to life giving sustenance to everlasting life. We return thanks to you, and we pray that you would add blessing to the reading of your word, that you would move us more and more toward faith and encouragement, perseverance—being encouraged by your Son Jesus, empowered by your Spirit. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

So as we look at Genesis 22 tonight we'll be reading verses 1-19. And what's wonderful about this passage are many, many things that we won't even be able to touch on tonight. But as one Old Testament scholar has written, the account of the sacrifice of Isaac constitutes the aesthetic and theological summit of the whole story of Abraham. Let's read this text, this story, this passage, that is the ultimate pinnacle of what God's telling us about the Gospel, about himself, through the story of Abraham. Follow along with me.

<sup>1</sup> After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." <sup>2</sup> 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." <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. <sup>5</sup> 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." <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" <sup>8</sup> Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together.

<sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. <sup>11</sup> But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." <sup>12</sup> 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." <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> 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."

<sup>15</sup> And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven <sup>16</sup> and said, "By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, <sup>17</sup> 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, <sup>18</sup> and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice." <sup>19</sup> So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba. And Abraham lived at Beersheba.

This is the Word of God. (Thanks be to God.) Now if I don't know if it's a true story; I don't know if it's completely made up. I hope it's not made up, because the man who told me the story is trustworthy. I don't have the details of the source of the story. But there was a missionary in one of the islands in the Pacific, and he was there living among the people and teaching and doing just a myriad of things. But one of the things they would do in the evenings would be to gather together and tell stories. And one evening—well, several evenings—the missionary had been going through the stories in Genesis one after another, and one particular evening he comes to this story and he's reading. And I don't know why—I don't know if it was, you know, maybe they had been there too long and he got tired and just stopped, or I like to think it was purposeful. But he stopped at verse 10: "Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son." And then he said good night. He said we'll come back tomorrow and finish the story.

There is tension in the story. There is suspense. That is a prime place in the story that you're hanging...You're like, OK, how is this going to end? Where is this going? We'll come back to that at the end tonight of where that story ended. But as you look at this story, you can't take it by itself, because if you do, you interject yourselves. You seek to put yourself in this story. You know, am I Abraham? What would I do in that position? Am I Isaac? How can God ask him to do this? Those kinds of questions certainly are valid, but it's important to see it in context of the story that's being told even before this chapter. And the first step, really, of understanding any passage, is knowing the context, as well.

And we see that Moses is, indeed, the author. He's telling a story of the Israelites. He's telling them in the context of them being on the other side of deliverance. They are on the other side of their freedom, the other side of the Jordan. They are in the wilderness. They are at the base of Mount Sinai. And they're hearing these stories for the first time, making sense of who they are and how did they get here. For me what's so wonderful about this, the series that we're doing—even in my own life—how powerful putting the Gospel in context of the beginning of the story really is. That the Gospel begins in Genesis. Seeing this story traced out is incredibly important.

And so we see here immediately in the opening scene there is a problem. Now we the readers are aware of what this problem is; we see that God is testing Abraham. Abraham doesn't know that. We know that, because it says that that's what happened. And we get to kind of have a fly on the wall experience of what is about to happen with Abraham and his son. It is later in the story that the reason for God's test is revealed. Now that's given to us and Abraham at the same time, there in Genesis 12:17-18. We see that this conflict for Abraham is that God has

asked him to kill his son as a burnt offering. And for a burnt offering, that's a sacrificial, ritualistic way of talking about killing him and cutting him up and then placing him on fire to be burned up. So that's what God is asking him to do. All right. Well, where are our bracelets then? [WWJD bracelets, i.e. "What would Jesus do?"] What would you do? What would God do? That becomes some of the questions of the text. What is happening? What is going to happen?

And we see this series of dialogue in this passage, too. And each time that there's an interaction, each time that there's a back and forth, it serves as a point to emphasize what is happening in this text. And it's a way that it actually slows down the scene in order to observe really the weight of what's happening here. And there's implied periods of silence. There's time. There's imagery. Think about these images, just even in the passage of the saddling a donkey, cutting up the wood, walking down a path and viewing mountains from a distance, a father and a son carrying materials up the mountain to perform a sacrifice, the activity of building the altar, the binding of his son Isaac who appears passive throughout the whole process and compliant, and even the repetitious comments about the knife.

We see also how time is used as a vivid way to control the pace of the story. The time needed to make these preparations, the time needed to travel three days, the time needed to walk up the mountain, and the time needed to build the altar. Waiting. Expecting. Questioning what's about to happen. The reader resonates with Abraham as he meticulously fulfills each of these steps, and these details really begin to shape the story. They capture our attention, and they build the suspense. And taken by itself it does appear cruel that God would make this request

But we don't take it by itself. The text is the peak of the narrative that we've been walking with Abraham from Genesis 12. The beginning of Genesis 12 parallels the resolution in Genesis 22, which is sometimes called 'The Divine Oath' there in verses 15-18. There we see God initially calling out to Abraham and promising to make him a great nation, a great name, and a blessing to all families through him. We read that passage this morning. Genesis 12:1-4. Similarly, Abraham follows God's call to go to the land of Mariah here in our passage. Again he's hearing the Lord, and he's responding by faith. Because of Abraham's obedience the initial promises there in Genesis 12, the covenant found in Genesis 15, and the stipulations given alongside the sign and seal of the covenant which we discussed this morning in Genesis 17—all these things are culminating and being fulfilled here in this passage, in this chapter.

One Old Testament scholar writes this: By demonstrating his obedience to God, even to the point of death—of being willing to sacrifice his only son—Abraham fulfills the condition laid down in chapter 17:1, and he shows beyond doubt his willingness to walk before God and be blameless. This 'divine oath' that we read here reiterates previous promises of blessings: the promise of offspring, the promise of all nations of the earth being blessed.

So here this word again, this theme, of 'offspring' is repeated. It's incredibly important. It's used twice in verse 17 and 18. Here is one scholar that...well, I don't want to get lost in the weeds too much, but there's a lot of ink on this phrase. A lot. But one particular passage might say this: While each half of the oath in verse 17 and 18 refers to 'seed,' there are suggestions in the text that the second half, in verse 18—in contrast to verse 17—the term 'seed' denotes a single descendant of Abraham. In other words, God swears that the nations will be blessed through one of Abraham's descendants, rather than through all of them collectively.

With God's good created order being disrupted there in the garden with Adam and Eve in their rebellion, God promised a future seed. We discussed this with Genesis 3:15. In that promise there would be an end to all strife resulting from their fall. So here in our passage in Genesis 22 we see again God's intention of a promised seed that will be the source of the nation's blessing. The theme of this particular story would be incredibly significant to those at the base of the mountain, Mount Sinai, the Exodus community. And we see here with Abraham and Isaac it really is climaxing to the fulfillment of what God has been saying about what he's going to be doing through Abraham's lineage. He establishes it through Isaac; he establishes it through Jacob. So when we read over and over again in the historical books, to the wisdom in poetry of the Psalms—that when we see them saying the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob—that is the totality of who God is as a covenant maker. And that is being established through a line of promise.

So to even understand this passage—as I mentioned, it is absolutely valid to ask questions, because in our context today this passage can be incredibly off putting. We are assuming something about God. We might call him capricious. We might call him an abuser or a bully. There have been worse things said. But we have to have our questions informed by what's actually being said in the text, versus what we're bringing to the text. And a good reader must not miss that step by inserting themselves into the story as one of the characters. No one is Abraham. God will not ask you to sacrifice one of your children as a test. We can't begin to wonder: *Well, how is God testing me, and what's the test?* We don't have that privilege, we don't have that understanding, we don't have that knowledge of what God is doing in our lives. So it's almost freeing to say well, this is Abraham's test, because God is testing him specifically.

Likewise, it is important not to skim the surface and jump to...you know, jump to—as other people have done—there's a rich history and a rich tradition to this of allegorically looking at this and what this looks like for Isaac being bound and being on the wood and carrying the sticks. And it's just like Jesus on the cross. There is an appropriate way to get there, but we can't insert Jesus directly into this text. We have to see where this text is going, and we've got to follow it to the cross. We've got to follow it to where Jesus is the fulfillment of these things.

Another misappropriation, another thing is we want to get in the text and say, well, if this is a test and Abraham is supposed to be giving up something that he loved so dearly, that is what we must do. We must give up something that we're willing to sacrifice. That is our test. And although that is a true statement—that we need to lay down our treasures and we need to be able to be willing to die to ourselves—this text isn't asking us to do those things. Those things are true things that we have to wrestle with, but from other passages. This text is something telling something much bigger and something much grander than something about us individually.

Abraham is mentioned elsewhere in the Old Testament, as well, in connection with remembering God's gracious covenant. So we have to see where we are placed in the tapestry of the story that's being told and see where the threads trace. The psalmist there in 105—it was the Psalm that we were called to worship with this evening—the psalmist writes, “He remembers his covenant forever, the word that he commanded for a thousand generations, the covenant that he made with Abraham, his sworn promise to Isaac, which he confirmed to Jacob

as a statute, to Israel as an everlasting covenant.” [Psalm 105:8-10] The Old Testament remains consistent in building upon God's covenants. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David. The prophet Jeremiah writes “As the host of heaven cannot be numbered and the sands of the sea cannot be measured, so I will multiply the offspring of David my servant.” Again, the prophet’s building on that theme of seed and promise, moving toward the story of the Messiah, the one who is to come to bring all things to right before God.

The New Testament is all over the place with this. Matthew in the genealogy of Jesus is connecting his lineage and heritage to Abraham. The continuity remains throughout the Gospels, as Jesus himself also alludes to the true sons of Abraham. Romans, Galatians, Hebrews, James—they all elaborate various aspects of Abraham’s significance. And the New Testament references really are zeroing in, focusing in on Abraham's faith, his obedient response, and the true meaning of his offspring.

You see, faith is a crucial factor to the original story, as well as it is to us as we look at the New Testament. Paul focuses on Abraham's faith as the means for his justification there in Galatians 3. Hebrews talks about Abraham's faith in the cloud of witnesses. It's by faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And when he went out, not knowing where he was going, by faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. We looked at that this morning. And then again later on in Hebrews 11, 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 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. The purpose of these passages highlights how Abraham responded out of faith to God's word.

Likewise, you and me, Christians of all traditions and all time, must exercise faith in response to God as we’re making the connection to the source of our faith, who is Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. In Paul's letter of Galatians that's where he's really honing in on this offspring, referring to the Messiah, the One. As one of my professors said—based on what Paul is saying there in Galatians—Paul was seeing what was really there in Genesis. Even Paul, who we love to think of as...well, we don't think, he is, he's the author of so many letters to the New Testament, but he is rooting what he is saying in the story of old; he is rooting it in Genesis.

So as 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians this passage and its elaborations found there in the New Testament, it really begins to help us understand how do we even apply this. How do we understand this story for our lives. And I would say it really actually coincides with how the first audience needs to be interacting with this passage. We are to understand God's redemptive plan, established by covenants, through a covenant representative. It's his gracious character—God remaining forever faithful and trustworthy to fulfill his promises. The Exodus community would see God extending his covenant promises to Abraham, which would be further established through a promised heir—Isaac, not Ishmael. Abraham had another son. Isaac was not his only son, but it was the only son that the covenant was to be established through.

The original audience would further see Abraham's faith expressed through his obedience to God's word. He believed God and it impacted his decisions. The story would encourage the

Israelites to emulate and exercise faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, because he himself remains true to his covenants. And so for me, a Gentile, a Christian, Paul explains that being an heir of the promise extends to even us Gentiles—those on the outside of God's covenant promises being welcomed in, being able to be grafted into that vine, being able to participate in those promises—for us to place our faith in the ultimate covenant representative, namely, Jesus. Praise God. The God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, is the same God who redeems his people through Jesus Christ. The seed promised there in Genesis 3:15 is echoed in Genesis 22:18, and is ultimately fulfilled in Jesus.

If this story were not present in scripture or if somehow God did not establish his covenant through Isaac, then God's people in the desert at the base of that mountain would have no assurance of this God as Creator and Redeemer. The Israelite question of, 'Why us? Why are we on the other side of the Jordan? Why are we on the base of your mountain? Why? Why? Why?' would never be answered, and therefore it would nullify God's calling upon them as his people to be a blessing to the nations in order to reflect God's glory, to reflect God's purposes, to reflect his redemption in all creation. And we on this side of the cross would have no part in this blessing, this blessing to and through Abraham. This text, this passage, speaks about God's covenant favor on a particular people who he commissions to be the ambassadors, to be the reflectors, to be the people who are on mission to reflect his covenant love, his covenant keeping promises, that relationship we have with him.

The story of Israel would again and again observe God's initiating grace and patient forgiving character. Abraham's faith was commendable, but not because he was faithful, but rather because the one whom he was placing his faith in was credible. We are to respond in the same way, with that same faith, entrusting our lives to God who creates, who provides, who sustains, who calls his people to himself for a purpose for others. Understanding the significance of the promised seed here—in the whole story in Genesis, but in this culmination in chapter 22, and we see it traced out through the Scriptures—it increases our thanksgiving, it increases our praise, it increases our faith that we are included in this grand story that God continues to communicate, and of which Christ Jesus fulfills. This is the story of God's love. This is the story of God's redemption. This is the story of God's deliverance that is before you and it includes you. You are welcomed into that space, you are welcomed into his story because he has made it possible by the sacrifice of his Son Jesus Christ, our mediator, the author of our faith, the perfecter of our faith.

So as we conclude and as we go to the table to commune with this God who makes covenant with us through His Son Jesus, I do—I want to tell you the rest of that story. They come together the next night, and he picks up where he left off with Abraham with his hand in the air, the knife in the air. And verse 11: "But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Do not lay your hand on the boy...'" and everybody erupted. They were like, *I knew it! I knew God would not let him do it!* And that, my friends, is a powerful story of God's story of redemption, that when we are reading these stories, they are not individual, separated stories, but they're the tapestry of God's love, God's story that he's telling about himself. And when we are engaging in these stories—yes, we come with our questions. Yes, we come to understand. But we come to listen and to watch and to see.

And if we had more time I would go into those beautiful words that are in this chapter. But this, just in short, this relationship between the 'Lord will provide.' There is a theme that is running through this passage, and it is a play on the word of 'seeing' and 'providing.' Of lifting your eyes and seeing the mountain that God showed Abraham. Seeing and lifting your eyes and seeing the little ram that God provided. It's seeing God's provision in his redemption. May we do that by faith as we look to Jesus. May we do that by faith even as we go from hearing this passage, the story of God's redemption, to participating in a meal and a table that we get to commune with Him and with each other, participating in the fulfillment of that redemption in His Son Jesus. Let us go to him in faith.

Let's pray. Father, we are indeed so grateful that we can see your character and we can see your works of redemption and we can see your faithfulness time and time and time again in your scriptures, and how we can then respond by saying you are faithful then and there in the past, you will be faithful once again in my present, and you will be faithful once again in my future. And let us hold fast to you by faith. Help us to see with our eyes and to know with our hearts, that we would hear of your Gospel, the good news of your seed, the good news of your offspring born, your offspring who lived and who died and who was raised again. We give you all the praise and the glory for your redemption in your son Jesus. We pray this in his name. Amen.