

“The First Glimpse of the Cross”

Genesis 22:9-24

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We read and considered the first 12 verses of this narrative last Lord’s Day morning. Today we read the rest. The narrative of Genesis 22 is recognized both in Jewish and Christian interpretation as of great importance to the unfolding revelation of God’s purpose for his people. The Jews actually have a name for this history. They call it the *Akedah* after the Hebrew verb “to bind” which is found in verse 9.

Text Comment

v.12 Remember, this episode began with the notice that God was testing Abraham, testing his loyalty to him, testing his faith in him. Abraham had passed the test, stiff as it was. As James would later put it, Abraham proved his faith with his deeds. [Waltke, 308]

v.14 The King James, you may remember, typically transliterated such Hebrew place names and my generation and the generations before it, going all the way back to the beginning of English translations of the Bible, grew up familiar with the name *Jehovah Jireh*, the transliteration of the two Hebrew words here, “the Lord will provide.”

The second half of the verse is obviously not part of the narrative, but an editorial note. The information that this then familiar phrase was commonly repeated “to this day,” is one of what are called “post-Mosaic additions” to the Pentateuch, explanatory comments by a later editor for a later audience. Who that editor was we do not know, but such editorial work was done on the earlier books of what we call the OT, at least until their text was regarded as finished. Presumably someone with prophetic authority was in charge of this, perhaps another author or authors of OT books.

v.18 Great stress is laid on the fact that the promises of God’s covenant had to be claimed by an obedient faith. The very promises that God had made to Abraham long ago at the very beginning of this narrative in Genesis 12, which were then made as an act of pure grace are now repeated but this time as the reward for Abraham’s obedience.

v.20 “Milcah *also* has borne children...” reflects the fact that now that Sarah has borne a son, the wives of both brothers are mothers.

v.24 The verses that conclude our chapter 22 – remember the chapter divisions come much later than the Bible itself – begin the transition from the story of Abraham to that of Isaac, begin the account of the succession of faith from the first generation to the next. What we have in these verses is the genealogy of Nahor, Abraham’s brother: his twelve sons by two different women. The really significant piece of information is that Bethuel was the father of Rebekah, a woman we have not yet met, but who would marry Isaac and be Jacob’s mother. Further, in 28:5 we learn that Rachel and Leah, the two wives of Jacob,

and so the mothers of the twelve sons of Jacob, the progenitors of the twelve tribes of Israel, were likewise descendants of Bethuel.

Growing up in St. Louis, Missouri as I did, every summer we made our way westward to our summer place in the mountains of Colorado. In the days before the building of interstate highways and, for part of the trip still today, one travels through western Kansas and eastern Colorado on the old U.S. 40, the fabled highway – mostly only two lanes in those days, and still today – that stretched from the Atlantic coast of New Jersey to the California shore. Upon entering Colorado on Highway 40, one soon comes to Firstview, a little hamlet, like so many others, gathered around a huge grain elevator adjacent to the railroad tracks. Firstview is too small to be incorporated; the nearest actual town, Cheyenne Wells, is itself not much more than a wide spot on the road.

The name Firstview owes to the fact that it sits on the spot where first explorers and then pioneers got their first glimpse of Pikes Peak, still some 110 miles to the west. I remember as a boy always searching for the Peak to the west as we passed through Firstview. The sky had to be perfectly clear to see the projection of the more than 14,000 foot summit just peaking over the distant horizon, but from time to time the sky was clear enough to see it, and after crossing a thousand miles of Great Plains, it was there that we got our first tantalizing look at the Rock Mountains. As the miles fell away behind, the mountains grew larger and larger until they were looming over us as we approached Colorado Springs.

We'll think of Genesis 22 as the Bible's *Firstview*. But what we are seeing on the distant horizon is not a mountain but the cross of Jesus Christ. The words "instead of (or in place of) his son" in v. 13 are the Bible's first explicit mention of substitutionary atonement, the sacrifice of one life for the sake of another or others. [Waltke, 308]

The work of God *within* the believer – the transformation of life and a life of obedience to God's commandments – is obviously an essential part of the Bible's message. How men and women *ought to live* and how they might come to live that way by faith in God and obedience to his commandments, receives great emphasis in the Bible. To be sure, the Bible has more to say about that than about anything else. If you are a faithful reader of the Word of God, you know this. Page after page and book after book is devoted to how we ought to live, to examples both good and bad, and to considerations that ought to motivate holy living.

But no one can read the unfolding revelation of the Word of God without soon recognizing that all of this consideration of human life and how it ought to be lived rests on a foundation of divine intervention for the salvation of the world. That intervention, to be sure, takes various forms, from divine election, to the regeneration of the sinful human heart by the Holy Spirit, to the consummation of all things at the Second Coming of Christ.

But central to that divine intervention, to that work of God on behalf of sinful and unworthy human beings, is substitutionary atonement. The concept is embedded in the practice of blood sacrifice, which became, in the Law of Moses, a regular, highly organized, and essential feature of Israel's religious life, by which I mean the practice of her relationship with Yahweh. The sacrifices, or most of them – as we saw working our way through Leviticus recently – were

explicitly for the purpose of *atonement*, the removal of the guilt of sin. That removal was achieved by a substitutionary death, an animal that died, as it were, in the place of the person himself or herself. The place of blood and the sprinkling or splashing of blood in these rituals was precisely as a symbol of death. Sin deserves the death penalty and that penalty had been imposed, but on a substitute, not on the sinner himself or herself.

The fact that the sinner placed his or her hands on the head of the animal *before it was killed* served to make the substitution all the more clear. That ritual of the laying on of hands served to indicate the transference of guilt from sinner to substitute, which substitute then was killed in the sinner's place. Every honest reader of the Bible can see this a mile away. The obvious is denied only in divinity school graduate seminars, the only place where arcane and utterly unlikely alternative explanations for the sacrificial ritual can seem persuasive!

And, as time passed, the revelation of the reality of salvation by substitutionary atonement advanced step by step – new vocabulary was added to explain this theology; new experiences of redemption occurred in the life of Israel – until we find ourselves finally in the account of the suffering servant of Isaiah 53:

“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – every one – to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

That text is like Cinderella's slipper. Only one historical person fits it or could possibly fit it. Once the Christian understanding of this text became widespread, Jewish interpreters began to favor interpretations that took the passage to mean something other than the coming of a personal Messiah who would die in our place for our sins. Rashi, the great medieval Jewish commentator, introduced the interpretation, still held by Jews today, that the Servant of the Lord was the nation of Israel herself. Maimonides, the 12th century Jewish biblical scholar, sometimes called the Jews' “second Moses,” called Rashi's interpretation of Isaiah 53 preposterous. Israel couldn't fit this description. There is only one who can!

Speaking of this same text, the German scholar, Franz Delitzsch wrote: “The fifty-third [chapter] of Isaiah reads as if it had been written beneath the cross of Calvary. The Holy Ghost has here excelled himself!” [Cited in Whyte, *With Mercy and With Judgment*, 201-202]. It is not too much to say that the four Gospels of the New Testament are the Bible's commentary on Isaiah 53 and its account of the coming one who would offer himself as atonement in the place of his people and for their sins. And not the Gospels only. There are 46 references to Isa. 52:13-53:12 in the index of citations of and allusions to OT texts in the Nestle-Aland edition of the Greek New Testament. This great text in Isaiah has left its mark everywhere on the pages of the New Testament.

According to the British scholar, J. S. Whale, this Servant Song, the last of the four, “makes twelve distinct and explicit statements that the Servant suffers the *penalty* of other men's sins: not only vicarious suffering but penal substitution is the plain meaning of its fourth, fifth, and sixth verses.” [Packer, *What did the Cross Achieve: The Logic of Penal Substitution*, 34n.] We were guilty. We deserved punishment for our going astray – great punishment for our having gone greatly astray – and he bore that punishment, he suffered that punishment, in our place. The soul

that sins must die. Divine justice demands punishment for sin; God's perfect holiness demands that the scales be balanced; that the debt be paid.

All that remained after the prophecy of Isaiah 53 was for the fulfillment to be realized in history and it was in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

In my place condemned he stood;
Sealed my pardon with his blood.

Not only did Jesus teach his disciples that he had come to give his life a ransom for many, his entire ministry was by his own express intention a pilgrimage to the cross. "No one takes my life from me," he said, "I lay it down of my own accord." "The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep." "This commandment I have from my father."

And once Christ had died and risen again, his death and resurrection became the spear point of the Christian proclamation to the world. Paul would summarize his preaching as simply "the word or message of the cross." And across his writings are found statements like this one: "[Christ], who knew no sin, was made to be sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in him." And not just Paul. Here is Peter: "Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God."

Substitutionary atonement, the death of our substitute in our place to pay on our behalf the penalty of our sins is the scarlet cord that ties the Bible together. The cross was to an infinite degree history's most excruciatingly horrible event; and yet it was also history's most resounding success. For it liberated untold multitudes of human beings from bondage to sin and to the death that is sin's just punishment.

Human life must be transformed, to be sure, but it was the cross and Christ's satisfying divine justice on our behalf that made possible God's work of grace *in* our lives. Christ *for* us comes before Christ *in* us. The work of God *outside and apart from* us on the cross comes and had to come before the work of God *within* us. Our sin had made a separation between us and God and Christ took that sin away by bearing its punishment in our place. Because of the cross, God could draw near to us to fix us and make us good.

That, as we are sometimes wont to forget, is the central message of the Bible and the Christian faith. "Jesus died for us." *And already here in Genesis 22 we have the foundation laid for the revelation of what was then a still distant event.*

The Bible prophesies the future in many different ways. There are, of course, passages in which a prophet or an apostle or the Lord himself tells his contemporaries what will transpire in days to come. We have encountered that kind of prophetic teaching already in Genesis. For example, God told Abraham that he would make him into a great nation and that all the world would be blessed through him, but also that before his descendants would take possession of the Promised Land, they would have a four hundred year sojourn in Egypt. Some of what was then prophesied has already happened, some is in the process of happening as we speak.

But, God in his genius, did not provide his people with knowledge of things to come only in this one way. So central to his people's true faith was the unfolding of his plan of salvation in history, so crucial to their faith in him was their understanding of that plan, that God wove into their own history many anticipations of those developments that were still future for them, especially the incarnation, suffering, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus who was, remember, the seed of Abraham. This is what for ages has been referred to as *typology*, prophecy in the form of persons, places, things, and events.

A type in this sense is a person, thing, or event that represents or symbolizes another, especially another person, thing, or event that is still to come. For example, Israel's deliverance from Egypt by the blood of the Passover lamb was a prophecy of the redemption of the people of God by the sacrifice of the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world. Her wandering in the wilderness for forty years before she entered the Promised Land, was in the Bible and has been understood in Christian thinking ever since likewise a type, a symbolic representation of the Christian life. A man or a woman delivered by the grace and power of God from bondage to his or her sin and the death that is its punishment – the picture of which we have in the Passover and the exodus – then makes a pilgrimage through the desert of this world, and then, at last, enters heaven, the Promised Land. African American spirituals, as you know, made a great deal of this typology: "I looked over Jordan, and what did I see, coming for to carry me home..."

Or take another example. The offices God appointed for the people of Israel were also types, or symbolic representations or explanations of the coming one who would be the Savior of his people. God appointed prophets and priests and kings for his people to communicate his will, to superintend their worship, to mediate their relationship with him, and to rule and protect them. All of this likewise served to prepare the way for the arrival of the Lord Jesus who, we are not surprised to learn, is presented to us in the New Testament as a prophet, a priest, and a king, indeed, *the* prophet, *the* priest, and *the* King of Kings. He is Moses and Aaron, Elijah and Isaiah, and David and Hezekiah *to the nth degree!* We understand Jesus better because such men as these prefigured his life and work. They were his forerunners.

It is the Lord's sovereign rule of history and his infinite and exact knowledge of the future that makes typology possible. He knows what is to come, what person and what events lie or will lie at the center of human history and of the salvation of mankind, and so he is able to weave into the life of mankind and, especially, the life of his people, all manner of anticipations, enacted prophesies, and flesh and blood explanations of what is to come and in this way teach his people what his promises mean long before they come to pass. These types also help us who live after the events to have a fuller understanding and appreciation of the history of our salvation. Reading the Bible from beginning to end we understand how things are connected one to another, how the exodus is so much more significant, and significant in a so much deeper way than anyone could have fully appreciated at the time or how much David has to teach us about what it means for Jesus to be our king, and so on.

Well, very obviously we have such a type before us in the account of Abraham sacrificing Isaac. The symbolism is so obvious that no one who believes the Scripture to be the Word of God has ever doubted that we have in this account of Abraham sacrificing Isaac an enacted prophesy of

the death of Jesus Christ, the true seed of Abraham. Think of how many parallels there actually are, many of which the Bible either explicitly or implicitly calls our attention to at some point.

We mentioned some of them last Lord's Day morning. The place where the sacrifice was made was the hill Moriah, which, it seems, was the very place where Solomon would later build the temple. It was, therefore, on that very hill that sacrifices would be offered daily for centuries, sacrifices to deliver Israel from her sins. It was on that hill, in a rebuilt temple, that the curtain that divided the holy place from the most holy place would be torn in two at the moment of Christ's death on Calvary, itself only a few minutes' walk to the west.

The narrative calls our attention to the fact that father and son walked together to the place of sacrifice, a point mentioned in both v. 6 and once again for emphasis in v. 8. What is more, Isaac appears to have gone willingly with his father and submitted to being bound and placed on the altar even when it must have been obvious what his father intended to do. How often in the New Testament we are reminded that the Son came into the world to do the Father's will and that he went to the cross to redeem the people his Father had given to him. A Son willingly submitting to his Father's will to secure the salvation of sinners is the Bible's understanding of the cross and we have that beautifully depicted here.

And there is Isaac himself carrying the wood for his own sacrifice. I mentioned last time that even Jewish commentators on this passage drew attention to the similarity between what Isaac did and what they had seen condemned men do in their time, who had to carry their own cross to the place of execution.

But, more important still, is the fact that the one who was to be sacrificed was Abraham's seed, Abraham's descendant. The fact that Jesus was himself the seed of Abraham is a matter of great importance in the New Testament, indeed Paul, at a critical juncture of one of the most important arguments about the way of salvation in the NT, makes a point of the fact that Jesus was the Seed of Abraham. But it is so easy for a practiced reader of the Bible to see that Jesus was not only Abraham's descendant, he was God's Son, God the Son. If God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac for him, it was only because he was in due time to sacrifice his own Son for Abraham.

And, finally, here in Genesis 22, as at the cross, it was God who provided the lamb. Abraham did not provide it – he had only his son to offer, who could have made no one right with God for Isaac was a sinner himself. God provided the ram there on the mountain and God provided the sacrifice at Calvary. And what was the sacrifice? Again and again in the chapter we read that Isaac was Abraham's *only* son, and the son whom he loved. The Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world by dying in the place of his people was God's own Son. "For God so loved the world that he sent his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life."

This still does not exhaust the parallels between this scene and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Do you not think, for example, that at some point Abraham said to God in heaven, and perhaps Isaac even to his father, words to the effect of: "Father, take this cup from me, but not my will, but thine be done"?

Once, in a conversation with a group of religious leaders, the Lord Jesus told them, "Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad." Jesus didn't explain that remark and he didn't tell us precisely when or how or to what extent Abraham anticipated and saw in the distance the day of the Lord Jesus Christ. When did Abraham see Christ's day? On what occasion did Abraham see, as it were, the coming of Christ, his promised seed, the arrival that would be the salvation of the world? Well, no one can say for sure, but isn't there good reason to think that it was on *this* occasion, when God provided the ram in place of Isaac for sacrifice? What other occasion in Abraham's life provided such beautiful and powerful confirmation of the fact that God was going to keep his promises; he was going to bless the world through Abraham's seed and that he was going to do that through a sacrificial death?

Remember, we know from many texts that devout believers in those ancient days knew good and well that the blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sin. They knew that the sacrifices worked precisely because they stood for, they pointed to something else, something greater through which their forgiveness would come.

Here, two thousand years before the appearance of the Son of God and Son of Mary in the world, we have one of the grandest possible pictures of salvation from death by vicarious or substitute sacrifice. And ever after in the Bible and in the history of the church, the good news has been that Jesus Christ died for sinners, the just for the unjust, to bring them to God.

Here is B. B. Warfield:

"The study of the great Greek and Roman moralists of the Empire...leaves upon my own mind a strong conviction that the fundamental difference between heathenism of all shades and Christianity is to be discovered in the doctrine of Vicarious Sacrifice, that is to say, in the Passion of our Lord.' This is as much to say that not only is the doctrine of the sacrificial death of Christ embodied in Christianity as an essential element of the system, but in a very real sense it constitutes Christianity. It is this which differentiates Christianity from other religions. Christianity did not come into the world to proclaim a new morality and, sweeping away all the supernatural props by which men were wont to support their trembling, guilt-stricken souls, to throw them back on their own right arms to conquer a standing before God for themselves. It came to proclaim the real sacrifice for sin which God had provided in order to supersede all the poor fumbling efforts which men had made and were making to provide a sacrifice for sin for themselves; and, planting men's feet on this, to bid them go forward. It was in this sign that Christianity conquered, and it is in this sign alone that it continues to conquer. We may think what we will of such a religion. What cannot be denied is that Christianity is such a religion." [B. B. Warfield, *The Person and Work of Jesus Christ*, 425-426]

Surely that is right. Christ for us, his death for our salvation is the exact center of the Christian faith, and our faith. All of its other doctrines radiate outward from that center. And so it must be true that any form of Christianity that dismisses or relegates to the periphery Christ's terrible sin-bearing for us, his death as the Lamb of God, is and must be a denatured and inauthentic Christianity. And that is relatively so even for you and me to the extent that we allow such a diminishment of the cross in our own hearts. Because the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ is the

animating center of the Christian faith, drawing into it and radiating from it the seriousness of our sin and both the wrath and the love of God, the more we will think and feel and live under the cross, the more faithful Christians we will be. The less that sacrifice consumes us, the more banal and spiritless our Christianity becomes, however committed we may be to doctrines of our faith and however well others may continue to think of us.

It is when we say with Paul, "God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ" – say it and mean it and feel it -- that everything else comes good in our walk with God, by which I mean that a way is made for the full measure of love, thanksgiving, devotion, godly fear, joy, and the sense of duty from which a great life of Christian holiness comes. Let me finish with Richard Hooker, the great Anglican theologian of the 16th century, this from his immortal sermon on justification by faith.

“Let it be counted folly, or phrenzy, or fury, or whatsoever, it is our wisdom and our comfort. We care for no other knowledge in the world but this: that man hath sinned and God hath suffered: that God hath made himself the sin of men, and that men are made the righteousness of God.”