

GENESIS

A THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY

THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND JACOB

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SUMMARY OF ISAAC

Isaac played a critical role in most of the stories concerning Abraham and the Promises, but it was more of a secondary role. The emphasis was on what God was doing with and for Abraham.

- Isaac was the promised son.
- The LORD found a wife for Isaac so that Abraham's Family could grow.
- God spared Isaac from death by sacrifice by providing a substitute victim – thus giving Abraham the key to the doctrine of the resurrection.

Isaac's own story consists of two events: his wanderings in Canaan and dealing with the pagans there; and the blessing that he gave his son Jacob. As for the first, Isaac learned that he did indeed inherit the same Promises from Abraham's God since the LORD protected and prospered him in *the same ways* that he took care of Abraham. The situations were identical, the needs were identical, and the LORD solved the problems in the same ways.

As to the second event in Isaac's record – the blessing of Jacob as his spiritual heir – Isaac had something to learn about that. The manner of his own birthright taught us all that only those born by the power of the Spirit can be heirs of God. But now Isaac had to learn that those born by the Spirit aren't necessarily able to pass that inheritance on to their descendants. It's still a matter of God's choice, not by human descent – child of a believer though he/she might be.

Born by the Spirit

The important lesson, however, that we must take away from the story of Isaac is the fact that he was born by the power of the Spirit. His mother was long past her child-bearing age; his birth, therefore, was a miracle and required the hand of God. In fact, the possibility of Sarah having a child was so out of reckoning that both Abraham and Sarah disbelieved the Promise at first. (Genesis 16:1-2; 17:17-18; 18:12)

Jesus Christ led the way.

And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy – the Son of God." (Luke 1:35)

Christ is the second Adam, the beginning of a new race of men. They will be the old man resurrected into a new spiritual life, able to live with God.

For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. (1 Corinthians 15:22)

Thus it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first but the natural, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust;

the second man is from Heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of Heaven, so also are those who are of Heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of Heaven. (1 Corinthians 15:45-49)

This principle holds for all who call on God as “our Father in Heaven.” There must be a spiritual birth for God’s children.

But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:12-13)

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. (John 3:5)

Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise ... born according to the Spirit. (Galatians 4:28-29)

Man was originally designed to be aware of God; he lived in two worlds at the same time – this physical world, and God’s spiritual world. He needed that contact so that he would know how to live in a way that pleased God.

But now that we’ve been cut off from God, nothing we do pleases him. In fact we can’t even see God anymore. He’s hidden in darkness; he withdrew from mankind and left us to our fate. We’re living in darkness now, not light. Much that we do angers God, destroys his Creation, and destroys us as well. Without his light, it’s impossible for us to glorify him as we ought.

So if there’s going to be any reconciliation between God and man, man must be brought back to life spiritually so that he can see and know the true God. It must be a first-hand experience. A religion that only depends on hearsay isn’t good enough – we may get the right facts from another person, but until we ourselves meet God face to face there is no possibility for life for us.

That spiritual birth is identical to a newborn child coming to life. Parents see themselves in their new baby; they love and care for it as they do their own flesh. They have great plans for the child as they nurture it, teach it, and guide it in its growth and development. In the same way, God the Father takes newborn Christians into his arms and loves him/her, cares for them, teaches them, corrects them, and nurtures them into the “fullness of the Son”. (Ephesians 4:7-16) *This* is the goal of the Church’s Mission, to produce spiritual children for God’s Family.

But without this vital connection between Father and child, a human being remains dead in their sins, an offensive carcass rotting in its innate wickedness, to be swept up on Judgment Day and dumped into the eternal fires of Hell as useless garbage. That sounds harsh and cruel, and people think God would never do such a heartless thing to human beings, but his own testimony contradicts our misplaced “compassion.” We certainly saw examples in Genesis of God dealing summarily with the wicked. The rest of Scripture bears the same testimony.

Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his

kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 13:40-42)

And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 25:30)¹

Coming alive spiritually makes certain critical things possible.

- *Those who are born again in the Spirit discover a new Father in their lives.* The family that you are born into makes all the difference in the world as to your future. If you're born into a well-to-do family, life will probably be good. If you are born into poverty, life will be a struggle. And if you're born to criminal parents you will probably become a criminal yourself.

God is the Father of the Christian. That means your future will be the next world, not this one. You were born to sit at God's right hand, one with his Son, ruling the new heavens and earth, sharing in his glory. You were born to be righteous and holy, even as your Father in Heaven is holy. You were given his Spirit so that you will be able to know him, walk with him, and honor him as you live in this world. There is so much in store for you that nobody on earth has ever conceived of. It's your Father's will that you be formed into his image, and become a son pleasing to him. He will fulfill all the requirements for you.

- *Those who are born again can now walk in the Spirit.* God gives the gift of faith to his children: he turns the light on from Heaven, so that they can see the things they need to know about. The light of Heaven shows them the true nature of the world they live in – it's a kingdom of darkness, ruled over by the "prince of the power of the air," polluted with sin and destined for destruction. Without the Spirit, people stumble through life trying to achieve their goals and unaccountably failing in the end. But with the Spirit the Christian can make his/her way through the spiritual battlefield safely and reach their goal of Heaven in the end.
- *The children of God can deal with the Treasures of Heaven now.* Jesus told his followers to "store up Treasures in Heaven." (Matthew 6:19-21) For some reason, most people I've met don't have any idea what those Treasures are, let alone how to store them up. So when they need God's resources for the problems and situations they have in life, they end up empty-handed and crying like babies, paying the price for being so spiritually irresponsible. But those who (like the 5 virgins prepared for the wedding – Matthew 25:1-13) spend their time identifying, training in, and storing up the Treasures of Heaven will successfully handle whatever problems that life throws at them. It's all there for the taking. The Spirit of God opens the doors of Heaven to us just for that purpose.

¹ And that is the testimony of the "compassionate" Jesus whom people think would never hurt anybody!

- *Only the children of God can overcome this world and their enemies.* We've seen already that God has a dim view of this world that we live in. Modern Bible students are entirely mistaken about John 3:16 when they attribute God's universal love to all despite the spiritual disaster that we've created out of his world. God loves the world *he* made; he hates the corrupted world that we've replaced his with. And one of the most important things in the agenda that God has for his newly born children is to prepare for, and successfully engage in, warfare against this world. Jesus told his disciples, "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." (John 16:33) We are now equipped to tackle "spiritual forces of darkness" and target the true enemies of our souls, instead of wasting our lives struggling with trivia as the pagans do.

Not of this world

When God puts his Spirit in his people, they are "born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding Word of God." (1 Peter 1:23) In other words, our spirits come to life with a life not of this world; it truly does come from God's hand. That means a Christian is not part of this world, spiritually speaking. Our bodies are subject to the same forces and circumstances that unbelievers are subject to, but spiritually we are immune to the world's power.

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)

The world cannot hurt us, nor can it help us. Our very nourishment comes from God's world, not this one. We are like roses in the desert – a miracle of life surrounded by forces of darkness that can't touch our lives. The world's treasures are useless to us. We feed on the "milk of the Word of God", the flesh and blood of the body of Christ (John 6:22-59), which has the power to lift us into God's presence and live with him in Spirit. While the world is a trap that unbelievers cannot avoid, we can easily walk away from it by following the Spirit of Christ. We still live in it, but we are wary of it because of the death it brings; we keep a light touch on our possessions and look instead to the world to come for our treasures.

And by "world" I mean what man and Satan has turned God's creation into – the fulfillment of lusts, cursed by God, and inevitably leading to death. The curses still affect us (disease, poverty, war, oppression, death), but in every circumstance, "for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28) There are two roads in this world: the "broad way" leading most of humanity to death, and the "narrow way" leading God's people to life. Both are present in this world, but the same world influences each group in totally different ways.

Deceived about which son

Isaac himself had to learn more details about his Inheritance rights. I'm sure the details of his birth were the topic of conversation in his family during his entire life. But there remained another lesson to complete the picture.

Abraham's son Ishmael was categorically eliminated from the Inheritance. He was not born miraculously, and therefore had no rights. But wouldn't the son of Isaac naturally inherit those rights? The son born by the Spirit, one would think, would naturally produce more children pleasing to God, and form the Family that was promised to Abraham. Once God got the wrong son out of the way, the descendants of the right son would make up the pure Family.

So another lesson was in order. Genesis is made up of step-by-step lessons that gradually put the entire picture into place. We can't stop short anywhere in the story line or we'll miss important points of the Covenant. And what Isaac had to learn was that, in spite of the fact of his own spiritual birth, his children weren't necessarily going to be heirs of the Covenant.

Isaac had a special affinity for his son Esau, probably because Esau was Isaac's firstborn son. And no doubt Esau "battered up" his father in order to make his inheritance certain. The problem was that Esau not only didn't care about the spiritual side of the Covenant, he didn't even know God. There was no personal encounter between Esau and Isaac's God. On the other hand, Jacob met God face to face at Bethel and it changed his entire life as a result. The spiritual birth that is so required in God's children happened not to Isaac's firstborn son but to the second son, the one who legally had no rights to the estate.

And so we have this painful story of the LORD pulling Isaac away from Esau and giving Jacob the Inheritance. The world has seen this over and over. Christians naturally assume that their own children, the ones they love the most, will come into the same spiritual inheritance that they enjoy. God does not share our love for many of our children. To him they are still dead, undeserving of life, "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction." We would never think that about our children, and yet God looks at most of the human race in that light.

The Covenant Promises are not given to those born naturally – not even to the children of those born spiritually. The parents' rights are not passed on down through families. They are given by the hand of God to those *chosen by God*, not by the parents.

And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. (Acts 13:48)

This is why Jesus said that the Kingdom of God divides families; it doesn't unite them.

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. (Matthew 10:34-36)

Our natural affections make us look for loopholes in the rules; we think with our emotions instead of staying strictly with the facts. We would never deny the best for our children, whereas God looks at the heart. How many loved ones have been buried by grieving parents and told by the pastor that the child has been gathered into the eternal Father's loving arms, when in fact no such thing ever happened. How difficult it is to tell bereaved parents the truth!

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. (Psalms 51:5)

None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one. (Romans 3:10-12)

No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. (John 6:44)

I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6)

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the Kingdom of God. ... Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God. (John 3:3, 5)

And as we learn from this story of Isaac, there simply is no way of predicting who the next generation of God's children will be. We think in natural terms, we go by our natural feelings, we follow the world's ways. Surely God will save our children when we were so careful to bring them up "in the fear and admonition of the LORD." But we think that God also feels the way we do. He doesn't. The Spirit's ways are totally unknown to us; we can only guess where it will go by looking at where it has been.

The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. (John 3:8)

The truth is this: anyone not born again by the Spirit has no rights to eternal life. They get nothing from God but his wrath.² But those who are "born again" according to the teaching of Jesus and the Apostles will be welcomed in love by the Father in Heaven and will receive everything in God's Treasury, without measure.

² As for those who claim that babies dying in infancy go to be with Jesus, I don't know if people have really thought this thing through. If children are automatically taken to Heaven, without going through the Scriptural requirements of spiritual birth and conversion, it would be better for parents to abort their babies and guarantee their eternity rather than let them grow up into the sinners that all of us inevitably become. But abortion is wrong on two grounds: *first*, it's murder. *Second*, that false belief that children are automatically welcome to God's Kingdom is based on human emotions, not the Truth. Abortion is actually dooming the child to eternal destruction with the rest of humanity.

This may seem to be more material than warranted to draw from the lesson of Isaac's special birth. But the story itself justifies our special focus here. It was not possible for Sarah to have a son; nevertheless God gave her a son. Isaac was not Abraham's first son – Ishmael was. But Isaac was the heir whom God chose to inherit Abraham's estate, not Ishmael. Sarah had Ishmael and his mother thrown out of the Family camp so that her own son would have clear claim to the Inheritance. The entire sequence of events stresses the critical importance of the miracle baby over against the son born naturally.

And the Apostle Paul also stresses the importance of this event. To him, the manner of Isaac's birth is a *requirement* for all who call on God as their Father.

Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. But what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman." So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman. (Galatians 4:28-31)

Paul could not conscientiously hand out the Treasures of Heaven to people who were not in God's Family; that's not legal. But once they showed signs of being born by the Spirit, he worked and prayed for them passionately.

The key, then, is in how we have come to know God: by hearsay, by family tradition, by conforming to community standards – or by a personal encounter with the living God through his Son Jesus Christ. The first is Ishmael's lot and will get us nowhere with God. The second is Isaac's special inheritance. It's a fundamental requirement that the descendants of Abraham who inherit his estate be born by the Spirit of God.

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Genesis : A Theological Commentary

ISBN 978-1722102463



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A subsidiary of
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