

Patriarchs, II

I want to read from Hebrews 11 concerning four of the patriarchs we will be discussing today. Hebrews 11:17-22 says:

By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death. By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future. By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph’s sons, and worshipped as he leaned on the top of his staff. By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions about his bones.

It is interesting that the writer to the Hebrews chooses to write about certain things that a biblical theologian might mention as the first indicators of the patriarchs’ faith. I want to remind you that there are details in the Scriptures that we might pass over in a course like this where we are trying to emphasize a few main points, but I don’t want to give the impression that Hebrews refers to minor details in the lives of these people. The Book of Hebrews explains that these four patriarchs, in spite of what you may see of them, are men of faith. Hebrews is the great New Testament book of covenantal living—of God keeping covenant and of how people reacted and responded to God. “By faith Abram...by faith Isaac...by faith Jacob...by faith Joseph”—these men were believers in the promises. They were agents of blessing. Always keep that in mind as you think of these men. As you preach and teach, don’t use them merely as examples, but teach and preach them as instruments God used to reveal to us the life that He demands of us. Let us pray.

*Lord, our God, as we commence our study again we pray that You will bless us, uphold us, sustain us, and strengthen us. Lord, You know what we need. Thank You for the mercies You have shown us this week. Thank You for all Your loving-kindness and grace. God, how good You are to us. Thank You. Please be with us in this hour. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*

In our last lecture, we began our discussion of the patriarchs. We dealt with Abraham—his background, his call in Genesis 12, God covenanting with him in Genesis 15, and God elaborating on the covenant in Genesis 17. Now I want to continue with Abraham and also go on to his son, grandson and great-grandson.

Abraham must be seen as a covenant mediator. After God covenanted with him, Abram had to serve as God’s mediator. We read in the first part of Genesis 18 about the promise of Isaac to be born. You are familiar with the story of Sarah laughing and then denying that she laughed, after hearing the promise that she would have a child, Isaac. That promise is given chapter 18, and then the text goes on to say that the angel of the LORD (who was one of the three men who came and gave the promise concerning Isaac) spoke about Sodom and Gomorrah and the angel of the LORD remained with Abraham while the attendants with him moved on toward the cities. I wish there was more detail in chapters 18 and 19, but we have enough detail to know that Abraham understood that judgment was to fall upon the cities of the lower plain, at the lower end of the Dead Sea. Abraham knew that Lot was there, but Abraham did not mention Lot. Abram prayed for the righteous: “God, if those five cities have 50 righteous people, won’t You spare thousands for the sake of 50?” Abraham is a mediatorial priest. He prayed courageously and consistently and persistently until he arrived at a very low number. He prayed for Lot and Lot’s family. Interestingly, he did not ask for four people—Lot and his wife and the two daughters of Lot—but he

asked for Lot plus at least a few more. Each time God responded to Abraham's mediatorial action and said, "Yes, I will spare." Mediatorial prayer is very effective, not because it is prayed, but when it is prayed. That is the difference again between conditionality and contingency. When we pray as covenant parents, brothers and sisters, and children, God has promised to hear.

It is amazing how God answered Abraham's mediating prayer. We notice also that Abraham had to pray on behalf of Abimelech, when in a real sense, Abraham himself was to blame. We find this story in Genesis 20. Abraham comes face to face with the royal figure of Abimelech, the king of the Philistines, and Abraham again lies concerning his wife. Abimelech receives the scourge of God for taking another man's wife, and then Abraham is called upon to mediate even though he was the cause of the problem. He mediates effectively, now in a royal setting. He pleads on behalf of the king. Abraham was supposed to be a blessing to the kings and to the nations. Although he did not function very effectively in his living situation, he did mediate through his praying again. In Genesis 20 we see him as a priest praying and pleading in the royal context.

In chapter 21, we see Abraham in the context of Ishmael and Isaac. Isaac is born in the first verses of chapter 21 and then we see the strife that developed between Ishmael and Isaac. It is interesting that now Abraham has to mediate, but his mediating work does not bring him complete comfort. He has to send one of his sons away, but he sends him away with God's blessing. He mediates on behalf of Ishmael.

I can remember a pastor who came into our Bible class one day looking very tired. He had not had much sleep the night before. Someone asked, "Pastor, don't you feel well?" and then he said that he had spent the night awake talking with one of his sons and praying with him and praying for him. Someone else asked, "Wouldn't you have been better off if you had gone to bed and slept awhile?" This pastor said no, not when there's a son who needs to be prayed for because of the strife and tension in his life. The father said that he felt to a certain extent that he have been so busy as a pastor that he had not spent enough time with him. This son was a young man who was only a few years older than we were. We knew him to be a rascal. For example, he used to break into the church closet and get out the communion wine when he got thirsty. I will never forget the example of that pastor who would give up sleep to pray for a son who needed prayer. That is covenantal parental mediation. It is not easy by any means, but it is necessary. God teaches us through Abraham that covenantal mediation can be effective.

We also read that Abraham was faithful in covenantal living. There are two passages in particular that we should refer to briefly. The first is in Genesis 22, when Abraham is told that he must take his son, his only son, the son of promise. Remember how Hebrews 11 refers to that. Through that son, the promise of a numerous seed was to become reality, but God now tells Abraham to take Isaac, his one and only son, and then we see this little phrase again, *lech lecha*. This is the imperative form of *halach*, and it could mean "go by yourself." Don't take your wife, don't take Eliezer, your main servant, but go by yourself. In the same way that he had to go from the Ur of the Chaldeans and from Hebron, so now Abraham had to go by himself again, but this time he must take with him his son Isaac, and offer him as a sacrifice.

The problem of child sacrifice is discussed at length in many critical commentaries and theologies. Child sacrifice was very prevalent in those days, and Abraham undoubtedly knew what it was to sacrifice a child. We read that Abraham did not argue, but had faith that God could resurrect from the dead the son He had told Abraham to put to death. After all, wasn't Isaac already a child born from the dead? Sara had laughed, saying "Am I who old and worn, am I going to have a child?" So Isaac came forth, metaphorically speaking, from a dead womb. He was a miracle child. If God could bring forth a child

from aged parents, God could also bring a child back from an altar where his lifeblood had been poured out. That is the test of faith.

You know that I am a father of eight children, six sons and two daughters. I will never forget when we were missionaries in Australia and our oldest son, who was 15 years old at the time, told me that he wanted to go to a Christian high school and a Christian college in the United States. At that time, my six sons and I were getting up every morning at 5:30 and going to a local gym and exercising together. The man at the gym thought it was so wonderful that a man came in there with his six sons. My youngest son Chuck was only four years old at the time and we all went through a program together, flexing our muscles on all the different machines and then we'd swim for 30 minutes; the gym fees were very inexpensive since we were a family. One day I told the man that our oldest son was leaving and he almost cried. He said, "I have been bragging about that beautiful family, the father with the six boys coming in," and I said, "Man, you'll make me cry if you talk about this much longer." The last Sunday evening that we were in church worshipping together before I was to bring my son to the airport in Sydney so he could fly to San Francisco to live with my brother and finish Christian high school there, I couldn't stay in church. It was too painful. It is hard to give up. It is hard to separate. It is hard to say good-bye, but for the sake of the Lord, we may have to do some of these things not only as missionaries, but in other settings too. The Lord blessed that decision: that son is a very effective minister now in northwest Iowa. We are thankful for that. It was difficult to be a covenantal parent as Abram had to be, but faith, according to the Scriptures, prevailed.

God gives faith. God gives us the strength and courage to live by faith regardless of how precious something may be to us. Try Him. He won't fail you.

I will be 69 years old in a few weeks. I could give you my life story; it's a story of God never failing. As a missionary, we went to Brazil. We spent some time in Nigeria and in New Zealand. We traveled through Singapore, Hong Kong and Japan. Everywhere God guarded us and blessed us. At times it has been painful for us as parents to know that our oldest daughter and six of our grandchildren are Australians. Our oldest daughter stayed in Australia, but she was able to continue there the work that my wife started. In the Christian Reformed Church, we have a women's ministry called the Calvinettes. My wife helped transplant that program over there and today, my daughter is the international leader between Australia and New Zealand. It is beautiful Christian work that my wife was able to start. It's amazing how God works. If we as parents are faithful like Abraham, with courage to claim God's promises (and that takes a lot of courage), God will bless our families.

God did not require Abraham to kill Isaac after all. Some people say that Isaac on the altar was a type of Christ, but Isaac was really not the type of Christ in that instance. Rather, it was the ram that was caught in the bramble bush. The ram was sacrificed in place of Isaac. Now, in some sense, Isaac could be called an example of how Christ later on went to the cross—as Isaiah would say, like a sheep led to the shearer. Isaac said, "Father, where is the lamb?" Abraham said, "God will provide." When Abraham put Isaac on the altar, there is no indication in the text that Isaac protested. As we will see in a moment, Isaac was a passive type, but then God provided a way out—the ram that becomes the sacrificial substituting lamb. Isaac could live and Abraham could rejoice because God provided a substitute as Abraham had faith to believe. That is covenantal living.

Turn to Genesis 26. We often read that the covenant with Abraham was a covenant of promise whereas the covenant with Moses was a covenant of law and works. Some scholars make quite a distinction between a covenant of law and a covenant of promise, but the covenant of grace contains both of these dimensions. To illustrate this, I want to point out that when the story of Isaac begins, God said in verse 5

of chapter 26, “because Abraham obeyed me and kept my requirements, my commands, my decrees and my laws.” These are the four basic terms that you find later on in the Pentateuch and in Psalm 119 to refer to God’s will as formulated within a legal setting—legal documents, statutes, ordinances, judgments. Four basic terms, however, that are used later are here—requirements, commands, decrees and laws. Abraham obeyed them. We don’t read at all in the record of Abraham’s life that God ever gave him the law. If God verbalized the law to Abraham, the Scriptures do not record that, Abraham knew God’s requirements, His commands, His abiding statutes and ordinances, and he kept them. This was part of the covenant of grace. Grace and law are never antithetical to one another. Redemption and obedience are beautifully harmonious. Grace and redemption go together, but so do grace and obedience, grace and righteousness. Without the law, there is no righteousness to be known. Abram had many failures and weaknesses. He lied about his wife twice—in Egypt and to the Philistine king. He took Hagar as his concubine. He was afraid after he had conquered the five kings from the north in Genesis 14. He had weaknesses. He was human. But when all is said and done, here was a covenant man who lived obediently. That is why Abram could serve as the father of believers, as the mediator who stood in the line between Adam, Noah, and the Lord Jesus Christ. Abram is a type of Christ, a forerunner of Christ.

To summarize our discussion of the Abrahamic covenant: first, we talked about the cosmic setting. In the setting of the cosmic kingdom, Abraham receives the promise of the land and he prospers materially. So often when you listen to certain groups of Christians, you get the impression that the poorer you are, the more blessed your life is, but the Scriptures speak of Abraham as a rich man. God prospered him and gave him everything he needed so he could live faithfully and fruitfully and be a blessing not only by his covenantal living, but also by his covenantal giving. It is not possible to be a covenantal giver if one does not first of all receive from the Lord. The problem is that so many people do receive, but then fail to give.

We also see Abraham in the cosmic setting interacting with the nations. According to Genesis 12, this was something he had to do. He was given the opportunity to interact with the nations when he interceded for Sodom and Gomorrah and the other cities, when he interceded for Abimelech and also when he went to Egypt. He dealt with the five kings of the land. In the cosmic setting, Abraham was given the opportunity to interact and to be an influence. I want to point out particularly that Abram was often called the father of the covenant of grace. When God covenanted with Abraham, He enlarged upon various aspects of the covenant. These new elements of the covenant would include the land, the stipulation of Genesis 17:1, the oath, the rite of circumcision, and the substitution of the ram. Two elements I want to point out particularly here are the role of the mediator and the centrality of the seed concept. The most central concept is not the land, nor even Abram’s faith, but rather the seed. Throughout Genesis 12, 15, 17, 22, and 26, the concept of the seed continues to surface as a central concern.

In our last lecture we traced the concept of the seed from Adam to Seth to Noah to Abraham. The central concept here is the promise to Adam and Eve in the garden of the seed of the woman who will bruise the head of the serpent; everything else is in a supportive role. For that reason, people who place a strong emphasis on the covenant are often also people who place a strong emphasis on offspring and family. The matters of circumcision and baptism relate to this as well.

My next and final point on this topic is the universal dimension of the covenant. Although Abraham was the particular individual chosen, he was elected and appointed and qualified to serve on behalf of all the nations—the entire universe. He was to be a universal servant.

Let us move on to Genesis 26, where we begin to follow the covenant with Isaac. We have referred already to his miraculous birth and the fact that he was spared from being sacrificed. In Genesis 26, God tells Isaac to remain in the land. There was a famine and Isaac was thinking of going to Egypt, but God tells him to stay in the land. I'll read from verses 3 and 4:

Stay in this land for a while and I will be with you and will bless you. For to you and your descendants I will give all these lands and will confirm the oath I swore to your father, Abraham. I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and will give them all these lands and through your offspring all nations on the earth will be blessed.

God here repeats the most important elements of the covenant with Abraham and tells Isaac that the covenant continues with him. Some people talk about “covenants,” in the plural, but here we see that it is the same covenant from generation to generation. The redemptive dimension of the covenant within the cosmic setting continues from Adam and Eve through Noah and Abraham and now to Isaac. Isaac was not given any new stipulations, because when God says to Isaac, “Because your father did this, My covenant is with you,” it is certainly implied that Isaac was expected to live as his father had lived. In response to God continuing His covenant, Isaac had to be an obedient man as well.

In the life of Isaac, we see the principle of election. We see this principle of election when Rebekah is pregnant and she has strife in her womb. She asks the Lord why this is happening, and God tells her that two nations are struggling in her womb; the younger will be the chosen one and the elder will serve the younger. This was not because of Jacob's merit in what he did later. This is strictly according to God's sovereign will before they were born. In the New Testament we find a reflection on that in Paul's letter to the Romans. Before either one had been able to do good or bad, God chose Jacob. He is the one who grasped Esau's heel; that is why he was called *Ya'akov*. The verb from which the name comes means “to deceive,” but he was chosen. There is the principle of election and Isaac had a difficult time coming to terms with it. But Isaac, being a passive man, does not exert himself too strongly. Once again, we see a woman taking a dominant role as this time Rebekah helps Jacob get the birthright. Isaac is passive in taking a wife. Isaac is quite passive in making the arrangement for the covenantal birthright to be passed on.

I enjoyed reading what Vos had to say about Isaac's passive role. God can and does use passive people as well as active people. I have seen that many times in my own life. I am inclined to be an active person, but God has used some passive people in a powerful way. When I say “passive” I don't mean “lazy”—there's a difference—but passive in the sense of just sitting back and being used when it is time to be used. That is also part of covenantal living.

We move from Isaac to Jacob. Again in Genesis 28, we see the principle of election, because God comes to Jacob after Jacob has deceived his father with the help of his mother. He is fleeing for his life to get away from Esau, and Jacob has a dream at Bethel. While he is sleeping with his head on a stone, he sees a stairway resting on the earth and reaching to heaven. Angels of God were ascending and descending. (Jesus refers to this passage in the Gospel of John.) Genesis 28:13-15 says:

There above it stood the LORD, and he said: “I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you...”

God had said this in Genesis 17 to Abraham. He had said it in Genesis 26 to Isaac, and now he says it to Jacob, the deceiver who was fleeing for his life: “You are mine, I have chosen you. I will not leave you. I will not forsake you. I will go wherever you go in spite of everything you have said and done. I will watch over you wherever you go and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised.” There you have God continuing to work out His election in spite of Jacob’s character. Election does not come by merit.

We have to spend a few moments now looking at Jacob’s response to God. In Genesis 28:20, we read, “And Jacob said, *im Yahweh*...” This word *im* is often translated as “if.” If that is the case, then Jacob is making a deal with God—“If God brings me back, if He prospers me, if He gives me the land, then I will give Him a tenth.” I don’t translate it in that way, that little conjunction as “if.” There are a number of cases when this word *im* is interpreted temporally rather than conditionally. So we might have simply, “When You do this, Lord, then I will be able to give You a tenth. Until You fill my hand, Lord, I can’t give You a tenth of what You’ve put in it.” If we translate this way, Jacob is not making a deal with God. He is making a proper obedient response to God, and God does bless him.

We read from Genesis 29:31 to Genesis 30:24 that Jacob is blessed. He doesn’t have to worry about not being able to have one child. He soon has 12. God blesses him with children. You will find these sons listed in Genesis 35:23-26. God surely keeps the promise of seed, and that, in a way, becomes the dominant factor in the story of Jacob. God provides continuity by giving him the 12 sons, and the seed continues. But returning to Genesis 30:25-43, we also read how richly God blessed Jacob in another way, in a setting that one might say is rather dubious.

I remember a professor at Calvin College who said with reference to this incident that the deceiver was deceived, but he was blessed anyway. Jacob thought that by putting rods in front of these animals that he could control what they looked like when they were born. Genetically, biologically, scientifically, that doesn’t make sense. Jacob did it, but God blessed him anyway. The principle of election means that God kept His promise in spite of Jacob’s character. Jacob was going to try to fool his father-in-law, Laban, but God blessed him anyway. The lesson is not that we can go out and deceive people and then God will make it all work out well. Not at all! Rather, the story of Jacob is the story of a difficult character, very active, sometimes rather dubious, who becomes the father of the nation of Israel from which the Christ is to come. God did prosper him, but Jacob had to go through tests also. A major test was when Jacob wrestled with the angel of the LORD at Peniel. God humbled Jacob, coming to him face-to-face as the angel of the LORD (I’m convinced this is the second Person of the Trinity) but Jacob was a mighty warrior. He hung on, saying “I will not let You go unless You bless me.” God tested Jacob and Jacob passed the test. He responded appropriately: “God, if You don’t bless me, I can’t do anything.” The battle for Jacob was won there at the ford of the Jabbok.

Years ago I took a group of students from Reformed Theological Seminary to Jordan and we stood in that very place. The Jabbok is only a little stream there in a bit of a gully, but there is a sign that says “the place where Jacob wrestled with the Lord.” We took a picture of that sign. Jacob was tested at the ford of the Jabbok, but he was also tested the next day when he had to come face to face with Esau, the man whom he had deceived and robbed.

Moving on to the life of Joseph, we do not have any specific new revelation in Joseph’s life, but a great deal of what God had promised to Abram, Isaac and Jacob is worked out in the life of Joseph. In Joseph’s life we see the demonstration of God’s sovereignty, God’s providence, and God’s faithfulness. In addition, I want to stress three more things. The first is the emphasis on the concept of royalty. Joseph was a type of Christ and Joseph typified the royal dimension of the Christ to come. Joseph the covenant

mediator was a royal mediator, but achieving that royalty of which he dreamed came to him only through the anger of his brothers, his suffering, being sold, being imprisoned, being tempted, and being lied about. We see in Joseph's life a picture of the suffering one goes through in order to become the royal provider and mediator. Secondly, I want to emphasize that Joseph, although he is a mediatorial type, is not an ancestor of the Christ to come. We see here a clear distinction between a type and an ancestor. Abraham was both ancestor and type. We will talk further about typology in the next few lectures. Joseph's offspring, Ephraim and Manasseh, never became ancestors of the Christ, but in his position as a covenant man, as a royal person, he surely typified Christ. In a way, Joseph was the embodiment of Christ on earth. It was Joseph who kept the people alive. It was the Second Person of the Trinity, the great redeeming, providing, upholding one, who worked through Joseph. Similarly, we will see how the angel of the LORD works through Moses, as He in some sense incarnates Himself in Moses.

Finally, I want to point out that Genesis 48 and 49 are very important chapters because of the blessings that Jacob pronounces prophetically. Joseph's sons do not become the bearers of the seed line, and neither does Reuben or Simeon or Levi. Judah is the one. Jacob may have been surprised that he had to point to Judah and say that he, the fourth son, is the one who will carry on the royalty that Joseph has so beautifully demonstrated.

We have much to learn from the covenant patriarchs. However, when you preach and teach on these passages, don't preach Abraham, but rather preach the God of Abraham and how He uses and blesses and prospers His covenant agents. God in His sovereignty, providence, and faithfulness has always used His people to carry out His purposes, and the greatest purpose of all was the Christ to come.