

## PART THIRTY-FOUR

### THE STORY OF ABRAHAM: CONFIRMATION OF THE COVENANT

Genesis 22:1-24

#### *The Sacrifice of Isaac (1-24)*

1 And it came to pass after these things, that God did prove Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham; and he said, Here am I. 2 And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest, even Isaac, and get thee into the land of Moriak; and offer him there for a burnt-offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of. 3 And Abraham rose early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son; and he clave the wood for the burnt-offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him. 4 On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off. 5 And Abraham said unto his young men, Abide ye here with the ass, and I and the lad will go yonder; and we will worship, and come again to you. 6 And Abraham took the wood of the burnt-offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took in his hand the fire and the knife; and they went both of them together. 7 And Isaac spake unto Abraham his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold, the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering? 8 And Abraham said, God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son: so they went both of them together.

9 And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built the altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar, upon the wood. 10 And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. 11 And the angel of Jehovah called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I. 12 And

CONFIRMATION OF COVENANT 22:1-24

he said, Lay not thy hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him; for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from me. 13 And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and, behold, behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns: and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt-offering in the stead of his son. 14 And Abraham called the name of that place Jehovah-jireh: as it is said to this day, In the mount of Jehovah it shall be provided. 15 And the angel of Jehovah called unto Abraham a second time out of heaven, 16 and said, By myself have I sworn, saith Jehovah, because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, 17 that in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heavens, and as the sand which is upon the seashore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; 18 and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice. 19 So Abraham returned unto his young men, and they rose up and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham dwelt at Beer-sheba.

20 And it came to pass after these things, that it was told Abraham, saying, Behold, Milcah, she also hath borne children unto thy brother Nabor: 21 Uz his first-born, and Buz his brother, and Kemuel the father of Aram, 22 and Chesed, and Hazo, and Pildash, and Jidlaph, and Bethuel. 23 And Bethuel begat Rebekah: these eight did Milcah bear to Nabor, Abraham's brother. 24 And his concubine, whose name was Reumah, she also bare Tebah, and Gaham, and Tahash, and Maacah.

1. *The Divine Command*, vv. 1, 2

Skinner (ICCG, 327-328): "The only incident in Abraham's life expressly characterized as a 'trial' of his faith is the one here narrated, where the patriarch proves his readiness to offer up his only son as a sacrifice at the

command of God. The story, which is the literary masterpiece of the Elohist collection, is told with exquisite simplicity; every sentence vibrates with restrained emotion, which shows how fully the author realizes the tragic horror of the situation." "For many years had Abraham waited for the promised seed, in which the divine promise was to be fulfilled. At length the Lord had given him the desired heir of his body by his wife Sarah, and directed him to send away the son of the maid. And now that this son had grown into a young man, the word of God had come to Abraham to offer up this very son, who had been given to him as the heir of the promise, for a burnt-offering, upon one of the mountains which should be shown him. The word did not come from his own heart—was not a thought suggested by the sight of the human sacrifices of the Canaanites, that he would offer a similar sacrifice to his God; nor did it originate with the tempter to evil. The word came from *Ha-Elohim*, the personal, true God, who tried him, *i.e.*, demanded the sacrifice of the only, beloved son, as a proof and attestation of his faith. The issue shows, that God did not desire the sacrifice of Isaac by slaying and burning him upon the altar, but his complete surrender, and a willingness to offer him up to God even by death. Nevertheless the divine command was given in such a form, that Abraham could not understand it in any other way than as requiring an outward burnt-offering, because there was no other way in which Abraham could accomplish the complete surrender of Isaac, than by an actual preparation for really offering the desired sacrifice. This constituted the trial, which necessarily produced a severe internal conflict in his mind. . . . But Abraham brought his reason into captivity to the obedience of Faith" (BCOTP, 248).

V. 1. Speiser puts it: "God put Abraham to the test" (ABG, 161). God tempts no man by enticing him to sin (Jas. 1:13). "Nor does the word here signify any such

CONFIRMATION OF COVENANT 22:1-24

thing, but to *try exquisitely*; nor doth God try men in order to promote or to confirm his own knowledge of them, but to manifest what they are, to themselves and to the world, that his rewarding or punishing them may appear the more wise and equal, or his blessing them the more gracious (Deut. 3:2, 13:3; Judg. 2:22; 2 Chron. 32:31; Psa. 139:23, 24; 1 Cor. 10:13; Exo. 15:25, 16:4; Jas. 1:12; 1 Sam. 3:4, 6). By this command God tried the faith of Abraham with respect to his believing that in Isaac his *seed should be called*; and that through the death of the Messiah he and other believers should obtain everlasting salvation; and tried his obedience in the most tender point that could be conceived—his deliberate slaying of his own darling, his only son by his wife, his only son now left in his own house, ch. 21:1, 12, 14" (SIBG, 247-248). "‘God put Abraham to the test’—the effect is heightened by the definite article with Elohim. The idea is thus conveyed that this was no ordinary procedure, but that God had a particularly important objective in mind" (ABG, 162).

Rashi notes how God bore down on Abraham's heart more poignantly with each successive explanatory phrase (SC, 108): "*Thy son*. ‘But I have two sons,’ Abraham said. ‘*Thine only one*,’ was the reply. ‘But each is the *only one* of his mother!’ ‘*Whom thou lovest*,’ he was told. ‘But I love both!’ and the answer came, ‘*Even Isaac*.’ Why did not God name Isaac at once? Lest Abraham's mind should reel under the sudden shock. Further, to make His command more precious to him. And finally, that he might receive a reward for every word spoken."

The ARV gives the most satisfactory rendering: "God did *prove* Abraham." That is to say, God proved Abraham (his faith, his righteousness) *to himself*, to *his posterity*, and to *all humanity*, as the Father of the Faithful. Surely God knows whether a man's faith will be strong enough to enable him to emerge triumphantly from such an ordeal (cf. 1 Cor. 10:13). Cf. Jas. 1:12-15: the real

temptation, that of Satan, occurs when one is drawn away by his own lust, and enticed, even as Eve—at Satan's suggestion—was enticed by her lust for illicit knowledge (Gen. 3:6). James gives us here the true pedigree of sin: Satan, lust, sin, death.

Note that God *said* to Abraham, etc., v. 1, possibly in a dream-vision, but surely in an audible voice which previous experience had taught him to recognize. Note the patriarch's simple response, "Here am I," a response that combined both humility and readiness: so do the righteous always respond to God's calls (cf. Acts 22:10, Isa. 6:8).

"*Into the land of Moriah,*" i.e., "*Jerusalem.* The Rabbis explained that it was so named because from thence 'teaching' (*horaah*) went forth to the world. It was the land of the Amorite . . . the land where myrrh grew abundantly (cf. Song of S. 4:6); it was the site of the Temple," cf. 2 Chron. 3:1 (S.C., 109). "2 Chron. 3:1 identifies Moriah with the hill on which the Jerusalem temple was later built. Subsequent tradition accepted the identification" (JB, 39). As in all such cases involving the support of tradition only, modern criticism is inclined to be skeptical about this identification. It has been objected that the region of Beersheba (from which Abraham and Isaac set out) is not sufficiently distant from Jerusalem to have required a journey of three days to get there, and that a topographical feature of the city of Jerusalem is that the Temple hill is not visible until the traveler is quite close. "However, the distance from S. Philistia to Jerusalem is about 50 miles, which might well have required three days to traverse, and in Genesis the place in question is not a 'mount Moriah' but one of the several mountains in a land of that name, and the hills on which Jerusalem stands are visible at a distance. There is no need to doubt therefore that Abraham's sacrifice took place in the site of the later Jerusalem, if not on the Temple hill"

CONFIRMATION OF COVENANT 22:1-24

(NBD, 842). "*Moriah* signifies 'the vision' or 'manifestation of Jehovah.' The name is here given to 'the land' on one of whose mountains the sacrifice was to be offered up; it is also given to the mountain on which the temple was built. The common belief is that these two places were identical, and we see no reason to doubt or question it. Mount Moriah is an oblong-shaped hill, or rather point of a ridge, having the deep glen of the Tyropoeon on the west, and the Kidron on the east. The glens unite at the foot of the hill on the south. The elevation of the summit above the bottom of the glens is about 350 feet. Moriah is now crowned by the Great Mosque, and is one of the most venerated sanctuaries of the Mohammedans" (SIBG, 248).

2. *The Journey*, vv. 1-8. "The accumulation of brief, sententious clauses here admirably represents the calm deliberation and unflinching heroism with which the patriarch proceeded to execute the Divine command" (PCG, 283). *Note the preparations*: these were begun early in the morning (cf. 19:27, 20:8, 21:14). The patriarch saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him—the ass for the wood, the young men for the ass; *and Isaac his son* (probably explaining to him as yet only his intention to offer sacrifice on a distant mountain). Nothing is indicated here but sublime innocence on Isaac's part and unflinching resoluteness and obedience on the part of Abraham. (Did Abraham say anything to Sarah about this journey, especially the purpose of it? We doubt it. From previous attitudes on her part we can hardly believe that she would have accepted this apparently tragic commission with the same unflinching obedience of faith that characterized Abraham's response). "While the outward preparations are graphically described, no word is spared for the conflict in Abraham's breast—a striking illustration of the reticence of the legends with regard to mental states" (Skinner, ICCG, 329). How old was Isaac at this time?

Josephus (*Antiq.*, I, 13, 2) follows the tradition which puts his age at twenty-five; other commentators would have him to be some eighteen years old at the time. (He was thirteen, it will be recalled, when he was circumcised, *Gen.* 17:25). At any rate he was intelligent enough to be a willing party to the sacrifice of his life at God's command (once the purpose of the journey was revealed to him), and strong enough to carry up the "mountain" the split wood for the offering.

Without taking counsel with anyone, the solemn procession set out from the Beersheba area—the patriarch, with his son, his two servants, and the ass that bore the wood—and on the third day they arrived within sight of the place of sacrifice. (Glueck has called attention to the fact that it would have been odd for Abraham to have carried wood from Beersheba to the wooded country around Jerusalem where he could easily have found all the wood that he needed. He suggests that the *land of Moriah* of this text might have been "in the treeless ranges of Sinai down near Kadesh." However, the three days' journey certainly is in accord with the distance of some fifty miles from Beersheba to the region around Jerusalem. At any rate, Abraham on the third day "saw the place afar off." It is evident from this statement that by this time the place had been specifically indicated by divine authority (cf. v. 2). We can hardly imagine the intensity of the pang that shot through the patriarch's heart ordering the two servants to "abide" where they were with the ass (it seems quite probable that what was about to take place would have been repugnant to them: at any rate they could hardly have thought of it as "worship"), Abraham said, "I and the lad will go yonder, and we will worship, and come again to you" (v. 5). Note the "we" in this promise: "Abraham firmly believed that God would restore his son to life from the ashes into which he expected him to be burned, and cause him to come back with him, Heb.

CONFIRMATION OF COVENANT 22:1-24

11:19" (SIBG, 248). So "they went both of them together" up the mountain, Isaac carrying the heavier load, the wood for the offering. The aged Abraham could hardly have carried this load, but "with resoluteness of faith he bears the two means of destruction: a container, like a censer, filled with live coals, and the fatal knife" (EG, 625). (It is curious that we do not find any allusion in the Old Testament to the method of producing fire). Vv. 7, 8: "The narrative gives free play to our imagination as it pictures father and son proceeding step by step up the hill. Isaac cannot but sense that some unwonted burden depresses his father past anything that the son had ever observed in the father before. This attitude on the father's part causes some restraint between the two, and a strange perplexity falls upon Isaac" (EG, 625). "The pathos of this dialogue is inimitable: the artless curiosity of the child, the irrepressible affection of the father, and the stern ambiguity of his reply, can hardly be read without tears" (ICCG, 330). Undoubtedly Abraham now made it clear to his son what was about to take place and why. "Isaac, though able to resist, yielded up himself, as typical of Christ's voluntary oblation of himself for us, Phil. 2:8, Eph. 5:2, Acts 8:32" (SIBG, 248). Cf. also Heb. 12:2—note, "for the joy that was set before him," *i.e.*, the ineffable joy of redeeming lost souls, "he endured the cross," etc. "God will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son." "The father devises an answer which is a marvelous compound of considerate love and anticipative faith. He spares Isaac undue pain and leaves the issues entirely with God, where in his own heart he left them throughout the journey. In the light of what follows, Abraham's answer is well-nigh prophetic, 'God will provide.' It marks the high point of the chapter, the one thing about God's dealings with His own that here receives emphatic statement" (EG, 62)." On v. 8: "God will provide the lamb; and if not, then you, my son, will be the



offering. And although Isaac was aware that he might be sacrificed, yet *they went both of them together, with one mind*" (SC, 110).

3. *The Sacrifice Averted.* Vv. 9-13. The preliminary ritual is now carried out: the altar is built, and the wood laid in order. Isaac is then bound and laid upon the altar, and Abraham lifts the deadly knife to kill. But the sacrifice is averted as again we meet the Angel of Jehovah, speaking from heaven, to stay the patriarch's hand. V. 12—"Now I know," etc. ("Now I can give a reason to all intelligent beings for my love for thee; now I have proved that thou art a Godfearing man," etc. "Now I can record in Scripture for all generations to know that you are truly my Friend.") V. 13—The substitution of the ram "caught in the thicket" for the human victim evidently takes place without express command, the patriarch recognizing by its mysterious presence at the moment of crisis that it was 'provided.' "After lying under a sentence of death three days, Isaac was released by the orders of Heaven, as a figure of Christ's resurrection on the third day, 1 Cor. 15:3, 4; Matt. 16:21, 17:23, 20:19; Luke 13:32)" (SIBG, 248). "This ram was directed hither by divine providence, as a figure of Christ appointed of God, and engaged to make atonement for our sins, 1 Pet. 1:19, Job 33:24" (*ibid.*) "In the extremities of distress God interposes as a helper and deliverer, Deut. 32:36, Mic. 4:10, Matt. 15:32. And on Mount Moriah in the temple God was long manifested in the symbols of his presence, 2 Chron. 3:1, Psa. 76:2; and there Jesus often appeared while in the flesh, Hag. 2:7; John, chs. 2, 5, 7, 10" (*ibid.*).

V. 11—"Here *am I*. Abraham heard God call him; he was quick to respond. Had he not been listening he *could* not have responded; had he been disobedient he would not have answered yes" (HSB, 36). V. 13—"The ram caught in the thicket was a revelatory event of God to Abraham. When Abraham prepared to offer his only

CONFIRMATION OF COVENANT 22:1-24

son Isaac in obedience to God's command, his dilemma was this: how could he reconcile the command of God to slay his son with God's previous promise that through this son should come a great posterity? He did not solve the problem by deciding to disobey God's command to offer up Isaac. Rather by faith he concluded that God Himself would raise Isaac from the dead *after* he had been offered. Spiritually there is a deeper lesson. God, like Abraham, did not spare His own Son (Rom. 8:32). And, as Abraham received back Isaac as though he had been raised from the dead, so Christ has been raised by the Father from the dead" (*ibid.*)

4. V. 14. *Jehovah-jireh, i.e., Jehovah will see, or provide.* "The plain meaning is: 'the Lord will see' and choose this place for the dwelling of the Divine Presence, *i.e., the Temple*" (Rashi, SC, 111). (Is there contradiction between the Name used here and the statement in Exo. 6:3, where God is represented as telling Moses that He was known to the patriarchs as *El Shaddai*, but by His Name *Yahwe* He was not known to them?) "Certainly this is not to be taken to mean that the patriarchs were altogether ignorant of the name *Jehovah*. It was in His attribute as *El Shaddai* that God had revealed His nature to the patriarchs; but now [at the beginning of the Mosaic ministry] He was about to reveal Himself to Israel as *Jehovah*, as the absolute Being working with unbounded freedom in the performance of His promises. For not only had He established His covenants with the fathers, but He had also heard the groaning of the children of Israel. . . . On the ground of the erection of His covenant on the one hand, and, what was irreconcilable with that covenant, the bondage of Israel on the other, *Jehovah* was now about to redeem Israel from its sufferings and make it His own nation" (KD, BCOTP, 468). In a word, under the mediatorship of Moses He would reveal Himself fully as the Covenant-God, *Yahwe*.

Vv. 15-19. "When God made promise to Abraham, since he could swear by none greater, he swore by himself, saying, Surely blessing I will bless thee," etc. Note that the promise—the Abrahamic promise—is now confirmed (by the Angel of Jehovah calling unto Abraham a second time out of heaven) by two immutable things, *his word and oath*, in which it is impossible for God to lie, etc. The promises here solemnly confirmed by oath are almost wholly related to Abraham's Hebrew and spiritual seed. *To possess the gates of their enemies* is to obtain their country, or to have dominion over them, and rule among them: Gen. 21:12, 24:60; Deut. 21:19, 22:24. The Jews had temporal dominion over their enemies in the time of Joshua, David, etc., cf. Joshua, chs. 6-19; 2 Sam., chs. 8, 10. And Christ and His people have a spiritual dominion over them, Psalms 2:8-9, 22:27-30; Dan. 4:34-35; Rom. 8:37, 1 Cor. 15:25-28, Col. 2:15. What a quiet, poignantly meaningful ending, to an experience unparalleled in the history of man. How striking the final word from heaven: "because thou hast obeyed my voice." Now, Abraham, his son, his two servants, and the beast of burden return to Beersheba, "and Abraham dwelt at Beersheba."

5. *The Progeny of Nabor*, vv. 20-24, a list of the Aramaean tribes. Note the division here between legitimate (vv. 23-24) and illegitimate (v. 24) sons. Concubines were women of a middle state, between wives and harlots; "a kind of half-wives, sharing in bed and board, but not in the government of the family, Gen. 25:1-6, 30:4, 35:22; Judg. 19:1, 1 Ki. 11:3, 1 Chron. 1:32. They served under the lawful wives, if alive, Gen. 16:6-7, 32:22; and their children had no title to the inheritance, Gen. 25:5, 6 (SIBG, 248). The genealogy inserted here is designed, of course, to introduce the family from which Rebekah is to make her appearance in the sacred history.

CONFIRMATION OF COVENANT 22:1-24

6. *The Significance of Abraham's Sacrificial Act.*

One most important truth to be derived from it is that *the essence of sacrifice is the moral disposition of the suppliant.* Moreover, as the essential property of music is harmony, and that of art is beauty, so the essential property of love is sacrifice. This particular episode, however, has significance along other lines. We might well ask whether God's design in this particular case was in any way related to the pagan practice of human sacrifice. Some authorities think so. For example, from one exegete we read that "presumably" the intent of the tale was to teach that "human sacrifice has no place in the worship of the Lord the God of Israel, cf. Mic. 6:6-8" (IBG, 645). Again (JB, 39, n.): "It is the basis of the ritual prescription for the redemption of the first-born of Israel: like all 'first-fruits' these belong to God; they are not, however, to be sacrificed but bought back, 'redeemed,' Exo. 13:11. Lying behind the story, therefore, is the condemnation of child-sacrifice, see Lev. 18:21ff., so often denounced by the prophets. In this incident Abraham's faith reaches its climax—the story's second lesson, more profound than the first. In the sacrifice of Isaac, the Fathers saw a prefiguring of the Passion of Jesus, the only-begotten Son." Cf. Speiser (ABG, 165): "Was it, then, the aim of the story to extol obedience to God as a general principle? Abraham had already proved himself on that count by heeding the call to leave Mesopotamia and make a fresh start in an unknown land (12:1 ff.) The meaning of the present narrative, therefore, would have to become something more specific. And we can hardly go too far afield if we seek the significance of Abraham's supreme trial in the very quest on which he was embarked. The involvement of Isaac tends to bear this out, since the sole heir to the spiritual heritage concerned cannot but focus attention on the future. The process that Abraham set in motion

was not to be accomplished in a single generation. It sprang from a vision that would have to be tested and validated over an incalculable span of time, a vision that could be pursued only with singlemindedness of purpose and absolute faith—an ideal that could not be perpetuated unless one was ready to die for it, or had the strength to see it snuffed out. The object of the ordeal, then, was to discover how firm was the patriarch's faith in the ultimate divine purpose. It was one thing to start out resolutely for the Promised Land, but it was a very different thing to maintain confidence in the promise when all appeared lost. The fact is that short of such unswerving faith, the biblical process could not have survived the many trials that lay ahead." May we not conclude, just at this point, that one basic aspect of the Divine intention is very simply stated in the recorded affirmation, namely, that "God did *prove* Abraham"? But there was another aspect of God's purpose that cannot be omitted without vitiating the significance of the thing commanded. This is exquisitely stated, as follows (SIBG, 248): "While I admire the faith and obedience of Abraham, and the cheerful submission of Isaac—while I place these bright examples before me—my faith directs me to more glorious objects: let me with astonishment think of Jehovah bringing His only begotten Son into the world, permitting him to be laid on the altar, and through his sacrifice forgiving our sins! Let me behold Jesus caught, seasonably caught, in the thickets of men's wilful transgressions of his own compassion, and of our transgressions resting on him, and borne in our stead! Let me listen to the new testament in his blood, in which Jehovah swears that men shall be blessed in him, and all nations shall call him blessed." *Thus we see again that the incidents of the Old Testament record are fully clarified only in the light of New Testament fulfilment.*

\* \* \* \* \*

## FOR MEDITATION AND SERMONIZING

## The Ultimate Degree of Faith

Gen. 22:1—"And it came to pass after these things, that God did *prove* Abraham," etc.

By *ultimate* we mean the highest, that degree of faith beyond which one cannot go. This implies, of course, that there are lesser degrees of faith. Note that faith is defined scripturally as "the assurance of things hoped for, a conviction with respect to things not seen," Heb. 11:1; cf. 2 Cor. 4:16-18.

A *moral* command of God requires that a thing be done *because it is right in respect to the very nature of things*. The Decalogue is a code of moral law: to identify it as such one needs only to follow the principle of universalization, namely, that a man in contemplating a certain action, by asking himself what the effect would be if every person would do the same thing under the same circumstances, can surely see for himself whether his contemplated action is right and good or wrong and bad. Tested by this principle, it becomes obvious that idolatry (of whatever kind), false swearing (blasphemy, perjury), disrespect for parents, murder, adultery, theft, false witness (slander, libel), covetousness, etc., if universalized would destroy social order, and in all likelihood the human race itself. (Recall the venerable doctrine of the Seven Deadly Sins: pride, covetousness (avarice), lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth.) The only exception, of course, is the law of the Jewish Sabbath: this was a *positive* institution, and was superseded, with the establishment of the church, by the Christian Lord's Day, the first day of the week (Acts 20:7, 1 Cor. 16:1-2, Mark 16:9, Rev. 1:10).

A *positive* command, in Scripture, requires a thing to be done because Divine authority orders it. The chief characteristic of this kind of command is that there is no necessary logical connection between the thing commanded

and the end in view. The primary reason for such a command is simply that God has ordained it, for a specific purpose; and He is to be obeyed if the divine purpose is to be actualized. Unbelief will ask, Why, and Wherefore, when confronted with a positive command, but faith obeys without asking questions. (Of course, such a command has always the moral virtue (excellence) of obedience inherent in its fulfilment). One who obeys a positive command does so solely out of faith in God and love for God; the obedience is a manifestation of the faith and love which motivate it. Positive commands are designed to *prove* the faith of the professing believer. (Cf. Matt. 7:24-27; John 15:14, 14:15, 8:31-32, Heb. 5:9, etc.). There are three degrees, we might well say, in obedience to a positive command in attaining the supreme (ultimate) manifestation of faith: (1) To obey when one can see clearly that there is no logical connection between the thing commanded and the end in view; (2) to obey a divine command when one can see clearly that the thing commanded cannot do any good in itself; (3) to obey when one can see clearly that the thing commanded is in itself wrong, that is, in relation to the structure of the moral life. Now for some examples:

1. *Exodus 12:1-14*. Can one see any logical connection between the sprinkling of the blood of a lamb on the side-posts and lintel of every Israelite habitation in Egypt and the preservation from death of the firstborn in all those households? What was there in the blood of a lamb to save anyone? Why did it have to be the blood of a male lamb, one without blemish, a male a year old? Why did the blood have to be sprinkled on the side-posts and lintels of all the habitations of the Israelites? Could not God have discerned where His own people were dwelling without all this "unnecessary" "irrelevant" "claptrap"? What an opening here for fulminations about "non-essentials," "mere forms," "mere outward acts," etc.! Had

## CONFIRMATION OF COVENANT 22:1-24

our modern "clergy" been present, no doubt they would have started an argument with God right on the spot. But how did it all turn out? Precisely as God had said it would: those Israelites were not so unbelieving as to refuse to take God at His word, especially in the exigencies under which they were suffering, and the next morning it was discovered that in every house where the blood was present as God had commanded there was salvation, there was life; and that in every house where the blood was not present as God had ordered, there was death, lamentation, suffering, on account of the death of the firstborn.

2. 2 *Sam.* 6:6-7: Note the statute in the Mosaic Law that forbade anyone who was not a Levite to touch the Ark of the Covenant: Num. 15:51; 3:10, 38; 4:15, 19, 20. The penalty for the violation of this law was *death*. But why should it hurt for *anyone* to touch the Ark, whether of the tribe of Reuben, Gad, Judah, Benjamin, or any of the other tribes, anymore than for a Levite to do it? Surely, the mere touching the ark in itself could not have harmed anyone! But what did happen when a non-Levite did put out his hand, as he thought, to prevent the Ark from falling off the new cart on which David was having it transported to Jerusalem? He fell dead on the spot, 2 *Sam.* 6:7. Does this mean that the Ark was a fetish, that it had magical power of some kind? Of course not. The tragic death which Uzzah suffered was for disobedience to God. Even his good intentions in doing what God had forbidden did not protect him from the infliction of the penalty! Uzzah followed his own wisdom (which should have told him that God Himself would have protected the Ark from any kind of hurt) and not the wisdom of God, as multiplied thousands have done in all ages and are doing today in greater numbers than ever before in the history of the race. What a warning this incident is against trifling with God's Will and Word!



3. *Numbers 21:4-9*. The story of the brazen serpent. One can see at a glance here, that there was no efficacy in the thing commanded, that is, *in itself*. What was there in a piece of brass to heal a human being of disease? Did it have magical power of some kind? Of course not. The efficacy was in the willingness of the people to take God at His word; when their faith became active, God kept *His* promise. It was God who did the healing, not the serpent of brass; the latter was only the means of eliciting their obedience of faith. It will be recalled that this brazen serpent became in itself an object of worship to the Israelites in a later age: they burned incense to it, we are told (2 Ki. 18:4-5). Whereupon King Hezekiah, calling it Nehushtan, "a piece of brass," ordered it broken into pieces and utterly destroyed.

4. *2 Kings 5:1-14*. What an array of details having no power in themselves to effect the healing of Naaman, of his leprosy! What possible connections between the things commanded and the end in view? Was there some special cleansing power in the water of the Jordan River? Why should Naaman have to dip himself *seven* times: Could not God have healed him without all this "fol-de-rol"? Certainly, that is, had He chosen to do so? But God could not have *proved* Naaman's willingness to take Him at His word without some sort of procedure such as He ordered. How did things turn out for the Syrian chieftain? Precisely as God said that it would: when Naaman had fully completed the required details, arising from the Jordan after the seventh dipping, "his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean."

5. *Joshua 6:1-21*. What a war strategy this was, that Yahwe gave to Joshua to capture the city of Jericho! What an array of "mere forms," "mere outward acts," which apparently had no necessary connection with the end in view! What was there in all this marching to bring down walls that withstood battering rams and other

## CONFIRMATION OF COVENANT 22:1-24

engines of destruction? What special kind of power was generated by the marching of Joshua's army, with the Ark at the center of the procession, once each day for six successive days and seven times on the seventh day? What could the people inside Jericho have been thinking about these repeated military parades? Why the final blowing of trumpets and shouting by Joshua's soldiers on the seventh day? We have heard in recent years of "pious" and "praying" and "Bible-reading" generals, but we doubt very much that any of them would have had the faith to carry out the war program that Joshua executed which brought about the fall of Jericho. Joshua took God at His word. He carried out the Divine strategy to the very letter, not expecting that what he and his army were doing would bring down the walls, but fully believing that if he did his part in faith, God would do the rest. And his faith was rewarded: "the wall came tumbling down."

What an array of "non-essentials" in all these instances of positive law! Think what the response would have been if our "theologians" had been on the ground when these orders were given by the Ruler of the universe! Why would God authorize all this "nonsense"? Why all these "mere forms," "mere outward acts," "mere external performances," etc., etc. What is all this but "blind obedience" to ordinations that are "without rhyme or reason"? Oh yes, the theologians, the clergy, the "princes of the church," all would have had a field day had they been recipients of the Divine instructions in these various instances of the operation of positive divine law.

6. We now come to the ultimate of all proofs, surely the noblest manifestation of the obedience of faith that is recorded in Scripture. This occurred when God did prove Abraham by commanding him to offer up Isaac for a burnt-offering (Gen. 22:1-3). Here was a thing commanded which by the universal judgment of mankind was wrong: no nation has ever been known to have been

without a distinction between justifiable and unjustifiable killing, and the kind of killing that is always reckoned to be unjustifiable is *murder*, the taking of another man's life by one's own authority "with malice aforethought." (Of course, in this instance no "malice aforethought" was involved; nevertheless, by all human standards the act was wrong.) Moreover, it was surely wrong to deliberately kill a son, and the only son at that. And it was doubly wrong, in this instance, to kill the one who had been born "out of due season" as the Child of Promise. What an argument Abraham might have offered against obedience to this command! How could such an order proceed from the God who is infinite goodness? Was not this ordination a complete disavowal by God Himself of all the promises He had made respecting Abraham and his seed? No such unbelieving talk, however, fell from Abraham's lips. With him there was no occasion for argument: Yahwe had spoken and it was his portion simply to obey. We know the rest of the story, up to the very point of the patriarch's poisoning the deadly knife above his son, lying bound and helpless on the altar. No doubt he would have carried out the divine order fully, even to the killing itself, because, we are told, his faith was such that he "accounted God able to raise Isaac up, even from the dead, from whence he did also in a figure receive him back" (Heb. 11:19). It was in this manner that God did actually *prove* Abraham and the depth of his faith, not only to himself, but to all mankind.

What is the application? In consequence of this incident, the name of Abraham has gone down in sacred history as the Father of the Faithful and the Friend of God (John 15:14, 2 Chron. 20:7, Jas. 2:23, Rom. 4:11, 16). Moreover, our salvation under the New Covenant is contingent not on our having the blood of Abraham coursing through our veins, but on having the faith of Abraham in our

CONFIRMATION OF COVENANT 22:1-24

hearts (John 3:1-8, Rom. 4:13-17, Gal. 3:23-29, Jas. 2:20-26).

Unbelief will call this obedience of Abraham an act of *blind* faith. It is blind faith, of course, to obey another *man* implicitly without question. It is never blind faith to obey God, for the reason that *God never commands men to do anything simply to benefit Him. His commands are always, ultimately, for our good. Therefore, anything that God commands is made right by the fact that He commands it.*

In the process of becoming a Christian on the terms laid down by apostolic authority, the penitent believer is confronted with one basically *positive* institution. That institution is baptism, as ordained by the Great Commission. It is the only positive institution the Holy Spirit has seen fit to associate with conversion under the New Covenant. That baptism is essentially a *positive* institution (although it does carry with it the *moral* excellence of obedience to God) is evident from the following considerations. One can readily see that belief in Christ, repentance from sin, confession of Christ—all these are necessary to becoming a Christian. Belief is necessary to change the heart; repentance is necessary to change the will, the disposition, the course of life. Confession is necessary as a public commitment and testimonial in the presence of, and for the benefit of, all those who themselves need divine redemption without which they are lost, both in this world and in the world to come. Confession is a public commitment to the new life which the penitent believer has espoused.

*But why be baptized?* What moral change is effected in baptism, other than the moral benefit that always follows obedience to God? We reply that baptism effects no basic moral change: that change comes in faith and repentance in order that the baptism may be efficacious. Baptism is essentially *transitional* (1 Pet. 3:20-21). It is the abandonment of the old man and the putting on of the

new (Rom. 6:1-11). It is the relinquishing of the old life of alienation, and the assumption of the new life of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17, Tit. 3:5). It is the transitional act in which the believing penitent renounces allegiance to the world, the flesh and the devil, and accepts the authority of the Prince of righteousness. It is the formal act of obedience in which the one who was formerly an alien, is adopted into the family of God and thus made an heir of God and joint-heir with Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:16-17) of that "inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away" (1 Pet. 1:4, 2:22-25; Acts 26:18). Hence, baptism is administered "in the name of Christ" (*i.e.*, by His *authority*), according to the formula, "into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19). It is the divine appointment wherein the repentant believer receives pardon of his sins (in the mind of God) and is formally inducted *into Christ* (Acts 2:38, Col. 2:11-12) and sealed "with the Holy Spirit of promise" (Eph. 1:13, 2 Cor. 1:21-22; cf. discussions of *spiritual circumcision*, in foregoing sections herein).

It is evident that the dipping of a person in water could not *per se* have efficacy unto salvation. It is equally evident that there is no power in water *per se* to take away the guilt of sin. And it is quite evident that God could pardon a believer without baptism as easily as with it, had He chosen to do so. The fact remains, however, that in the light of New Testament teaching, we have no indication that He has chosen to do so. Baptism is said to be for remission of sins (Acts 2:38), for induction into Christ (Gal. 3:27) and is therefore a prerequisite of pardon (Acts 10:47-48). This is sufficient for the man of faith. Unbelief will persist, however, in speaking of baptism as a "non-essential," a "mere outward act," a "mere external performance," etc. The Apostle Paul, on the contrary, writes of it as an act of obedience "from the heart" (Rom.

CONFIRMATION OF COVENANT 22:1-24

6:17), hence an act of faith; and the Apostle Peter describes it as the "appeal of a good conscience toward God" (1 Pet. 3:21).

Here, then, at the very entrance into the Kingdom, at the door to the Fold, the issue is placed squarely before each alien sinner, as to whether he has sufficient faith to obey a positive command which he can see clearly has no logical connection, in itself (*i.e.*, as an immersion in water) with the end in view. Here he must make a choice whether he will do, or not do, what the Lord commands. Here he must decide whether he will yield to the authority of the Head of the Church. The tragedy today is that there are so many to whom religion is little more than a ritual, a sort of insurance policy against hell-fire; so many who follow the line of least resistance in everything they do, who have so little conviction and courage, so little love for God and so little faith in the Lord Jesus, that when they reach the baptismal pool, they will stop and argue the case, and in so many instances will turn aside to accept a meaningless substitute which human theology has provided for the sake of convenience. What a tragedy! "Oh ye of little faith!" Jesus was willing to go all the way from Nazareth in Galilee to the Jordan River, some seventy to eighty miles, to submit to this divine institution and thus do the Father's will to the full (Matt. 3:15). This He did, He who was without sin, to please the Heavenly Father and to set the right example for all who would follow in His steps. If we expect to be called His disciples, we certainly will not start an argument at the baptismal pool! If we do hesitate, or turn aside, we not only fall short of that obedience which is necessary for justification, but we also lose the rich spiritual experience which always accompanies the walk of faith such as Enoch walked, such as Noah walked, such as Abraham walked, such as Moses walked, such as all the faithful have walked. Preachers fulminate so glibly about faith, justification by faith, etc. But faith is precisely the thing

that is lacking in the professing church of this day and age. We simply cannot be the spiritual children of Abraham unless we have the faith of Abraham in our hearts, the faith that prompts us to realize that we are strangers and pilgrims here, that this world has no rest for us, that we journey to a better country, that is, a heavenly country, where there *remaineth* eternal rest for the people of God (Heb. 4:9).

Note that the life of Abraham is the story of the continuous expansion and intensification of the covenant and the covenant-promise. There was the initial promise to which Abraham responded in complete obedience (Gen. 12:1-3). As God enlarged the promise, Abraham responded in faith which was reckoned to him for righteousness (15:6): at this communication the land of Canaan was specifically pledged to the patriarch's fleshly seed. With the promise of the son, God appointed fleshly circumcision to be the sign of the covenant (ch. 17). Both the promise and the covenant were officially sealed as a result of Abraham's obedience of faith in which he *proved* his faith by his willingness to sacrifice his only son Isaac, the Child of Promise, accounting that God would raise him from the dead (ch. 22; cf. Heb. 11:9-19).

Any one who has faith deep enough to prompt him to meet the appointments ordered by Divine grace can be absolutely sure of receiving the blessings which that Grace has connected with the specific appointment. We can be absolutely sure that our God, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, will actualize His "precious and exceeding great promises" (2 Pet. 1:4) if and when we, both as sinners and as saints, meet the conditions, by our obedience of faith, which Divine Grace has stipulated. "The firm foundation of God standeth" always (2 Tim. 2:19, Isa. 46:9-11).

REVIEW QUESTIONS ON  
PART THIRTY-FOUR

1. In what way, according to Chapter 22, did God *prove* Abraham? What does the verb *prove* signify in this connection?
2. Show how each successive phrase in the Divine command here intensified the significance of the command (according to Rashi).
3. What indicates that God had a particularly important objective in this instance.
4. What was the patriarch's response to what God said to him?
5. Where is the land of Moriah traditionally? What facts seem to justify this tradition?
6. What reason does Glueck give for questioning this tradition?
7. What preparations did Abraham make for the journey?
8. Do you suppose that Abraham said anything to Sarah about the purpose of the journey? Explain your answer.
9. How old probably was Isaac when this incident occurred?
10. From what place did they start on their journey? How far was it from this place to Jerusalem?
11. How much time did the journey require? Is this in harmony with the distance traveled, that is, if the place of sacrifice was near Jerusalem?
12. On reaching the place of sacrifice, what did Abraham and Isaac do? Why did the two go alone to the place of sacrifice?
13. What did Isaac carry to the place of sacrifice? To what New Testament fact does this point directly?
14. When, probably, did Abraham explain to Isaac what was to be done? How did Isaac respond? What does this suggest as to Christ's Sacrifice on the Cross?



15. Did Abraham show that he was prepared to make the actual sacrifice of his son? What does the writer of Hebrews tell us about what Abraham thought actually would happen? What is meant by the statement that this did happen "in a figure"?
16. How did Abraham reconcile God's command to sacrifice Isaac, with His promise that through Isaac there should come to Abraham a great posterity?
17. What did the Angel of the Lord do to avert the sacrifice?
18. What did the name *Jehovah-jireh* mean? How can this name be harmonized with what is revealed in Exo. 6:3?
10. How and in what ways did God renew His divine promises with respect to Abraham and his seed? Explain the twofold significance of the Promise.
20. What reason did God give for His renewal of the Promise at this time?
21. Why was the record of Nahor's progeny introduced at this point?
22. What was the basic significance of Abraham's sacrificial act?
23. Is it reasonable to conclude that this incident was for the purpose of showing God's disapproval of human sacrifice?
24. In what ways did the Sacrifice of Isaac prefigure the Sacrifice of God's Only Begotten?
25. What is Speiser's explanation of the significance of Abraham's supreme trial?
26. What is meant by the *ultimate* degree of faith?
27. Distinguish between God's moral and His positive commands?
28. What are the ascending degrees of faith manifested in obedience to a positive divine command? What is the essential character of the ultimate or highest degree?

CONFIRMATION OF COVENANT 22:1-24

29. Give examples of positive commands which involve the lesser degrees of faith?
30. What great lesson is derived from the history of the Brazen Serpent?
31. Why cannot what is called "*blind faith*" be involved in obedience to God's commands?
32. Explain how Christian baptism, that which is authorized by the Great Commission, is basically a *positive* command.
33. What is the distinctly spiritual reason for obedience to Christ in baptism?
34. Explain what is meant by the *transitional* significance of baptism?
35. Why, according to His own statement, was Jesus baptized in the Jordan?
36. In there any ground on which one can rightly assume that our Lord ever ordained a "non-essential" act? Would not such a claim be in itself blasphemy?
37. Review at this point what is meant in Scripture by spiritual circumcision.