

# Sermon 1, The Seed at the Gate, Genesis 22:15-18

**Proposition:** The Son of God reveals in an oracle that His Father has taken an oath to multiply Abraham's plural seed and grant victory over the gates of Hell to Abraham's singular Seed.

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## Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, it's beginning to look a lot like Christmas. While there may not be much snow on the ground, it is definitely that time of year when we celebrate the birth of the Son of God as a man, as one of us. This year we're going to do something a little different. Instead of looking at the same old Christmas texts, another sermon on Matthew 1 or Luke 2, we are going to look at four Messianic prophecies in the Pentateuch. These sermons are largely drawn from an excellent book by Kevin Chen called *The Messianic Vision of the Pentateuch*, which shows in great exegetical detail that the Pentateuch predicts the coming, the suffering, the death, the resurrection, and the triumph of the Messiah, who is known as the Seed of the Woman or the Seed of Abraham. He is also clearly affiliated with the tribe of Judah. As Chen comments, "Rather than assuming *a priori* what biblical authors could or could not have known and then allowing that assumption to influence our exegesis of their writings, it is better not to assume anything about what they knew and simply to take them at their (written) word."<sup>1</sup> I've heard people say that the OT authors could not have known about Jesus. But as we will see, the Pentateuch certainly speaks with exceptional clarity regarding someone who sounds an awful lot like Jesus of Nazareth as He's described in the gospels. The first time He's

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin S. Chen, *The Messianic Vision of the Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 26.

mentioned is in Genesis 3:15, where He is called the Seed of the Woman. But the picture is filled in quite a bit in these verses here at the end of the story of the sacrifice of Isaac. What I hope to show you is that here in Genesis 22, the Son of God, whom the narrator calls the Angel of Yahweh, reveals that His Father has taken an oath. He has sworn to multiply the plural seed of Abraham, the group we call the people of God — and He has sworn to give victory to the singular seed of Abraham, the Seed of the Woman from Gen. 3:15.

### **I. The Background: Abraham Almost Sacrifices His Son, vv. 1-14**

The background to this passage is the sacrifice of Isaac, one of the most wondrous episodes in the whole Bible. Abraham takes his son, his only son, whom he loves — Isaac — and raises the knife to slay him. At that moment the Angel of Yahweh intervenes and provides a ram in place of Isaac.

The story is powerful, and I wish that we had time to explore it in detail. But I want to simply say that the story is the context for this notable oracle of Yahweh. It is in the moment after Abraham has sacrificed the lamb that God provided that the Angel of the LORD calls to him a second time and announces God's plan of blessing for Abraham — a blessing that will see his plural seed multiply, and within their number a singular Seed arise who will inherit the gate of His enemies. This, in turn, will lead to blessing for all the families of the earth. Clearly, then, the death of the lamb, i.e., the sacrifice of the only son, is the context in which this blessing is possible.

So keep that in mind: The death of the son, the death of the lamb of God, is the prerequisite for these good things to take place. The Seed will conquer the gate of His enemies, but the Lamb of God has to die first. Now, at this point in the book of Genesis, Moses had already hinted at the death of the Seed. That's back in Gen. 3:15, where the Seed is struck on the heel. Struck by what? By the serpent. In biblical times as today, the most feared serpents were the poisonous ones. To be struck on the heel by a poisonous snake is deadly, and obviously, the fulfillment of the prophecy makes it abundantly clear that yes, this reference to the serpent striking the Seed's heel is a reference to killing the Seed. The pieces are already falling into place, in between Abraham's insistence that God will provide a lamb for Himself and then God literally supplying Abraham with a lamb in place of Isaac, and then the Angel saying "Because you have not withheld your son," the blessings of the singular Seed, the plural seed, and the nations will follow.

### **II. The Mediator: Yahweh's Angel, v. 15**

Who announces these things to Abraham? It is not Yahweh Himself speaking from Heaven. Rather, the message is delivered by the Angel of Yahweh, who speaks to Abraham twice. The narrator takes pains to tell us that after the first conversation was over, and Abraham had sacrificed the ram and named the place Yahweh-Yireh, "The LORD will provide," then the Angel abruptly resumed the conversation. He called to Abraham a second time from Heaven. It's almost as though this a coda to the previous conversation. Abraham had passed the test; he had shown that he feared God (in terms of the language of Gen. 22), and that he had faith (James 2). But there is more to the story. The Angel resumes the conversation. Who is this Angel of

Yahweh? He is the pre-incarnate Son of God, the one who is Yahweh but also distinguished from Yahweh. This is abundantly clear in Judges, when the Angel of Yahweh visits Manoah and his wife, and they come away from the encounter saying “We have seen Yahweh!” The fuller revelation in the New Testament makes it clear that this Angel of Yahweh is identical to Yahweh in terms of being and power, but differentiated from Him in terms of personhood. He is another person who fully possesses the one Divine nature.

And so, this one is uniquely equipped to be the Mediator, to speak from Heaven. He is God, but He is the one who will be man. He is God, but He is distinguished from His Father and speaks of Him in the third person.

### **III. The Oath, v. 16a**

And what does He reveal?

#### **A. Yahweh’s First Oath**

He tells Abraham that Yahweh has sworn an oath. There are oaths before this in the Bible, for example in the previous chapter. But this is the first time Yahweh takes an oath in the Biblical text. It would be going too far to say that this is the first promise God ever made, but it is undoubtedly the first time that He swore an oath to a human being.

Now, you and I can’t put God under oath. Indeed, He is the personification of truth, and He cannot lie. He need not swear at all! But He humbles Himself to our level, and swears — not by Heaven, or by earth, or by the life of trees, or by the altar that Abraham built at Mamre, or anything along those lines. He swore by Himself, by Yahweh. He could not find anything greater by which to swear. Huck Finn felt that he could lie with impunity after he was put under oath on a dictionary;

“Lay your hand on this book and say it.”

I see it warn’t nothing but a dictionary, so I laid my hand on it and said it. So then she looked a little better satisfied, and says:

“Well, then, I’ll believe some of it; but I hope to gracious if I’ll believe the rest.”

Huck found something lesser by which to swear, and his conscience was comforted. God didn’t swear on the dictionary or even on the Bible; He swore on Himself. Abraham could have no possible reason for doubting the barest word of God; but he really had every reason to trust a statement that God made under oath.

#### **B. Yahweh’s First Oracle**

The other thing to notice is that this is a prophetic oracle, a “ne’um Yahweh.” This is prophetic terminology. The prophets say this all the time to indicate that the very words they speak are not their own, but that they come direct from the mouth of God Himself. This is the first time in Scripture that this phrase appears. Again, it is not the first time that God speaks; that happens all the way back in Genesis 1. But clearly, the narrator — and the Angel — are marking the thing they’re about to say as extremely important. This is no ordinary word from God (if there could be such a thing). This is an extraordinary, and extraordinarily important, word from God. When

your mom or dad tells you something, and then adds “I swear to God,” and then further adds, “Spoken by me, Annie Nelson, on this ninth day of November in the year of our Lord two thousand and twenty-two,” you sit up and say, “Clearly, I am supposed to pay an extra level of attention to this. What she just said is incredibly important.”

Abraham, in other words, needed to listen up. If he had a pencil along, it would not have been a bad idea to take notes.

#### **IV. The Promise, vv. 16b-18**

You and I need to listen up too. This is a special word from God, a word that Abraham really needed to hear and that, this Christmas season, you and I really need to hear as well. What promise did God give with such signal markers of importance attached to it? Well, the three points, A, B, and C that follow below, are not really a logical outline. Instead of each being a proposition in their own right, together they form a single proposition. I did it this way because the sacrifice of the Lamb/Son, Yahweh keeping His promises, and the blessing of the nations are not three separate promises. They are three interconnected movements in the one drama of redemption. Through the sacrifice of the only Son who is also the Lamb provided by God, Yahweh will keep His promises to multiply Abraham’s plural seed and grant victory to Abraham’s singular seed, with the final result of blessing all nations through uniting them to the Seed. Brothers and sisters, what a glorious promise of the coming Messiah this is!

##### **A. Through the Sacrifice of the Only Son/Lamb from God, v. 16b**

The first thing to see is that the promise is predicated on Abraham’s act of sacrificing his son: “Because you have done this thing,” says the Son of God from Heaven. Now, what does that mean? Here’s what it doesn’t mean: It doesn’t mean that thanks to Abraham’s obedience, Christ’s sacrifice is no longer necessary. It doesn’t mean that God’s promises are predicated entirely on His people’s obedience, such that if you and I fail to obey, the promises go away. The promises are not conditional in that sense; if they were, God would never have kept any of them.

Here’s what the “because” means. It means that the promise can only be kept through the sacrifice of the Son who is the Lamb. Because what does God say? “You have not withheld your son, your only son.” But Abraham *had* withheld his son. This is that little stress point in the narrative that reveals the clue to what the real meaning is. Abraham had been *willing* to offer his son, but had not actually done so because the Angel told him not to. To say “I was willing to remodel the kitchen for you, honey, but I ended up not doing it because you didn’t want it,” and to have her say, “Well, you did not withhold a new kitchen from me” doesn’t quite make sense. Being willing to give something and actually giving it are two different things. In other words, the Angel is not saying that Abraham as good as sacrificed his son. The angel is saying that Abraham’s sacrifice is the kind of action through which the promise will come to pass. It is not that action, but it is like that action. Offering the ram provided by God counts as offering the son provided by God. But the real action, the one through which all the promises will actually be unleashed, will take place later, when the Son of God who is the only Son and the Lamb of God at the same time sacrifices Himself.

“Because you have done this thing,” then, means “The sacrifice of the only son and lamb is the precondition for all the promises. The promises are not free; they require sacrifice, and not just any sacrifice, but the sacrifice of the most precious person in the world, the beloved Son. Because you sacrificed a lamb from God, representing the act of sacrificing your beloved son who is the ancestor of the true Beloved Son, now I can and will bless you.” In other words, through Abraham God deliberately depicted something of what the crucifixion of His Son would be like. That crucifixion is a necessary part of that blessing, because there are no blessings for a defiled people until their sin has been dealt with through the death of the Son.

### **B. Yahweh Will Keep His Promises, v. 17**

Through Abraham’s sacrifice, which is a sign and pre-enactment of the ultimate Sacrifice, Yahweh’s promises are unleashed in the world. That is the thing that had to be announced by no less a messenger than the Angel of Yahweh, as an oracle from God Himself, with an oath confirming its validity. What, then, are the promises that Yahweh makes to Abraham?

#### **1. He Will Surely Bless Abraham**

The first is “blessing I will bless you.” Abraham has a good thing coming to him! What is this blessing? I think the most natural reading is to say that the blessing is the two things that God promises to do. The first of these things is for Abraham’s plural seed, and the second is for the patriarch’s singular seed.

#### **2. He Will Surely Multiply Abraham’s Plural Seed**

The promise here is that the descendants of Abraham will be as innumerable as the stars in the sky and the grains of sand on the seashore — an obvious reference to the later multiplication of Israel during the time before Christ, and then to the global spread and multiplying of the church in the years since. Today, those who claim the name of Christ are the single largest group of human beings on the planet. This is a direct fulfillment of God’s promise to multiply the plural seed of Abraham. Indeed, if it comes to that, the two largest religions on earth today look to Abraham as their father, along with what is far and away the most influential of the tiny religions (Judaism). If you add together the 1.8bn Muslims and the 2.2bn Christians, you have a clear majority of human beings who trace their lineage, physical or spiritual, to Abraham.

God made this promise to Abraham, and He has kept it. To have 51% of the human race call you “Father” certainly fulfills the title of “Big Daddy” that God bestowed on this man.

#### **3. He Will Grant Victory to Abraham’s Singular Seed**

But the promises to the singular seed outshine even the promises to the plural seed, magnificent as those are. Here in Gen. 22, God tells Abraham that from the plural seed a singular seed will emerge, a single One in whom all the families of the earth will be blessed. The Angel of Yahweh says two major things about this singular Seed.

##### **a) The Singular Seed will Inherit**

First, He will “inherit” or “possess” (two possible translations). Clearly, there is resonance here with the repeated statements in the rest of the Bible that the meek will inherit the earth.

**b) The Gate of His Enemies (cf. Gen. 24:60, Psalm 127:5, Matt. 16:18)**

But rather than saying “inherit the earth,” the Angel specifically promises that the singular Seed of Abraham will inherit the gate of His enemies. Now, your translation might say “the gate of their enemies” (so CEB, CSB, NKJV, NAS, NET, NIV, NJB, RSV, NRSV). But the pronoun in Hebrew is the third-person masculine singular possessive, i.e., “his” — reflected accurately in the ESV and KJV.

What in the world does it mean to possess the gate of His enemies? How do gates have anything to do with the death of the Lamb of God who is also the beloved Son? The answer is that, if you care to look, this “gate” theme actually crops up repeatedly through scripture. It is repeated nearly verbatim two chapters later, when Rebekah leaves her family to go be Isaac’s wife: “And they blessed Rebekah and said to her, ‘Our sister, may you become thousands of ten thousands, and may your offspring possess the gate of those who hate him!’ (Gen 24:60 ESV). Again, then, this promise of the Seed possessing the gate of His enemies, here described as His “haters”. But the gate theme crops up elsewhere too. One thinks immediately of Samson’s all-too-literal fulfillment of this promise. He picked up the gates of Gaza, right out of the ground, and carried them away to the top of a hill — thus possessing the gate of his enemies in a way that no one could argue with. One of the two psalms of Solomon, the other of which (Ps. 72) is heavily Messianic, also ends by talking about the man with his quiver full of children (a clear reference to the multiplication of the plural seed) who “speaks with his enemies in the gate,” unashamed (Ps. 127). Why won’t he be ashamed? Because the gate belongs to him! He has inherited it, possesses in spite of His enemies, and has a mighty seed. I think often of my dad, flanked by his seven strong and manly sons. Dad is a good man, but there is no doubt that the eight of us together are far more impressive than he is alone. Even so, this picture of the multiplying seed, the possession of the enemies’ gate, and the singular Seed who possesses it, all come together to make Psalm 127 make perfect sense.

Finally, this reference is picked up by Jesus Himself in His famous promise to build His church, “and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it.” Once again, the Son of God is shown possessing the gate of His enemies. All His enemies are locked up in Hell — but He inherits the gates, busts them open, and leads out a host of captives who joyfully become His seed.

**C. Blessing All Nations through Uniting them to the Seed, v. 18a**

That is where the Angel of Yahweh takes this promise: all the nations of the earth, every people group that lives on this rock, will be blessed through union with the Seed. Just as Paul constantly repeats the words “in Christ” to tell us that the blessings of the Christian life happen only in union with our Savior, so already Moses uses the same phrase from the mouth of Yahweh’s angel to tell us that the blessings of Abraham only come to those who are united to Abraham’s singular Seed. All those in Him, some from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation, will be blessed because Abraham offered the lamb from God as a symbolic offering of his beloved only son.

**V. The Application: This Doesn't Happen Apart from Abraham's Obedience, v. 18b**

In case we missed it, the Angel adds again the words “because you have obeyed my voice.” Ultimately, we understand that the blessing happens because Jesus obeyed. But the blessing is also conditioned in some sense on Abraham's obedience. Without Abraham going and enacting the symbolic death of the beloved son through the sacrifice of the ram caught in the bushes, this blessing for the nations would, at worst, not have come at all — or at best, come through a different channel. Frankly, I don't know how best to conceptualize or understand this contingency. But I do know this: Obedience to God is not optional. When you say “God is going to make it work out no matter what I do,” you are on very thin ice. It is true that God doesn't need your help. But it is equally true that if you refuse to obey Him, you are cutting yourself off from the blessings. He may still bring blessings to the nations. But if you back out of that possibility, if you refuse to offer your beloved son or whatever beloved thing God asks from you, don't look for His favor. You are not saved by your obedience, but you are most certainly blessed by it!

Good works are not necessary to justification but they are essential to salvation. Because Abraham obeyed, God promised to multiply his plural seed and bring his singular seed as the one who conquered His enemies' gate. So know, love, and trust the God who promises that His Seed will possess the gate of His enemies. And obey Him. Don't be an enemy; be a friend, a follower, a servant of the Seed. Amen.