

Concordia Seminary - Saint Louis

## Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary

---

Master of Sacred Theology Thesis

Concordia Seminary Scholarship

---

5-1-1989

### Isaac as Preached by Luther

Ralph Rokke

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/stm>



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Rokke, Ralph, "Isaac as Preached by Luther" (1989). *Master of Sacred Theology Thesis*. 83.  
<https://scholar.csl.edu/stm/83>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Concordia Seminary Scholarship at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master of Sacred Theology Thesis by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact [seitzw@csl.edu](mailto:seitzw@csl.edu).

ISAAC AS PREACHED BY LUTHER

---

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty  
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,  
Department of Systematic Theology  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Sacred Theology

---

by

Ralph Maynard Rokke

May, 1989

Approved by: Norman Nagel

Advisor

Robert Rosin

Reader

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The writer would like to express his appreciation to Dr. Norman Nagel of Concordia Seminary for suggesting the title of this study and for providing guidance in a very rich study in theology and in the exposition of God's Word.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Chapter

**I. Introduction.....1**

**II. GOD'S EIGHT PROMISES TO ABRAHAM  
CONCERNING THE BIRTH OF ISAAC.....4**

The First Promise: Genesis 12:1-4.....5  
The Second Promise: Genesis 12:7.....10  
The Third Promise: Genesis 13:14-17.....10  
The Fourth Promise: Genesis 15.....13  
The Fifth Promise: Genesis 17.....18  
The Sixth Promise: Genesis 18.....26  
The Seventh Promise: Genesis 21:12-13.....31  
The Eighth Promise: Genesis 22:16-18.....42

**III. THE MAJOR EVENTS OF ISAAC'S LIFE.....47**

The Promise of Isaac's Birth and  
the Birth Itself.....47  
The Sacrifice of Isaac.....52  
The Marriage of Isaac.....72  
Isaac's Wait for the Seed.....79

**IV. OBSERVATIONS ABOUT LUTHER'S  
HERMENEUTICAL METHODOLOGY.....111**

1. The Scriptures Are the Word of God.....112  
2. All of the Word Is Law and Gospel.....116  
3. Christ Is the Heart of the Scriptures.....120  
4. Know the Central Message of the Text.....123  
5. Paul Is the Most Perfect Teacher.....126  
6. The Most Charitable Construction.....128  
7. Appearances Are Usually False.....132  
8. Synecdoche.....137  
9. The Saints Are Models for Christians.....140  
Conclusion.....143

**SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY..... 145**

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

This study is an attempt to summarize what Martin Luther believed, taught, and confessed concerning the Old Testament saint and patriarch Isaac.

The title of this study is "Isaac As Preached By Luther." The word "preached" as it is used in this title has a very general meaning. It is used to refer to all that Luther taught about Isaac. The primary goal is to summarize what Luther taught about Isaac, and a secondary goal is to describe a few of the hermeneutical principles which Luther employed in arriving at his conclusions concerning Isaac.

This study will trace Luther's exposition of the life of Isaac primarily as that exposition is found in his Genesis Commentary, although at times references will also be made to other writings of Luther in which Isaac is mentioned. Luther's main work in expounding the life of Isaac was accomplished in the late 1530s and the early 1540s. At that time he dealt with Isaac as a part of his magnificent university lectures on the book of Genesis. He began the Genesis lectures on June 3, 1535, and he concluded them on November 17, 1545, just months before his death on

February 18, 1546.<sup>1</sup> They were the last great labor of his life.

In the margin of his notes on Genesis 22, Luther wrote that he had begun lecturing on that chapter on the day following the funeral of his friend and colleague Dr. Sebald Münsterer. Dr. Münsterer died in a plague which struck Wittenberg in 1539, and his funeral is known to have been held on October 26, 1539.<sup>2</sup> Thus we know that October 27, 1539, was the date for Luther's lecture on Genesis 22 which describes the sacrifice of Isaac. It is also believed that Luther lectured on Genesis 24 in 1540,<sup>3</sup> and on Genesis 26-30 in late 1541 and in 1542.<sup>4</sup>

Special attention will be given in this study to Luther's exposition of God's eight promises to Abraham concerning the meaning of the birth and life of his son Isaac. These promises are found scattered in the text of Genesis in chapters 12-22. Attention will also be given to the exposition of the sacrifice of Isaac, which is described in Genesis 22; to the exposition of his marriage, which is described in Genesis 24; and to the exposition of Isaac's

---

<sup>1</sup>Martin Luther, D. Martin Luthers Werke; kritische Gesamtausgabe (Weimarer Ausgabe), 42. Band, Einleitung von G. Hoffmann, (Weimar: Herman Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1895), pp. vii-viii. [Hereafter WA]

<sup>2</sup>Martin Luther, Luther's Works, 55 vols., gen. eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehman (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House and Philadelphia: Muhlenberg/Fortress Press, 1955--), 4:ix. [Hereafter LW].

<sup>3</sup>LW, 4:x.

<sup>4</sup>LW, 5:xi.

later trials, which are recorded in Genesis 25:21-28:5.

The greatest trial which Isaac endured after his marriage was a long wait for children to be born to him and to his wife Rebekah. Since Isaac had been promised that Christ would come as his descendant, this wait was really a wait for Christ, and it was only the foremost among many trials which he endured as he waited for God to fulfill His promises.

Luther said that Isaac spent his whole life enduring one trial after another. God gave Isaac these trials which seemed to contradict His promises to bless Isaac and to give him Christ. Yet the trials did not overthrow God's promises. The promises of the Gospel, as God gave them to Isaac, were all true. They stood fast, in spite of appearances to the contrary, and Isaac's faith in God's promises grew as it was exercised by the trials.

The story of Isaac as Luther presents it to us is the story of God's working powerfully in one man's life both through His law and through His Gospel. Luther presents the story of Isaac to all Christians as an illustration of how they may expect God also to work in their lives through His Law and His Gospel, and he presents the man Isaac to his hearers as a model for them to follow in trusting in God's promises and in bearing the cross patiently.

CHAPTER II  
GOD'S EIGHT PROMISES TO ABRAHAM  
CONCERNING THE BIRTH OF ISAAC

On six occasions before Isaac was born, God spoke to Abraham and gave him promises about the birth of Isaac. On two more occasions after Isaac's birth, God again spoke to Abraham telling him of the significance of Isaac.

Luther paid the greatest attention to these promises. He wrote, ". . . I have stated repeatedly . . . that in the Holy Scriptures and the accounts they record one should take note above all of the Word and addresses of God . . ." <sup>1</sup> He wrote also:

Moreover, how impressive Abraham's glory is, since he enters so often into conversation with God! We find that God conversed with him eight times. <sup>2</sup>

For Luther, the eight promises were important because God was speaking in them. Since God was speaking in them about Isaac, he, too, was important. Luther wrote:

Moses praises and exalts the birth of Isaac at such length because he wants to remind us that nothing should be given so much consideration as the Word itself. <sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>LW, 4, p. 140.

<sup>2</sup>LW, 4, p. 140.

<sup>3</sup>LW, 4, p. 7.



**The First Promise:**  
**Genesis 12:1-4**

The first occurrence of God giving a promise to Abraham is recorded in Genesis 12:1-4. The promise came when Abraham was still living at Haran. He was seventy-five years old and was still named Abram.

At that time God said to Abram:

Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee: And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.<sup>4</sup>

Luther regarded this first promise to Abraham as marking the beginning of a "third age" in the history of the world. The first age was the period from the creation to the flood, and the second was from the flood to Abraham. Luther said that the beginning of this third age came at a time when ungodliness had so increased in the world that it was necessary for God to accomplish "the rebirth of the church, lest it collapse entirely and true religion be utterly blotted out."<sup>5</sup>

Luther noted that Abraham was an idolater when God called him to leave Haran and move to Canaan. He pointed out that Abraham's deliverance from idolatry resulted not

---

<sup>4</sup>All Biblical quotations are taken from the Authorized Version.

<sup>5</sup>LW, 2:245.

from his own merits or powers but solely by the grace of God who pitied Abraham and called him.<sup>6</sup>

In this Luther saw an early proof that salvation is by grace alone. He wrote, "Therefore this passage is important as proof for the doctrine of grace over against the worth of merits and works . . ."7

The means which God used to save Abraham was His Word. Luther wrote, "Abraham is merely the material that the Divine Majesty seizes through the Word and forms into a new human being and into a patriarch."<sup>8</sup>

God's reason for choosing an idolater to be the ancestor of Christ was so that God's grace toward sinners might be shown. Luther wrote, "The Son of God wants this ancestor in His line of descent . . . in order to show that He is the Savior of sinners."<sup>9</sup> Here, as he expounded upon the life of Isaac, Luther preached Christ as a Savior for all sinners.

Luther believed that God's first Word to Abraham came to him through the patriarch Shem. Shem was the son of Noah, and Luther also thought that he was Melchizedek, the king of Salem, who is mentioned in Genesis 14:18.<sup>10</sup>

Luther was convinced that God's first call to Abraham came to him mediately through Shem. Later God would speak to Abraham directly, but, in Luther's view, God's first Word

---

<sup>6</sup>LW, 2:246.      <sup>7</sup>LW, 2:246.      <sup>8</sup>LW 2:247.

<sup>9</sup>LW, 2:248.      <sup>10</sup>LW, 2:383.

to Abraham came to him, as it does to us, through the office of the ministry. Luther wrote:

I am convinced that he was not called directly by God without the ministry, as it is related below (Gen. 18:2) that God visited him, conversed with him, and was even the guest of Abraham; but I believe that this command was brought to him either by the patriarch Shem personally or by some others who had been sent by Shem.<sup>11</sup>

God's call to Abraham, though it came through Shem, was nevertheless the true Word of God. Luther said, "Whatever men speak at the prompting of the Spirit of God, that God Himself speaks, as Christ says (Luke 10:16): 'He who hears you, hears me.'"<sup>12</sup>

Luther praised the faith of Abraham for being willing to give up his previous idolatrous religion and to go by faith to Canaan in obedience to God's Word. He praised Sarah too for being willing to go with Abraham. He wrote:

She was aided by the Holy Spirit, who moved her womanly heart so that she also, disregarding everything else, followed God when He called, since she also desired to be saved and not be condemned with idolaters.<sup>13</sup>

God's first promise to Abraham was this: "And I will make of thee a great nation . . ." (Genesis 12:2) Luther regarded this as being a promise that the nation of Israel would be descended from Abraham. This was a promise of physical descendants.<sup>14</sup>

God also said to Abraham, "I will bless thee." (Gen-

---

<sup>11</sup>LW, 2:249. <sup>12</sup>LW, 2:250. <sup>13</sup>LW, 2:252.

<sup>14</sup>LW, 2:254.

esis 12:2) Luther regarded this as being a promise that the nation of Israel would endure.<sup>15</sup>

The third promise was, "And make thy name great." (Genesis 12:2) Luther understood this as being a promise that great men such as David, Daniel, and others would come from Abraham.<sup>16</sup>

The fourth promise in God's first call to Abraham was, "And thou shalt be a blessing." (Genesis 12:2) Luther saw this as a promise that kings of other nations, such as Darius and Cyrus, would later be blessed through Abraham's seed.<sup>17</sup>

The fifth promise was "And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee." (Genesis 12:3) Luther saw this primarily as an assurance of protection for the descendants of Abraham.<sup>18</sup>

The sixth promise in God's first Word to Abraham was the most important of all. God said, "And in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed." (Genesis 12:3) Luther regarded this as a promise of Christ. He wrote, "But now there follows that promise which should be written in golden letters and should be extolled in the language of all people, for it offers eternal treasures."<sup>19</sup> This promise,

---

<sup>15</sup>LW, 2:257.

<sup>16</sup>LW, 2:258.

<sup>17</sup>LW, 2:259.

<sup>18</sup>LW, 2:259.

<sup>19</sup>LW, 2:260; Martin Luther, D. Martin Luthers Werke; kritische Gesamtausgabe (Weimarer Ausgabe), 42. Band, Einleitung von G. Hoffmann, (Weimar: Herman Böhlau

he said, cannot be understood in a material sense, for it dispenses blessing among all the nations. Only Jesus Christ, the Son of God, can do that.

Luther believed that Abraham understood this promise as being a promise of Christ. He depicted Abraham as thinking to himself:

. . . from my posterity will be born One who is blessed in His own person and who will bring a blessing so long and wide that it will reach all the families of the earth. He must necessarily be God and not a human being, although He will be a human being and will take on our flesh so that He is truly my seed.<sup>20</sup>

Luther saw here not only the incarnation but also that Abraham understood the promise of the incarnation.

This first Word of God to Abraham included promises pertaining to two covenant peoples. It gave him the promise of "a great nation," which was a reference to the future nation of Israel, and it gave him the promise that "in thee shall all nations of the earth be blessed," which was a promise that the church would be his descendants. As shall be seen, both of these covenant peoples were given to Abraham through Isaac.

---

Nachfolger, 1895), p. 447, [Hereafter WA] lines 10-11 - "Sed nunc sequitur illa aureis literis scribenda et omnium linguis celebrenda promissio, quae aeternos thesauros offert." Luther regarded this promise as being pure Gospel. Its presence in the history of Abraham and Isaac enabled Luther to interpret all subsequent events in their lives as events happening to sinners who were justified by God's grace through faith in Christ.

<sup>20</sup>LW, 2:260.

This, then, is the first Word of God which came to Abraham and contained promises pertaining to Isaac and to Christ. Luther saw in this Word both Law and Gospel. He saw Law in it in its implicit reproof of Abraham's idolatry, and he saw Gospel in it in that Abraham was given a wonderful promise concerning Christ.<sup>21</sup>

**The Second Promise:**  
**Genesis 12:7**

The second occurrence of God giving a promise to Abraham is a very brief one. It is recorded in Genesis 12:7. It came after Abraham had moved to the land of Canaan. There God appeared to him and said, "Unto thy seed will I give this land."

Luther said that this promise came to Abraham after he had exhausted himself "by his burdensome exile and endless migrations."<sup>22</sup> Luther saw this promise as being given to Abraham to comfort and reassure him at a time of weariness.

This promise pertains to the future nation of Israel. Luther wrote of it: "This promise is truly a physical one."<sup>23</sup> He saw it as pertaining to Israel, not the church.

**The Third Promise:**  
**Genesis 13:14-17**

The third time that God spoke to Abraham and gave him promises is recorded in Genesis 13:14-17. The Lord said to Abraham:

---

<sup>21</sup>LW, 2:253-254.

<sup>22</sup>LW, 2:283.

<sup>23</sup>LW, 2:284.

Lift up now thine eyes, and look from the place where thou art northward, and southward, and eastward, and westward. For all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed forever. And I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth: so that if a man can number the dust of the earth, then shall thy seed also be numbered. Arise, walk through the land in the length of it and in the breadth of it; for I will give it unto thee.

Luther wrote concerning this passage:

Now comes the third passage in which it is written: "The Lord spoke with Abraham." I have often exhorted that in the accounts or, as the masses call them, the legends of the saints, this chief feature of the account must be particularly observed, namely, the Word of God. In all ages God has done great things and wonderful works through His saints. These works are impressive and strike the eye; but for us who teach as well as learn the Holy Scriptures, God's own utterance must be especially resplendent.<sup>24</sup>

Luther again shows here how the Word of God was for him the highest source of authority and truth.

Luther regarded this third promise of God to Abraham as also pertaining to Israel. He called it "a physical blessing."<sup>25</sup>

In commenting on this third promise to Abraham, Luther again expressed the opinion that God's Word had come to Abraham through Shem. He wrote:

But someone will say, how did God speak to Abraham? From heaven, as Christ converses with Paul near Damascus? My own opinion is this: He did so through the patriarch Shem and through the human ministry.<sup>26</sup>

In expounding on this text, Luther began to make a very important distinction between two kinds of posterity which would come to Abraham through Isaac. One kind would

---

<sup>24</sup>LW, 2:351

<sup>25</sup>LW, 2:358.

<sup>26</sup>LW, 2:358.

be physical posterity, the nation of Israel, and the other kind would be a spiritual posterity, the church. Luther saw references to these two different kinds of posterity in Genesis 15:5 and Genesis 13:16. He wrote concerning these two passages:

There [Genesis 15:5] he [the Lord] compares the descendants of Abraham to the stars and luminaries of heaven, but here [Genesis 13:16] to the dust of the earth.

These comparisons indicate the twofold posterity of Abraham: the one, earthly and physical; the other, heavenly, spiritual, and eternal.<sup>27</sup>

Luther saw the church as the spiritual and therefore more glorious posterity of Abraham. He knew that this interpretation would be offensive to Jewish scholars. Consequently he anticipated their objections and answered them.

Luther said that the Jews, because of their denial of Christ, have been set aside as the people of God. God's promise to them that the land of Canaan would be theirs "for ever" meant "that is, up to the time of Christ."<sup>28</sup>

Luther said that the Hebrew word עולם which is translated here as "for ever," "does not denote unlimited or eternal time, but an uncertain length of time or a long time without any definite termination."<sup>29</sup> In this case, Luther said, it designated the time of the physical generations of Israel until the advent of Christ who would come and initiate a new spiritual generation, the church.

---

<sup>27</sup>LW, 2:359.

<sup>28</sup>LW, 2:360-361.

<sup>29</sup>LW, 2:361.



**The Fourth Promise:**  
**Genesis 15**

The fourth occurrence of God giving His promises to Abraham is recorded in Genesis 15. This occurrence took the form of a fairly lengthy conversation between God and Abraham. Luther said of it, ". . . this very passage, because of God's extensive conversation with Abraham, deserves to be regarded as highly important."<sup>30</sup>

This Word came several years after Abraham had received the first promise concerning descendants and yet at a time when he was still childless. Abraham had begun to think that perhaps the promise meant that he would not have children from his own body, but through his servant Eliezer.

Luther believed that Abraham at this time was undergoing some kind of trial. Luther was not entirely sure what the trial was, but he believed that there had to be a trial since God began this conversation by saying, "Fear not, Abram." (Genesis 15:1) Luther wrote:

If he was not at the point of despair over his defense or protection, or did not have doubts about his reward, what was the need of God's exhortation not to fear and of His promise of an abundant reward?<sup>31</sup>

As Luther continued, however, he concluded that perhaps the trial for Abraham at this time stemmed from his lack of children. Luther wrote, "Therefore Abraham's trial actually consisted in his fear that the promise would be

---

<sup>30</sup>LW, 3:17.      <sup>31</sup>LW, 3:4.

diverted from his own offspring and seed to his servant."<sup>32</sup> He based this conclusion on verses 2 and 3 of Genesis 15 in which Abraham pointed out to God that he was still childless and that his only heir seemed to be his slave Eliezer of Damascus.

Luther felt that Abraham's faith in God's promises was wavering at this time, and therefore God reassured Abraham by telling him in verse 4, ". . . he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thy heir."

From that time on, Abraham knew that the promised seed would come from his own body. He did not yet know for sure that Sarah would be the mother of the child, but he knew that he would be its father. Luther wrote:

Just as Abraham is strengthened by the divine Word, that he might be certain about the promise which his domestics were distorting, so it is God's regular custom to stand by and strengthen the church when it is in trouble.<sup>33</sup>

Three things are especially significant in this fourth occurrence of the promise. The first has already been noted. It is that God assured Abraham that his heir would be born of his own body.

The second significant thing is that Moses recorded

---

<sup>32</sup>LW, 3:13.

<sup>33</sup>LW, 3:16; WA, 42:559, lines 35-37 - "Sicut igitur Abraham divina voce confirmatur, ut de promissione, quam depravabant domestici eius, certus esset: Ita semper solet Deus laboranti Ecclesiae adesse, et eam confirmare." Here Luther presented the case of Abraham to his hearers as an example of how all believers may be sure that God will help them in times of trouble.

explicitly here that Abraham was justified by his faith in the promise of God. Genesis 15:6 says, "And he [Abraham] believed in the LORD; and he [the Lord] counted it to him for righteousness." Luther noted that this is the first passage in the Bible to state the value of faith in this way. He wrote:

Moreover, when Moses adds that Abraham believed God, this is the first passage of Scripture which we have had until now about faith. For the others, which Moses mentioned previously - the passage about the Seed of the woman, for example, the command to build the ark, the threat of the Flood, and the command to Abraham to leave his country, etc. - merely demand faith; they do not praise or recommend it.<sup>34</sup>

Abraham was justified by faith, and the Apostle Paul expounded upon this verse in Romans 4 to show that justification by faith is the only way of salvation for all people. Paul wrote in Romans 4:23-24:

Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it [righteousness] was imputed to him; But for us also, to whom it [righteousness] shall be imputed, if we believe in him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead.

Luther wrote:

Read Paul, and read him most attentively. Then you will see that from this passage he constructs the foremost article of our faith - the article that is intolerable to the world and to Satan - namely that faith alone justifies.<sup>35</sup>

Paul taught justification by faith on the basis of

---

<sup>34</sup>LW, 3:19.

<sup>35</sup>LW, 3:19; WA, 42:562 - "Vos Paulum legite, et legite attentissime, ac videbitis ex hoc loco extruere eum praecipuum nostrae fidei articulum, mundo et Satanae intolerabilem, quod sola fides iustificet."

Genesis 15:6. He also taught that Abraham is the father of all who are justified by faith. In Romans 4:16 Paul referred to Abraham as "the father of us all." Included in that statement are all who believe in God's promises concerning Christ. Thus Luther, in asserting that Christians are the truest seed of Abraham, was merely following Paul.

The statement in Genesis 15:6 that Abraham was justified by faith is an extremely important one. Luther wrote that the Holy Spirit included it here so that ". . . you might conclude on the basis of a correct inference that those who accept this Seed, or those who believe in Christ, are righteous."<sup>36</sup> He also wrote, "Hence our doctrine that we are justified before God solely through His accounting mercy has its foundation in this passage."<sup>37</sup>

This discussion of justification by faith led Luther to give a description of the distinction between Law and Gospel in the Word of God. He wrote:

The promise requires faith; the Law works. The promise is certain and reliable, and is surely carried out, because God carries it out. But the Law is not carried out, because we, who try to fulfill it, are human beings, that is, weak sinners.<sup>38</sup>

Here we see how the distinction between Law and Gospel helped Luther to understand why even Abraham could only be justified by faith. The Law cannot save because it makes demands of man, and man cannot meet the demands because he is weak through sin.

---

<sup>36</sup>LW, 3:20.      <sup>37</sup>LW, 3:22.      <sup>38</sup>LW, 3:26.

The Gospel, however, can save because it makes the work of man's salvation God's responsibility. What man cannot do, God can. Therefore, every sinner, even Abraham, can only be justified through faith in God's promises concerning what God has done and will do in Christ.

In Luther's view, justification by faith has always been the only way whereby sinners are reconciled to God. This principle was true for the saints of the Old Testament period, just as it is now true for the saints of the New Testament age. Luther wrote:

The only difference between Abraham's faith and ours is this: Abraham believed in the Christ who was to be manifested, but we believe in the Christ who has already been manifested; and by that faith we all are saved.<sup>39</sup>

The third thing in Genesis 15 which is especially significant is that God foretold here that Israel would spend many years in bondage in Egypt. In Genesis 15:13-16, God told Abraham that his descendants would spend 400 years in bondage in a strange land. He also told him that they would then be delivered with great riches. Luther commented that after that time Abraham doubtless impressed upon his descendants in sermon after sermon that when their time of hardships came they should not despair but rather remember God's promises to return them to Canaan.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup>LW, 3:26.

<sup>40</sup>LW, 3:33.

**The Fifth Promise:**  
**Genesis 17**

The fifth time when God spoke to Abraham and gave him promises concerning the birth of Isaac is recorded in Genesis 17. It occurred when Abraham was 99 years old, thirteen years after he had fathered Ishmael by means of the slave Hagar in an attempt to fulfill the promise as he understood it. This fifth promise came in the form of a lengthy address by God to Abraham.

In this fifth address, circumcision was made the outward covenant sign for the physical nation to be raised up through Isaac. God said to Abraham in Genesis 17:10:

This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised.

In his exposition of this fifth Word of God to Abraham, Luther dealt extensively with the subject of circumcision. He said that circumcision needed to be discussed at length so that Christians would not become confused about it and believe that it was necessary for them.

Luther said that two arguments showed that circumcision was not necessary for Christians. The first one was that circumcision was a command of the Law, and, since Christ is the end of the Law for all who believe, therefore circumcision is not necessary for believers who live after the incarnation. The second argument is that circumcision obviously does not make a person righteous because even

Abraham, to whom it was first given, had already been declared righteous by faith before he was circumcised.<sup>41</sup>

Luther then explained why God instituted circumcision.

He wrote:

For this law concerning circumcision was imposed on the Jews, not in order that they might be justified by it - for then Christ would have been promised in vain - but in order that they might be a people separated from all other peoples, in order that it might be known from what people, from what part of the world, the Savior was to be born.<sup>42</sup>

Here Luther shows again how he viewed all of God's Word in relationship to Christ. Even God's command of circumcision was to be understood in light of Christ. It was to be seen as a sign pointing to the coming of Christ.

Luther emphatically taught that God intended circumcision to end when Christ came. He wrote:

The patriarchs understood well that the command concerning circumcision extended no further than to the descendants of Abraham and that the descendants of Abraham did not have to observe it forever but only up to the time of Christ, the true Seed of Abraham.<sup>43</sup>

Luther further wrote:

Therefore after Christ had come, circumcision had to give way as a shadow gives way when the sun comes.<sup>44</sup>

In Luther's view, circumcision was given as a mark to the Jews in order to prompt the admiration of the Gentiles for the true God until Christ would come and give a new mark. That new mark would be baptism. Luther wrote that

---

<sup>41</sup>LW, 3:77-78.    <sup>42</sup>LW, 3:82.    <sup>43</sup>LW, 3:81.

<sup>44</sup>LW, 3:91.

baptism is:

. . . a mark by which both the Jews and the Gentiles would be certified as sharers in the eternal grace which, through the Son of God, falls to the lot, not of those who are favored because of the prerogative of birth according to the flesh but of those who believe, or have been born again through water and the Spirit.<sup>45</sup>

Luther followed Paul extensively in his teaching about circumcision. He called Paul "the best and most learned interpreter of Moses,"<sup>46</sup> and Luther joined with Paul in affirming that it is not birth in the family line of Abraham or circumcision which saves but rather faith in the promises of Christ where were given to Abraham.<sup>47</sup>

Luther defined being in the bosom of Abraham, mentioned by Christ in Luke 16:22, as being in the promise of God,<sup>48</sup> and he wrote, ". . . the Gentiles are excluded from circumcision, they are nevertheless not excluded from the blessing if they believe with faithful Abraham."<sup>49</sup>

The second thing which Luther noted in his exposition of Genesis 17 was that God changed Abraham's name in this fifth repetition of the promise to him. Prior to this time, Abraham's name had been Abram אַבְרָם, which means "lofty father." After this time, it was to be Abraham אַבְרָהָם, which means "father of a multitude."<sup>50</sup> This name signified that Abraham would be the father of all who believe in

---

<sup>45</sup>LW, 3:95.      <sup>46</sup>LW, 3:94.      <sup>47</sup>LW, 3:96.

<sup>48</sup>LW, 3:110.      <sup>49</sup>LW, 3:143.      <sup>50</sup>LW, 3:100.



the promise of Christ.<sup>51</sup>

Sarah's name was also changed from Sarai שָׂרַי to Sarah שָׂרָה . Sarai meant "my lady" in the sense of a mistress of a household. Sarah meant "victor" or "over-comer" to show that she would be the mother of countless families in the church.<sup>52</sup>

The third thing in Genesis 17 of which Luther took special note was God's promise in verse 7: "And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee."

This was a promise concerning Israel, Abraham's physical descendants, and Luther again interpreted the word "everlasting" as meaning only until Christ came. Luther taught that when Christ came, a new spiritual generation began. This new spiritual generation is the church, and the church too is the seed of Abraham. Luther wrote that God hereby assigned to the church "a definite place in the family of Abraham."<sup>53</sup> The covenant promised here began, then, with Israel but passed to the church when Christ came.

Luther said that the condition of the Jews in his day was clear evidence that their generations as the people of God were at an end. He wrote:

We have the evidence before our eyes that the generations have now ceased to exist for more than 1,500 years; for they are without a temple, without a

---

<sup>51</sup>LW, 3:112.

<sup>52</sup>LW, 3:146-147.

<sup>53</sup>LW, 3:123.

priesthood, and without a kingdom. This surely means that the generations are at an end. What folly it is, therefore, still to insist on circumcision!<sup>54</sup>

God promised to Abraham both Israel and the church, but the latter was the greater promise. Luther referred to God's promises concerning the land of Canaan and the nation of Israel as a shell within which he presented to Abraham an even more valuable kernel, which was the promise of Christ and the church. Luther wrote:

Thus the external promises are like a shell; but the essential part of the nut and its real nature is Christ and eternal life . . .

. . . the material promises are like nuts and apples with which we attract children to ourselves.<sup>55</sup>

God gave to Abraham two kinds of descendants through Isaac. One was the nation of Israel, and the other is Christ and the church. The second kind of posterity is more valuable and is Abraham's truest seed.

A fourth piece of significant information which God gave to Abraham in this fifth promise was that Sarah would indeed be the mother of the son which God had promised to Abraham. God said to Abraham concerning Sarah in Genesis 17:16:

And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be of her.

Abraham's response was to laugh. Luther wrote, "Exulting and triumphing in the most beautiful and perfect faith,

---

<sup>54</sup>LW, 3:126.      <sup>55</sup>LW, 3:149.

he falls to the ground and laughs."<sup>56</sup> Luther said that Christ was thinking of this incident when He said in John 8:56, "Abraham saw my day and was glad."<sup>57</sup> Luther followed Christ in interpreting this passage and in observing not sin but the highest form of godliness in Abraham's laughter.

In Luther's view, God was clearly showing here that there are two covenants, and that the second covenant, too, was established with Isaac. Indeed the second covenant was established more exclusively with Isaac than was the first. The first covenant, the physical covenant according to which the nation of Israel was raised up, had circumcision as its mark, and Ishmael was allowed to share in circumcision.

The promise of the second covenant, however, was established by these words: ". . . I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him." This promise was for Isaac alone and excluded Ishmael. It was the promise according to which God raised up the church as the spiritual seed of Abraham and Isaac through Christ.

Luther wrote:

The second covenant is here established with Isaac . . . This text proves that besides the covenant of circumcision there is another, which pertains to Isaac alone and not, like the covenant of circumcision, to Ishmael also.

What, then, shall we say was the nature of this covenant? It was obviously the promise concerning

---

<sup>56</sup>LW, 3:154.      <sup>57</sup>LW, 3:153.

Christ, which Abraham understood well.<sup>58</sup>

Here we see another reason why Luther, following Paul, believed and taught that the true seed of Abraham and of Isaac is the church and not the nation of Israel. The nation of Israel, the people of the first covenant, delighted in a covenant whose mark was circumcision. Yet circumcision was a sign in which Ishmael too was allowed to share. It was a sign which pertained only to the flesh.

The church, on the other hand, delights in a covenant which was given only to Isaac and whose fulfillment is Christ. Luther put it this way:

. . . this text gives the Jews clear proof concerning the twofold covenant. The covenant of circumcision, which they value so highly, is solely a covenant of the Law and is temporal. Not only Isaac but also Ishmael and the descendants of Ishmael rejoice in it; but the other covenant, which excludes Ishmael and is made with Isaac alone, is spiritual and eternal. The covenant of circumcision is given for our performance before the Law of Moses and is established for a definite people, in a definite land, and for a definite time, namely, while the generations of Abraham are in existence. The covenant of Isaac, however, is not given for our performance; it is entirely free, without a name, without a time, and yet from the seed of Isaac, lest one look for the blessing from another source.<sup>59</sup>

In Luther's view, the covenant by which God raised up the church is far superior to the covenant by which He raised up the nation of Israel. It is superior because it is spiritual, because it is eternal, and because it is a covenant of grace rather than law. Luther called it "a

---

<sup>58</sup>LW, 3:162.

<sup>59</sup>LW, 3:162-163.

spiritual covenant concerning the future Savior."<sup>60</sup>

Luther took pains in expounding the fifth Word of promise from God to Abraham to remind his hearers that we too have been blessed with knowledge concerning the second covenant. He wrote:

Even though God does not appear to us in an extraordinary form, as He did to Abraham, yet His usual and most friendly and most intimate appearance is this, that He presents Himself to us in the Word, in the use of the Keys, in Baptism, and in the Lord's Supper.<sup>61</sup>

Our revelation concerning the promise of Christ is greater than Abraham's. Luther wrote:

If Abraham should be compared with us who live in the New Testament, he is, for the most part, less important than we are, provided that one considers the matter impartially. To be sure, in his case the personal gifts are greater; but God did not manifest Himself to him in a closer and more friendly manner than he does to us.<sup>62</sup>

Luther thus makes the point that whoever possesses in greatest clarity the Gospel of Christ has been most blessed by God.

Luther praised Abraham's unquestioning obedience to God's command for him to be circumcised. Abraham did not allow his reason to ask why he should be circumcised and so hold him back from the painful act. Instead, as Luther wrote:

He simply cuts the throat of this baneful why and tears it out of his heart by the roots. He takes

---

<sup>60</sup>LW, 3:162.

<sup>61</sup>LW, 3:165.

<sup>62</sup>LW, 3:166.

reason captive and finds satisfaction in the one fact that He who gives the command is just, good, and wise . . .<sup>63</sup>

**The Sixth Promise:**  
**Genesis 18**

The sixth promise from God to Abraham concerning Isaac's birth is recorded in Genesis 18. In the sixth instance, the Lord appeared to Abraham in the form of a man who was traveling toward Sodom, and the Lord made three statements to Abraham concerning the promise of Isaac and therefore of Christ.

First the Lord said to Abraham:

I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life; and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son. (Genesis 18:10)

Second, after Sarah laughed at overhearing this statement, the Lord said:

Wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I of a surety bear a child, which am old?

Is any thing too hard for the LORD? At the time appointed I will return unto thee, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son. (Genesis 18:13-14)

The third statement of the Lord came in the form of a rhetorical question as to whether or not He should inform Abraham of His intent to judge Sodom. The Lord said:

Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do;

Seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? (Genesis 18:17-18)

---

<sup>63</sup>LW, 3:173.

This rhetorical question reaffirmed that God intended to bless Abraham.

Luther noted that in the first statement God promised to give Sarah a son "according to the time of life" (Genesis 18:10). He said that this meant that the child would be born after a normal gestation period, as are other children. Luther depicted God as saying, "In accordance with the manner in which an infant always receives life in the womb and is born, so Isaac, too, will receive life and be born."<sup>64</sup>

Luther saw here an analogy between the birth of Isaac and the birth of Christ. He wrote concerning Christ's birth:

In order that the normal course of nature might be preserved, the Virgin Mary carried Christ in this manner up to the tenth month; and during the entire time He, like other embryos, received nourishment from the drops of blood of His mother, who was sanctified by the Holy Spirit.<sup>65</sup>

Sarah, who was sitting in the tent and listening to the words of the Lord to her husband, laughed when she heard the promise that she would bear a son for Abraham. Luther said that she laughed because she did not believe the promise, and she did not believe it because she and Abraham were so old.<sup>66</sup> Abraham was, at that time, 99 years old, and Sarah was 89 years old. Luther commented:

. . . they had almost come to the end of their days; they were in their declining years. They were already

---

<sup>64</sup>LW, 3:206.

<sup>65</sup>LW, 3:206.

<sup>66</sup>LW, 3:207.

near death. Therefore Sarah did not believe; she laughed.<sup>67</sup>

In the second statement, God then questioned Sarah's laughter and asked, "Is any thing too hard for the Lord?" Luther said that the Lord asked this question as a means of strengthening Abraham and Sarah's faith in His power to fulfill His Word. Luther said that this question was a word "by which she, as though brought back to life, may rise again to the hope of fruitfulness; for this word is truly a voice that raises the dead."<sup>68</sup>

Luther also found opportunity here to exhort his hearers to have faith in Christ. He wrote:

Therefore call upon God, take hold of His Word, and cling to the sacrificial victim Christ, who has rendered satisfaction for your sins and has transferred your death to Himself and overcome it; and do not let it bother you that you are a sinner. Consider God's command. He wants you to cling to His Son and tells you to believe. Direct your eyes to this, and do not inquire into what has been done or will be done about others; but think about yourself, so that you may comply with this command.<sup>69</sup>

Here is seen again Luther's pastoral concern that sinners should come to salvation through faith in Christ.

Luther saw in God's rhetorical question with its declaration of blessing for Abraham a promise which was intended to encourage Abraham and also to bolster him to hear about the judgment which God would soon send upon Sodom.

---

<sup>67</sup>LW, 3:207.

<sup>68</sup>LW, 3:211.

<sup>69</sup>LW, 3:214-215.



The third statement of the Lord in this sixth Word to Abraham was one which the Lord began by asking:

Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do;

Seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? (Genesis 18:17-18)

The Lord then went on to tell Abraham that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was great and that they were about to be judged.

Luther wrote:

Therefore it is an extraordinary proof of God's benevolence when the Lord declares that He cannot conceal anything from Abraham.<sup>70</sup>

The third statement begins with a promise of blessing for Abraham and then proceeds to a threat of judgment against Sodom and Gomorrah. In this juxtaposition of promise and judgment, Luther saw again God's way of working through Law and Gospel in the lives of His people. He wrote, "If you divide all Scripture, it contains two topics: promises and threats or benefits and punishments."<sup>71</sup>

Luther said that even Christians need to hear the Law as well as the Gospel preached to them. The reason is that the Law purges them from sin, and it drives them to cling to God's promises. He wrote:

In fact, the true saints themselves, who are righteous through faith in the Son of God, have the sinful flesh, which must be mortified by constant chastening . . .<sup>72</sup>

---

<sup>70</sup>LW, 3:220.

<sup>71</sup>LW, 3:225.

<sup>72</sup>LW, 3:225.

The antinomians of Luther's day said that the Law ought not to be preached in the church. Luther replied that such a claim is characteristic of men who do not know Christ and are blinded by pride and wickedness.<sup>73</sup>

Luther said that the world too hates the preaching of the Law. It hates the Law because the Law reveals to it that its deeds are evil. Luther said, however, that preachers of God's Word should not let the world's hatred for the Law deter them from preaching it. They should see instead that God's judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah reveals that His awful judgments should be impressed upon hearts which are inclined to sin.<sup>74</sup>

God's people need the work of the Law in their lives, and the hardships to which God subjects them is one form of the working of His Law in the lives of His people. Luther wrote:

The godly who are burdened with a cross and in various ways are hard pressed and sigh have need of promises in order to be buoyed up by them.<sup>75</sup>

This statement shows that, in Luther's view, the crosses which God places upon His people are a form of His Law at work within them. To be "hard pressed" makes one need God's promises. The Law makes one need the Gospel.

God sought, then, in His sixth promise to Abraham to strengthen the faith of both Abraham and Sarah, but especially Sarah. He strengthened Sarah's faith, even though

---

<sup>73</sup>LW, 3:225.

<sup>74</sup>LW, 3:221.

<sup>75</sup>LW, 3:221.

she laughed at the promise that she would bear a son. God did not take offense at her laughter because she had already submitted everything to Him.<sup>76</sup>

In the sixth promise, the Word of God became the means whereby Sarah was brought back to life and was given renewed hope of fruitfulness.<sup>77</sup> This promise became God's means of reviving the dead flesh of both Abraham and Sarah.<sup>78</sup>

**The Seventh Promise:**  
**Genesis 21:12-13**

Isaac's birth is recorded in Genesis 21:1-6. He was born in the next year, exactly as God had promised that he would be.

God's seventh Word to Abraham about the importance of Isaac came after he was born at the time when he was being weaned. A feast was made on the day of weaning, and Sarah observed at the feast that Ishmael, who was then more than 14 years old, was mocking Isaac.

Sarah went to Abraham and demanded that he cast out both Ishmael and his mother Hagar. Abraham loved them both and did not want to do it.

Then God spoke to Abraham and commanded him to yield to Sarah's demands. God said to Abraham in Genesis 21:12-13:

Let it not be grievous in thy sight because of the lad, and because of thy bondwoman; in all that Sarah hath said unto thee, hearken unto her voice; for in

---

<sup>76</sup>LW, 3:212.

<sup>77</sup>LW, 3:211.

<sup>78</sup>LW, 3:177.

Isaac shall thy seed be called.

And also of the son of the bondwoman will I make a nation, because he is thy seed.

Luther believed that in this instance too God spoke to Abraham through Shem or some other minister of His Word. He said that Shem reminded Abraham of the fact that God's greatest promise was attached to Isaac and therefore Abraham clearly owed his first allegiance to Isaac.

Luther wrote:

Thus Abraham heard from the fathers who were living at that time the interpretation of the promise made in chapter seventeen, namely, that an eternal covenant was made with Isaac, who not only was born as the result of the promise but would also produce a blessing, namely, Christ, who blesses all believers.<sup>79</sup>

The main thing to note in the seventh Word of promise is that God told Abraham, ". . . in Isaac shall thy seed be called" (Genesis 21:12). This was a reminder that the spiritual covenant was reserved for Isaac alone. The church would come through Isaac. Temporal blessings were promised through Ishmael, as well as through Isaac, but spiritual blessings were promised through Isaac alone.

In expounding upon God's promise, ". . . in Isaac shall your seed be called," Luther made a distinction between three kinds of progeny which God gave to Abraham. Earlier, in his exposition of Genesis 13:16, Luther had distinguished between two kinds of progeny which God gave to Abraham. He described the one as "earthly and physical" and

---

<sup>79</sup>LW, 4:24-25.

the other as "heavenly, spiritual, and eternal."<sup>80</sup> He identified the first as Israel and the second as the church. Now, however, in commenting on Genesis 21:12, he adds a third category to cover the nations descended from Ishmael; from the sons of Keturah, who was Abraham's wife after Sarah died; and from Esau, who was Abraham's grandson. This category is much like the first one. It too consists of descendants who are earthly and physical.

Luther set forth this distinction between Abraham's three kinds of progeny in his exposition of the life of Isaac because two of the three kinds of progeny were covenant peoples who were given as descendants to Abraham through Isaac. Because of the importance of this distinction to Luther's understanding of God's promises concerning Isaac, it must now be looked at in some detail before proceeding to the eighth and last promise to Abraham concerning Isaac.

Luther claimed to follow Paul in this matter, and he wrote that Paul "postulates a threefold progeny of Abraham."<sup>81</sup> Luther then goes on to describe Paul's doctrine of the threefold progeny in these words:

The first is physical and without the promise concerning Christ . . . The second progeny, says Paul, is physical, but with the promise concerning Christ . . . The third progeny, says Paul, is not physical but is the offspring only of the promise. Although it certainly does not belong to the flesh of Abraham,

---

<sup>80</sup>LW, 2:359.      <sup>81</sup>LW, 4:25.

still it holds to faith and embraces the promise made to Abraham.<sup>82</sup>

The first kind is the Ishmaelites and the Edomites. The second kind is the nation of Israel, and the third kind is the Christian Church.

The Ishmaelites are one example of the first kind of progeny which God gave to Abraham. They are a people, physically descended from him, who have no special or unique promise which links them to Christ more than other people are linked to Him.<sup>83</sup> Luther identified the Turks of his own day as being the physical descendants of Ishmael and of Abraham.<sup>84</sup>

In Genesis 17:6 God gave this promise to Abraham: ". . . I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee." The plural form of the word "nations" indicated that not only Israel but also other physical nations would be descended from Abraham. The Ishmaelites were one of those nations.

Although God did not give to the Ishmaelites the promise of Christ, he did give to them a promise of earthly riches and power. At the time that God required Abraham to cast out Ishmael and Hagar, God promised Abraham, "Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation." (Genesis 17:20)

---

<sup>82</sup>LW, 4:25-26.

<sup>83</sup>LW, 4:28.

<sup>84</sup>LW, 4:28.

God kept His promise. Ishmael became rich and powerful. Luther wrote concerning the Turks of his own day, "For Ishmael's descendants occupied the entire southern region, and today the Saracens are still a great people."<sup>85</sup>

Since Ishmael as a teenager scoffed at Isaac and tried to take for himself Isaac's place of promise in God's plan of salvation, Luther saw him as a symbol in Scripture of a false church which attacks a true one. He wrote, "This battle between Isaac and Ishmael will never cease."<sup>86</sup> He meant that there have always been and always will be those who, like Ishmael, claim to be the people of God, although they do not hold to His promise concerning Christ. Holding faithfully to the promise of Christ is thus the mark of the true church.

Even though Luther viewed Ishmael as a symbol in Scripture of a false church, and even though he viewed the Muslim Saracen Turks as being Ishmael's natural descendants, he nonetheless also believed that Ishmael himself and many of his descendants were saved. He wrote, "Thus I do not doubt that Ishmael and many of his descendants were converted to the true church of Abraham."<sup>87</sup>

Luther saw this as happening precisely because Ishmael and his mother were cast out. That action crushed their damning pride, reduced them to repentance, and brought them

---

<sup>85</sup>LW, 4:35.      <sup>86</sup>LW, 18:175.      <sup>87</sup>LW, 4:42.

back to faith in God's promise.<sup>88</sup> Luther wrote concerning Ishmael, ". . . after he has been humbled, he is brought back into the church from which he had been cast out because of presumption."<sup>89</sup>

A second nation which belonged to the merely physical progeny of Abraham was that of the Edomites. The Edomites were Abraham's descendants through his grandson Esau.

Like Ishmael, Esau too was a symbol for Luther of ungodly men who try to appropriate for themselves the blessings which God gives to those who cling to His promise of Christ. Also, like the Ishmaelites, the Edomites were a nation blessed with earthly wealth, power, and glory.

In both of these respects, Luther saw both the Ishmaelites and the Edomites as being like the papists of his own day. In 1535, in his Lectures on Galatians, he wrote, "Today we endure persecution from our Ishmaelites, the papists and the fanatical spirits."<sup>90</sup>

Concerning the Edomites he wrote:

The genealogy of Esau, then, is fittingly added to the history of the two patriarchs Isaac and Jacob. For in this we see the glory and flourishing of the flesh and of ungodly men in this life. They abound in rank, resources, and successes; they gain possession of the empires and kingdoms of the world and either disregard or oppress the godly . . .<sup>91</sup>

Yet, in spite of their wealth and power, the Ishmaelites, Edomites, and papists are not to be envied or emulated

---

<sup>88</sup>LW, 4:42.      <sup>89</sup>LW, 4:69.      <sup>90</sup>LW, 26:454.

<sup>91</sup>LW, 6:310.



by God's people Luther wrote:

Let us rather attach ourselves to the poor and to the mourners who have the promise rather than to the ungodly who, even though they flourish for a time, are finally overthrown and destroyed.<sup>92</sup>

Luther saw Esau and the Edomites as symbols of all ungodly men. Yet in Luther's view, Esau too, like Ishmael, was eventually saved. He wrote:

But I think that Esau was truly changed in his heart . . . he was a great man, a fine, brave man, undoubtedly instructed in the doctrine and sermons of Isaac and the other fathers among whom he was brought up, and he learned to curb his evil desires.<sup>93</sup>

Luther saw the Edomites in general as being representative of ungodly men. Yet he believed that some among them were saved by what he called "accidental mercy." He wrote concerning some of the descendants of Esau, "For although they lost the promise of the coming Seed, they nevertheless obtained accidental mercy . . ."<sup>94</sup> By that term he meant a kind of mercy which saves individuals here and there from amongst nations and groups which, in general, reject the promise of Christ.

In Luther's view, the same kind of accidental mercy was given to individual papists, monks, Turks, and Jews in his own day. He wrote:

But if some of our adversaries are saved, they are not saved because they are papists, monks, or Turks, but because they come to us, that is, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And although they are not of our seed, yet they are grafted into it. Thus not the entire mass is rejected, but only the glory and pride of the mass,

---

<sup>92</sup>LW, 6:311.

<sup>93</sup>LW, 6:170.

<sup>94</sup>LW, 6:295.

which glories in its fathers, in ceremonies, and in the Law. And if it wants to be engrafted together with us, it will be a holy mass together with us and with the entire generation of the godly, but as a result of grace, not as a result of the righteousness of the flesh and of works, in which the world seeks salvation and righteousness.<sup>95</sup>

In Luther's view, then, salvation through faith in Christ is available to all men. Some nations and groups, as a whole, are not inclined to accept it, but whoever within those groups does trust in Christ will be saved.

Abraham's first kind of progeny did not descend from Isaac. His other two kinds of progeny did descend from Isaac, although in different ways. One of them came through natural, physical reproduction. The other kind descended from him by becoming united, through faith, with his distant offspring Jesus Christ. The first kind is the nation Israel; the second kind is the church.

Luther described the nation of Israel as Abraham's physical progeny "with the promise concerning Christ."<sup>96</sup> By that he meant that Israel was given the promise that Christ would take on human flesh through it. Israel would be phys-

---

<sup>95</sup>LW, 4:368; WA, 43, p. 401, lines 14-22 - "Si qui autem ex adversariis salvantur, non ideo, quod Papistae, quod Monachi aut Turcae sunt, salvantur, sed quia ad nos se conferunt, hoc est, ad Abraham, Isaac, Iacob. Et quanquam non sunt de nostro semine: tamen sunt insititii. Sic reiicitur non universa massa, sed gloria et superbia massae, quae de patribus, ceremoniis et lege gloriatur. Et si nobiscum vult inseri, erit massa sancta nobiscum et cum tota generatione piorum. Sed ex gratia, non ex iusticia carnis et operibus, in quibus mundus salutem et iustitiam quaerit."

<sup>96</sup>LW, 4:26.

ically related to Christ.

A merely physical kinship with Christ does not, however, justify a sinner before God. Justification is by grace through faith. Luther wrote:

. . . birth according to the flesh carries with it no prerogative, not even in the case of Isaac; for everything depends on the promise. But the promise can be accepted solely by faith.<sup>97</sup>

Because fleshly Israel did not receive Christ in faith at His coming, God allowed it to cease to exist shortly after that time. Luther wrote, ". . . the Jews are no longer the people of God, but . . . they have been cast aside by God because they denied Christ."<sup>98</sup>

In Luther's view, God's promises concerning Israel were all fulfilled and his purposes for it were all completed when Christ came. Therefore, because of Israel's unbelief, God set it aside. He turned His attention instead to the church. Luther wrote, "When Christ comes, the shell or hull in which the kernel is enclosed is broken; that is, the temporal blessing comes to an end, and the spiritual blessing takes its place."<sup>99</sup>

In his younger days as a professor, Luther seemed to believe in the eventual conversion of the Jews to Christ. In the years 1515 and 1516, when he was lecturing on the book of Romans, he wrote:

So also the Jews who threw Christ out to the Gentiles, where He now has the position of ruler, will finally

---

<sup>97</sup>LW, 3:95.    <sup>98</sup>LW, 2:360.    <sup>99</sup>LW, 3:148.

come back to Him, drawn by hunger for the Word, and they will receive Him among the Gentiles.<sup>100</sup>

As he grew older, however, he changed his mind. In 1526, when he wrote his commentary entitled Four Psalms of Comfort, he wrote, ". . . Judaism, as we call the Jewish nation, will not be converted."<sup>101</sup>

At the time of the Genesis lectures in the period between 1535 and 1545, he expressed himself even more emphatically that God had given up on the Jews. He wrote then, as if speaking to the Jews:

You have no promise, nothing sure to wait for, and no clearly defined time of your exile. What, then, has become of the promise? Does it not follow either that God has lied or that the Jews are no longer the people of God? But it is impossible for God to lie; hence this leaves the conclusion that the Jews have been cast aside by God and have ceased to be the people of God.<sup>102</sup>

Luther no longer believed in a general conversion of the Jews, but he still believed and taught that the grace of God in Christ was available to any individual Jew who claimed it by faith. He wrote:

This does not mean that no Jew may ever come to faith again. Some crumbs must remain, and some individuals must be converted.<sup>103</sup>

As with the Edomites, Luther saw that God gave accidental mercy to individual Jews.

Luther defined Abraham's third kind of progeny as those who do not belong to his flesh but still hold to faith

---

<sup>100</sup>LW, 25:430.      <sup>101</sup>LW, 14:270.      <sup>102</sup>LW, 2:360.

<sup>103</sup>LW, 14:270.

and embrace the promise of Christ which God gave to Abraham.<sup>104</sup> This kind of progeny is the Christian church.

In his commentary on the Four Psalms of Comfort, he wrote, ". . . the church is made up of those who have the promise and believe it . . ." <sup>105</sup> It was Luther's view that the church is the truest seed of Abraham. It is the progeny to which God was referring when He said to Abraham in Genesis 21:12, ". . . for in Isaac shall thy seed be called."

Luther wrote:

Therefore the text before us should be used as a proverb: "Through Isaac shall your descendants be named;" that is, he who has the promise and believes shall be the heir.<sup>106</sup>

He also wrote:

Therefore those who accept the promise in faith are true sons of the promise and heirs of Abraham, as Christ says (Matt. 3:9): "God is able from stones to raise up children to Abraham." But if they come from stones, then they do not come from the flesh of Abraham.<sup>107</sup>

Luther wanted to refute the arguments of the Jews in his day that Christians are not descended from Abraham and therefore cannot be his true heirs. He said that the Jews used such arguments as battering-rams against the Christians and thereby subverted many.<sup>108</sup>

Luther used his distinction of the three-fold progeny to refute the Jews and to reassure the Christians. He

---

<sup>104</sup>LW, 4:26.      <sup>105</sup>LW, 4:31.      <sup>106</sup>LW, 4:30.

<sup>107</sup>LW, 4:26.      <sup>108</sup>LW, 4:25.

wrote:

. . . the Jews boast in vain against us that they are the descendants of Abraham. For it does not follow from this that they are also heirs of Abraham, unless they apprehend the promise and believe in Christ.<sup>109</sup>

He further refuted the Jews by saying, "There is no people of God unless it has the promises and believes them."<sup>110</sup> He further reassured Christians by declaring, ". . . the essential quality of the heirs is the promise itself."<sup>111</sup>

Here, then, is the main point in Luther's exposition of God's seventh promise to Abraham concerning Isaac. It is that God's promise in Genesis 21:12, ". . . for in Isaac shall they seed be called." is a promise that the church will be the spiritual progeny of Abraham. Luther wrote that faith in God's promise of Christ "makes us, too, who are by nature Gentiles, heirs of Abraham, yes, brothers and fellow heirs of Christ (Rom. 8:17)."<sup>112</sup>

**The Eighth Promise:**  
**Genesis 22:16-18**

The eighth and final time when God spoke to Abraham and gave him promises concerning Isaac is recorded in Genesis 22:16-18. This Word from God came on Mount Moriah moments after an angel had stopped Abraham from offering up

---

<sup>109</sup>LW, 4:27.      <sup>110</sup>LW, 4:32.

<sup>111</sup>LW, 4:27; WA, 43:155, line 5 - "Forma igitur substantialis haeredum est ipsa promissio."

<sup>112</sup>LW, 4:27.

Isaac as a burnt offering. God said to Abraham:

By myself have I sworn, saith the LORD, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son:

That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies;

And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice.

Here God swore an oath by Himself. He swore that Christ would be the seed of Abraham,<sup>113</sup> and He swore that in Christ all nations of the earth would be blessed. This was a promise of blessing to anyone who would accept it. Luther wrote:

. . . this promise also pertains to us Gentiles and to all who will ever hear and accept it.

To be sure, the promise was not spoken to us, and in this the Jews surpass us; but we are nevertheless the persons of whom God is speaking.<sup>114</sup>

God excluded no one, and Luther rejoiced in that fact. He wrote that the words of this promise "truly deserve to be written in large letters of gold and to be continually before our eyes and in our heart."<sup>115</sup>

---

<sup>113</sup>LW, 4:152.      <sup>114</sup>LW, 4:152.

<sup>115</sup>LW, 4:152; WA, 43:245, lines 30-31 - "Et digna sane haec verba sunt, quae grandisculis et aureis literis pingatur, nostrisque oculis et animo perpetuo obversentur." Genesis 22:18 is another passage in the story of Abraham and Isaac which Luther regarded as being crucially important because of its promise of salvation for sinners. Luther regarded the promise in Genesis 22:18 as being like the promise in Genesis 12:3 that in Abraham all the nations of the earth would be blessed. He saw them both as being pure Gospel.

Luther said that the promise of Christ which is given here is so powerful that it is "able to destroy and abolish both death and the entire curse which was brought on us as a result of original sin."<sup>116</sup> Luther wanted his hearers to take this promise by faith and apply it to themselves by saying:

I am no longer a sinner; I am righteous. I am not cursed; I am blessed through the Seed of Abraham—the Seed who is true man, born of the descendants of Abraham, and true God.<sup>117</sup>

God's eighth promise to Abraham concerning Isaac was a promise infinitely rich for believers. To them it offered all of the riches of Christ. Luther said of it, "This promise embraces almost the entire Christian doctrine, the incarnation of Christ and justification."<sup>118</sup>

Luther referred to its riches for believers as its "affirmative meaning," but he said also that it had a "negative proposition" which needed to be examined. Its negative proposition was that it excluded any possibility of works righteousness. He wrote, ". . . every blessing apart from this one is condemned."<sup>119</sup>

Luther specifically rejected this proposition: "Faith alone does not justify, but faith does so in conjunction with works."<sup>120</sup> The doctrine of Christ condemns all trust in works as a basis for salvation and makes the

---

<sup>116</sup>LW, 4:161.

<sup>117</sup>LW, 4:161.

<sup>118</sup>LW, 4:167.

<sup>119</sup>LW, 4:162.

<sup>120</sup>LW, 4:164.



righteousness of works altogether nothing.

Luther also rejected the idea of universalism. He said that the promise, "And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed," does not mean that every individual in every nation will be saved. Rather it means that all who will be blessed will be blessed in Christ. Luther wrote, "An exclusive rather than a universal principle is meant, as though one said, 'Nowhere is there light, life, and salvation except in this Seed.'"<sup>121</sup>

Luther noted that this is the only place in Scripture which records a present instance of God swearing an oath. All other references to God swearing an oath record that He had sworn it in the past. Luther therefore implied that all of God's subsequent oaths were contained in this one. He called this oath "the gushing fountain, as it were, of the prophecies and addresses of Isaiah, David, and Paul."<sup>122</sup>

God swore by Himself in giving this oath. He did it as if to say, "If I do not keep my promises, I shall no longer be He who I am."<sup>123</sup> Luther said that God did this as "an indication of a heart burning with expressible love and with a desire for our salvation . . ."<sup>124</sup> Here again is seen Luther's great awareness of the centrality of the Gospel of Christ and of salvation for sinners in the life story of Isaac.

---

<sup>121</sup>LW, 4:177.

<sup>122</sup>LW, 4:151-152.

<sup>123</sup>LW, 4:143.

<sup>124</sup>LW, 4:142-143.

This is the last of God's eight promises to Abraham concerning Isaac. Luther said concerning all of them:

. . . it must be noted especially that these promises include Christ Himself, yes, eternal life, even though they appear to be speaking, not of Christ, but of Isaac.<sup>125</sup>

---

<sup>125</sup>LW, 3:148; WA, 42:654, lines 8-10 - "Observandum autem praecipue hoc est, quod hae promissiones includunt ipsum Christum, imo aeternum vitam, etsi non de Christo, sed de Isaaco videantur loqui."

## CHAPTER III

### THE MAJOR EVENTS OF ISAAC'S LIFE

Luther's exposition of the life of Isaac clusters around four events. They are: 1. The promise of Isaac's birth and the birth itself; 2. The call for Abraham to offer up Isaac as a sacrifice to God; 3. The marriage of Isaac to Rebekah; and 4. Isaac's wait for the birth of children to whom he could pass on the promise of Christ. Each of these four events will be looked at in turn.

#### The Promise of Isaac's Birth and the Birth Itself

As has been already noted, God gave promises to Abraham concerning Isaac six times before Isaac's birth, and then God twice more repeated and clarified the promises after Isaac was born. Luther paid the greatest attention to these promises since they were the Word of God.<sup>1</sup>

The promises have already been reviewed, but it must be said again that Luther regarded them, ultimately, as promises of the coming of Christ. Luther used logic, based upon Genesis 12:3, to show that the promise had to pertain to Christ.

---

<sup>1</sup>LW, 4:140.

In Genesis 12:3 God said to Abraham, ". . . in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed." Luther wrote concerning this promise:

If the Seed of Abraham does this, He must necessarily be a true human being by nature; on the other hand, if He blesses others, even all the families of the earth, He must necessarily be something greater than the seed of Abraham, because the seed of Abraham itself stands in need of this blessing on account of its sin.<sup>2</sup>

Luther saw, then, that the Seed promised to Abraham would also be more than the seed of Abraham. The promised Seed would be able to bless sinners because He Himself had no sin and because He was able to take away the sin of others. Luther saw this as a promise that could only be understood in terms of the incarnation of the Son of God.

The birth of Isaac is described in Genesis 21:1-3 in these words:

And the LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did unto Sarah as he had spoken.

For Sarah conceived, and bare Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him.

And Abraham called the name of his son that was born unto him, whom Sarah bare to him, Isaac.

The birth of Isaac was a miraculous birth. Luther saw a parallel between Isaac's birth and the birth of Christ. John 1:14 declares concerning Christ's birth, "And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us . . ." Luther wrote concerning Isaac's birth, "And if I may express it in this way,

---

<sup>2</sup>LW, 2:261.

the promise has now been made flesh."<sup>3</sup>

Clearly Luther saw an analogy. As Isaac's birth provided Abraham with fleshly substance to show him that God keeps His promises, so the birth of Christ, God's Son who came in the flesh, provides all believers, in an even more exalted manner, with substance which shows that God keeps His promises.

Genesis 21:1-2 declares that Isaac was born in fulfillment of God's Word. Luther wrote concerning the birth of Isaac:

Moses praises and exalts the birth of Isaac at such length because he wants to remind us that nothing should be given so much consideration as the Word itself.<sup>4</sup>

Genesis 21:6 records that Sarah laughed after Isaac's birth. Concerning the verb *ᾤσῆ* in that verse, Luther wrote, "The proper meaning of the verb is 'to laugh.'"<sup>5</sup> Luther said that Sarah laughed not only out of carnal gladness that she had finally borne a son, but also with a gladness of the Holy Spirit because she had become a mother as a result of God's blessing. He wrote, ". . . she knows that from this son of hers will be born the One who will

---

<sup>3</sup>LW, 4:4.

<sup>4</sup>LW, 4:7; WA, 43:141, lines 4-6 - "Haec causa est, cur Moses sic copiose celebret et extollat generationem Isaac, ut commoneat nos, nihil tam respiciendum esse, quam ipsum verbum." Note here how closely Luther links the birth of Isaac with the fulfillment of God's Word.

<sup>5</sup>LW, 4:10.

deliver the entire human race from the everlasting curse."<sup>6</sup>

Yet Sarah's joy was not unmixed with pain. She knew that evil men would laugh at her for bearing this son in her old age. Luther said that her words contained not only joy but also shamefacedness, and he depicted her as saying, ". . . among men all who hear of it will laugh at me."<sup>7</sup> She thought that men would laugh at her for being a lustful old woman.

A strong emphasis in Luther's exposition of the birth of Isaac is the value of God's Word, and he lamented that we do not appreciate the Word as we should. He wrote, ". . . we do not lack promises, but we lack the faith that Abraham had."<sup>8</sup>

God gave His Word to Abraham in the form of promises concerning a future coming of Christ, and Abraham believed the Word. God gives His Word to us in Scripture, in baptism, in the Lord's Supper, and in absolution, but even though these promises are on a par with those of Abraham or are even above his, we, regrettably, too often do not believe them.

Luther wrote:

The only difference between us and Abraham is this, that Abraham believed the promises, but we do not believe them.<sup>9</sup>

He wrote also:

---

<sup>6</sup>LW, 4:11.      <sup>7</sup>LW, 4:11.      <sup>8</sup>LW, 4:17.

<sup>9</sup>LW, 4:16.

. . . if we could only believe as Abraham believed, we would be in Paradise, yes, even in heaven itself.<sup>10</sup>

Luther praised Abraham for believing that Isaac would be born to him and Sarah. He wrote:

. . . Isaac had to be conceived by faith before he was begotten physically by Abraham. For if Abraham had not believed that Isaac would certainly be born from him, that is, that God is true in His promises, he would never have begotten Isaac.<sup>11</sup>

Luther wished his hearers to believe in the promises of God as Abraham did.

Faith justifies. Abraham was justified by faith, as Genesis 15:6 declares, and Isaac too was justified by faith in the promise of Christ which God had attached to him. Luther wrote concerning Isaac:

He was born as the result of the promise, actively and passively, so to speak: passively, because the Blessed Seed is promised to him; actively, because he believes the promise.<sup>12</sup>

Isaac believed the promise and was justified by his faith. Faith made him not only an instrument in God's plan of salvation, but also a participant in the salvation.

Faith justifies us too. Luther wrote that faith "makes us, too, who are by nature Gentiles, heirs of Abraham, yes, brothers and fellow heirs of Christ (Rom. 8:17)."<sup>13</sup> Faith makes all believers, then, both the children of Abraham and the children of God.

---

<sup>10</sup>LW, 4:16-17.

<sup>11</sup>LW, 8:286.

<sup>12</sup>LW, 4:27.

<sup>13</sup>LW, 4:27.

Faith unites believers to Christ, and it also brings them all blessings in Him. In his Sermons on the First Epistle of St. Peter, Luther wrote, "A Christian soul has all that Christ has . . . Faith brings us all Christ's possessions together."<sup>14</sup> Luther wrote that faith brings life to both body and soul. The soul is alive now. At a later time, the body will be resurrected and will be transformed to be like Christ's glorious body.<sup>15</sup>

Faith in the promise of Christ brings to every believer, then, all of these riches, as it brought Isaac to Abraham. All of this Luther saw in the birth of Isaac who was born according to God's promise.

### The Sacrifice of Isaac

In Genesis 22:2 we are told that God one day said to Abraham:

Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.

Genesis 22:3-19 tells us that Abraham obeyed this command of the Lord. He went to Mount Moriah and there built an altar. He bound his son Isaac and laid him upon the altar. Then Abraham reached forth his hand to slay Isaac with a knife.

At the last instant God stopped Abraham. God caused an angel to speak to Abraham and command him not to slay

---

<sup>14</sup>LW, 30:90.

<sup>15</sup>LW, 4:158.



Isaac. God provided a ram to be offered up in Isaac's place. Then the angel spoke to Abraham a second time and said:

By myself have I sworn, saith the LORD, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son:

That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies;

And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice. (Genesis 22:16-18)

The Biblical account of this incident from the life of Isaac is relatively short. Nineteen verses are all that are recorded about it. Luther wished that there had been much more. He called it a very great event which the Holy Spirit has described in very few words.<sup>16</sup>

Luther regarded God's command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac as being the greatest trial to which God ever subjected him.<sup>17</sup> This was not by any means Abraham's only trial. He experienced many great "patriarchal trials," as Luther termed them,<sup>18</sup> but this was the worst and most painful.

This trial was painful because of Abraham's natural love for his son. Luther wrote:

What do you suppose the sentiments of Abraham's heart were in this situation? He was a human being, and, as I have stated repeatedly, he was not without natural affection.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup>LW, 5:283.      <sup>17</sup>LW, 4:91.      <sup>18</sup>LW, 4:91.

<sup>19</sup>LW, 4:98.

It was painful, then, because Abraham loved Isaac and because he and Sarah were beginning to make plans for Isaac's marriage.<sup>20</sup>

But far worse, in Luther's view, was the fact that this trial confronted Abraham with a terrible contradiction. The command to sacrifice Isaac contradicted and seemed to render impossible God's earlier promise to Abraham to give the Blessed Seed, Christ, through Isaac.

Luther wrote:

Here God is clearly contradicting Himself; for how do these statements agree: 'Through Isaac shall your descendants be named' (Gen. 21:12) and 'Take your son and sacrifice him?'<sup>21</sup>

Luther further wrote:

For there is a contradiction with which God contradicts Himself. It is impossible for the flesh to understand this; for it inevitably concludes either that God is lying - and this is blasphemy - or that God hates me - and this leads to despair.<sup>22</sup>

Luther saw the dilemma which confronted Abraham in this trial as the clear contradiction between God's Law and His Gospel. The Gospel which God had given Abraham was His

---

<sup>20</sup>LW, 4:92.      <sup>21</sup>LW, 4:92.

<sup>22</sup>LW, 4:93; WA 43:202, lines 17-20 - "Est enim contradictio, qua ipse Deus sibi ipsi contradicit, hoc carni impossibile est intelligere: necessario enim cogitat, vel mentitur Deus, quod blasphemum est, vel odit me Deus, quod deperationis est occasio." The contradiction which Luther mentions here is the contradiction between God's Law and His Gospel. The contradiction is in our human perception of God's working in our lives, not in God's actual intention toward us. His intention is solely gracious. Nevertheless, since we are only able to perceive God as contradictory, Luther referred to Him as being so. For us, He is contradictory.

promise that Christ and the church would come to Abraham through Isaac. The Law with God confronted him in this trial was the command to offer up Isaac before he had had opportunity to marry and produce children. How could Abraham believe God's promise and at the same time be obedient to His command?

Luther's insight into the nature of this dilemma which confronted Abraham was unique. Other commentators have recognized that Abraham faced a dilemma, but they have usually defined it either as the tension between Abraham's desire to obey God and his desire to spare his son, or else as the tension between his desire to obey the general law of God against killing and his desire to obey God's specific command here to kill Isaac.

Søren Kierkegaard, for example, believed that Abraham was subjected to a powerful contradiction between God's general command which forbids killing and His specific command to sacrifice Isaac. Consequently Kierkegaard wrote that "love to God may cause the knight of faith to give his love to his neighbor the opposite expression to that which, ethically speaking, is required by duty."<sup>23</sup>

Luther did not understand the contradiction facing Abraham in these terms. Rather, Luther saw Abraham as being pained by the fact that God's command to kill Isaac contra-

---

<sup>23</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling; A Dialectical Lyric, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1945), p. 105.

dicted His earlier promise that a Savior and spiritual seed would come to Abraham through Isaac.

Werner Elert has summarized the uniqueness of Luther's view in these words:

Alone in contrast to Kierkegaard, Luther perceived that the dilemma of Abraham was not that one command, a specific one, contradicted another, a general one, but rather that God here demanded something from him which was in contradiction to His own promise.<sup>24</sup>

Luther himself wrote very directly, "I have stated what Abraham's trial was, namely, the contradiction of the promise."<sup>25</sup>

In this trial Abraham was tempted in two ways. He was tempted first to believe that God's promises to him concerning Isaac were lies. He could have concluded that God never meant to give him descendants through Isaac.

The second temptation was to disobey the command to offer up Isaac and to justify his disobedience on the grounds that he was acting out of faith in God's promises. He could have concluded that the command did not really come from God.

Luther said that reason would, on its own, inevitably adopt one or the other of these two courses of action. He

---

<sup>24</sup>Werner Elert, Das christliche Ethos; Grundlinien der Lutherischen Ethik (Tübingen: Furche-Verlag, 1949), p. 332 - "Allein im Unterschied von Kierkegaard erblickt er [Luther] die Aporie Abrahams nicht darin, daß hier ein Befehl (der besondere) einem andern (dem allgemeinen) widerspricht sondern darin, daß Gott von ihm etwas verlangt, was in Widerspruch zu seiner Verheißung steht."

<sup>25</sup>LW, 4:95.

wrote:

Human reason would simply conclude either that the promise is lying or that the command is not God's but the devil's . . . Reason cannot do anything else, as experience shows in less important matters.<sup>26</sup>

Luther shows here that reason is not to be trusted in comprehending God's will.

Abraham, however, did not succumb to either temptation. Rather he overcame the terrors of the Law by faith in the promises of the Gospel. He believed in God's promise in spite of God's seeming cruelty to him, and indeed he was able to be obedient to God's command to kill Isaac precisely because he believed in the promise which God had already given him. Luther wrote:

. . . therefore he had no doubt that Isaac, even if he were to die, nevertheless would be revived and that his progeny would live on, because God does not permit His command and promise to be of no effect.<sup>27</sup>

Abraham therefore trusted that God would be faithful to the promises of the Gospel even though the Law contradicted them. Abraham believed so strongly in God's promise that he was not deterred from obeying God's command which went against the promise. Abraham thus overcame God's Law by believing God's Gospel.

Elert puts it this way:

He obeys, and he can only obey, because, in spite of the command and in spite of appearances, he believes

---

<sup>26</sup>LW, 4:95.

<sup>27</sup>LW, 4:106-107.

in the inviolability of the promise.<sup>28</sup>

It was Luther's view that no human being is ever able to do the works of the Law until he has first believed in the Gospel. In his Lectures on Galatians, he wrote:

Therefore "to do" is first to believe and so, through faith, to keep the Law . . . The sound of the promise to Abraham brings Christ: and when He has been grasped by faith, then the Holy Spirit is granted on Christ's account. Then God and our neighbor are loved, good works are performed, and the cross is borne. This is really keeping the Law; otherwise the Law remains permanently unkept. Therefore clearly and properly defined, "to do" is simply to believe in Jesus Christ, and when the Holy Spirit has been received through faith in Christ, to do the things that are in the Law.<sup>29</sup>

Luther also said that it is impossible to keep the Law without the promise and that in all the world there is no one to whom the title "Doer of the Law" can rightly be given without the promise of the Gospel.<sup>30</sup>

Abraham's trial concerning the sacrifice of Isaac furnishes us with a model to follow when God subjects us to similar trials. Luther said that when we are tempted to despair because of a testing by God and because we see a contradiction between what God has promised us and the circumstances in which He has placed us, then we, like Abraham, ought to take refuge in God's promises alone. He wrote:

---

<sup>28</sup>Elert, p. 333 - "Er gehorcht, und er kann nur gehorchen, weil er trotz dem Befehl und trotz diesem Augenschein an die Unverbrüchlichkeit der Verheißung glaubt."

<sup>29</sup>LW, 26:255.

<sup>30</sup>LW, 26:255.

Our only consolation is that in affliction we take refuge in the promise; for it is our staff and rod, and if Satan strikes it out of our hands, we have no place left to stand. But we must hold fast to the promise and maintain that, just as the text states about Abraham, we are tempted by God, not because He really wants this, but because He wants to find out whether we love Him above all things and are able to bear Him when He is angry as we gladly bear Him when He is beneficent and makes promises.<sup>31</sup>

Luther wrote that God's actions in requiring the sacrifice of Isaac were designed to kill the mind of the flesh in Abraham.<sup>32</sup> God required Abraham to kill his son so that he would have no hope left. Luther wrote:

But when God commands that Abraham's son should be taken away, He leaves no hope but simply confronts Abraham with a contradiction. And God, who formerly seemed to be his best friend, now appears to have become an enemy and a tyrant.<sup>33</sup>

Luther said that God deals with all of His children in the same manner in order to make manifest what is in their hearts. God knows what is in a sinner's heart, but the sinner himself does not. Through means of trials in which His promises are contradicted, God reveals to a sinner what is in his own heart and that it is "enmity against God," as

---

<sup>31</sup>LW, 4:93; WA, 43:202, lines 30-36 - "Unica enim nostra consolatio est, quod in afflictione confugimus ad promissionem, ea sola baculus et virga nostra est, quem si nobis Sathan ex manibus excutit, nusquam manere possumus. Sed promissio retinenda est, et statuendum, quod, sicut de Abrahamo textus dicit, tentemur a Domino, non quod revera Deus hoc velit, sed quod experiri vult, an eum diligamus super omnia, et possimus eum iratum sic ferre, sicut libenter ferimus beneficientem et promittentem" Here Luther shows that God is not truly double-minded in His intentions toward us, but only appears contradictory because of His use of Law and Gospel.

<sup>32</sup>LW, 4:95.      <sup>33</sup>LW, 4:94.

Romans 8:7 declares. God thereby slays the "head of the serpent" in the sinner."<sup>34</sup>

In the command to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham was confronted with a clear contradiction between God's promise and His Law. Abraham overcame the contradiction by faith.

Reason did not supply Abraham with a solution to the dilemma of how Isaac could die childless and yet be the father of Christ and the church, but faith did. Faith pointed him to the resurrection. Luther wrote:

. . . Abraham relies on the promise . . . he also believed that he [Isaac] was to be raised after being buried and reduced to ashes, in order that he might have descendants . . . Accordingly, Abraham understood the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, and through it alone he resolved this contradiction, which otherwise cannot be resolved . . .<sup>35</sup>

Luther presented Abraham as an example to his hearers and urged them to be like Abraham and to cling to God's promises alone. He wrote:

These trials of the saintly patriarch have been set before us in order that we may be encouraged in our own trials and may say with Abraham: "Though my son Isaac dies, nevertheless, because he believes in God, the very grave in which his ashes will lie will not be a grave but will be a bedchamber and a sleeping room."<sup>36</sup>

Here Luther used the name "Isaac" as a figure for every blessing which God has ever promised to His people, and he gives the pastoral counsel that we, too, when God allows us to undergo sufferings and when He deals with us according to His Law, ought to cling by faith to our Isaac,

---

<sup>34</sup>LW, 4:95.

<sup>35</sup>LW, 4:96.

<sup>36</sup>LW, 4:97.



that is, to God's promises to us.

Luther gave this description of faith in his Commentary on Psalm 118, written in 1530:

Faith does not despair of the God who sends trouble. Faith does not consider Him angry or an enemy, as the flesh, the world, and the devil strongly suggest. Faith rises above all this and sees God's fatherly heart behind his unfriendly exterior. Faith sees the sun shining through the thick, dark clouds and this gloomy weather. Faith has the courage to call with confidence to Him who smites it and looks at it with such a sour face.

That is skill above all skills. It is the work of the Holy Spirit alone and is known only by pious and true Christians.<sup>37</sup>

In the trial concerning Isaac, Abraham had exactly that kind of faith. He trusted in God even when God seemed to be cruel and unreasonable.

Genesis 22:2 records that God told Abraham to offer up Isaac upon a mountain in the land of Moriah. Luther identified Moriah with Jerusalem. He wrote:

Here Jerusalem was located. At that time it was called Salem and also Jebus, and it was governed by the patriarch Shem.<sup>38</sup>

The Bible says in 2 Chronicles 3:1 that King Solomon later built his temple in Jerusalem upon Mount Moriah. Luther accepted this teaching of Scripture as true. He wrote:

David bought this hill from Araunah and built an altar there because Abraham had offered Isaac in this same place, and it has its name out of respect for God and His worship because Adam, Eve, Cain, and Abel made offerings on that mountain and it was always a holy

---

<sup>37</sup>LW, 14:59.

<sup>38</sup>LW, 4:99.

place to the following patriarchs and set apart for the usages and exercises of divine worship.<sup>39</sup>

We see here how Luther held to the historical reliability and veracity of Scripture.

Luther believed that the mountain to which God directed Abraham for the sacrifice of Isaac was also a place where Adam, Abel, and Noah had earlier brought sacrifices. He wrote that Adam had lived near Moriah after he was driven out of Paradise and that Moriah remained a place famous for the worship of God up until the time of Christ. After that, however, the church and the worship of God were spread throughout the world and were no long confined to that "small corner of the Jewish land."<sup>40</sup>

God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his son was a unique one. Other people in future generations sometimes emulated it. King Ahaz, for example, thought that he performed a splendid service for God by making his son pass through fire (2 Kings 16:3). Luther said, however, that Ahaz had no specific command from God to do such a thing, and therefore he should not have undertaken anything contrary to the Decalog.<sup>41</sup>

Luther wrote concerning Ahaz:

Ahaz sacrifices his son to an idol (2 Kings 16:3) and, though he is a most infamous murderer, considers himself like Abraham in saintliness. For inasmuch as he gives no consideration to the Word and command of God, which alone is the true and eternal criterion of

---

<sup>39</sup>LW, 6:223.

<sup>40</sup>LW, 4:100-101.

<sup>41</sup>LW, 4:102.

works, he accepts death as life and deadly poison as helpful medicine.<sup>42</sup>

Here again we see the centrality of the Word in Luther's thinking. Luther wrote, ". . . without the Word no obedience pleases God."<sup>43</sup> Works done without the Word are nothing but filth, even though they may be saintly in appearance. Works done with the Word, however, are always glorious and grand, no matter how small.<sup>44</sup>

It is the Word which sanctifies all things. In his Lectures on Jonah, published in 1526, Luther wrote:

The command to Noah to build the ark, to Abraham to sacrifice his son, and to Solomon to erect the temple were all God's word; but that does not imply that I should do likewise. No, those words of God were not directed to me . . . Therefore we must not content ourselves to inquire whether a certain word is of God, but we must also ascertain whether or not this word is intended for us and so apply it to ourselves or not . . .<sup>45</sup>

For any deed, then, to be pleasing to God, it must be done in accord with the Word of God, and the Word must be one which God intended for the doer.

Luther wrote that in the examples of the fathers the efficacy and power of the Word and of faith are very prominent. He said that what a Christian undertakes on the strength of God's Word must succeed even if there were no angel remaining in heaven.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup>LW, 3:216.

<sup>43</sup>LW, 4:123.

<sup>44</sup>LW, 4:103.

<sup>45</sup>LW, 19:42.

<sup>46</sup>LW, 4:107.

Abraham's trial concerning the offering up of Isaac caused him to die to self. Luther describes Abraham's death-to-self in these words:

After Abraham has received the command, he sees nothing else. Everything fades out in him: Sarah, the domestics, his home, and Isaac. This is true mortification . . .<sup>47</sup>

Luther said that Sarah had undergone and accepted a similar death-to-self earlier when she had concluded that she could not be the mother of the promised son and would have to allow Hagar to bear him for her. Luther noted that such true mortifications do not happen in desert places or places of self-chosen exile from human society. Rather they happen "in the household and in the government."<sup>48</sup>

Luther thought that Isaac was about 20 years old<sup>49</sup> or about 25 years old<sup>50</sup> when God called for him to be sacrificed. He reached that conclusion by inference based upon the fact that Isaac was strong enough to carry the burden of wood needed for the sacrifice (Genesis 22:6).<sup>51</sup>

Luther said that when Isaac and Abraham walked toward the appointed mountaintop Isaac was still unaware that he was to be the sacrifice. Luther said that Isaac was nevertheless ready to obey.

---

<sup>47</sup>LW, 4:109; WA, 43:213, lines 29-30 - "Postquam accepit mandatum, praeter id unum nihil videt. Omnia in eo moriuntur, Sara, familia, domus, Isaac. Haec vera mortificatio est . . ."

<sup>48</sup>LW, 4:109.

<sup>49</sup>LW, 4:91.

<sup>50</sup>LW, 4:111.

<sup>51</sup>LW, 4:92.

When the time came that Abraham bound Isaac and laid him on the altar, Isaac readily submitted. Luther wrote:

It is certainly amazing how Isaac was able to cast aside so suddenly all fondness for this life and to forget father, mother, home, the promise, and finally life itself, which he had barely begun . . . It was surely extraordinary faith through which Isaac was able to turn away so suddenly from life and to hand himself over to death.<sup>52</sup>

Luther said that Abraham bound Isaac before laying him on the altar, not to keep him from running away, but simply to conform the sacrifice of Isaac in that respect also with the usual custom of the day for burnt offerings.<sup>53</sup>

Luther saw a parallel between the submission of Isaac to his sacrifice and the submission of Christ to the cross. Christ prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, ". . . thy will be done." (Matthew 26:42) Luther depicted Isaac as thinking, "Let the will of the Lord be done," and he further wrote, "With the exception of Christ we have no similar example of obedience."<sup>54</sup>

In Luther's view, Abraham and Isaac both died upon Mount Moriah. They died because they experienced there the horror of death. For Luther the separation of the soul from the body was not the essence of death. He wrote, "Natural death, which is the separation of the soul from the body is simple death,"<sup>55</sup> and simple death is not the worst.

Rather the essence of death is the terror of it.

---

<sup>52</sup>LW, 4:112.

<sup>53</sup>LW, 4:114.

<sup>54</sup>LW, 4:114.

<sup>55</sup>LW, 4:115.

Luther wrote:

But whenever a human being stands in fear of death, that is, has the conviction that he must die, then he feels the violence of real death to such an extent that he cannot hold up. Then he dies in the truest sense of the word, not when the separation of the soul from the body takes place.<sup>56</sup>

He also wrote:

But to feel death, that is, the terror and fear of death - this indeed is real death. Without fear death is not death; it is a sleep . . .<sup>57</sup>

Abraham and Isaac both died on Mount Moriah. Luther wrote:

Here in Abraham was the death of the soul, because he had no doubt whatever but was convinced beyond all doubt that Isaac had to be sacrificed and had to be killed at that moment.<sup>58</sup>

Isaac too was convinced that he had to die. Therefore Luther wrote of both of them, "Thus both are killed, since they see and feel nothing else than death."<sup>59</sup>

Abraham and Isaac both died on Mount Moriah, and yet they were able to overcome death by faith. Luther depicts Abraham as comforting his heart with these thoughts:

My son Isaac, whom I am killing, is the father of the promise, and this proposition is absolutely true. Consequently, my son will live forever and will be the heir. Therefore even if he has to die now, he will nevertheless not die in reality but will rise again.<sup>60</sup>

Faith in the resurrection gave Abraham and Isaac the ability

---

<sup>56</sup>LW, 4:115.      <sup>57</sup>LW, 4:115.

<sup>58</sup>LW, 4:115; WA, 43:218, lines 15-16 - "Hic in Abrahamo animae mors fuit, quia nihil dubitavit, sed certo scivit immolandum, et illo momento occidendum esse Isaac."

<sup>59</sup>LW, 4:115.      <sup>60</sup>LW, 4:117.

to regard death as no more than a sport. Indeed it gave them the power to kill death.<sup>61</sup>

In one moment, then, on Mount Moriah, Abraham and Isaac experienced both the terror of God's Law and the comfort of His Gospel. The Law slew them, but the Gospel overcame their deaths and assured them that they had life even in the midst of death. Luther wrote, "In one moment Abraham the father and Isaac the son are killed and live."<sup>62</sup> Faith gave them victory.

Luther taught that faith is the victory for all of God's people, and he wanted to impress this teaching upon his hearers. With faith there is life even in death. He wrote:

Therefore let us remember this sight which Moses has set before us, and let us remember that jesting of the Divine Majesty in the matter of death, in order that we may learn to believe that death is life.<sup>63</sup>

Faith in the Gospel makes God's people able to overcome the terrors of the Law and of death. Faith makes God's people confident that at all times they are safe in the hands of their gracious God. Luther wrote:

But this is the wisdom of Christians and the unique teaching of the church - the teaching to which Abraham holds fast: "Though I am killing my son, I have him alive."<sup>64</sup>

He also wrote, ". . . the victory of Abraham, Isaac, and all the saints is faith."<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>61</sup>LW, 4:117.

<sup>62</sup>LW, 4:117.

<sup>63</sup>LW, 4:118.

<sup>64</sup>LW, 4:118.

<sup>65</sup>LW, 4:115.

Because Abraham and Isaac persevered in faith, they found that God is not only able to raise the dead but wants to do so.<sup>66</sup> In other words they learned the depths of the grace of God through tasting the bitterness of His wrath. His Law was the servant of His grace to make them know Him better.

The obedience unto death of Abraham and Isaac was very pleasing to God. Luther wrote:

The obedience gave God extraordinary pleasure. For of all the sacrifices the one most acceptable to God is this: to kill sin, to live in righteousness, holiness obedience, and mortification of the flesh.<sup>67</sup>

Their obedience was so pleasing to God because it was based upon faith in His Word.

Luther condemned the papists and all who try to please God with "self-chosen works."<sup>68</sup> He said that we must not try to choose our own works and sufferings. He wrote, "If you are a married man or do your duty zealously in any kind of life, God will give you enough to do and to suffer."<sup>69</sup> He further wrote, ". . . there will be no need to invite torments of your own choice."<sup>70</sup>

In his commentary on Psalm 32, Luther wrote:

Behold this is the way of the cross . . . You must not follow the work which you choose, not the suffering which you devise, but that which comes to you against your choice, thoughts, and desires.<sup>71</sup>

Luther commented that monks choose their own religions, and

---

<sup>66</sup>LW, 4:119.

<sup>67</sup>LW, 4:123.

<sup>68</sup>LW, 4:123.

<sup>69</sup>LW, 7:357.

<sup>70</sup>LW, 7:356.

<sup>71</sup>LW, 14:152.



they are "insufferable and poisonous."<sup>72</sup> To those who simply trust God, however, Luther wrote:

. . . you will determine that your life is a game played by God, that all you do and suffer is pleasing to Him, provided that it is done in faith, and that finally death itself is precious in the sight of the Lord (Ps. 116:15).<sup>73</sup>

Abraham and Isaac survived Mount Moriah because they believed in the promise of God. Through His Law, God gave them at Mount Moriah a trial unto death, a trial of His choosing, but through His Gospel He gave them faith and thus life in the midst of death.<sup>74</sup>

God's people honor God when they honor His Word. All who wish to investigate the will of God apart from the Word are to be condemned.<sup>75</sup> Luther said that Adam sought God apart from His word in Paradise, just as Satan did in heaven. "Both," he wrote, "found Him, but not without great harm."<sup>76</sup>

Luther urged his followers to abide by the Word alone. He wrote:

These things should be taught, and they should also be transmitted to our descendants, in order that they may observe the heavenly command (Matt. 17:5), "Listen to Him," that is, to the evangelists and the apostles. Let them read and listen to these, likewise to the Old Testament, which bears faithful testimony concerning all these things.<sup>77</sup>

Christians, in other words, are to hold to God's Word alone. To read and to listen to Scripture is to obey the heavenly

---

<sup>72</sup>LW, 7:357.

<sup>73</sup>LW, 7:357.

<sup>74</sup>LW, 4:116.

<sup>75</sup>LW, 4:125.

<sup>76</sup>LW, 4:144.

<sup>77</sup>LW, 4:126.

mandate, "Listen to Him."

Genesis 22:11-12 records that an angel called to Abraham and told him not to kill Isaac. This incident prompted Luther to describe the difference between good angels and bad angels. He wrote:

. . . the good angels depart with joyfulness and leave the hearts serene and cheerful. This is God's procedure when he sends good angels; and by this sign Abraham, too, was reminded that a real angel was there.

But a wicked angel, like a serpent, creeps along softly and gently until he decoys people into smugness and sin. Then he goes away, leaving horrible fear behind.<sup>78</sup>

Through His angel, God nullified the command for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. That may seem to us to be another contradiction on God's part. First He called for the sacrifice. Then He forbade it. Nevertheless we must accept God's ways of doing things with respect and fear. Luther wrote:

But we Christians must think and speak about these matters both with respect and with the fear of God, and we must recognize that it is God's nature to do contradictory things when things are contradictory.<sup>79</sup>

Luther wished to teach his hearers to trust in the God of the Gospel and of promises in spite of the God of the Law and of appearances. He wrote:

---

<sup>78</sup>LW, 4:129.

<sup>79</sup>LW, 4:131; WA, 43:229, lines 26-28 - "Verum nobis Christianis de his rebus, et cum reverentia, et timore Dei cogitandum et loquendum est. Et talis agnoscendus est Deus, quod agat contraria in contrariis."

He [God] tempts us and proposes a strange work, that He may be able to do His own. Through our affliction He seeks to get His sport and our salvation.<sup>80</sup>

Here Luther refers to God's work through the Law as a strange work on His part, and Luther calls God's own work that which He accomplishes in believers through the Gospel, namely, salvation. Thus we see Luther's faith in God's grace.

In the call for the sacrifice of Isaac God feigned intentions of cruelty and hatred toward Abraham and Isaac, but, as always, His true intentions were kind and loving. God was merely sporting with them. Luther wrote:

God sports with the children He loves and, as it seems to the flesh, shows Himself angry and dreadful. Hence there arise the well-known laments "I am driven far from thy sight" (Ps. 31:22) and "Hide not Thy face from me" (Ps. 27:9). But these are merely instances of sporting. God will not deceive or cheat you. Just hold fast to His infallible and unchanging promise.<sup>81</sup>

God's true intentions toward His people are gracious, and those who cling to His promises in spite of appearances always find, in the end, that He is gracious.

Luther shows us, then, in his exposition of the trial of Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah that God sends trials to His people and works in their lives through His Law, not to destroy them, but to bless them. Through testings, He teaches His people to walk by faith alone and to trust, as

---

<sup>80</sup>LW, 4:131; WA, 43:229-230, lines 36-1 - "Alienum opus tentat et proponit, ut suum facere possit: per nostram adflictionem quaerit suum ludum et nostram salutem."

<sup>81</sup>LW, 4:132.

Luther wrote in his Lectures on Hebrews, in "the bare voice of God."<sup>82</sup>

To a saint who clings to God's promises when a trial comes, the trial is seen, afterwards, not to have overturned the promises at all. The promises stand. Luther wrote:

Such in general are all temptations. At first they appear to be very gloomy, terrible, and quite different from the promises, but in the end the outcome agrees with the Word of God, which remains firm and unmoved.<sup>83</sup>

Genesis 22:19 records that after the trial on Mount Moriah Abraham returned to Beersheba and to his home there. Luther praised Abraham for doing so. Abraham did not go beyond the command of God's Word and try to remain upon Moriah and turn it into a shrine. Instead Abraham returned to his former duties and performed them again. He returned to God's earlier calling for him.<sup>84</sup>

#### The Marriage of Isaac

The third major event in the life of Isaac was his marriage to Rebekah, and it is described in Genesis 24. Since Genesis 23 tells of the death of Sarah, Abraham's beloved wife, Luther expounded at length on the subject of marriage in his commentary on both of those chapters and also in his commentary on Genesis 25:1-10, which tells how Abraham married Keturah after the death of Sarah.

Luther's major emphasis in expounding on Genesis

---

<sup>82</sup>LW, 29:238.

<sup>83</sup>LW, 6:162.

<sup>84</sup>LW, 4:181.

23:1-25:10 was a point in opposition to the theology of the Roman Catholic Church. It was that marriage is a good and God-given way of life, and therefore it is more pleasing to God than is the self-imposed celibacy which the Roman Church values so much.

Luther said that the pope viewed marriage as a brothel and saw no difference between the coition of beasts and that of human beings.<sup>85</sup> He said too that the pope saw only the shameful union of the flesh in marriage and disregarded God's promise and ordinance concerning it.<sup>86</sup>

Luther, on the other hand, taught that marriage is essentially a partnership between husband and wife according to the will of God for mutual help.<sup>87</sup> Lust and gratification are not its objectives, but rather that husband and wife be partners together in serving God. Consequently Luther held marriage in high esteem.<sup>88</sup>

Luther said that when Sarah died, Abraham lost his right eye.<sup>89</sup> He meant that Abraham lost a very useful part of himself. Sarah was the mistress of Abraham's home. She was his helper in managing a household of some one thousand persons.<sup>90</sup> Sarah and Abraham were co-workers, and their working together was, for Luther, the very model of what marriage ought to be.

Luther defined marriage in this way:

---

<sup>85</sup>LW, 4:247.

<sup>86</sup>LW, 4:222.

<sup>87</sup>LW, 4:222.

<sup>88</sup>LW, 4:222.

<sup>89</sup>LW, 4:223.

<sup>90</sup>LW, 4:199.

Marriage is the divinely instituted and lawful union of a man and a woman in the hope of offspring, or at least for the sake of avoiding fornication and sin, to the glory of God. Its ultimate purpose is to obey God and to be a remedy for sin . . .<sup>91</sup>

There are several elements in this definition of marriage, including the desire for offspring and avoiding fornication. But the main thing to notice is that marriage is "divinely instituted." God established marriage in the Garden of Eden when He created Eve and brought her to Adam. Marriage is good and godly, then, because it was instituted by God.

Genesis 23:1-2 tells us that Sarah died when she was 127 years old. Luther noted that she had seen many changes in her life. Indeed she had been through so many changes that God had, in effect, given her many different lives in one lifetime. Luther commented that this is common for God's people, and he wrote, ". . . for we die as often as a new trial arises, and we become alive in turn when we are buoyed up and receive comfort."<sup>92</sup>

Sarah was a good woman. Luther noted that Peter wrote in 1 Peter 3:6 that all Christian women are the daughters of Sarah, and Luther therefore said that no other matron in the Holy Scriptures is so distinguished as Sarah.<sup>93</sup>

Luther noted too that Genesis 23:2 records that Abraham wept when Sarah died. Luther said that it was not wrong for Abraham to weep at that time, and he said that our weep-

---

<sup>91</sup>LW, 4:244.

<sup>92</sup>LW, 4:188.

<sup>93</sup>LW, 4:189.

ing also, when parents, a wife, or friends die, does not displease God.<sup>94</sup>

In his exposition of Genesis 25, in which the marriage of Abraham to Keturah is described, Luther accounted for the remarriage of Abraham in his old age by explaining that Abraham wanted more children. He said that Abraham was not prompted by lasciviousness, for during all of the years that Sarah had been barren, he had waited patiently for the blessings of God and had never shown any inclinations toward lust.<sup>95</sup>

Rather Abraham wanted more children. God had promised Abraham in Genesis 17:4 that he would be the father of many nations. Abraham therefore remarried, not because he sought the gratification of lust, but because he sought the fulfillment of God's promises, and indeed he and Keturah were blessed with six sons.<sup>96</sup>

There were three years between Sarah's death and the time when Abraham sought a wife for Isaac. Those years were a time of mourning and sadness for the two men. Finally Abraham sought a wife for Isaac to help to comfort him.<sup>97</sup>

Luther saw in Abraham's search for a wife for Isaac that appearances can be false in the lives of God's people. Outwardly the search appeared to be carnal and worldly. It seemed, Luther said, "to be a sordid and almost indecent

---

<sup>94</sup>LW, 4:195.

<sup>95</sup>LW, 4:303.

<sup>96</sup>LW, 4:303.

<sup>97</sup>LW, 4:223.

business."<sup>98</sup>

The reality of the situation, however, was quite different. Abraham was acting entirely by faith. God had promised that Isaac would be the father of Christ. Therefore Isaac had to have a wife. Abraham's actions in seeking a wife for Isaac were spiritual, and "whatever remains of the flesh is devoured by faith."<sup>99</sup>

Luther wrote:

Thus Abraham preached that in the lust and concupiscence which are apparent to our senses one should keep in mind the future Seed that would be without lust and blessed - the Seed that would save the entire world.<sup>100</sup>

Abraham did not want Isaac to marry one of the local girls in the land of Canaan where they were dwelling. The reason was that the Canaanites were idolaters. Isaac might be enticed away from the worship of the true God. Luther wrote concerning Abraham:

Therefore he was unwilling to mix his seed with the blood of the Canaanites, lest his son become an idolater and the commingling of the seed lead at the same time to an intermingling of holy and idolatrous forms of worship.<sup>101</sup>

Abraham did not need to accept an unsuitable woman as a wife for Isaac, because he had faith in God. He knew that God would provide a suitable bride for Isaac even if He had to raise her up from stones, a clod, or a rib.<sup>102</sup>

Abraham committed the search for a bride for Isaac to

---

<sup>98</sup>LW, 4:252.

<sup>99</sup>LW, 4:252.

<sup>100</sup>LW, 4:234.

<sup>101</sup>LW, 4:246.

<sup>102</sup>LW, 4:258.



the steward of his house, a man named Eliezer. In Genesis 24:2-4 Abraham gave this charge to Eliezer:

Put, I pray thee, thy hand under my thigh:

And I will make thee swear by the LORD, the God of heaven, and the God of earth, that thou shalt not take a wife unto my son of the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell:

But thou shalt go unto my country, and to my kindred, and take a wife unto my son Isaac.

It was a high responsibility to give to a servant. Abraham trusted this man Eliezer, and this incident gave Luther an opportunity to note that godly, faithful servants are rare and a great gift from God.<sup>103</sup>

Luther said that he did not know whether or not Abraham originated the form of oath which is described here. It is strange and unusual. Abraham requested that his servant touch his thigh, that is, his sexual organ, while promising not to take a local bride for Isaac but to get one instead from Abraham's home country. Luther said that such a custom may have existed among the people of Abraham's day, but nonetheless in this case it had special significance. The significance here related to Christ.

In Luther's view, Abraham required his servant to touch his thigh while swearing this oath because his thigh was a sacred object.<sup>104</sup> Abraham had been promised by God that the Blessed Seed would come from his body. Therefore Christ would come from his loins, and therefore the servant

---

<sup>103</sup>LW, 4:229.

<sup>104</sup>LW, 4:231.

was being asked to swear by Christ Himself.<sup>105</sup>

Luther put it this way:

. . . from the loins of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob there was to come the Seed which would bless all nations. For God bound His Word, holiness, truth, and kindness to the thighs of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Therefore the thigh was truly sacrosanct; it was really sacred, not because it was flesh and blood but because of the promise bound to and embodied, so to speak, in this thigh.<sup>106</sup>

Abraham's thigh was a sacred object to him because from it "would come the Seed that would give life to and justify the entire human race."<sup>107</sup> By his action here Abraham confessed his faith that "the Fruit from his loins is true God."<sup>108</sup> He also impressed upon his household the "wonderful mystery of the incarnation of Christ."<sup>109</sup>

Luther's way of looking at all of Scripture in the light of Christ is clearly seen in his interpretation of this passage. Others might look at this text and see in it no reference at all to the incarnation. Luther, however, saw the incarnation even here.

He saw that God had promised the incarnation clearly enough to Abraham so that Abraham understood the promise. He saw that Abraham was justified by his faith in the promise, and he saw that Abraham was acting entirely by faith in the promise as he sought a wife for Isaac. In short, then, Luther saw that faith in the promise of Christ

---

<sup>105</sup>LW, 4:233.

<sup>106</sup>LW, 8:139.

<sup>107</sup>LW, 4:231.

<sup>108</sup>LW, 4:259.

<sup>109</sup>LW, 4:239.

governed all that happened here.

Luther wrote:

Here Scripture bears witness clearly that the mystery of the Godhead was not unknown to the fathers, especially to Abraham, who would not have permitted the oath to be made in these words if he had not understood that the Seed is more than a human being.<sup>110</sup>

In Luther's view, then, the search for a wife for Isaac was prompted by faith in God's promise concerning Christ. Abraham sought a wife for Isaac because he was waiting for the birth of a son of Isaac who would also be the Incarnate Son of God.

The marriage of Isaac to Rebekah is described in Genesis 24:67:

. . . and she became his wife; and he loved her: and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

The marriage of Isaac and Rebekah took place according to the will of God. Luther concluded, "The affection with which we love our wives pleases God."<sup>111</sup>

#### Isaac's Wait for the Seed

The fourth and last major phase of Isaac's life was a long period in which God subjected him to many testings and trials. During the first part of that long period, Isaac waited, seemingly in vain, for children to be born to him and Rebekah. The long wait was the first in a life-long series of trials in which God tested Isaac's faith in the promise of the coming Blessed Seed.

---

<sup>110</sup>LW, 4:244.

<sup>111</sup>LW, 4:299.

Again and again God tested Isaac. God placed Isaac in circumstances in which he suffered and in which he seemed to experience the exact opposite of the blessings which God had promised to him. Yet God's promises were not forgotten. In the end Isaac received his promised seed and also all of the blessings which God had promised to him.

Luther approached the exposition of the last part of Isaac's life as the task of presenting Isaac to his hearers as an example of patience in suffering and of faith in God's promises in spite of circumstances which appear to negate them. Luther wrote concerning Abraham and Isaac:

They have been presented to us by God as an example of the true worship of God, which consists mainly and really, not in outward sacrifices or works but in faith, hope, and love of God.<sup>112</sup>

God made Isaac and Rebekah wait upon Him, and Luther, through expounding the Scriptures concerning them, wanted to teach us too to wait upon God. He wrote:

But God wants His promises to be invisible and contradictory, in order that we may be put to the test and exercised, and may learn that waiting is true worship and is most pleasing to God.<sup>113</sup>

The last phase of Isaac's life consisted of a time span of about 140 years. It included the first 20 years of

---

<sup>112</sup>LW, 4:320; WA, 43:367, lines 21-24 - ". . . nobisque a Deo propositi sunt in exemplum veri cultus Dei, qui principaliter et vere consistit non in externis sacrificiis aut operibus, Sed in fide, spe et dilectione Dei." Luther continually presented the patriarchs as models to his hearers. Here he shows us the most valuable aspect of their example, which is the nature of their worship of God.

<sup>113</sup>LW, 4:321.

his married life, the time when he was between 40 and 60 years old. That was when he and Rebekah were waiting for children to be born to them.

It included also the period between the birth of their sons, Jacob and Esau, when Isaac was 60 years old, and the time when, at the age of 137 years, Isaac sent his son Jacob away to live with his uncle Laban.<sup>114</sup>

Finally it included the last 43 years of Isaac's life, when he was between the ages of 137 and 180 years old. Those were years in which Isaac continued to live and to experience trials, but he was no longer the focus of the Biblical narrative concerning the patriarchs, the focus having shifted instead to his son Jacob.

The last phase of Isaac's life is recorded in Genesis 25:11-28:5. Luther called that section a fourth book of Moses in Genesis, a book about the patriarch Isaac.<sup>115</sup>

After Genesis 28:5, Jacob becomes the focus of the Biblical narrative. Isaac, however, continued to live for another 43 years. His death is recorded in Genesis 35:29. There we are told that he died at the age of 180 years. Luther wrote that during the last 43 years of his life Isaac was "blind and useless for governing."<sup>116</sup>

Attention shall now be given to the trials of Isaac and to Luther's exposition of them. Luther wrote:

---

<sup>114</sup>LW, 5:99.

<sup>115</sup>LW, 4:320.

<sup>116</sup>LW, 5:272.

This is how Moses describes the life of this saintly father in accordance with this one chief point, namely, that he spent his life in many tribulations.<sup>117</sup>

The first trial for Isaac and Rebekah after their marriage is disclosed in Genesis 25:21. It declares, ". . . she was barren . . ." Luther said that in this trial Rebekah was "tried by God with a long cross and suffering."<sup>118</sup>

God had promised Abraham, ". . . in Isaac shall thy seed be called" (Genesis 21:12) . That meant that Christ and the church were to come through Isaac. Yet Isaac's wife appeared unable to bear children. Luther wrote:

Therefore one can easily conclude how severely Rebecca was tortured and how great Isaac's grief was when he saw that His wife almost despaired of having offspring.<sup>119</sup>

Luther pointed out that Isaac and Rebekah's lack of children was made all the more painful for them by the fact that Ishmael, Isaac's brother, very quickly became the father of twelve sons. The twelve sons, in turn, each became a prince and the father of a large tribe. Thus Isaac had the promise of Christ, but Ishmael had all the children. This was, Luther wrote, "surely a severe trial for faith, hope, and love."<sup>120</sup>

Luther cited this situation as an example of how God often works in the lives of His people. He wrote:

---

<sup>117</sup>LW, 5:6.

<sup>118</sup>LW, 4:352.

<sup>119</sup>LW, 4:337.

<sup>120</sup>LW, 4:325.

. . . all the works of God are in conflict with His promise, which nevertheless remains completely true and unshaken. But what offends is the fact that it is invisible, delayed and turned into its opposite.<sup>121</sup>

He also wrote:

. . . when you have a promise of God, it will happen that the more you are loved by God, the more you will have it hidden, delayed, and turned into its opposite.<sup>122</sup>

Yet Luther reminds us that God is always present and gracious to us no matter how He seems to be against us.<sup>123</sup>

Genesis 25:21 records that Isaac entreated the Lord on behalf of Rebekah because she was barren. Luther praised Isaac for having the faith to do so. He wrote, ". . . he [Isaac] takes heart and directs a fervent and powerful prayer to God."<sup>124</sup> He further wrote:

Such outstanding boldness and greatness of faith the flesh does not see. But this is written for our sakes, in order that we may be bold and confident, and may learn to pray; for the prayers of believers cannot be in vain.<sup>125</sup>

Genesis 25:21 records that the Lord heard Isaac's prayer and that Rebekah conceived. Genesis 25:22, however, records that the children struggled within her. This was the next trial for the couple, and particularly for Rebekah.

---

<sup>121</sup>LW, 4:326.

<sup>122</sup>LW, 4:326; WA, 43:371, lines 25-27 - "Quando habes promissionem divinam, quo magis diligaris a Deo, hoc magis habebis absconditam, dilatam et in contrarium positam." Luther's concept of the hiddenness of God is clarified here. It refers not to God hiding Himself in toto, but only as regards His promises and His grace.

<sup>123</sup>LW, 4:327.

<sup>124</sup>LW, 4:341.

<sup>125</sup>LW, 4:341.

Luther used this passage as a basis for discussing predestination and the distinction between the two kinds of birth, one being physical birth and the other the new birth or spiritual birth. He noted that the Apostle Paul in Romans 9:10-13 had used this passage in discussing election, and Luther wrote, ". . . we, as imperfect pupils, want to follow the most perfect teacher."<sup>126</sup>

Luther said that both kinds of birth are exemplified in the twin sons which Rebekah bore. Esau was born according to the flesh alone, but Jacob was born both according to the flesh and according to the promise of God. Therefore God preferred Jacob.<sup>127</sup>

Luther said that just as there was life-long conflict between Jacob and Esau so there is always conflict in this world between those who are born only according to the flesh and those who are born according to the Spirit. Those who believe in Christ are God's true children, but those who rely upon themselves claim to be. The former have been given the new birth, but the latter rely upon their first birth. Consequently they can never live together in peace. Luther wrote:

But this is the source of perpetual war from the beginning of the world to the end, not about trivialities but about that glorious title "church," the people of God, the kingdom of heaven, and eternal life.<sup>128</sup>

---

<sup>126</sup>LW, 4:342.

<sup>127</sup>LW, 4:345.

<sup>128</sup>LW, 4:345.



The first trial of Isaac and Rebekah was, then, their long wait for children, and the next trial was that when Rebekah did become pregnant the twin boys within her womb struggled against each other.

Rebekah suffered from their struggling. She said in Genesis 25:22, "If it be so, why am I thus?" Luther wrote:

This is a twofold, yes, a sevenfold trial; for Rebecca now feels that it would have been better to remain barren forever than to be so woefully afflicted.<sup>129</sup>

Luther says that Rebekah's case points out how Christians often feel. He says that we often say, as Rebekah probably did at that time, "The longer I pray, the more severely I am afflicted and tormented."<sup>130</sup>

Luther points out that God's manner of working here in Rebekah's life is similar to how He works in the lives of all of His people. He subjects them to the cross.<sup>131</sup> He conceals and withdraws Himself from His people,<sup>132</sup> and, as a result, it sometimes seems to them that God and His Word are nothing. Luther wrote:

For this reason nothing in the world seems more uncertain than the Word of God and faith, nothing more delusive than hope in the promise. In short, nothing seems to be more nothing than God Himself.<sup>133</sup>

---

<sup>129</sup>LW, 4:353.

<sup>130</sup>LW, 4:353.

<sup>131</sup>LW, 4:356.

<sup>132</sup>LW, 4:356.

<sup>133</sup>LW, 4:355; WA, 43:392, lines 16-18 - "Ideoque in mundo apparet nihil esse fallacius verbo Dei et fidei, nihil vanius spe promissionis. Denique nihil magis nihil esse videtur, quam Deus ipse."

God seems to hide Himself from His own people, and we cannot explain why he does so. Luther says, however, that we shall have the answer on the day when Christ puts all of His enemies under His feet, as is described in 1 Corinthians 15:25. Until then, Luther says, we should only believe and hope.<sup>134</sup>

Luther said that it is the wisdom of the saints to trust in God in spite of the apparent futility of doing so. He wrote:

For it is the wisdom of the saints to believe in the truth in opposition to the lie, in the hidden truth in opposition to the manifest truth, and in hope in opposition to hope.<sup>135</sup>

The wisdom of the saints is very different from reason. Reason always follows after things that are visible. Faith trusts in things that are invisible. Therefore reason must be killed by despair, mistrust, hatred, and murmuring against God. Once reason has been killed and everything external taken away, then there is room for the Word and for faith.<sup>136</sup>

Rebekah felt that she had been cast aside by the Lord when her unborn sons struggled against each other within her. God, however, had not forsaken her but was only hiding Himself from her for a time.<sup>137</sup> Soon He allowed Himself to be found again.

---

<sup>134</sup>LW, 4:357.

<sup>135</sup>LW, 4:357.

<sup>136</sup>LW, 4:360.

<sup>137</sup>LW, 4:358-359.

Genesis 25:22 records that Rebekah at that time went to inquire of the Lord as to the reason for the struggle within her. Luther understood that to mean that she went to Shem and sought his counsel as the world's foremost spiritual leader and preacher of the Word in those days.<sup>138</sup> Luther said that God used Shem to comfort Rebekah and to help her to find her lost God again.<sup>139</sup>

Genesis 25:23 states:

And the LORD said unto her, Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from the bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger.

Luther portrayed Shem as conveying this message from God to Rebekah and as explaining it in this way:

. . . two nations will come from your womb. You have only been afflicted and your prayer has been a test whether you are willing to persevere. Consequently you should know that more has been granted you than was prayed for, that more has been given than was asked for or understood. For you were not able to understand what or how much God would grant. He understood your prayer better than you did.<sup>140</sup>

Luther said that Rebekah was comforted by Shem's words.

The birth of Jacob and Esau is described in Genesis 25:24-26. It says:

And when her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold there were twins in her womb.

And the first came out red, all over like an hairy garment; and they called his name Esau.

---

<sup>138</sup>LW, 4:359.

<sup>139</sup>LW, 4:360.

<sup>140</sup>LW, 4:363.

And after that came his brother out, and his hand took hold on Esau's heel; and his name was called Jacob: and Isaac was threescore years old when she bore them.

Luther saw in the birth of Jacob and Esau an undeniable illustration of the fact that God works in this world in His own ways, inscrutable to human reason, to save whomever He wishes. God had said, ". . . the elder shall serve the younger," (Genesis 25:23) and so God showed, even before their birth, that He had chosen Jacob and rejected Esau to stand in the ancestral line of Christ.

To our human way of thinking, there is no reason why God should have done so. Indeed we are inclined to think that the honor should have gone to Esau as the firstborn. Esau's primogeniture, however, did not commend him to God, just as nothing in our first birth commends us to God. He saves by grace alone.

Luther saw that the birth of Jacob and Esau teaches that salvation is by God's grace alone without human merit. He wrote:

Here the foundations of the entire Christian doctrine are confirmed. Through the birth of these twins God wants to pass sentence in advance on the entire world, yes, even to anticipate and put an end to all righteousnesses of the flesh . . . these words lay the foundations of our doctrine and powerfully support them, namely, that before God the flesh is dead and condemned, but the spirit is made alive.<sup>141</sup>

Predestination is a mystery that belongs to the hiddenness of God, and Luther used the birth of Jacob and Esau

---

<sup>141</sup>LW, 4:370-371.

as an opportunity to describe two ways in which God is hidden from us. Luther taught that God is hidden from us both a priori and a posteriori.

Luther said that God is hidden from us a priori concerning His "innermost and secret counsels."<sup>142</sup> This aspect of God's hiddenness involves such matters as "why He deliberates, acts, rules, saves, destroys, etc., in this way or another."<sup>143</sup> According to the a priori hiddenness of God, God is "hidden for us within Himself and in His divinity."<sup>144</sup> God's a priori hiddenness is, then, His hiddenness according to what He has not revealed to us of Himself.

God's a posteriori hiddenness is His hiddenness even as He "calls, speaks, and manifests Himself."<sup>145</sup> When God reveals Himself to us and we still do not comprehend Him and His will because His nature and working are simply too high for us, then God is hidden from us a posteriori.

Luther taught that our response should be different to each of the two kinds of God's hiddenness. When God is hidden from us a posteriori, that is, after He has revealed Himself, then we should study His Word and seek to understand it. Whatever we still do not understand, even after study, we should simply accept by faith. When we accept God's Word by faith, then He reveals Himself to us more and more and dispels this a posteriori hiddenness.

---

<sup>142</sup>LW, 4:371.

<sup>143</sup>LW, 4:371.

<sup>144</sup>LW, 4:371.

<sup>145</sup>LW, 4:371.

Our response to God's a priori hiddenness, that is, to His hiddenness concerning things which He has not revealed to us, should be different. God's a priori hiddenness we should simply ignore. It is beyond us. We are unable to know anything about God which He has not revealed to us, and so we should not even try. Luther wrote:

Thus you have enough trouble and pains to understand God when He is working and calling, and there is no need for you to search and explore secrets and things that are too high for your comprehension.<sup>146</sup>

Genesis 25:28 records that Isaac loved Esau, and Rebekah loved Jacob. Here was the next trial for the couple. They did not agree about which son God had chosen to be the heir of the promise of Christ. This raises the question of why Isaac preferred Esau and intended to give him the blessing, even though God had said that the elder would serve the younger. Did Isaac intend deliberately to disobey God in passing on the blessing and the promise to Esau?

Luther concluded that Isaac believed, sincerely but mistakenly, that in the womb Jacob was the elder and Esau the younger, and before they were born, God changed the order, causing Esau, the younger, to be born first.<sup>147</sup> If this were true, then Isaac could suppose that the right of bearing the promise of Christ should indeed go to Esau.

---

<sup>146</sup>LW, 4:371.

<sup>147</sup>LW, 4:388.

Isaac and Rebekah disagreed about which son was to receive the blessing of the promise of Christ, and this disagreement led to the deception of Isaac, recorded in chapter 27, by which Rebekah and Jacob won the blessing for Jacob, in spite of Isaac's wishes.

But Isaac's next trial is recorded in Genesis 26:1. It says, "And there was famine in the land. . ." Luther praised Isaac's faith in coping with this trial. He wrote:

If I had two sons, a wife, domestics, such a great multitude of cattle and servants and did not have a foot-breadth of ground to set my foot on, what would I do there? I would surely give up control and management of the household and run away.<sup>148</sup>

He wrote also:

But what great faith one sees there! What inestimable patience! What unbelievable forbearance, goodness, and kindness one sees!<sup>149</sup>

Thus Luther continues to present Isaac to his hearers as a role-model of faith and of patience in the midst of adversity.

Luther supposed that Isaac, who preached about and served the true God, received the blame from his neighbors for the famine which overtook their land. Luther commented that much the same thing happened when the Gospel was again brought to light during the Reformation. He said that then, too, ungodly people blamed the Gospel for poorer harvests, costlier grain, and declining morals among the people.<sup>150</sup> He said, "The doctrine of the Gospel is blamed for every

---

<sup>148</sup>LW, 5:7.

<sup>149</sup>LW, 5:7.

<sup>150</sup>LW, 5:10-11.

evil."<sup>151</sup>

Luther explained why God sends famines and other disasters by saying that they are tests for the godly. He said that God sends famines, wars, pestilence, and similar disasters to try godly people, "in order that they may learn to maintain with assurance that they will be nourished even in a time of famine."<sup>152</sup> God also sends such disasters to the ungodly to offend and punish them.<sup>153</sup>

God spoke to Isaac at this time of famine and comforted him. God said to him in Genesis 26:2-5:

Go not down into Egypt; dwell in the land which I will tell thee of:

Sojourn in this land, and I will be with thee, and will bless thee; for unto thee, and unto thy seed, I will give all these countries, and I will perform the oath which I sware unto Abraham thy father;

And I will make thy seed to multiply as the stars of the heaven, and will give unto thy seed all these countries; and in thy seed shall all nations of the earth be blessed.

Because that Abraham obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.

Luther wrote that nearly all of God's earlier promises to Abraham were repeated and brought together here.<sup>154</sup> This word to Isaac included temporal promises concerning lands, and a spiritual promise concerning Christ. The latter, of course, was the promise that in Isaac's seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

---

<sup>151</sup>LW, 5:11.      <sup>152</sup>LW, 5:10.      <sup>153</sup>LW, 5:10.

<sup>154</sup>LW, 5:16.



The incarnation was the essence of the spiritual promise given here to Isaac. Luther again showed why this must be so. He wrote:

For if He were not God, He would not be able to bless us accursed men; if He were not a man, the blessing would not come to us.<sup>155</sup>

Thus the Seed promised here to Isaac had to be the Incarnate Son of God. Luther said that God spoke here to Isaac to "buoy him up with a new comfort."<sup>156</sup>

Isaac's next trial was that the men Gerar were so lustful and treacherous that he feared for his life as he lived among them. He feared that they would kill him in order to take Rebekah, his beautiful wife, from him. Consequently he lied to them and told them that Rebekah was not his wife but his sister.

Genesis 26:6-7 records:

And Isaac dwelt in Gerar:

And the men of the place asked him of his wife; and he said, She is my sister: for he feared to say, She is my wife; lest, said he, the men of the place should kill me for Rebekah; because she was fair to look upon.

Luther was compelled to acknowledge that Isaac sinned in this situation. He wrote:

---

<sup>155</sup>LW, 5:19; WA, 43:441, lines 21-23 - "Nisi enim Deus esset, non posset nos maledictos benedicere. Nisi homo esset, non veniret ad nos benedictio . . ." Luther saw that as God had earlier promised the incarnation to Abraham in Genesis 12:3 and 22:18, He now promised it to Isaac in Genesis 26:4.

<sup>156</sup>LW, 5:15.

Here such great weakness is apparent in him, such shameful helplessness, that one can think of nothing more disgraceful. For is it not a shameful example that he denies that Rebekah is his wife?<sup>157</sup>

The question arises: Why did Luther regard Isaac's lie here as being worse than Abraham's earlier and similar lies about Sarah being his sister? The answer is that when Abraham in Genesis 12:13 and Genesis 20:2 said that Sarah was his sister, the promised seed, Isaac, had not yet been born to him. Thus Luther believed that Abraham, at those times, was still looking forward to the birth of the promised seed and therefore only acted rashly because of his desire to keep himself alive so that Christ could come.

Luther wrote concerning Abraham:

Because Scripture often presents Abraham to us as a believing father and a perfect model of faith, I prefer to decide in favor of the opinion that here, too, his great faith is revealed rather than either that he sinned or that his faith succumbed in the trial.<sup>158</sup>

Isaac, however, lied about Rebekah in Genesis 26:6 after his sons Jacob and Esau had already been born. Thus he lied after the line of the Blessed Seed had already been extended beyond him. Also Genesis 26:7 says that Isaac acted out of fear. Faith, therefore, was not his motivation. Clearly, then, Isaac sinned.

Luther could, in this instance, find no useful example in Isaac to present to his hearers. So Luther turned to God Himself. He noted that God protected Isaac and Rebekah even

---

<sup>157</sup>LW, 5:25.

<sup>158</sup>LW, 2:294.

during this time of failure. Therefore he wrote:

. . . the weakness on Isaac's part would have brought about the defilement of his wife, adultery, and many other evils if God had not prevented it. But God permits the saints to fall in this manner in order that He may preserve them in spite of this.<sup>159</sup>

Luther showed his hearers that even in this incident God's people may find comfort in the Scriptures. They learn here that when they fall God is gracious and will restore them. They see also that they stand by His power alone. Luther wrote of this incident:

. . . it is recorded for the comfort of the churches, in order that we may know how merciful God is.<sup>160</sup>

Genesis 26:8 records that Isaac's lie about Rebekah came to light when he was observed by King Abimelech, the king of Gerar, to be sporting with his wife Rebekah. The king asked Isaac why he had told this lie about his wife, and Isaac was compelled to admit that it was because of fear.

Concerning the statement that Isaac was sporting with Rebekah his wife, Luther noted that the Hebrew word for "sporting" or "joking" is **פִּנָּץ**, which basically means "to laugh." It is the very word from which Isaac's own name, **יצחק**, is derived.

Luther commented:

Moreover in the Hebrew there is a neat allusion which cannot be reproduced in any other language: "Isaac was Isaac-ing," Isaac, that is, the laughing, friendly, lovable man, was being friendly with his wife. He

---

<sup>159</sup>LW, 5:28.

<sup>160</sup>LW, 5:25.

was conducting himself like a real Isaac. . .<sup>161</sup>

Luther used this opportunity to instruct his hearers about how men ought to treat their wives. He said that they ought to treat them with kindness and fun to spite the devil.<sup>162</sup> He further wrote:

. . . I strongly detest those men who are full of courage toward women and, as the saying goes, are lions at home and rabbits outside the home.<sup>163</sup>

In the midst of his discussion of Isaac sporting with Rebekah, Luther returned again to a discussion of the hiddenness of God, and he took up the topic of predestination. He observed that Isaac lied about Rebekah because of fear, and he wrote, "But it pleases me to take from this passage the opportunity to discuss doubt, God, and the will of God."<sup>164</sup>

Luther then noted that among some of the nobles of his day statements of the following kind were being made:

If I am predestined, I shall be saved, whether I do good or evil. If I am not predestined, I shall be condemned regardless of my works.<sup>165</sup>

Thus some of the nobles felt themselves at liberty to sin as much as they wanted since predestination and not their own works would determine whether or not they were saved.

Luther called these ideas "devilish and poisoned darts and original sin itself."<sup>166</sup> He said that the subject of predestination belongs to the hidden God, that is to things

---

<sup>161</sup>LW, 5:36.

<sup>162</sup>LW, 5:33.

<sup>163</sup>LW, 5:33.

<sup>164</sup>LW, 5:42.

<sup>165</sup>LW, 5:42.

<sup>166</sup>LW, 5:42.

about God which He has not chosen to reveal to us, and therefore thoughts of this kind which are attempts to investigate God apart from His Word are altogether devilish.<sup>167</sup>

Luther then went on to point out that all that we can know about God has been revealed in Jesus Christ. He wrote:

If you want to escape despair, hatred, and blasphemy of God, give up your speculation about the hidden God, and cease to strive in vain to see the face of God.<sup>168</sup>

He said:

The only thing you have to do is to receive the Son, so that Christ is welcome in your heart in His birth, miracles, and cross.<sup>169</sup>

Luther said that if we listen to the Incarnate Son of God, then predestination will present itself of its own accord.<sup>170</sup> We must not inquire into the secrets of the hidden God but should content ourselves with what God has revealed to us through the calling and ministry of His Word.<sup>171</sup>

The next trial for Isaac was that some of his wells were stopped by his neighbors who became jealous of his prosperity. (Genesis 26:15) Also, other wells were stolen from him. (Genesis 26:20-21) These seem to be only small matters, but again God appeared to hide Himself from Isaac.

Luther wrote:

---

<sup>167</sup>LW, 5:44.

<sup>168</sup>LW, 5:45.

<sup>169</sup>LW, 5:45.

<sup>170</sup>LW, 5:47.

<sup>171</sup>LW, 5:50.

. . . these things that are mentioned about the water and the wells are not laughable, as they seem to be according to the judgment of the flesh; but they all served the purpose of putting faith into practice. For Isaac had the promise of God who said: "I shall be with you." But now he is confronted with the opposite, as though he had been abandoned by God, who gave him the promise. Therefore we, too, should learn to wait for the Lord if we have His promise no matter what else happens.<sup>172</sup>

Yet another trial came to Isaac. It was that King Abimelech commanded him to leave his domain. The reason was that Abimelech and his people had become jealous of Isaac's increasing riches (Genesis 26:16). Isaac could have become discouraged by this expulsion, but instead, in Luther's view, Isaac once again clung to the promise and held out firmly.<sup>173</sup>

Luther wrote that when trials befall any of God's people, then they should remember that they have God's promise and therefore it is certain that His holy angels are round about them to protect them. He wrote:

But if any evil befalls us beyond, or contrary to, this trust and protection, this happens because of a special purpose that is hidden from us and especially from our adversaries.<sup>174</sup>

Luther also offered this explanation as to why God subjects His people to trials:

But without a trial we learn nothing and make no progress. For this is the warfare and the exercise of Christians through which we learn that we are under the protection of the angels, and that although we are plagued by severe trials, yet they do us no harm. This

---

<sup>172</sup>LW, 5:59.

<sup>173</sup>LW, 5:60.

<sup>174</sup>LW, 5:62.

is our theology.<sup>175</sup>

Luther claims here a certain kind of theology. What kind is it? It is of course the theology of the cross. It is the theology of faith in God and His promises in spite of suffering and even death.

God subjects His children to suffering and death. He lays upon them heavy crosses. Yet, because He has also given them His promises, the sufferings do not really hurt them, and death does not truly destroy them. In spite of it all, they are safe and blessed in Christ. This is the theology of the cross, that God leads His children through death to life.

All of the people of God have the assurance which He gave to Isaac: ". . . even if we must perish we shall not perish."<sup>176</sup> Luther also says that God gives us this assurance: "But as long as God lives, it is certain that we, too, shall live . . ."<sup>177</sup>

In expounding upon Isaac's trials concerning his wells, Luther again stated that Isaac was meant to be an example of faith for us. He wrote:

. . . he persevered and overcame most difficult trials as an example for us, lest we despair in any perils.<sup>178</sup>

After the trial of having his wells stolen, Isaac was given new wells which the Lord enabled him to keep. In

---

<sup>175</sup>LW, 5, p. 63.

<sup>176</sup>LW, 5:63.

<sup>177</sup>LW, 5:88.

<sup>178</sup>LW, 5:69.

other words, God comforted Isaac after his trial. Luther said that this is the continuous pattern for the lives of God's people upon this earth. Sometimes God allows them to feel the cross more keenly; sometimes less so.

Luther put it this way:

Observe . . . how God exercises his saints. Now things are sweet; now they are sour. Now He lets harsh things happen, now things that are pleasant. He who is truly a Christian will experience the same . . .<sup>179</sup>

Comfort and tribulation continually alternate in the lives of God's people. Luther wrote, ". . . one should look for comfort after tribulation, for this alternation is continuous in the life of the saints."<sup>180</sup>

After the trials concerning the wells, God again comforted Isaac. God said to him in Genesis 26:24:

I am the God of Abraham thy father: fear not, for I am with thee, and will bless thee, and multiply thy seed for my servant Abraham's sake.

Luther saw in this promise to Isaac yet another proof of the reality of the resurrection. He noted that Abraham had died by this time, and yet God here calls Himself the God of Abraham. Consequently Luther wrote:

God is not the God of that which is nothing. No One and Nobody do not worship God, and God does not rule over them. Abraham died, and God is the God of Abraham. Consequently Abraham is living.<sup>181</sup>

Abraham, in other words, had died but would rise again. Therefore this promise was a promise of the resur-

---

<sup>179</sup>LW, 5:69.

<sup>180</sup>LW, 5:87.

<sup>181</sup>LW, 5:73.



rection.

This Word from God to Isaac was the last one given to him, and in it God promised to be with him. Luther wrote, "This is the last promise, and with it Isaac sustained himself till the end of his life.<sup>182</sup>

Genesis 26:25 says that after receiving this promise Isaac built an altar and called upon the name of the Lord. Luther interpreted that to mean that Isaac established a church at Beersheba and spent the rest of his life there preaching the Word of God. Luther wrote:

. . . Isaac delivered many very beautiful sermons there for approximately 70 or 80 years. He preached the mystery of the Trinity, of the incarnation of Christ, and of immortality, and all things that are read in the Gospel today and are being taught.<sup>183</sup>

Isaac's next trial concerned the marriage of his son Esau to two Hittite women. Luther noted that when Isaac's external trials concerning greedy neighbors ceased, then trials began within his own household.<sup>184</sup>

Genesis 26:34-35 records:

And Esau was forty years old when he took to wife Judith the daughter of Beerli the Hittite, and Bashemath the daughter of Elon the Hittite:

Which were a grief of mind to Isaac and to Rebekah.

In Luther's view these Hittite wives of Esau were arrogant and haughty and caused divisions in Isaac's household. They boasted that the promise of Christ rightly belonged to Esau, and they belittled Jacob's claim to it.

---

<sup>182</sup>LW, 5:78.

<sup>183</sup>LW, 5:78.

<sup>184</sup>LW, 5:89.

Luther wrote:

Esau and his wives boasted of the priesthood and the sovereignty and that Jacob should neither hope for nor expect anything else than one share or an insignificant little gift.<sup>185</sup>

Luther said that the Canaanite wives of Esau vexed Isaac and Rebekah habitually and without interruption. He referred to them as "those two cancers of Rebekah,"<sup>186</sup> and he said that they continued to torment Isaac and Rebekah until finally the violent outburst took place in which Rebekah tricked Isaac into giving the blessing of the first-born to Jacob.<sup>187</sup>

The deception of Isaac is told in Genesis 27:1-40. Isaac was, at that time, 137 years old,<sup>188</sup> and he had decided that since his life might soon end he should pronounce a blessing upon Esau and give to him the role of successor in bearing the promise of Christ.

Isaac, however, was old and blind. Rebekah consequently told Jacob to dress in Esau's clothing, and she sent Jacob to Isaac with the claim that he was Esau. Isaac could not see Jacob, and therefore he accepted him as Esau and gave him the blessing which included dominion over his brother.

Luther asked:

Did Rebekah and her son have the right to lie, to deceive the very saintly patriarch who was a blind old

---

<sup>185</sup>LW, 5:93.

<sup>186</sup>LW, 5:168.

<sup>187</sup>LW, 5:98.

<sup>188</sup>LW, 5:99.

man, in such an important matter, and to deprive brother Esau of the blessing and the primogeniture?<sup>189</sup>

Luther's answer was yes, because God had appointed Jacob to receive the blessing.<sup>190</sup> Luther said that Rebekah and Jacob broke commandments in the Second Table of the Law, but they were faithful to the First Table by seeking God's will. Luther wrote, "The Second Table yields and is nothing when it impinges on the First."<sup>191</sup>

In Genesis 25:23 God had said that the elder brother would serve the younger. In Luther's view, Rebekah had understood that Word of God more accurately than did Isaac, and therefore her actions in deceiving Isaac to gain the blessing for Jacob were quite justified. He called the deception of Isaac a "sinless and pious deception."<sup>192</sup>

In fact, Luther said that Rebekah probably was advised by the patriarch Eber to do everything that she could to secure the blessing for Jacob.<sup>193</sup> Thus Luther said that Isaac was "beautifully deceived by the counsel and cunning of Rebekah."<sup>194</sup>

In the midst of his exposition of the deception of Isaac, Luther took up a discussion of the topic of faith, and he did so inspired by the faith of Rebekah and Jacob that God would bring the birthright to Jacob in spite of Isaac's wishes. Luther portrayed Rebekah as believing that

---

<sup>189</sup>LW, 5:110.

<sup>190</sup>LW, 5:113.

<sup>191</sup>LW, 5:114.

<sup>192</sup>LW, 5:95.

<sup>193</sup>LW, 5:111.

<sup>194</sup>LW, 5:200.

the blessing must come to Jacob no matter what resisted it or who opposed it, because God willed that Jacob should have it.<sup>195</sup>

Luther commented concerning faith:

Faith attaches itself to a thing that is still an utter nothing and waits until everything comes about . . . faith, which takes hold of the promise, fixes the heart on what is altogether absurd, impossible, and contained in the Word and God's promise.<sup>196</sup>

Faith, in other words, produced for Rebekah and Jacob the substance of that for which they hoped.

Faith brought victory to Rebekah and Jacob, but conversely, Esau, who had long exalted himself contrary to God's Word, found himself suddenly humbled and defeated. Luther described Esau's change of fortune in these words:

He offers his father the food he had prepared. Then all things, all hope, and all joys suddenly collapse, and he himself is dashed to the ground as though struck by a thunder-bolt from heaven.<sup>197</sup>

Luther also wrote:

For he who had been a lord, a king, and a priest at six o'clock in the morning has become a servant by evening.<sup>198</sup>

Esau could not bear this humiliation. He consoled himself by planning to kill Jacob. Rebekah heard of Esau's plans, and in Genesis 27:42-45 gave this warning to Jacob:

Behold, thy brother Esau, as touching thee, doth comfort himself, purposing to kill thee.

---

<sup>195</sup>LW, 5:129.

<sup>196</sup>LW, 5:128.

<sup>197</sup>LW, 5:167.

<sup>198</sup>LW, 5:168.

Now therefore, my son, obey my voice and arise, flee thou to Laban my brother to Haran;

And tarry with him a few days, until thy brother's fury turn away;

Until thy brother's anger turn away from thee, and he forget that which thou has done to him: then I will send, and fetch thee from thence: why should I be deprived also of you both in one day?

Luther commended Rebekah for giving this advice and Jacob for heeding it. He noted that they could simply have trusted God to deliver Jacob and have done nothing, but that would have been to tempt God. Luther said that God wanted them to use the means which He provided for avoiding danger, which, in this case, was fleeing.

Luther said that in general God wants his people to use the means which He makes available to them. He wrote:

Hence in all our affairs and actions this example of Rebecca should admonish us to do what lies in our power, that is, to make use of the means in accordance with the promise and later to trust the outcome and the predetermination to God. 199

Luther said that God gives breasts to a mother to feed her child, and therefore a mother should not presume that God will nourish her child without milk.<sup>200</sup> So, too, God wishes His people to employ the means which He gives to them. Luther wanted his hearers, in seeking salvation, to direct their attention to the means of grace and not to presume upon predestination.<sup>201</sup>

---

<sup>199</sup>LW, 5:179.

<sup>200</sup>LW, 5:173.

<sup>201</sup>LW, 5:173.

Genesis 23:5 tells of Isaac sending Jacob away to live with his uncle Laban. Luther said that after Jacob left, Isaac and Rebekah experienced another trial. It was that Esau and his Hittite wives remained as overbearing as ever. This was, Luther wrote, "a severe trial and the utmost grief of the parents."<sup>202</sup>

Isaac's blindness, too, was a trial for the patriarch. Luther wrote, ". . . he had the misfortune and almost unbearable cross that in his old age he was deprived of his sight."<sup>203</sup>

Luther said that the trials of the patriarchs somehow speak to us more than do the sufferings of Christ about the need for patience in our sufferings and for faith in the Word of God. He wrote:

Although those afflictions of the patriarchs are nothing when compared to Christ's suffering, yet they affect our hearts more; for Christ's suffering is not perfectly understood by us, and we do not believe that He was such a wretched and abject man as He actually was. Furthermore, everybody thinks that since he was God, He could easily bear and overcome everything.<sup>204</sup>

Since we do not understand Christ's sufferings properly, therefore the Biblical saints such as Isaac can provide us with effective examples of endurance and steadfastness in misfortunes.

Rebekah told Isaac that she did not want Jacob to take a Canaanite wife, and thereby she persuaded him to send Jacob to her homeland to get a wife. Isaac agreed to this

---

<sup>202</sup>LW, 5:175.

<sup>203</sup>LW, 5:176.

<sup>204</sup>LW, 5:177.

plan, and in Genesis 28:1-5 Isaac sends Jacob away with these words:

Thou shalt not take a wife of the daughters of Canaan.

Arise, go to Padanaram, to the house of Bethuel thy mother's father; and take thee a wife from thence of the daughters of Laban thy mother's brother.

And God Almighty bless thee, and make thee fruitful, and multiply thee, that thou mayest be a multitude of people;

And give to thee the blessing of Abraham, to thee, and to thy seed with thee; that thou mayest inherit the land wherein thou art a stranger, which God gave unto Abraham.

Luther commented:

Accordingly . . . Jacob is sent into exile. He who has been blessed and appointed as the heir is cast out of the house and flees from his enraged brother . . . How does this agree with the promise and with such a rich blessing?<sup>205</sup>

He further commented:

This, then, is one of the wonderful examples of the divine government by which God shows that He requires confidence in His Word and promises, even if the opposite of what is contained in the promise happens. He does so in order that we may accustom ourselves to trust in God in things that are absent and are placed far out of our sight.<sup>206</sup>

Thus Luther began to observe in Jacob's life the same kinds of workings of God by which God had worked in Isaac's life, namely, the hiddenness of God and the cross.

---

<sup>205</sup>LW, 5:183.

<sup>206</sup>LW, 5:183; WA, 43:554, lines 28-32 - "Hoc ergo unum de mirabilibus exemplis est gubernationis divinae quo ostendit Deus se exigere fiduciam verbi et promissionum, etiamsi contraria fiunt ab iis, quae in promissione continentur. Ut adsuescamus confidere Deo in rebus absentibus, et procul extra conspectum nostrum positis."

Luther said that a new book begins at Genesis 28:10. He called it "the Fifth Book of Genesis" and "the history of the patriarch Jacob."<sup>207</sup> Isaac's book had ended.

After Genesis 28:5, Isaac is mentioned only peripherally in the Bible's account of the patriarchs. Isaac's trials, however, continued. In Luther's view, Isaac lived to see many of the misfortunes which befell his son Jacob, the rape of his granddaughter Dinah, the defilement of Jacob's bed by Reuben, and the loss of Joseph. He even lived to hear of the death of his daughter-in-law Rachel.<sup>208</sup>

Luther wrote:

. . . Isaac endures misfortunes in his household, and the bitterest misfortunes of all, from the 100th year of his life up to his 180th year. All this he is compelled to bear and swallow until his grandson Joseph is cast out into Egypt, for in that year or thereabouts he died. And he saw and bore misfortune that will happen later on to his son Jacob, to his grandson Joseph, to Esau, who was a renegade, to Dinah, who was raped, and to Reuben, who went up to Jacob's bed. That vast sea of trials on which he is tossed about during these 80 years eventually engulfs him.<sup>209</sup>

The death of Isaac himself is recorded in Genesis 35:29. It says:

And Isaac gave up the ghost, and died, and was gathered unto his people, being old and full of days: and his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.

Isaac died at the age of 180 years.

Isaac's life was long, but in Luther's view it could have been longer. Luther thought that Isaac's death was

---

<sup>207</sup>LW, 5:200.

<sup>208</sup>LW, 6:280.

<sup>209</sup>LW, 5:90.



hastened by his grief at the loss of his grandson Joseph. Isaac's trials, in other words, shortened his life. Luther wrote, ". . . I believe that Isaac could have lived much longer had he been spared this disaster."<sup>210</sup> Luther also wrote, "This ornament of the world had to weep and grieve himself to death!"<sup>211</sup>

Thus Luther ends his exposition of the life of Isaac. It was a life in which Luther saw God working in two preeminently important ways. The first was by giving the promise of Christ and by creating faith in that promise. The second was by subjecting Isaac to trials and the cross so that his faith was tested and exercised. Luther saw in Isaac a case study in the theology of the cross, that is, in how God, by means of the promise of Christ and of laying heavy crosses upon His people, leads them through death to life.

In Luther's view, all Christians can benefit from studying the life of Isaac, for there they see how God works in the lives of His people, and they find an example to follow of patient faith in the midst of suffering.

Luther wrote:

If God lets His saints, whom He loves dearly, be so afflicted, then let us too, bear it patiently if at some time sad and adverse experiences fall to our lot. For these matters are not signs of wrath and of being forsaken but rather proofs of grace for the testing of our faith.<sup>212</sup>

---

<sup>210</sup>LW, 6:367.

<sup>211</sup>LW, 6:404.

<sup>212</sup>LW, 6:406.

In other words, then, the more that God hides Himself from His people, who trust in Him, and the more that He gives them crosses to bear, the more surely He loves them.

CHAPTER IV  
OBSERVATIONS ABOUT LUTHER'S  
HERMENEUTICAL METHODOLOGY

Luther's main teachings about the life of Isaac have now been summarized. Next attention shall be turned to a study of Luther's methods of Biblical interpretation. A study of Luther's hermeneutical methodology is very helpful for seeing how he arrived at his extraordinary insights into the working of God in the life of Isaac.

Eugene Klug, in his book entitled From Luther to Chemnitz on Scripture and the Word, has observed that Luther, in his Genesis Commentary, gives frequent and explicit statements about how Scripture should be interpreted. Klug has written:

The Genesis Commentary, thus, can be said to be an arena in which Luther makes his own hermeneutical method perfectly clear, both in modus operandi of his exegesis itself, as well as in summary statements directly addressed to the question.<sup>1</sup>

This is indeed correct. The purpose of this chapter is to note some of Luther's most important hermeneutical principles and to show how he employed them to arrive at his masterful interpretation of the life of Isaac.

---

<sup>1</sup>Eugene F. Klug, From Luther to Chemnitz on Scripture and the Word (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), p. 95.

Nine principles will be noted. An effort will be made to present them in logical sequence, so that those principles are presented first which are foundational for the ones which follow, and so that those principles are presented later which presuppose the earlier ones.

This is not meant to suggest that Luther regarded the first principle as being the most important, the second as being secondarily important, and so forth. Luther, for example, probably stressed the need for proper distinction between Law and Gospel more overtly and more frequently than he did that the Bible is the Word of God. Nevertheless the fact remains that when Luther declared that all of Scripture is divided into Law and Gospel he was presupposing the existence of Scripture as the Word of God. Therefore the first principle to be looked at here is that Scripture is the Word of God, and then his principle of distinguishing between Law and Gospel in the Word will be noted.

Throughout this chapter those principles will be examined first which seem to be necessary as presuppositions for the ones which follow, and, at the end of the chapter, a few general concluding observations will be presented concerning Luther's preaching about Isaac.

### **1. The Scriptures Are** **the Word of God**

It was Luther's view that the Scriptures are the Word of God, and therefore they are to be completely accepted and

fully trusted in all which they declare. In Luther's view, there is no error in Scripture, nor can there be, because Scripture is the product of the Holy Spirit. Scripture is the Word of God, and therefore what it declares about Isaac must be true in every detail.

Luther made his view of the Holy Spirit's role in the writing of the book of Genesis very clear in the Genesis Commentary in the following statement. He wrote:

One must always keep in view what I emphasize so often, namely, that the Holy Spirit is the Author of this book.<sup>2</sup>

This statement is an example of how Luther routinely, in the course of the Genesis lectures, ascribed authorship of the book of Genesis to the Holy Spirit. Another example of this was noted above (page 53). There Luther was quoted as saying that the Holy Spirit used very few words to describe the great events which took place upon Mount Moriah.

Thus we see that Luther regarded Genesis as God's book. Yet he also frequently referred to Moses as the author of it. An instance of this was noted above (page 4). Luther was quoted as saying that Moses praised and exalted the birth of Isaac. Clearly, then, it was Luther's view that Moses was the human author of Genesis, but the Holy Spirit was its Divine Author. God, in other words, spoke through Moses.

Because Luther believed the Scriptures to be the Word

---

<sup>2</sup>LW, 5:352.

of God, it was often necessary for him consciously to submit his own reason and preferences to the overriding authority of Scripture. For example, in Genesis 24 there is a rather lengthy description of the first meeting between Eliezer, the servant of Abraham, and Rebekah, the future wife of Isaac. Luther did not regard that account as being particularly important. He wrote about it:

. . . I myself wonder why Moses has so much to say about such unimportant matters when above he has been very concise in matters far more sublime.<sup>3</sup>

Luther went on, however, to submit to the authority of the Word. He wrote:

There is no doubt, however, that the Holy Spirit wanted these things to be written and to stand for our instruction; for in Holy Scripture nothing unimportant is put before us and nothing unprofitable.<sup>4</sup>

Luther further quoted Romans 15:4 as proof that there is nothing unimportant in Scripture. That verse states, "Whatever was written . . . was written for our instruction." Thus we see that when Luther's reason conflicted with Scripture, he willingly set aside his own perspective, and he defended the Word. Scripture was the wisdom of God for Luther.

Luther's high view of the authority of Scripture as the Word of God was a part of his overall reverence for the Word of God in whatever form it is given to men. Luther wrote:

---

<sup>3</sup>LW, 4:274.      <sup>4</sup>LW, 4:274.

. . . in the examples of the saintly fathers it should be looked upon as the main thing and the highest commendation that God spoke with them and that they had the Word of God. This is the point that elucidates these accounts and gives a true understanding of what and how great these dregs and seemingly contemptible outward appearances of the greatest saints are. For where the Word of God is, there one also finds true faith and true works.<sup>5</sup>

In Luther's view, then, what ennobled the patriarchs and what made them such important figures in human history was the fact that God gave His Word to them. The presence of the Word made the sacrifice of Isaac a godly deed rather than a sinful, murderous one. The presence of the Word made the search for a wife for Isaac a God-pleasing and noble quest rather than a foolish and sinful one.

As was noted above (page 63), in Luther's view works done in accordance with God's Word are always glorious and grand, but those done without God's Word are never pleasing to Him.

Luther revered God's Word. He revered it as it was given directly to Abraham and Isaac, and he revered it in the form of Holy Scripture.

---

<sup>5</sup>LW, 4:3-4; WA, 43:431, lines 1-7 - "In exemplis sanctorum patrum hoc tanquam caput et summam commendationem spectandam esse, quod Deus cum eis locutus est, quod habuerunt verbum Dei. Ille est locus, qui illustrat hasce historias, et praebet verum intellectum, quid et quanta sint istae feces et contemptibiles species, ut apparent, sanctissimorum virorum. Ubi enim est verbum Dei, ibi et vera fides est et sunt opera vera." In this statement Luther juxtaposes three of his hermeneutical principles. They are the primacy of the Word of God, the falsity of appearances, and the value of the examples of the saints.

## 2. All of the Word

### Is Law and Gospel

The second principle of Luther's hermeneutics is that all of God's Word consists of Law and Gospel, and for a correct understanding of any passage, the Law and Gospel in it must be properly divided. In his Genesis Commentary, Luther wrote:

If you divide all Scripture, it contains two topics: promises and threats or benefits and punishments.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, all of Scripture is either Law or Gospel.

In his Lectures on Galatians, Luther wrote:

The knowledge of this topic, the distinction between the Law and the Gospel, is necessary to the highest degree; for it contains a summary of all Christian doctrine. Therefore let everyone learn diligently how to distinguish the Law from the Gospel, not only in words but in feeling and in experience . . .<sup>7</sup>

In Luther's view, then, distinguishing between the Law and the Gospel is the foremost task of Biblical interpretation.

But what did Luther mean by the terms "Law" and "Gospel?" How did he define them? In 1525, he wrote Ein Unterrichtung wie sich die Christen ynn Mose sollen schicken gepredigt durch Martinum Luther. In that work he gave the following definitions of Law and Gospel:

The Law commands and exhorts concerning us, what we should do . . . The Gospel, however, does not preach what we should do or not do. It demands nothing from us, but rather turns things around and says, "See, dear man, this is what God has done for you. For you He put His Son into flesh. He allowed Him to be killed for your sake and thus saved you from sin,

---

<sup>6</sup>LW, 3:225.

<sup>7</sup>LW, 26:117.



death, the devil, and hell. Believe this and receive it and you will be saved.<sup>8</sup>

Here we see the essence of Luther's understanding of the distinction between Law and Gospel. Law is that part of God's Word which gives commands to man and threatens him with judgment. Gospel is that part of God's Word which consoles the sinner by offering him freely the grace of God in Christ.

These are the narrow and precise definitions of Law and Gospel. Luther also, however, commonly employed broadened definitions of the terms. He then used them so that by the term "Gospel" he referred to any promise of blessing from God and by the term "Law" he referred to any demand placed upon man, either through a verbalized command from God or through trying circumstances sent by God.

Luther's reason for broadening his definition of the term "Gospel" to refer to any blessing from God is seen in the following statement from his Genesis Commentary. He wrote:

Furthermore, every promise of God includes Christ; for if it is separated from this Mediator, God is not

---

<sup>8</sup>WA, 16:366-367, lines 31-26. Das gesetz gebeut und foddert von uns, was wir thuen sollen . . . Das Evangelion aber prediget nicht, was wir thuen odder lassen sollen, foddert nichts von uns, sondern wendet es umb, thut das widderspiel . . . und spricht: Sihe, lieber mensch, das hat dir Gott gethan, er hat seinem son für dich ynns fleisch gesteckt, hat yhn umb deinet willen erwürgen lassen und dich von sünde, tod, Teuffel und helle errettet, das gleube und nym es an, so wirstu selig.

dealing with us at all.<sup>9</sup>

He also wrote, ". . . the promises include Christ Himself, yes, eternal life, even though they appear to be speaking, not of Christ but of Isaac."<sup>10</sup>

Luther thus indicates that God is only able to bless sinners because of Jesus Christ. Therefore every blessing which God has ever promised to any sinner is a part of the Gospel, since it was given for Christ's sake. The Gospel, broadly defined, consists, then, of every promise of God.

Similarly, Luther also broadened his definition of the Law. That fact is seen in the following pair of statements which show that Luther equated the bearing of the cross with the preaching of the Law. He wrote:

The godly who are burdened with a cross and in various ways are hard pressed . . . have need of promises . . .<sup>11</sup>

He also wrote:

We all receive promises with joy . . . but the preaching of the Law frightens men . . .<sup>12</sup>

In these two statements Luther equates the bearing of the cross with the effect of the preaching of the Law. He does so by depicting both as the antithesis of promises. Since both are the antithesis of promises, that is, of Gospel, then both must be the same thing, that is, the Law.

---

<sup>9</sup>LW, 3:26.

<sup>10</sup>LW, 3:148.

<sup>11</sup>LW, 3:221.

<sup>12</sup>LW, 3:221.

Luther, then, saw God as working by means of Law in the lives of His people not only when He spoke to them and gave them explicit, hard commands, but also when He silently allowed them to suffer hardships in spite of all of His promises to them. This fact was noted above (page 30).

God worked through Law in the life of Isaac by giving him hardship after hardship and trial after trial. These trials were the working of Law in Isaac's life because implicit in all of them was this command from God: Trust in me and cling to my promise of Christ even when I seem to be hidden from you and even when I lay a heavy cross upon you. As was noted above (page 80), Luther taught that God wants all of His promises to His people to be contradictory so that they may learn to wait upon Him. Such waiting is the truest worship of God.

When Law and Gospel are broadly defined, it is easy to see how Luther viewed the whole life of Isaac in terms of Law and Gospel. Luther saw Gospel in Isaac's life in God's promises to Isaac, and he saw Law in Isaac's life in the hardships to which God subjected him.

The Gospel was God's promise that Christ and the church would come as Isaac's descendants. The Gospel gave Isaac faith and hope and made him spiritually alive.

The Law in Isaac's life was the hardships to which God subjected him. Its work was to kill all of the vestiges of pride and self-confidence in Isaac and to drive him to cling

to God's promises alone. Luther saw in Isaac's life a continual interplay of Law and Gospel.

As was mentioned above, (page 109) Luther wished to teach his hearers that God will work in the same ways in their lives. Through the Law, God slays the old man, and through the Gospel, He raises up the new man.

### 3. Christ Is the Heart of the Scriptures

A third principle of Luther's hermeneutics is that all of Scripture is a testimony to Jesus Christ as the only Savior from sin. Therefore, because of the centrality of Christ in Scripture, those passages of Scripture are most blessed and most valuable which most directly reveal Christ.

In 1515-1516, in his lectures on Romans, Luther said, ". . . the entire Scripture deals only with Christ everywhere . . .," and ". . . all Scripture finds its meaning only in Christ . . ."13

He also said in 1517, in his commentary on Psalm 143 in The Seven Penitential Psalms:

Whenever I found less in the Scriptures than Christ, I was never satisfied; but whenever I found more than Christ, I never became poorer. Therefore it seems to me to be true that God the Holy Spirit does not want to know anything besides Jesus Christ . . .14

---

13 LW, 25:405.

14 LW, 14:204; WA, 18:529, lines 5-9 - ". . . als offft ich weniger ynn der schrifft denn Christum finden habe, bin ich noch nie sat worden, Als offft aber ich mehr denn Christum funden habe, bin ich nie armer worden, das mich

In Luther's view, then, all of Scripture is a witness to Christ.

Nevertheless, some passages of Scripture are more clear and more direct in their witness to Christ than are others. In his Preface to the New Testament, first written in 1522, and then later revised in 1534, and 1546, Luther gave the following evaluation of several New Testament books based upon their greater or lesser clarity in presenting Christ:

. . . you can judge all the books and decide among them which are the best. John's Gospel and St. Paul's epistles, especially that to the Romans, and St. Peter's first epistle are the true kernel and marrow of all the books. They ought to be the foremost books, and it would be advisable for every Christian to read them first and most, and by daily reading to make them as much his own as his daily bread. For in them . . . you do find depicted in masterly fashion how faith in Christ overcomes sin, death, and hell, and gives life, righteousness, and salvation. This is the real nature of the Gospel.<sup>15</sup>

Here we see that Luther valued most highly those books of the New Testament which most clearly presented Christ as the only Savior from sin.

In his exposition of the life of Isaac, Luther followed the same principle. He valued most highly those portions of the account in which the promise of Christ was given most clearly.

Note, for example, his response to Genesis 12:3, as

---

auch das war dunckt, das Gott der heilige geist nicht meer weis noch wissen wil, denn Jhesum Christum . . ."

<sup>15</sup>LW, 35:361-362.

mentioned above (page 8). In Genesis 12:3, God said to Abraham, ". . . and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed."

Luther said that that was a promise that Christ would come, and that He would save sinners from every family upon the earth. Consequently Luther wrote concerning that passage:

But now there follows that promise which should be written in golden letters and should be extolled in the language of all people, for it offers eternal treasures.<sup>16</sup>

Luther regarded as worthy of golden letters this passage which promised directly the coming of Christ.

In Genesis 22:18, God spoke to Abraham after his obedience in offering up Isaac, and God again gave him a similar promise. God said to him:

And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice.

Luther commented, as was noted above (page 43):

These words truly deserve to be written in large letters of gold and to be continually before our eyes and in our heart.<sup>17</sup>

Again a direct promise of Christ was seen by Luther as being worthy of golden letters. He regarded it as being of extraordinary value in Scripture.

In Luther's view, then, all Scripture is a witness to Christ. Yet, even so, some passages are more to be prized than others, because they witness more directly to Him.

---

<sup>16</sup>LW, 2:260.

<sup>17</sup>LW, 4:152.

In his exposition of the life of Isaac, Luther valued most highly those passages which most directly promised Christ. As shall be observed shortly, he interpreted other passages in light of them.

#### 4. Know the Central Message of the Text

A fourth principle which Luther followed in Biblical interpretation was that each passage has one sure and constant meaning, which is its literal sense, and that that is the meaning which should be emphasized in the exposition of any passage. In his Genesis Commentary Luther declared:

. . . if we want to treat Holy Scripture skillfully, our effort must be concentrated on arriving at one simple, pertinent, and sure literal sense.<sup>18</sup>

He also wrote that the true meaning of any passage is "the literal and historical meaning, the only one that should be retained and stressed."<sup>19</sup> It was Luther's view that for anyone rightly to interpret any passage of Scripture he must first understand its central thrust, which is its literal sense, and, after this has been determined, then one is able to explain the passage as a whole and also its individual components.

Now how is this done? How does one determine the central message of a text? Luther's answer was that one looks for what the passage has to say about Jesus Christ.

---

<sup>18</sup>LW, 3:27.

<sup>19</sup>LW, 3:29.

Even in passages in which Christ is not overtly mentioned, He is present, and one should look at those passages in light of Christ.

For Luther, Jesus Christ was always the touchstone. He wrote:

Furthermore, I consider knowledge of the subject matter nothing else than a knowledge of the New Testament; for when this is understood well, the entire Scripture of the Old Testament is clear. But because the rabbis are not only unacquainted with Christ but utterly reject Him, what can we learn from them?<sup>20</sup>

Here we see that for Luther the subject matter of a passage is what it has to declare about the New Testament, and by that he means what it has to declare about Jesus Christ.

Did Luther employ this principle in his preaching about Isaac? The answer is an emphatic "Yes!" Luther often saw a witness to Christ in passages about Isaac in which other commentators often have not seen Christ at all. As a result, he also explained many passages in ways in which others have not.

For example, Luther saw Christ in the command in Genesis 17:10-14 that Abraham and all the males of his household should be circumcised. As was noted above (page 19), Luther said that this command was given to the Jews, not so that they could be justified by it, but so that "it might be known from what people, from what part of the world, the

---

<sup>20</sup>LW, 3:73.



Savior was to be born."<sup>21</sup>

Luther, in other words, determined the central meaning of the whole passage about circumcision in light of the promise already given about the coming of Christ. God had already promised Abraham that Christ would come as his descendant. Therefore Luther concluded that the command about circumcision had to be subservient to the promise about Christ, and he decided that God intended it to mark out the nation from which Christ would come.

Another example of Luther finding the basic meaning of a passage by seeing what it taught about Christ is found in his interpretation of the strange oath which Abraham required his servant Eliezer to swear. This is described in Genesis 24:1-9.

There it is recorded that Abraham caused his servant Eliezer to touch his thigh, that is, his sexual organ, and to swear by the Lord that he would not take a wife for Isaac from among the idolatrous Canaanites. Eliezer was to swear instead that he would go to Abraham's homeland, and there take a wife for Isaac.

As was pointed out above, (page 78) Luther accounted for Abraham requiring this strange oath by explaining that Abraham knew that Christ would come from his loins. Therefore, when the servant was asked to touch Abraham's loins, he was being asked to swear by Christ Himself.

---

<sup>21</sup>LW, 3:82.

Here again Luther interpreted a whole passage based on what it teaches about Christ, even though Christ Himself is not mentioned in it. Luther knew that God had promised the coming of Christ to Abraham, and he knew that Abraham was living by faith in that promise. Therefore Luther felt free to interpret the whole passage based upon Abraham's faith in the promise of Christ.

John Wilch has written that, for Luther, the sensus literalis of Scripture is always its sensus Christi.<sup>22</sup> That statement is correct. For Luther, every passage of Scripture must be interpreted in light of its basic message, and its basic message is always what it teaches about Christ.

### 5. Paul Is the Most Perfect Teacher

In his Genesis Commentary, Luther made the following statement:

Therefore we owe Paul special honor as the greatest teacher of Holy Scripture, and it is proper for us to follow him.<sup>23</sup>

Elsewhere in the lectures on Genesis, Luther also referred to Paul as "the greatest apostle,"<sup>24</sup> "the best and most learned interpreter of Moses,"<sup>25</sup> and "the most perfect teacher."<sup>26</sup> Thus a fifth principle of Luther's hermeneu-

---

<sup>22</sup>John R. Wilch, "Luther as Interpreter: Christ and the Old Testament," Consensus 9 (July 1983):5.

<sup>23</sup>LW, 3:29.      <sup>24</sup>LW, 3:5.      <sup>25</sup>LW 3:94.

<sup>26</sup>LW, 4:342.

tics, and one which he observed in his preaching about Isaac, was to follow the interpretations of Paul.

The instances of Luther overtly following Paul are many. One of the most important was mentioned above (pages 15-16) and concerned Luther's interpretation of Genesis 15:6.

In Genesis 15:6, the statement is made that Abraham believed in the Lord, and that the Lord counted Abraham's faith to him for righteousness. Paul, in Romans 4:23-24, pointed to this verse as clear evidence from the Old Testament that God justifies by faith alone.

Paul taught on the basis on Genesis 15:6 that those who trust in the promises of God concerning Christ are justified, and those who try to earn justification by their own good works are not justified. Consequently, as was noted above (pages 15-16), Luther credited Paul with constructing from a statement about Abraham's faith the most important doctrine of the Christian church, which is that justification is by faith alone.

Luther also followed Paul in distinguishing between the three kinds of progeny which God gave to Abraham, as was mentioned above (pages 33-34). Luther agreed with Paul in concluding that the Christian church is the truest seed of Abraham, even though it consists largely of Gentiles. Luther wrote:

Therefore Paul is right in stating that those are heirs who are of the promise and believe the promise,

whether they were born of the flesh of Abraham or not.<sup>27</sup>

A third instance of Luther following Paul was in his interpretation of Genesis 25:23. In that verse, Luther credited Paul with discussing in a "sublime manner"<sup>28</sup> God's choice of Jacob rather than Esau to be the successor of Isaac in bearing the promise of Christ.

Luther praised Paul for observing that in this incident predestination is taught, and Luther wrote, "I surely would never have looked at these words in this manner."<sup>29</sup>

Clearly, then, Luther looked to Paul again and again for guidance in his understanding of the Scriptures. Paul was indeed, for Luther, the most perfect teacher.

## 6. The Most Charitable

### Construction

A sixth principle of Luther's hermeneutics was to interpret the actions and motivations of Isaac and of the other Old Testament saints as charitably as possible. Luther was reluctant ever to charge the saints with specific sins, and he would do so only when the text of Scripture allowed him no other possibility.

---

<sup>27</sup>LW, 4:27; WA, 43:155, lines 9-11 - "Recte igitur Paulus dicit, haeredes esse, qui sunt promissione, hoc est, qui audiunt promissionem, et promissioni credunt, sive sunt nati ex carne Abrahae, sive non." This statement is of the highest importance in understanding Luther's theology concerning Isaac. It shows that God's promises to and about Isaac offer salvation to all repentant sinners.

<sup>28</sup>LW, 4:366.      <sup>29</sup>LW, 4:342.

The primary reason why Luther always sought to defend and praise the saints was because the word of God declares that they are the models of faith for all believers. Luther wrote concerning both Abraham and Isaac:

They have been presented to us by God as an example of the true worship of God, which consists mainly and really, not in outward sacrifices or works but in faith, hope, and love of God.<sup>30</sup>

He also wrote concerning Isaac:

But a fervent and unconquerable faith shines in him. Because of it he persevered and overcame most difficult trials as an example for us, lest we despair in any perils.<sup>31</sup>

He further wrote concerning Isaac, as was noted above (page 91):

But what great faith one sees there! What inestimable patience! What unbelievable forbearance, goodness, and kindness one sees!<sup>32</sup>

Because of the value of the saints as examples for God's people, Luther upheld and defended them as much as possible. He fulfilled his own explanation of the eighth commandment by putting the most charitable construction on all the deeds of the saints.

One example of this was pointed out above (page 22) concerning Genesis 17:16. In Genesis 17:16 we are told that God gave to Abraham a promise that a child would be born to him and Sarah. Abraham's response was to fall to the ground

---

<sup>30</sup>LW, 4:320. See also p. 80 above.

<sup>31</sup>LW, 5:69. See also p. 99 above.

<sup>32</sup>LW, 5:7.

laughing.

Luther could have ascribed Abraham's laughter to a lack of faith, but he did not. Rather he credited Abraham with exulting and triumphing in the most beautiful faith. He called Abraham's response the highest form of godliness.

Similarly, when Abraham lied about Sarah being his sister rather than his wife, Luther defended Abraham. He said that, since Isaac had not yet been born, Abraham only lied to keep himself alive so that he could father a child and so that Christ could come.

Luther wrote:

Because Scripture often presents Abraham to us as a believing father and a perfect model of faith, I prefer to decide in favor of the opinion that here, too, his great faith is revealed rather than either that he sinned or that his faith succumbed in the trial.<sup>33</sup>

This was Luther's general custom. Whenever an action by a saint could be interpreted as either a sin or an act of faith, Luther would choose the latter alternative.

In the case of Isaac's lie about Rebekah, however, Luther could not employ the same defense on Isaac's behalf which he had earlier employed for Abraham. In Genesis 26:7 it is recorded that Isaac lied about Rebekah and said that she was his sister rather than his wife. At that time, however, Isaac's two sons, Jacob and Esau, had already been born. The physical descent of Christ had already been ex-

---

<sup>33</sup>LW, 2:294. See also p. 94 above.

tended beyond him. Also the Word of God declares that Isaac lied because he was fearful. Therefore Luther was compelled, in this instance, to admit that Isaac had sinned. This was noted above (pages 94-95).

This admission was distasteful to Luther, and he sought every means for mitigating the effect of Isaac's bad example upon his hearers. He finally concluded that this incident teaches that God is merciful and that He will restore His people when they stumble and fall.

Luther also defended Rebekah for deceiving Isaac and for thereby winning the blessing of the promise of Christ for Jacob. Luther extolled Rebekah's action as being a work of faith, and he said that, since God wanted the blessing to go to Jacob, she was being faithful to the First Table of the Law, even if, in so doing, she was compelled to break the Second Table. This was noted above (page 103).

Even Isaac, who was on the wrong side of the question of who should be the inheritor of the promise of Christ, was excused by Luther. Luther said that God certainly meant for Jacob to receive the blessing, but that Isaac mistakenly believed that it should go to Esau. This was noted above (page 90). Luther excused Isaac.

Again and again, then, Luther put the most charitable construction on the deeds and motivations of the saints. He did it because the Word of God said that they were to be examples for God's people, and he did it because, as he wrote,

". . . the rhetoric of the Holy Spirit attaches more importance to the things that are good than it does to the things that are evil."<sup>34</sup>

## 7. Appearances Are

### Usually False

A seventh principle of Luther's hermeneutics was that where God is working in this world appearances are usually false. Luther saw the truth of this principle many times in the life of Isaac. He saw that Isaac appeared to be one thing but was, in reality, something very different.

He saw that the hardships which God sent into Isaac's life gave the appearance that God was ignoring him or had even rejected him. Yet he saw too that the fact that God had given His promises to Isaac made the reality of God's love for Isaac far different than the appearances suggested.

Concerning what Isaac appeared to be, Luther wrote:

. . . Isaac is a most wretched beggar. His father Abraham is an exile among the heathen and does not own even a foot of ground in this country.<sup>35</sup>

And he also wrote concerning the appearances of all of the patriarchs:

. . . they had absolutely no unusual or special semblance of saintliness; and when the flesh, that is, the wise men of this world and the monks, sees this weakness, it is greatly offended and has profound contempt for the saintly patriarchs.<sup>36</sup>

But the reality concerning Abraham and Isaac was far

---

<sup>34</sup>LW, 3:347.

<sup>35</sup>LW, 1:295.

<sup>36</sup>LW, 4:332.



different. Luther wrote:

. . . under that sack of household life in the case of the fathers the sun, the moon, and the stars, that is, the most excellent virtues shine.<sup>37</sup>

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were different from what they appeared to be. They were different because God's Word had been given to them. This passage has been quoted before, but it must be quoted again. Luther wrote:

. . . in the examples of the saintly fathers it should be looked upon as the main thing and the highest commendation that God spoke with them and that they had the Word of God. This is the point that elucidates these accounts and gives a true understanding of what and how great these dregs and seemingly contemptible outward appearances of the greatest saints are. For where the Word of God is, there one also finds true faith and true works.<sup>38</sup>

God's Word, then, gave Abraham and Isaac a standing before God far greater than their appearances suggested.

Now appearances in the lives of Abraham and Isaac were false not only concerning their nature, but also concerning their circumstances. The truth of God's love for them was often belied by the hardships which they endured.

As was noted above (page 82), Isaac spent his whole life in many tribulations. Isaac endured the torment of being sacrificed upon Mount Moriah, the frustration of a long wait before children were born to him and to Rebekah, and the hardships of living amongst ungodly neighbors and of having two heathen daughters-in-law whom Luther referred to

---

<sup>37</sup>LW, 5:6.

<sup>38</sup>LW, 5:3-4. See also p. 115 above.

as the two cancers.

To outward appearances, all of Isaac's trial suggested that God did not love him or that God had abandoned him.

Luther wrote:

It seems that God is either untruthful when He makes promises or is negligent, as we have had several examples above with respect to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The histories of these men seem to show nothing else than that they were without God or that God forgot them or had ceased completely to take care of them.<sup>39</sup>

But again reality was far different than appearances. The reality was that Isaac survived the sacrifice of Mount Moriah. He and Rebekah did receive children, and one of Isaac's sons, Jacob, was given the promise of Christ. Isaac's descendants did live in the land of Canaan until Christ came. Christ did come in fulfillment of the promise, and the church did become Isaac's spiritual descendants through Christ, as was noted above (page 41).

Through the Gospel God gave Isaac the promise of Christ, but through the Law He gave him hardships and trials. The Law often made the Gospel seem impossible. Yet these two contradictory workings were called by Luther, "the marvelous counsels of God in governing His saints."<sup>40</sup>

Luther also wrote, as was noted above (page 83):

Therefore these are strange accounts and the cause of very great offenses to carnal-minded people; for all the works of God are in conflict with His promise, which nevertheless remains completely true and unshaken. But what offends is the fact that it is invis-

---

<sup>39</sup>LW, 8:199.

<sup>40</sup>LW, 4:326.

ible, delayed, and turned into its opposite.<sup>41</sup>

The promises of God are invisible. His working through the Law is visible to the vision and to the understanding of natural man. Natural man can well perceive the hardships of the cross.

The value of God's promises, however, can only be perceived by faith. Therefore appearances are false in the lives of the saints. What can be apprehended with the eyes of the flesh is not the whole story. The flesh sees the cross which God lays upon His people, but only faith sees the value of God's promises to them.

Luther referred to God as hiding Himself when God allows trials to come into the lives of His people. He wrote:

He is indeed the God of life, glory, salvation, joy, and peace; and this is the true face of God. But sometimes He covers it and puts on another mask by which He offers Himself to us as the God of wrath, death, and hell.<sup>42</sup>

Luther taught that God hides Himself from His people, but still He is always gracious, even when He is hidden.

Luther wrote:

. . . God is present and beneficent, no matter how He seems to be against us.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup>LW, 4:326; WA, 43:371, lines 20-23 - "Hae itaque admirandae historiae sunt, et hominibus carnalibus maximorum scandalorum causa, pugnant enim omnia opera Dei cum promissione, quae tamen verissima et immota manet. Sed hoc offendit, quod est invisibilis, dilata et in contrarium posita."

<sup>42</sup>LW, 8:31.

<sup>43</sup>LW, 4:327.

To human reason the contradiction posed by God's working in His two contradictory ways is insoluble. As was noted above (page 57), reason, faced with the contradictions of Law and Gospel, inevitably concludes either that God is lying when He gives His promises, or that His Law is from the devil and not truly from God. Reason must choose one alternative or the other.

The contradiction is overcome, however, by faith. Faith believes in both the Gospel and the Law. It knows that both are the Word of God, and, indeed, it is the very faith of believers in God's Gospel which empowers them to fulfill His Law. Thus Abraham, on Mount Moriah, could offer up his beloved son, confident that he would receive him back again because of God's promises.

Luther taught His hearers that when God shows Himself to be angry or dreadful to them, He is doing so only for the purpose of strengthening their faith. He wrote:

Thus God's testing is a fatherly one . . . He does not test in order that we may fear and hate Him like a tyrant but to the end that He may exercise and stir up faith and love in us.<sup>44</sup>

Faith believes this. Faith rises above the burden of the Law, of the cross, and of the hiddenness of God. As Luther wrote in 1530, in his commentary on Psalm 118, and as was noted above (page 61), faith "sees God's fatherly heart behind his unfriendly exterior."<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup>LW, 4:132.

<sup>45</sup>LW, 14:59.

Here, then, is a seventh principle of Luther's hermeneutics. Appearances are false. Luther wrote that if you want to serve God, then you must believe in things that are invisible, hope for things that are delayed, and love God, even when He shows Himself unfriendly to you.<sup>46</sup>

He wrote that all of the instances of God's help are in the midst of opposites. God preserves in death, bestows righteousness in sin, and gives peace and security in the midst of extreme peril.<sup>47</sup>

### 8. Synecdoche

An eighth principle of Luther's hermeneutics was to see in Scripture and also to employ frequently in his own exposition of it a rhetorical and literary device known as synecdoche. Synecdoche is the practice of referring to a whole by one of its parts or of referring to a part by the name for the whole.

Luther believed that the Scriptures employ this device frequently. He said that it is "common in Holy Scripture,"<sup>48</sup> and, in his own preaching about Isaac, he also frequently made use of it.

One example of synecdoche which Luther observed in Scripture was its use of the word "seed." In Genesis 21:12 God said to Abraham, ". . . in Isaac shall thy seed be

---

<sup>46</sup>LW, 4:324.      <sup>47</sup>LW, 4:232.

<sup>48</sup>LW, 6:343.

called."

As was noted above (page 41), Luther regarded that promise as being not just a promise of the birth of Isaac alone, but also that Christ and the whole church would become Abraham's children through Isaac. Luther thus regarded the word "seed," in Genesis 21:12, as being a reference to Christ and the church as well as to Isaac.

Yet Luther saw the same word "seed" as referring to Christ alone in Genesis 22:18. There God said to Abraham, "And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed." In that instance, Luther saw it as being a reference to the only One who is able to bring the blessing of salvation to sinners. This was noted above (page 43).

Thus Luther saw the word "seed" as one which could refer to Isaac, Christ, and the church, either individually or altogether. It is, in Scripture, a synecdoche.

Luther not only saw synecdoche in Scripture, but he also employed it as he expounded Scripture. For example, he made this statement: "But the true church is where Isaac, the son of promise is."<sup>49</sup>

Did Luther mean by this statement that the whole church consists of the one man Isaac alone? Of course not! He used the name "Isaac" here to refer to the whole church, because the church consists of all people who, like Isaac, believe in God's promise offering salvation in Christ.

---

<sup>49</sup>LW, 4:34.

Luther used synecdoche. He used it to show that Isaac, Christ, and the church are one.

Luther also used synecdoche when, as was noted above (pages 60-61), he referred to all of God's blessings to His people as being their "Isaac." Luther referred to God's blessings in that way because the greatest gift which God gave to Abraham was Isaac, and because every blessing of God to His people comes to them through Christ, who, in turn, came through Isaac.

Another use of synecdoche by Luther is found in this statement in which he refers to Christ in a context in which we might expect him to refer to Isaac:

Abraham falls to the ground and laughs . . . for now he is sure that he will be the father and Sarah will be the mother of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, through whom salvation and blessing will come to the entire world.<sup>50</sup>

Here Luther uses the names of Isaac and of Christ interchangeably, since they are linked together by God's promise.

The net effect of Luther's use of synecdoche in his exposition of the life of Isaac is to remind his hearers continually that God's promise of Isaac was, in reality, the promise of Christ. Isaac, Christ, and the church are all one. They are all the children of Abraham because of God's promise that "in Isaac shall thy seed be called" (Genesis 21:12). They are all also equally precious in God's sight. Because of Christ, God cherishes Isaac and the church as

---

<sup>50</sup>LW, 3:154.

much as He cherishes Christ.

Luther had a great understanding of the unity of God's Word. It stemmed from the fact that he saw Christ everywhere in Scripture. His use of synecdoche is a reflection of the unity which he saw in God's Word.

## 9. The Saints Are Models

### For Christians

The ninth principle of Luther's hermeneutical methodology, and the last one which will be noted here, is that God intends the lives of the Old Testament saints to serve as models for His people. Luther believed that God caused Isaac and all the Old Testament saints to undergo their trials and to experience all that they did so that the events of their lives could be recorded in Scripture and could serve as examples for all subsequent generations.

Luther wrote:

Therefore in the Holy Scriptures the most beautiful examples of the fathers - Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are celebrated. These men were lights of the whole world and of the church of God.<sup>51</sup>

He also wrote:

And we should give thanks to the Holy Spirit for recording the accounts of the saintly fathers in such a way that they are patterns not only of faith and of superior virtues but in civic life also . . .<sup>52</sup>

As was noted above (page 80), he further wrote:

They have been presented to us by God as an example of the true worship of God . . .<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup>LW, 7:11.

<sup>52</sup>LW, 4:78.

<sup>53</sup>LW, 4:320.



Luther thus regarded Isaac as being a model for God's people. He also believed that there is enduring value in Isaac's example because God deals with all of His people in the same ways in which He dealt with Isaac. God works through the Law and the Gospel in the lives of all who trust in Christ.

Luther wrote:

Accordingly, these things are written for our sakes, in order that we may know that the most saintly fathers and mothers underwent the same experiences we are wont to undergo.<sup>54</sup>

And he wrote about Isaac, as was noted above (page 99):

. . . he persevered and overcame most difficult trials as an example for us, let we despair in any perils.<sup>55</sup>

Isaac is an example of faith in God's promises and of patience in bearing the cross. Carnal men may despise the examples of the saints, but their examples should be carefully inculcated in the minds of the godly.<sup>56</sup>

In Luther's view, the faith of the saints is the most valuable aspect of their example. He wrote that people often mimic the works of their fathers, but disregard their faith. Then, he said, they become mere apes of their fathers.<sup>57</sup>

As was noted above (pages 62-63), Luther regarded King Ahaz as being just such an ape. Luther called him "a most

---

<sup>54</sup>LW, 4:189-190.

<sup>55</sup>LW, 5:69.

<sup>56</sup>LW, 7:133.

<sup>57</sup>LW, 4:328.

infamous murderer."<sup>58</sup> Ahaz sought to be like Abraham by offering up his son as a sacrifice to God. Yet God had not commanded such a sacrifice. Therefore Ahaz acted without the Word and without faith. He was a mere ape.

God's people are to follow the example of the fathers both in faith in God and in bearing the cross. Luther wrote that the saints' trials were recorded "as an example in order that we may see how God plagues His saints, to whom He has given the Word and has promised eternal life."<sup>59</sup>

Luther also wrote, as was noted above (page 109):

If God lets His saints, whom He loves dearly be so afflicted, then let us too, bear it patiently if at some time sad and adverse experiences fall to our lot.<sup>60</sup>

Isaac bore patiently the cross which God appointed to him. He trusted in God's promises that Christ would come as his descendant, in spite of his many troubles and sorrows. Luther taught that all of God's people should do the same.

As was mentioned above (page 106), Luther said that somehow the examples of the saints speak more strongly to the hearts of God's people than even the greater example of Christ Himself. He wrote:

. . . the weaker examples of the fathers affect us more than that sublime example of the Son of God. In Christ there was a greater humiliation than in all the fathers. But it does not enter our heart, for the fact that Christ is God stands in the way. The patriarchs, however, move us more strongly. They were men like ourselves in all things when they were in-

---

<sup>58</sup>LW, 3:216.

<sup>59</sup>LW, 5:89.

<sup>60</sup>LW, 6:406.

olved in difficulties.<sup>61</sup>

Because of Christ's divinity, His example in patiently bearing the cross does not affect us as strongly as it should. Therefore we need the examples of the fathers. They provide us with faithful models to follow. Luther kept this fact always in mind in his preaching and teaching about the life of Isaac.

### Conclusion

The main points of Luther's preaching about Isaac have now been summarized, and also some of the principles have been described which he employed in choosing which points to emphasize. A few concluding remarks remain.

Luther's preaching about Isaac is the exposition of how God worked in one man's life through His Law and His Gospel to transform a sinner into a saint. Luther saw the Bible's account of Isaac's life as a demonstration to the church of how God slays the old man through the Law and raises up the new man through the Gospel.

The life of Isaac teaches God's people two basic things. First it teaches them how God works in the lives of His people, and second it teaches them, by example, how a child of God should receive and submit to the working of God in his life.

As God worked in Isaac's life through Law and Gospel,

---

<sup>61</sup>LW, 7:328.

so He may be expected to work in the lives of all of His people. As Isaac bore patiently the cross and the hiddenness of God in his life, while simultaneously trusting in God's promises to him, so, too, every Christian should bear his cross patiently, while simultaneously trusting in God's promises to him.

The life of Isaac was, then, for Luther, a lesson to every Christian of what to expect from God and a model of how to respond to God. It showed Luther that a child of God may indeed spend his entire life in tribulations, and yet be confident that all of God's promises to him are true.

Isaac's life shows us that God's Law contradicts His Gospel, but it never overturns it. Through death, God led Isaac to life. Through the Law and trials, God taught Isaac not to love his life in this world, nor to trust in himself. Through the promise that from Isaac's seed would come the Savior who would be both God and man, God gave Isaac faith in Christ and made him into a new man with new spiritual life.

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Books By Luther

- Luther, Martin. Luther's Works. Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, and Philadelphia: Muhlenberg/Fortress Press, 1958-.
- Luther, Martin. D. Martin Luthers Werke. Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1883-.

### Books About Luther And/Or Isaac

- Aland, Kurt. Hilfsbuch zum Lutherstudium. Bearbeitet in Verbindung mit Ernst Otto Reichert und Gerhard Jordan. Dritte, neubearbeitete und erweiterte Auflage. Witten Luther-Verlag, 1970.
- Bayer, Oswald. Promissio: Geschichte der reformatorischen Wende in Luthers Theologie. Göttingen: Vandenhöck und Ruprecht, 1971.
- Bornkamm, Heinrich. Luther and the Old Testament. Translated by Eric W. and Ruth C. Gritsch. Edited by Victor I. Gruhn. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969.
- Bornkamm, Heinrich. Luther's World of Thought. Translated by Martin H. Bertram. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958.
- Brecht, Martin. Martin Luther His Road to Reformation. 1483-1521. Translated by James L. Schaff. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985.
- Brinkel, Karl. "Luthers Hermeneutik in seiner Übersetzung des Alten Testaments und die gegenwaertige Revision der Lutherbibel." Luthertum: Eine Schriftenreihe herausgegeben von Walter Zimmermann, Franz Lau, Herman Schlyter, Johannes Pfeiffer. Heft 24. Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1960.

- Dillenberger, John. God Hidden and Revealed: The interpretation of Luther's deus absconditus and its significance for religious thought. Foreward by Paul Tillich. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1953.
- Edwards, Mark U., Jr. Luther and the False Brethren. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1975.
- Edwards, Mark U., Jr. Luther's Last Battles: Politics and Polemics, 1531-46. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1983.
- Elert, Werner. Das christliche Ethos; Grundlinien der lutherischen Ethik. Tübingen: Furche-Verlag, 1949.
- Elert, Werner. The Structure of Lutheranism. Translated by Walter A. Hansen. Foreword by Jaroslav Pelikan. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962.
- Gerrish, B.A. Grace and Reason: A Study in the Theology of Luther. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962.
- Grimm, Harold John. Martin Luther as a Preacher. Columbus, OH: Lutheran Book Concern, 1929.
- Hägglund, Bengt. History of Theology. Translated by Gene J. Lund. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968.
- Jensen, N. Otto. Luthers Gudstro: en indforelse i Luthers tankeverden. København: G. E. C. Gads Forlag, 1959.
- Kattenbush, Ferdinand. Deus Absconditus bei Luther. Festgabe für Julius Kaftan. Tübingen, 1920.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. Fear and Trembling: A Dialectical Lyric. Translated by Walter Lowrie. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1945.
- Klug, Eugene F. From Luther to Chemnitz, on Scripture and the Word. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971.
- Kramm, H. H. The Theology of Martin Luther. London: James Clark, 1947.
- Lerch, David. Isaaks Opferung christlich gedeutet: Eine auslegungsgeschichtliche Untersuchung. Beiträge zur historischen Theologie. Herausgegeben von Gerhard Ebeling, 12. Tübingen: Verlag J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1950.

- Lerfeldt, Svend. Den Kristnes Kamp: mortificatio carnis: En Studie I Luthers Teologi. København. G. E. C. Gads Forlag, 1949.
- Loeschen, John R. Wrestling with Luther: An Introduction to the Study of His Thought. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1976.
- Lohse, Bernhard. Ratio und Fides: Eine Untersuchung über die Ratio in der Theologie Luthers. Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1958.
- Pedersen, E. Thestrup. Luther som Skriftfortolker: En studie i Luthers skriftsyn hermeneutik og eksegesi. København: Nyt Nordisk Forlag Arnold Busck, 1959.
- Pelikan, Jaroslav Jan. Luther the Expositor: Introduction to the Reformer's Exegetical Writings. Companion volume to Luther's Works. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959.
- Pohlmann, Hans. Hat Luther Paulus Entdeckt? Eine Frage zur theologischen Besinnung. Berlin: Verlag Alfred Toepelmann, 1959.
- Prenter, Regin. Luther's Theology of the Cross. Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1971.
- Quanbeck, Warren A. The Hermeneutical Principles of Luther's Early Exegesis. Th.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1948.
- Radmacher, Earl D. and Preus, Robert D., eds. Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible. Grand Rapids: MI: Academy Books, Zondervan Publishing House, 1984.
- Reu, Johann Michael. Luther and the Scriptures. Columbus, OH: The Wartburg Press, 1944.
- Saarnivaara, Uuras. Luther Discovers the Gospel: New Light upon Luther's Way from Medieval Catholicism to Evangelical Faith. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951.
- Siggins, Jan D. Kingston. Martin Luther's Doctrine of Christ. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970.

- Vogelsang, Erich. Die Anfänge von Luthers Christologie, nach der ersten Psalmenvorlesung: Insbesondere in ihren exegetischen und systematischen Zusammenhängen mit Augustin und der Scholastik dargestellt. Berlin und Leipzig: Verlag von Walter De Gruyter & Co., 1929.
- Von Loewenich, Walter. Luther's Theology of the Cross. Translated by Herbert J. A. Bouman. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1976.
- Von Rad, Gerhard. Das Opfer des Abraham. Mit Texten von von Luther, Kierkegaard, Kolakowski; und Bildern von Rembrandt. München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1971.
- Weier, Reinhold. Das Thema vom verborgenen Gott von Nikolaus von Kues zu Martin Luther. Münster, Westf.: Verlag Aschendorff, 1967.

#### Journal Articles

- Nagel, Norman. "The Authority of Scripture." Concordia Theological Monthly 27 (1956):693-706.
- Nagel, Norman. "The Incarnation and the Lord's Supper in Luther." Concordia Theological Monthly 24 (1956):625-652.
- Schurb, Ken, "Luther and the Jews: A Reconsideration." Concordia Journal 13 (October 1987):307-330.
- Wilch, John R. "Luther as Interpreter: Christ and the Old Testament." Consensus 9 (July 1983):3-7.