

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 5

Abraham, God and Christ

The New Testament sermon/letter that we call Hebrews begins,

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. (Heb. 1:1-2)

The writer divides time into two sections, “long ago” and “these last days.” He tells us that “long ago” was before Christ, but the “last days” are the days of Christ and since. These time divisions were useful in understanding *how* God spoke before (“in many ways ... by the prophets”) versus how God speaks since (“by his Son”). But while this distinction can be drawn in *how* God spoke, there is no distinction drawn in *what* God spoke.

God’s message has always stayed consistent. It is that God offers a solution for the deadly problems that resulted from man choosing to live by his own rules rather than accepting God’s guidance and instruction. To use Paul’s words,

Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned... Death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam (Rom. 5:12-14).

This was the problem God had promised to remedy.

We noted in the previous lesson that even as God was pronouncing judgment flowing from the rebellion of man, God was also assuring that a redemption would flow from his hands and the offspring of woman. Such prophecies were not isolated to the words and actions in Eden. God continued to speak his message of redemption “at many times and in many ways.”

The writer of Hebrews makes this very point. We have in the Old Testament, prophetic words and expressions about Christ, about God’s message of coming redemption. Peter also wrote of this link between the Old Testament prophets and Christ, comparing it to the experience he had with Christ incarnate.

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," we

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ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. And we have something more sure, *the prophetic word*, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. *For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit* (2 Peter 1:16-21).

In this sense we peer into Scripture's writings about Abraham. In this lesson we pull out three different events in Abraham's life. These are three vignettes where, for almost two thousand years, the church has seen the hand of God prophesying his salvation message. These stories show God speaking not only in words, but also in the events that unfolded. In this sense we see the Hebrews teaching that God spoke by the prophets "at many times and *in many ways*."

MELCHIZEDEK

In Genesis 12 the LORD called Abraham (then called Abram) to leave his home and go where God would make a great nation of him. Abram left Ur, taking his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, their people and possessions heading to the land of Canaan.¹ During a famine, Abram and his group went to Egypt. Upon their return to Canaan, there were disputes among the herdsmen of Lot and Abram, so Lot went one way and Abram the other.

By Genesis 14, there is a battle between the kings in Lot's area and another group of kings. Lot's kings lose, and Lot is captured, along with his family and possessions. One person escaped and found Abram, telling him about what had happened. Abram gathered the 318 trained men in his household (meaning all those who worked for and with him, not simply his relatives) and went on a rescue mission.

Abram was successful and brought back Lot and the others, along with their possessions. Here we have the first encounter for our discussion:

After his return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet him [Abram] at the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley). And Melchizedek

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¹ Next lesson will deal with the insights we get into the life of Abraham from archaeology and other ancient near eastern studies.

king of Salem brought out bread and wine. (He was priest of God Most High.) And he blessed him and said, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!" And Abram gave him a tenth of everything (Gen. 14:17-20).



Writing about this in 1877, Dr. J. Oswald Dykes noted,

It is thus there steps upon the scene one of the most mysterious personages of Holy Writ...not only a worshipper of the true God, but a man of such priestly sanctity, that beneath his hand the patriarch himself bows to receive the blessing of God, and through him the patriarch prefers his grateful offerings to Jehovah.²

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² Dykes, J. Oswald, *Abraham, the Friend of God: A study from Old Testament History* (London: Nisbet & Co. 1877) at 107.

Since before the completion of the New Testament, the church has seen in Melchizedek a representation of Christ. As we break apart this story, we see much of why the church saw this speaking of Christ packed into the few verses:

1. “Melchizedek” as a name carries significance. The name is a composite of two Hebrew words, “*Melek*” meaning “king” and “*sedeq*” meaning “righteousness.” In the form used in the name, it means, “My king is righteous.” This echoes heavily of the New Testament attributes and name of Christ, the King of kings, who was called “the Righteous One” (Acts 3:14, 7:52). Not only is Christ our king righteous, but as Paul emphasized, when we are in Christ we actually become the “righteousness of God” (see, e.g., 2 Cor. 5:21).
2. Melchizedek not only had a righteous king, but he was himself the “King of Salem.” The Hebrew uses *melek* again, this time tying it to the word “Salem.” The word Salem is better known in its modernized form of “*shalom*.” It means “peace.” Thus we have the King of Righteousness also being the King of Peace. Of course the church long understood Isaiah 9:6 to be prophetic about Christ as a child as it phrased his name to include the title, “Prince of Peace.”

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, ***Prince of Peace***.

3. Further importance is drawn from the fact that many scholars believe that “Salem” was an older name for the city of Jeru-salem.³ This is tied to Jesus who himself called Jerusalem, “the city of the great King” (Mt. 5:35). It was in Jerusalem that Jesus spoke of the Temple as his “Father’s house” (Lk 2:49). Over Jerusalem we read of Jesus weeping and lamenting with a play on the meaning of the city as the “foundation of peace”

And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, "Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for ***peace!*** But now they are hidden from your eyes (Lk 19:41) .

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³ A number of scholars see “Jerusalem” as a composite of *Jeru* and *Salem* meaning the “foundation of peace.” Scripture seems to equate biblical Jerusalem with the city of Salem in passages like Psalm 76:1-2 “In Judah God is known; his name is great in Israel. His abode has been established in Salem, his dwelling place in Zion.” See, Davidson, Benjamin, *The Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon*, (Hendrikson 2007) at 346; Berlin and Brettler, ed’s, *The Jewish Study Bible*, (Oxford) 2004) at 34-35.

Finally we should add that John in his revelation saw the “new Jerusalem” coming down from heaven prepared as a bride for her husband—Jesus (Rev. 21:2,9-10).

4. Melchizedek brings out bread and wine for Abram. These same elements form the communal supper for Christ and his apostles (Mt. 26:26-29).
5. Melchizedek was a “priest,” a label that demands note because Christ was also a Priest. In John 17, Christ is praying for his followers in anticipation of the crucifixion. Scholars call this prayer “the High Priestly Prayer” recognizing Christ intervenes as a High Priest. The title added to Jesus’ name is “Christ” (Hebrew “*Messiah*”) meaning “anointed.” In the Old Testament, three groups of people were anointed for service to God, prophets, priests, and kings. Jesus as Messiah/Christ was all three. He was prophet, priest and king of God Most High. Over and over the writer of Hebrews makes this point (Heb. 2:17, 3:1, 4:14-15, 5:5, etc.). In fact, as we will make the point later, Hebrews 5:6 makes it clear,

So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"; as he says also in another place, □ "You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek" (quoting Psalm 110:4).

6. Melchizedek was a priest of “God Most High.” “Most High God” was a term used in both the Old and New Testaments to refer to Jehovah God. In Luke 8:26-33 when Jesus was casting out the Legion of demons from a man of the Gerasenes, the demons recognized Jesus as “Son of the Most High God.” Similarly when Mary was hearing from the angel prior to the incarnation she was told,

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the **Most High** will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God” (Lk 1:35).

Paul and his missionary team were similarly called by one who had a spirit of divination, “servants of the Most High God” (Acts 16:17).

Melchizedek as priest of God Most High was clearly a foreshadowing of Christ.

7. Melchizedek blessed Abram by “God Most High.” This is carried forward to the relationship between Christ and the church because it is in Christ, Paul taught, that the church has been blessed with “every spiritual blessing” (Eph. 1:3, 6).

8. Abram tithes to Melchizedek. Abram gives Melchizedek a tenth of all he recovered. This is seen to reflect the charge of God's people to tithe to God, recognizing that all things come from his hand. As Leviticus set out the law and principle,

Every **tithe** of the land, whether of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the trees, is the LORD's; it is holy to the LORD (Lev. 27:30).

This altogether brief encounter is more magnified when we consider that Melchizedek is mentioned in only three places in Scripture: (1) here in Genesis 14, (2) in Psalm 110, and (3) in Hebrews 5-7.

The writer of Hebrews understood these same ideas and used both the Genesis and Psalm passage to explain some of the implications of Melchizedek for the church (some of which we quoted earlier):

So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"; as he says also in another place, "***You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.***" In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, ***being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek*** (Heb. 5:5-10).

Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become ***a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek*** (Heb. 6:20).

Then in Chapter seven, Hebrews goes into greater detail, even recounting the events between Abram and Melchizedek:

For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, and to him Abraham apportioned a tenth part of everything. He is first, by translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then he is also king of Salem, that is, king of peace. He is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever.

See how great this man was to whom Abraham the patriarch gave a tenth of the spoils! And those descendants of Levi who receive the

priestly office have a commandment in the law to take tithes from the people, that is, from their brothers, though these also are descended from Abraham. But this man who does not have his descent from them received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior. In the one case tithes are received by mortal men, but in the other case, by one of whom it is testified that he lives. One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him.

Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron? For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well. For the one of whom these things are spoken belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar. For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.

This becomes even more evident when another priest arises in the likeness of Melchizedek, who has become a priest, not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by the power of an indestructible life. For it is witnessed of him, "You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek." (Heb. 7:1-15).⁴

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⁴ In Edward Fudge's article, *Leaven: A Journal for Christian Ministry*, 17/4 (4th Qtr. 2009), p. 193, he drew the point of Hebrews further:

Both Jesus and Melchizedek occupy the dual role of king/priest, but our author focuses on their qualification to be appointed priest. Appointment to the Levitical priesthood required bloodline (Nehemiah 7:63-64), birth date (Numbers 4:46-47) and a flawless body (Leviticus 21:16-20). Melchizedek had no priestly father, mother or genealogy (Hebrews 7:3). His priesthood was not term limited by beginning or end but was rather perpetual (Hebrews 7:3). The only basis for Melchizedek's priesthood was his own character.

In the same way, Jesus' priesthood does not depend on family tree or legal term, but rather on his holy character and obedient life. His qualification for appointment as priest was not a perfect body ("a law of physical requirement") but a sinless life (Hebrews 7:16). Because Jesus was completely free of sin, death could not hold him. His priesthood is energized and sustained by the inherent dynamic of an indestructible life. For the same reason, God could swear that Jesus would be priest forever and know that he would never change his mind.

It follows immediately after this story where Melchizedek blesses Abram that God appeared to Abram promising his “reward shall be very great” (Gen. 15:1). God then promised Abram a son for an heir and offspring that are as innumerable as the stars in heaven. Abram believed the LORD and his faith was “counted to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6).

THE THREE VISITORS

After the experience with Melchizedek and the promise of innumerable offspring, Genesis follows the story as Abram and his wife Sarai attempt to make true the promise of God by giving Abram Sarai’s servant Hagar to mother an offspring. Ishmael is born to Hagar, but is clearly not the son of promise God had made.

The LORD appears to Abram again at the age of 99, explaining anew his promise of a covenant through Abram’s offspring. God tells Abram to no longer be named “Abram” (meaning “exalted father”), but instead “Abraham” (meaning “father of a multitude”). God instructs Abram to circumcise himself and every male in the household then and in future generations (on the eighth day after birth for all male children).

God further instructs Abraham to call Sarai “Sarah.” Sarah is going to give birth to the promised son, even though she was ninety years old. Abraham laughs to himself over this promise, and God instructs Abraham to name the coming child “Isaac” which means, “he laughs” in Hebrew.

As Genesis turns to chapter 18, we read of Abraham sitting at the door of his tent by the “oaks of Mamre” when “the LORD appeared to him.” Abraham looks up, but does not see one LORD. Instead he sees three men standing before him. Abraham readies his best hospitality, giving instructions for food and drink. Verses nine and ten then make an interesting statement:

They said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" And he said, "She is in the tent." The LORD said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him.

While the passage earlier indicated three *men* were standing before Abraham, here we are told that the one speaking was the LORD. Sarah laughs this time and it is again the LORD that says,

The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' 14 Is anything too hard for

the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son."

It is during this same conversation that the LORD tells Abraham about the coming destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.



Over the centuries, Christian art has seized on this story as one where the three visitors represent the Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Getty museum holds a 16th century painting of the scene called “Abraham and the Three Angels.” In the painting, the visitors look very much alike in personal features as well as clothing. This is typical of the paintings of this scene, with the three being close to identical as representative of the Trinity.

The history behind seeing the visitation as one of the Trinity goes back at least as far as Augustine (354-430). In his work on the Trinity Augustine noted the way Abraham shifted his conversation between the singular and the plural when addressing the three men.⁵ Augustine emphasized,

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⁵ While this is hard to pick up in the English translation, the Hebrew has singular verbs in verse 3 but plural verbs in verses 4 and 5. So in verse 3, Abraham speaks of “finding favor in *your* sight”

And then, setting forth in due order after what manner the Lord appeared to him, it has added the account of the three men, whom Abraham invites to his hospitality in the plural number, and afterwards speaks to them in the singular number as one.⁶

Some scholars see the text as shifting between the idea there were three men visiting or one LORD visiting.⁷ Augustine explained,

Whereas three appeared, Abraham there speaks to one as the Lord.⁸

Augustine further saw the three as the same in the story in ways that bring forward the paintings like that in the Getty,

But since three men appeared, and no one of them is said to be greater than the rest either in form, or age, or power, why should we not here understand, as visibly intimated by the visible creature, the equality of the Trinity, and one and the same substance in three persons?⁹

Many throughout church history have seen this passage as prophetically teaching not only of Christ, but also of the Holy Spirit.

THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC

After the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, an encounter with Abimelech (king of Gerar), Sarah conceives and gives birth to a son. As instructed, Abraham names the son Isaac. At the time, Abraham is 100 years old.

Genesis chapter 22 relates the account of Abraham being called to sacrifice Isaac.

After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!"
And he said, "Here am I." He said, "Take your son, your only son

[singular] and a request that the singular form visitor “not pass by.” Verses 4 and 5 use plurals “wash your [plural] feet” and “rest yourselves [plural],” etc.

⁶ Augustine, *On the Trinity*, (Eerdmans Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 3), trans'd by Haddan, Chap. 10 at 19.

⁷ Reno, Russell, Genesis, *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*, (Brazos Press 2010) at 182ff.

⁸ Augustine Chap. 11 at 21.

⁹ *Ibid.* at 20.

Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you." And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here am I, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together.

When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of that place, "The LORD will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided." (Gen. 22:1-14).

After this episode, the LORD again visits Abraham and confirms that his offspring will number like stars in the sky and grains of sand on the seashore.

Like the Melchizedek story, this one seems to immediately offer not just words of prophecy related to Christ, but events of prophecy as well. We do well to first note the comparison between these events with those noted in Genesis 12 where God called Abram out of Ur. In both cases, the rare Hebrew verbal command "Go" is used. Further in Genesis 12 Abram is told to go to an unknown country while in Genesis 22, Abraham is told to go to an unknown mountain.

A difference, however, lies in the fact that in Genesis 12, Abram is promised that by going, God would make a great nation of him (Gen. 12:2). There is no such

promise for Abraham and Isaac. Hebrews does tell us that Abraham considered that God “was able even to raise him from the dead” (Heb. 11:19), but that does not mean that Abraham had the promise of such!



God ultimately instructs Abraham to take Isaac to Mount Moriah. 2 Chronicles 3:1 informs us that Solomon built the temple on Mount Moriah. Of course this is the same Temple area where the curtain that separated the Holy of Holies was torn in two at the death of Christ (Mark 15:38).

As Abraham and Isaac make their way to the area for the sacrifice, Isaac asked his father where the sacrificial animal was. In a prophetic sense, Abraham offered,

God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering (Gen. 22:8).

This is ultimately exactly what God did. He was not using the sacrifice of a human father's son to atone for sins. The Sacrifice was of God's own son. The

lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world is the capital S—Son of the capital F—Father, not the son of the father (Abraham meaning “father of many”).

In this sense we understand the prophetic voice of John the Baptist who, upon seeing Christ, proclaimed,

Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world (Jn. 1:29).

When Abraham was about to kill Isaac, an angel of the Lord stopped him and Abraham saw a ram caught in the thicket, which substituted for Isaac. But the ram was not a once-for-all sacrifice. It was merely a foreshadowing substitute for what God would later provide.

Another prominent note in the foreshadowing of Christ comes in the fact that the place of sacrifice was secured on the third day (Gen. 22:4). The echo of the “third day” reverberates in the New Testament once the sacrifice of Christ is completed with the resurrection.

Once they arrive at the site, the text adds the clause that,

they went both of them together.

This echoes in the ultimate harmony between Father and Son in the sacrifice of Christ. For while “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son,” Jesus so loved the world that he came! He was faithful and obedient as a Son, “obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8).

Before concluding we should note that there is much about this story that puzzles and causes discomfort among many. For example, the story begins with the explanation that

After these things God tested Abraham and said to him...

The idea of God performing such a test rankles many. We should note that some scholars believe the statement of “testing” at the beginning of the story is not to emphasize that God goes about testing people in such a manner. Rather it is included to make sure that no Jew ever thinks that the story is one that can be used to justify the child sacrifices of other contemporary cultures.¹⁰

Of course the content of the story shows God putting Abraham to the test, but in a way that demonstrated to Abraham his faith. Surely God, who knows the words on our tongues before we express them, pre-knew Abraham’s choice. Abraham’s faith was actualized by his actions.

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¹⁰ Sarna, Nahum, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, (JPS 1989) at 151.

CONCLUSION

When the Jews were frustrated with Jesus and quizzed him, accusing him of being a Samaritan and of having a demon, the subject of Abraham came up. Jesus responded to the Jews saying,

Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad (Jn 8:56).

Jesus does not tell us how clearly Abraham knew or understood the work of Christ. But there was no doubt Abraham had some level of understanding. As the writer of Hebrews taught,

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets (Heb. 1:1).

The promise of God's redemptive work has seen fruition. Christ has died for the sins of the world!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *"Melchizedek... was priest of God most High"* (Gen. 14:18).

The book of Hebrews held a strong message for any Jew who thought it best to abandon faith in Christ and return to Judaism. Jesus eclipsed everything Judaism had to offer. The descendants of Abraham, including the Levitical priests, could not be deemed greater than Melchizedek, for Abraham himself bowed before Melchizedek. (And from a Jewish perspective, Abraham's offspring were in his loins and participated in the bowing down!)

We have in Christ, a High Priest of God Most High who has straight access before the Father. What is more, we are assured he uses this access to the benefit of the believer. Take time this week to set your prayers and concerns before Christ as High Priest. Take your prayers to God through Jesus!

2. “*The LORD appeared...three men*” (Gen. 18:1-2).

We do not know if the three that appeared to Abraham were the Trinity. But we do know that God takes an interest in his people, that God has a plan, and that God’s plan unfolds before our very eyes, in what may start out as ordinary days. We should pause for a moment and contemplate this. God takes an interest in his people. Do we belong to him? If so, we know ***he is interested in us***, in what we say, what we do, and where we are going! Let us commit anew to acknowledging the LORD in all our ways, trusting him to make our paths straight! (Prov. 3:6).

3. “*God will provide...the lamb for a burnt offering*” (Gen. 22:8).

The gospel story is plainly set out in this verse. God provides – not Isaac, Abraham’s son — but God’s lamb. The only efficient sacrifice that truly can take the stain of sin away from anyone.

WANT MORE?

Next week we continue our study of Abraham, considering the insight into the stories of his life brought about by studying Ancient Near Eastern civilizations. Read the story again of Abraham. Email me at wantmore@biblical-literacy.com, telling me what seems most outlandish about Abraham’s world and the way he went about things. Let us see if cultural studies will shed some light on those events.