

## John 21 – Only Begotten

07/21/2024

### **Scripture 1: (Jn. 3:16-18 KJG)**

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

### **Scripture 2: (Gen. 22:1-18 ESV)**

After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!"

And he said, "Here I am."

He said, "Take your son, your only son 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 I am, 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 I am."

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."

And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven and said, "By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore.

And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice."

**Scripture 3: (Heb. 11:17-19 KJG)**

By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten *son*, Of whom it was said, That in Isaac shall thy seed be called: Accounting that God *was* able to raise *him* up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure.

**Scripture 4: (Ps. 2:1-12 ESV)**

Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?

The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying, "Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us."

He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, "As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill."

I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel."

Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

**Scripture 5: (Jn. 1:14 KJG)**

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.

## Sermon:

There is much concerning the Person of Jesus Christ, God the Son, that continues to remain a mystery for us, but we do “know” some things. However, I do not mean the “stories” which tell us about Jesus' life and His words as found in the Gospel but instead, what I am talking about is the What and How of “Who He Is”. We know and believe that:

- He is the physical, human revelation of God to Man, the eternal “Word made flesh”.
- He is God, the Creator of all things, “*All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.*” (Jn. 1:3 ESV).
- He is the source of life and the rule for living, “*In him was life, and the life was the light of men.*” (Jn. 1:4 ESV).
- He is Man, born of the virgin Mary, as Gabriel told her “*And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.*” (Lk. 1:31-33 ESV)
- Therefore, He is the Son of God and the Son of Man, “*...therefore the child to be born will be called holy-- the Son of God.*” (Lk. 1:35 ESV) and “*No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.*” (Jn. 3:13 ESV).

We confess in the Nicene Creed that He is “...the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father...<sup>1</sup>”. We confess in the Definition of Chalcedon that He is the God-man: “truly God and truly Man” possessing both divine and human natures: undivideable, unmixed and unmingled, unconfused; of the same substance or essence as the Father and the Holy Spirit, {Greek: *homoousious*}, yet still a distinct Person within the Godhead.

Unfortunately, most what we can say that we know and understand about Christ, is the result of interpretation. Sadly, there have been many misunderstandings concerning the Person of Christ in history: each leading to various heresies; but only one understanding has been affirmed as the orthodox belief by the Christian church since the 4<sup>th</sup> Century.

There is one element which is critically important for us to understand and “get right” in our faith because it is foundational. It is the bedrock supporting everything we believe about “Who Jesus is”, “What Jesus did for us”, and “How He was able to do it”. That element is the Greek term, *monogenes*, and it carries certain distinctions within it that many modern English translations run the risk of losing, through the evolution of English grammar and vocabulary. The sense we must retain and preserve and most clearly understand is: “only begotten”.

*Monogenes* is used by the New Testament authors only a handful of times: mostly by John who uses it five times (John 1:14+18, 3:16+18; 1 John 4:9) and Luke uses it three times (7:12, 8:24, 9:38). The best way for us to understand the Jewish use of infrequently used Greek terms is by considering how they were used in the Septuagint (LXX), and there we find *monogenes* used in two ways:

- the Psalmist uses it as a term describing “loneliness”, for a sense of solitary uniqueness (21:21; 24:16; 34:17); and,
- the book of Judges uses it to describe the daughter of Jephthah, his only child (11:34).

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1 {τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ τὸν Μονογενῆ, τὸν ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς γεννηθέντα πρὸ πάντων τῶν αἰώνων,}

I have said it before, *monogenes* (Strong's #3439) is a compound Greek word derived from *mono*: meaning “one”, “solo”, “only”, or “unique”; with *gennao*<sup>2</sup> (Strong's #1080): meaning “to beget”, “to give birth to”, “to father”, “to generate”, or “to be born” {it is the word from which we get “generation” and “genealogy” and why we sometimes flippantly refer to certain chapters of Scripture as “the begats”}; which united together simply means “only begotten”, making it an appropriate term for an “only child”, especially an “only child by natural birth” as opposed to adoption.

When Luke uses the term in his Gospel, he uses it to describe “only children”; an important description in that time and place because of the weight of responsibility they were expected to carry as being “only children”. However, I can tell you that they also experienced a degree of both uniqueness and loneliness {being an only child myself}. However, this plain understanding of the term has led to confusion and controversy within church history, if applied to Jesus, because it can lead to very wrong conclusions and interpretations about *how* Jesus is the Son of God.

Fortunately, its single appearance in Hebrews helps explain what John intended by his use of the term. He understood and intended both aspects, as well as something more. The author of Hebrews wrote, “*By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his **only begotten son**, Of whom it was said, That in Isaac shall thy seed be called: Accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure.*” (Heb. 11:17-19 KJG) thus making Hebrews the key which unlocks this important mystery.

Meaning that the author of Hebrews instructs us to use Abraham and Isaac as the {hermeneutical} lens through which we should understand the description of Jesus as the *monogenes* Son of God. Hebrews directs us back to two things, to better understand John 3:16's description of Jesus Christ as God's “only begotten Son”:

- the relationship between Abraham and Isaac; and
- Abraham's willingness to offer Isaac as a sacrifice to the LORD, in faith.

Now we know, from the song, that “Father Abraham' had many sons {and I am one of them and so are you, so let's all praise the LORD!}”:

- by Hagar, Sarah's servant whom she gave to him “as a wife” (Gen 16:3), he had Ishmael, his firstborn;
- by Sarah, his first and primary wife, he had Isaac, his heir;
- by Keturah, his third wife whom he married after the death of Sarah, he had:
  - Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah;

Ultimately, Abraham is the father: the *pater familias* and primogenator; of eight natural born sons. That means the plain and common understanding of *monogenes* cannot be applied simply to Isaac. Although he was the “only begotten” son of Sarah, as she is not mentioned in this bullet point within the “hall of faith”, she should not be what the author of Hebrews intends us to think on. Instead, the author follows this instance of *monogenes* with “... *Of whom it was said, That in Isaac shall thy seed be called...*” calling to our attention God's covenant promise to Abraham, recalling Genesis 17:19 “*God said, "No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him.*” (Gen. 17:19 ESV).

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2 <https://www.billmounce.com/greek-dictionary/gennao>

- This makes Isaac the *monogenes* son of Abraham because he was **uniquely** begotten. Isaac is Abraham's “[child] of the promise”, as defined by Paul in Galatians (Gal 4:28).

Like the bronze serpent, Isaac is another “type” of Christ. The example of Isaac, as used by the author Hebrews, makes him a pre-figurement of Christ in the same way that the bronze serpent was a pre-figurement of Christ being hung from a Roman cross. That which happens in the Old Testament, leads us to expect and understand what happens in the New Testament.

- The LORD made a covenant with Abraham, an everlasting covenant with him and his heirs. Part of that covenant was a sign given by God, to prove to Abraham that the LORD would keep His word; that sign was that Sarah would bear Abraham a son, even in her old age and despite her disbelief, and so, Isaac was born.
- The LORD gave King Ahaz a sign; a sign to prove that God would deliver Israel from its enemies, “*Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.*” (Isa. 7:14 ESV). Thus Jesus was born of the virgin Mary after Gabriel, the LORD's angel, informed her and promised her that she would bear God's son.

The birth of Isaac and the birth of Jesus both followed God's unique promise: a promise that God would do what is impossible for Man; that a woman who could not possibly have children, due to their present circumstances, would :

- Sarah, a post-menopausal woman: a woman far past child bearing age; gave birth to a healthy son.
- Mary, a virgin: a girl who had not yet “known” a man; gave birth to a healthy son.

Both were miracles of God, but the greater miracle was with Mary since the conception of Jesus did not involve a man's participation. Instead, the power of the Holy Spirit came upon her and overshadowed her to make her son truly holy, the “*Son of God*” (Luke 1:35) and the LORD God, His Father, truly.

However, that is not the only “type” example shared by Isaac and Jesus. There is also the other story that the author of Hebrews alludes to, that of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac.

That story is one of the most troubling stories in the Old Testament for us as the “People of God” because in it, the LORD *seems* to act against His revealed character and His commandments, suggesting that maybe perhaps “God does change”, or that “God is inconsistent” or, even worse, that maybe “God actually is *evil*”. God gives an express command against child sacrifice, “*You shall not give any of your children to offer them to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD.*” (Lev. 18:21 ESV), while murder is a violation of the 6<sup>th</sup> Commandment. Although those statutes are given later, Abraham should have known that this was a wicked thing because God had commanded Noah (for all mankind), “*From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.*” (Gen. 9:5-6 ESV).

Now, in this story:

- God commanded Abraham, “*Take your son, your only son 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.*” {Interestingly, while the Hebrew in this passage uses the term, *yachiyd*, meaning “only” or “solitary” and frequently translated as carrying the implication of “only son” (Gen 22:2, 12, 16; Jer 6:26; Amos 8:10; Zech 12:10) and translated into Greek as *monogenes* in Judges 11:34 and Psalm 22:21, 25:16,

35:17, 68:7 but translated as *agapetos*: meaning “beloved” or “beloved son”; in those other instances. Therefore, we can infer that the Jewish translators of the LXX understood some similarity of emotional relationship between *monogenes* and *agapetos*, such that there would be little “felt” difference between an “only child” and an especially “beloved child”.

- God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son, his only son to whom the LORD had promised an everlasting covenant.
- God command Abraham to murder a human person: his son; as an offering to demonstrate his faith: his trust, his *pisteuo*; in the LORD.

Fortunately, because Moses tells us, we know that this was only “a test” (Gen 22:1), but Abraham did not know that it was a test. Yet still, he surely must have known that something was wrong with what was going on. The God in whom he trusted was asking Him to do something which all nature, reason, and God's Law called abominable, wicked, and evil. So Abraham, by going along with this, by obeying this demand of God, could have only assumed three possibilities:

- that God had lied about making a covenant with him for Isaac; that God was wicked or cruel and was toying with his feelings by giving him a son and then forcing him to kill his hope and his joy; or that he was obeying a divine monster meekly thinking, as Job had said, “*The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.*” (Job 1:21 ESV); or,
- that God was going to provide another different option; that this was a test and he was trusting God to stop it before events would go too far (Gen 22:8); or,
- that God would raise Isaac up from the dead, as the author of Hebrews proclaims (Heb 11:19).

While he probably have feared the first option, I cannot imagine that he actually believed it was a true probability; not from the righteous God who had thus far provided for him.

The second option was possible and humanly probable; it is the perspective most commonly held by Jews {and Muslims, although the Quran substitutes Ishmael for Isaac}, because it preserves a righteous hope of God and His providence since God never intended for Abraham to actually kill his son.

Thus the third, Holy Spirit inspired, explanation {interpretation} must be the truth. Abraham was willing to sacrifice his most beloved son, as proof of his *pisteuo* in the LORD because of his confidence that the righteous and just God would restore his beloved son to him.

Regardless, that interpretation still seems to suggest that God might command something wicked so that something good could happen, which shows that even Abraham's understanding of God's character, “Who He Is”, may have been faulty or wrong at times, something that should give us hope because we all end up wrong about some part of our faith.

- God never intended for Abraham to kill Isaac, nor would He have allowed him to, but the LORD did want to see and know that Abraham was willing to sacrifice his *monogenes* son because of his faith and trust in God's promised future.

Abraham, with Isaac, also serves as a “type” here, foreshadowing God the Father's willingness to sacrifice **His** “only begotten” Son in order to keep the promise of His blessing upon all of Abraham's promised children. Thus Isaac was a “type” of Christ in two more ways:

- by foreshadowing God the Son, Jesus Christ, being given by God the Father in sacrifice; and,
- by his obedience to his father, Abraham, by carrying the wood he was intended to be sacrificed upon, and by being bound, and being prepared as the sacrifice. {Scripture tells us nothing of Isaac's immediate reaction to these happenings, but the continuing and later narrative shows that they retained a loving and positive (or at least a dutiful) relationship afterwards; however, I find it hard to imagine Isaac obeying his father in this, quietly and meekly.}

So, Isaac and Jesus were both *monogenes*, men uniquely born to women who should not have been able to birth them, except through a miracle of God. Both Isaac and Jesus carried the means of their sacrifice as a burden. Both Isaac and Jesus were prepared as sacrifices. But God, in His mercy, spared the life of Isaac, Abraham's *monogenes* son for his father's sake while God, in His mercy, did not spare the life of His own *monogenes* Son for our sake.

Considering all that, we can say that because {Abraham so loved the LORD, that he was willing to give his only begotten son because he believed in God and he trusted that God will keep all of His promises: promises for a people, a home, and for life.}; therefore, we were able to recognize and understand it when “*God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*”.

Although Jesus and Isaac were similar, Jesus is more uniquely *monogenes* because He was conceived by the Holy Ghost and not by man, granting Him the two distinct natures of: God and Man. No other person, before or since, was born in the same or a similar circumstance. Even Adam, the first man {and called, the Son of God by Luke}, was not, because he was created by God directly and not born {which leads some to wonder, “Did Adam have a belly button?”}. Jesus is **THE** real *monogenes*, the “only begotten”, the only “natural-born” Son of God. But that is where a different problem begins.

- If Jesus was “begotten”, then does that also mean He was “created”?

But why is this question so important? What is the “big deal”, really?

So what, if He was? What does it matter? Why should it matter for us?

We still affirm, along with the Jews that “*The LORD our God, the LORD is one.*” (Deut. 6:4 ESV) and we believe that this “one God” is a singular Triune God: one substance (or essence) and three distinct persons. Those who understand this wrong cannot believe that Jesus is the one true God.

This question has been the cause of several heresies in church history, some of which persist into the present (the Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, or those who openly deny it by saying that Jesus was just a good, moral teacher) and having this wrong matters for both our eternal hope and our worship, because it directly concerns the effectiveness of our salvation. If someone is wrong about this, then they have no hope in the resurrection, they worship a false god, and they cannot be justified before God.

Denying the historic, orthodox understanding of the unique nature of God the Son, His dual nature as being **both** God and Man, believing that He is not Who and What we believe Scripture teaches He is, means that He could not have accomplished what we believe Scripture says He did.

Here are three heretical examples and why they create such problems:

- **Arianism** – is based upon the teachings of Arius which prompted the calling of the Council of Nicea and the writing of the Nicene Creed. He taught that “there was a time when Christ was not”; that He was the

very first and the greatest created being. This denies the eternality of God the Son. This denies His role in and work of creation. This makes Christ a “creature” instead of the Creator.

- If Christ was created; if He cannot be eternal; then He cannot be the only Eternal, Sovereign, Creator God. That means He cannot be, {the Word who was in the beginning, who was with God, and who is God} (John 1:1).
- **Adoptionism** – is the belief that although Jesus was born a man (the son of Mary and Joseph), He *became* the Son of God. He was “adopted” by God the Father upon His baptism when the Holy Spirit descended upon Him. Like Arianism, this understanding denies the eternality of Christ. It denies His non-created status, and denies His unique and perfectly united nature as both God and Man. This denies His role in and work of creation. This suggests that Jesus underwent an apotheosis: that He was a man who *became* God rather than God who became man.
  - If Christ was a man who became God; then He cannot be, {the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us, who showed us the glory of God as the only Son from the Father} (John 1:14).
- **Docetism** – is a belief that Christ only *seemed* to be human; that He only *appeared* to have human flesh and needs. This denies His human nature in favor of affirming His eternal divine nature. This denies His birth by a virgin and this denies His atoning death upon the cross as an “overcompensation” to defend His divinity.
  - If Christ did not possess a human nature, then: He could not have been born of a virgin; He could not have died a sacrificial death for our sins.
  - If He did not die, then He could not have been raised from the dead which has the effect of removing our hope of justification by the gracious application of Christ's righteousness and it removes our hope of being raised to everlasting life with Him in His eternal Kingdom.
  - If Christ is not both man and God, then He cannot be {the Word who is “...the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”} (Jn. 1:29 ESV).

So, if Jesus is the *monogenes*, the “only begotten” Son of God and His “begetting” does not relate to Him being created, then what does it actually mean?

On the one hand, it refers to the uniqueness of Jesus as a human man uniquely and miraculously born. It refers to a uniqueness, different from all other religions, of divinity **adding** humanity to themselves; by condescending to be born and living a fully human life; temporarily self-limiting themselves (Greek: *kenosis*; Philippians 2:5-11) even while retaining the fullness of deity. Other religions: such as the Greeks and Romans, Egyptians, or other ancient Near East faiths: had their gods “temporarily” take on human form and visit earth, but they never took on humanity (a human nature). They merely looked or *seemed* to be human {as the Docetists suggested}.

But, on the other hand, whenever we speak about God the Father “begetting” God the Son, we mean it as a way that distinguishes the Father from the Son, in their Personage, just as we speak about God the Holy Spirit “proceeding from the Father {and the Son}” (Nicene Creed; John 14:26) as a way to distinguish Him as a separate person, while still being the same God.

- “Begetting” is a relationship defining term. It describes Christ's *filial* love for the Father as His Son.



Before Jesus was born of Mary, He was still eternally the “only begotten” Son of God: the Word; the *Logos* who is the *Theos* and the *Phos*.

When He was born, God the Son added humanity to His divinity as a “type”, so that the eternally elected, predestined, “[children] of God” (John 1:12) could have divinity added to our humanity. Christ came down; God the Son, the Son of Man descended so that one day we may ascend with Him, in Him, by our *pisteuo*, our faith in Him. He is eternally the “only begotten” so that we may be adopted and share in God's inheritance as sons and daughters, as Christ remains “*the firstborn of all creation*” (Col 1:15): the preeminent Son and “*heir of all things*” (Hebrews 1:2).

We may be, all of the Elect are, equally the children of God with Jesus Christ, yet He is the “only begotten” and we are the adopted. We are, all the Elect are loved by God the Father as His sons and daughters, but “*God so loved the world...*”, so loved us, “*...that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*”.

- God loves you and me, God our Father loves us so much that He willingly sacrificed His “only begotten” Son for the benefit of His adopted children.
- Jesus loves you and me, God the Son loves us so much that He willingly laid down His own life so that we, his siblings and friends, might receive eternal life “*Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.*” (Jn. 15:13 ESV).

Understanding and preserving “Only begotten” matters because it teaches us about the greatness and depth of God's love for us.

The LORD giving His “only begotten” for us, teaches us that God loves us more than He loves Himself. So that, if God loves us more than Himself, then we, His image-bearers, ought to love Him more than ourselves.

Therefore, let us live more faithfully and more loving of God and others. So, knowing, appreciating and receiving God's great love let us now strive to {love the LORD our God with our whole heart, our whole mind, our whole soul, and all of our strength} and to {love our neighbor as ourselves}; as better than ourselves, as befits the God who loves us.

**AMEN**