Abraham Offering Up Isaac

Pasture for the Flock of God · Genesis 22

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Genesis 22 This was a remarkable trial of Abraham's faith. He had often been tested before, but not in this way. He had been tried by famine in the land, and failed by going down into Egypt. He had been soreIy tried in family rule by being obliged to turn Ishmael out of the house. He had waited for many years in his old age for the fulfilment of the divine promise to give him a son, and, hoping against hope, accounted that God was able to perform what He had promised; so, after he had patiently endured, he received the child Isaac as God's precious and peculiar gift. But time passed on. Isaac grew up. For many years he had been the delight of fond and godly parents, and most unexpectedly the aged patriarch was called upon to give him back to God -- to surrender this gift which His own sovereign mercy had bestowed. And, strange to say, in this severest trial his faith and obedience most blessedly shine forth. The reason of this, no doubt, was, that the trial met him when in communion with God. The emergency found him calling on the name of the Lord, the everlasting God, at Beersheba, as the concluding verses of the preceding chapter shew; so that when God called he had no question to settle, no errors to set right, no matters for self-judgment to delay him; but when God said, Abraham,

his immediate reply was, Here I am {Gen. 22:1}.

Let us not fail to gather from this that God may call upon us to give back to Him what we may least expect; for if He bestows gifts, is it not that we should hold them in entire subjection to His will? And happy indeed is it for those who day by day hold the blessings of God in His hands, so that when He calls for them we may be at once ready to yield them up. The moment we tenaciously grasp any of God's gifts as our own they become sources of care, and expose us to the governmental dealings of God. But to hold all God's gifts so entirely in the hands of the gracious Giver, as to leave them continually at His own disposal, is the surest way of enjoying and retaining the comfort of them, On no account, let us forget the great importance of the state of soul in which the trial finds us. If it occur when we are occupied with self, or taken up with circumstances, or in a careless and unjudged walk, we shall be quite unprepared for the trial of our faith; so that instead of responding to the will of God, and quietly going through it with God, self-will, pride, fretfulness, and rebellion may be manifested. Even a small trial then seems too much for us, and may call for the settlement of questions of conscience by self-judgment and confession, before being able calmly to consider the matter in the presence of God. On the other hand, if the trial find us happy in God's presence, in the spirit of worship and thanksgiving, dwelling on the perfectness of divine love to us,

enjoying His favor, then we unhesitatingly (however painful to nature) own the claims of God to be paramount and best, and peacefully bow to His will in child-like obedience and confidence. Let us not fail, then, to learn the lesson here set before us of the vast importance of our abiding in the Lord Jesus, and of habitually enjoying the privileges and blessings God has graciously given to us in Him. But it

was with Abraham as it is sometimes with us, that God tried his faith in a way that he never could have expected. Isaac was a son specially given to Abraham by divine promise in his old age; could he then possibly have anticipated that he would one day be suddenly called upon to give him back to God, by offering him up as a burnt-offering? Again, all the promises of God, both as to his descendants and the nations, were given in Isaac: In Isaac shall thy seed be called {Gen. 21:12, Heb. 11:18};

and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed {Gen. 22:18}.

Can it then be possible that God would have this one put to death? But the hoary-headed patriarch asks no questions. He knows that God's calls are imperative, and that His word must be implicitly obeyed; and when the man of faith was thus occupied with God, and accounting that He was able to raise him up again from the dead, he was strengthened at once to arise and obey every detail of direction for the accomplishment of His will. He knew that God is faithful, that He could not deny Himself, that the counsel of the Lord standeth for ever, and in some way or other all His own promises must be fulfilled. As on the occasion of Isaac's birth, he staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; being fully persuaded that, what He had promised, He was able also to perform {Rom. 4:20, 21};

so now He could go forth, accounting that God was able to raise him up even from the dead {Heb. 11:19}.

It was reckoning then entirely upon the faithfulness and almighty power of God, that enabled the heavy-hearted patriarch to go forth, step by step, according to the divine command in this time of deep affliction. The trial finding him as it did occupied with God, calm and happy in His presence, he went forth looking to God, walking step by step, and day by day, according to His bidding, believing that if his beloved Isaac were bound to the altar and killed, and consumed to ashes as a burnt-offering, that He was able to raise him up from the dead, and establish all His promises in him. This was the way of faith; hence we are told, By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac,

&c. {Heb. 11:17}.

It was not reckoning upon any arm or stratagem of the flesh, not brooding over circumstances, painful, most painful to nature as they must have been, but having to do with God, the living and true God. No doubt he felt his own weakness, and his feelings must have been acutely sensitive, every emotion of affection too put to its utmost stretch; but all this only the more earnestly cast him unreservedly upon God, and, like another, he might say, My flesh and my heart faileth; but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever {Psa. 73:26};

or again, Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him {Job 13:15},

for faith knows no other resource or confidence. Oh the blessedness of thus holding all our blessings in faith, at the sovereign disposal of the Giver of every good and perfect gift! Then we shall have to do with God, and take all from Him, and, confiding in His perfect and changeless love, our song

will be -“Take what Thou wilt, we’ll ne’er repine; E’en as the branches to the vine Our souls will cling to Thee.”

Thus we confide in God in the time that seems to us most perilous; every murmur is hushed, and fretfulness dare not intrude upon the scene. We can in every thing give thanks {1 Thess. 5:18};

we bless the Lord at all times, and have His praise continually on our lips -“We praise Him for all that is past, And trust Him for all that’s to come.”

But this cannot be the case if our hearts are not really stayed upon God, and our souls kept consciously and happily in His blessed presence. How often, alas! instead of this, when trials of faith come, they serve rather to waken us up to a sense of our own carnality, worldliness, and carelessness of walk, and drive us to self-judgment and humiliation before God, instead of manifesting the calm dignity of a faithful servant, and in quietness of soul saying, Behold, here I am {Gen. 22:1}.

With Abraham, as we have noticed, there were no questions of walk and conduct to be settled when he was called by God. He was ready at once to hear and attend to the divine directions, which were: Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt-offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of (Gen. 22:2).

How totally unexpected such a command must have been! How very solemn! With what point must these words have penetrated into the deepest recesses of the heart of this aged man of faith! A man of like passions with ourselves, whose very heart-strings were entwined around his precious Isaac, he stands before God, hearkens to these thrilling words, so calculated to make every fibre of his earthly tabernacle quiver, and unhesitatingly bows to Him; for he knows the Judge of all

the earth must do right. Without a reply, a murmur, or uttering even a question, conscious that God’s word must be implicitly carried out at all costs, he obeys. We are told that Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt-offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him (Gen. 22:3).

Thus we see the obedience of faith acting, as it always does, in strict subjection to the word of God. He travels along the road so plainly marked out for him day and night, with Isaac and his servants; and it was not until the third day that he first caught sight in the distance of the place where this most solemn and affecting scene was to be enacted. Then, as he had received no command from God to take any one with him to Moriah’s mount but Isaac his son, he bade the servants to tarry there with the ass until they returned. He said unto his young men, Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you (Gen. 22:5).

Then Abraham, having laid the wood upon Isaac, took fire in his hand, and a knife, and they went both of them together. The father and his only son thus went on side by side together, until they reached the place which God had told him of {Gen. 22:9}.

This must have been a terrible moment for the father of the faithful. But he had often proved the goodness and faithfulness of God; and distressing and unintelligible as all this at this moment may have been to him, yet he could trust God, and act according to His own word, assured that the path of obedience must be the path of blessing. Accordingly, Abraham first builds an altar; then he lays the wood in order, making it ready to consume the sacrifice; after this, he takes the darling of his heart, his precious Isaac, into his arms, and having bound him, laid him, as he would another sacrifice, on the altar upon the wood. And now the trying moment has fully come; neither parental feelings nor reasonings can rule now. The word of God was plain, and He claims obedience at all costs. The aged patriarch yields himself wholly unto God; he makes no reserve. He knew that God meant what He said; he is therefore in real earnest. The knife is at hand, and the fire ready to consume to ashes this only son whom he loved. We are told that Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son {Gen. 22:10}.

But this is far enough for God. The patriarch's faith had been tested, and its reality proved. He had to do with God; a voice therefore calls out of heaven, to stop his uplifted arm from actually plunging the knife into the heart of his beloved son. He hears from heaven, Abraham, Abraham;

and he said, Here am I {Gen. 22:11};

and having thus turned to God, he hears the divine command: Lay not thine hand upon the lad: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me (Gen. 22:12).

Thus Abraham proves again the goodness and faithfulness of God, and, like another could say, he had seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy (see James 5:11).

It must indeed have been a joyous moment to the heart of Abraham as he loosed his son, and received him to his welcome bosom again as one raised from the dead. It was more than deliverance in respect of being saved from the unutterable pain of inflicting the fatal blow on his only and much-loved son; for he had also the consolation that God, who had tried him, had found him faithful; and he also had the testimony in his conscience that in obeying the truth at all costs he had pleased God. It was perhaps the happiest time he had ever known; for the angel called to Abraham out of heaven the 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 (referring to Israel's future blessings); and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed (referring to Gentiles); because thou hast obeyed My voice (Gen. 22:15-18).

Thus the blessing of God, not only to himself, but to many, many others, is connected with his faithfulness to His own word. All, no doubt, will be established through the Seed, Christ; but we can surely gather for ourselves the profitable lesson, that if we are obedient to the word of the Lord at all costs, whatever trial it may entail, it will secure God's approval, and His blessing, both to ourselves and

others. Before looking at the typical instruction which this marvelous scene sets forth, the obedience of Isaac calls for a few remarks. Abraham is specially spoken of by the Holy Ghost as an example of family rule according to God: I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment; that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which He hath spoken of him (Gen. 18:19).

Nor is Scripture wanting in charming examples of the family order and piety of the father of the faithful; enough surely is recorded to show that real godliness should be manifested in every department of our social as well as public life. Where family piety is wanting, we may be sure there is little if any piety elsewhere. It is easy for the natural man to be either religious or irreligious before men; but the life of faith always (not sometimes, but always) has to do with God. So it was with Abraham, and so it is with every true believer now. We cannot doubt the aged patriarch's loving attachment to Sarah. No one can survey the touching scene on the plains of Mamre, when heavenly visitors suddenly arrived at the tent door in the heat of the day, without seeing what true conjugal love and confidence subsisted between Sarah and her lord. After offering hospitality to these unknown but welcome visitors, Abraham ran at once to Sarah to bake cakes for them on the hearth, while, almost at the same moment, he commanded a servant to dress a calf which his master had selected for the

entertainment of his guests. We are told that the young man hasted to dress it {see Gen. 18:7}.

And we cannot doubt that Sarah, who is held up as an example to Christian wives, was delighted to help in thus carrying out her husband's desires to entertain their heavenly visitors. But as obedience and reverence are not the only qualities of a pious wife, so the Holy Ghost has carefully noted down for our admiration and profit that she was Abraham's helpmeet also. When Ishmael was mocking the child of promise, she evidently discerned the evil when Abraham did not, and knew better than he the will of God about it. And, though consciously in advance of her husband on this point, she did not move out of her own proper sphere to act upon it, but put it before him whom she reverently owned as lord, and waited for him to fulfil his own responsibility as ruler of the household. We are told that Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, which she had born unto Abraham, mocking. Wherefore she said unto Abraham, Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac. And the thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight because of his son. And God said unto Abraham, 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 Isaac shall thy seed be called. And also of the son of the bondwoman will I make a nation, because he is thy seed (Gen. 21:9-13).

The result, we know, was, that Abraham sent her and her child away. Thus we see Sarah, in her character of helpmeet, as knowing the Lord's mind concerning him who was heir according to the promise of God. About this she was exercised before God; and a wife, though a Christian, lamentably fails to fill the place allotted to her in the wisdom of God, if she lacks exercise of soul before Him as to carrying out His will in the family circle, even though there be a goodly measure of subjection and reverence manifested. As we have noticed, Abraham is commended of God for ruling his own servants

and children. We have seen in chapter 18 how readily the young man obeyed him; and, when approaching mount Moriah, the young men were commanded to tarry there with the ass until they came to them again, and verse 19 shows how obedient they were to their master's bidding. The filial subjection of Isaac, the much-loved and only son, is also remarkably set forth. Though burdened with the pile of wood necessary for consuming a burnt-offering, he freely converses with his father, saying, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering? {Gen. 22:7}

and seemed satisfied at being told, My son, God will provide Himself a lamb for a burntoffering {Gen. 22:8}.

All this shows filial confidence and love; so that when the moment arrived, he bows to his father's command to be laid on the wood, and bound to the altar as a burnt-offering. But all these points show the family piety which marked Abraham's household. The secret of power and blessing, no doubt, was his own personal walk before God, whom he knew to be his

shield and his exceeding great reward {Gen. 15:1}.

The typical instruction of this portion of divine truth has been frequently noticed. It is perhaps the only type we have in Scripture of God giving His only-begotten Son, delivering Him up for us all. And though He spared Abraham's parental feelings, He spared not His own Son, but delivered Him for our offences, and forsook Him in His deepest agony upon the cross, because our sins were upon Him. No doubt there is significance in the expression, They (the father and the son) went both of them together {Gen. 22:6},

while the servants were at the foot of the mountain; for in that unparalleled scene on Calvary, the transaction was between God and His only-begotten Son. They were together, and none else than those can ever fathom the mystery of God's just condemnation of sin as then and there took place. But though God spared the patriarch's feelings, the ram caught in the thicket was really offered upon that altar instead of Isaac; and when Abraham loosed his son from the altar, he received him as alive from the dead, and thus he became a type of Jesus risen. The typical instruction, moreover, is so accurately maintained that we do not see Isaac after he is loosed from the altar of burnt-offering till he comes forth again to meet his bride. And further, the record between these two events, which so strikingly portray Christ risen, ascended, and coming, remarkably sets forth almost all the leading elements at work in the world, both spiritually and temporally considered, from the resurrection of Christ to His coming to meet His bride in the air. First of all, let us look at this marvelous scene dispensationally. After the offering up and resurrection of the only son, in a figure, Sarah dies; i.e. God's blessing to the Jews in the way of promise dies, the kingdom is tendered by Peter (Acts 3), and the death of Stephen (Acts 7) shuts the door to Israel's blessing in that way. We see also the Holy Ghost (typified by Eleazar, Abraham's servant) is sent forth to select a bride for the Heir of all things, the only Son {Gen. 22:2, 12}

who had been on the altar of burnt-offering; and his mission is so successful in carrying out the father's will that he wins a bride for Isaac through his report of him, and leaves her not until he

conducts her to the bridegroom's embrace, who during this time is occupied in intercession (Gen. 24:63-67). After this, the natural descendants of Abraham, the children of Israel, are again brought upon the scene; getting blessing through Abraham, it is true, but Isaac pre-eminent among them as the risen one and heir of all things (Gen. 25:1-15). Then observe, during this period the world goes on its course (Gen. 23). There is death, burial, getting a grave to bury the dead out of their sight; there is also buying and selling, courtesy, kindness, and liberality too; but all is of the world, and not of the Father. Amidst it all we see the man of faith, the man that had not only been associated with the sacrifice, but with the risen one, who knew God as the Raiser of the dead, and thus disclosed to him a scene out of and beyond this region altogether. The man of faith, therefore, rises so superior to every thing here, that his bold confession

before men is, I am a stranger and a sojourner

and all I want here is a grave to bury my dead out of my sight {Gen. 23:4};

and even that I cannot accept as a gift, but will pay the true price for. This is a noble confession. I am a stranger;

I am not one of you; and do not desire, with all your possessions, rank, or courtesy, to be reckoned with you; for I do not belong to this scene. I am a sojourner -- only here for a little while; how long or short I know not. It may be the next hour may bring commands from God to go elsewhere. This is his confession before men, and therefore he could afford to be kind and courteous, and weigh out to the sons of Heth four hundred shekels of silver, current money with the merchant, for the field in Machpelah for a possession of a burying-place. Thus we find blessed lessons of instruction as to trial of faith, family piety, as well as typical instruction concerning the person of Christ, His accomplished work, the ways of God in different dispensations, and the true place here of those who are associated with Christ risen, and waiting for His return from heaven. The remarkable accuracy with which these typical lines have been drawn, seems enough to bow the stoutest infidel to the acknowledgment of their divine authorship; while the believer, who walks in the bright shining light of the New Testament Scriptures, cannot but be filled with joy and comfort, in tracing the unmistakable ministry of Him who knows the end from the beginning. Known unto God are all His works from the beginning of the world {Acts 15:18}.