

## THE GREATEST TRIAL OF ALL

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"Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest; and offer him for a burnt offering." -- Genesis 22:2. So long as men live in the world, they will turn to this story with unwaning interest. There is only one scene in history by which it is surpassed; that where the Great Father gave His Isaac to a death from which there was no deliverance. God and Abraham were friends in a common sorrow up to a certain point; though the infinite love of God stepped in to stay the hand of Abraham at the critical moment, sparing His friend what He would not spare Himself.

**"GOD DID TEMPT ABRAHAM."**

A better rendering might be, "God did put Abraham to the test." Satan tempts us that he may bring out the evil that is in our hearts; God tries or tests us that He may bring out all the good. In the fiery trial through which the believer is called to pass, ingredients of evil which had counteracted his true development drop away, shriveled and consumed; whilst latent qualities -- produced by grace, but not yet brought into exercise -- are called to the front; receive due recognition; and acquire a fixity of position and influence which nothing else could possibly have given them. In the agony of sorrow we say words and assume positions, which otherwise we should never have dreamt of, but from which we never again recede. Looking back, we wonder how we dared to do as we did; and yet we are not sorry -- because the memory of what we were in that supreme hour is a precious legacy; and a platform from which we take a wider view, and climb to the further heights which beckon us.

The common incidents of daily life, as well as the rare and exceptional crises, are so contrived as to give us incessant opportunities of exercising, and so strengthening, the graces of Christian living. Happy are they who are ever on the alert to manifest each grace, according to the successive demands of the varied experiences of daily life. If we were always on the outlook for opportunities of manifesting the special qualities of Christ's character, which are called for by the trials, and worries, and vexations of common experience, we should find that they were the twenty thousand chariots of God, waiting to carry us up to heights which could never otherwise be trodden by our feet.

**BUT GOD SENDS US NO TRIAL, WHETHER GREAT OR SMALL, WITHOUT FIRST PREPARING US**

He "will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it" (1 Corinthians 10:13). Trials are, therefore, God's vote of confidence in us. Many a trifling event is sent to test us, ere a greater trial is permitted to break on our heads. We are set to climb the lower peaks before urged to the loftiest summits with their virgin snows; are made to run with footmen before contending with horses; are taught to wade in the shallows, before venturing into the swell of the ocean waves. So it is written: "It came to pass AFTER THESE THINGS, that God did tempt Abraham."

Moreover,

**GOD OFTEN PREPARES US FOR COMING TRIAL, BY GIVING US SOME NEW AND BLISSFUL REVELATION OF HIMSELF**

I notice that, at the close of the preceding chapter, we are told that "Abraham called on the name of the everlasting God." Now, we do not learn that he had ever looked on God in this light before. He had known Him as God, the Almighty (17:1), but not as God, the Everlasting. The unchangeableness, the eternity, the independence of change, and time, and tens, which mark the Being of Jehovah -- all these broke suddenly on his soul about that time in a fresh and more vivid manner. Who that can remember seeing the sea for the first time can ever forget the first impression of its grandeur and far-spread mirror-like expanse? And the soul of the patriarch was thrilled with the lofty train of high and holy thought, as he used that name in prayer beside the well, and beneath the spreading shade of the tree he had planted. And with him, as so often with us, the new name was to enable him the better to withstand the shock of coming sorrow.

**THE TRIAL CAME VERY SUDDENLY**

As we have seen, life was flowing smoothly with the patriarch, -- courted by Abimelech; secure of his wells; gladdened with the presence of Isaac; the everlasting God his friend. "Ah, happy man," we might well have exclaimed, "thou hast entered upon thy land of Beulah; thy sun shall no more go down, nor thy moon withdraw itself; before thee lie the sunlit years, in an unbroken chain of blessing." But this was not to be. And just at that

moment, like a bolt out of a clear sky, there burst upon him the severest trial of his life. It is not often that the express trains of heaven are announced by warning bell, or falling signal; they dash suddenly into the station of the soul. It becomes us to be ever on the alert; for at such an hour and in such a guise as we think not, the Son of Man comes.

#### THE TRIAL TOUCHED ABRAHAM IN HIS TENDEREST POINT

It concerned his Isaac. Nothing else in the circumference of his life could have been such a test as anything connected with the heir of promise, the child of his old age, the laughter of his life. **HIS LOVE WAS TESTED.** For love of God, he had done much. But at whatever cost, he had ever put God first, glad to sacrifice all, for very love of Him. For this he had torn himself from Charran. For this he had been willing to become a homeless wanderer; content if at the last he became an inmate of God's home. For this he had renounced the hopes he had built on Ishmael; driving him, as a scapegoat, into the wilderness to return no more. But, perhaps, if he had been asked if he felt that he loved God most of all, he would not have dared to say that he did. We can never gauge our love by feeling. The only true test of love is in how much we are prepared to do for the one to whom we profess it. "He that hath My commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth Me." But God knew how true and strong His child's love was, and that he loved Him best. So He put him to a supreme test, that all men might henceforth know that a mortal man could love God so much as to put Him first, though his dearest lay in the opposite scale of the balance of the heart. Would not you like to love God like this? Then tell Him you are willing to pay the cost, if only He will create that love within you. And, remember: though at first He may ask you to give up your Isaac to Him, it is only that you may take up your true position, and evince to the world your choice; for He will give your beloved back again from the altar on which you have laid him. "Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and offer him for a burnt-offering." (Genesis 22:2).

#### IT WAS ALSO A GREAT TEST OF HIS FAITH

Isaac was the child of promise. "In Isaac shall thy seed be called." With reiterated emphasis this lad had been indicated as the one essential link between the aged pair and the vast posterity which was promised them. And now the father was asked to sacrifice his life. It was a tremendous test to his faith. How could God keep His word, and let Isaac die? It was utterly inexplicable to human thought. If Isaac had been old enough to have a son who could perpetuate the seed to future generations, the difficulty would have been removed. But how could the childless Isaac die; and still the promise stand of a posterity through him, innumerable as stars and sand? One thought, however, as the Epistle to the Hebrews tells us, filled the old man's mind, "GOD IS ABLE." He "accounted that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead" (Hebrews 11:19). He felt sure that somehow God would keep His word. It was not for him to reason how, but simply to obey. He had already seen Divine power giving life where all was as good as dead; why should it not do it again? In any case he must go straight on, doing as he was told, and calculating on the unexhausted stores in the secret hand of God. Oh for faith like this! -- simply to believe what God says; assured that God will do just what He has promised; looking without alarm, from circumstances that threaten to make the fulfillment impossible, to the bare word of God's unswerving truthfulness. Surely this habit is not so impossible of attainment. Why then should we not begin to practice it, stepping from stone to stone, until we are far out from the shore of human expediency leaning on the unseen but felt arm of Omnipotence?

#### IT WAS A TEST OF ABRAHAM'S OBEDIENCE

It was in the visions of the night that the word of the Lord must have come to him: and early the next morning the patriarch was on his way. The night before, as he lay down, he had not the least idea of the mission on which he would be started when the early beams of dawn had broken up the short Eastern night. But he acted immediately. We might have excused him if he had dallied with his duty; postponing it, procrastinating, lingering as long as possible. That, however, was not the habit of this heroic soul, which had well acquired the habit of instantaneity, one of the most priceless acquisitions for any soul ambitious of saintliness. "And Abraham rose up early in the morning" (v.3). No other hand was permitted to saddle the ass, or cleave the wood, or interfere with the promptness of his action. He "saddled his ass, and clave the wood for the burnt-offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him." This promptness was his safeguard. While the herdsmen were beginning to stir, and the long lines of cattle were being driven forth to their several grazing grounds, the old man was on his way. I do not think he confided his secret to a single soul, not even to Sarah. Why should he? The lad and he would enter that camp again, when the short but awful journey was over. "I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you."

#### THIS TEST DID NOT OUTRAGE ANY OF THE NATURAL INSTINCTS OF HIS SOUL

First of all, he was too familiar with God's voice to mistake it. Too often had he listened to it to make a mistake in this solemn crisis. And he was sure that God had some way of deliverance; which, though he might not be able to forecast it, would secure the sparing of Isaac's life. Besides, he lived at a time when such sacrifices as that to which he was called were very common; and he had never been taught decisively that they were abhorrent to the mind of his Almighty Friend. We must, in reading Scripture, remember that at first all God's servants were more or less affected by the religious notions that were current in their age; and we must not imagine that in all respects they were divested of the misconceptions that resulted from the twilight revelation in which they lived, but have since become dissipated before the meridian light of the Gospel. One of the first principles of that old Canaanitish religion demanded that men should give their firstborn for their transgression, the fruit of their body for the sin of their soul. On the altars of Moab, and Phoenicia, and Carthage; nay, even in the history of Israel itself -- this almost irrepressible expression of human horror at sin, and desire to propitiate God, found terrible expression. Not that fathers were less tender than now, but because they had a keener sense of the terror of unforgiven sin; they cowered before gods whom they knew not, and to whom they imputed a thirst for blood and suffering; they counted no cost too great to appease the awful demands which ignorance, and superstition, and a consciousness of sin, made upon them.

Perhaps Abraham had lately witnessed these rites; and as he did so, he had thought of Isaac, and wondered if he could do the same with him; and marveled why such a sacrifice had never been demanded at his hands. And it did not, therefore, startle him when God said, "Take now thy son, and offer him up." He was to learn that whilst God demanded as much love as ever the heathen gave their cruel and imaginary deities, yet Heaven would not permit of human sacrifices or of offered sons. A Greater Sacrifice was to be made to put away sin. Abraham's obedience was, therefore, allowed to go up to a certain point, and then peremptorily stayed -- that in all future time men might know that God would not demand, or permit, or accept human blood at their hands, much less the blood of a bright and noble lad; and that in such things He could have no delight.

Here let us ask ourselves whether we are of this same mind; holding our treasures with a loose hand; loving God most of all; prepared to obey Him at all costs; slaying our brightest hopes if God bid it -- because so sure that He will not fail or deceive us. If so, may God give us this mind, and keep us in it, for His glory, and for the maturing of our own faith.

What those three days of quiet traveling must have been to Abraham, we can never know. It is always so much easier to act immediately and precipitately, than to wait through long days, and even years; but it is in this process of waiting upon God that souls are drawn out to a strength of purpose and nobility of daring, which become their sacred inheritance for all after-time. And yet, despite the patriarch's preoccupation with his own special sorrow, the necessity was laid upon him to hide it under an appearance of resignation, and even gladness; so that neither his son nor his servants might guess the agony which was gnawing at his heart.

At last, on the third day, he saw from afar the goal of his journey, God had informed him that He would tell him which of the mountains was the appointed spot of the sacrifice: and now probably some sudden conviction seized upon his soul, that an especial summit, which reared itself in the blue distance, was to be the scene of that supreme act in which he should prove that to his soul God was chiefest and best. Tradition, which seems well authenticated, has always associated that "mountain in the land of Moriah" with the place on which, in after days, stood the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite, and the site of Solomon's Temple; and there is a wonderful appropriateness in the fact that this great act of obedience took place on the very spot where hecatombs of victims and rivers of blood were to point to that supreme Sacrifice which this prefigured.

As soon as the mountain had loomed into view, Abraham 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." What a significant expression, in this connection, is that word WORSHIP! It reflects the mood of the patriarch's mind. He was preoccupied with that Being, at whose command he had gone forth on this sorrowful errand. He looked upon his God, at the moment when He was asking so great a gift, as only deserving adoration and worship. The loftiest sentiment that can fill the heart of man swayed his whole nature; and it seemed to him as if his costliest and dearest treasure was not too great to give to that great and glorious God who was the one object of his life.

It is of the utmost importance that we should emphasize the words of ASSURED CONFIDENCE, which Abraham addressed to his young men before he left them. "I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you." This was something more than unconscious prophecy: it was the assurance of an unwavering faith, that somehow or other God would interpose to spare his son; or at least, if necessary, to raise him from the dead. In any case Abraham was sure that Isaac and he would before long come again. It is this which so largely removes the difficulties that might otherwise obscure this act; and it remains to all time a most striking proof of the tenacity with which faith can cling to the promises of God. When once you have received a promise, cling to it

as a sailor to a spar in the midst of the boiling waters. God is bound to be as good as His word. And even though He ask you to do the one thing that might seem to make deliverance impossible; yet if you dare to do it, you will find not only that you shall obtain the promise, but that you shall also receive some crowning and unexpected mark of His love.

#### THE INFLUENCE OF ABRAHAM'S BEHAVIOR WAS FELT BY HIS SON

He caught his father's spirit. We do not know how old he was; he was at least old enough to sustain the toil of a long march on foot, and strong enough to carry up hill the faggots, laid upon his shoulders by his father. But he gladly bent his youthful strength under the weight of the wood, just as through the Via Dolorosa a greater than he carried His cross. Probably this was not the first time that Abraham and Isaac had gone on such an errand; but it is beautiful to see the evident interest the lad took in the proceedings as they went, "both of them together."

At all previous sacrifices, Abraham had taken with him a lamb; but on this occasion Isaac's wondering attention was drawn to the omission of that constant appendage to their acts of sacrifice; and with a simplicity which must have touched Abraham to the quick, he said, "My father, behold the fire and the wood! but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering?" What a stab was this to that sorely-tried heart, which dared not even reveal the secret beneath which it bowed; and which eagerly caught at a subterfuge to enable it to postpone the answer. Thus with a gleam of prophetic insight, mingled with unwavering faith in Him for whose sake he was suffering, the father answered, "My son, God will Himself provide a lamb for a burnt-offering." So they went Both of them together.

#### CAN WE WONDER THAT ABRAHAM SHRANK FROM DISCLOSING ALL THE FACTS?

We all have our treasures whom we fondly love. We shudder at the remotest thought of losing them. With breaking hearts we watch the color fade from the cheek of a darling child, or mark the slow progress of disease in some twin soul; but Abraham must submit to a keener test than these. Our dear ones depart in spite of all we do to keep them; but in Abraham's case there was this added anguish, that he was to inflict the blow. The last thought that Isaac would have of him would be, holding the uplifted knife; and even though the lad might be restored to him -- yet would it not be a revelation to the young heart to discover that it was possible for his father to do to him an act of violence like that?

#### BUT AT LAST THE DISCOVERY COULD NO LONGER BE WITHHELD

"They came to the place which God had told him of, and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order." Can you not see the old man slowly gathering the stones; bringing them from the furthest distance possible; placing them with a reverent and judicious precision; and binding the wood with as much deliberation as possible? But at last everything is complete; and he turns to break the fatal secret to the young lad who had stood wonderingly by. Inspiration draws a veil over that last tender scene -- the father's announcement of his mission; the broken sobs; the kisses, wet with tears; the instant submission of the son, who was old enough and strong enough to rebel if he had had the mind. Then the binding of that tender frame; which, indeed, needed no compulsion, because the young heart had learned the secret of obedience and resignation. Finally, the lifting him to lie upon the altar, on the wood. Here was a spectacle which must have arrested the attention of heaven. Here was a proof of how much mortal man will do for the love of God. Here was an evidence of Childlike faith which must have thrilled the heart of the Eternal God, and moved Him in the very depths of His being. Do you and I love God like this? Is He more to us than our nearest and dearest? Suppose they stood on this side, and He on that side: would we go with Him, though it cost us the loss of all? You think you would. Aye, it is a great thing to say. The air upon this height is too rare to breathe with comfort. The one explanation of it is to be found in the words of our Lord; "He that loveth father or mother, son or daughter, more than Me, is not worthy of Me" (Matthew 10:37).

The blade was raised high, flashing in the rays of the morning sun; but it was not permitted to fall. With the temptation God also made a way of escape. "And the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven, and said, 'Abraham!'" With what avidity would that much-tried soul seize at anything that offered the chance of respite or of pause! and he said, his uplifted hand returning gladly to his side, "Here am I!" Would that we could more constantly live in the spirit of that response, so that God might constantly live in the spirit of that response, so that God might always know where to find us; and so that we might be always ready to fulfill His will. Then followed words that spoke release and deliverance: "Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from Me" (v.12).



When we have given our best and costliest to God, passing our gifts through the fire, surrendering them to His will, He will give them back to us as gold refined -- multiplied, as Job's belongings were. But it is also quite likely that He will not do so until we have almost lost all heart and hope. "Abraham called the name of that place Jehovah-Jireh," "The Lord will provide." And so it passed into a proverb, and men said one to another, "In the mount of the Lord deliverance shall be seen." It is a true word. Deliverance is not seen till we come to the mount of sacrifice. God does not provide deliverance until we have reached the point of our extremest need. It is when our Isaac is on the altar, and the knife is about to descend upon him, that God's angel interposes to deliver.

Near by the altar there was a thicket; and, as Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked around, he beheld a ram caught there by its horns. Nothing could be more opportune. He had wanted to show his gratitude, and the fullness of his heart's devotion; and he gladly went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt-offering instead of his son. Here, surely, is the great doctrine of substitution; and we are taught how life can only be preserved at the cost of life given. According to one of the early Church writers, there is a yet deeper mystery latent here; viz., that whilst Isaac represents the Deity of Christ, the ram represents His human nature, which became a sacrifice for the sins of the world. I am not user that I would altogether accept this interpretation; because it is the Deity of Christ working through His humanity which gives value to His sacrifice; but all through this marvelous story there is an evident setting forth of the mysteries of Calvary.

Abraham's act enables us better to understand the sacrifice which God made to save us. The gentle submission of Isaac, laid upon the altar with throat bare to the knife, gives us a better insight into Christ's obedience to death. Isaac's restoration to life, as from the dead, and after having been three days dead in his father's purpose, suggests the resurrection from Joseph's tomb. Yet the reality surpasses the shadow. Isaac suffers with a clear apprehension of his father's presence. Christ, bereft of the consciousness of His Father's love, complains of His forsakenness. All was done that love could do to alleviate Isaac's anguish; but Christ suffered the rudeness of coarse soldiery, and the upbraidings of Pharisee and Scribe. Isaac was spared death; but Christ drank the bitter cup to its dregs.

Before they left the mountain brow, the angel of Jehovah once more addressed the patriarch. God had often promised: now for the first time He swore; and since He could swear by no greater He swore by Himself, and said: "By Myself have I sworn, 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" (v.16-17). Think not, O soul of man, that this is a unique and solitary experience. It is simply a specimen and pattern of God's dealings with all souls who are prepared to obey Him at whatever cost. After thou hast patiently endured, thou shalt receive the promise. The moment of supreme sacrifice shall be the moment of supreme and rapturous blessing. God's river, which is full of water, shall burst its banks, and pour upon thee a tide of wealth and grace. There is nothing, indeed, which God will not do for a man who dares to step out upon what seems to be the mist; though as he puts down his foot he finds it rock beneath him.

#### ALL WHO BELIEVE ARE THE CHILDREN OF FAITHFUL ABRAHAM

We then, Gentiles though we are, divided from him by the lapse of centuries, may inherit the blessing that he won; and the more so as we follow closely in his steps. That blessing is for us if we will claim it. That multiplication of seed may be realized in our fruitfulness of service. That victory over all enemies may give us victory in all time of our temptation, and that blessing for all the nations of the earth may be verified again as we go forth into all the world telling the story of a Savior's death.

From that eminence Abraham looked across the vale of centuries, and saw the day of Christ. He "saw it, and was glad" (John 8:56). With a new light in his heart, with a new composure on his face, talking much with Isaac of the vision which had broken upon his noble soul, Abraham returned to his young men. "And they rose up and went together to Beersheba, and Abraham dwelt at Beersheba;" but the halo of the vision lit up the common places of his life, as it shall do for us, when from the mounts of sacrifice we turn back to the lowlands of daily duty.