

CHAPTER 65

THE FAITH OF ABRAHAM

(~~8817~~ HEBREWS 11:17-19)

This chapter is the chronology of faith, or a record of some of the outstanding acts which that grace has produced in all ages. The apostle having mentioned the works wrought by the faith of those who lived before the Flood (verses 4-7), and having spoken of the patriarchs in general (verses 8-16), now mentions them in detail. He begins again with that of Abraham, who in this glorious constellation shines forth as a star of the first magnitude, and therefore is fittingly styled the father of the faithful. Three principal products of his faith are here singled out: his leaving the land of his birth, upon the call of God (verse 8); the manner of his life in Canaan, sojourning in tents (v. 9); and his offering up of Isaac. The first pictures conversion, the second the Christian's life in this world, the third the triumphant consummation of faith.

Among all the actings of Abraham's faith nothing was more remarkable and noteworthy than the offering up of his son Isaac. Not only was it the most wonderful work of faith ever wrought, and therefore is the most illustrious of all examples for us to follow (the life and death of Christ alone excepted), but it also supplies the most blessed shadowing out of the love of God the Father in the gift of His dear Son. The resemblances pointed by the type are numerous and striking. Abraham offered up a son, his only begotten son. Abraham delivered up his son to a sacrificial death, and, in purpose, smote him. But observe too how the antitype excelled the type. Abraham's son was only a man. Abraham offered up Isaac under Divine command: God was under no constraint, but gave Christ freely. Abraham's son suffered not; Christ did.

Let it not be forgotten that the chief design before the apostle throughout this chapter, was to demonstrate unto his tried brethren the great efficacy of faith: its power to sustain a very great trial, to perform a very difficult duty, and to obtain a very important blessing. Unmistakably were these three things illustrated in the case we are now to consider. As we have

already seen, it was not without good reason that Abraham is designated the father of all who believe. But among all the actings of his faith none was more memorable than its exercise upon Mount Moriah. If we consider the object of it, the occasion of it, the hindrances which stood in his way, and his blessed victory, we cannot but admire and wonder at the power of Divine grace triumphing over the weakness of the flesh.

“By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son” (verse 17).

For a clearer understanding of this verse we need to consult ^{<021>}Genesis 22: there we read, “And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am. And He said, 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” (verses 1, 2). The whole of what follows in ^{<021>}Genesis 22, to the end of verse 19, should be carefully read. Before attempting to expound our present verse and make application to ourselves of its practical teachings, let us seek to remove one or two difficulties which may stand in the way of the thoughtful reader.

First, “By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac.” The word “offered up” is the same that is used for slaying and offering up sacrifices. Here then is the problem: how could Abraham “offer up” his son by *faith*, seeing that it was against both the law of nature and the law of God for a man to slay his own son? ^{<021>}Genesis 22:2, however, shows that his faith had a sure foundation to rest upon, for the Lord Himself had commanded him so to do. But this only appears to remove the difficulty one stage farther back: God Himself had laid it down as a law that

“whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed” (^{<006>}Genesis 9:6).

True, but though His creatures are bound by the laws He has prescribed them, God Himself is not.

God is under no law, but is absolute Sovereign. Moreover, He is the Lord of life, both Giver and Preserver of it, and therefore has He an indisputable right to dispose of it, to take it away when He pleases, by what means or instruments He sees fit. God possesses supreme authority, and when He

pleases sets aside His own laws, or issues new ones contrary to those given previously. By His own imperial fiat, Jehovah now, by special and extraordinary command, constituted it a duty for Abraham to do what before had been a sin. In similar manner, He who gave commandment

“thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image or any likeness”
(~~0204~~Exodus 20:4),

ordered Moses *to make* a brazen serpent (~~0208~~Numbers 21:8)! Learn, then, that God is bound by no law, being above all law.

Second, but how could it be truly said that Abraham “offered up Isaac,” seeing that he did not actually slay him? In regard to his willingness, in regard to his set purpose, and in regard to God’s acceptance of the will for the deed, he *did* do so. There was no reserve in his heart, and there was no failure in his honest endeavors. He took the three days’ journey to the appointed place of sacrifice; he bound Isaac unto the altar, and took the knife into his hand to slay him. And God accepted the will for the deed. This exemplifies a most important principle in connection with God’s acceptance of the Christian’s obedience. The terms of His law have not been lowered: God still requires of us personal, perpetual, and perfect obedience. But this we are unable to render to Him while in our present state. And so, for Christ’s sake, where the heart (at which God ever looks) *truly desires* to fully please Him in all things, and makes an honest and *sincere effort* to do so, God graciously accepts the will for the deed. Carefully ponder ~~4182~~2 Corinthians 8:12 which illustrates the same blessed fact, and note the word “willing” in ~~5838~~Hebrews 13:18!

Third, the statement made in ~~0220~~Genesis 22:1, “God did tempt Abraham,” or as our text says, “when he was tried,” for that is exactly what both the original Hebrew and Greek word signifies: to make trial of.

“It is an act of God whereby He proveth and makes experience of the loyalty and obedience of His servants” (W. Perkins).

And this *not* for His own information (for He “knoweth our thoughts afar off”), but for their own knowledge and that of their fellows. Christ put the rich young ruler to the proof when He said, “Go, sell that thou hast, and give to the poor” (~~4182~~Matthew 19:21). So too He made trial of the Canaanitish woman when He said,

“It is not meet to take the children’s bread and to cast it to the dogs” (⁴⁰⁵⁶Matthew 15:26).

“By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac.” In order to understand and appreciate the fact that it was “by *faith*” Abraham offered up Isaac, we must examine more closely the nature of that test to which the Lord submitted the one whom He condescended to call his “friend.” In bidding him to sacrifice his beloved son, that ordeal combined in it various and distinct features: it was a testing of his submission or loyalty to God; it was a testing of his affections, as to whom he really loved the more: God or Isaac; it was a testing of which was the stronger within him: grace or sin; but supremely, it was a testing of his *faith*.

Carnal writers see in this incident little more than a severe trial of Abraham’s natural affections. It cannot be otherwise, for water never rises above its own level; and carnal men are incapable of discerning spiritual things. But it is to be carefully noted that ⁸¹¹⁷Hebrews 11:17 does not say, “In submission to God’s holy will, Abraham offered up Isaac,” though that was true; nor “out of supreme love for God he offered his son,” though that was also the case. Instead, the Holy Spirit declares that it was “by *faith*” that the patriarch acted, declaring that “he that had *received the promises* offered up his only begotten son.” Most of the modern commentators, filled with fleshly sentiment rather than with the Holy Spirit, completely miss this point, which is the central beauty of our verse. Let us seek then to attend unto it the more particularly.

In calling upon Abraham to sacrifice his son as a burnt offering, the Lord submitted his faith to a fiery ordeal. How so? Because God’s promises to Abraham concerning his “seed” centered in Isaac, and in bidding him slay his only son, He appeared to contradict Himself. Ishmael had been cast out, and Isaac’s posterity alone was to be reckoned to Abraham as the blessed seed among whom God would have His church. Isaac had been given to Abraham after he had long gone childless and when Sarah’s womb was dead, therefore there was no likelihood of his having any more sons by her. At the time, Isaac himself was childless, and to kill him looked like cutting off all his hopes. How then could Abraham reconcile the Divine command with the Divine promise? To sacrifice his son and heir was not only contrary to his natural affections, but opposed to carnal reason as well.

In like manner God tests the faith of His people today. He calls upon them to perform the acts of obedience which are contrary to their natural affections and which are opposed to carnal reason.

“If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me” (~~4064~~ Matthew 16:24).

How many a Christian has had his or her affections drawn out toward a non-Christian, and then has come to them that piercing word,

“Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers” (~~4064~~ 2 Corinthians 6:14)!

How many a child of God has had his membership in a “church” where he saw that Christ was dishonored; to heed that Divine command,

“Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord” (~~4067~~ 2 Corinthians 6:17)

entailed leaving behind those near and dear in the flesh; but the call of God could not be disregarded, no matter how painful obedience to it might be.

But when are we put to such a trial as to offer up our Isaac? To this question the Puritan Manton returned a threefold answer.

First, in the case of *submission to* the strokes of providence, when near relations are taken away from us. God knows how to strike us in the right vein; there will be the greatest trial where our love is set.

Second, in case of *self-denial*, forsaking our choicest interests for a good conscience. We must not only part with mean things, but such as we prize above anything in the world. When God requires it (as He did with the writer) that we should forsake father and mother, we must not demur; nay, our lives should not be dear unto us (~~4024~~ Acts 20:24).

Third, in *mortifying* our bosom lust: this is what is signified by cutting off a “right hand” or plucking out a “right eye” (~~4052~~ Matthew 5:29, 30).

Let us notice the *time* when Abraham was thus tested. The Holy Spirit has emphasized this in ~~4020~~ Genesis 22:1 by saying, “And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham.” A double reference seems to be made in these words.

First, a general one to all the preceding trials which Abraham had endured -- his journey to Canaan, his sojourning there in tents, the long, long wait for the promised heir. Now that he had passed through a great fight of afflictions, he is called upon to suffer a yet severer test. Ah, God educates His children little by little: as they grow in grace harder tasks are assigned them, and deeper waters are called upon to be passed through, that enlarged opportunities may be afforded for manifesting their increased faith in God. It is not the raw recruit, but the scarred veteran, who is assigned a place in the front ranks in the battle. Think it not strange then, fellow-Christian, if thy God is now appointing thee severer tests than He did some years ago.

Second, a more specific reference is made in ^{<0220>}Genesis 22:1 to what is recorded in the previous chapter: the miraculous birth of Isaac, the great feast that Abraham made, when he was weaned (verse 8), and the casting out of Ishmael (verse 14). The cup of the patriarch's joy was now full. His outlook seemed most promising: not a cloud appeared on the horizon. Yet it was then, like a heavy clap of thunder out of a clear sky, that the most trying test of all came upon him! Yes, and so it was just after God had pronounced Job "a perfect man and an upright" that He delivered all that he had into Satan's hands (^{<3008>}Job 1:8, 12). So too it was when Paul had been rapt to the third heaven, when he received such "abundance of revelations," that there was given him "a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet him" (^{<4700>}2 Corinthians 12:1-7).

How we need to seek grace that we may be enabled to hold every thing down here with a light hand. Rightly did an old writer say, "Build not thy nest on any earthly tree, for the whole forest is doomed to be cut down." It is not only for God's glory, but for our own good, that we set our affections upon "things above." And in view of what has just been before us, how necessary it is that we should *expect* and seek in advance to be prepared for severe trials. Are we not bidden to "hear for the time to come" (^{<2402>}Isaiah 42:23)? The more we calmly anticipate future trials, the less likely are we to be staggered and overcome by them when they arrive:

"Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you"
(^{<0042>}1 Peter 4:12).

Having observed the time when Abraham was tested, let us now consider the *severity* of his trial.

First *the act* itself. Abraham was ordered to slay, not all his bullocks and herds, but a human being; and that not one of his faithful servants, but his beloved son. Abraham was bidden, not to banish from home or send him out of Canaan, but to cut him off out of the land of the living. He was commanded to do a thing for which no reason could be assigned save the authority of Him who gave the command. He was bidden to do that which was most abhorrent to natural feeling. He must not only consent unto the death of his dear Isaac, but himself be his executioner. He was to slay one who was guilty of no crime, but who (according to the Divine record) was an unusually dutiful, loving, and obedient child. Was ever such a demand made upon a human creature before or since!

Second, consider *the offerer*. In our text he is presented in a particular character: “he that had received the promises,” which is the key clause to the verse. God had declared unto Abraham that He would establish an everlasting covenant with Isaac and with his seed after him (^{<0170>}Genesis 17:9). Isaac, and none other, was the “seed” by whose posterity Canaan should be possessed (^{<0127>}Genesis 12:7). It was through him that all nations should be blessed (^{<0170>}Genesis 17:7), and therefore it must be through him that Christ, according to the flesh, would proceed. These promises Abraham had “received”: he had given credit for them, firmly believed them, fully expected their performance. Now the accomplishment of those promises depended upon the preservation of Isaac’s life — at least until he had a son; and to sacrifice him now, appeared to render them all null and void, making their fulfillment impossible.

“He that had received the promises” —

“which noteth not only the revelation of the promises, concerning a numerous issue, and the Messiah to come of his loins, but the entertaining of them and cordial assent to them. He received them not only a private believer, but as a feoffee in trust for the use of the church. In the first ages of the world God had some eminent persons who received a revelation of His will in the name of the rest. This was Abraham’s case, and he is here viewed not only as a father, a loving father, but as one who had received the promises as a public person, and father of the faithful — the person whom God had chosen in whom to deposit the promises” (T. Manton).

Herein lay the *spiritual* acuteness of the trial: would he not in slaying Isaac be faithless to his trust? would he not by his own act place the gravestone on all hope for the fulfillment of such promises?

Forcibly did Matthew Henry, when commenting upon the time at which Abraham received this trying command from God, say,

“After he had received the promises that this Isaac should build up his family, and that ‘in him his seed should be called’ (~~8118~~ Hebrews 11:18), and that he should be one of the progenitors of the Messiah, and all nations blessed in Him; so that in being called to offer up his Isaac, he seemed to be called to destroy and cut off his own family, to cancel the promises of God, to prevent the coming of Christ, to destroy the whole truth, to sacrifice his own soul and his hope of salvation, to cut off the church of God at one blow; a most terrible trial!”

If Isaac were slain, then *all* seemed to be lost.

It may be asked, But *why* should God thus try the faith of the patriarch? For Abraham’s own sake that he might the better know the efficacy of that grace which God had bestowed upon him. As the suspending of a heavy weight upon a chain reveals either its weakness or its strength, so God places His people in varied circumstances which manifest that state of their hearts — whether or no their trust be really in Him. The Lord tried Hezekiah to show unto him his frailty (~~4821~~ 2 Chronicles 32:31); he tried Job to show that though He slew him yet would he trust in God. Second, for the sake of others, that Abraham might be an example to them. God had called him to be the father of the faithful, and therefore would He show unto all generations of his children what grace He had conferred upon him — what a worthy “father” or pattern he was (condensed from W. Gouge).

In like manner, God tries His people today and puts to the proof the grace which He has communicated to their hearts: this, both for His own glory, and for their own comfort. The Lord is determined to make it manifest that He has on earth a people who will forsake any comfort and endure any misery rather than forego their plain duty; who love Him better than their own lives, and who are prepared to trust Him in the dark. So too we are the gainers, for we never have clearer proof of the reality of grace than when we are under sore trials.

“Knowing that tribulation worketh patience, and patience experience, and experience hope” (~~488B~~Romans 5:3, 4).

As another has said, “By knocking upon the vessel we see whether it is full or empty, cracked or sound, so by these knocks of providence we are discovered.”

Rightly did John Owen point out, “Trials are the only touchstone of faith, without which men must want (lack) the best evidence of its sincerity and efficacy, and the best way of testifying it unto others. Wherefore we ought not to be afraid of trials, because of the admirable advantages of faith, in and by them.” Yea, the Word of God goes farther, and bids us, “Count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations” or “trials,” declaring

“that the trying of your faith worketh patience; but let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing” (~~500C~~James 1:2-4).

So too,

“Though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations (or “trials”) that the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honor, and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ” (~~600C~~1 Peter 1:6, 7).

In conclusion, let us observe how Abraham conducted himself under this sore trial: “he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son.” Many instructive details concerning this are recorded in ~~022D~~Genesis 22. There it will be found that Abraham consulted not with Sarah — why should he, when he already *knew* God’s will on the matter! Nor was there any disputing with God, as to the apparently flagrant discrepancy between His present command and His previous promises. Nor was there any delay:

“And 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” (~~022D~~Genesis 22:3).

And how is his unparalleled action to be accounted for? From what super-fleshly principle did it spring? A single word gives the answer: FAITH. Not

a theoretical faith, not a mere head-knowledge of God, but a real, living, spiritual, triumphant, *faith*.

“*By faith* Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac.” By faith in the Divine justice and wisdom behind the command so to act. By faith in the veracity and faithfulness of God to make good His own promises. Fully assured that God was able to fulfill His word, Abraham closed his eyes to all difficulties, and steadfastly counted upon the power of Him that cannot lie. This is the very nature or character of a *spiritual* faith: it persuades the soul of God’s absolute supremacy, unerring wisdom, unchanging righteousness, infinite love, almighty power. In other words, it rests upon the *character* of the living God, and trusts Him in the face of every obstacle. Spiritual faith makes its favored possessor judge that the greatest suffering is better than the least sin; yea, it unhesitatingly avows “Thy loving kindness is better than life” (~~Psalm~~ Psalm 63:3).

We must leave for our next article the consideration of the remainder of our passage. But in view of what has already been before us, is not both writer and reader constrained to cry unto God, “Lord, have mercy upon me; Pardon my vile unbelief, and graciously subdue its awful power. Be pleased, for Christ’s sake, to work in me that spiritual and supernatural faith which will honor Thee and bear fruits to Thy glory. And if Thou hast, in Thy discriminating grace, already communicated to me this precious, precious gift, then graciously deign to strengthen it by the power of Thy Holy Spirit; call it forth into more frequent exercise and action. Amen.”