

LIFE'S HARDEST TRIAL

by Ray C. Stedman

There is a trial that is perhaps the hardest of all and it is to this incident in the life of Abraham that we now arrive. In the 22nd chapter of Genesis is one of the most famous stories in the Bible, the story of Abraham offering up Isaac. I think anyone can see, in this account of Abraham offering his son Isaac as a burnt offering, a remarkable foreshadowing in the Old Testament of the work of Christ in the New. It seems to me that no one watching old Abraham binding his dear son to the altar and his heart breaking within him can miss the parallel with God sending his own Son to Calvary's mountain centuries later.

I want to touch on that aspect as we go through this story, but I wish primarily to dwell on the individual application to our own hearts. As we have been studying through the life of Abraham, you notice we've seen God has written this man's story in such a way that he is a "sample man of faith," that is, the Pilgrim's Progress of the Old Testament and all these incidents recorded in Abraham's life form clear pictures for us of what occurs in our life of faith. Therein we learn some instructive lessons.

In Chapter 22, we come to the story of Abraham's greatest trial. This is the deepest thrust of the cross of Christ into his life. Because it was the work of the cross in the life of Abraham, there is involved in this account a Gethsemane, a Calvary, and a resurrection.

After these things God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his ass, 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 afar off. (Gen 22:1-4 {RSV})

It is helpful to realize that about twenty years have elapsed between Chapters 21 and 22. We last saw Abraham in a tent by the well of Beer-sheba in the wilderness with his son Isaac. There he built an altar and worshipped and called on the name of the everlasting, unchangeable God. For twenty years of blessing and happiness, Isaac has been the delight of his parents' hearts. True to his name, he has brought laughter into their tent; the whole family life centers around this dear boy as he grows up to young manhood. Suddenly like a thunderbolt from the sky comes this word from God. Abraham can hardly believe his ears: God says, "Now take your son Isaac, your only son whom you love, (I know you love him) and go to Mount Moriah and offer him up on that mountain."

Mount Moriah is the very place where in later years King David bought the threshing floor of Ornan as a place for the site of the temple, (1 Chr 21:18). On that very place where Abraham offered Isaac, the temple of Solomon was built, (2 Chr 3:1). Today there stands in that very place the Dome of the Rock, a Moslem mosque, built over the great rock that formed the altar upon which Abraham offered Isaac. It is from this rock that the Mohammedans believe Mohammed and his horse ascended to heaven. So it is a very historic spot.

You can imagine what a blow this was in Abraham's life. It is specifically called a test. That means it was meant by God to determine if Abraham's confidence is in his son Isaac, or in God who gave him his son. This is a test of Abraham's real heart love. In other words, will Abraham obey the first commandment, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind"? (Matt 22:37 {RSV}). This is also a test of how far this man has advanced in the life of faith and in the strength of the Spirit.

As we read through this account, we see that it says nothing about Abraham's emotional reaction to this request of God's. I think the reason is that it was quite unnecessary to say anything. We instinctively know

what this must have meant to Abraham. His first reaction must have been incredulity. How could God be asking this of him? And yet, the voice is unmistakable; he has heard this voice many times.

Every now and then an account appears in the newspaper that someone has heard "the voice of God" telling him to go murder a certain person. We read of a terrible murder carried out in the mistaken belief that God has ordered it. But there is nothing like that occurring here. It is clear from the complete account that God never had any intention of allowing this to be carried through, but it was a very severe and bitter test as to where Abraham's love was centered.

God is a jealous God, very concerned that he has what he deserves; that is, first place in every human heart and life. You can imagine the questions that must have arisen in Abraham's heart as he contemplated what God had asked of him. What about the promises -- all that God had said would take place -- what about those? God has said: "Take your son and offer him as a burnt offering."

"But Lord," Abraham might have said, "How will the promises be fulfilled that my seed should fill the land and be as numerous as the stars in the heavens and the sand on the seashore? Why should this be asked of me?"

Whenever we get into a strait like this, the question in our hearts is always: "Why?" Why should God do this? Why should it be asked of me? "I can see, God, why you asked me, your servant Abraham, to give up Ishmael. You told me to cast him out of the tent because he was the son of the flesh, not of promise." We can understand when God tells us to get rid of some cherished attitude that we know is wrong. We never ask why about that.

"But, Lord," Abraham said, "This is Isaac; this is the son of promise, this is the one you yourself gave me. Why do you ask me to put him to death like this -- the very gift of your grace to my heart?"

And then Satan must have suggested doubts to him, so that he wondered, "How can I find strength to do this? And what about Sarah? What is she going to say when I come back from that mountain empty-handed and she asks me what happened? I'll have to invent some kind of yarn to explain it and I know she won't believe me. She'll keep probing till she finds out the answer and how am I going to face her?"

These must have been some of the questions that arose in his heart. What a sleepless, troubled night of torture and heartbreak this man went through.

And yet, is it not also a picture for us of that awful struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane when our Lord Jesus faced this very same test? God was requiring something of him which God surely could not be asking.

I think in some lesser degree, you and I have had experiences like this. Perhaps you have stared in unbelief at some situation or circumstance in your life, and said, "Is this what God wants me to go through? Is this what God is asking of me? Is this God's will?" And your heart cries out, "Why? Why should this happen to me?" Well, this is life's hardest trial. It is never so difficult when we can see a reason. However, when something happens to us in which we fail to see any logic, and, in fact, everything seems to be against it, this is when faith is really put to the test.

Now, notice that, when morning comes, Abraham's obedience is prompt and complete. Though his heart is torn, yet he obeys God. He has passed the test. I am tremendously impressed at the obedience of this man Abraham. Is not this the secret of his life? We are so inclined to excuse ourselves from hard things and to rationalize our way out of difficult situations, relieving the pressure and avoiding certain unpleasant situations. We don't like disturbing questions, and unsettling challenges. When it comes right down to it, we don't like to take hold of ourselves, and say, "I am going to obey God!"

As I have lived, and prayed, and studied through the years, I have discovered that God is an utter and complete realist. He is not at all impressed with our emotional, hysterical outbursts. We sometimes get all wrought up, and believe our emotions will melt the heart of God, and change his mind. But God knows that when he tells us to do something, it is necessary for our benefit, for his benefit, and for everyone concerned, he expects us

to obey. I am impressed with Abraham's obedience here; when he hears God tell him to offer his son as a burnt offering on yonder mountain, Abraham obeys.

Now we come to faith's calvary:

Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the ass; I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you." And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it on Isaac his son; and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here am I, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God will provide 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 an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar, upon the wood. Then Abraham put forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of that place The Lord will provide; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided." (Gen 22:5-14 {RSV})

Again the record is silent about the emotional reaction of Abraham here, but we have only to put ourselves in his place to sense what he felt, how his heart was torn, how he avoids telling Isaac the fearful truth until the very last possible moment, how he perhaps trembles within when Isaac asks the question, "Where is the lamb?" We know there is no real answer to Isaac's question until we run through intervening centuries and listen in the New Testament to John the Baptist standing before the people of Israel saying, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," (John 1:29 RSV). Just as our Lord Jesus approached his cross with calmness and quiet self-control, so there is seemingly a sense of peace about this man Abraham as he draws nearer the actual sacrifice of Isaac.

What is the explanation for this? Where did this stricken father find the strength to carry through this fearsome task? How did he nerve himself to do it? The answer is found here in one brief phrase in Verse 5, "Then Abraham said to his young man, 'Stay here with the ass; I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you.'" We will both be coming back again. Abraham is not trying to deceive these men, but somewhere in the quiet meditations of that awful night when this word first came to him, there came the consciousness that God could do something to raise this boy from the dead and Abraham believed in resurrection. That is where he found the peace to follow God's command. In the struggles of that night, he began to reason and to reckon on God.

He must have thought something like this: "Now God has given me promises and I have lived with God long enough to know that when God gives a promise, he carries it through. God has said that in my son, Isaac, all the nations of the earth shall be blessed. Isaac is necessary to the fulfillment of the promise. It can't be any other; he has said this boy is the one who is going to be the fulfillment of the promise. Well, then, if God has asked me now to offer him up as a sacrifice, there is only one explanation. God intends to raise him from the dead."

Abraham had never had, as we have today, the experience or the record of anyone having risen from the dead. He knew nothing of Easter, nor of Lazarus, nor the miracles in the Gospel accounts. Yet so firm is his faith in the character of God that he comes to a realization of the resurrection. This is confirmed in Hebrews 11: "By faith Abraham ... offered up Isaac," {Heb 11:17 RSV}. "He considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead; hence, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back," (Heb 11:19 {RSV}). And so, to this father, as he is traveling on the way to Mt. Moriah, Isaac has been as good as dead in his eyes for three days. Abraham risked everything he owned and loved upon the character of God and found him to be a God of

resurrection.

Because of this wonderful triumph in his life, he calls this place, "God will provide." Because of this miracle there sprang up a little saying in Israel, a proverb:

"When you get to the mount, it will be provided."

Do you know what that means? God's ways with men are such that it seems as though deliverance will never come. It seems that you will never be delivered. But if you go on, when you get to the mount it will be provided. Man's disappointments are God's appointments. It is never too late for God. Even if Abraham had had to carry the bloody business through to its end, nevertheless, his father's heart was quiet in restful peace because he knew God would raise his son from the dead. He had promised; therefore, it must be.

In conclusion, we read of the hope of resurrection morning:

And the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, "By myself I have sworn, says the Lord, because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore. And your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves, because you have obeyed my voice." So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham dwelt at Beer-sheba. (Gen 22:15-19 {RSV})

When Abraham gave his son back to God, then God said the promise of fruitfulness would be immediately fulfilled. There would be no more delay. The rivers of living waters would now begin to flow out from him to bless all the nations of the earth as God had promised. It was when Isaac came back from the dead, so to speak, in resurrection power that God said, "Now the fruitfulness of your life will be manifest." This is resurrection life.

Even God's gifts to us are of no value until we are willing, if necessary, to lose them so that God might reign without a rival in our hearts. When we have to come to that place to which the Spirit of God wants to bring us, that perfect relationship with the Father (in which our Lord lived his entire life) when God means more to us than anything, when we love the Lord our God with all our strength and soul and mind and spirit and heart, and we are even willing to give up the very gift that God has given, then in resurrection power that gift will be a blessing to everyone it touches.

We all have been given gifts from God. Maybe God has given you a special talent and you are asked to take a job where perhaps you can't use that talent. You wonder about it, and perhaps rebel over this. But remember Abraham, and give it back to God. Face the possibility of not using that talent and the God of resurrection will take that talent and return it to you and make it a blessing to many hearts. Anything else will be a curse.

Perhaps you have a loved one and a situation arises in which you have to part from him or break that relationship. This is a struggle, but Abraham's faith says that if God asks you to do it, then there is blessing beyond if you obey. Maybe you are living in a situation of comfort and happiness but you are needed in another place which is not as pleasant, and you say, "Lord, why -- why do I have to give up my home and my relationships which I enjoy and go there?" You resist, you question, as Abraham did. Remember, however, that if God calls, you must obey. Beyond the apparent heartbreak and death lies resurrection. In the resurrection of that experience, God will give you back that gift and make it a blessing.

Is not this the record of every man and woman whose life has ever counted for God, who have been willing to give up the very areas they thought were God's choice blessing for them when God called? In so doing, God made them a blessing. It can be in minor or major areas. This is the principle of the cross throughout all our lives. This is what makes resurrection life possible. This is why the Lord Jesus says, "He who loves father or mother ... son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me," {Matt 10:37 RSV}. "He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it," (Matt 10:39 {RSV}).

Our God is the God of resurrection. When it looks as though we are throwing away every chance of blessing, God transforms in a moment the very thing we give up into the most richly rewarding and meaningful experience we have ever had.

I dare you to act upon this!

I don't know what it might be for you, but I know this is true and God has written this account so we may know that this is his way in the affairs of men.

When we dare to stand upon what God has said, we discover as Paul did that the yearning of our hearts is "that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death," (Phil 3:10 {RSV}).

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