

NOTES ON THE BOOK OF GENESIS

by

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

ABRAHAM is now in a fit moral position to have his heart put to a most severe test.

The long-cherished reserve being put forth from his heart, in Chapter 20.- the bond-woman and her son being put forth from his house, as in Chapter 21, he now stands forth in the most honored position in which any soul can be placed, and that is a position of trial from the hand of God Himself. There are various kinds of trial: trial from the hand of Satan; trial from surrounding circumstances; but the highest character of trial is that which comes directly from the hand of God, when he puts his dear child into the furnace for the purpose of testing the reality of his faith.

God will do this: He must have reality. It will not do to say, “**Lord, Lord,**” or, “**I go, sir.**”

The heart must be probed to the very bottom, in order that no element of hypocrisy or false profession may be allowed to lodge there. “**My son, give of thine heart.**”

He does not say, “Give me thine head or thine intellect, or thy talents, or thy tongue, or thy money;” but “**Give me thine heart:**” and in order to prove the sincerity of our response to this gracious command, he will lay his hand upon something very near our hearts.

Thus he says to Abraham, “**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.**”

This was coming very close to Abraham’s heart. It was passing him through a searching crucible indeed.

God “**requires truth in the inward parts.**”

There may be much truth on the lips, and much in the intellect, but God looks for it in the heart. It is no ordinary proof that will satisfy God, as to the love of our hearts. He himself did not rest satisfied with giving an ordinary proof. He gave his Son, and we should aim at giving very striking proofs of our love to him Who so loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses and sins.

However, it is well to see that God confers a signal honor upon us when he thus tests our hearts.

We never read that “the Lord did tempt Lot.” No; Sodom tempted Lot. He never reached a sufficiently high elevation to warrant his being tried by the hand of the Lord.

It was too plainly manifest that there was plenty between his heart and the Lord, and it did not, therefore, require the furnace to bring that out. Sodom would have held out no temptation whatever to Abraham. This was made manifest in his interview with Sodom’s king, in Chapter 14. God knew well that Abraham loved him far better than Sodom; but he would make it manifest that he loved him better than anyone or anything, by laying his hand upon the nearest and dearest object.

“Take now thy son, thine only son, Isaac.”

Yes, Isaac, the child of promise; Isaac, the object of long-deferred hope, the object of parental love, and the one in whom all the kindreds of the earth were to be blessed.

This Isaac must be offered as a burnt-offering. This, surely, was putting faith to the test, in order that, being more precious than gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, it might be found unto praise, and honor, and glory. Had Abraham’s whole soul not been stayed simply on the Lord, he never could have yielded unhesitating obedience to such a searching command. But God Himself was the living and abiding support of his heart, and therefore he was prepared to give up all for him.

The soul that has found all its springs in God, can without any demur, return from all creature streams. We can give up the creature just in proportion as we have found out, or become experimentally acquainted with the Creator, and no further. To attempt to give up the visible things in any other way, save in the energy of that faith which lays hold of the invisible, is the most fruitless labor possible. It cannot be done.

I will hold fast my Isaac until I have found my all in God.

It is when we are enabled by faith, to say **“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble,”** that we can also add, **“therefore will we not fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea”** (Psalm 46:1, 2).

“And Abraham rose up early in the morning.”

There is ready obedience. **“I made haste and delayed not to keep thy commandments.”**

Faith never stops to look at circumstances, or ponder results; it only looks at God; it expresses itself thus: **“But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother’s womb, and called me by his grace, to reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the Gentiles; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood.”** (Galatians 1:15, 16).

The moment we confer with flesh and blood, our testimony and service are marred, for flesh and blood can never obey. We must rise early, and carry out, through grace, the divine command. Thus we are blessed, and God is glorified.

Having God's own word as the basis of our acting will ever impart strength and stability to our acting. If we merely act from impulse, when the impulse subsides, the acting will subside also.

There are two things needful to a course of steady and consistent action, viz., the Holy Ghost, as the power of action, and the word to give proper direction.

To use a familiar illustration: on a railway, we should find steam of little use without the iron rails firmly laid down; the former is the power by which we move; and the latter, the direction. It is needless to add that the rails would be of little use without the steam.

Now, Abraham was blessed with both.

He had the power of action conferred by God; and the command to act given by God also. His devotedness was of a most definite character; and this is deeply important.

We frequently find much that looks like devotedness, but which, in reality, is but the desultory activity of a will not brought under the powerful action of the Word of God. All such apparent devotedness is worthless, and the spirit from which it proceeds will very speedily evaporate.

We may lay down the following principle viz.,

- whenever devotedness passes beyond divinely appointed bounds it is suspicious.
- if it comes not up to these bounds it is defective; if it flows without them it is erratic.

I quite admit that there are extraordinary operations and ways of the Spirit of God, in which He asserts His own sovereignty, and rises above ordinary bounds; but, in such cases, the evidence of divine activity will be sufficiently strong to carry home conviction to every spiritual mind; nor will they, in the slightest degree, interfere with the truth of the principle that true devotedness will ever be founded upon and governed by divine principle. To sacrifice a son might seem to be an act of most extraordinary devotedness; but, be it remembered, that what gave that act all its value, in God's sight, was the simple fact of its being based upon God's command.

Then, we have another thing connected with true devotedness, and that is a spirit of worship.

“I and the lad will go yonder and worship.”

The really devoted servant will keep his eye, not on his service, be it ever so great, but on the Master, and this will produce a spirit of worship.

If I love my master, according to the flesh, I shall not mind whether I am cleaning his shoes or driving his carriage; but if I am thinking more of myself than of him, I shall rather be a coachman than a shoeblack.

So it is precisely in the service of the heavenly Master; if I am thinking only of Him, planting churches and making tents will be both alike to me.

We may see the same thing in angelic ministry.

It matters not to an angel whether he be sent to destroy an army, or to protect the person of some heir of salvation. It is the Master who entirely fills his vision.

As someone has remarked, "if two angels were sent from Heaven, one to rule an empire, and the other to sweep the streets, they would not dispute about their respective work."

This is most true, and so should it be with us. The servant should ever be combined with the worshipper, and the works of our hands perfumed with the ardent breathings of our spirits.

In other words we should go forth to our work in the spirit of those memorable words, **"I and the lad will go yonder and worship."**

This would effectually preserve us from that merely mechanical service into which we are so prone to drop,- doing things for doing's sake, and being more occupied with our work than with our Master. All must flow from simple faith in God, and obedience to His Word.

"By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac; and he that had received the promises, offered up his only-begotten" (Hebrews 11:17).

It is only as we are walking by faith that we can begin, continue, and end our works in God.

Abraham not merely set out to offer his son, but he went on, and reached the spot which God had appointed.

"And Abraham took the wood of the burnt-offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife: and they went both of them together." And further on we read, **"And 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. And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son."**

This was real work, **"a work of faith and labor of love,"** in the highest sense.

It was no mere mockery - no drawing near with the lips, while the heart was far off - No saying, **"I go, sir, and went not."** It was all deep reality, just such as faith ever delights to produce, and which God delights to accept.

- It is easy to make a show of devotedness when there is no demand for it.
- It is easy to say, **"though all shall be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended though I should die with thee, yet will I not deny thee;"** but the point is to stand the trial.

When Peter was put to the test, he entirely broke down. Faith never talks of what it will do, but does what it can in the strength of the Lord.

Nothing can be more thoroughly worthless than a spirit of empty pretension. It is just as worthless as the basis on which it rests. But faith acts **“when it is tried;”** and till then it is content to be unseen and silent.

Now, it needs hardly to be remarked that God is glorified in those holy activities of faith. He is the immediate object of them, as He is the spring from whence they emanate.

There was not a scene in Abraham’s entire history in which God was so much glorified as the scene on Mount Moriah. There it was that he was enabled to bear testimony to the fact that he had found all his fresh springs in God,- found them not merely previous to, but after, Isaac’s birth.

This is a most touching point.

- It is one thing to rest in God’s blessings, and another thing to rest in Himself.
- It is one thing to trust God when I have before my eyes the channel through which the blessing is to flow; and quite another thing to trust Him when that channel is entirely stopped up.

This was what proved the excellency of Abraham’s faith. He showed that he could not merely trust God for an innumerable seed while Isaac stood before him in health and vigor; but just as fully if he were a smoking victim on the altar.

This was a high order of confidence in God; it was unalloyed confidence; it was not a confidence propped up in part by the Creator and in part by the creature. No; it rested on one solid pedestal, viz., God Himself.

“He accounted that God was able.”

He never accounted that Isaac was able. Isaac without God was nothing; God without Isaac was everything. This is a principle of the very last importance, and one eminently calculated to test the heart most keenly.

Does it make any difference to me to see the apparent channel of all my blessings dried up? Am I dwelling sufficiently near the fountain-head to be able, with a worshipping spirit, to behold all the creature streams dried up? This I do feel to be a searching question.

Have I such a simple view of God’s sufficiency as to be able as it were to **“stretch forth my hand and take the knife to slay my son.”**

Abraham was enabled to do this, because his eye rested on the God of resurrection.

“He accounted that God was able to raise him up even from the dead.”

In a word, it was with God he had to do, and that was quite enough.

He was not suffered to strike the blow. He had gone to the very utmost bounds; he had come up to the line beyond which God could not suffer him to go. The Blessed One spared the father's heart the pang which he did not spare His own heart, even that of smiting His Son.

He, blessed be his name, passed beyond the utmost bounds, for **“he spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all.” “It pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief.”**

There was no voice from Heaven when, on Calvary, the Father offered up his only-begotten Son.

No, it was a perfectly accomplished sacrifice; and in its accomplishment our everlasting peace is sealed.

However, Abraham's devotedness was fully proved and fully accepted.

“For now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from me.”

Mark, it is **“now I know.”**

It had never been proven before. It was there, no doubt; and, if there, God knew it; but the valuable point here is that God founds his knowledge of it upon the palpable evidence afforded at the altar upon Mount Moriah.

Faith is always proved by action, and the fear of God by the fruits which flow from it.

“Was not Abraham our farther justified by works when he had offered Isaac his son on the altar?” (James 2:21).

Who could think of calling his faith in question? Take away faith, and Abraham appears on Moriah as a murderer and a madman. Take faith into account, and he appears as a devoted worshipper, - a God-fearing, justified man. But faith must be proved.

“What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works?” (James 2:14).

Will either God or man be satisfied with a powerless and profitless profession? Surely not. God looks for reality, and honors it where he sees it; and as for man, he can understand naught save the living and intelligible utterance of a faith that shows itself in acts. We are surrounded by the profession of religion; the phraseology of faith is on every lip; but faith itself is as rare a gem as ever, - that faith which will enable a man to push out from the shore of present circumstances, and meet the waves and the winds, and not only meet them but endure them, even though the Master should seem to be asleep on the pillow.

And here I would remark the beautiful harmony between James and Paul on the subject of justification.

The intelligent and spiritual reader, who bows to the important truth of the plenary inspiration of Holy Scripture, knows full well that on this question it is not with Paul or James we have to do, but with the Holy Ghost, who graciously used each of those honored men as the pen to write His thoughts, just as I might take up a quill-pen or a steel-pen to write my thoughts, in which case it would be quite preposterous to speak of a discrepancy between the two pens, inasmuch as the writer is one.

Hence it is just as impossible that two divinely-inspired penmen could clash, as that two heavenly bodies, while moving in their divinely-appointed orbits, could come into collision.

But, in reality, as might be expected, there is the fullest and most perfect harmony between those two apostles; indeed, on the subject of justification, the one is the counterpart or exponent of the other.

Paul gives us the inward principle, James the outward development of that principle;

- The former presents the hidden life, the latter the manifested life;
- The former looks at man in relation to God, the latter looks at him in his relation to man.

Now we want both: the inward would not do without the outward; and the outward would be valueless and powerless without the inward.

“Abraham was justified” when **“he believed God;”** and **“Abraham was justified”** when **“he offered Isaac his son.”**

In the former case we have his secret standing; in the latter, his public acknowledgment by Heaven and earth.

It is well to understand this distinction.

There was no voice from Heaven when **“Abraham believed God,”** though in God’s view he was there, then, and thus **“counted righteous;”** but **“when he had offered his son upon the altar,”** God could say, **“now I know;”** and all the world had a powerful and unanswerable proof of the fact that Abraham was a justified man.

Thus will it ever be.

Where there is the inward principle, there will be the outward acting; but all the value of the latter springs from its connection with the former. Disconnect, for one moment, Abraham’s acting, as set forth by James, from Abraham’s faith, as set forth by Paul, and what justifying virtue did it possess? None whatever. All its value, all its efficacy, all its virtue, springs from the fact that it was the outward manifestation of that faith, by virtue of which he had been already counted righteous before God.

Thus much as to the admirable harmony between Paul and James: or rather as to the unity of the voice of the Holy Ghost, whether that voice be uttered by Paul or James.

We now return to our chapter.

It is deeply interesting to mark here how Abraham's soul is led into a fresh discovery of God's character by the trial of his faith.

When we are enabled to bear the testings of God's own hand, it is sure to lead us into some new experience with respect to his character, which makes us to know how valuable the testing is.

If Abraham had not stretched out his hand to slay his son, he never would have known the rich and exquisite depths of that title which he here bestows upon God, viz., "**Jehovah Jireh.**" it is only when we are really put to the test that we discover what God is.

Without trial we can be but theorists, and God would not have us such: he would have us entering into the living depths that are in himself,- the divine realities of personal communion with him.

With what different feelings and convictions must Abraham have retraced his Steps from Moriah to Beer-sheba! From the mount of the Lord to the well of the oath! What very different thoughts of God! What different thoughts of Isaac! What different thoughts of everything!

Truly we may say, "**Happy is the man that endureth trial.**"

It is an honor put upon one by the Lord himself, and the deep blessedness of the experience to which it leads cannot easily be estimated. It is when men are brought, to use the language of the 107th Psalm, "**to their wits' end,**" that they discover what God is.

Oh, for grace to endure trial, that God's workmanship may appear, and his name be glorified in us!

There is one point, which, before closing my remarks on this chapter, I shall notice, and that is, the gracious way in which God gives Abraham credit for having done the act which he had showed himself so fully prepared to do.

"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 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."

This beautifully corresponds with the Spirit's notice of Abraham's acting, as put before us in Hebrews 11, and also in James 2, in both of which Scriptures he is looked upon as having offered Isaac his son upon the altar.

The grand principle conveyed in the whole matter is this: Abraham proved that he was prepared to have the scene entirely cleared of all but God; and, moreover, it was this same principle which both constituted and proved him a justified man.

Faith can do without everyone and everything but God.

It has the full sense of his sufficiency, and can, therefore, let go all beside. Hence Abraham could rightly estimate the words, “**by my self’ have I sworn.**” Yes, this wondrous word, “**myself,**” was everything to the man of faith.

“For when God made promise to Abraham, because he could swear by no greater, he sware by himself . For men verily swear by the greater, and an oath for confirmation is to them an end of all strife. Wherein God, willing more abundantly to show unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath.”

The word and oath of the living God should put an end to all the strivings and workings of the human will, and form the immovable anchor of the soul amid all the tossing and tumult of this stormy world. Now, we must condemn ourselves constantly, because of the little power which the promise of God has in our hearts. There it is, and we profess to believe it; but ah! it is not that deep, abiding, influential reality which it ought ever to be; we do not draw from it that “**strong consolation**” which it is calculated to afford.

How little prepared are we, in the power of faith, in the promise of God, to slay our Isaac!

We need to cry to God that he would be graciously pleased to endow us with a deeper insight into the blessed reality of a life of faith in himself, that so we may understand better the import of that word of John: “**This is the victory that overcometh the world, even your faith.**”

We can only overcome the world by faith.

Unbelief puts us under the power of present things; in other words, it gives the world the victory over us.

A soul that has entered by the teaching of the Holy Ghost into the sense of God’s sufficiency, is entirely independent of things here.

Beloved reader, may we know this, for our peace and joy in God and his glory in us.

~ end of chapter 22 ~

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