Faith Tested and Crowned-Alexander Maclaren

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I. Faith Tested and Crowned

- Genesis 22:1-14+

A life of faith and self-denial has usually its sharpest trials at or near its beginning. A stormy day has generally a calm close. But Abraham's sorest discipline came all sudden, like a bolt from blue sky. Near the end, and after many years of peaceful, uneventful life, he had to take a yet higher degree in the school of faith. Sharp trial means increased possession of God. So his last terrible experience turned to his crowning mercy.

(1) The very first words of this solemn narrative raise many questions.

We have God appointing the awful trial. The Revised Version properly replaces 'tempt' by 'prove.' The former word conveys the idea of appealing to the worse part of a man, with the wish that he may yield and do the wrong. The latter means an appeal to the better part of a man, with the desire that he should stand. Temptation says: 'Do this pleasant thing; do not be hindered by the fact that it is wrong.' Trial, or proving, says: 'Do this right and noble thing; do not be hindered by the fact that it is painful.' The one is 'a sweet, beguiling melody,' breathing soft indulgence and relaxation over the soul; the other is a pealing trumpet-call to high achievements.

God's proving does not mean that He stands by, watching how His child will behave. He helps us to sustain the trial to which He subjects us. Life is all probation; and because it is so, it is all the field for the divine aid. The motive of His proving men is that they may be strengthened. He puts us into His gymnasium to improve our physique. If we stand the trial, our faith is increased; if we fall, we learn self-distrust and closer clinging to Him. No objection can be raised to the representation of this passage as to God's proving Abraham, which does not equally apply to the whole structure of life as a place of probation that it may be a place of blessing. But the manner of the trial here presents a difficulty. How could God command a father to kill his son? Is that in accordance with His character? Well, two considerations deserve attention. First, the final issue; namely, Isaac's deliverance, was an integral part of the divine purpose from the beginning of the trial; so that the question really is, Was it accordant with the divine character to require readiness to sacrifice even a son at His command? Second, that in Abraham's time, a father's right over his child's life was unquestioned, and that therefore this command, though it lacerated Abraham's heart, did not wound his conscience as it would do were it heard to-day. It is impossible to conceive of a divine injunction such as this being addressed to us. We have learned the inalienable sacredness of every life, and the awful prerogative and burden of individuality. God's command cannot enforce sin. But it was not wrong in Abraham's eyes for a father to slay his son; and God might shape His message to the form of the existing morality without derogation from His character, especially when the result of the message would be, among other things, to teach His abhorrence of human sacrifices, and so to lift the existing morality to a higher level.

2. The great body of the history sets before us Abraham standing the terrible test.

What unsurpassable beauty is in the simple story! It is remarkable, even among the scriptural narratives, for the entire absence of anything but the visible facts. There is not a syllable about the feelings of father or of son. The silence is more pathetic than many words. We look as into a magic crystal, and see the very event before our eyes, and our own imaginations tell us more of the world of struggle and sorrow raging under that calm outside than the highest art could do. The pathos of reticence was never more perfectly illustrated. Observe, too, the minute, prolonged details of the slow progress to the dread instant of sacrifice. Each step is told in precisely the same manner, and the series of short clauses, coupled together by an artless 'and,' are like the single strokes of a passing bell, or the slow drops of blood heard falling from a fatal wound. The homely preparations for the journey are made by Abraham himself. He makes no confidante of Sarah; only God and himself knew what that bundle of wood meant. What thoughts must have torn his soul throughout these weary days! How hard to keep his voice round and full while he spoke to Isaac! How much the long protracted tension of the march increased the sharpness of the test! It is easier to reach the height of obedient self-sacrifice in some moment of enthusiasm, than to keep up there through the commonplace details of slowly passing days. Many a faith, which could even have slain its dearest, would have broken down long before the last step of that sad journey was taken.

The elements of the trial were two: first, Abraham's soul was torn asunder by the conflict of fatherly love and obedience to God. The narrative intimates this struggle by continually insisting on the relationship between the two. The command dwells with emphasis on it: 'thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest.' He takes with him 'Isaac his son'; lays the wood on 'Isaac his son.' Isaac 'spake

unto Abraham his father'; Abraham answers, 'Here am I, my son'; and again, 'My son, God will provide.' He bound 'Isaac his son'; he 'took the knife to slay his son'; and lastly, in the glad surprise at the end, he offers the ram 'in the stead of his son.' Thus, at every turn, the tender bond is forced on our notice, that we may feel how terrible was the task laid on him—to cut it asunder with his own hand. The friend of God must hold all other love as less than His, and must be ready to yield up the dearest at His bidding. Cruel as the necessity seems to flesh and blood, and specially poignant as his pain was, in essence Abraham's trial only required of him what all true religion requires of us. Some of us have been called by God's providence to give up the light of our eyes, the joy of our homes, to Him. Some of us have had to make the choice between earthly and heavenly love. All of us have to throne God in our hearts, and to let not the dearest usurp His place. In our weakness we may well shrink from such a test. But let us not forget that the trial of Abraham was not imposed by his own mistaken conceptions of duty, nor by a sterner God than the New Testament reveals, but is distinctly set before every Christian in essence, though not in form, by the gentle lips from which flowed the law of love more stringent and exclusive in its claims than any other: 'He that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me.'

The conflict in Abraham's soul had a still more painful aspect in that it seemed to rend his very religion into two. Faith in the promise on which he had been living all his life drew one way; faith in the later command, another. God seemed to be against God, faith against faith, promise against command. If he obeys now, what is to become of the hopes that had shone for years before him? His whole career will be rendered nugatory, and with his own hand he will crush to powder his life's work. That wonderful short dialogue which broke the stern silence of the journey seems to throw light on his mood. There is nothing in literature sacred or secular, fact or fiction, poetry or prose, more touching than the innocent curiosity of Isaac's boyish question, and the yearning self-restraint of the father's desperate and yet calm answer. But its value is not only in its pathos. It seems to show that, though he knew not how, still he held by the hope that somehow God would not forget His promise. Out of his very despair, his faith struck, out of the flint of the hard command, a little spark which served to give some flicker of light amid the darkness. His answer to his boy does not make his sacrifice less, but his faith more. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews gives a somewhat different turn to his hopes, when he tells us that he offered up the heir of the promises, 'accounting that God was able to raise him from the dead.' Both ways of clinging to the early promise, even while obeying the later command, seem to have passed through his mind. The wavering from the one to the other is natural. He is sure that God had not lied before, and means what He commands now. He is sure that there is some point of reconciliation—perhaps this, perhaps that, but certainly somewhat. So he goes straight on the road marked for him, quite sure that it will not end in a blind alley, from which there is no exit. That is the very climax of faith—to trust God so absolutely, even when His ways seem contradictory, as to be more willing to believe apparent impossibilities than to doubt Him, and to be therefore ready for the hardest trial of obedience. We, too, have sometimes to take courses which seem to annihilate the hope and aims of a life. The lesson for us is to go straight on the path of clear duty wherever it leads. If it seem to bring us up to inaccessible cliffs, we may be sure that when we get there we shall find some ledge, though it may be no broader than a chamois could tread, which will suffice for a path. If it seem to bring us to a deep and bridgeless stream, we shall find a ford when we get to the water's edge. If the mountains seem to draw together and bar a passage, we shall find, when we reach them, that they open out; though it may be no wider than a cañon, still the stream can get through, and our boat with it.

3. So we have the climax of the story—faith rewarded.

The first great lesson which the interposition of the Divine voice teaches us, is that obedience is complete when the inward surrender is complete. The outward act was needless. Abraham would have done no more if the flashing knife had buried itself in Isaac's heart. Here is the first great proclamation of the truth which revolutionises morality and religion, the beginnings of the teaching which culminates in the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount, and in the gospel of salvation, not by deeds, but through faith. The will is the man, the true action is the submission of the will. The outward deed is only the coarse medium through which it is made visible for men: God looks on purpose as performance.

Again, faith is rewarded by God's acceptance and approval. 'I know that thou fearest God,' not meaning that He learned the heart by the conduct, but that, on occasion of the conduct, He breathes into the obedient heart that calm consciousness of its service as recognised and accepted by Him, which is the highest reward that His friend can know. 'To be well pleasing to Him' is our noblest aim, which, cherished, makes sacrifice sweet, and all difficult things easy. 'Nor know we anything more fair Than is the smile upon Thy face.'

Again, faith is rewarded by a deeper insight into God's will. Much has been said about the sacrifice of Isaac in its bearing upon the custom of human sacrifice. We do not believe that Abraham was led to his act by a mistaken idea, borrowed from surrounding idolatries. His position as the sole monotheist amid these, the absence of evidence that human sacrifice was practised then among his neighbours, and, above all, the fact of the divine approval of his intention, forbid our acceptance of that theory. Nor can we regard the condemnation of such sacrifices as the main object of the incident. But no doubt an incidental result, and, we may perhaps say, a subsidiary purpose of it, was to stamp all such hideous usages with the brand of God's displeasure. The mode of thought which led to them was deeply rooted in the consciousness of the Old World, and corresponded to a true conception of the needs of humanity. The dark sense of sin, the conviction that it required expiation, and that procurable only by death, drove men to these horrid rites. And that ram, caught in the thicket, thorn-crowned and substituted for the human victim, taught Abraham and his sons

that God appointed and provided a lamb for an offering. It was a lesson won by faith. Nor need we hesitate to see some dim forecast of the great Substitute whom God provided, who bears the sins of the world.

Again, faith is rewarded by receiving back the surrendered blessing, made more precious because it has been laid on the altar. How strange and solemn must have been the joy with which these two looked in each other's faces! What thankful wonder must have filled Abraham's heart as he loosed the cord that had bound his son! It would be many days before the thrill of gratitude died away, and the possession of his son seemed to Abraham, or that of life seemed to Isaac, a common thing. He was doubly now a child of wonder, born by miracle, delivered by miracle. So is it ever. God gives us back our sacrifices, tinged with a new beauty, and purified from earthly alloy.

We never know how sweet our blessings are till we have yielded them to Him. 'There is no man that hath left' anything or any person for Christ's sake and the gospel's who will not 'receive a hundred-fold more in this life, and in the world to come life everlasting.'

Lastly, Abraham was rewarded by being made a faint adumbration, for all time, of the yet more wondrous and awful love of the divine Father, who, for our sakes, has surrendered His only-begotten Son, whom He loved. Paul quotes the very words of this chapter when he says: 'He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all.' Such thoughts carry us into dim regions, in which, perhaps, silence is best. Did some shadow of loss and pain pass over the divine all-sufficiency and joy, when He sent His Son? Was the unresisting innocence of the son a far-off likeness of the willing eagerness of the sinless Sufferer who chose to die? Was the resolved surrender of the father a faint prelude of the deep divine love which gave His only Son for us? Shall we not say, 'Now I know that Thou lovest me, because Thou hast not withheld Thy Son, Thine only Son, from me'? Shall we not recognise this as the crown of Abraham's reward, that his act of surrender of his dearest to God, his Friend, has been glorified by being made the mirror of God's unspeakable gift of His Son to us, His enemies?

II. The Crowning Test and Triumph of Faith

The first words of this lesson give the keynote for its meaning. 'God did prove Abraham'; the strange command was a test of his faith. In recent times the incident has been regarded chiefly as embodying a protest against child-sacrifices, and no doubt that is part of its intention, and their condemnation was part of its effect, but the other is the principal thing. Abraham, as the 'Father of the Faithful,' has his faith tested by a series of events from his setting out from Haran, and they culminate in this sharpest of all, the command to slay his son. The life of faith is ever a life of testing, and very often the fire that tries increases in heat as life advances. The worst conflicts are not always at the beginning of the war.

Our best way of knowing ourselves is to observe our own conduct, especially when it is hard to do nobly. We may easily cheat ourselves about what is the basis and ruling motive of our lives, but our actions will show it us. God does not 'test' us as if He did not know what was gold and what base metal, but the proving is meant to make clear to others and ourselves what is the worth and strength of our religion. The test is also a means of increasing the faith which it demonstrates, so that the exhortation to 'count it all joy' to have faith tried is no overstrained counsel of perfection.

The narrative plainly declares that the command to sacrifice his son was to Abraham unmistakably divine. The explanation that Abraham, living beside peoples who practised child-sacrifice, heard but the voice of his own conscience asking, 'Canst thou do for Jehovah what these do for Moloch?' does not correspond to the record. No doubt God does speak through conscience; but what sent Abraham on his terrible journey was a command which he knew did not spring up within, but came to him from above. We may believe or disbelieve the possibility or the actuality of such direct and distinguishable commands from God, but we do not face the facts of this narrative unless we recognise that it asserts that God made His will known to Abraham, and that Abraham knew that it was God's will, not his own thought.

But is it conceivable that God should ever bid a man commit a crime? To the question put in that bald way, of course there can be but one answer, No. But several conditions have to be taken into account. First, it is conceivable that God should test a man's willingness to surrender what is most precious to him, and what all his hopes are fixed on; and this command was given with the purpose that it should not be obeyed in fact, if the willingness to obey it was proved. Again, the stage of development of the moral sense at which Abraham stood has to be remembered. The child-sacrifices around him were not regarded as crimes, but as worship, and, while his affections were the same as ours, and his father's heart was wrung, to slay Isaac did not present itself to him as a crime in the way in which it does so to us. God deals with men on the moral and spiritual level to which they have attained, and, by descending to it, raises them higher.

The purpose of the command was to test faith, even more than to test whether earthly love or heavenly obedience were the stronger. There is a beautiful and instructive climax in the designations of Isaac in verse 2, where four times he is referred to, 'thy son, thine only son,' in whom all the hopes of fulfilment of the divine promise were concentrated, so that, if this fruit from the aged tree were cut off, no other could ever grow; 'whom thou lovest,'—there the sharp point pierces the father's heart; 'even Isaac,' in which name all

the ties that knit him to Abraham are gathered up. Each word heightens the greatness of the sacrifice demanded, and is a fresh thrust of the dagger into Abraham's very life. Each suggests a reason for not slaying Isaac, which sense might plead. God does not hide the painfulness of surrender from us. The more precious the treasure is, the more are we bound to lay it on the altar. But it was Abraham's faith even more than his love that was tested. The Epistle to the Hebrews lays hold on this as the main element in the trial, that he who 'had received the promises' was called to do what seemed to blast all hope of their being fulfilled. What a cruel position to have God's command and God's promise apparently in diametrical opposition! But faith loosened even that seemingly inextricable tangle of contradiction, and felt that to obey was for man, and to keep His promise was for God. If we do our duty, He will see to the consequences. 'Tis mine to obey; 'tis His to provide.'

Nothing in literature is more tenderly touched or more truly imagined than that long, torturing journey—Abraham silent, Isaac silently wondering, the servants silently following. And, like a flash, at last 'the place' was seen afar off. How calmly Abraham speaks to the two followers, mastering his heart's throbbing even then! 'We will worship, and come again to you'—was that a 'pious fraud' or did it not rather indicate that a ray of hope, like pale light from a shrouded sun, shone for him? He 'accounted that God was able to raise him up even from the dead.' Somehow, he knew not how, Isaac slain was still to live and inherit the promises. Anything was possible, but that God's word should fail was impossible. That picture of the father and son alone, the one bearing the wood, the other the fire and the knife, exchanging no word but once, when the innocent wonder of Isaac's question must have shaken Abraham's steadfastness, and made it hard for him to steady his voice to answer, touches the deepest springs of pity and pathetic sublimity. But the answer is in the same spirit as that to the servants, and indicates the same hope. 'God will provide Himself a lamb, my son.' He does not know definitely what he expects; he is ready to slay Isaac, but his faith is not quenched, though the end seems so inevitable and near. Faith was never more sharply tested, and never more triumphantly stood the test.

The divine solution of the riddle was kept back till the last moment, as it usually is. The place is slowly reached, the hill slowly climbed, the altar built, the unresisting Isaac bound (with what deep thoughts in each, who can tell?), the steady hand holding the glittering knife lifted—a moment more and it will be red with heart's blood, and not till then does God speak. It is ever so. The trial has 'its perfect work.' Faith is led to the edge of the precipice, one step farther and all is over. Then God speaks, all but just too late, and yet 'right early.' The willingness to make the sacrifice is tested to the utmost, and being proved, the sacrifice is not required.

Abraham had said to Isaac, 'God will provide a lamb,' and the word 'provide' is that which appears in the name he gave to the place —Jehovah-jireh. The name, then, commemorated, not the servant's faith but the Lord's mercy, and the spirit of it was embodied in what became a popular saying, 'In the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.' If faith dwells there, its surrenders will be richly rewarded. How much more dear was Isaac to Abraham as they journeyed back to Beersheba! And whatever we lay on God's altar comes back a 'hundred-fold more in this life,' and brings in the world to come life everlasting.