

The Friend of God

"Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest."

The greatest interest must ever be attached to the life and character of our father Abraham. Save those of Christ and Moses, his name stands out the most prominently in history, of all the *Friends of God*, His inflexible purpose and invincible determination to serve God under all circumstances, ruled his whole life. This generic principle of a godly man, together with his rugged strength of character and fortitude of mind under suffering, challenges our admiration of Abraham at every point in his life, marking him as a man of firmness and of godly action, whose name as a consequence is imperishably written on the sacred page.

This venerable father of antiquity, styled in the Scriptures, "the Father of the Faithful," was born in the line of Shem 352 years after the flood, in a place called Ur of the Chaldees, the same as the modern Orfa, a city that lies on the edge of one of those rugged spurs which descend from the mountains of Armenia into the Assyrian plains. Blessed with an abundant supply of the purest water, the place is even to-day styled an oasis—a veritable paradise in the old Chaldean wilderness.

In this beautiful little city, from which even now the Oriental traveller turns reluctantly away, the patriarch Abraham was born and spent the earlier portion of his life. It was while he dwelt in Ur of the Chaldees that he received his first call to leave the land of his nativity and go to another land. The call was very positive:

"Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will show thee, and I will make of thee a great nation and I will bless thee."

Abraham did not hesitate to comply. He believed God and proceeded at once to obey Him. He immediately turned his back on the land of his birth and set his face toward the hills of Canaan. Here his posterity became a great and wonderful people, living in that narrow stretch of country lying between the emerald waters of the Mediterranean and the sun-burnt sands of the desert.

Here at the cross-roads of the world this wonderful people lived for several centuries, and although crushed again and again by the battalions of Babylon, by the Princes of Persia, by the armies of Alexander, and by the thundering legions of Rome, this Chosen People still clung to Canaan's hills, tending their flocks, building their white stone villages, beautifying their eternal city, and worshipping in their Holy Temple "the Only True God," till at last in the shadows of the twilight hour of Israel's national history, there appeared that crowning glory of her setting sun, *Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews*—the flower of the Jewish race, the Rose of Sharon, and the Lily of the Valley, whose rich fragrance and holy perfume have ever since afforded a healing balm to the lives of all the true Children of Abraham.

Abraham is styled not only the "*Friend of God*," but also "*the Father of the Faithful*." Father of all the faithful, even the One styled in Revelation "Faithful and True," whom we remember this morning as "the Lamb of God who taketh away the sin of the world," but who in the near future, will be recognized as the One who in righteousness will judge and make war.

The New Testament begins with language that not only identifies Jesus Christ as the Son of Abraham, but also as the "head" under which the Divine economy of human affairs, as outlined in "promises made unto the Fathers" shall ultimately be established:

"The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham"
(Matt. 1:1).

The intervening generations are carefully traced afterwards in the chapter, but in this verse they are thrown into the background, and Abraham and David stand out as headlights at once visible in the great genealogical chart that leads to Christ. *Why is this?* For what purpose is the matter put in this remarkable way?

"Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham."

Why this grouping of names so distant in time, and this ignoring of all intervening generations? Our Lord had a long line of ancestry according to the flesh, but it was with two alone—*Abraham*, the Friend of God, and *David*, the man after God's own heart—that God made two great comprehensive covenants of promise, embracing within their scope the whole Gospel plan.

Thus, we find that the oath-confirmed promises made unto the fathers centre and culminate in Christ. In him are bound up the destinies of the world, he is "the Way, the Truth, and the Life," for Abraham and all his children, including even himself, a doctrine in which the whole earth shall yet harmonize with heaven.

Abraham was constituted "the father of all them that believe," by his faith in the promises that were made unto him by unmistakable angelic communication. In these promises we have the foundation of a vital plan of salvation, all uncertainty concerning the truth and reality of which, was removed by the tests and trials that were applied to the faith of Abraham.

These angelic tests afforded unquestionable evidence of the Divine origin of the promises, and the Divinity of the plan. The offerings up of Isaac is an illustration; Abraham was about 120 years old when he received the strange and startling command to offer his beloved son Isaac for a burnt offering, upon an unknown mountain in the land of Moriah.

The message came to him in a vision of the night, in his quiet home in Beersheba. There he had set up an altar for the worship of the Most High.

There he had gathered around him a great household, even hundreds of servants and herdmen, and thousands of camels, and sheep, and goats, and cattle. His flocks and tents covered all the grassy plains between the deserts of Arabia and the hills and mountains of Judea. There Abraham had become very rich, and he was already the greatest among all the men of the East. There had been fulfilled unto him the Divine promise in the gift of Isaac, the son of his faith and hope.

His trials and conflicts apparently all over, his temporal desires fulfilled, his faith confirmed, what had he now to expect but a serene and cheerful old age, and a peaceful close to his long and eventful life? How blest for him in life's declining years to crown his labours with an age of ease.

He had left his home, kindred and country, at the Divine command. He had lived a pilgrim and a stranger in a land not his own. He had clung to the Divine promises, when, to all human appearances, fulfilment seemed a contradiction and an impossibility. He had borne all the bitterness of a father's grief in sending forth Ishmael to wander in the wilderness, and after all these trials of faith and submission, could there yet be in store another and greater trial to break his aged heart, when to all appearances he was the least able to bear it?

It is comparatively easy to face a storm of affliction while the heart is young and full of hope, but it is very hard for an old man to find that the sorest trial is reserved for the last, when the burden of age rests heavy upon his shoulders. The terms of the terrible commands as expressed seem as if they were intentionally chosen to harrow his heart. Every word seems like a dagger to pierce the father's breast. Four times over, the emphasis falls just where it would give him the deepest pain:

"Take **now** thy **son**, thine **only** son, Isaac **whom thou lovest**, and offer him for a burnt offering."

It would have been sufficient to break his heart to lose such a son by the ordinary course of sickness and death, but how could a father shed the life-blood of his beloved son with his own hand? How could he heap on the fuel and the fire that must burn his body to ashes in his sight? It seems so terrible, so contradictory.

Restless and alarmed, we can picture him stepping forth from his tent. Above him he would see the dome of the Arabian sky all ablaze with the starry host, and he would remember the Divine Voice, which fifty years before, had said to him:

"Look now toward heaven and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them; so, shall thy seed be."

Can it be that now, that same Voice commands him to *slay* his loved son? As he lingers to the dawn, and looks along the pathway of the plain, the morning breeze raises a cloud of dust and sweeps it across the plain; and the words come again to him,

"I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth."

Looking away to the north and east, he may have seen the baleful light of altar fires blazing upon the hill tops. He would know that upon those high places the worshippers of the false gods, Baal, Moloch, and Chemosh, offer their children in sacrifice, and shall the worshipper of the only True God become like one of these, and stain his hand with the blood of his beloved son?

Oh, who can tell the struggling emotions of his heart, under this awful trial? Would he not kneel at the foot of the altar and pray for further light? —but none came. He arises, and concludes that as the command is from God, it must be obeyed, and the quickest obedience will be found the easiest and the best. He awakens Isaac, calls two of his servants, and makes the necessary arrangements for a three days' journey.

Shall he tell the secret of the journey to Isaac? Shall he inform the fond mother, who may see her son no more? This might make obedience more difficult. He keeps the secret command to himself and girds himself anew to complete the great act of faith. Onward they journey for three days through a land that was to be given to him and his seed for an everlasting inheritance.

Finally, they arrive at the Mount. Father Abraham prays, as did his illustrious Seed, centuries afterwards, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me," but no answer comes, so Isaac is told that he must be the sacrifice. We do not know what was said by Isaac when he received the dreadful information, but we do know that he consented to be bound and laid upon the altar, for he was now a young man and therefore strong enough to frustrate his father's plan. He looked (as he thought) for the last time, upon the face of his father, and then in silence awaited the stroke of the knife.

It is difficult to tell who is most to be pitied, the father, who must inflict the fatal blow, or the son, who submits in silence to be slain. As Abraham stretched forth his hand to slay his son, the angel of the Lord called out of heaven, saying,

"Lay not thy hand upon the lad . . . for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing that thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from Me."

Let us receive a lesson here. Nothing in this life is too precious for us to give to God. Give Him your MONEY. Give Him your TIME. Give Him your TALENTS. And all your gifts, all your efforts, all your toil, yea, every act of duty performed in His Name will certainly receive an exceedingly great reward.

Among the various classes of evidence which the Bible affords of the authenticity and divinity of the promises made unto the fathers, this test of Abraham's faith stands out most brilliantly. No man of the character of Abraham could have possibly stood firm in such a trial, or test of faith, unless he was absolutely convinced that the promises made unto him and his seed were undoubtedly of Divine origin.

The purpose of God being thus served, He does not require men to offer their children in sacrifice, but there is one great sacrifice that He now requires of us. Paul refers to it in Rom. 12:1.

"I beseech you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service."

Abraham's offering of Isaac also foreshadowed that Great and Perfect Sacrifice, which we memorialize this morning—

"In this was manifested the love of God towards us . . . in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (1 John 4:9).

"God so loved." Our lesson this morning enables us more fully to understand how real, how deep, how unutterably great was the Father's love to man. Our loving Master testified:

"The Father Himself loveth you."

Lessons from the wonderful life of this eminent friend of God might be greatly multiplied, but let us conclude with the comforting thought that now—while in Machpelah's cave his dust and ashes lie awaiting that better resurrection to life and immortality, the record of his life still lives—and from that sacred history we see constantly gleaming many golden rays of light to cheer us in our darkest hours, and in the greatest trials of this, our ever-changing life, enabling us to see God even in the darkness and to feel His helping hand in the most trying scenes of life, as He guides His weary pilgrims along through the darkness of the Gentile night and onward to that city for which Abraham looked—that city whose Builder and Maker is God. Let us, therefore,

"Stagger not at the promise of God, but be strong in faith, giving glory to God, being fully persuaded that what He has promised, He is able to perform."

Much has already been performed. But—

"To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven."

When the fulness of time had come, God sent forth His son, born of a woman—

"When we were yet without strength, according to the time, Christ died for the ungodly."

We can this morning look back upon these events many centuries in the past and see the fulfilment of all things written in the prophets, relating to the sufferings and death of Christ. We see him made a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God to confirm the promises made unto the fathers. The knowledge of the strict fulfilment of these things in the past strengthens our faith in the "hoped-for" things of the future.

Jehovah's faithfulness in the past is a guarantee of that which is to come. The historical picture aids the prophetic and encourages, comforts and strengthens us in our patient waiting for Christ.

—B. J. Dowling.

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