

PROMISES GOD NEVER KEPT!

Harry Whittaker

Was there ever any Bible story so frequently or so badly mishandled as the familiar one about Abraham's offering of Isaac? In the kindergarten it has its value because of its element of suspense—will Isaac really die in this horrible fashion?—and also because of the admirable moral overtones about obedience to one's parents. In church, sermons galore have been preached about it, most of them hopelessly wrong in emphasis, through ignorance or wilful neglect of the context. In college and university this story has been held up before English Literature classes as a perfect model of the powerful effect of simple language when properly used: "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". And amongst critics of the Bible there is always a good deal of superior lifting of eye-brows over God's *tempting* of Abraham and the story's apparent countenancing of human sacrifice.

Let it be admitted right away—the story is not without its difficulties. This tract is a challenge to you as an intelligent reader to consider afresh this incident of the sacrifice of Isaac from an altogether different point of view. The story has something to teach which you may not have even considered possible. And it is no exaggeration to say that the conclusions it leads to are positively startling.

First, then, a brief consideration of this "tempting" of Abraham by God. A simple illustration will quickly put this in its proper perspective. When an engineer wants to test a sample of metal, he puts it in a machine which will crush or stretch or twist it until at last it gives way under the strain. That is one kind of "tempting" or "testing". But if a man is going to buy a second-hand car, he does not get into it and proceed to try conclusions with a telegraph-pole or attempt to drive it across the side of a mountain. He does, however, put it through a series of tests in order to assess its performance under the sort of conditions he wants to use it for. That is another kind of "tempting" or "testing".

When God tempted Abraham, which kind of test was He applying ? Without any doubt, the second. A careful re-reading of Genesis 22 will soon make this fact very clear, and especially if the background to the incident is considered.

The main facts, which are usually left out of sight, are these. God had made certain astonishing promises to Abraham. "Abraham, you shall be the father of a great multitude" (see Genesis 15: 1-6 and 17: 15-19). But Abraham was an old man, and his wife long past child-bearing. Nevertheless, Abraham did not waver in his belief of the promise, and in due course Isaac was born. Yet another promise was: "Abraham, all this land of Palestine to which I led you shall be for you and for your seed* for an everlasting possession" (see Genesis 13: 14-17 and 15: 7). And to make things perfectly explicit it was added that through Isaac and through no other child that was born, these promises should be fulfilled: "In Isaac shall thy seed be called" (Genesis 21: 12).

[A Bible word meaning "son" or "descendant". Like the English word "seed" it can mean one or many.]*

Imagine, then, Abraham's dismay when he was bidden to offer this only son as a sacrifice. If Isaac were to be slain, how could these wonderful promises, by which such store was set, be fulfilled? Divine command and divine promise seemed to be in flat contradiction with each other.

Nevertheless, Abraham was prepared to walk by faith in this crucial test. The New Testament's illuminating comment is: He accounted "that God was able to raise him up. even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure" (Hebrews 11: 19).

A consideration of the promise that "all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever... Arise, walk through the land in the length of it and in the breadth of it; for I will give it unto thee" (Genesis 13: 15, 17), makes it possible to infer that Abraham believed that God will one day raise the dead.

In his natural lifetime Abraham was never *given* any of that land. All that he ever owned was what he *bought* for the burial of his wife: God "gave him none inheritance in it, no, not so much as to set his foot on: yet he promised that he would give it to him for a possession" (Acts 7: 5).

It was on these lines that eminent men in New Testament days reasoned about the great day of resurrection, and apparently it was on such a foundation that Abraham himself also built his faith as he journeyed with Isaac to Moriah, "the mount of the vision of Jehovah".

At the crucial moment—how well this part of the story is known to everyone!—Abraham's hand was stayed. The faith was accepted for the fact, the will for the deed. And thus Abraham, and every faithful imitator of Abraham's faith, was taught that no sacrifice a man may offer is really adequate to make him acceptable in the sight of the Almighty: "Shall I give... the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" (Micah 6: 7).

Yet, instead of Isaac, Abraham was bidden sacrifice the "ram caught in a thicket". The point of this was admirably explained by a fine seventeenth-century expositor thus: "Thereby implying that while God deferred the offering of the Blessed One (Jesus) who should be a Son of Abraham (see Matthew 1: 1), he would accept as instead thereof the offering of Bulls and of Rams for the expiation of sin: and therefore he that offered this offering instead did therein acknowledge that the offering of the Blessed Seed of Abraham was yet deferred".

That this is the right idea may be seen from the meaning of the name which Abraham gave to this altar: "The Lord will provide (a sacrifice) ". Abraham was looking to the future. The name Jehovah-jireh does not mean "The Lord has provided", with reference to the ram just offered.

The next part of the narrative, so often omitted or scamped, is really the most important of all. The words deserve to be read with all possible care: "And the angel of the Lord called unto Abraham out of heaven the second time, and said. 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 the 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" (Genesis 22: 15-18).

Whatever the meaning here, there can hardly be anything more vital in all the Bible, for when God gave this promise He actually swore an oath with regard to it. If men make an occasion specially solemn, as by an oath on the Bible in court, how much more important must this promise of God be ! And "because he could swear by no greater" (Hebrews 6: 13), God swore by His own existence. So it really is very important.

In considering the details, it is convenient to take the items in reverse order.

"In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed." In two places the New Testament quotes and explains these words. Consider the Apostle Peter's comment: "Ye are the children of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying unto Abraham, And in thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed." And now the meaning of these words is given: "Unto you first God, having raised up his Son Jesus (the Seed!), sent him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from his iniquities" (Acts 3: 25, 26).

Thus according to Peter, the great Promise to Abraham was about Jesus bringing the forgiveness of sins.

So also the Apostle Paul. His comment is different, but the meaning is the same: "And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify (reckon as righteous, consider forgiven) the heathen (nations) through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying. In thee shall all heathen (nations) be blessed,... Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, 'And to seeds', as of many; but as of one 'And to thy seed', which is Christ" (Galatians 3: 8, 16).

Back in Genesis 22 it is possible to see why Paul is so emphatic that the Seed spoken of is *one* and not many, for the Promise also said: "And thy seed shall possess the gate of *his* enemies".

The meaning of this further detail may not be immediately obvious to a modern reader, but the idea behind it would be readily grasped by Abraham. Imagine an ancient walled city with one main gate. Whoever held that gate held all effective power over the city, with ability to control all essential activity and especially to decide who should go in and who should go out. The great Enemy of mankind, and the very last to be destroyed when God's glory fills the earth, is Death. Jesus, by virtue of his personal victory over sin, is now able not only to forgive the sins of others but also to control the powers of this great enemy, Death: "I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death" (Revelation 1: 18).

Jesus now possesses the gate of his greatest enemy. He has authority to decide, and in the Last Day he will decide, who shall come out of that grim city of the dead, to go into it no more, and also who shall go into it, to stay there for ever!

How appropriate it was that when the son of Abraham had, in a figure, died as a sacrifice and rose again, that God should pull back the corner of the curtain to reveal to this man of faith the wonderful day when another Son of Abraham should truly die as a sacrifice and rise again from the dead, bringing forgiveness of sins and hope of life everlasting.

How appropriate, too, that God should say, in effect, to Abraham: You have been prepared to give as a sacrifice your son, your only son, whom you love; therefore I—the Almighty—solemnly promise that I will give you My Son, My Only Son, whom I love, and I will give him as a Sacrifice !

How meaningful now are the very first words of the New Testament "The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the *son of Abraham*". The gospel was preached to Abraham, and—in however dim and shadowy a fashion—Abraham understood it to be the best of all Good News, for Jesus was able to say to his Jewish adversaries: "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad".

One day, when Jesus comes again, the Father of the Faithful, now sleeping in the dust for long centuries, will rise from the dead—"The Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout... and the dead in Christ shall rise first" (1 Thessalonians 4: 16).

Then will be fulfilled that other great Promise which until now has never had any kind of fulfilment: "Arise, walk through the land (the land of Palestine) in the length of it and in the breadth of it; for I will give it unto *thee*" (Genesis 13: 17). Assuredly Abraham believed in the resurrection of the dead.

But there is another important facet of the Promise on Mount Moriah yet to be considered: "I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore".

Here it is not sufficient to say: This multitudinous seed is the people of Israel, descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. That is only half the truth. Again the New Testament throws an unexpected light on these words. In a series of plain yet powerful statements in Galatians 3, Paul says that this Promise to Abraham also carries through to all others, (whether descended from Abraham or not) who by sharing Abraham's faith in the Promise, show themselves to be his spiritual heirs: "Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children (seed) of Abraham... they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham... that the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ" (Galatians 3: 7, 9, 14).

The chapter builds up to this magnificent climax: "For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There

is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise".

Please read that quotation again, for it explains how *you* may share in the gracious fulfilment of these Promises of God.

Perhaps there is special meaning in the double description of the multitudinous seed: "as the stars of heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore"—as though it was envisaged from the very first that Abraham was to be the father not only of an earthly seed, the people of Israel, but also of those who may be called a heavenly seed because they are his spiritual children through their faith in the Promises.

Jesus Christ is the key to all these remarkable truths. The point is repeated over and over again in the New Testament that no man can *earn* eternal life from God by the good deeds which he does. "All (are) under sin ... There is none righteous, no, not one... All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3: 9, 10, 23). But there is another kind of righteousness better in the sight of God than being a "do-gooder". When a man shows *faith*, like that of Abraham, God accepts *that* as righteousness. This is a better way of pleasing Him: Abraham "staggered not at the promise... through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God... And it was imputed to him for righteousness. Now it was not written for his sake alone ... but for *us* also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead". (Romans 4: 20, 22-24).

You express that belief by Christian baptism, which is a symbolic imitation of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

So, then, it all boils down to a few simple but very important ideas: —

1. God promised to Abraham
 - (a) the land of Palestine, to be his for ever.
 - (b) a Seed who should conquer death, and bring forgiveness of sins.
2. To inherit the Land, Abraham will rise from the dead to everlasting life.
3. The Seed is Jesus.
4. All who share the faith of Abraham and who become his "seed" by joining themselves to Jesus will share also the blessings of the Promise—forgiveness, resurrection from the dead, everlasting blessedness on the earth.
5. Faith in Jesus and in the Promises made to Abraham is signified by Christian baptism.

ARE THESE THINGS IMPORTANT TO YOU?

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