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FREDERICTON, N. B., SATURDAY, APRIL 21, 1888.

[100 per Annum.
Vol. XLIV., No. 25]

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Our Pulpit.

Abraham the Friend of God.

The Great Trial.

SERMON PREACHED BY

REV. A. J. MOWATT.

In St. Pat's Church Fredericton, April 15th.

Take now thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest, even Isaac, 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.—GEN. XXII. 2.

Years have elapsed, years of undisturbed felicity, how many we have no means of knowing, perhaps fifteen, perhaps twenty or twenty-five, perhaps even thirty. Isaac is grown to be a lad, a word used to describe a youth or young man all the way from fifteen to thirty. Those years at Beersheba were lived so peacefully and prosperously that not a remark is made about them. The patriarch and his neighbors the Philistines seem to have got along well together. Both they and he had kept the league. And indeed, it is worthy of notice in passing, that as soon as Abraham came to be known, he was esteemed and respected, loved and trusted. He was a man of peace, one who sought the good of others rather than his own, a most unselfish man, and, though a stranger in the land and almost an intruder, he won his way by his meekness and unselfishness, and prospered. 'Blessed are the meek' said the Christ, for they shall inherit the earth.

Abraham was now in the zenith of his power and prosperity, and had been so for a long time, and it must have looked to him as if he could never see trouble again. No shadow of evil was flung across his tent door. With him it was the green pastures and still waters. His cup of blessing was lip-full and running. It was the afternoon of life with him, the morning of old age, as some one describes it, and his sky was cloudless, and his days full of the sunshine of God's peace and favor. Nothing more could be wished for or wanted to perfect his blessedness, to round up his days.

But just then came the greatest trial of his life. It broke in upon his tranquility with a rude abruptness, like a bolt out of a clear sky, and it fell upon him with a remorseless fury that seemed to revel in pitilessly pelting his soul. It is hard to conceive of anything harder than these words coming ringing in the still midnight to Abraham: *Take now thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest, even Isaac, 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.*

Now, first, the Need and Nature of Abraham's Great Trial. Let us be sure of this, that nothing in the shape of trial, nor for that matter in any other shape, comes to men from the hand of God in vain. He has a purpose in all He does and sends, a purpose that justifies to Himself whatever He does and sends, and wisdom and mercy are in everything. It looks sometimes to us so arbitrary and uncalled for, so out of the way of ordinary trials and afflictions, the method of God's dealings with us, that we cannot understand it. Indeed it looks as if He was doing it to tease, worry, perplex, torment, rather than for any real good, or because there is need. But that cannot be. No matter what the trial, the shape it comes to us in, and all its dark surroundings, it is from God, then let us not hesitate to go through with it, for out of it will come His glory and our good.

You see the patriarch, well on toward the evening of his days, asleep in his tent at Beersheba, or perhaps half asleep. For years and years no voice from Heaven has come to him. But he does not wonder at that perhaps, for now he has about all he wants. The heir of the promise, the one link that binds him to all the good to be, lies near, and he is all he could ask, so full of promise, so amiable, so rich in all the gentler graces that go to adorn character and beautify life, and he has almost reached manhood. How his heart is bound up in him, and how proud he is of him! He feels so sure of him. Isaac cannot die. Isaac cannot turn out bad. Isaac cannot disappoint and prove a failure. Isaac is the hope of the world, the key that is to open a door that no man can shut. Other parents tremble for what the years are to do for their sons and daughters, the graves they open, the temptations they bring, and the cruel disappointments they may come to them with. But let come what may,

Isaac is safe, for he is the seed, the one seed, and God will let no harm come to the child of miracle, the seed that is to sow the future with His good.

But hark! a voice comes ringing, a voice Abraham has heard again and again. He is not mistaken, cannot be mistaken. It is the voice of his God he hears, and he listens with all his being to catch every word the voice has to say, for what God says is worth hearing and heeding. There is a terrible distinctness in every word, and a pause, longer or shorter, between the words as they come, so that the full import of what is said may be taken in. But every word of the message rings in the patriarch's soul like a death-knell: *'Take now thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest, even Isaac, 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.'*

What a message for a father to hear and do! And how unlike every other that had ever come to him from the lips of Jehovah, and all that had been handed down to him by the faithful of other days! And yet he is sure God has spoken the message to him. He cannot doubt it any more than he can doubt his own identity. I think if he could have, he would have. If any such message came to us to-day purporting to be Divine, and indeed there are strange messages that tingle the ears of ill-balanced minds, we would at once cast it from us as the suggestion of the devil, not the word of God. But we must remember that Abraham lived when it was not uncommon to offer up human sacrifices to propitiate an offended Deity and when a father sometimes led his own child to the altar to be his victim. It was easy to offer a lamb, but how hard, and because hard, how much more propitiatory, to offer a son. So men reasoned.

And may the thought not have come to Abraham sometimes as he offered his lambs, that the Canaanites around him were more self denying in worshipping their idols than he was in worshipping the living and true Jehovah? He offered only a lamb, and how little a sacrifice for him who had so many lambs; but they, in their cruel devotion, with a bleeding heart, went to their home, and took their own flesh and blood, and offered that as their sacrifice. The more of a sacrifice, they said, the better the sacrifice. And there is a background of truth there, and it cannot now be known how close home to Abraham's heart may have come some of these very questions, and how deeply he may have been exercised about them. The clear sunlight we enjoy to-day was not reached but by terrible gropings in the dark in the days of old. And Abraham had some of that groping in the dark to do for himself and us. He may have been, I can imagine, an unwilling spectator of some grim Canaanitish orgies, in which a ruler of the people, a man of might in the land, yielded up his own son to the sacrificial knife to propitiate in this rude way the Divine mercy and favor. And in some way the question may have come to him: *'Could I do for my God what that heathen has done for his? Could I yield up my one son, my Isaac, if Jehovah should demand him?'* And then he would thrust from him the unwelcome thought, and would shelter himself behind this commonplace, that Jehovah makes no such demand.

And is there not here a startling thought intruding itself upon us as we bow at our altar? To-day we easily, cheaply worship. How little it costs us. We deny ourselves no comfort. We sacrifice nothing—not even lambs, much less sons. We come here with our cheap words, our bloodless sacrifices, our formalities, our empty-handed and empty hearted service, and we worship our God, and we are glad that it costs us so little. Ah! we know not what it is to worship, without passing through some such experience as Abraham passed through, wherein he was taught that Jehovah does demand even the one son as His sacrifice, a living sacrifice, not a dead one.

Secondly, Abraham's Prompt and Unquestioning Obedience. Not a word is said here, not a hint given, how much of a struggle it cost Abraham to do what he was commanded, but we know that such commands are not obeyed, and such trials are not gone through, without a struggle. It must have been hard for him to bring himself to do what he was told to do, we cannot know how hard. The wonder to us is that he could bring himself to do it at all. But then, we must remember, there was a coming up to it, a preparation for it, through long years of believing and obeying. All his life, from

his call, to this crowning act of self-sacrifice, he had been yielding himself to the will of God, till he had attained a spiritual discipline, a willingness and trustfulness that we do not know anything at all about. Still, even Abraham could not, without no little of a struggle with himself, go and do what all his parental feelings must have recoiled from. And then everything seemed to hinge on that one life, and now it must be laid on God's altar, and by his hands. How cruel and terrible, how inscrutable and wonderful! He could not make it out, nor satisfy himself with regard to it. But his duty is clear. He felt there must be a way out of this maze, but how or where he knew not, and it was not for him to puzzle it out. His was not to reason how or why; his was to do, and Isaac's was to die. But what an ordeal for his faith!

For hours, as he lay waiting for the morning to come he struggled with himself, he wrestled with his doubts, he fought out the question of duty; and for a time, it may be, it seemed uncertain what would be the issue. He was hard put to it, harder perhaps than he had ever been put to it. So much had to be given up, so many hopes uprooted by a cruel wrench, with the giving up of Isaac. He recalled the wilderness of years when there was no Isaac, and then he looked forward to the wilderness of years when again there would be no Isaac, and his soul cried out in an agony of woe; 'O God, pity my weakness, and help me to do right. If it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless not my will, but thine be done.' Thus, he struggled and prayed and wept, and at last he felt he could trust God, and do as he was told. He was willing; his faith had triumphed.

The morning star appears, and while it is yet dark the man of six score years, strong in faith and full of vigor, is up preparing for his journey. You hear him splitting the wood that is to burn on the distant altar. He awakes his son, and tells him he is to accompany him. The ass is saddled, and with two of his young men to assist, he takes some fire, perhaps from his altar, and now they are ready for their strange sad journey. Sarah comes to the tent door to see them off, and has pleasant words for them, wishing them a good journey, and a safe and speedy return. Abraham cannot tell her to kiss her boy for the last time. In his own deep heart and alone he must bear the message of God, and how it crushes all his soul.

But they are off. The rising sun gilds the mountain tops far away to the north as they leave Beersheba, and the shepherds are leading their flocks to the hills. The hum of the busy day is just beginning. Up the valley towards Hebron they slowly wend their way, and that night weary with their long tramp, they sleep in the oak-grove of Mamre. Next morning they are off with the sun, and sleep perhaps at Beth-lehem. Early on the third day, they desert the mountain in the distance to which they have been sent. And now Abraham asks the young men to remain behind with the ass, while he and his son go to the mountain to worship. He lays the wood for the altar upon his son, his cross; then he himself takes the fire and the sacrificial knife, his cross, and they go forward to their trial.

The mountain is called Moriah, and tradition has identified it with that mountain on whose summit was built the temple, and near to which in later days was acted the bloody tragedy of the cross, the real sacrifice of God's own one son. This of course we cannot be sure of, and some have been at pains to disprove it. But somehow we feel as if the place where Abraham offered his sacrifice, is the place where the cross was set up, and God's son was sacrificed, and made a burnt-offering for the sin of the world.

You see Abraham and Isaac making their slow way up the tangled mountain-side, and little is said by either. The priest-father has his own thoughts, and it is all he can do to keep his overburdened heart from breaking forth into a wild bitter cry of anguish. Isaac is laboring up behind with his burden of wood for the altar-fire, and he has his own little thoughts. Presently he notices what he believes to be a serious oversight; there is no lamb for sacrifice. You hear him calling to his father striding on before: *'My Father!'* And the father, buried with his own sad thoughts, answers mechanically to his son's words: *'Here am I, my son!'* And then the son said in words that must have gone to the father's heart like a sharp two-edged sword, words so guileless and simple, so unsuspecting and affecting; *'Behold the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering?'*

There is a pause. What will the priest-father say to his boy that will be a fitting answer? He cannot yet say *'My own dear son is to be the lamb.'* Nor can he tell a bold falsehood in the face of such innocence. And he pauses to think what he will say, and the right answer comes to him; *'God will provide himself the lamb for the burnt-offering, my son.'* But what an effort on his part to say that. It is said that a pebble flung into the crater of a slumbering volcano will sometimes wake up all its mighty energies; and it would be all that Abraham's great still heart could stand not to be convulsed with anguish when from the lips of his son dropped so suddenly a remark that must have gone down to the depths of his burning soul. 'But the Lord helped him, and he was calm, strong.

Presently they are at the place. Abraham gathers stones and piles up a rude altar. It does not take him long to do it, for he knows all about altar-building. And yet he builds it not any way, but with reverent hands, for it is to be the most wondrous altar he has ever built. And Isaac helps, carrying the stones to his father, little suspecting that he is erecting his own funeral pile. Then the wood is laid in order ready to be kindled. And now comes the terrible act of the tragedy. With a firm strong hand he takes hold of Isaac, and in his eyes the son can see at once his dreadful fate. He does not need to be told what is coming. *'My child,'* the father with choking words would say to the son, *'thou art the lamb of the altar; it is God's will.'* The thought must have come to Isaac; *'shall I submit to be the victim to bleed and die?'* He is not now a child. He is a grown lad of at least seventeen and many believe him to have been over twenty, and some make out that he was thirty. He could, then, if he had been so minded, have overpowered his father, who was now an old man of six score years. But as his good father talked, he was willing. Isaac seems to have been all his life through, meek, gentle, submissive; wanting perhaps in energy, deficient in strength of will, letting himself too often and too easily be overruled by others. And so his father bound him, and laid him on the altar. Then looking up to Heaven with a heart crying to God for Divine help and comfort, he prays for himself and his child; prays that he might be strengthened to offer his son, and that his son might be willing to be offered; prays as he prayed for Sodom on the night before its doom, pouring out all his soul with strong crying and tears into the ears of the listening Jehovah. He ceases, and is strangely calm. He tells Isaac to be brave, and bear mutely and meekly. He reaches for the knife, and raises his arm for the fatal lunge. But he is spared this. An angel of the Lord calls to him not to hurt the child, for now it is known that he is willing to give up, not only Ishmael the son of the bondwoman, but even Isaac the son of Sarah, the child of promise. His faith has triumphed in the great trial.

At the moment, too, Abraham observes a ram caught by his horns in a thicket behind him. At once he releases his son, and offers the ram in his stead, and understands, as he never understood so well before, how the Lord is Jehovah-Jireh, The-Lord-will-provide.

Now, in conclusion, so many lessons and truths cluster here, more than I have time to dwell upon to-night. And this must strike the thoughtful and observant reader, that God was preparing the world for the awful tragedy of the cross. Abraham the father, offering his one son, was a faint delineation of the eternal Father offering up on the cross the eternal son. You ask why it was Abraham was tested in this way, and you suggest this and that as a sufficient reason. But I cannot but see here, every time I read it over, a promise and prophecy of what was to be on this very mountain. Where Abraham's altar stood perhaps, there stood the cross. Here where Isaac groaned, and all but died y His father's hand, Jesus wailed out that wild bitter cry, *'My God! my God! why hast thou forsaken me?'* As we wonder at Abraham's sacrifice, and Isaac's patience and submission, let us wonder still more at God's sacrifice, and the Christ's submission and lamblike patience.

Learn here again that there is no escaping trials. We need them, and we shall have them. When we are not looking for them, and in a shape perhaps that we do not expect them, they will come to us. On something we hold so dear, God will lay His hand, some pet-child, some promising Isaac, and He will ask us to give it up, and in a way that is so hard. He asked Abraham to put

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