

Abraham's Offering up his son Isaac

by George Whitefield

"And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him, for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy Son, thine only Son from me." Genesis 22:12

The great Apostle Paul, in one of his epistles, informs us, that "whatsoever was written aforetime was written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the holy scripture might have hope." And as without faith it is impossible to please God, or be accepted in Jesus, the Son of his love; we may be assured, that whatever instances of a more than common faith are recorded in the book of God, they were more immediately designed by the Holy Spirit for our learning and imitation, upon whom the ends of the world are come. For this reason, the author of the epistle to the Hebrews, in the 11th chapter, mentions such a noble catalogue of Old Testament saints and martyrs, "who subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, stopped the mouths of lions, etc. and are gone before us to inherit the promises." A sufficient confutation, I think, of their error, who lightly esteem the Old Testament saints, and would not have them mentioned to Christians, as persons whose faith and patience we are called upon more immediately to follow. If this was true, the apostle would never have produced such a cloud of witnesses out of the Old Testament, to excite the Christians of the first, and consequently purest age of the church, to continue steadfast and unmoveable in the profession of their faith. Amidst this catalogue of saints, methinks the patriarch Abraham shines the brightest, and differs from the others, as one star differeth from another star in glory; for he shone with such distinguished luster, that he was called the "friend of God," the "father of the faithful;" and those who believe on Christ, are said to be "sons and daughters of, and to be blessed with, faithful Abraham."

Many trials of his faith did God send this great and good man, after he had commanded him to get out from his country, and from his kindred, unto a land which he should show him; but the last was the most sever of all, I mean, that of offering up his only son. This, by the divine assistance, I propose to make the subject of your present meditation, and, by way of conclusion, to draw some practical inferences, as God shall enable me, from this instructive story. The

sacred penman begins the narrative thus; verse 1. "And it came to pass, after these things, God did tempt Abraham." After these things, that is, after he had underwent many severe trials before, after he was old, full of days, and might flatter himself perhaps that the troubles and toils of life were now finished; "after these things, God did tempt Abraham." Christians, you know not what trials you may meet with before you die: notwithstanding you may have suffered, and been tried much already, yet, it may be, a greater measure is still behind, which you are to fill up. "Be not high-minded, but fear." Our last trials, in all probability, will be the greatest: and we can never say our warfare is accomplished, or our trials finished, till we bow down our heads, and give up the ghost. "And it came to pass, after these things, that God did tempt Abraham." "God did tempt Abraham." But can the scripture contradict itself? Does not the apostle James tell us, "that God tempts no man;" and God does tempt no man to evil, or on purpose to draw him into sin; for, when a man is thus tempted, he is drawn away of his own heart's lust, and enticed.

But in another sense, God may be said to tempt, I mean, to try his servants; and in this sense we are to understand that passage of Matthew, where we are told, that, "Jesus was led up by the Spirit (the good Spirit) into the wilderness, to be tempted of the devil." And our Lord, in that excellent form of prayer which he has been pleased to give us, does not require us to pray that we may not absolutely be led into temptation, but delivered from the evil of it; whence we may plainly infer, that God sees it fit sometimes to lead us into temptation, that is, to bring us into such circumstances as will try our faith and other Christian graces. In this sense we are to understand the expression before us; "God did tempt or try Abraham." How God was pleased to reveal his will at this time to his faithful servant, whether by the Shekinah, or divine appearance, or by a small still voice, as he spoke to Elijah, or by a whisper, like that of the Spirit to Philip, when he commanded him to join himself to the eunuch's chariot, we are not told, nor is it material to inquire. It is enough that we are informed, God said unto him, Abraham; and that Abraham knew it was the voice of God: for he said, "Behold, here I am." O what a holy familiarity (if I may so speak) is there between God and those holy souls that are united to him by faith in Christ Jesus! God says, Abraham; and Abraham said (it should seem without the least surprise) Behold, here I am. Being reconciled to God by the death and obedience of Christ, which

he rejoiced in, and saw by faith afar off; he did not, like guilty Adam, seed the trees of the garden to hide himself from, but takes pleasure in conversing with God, and talketh with him, as a man talketh with his friend. O that Christ-less sinners knew what it is to have fellowship with the Father and the Son! They would envy the happiness of saints, and count it all joy to be termed enthusiasts and fools for Christ's sake.

But what does God say to Abraham? Verse 2. "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 shall tell thee of." Every word deserves our particular observation. Whatever he was to do, he must do it now, immediately, without conferring with flesh and blood. But what must he do? "Take now thy son." Had God said, take now a firstling, or choicest lamb or beast of thy flock, and offer it up for a burnt-offering, it would not have appeared so ghastly; but for God to say, "take now thy son, and offer him up for a burnt-offering," one would imagine, was enough to stagger the strongest faith. But this is not all: it must not only be a son, but "thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest." If it must be a son, and not a beast, that must be offered, why will not Ishmael do, the son of the bond-woman? No, it must be his only son, the heir of all, his Isaac, by interpretation laughter, the son of his old age, in whom his soul delighted, "whom thou lovest," says God, in whose life his own was wrapped up: and this son, this only son, this Isaac, the son of his love, must be taken now, even now, without delay, and be offered up by his own father, for a burnt offering, upon one of the mountains of the which God would tell him. Well might the apostle, speaking of this man of God, say, that "against hope he believed in hope, and, being strong in faith, gave glory to God." For, had he not been blessed with faith which man never before had, he must have refused to comply with this severe command. For how many arguments might nature suggest, to prove that such a command could never come from God, or to excuse himself from obeying it? "What! (might the good man have said) butcher my own child! It is contrary to the very law of nature: much more to butcher my dear son Isaac, in whose seed God himself has assured me of a numerous posterity. But supposing I could give up my own affections, and be willing to part with him, though I love him so dearly, yet, if I murder him, what will become of God's promise? Besides, I am now like a city built upon a hill; I shine as a light in the world, in the midst of a crooked and

perverse generation: How then shall I cause God's name to be blasphemed, how shall I become a by-word among the heathen, if they hear that I have committed a crime which they abhor! But, above all, what will Sarah my wife say? How can I ever return to her again, after I have imbrued (to wet or stain) my hands in my dear child's blood? O that God would pardon me in this thing, or take my life in the place of my son's!"

Thus, I say, Abraham might have argued, and that too seemingly with great reason, against complying with the divine command. But as before by faith he considered not the deadness of Sarah's womb, when she was past age, but believed on him, who said, "Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed;" so now, being convinced that the same God spoke to and commanded him to offer up that son, and knowing that God was able to raise him from the dead, without delay he obeys the heavenly call. O that unbelievers would learn of faithful Abraham, and believe whatever is revealed from God, though they cannot fully comprehend it! Abraham knew God commanded him to offer up his son, and therefore believed, notwithstanding carnal reasoning might suggest many objections. We have sufficient testimony, that God has spoken to us by his son; why should we not also believe, though many things in the New Testament are above our reason? For, where reason ends, faith begins. And, however infidels may stile themselves reasoners, of all men they are the most unreasonable: For, is it not contrary to all reason, to measure an infinite by a finite understanding, or think to find out the mysteries of godliness to perfection? But to return to the patriarch Abraham: We observed before what plausible objections he might have made; but he answered not a single word: no, without replying against his Maker, we are told, verse 3, that "Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt-offering, and rose up and went unto the place of which God had told him." From this verse we may gather, that God spoke to Abraham in a dream, or vision of the night: For it is said, he rose up early. Perhaps it was near the fourth watch of the night, just before break of day, when God said, Take now thy son; and Abraham rises up early to do so; as I doubt not but he used to rise early to offer up his morning-sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. It is often remarked of people in the Old Testament, that they rose early in the morning; and particularly of our Lord in the New, that he rose a great while before day to pray. The morning befriends

devotion; and, if people cannot use so much self-denial as to rise early to pray, I know not how they will be able to die at a stake (if called to it) for Jesus Christ. The humility as well as the piety of the patriarch is observable: he saddled his own ass (great men should be humble) and to show the sincerity, though he took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, yet he keeps his design as a secret from them all: nay, he does not so much as tell Sarah his wife; for he knew not but she might be a snare unto him in this affair; and, as Rebekah afterwards, on another occasion, advised Jacob to flee, so Sarah also might persuade Isaac to hide himself; or the young men, had they known of it, might have forced him away, as in after-ages the soldiers rescued Jonathan out of the hands of Saul. But Abraham fought no such evasion, and therefore, like an Israelite indeed, in whom there was no guile, he himself resolutely “clave the wood for the burnt-offering, rose up and went unto the place of which God had told him.”

In the second verse God commanded him to offer up his son upon one of the mountains which he would tell him of. He commanded him to offer his son up, but would not then directly tell him the place where: this was to keep him dependent and watching unto prayer: for there is nothing like being kept waiting upon God; and, if we do, assuredly God will reveal himself unto us yet further in his own time. Let us practice what we know, follow providence so far as we can see already; and what we know not, what we see not as yet, let us only be found in the way of duty, and the Lord will reveal even that unto us. Abraham knew not directly where he was to offer up his son; but he rises up and sets forward, and behold now God shows him: “And he went to the place of which God had told him.” Let us go and do likewise. Verse 4. “Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off.” So that the place, of which God had told him, was no less than three days journey distant from the place where God first appeared to him, and commanded him to take his son. Was not this to try his faith, and to let him see that what he did, was not merely from a sudden pang of devotion, but a matter of choice of deliberation? But who can tell what the aged patriarch felt during these three days? Strong as he was in faith, I am persuaded his bowels often yearned over his dear son Isaac. Methinks I see the good old man walking with his dear child in his hand, and now and then looking upon him, loving him, and then turning aside to weep. And perhaps, sometimes he stays a little behind to pour out his heart before God, for he had no mortal to tell his case

to. Then, methinks, I see him join his son and servants again, and talking to them of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God, as they walked by the way.

At length, “on the third day, he lifts up his eyes, and saw the place afar off.” And, to show that he was yet sincerely resolved to do whatsoever the Lord requested of him, he even how will not discover his design to his servants, but “said, verse 5. To his young men,” (as we should say to our worldly thoughts, when about to tread the courts of the Lord’s house) “Abide you here with the ass; and I and the lad will go up yonder and worship, and come again to you.” This was a sufficient reason for their staying behind; and, it being their master’s custom to go frequently to worship, they could have no suspicion of what he was going about. And by Abraham’s saying, that he and the lad would come again, I am apt to think he believed God would raise him from the dead, if so be he permitted him to offer his child up for a burnt-offering. However that be, he is yet resolved to obey God to the uttermost; and therefore, Verse 6. “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.” Little did Isaac think that he was to be offered on that very wood which he was carrying upon his shoulders; and therefore Isaac innocently, and with a holy freedom (for good men should not keep their children at too great a distance) “spake unto Abraham his father, and said, My father; and he (with equal affection and holy condescension) said, Here am I, my son.” And to show how careful Abraham had been (as all Christian parents ought to do) to instruct his Isaac how to sacrifice to God, like a youth trained up in the way wherein he should go; Isaac said, “Behold the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering?” How beautiful is early piety! How amiable, to hear young people ask questions about sacrificing to God in an acceptable way! Isaac knew very well that a lamb was wanting, and that a lamb was necessary for a proper sacrifice: “Behold the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering?”

Young men and maidens, learn of him. Hitherto, it is plain, Isaac knew nothing of his father’s design: but I believe, by what his father said in answer to his question, that now was the time Abraham revealed it unto him. Verse 8. “And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a Lamb for a burnt-offering.”

Some think, that Abraham by faith saw the Lord Jesus afar off, and here spoke prophetically of that Lamb of God already slain in decree, and hereafter to be actually offered up for sinners. This was a lamb of God's providing indeed (we dared not have thought of it) to satisfy his own justice, and to render him just in justifying the ungodly. What is all our fire and wood, the best preparations and performances we can make or present, unless God had provided himself this Lamb for a burnt-offering? He could not away with them. The words will well bear this interpretation. But, whatever Abraham might intend, I cannot but think he here made an application, and acquainted his son, of God's dealing with his soul; and at length, with tears in his eyes, and the utmost affection in his heart, cried out, "Thou art to be the lamb, my Son;" God has commanded me to provide thee for a burnt-offering, and to offer thee upon the mountain which we are now ascending. And, as it appears from a subsequent verse, Isaac, convinced that it was the divine will, made no resistance at all; For it is said, "They went both of them together;" and again, when we are told, that Abraham bound Isaac, we do not hear of his complaining, or endeavouring to escape, which he might have done, being (as some think) near thirty years of age, and, it is plain, capable of carrying wood enough for a burnt-offering. But he was partaker of the like precious faith with his aged father, and therefore is as willing to be offered, as Abraham is to offer him: And "so they went both of them together." Ver. 9 At length "they came to the place of which God had told Abraham. He 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 here let us pause a while, and by faith take a view of the place where the father has laid him. I doubt not but that blessed angels hovered round the altar, and sang. "Glory be to God in the highest," for giving such faith to man.

Come, all ye tender hearted parents, who know what it is to look over a dying child: fancy that you saw the altar erected before you, and the wood laid in order, and the beloved Isaac bound upon it: fancy that you saw the aged parent standing by weeping. (For, why may we not suppose that Abraham wept, since Jesus himself wept at the grave of Lazarus?) O what pious, endearing expressions passed now alternately between the father and the son! Josephus records a pathetic speech made by each, whether genuine I know not: but methinks I see the tears trickle down the Patriarch Abraham's cheeks; and out of the abundance

of the heart, he cries, Adieu, adieu, my son; the Lord gave thee to me, and the Lord calls thee away; blessed be the name of the Lord: adieu, my Isaac, my only son, whom I love as my own soul; adieu, adieu. I see Isaac at the same time meekly resigning himself into his heavenly Father's hands, and praying to the most High to strengthen his earthly parent to strike the stroke. But why do I attempt to describe what either son or father felt? It is impossible: we may indeed form some faint idea of, but shall never full comprehend it, till we come and sit down with them in the kingdom of heaven, and hear them tell the pleasing story over again. Hasten, O Lord, that blessed time! O let thy kingdom come! And now, the fatal blow is going to be given. "And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son." But do you not think he intended to turn away his head, when he gave the blow? Nay, why may we not suppose he sometimes drew his hand in, after it was stretched out, willing to take another last farewell of his beloved Isaac, and desirous to defer it a little, though resolved at last to strike home?

Be that as it will, his arm is now stretched out, the knife is in his hand, and he is about to put it to his dear son's throat. But sing, O heavens! and rejoice, O earth! Man's extremity is God's opportunity: for behold, just as the knife, in all probability, was near his throat, ver. 11, "the angel of the Lord, (or rather the Lord of angels, Jesus Christ, the angel of the everlasting covenant) called unto him, (probably in a very audible manner) from heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham. (The word is doubled, to engage his attention; and perhaps the suddenness of the call made him draw back his hand, just as he was going to strike his son.) And Abraham said, Here am I." "And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now know I that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me." Here then it was that Abraham received his son Isaac from the dead in a figure. He was in effect offered upon the altar, and God looked upon him as offered and given unto him. Now it was that Abraham's faith, being tried, was found more precious than gold purified seven times in the fire. Now as a reward of grace, though not of debt, for this signal act of obedience, by an oath, God gives and confirms the promise, "that in his seed all the nations of the earth should be blessed," ver. 17, 18. With what comfort may we suppose the good old man and his son went down from the mount, and returned unto the young men! With what joy may we imagine he

went home, and related all that had passed to Sarah! And above all, with what triumph is he now exulting in the paradise of God, and adoring rich, free, distinguishing, electing, everlasting love, which alone made him to differ from the rest of mankind, and rendered him worthy of that title which he will have so long as the sun and the moon endure, "The Father of the faithful!" But let us now draw our eyes from the creature, and do what Abraham, if he was present, would direct to; I mean, fix them on the Creator, God blessed for evermore. I see your hearts affected, I see your eyes weep. (And indeed, who can refrain weeping at the relation of such a story?) But, behold, I show you a mystery, hid under the sacrifice of Abraham's only son, which, unless your hearts are hardened, must cause you to weep tears of love, and that plentifully too. I would willingly hope you even prevent me here, and are ready to say, "It is the love of God, in giving Jesus Christ to die for our sins." Yes; that is it. And yet perhaps you find your hearts, at the mentioning of this, not so much affected. Let this convince you, that we are all fallen creatures, and that we do not love God or Christ as we ought to do: for, if you admire Abraham offering up his Isaac, how much more ought you to extol, magnify and adore the love of God, who so loved the world, as to give his only begotten Son Christ Jesus our Lord, "that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish, but have everlasting life?"

May we not well cry out, Now know we, O Lord, that thou hast loved us, since thou hast not withheld thy Son, thine only Son from us! Abraham was God's creature (and God was Abraham's friend) and therefore under the highest obligation to surrender up his Isaac. But O stupendous love! Whilst we were his enemies, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, that he might become a curse for us. O the freeness, as well as the infinity, of the love of God our Father! It is unsearchable: I am lost in contemplating it; it is past finding out. Think, O believers, think of the love of God, in giving Jesus Christ to be a propitiation for our sins. And when you hear how Abraham built an altar, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood; think how your heavenly Father bound Jesus Christ his only Son, and offered him upon the altar of his justice, and laid upon him the iniquities of us all. When you read of Abraham's stretching forth his hand to slay his son, Think, O think, how God actually suffered his Son to be slain, that we might live for evermore. Do you read of Isaac carrying the wood upon his shoulders, upon which

he was to be offered? Let this lead you to mount Calvary (this very mount of Moriah where Isaac was offered, as some think) and take a view of the antitype Jesus Christ, the Son of God, bearing and ready to sink under the weight of that cross, on which he was to hang for us.

Do you admire Isaac so freely consenting to die, though a creature, and therefore obliged to go when God called? O do not forget to admire infinitely more the dear Lord Jesus, that promised seed, who willingly said, "Lo, I come," though under no obligation so to do, "to do thy will," to obey and die for men, "O God!" Did you weep just now, when I bid you fancy you saw the altar, and the wood laid in order, and Isaac laid bound on the altar? Look by faith, behold the blessed Jesus, our all-glorious Emmanuel, not bound, but nailed on a accursed tree: see how he hangs crowned with thorns, and had in derision of all that are round about him: see how the thorns pierce him, and how the blood in purple streams trickle down his sacred temples! Hark how the God of nature groans! See how he bows his head, and at length humanity gives up the ghost! Isaac is saved, but Jesus, the God of Isaac, dies; A ram is offered up in Isaac's room, but Jesus has no substitute; Jesus must bleed, Jesus must die; God the Father provided this Lamb for himself from all eternity. He must be offered in time, or man must be damned for evermore. And now, where are your tears? Shall I say, refrain your voice from weeping? No; rather let me exhort you to look to him whom you have pierced, and mourn, as a woman mourneth for her first-born: for we have been the betrayers, we have been the murderers of this Lord of glory; and shall we not bewail those sins, which brought the blessed Jesus to the accursed tree? Having so much done, so much suffered for us, so much forgiven, shall we not love much! O! let us love Him with all our hearts, and minds, and strength, and glorify him in our souls and bodies, for they are his. Which leads me to a second inference I shall draw from the foregoing discourse.

From hence we may learn the nature of true, justifying faith. Whoever understands and preaches the truth, as it is in Jesus, must acknowledge, that salvation is God's free gift, and that we are saved, not by any or all the works of righteousness which we have done or can do: no; we can neither wholly nor in part justify ourselves in the light of God. The Lord Jesus Christ is our righteousness; and if we are accepted with God, it must be only in and through the personal righteousness, the active and passive obedience, of Jesus Christ his

beloved Son. This righteousness must be imputed, or counted over to us, and applied by faith to our hearts, or else we can in no wise be justified in God's sight: and that very moment a sinner is enabled to lay hold on Christ's righteousness by faith, he is freely justified from all his sins, and shall never enter into condemnation, notwithstanding he was a fire-brand of hell before. Thus it was that Abraham was justified before he did any good work: he was enabled to believe on the Lord Christ; it was accounted to him for righteousness; that is, Christ's righteousness was made over to him, and so accounted his. This, this is the gospel; this is the only way of finding acceptance with God: good works have nothing to do with our justification in his sight. We are justified by faith alone, as saith the article of our church; agreeable to which the apostle Paul says, "By grace ye are saved, through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God."

Notwithstanding, good works have their proper place: they justify our faith, though not our persons; they follow it, and evidence our justification in the sight of men. Hence it is that the apostle James asks, was not Abraham justified by works? (alluding no doubt to the story on which we have been discoursing) that is, did he not prove he was in a justified state, because his faith was productive of good works? This declarative justification in the sight of men, is what is directly to be understood in the words of the text; "Now know I, says God, that thou fearest me, since thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me." Not but that God knew it before; but this is spoken in condescension to our weak capacities, and plainly shows, that his offering up his son was accepted with God, as an evidence of the sincerity of his faith, and for this, was left on record to future ages. Hence then you may learn, whether you are blessed with, and are sons and daughters of, faithful Abraham. You say you believe; you talk of free grace and free justification: you do well; the devils also believe and tremble. But has the faith, which you pretend to, influenced your hearts, renewed your souls, and, like Abraham's, worked by love? Are your affections, like his, set on things above? Are you heavenly-minded, and like him, do you confess yourselves strangers and pilgrims on the earth? In short, has your faith enabled you to overcome the world, and strengthened you to give up your Isaacs, your laughter, your most beloved lusts, friends, pleasures, and profits for God? If so, take the comfort of it; for justly may you say, "We know assuredly, that we do fear and love God, or rather are loved of him." But if you are only talking believers, have only a faith of the head,

and never felt the power of it in your hearts, however you may bolster yourselves up, and say, "We have Abraham for our father, or Christ is our Saviour," unless you get a faith of the heart, a faith working by love, you shall never sit with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, or Jesus Christ, in the kingdom of heaven.

But I must draw one more inference, and with that I shall conclude. Learn, O saints! From what has been said, to sit loose to all your worldly comforts; and stand ready prepared to part with everything, when God shall require it at your hand. Some of you perhaps may have friends, who are to you as your own souls; and others may have children, in whose lives your own lives are bound up: all I believe have their Isaacs, their particular delights of some kind or other. labour, for Christ's sake, labour, ye sons and daughters of Abraham, to resign them daily in affection to God, that, when he shall require you really to sacrifice them, you may not confer with flesh and blood, any more than the blessed patriarch now before us. And as for you that have been in any measure tried like unto him, let his example encourage and comfort you. Remember, Abraham your father was tried so before you: think, O think of the happiness he now enjoys, and how he is incessantly thanking God for tempting and trying him when here below. Look up often by the eye of faith, and see him sitting with his dearly beloved Isaac in the world of spirits. Remember, it will be but a little while, and you shall sit with them also, and tell one another what God has done for your souls. There I hope to sit with you, and hear this story of his offering up his Son from his own mouth, and to praise the Lamb that sitteth upon the throne, for what he hath done for all or souls, for ever and ever.