

Emblems From the Life of Isaac

by A.B. Simpson

The sermon explores the life of Isaac as a type of the Gospel and Spiritual Seed, and it highlights the importance of regeneration, the death of self, and sanctification.

Scripture: Galatians 4:22

Topics: "Surrender to God", "New Birth"

Description

A.B. Simpson explores the life of Isaac, emphasizing how his birth symbolizes the new birth through the Spirit and the promise of God. He contrasts Isaac with Ishmael, representing the law and flesh, and discusses the expulsion of Ishmael as a metaphor for the Christian's struggle against sin. Simpson highlights the significance of Isaac's willingness to be sacrificed, paralleling it with the surrender of self to God, and concludes with the importance of living in the Spirit and the blessings that come from obedience to God's covenant. The sermon encourages believers to embrace their identity in Christ and the transformative power of grace.

Transcript

In the fourth chapter of Galatians, the apostle gives us a key to some of the most important events in the life of Isaac, and along with these a principle which may be applied to other portions of the historical Scriptures, as a key to their interpretation. He tells us that the birth both of Ishmael and Isaac was typical of the divine dispensations; the former representing the Law and the Flesh; the latter, the Gospel and the Spiritual Seed; and that the expulsion of Ishmael and the solo inheritance of Isaac completed the type as respects the passing away of the law and the permanence of the gospel. He also applies the teaching of these symbols to the spiritual life of the individual Christian. Authorized by this divine pattern, we shall endeavor reverently to gather the spiritual lessons, not only of these facts, but others in the life of this remarkable character. More reserved and passive than the other patriarchs, Isaac is, perhaps, more obscure and less understood by most Christians than any of the characters of the book of Genesis; but there is none that, when properly realized, impresses itself so vividly upon the heart, and teaches such profound and searching lessons for all Christian lives. A life very largely made up of commonplace events, it is just the life that meets the needs, the failures and the testings of most of us; and we trust we shall find many points of contact with that which is most real and essential in our religious experience.

SECTION I -- The Birth of Isaac.

The apostle that we have already referred to, declares that he was born after the Spirit and according to promise. His birth was not natural and ordinary, but extraordinary and supernatural. Not until nature had failed, and the hope of issue from the bodies of Abraham and Sarah was humanly improbable, did God even promise the covenant seed; and, even after this, an interval of testing had to come before the promise was fulfilled. His birth, therefore, was the direct result of omnipotent power, and so it stands as the type of that greater birth, which, in later ages, came through Mary of Bethlehem, even the Incarnation of the Eternal Son of God. This greater mystery and mightier miracle was distinctly foreshadowed in the babe of promise that came to Hebron's tent.

There is another miracle and mystery of grace, which was also foreshadowed by the birth of Isaac -- that is, the new birth of all the spiritual seed of Abraham. Just as truly as Isaac was born of the Spirit, and Jesus became incarnate through the overshadowing of the Holy Ghost, so "except a man be born of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God." This is not a natural reformation, not the result of human energy or will, but the work of the Almighty Spirit; beyond the power of nature and after it has failed. "As many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God: which were born not of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." Have we experienced this mighty new creation? Blessed be God, it is for us as well as Abraham.

It is not only by the Spirit, but also through the promise. It is not an arbitrary favoritism of heaven, but "as many as received Him," to them it is given. Would you have this new life which brings you into all the blessings and hopes of the covenant? Come to Christ, and receive the immortal life which He waits to breathe into every living heart.

SECTION II -- The Birth of Ishmael.

Ishmael stands for the flesh and natural life, and the bondage of the law under which it lies. When we speak of the flesh, we do not mean merely that which is gross, sensual and basest in human nature, but all that is born of Adam and part of the natural life. Ishmael and Esau had many lofty human qualities, and Ishmael's race today are more noble in many things than their fellows; and so the natural man is often a generous man, a cultivated man, even a moral man. The unregenerate woman may be a beautiful girl, a faithful wife, an affectionate mother, even a social benefactor; but this may be all mere instinct and humanity. This is not to be despised; this is not depreciated even in the Scriptures, but it cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The word "natural" in the Epistles is literally "psychical," the man of soul rather than the spiritual man. This is the nature which all the sons of Adam inherit, and which sin has tainted and overshadowed with the curse.

Like Ishmael it is the firstborn and has already claimed its sovereign rights in every human heart, before grace appears upon the scene. It is into this home, where Ishmael has grown up with all his established rights, that Isaac comes; and so it is in the heart that has walked after the flesh that the grace of God implants the new life of regeneration. Dear friends, where do we stand in this matter? Let us not deceive ourselves because our flesh is not the debased, gross and vicious nature which we see in some. Let us remember the solemn picture of the life which cannot enter heaven. "Wherein in times past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the powers of the air, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and the mind, and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others." May God fulfill the other picture to all who may read these lines: "But you hath He quickened which were dead in trespasses and sins."

SECTION III -- The expulsion of Ishmael.

The position of the infant Isaac in Abraham's tent, by the side of Ishmael, was very similar to the position of the new born but yet unsanctified soul in the conflict with its old carnal nature. We can readily imagine the innumerable petty tyrannies and persecutions to which the little rival of Hagar's child was constantly exposed. It is the type of the battle which goes on so long in many a Christian's soul; in which he strives in his own new strength, but often in vain, against the stronger impulses and tendencies of an evil heart. The picture is drawn in the seventh chapter of Romans with painful vividness and ends at last in the bitter cry of the baffled soul, "O! wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" The strife was ended in Abraham's tent by Sarah, who, realizing at once the impossibility of such a life, and the peril of her most precious hopes and promises, demands the prompt expulsion of Isaac's rival. "Cast out the bondwoman and her son!" is the hard demand, from which Abraham's sympathy recoils, but which God's wisdom approves and confirms, and which Abraham sees at least to be unavoidable; and so Ishmael goes forth to his own place, and Isaac remains the undisputed heir of the covenant promises and the peaceful master of the patriarchal nursery.

We need not say that this stands for the decisive moment when the regenerated soul rises to its freedom. Definitely and wholly surrendering the old heart to death and exclusion, it receives the Holy Spirit and the personal Christ to fight the battle henceforth in the victory of faith, and possess the entire spirit in rest, purity and complete consecration. It is not necessary that Ishmael should cease to exist, nor can we claim that sin is dead, but Ishmael is henceforth outside the tent of Isaac, and so, self and sin should be likewise outside the citadel of the will, and the sanctuary of the heart. Sin and Satan are not dead, but we are henceforth dead unto sin and alive unto God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Let us stop and ask ourselves, which of these pictures is the true representation of our inner life? Is the feeble principle of divine grace, struggling for its very life in the midst of all the contending passions and impulses of our carnal heart, and persecuted by the flesh from day to day, like Isaac at the hands of Ishmael; or have we, notwithstanding all the pleadings of nature and sympathy "crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts" and entered into the rest and victory of a single heart and a sanctified spirit, in fellowship with Christ, who henceforth fights our battles and garrisons our soul.

There is a great difference how we spell a single sentence in the Epistle to the Galatians "The flesh lusteth against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh," is the sad picture of the ceaseless warfare between our spirit and our flesh. But "The SPIRIT lusteth against the flesh,, and the flesh against the SPIRIT," describes the battle in which the Holy Spirit, not our spirit, wages the warfare, and always wins the victory. May the Lord lead every weary heart to the surrender and the decisive trust which will bring this glorious triumph. This is our right under the Gospel just as much as it was Isaac's by the promise. Sarah, in this, represented the Holy Ghost, who is ever demanding for us our sanctified rights and pressing us forward to claim them. Let us yield to her pleadings, and "cast out the bondwoman and her children."

It is also implied that this deliverance brings us not only into the life of the Spirit, but into the liberty of the Gospel. "They that are led of the Spirit are not under the law."

Until we reach this experience the soul is ever acting in some sense under bondage and compulsion. Henceforth its service springs from life and love, and is "the glorious liberty of the children of God."

Besides the application of this incident to the individual Christian, it has also a larger reference to the two dispensations of law and grace; Hagar and her son representing the Mosaic system, and Isaac and his

seed the dispensation of free grace under the Gospel. Like Isaac and Ishmael the former has given place to the latter, and we live in the enjoyment of its light and love and holy liberty. Against the idea of returning back to the bondage of that law through the Judaizing spirit, Paul earnestly protested in his letter to the Galatians, and emphatically taught that the spirit of the law would ever lead to the works of the flesh. It is as true today, and as necessary to be remembered. Mere morality and discipline must ever fail to produce the fruits of true holiness. They can only spring from the grace of God, the love of Christ, and the living power of the Holy Spirit.

SECTION IV -- The Sacrifice of Isaac.

The expulsion of Ishmael does not end the trials of Abraham's covenant child; there is yet to come a deeper test and a profounder lesson, and a test and lesson that have their parallel in every consecrated life. The command suddenly comes one morning which consigns all this hope and happiness to the dark and inexorable decree of death. "Take now, thy son thine only son, whom thy lovest," is the mysterious mandate, "and offer him for a burnt offering, on one of the mountains that I shall show thee." We are accustomed to look at this scene chiefly from the side of Abraham, and think of the amazing faith and fortitude of the father's heart that could yield not only its affections, but its very faith and hope and all that was linked with God and the future, in blind obedience and submission, and yet unfaltering faith, to this strange and awful test. All this is true, and all is worthy of the high approval which God Himself has placed upon it. It was the supreme test of Abraham's faith and obedience. But have we looked at it aright from the standpoint of Isaac? Have we thought of all that it meant to that sensitive and shrinking boy, -- the strange and sudden separation from his mother's side, the parting that must have been so trying, the journey of three long days of suspense, that strange reserve of anguish in his father's face that could not speak, yet could not conceal the overhanging shadow, the innocent question "where is the lamb?" the sudden bursting upon his consciousness of the full meaning, as he himself was bound and laid upon that altar, the silent submission, all the more impressive because no word is given us of his suffering, the strange horror of seeing his own dear father stand above him with that gleaming knife, the awful moment of agony and suspense in which an eternity could be felt before the hand was stayed and the tragedy averted? It was the same to Abraham, it was the same to Isaac, as though the sacrifice had been accomplished. The bitterness of death was past, and to all time and eternity Isaac never could forget the memories of that hour. He had really died in the surrender of his will, and his future life was overshadowed with the consciousness that he was as one raised from the dead. So the Scriptures speak of it, and so must they have felt it.

Not only was it the figure, as nothing else ever was, of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ by His Father's hand for our salvation -- a sacrifice which had no arresting hand to stop, no voice to say, "There is a lamb to take His place " -- but which went through all the darkness and bitterness and mystery of death for us.

But it has an equally important meaning for our spiritual life. It is to us the symbol of the death of self and the surrender of our inmost life to God which comes oftentimes, in Christian experience, even after that deeper life which we saw begun in our last section. The expulsion of Ishmael means separation from sin and the flesh. The sacrifice of Isaac means the death of self, and the dedication of the inmost will and life and being unto God.

By various ways the searching test is made, and the soul is led to yield itself to His will; and, in the hour of sacrifice, find its life, and henceforth "live not unto itself, but unto Him who died for us and rose again." Henceforth it is easy to yield to everything that God wills. The spirit has been melted and bowed, the head

has been laid low on Jesus' breast, and the keynote of life is "not my will, but thine be done"; and while God gives back even Isaac, and gives His higher, better will to each of us, it is henceforth quite different. It is so linked with Him, and so mingled with our self-renunciation that it is no longer we, "but Christ that liveth in us." Thus must we learn to lay everything, not only the evil, but the good on His altar, and hold even our highest hopes and sweetest promises and divinest blessings and inmost life as His and all for Him, writing upon them: "Of Him, by Him and for Him are all things, to whom be glory forever and ever, Amen."

SECTION V -- The Marriage of Isaac.

The bridal of Isaac and the wooing of Rebekah is a sample of sacred romance as beautiful in its way as the story of Eve, and is as full of literary charm as it is of sacred meaning.

The fact that Isaac had but one bride in an age of polygamy was a marked type of his illustrious Antitype, the Lord Jesus Christ, who is gathering to Himself His one spiritual and beloved partner in the fellowship of His glory and His kingdom. Isaac's bride was chosen by the most deliberate counsel and care from his own kindred in distant Mesopotamia; so God is calling out of this remote world a people for his Son, and a race who are linked with Him by the kindred ties of His own blood. Eleazar, Abraham's servant, who was entrusted with the choice of the bride, is the striking type both by his name and character of the Holy Spirit, through whom God is calling and leading us to Christ. Like the faithful servant, the blessed Spirit comes on his long and distant journey to seek and find the soul that he is wooing. He meets us, as they met Rebekah, in our common life and in the simple incidents of our human experience, which often lead to the greatest decisions of life: like Rebekah at the well and the other woman in the parallel scene at Sychar. As he laid before Rebekah and her family the claims of Isaac, and spake not of himself, but of his master and his son, and all his wealth and glory, so the Holy Spirit hides Himself behind His work and message, and ever seeks to reveal to us the glory, and beauty, and the claims of Jesus. As Eleazar exhibited to Rebekah, and even placed upon her person some of the treasures which Isaac had sent, so the Spirit not only shows us, but gives us the precious things of Christ, and blesses us with the tokens of His love, even before our full betrothal and unconditional consecration. Like that ancient messenger He gently waits a little season for our answer, and then, like him, He presses the urgent call, "Wilt thou go with this man?" Like Rebekah we must each answer for ourselves. Christ will have no unwilling wedded ones, but demands our wholehearted and joyful surrender. "Hearken, O daughter, and consider" is His cry; "forget also thy kindred, and thy father's house: So shall the king greatly desire thy beauty." Rebekah's reply is as prompt and unequivocal as ours should ever be. "I will go," is the answer which links her forever with the most glorious hopes and destinies of humanity. She has nothing to give but simply herself; that is all He asks from us. Her very wedding robes, and even the veil in which she is to be presented to Isaac, were brought by the servant, and were presented to her before she meets her husband; and clothed in his robes, riding upon his camel, led by his servant, and wholly consecrated to be all his own, she goes forth to meet him.

What a procession! What a picture of our standing! Thus we, too, may wear the wedding garments ere we meet Him at the marriage. He asks from us no costly portion, but gives us all He requires from us. While we are told in one verse that "the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready," we are also told in the next it "was granted to her that she should robe in fine raiment, clean and white -- the righteousness of the saints." Her robes were "GRANTED TO HER" like Rebekah's, and, like ancient wedding garments, at the very door of the king's palace. We meet Him in His own beauty and character, and are accepted not for what we are, but for what he makes us and is made unto us. Sanctification, thus,

is all of grace, for "we are His workmanship, and created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God before hath PREPARED that we should walk in them."

Let us put on our heavenly raiment, and keep our garments with holy vigilance, "lest we walk naked, and they see our shame." And as when Rebekah beheld her lord approaching, she wrapped herself in his veil, and so met him with a token that he could not mistake, so when we shall come to our Master, may we be found not having our own righteousness, but that which is of the faith of Christ, wearing the robes which all heaven will recognize as the token of the bride of the Lamb.

The procession is at length nearing home, and Isaac had gone out to meet it. It is eventide, and others do not see the meeting fully, as, clasped in each other's arms, they enter the bridal tent, and Rebekah becomes the wife of the chosen seed, and the future mother of the Redeemer Himself. So, too, shall it be in a little while; we shall behold on the distant horizon the signs of home, but ere we reach it our blessed Lord will have hastened to meet us on the way. It may be the eventide of life. It will be the eventide of the world's history; and our meeting with Him in the air may not be seen by earth's busy myriads, but we shall know Him and He shall recognize us by the tokens He has given, by the robe we wear, and by the witness of the Holy Spirit who shall be with us still. Happy meeting! Blessed hope! True home! The eternal idea of every marriage feast and wedding veil and throb of earthly love. God grant we may be found in that happy company.

SECTION VI -- Isaac's Wells.

The later scenes of Isaac's life are not quite free from clouds. In an hour of trial and famine, he seems to have acted without divine counsel. He went down into the country of the Philistines, where he found abundance of food, and had an extraordinary measure of worldly prosperity, but where he had no recorded instance of the Divine presence, and met with continual trouble from the inhabitants of the land. There seems to be no doubt that in this he acted wrongly, and has become an example to us of the needless troubles and unavoidable spiritual loss which will ever follow even tacit disobedience, and the acting of our own wisdom, prudence and self-will. Isaac obeyed so far that he did not go down to Egypt; but he went a little out of the land. So we, without going into the world, may touch its spirit and get complicated with its entanglements in some things, and so have to learn Isaac's lesson.

The first trouble arose from the lack of water, and when they dug the necessary wells or rather opened the ancient wells of Abraham, their enemies strove with them, and claimed the prior right to them. The world will easily get the best of us when we fight it on forbidden ground. Isaac showed at least the power of grace in the spirit which he manifested, notwithstanding his mistake. He did not contend with them, but moved on from well to well, leaving them in possession, and calling the wells by the names suggested by his bitter experiences: "Contention," "Hatred," and finally "Room," when at length they let him alone. We shall always find room enough when we, like him, pursue a course of gentleness, and prefer a temporary sacrifice to an unseemly strife.

This quality of patience and endurance appeared more strongly in Isaac than any of the patriarchs, and had its real root in the self-sacrifice through which he had passed on Mount Moriah. So they who have died with Christ once for all, will not find it hard to die daily on the innumerable crosses of life's trials.

At length he moves entirely out of the land of his sojourning, and pitches his tent at Beer-sheba in the land of promise. Immediately, that very night, God appears to him in token of His approval, and renews with him His covenant, while his servant comes with the tidings that "afresh and invaluable well has just poured

out its abundant waters in the camp. They give it the name of the covenant that has just been renewed, and call it Beer-sheba, or "the well of the oath." So we shall find that a decisive return to the exact line of God's covenant will ever bring to us deliverance from our troubles, the presence of God, and the fountains of blessing.

Not only so, but the Philistines were glad to come to Beer-sheba and beg an alliance with Isaac and his tribe. The man whom they persecuted and asked to leave their presence while he was on their level, is sought for as a friend and counselor when he rises to his true place and separates himself from them. So we never can bless the world till we are separated from the world, and never can lift it up until we get on a higher level than its own. The men who are not afraid of losing their influence are the men whom God will give influence with others. The men who are willing to risk the loss of the world's friendship, for the sake of God, are the men to whom the world will go in its hour of need for comfort and help and heavenly blessing. Let us be true to God! Let us ever stand within the confines of our inheritance, and God will bless us and make us a blessing.

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