

Genesis 22:1-24

by John Calvin

John Calvin's sermon on Genesis 22:1-24 explores Abraham's profound faith and obedience in the face of God's command to sacrifice Isaac, highlighting God's provision and the promise of blessings.

Topics: "Faith And Obedience", "Trust In God"

Description

John Calvin preaches on the profound faith and obedience of Abraham when God tested him by commanding him to sacrifice his son Isaac. Despite the extreme trial, Abraham's unwavering faith in God's promises and providence led him to obey without hesitation, demonstrating his complete submission to God's will. Through this intense test, Abraham's love for God and his willingness to sacrifice his most precious possession exemplify the ultimate trust and devotion to God, inspiring us to trust in God's faithfulness even in the midst of our greatest challenges.

Transcript

1. And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am

1. Et fuit, posthaec Deus tentavit Abraham, et dixit ad eum, Abraham: qui dixit, Ecce ego.

2. And he said, 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 will tell thee of.

2. Et dixit, Tolle nunc filium tuum, unicum tuum, quem dilexisti Ishac, et vade ad terram Moriah, et offer eum ibi in holocaustum super unum e montibus, quem dixerero tibi.

3. And 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.

3. Et surrexit Abraham mane, et stravit asinum suum, et cepit duos pueros suos secum, et Ishac filium suum: et scidit ligna holocausti: et surrexit, perrexitque ad locum, quem dixerat ei Deus.

4. Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off.

4. Die tertia levavit Abraham oculos suos, et vidit locum procul.

5. And Abraham said unto his young men, Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you.

5. Et dixit Abraham ad pueros suos, Manete hic cum asino: et ego et puer pergemus usque illuc, et adorabimus, revertemurque ad vos.

6. And 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.

6. Et accepit Abraham ligna holocausti, et posuit super Ishac filium suum, et accepit in manu sua ignem et gladium, et perrexerunt ambo pariter

7. And Isaac spake unto Abraham his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?

7. Dixit autem Ishac ad Abraham patrem suum, dixit, inquam, Pater mi. Et dixit, Ecce ego fili mi. Et dixit, Ecce ignis et ligna, et ubi pecus in holocaustum?

8. And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together.

8. Et dixit Abraham, Deus prospiciet sibi pecudem in holocaustum, fili mi. Itaque perrexerunt ambo pariter.

9. And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood.

9. Et venerunt ad locum, quem dixerat ei Deus: et aedificavit ibi Abraham altare, et ordinavit ligna, et ligavit Ishac filium suum, et posuit eum super altare super ligna.

10. And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.

10. Et misit Abraham manum suam, et accepit gladium ut jugularet filium suum.

11. And the angel of the LORD called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I.

11. Et clamavit ad eum angelus Jehovae de coelo, et dixit, Abraham, Abraham. Et dixit, Ecce ego.

12. 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.

12. Et dixit, Ne extendas manum tuam in puerum, et ne facias ei quicquam: quia nunc cognovi quod times Deum, nec prohibuisti filium tuum unicum a me.

13. And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns: and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son.

13. Tunc levavit Abraham oculos suos, et vidit, et ecce aries post eum detentus in perplexitate spinarum cornibus suis: et perrexit Abraham, et accepit arietem, obtulitque eum in holocaustum pro filio suo.

14. And Abraham called the name of that place Jehovahjireh: as it is said to this day, In the mount of the LORD it shall be seen.

14. Et vocavit Abraham nomen loci ipsius, Jehova videbit: idcirco dicitur hodie, In monte Jehova videbit.

15. And the angel of the LORD called unto Abraham out of heaven the second time,

15. Et clamavit angelus Jehovae ad Abraham secundo e coelo,

16. 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 :

16. Et dixit, Per me juravi, dixit Jehova, certe pro eo quod fecistirem hanc, et non prohibuisti filium tuum unicum tuum:

17. 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;

17. Quod benedicendo benedicam tibi, et multiplicando multiplicabo semen tuum sicut stellas coeli, et sicut arenam, quae est juxta litus maris: et haereditabit semen tuum portam inimicorum suorum.

18. And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice.

18. Et benedicentur in semine tuo omnes gentes terrae, eo quod obedivisti voci meae.

19. So Abraham returned unto his young men, and they rose up and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham dwelt at Beersheba.

19. Postea reversus est Abraham ad pueros suos, et surrexerunt, perrexeruntque pariter in Beer-sebah, et habitavit Abraham in Beer-sebah.

20. And it came to pass after these things, that it was told Abraham, saying, Behold, Milcah, she hath also born children unto thy brother Nahor;

20. Et fuit, posthaec nuntiatum fuit ipsi Abraham, dicendo, Ecce, peperit Milchah etiam ipsa filios nachor fratri tuo.

21. Huz his firstborn, and Buz his brother, and Kemuel the father of Aram,

21. Hus primogenitum suum, et Buz fratrem ejus, et Cemuel patrem Aram,

22. And Chesed, and Hazo, and Pildash, and Jidlaph, and Bethuel.

22. Et Chesed, et Hazo, et Pildas, et Idlaph, et Bethuel:

23. And Bethuel begat Rebekah: these eight Milcah did bear to Nahor, Abraham's brother.

23. Et Bethuel genuit Ribcah: octo istos peperit Milchah ipsi nachor fratri Abraham.

24. And his concubine, whose name was Reumah, she bare also Tebah, and Gaham, and Thahash, and Maachah.

24. Et concubina ejus, cujus nomen Reumah, peperit etiam ipsa Tebah, et Gaham, et Thahas, et Mahachah.

1. And it came to pass . This chapter contains a most memorable narrative. For although Abraham, through the whole course of his life, gave astonishing proofs of faith and obedience, yet none more excellent can be imagined than the immolation of his son. For other temptations with which the Lord had exercised him, tended, indeed, to his mortification; but this inflicted a wound far more grievous than death itself. Here, however, we must consider something greater and higher than the paternal grief and anguish, which, being produced by the death of an only son, pierced through the breast of the holy man. It was sad for him to be deprived of his only son, sadder still that this son should be torn away by a violent death, but by far the most grievous that he himself should be appointed as the executioner to slay him with his own hand. Other circumstances, which will be noted in their proper place, I now omit. But all these things, if we compare them with the spiritual conflict of conscience which he endured, will appear like the mere play, or shadows of conflicts. For the great source of grief to him was not his own bereavement, not that he was commanded to slay his only heir, the hope of future memorial and of name, the glory and support of his family; but that, in the person of this son, the whole salvation of the world seemed to be extinguished and to perish. His contest, too, was not with his carnal passions, but, seeing that he wished to devote himself wholly to God, his very piety and religion filled him with distracting thoughts. For God, as if engaging in personal contest with him, requires the death of the boy, to whose person He himself had annexed the hope of eternal salvation. So that this latter command was, in a certain sense, the destruction of faith. This foretaste of the story before us, it was deemed useful to give to the readers, that they may reflect how deserving it is of diligent and constant meditation.

After these things God did tempt Abraham . The expression, after these things, is not to be restricted to his last vision; Moses rather intended to comprise in one word the various events by which Abraham had been tossed up and down; and again, the somewhat more quiet state of life which, in his old age, he had lately begun to obtain. He had passed an unsettled life in continued exile up to his eightieth year; having been harassed with many contumelies and injuries, he had endured with difficulty a miserable and anxious existence, in continual trepidation; famine had driven him out of the land whither he had gone, by the command and under the auspices of God, into Egypt. Twice his wife had been torn from his bosom; he had been separated from his nephew; he had delivered this nephew, when captured in war, at the peril of his own life. He had lived childless with his wife, when yet all his hopes were suspended upon his having offspring. Having at length obtained a son, he was compelled to disinherit him, and to drive him far from home. Isaac alone remained, his special but only consolation; he was enjoying peace at home, but now God suddenly thundered out of heaven, denouncing the sentence of death upon this son. The meaning, therefore, of the passage is, that by this temptation, as if by the last act, the faith of Abraham was far more severely tried than before.

God did tempt Abraham . James, in denying that any one is tempted by God, (Jas 1:13,) refutes the profane calumnies of those who, to exonerate themselves from the blame of their sins, attempt to fix the charge of them upon God. Wherefore, James truly contends, that those sins, of which we have the root in our own concupiscence, ought not to be charged upon another. For though Satan instils his poison, and fans the flame of our corrupt desires within us, we are yet not carried by any external force to the commission of sin; but our own flesh entices us, and we willingly yield to its allurements. This, however is no reason why God may not be said to tempt us in his own way, just as he tempted Abraham, -- that is, brought him to a severe test, -- that he might make full trial of the faith of his servant.

And said unto him . Moses points out the kind of temptation; namely, that God would shake the faith which the holy man had placed in His word , by a counter assault of the word itself. He therefore addresses him by name, that there may be no doubt respecting the Author of the command. For unless Abraham had been fully persuaded that it was the voice of God which commanded him to slay his son Isaac, he would have been easily released from anxiety; for, relying on the certain promise of God, he would have rejected the suggestion as the fallacy of Satan; and thus, without any difficulty, the temptation would have been shaken off. But now all occasion of doubt is removed; so that, without controversy, he acknowledges the oracle, which he hears, to be from God. Meanwhile, God, in a certain sense, assumes a double character, that, by the appearance of disagreement and repugnance in which He presents Himself in his word, he may distract and wound the breast of the holy man. For the only method of cherishing constancy of faith, is to apply all our senses to the word of God. But so great was then the discrepancy of the word, that it would wound and lacerate the faith of Abraham. Wherefore, there is great emphasis in the word, "said," 445 because God indeed made trial of Abraham's faith, not in the usual manner, but by drawing him into a contest with his own word. 446 Whatever temptations assail us, let us know that the victory is in our own hands, so long as we are endued with a firm faith; otherwise, we shall be, by no means, able to resist. If, when we are deprived of the sword of the Spirit, we are overcome, what would be our condition were God himself to attack us with the very sword, with which he had been wont to arm us? This, however, happened to Abraham. The manner in which Abraham, by faith, wrestled with this temptation, we shall afterwards see, in the proper place.

And he said, Behold, here I am . It hence appears that the holy man was, in no degree, afraid of the wiles of Satan. For the faithful are not in such haste to obey God, as to allow a foolish credulity to carry them away, in whatever direction the breath of a doubtful vision may blow. But when it was once clear to Abraham, that he was called by God, he testified, by this answer, his prompt desire to yield obedience. For the expression before us is as much as if he said, Whatever God may have been pleased to command, I am perfectly ready to carry into effect. And, truly, he does not wait till God should expressly enjoin this or the other thing, but promises that he will be simply, and without exception, obedient in all things. This, certainly, is true subjection, when we are prepared to act, before the will of God is known to us. We find, indeed, all men ready to boast that they will do as Abraham did; but when it comes to the trial, they shrink from the yoke of God. But the holy man, soon afterwards, proves, by his very act, how truly and seriously he had professed, that he, without delay, and without disputation, would subject himself to the hand of God.

2. Take now thy son . Abraham is commanded to immolate his son. If God had said nothing more than that his son should die, even this message would have most grievously wounded his mind; because, whatever favor he could hope for from God, was included in this single promise, In Isaac shall thy seed be called. Whence he necessarily inferred, that his own salvation, and that of the whole human race, would perish, unless Isaac remained in safety. For he was taught, by that word, that God would not be propitious to man without a Mediator.

For although the declaration of Paul, that 'all the promises of God in Christ are yea and Amen,' was not yet written, (2Co 1:20,) it was nevertheless engraven on the heart of Abraham. Whence, however, could he have had this hope, but from Isaac? The matter had come to this; that God would appear to have done nothing but mock him. Yet not only is the death of his son announced to him, but he is commanded with his own hand to slay him, as if he were required, not only to throw aside, but to cut in pieces, or cast into the fire, the charter of his salvation, and to have nothing left for himself, but death and hell.

But it may be asked, how, under the guidance of faith, he could be brought to sacrifice his son, seeing that what was proposed to him, was in opposition to that word of God, on which it is necessary for faith to rely? To this question the Apostle answers, that his confidence in the word of God remained unshaken; because he hoped that God would be able to cause the promised benediction to spring up, even out of the dead ashes of his son. (Heb 11:19.) His mind, however, must of necessity have been severely crushed, and violently agitated, when the command and the promise of God were conflicting within him.

But when he had come to the conclusion, that the God with whom he knew he had to do, could not be his adversary; although he did not immediately discover how the contradiction might be removed, he nevertheless, by hope, reconciled the command with the promise; because, being indubitably persuaded that God was faithful, he left the unknown issue to Divine Providence. Meanwhile, as with closed eyes, he goes whither he is directed. The truth of God deserves this honor; not only that it should far transcend all human means, or that it alone, even without means, should suffice us, but also that it should surmount all obstacles.

Here, then, we perceive, more clearly, the nature of the temptation which Moses has pointed out. It was difficult and painful to Abraham to forget that he was a father and a husband; to cast off all human affections; and to endure, before the world, the disgrace of shameful cruelty, by becoming the executioner of his son. But the other was a far more severe and horrible thing; namely, that he conceives God to contradict Himself and His own word; and then, that he supposes the hope of the promised blessing to be cut off from him, when Isaac is torn away from his embrace.

For what more could he have to do with God, when the only pledge of grace is taken away? But as before, when he expected seed from his own dead body, he, by hope, rose above what it seemed possible to hope for; so now, when, in the death of his son, he apprehends the quickening power of God, in such a manner, as to promise himself a blessing out of the ashes of his son, he emerges from the labyrinth of temptation; for, in order that he might obey God, it was necessary that he should tenaciously hold the promise, which, had it failed, faith must have perished.

But with him the promise always flourished; because he both firmly retained the love with which God had once embraced him, and subjected to the power of God everything which Satan raised up to disturb his mind. But he was unwilling to measure, by his own understanding, the method of fulfilling the promise, which he knew depended on the incomprehensible power of God. It remains for every one of us to apply this example to himself. The Lord, indeed, is so indulgent to our infirmity, that he does not thus severely and sharply try our faith: yet he intended, in the father of all the faithful, to propose an example by which he might call us to a general trial of faith.

For the faith, which is more precious than gold and silver, ought not to lie idle, without trial; and experience teaches, that each will be tried by God, according to the measure of his faith. At the same time, also, we may observe, that God tempts his servants, not only when he subdues the affections of the flesh, but when he reduces all their senses to nothing, that he may lead them to a complete renunciation of themselves.

Thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest . As if it were not enough to command in one word the sacrifice of his son, he pierces, as with fresh strokes, the mind of the holy man. By calling him his only son, he again irritates the wound recently indicted, by the banishment of the other son; he then looks forward into futurity, because no hope of offspring would remain. If the death of a firstborn son is wont to be grievous,

what must the mourning of Abraham be? Each word which follows is emphatical, and serves to aggravate his grief. 'Slay' (he says) 'him whom alone thou lovest.' And he does not here refer merely to his paternal love, but to that which sprung from faith. Abraham loved his son, not only as nature dictates, and as parents commonly do, who take delight in their children, but as beholding the paternal love of God in him: lastly, Isaac was the mirror of eternal life, and the pledge of all good things. Wherefore God seems not so much to assail the paternal love of Abraham, as to trample upon His own benevolence. There is equal emphasis in the name Isaac by which Abraham was taught, that nowhere besides did any joy remain for him. Certainly, when he who had been given as the occasion of joy, was taken away, it was just as if God should condemn Abraham to eternal torment. We must always remember that Isaac was not a son of the common order, but one in whose person the Mediator was promised.

Get thee into the land of Moriah . The bitterness of grief is not a little increased by this circumstance. For God does not require him to put his son immediately to death, but compels him to revolve this execution in his mind during three whole days, that in preparing himself to sacrifice his son, he may still more severely torture all his own senses. Besides, he does not even name the place where he requires that dire sacrifice to be offered, Upon one of the mountains, (he says,) that I will tell thee of. So before, when he, commanded him to leave his country he held his mind in suspense. But in this affair, the delay which most cruelly tormented the holy man, as if he had been stretched upon the rack, was still less tolerable. There was, however, a twofold use of this suspense. For there is nothing to which we are more prone than to be wise beyond our measure. Therefore, in order that we may become docile and obedient to God, it is profitable for us that we should be deprived of our own wisdom, and that nothing should be left us, but to resign ourselves to be led according to his will. Secondly, this tended also to make him persevere, so that he should not obey God by a merely sudden impulse. For, as he does not turn back in his journey, nor revolve conflicting counsels; it hence appears, that his love to God was confirmed by such constancy, that it could not be affected by any change of circumstances. Jerome explains the land of Moriah to be 'the land of vision,' as if the name had been derived from מִרְיָה (rahah .) But all who are skilled in the Hebrew language condemn this opinion. Nor am I better satisfied with those who interpret it the myrrh of God. 447 It is certainly acknowledged by the consent of the greater part, that it is derived from the word יָרַח (yarah ,) which signifies to teach or from יָרַי (yarai ,) which signifies to fear . There is, however, even at this time, a difference among interpreters, some thinking that the doctrine of God is here specially inculcated. Let us follow the most probable opinion; namely, that it is called the land of divine worship, either because God had appointed it for the offering of the sacrifice, in order that Abraham might not dispute whether some other place should not rather be chosen; or because the place for the temple was already fixed there; and I rather adopt this second explanation; that God there required a present worship from his servant Abraham, because already in his secret counsel, he had determined in that place to fix his ordinary worship. And sacrifices properly receive their name from the word which signifies fear , because they give proof of reverence to God. Moreover, it is by no means doubtful that this is the place where the temple was. afterwards built. 448

3. And Abraham rose up early in the morning. This promptitude shows the greatness of Abraham's faith. Innumerable thoughts might come into the mind of the holy man; each of which would have overwhelmed his spirit, unless he had fortified it by faith. And there is no doubt that Satan, during the darkness of the night, would heap upon him a vast mass of cares. Gradually to overcome them, by contending with them, was the part of heroic courage. But when they were overcome, then immediately to gird himself to the fulfillment of the command of God, and even to rise early in the morning to do it, was a remarkable effort. Other men, prostrated by a message so dire and terrible, would have fainted, and have lain torpid, as if

deprived of life; but the first dawn of morning was scarcely early enough for Abraham's haste. Therefore, in a few words, Moses highly extols his faith, when he declares that it surmounted, in so short a space of time, the very temptation which was attended with many labyrinths.

4. And saw the place . He saw, indeed, with his eyes, the place which before had been shown him in secret vision. But when it is said, that he lifted up his eyes, Moses doubtless signifies, that he had been very anxious during the whole of the three days. In commanding his servants to remain behind, he does it that they may not lay their hands upon him, as upon a delirious and insane old man. And herein his magnanimity appears, that he ties his thoughts so well composed and tranquil, as to do nothing in an agitated manner. When, however, he says, that he will return with the boy, he seems not to be free from dissimulation and falsehood. Some think that he uttered this declaration prophetically; but since it is certain that he never lost sight of what had been promised concerning the raising up of seed in Isaac, it may be, that he, trusting in the providence of God, figured to himself his son as surviving even in death itself. And seeing that he went, as with closed eyes, to the slaughter of his son, there is nothing improbable in the supposition, that he spoke confusedly, in a matter so obscure.

7. My father . God produces here a new instrument of torture, by which he may, more and more, torment the breast of Abraham, already pierced with so many wounds. And it is not to be doubted, that God designedly both framed the tongue of Isaac to this tender appellation, and directed it to this question, in order that nothing might be wanting to the extreme severity of Abraham's grief. Yet the holy man sustains even this attack with invincible courage; and is so far from being disturbed in his proposed course, that he shows himself to be entirely devoted to God, hearkening to nothing which should either shake his confidence, or hinder his obedience. But it is important to notice the manner in which he unties this inextricable knot; namely, by taking refuge in Divine Providence, God will provide himself a lamb. This example is proposed for our imitation. Whenever the Lord gives a command, many things are perpetually occurring to enfeeble our purpose: means fail, we are destitute of counsel, all avenues seem closed. In such straits, the only remedy against despondency is, to leave the event to God, in order that he may open a way for us where there is none. For as we act unjustly towards Gods when we hope for nothing from him but what our senses can perceive, so we pay Him the highest honor, when, in affairs of perplexity, we nevertheless entirely acquiesce in his providence.

8. So they went both of them together . Here we perceive both the constancy of Abraham, and the modesty of his son. For Abraham is not rendered more remiss by this obstacles and the son does not persist in replying to his father's answer. For he might easily have objected, Wherefore have we brought wood and the knife without a lamb, if God has commanded sacrifices to be made to him? But because he supposes that the victim has been omitted, for some valid reason, and not through his father's forgetfulness, he acquiesces, and is silent.

9. And they came to the place . Moses purposely passes over many things, which, nevertheless, the reader ought to consider. When he has mentioned the building of the altar, he immediately afterwards adds, that Isaac was bound. But we know that he was then of middle age, so that he might either be more powerful than his father, or, at least, equal to resist him, if they had to contend by force; wherefore, I do not think that force was employed against the youth, as against one struggling and unwilling to die: but rather, that he voluntarily surrendered himself. It was, however, scarcely possible that he would offer himself to death, unless he had been already made acquainted with the divine oracle: but Moses, passing by this, only recites that he was bound. Should any one object, that there was no necessity to bind one who willingly offered himself to death; I answer, that the holy man anticipated, in this way, a possible danger;

lest any thing might happen in the midst of the act to interrupt it. The simplicity of the narrative of Moses is wonderful; but it has greater force than the most exaggerated tragical description. The sum of the whole turns on this point; that Abraham, when he had to slay his son, remained always like himself; and that the fortitude of his mind was such as to render his aged hand equal to the task of offering a sacrifice, the very sight of which was enough to dissolve and to destroy his whole body.

11. And the angel of the Lord called unto him . The inward temptation had been already overcome, when Abraham intrepidly raised his hand to slay his son; and it was by the special grace of God that he obtained so signal a victory. But now Moses subjoins, that suddenly beyond all hope, his sorrow was changed into joy. Poets, in their fables, when affairs are desperate, introduce some god who, unexpectedly, appears at the critical juncture. It is possible that Satan, by figments of this kind, has endeavored to obscure the wonderful and stupendous interpositions of God, when he has unexpectedly appeared for the purpose of bringing assistance to his servants. This history ought certainly to be known and celebrated among all people; yet, by the subtlety of Satan, not only has the truth of God been adulterated and turned into a lie, but also distorted into materials for fable, in order to render it the more ridiculous. But it is our business, with earnest minds to consider how wonderfully God, in the very article of death, both recalled Isaac from death to life, and restored to Abraham his son, as one who had risen from the tomb. Moses also describes the voice of the angel, as having sounded out of heaven, to give assurance to Abraham that he had come from God, in order that he might withdraw his hand, under the direction of the same faith by which he had stretched it out. For, in a cause of such magnitude, it was not lawful for him either to undertake or to relinquish anything, except under the authority of God. Let us, therefore, learn from his example, by no means, to pursue what our carnal sense may declare to be, probably, our right course; but let God, by his sole will, prescribe to us our manner of acting and of ceasing to act. And truly Abraham does not charge God with inconstancy, because he considers that there had been just cause for the exercising of his faith.

12. Now I know that thou fearest God . The exposition of Augustine, 'I have caused thee to know,' is forced. But how can any thing become known to God, to whom all things have always been present? Truly, by condescending to the manner of men, God here says that what he has proved by experiment, is now made known to himself. And he speaks thus with us, not according to his own infinite wisdom, but according to our infirmity. Moses, however, simply means that Abraham, by this very act, testified how reverently he feared God. It is however asked, whether he had not already, on former occasions, given many proofs of his piety? I answer that when God had willed him to proceed thus far, he had, at length, completed his true trial; in other persons a much lighter trial might have been sufficient. 449 And as Abraham showed that he feared God, by not sparing his own, and only begotten son; so a common testimony of the same fear is required from all the pious, in acts of self-denial. Now since God enjoys upon us a continual warfare, we must take care that none desires his release before the time.

13. And, behold, behind him a ram . What the Jews feign respecting this ram, as having been created on the sixth day of the world, is like the rest of their fictions. We need not doubt that it was presented there by miracle, whether it was then first created, or whether it was brought from some other place; for God intended to give that to his servant which would enable him, with joy and cheerfulness, to offer up a pleasant sacrifice: and at the same time he admonishes him to return thanks. Moreover, since a ram is substituted in the place of Isaac, God shows us, as in a glass, what is the design of our mortification; namely, that by the Spirit of God dwelling within us, we, though dead, may yet be living sacrifices. I am not ignorant that more subtle allegories may be elicited; but I do not see on what foundation they rest.

14. And Abraham called the name of that place . He not only, by the act of thanksgiving, acknowledges, at the time, that God has, in a remarkable manner, provided for him; but also leaves a monument of his gratitude to posterity. In most extreme anxiety, he had fled for refuge to the providence of God; and he testifies that he had not done so in vain. He also acknowledges that not even the ram had wandered thither accidentally, but had been placed there by God. Whereas, in process of time, the name of the place was changed, this was done purposely, and not by mistake. For they who have translated the active verb, 'He will see,' passively, have wished, in this manner, to teach that God not only looks upon those who are his, but also makes his help manifest to them; so that, in turn, he may be seen by them. The former has precedence in order; namely, that God, by his secret providence, determines and ordains what is best for us; but on this, the latter is suspended; namely, that he stretches out his hand to us, and renders himself visible by true experimental tokens.

15. And the angel of the Lord called unto Abraham . What God had promised to Abraham before Isaac was born, he now again confirms and ratifies, after Isaac was restored to life, and arose from the altar, -- as if it had been from the sepulcher, -- to achieve a more complete triumph. The angel speaks in the person of God; in order that, as we have before said, the embassy of those who bear his name, may have the greater authority, by their being clothed with his majesty. These two things, however, are thought to be hardly consistent with each other; that what before was gratuitously promised, should here be deemed a reward. For we know that grace and reward are incompatible. Now, however, since the benediction which is promised in the seed, contains the hope of salvation, it may seem to follow that eternal life is given in return for good works. And the Papists boldly seize upon this, and similar passages, in order to prove that works are deserving of all the good things which God confers upon us. But I most readily retort this subtle argument upon those who bring it. For if that promise was before gratuitous, which is now ascribed to a reward; it appears that whatever God grants to good works, ought to be received as from grace. certainly, before Isaac was born, this same promise had been already given; and now it receives nothing more than confirmation. If Abraham deserved a compensation so great, on account of his own virtue, the grace of God, which anticipated him, will be of none effect. Therefore, in order that the truth of God, founded upon his gratuitous kindness, may stand firm, we must of necessity conclude, that what is freely given, is yet called the reward of works. Not that God would obscure the glory of his goodness, or in any way diminish it; but only that he may excite his own people to the love of well-doing, when they perceive that their acts of duty are so far pleasing to him, as to obtain a reward; while yet he pays nothing as a debt, but gives to his own benefits the title of a reward. And in this there is no inconsistency. For the Lord here shows himself doubly liberal; in that he, wishing to stimulate us to holy living, transfers to our works what properly belongs to his pure beneficence. The Papists, therefore, wrongfully distort those benignant invitations of God, by which he would correct our torpor, to a different purpose, in order that man may arrogate to his own merits, what is the mere gift of divine liberality.

17. Thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies. He means that the offspring of Abraham should be victorious over their enemies; for in the gates were their bulwarks, and in them they administered judgment. Now, although God often suffered the enemies of the Jews tyrannically to rule over them; yet he so moderated their revenge, that this promise always prevailed in the end. Moreover, we must remember what has before been stated from Paul, concerning the unity of the seed; for we hence infer, that the victory is promised, not to the sons of Abraham promiscuously, but to Christ, and to his members, so far as they adhere together under one Head. For unless we retain some mark which may distinguish between the legitimate and the degenerate sons of Abraham, this promise will indiscriminately comprehend, as well the Ishmaelites and Idumeans, as the people of Israel: but the unity of a people depends on its head.

Therefore the prophets, whenever they wish to confirm this promise of God, assume the principle, that they who have hitherto been divided, shall be united, under David, in one body. What further pertains to this subject may be found in the twelfth chapter Ge 12:1

19. And they rose up, and went together to Beer-sheba . Moses repeats, that Abraham, after having passed through this severe and incredible temptation, had a quiet abode in Beersheba. This narration is inserted, together with what follows concerning the increase of Abraham's kindred, for the purpose of showing that the holy man, when he had been brought up again from the abyss of death, was made happy, in more ways than one. For God would so revive him, that he should be like a new man. Moses also records the progeny of Nahor, but for another reason; namely, because Isaac was to take his wife from it. For the mention of women in Scripture is rare; and it is credible that many daughters were born to Nahor, of whom one only, Rebekah, is here introduced. He distinguishes the sons of the concubine from the others; because they occupied a less honorable place. Not that the concubine was regarded as a harlot; but because she was an inferior wife, and not the mistress of the house, who had community of goods with her husband. The fact, however, that it entered into Nahor's mind to take a second wife, does not render polygamy lawful; it only shows, that from the custom of other men, he supposed that to be lawful for him, which had really sprung from the worst corruption.

Footnotes

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"Quare magna subest emphasis verbo loquendi."

446

God's usual manner of trying the faith of his people is, by causing the dispensations of his providence apparently to contradict his word, and requiring them still to rely upon that word, notwithstanding the apparent inconsistency. But in Abraham's trial, He proposed a test far more severe. For His own command, or word, was in direct contradiction to what he had before spoken; His injunction respecting the slaying of Isaac could, by no human method of reasoning, be reconciled to his promises respecting the future destinies of Abraham's family, of the Church, and of the world. -- Ed.

447

This extraordinary interpretation is supposed to be sanctioned by Canticles 4:6, "I will get me to the mountain of myrrh, and to the hill of frankincense." -- Vide Poli Syn. in loc. -- Ed.

448

It may be doubted whether the interpretation of Jerome, which Calvin rejects, is not preferable to that which he adopts. From the subsequent explanation in verse 14, it seems highly probable, that 'the land of vision' is the true explanation of the term in question. But even this admits of a double construction. The Septuagint calls it 'the high land,' as if it were merely conspicuous on account of its elevation -- the land that might be seen afar off. But a more suitable interpretation seems to be, that it was the land favored by the vision of divine glory, the spot on which the angel of Jehovah appeared to David, and on which the temple was built by Solomon. -- Ed.

449

"Respondeo, quando hucusque eum progredi volebat Deus, tunc vera demum probatione, quae in aliis multo levior sufficeret, defunctum esse." -- "Je respond que Dieu vouloit qu'il poursuivist jusques la; et que lors finalement, il s'est acquitte de son espreuve, laquelle eust este beaucoup legere en d'auctres, et eust bien suffi." -- French Tr

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