

TALMAGE'S SERMON.

STORY OF THE HEROIC RESCUE OF ISAAC.

Golden Text: Behold the Fire and the Wood, But Where is the Lamb?—Gen 22-7 Abraham's Supreme Trial—Delivered Oct. 13, 1895.



HERE are Abraham and Isaac: the one a kind, old, gracious, affectionate father; the other a brave, obedient, religious son. From his bronzed appearance you can tell that this son has been much in the fields, and from his shaggy dress you know that he has been watching the herds. The mountain air has painted his cheek rufous. He is twenty, or twenty-five, or, as some suppose, thirty-three years of age; nevertheless a boy, considering the length of life to which people lived in those times, and the fact that a son never is anything but a boy to a father. I remember that my father used to come into the house when the children were home on some festive occasion, and say: "Where are the boys?" although "the boys" were twenty-five, and thirty, and thirty-five years of age. So this Isaac is only a boy to Abraham, and his father's heart is in him. It is Isaac here and Isaac there. If there is any festivity around the father's tent, Isaac must enjoy it. It is Isaac's walk, and Isaac's apparel, and Isaac's manners, and Isaac's prospects, and Isaac's prosperity. The father's heart-strings are all wrapped around that boy, and wrapped again, until nine-tenths of the old man's life is in Isaac. I can just imagine how lovingly and proudly he looked at his only son.

Well, the dear old man had borne a great deal of trouble, and it had left its mark upon him. In hieroglyphics of wrinkle the story was written from forehead to chin. But now his trouble seems all gone, and we are glad that he is very soon to rest forever. If the old man shall get decrepit, Isaac is strong enough to wait on him. If the father get dim of eyesight, Isaac will lead him by the hand. If the father become destitute, Isaac will earn him bread. How glad we are that the ship that has been in such a stormy sea is coming at last into the harbor. Are you not rejoiced that glorious old Abraham is through with his troubles? No! no! A thunderbolt! From that clear eastern sky there drops into this father's tent a voice with an announcement enough to turn black hair white, and to stun the patriarch into instant annihilation. God said: "Abraham!" The old man answered: "Here I am." God said to him: "Take thy son, thy only son, Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt-offering." In other words, slay him; cut his body into fragments; put the fragments on the wood; set fire to the wood, and let Isaac's body be consumed to ashes.

"Cannibalism! Murder!" says some one. "Not so," said Abraham. I hear him soliloquize: "Here is the boy on whom I have depended! Oh, how I loved him! He was given in answer to prayer, and now must I surrender him? O Isaac, my son! Isaac, how shall I part with you? But then it is always safer to do as God asks me to; I have been in dark places before, and God got me out. I will implicitly do as God has told me, although it is very dark. I can't see my way, but I know God makes no mistakes, and to him I commit myself and my darling son." Early in the morning there is a stir around Abraham's tent. A beast of burden is fed and saddled. Abraham makes no disclosure of the awful secret. At the break of day he says: "Come, come, Isaac, get up! We are going off on a two or three days' journey." I hear the axe hewing and splitting amid the wood until the sticks are made the right length and the right thickness, and then they are fastened on the beast of burden. They pass on—there are four of them—Abraham, the father; Isaac, the son; and two servants. Going along the road, I see Isaac looking up into his father's face, and saying: "Father, what is the matter? Are you not well? Has anything happened? Are you tired? Lean on my arm." Then, turning around to the servants, the son says: "Ah! father is getting old, and he has had trouble enough in other days to kill him."

The third morning has come, and it is the day of the tragedy. The two servants are left with the beast of burden, while Abraham and his son Isaac, as was the custom of good people in those times, went up on the hill to sacrifice to the Lord. The wood is taken off the beast's back, and put on Isaac's back. Abraham has in one hand a pan of coals or a lamp, and in the other a sharp, keen knife. Here are all the appliances for sacrifice, you say. No, there is one thing wanting; there is no victim—no pigeon, or heifer, or lamb. Isaac, not knowing that he is to be the victim, looks up into his father's face, and asks a question which must have cut the old man to the bone: "My father!" The father said: "My son, Isaac, here I am." The son said: "Behold the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb?" The father's lip quivered, and his heart faint, and his knees knocked together, and his entire body, mind and soul shivered in sickening anguish as he struggles to gain equipoise; for he does not want to break down. And then he looks into his son's face, with a thousand rushing tendernesses, and says: "My son, God will provide himself a lamb."

The twin are now at the foot of the hill, the place which is to be famous for a most transcendent occurrence. They gather some stones out of the field, and build an altar of three or four feet high. Then they take this wood off Isaac's back and sprinkle it over the stones, so as to help and assist the flame. The altar is done—it is all done. Isaac has helped to build it. With his father he has discussed whether the top of the table is even, and whether the wood is properly prepared. Then there is a pause. The son looks around to see if there is not some living animal that can be caught and butchered for the offering. Abraham tries to choke down his fatherly feelings and suppress his grief, in order that he may break his son the terrific news that he is to be the victim. Ah! Isaac never looked more beautiful than on that day to his father. As the old man ran his emaciated fingers through his son's hair, he said to himself: "How shall I give him up? What will his mother say when I come back without my boy? I thought he would have been the comfort of my declining days. I thought he would have been the hope of ages to come. Beautiful and loving, and yet to die under my own hand. Oh, God! is there not some other sacrifice that will do? Take my life, and spare his! Pour out my blood, and save Isaac for his mother and the world!" But this was an inward struggle. The father controls his feelings, and looks into his son's face, and says: "Isaac, must I tell you all?" His son said: "Yes, father. I thought you had something on your mind; tell it." The father said: "My son, Isaac, thou art the lamb?" "Oh," you say, "why didn't that young man, if he was twenty or thirty years of age, smile into the dust his infirm father? He could have done it." Ah! Isaac knew by this time that the scene was typical of a Messiah who was to come, and so he made no struggle. They fell on each other's necks, and wailed out the parting. Awful and matchless scene of the wilderness. The rocks echo back the breaking of their hearts. The cry: "My son! my son!" The answer: "My father! my father!" Do not compare this, as some people have, to Agamemnon, willing to offer up his daughter, Iphigenia, to please the gods. There is nothing comparable to this wonderful obedience to the true God. You know that victims for sacrifice were always bound, so that they might not struggle away. Rawlings, the martyr, when he was dying for Christ's sake, said to the blacksmith who held the manacles: "Fasten those chains tight now, for my flesh may struggle mightily." So Isaac's arms are fastened, his feet are tied. The old man, rallying all his strength, lifts him on to a pile of wood. Fastening a thong on one side of the altar, he makes it span the body of Isaac, and fastens the thong at the other side of the altar, and another thong, and another thong. There is the lamp flickering in the wind, ready to be put under the brush-wood of the altar. There is the knife, sharp and keen. Abraham, struggling with his mortal feelings on the one side, and the commands of God on the other—takes that knife, rubs the flat of it on the palm of his hand, cries to God for help, comes up to the side of the altar, puts a parting kiss on the brow of his boy, takes a message from him for mother and home, and then, lifting the glittering weapon for the plunge of the death-stroke—his muscles knitting for the work—the hand begins to descend. It falls! Not on the heart of Isaac, but on the arm of God, who arrests the stroke, making the wilderness quake with the cry: "Abraham! Abraham! lay not thy hand upon the lad, nor do him any harm!" What is this sound back in the woods? It is a crackling as of tree branches, a bleating and a struggle. Go, Abraham, and see what it is. Oh, it was a ram that, going through the woods, has its crooked horns fastened and entangled in the brushwood, and could not get loose; and Abraham seizes it gladly, and quickly unloosens Isaac from the altar, puts the ram on in his place, sets the lamp under the brushwood of the altar, and as the dense smoke of the sacrifice begins to rise, the blood rolls down the sides of the altar, and drops hissing into the fire, and I hear the words: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

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Well, what are you going to get out of this? There is an aged minister of the Gospel. He says: "I should get out of it that when God tells you to do a thing, whether it seems reasonable to you or not, go ahead and do it. Here Abraham couldn't have been mistaken. God didn't speak so indistinctly that it was not certain whether he called Sarah, or Abimelech, or somebody else; but with divine articulation, divine intonation, divine emphasis, he said: 'Abraham!' Abraham rushed blindly ahead to do his duty, knowing that things would come out right. Likewise do so yourselves." There is a mystery of your life. There is some burden you have to carry. You don't know why God has put it on you. There is some persecution, some trial, and you don't know why God allows it. There is a work for you to do, and you have not enough grace, you think, to do it. Do as Abraham did. Advance, and do your whole duty. Be willing to give up Isaac, and perhaps you will not have to give up anything. "Jehovah-jireh—the Lord will provide." A capital lesson this old minister gives us. Out yonder, in this house, is an aged woman; the light of heaven in her face; she is half-way through the door; she has her hand on the pearl of the gate. Mother, what would you get out of this subject? "Oh," she says, "I would learn that it is in the last pinch that God comes to the relief. You see the altar was ready, and Isaac was fastened on it, and the knife was lifted; and just at the last moment God broke in and stopped proceedings. So it has been

in my life of seventy years. Why, sir, there was a time when the flour was all out of the house; and I set the table at noon and had nothing to put on it; but five minutes of one o'clock a loaf of bread came. The Lord will provide. My son was very sick, and I said: 'Dear Lord, you don't mean to takt 'im away from me, do you? Please, L. rd, don't take him away. Why, there are neighbors who have three and four sons; this is my only son; this is my Isaac. Lord, you won't take him away from me, will you?' But I saw he was getting worse and worse all the time, and I turned round and prayed, until after awhile I felt submissive, and I could say: 'Thy will, O Lord, be done!' The doctors gave him up. And, as was the custom in those times, we had made the grave-clothes, and we were whispering about the last exercises when I looked, and I saw some perspiration on his brow, showing that the fever had broken, and he spoke to us so naturally, that I knew that he was going to get well. He did get well, and my son Isaac, whom I thought was going to be slain and consumed of disease, was loosened from that altar. And bless your souls, that's been so for seventy years; and if my voice were not so weak, and if I could see better, I could preach to you younger people a sermon; for though I can't see much, I can see this: whenever you get into a tough place, and your heart is breaking, if you will look a little farther into the woods, you will see, caught in the branches, a substitute and a deliverance. 'My son, God will provide himself a lamb.'

Thank you, mother, for that short sermon. I could preach back to you for a minute or two and say, never do you fear. I wish I had half as good hope of heaven as you have. Do not fear, mother; whatever happens, no harm will ever happen to you. I was going up a long flight of stairs; and I saw an aged woman, very decrepit, and with a cane, creeping on up. She made but very little progress, and I felt very exuberant; and I said to her: "Why, mother, that is no way to go up-stairs;" and I threw my arms around her and I carried her up and put her down on the landing at the top of the stairs. She said: "Thank you, thank you; I am very thankful." O mother, when you get through this life's work and you want to go up-stairs and rest in the good place that God has provided for you, you will not have to climb up—you will not have to crawl up painfully. The two arms that were stretched on the cross will be flung around you, and you will be hoisted with a glorious lift beyond all weariness and all struggle. May the God of Abraham and Isaac be with you until you see the Lamb on the hill-tops.

Now, that aged minister has made a suggestion, and this aged woman has made a suggestion; I will make a suggestion: Isaac going up the hill makes me think of the great sacrifice, Isaac, the only son of Abraham. Jesus, the only Son of God. On those two "onlys" I build a tearful emphasis. O Isaac! O Jesus! But this last sacrifice was a most tremendous one. When the knife was lifted over Calvary, there was no voice that cried "Stop!" and no hand arrested it. Sharp, keen, and tremendous, it cut down through nerve and artery until the blood sprayed the faces of the executioners, and the mid-day sun dropped a veil of cloud over its face because it could not endure the spectacle. O Isaac, of Mount Moriah! O Jesus, of Mount Calvary! Better could God have thrown away into annihilation a thousand worlds than to have sacrificed his only Son. It was not one of ten sons—it was his only Son. If he had not given up him, you and I would have perished. "God so loved the world that he gave his only—" I stop there, not because I have forgotten the quotation, but because I want to think. "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Great God! break my heart at the thought of that sacrifice. Isaac the only, typical of Jesus the Only.

You see Isaac going up the hill and carrying the wood. O Abraham, why not take the load off the boy? If he is going to die so soon, why not make his last hours easy? Abraham knew that in carrying that wood up Mount Moriah, Isaac was to be a symbol of Christ carrying his own cross up Calvary. I do not know how heavy that cross was—whether it was made of oak, or acacia, or Lebanon cedar. I suppose it may have weighed one, or two, or three hundred pounds. That was the lightest part of the burden. All the sins and sorrows of the world were wound around that cross. The heft of one, the heft of two worlds: earth and hell were on his shoulders. O Isaac, carrying the wood of sacrifice up Mount Moriah. O Jesus, carrying the wood of sacrifice up Mount Calvary, the agonies of earth and hell wrapped around that cross. I shall never see the heavy load on Isaac's back, that I shall not think of the crushing load on Christ's back. For whom that load? For you. For you. For me. For me. Would that all the tears that we have ever wept over our sorrows had been saved until this morning, and that we might now pour them out on the lacerated back and feet and heart of the Son of God.

C. S. Phelps and Henry Burden of Ottawa, Ill., were killed by a train near that place. Christopher Dalton died in jail at Nevada, Mo., of consumption. A handsome female photographer ought to do a good business with her taking ways. It is as easy for some men to be witty as it is difficult for some to be otherwise than dull. "Never play at any game of chance." The man who hides four aces in his sleeve observes this rule. A courtesy or kindness on the part of a stranger should be received in the spirit in which it is meant.

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