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The School of Sonship

by T. Austin-Sparks

Edited and supplied by the Golden Candlestick Trust.

Reading: Gen. 12:1-2,7-10; 13:1,3,4; 17:1-8,19; 18:13-14.

The key to the life of Abraham is that word "sonship". What was the immediate net result of Abraham's life on earth? Well, God found him in Ur of the Chaldees, ordered him to get out, to go to another land. He did it, he arrived there, took a brief survey, found difficulties, cleared out, had to go back again and start wandering about, up and down; various incidents coming into the course of things. The Lord appeared to him, said a lot of wonderful things, made promises and covenants. Abraham went through some deep trying experiences and getting to know the Lord in a deep way, reached the place where he could be called "the friend of God", and died and was buried. What is the result of it all? Only one thing - Isaac, and that was what he went through everything for. The upshot of his whole life was sonship in the true spiritual and Divine sense, not in any earthly sense, but sonship according to God's mind, and thus you have to take everything in Abraham's life as related to sonship, sonship being its inception and its objective.

Service and Sonship

I do not think anyone will doubt that Abraham was a great servant of God. Now looking back from this present standpoint, taking in all the generations and all the centuries from Abraham's day till now, we have to say that Abraham has proved to be a very profitable servant, for Christ came of the seed of Abraham and all the values of Christ are in Abraham's life. If that is true, if Abraham has served God's purposes so wonderfully, then we have one more great emphasis upon this, that

service is bound up with sonship and what is meant by sonship spiritually is that which serves God most fully.

Faith and Sonship

There are some things in Abraham's life, as of course in the life of everyone called into this true service of sonship, which are the governing things. There is that one foremost thing which we always associate with Abraham - faith.

The Lord said that He would give Abraham a son and told him that he should call his name Isaac, and Isaac means "to laugh". When the announcement was made, Sarah laughed the laugh of ridicule, and the Lord said, "Wherefore did Sarah laugh? Is anything too hard for the Lord?" Abraham believed God and the laugh of ridicule was turned into the laugh of triumphant accomplishment and that is the outworking of faith. Faith stands over against that which nature says is far too hard even for the Lord. Faith laughs at impossibilities and cries, 'It shall be done!' Isaac, sonship, is the embodiment of the laugh of triumphant faith over against all that is said by nature to be too hard even for the Lord. Isaac does no great exploits; he re-digs a few wells and just quietly walks about the earth saying, "I am here, but my being here means that the laugh of ridicule because of the utter impossibility has been wiped out. God has done it." That is sonship.

That is what God is doing with you and me, and with all those who are really put into His hands for Him to reach His end in them. He brings us into situations and to times when everything says, 'It is impossible! It is too late! It cannot be! Even God could not do this!' Then it becomes a living actuality that simply says to you afterwards, 'Here I am!' It is a terrible thing while we are going through it. Faith is subjected to the most terrible testings in order to get to that end of sonship.

The First Test of Faith

Now, there is this point about Abraham's tests of faith. His first step of obedience was quite spontaneous and without difficulty. He got an assurance and he moved out on it, but when he got to the place which had been mentioned, I suppose the first thing that he was conscious of was a question as to whether he had really got to it, whether he had not made a mistake. The Canaanite was in the land, and there was a mighty famine. There was nothing there prepared for him at all. He simply found himself in a desolation and the first test of faith is, "Well, am I after all mistaken? Have I taken the wrong course, have I missed the way somewhere?"

Now note: Abraham built an altar. He got over those initial difficulties by planting something which says in effect, "I take this land in the Name of the Lord." An altar always means something is made God's, and faith triumphed against the appearances for the moment, and said, "I take this for God."

Deviations in the School of Sonship

But then he moved, and the famine was everywhere, the trial intensified, and he went down to Egypt. He deviated under the trial. His faith for the moment failed. You know what happened in Egypt. He got into greater difficulty and did not find the Lord there, and had to go back again, back to his altar. Abraham deviated more than once by wavering faith. He deviated a little later on and found himself in difficulties again, having to use deception to get out of trouble. He deviated over Hagar and Ishmael, but the point is this: God never accepted any deviations. The Lord came back

every time to the point - sonship. "I am not accepting your Ishmael! I am not accepting your alternatives! I stand here, I hold you to this! There are no deviations." God never moved away from His purpose - and that was Isaac.

Now, in this School of Sonship, we all have our deviations. Faith sometimes gives way; we let in a question and that question, like the thin edge of a wedge, is driven home until we find there is a gap between us and the Lord and the question is ever making that breach wider. Everything seems so contrary to what we might expect if we took the sacrificial path of consecration to the Lord and obedience to His indicated will. It might be there is a question which is causing growing uncertainty, unrest, loss of joy, getting you simply moving round that circle occupied with the problem of the situation. It is written for us in the life of this servant of God - the way of sonship is this way, and the absence of proofs and evidences, the stripping off of all that realm of things to give outward assurance that we are right, is all of a piece with what God is doing to bring forth sonship. This is the true test of faith. Do we, after all, believe God as being faithful apart from any of the evidences given by Him as to His faithfulness? Abraham never possessed that land. Up to the day of his death he was still looking for a city which hath foundations. But the greatest of all achievements was accomplished in him by God, and he stands as the father of the faithful. Everything dates back to Abraham's faith. Those who have gone the way of Abraham in the School of Sonship, who have been brought to know God along the line of faith's deepest testing and proving, are those who have got the substance of things, who have resources for really spiritual service.

I wonder how many of you know something about these deviations and what they mean in the inward life? Deviation because of a doubt. You are out of the way and you know it. What are you going to do? God is never coming down to us in our Egypt. If we go down there, the Lord is not coming after us. We have got to come back to the altar where our tent was first pitched in relation to God's purpose, back to the point where we went off. The Lord remains by His altar, and we have to come back and call upon the Name of the Lord there.

The Lord has set His heart upon sonship and the way of sonship is faith. Egypt is an alternative to faith; Egypt is the realm of things seen. You may get, just for the time being, what you sought in Egypt, but so far as the Lord's supreme purpose in your life is concerned, you have missed it. The only thing to do is to get back.

Resurrection and Sonship

Faith's supreme triumph is seen in resurrection. That is the issue of Abraham's life. Isaac is given, but even Isaac becomes an occasion and means of a new test of faith. "Take now thy son and offer him". But the apostle tells us that he received him back as from the dead by faith. He accounted that God was able to raise the dead. Faith went on to resurrection, and sonship, standing in the power of resurrection, represented the supreme triumph of faith.

Now, in principle that means for us that things go altogether beyond human hope and if something is taken into death, then there is no power on earth that can save it. Death is the end of all things here. If there is a refusal to accept death as the end, but God as the end, faith triumphs over death. The way of the Lord with us in this School of Sonship is by the way on the one hand of death, and on the other hand, of resurrection, where God is the only power, hope and resource, and we are knowing God over against all human impossibilities, over against death. It is the deep way of

sonship. But again and again it happens. The Isaac laugh! Many of you have laughed the laugh of Isaac, I am sure.

If we are going on with God, we are going this way. We are going to be put into really terrible situations from the natural standpoint - stripped of all, to find God. Oh, this finding of God is a terrible business - to the flesh it is terrible - finding God, coming to know God as the God of resurrection. Then, when you are there, you are in the place of the greatest service to God, you are in a position to serve the Lord in a very wonderful and a very fruitful way.