

number of times it shall forgive ; but which, by one thought of momentary and absolute surrender, has become that unfailing charity which beareth, hopeth, and believeth all things.

GEORGE MATHESON.

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### THE TWO PROMISES GIVEN TO ABRAHAM.

THERE are two Promises (Gen. xii. 3 and Gen. xxii. 18), given to Abraham at different periods of his life, the distinction between which has been generally overlooked by commentators. The first was given to him as Abram (the *exalted father* of a chosen nation), on the occasion of his shewing his faith in God by leaving his "country and kindred and father's house," to go into a land that God was to shew him, "not knowing whither he went" (Heb. xi. 8). The second was the blessing pronounced upon him as Abraham (the *father of a multitude*, or spiritual seed comprising believers of all nations), on the occasion of his exhibiting the highest instance of faith ever reached by a mere mortal, in giving up, as a sacrifice, without a word of remonstrance, his only and beloved son Isaac, on whose life all God's promises to him were suspended. It were strange indeed if so wonderful an instance of faith as this last called forth no higher promise than the first, if the second was, as it is generally regarded, a mere repetition of the earlier promise, confirmed only by the addition of an oath on God's part. We have but to place the two promises in juxtaposition to see that every term in the later rises in intensity above the earlier :—

"In thee—shall all the families of the land—be blessed" (Gen. xii. 3).

"In thy seed—shall all the nations of the earth—bless themselves" (Gen. xxii. 18).

The distinction between the two promises, which would so forcibly strike the Israelite in interpreting the words literally, escapes the notice of the Christian, accustomed to regard them rather in the spiritual light in which they are presented by St. Paul. To an Israelite the words of the first promise, "In thee [*i.e.* Abram] shall all etc.," would appear to refer exclusively to his own countrymen alone, as being the "children of Abraham": in the second promise alone could the Gentiles, as "the nations of the earth," claim any interest. But St. Paul's extension of the first promise to all Christians, not Jews alone, but Gentiles also, as being the spiritual children of Abraham (Gal. iii. 29), has led us to overlook the palpable distinction between the two promises; and the faulty rendering by the same words in most modern versions (following the example of the Septuagint and Vulgate) of two of the terms in the promises, which are quite distinct in the original Hebrew, has added to the confusion.

We must therefore endeavour to ascertain with precision the distinctive signification of the corresponding terms in each promise. And, first, with regard to the third term, expressive of the blessing in each, "be blessed" (Heb. *nivrëkhû*, passive conjugation), and "bless themselves" (Heb. *hithbarëkhû*, reflexive conj.):—What is to be understood by being "blessed in" a person? Genesis xlviii. 20, supplies the answer, where Jacob, in blessing the two sons of Joseph, says, "In thee shall Israel bless, saying, God make thee as Ephraim and as Manasseh," *i.e.* bless thee in the same manner as they were blessed. Ephraim and Manasseh are made the examples or patterns of blessing, after which others are to be blessed. In accordance with this the words, "In thee [Abram] shall all be blessed," must be explained to mean that Abram and Abram's faith are the pattern after which others are to receive God's blessing. Now "Abram (we read Gen. xv. 6) believed in

the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness." Such accordingly is St. Paul's explanation of this first promise in Galatians iii. 6-9, as extending to all who shew like faith as Abram: "And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed. So then they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham."

In contradistinction to this, the expression, "blessing oneself in another," so far from placing oneself on a level with the person referred to, regards him as the source and foundation of the blessing, which can only be received through dependence and trust in him; as appears from the instances in which this form of the Hebrew verb (the *hithpael*, or reflexive) is used: as

"He who *blesseth himself* in the earth

Shall *bless himself* in the God of truth" (Isa. lxxv. 16).

"The nations shall *bless themselves* in Him,

And in Him shall they glory" (Jer. iv. 2).

Even in Deuteronomy xxix. 19, where it is said of the man "whose heart turneth away from the Lord," that "he shall *bless himself* in his heart, saying, I shall have peace, though I walk in the imagination of mine heart, to add drunkenness to thirst," it is evident that the man makes the "imagination of his own heart" the source or foundation of his trust for blessing to himself.<sup>1</sup>

The distinction now drawn will help to explain the significance designed by the change in the other terms of

<sup>1</sup> The greater promise is repeated in identical terms to Isaac (Gen. xxvi. 4) as to Abraham, inasmuch as the entire surrender of himself to God must have been equally complete on his part, since without the young man's consent the aged father could never have been able to bind him and to lay him on the wood prepared for the sacrifice.

Both blessings are transmitted to Jacob, but incorporated into one: "In thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed" (Gen. xxviii. 14). The verb accordingly is in the passive—which is the form alone applicable in the lesser blessing.

the respective blessings. The rise in meaning signified by the change of the verbal form "bless themselves in," requires a corresponding rise in the other terms. With regard to the first pair of terms, what, let us inquire, is the import of the change from "in thee" to "in thy seed"? "In thee shall men be blessed" supposes an equality of blessedness, attainable at least, with the person in whom they are to be blessed; whereas "shall bless themselves" regards the person in whom they bless themselves to be so highly exalted above them that they look up to him as the source from whence their blessings flow, and the object of their humble and confiding trust. "In *thee*," therefore, if denoting a mere man, "shall bless themselves" is inadmissible, since it would be directly opposed to the language of Scripture, which pronounces "Cursed be the man that trusteth in *man*" (Jer. xvii. 5). Hence "in thee," when the verbal term becomes "men shall bless themselves," must be changed into "in thy seed"; and "thy seed," pointing back, as without doubt it did, to them, to the primeval promise of the "seed" of the woman empowered to reverse the curse of death, assumes ever more and more in successive revelations a superhuman character, so as to be all but identified with the Almighty:—as David's "seed" (2 Sam. vii. 12-16) exalted to a filial relationship with Jehovah, God being to him a "father" and he to Him a "son," whose "throne should be established for ever"—again, though David's son, yet styled by him "my lord," as being seated at the "right hand" of God and ordained by Him a "priest for ever" (Ps. cx. 1, 4)—even the highest dignity and titles, befitting the Eternal, being ascribed to him, "Wonderful, Counsellor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace" (Isa. ix. 6)—"this," in fine, being "his name whereby he shall be called, THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS" (Jer. xxiii. 6).

Lastly, as regards the change from "all the *families of the land*" into "all the *nations of the earth*:"—a faith, such as Abram's in its earlier stage, in God as the supreme Disposer of all, able and willing to bless and protect his worshippers, would suffice to combine "all the families of the (*ādāmah*, or cultivable) land" of their possession, as it did the Israelites, into kindly and brotherly union with each other as one nation, though bitterly hating and being hated by all other nations. But to unite into one "all the nations" and the whole "earth" (*erets*), requires a far higher stage of faith. The bond which alone can effect this union and brotherhood must be faith in the universal Fatherhood of God as the one common Father of all, and in the universal Brotherhood of men, as manifested in a "seed" who was at the same time "son of God" and "son of man"—able both to save and sympathize with his brethren—the gift of a Father's love to all his children on earth, and who demonstrated his brotherly love towards our whole race by taking on Him our nature, and by his perfect self-surrender and self-sacrifice, procuring salvation and endless blessedness for every race and nation.

There is thus a clear distinction between the two promises, the first falling far short of the second, when the earlier promise is construed strictly according to the letter. Still its terms might have excited higher hopes in the mind of Abraham, so as almost to include the higher promise; and the believer, as his faith advances, grows in the conviction that God will never come short but will exceed the expectation of his children in the fulfilment of his promises. And such we believe to have been the case with Abraham. The words "In thee shall all the families of the land be blessed," prescribe no limits which would exclude the hope of the highest blessings which God could bestow on the whole race; and the growth of Abraham's faith, quickened by the birth of a son to himself notwithstanding "his own body

being now as good as dead, and the deadness of Sarah's womb" (Rom. iv. 19), would seem to explain the promptness and unquestioning character of Abraham's obedience to the command which bade him offer up his son Isaac. Unbelief would have suggested that compliance with such a demand would entirely frustrate all the promises. But faith such as Abraham's drew the opposite conclusion, that the command now given was to be the very means of fulfilling God's promise, however little he could understand the mode by which it was to be accomplished. Strongly, therefore, though flesh and blood recoiled against it, the spirit unhesitatingly accepted the command. Nor was the father of believers disappointed in his hope: "Abraham saw my day, and was glad" (John viii. 56). To what occasion can we with greater probability assign the deep insight into the divine plan of redemption, here ascribed by the Saviour himself to Abraham, other than to the auspicious moment when his faith had reached its highest point of elevation by the voluntary surrender of his beloved son? Sacrifice was the regular and God-ordained (see Gen. xv. 9, xxxv. 1) mode of worship and acceptable approach to God in patriarchal times. Wherever Abraham settled for a time, he erected an altar and called on the name of the Lord. Sacrifice included two *symbolical acts* representative of the offerer: first, the shedding the blood of the offering, signifying the deserved forfeiture of the offerer's life, in place of which the life of the innocent and sinless victim is accepted as an atonement; and secondly, the presentation of the entire body of the sacrificial victim as a whole burnt-offering unto the Lord, symbolizing the offerer's presenting his "body as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God" (Rom. xii. 1), as being now purged from sin. The offering required of Abraham was that of a life which he esteemed more precious than his own, the sacrifice of the very son of promise, on whose life depended the fulfilment

of all God's promises. The demand, in short, was the greatest that could be made, that a father should give up the life of his son, his only son, whom he loved, and offer him up as a burnt offering. And now, when he had all but consummated the sacrifice, his hand is arrested, and another sacrifice is substituted, provided by God himself. What other inference could Abraham draw but that no sacrifice which man could offer, though he should "give his first-born for the sin of his soul" (Micah vi. 7), would suffice—that a more efficacious offering still was needed, which God Himself would provide? That such was Abraham's understanding of the whole transaction—and that he saw in what had taken place a foreshadowing of a greater and more perfect sacrifice, which Jehovah Himself should provide—he testified by the name, "Jehovah-jireh" (= *the Lord will provide*, Gen. xxii. 14), which he gave to the scene of this remarkable transaction, to keep alive the remembrance of it to succeeding generations.

Such—unless we err in associating with the highest manifestation of Abraham's faith the occasion of his highest inspiration, and vision of "the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world" when, as Christ attests, "Abraham saw my day and was glad"—or such like, would be the reflections awakened in Abraham's mind by the revelation vouchsafed to him of God's purposes of grace for a sinful world, to transmit to his posterity for the instruction of the early church; and if so, the more comprehensive meaning, which we claim for the second promise above the first, seems to be fully justified.

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