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Friendship With God

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"And the Lord spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend" (Exodus 33:11).

"Didst not thou, O our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before thy people Israel, and gavest it to the seed of Abraham thy friend for ever?" (2 Chronicles 20:7).

"But thou, Israel, my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the seed of Abraham my friend" (Isaiah 61:8).

"By faith Abraham, being tried, offered up Isaac: yea, he that had gladly received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; even he to whom it was said, In Isaac shall thy seed be called: accounting that God is able to raise up, even from the dead; from whence he did also in a parable receive him back" (Hebrews 11:17-19).

"And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned unto him for righteousness; and he was called the friend of God" (James 2:23).

There are many astonishing things in the Bible. Few of them, however, are more so than this - that God should desire a friend.

We would think that of all things God would be able to get on quite well without having men in that relationship with Himself. I say it is an astonishing thought that God, in all His self-sufficiency, His fullness, His creative power, should want a friend, but here it is - "Abraham my friend" ... "the friend of God".

This, dear friends, is the one thing in the mind of God behind all His strange ways. Probably in all the

Bible there was no one who had greater reason than did Abraham to think of God's ways as being very strange. How strange those ways were! And very rarely were they easy. Almost every step, if not every step, was fraught with perplexity. But God was governed in all His dealings with Abraham by this one idea and thought: to have a friend, and to bring a man into such a relationship with Himself as to be able to speak of him as "My friend".

You know, of course, that that title and that relationship are peculiarly and especially connected with Abraham. There are some wonderful things said about other men - Moses, Daniel ("O man greatly beloved") - but "My friend" is uniquely Abraham's title. To understand that we have to look again at the way by which Abraham was led and how at last he arrived in the heart of God.

While the whole life of Abraham is required to make up the full inclusiveness of this sublime fellowship, there is little doubt, I think, that consummately it was bound up with that one incident of which we have just read: the call to offer his son Isaac. Just think what that really meant where Abraham was concerned! Did God call him from Ur of the Chaldees, to leave all and come out, without telling him anything more than that He would lead him to a land? If we knew everything we would see that that was no small step, for there is every reason to believe that Abraham was a prosperous and great man in Ur. Did God lead him out? Did God promise him a son, and then go away and leave him without fulfilling His promise? Did God bind up the whole of his life with that promise and with that son? The very justification of his move from that old country, leaving everything, was focused and centred in that son. Abraham's whole life, the justification of his living at all, and everything in his life, was centred in that son. All the commands and all the guidance of God to Abraham ended in Isaac. Did God so call, so lead, so promise? Did He make Isaac the exclusive vessel of His Divine purpose and the explanation and meaning of all His promises to Abraham, so that Abraham had no alternative to Isaac? Abraham tried an alternative and found that God was not in that. He tried through Ishmael, but found that that was no way through. There was no alternative for his life for God, his knowledge of God, his history with God, but Isaac. Should Isaac not exist his faith would have been in vain, for he had nothing else. God would have failed him, and his life would have been a failure.

Naturally, if Isaac did not exist, or if he died, there would be some tremendous implications. The obvious implication would have been that Abraham had been misled, deceived, and followed a false line; that God had mocked him and brought him into a trap. He had followed God in a way which he had believed with all his heart to be God's way for him, and he had committed himself without reserve to what he believed to be the way of God for his life. And all that centred in Isaac.

Then came: "Take thou thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest... and offer him" (Genesis 22:2). Dear friends, we cannot make too much of the seriousness of the crisis to which Abraham had now come. It was a tremendous thing for him! It might have raised the question of what kind of a God his God was, or who this God was to whom he had given his life, and there are many other questions and implications. All his guidance, his consecration, his long years of waiting and travailing, his faithful obedience - and now, at one blow, it looked as though it was all shattered. To survive that, and, more than that, to go through it triumphantly, is to explain what God means by friendship. Yes, that is the meaning of friendship - but what is it?

Well, if this is the Divine explanation of friendship, and we are called to be partakers of the Divine nature, and God is working with us to bring about such a relationship, it is going to be along that same road. If you and I want even to approximate to this relationship, this supreme relationship to God, if our hearts do respond to this suggestion and proposition that God should be able to speak of us as His friends (and, on the face of it, no doubt everyone would say: 'Yes. There is nothing that I

would covet more than that God should be able to speak of me as "My friend"), then see what it means.

Firstly, it means absolute and unreserved committal for life and with life to God, without reserves and without alternatives. Abraham had no alternative. This relationship, this going on with God, was everything or nothing for it was sealed in a blood covenant. You will remember the occasion when that covenant was made. The sacrifice was cut in two. The one half was put on one side and the second half was put on the other side. One side was God's and the other was Abraham's. Blood was shed and they together, in the true figure, joined hands and moved between the two halves. In the blood of that sacrifice each committed himself to the other in terms of blood, or life, for ever - God's "covenant for ever" (Psalm 105:8). Abraham's covenant with God was in terms of life. At Mount Moriah God was taking the very life-blood out of Abraham, but Abraham was standing to it. He was standing to the very basis of his relationship with God. It was a committal for ever with life itself to God, and the end of that was: "Abraham, my friend".

These are hard things that I am saying, and beyond our present attainment, I know. Not one of us would claim to have reached this point. Nevertheless, this is what God is working towards.

Friendship, further, means this: confidence in the other, when He neither explains His way, nor can we understand what He is doing. Of course, that is friendship at its best in human terms. If there is true friendship, a friend may not always explain to you why he or she takes a certain course, but you have come to trust that one so much that you do not want an explanation. You are ready to believe, without an explanation, that that one knows what he or she is doing, and you have perfect confidence in that one. It is friendship, even when the other one is silent and saying nothing.

There is a slight reflection of this in the life of Mr. Hudson Taylor. After having been in China, away from this country and from his wife, for a long time, he came home and his wife met him at the ship. They got into a conveyance together, and, of course, you would have thought that at once he or she would engage in voluminous conversation on all that had happened during the years they were apart. But they took that journey in absolute silence - and *neither was offended!* Not one word passed between them, but that was the deep, deep understanding of true fellowship. Oh, for something like that with the Lord! He is silent, and that silence is a most testing thing to us. Why does He not speak? Why does He not act? Why does He not do something? He is silent and inactive, and seems to be indifferent. Ah, to believe Him then is the stuff of friendship, a constituent of true friendship.

"Abraham believed God." You notice that that is connected with this very thing, the offering of Isaac. To have confidence in a friend when the friend seems to be mysterious, strange, inexplicable, un-understandable, reserved, silent, is a constituent indeed of true friendship.

But Abraham looked beyond the present and the immediate, and said in his heart: 'This is not everything. This is not the whole story. This is not the end, because it is not the end of God. Even if it is death' - oh, wonderful triumph of faith! - 'even if I have to slay that son in whom everything for me is centred, nevertheless, God is God, and He can raise the dead. Even if Isaac is there, dead, God can raise him. I look beyond death, beyond the present situation which may seem to have shattered all hope, and I see God as reaching further on. I believe God. I do not understand, and am not able to explain, but I believe God.'

That is very testing, and I say that it is beyond every one of us, but this is the basis of the ultimate relationship with God. Surely this is the gold of the new Jerusalem!

But what about Isaac? He was the new hope, the link in the chain of God's whole dispensational movements, and the embodiment of this friendship.

Young brothers and sisters, you are the next link in the chain of God's gifts and God's testimony on this earth. Do put your feet down on the ground of the link before. Take up the testimony of Abraham and take this position: 'I, not as something in myself, not beginning nor ending with me, but just as a link in this mighty chain of the ages, commit myself without reserve to my God, for life and with my life.' If you will do that you are the new hope of the next phase.

Of course, behind Abraham we are seeing God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, and we all know so well that any hope we have today is because God raised His Son from the dead. But that is not only a truth concerning Christ. It is a law of God's ways all through history - that something is baptized into death, and in that baptism the testing of heart relationship with God goes on. And that is the point. When Jesus was baptized into death on the Cross, it was the ultimate test of His heart relationship with His Father. His heart broke on that - but, oh! we are all so glad that the very last utterance was: "Father, into thy hands..." (Luke 23:46). That is triumph! He is through! Earlier He had cried: "My God, my God!", but now He is saying: "Father". It was a test, the ultimate, final test of His heart relationship with His Father - and, mark you, every baptism into death is that.

We are being found out, dear friends, by deep and terrible testings on the cross of baptism into death as to where our hearts are; whether they are in things, or in God; whether our life is bound up in some *thing*, or whether it is with God.

You see, that was the point with Isaac. After all, it was proved that Abraham was bound up with much more than Isaac, for he was bound up with God. 'All right!', said Abraham. 'Everything seemed to have been centred in Isaac, but if Isaac goes, I still have God.'

What is our life bound up with? Is it things? Is it life work? What is it? We shall be tested as to whether it is the Lord who has our hearts. If He has, we are not going to fight for our own ways, our own ends, our own interests or our own ideas, even in the work of God. It is the Lord who has to take preeminence over all things, and over us. Isaac embodied that position with Abraham.

Oh, dear friends, see to it that your heart is like that toward your Lord! If it is, you have the basis of this glorious end: 'My friend, My friend'. Is that worth having? Surely it is, and that He should say at the last: 'Come in, My friend!'