

ELIJAH E. WILLIAMS

TRIED, Even As Abraham

How God's Will Becomes Ours Forever



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For my wife, Lori.

For her exceptional patience with me during my trials.

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CHAPTER 1

Disruption

I SAT AT MY KITCHEN TABLE, TIRED AND PERPLEXED. IT WAS THE FALL OF 2021, and I was in my fifth year serving as a bishop. More importantly, nearly twenty months had transpired since the COVID-19 pandemic had entirely disrupted every facet of ordinary life. My disillusionment that day didn't come from the pandemic but from the way various members of my ward and stake had reacted to it. Specifically, I was troubled by how these covenant-making Saints had responded to local Church leaders and, most notably, to the counsel and urgings of our sustained prophet, President Russell M. Nelson.¹

Some members complained that Church pandemic policies were too stringent. Some argued that the policies were too lax. Some suggested that President Nelson had capitulated to certain political views or was being weak in the face of adversity. Some refused to come back to church until everyone was masked. Others refused to come back to church until no ward or stake leader wore a mask. Some never came back.

Many Church pandemic policies were left to the determination of local leaders, and I was often criticized for various positions. When church meetings began to resume, I was criticized for wearing a mask. Conversely, I was criticized for not forcing all sacrament meeting attendees to wear a mask. I was once told that I had no charity or love for the ward members because I didn't

compel all Church members to wear masks at meetings, thereby threatening the lives of everyone.

As I sat at my kitchen table that day, I asked myself, “How can this be?” While it is the nature of trials to blindsides us and disrupt our lives and norms, these adverse responses came from those who should have been the true and faithful. The same people who had once so resolutely sustained the President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as a prophet, seer, and revelator had now become his vocal critics. The same people who had always supported local Church leaders suddenly railed against them.

I certainly knew that the pandemic was unprecedented in numerous respects, but I thought, “Shouldn’t our faith and testimony of the Restoration and of priesthood keys supersede cultural, political, or societal influences, opinions, and fears?” I asked myself, “This is certainly difficult, but haven’t Latter-day Saints in Church history been asked to pass through far greater trials? If we as a people can’t endure the inconveniences of this pandemic, how will we endure the far greater trials expected in the days leading up to the Lord’s Second Coming?”

My mind was troubled as I considered these things. Fear seemed to have replaced faith in too many hearts. Trust in God and His prophet seemed to have been swapped for the opinions of mortal prognosticators. I remembered how many had fallen away during the formative years of the Church as adversity and new doctrines perplexed the early Saints’ minds and hearts. I knew that if some had stumbled in their faith due to pandemic difficulties, many would likely do the same as greater trials came upon the Church in the future. I then felt to ask myself one of the most pivotal questions of my life: “Is there anything that God or His prophet could ever ask you to do that would cause you to falter in your faith and fall away?”

I honestly didn’t know the answer. I tried to envision myself being asked to pass through the most severe trials the faithful have ever endured in ages past. I asked myself, “If the prophet asked me to do so, could I kneel before enemies as the Anti-Nephi-Lehies and subject myself to death while in the act of prayer?” (See Alma 24:17–26.) I thought, “Could I endure new and difficult doctrines as did Christ’s original Apostles and not ‘go away’?” (See John 6:66–

69.) “Am I capable,” I wondered, “of sending my son into the mission field knowing with certainty, by the voice of the Spirit, that I would never see my child again in mortality, essentially sacrificing him to the Lord in the manner of Abraham and Issac?”

During a period of great suffering and persecution, the early Saints were told by the Lord that “they must needs be chastened and tried, even as Abraham, who was commanded to offer up his only son. For all those who will not endure chastening, but deny me, cannot be sanctified” (Doctrine and Covenants 101:4–5). The Prophet Joseph Smith reaffirmed this need to be tried when he said, “You will have all kinds of trials to pass through. And it is quite as necessary for you to be tried as it was for Abraham and other men of God. . . . God will feel after you, and He will take hold of you and wrench your very heart strings, and if you cannot stand it you will not be fit for an inheritance in the Celestial Kingdom of God.”² That is a sobering thought. It is the essence of the question I had asked myself while pondering the pandemic’s spiritual effects at the kitchen table.

The trial of Abraham is quite familiar to members of the Church and to those who espouse other forms of Christianity as well as Judaism and Islamism. Abraham was commanded by God to offer up his only son, Issac, as a human sacrifice. Though Isaac was conceived by a miraculous act of God and was the one through whom God’s promises to Abraham were to be fulfilled, Abraham followed the command of God and took Issac to the land of Moriah. There, immediately prior to completing the sacrificial act, an angel of the Lord came and declared to Abraham, “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” (Genesis 22:12). God then provided “a ram caught in a thicket by his horns” (Genesis 22:13) as the sacrifice, and Isaac lived to fulfill his foreordained mission.

What is it about the trial of Abraham that has resonated so profoundly throughout the ages and across so many religious backgrounds? Why is it that God Himself references this trial as the benchmark by which all of us must be tried if we desire to have an “inheritance in the Celestial Kingdom of God”? Why is it necessary that we be tried in a way that so profoundly disrupts our

peace and confounds our mind and heart? How do we know if we have experienced our trial of Abraham, and what do we do if we think we have failed it? How do we possibly prepare ourselves for a trial we can't, and won't, see coming?

The answers to these and other pertinent questions will come as we consider the doctrines of obedience and sacrifice, analyze the trial of Abraham, and examine the lives of those who have been “tried, even as Abraham.”

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1. “First Presidency Urges Latter-day Saints to Wear Masks, Be Vaccinated,” *Church News*, August 12, 2021.
 2. Joseph Smith, in *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 231.

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