



Our Failure, God's Faithfulness

Wrestling with God: The Stories of Isaac & Jacob, Part 2

Genesis 25:19 – 26:35

Patrick Havens

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We're continuing in our Genesis series. Last week we looked at God's providence in providing a bride for Isaac, and today we'll be looking at the only chapter in the Bible that is purely a narrative about Isaac. Let's read the first five verses of chapter 26:

²⁶ Now there was a famine in the land, besides the former famine that was in the days of Abraham. And Isaac went to Gerar to Abimelech king of the Philistines. ² And the Lord appeared to him and said, "Do not go down to Egypt; dwell in the land of which I shall tell you. ³ Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and will bless you, for to you and to your offspring I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father. ⁴ I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and will give to your offspring all these lands. And in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, ⁵ because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws."

Let's pray.

God, let Your Word speak to us. Open our eyes to see glorious things. Comfort our hearts with Your good news, and may we all be edified around this text and my preaching today. We want to glorify You, that Your name may be exalted in all the earth. We give this time to you, in Jesus' name. Amen.

The Bible is the story of salvation. In Genesis 1, God speaks and everything comes into existence. In Genesis 12, God speaks, saying He's going to create a people through one man, Abram, who becomes Abraham. Then from Genesis 12-50, we're dealing with one family tree that includes four generations: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and then Joseph.

Like any family album, there are some real winners and some losers, although the majority of the people are average Joe Shmoe's—not doing much other than existing. If I were to ask you to tell me some of the amazing events in Abraham's family album, you could tell me stories about Abraham or Jacob or Joseph. But if I ask you to tell me about Isaac, there aren't

really any great events. He seems to be overshadowed by his father Abraham and his sons, Jacob and Esau.

This tells us that it's possible to be in God's covenant family without a great resume, without having a pedigree of activities and events. You can be average and ordinary people. Still, God is not ashamed to call Himself "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." That's good news, knowing we can be included in God's covenant purposes that way.

By chapter 27, Isaac is blind, he gets derailed about God's purposes in the blessing, and then he's out of the picture. So in many ways, we can see that God's everlasting covenant is really not based on any of our works, but only on His grace. Those who believe in His grace are those who will enter into His family and will be forever changed. We are brought in, not by works, but by faith.

Looking at Genesis 26:3, we see the emphasis in God's words. *"I will be with you and will bless you...I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father."* When we use the word "covenant," this refers to the pledge—the "deal"—that God made with Abraham. The process of making the covenant was a bloody mess. They cut animals in half, and figuratively God passed through those animals, promising to fulfill His oath to Abraham. That promise is what drives Genesis. It was made early in the story line, and now we see how God is keeping His promise to His people.

Notice some of the components in this promise. In verse four we see that God will be present with Isaac to fulfill three things: a people, a land and then ultimately that they will be a blessing to the nations. First, God promises to "multiply your offspring." And because this is part of the covenant, God wants to multiply a believing people—not just numerous people, but people who believe. God's desire is to have numerous people who know Him as God. These people are going to be given the land, a place of blessing, and then the reason God will bless them is so that they might be a blessing to the other nations.

So as we look at this part of the story that involves Isaac, we'll begin to see how this covenant promise is unfolding through his life. How is God, through Isaac, going to begin to create a people, give them a land, and prepare them to become a blessing to the nations? Let's begin with the promise of a people who know God. In Genesis 25:19-21, we read this:

These are the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham fathered Isaac, and Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah to be his wife, the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, the sister of Laban the Aramean. And Isaac prayed

to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren. And the Lord granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived.

When we think about the three components of the promise—a people, a land and a blessing—every piece involves a stumbling block, a barrier, a hindrance, or a hurdle. It wasn't smooth sailing. There was no red carpet to march down. Isaac couldn't even have a child. He's promised he would father a multitude of people, but they haven't even had one. It was a test of faith. "God said this, but I don't see how it's going to happen." Isaac faced the hindrance of Rebekah's barrenness.

It's interesting that this was a common experience in Abraham's family tree. First Sarah, now Rebekah, and later Jacob's wife, Rachel, all experienced barrenness. And much later, Elizabeth is also barren in the New Testament. In a sense this communicates to us that we are impotent to bring about God's purposes. We get His promises, then we discover we can't fulfill them in our own strength or ingenuity. Abraham tried. He took a second wife. He was going to run with this ahead of God.

Isaac was a man of prayer. I think when Rebekah came to him he was meditating in the field. God heard his prayer. I doubt he only prayed once. It says at the end of verse 26 that Isaac was 60 years old when she bore her sons. So for 20 years he wrestled with her infertility. Still he prayed confidently, because God had promised his father Abraham, "I'm going to give you many descendants."

Think of the dynamic. God is sovereign and has promised to accomplish His promise, yet Isaac still prayed. He didn't just sit back and wait. Rather, God used his prayers as the means through which He fulfilled His promise. This is a good reminder of the importance of both God's sovereignty and our involvement in seeking Him in prayer, as we see it here in the life of Isaac.

Although we cannot fulfill God's promises in our own strength, notice too that even in the lives of God's promised covenant people, there would continue to be great trials and suffering. So in spite of all the happiness Isaac and Rebekah felt after 20 years of barrenness, even during pregnancy her twins struggled together in her womb. The word "struggle" is more than just the usual baby kicking. This was far more intense. Verse 22, Rebekah asks God, "Why is this happening to me?" God explains that even before they're born there is a war going on. Verse 23:

*And the Lord said to her,
"Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples from within you shall be divided;
the one shall be stronger than the other,
the older shall serve the younger."*

After the children were born, we're given these prophetic insights. *"When her days to give birth were completed, behold, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy cloak, so they called his name Esau."* I would love to have seen this little red hairy guy. The name Esau is a play on the word 'hair.' Verse 26, *"Afterward his brother came out with his hand holding Esau's heel, so his name was called Jacob."* The name Jacob is a play on the word 'heel.' The heel-grabber—it gives us a clue as to what he would be like.

Our insight into their character continues: *"When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field."* He was a man's man. He drove the truck, had the tattoos and the gun rack, bow and arrow. He's your kind of guy. You visit his home and he serves you barbecue. Isaac actually favored this son. But then we read, *"Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents."* Probably a mama's boy. He enjoyed the library, a city-dweller kind of guy. *"Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob."*

Just think about Isaac and Rebekah and their favoritism with their children. It makes sense to us. Isaac likes the son who brings him food—he's proud of him. Jacob is helping Rebekah in the kitchen. But Isaac's choice wasn't God's choice. The Lord decides in His own way. He tells Rebekah before they're born, *"The older shall serve the younger. The stronger will be under the weaker."* How does God choose like this?

Paul actually uses this situation to illustrate and teach a doctrine in Romans 9—the doctrine of election. We wonder how God chooses between two nations? Why does He choose the weaker and the lesser to rise above the stronger? Jesus told us, *"The last shall be first."* His choices may baffle us or fit how we might think. It doesn't match our cultural understanding. Isn't the firstborn the son who should lead? Doesn't the stronger person win? Isn't the majority culture given priority? No. God chooses the younger here. Even though it twists our thinking, it's His way. These sons represented two nations. Like Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Esau and Jacob represent two separate and diverse ways to live.

Let's pick up at verse 29 for more insight into the reality of their differences:

²⁹ *Once when Jacob was cooking stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was exhausted.* ³⁰ *And Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stew, for I am exhausted!" (Therefore his name was called Edom.)* [The people group that comes from Esau are named Edomites. It's a word that means red.] ³¹ *Jacob said, "Sell me your birthright now."* ³² *Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?"* ³³ *Jacob said, "Swear to me now."* *So he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob.* ³⁴ *Then Jacob gave Esau*

bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

Remember what the birthright is that he's despising. It's the family tree of blessing. It's the people who would be blessed and given a land and then made into a blessing. He's rejecting God's covenant promises. He's turning away from them, and for what? Red lentil stew. We face similar temptations every day. We're impulsive people too, and we're given to appetites. We make rash decisions on the spur of a moment, thinking that our satisfaction in that moment is most important. In that way we too can despise God's ways. It's the insanity of sin. Isn't every sin you can think of in some way connected to what Esau has done—giving in to our passions or the cry of our bellies? We're letting our flesh dictate our choices and actions. In this sense Esau's choice represents an earthly and non-spiritual way of life.

Jacob represents the other nation—but what's interesting is that Jacob is not really a better person than Esau. He's a deceiver. He deliberately chose to steal the birthright from his brother. He may have purposely set the stage to trick Esau. So morally they're both sinners. Yet God in His grace pursued Jacob. We'll see that story unfold as we read through Genesis. He didn't see Jacob as a better person. That's not how God made His choice.

God's wisdom is beyond us, but what we do know is that He not only pursued Jacob, but eventually changed his life. He drew him in and eventually made him part of the vehicle of redemption, the means whereby He blessed the world through the promised Redeemer. It's another evidence that God chooses the weak things of this world to shame the strong. He chooses the lowly and despised things, in order that we who are in Christ cannot boast before Him. We understand that we have been shown great mercy in spite of not deserving it.

So counter to what we would think, God chooses the unlikely brother in this story. He is continuing to fulfill His promises to Abraham by overcoming Rebekah's barrenness, and He even overcomes the failure of Isaac and Rebekah's favoritism. His covenant is based on His grace, and He will fulfill His purpose to bring about a people who will worship Him and who will be a blessing to all the nations.

What are the obstacles, therefore, to this people becoming a blessing to the nations? In Genesis 26:1 we see there was a famine in the land, which prompted Isaac to move to Gerar and come under the leadership of Abimelech, the king of the Philistines.

Picking up at Genesis 25:6, we read:

⁶ So Isaac settled in Gerar. ⁷ When the men of the place asked him about his wife, he said, "She is my sister," for he feared to say, "My wife," thinking, "lest the men of the place should kill me because of

Rebekah,” because she was attractive in appearance. ⁸ When he had been there a long time, Abimelech king of the Philistines looked out of a window and saw Isaac laughing with Rebekah his wife. ⁹ So Abimelech called Isaac and said, “Behold, she is your wife. How then could you say, ‘She is my sister?’” Isaac said to him, “Because I thought, ‘Lest I die because of her.’” ¹⁰ Abimelech said, “What is this you have done to us? One of the people might easily have lain with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us.” ¹¹ So Abimelech warned all the people, saying, “Whoever touches this man or his wife shall surely be put to death.”

Here Isaac is in a special covenant relationship with God, yet an unbeliever has more insight than he does. In fact, Abimelech sets up a law to protect a man and his wife, in sense out of fear of God. Isaac’s calling is to be a blessing to the nations, but in fact at this point he’s putting them at risk by lying about his wife. How can you be a blessing to a nation when you’re not even honest with them? We too need to think deeply in our hearts about what it means to bless our enemies. What does it mean to love people we’re afraid of, or who are different from us? How do we trust God’s purposes in this time?

Another thought that comes to me is that this chapter could easily have been titled, “Like Father, Like Son.” Children catch more than they’re taught. If you know the story earlier in Genesis, Abraham did the same thing to his wife—twice. Or here are a couple other possible titles for story: “A Chip Off the Old Block.” Or, “The Apple Doesn’t Fall Far From the Tree.” Isaac is following in the steps of his father Abraham, whose sin pattern is continuing in his son.

So too our children will catch more than we realize. They watch us. Which of course is good if we’re imitating Christ. They can catch our love for God’s Word, our love for prayer and praise, our commitment to church, and so much more. But they also are catching other things—and that should sober us. Isaac is just following in the steps of his father. Abraham feared men, and so does Isaac. This is one of the obstacles God needs to overcome in his life in order to fulfill His covenant purpose.

But right in the midst of the blatant rebuke by Abimelech, look at the next verse. What does God do with Isaac? *“And Isaac sowed in that land and...”* What does it say? Does it say he was in a time of famine? It says he *“reaped in the same year a hundredfold. The Lord blessed him, and the man became rich, and gained more and more until he became very wealthy. He had possessions of flocks and herds and many servants, so that the Philistines envied him.”* God was with him. God blessed him. God was teaching him.

Some of us may be thinking, “He failed—there should be some sort of judgment.” But God’s covenant purpose with Isaac comes through faith, not by works. The works will follow, as we’ll see in the life of Jacob. Twice in this chapter God reminds Isaac, “Remember My servant Abraham.” He’s constantly pointing Isaac to obedience, reminding him how Abraham believed and responded. God is wooing Isaac through his father Abraham, saying, “It’s because of Abraham that I’m blessing you.”

Think about us now as new covenant Christians. It’s for the sake of Christ that God blesses you and me. Not because of our obedience, but because of the obedience of Christ. It’s for the sake of another. And our response should be that we want to change and grow and increase. We’re seeing this in God’s dealings with Isaac, who is trying to figure out how to live out the promise he’s been given. God has told him in verse four, “I’m going to bless you, and through you I’m going to bless all the nations.”

Notice that the family tree being developed here in Genesis does not exclude the nations. God’s plan all along was to include the nations. He will graft them into this tree. Paul speaks of how it was foreseen that God would justify the Gentiles. He says in Galatians 3:7-8, *“Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed.’”*

If you belong to Christ, then you are an heir of Abraham according to this promise. God’s heart is for the nations, so God is fulfilling His promise in the new covenant through us as believers, and we are to bless the nations. But here in Genesis, Isaac is just trying to get with the program. “What does this mean? How do I do this? How do I put on love and not fear? How do I love my enemy, to be bold for those who want to persecute me, who believe differently than I do, who worship false gods? How am I going to bless them when they’re caught up in lies and falsehoods? This is going to take a lot of time and work.”

The nations certainly weren’t begging at his doorstep, asking him what to believe. They were hostile people. This challenge needs to grip our imagination as well, because we must never forget that we have good news for the nations. We have a covenant based on grace—not on works—through faith in the Messiah, the One Who fulfilled the covenant. We have good news, an invitation to the nations to come under the shade of this tree, to be grafted in, to enjoy God’s blessings even as we have.

So we see that God intends to bless a people through Isaac. He’s also using Isaac to be a blessing to the nations in the face of his fear of those nations. Then as the story unfolds, the

Philistines, who are envious of his wealth, begin to push Isaac out of the very place of blessing that Abraham had been promised. First, Isaac moves to the Valley of Gerar. He then goes through the land and digs out the wells the Philistines had buried. But when he uncovers one of the springs, the local herdsmen claim the water as theirs. Conflicts arise between them and Isaac's herdsmen. Isaac then digs out another and another. Finally he digs out a fourth well which becomes a well of oath where he makes a covenant with Abimelech.

All this time he must have been thinking, "Okay, God, You promised us this land, and then I have to leave—over and over." He must have wondered how God was going to fulfill His promise, as there was no peace in that place. But God meets him in the middle of this time. In Genesis 26:24 it says, "*And the Lord appeared to him the same night and said, 'I am the God of Abraham your father. Fear not, for I am with you and will bless you and multiply your offspring for my servant Abraham's sake.'*"

What did Isaac do? "*He built an altar there and called upon the name of the Lord and pitched his tent there. And there Isaac's servants dug a well.*" God's promise of a land is being realized now. This is just the beginning of an ongoing story line throughout the Old Testament, resulting in a place where God's people would live.

This points forward to the day when we will one day be at peace with one another and with God. While what we see now is conflict, unsettledness, struggle and we wonder how this will be accomplished, consider all the hurdles we've seen already in this story. There was barrenness, conflict between children, fear of other nations, the main character's own sinfulness—it was hard to see with all of this how God would fulfill His purposes through them. It's hard to see how He'll fulfill his mission through us, a people who continually drop the ball. How will He bring about His great and marvelous promises? This is what draws us into the story.

When we think about what He has accomplished for us, we have hope. In spite of not being able to see how He will fulfill His promises in the future, we must remember what He has done in the past and in fact is doing today—both for the nation of Israel and also for His Gentile people who are being grafted in to His family. As we consider the unreached areas, the neighborhoods where people have yet to hear the good news, we must remember that God is still active, and we're part of it. The story is still unfolding. Christ has given us the authority to go and make disciples of all nations.

It's exciting, yet it also includes suffering. Look where Isaac's story ends at the end of chapter 26. We see that Esau "*made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah.*" We see him as a great patriarch, yet his life ended in bitterness. God's plans always involve suffering, struggle and

doubt. But through His people—and ultimately through His Son—God’s purposes will be accomplished. This is our hope. In John 16:33 Jesus says, *“I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”*

Let’s pray.

God, thank You for Your Word. We pray that as we think about this passage that You would bring more and more things to our minds. We do want to go deep into what You’ve said and how Your promises are being fulfilled even now. Thank You, Jesus, for coming. You are the seed that was promised to Abraham, and You came and defeated all that stood against us. So we cling to You now. We want to be part of Your work, so that nations would come to know you and be blessed, and that the place You have in mind would be built. We pray that You will be glorified in our lives. Continue to shape us into the people who reflect Your image. I pray in Christ’s name. Amen.

New Covenant Bible Church

4N780 Randall Road, St. Charles, IL 60175

(630) 584-2611 ♦ www.newcbc.org

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