



IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE FATHER

SERIES: *THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS*

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Genesis 26

20th Message

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The question that our text from Genesis 26 raises is: How does the faith of the father get passed down to the son? This can be a difficult task, especially when the son lives in the shadow of his father's greatness. Many privileges come with being an heir to greatness, but it can be wrought with difficulty too. The second generation can live off the blessings of the first, but they can lack the faith or character of their fathers.

The children of my generation were raised by parents who lived through the Great Depression. Many who suffered through that era vowed that their children would never know poverty. They worked and scrimped and saved to spare them from suffering. They gave them privileges and freedoms they themselves never had. The children of the 60's, however, proved that these gifts of privilege can do more harm than good. The same can be true of our faith.

In Genesis 26 the narrator shows God's commitment to bless the second generation not only with the blessings of the fathers, but also with the faith of their fathers. And the method that God chooses to conform the faith of the son to the faith of the father is the experience of a famine.

This chapter comes immediately following the tumultuous opening of Jacob's birth. There we read of twins warring right from their mother's womb. Though our text today seems to interrupt the flow of the story, it is deliberately inserted as a little cameo of peace in the midst of the fighting. As Wenham writes:

We see Isaac as a timid, peace-loving man who avoids conflict with his neighbors wherever possible; such a contrast to his contentious sons, who are forever squabbling. This chapter therefore serves to heighten our appreciation of the unnaturalness of the intrafamilial strife that is about to tear apart Isaac's family in the following chapter. Yet Isaac receives the promises without fighting for them.¹

The story, which has seven scenes, takes place around three different geographical locations: Gerar, the wadi of Gerar, and Beersheba.

I. Isaac in Gerar (Gen 26:1-16)

A. Isaac's journey to Gerar (26:1)

Now there was a famine in the land, besides the previous famine that had occurred in the days of Abraham. So Isaac went to Gerar, to Abimelech king of the Philistines. (Gen 26:1, NASB)

The account opens with the report of a second famine in the land of promise. To avoid confusion, the narrator makes it clear that this famine was not the one that Abraham experienced, but a different one. God tests the faith of the second generation just as he did the first, so that their faith might be genuine. In the kingdom of God there is no such thing as second-hand faith. Even the Son of Man had to experience the temptations that accompanied hunger before he could begin his public ministry. So Isaac makes his way east to Gerar, a way station for pasturage on the route to Egypt. Because of the dependable water supply from the Nile, food supplies were always plentiful there. Further, Abraham had already secured a treaty with the king of Gerar (Gen 21:22-34). This would provide safe haven for Isaac and Rebekah on their

way to Egypt.

B. God's Oracle to Isaac (26:2-6)

The LORD appeared to him and said, "Do not go down to Egypt; stay in the land of which I shall tell you. Sojourn in this land and I will be with you and bless you, for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath which I swore to your father Abraham. I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and will give your descendants all these lands; and by your descendants all the nations of the earth shall be blessed; because Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws." So Isaac lived in Gerar. (Gen 26:2-6)

To further help Isaac conform to the faith of his father, God not only tests him, he speaks to him. His first words to him echo those he uttered to Abraham at his original call (12:1), and later, when he tested him to journey to Moriah (22:2): "Stay (i.e. settle temporarily as a resident alien) in the land of which I shall tell you." Wenham draws the implication, "These allusions make it clear that even if Isaac is not to walk in his father's footsteps geographically, he must follow him spiritually."² Isaac must learn to walk by faith by putting down roots in the place of famine, rather than seeking aid the traditional way, from outside the borders of the land. How gracious of God to address his fears before Isaac is overcome with the temptation to abandon the provision of the invisible God for the things that he can see.

Then, as he did with Abraham, God personally recommits himself to bless Isaac with the promises of seed and land. The promise is even expanded over that which God made to his father. God uses the double phrase "all these lands." Then he reminds Isaac that that vast inheritance was his not because his own doing; it was due to the faithfulness of his father. Isaac is a man of privilege because of his father's enduring obedience. As Walke writes: "The many synonyms for law connote Abraham's comprehensive obedience to God's rule over him...In Deut 11:1 the same list of terms refers to the whole law of Moses. The text shows that the person of faith does not live by law but keeps the law (see Gen 15:6; 22:1-19; Heb 11:8-19)."³ But this wonderful reassurance from God does not help Isaac overcome his fears. He succumbs to his insecurities. Like his father, he will compromise his wife's honor to preserve his own life.

C. Isaac's deception of Abimelech (26:7-11)

When the men of the place asked about his wife, he said, "She is my sister," for he was afraid to say, "my wife," thinking, "the men of the place might kill me on account of Rebekah, for she is beautiful." It came about, when he had been there a long time, that Abimelech king of the Philistines looked out through a window, and saw, and behold, Isaac was caressing his wife Rebekah. (Gen 26:7-8)

Rebekah's beauty, which first captured Isaac's affections (24:16), now feeds his fears. As was the case with his father, Isaac fears men more than God. This leads him to lie to protect his own life at the expense of Rebekah's honor.

After sufficient time has elapsed, the threat of rape dissipates and Isaac becomes complacent. Unable to control his sexual passions, he allows "himself to be publicly demonstrative with Rebe-

kah.”⁴ The narrator plays on Isaac’s name: “Laughter was tickling (*yitzhaq metzaheq*, lit.: “Laughter was causing to laugh”) Rebekah.” The doubling of Isaac’s name, and the fact that the king is peering out through his window (perhaps symbolic of a lens into the inner world) to discover the truth, may suggest that here we have an insight into Isaac’s real character. Sensual appetites can control this generally passive man.

Then Abimelech called Isaac and said, “Behold, certainly she is your wife! How then did you say, ‘She is my sister?’” And Isaac said to him, “Because I said, ‘I might die on account of her.’” 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.” So Abimelech charged all the people, saying, “He who touches this man or his wife shall surely be put to death.” (Gen 26:9-11)

But Isaac’s discovery works to the good of all. The king summons him and angrily rebukes him. This is reminiscent of the time his father was rebuked. Once again a patriarch lapses in faith and a pagan king mirrors the role of God. Abimelech’s biting question, “What is this you have done to us?” is a clear echo of God’s question to Eve in the garden (3:13). So too is the royal edict, “He who touches this man or his wife shall surely be put to death!” (2:17; 3:3) Isaac fears men, but Abimelech’s fear of God, coupled with his integrity, act as a corrective rod to get Isaac back on course. For a third time in the patriarchal narratives the role of the wife and sexual purity are rescued and sanctified.

What follows is a tribute to Isaac’s faith. Rather than groveling in defeat, or the self-hatred that often accompanies failure, Isaac takes positive steps to move forward in his faith.

D. Isaac sows in the land, becomes wealthy (26:12-16)

Now Isaac sowed in that land and reaped in the same year a hundredfold. And the LORD blessed him, and the man became rich, and continued to grow richer until he became very wealthy; for he had possessions of flocks and herds and a great household, so that the Philistines envied him. Now all the wells which his father’s servants had dug in the days of Abraham his father, the Philistines stopped up by filling them with earth. Then Abimelech said to Isaac, “Go away from us, for you are too powerful for us.” (Gen 26:12-16)

By faith Isaac obeys God and sows in the land of his sojourning, during a famine. Whereas Abraham received his wealth as a gift from the monarch (as embarrassing as it was), Isaac receives his as the result of his faithful sowing. The abundance of the harvest was beyond his expectations, and “the best that could be expected in Palestine (Matt 13:18).”⁵ But the blessing from God expanded even further: from his crops to all his flocks and herds. Isaac had become so wealthy it was evident for all to see. Isaac did so little and God did so much. Such are the blessings that God confers on his people.

But this public display of wealth provoked the envy of the Philistines, just as they envied his father’s wealth by filling up each of his wells with dirt and debris. In those actions we can hear the vile chorus of envy’s perpetual song: “If we can’t have it, neither can you!” Just imagine the work involved. This demonstrates that envy will go to great lengths to destroy for others what it cannot possess for itself.

But envy brings even more consequences for Isaac. It forces his expulsion from Gerar. Abimelech’s statement, “Go away from us, for you are too powerful for us,” will become prophetic of Isaac’s seed in Egypt (Exod 1:7, 20), whom Pharaoh will ask to leave. Here Isaac exhibits the faith of his father. When land is contested, he refuses to fight, and promptly leaves. After he leaves he goes on a reclamation project to restore what rightfully belonged to his father (Gen 21:22-34).

II. Isaac at the Wadi of Gerar (Gen 26:17-22)

And Isaac departed from there and camped in the valley (lit.

wadi) of Gerar, and settled there. Then Isaac dug again the wells of water which had been dug in the days of his father Abraham, for the Philistines had stopped them up after the death of Abraham; and he gave them the same names which his father had given them. (Gen 26:17-18)

The story now turns from Isaac’s search for food to his search for water, as the wealthy shepherd is reduced to a wandering nomad. If he does not find sufficient water for his flocks, he will face economic ruin. So after leaving Gerar he camps in the wadi of Gerar. This is an Arabic term describing “a dry riverbed that would be filled with water only during flash floods of the rainy season. But the floor of a wadi might conceal, as here, an underground source of water.”⁶ Faithfully and painstakingly, Isaac reopens each of his father’s wells, and reestablishes his property rights by giving them back their original names.

But when Isaac’s servants dug in the valley and found there a well of flowing water, (lit.: “living water”) the herdsmen of Gerar quarreled with the herdsmen of Isaac, saying, “The water is ours!” So he named the well Esek, because they contended with him. (Gen 26:19-20)

In the process, Isaac receives an unexpected blessing. Underneath the floor of the dry riverbed his servants discover a well of flowing water (lit.: “living water,” as Waltke describes, “a prized artesian well”). Such is the blessing to those who will not contest for the “gifts” of God. When they walk away from conflict, God opens springs of deeper blessings (Ps 84:6).

But before Isaac can even drink in the joy, the Philistines, continuing to harass him, seize the new well. The situation bears a strong resemblance to his father’s day, when Lot’s herdsmen quarreled with Abraham’s shepherds over grazing land. Having been well taught by his father, Isaac simply walks away. Though the memory remains bitter, he names this well of “living” water Esek, meaning “contention.”

Then they dug another well, and they quarreled over it too, so he named it Sitnah. He moved away from there and dug another well, and they did not quarrel over it; so he named it Rehoboth, for he said, “At last the LORD has made room for us, and we will be fruitful in the land.” (Gen 26:21-22)

Persisting in his search for water, Isaac digs another well. Unfortunately, upon its completion he meets with the same fate, as success is soured once more by yet another quarrel. But again he refuses to fight for what God has promised, and quietly walks away. The well is named, in painful memory of the strife, Sitnah, which means “accusation” or “hostility.” Finally, however, his persistence is rewarded. After successfully digging a third well there is no strife, and so he names it Rehoboth, meaning “wide, broad, or spacious.” The term is often used in the psalms to speak figuratively of God’s salvation that delivers the king from “narrow straits” and takes him to a “broad” place, free from anxiety. It is a place where Isaac’s heart is enlarged with joy. Thus Isaac’s heart resounds with joy that God had made room for them. He sees this as a sign that they could finally take root in the land and become fruitful.

From Rehoboth now, Isaac continues his journey back home to Beersheba.

III. Isaac in Beersheba (Gen 26:23-33)

A. The Lord appears to Isaac in Beersheba (26:23-25)

Then he went up from there to Beersheba. The LORD appeared to him the same night and said, “I am the God of your father Abraham; Do not fear, for I am with you. I will bless you, and multiply your descendants, For the sake of My servant Abraham.” So 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. (Gen 26:23-25)

Just as God reaffirmed his covenant with Isaac’s father, he

does so now with the son. After the son has by faith completed his journey through this famine, God recommits himself to him, identifying himself as the God of his father. It is as if God is saying to him, "The intimate relationship which your father had with me is meant for you as well." The son is not to have a secondhand faith, one based solely on tradition of the past, but a faith that is real and vital in the present. Now when Isaac hears the term "blessing," he can rely not merely on the abstract promise, but also on his own personal history. Waltke summarizes it as "protection (26:6-8, 11, 31), enjoyment of his wife (26:8, 11), yield of a hundredfold (26:12-13), herds and servants (26:14), water supply (26:17-22, 32), space (26:22), and triumph over his enemies (26:26-31)."

At this point in Isaac's life, when the traditions of the father become integrated into the experience of the son, he worships (note: this was absent after the first revelation, in 26:2-6). Now he builds an altar, calls upon the name of the LORD, and dwells in his tent (symbolic of his alien status in the land). But then he does something new: he digs another well, other than the one his father had dug, to make his father's former sanctuary his own. This is very important in the growth process. Once we have experienced worship as a result of an authentic faith we are able to take new ground beyond the shadow of "the father."

The chapter closes where it began. But now, instead of Isaac making his journey to Abimelech, Abimelech pays a visit to Beersheba to see Isaac.

B. Abimelech goes to Isaac, sues for peace (26:26-33)

Then Abimelech came to him from Gerar with his adviser Ahuzzath and Phicol the commander of his army. Isaac said to them, "Why have you come to me, since you hate me and have sent me away from you?" (Gen 26:26-27)

It is easy to imagine how Isaac's heart sank when the Philistines came into view, especially as Abimelech appears "in force," with Ahuzzath, the chief of police (a better translation than "advisor"), and Phicol, the commander of armed forces. No longer able to control his anger, Isaac demands to know why they have come, since they hate him. Even this peaceable man can be pushed over the edge. Their response is one of the most surprising turns in biblical narrative.

They said, "We see plainly that the LORD has been with you; so we said, 'Let there now be an oath between us, even between you and us, and let us make a covenant with you, that you will do us no harm, just as we have not touched you and have done to you nothing but good and have sent you away in peace. You are now the blessed of the LORD.'" (Gen 26:28-29)

Having suffered such ill treatment at their hands, Isaac can hardly believe his ears when they explain their motives. As they have observed Isaac continually and irrevocably being blessed following their persistent ill treatment of him, they have arrived at the conclusion that God is with him. Therefore they have come to "sue for peace." As the saying goes, "If you can't beat them, join them." But, notice in the offer of a treaty they turn a blind eye to their harsh treatment of Isaac in his expulsion, and their treachery in reclaiming his wells. But it makes no difference to Isaac whether they own their guilt or not. He graciously does not shame them with their history, or retaliate with cutting words. Like his father, he becomes the supreme model of hospitality and prepares them a feast fit for a king.

Then he made them a feast, and they ate and drank. In the morning they arose early and exchanged oaths; then Isaac sent them away and they departed from him in peace. (Gen 26:30-31)

Isaac would never forget this feast. What joy it brought him! Every bite was filled with the sweet aroma of peace, with not a hint of bitterness. Out of this historic moment was coined the proverb, "When a person's ways are pleasing to the Lord, he

makes even his enemies sue for peace with him" (Prov 16:7, Bruce Waltke's translation). In the morning they exchange oaths, and Abimelech departs in peace. A story that began with a famine and fleeting fears culminates with a feast, secure in peace. And Isaac receives still more blessing.

Now it came about on the same day, that Isaac's servants came in and told him about the well which they had dug, and said to him, "We have found water." So he called it Shibah; therefore the name of the city is Beersheba to this day. (Gen 26:32-33)

On that very day Isaac's servants return from completing the new well, and water flows in abundant supply. So in one day he secures an oath for security and a fresh water supply. In light of his joy he names the well "Shibah" ("seven," or "oath"). Later, as the city developed, it took on the same name, "Beersheba" ("well of oath," or "well of seven").

We will conclude with three lessons from Isaac's story in Beersheba.

IV. Lessons at Beersheba in the Footsteps of the Father

A. A famine for our faith

The first thing we learn from Isaac's story is that we cannot have the blessings of the fathers without having the faith of the fathers. As the writer of Hebrews reminds us, "Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith" (Heb 13:7). There is to be no secondhand faith in the kingdom of God. The consistent method that God uses to teach faith to each generation is to put them through a famine. This was true of each of the patriarchs, of Israel, King David, Elijah, Jesus, and the disciples.

Once we are in the famine we are given three simple instructions for our faith.

B. Faith in the famine

First, do not go outside the land of promise to find security. This is another way of saying we should not trust in the world's methods, because doing so often leads us to compromise our identity and family relationships in order to secure wealth. This is very damaging to faith. Isaac is given a strict warning by the LORD not to go to Egypt but to find his bread by faith in the land.

This is the great lesson for every generation. It is framed by those wondrous words of Moses when he wrote how God "humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD" (Deut 8:3). So, don't run from the famine; bloom where you are planted.

The second instruction is to faithfully "sow" in the midst of famine. This is all the initiative that Isaac took. And when he faithfully sowed during the famine, God blessed one hundredfold in the very first year. In the New Testament Christians are told to be faithful to sow two things: God's word (Mark 4:14-20; 2 Tim 4:2), and good deeds. To those who faithfully sow, God promises a glorious harvest. As Paul writes, "For the one who sows to his own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption, but to the one who sows to the Spirit shall from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we shall reap if we do not grow weary" (Gal 6:8-9). The psalmist says, "Those who sow in tears shall reap with joyful shouting" (Ps 126:5).

The third instruction for faith in the famine is to walk away from conflict. In case we are dull and miss the point, we see that Isaac walked away from contention on three separate occasions. What did he lose by so acting? Nothing! He finds his true riches secure and his water supply abundant. Isaac's faith would shape David, who followed his footsteps, as Psalm 37 proves,

Do not fret because of evildoers,

**Be not envious toward wrongdoers.
 For they will wither quickly like the grass
 And fade like the green herb.
 Trust in the LORD and do good;
 Dwell in the land and cultivate faithfulness.
 Delight yourself in the LORD;
 And He will give you the desires of your heart.** (Ps 37:1-4)

1. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (Dallas: Word, 1994), 188.
2. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 189.
3. Bruce Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 368.
4. Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York, W. W. Norton, 1996), 133.
5. Wenham, *Genesis*, 191.
6. Alter, *Genesis*, 134.
7. Waltke, *Genesis*, 370-371.

C. Motivation in the Famine

Finally, the text leaves us with a strong motivation to help us cultivate faith in the famine. What should motivate us is the vision of Isaac's feast. The whole story moves from famine, through fear, to faith, and culminates in a feast. And there is no bitterness in the eating, for it is the pure gift of God. That is what makes the feast so sweet. As the proverb says,

**It is the blessing of the LORD that makes rich,
 And He adds no sorrow to it.** (Prov 10:22)

After this wondrous feast, following the news that water is springing up out of the new well, we can almost hear Isaac singing to the LORD those words of worship which Israel would later sing in the wilderness:

**"Spring up, O well! Sing to it!
 The well, which the leaders sank,
 Which the nobles of the people dug,
 With the scepter and with their staffs."** (Num 21:17-18)

This is the joy of the banquet, a joy we are being prepared for not just at the end of the age, but to taste in good measure in this life: a banquet at which our enemies sit with us and proclaim that God is with us. Like father, like son...

If the positive vision of the feast is not enough to motivate us, then the rest of the story of Genesis, 23 chapters, will grip us by the throat as we live through the painful consequences of another son who chose to grasp instead of trust. In the end he will learn to trust, but who would want to experience the pain he would endure in the process?

**"The father of the righteous will greatly rejoice;
 he who begets a wise son will be glad in him."**
 (Prov 23:24, NRSV)

*Isaac in the Footsteps of his Father
 Literary Outline
 Genesis 26:1-33*

A Isaac goes to Abimelech for food	26:1
B The Lord appears to Isaac in Gerar Abrahamic Covenant renewed	26:2-6
C Deception of the Philistines: sister / wife	26:7-11
X Isaac sows, prospers, gains wealth Philistines become envious, Isaac sent away	26:12-14
C' Contention with Philistines over wells	26:15-22
B' The Lord appears to Isaac in Beersheba Covenant renewed – Isaac worships	26:23-25
A' Abimelech goes to Isaac for peace	26:26-33