



ISAAC'S STORY: LAUGHTER'S LAST LAUGH

SERIES: THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS

Catalog No. 1421

Gen 17-35 (selected)

21st Message

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November 11th, 2001

When our first daughter was two years old, I took her on a father-daughter outing to a farm behind our home. After looking at the farm animals we took our bag lunches and ate lunch together, seated on top of a wagon. Sitting there, overcome with appreciation at the privilege of fatherhood, I decided to document the memory. Over the next sixteen years I kept journals of our father-daughter memories. Before she left to attend college, I gave Rebecca several volumes of what I entitled *The father-daughter memories of Becky*. I did the same for each of my daughters. It would have been unthinkable to leave one of them out. Had I done so, I would have had to explain that if she wanted to know her special history, she would have to read it in the volumes of one of her sisters. Remarkably, this is what the author of Genesis does with Isaac's history. If we want to read about Isaac's life, we have to turn to Jacob's history.¹

Considering how wondrously Isaac's life began, it is shocking to find that his story is passed over in the narrative. Even more frustrating is the fact that the narrator does not give any reason for this. The art of biblical narration is to paint with subtle brush strokes. Here, the narrator challenges his readers to solve this compelling mystery. So this is our task. We will examine the seven scenes in Genesis that make up Jacob's story, placing them in chronological order to get a composite picture of Isaac's life.² As we do so we will discover where "Laughter" laughs last.

1. Conception and birth: Unadulterated joy (Gen 17:15-19; 18:9-15; 21:1-7)

If ever a child was wanted, Isaac was that child. Promised to a barren couple, well past the age of fertility, from the announcement of his conception to his birth, this hoped-for son was surrounded by laughter. Initially, it was the laughter of incredulity, when Abraham fell flat on his face in disbelief (17:17). Sarah had the same response when she secretly overheard the angelic promise. Her body was so old it was absurd to think she could ever experience pleasure again (18:12). But after they had waited twenty-five years, God transformed their laughter of unbelief into unadulterated joy. Isaac was born; life sprang from the dead. In fact, the birth of Isaac is the only time in the story of Abraham that there is joy unabated, with no word of sorrow (Prov 10:22). Parents who receive a "miracle" child well know that indescribable feeling of love that fills the heart at birth. On the occasion of Isaac's birth, Sarah comes to the realization that this miracle of life will eternally shape everyone's "laughter": "God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me" (Gen 21:6). No son could have been more loved and appreciated than Isaac.

2. Adolescence: Silent obedience (Gen 22)

Isaac grew up in a spiritually exceptional home. It is hard to think of any son in all of Scripture having a better situation to shape his early years. James Dobson would have written about this model home for his *Focus on the Family* books. The atmosphere would have been held up as the supreme example of how to build a child's self-esteem. Isaac did not grow up in a home where the father was emotionally absent. Abraham was intimately present, as is obvious in the affectionate verbal exchanges between father and the son, and in their intimate closeness as they walked hand in hand up Mount Moriah (22:7-8).

Isaac's home was a place where faith was not just taught, it was superbly modeled. Early on, he witnessed firsthand his father's obedience in sending his half-brother, Ishmael, off into the desert. Although this was a painful separation for this father, he carried out the command faithfully, while at the same time displaying extreme tenderness toward the boy and his mother. It is obvious that such holy behavior shaped Isaac, as in the very next scene he imitates his father's faith. In an act of supreme sacrifice he allows himself to be bound on the altar by his father, silently trusting himself into his care, even if that meant death. In the aftermath he brushes up against an intervening angel, and smells the sweet fragrance of the ram given in his stead. Isaac reaches the summit of obedience when he is but a teen. This act of obedience would become the icon of obedience in Scripture, foreshadowing that of our Lord Jesus. Displaying such acts of faith in his youth, one can only imagine what kind of greatness this youth was destined for.

3. 40 years: A marriage made in Heaven (Gen 24)

Next we come to Isaac's marriage, at the age of forty. The fact that this episode is the longest in all of Genesis (sixty-seven verses) underscores its importance. The whole story is driven by the hand of providence to secure just the right bride for the holy family. If Isaac is a model of faith, Rebekah is the paramount model of hospitality. At first, Abraham's servant is seized by her beauty, but that is nothing compared to her ready initiative and almost supernatural industry to water his ten thirsty camels. Rebekah is also portrayed as a woman who can speak her own mind in an all-male world (24:58). And she has no fear in making an Abraham-like journey of faith to join a new family in a new land. It's no wonder that when Isaac first laid his eyes on her "he loved her." Theirs was a marriage made in heaven. Their union brought great comfort to Isaac just after the death of his mother, as Rebekah dried his tears.

4. 40-60 years: Spiritual integration (Gen 26:1-33)

The next years were Isaac's "midlife" years (although they were anything but midlife for Isaac, who lived to be 180). Like Abraham, Isaac will be tested just after he has tasted the gifts of God. The story in Genesis 26 is perfectly structured to mirror the spiritual footsteps of his father, so that the faith of the father will become the faith of the son. The purpose of this test is to teach Isaac how to find a feast in the midst of the famine. In the beginning, he succumbs to his insecurities. Like his father, he compromises his wife's security for his own wellbeing. But, following a corrective word, he sows seed in the land and is blessed by God a hundredfold. Following the blessing, however, he is tested again by his expulsion from Gerar. But though he is reduced to a wandering nomad, he does not lose faith. He faithfully re-digs all his father's wells that had been stopped up by the Philistines. When each one is contested, he behaves just as his father did with Lot, and quietly walks away. By the end of the scene God has so blessed this patriarch that these once hostile Philistines sue for peace, and Isaac is now able to worship God out of his personal experience.

The only dissonant note in this episode is found in the use of Isaac's name (*yitzak*: "he laughs"). The verb "to laugh" is the theme word that ties Isaac's story together. It is first used by Abraham and Sarah to describe their laughter of unbelief (17:17; 18:12), but

later is transformed by God into ecstatic joy (21:6). Isaac is born, and his name, *“he laughs,”* forever seals their happiness in a rare tremor of bliss. In contrast to this joy there is also the laughter that mocks the gifts of God (Ishmael, in 21:9), and the judgment of God (when Lot’s sons-in law misinterpret Lot as *“joking,”* in 19:14). So laughter in Isaac’s story is dual-edged. The way one *“laughs”* is an indication of how one responds to God’s promise. That is what shapes destiny. *“Laughter”* yields indescribable joy for those who have faith, but for those who do not believe, their laughter drives them into exile (21:14), or even destruction (19:24-25).

With that context in view, the narrator has set up the reader to speculate how Isaac will embrace his own name. Will he embrace the faith of his parents and walk firmly into his divine destiny, or will he turn his name into a *“laughing”* joke? Given the journey of his faith thus far, we aren’t prepared for the narrator’s sleight of hand, which turns Isaac’s story on its head. The only time the verb *“to laugh”* is used with Isaac as the subject, is when he is in fact trying to hide his identity. In fear he compromises Rebekah, saying she is his sister, to spare his life. Yet, he cannot hide his true identity for long; he is overcome by his sensual passion for his wife.

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 26:8, NASB)

Unable to control his sexual passions, Isaac allows *“himself to be publicly demonstrative with Rebekah.”*³ The narrator plays on Isaac’s name: *“Laughter was tickling (yitzhaq metzahaq - 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 is an insight into Isaac’s deepest character. Sensual appetites can control this generally passive man. Though this appears to be a minor note in this episode, sadly, it is the *“last laugh”* in Isaac’s story. No longer is there verbal use of his name, indicating that of all the forces at work within this patriarch, it is his sensual appetites that will dominate him.

5. 60 years: Fatherhood—dangerous affections take root (Gen 25:19-34)

This brings us to the birth narrative, when Isaac is sixty. He emerges as a man of faith who for twenty years has prayed faithfully for the barren Rebekah. He did not succumb to worldly methods to secure the promise, as his father had done, but trusted in faith (prayer) and patience. And he is well rewarded, with not one but two sons, both of whom will become great nations. So far so good. But the narrator reveals the tragic turn for this patriarch.

Now Isaac loved Esau, because he had a taste for game, but Rebekah loved Jacob. (Gen 25:28)

Isaac’s affections are set not on the son of divine choice, but on Esau. And the reason is, *“for the game in his mouth.”* Esau appears to be a mirror of Isaac’s stepbrother Ishmael, performing in the wild field as he never could. Now the boy is used as a tool to feed the father’s sensual appetites, and in that feeding a deep reservoir of love is drawn from the father for the son. Observing this makes us wonder if the mention of Isaac’s first affection for Rebekah was a true, sacrificial love or merely a pleasurable response that she was a gift to meet his needs, a warm blanket of comfort after his mother’s death. At any rate, here we learn that this marriage made in heaven now appears to be in deep trouble, as it is divided by competing loyalties. Isaac’s affections have been radically altered from his years as a teenager. Now it appears he is embarked on a road where he will sacrifice anything for a son who has no spiritual sensitivity and no future.

This is very telling. Parents must ask themselves whether they use their children to feed the sensual appetites of a life never achieved. Living in this valley we see this played out over and over again. Children are rewarded with love, conditioned on either their athletic or academic performance, and in the process their spiritual development is buried.

6. 100 years: Retirement—sensual appetites rule the heart (Gen 27)

When Esau was forty years old he married Judith the daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Basemath the daughter of Elon the Hittite; and they brought grief to Isaac and Rebekah. (Gen 26:34-35)

When Isaac was forty, Abraham sought for him a wife who would be spiritually sensitive. Upon Esau turning forty, however, there is no mention of Isaac taking any initiative to do as his father had done, nor does it appear that he gave Esau any guidance or direction in choosing a wife. Isaac is an absent father. Left to himself, Esau marries, totally disregarding his history and breaking all boundaries with his grandfather’s faith. He marries two Canaanite wives of his choosing, and they were *“a bitterness of spirit to Isaac and to Rebekah.”* But though Esau’s actions are a source of bitterness to the couple, they bring no rebuke from the father. How can he rebuke him, after he has used him to feed his own sensuality? Even worse is the fact that Isaac continues to use this son as a tool for his own sensuality, rather than shaping him spiritually. Instead of using the corrective rod of rebuke he caters to him.

The seeds of sensuality grow into malignant weeds. If they are not forcefully rooted out, they will choke all the remaining life left in the soul (Mark 4:18-19). By the time Isaac reaches one hundred, this child of promise is defined by his sensuality.

Now it came about, when Isaac was old and his eyes were too dim to see, that he called his older son Esau and said to him, “My son.” And he said to him, “Here I am.” Isaac said, “Behold now, I am old and I do not know the day of my death. Now then, please take your gear, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field and hunt game for me; and prepare a savory dish for me such as I love, and bring it to me that I may eat, so that my soul may bless you before I die.” (Gen 27:1-4)

Here Isaac is portrayed as an old man who is practically blind -- a telling detail of his spiritual condition. Though he will live another eighty years he thinks he is on the verge of death. His sensuality has escalated from a seed within his soul to become the driving force in his life (*“tasty food”* is used six times; *“game”* is used eight times; *“love”* speaks of his deep affections, once given for his wife, but now reserved for food). There is nothing wrong with fine food and choice wine. It is when these appetites become the driving force of life, overruling the spiritual sensitivities of the heart, that they become wrong. In Isaac’s old age so desirous is he that his son feed his palate, he will reverse divine choices and bless what God has cursed. This is the height of evil. As a result, Isaac has to carry out his actions privately. He could not be open about this monumental family decision. But, as providence would have it, Rebekah overhears their conversation. She should have confronted Isaac’s planned disobedience directly, but by now the couple appears so divided they speak to one another only through their children. In fact, throughout the entire Isaac story there is no direct dialogue from Isaac to Rebekah. This is a telltale sign of his passivity and their disintegrating marriage. Let us not allow that to happen in our marriages. Sensual urges work differently on men and women. We should band together to challenge and encourage each another and refuse to cater to one another’s appetites to get what we want.

Rebekah does not use her gifts of initiative and industry to confront Isaac’s sensuality, however; rather, she achieves what she wants by catering to it. She uses Jacob to deceive his father and betray his brother, and offers to take full responsibility for

the curse in the event of failure (27:13). She prepares the savory stew, while Jacob dresses up in a ridiculous Halloween costume of animal skins. The scene seems so ludicrous it borders on the comic; perhaps this is the point the narrator is making. By the end of Isaac's life, sensuality has turned "Mr. Laughter" into a sordid joke.

Then he came to his father and said, "My father." And he said, "Here I am. Who are you, my son?" Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau your firstborn; I have done as you told me. Get up, please, sit and eat of my game, that you may bless me." Isaac said to his son, "How is it that you have it so quickly, my son?" And he said, "Because the LORD your God caused it to happen to me." Then Isaac said to Jacob, "Please come close, that I may feel you, my son, whether you are really my son Esau or not." So Jacob came close to Isaac his father, and he felt him and said, "The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau." He did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau's hands; so he blessed him. And he said, "Are you really my son Esau?" And he said, "I am." So he said, "Bring it to me, and I will eat of my son's game, that I may bless you." And he brought it to him, and he ate; he also brought him wine and he drank. Then his father Isaac said to him, "Please come close and kiss me, my son." So he came close and kissed him; and when he smelled the smell of his garments, he blessed him and said, "See, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field which the LORD has blessed; (Gen 27:18-27)

Isaac's sensuality has so drained his spiritual sensitivities it takes all five of his senses to discern which son is which. Yet all he has left is four, and the initial two give him conflicting information. His ears tell him it is Jacob (though even they prove faulty, and provide him no hint that his son's words are laden with blasphemy, 27:20), but his touch tells him it is Esau. (In the Old Testament, the ear was considered to be the most important organ of spiritual receptivity. Israel was to be a people governed by the "ear" [Deut 6:4], while their idolatrous Canaanite counterparts were governed by the "eye" [Exod 20:4]). As these two senses come into conflict, Isaac allows what he feels to overrule what he hears, and is finally swept away by, of all things, his nose! The smell of Jacob's gamy garments after the savory meal lift Isaac's senses into such a state of ecstasy that he crosses the ultimate moral boundary and blesses what God has cursed. In the end, instead of rebuking his son he has become like him. Isaac's continual feeding of his sensual appetites has brought him to the place where he will throw away the family's spiritual destiny ("the blessing") for a single meal. And there is no rebuke coming from his conscience.

7. 180 years: Homecoming and death (Gen 35:27-29)

Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre of Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had sojourned. (Gen 35:27)

Death, a time that is dense with emotion, frequently is the occasion of homecoming for parents and children. Yet in Jacob's homecoming there is a glaring absence of words and emotion from his father Isaac. This is all the more surprising when we remember that Jacob had been gone for twenty years. Silence is the most painful response of parents to children at these critical moments. Is this anguished silence the result of a life so compromised it is incapable of words? The silence is all the more painful when it is contrasted with Jacob's response to Joseph's homecoming.

And Joseph prepared his chariot and went up to Goshen to meet his father Israel; as soon as he appeared before him, he fell on his neck and wept on his neck a long time. Then Israel said to Joseph, "Now let me die, since I have seen your face, that you are still alive." (Gen 46:29-30)

In contrast to Jacob, Isaac seems to exit the stage of life with hardly a murmur. When this 180-year-old patriarch is finally placed in the ground, the narrator borrows much the same language of his father's funeral, but robs it of its vitality. Upon Abraham's death, he wrote:

And Abraham breathed his last and died in a ripe old age, an old man and satisfied with life; and he was gathered to his people. (Gen 25:8)

But when Isaac dies, he writes:

Now the days of Isaac were one hundred and eighty years. Isaac breathed his last and died and was gathered to his people, an old man of ripe age; and his sons Esau and Jacob buried him. (Gen 35:28-29)

Both father and son die at a ripe old age, sated with years. But while Abraham dies old and satisfied with life, Isaac dies old and empty. It is ironic that those who devoted their lives to feeding their senses end their lives unable to "feel." Compromise robs us of our vigor and dampens the fiery flame in living (Jer 2:13). Such a tragic ending may force us to ask if Isaac was even saved. I firmly believe that he was, because of God's sovereign choice of him as an heir of promise. Yet, Job's words seem appropriate, that he "escaped by the skin of his teeth" (Job 19:20). Isaac's story stands in sharp contrast to Abraham as a severe warning that the race is not to the swift, but to the faithful who endure until the end.

We will conclude with three spiritual antidotes to our sensual appetites.

Spiritual Antidotes to Sensual Appetites

1. Flame out, don't rust out

Our culture ranks with those of Greece and Rome as one of the most sensual in history. Technology may have served us well, but it has multiplied our capability for idolatry, especially when it comes to the imagination. If we are at all passive in this culture, we will be overrun and consumed. And it does not get easier with age. At fifty, I seem to battle more now than I did at twenty. Since sensuality is a constant danger that threatens the life of the soul, the obvious conclusion is that there can be no retirement from the life of faith. Forget the dream of spending your old age sitting back in a life of ease and indulgence. Look forward instead to your greatest works of faith in your waning years. At a recent elders meeting, one of our deacons announced with joyful tears that his eleventh grandchild had just given his life to Christ. This man and his wife set apart a special time for each of their grandchildren to make yearly visits so that they can have a hand in shaping them spiritually. Our brother has served as a continual example of faith to me.

Instead of going to our grave blind, like Isaac, we should endeavor to be like Moses, of whom the narrator writes:

Although Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died, his eye was not dim, nor his vigor abated. (Deut 34:7)

Or consider the example of Caleb, who never retired from the adventure of faith. Even into his eighties he was eager to take the high ground for the Lord:

"I am still as strong today as I was in the day Moses sent me; as my strength was then, so my strength is now, for war and for going out and coming in. Now then, give me this hill country about which the LORD spoke on that day, for you heard on that day that Anakim were there, with great fortified cities; perhaps the LORD will be with me, and I will drive them out as the LORD has spoken." (Josh 14:11-12)

So that's the first thing. You can retire from your job, but you may not retire from the life of faith. Taking new ground for Christ is always the best guard against sensuality.

2. Make physical blessings subservient to worship

Secondly, the life of faith in both the Old and New Testaments is anything but legalistic in handling our physical appetites. There is nothing wrong with the blessings of good wine, of banquets, and the joys of physical love (within the context of marriage). But the word from God is that we not allow these things to become the driving forces of life; rather, they must be kept subservient to worship. God instructed Israel that after they had possessed the good land of Canaan and ate of its wonderful fruits, they were to bless and give thanks to God. Appreciation is the antidote to sensuality.

“When you have eaten and are satisfied, you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land which He has given you.”
(Deut 8:10)

Later, Moses would give Israel further instruction to take some of their offerings designated to God and prepare a lavish feast and, most importantly, invite the orphan, widow and alien to the banquet (Deut 14:22-29). This was how the Lord, not their appetites, would remain central to their celebration. If God blesses you and gives you wealth, don't cringe in shame, but celebrate by using it to prepare a banquet to further his kingdom.

3. Keep a fresh vision of God

Finally, never forget that physical appetites are merely a faint shadow of our deeper longings to be possessed by the love of God. Therefore, our focus should remain not on earth but in heaven. The way to stay focused in this worldly age is to adopt spiritual disciplines of setting aside time, whether an hour a day, a morning a week or one day a month, for spiritual contemplation, reflection, fasting and prayer, to keep our vision of Christ flaming and bright. In this regard, I am reminded of the words of Paul:

Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us. For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things. For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself. (Phil 3:17-21)

May God grant us the grace to finish the race, and to finish well (2 Tim 4:6-8).

1. Genesis is carefully divided into ten different divisions, each titled with the Hebrew term *toledot*. *Toledot* is derived from the verb *yalad* – “to give birth to,” and is translated as “begettings” or “generations,” and speaks of the family history that issues forth from a particular individual. Therefore the *Toledoth of Isaac* (Gen 25:19) is really the stories about Jacob.

2. For a compelling article on Isaac's life see Bruce K. Waltke, “Reflections of Retirement From the Life of Isaac,” *Crux* 32:4 (December 1996), 4-14. This article proved very helpful in shaping the framework of my thoughts for this text.

3. Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 133.

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Isaac's Life *Literary Outline*

A Birth: God creates “laughter” – **joyous praise** for life out of death

B Teens: Silent **obedience** on Mt. Moriah

C Marriage: Isaac has **affections** for his wife - “Isaac **loved** Rebekah”

X. Isaac's last laugh: “Isaac caused Rebekah to laugh”

Isaac embraces his own name; this is the last time the verb “to laugh” is used in the story

C' Birth of Children

Isaac's **affections** are changed, and now become based on sensuality –
“Isaac **loved** Esau, for the game in his mouth”

B' Old age – Isaac spiritually blind, speaks in **disobedience**

A' Death and the return of the son – no speech, **silent resignation**