

Genesis 26:1-11, No. 43
“Covenantal Canoodling”
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The last time I preached on this text, some 18 years ago, that Lord’s Day happened to fall on Valentine’s Day. No such luck this time, though you will soon see that it would make an appropriate text for a Valentine’s Day sermon. Valentine’s Day, of course, is not a biblical or Christian holiday, but it most certainly does celebrate a biblical theme.

Text Comment

- v.1 The mention of the earlier famine invites comparison with the account we are given in chapter 12 and with what Abraham did in a similar situation. The shortest route from Canaan to Egypt led through the land of the Philistines. Isaac stopped in Gerar because his father had made a treaty with the king of Gerar (21:22-34) and so he could expect some help from him. Abimelech seems to have been a dynastic name. That explains why there are several Abimelechs who ruled in Gerar (cf. 20:2). Think of the English royal house’s preference for Henry or George or Edward. [Sarna, 183]
- v.2 Again, the similarity with Abraham is obviously intentional. The Lord had told him to “go to the land that I will show you.” [12:1]
- v.3 “Sojourn,” the Hebrew word *gur* signifies that Isaac was to be a resident alien, at least a semi-permanent resident of Gerar, but one with no legal rights. It took some faith to remain there because Egypt could be counted on for food even in a famine. [Waltke, 368] A pastoralist, like Isaac, could be expected to suffer want and the loss of his stock in a famine. [Sarna, 183]
- v.4 A virtual quotation of God’s words to Abraham, especially those in 22:17-18. Once again, the fortunes of the entire world are intertwined with those of the covenant family, a major theme in Genesis and the rest of the OT. [Sarna, 183]
- v.5 As before and as always hereafter, the gracious plan of God for the salvation of his people comes to pass through the faith and obedience of God’s covenant people. Abraham was hardly without sin, as even this chapter causes us to recollect, but he was, even as a sinner, God’s faithful covenant partner.
- v.7 As you remember, Abraham had urged Sarah to tell the same lie, not once but twice. Another parallel between Abraham and Isaac.
- v.10 Isaac was supposed to be a blessing to the nations, not a curse! In this case, however, Rebekah was never taken into the king’s harem as Sarah had been.

It was our Savior himself who, in John 10:35, taught us that every word in the Bible is important. Even details we are accustomed to pass over with little thought are weighty because

they are part of the Word of God. But, more than that, a very great advance in biblical interpretation has occurred in recent years in the study of biblical narrative, the history or story parts of the Bible. What scholars have realized is that the authors of these narratives were highly skilled at using their histories to teach both theology and ethics. They were theologians, not just historians, and wrote their narratives not simply to communicate what happened but to teach the faith and the godly life to their readers. Or, to put it another way, the biblical narratives are *thick*. There are layers of meaning and teaching in each one. You can learn various lessons from the same narrative and that is by intention. To accomplish this variety of purposes the biblical historians used a variety of literary techniques, often subtle rather than overt, techniques that would have been appreciated by the text's original readers or hearers but are only now beginning to be appreciated by us.

One of those techniques is repetition, not only for emphasis, but to draw attention to relationships. We have that repetition in spades here in chapter 26. The chapter's primary purpose is to demonstrate that the blessing promised to Abraham had been transferred to Isaac, that he was now the heir of the covenant God made with Abraham. All of the parallels drawn between Abraham and Isaac in the chapter, and there are more such parallels in the verses we will read next time, are intended to reinforce Isaac's legitimacy as the heir of the covenant. Their point is that Isaac now stands in Abraham's place. He is to carry the covenant forward through a new generation. The narrator doesn't *say* this so much as he *shows* this by invoking these parallels between Abraham and Isaac. Biblical literary technique is characteristically subtle in this way.

Another of these literary techniques is what is called anachrony or chronological displacement. By such terms is meant that an account is placed out of chronological order *on purpose*. In this case, the events that occurred in chapter 26 happened before, not after the birth of Isaac and Rebekah's twin sons reported in the previous chapter. Here Isaac and Rebekah are younger; if not newlyweds, they had not been married for many years. Had Isaac and Rebekah already had children, it would have been obvious to the Philistines that they were married and Isaac would never have attempted the subterfuge he did. [Waltke, 367] The reason for anachrony in this instance is that the theme of chapter 26 is God's blessing of Isaac as he had blessed Abraham before him. This emphasis will, in turn, explain Jacob's deceiving of his father in the next chapter; Isaac had the covenantal blessing to bestow. Remember, we are now in the *toledot* of Isaac. This section of Genesis is about Jacob and Esau, not about Isaac. The story of chapter 26 is told in large part to set the stage for what will happen in the following chapter. The blessing of the covenant had been given to Isaac which is why Jacob stole it from his father. God had already proved himself the God of Isaac as he had been the God of Abraham. Isaac's failure here in chapter 26, accordingly, was so morally indefensible that we read here, as had been the case twice with Abraham, even a pagan king had to rebuke him for the cowardly lie he had told.

But, what is more, the theft of Esau's blessing, *a deceit as much perpetrated by Rebekah as by Jacob*, likewise was a disgusting and demoralizing demonstration of the breakdown of a marriage that once had been so much better. All of this we are intended to notice and the attentive reader, or hearer, would no doubt notice it. Remember, they didn't read Genesis chapter by chapter as we do; those divisions did not exist in the early days. How could a couple

so much in love in chapter 26 become, at least to some degree, enemies of one another in chapter 27?

But, of course, in order for any reader to have that thought or to wonder over that development, it would have to be obvious *that a husband and wife who really loved one another would act as Isaac and Rebekah were acting when Abimelech chanced to see them through his window.*

Isaac and Rebekah may well have been laughing together, but then there is laughter and there is laughter. The kind of laughter Abimelech witnessed was the kind that only husbands and wives share! We have in this church a number of women with a great sense of humor and I laugh a lot when I am with them, but no one would conclude from our laughter that we are husband and wife. It is this fact that has led to other translations of the Hebrew word. The NIV renders it “caressing.” A very fine Jewish commentary on Genesis offers the translation “Abimelech saw Isaac *fondling* his wife Rebekah.” [Sarna, 184] A colloquial English translation would therefore be, “Abimelech saw Isaac and Rebekah canoodling.”

“Canoodle” is a great word. It apparently originated in American slang in the 19th century. The authoritative *OED*, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the final arbiter of the meaning of English words, defines *canoodle* as “to indulge in caresses and fondling endearments.” Or we might define it to mean “to kiss and cuddle amorously.” Any couple that has ever been in love, knows what it means to canoodle! In fact, most of us would be mortified to be overheard or observed when we are canoodling. We say things to our lovers that we would *never* say to anyone else! Consider this little bit of nonsense written by the urbane, learned, and sophisticated 19th century British politician David Lloyd-George to his mistress:

“When I woke up at 6, my first thought was of the loving little face engraved on my heart and I had a fierce thought to go there and then to cover it with kisses. But, darling, I am jealous once more. I know your thoughts are on roast mutton and partridge and chicken and potatoes and that you are longing to pass them through the lips which are mine and to bite them with luscious joy with the dazzling white teeth that I love to press.” [In Manchester, *Last Lion*, I, 644]

Yuk! But, I suspect I have said things that I would be equally embarrassed to put down on paper in the cold light of day! Had Lloyd-George known that that letter would one day be read by the public he would never have written it as he did.

The point is, however, that this is how men and women in love behave. They say over-the-top things to one another, they touch one another as a means of satisfying their longing for intimacy, and they laugh tête-a-tête as an expression of their joy in being in love. You have the same picture of a loving couple talking and acting this way – canoodling – in the Song of Songs, the Bible’s depiction of the pure and holy love between a man and a woman, and you find the same thing in Proverbs in connection with the love of a married couple. Add this picture of Isaac and Rebekah to the Bible’s portrait of married love in action.

In the Bible love – whether the love of the soul for God or the love of man and woman – is always both thought and action. It is never thought alone. A love that does not speak, that does

not touch, that does not smile or laugh, that does not express itself in visible and audible ways is not love. What do we read in Proverbs? “Better is open rebuke than hidden love.”

So what we have here in v. 8 is a picture of what marriage ought to be. It is this fact that creates the dissonance with the picture of Isaac and Rebekah’s marriage we will be given in chapter 27. *This is the way a husband and wife ought to be! This is how they ought to treat one another. Their love for one another ought to be obvious to any onlooker. And this kind of love would never do what Rebekah did to Isaac later!*

Remember this fundamental biblical principle. What is true at the beginning – of either a Christian life or a Christian marriage – ought to continue to be true to the end. We don’t begin our Christian life in love and deep gratitude and with a spirit of adventure and a willingness to make sacrifices for our Lord and Savior but then later come to realize that none of that is any longer necessary. Quite the contrary. Any real Christian is going to regret that his passion for the Lord has lessened or that she is not as ready to praise him in the hearing of others as once he was or she was. We would never accept a Christian saying that while he once was head over heels in the love with the Lord and wanted to demonstrate that love at every turn, now he realizes that there is no need to make such a spectacle of himself or constantly talk about Christ to others. If we heard someone saying that we would fear that he had lost his first love, what the Lord Jesus told the Ephesians they had done, and because they had done it they needed to repent and do the works they did at first. [Rev. 2:4-5]

When a couple was first in love and it came so naturally to them to speak of their love to one another and rejoice in it together, surely that was love *as it always ought to be*. Remember the power of that love – those of you that are married – and the pleasure that it gave to both of you! You were talking and touching and canoodling all the time and you loved it. And those behaviors continued to nourish and feed your love. It is a form of worship and worship is appointed in the Bible – whether the worship of God or the worship of a husband or wife – to preserve and strengthen and purify and beautify the relationship. It is why we go to church every week, because we have a relationship with God that needs to be nourished and nothing nourishes a relationship like worship. And between a man and a woman, canoodling – what Isaac and Rebekah were doing outside Abimelech’s window – is a form of worship, the worship of married love. *Alas, there doesn’t seem to have been much canoodling going on between them in their later years.*

Now let me pause at this point to say that this many years into my ministry I know better than I knew early on how sensitive and difficult this subject can be. For some, this kind of romantic love and pleasure in love is the deep disappointment of their lives either because they are not married and so wish they were or because they are married but don’t enjoy this kind of love. For them discussions of romance are painful, salt in an open wound.

There are others who are embarrassed by the subject. They may accept that they should act as Isaac and Rebekah acted but can’t imagine themselves doing so. They would be embarrassed even to try. Or they are only too well aware of what capital errors they have made in their marriage and now feel that it is too late, that their spouse would be skeptical, if not offended, by any effort to attempt such behaviors now. For many reasons people, even Christian people, can

look upon the biblical ideal of a romantic marriage with regret, shame, self-recrimination, or embittered longing.

Well, was it not so with Isaac and Rebekah? We see them here as young lovers, but it seems as if the passion of their romance – their affection for and delight in one another – had faded by the time of the events reported in chapter 27 when Rebekah played her husband for a fool, took advantage of his age and infirmity, and tricked him into blessing her favorite son instead of his. That is what makes this reference to their canoodling important. Had we not this brief window on their earlier marriage, we might have supposed, reading chapter 27, that their marriage had always lacked real affection, had never been a source of great pleasure to them both, and had always lacked loyalty. Now we know that their marriage was much better early than late. When Abraham had, on two occasions, lied about Sarah being his sister rather than his wife, the Lord unmasked the lie himself. He revealed to Pharaoh and then to the first Abimelech that Sarah was actually Abraham's wife. But here *it is Isaac and Rebekah's own love* that gave them away. It was too powerful to conceal.

We've already said that the reason there is no *toledot* of Abraham, which, as you remember, would be the life story of Isaac, is that Isaac's later life, his slide into spiritual imbecility and sensuality was not worthy of a record. He was gapped, left out on purpose by the biblical narrator. We already know that his later years were lived on the downgrade. And, apparently, that spiritual declension had a profound effect on his marriage.

To be sure, even as a younger man Isaac was not without his faults. Here he played the coward. Here he put at risk not only his wife's purity but the covenant seed. Rebekah was the matriarch of the covenant family. How could she bear the next generation if she had been taken into another man's bed? We are not told what Rebekah thought about Isaac's lie. She obviously went along with it. Perhaps it was easier to do because, as it happened, no Philistine man actually made advances toward her. God prevented that from happening and since the situation, as we read in 8, lasted a long time, they probably both thought that their deception was harmless insurance against a possible disaster.

The fact that they were still canoodling after that long time suggests that their relationship had not been damaged by Isaac's lying about her. *In other words, whatever we might say about Isaac's behavior here, he and Rebekah had a happy, romantic, delightful marriage*, as, of course, believing husbands and wives ought all to have. *That they lost it is the tragedy*, a tragedy far too often repeated in the history of the covenant between God and man and the covenant between covenant men and covenant women. And that tragedy led to much unhappiness in both Esau's life and Jacob's, who are, after all the real subject of this chapter or *toledot* of Genesis.

This is all very important because of the place of true married love in human life: its wonderful and fabulously important impact on the life of husbands and wives, upon their children, and upon the church as a whole and its witness in the world. Ours is a culture that still celebrates romantic love, but has a deeply conflicted, ambiguous, and confused view of that love. Our culture – at least in practice – has largely separated sexual attraction from romantic love, the kind of love that is exclusive and permanent, as all truly romantic love aspires to be. Romantic love in our culture is much more tied to sex than to marriage and so is, in the nature of the case,

impermanent, insecure, and uncertain. And in our self-regarding culture romantic love, even in its ideal, is something one practices more for oneself than for the other, which, of course, is the eventual death of any genuinely romantic love, as it must have been the death of Isaac and Rebekah's romance. *At the end Isaac cared more for his taste buds than he did for his wife!*

And so we observe all around us this double alienation which has become a public feature of our culture and a cause of a great deal of social dislocation and misery. First, there is the alienation from true love, which cannot exist without the expectation of permanence, without the twinship of love and death, which permanence requires in the nature of the case sacrifice and self-giving, a true union of hearts. Second, there is the alienation from marriage, an institution fewer and fewer Americans are committed to. But marriage is the only possible means to that missing fulfillment found in genuinely romantic love. After many experiences of dating and break-up, what marriage has long been thought to offer seems impossible to an ever-increasing number of American men and women. When one sexual relationship follows another, romantic only for a time, marriage is set up to become one more relationship likely to disappoint.

The late Natalie Cole, with the help of modern technology, was able to sing a beautiful love song with her father, who had died when she was a little girl,

“When I fall in love, it will be forever...”

But her own experience of love was nothing like that, married and divorced three times as she had been. The wish remains, the longing, but the experience is increasingly rare. And, sad to say, it's not to be found even in far too many longstanding marriages. They remain permanent, but not permanent in affection, delight, and true love, the kind of love that someone can observe when looking out a nearby window.

So it is my duty to remind you, brothers and sisters, of what the Bible expects from husbands and wives in marriage. It is my calling to hold up before you the biblical ideal toward which we are all to aspire and which we are all to practice, not only at the beginning of our marriage, but until its end. Isaac may have been a coward, but in this respect he was a model husband, until he was not. He treasured his wife. He loved to be with her. And he acted out his love. Their canoodling was all it took to convince Abimelech that he had been duped. But Isaac couldn't help himself; no loving husband can. His heart was filled with what the Germans call “Sehnsucht,” longing or yearning for Rebekah, a longing that was sexual, romantic, personal, and had within it the assumption of permanence. His failure was not that he had no such love for Rebekah; his failure was that he allowed it to cool instead of nursing its fire. Isaac and Rebekah in Genesis 26 are our example of married love and Isaac and Rebekah in Genesis 27 are the spur we need to work to preserve that earlier love and never to let it die.

We've been made for the kind of married love we find in Isaac and Rebekah here and in the Song and in Proverbs and in a great many Christian marriages ever since. We've been made for that; we have been shown that kind of love in the Bible; and we have seen it in ordinary life. We all have a longing for this kind of love. We, of all people, therefore, have no excuse if we settle for less than this kind of canoodling marriage. Any husband can do it, if Isaac did; so can any wife, if Rebekah did. These two were not spiritual giants! We know that because it is what

couples do when they are falling in love for the first time and when they couldn't help but express their delight in one another in such ways.

But more than that, Christians are forbidden to accept the lowering of biblical standards, in this respect as in every respect. If this is what a marriage ought to be, and it is clear that it is in the Bible, then this is what we ought to aspire to make of our own marriages and refuse to be content with anything less. And in our culture how powerful an adornment of our Christian faith must marriages be that are full of affection, pleasure, passion, and permanence.

Isaac was very foolish to put such love as he had for Rebekah at risk. But he was very wise to have demonstrated and nurtured it as he did. Perhaps he couldn't help himself you say. Perhaps not. But then, he never even met his wife until they were about to be married and see how he loved her. I give the last word to the Puritans, first Thomas Watson. Puritans knew a lot about romantic love and were famous for their happy marriages. It is word to husbands, but it applies, necessary changes being made, to wives as well.

“It is not having a wife, but loving a wife, that makes a man live chastely. He who loves his wife...will not go abroad to drink of muddy, poisoned waters. Pure conjugal love is a gift of God, and comes from heaven; but like the vestal fire, it must be cherished that it go not out. He who loves not his wife, is the likeliest person to embrace the bosom of a stranger.”

And how does one cherish and nourish married love? By expressing it: in words of praise and celebration of the other person, in a touch, in a gift, in every way that love can be expressed. It is nourished by being practiced and expressed. And remember this from another Puritan, Thomas Gataker's 1635 sermon on Proverbs 5:15.

“...the Holy Ghost did allow some such private dalliance and behavior to married persons between themselves as to others might seem dotage [senility]: such as may be was Isaac's sporting with Rebekah.”

You can remember, if you think you will, “private dalliance and behavior.” In my view it's easier to remember *canoodling*! And to remember that it's what genuinely loving husbands and wives have always done, and it is how those who observe you know that you really are deeply in love. And then remember this - *it is never too late to do the right thing.*