

Genesis 26:12-35, No. 44**“The Next in Line”****February 5, 2017****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

Last time we took the first eleven verses of this chapter and noted in our reading the many parallels drawn between Isaac and Abraham his father. The narrator in this way was emphasizing the fact that Isaac now stood in Abraham’s place as the heir of the covenant. The covenant was now his responsibility and so it was his responsibility to hand that covenant on to the generation that followed him. All of this prepares the reader for what comes in the following chapter.

Text Comment

- v.12 Isaac was a pastoralist. His primary business was sheep. But he also engaged in small-scale agriculture. In this case it was probably wheat that was grown. [Sarna, 185]
- v.15 The locals were prevented by their king from attacking Isaac, but that didn’t stop them from harassing him by cutting off his access to water. They wanted him to leave. He was a competitor.
- v.17 Again, as had been the case with Abraham, though he had gravely sinned in his dealings with Abimelech, Isaac was so greatly blessed by God that his prosperity worried the Philistines. And though greatly blessed, Isaac still remained a pilgrim. He had no land of his own.
- v.18 Once again, Isaac is paired with Abraham. Wells were given names as a way of establishing property rights. Again, it took a lot of work to dig or to reopen a well. Isaac obviously had a sizeable workforce at his disposal.
- v.19 In the course of their work Isaac’s servants uncovered an underground spring, which made the well especially valuable because it guaranteed a steady supply of water.
- v.22 The Hebrew word *ezeq* means contention or strife. *Sitnah* means opposition or hostility. *Rehoboth* means space or room. There was finally room for them all. If you remember, Abraham had the same problem with Lot’s herdsmen for the same reason. Both of them were so prosperous that they were crowding one another out. This area has been identified by archaeologists and there are several very ancient wells there and evidence of very early agricultural settlements. [Sarna, 186]
- v.23 God made the same promise to Isaac that he had made to Abraham, as we already read in vv. 3-5, and then made it again, as he had made it again and again to Abraham. And Isaac did what his father had done, made an altar and worshipped the Lord. Beersheba was the site of Abraham’s original non-aggression treaty with the Philistines. Once again history was repeating itself and so pairing Isaac with Abraham.

- v.26 In other words, Abimelech had brought along his chief civilian and chief military officer. He was serious about making a treaty. The fact that Abimelech initiated the treaty indicates that Isaac was now the stronger party. Isaac's family and retainers posed a greater threat to the Philistines than the Philistines posed to him. [Sarna, 187]
- v.29 Even the Philistines could see that the measure of Isaac's blessing required some explanation. Having been sent away into the desert from the fertile pasturelands around Gerar would have meant ruin for Isaac had he not found wells to water his animals. "Sent you away in peace" is a euphemism. They had driven Isaac away and stopped up his wells, but in negotiations one always tries to put the most generous interpretation upon past behavior.
- v.33 *Shibah* sounds like the Hebrew word for oath. So *Beersheba* means the well of the oath. The word can mean either oath or "seven." At the time of Abraham's earlier treaty with the Philistines at Beersheba the site was called Beersheba because of the seven lambs given in pledge of peace. Here Isaac updated the meaning of the name with a new explanation. As noted in v. 18, Isaac made a practice of giving wells the same name his father had given them. The site of the ancient site of Beersheba has been excavated and lies several miles west of the modern Israeli city of Beersheba. A number of us visited the site a few years ago and saw the well that is called Abraham's well, though no one can prove that it is the well mentioned here. In fact, there was at this time no town of Beersheba, only the well. Only later did a town grow up around the well. [Sarna, 389]
- v.34 Time had passed. When Esau was 40, Isaac was 100.

Liberal biblical scholarship has long argued that what we have in chapter 26 is a doublet, a second telling of the same story, namely the story of Abraham's journey to Egypt, his lying about Sarah his wife – telling the Egyptians that she was his sister –, returning to his homeland much wealthier than he had been before, and so on. All of that in Genesis 12, and, so the theory goes, some later narrator, confused, patched the same story onto Isaac's life and a still later editor included them both by mistake.

But the case for that conclusion has largely disappeared as in recent years more attention has been paid to Hebrew literary technique. In fact, as you remember, the chapter begins by drawing our attention to the similarity between what happened in Abraham's life and what happened in Isaac's. In the providence of God Isaac's personal history in many respects mimicked Abraham's. To be sure, some of this was inevitable, given the pilgrim nature of Isaac's life in the Promised Land, his pastoralist life, and the measure of God's blessing. Conflict about wells and the making of treaties were the stuff of that life. But the passage as we have it is also picking out precisely those features of Isaac's life that paralleled his father's. *That is the point.* It is typical of Hebrew narrative style that important truth is shown more than it is explicitly stated. And here we are shown that Isaac was now standing in Abraham's place. The point is made in many different ways. The promise to Abraham is repeated to Isaac. The great blessing poured out on Abraham was likewise lavished on Isaac. The difficulties both men faced were the same and so was the solution to those difficulties. Isaac made a point of giving the wells he reopened the same names his father had given them. The sign of God's presence and favor given to both

men at Beersheba was for Isaac what it had been for Abraham. Each man made a treaty with potential enemies there, and so on. God himself orchestrated the life of both men to confirm that the covenant he had made with Abraham had, at the death of the patriarch, been transferred and so remade with his son, Isaac. *The chapter is so impressively repetitive to make precisely that point.*

What makes this so significant is, of course, that this is the first explicit transfer of covenant inheritance in the history of salvation. And so fundamental principles are here disclosed that will be true forever. This covenant will be passed on, the same covenant with the same promises and the same stipulations or requirements. It will finally bless all the nations of the world as it continues to be passed on from generation to generation, both through family lines – “I will be a God to you and to your children” – and eventually through worldwide evangelism.

And then, as now, at the point of its being passed from one person to another – as you do so when you pass it to your children or when you bear witness to someone who is coming to faith in Jesus Christ – its fundamental content and nature are disclosed once again. You tell someone else what God has done in making covenant with man. You tell your children what all of this means, what it’s going to require of them, what promises God has made to them, and how they are to live in covenant with God. This is highlighted in our text in three distinct ways.

I. In the first place what is being transferred from father to son, and ever thereafter from one person to another, is the favor of God, his grace, his love, his blessing.

God blessed Isaac wonderfully, as he had blessed his father before him, no doubt in large part to make this point so explicit and obvious to every later reader of the Word of God. When driven from the more fertile pasturelands in the immediate vicinity of Gerar, he was left having to make do with less water and desert scrub for pasture. It was not a situation conducive to the growth of Isaac’s bottom line. Certainly the Philistines assumed that Isaac had profited from being allowed to pasture his flocks on richer grass and from growing his crops in richer soil and naturally assumed that being forced to make do with poorer pasture and drier soil would lessen his wealth, not increase it. They intended that it should be so and so drove him off by cutting off his water supply.

But the opposite happened. Isaac found water, even an artesian well he had not expected to find, and his wealth continued to grow, so much so that the Philistines realized that he had become more powerful than they – *one family more powerful than a people*. It was that fact that sent them to Beersheba with cap in hand asking for a non-aggression pact with a man they thought they had rendered harmless, but now feared more than they had feared him when he was living among them.

And lest we had any lingering doubt that this was in fact what was going on, it is removed in vv. 23-24. The Lord himself appeared to Isaac and explained what was happening. He was living under the divine favor. God had chosen him for this blessing. Indeed, it was so obvious that even the Philistines could tell that the Lord God had singled Isaac out for favor, and that being the case, they needed to get on this man’s good side pronto!

God promised to bless him, as we read at the beginning of the chapter, and the blessings came fast and furious, and kept coming in the teeth of what should have been most unfavorable circumstances.

II. In the second place, we have here disclosed that this divine favor is a gift; it is certainly nothing that Isaac deserved.

Remember, we have already seen that the biblical narrative has been written in such a way as to expose Isaac's failures as a covenant keeper. At the end of chapter 25 a dismal picture is painted of Isaac as a father: indulging in favoritism was bad enough, but a favoritism based on his taste buds makes any thoughtful reader of Genesis disgusted with the man.

And here it is no better. He lied about Rebecca his wife whom he clearly loved, because he was afraid of what the Philistines might do to him if they thought such a beautiful woman was his wife. They would kill him to acquire her. Not much faith in God or in God's promise.

But it gets worse. His failures as a father were greater than we have already read. At the end of this chapter, we read that Esau married two Hittite women. That is, he married with no regard to the covenant that God had made with his grandfather and now with his father. He brought into his home to be the mother of his children Canaanite women who were bound to bring with them their radioactively wicked culture: polytheistic, idolatrous, with worship that was indecently sensual.

Where was Isaac? We read later, in 28:8 that Esau only later learned that his parents were not pleased with his choice of wives, so, being the spiritually clueless man that he was, he went and got another wife, this time from the extended family, a daughter of Ishmael. In other words, Esau was a man of little spiritual worth who made decisions without regard to the will of God *in large part because he had never been taught to do otherwise.*

That point is emphasized when we read that Esau was 40 when he married. That was how old Isaac had been when he married. But Isaac's father had taken pains to be sure that his son would marry a woman worthy to be the matriarch of the covenant family. He was unwilling to let Isaac marry a Canaanite woman and went to great effort to ensure that he didn't. And obviously Isaac both knew what his father was insisting on and why. But Esau hadn't a clue. Why? Because Isaac had not done what Abraham had done, what God had commanded Abraham to do:

“For I have chosen [Abraham] that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him.”

That is the calling of a covenant parent but Isaac, it appears, almost entirely neglected that calling. Esau grew up a son of Canaan, not of the covenant! And, as the narrator shows us again and again, *that was Isaac's fault.* Isaac may have begun his life well – think of him on Mount Moriah in chapter 22 – but he finished badly and his sons paid for his spiritual indifference.

III. Third, we also are shown here that, strange as this may seem, given the indictment of Isaac in this chapter, the divine favor, unmerited and undeserved, must nevertheless be claimed by faith.

How can the selfish gourmand, the father who played favorites and who favored the wrong son for the wrong reason, the liar, the coward, and the negligent parent we have learned Isaac was; how can the patriarch who was “gapped,” left out of the story on purpose because of the disreputable character of his later life; I say, how can *this* man be an exemplar of faith? How can this disappointing man show us how to claim the salvation of God by faith, that is by a living confidence in God’s Word and promise, by a confidence that prompts obedience to God’s will? But in fact we know that Isaac *was* a man of faith, for we are told he was in Hebrews 11. Isaac, like Samson, made it into the hall of the heroes of faith and that teaches us something!

Despite all his failures, his capital transgressions against the demands of the covenant, *Isaac was a man of faith* and that too is demonstrated in our text. Remember that at the very beginning of the chapter, the Lord told Isaac not to leave the Promised Land, no matter the famine that was afflicting the land. He would have gone to Egypt as his father had done, but the Lord told him not to go *and Isaac obeyed*. Don’t underestimate that obedience on Isaac’s part. Under those circumstances it would have been expected that Isaac would suffer significant losses to his flocks and herds if he remained in Canaan. He didn’t, but that was solely the Lord’s doing. It may well have been that one reason Isaac’s prosperity made such an impression on the Philistines was precisely because they were losing stock and because they were not reaping a hundred fold from their sowing of seed. There was a famine after all and such a famine was expected to produce just those consequences: a decline in agricultural production and the death of animals for want of water. Everyone knew that. But Isaac prospered when everyone else was suffering. *Isaac didn’t know that he would prosper*. He trusted the Lord and did what he was told and the Lord blessed him for it as he had blessed Abraham for his faith and obedience, as we read in v. 5.

What is more, though it is a point that is not so obvious to the casual reader of Genesis 26, Isaac trusted the Lord in leaving Gerar when told to do so. The commentaries make something of a point of this. The patriarchs, though powerful men – so powerful that Abraham could muster a small army to retrieve Lot and many others from the kings of the north and so powerful that Abimelech and the Philistines came to Isaac to ask him for a treaty, something the weak did in the face of the strong in the ancient world, a virtual confession that they could not match Isaac’s military potential – I say, though the patriarchs were powerful men *they never fought for the Promised Land*. They could have taken it by force, but they never did. They trusted the Lord to give it to them as he had promised. So, in v. 17, Isaac leaving the environs of Gerar and heading out into the desert *was an act of faith*. He was, in Calvin’s recondite phrase, “presuming on the veracity of God.”

But still we are not done. When the Lord appeared to Isaac again at Beersheba, Isaac built an altar for worship and called upon the name of the Lord. That is faith and that is the obedience of faith. He knew that God was with him. He knew that his prosperity was God’s gift to him. And he acknowledged his dependence and his gratitude to God in the proper way.

And lest we have any doubt about this chapter as a demonstration of Isaac's faith, we have the Lord's own confirmation. At the beginning of the chapter the Lord told Isaac that if he believed and obeyed he would bless him greatly. And the Lord blessed Isaac very greatly. The Lord repeated that promise in v. 24 and the blessing that Isaac enjoyed was so remarkable that it led the Philistines to abandon any hope of competing with this man and, in effect, compelled them to surrender to him. God said that if Isaac believed he would be blessed and was he ever blessed! Surely that is powerful evidence that God saw Isaac as a believing man.

What we have in this chapter, therefore, is what we find in so many places in the Word of God and invariably in the experience of Christian life in the world: viz. *a sinful believer or, if you prefer, a believing sinner*. Such is the life of the covenant, such was it from the beginning. Isaac's faith was a weak faith in some ways, to be sure, but it was real faith nonetheless.

Remember we said that here in Genesis 26, when, for the first time, the gift of salvation was explicitly being transferred to the next generation, or when it was being renewed in the next generation, we are given to see in flesh and blood precisely what it is that is being handed on: *the favor and blessing of God as a free gift received by the faith of deeply flawed and unworthy people*. Everywhere in the Bible that is the Bible's philosophy of salvation: God's extraordinary gift, received by an often faltering but nevertheless real faith.

Now such a statement can seem to us a mere commonplace. We know this, or so we think; we don't need to be told that; or so we think. And true enough, we do know it. We have an intellectual understanding of the Bible's teaching. We agree with it.

But that is not at all the same thing as saying that we really *know* that truth; that we really understand what it; that it captivates us; that it shapes our life day by day as important, as significant, eternally valuable knowledge should. We confess so glibly that we are sinners and, on a certain level, we know it to be a fact. But every day and time after time we give away the fact to ourselves and often to others that we barely know what that confession means. I know and you know that if someone had the temerity to say about us the sorts of things that this narrator said about Isaac, if he or she had the gall to accuse us of caring more about our taste buds than our children, of making peace with the wicked world around us in ways that did actual harm to our family as well as to our own souls, or of cowardice, I say if someone accused us of such things – things that are, alas, perfectly true – we would immediately bristle. We would get defensive. Whether we would say it or only think it, we would ask in an offended tone, "Where does *that person* get off saying such things *about me*?" We say we are sinners, but if someone were to gap us, to leave us out of the story because we weren't worthy to be included, we would throw a fit or we'd hold a grudge against the writer until the day we died.

And if that were not sufficient evidence of how important it is for us to ponder Isaac's spiritual failures here, his sins, we have only to remember how much of our time we spend looking down our noses at others. We are so quick to judge; so ready to condemn others for sins no worse – and often less bad – than our own. Oh, we're sinners, we say; but by our attitudes and actions we then add, "but, thankfully, we're not as bad sinners as *those people*." The Philistines shouldn't be judged according to the same standard Isaac was judged by. To whom much is given much is required. Isaac was given a great deal, as you have been given a great deal. Isaac sinned against

light, against God's love, against his sacred duties. His sins were worse, not less bad, much worse. And so are yours and mine for the same reason. The worst sinners are always found in church; it must be so. The worst sinners in the world are in this sanctuary. It has to be so. To whom much is given, much is required.

Think back, brothers and sisters. Can you find a day in your life, a single day, when you did not look down on someone else? Judge not lest you be judged. For with the measure you use it will be measured to you! Oh yes; we Christians are sinners, real sinners, inexcusably sinners, the biggest of sinners because we are Christians. You can consider yourself to have really grasped this truth, really understood it, when you stop looking down on others as you and I do every day virtually without thought. Until then, if in some way *you are gapped*, have the decency and the spiritual intelligence to accept it as nothing more but your just deserts.

And until we gain that honesty with ourselves about our ourselves, we will always struggle to appreciate how much the favor of God, our acceptance with him is a free gift, a gift we had no right to receive, a gift that once given should continue to astonish us and humble us and bring us to grateful tears every moment of every day. The fact that it does not is the index of how little we really grasp even the fundamentals of our faith.

And then finally, we say that we know we must believe and obey, but how earnest are we really in seeking to practice our faith and how careful are we to walk in obedience before the Lord our God, to work out our salvation in fear and trembling? Even to ask those questions is to answer them. So, don't tell me, and certainly don't tell yourself that there is nothing new, nothing we don't already know in Genesis 26. This chapter is full of the most important and precious truth in the world and you and I have barely begun to understand it, to grasp it, to take it to heart, or to practice it in our lives. And the great calling of our lives is, therefore, really, deeply, and permanently to learn these truths until they are the warp and the woof of our hearts: the grace and gift of God, the sinfulness of even the Lord's own people, and the summons to living faith and active obedience. The Bible, the Christian faith, and your life and mine in a nutshell.