

God's Enduring Faithfulness

Genesis 26:24; Genesis 46:3, 4

A missionary in the deepest recesses of the Amazon finds himself surrounded by a menacing tribe of cannibals. Upon surveying the situation, he says to himself, "This is hopeless." His native guide says, "It's not hopeless, yet. Pick up that stone at your feet and bash in the head of the chief standing right in front of you." So, the missionary does as he is instructed. He now stands over the lifeless form of the chief, breathing heavily and is surrounded by 150 shocked tribesmen. Just before he turns to walk away, the guide says, "Okay, now it's hopeless."

To each of the major Hebrew patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, in a moment of perceived hopelessness, God spoke the words, "Do not be afraid ..." Though the attending circumstances for each occurrence of these words of comfort is unique, the theme is the same. Each time, God's child was questioning whether or not God was abandoning His promises. Would He really build a great nation out of this family? Would He really place this nation in its own land? Strange and stressful events conspired to raise doubts in each of these men, but, at just the right time, God knew when each man needed a word of encouragement to help him to stand. So, the LORD would speak, saying: "Do not be afraid ..."

I. Isaac, a Chip off the Old Block

Isaac was the son of Abraham, regarded by the Hebrews as the father of the nation. Isaac's story gets lost in that of his father, but in many ways, his life closely mirrored that of Abraham.

A. Isaac Learned from Some of Pop's Mistakes

Last week, we touched on the faith journey of Abraham. God called this 75-year-old man out of Ur of the Chaldeans and promised to make a great nation of his offspring, to give him a land of his own and to bless the world through him. But, as year passed into year, Abraham became more anxious that it was up to him to *make* something happen. At first, he thought of adopting a servant for an heir. God appeared again and assured him that he would physically father a child.

Abraham was joyful, but Sarah his wife was also old. The two agreed that he should sleep with a servant named Hagar, who bore Ishmael. However, God had in mind that Sarah herself should bear the child of promise. When Sarah learned this, she laughed. Was this the joyful laughter of a long-abandoned hope now restored? Was it the doubtful laughter of a heart saying, "Yeah, right!" Was it the nervous laughter of a woman, age ninety, who just found out she was going to have a baby? Whatever prompted the laughter, Sarah and Abraham would never forget that this child was God's miracle, for the LORD told them to name the boy, "Isaac," meaning, "laughter."

Later, when Abraham decided that his son needed a wife, he was adamant that the girl come from the home of God-fearing kinsmen. He swore a trusted servant to an oath that he would go back to the homeland and find a bride for Isaac. The servant asked, "What if I find a keeper, but she won't leave her home?" Abraham said, "Then, leave her there. You won't be bound to the oath. My son is not leaving this land!" To Abraham, a Canaanite bride for his boy was not an option and his boy moving away was not negotiable because the old man knew that neither of these scenarios would please God. Abraham, who had shown tendencies to run ahead of God in the past, now chose simply to wait for God to work this matter out.

It seems that Abraham had learned a lesson from which many today could benefit: “You don’t work God’s plan by breaking God’s plan.” Sometimes, we have to do something in order to join God in whatever it is that He’s doing, but other times, we must learn to wait. Whenever that thing you are contemplating in order to give God’s purposes a nudge smacks of ignoring something else God has already spoken to, you have a situation tailor-made for waiting on God. God has the prerogative of working out His purposes through and in spite of your ethical and relational shortcuts. You don’t have the prerogative of putting Him in a position to have to do so.

Abraham had run ahead of the LORD in the pursuit of His ways before. He did not do so when seeking a bride for Isaac. God worked things out. Rebekah was willing to come to Isaac’s home. And, we don’t see any glaring example that Isaac ever broke God’s will in his rush to make God’s will happen. That is not to say that Isaac’s record was unblemished in other areas.

B. Isaac Inherited Some of Pop’s Bad Habits

Due to a famine, Isaac went to the Philistine region of Gerar under the rule of one Abimelech. Rebekah was beautiful, so beautiful in fact, that Isaac feared that some Philistine might knock him off in order to take her for himself. So, he came up with this bright idea:

⁷When the men of that place asked him about his wife, he said, “She is my sister,” because he was afraid to say, “She is my wife.” – Genesis 26:7

Didn’t I hear that same story just recently? Oh, that’s right! Isaac’s daddy Abraham pulled this same stunt - twice – once in Egypt and once in this same region of Gerar. That king, probably a father or grandfather of this one, was also named Abimelech. I guess it’s just a guy thing to marry the prettiest woman that can possibly tolerate you, but it in the days of the patriarchs, it was risky. Abimelech saw Isaac caressing Rebekah and hit the ceiling. With a greater sense of righteousness than Isaac demonstrated, the king scolded Isaac for what might have happened.

Isaac did not do something gray so as to advance God’s purposes. He did something despicable so as to save his own skin. After the king cooled off, he issued an edict of protection for Isaac and allowed him to plant crops in the area. The LORD prospered Isaac in spite of that unfortunate propensity for “self-preservation at any cost” that his father Abraham had also demonstrated.

C. Isaac Relived Some of Pop’s Old Fears

Isaac was forty-years old when he married Rebekah, and she was barren for twenty years. To his credit, Isaac did not begin to devise any back-up plans like adopting a servant or sleeping with another woman for securing an heir. He stuck to praying. Rebekah became pregnant with twins. It was obvious right away that they were boys. They wrestled with each other even in the womb. We will return to these boys in a moment.

Isaac’s stint as a farmer in Gerar went a little too well. His power unnerved Abimelech, who sent him away. Apparently, Isaac did not move away far enough. He reopened wells that had belonged to Abraham when he lived in the area, but certain Philistine herdsmen in the area insisted that the wells were on their property. Isaac moved a little farther away and dug another well. They claimed that one as well. Isaac moved away further still and dug a well that was not contested.

Isaac named this last well *Rehoboth*, which means “room.” He knew God had made room for him, but even though his mouth was saying the right things, his heart was troubled by his recent experiences. As Isaac began to enjoy more of God’s favor, he also began to feel the heat of resentful neighbors. Apparently, Isaac was somewhat shaken in his confidence that the fulfillment of the promises of God were still in the works, for God appeared to Isaac, just as He had to Abraham, with a word of encouragement commencing with the greeting ...

D. Do Not Be Afraid, Isaac

... ²⁴That night the LORD appeared to him and said, “I am the God of your father Abraham. Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bless you and will increase the number of your descendants for the sake of my servant Abraham.” – Genesis 26:24

Again, Isaac’s story gets lost in the greatness of Abraham. Still, to calm a fear, God appeared to Isaac and reiterated the promises to him. Would that not have the effect of saying, “Isaac, as I was faithful to Abraham, so I will be faithful to you, for you also are a part of this story.”

God’s faithfulness in the past to those He loved then can be counted on in the present by those He loves today. Few of us will be regarded by future generations as vital characters in the story of faith. Still, we are each part of that ancient story. By faith, you are a citizen of that great nation promised to Abraham. God knows your needs. He cares about your fears. Whenever the Bible records a story of God speaking peace to the troubled heart of one of his covenant people, we can know that the Spirit of God will also speak peace to the troubled heart of any child of Abraham.

II. Israel, a New Challenge in the Story of Faith

Jacob, later to be named Israel, was the younger twin son of Isaac and Rebekah. Esau was the older child. A certain motif in Genesis continues through Jacob. God blesses the younger over the older. He chose Abel over Cain and Isaac over Ishmael. Now, He blesses Jacob over Esau. Later, He will bless Jacob’s youngest son Joseph over ten other sons of Jacob. God does this repeatedly to remind us that His blessings come to those who have no other claim to them. Still, the story is easier to follow when a younger brother turns out to be a demonstrably better man than the older. But, in the case of Jacob, God chooses to bless a real scoundrel.

A. Jacob Was by Nature Deceitful

When the twins were delivered, Esau came out first, but Jacob was right behind him, with his hand on Esau’s heel. Jacob means, “He grasps the heel,” which was a figure of speech for a “deceiver.” The name was well-suited. Jacob victimized his big brother on two occasions. Esau made it easy the first time. Esau loved to hunt in the country. He came in one day famished. Jacob had picked up cooking while hanging around the tent with Mom. He was preparing stew. Esau foolishly traded his birthright for a single bowl. The birthright was a double portion of Isaac’s inheritance. It wasn’t a very far-sighted choice. Clearly, Esau had impulse control issues.

All Jacob really did that time was take advantage of Esau’s stupid offer. The Bible actually indicts Esau for having “despised his birthright” (Genesis 25:34) or treating it as nothing. Esau also married a couple of local Canaanite girls, which not only grieved his parents but also showed him to be disinterested in the purposes of God. So, even though Jacob was a rascal, God was not unfair in allowing Esau to be stripped of his birthright and later, Isaac’s blessing.

It may have been those two pagan wives that motivated Rebekah, who favored Jacob anyway, to devise a plan for Jacob to steal the blessing from Esau. You remember the story. Isaac is old and nearly blind. Esau is off hunting. Jacob dons Esau's clothes and puts goatskin on his neck and smooth hands. He prepares some wild game just the way Esau would and comes before Isaac. Jacob pulls the wool (more precisely, the goatskin) over on Isaac and receives this blessing:

²⁸May God give you of heaven's dew and of earth's richness –
an abundance of grain and new wine.

²⁹May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you.
Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you.
May those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed." – Genesis 27:28, 30

Esau protested, but what was done was done according to Isaac. In the course of all this deceit, however, a prophecy worded to Rebekah while she was still pregnant came to pass:

"Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples from within you will be separated;
one people will be stronger than the other,
and the older will serve the younger." – Genesis 25:23

B. Jacob's Fears Were Often of His Own Doing

The fears and doubts of Abraham and Isaac were usually rooted in the presence of pagan enemies or in the troublesome passage of time when seemingly, nothing was happening in regard to God's promises. Jacob's fears were typically the result of crossing or mistreating his relatives.

Esau planned to kill Jacob as soon as their father died. Rebekah sent Jacob to her brother, Laban. There, Jacob fell for Laban's daughter Rachel and agreed to work seven years for Laban in exchange for her hand in marriage. A double-cross by Laban cost Jacob seven more years of labor, but he wound up with two wives, Rachel and her sister, Leah. Arguably, Laban got his due when Jacob enriched himself at his expense. It was more of a matter of Jacob being smarter than Laban rather than ripping him off, but once again, we find Jacob running in fear from a relative.

The most crushing fear Jacob would ever suffer would be when he was told that a wild animal had killed his favorite son, Joseph. In fact, ten older brothers who were fed up with Jacob's favoritism of Joseph had sold their little brother into slavery. Their animosity did not spring up overnight. They weren't just steamed about a special robe that Jacob had given to Joseph. Jacob loved Rebekah more than Leah and he had always loved Joseph more than any of his other sons.

C. Jacob Was the Recipient of Gracious Assurances

One famous story involving Jacob occurred when he was fleeing from Esau right after stealing the blessing. While on the run, he had a dream. He saw a stairway reaching from the earth to heaven with angels going up and down. At the top was the LORD Who repeated to Jacob the same promise of a land and a nation that He had worded to Abraham and Isaac. Jacob knew he had seen the very gateway to heaven and he named the place Bethel, which means "house of God."

Another famous story of Jacob occurred right before he was reunited with Esau. A man wrestles with him through the night. The man turns out to be an angel, who ends the contest by crippling Jacob in the hip with a simple touch. But, Jacob will not release his grip on the angel until he promises to bless him. The angel renames Jacob, Israel, which means, "He wrestles with God." This tells us that Jacob's life has been and would continue to be a struggle for blessing. Much of that struggle had been a matter of Jacob making things hard on himself, but since it was God's sovereign plan to bless Jacob, he was blessed. Jacob's family would become God's nation.

D. Do Not Be Afraid, Jacob

Years later, after Jacob's older sons would sell Joseph as a slave, Joseph would become a high official in Egypt and was in a position to rescue his family from a severe famine. But, this required that the family move to Egypt. This seemed to throw a monkey wrench into God's promise to establish His people in Canaan. Jacob's apprehension was to be expected, but God once again calmed a troubled mind:

³"I am God, the God of your father," he said. "Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there. ⁴I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again. And Joseph's own hand will close your eyes." – Genesis 46:3, 4

Once, God told Isaac to not go down to Egypt. Now, that is precisely where Jacob is to move his family. Egypt is something of a symbol for worldliness, materialism, comfort and indifference to God. Jacob had not lived through enough Old Testament history to have picked up on all of that, but there still must have been something very unsettling about following God in this particular matter. Still, God was quick to assure Jacob that His plan was still very much on track.

Hebrews 11 gives 22 verses to the faith of Abraham. One verse each is given to Isaac and Jacob:

²⁰By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future.

²¹By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff. – Hebrews 11:20, 21

Isaac simply carried on in faith, believing God's promise. Jacob was almost bedfast near the end of his life. This idea that he "leaned on the top of his staff" to bless Joseph's sons suggests that he rallied a bit in excited anticipation of the fulfillment of God's promises right before he crawled back into bed and died. They both came to grips with the fact that certain things might not come to pass in their lifetimes, but that did not cause them to abandon their faith.

... They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. – Hebrews 11:14

One normal effect of aging is that the muscles around the eye weaken and cannot tighten up and focus on objects close at hand. So, when your arms cease to be long enough to read a menu or a newspaper, and if you're lucky, you can get by with a cheap pair of reading glasses. But farsightedness isn't all bad. You can still see signs on the highway in plenty of time to react to them. Whether you're at the fifty-yard line of a football game or in the nickel bleachers doesn't make much difference. Furthermore, it seems as though God is best able to fill troubled hearts with peace when we are better able to see and to celebrate that which is far away rather than only see and only trust that which is near.