

Genesis 26:12-33

A Quarrel and a Covenant

In studying the narratives of the patriarchs Abraham and Isaac, we have remarked time and again how God has proved faithful. When they obeyed, God rewarded their obedience with blessing. When they disobeyed, God still protected them and continued to allow them to prosper. The Lord had called them, commanded them, and promised them blessing. The life of Abraham itself was a century-long illustration of the challenges and joys of walking with God.

Isaac, too, though much less studied in Scripture, walked with God. He faced many of the same challenges and experienced many of the same joys. He had moments of bold faith and times of great failure. In the previous passage, Scripture had established Isaac's credentials as the successor to the blessings of Abraham. Despite Isaac's despicable sin of trying to save himself by passing off his wife, Rebekah, as his sister, God proved faithful to the promises He had made to the patriarch Abraham. Yet, Scripture makes it abundantly clear that the blessings Isaac received were not due to his own achievements, but entirely due to God's grace and mercy. That same theme is continued in the narrative we look at this morning.

The Quarrel

When Isaac entered into the deception that threatened the kingdom of Gerar, it would have been easy for the king, Abimelech, to have simply sent Isaac and Rebekah away. After all, this is what Pharaoh had done to Abraham, when Abraham had pulled the same stunt. Sending Isaac and Rebekah away would have removed any chance that one of them would be harmed and thus the wrath of God would come down on Abimelech and his people. But Abimelech had been gracious. He had generously allowed the couple to stay. And so Isaac and his family lived in Gerar among the pagans.

Like his father, Isaac had flourished. He had abundance. He had not only survived the famine in Canaan but had actually increased his holdings. And he had also diversified. His father had been mainly a herdsman. We see Abraham often tending flocks and herds. Isaac did that as well, but now he also farmed. And Isaac enjoyed remarkable success as he began his career as a farmer. Scripture informs us that "Isaac sowed in that land and reaped in the same year a hundredfold" (v. 12). But Scripture does not attribute this bountiful harvest to Isaac's agricultural abilities. No, Isaac prospered because, "the Lord blessed him" (v. 12).

And the Lord had indeed blessed Isaac. Isaac ¹³became rich, and continued to grow richer until he became very wealthy; ¹⁴for he had possessions of flocks and herds and a great household" (v. 13-14). He not only possessed a bountiful harvest, but in addition had many flocks and herds - likely an assortment of cattle, oxen, sheep, goats, and donkeys. And Isaac also owned many servants. This increase had also characterized his father and would be true of his son as well (Genesis 12:16; 30:43). In the ancient world, especially in Mesopotamia, livestock was the ultimate measure of wealth, and it remained so for centuries. An example of the importance of livestock can be seen in the Latin language, not spoken until centuries later, but still reflecting the values of the cultures that came before it. In Latin the word for

money is *pecunia*. The word for cattle is *pecus*. Thus cattle meant money. But more importantly, the idea of Isaac becoming a farmer as well as a herdsman is indicative of something else, I think.

People with herds are migratory. That is, they wander from watering hole to watering hole, and are always in search of better pasture. Farmers are, by definition, at least to some degree sedentary. They must reside in one area long enough for their crops to mature and be harvested after they have been planted. It would be foolish to plant a crop and then relocate to an entirely different region, hoping to return and find the crop unmolested and ready to harvest.

By becoming a farmer it meant that Isaac was moving toward a more settled lifestyle. He was, in a much more literal way, *taking possession* of the promised land of Canaan. Surely, he still had flocks and herds that he moved about the land of southern Canaan. But during those seasons when he was settled, he had begun to farm. Environmentally, though, this new development would only put more pressure on the already insufficient supplies of water in the region.

Two elements of Isaac's agricultural success must be noted. First his harvest was extraordinary in the extreme. He planted his seed, and then he "reaped in the same year a hundredfold" (v. 12). This was simply unheard of in the ancient world. Since agronomists estimate that the minimum crop yield to sustain human existence was about threefold, and since the people of Canaan lived at or near a subsistence level, we can infer that the typical crop yield in the region was no more than four- or fivefold. Thus a yield of one hundred fold was simply unimaginable, and the fact that such a bounty came at a time when Canaan may still have been experiencing the famine, gained the attention of the local rulers.

The second element that is worth considering, is that the cause of this abundance was God. It certainly could not have been that God was responding to acts of obedience by Isaac. To the contrary, Isaac had demonstrated profound lack of faith. Instead, this was simply divine sovereignty interceding to bless one whom God had chosen to bless. Indeed God had blessed Isaac to such an extent "that the Philistines envied him" (v. 14). Isaac's increased wealth and status was such that he had drawn the attention of the people with whom he lived, and that notice was not one of rejoicing.

This was, and remains, I think, human nature. When a stranger, a newcomer, flourishes in an area in which we have long struggled and failed, we do not often receive their success gladly. Think of the workplace. If a person has been with the company for many years and yet still found himself unable to climb the corporate ladder, and a new hire comes in, impresses those in authority, and quickly earns a promotion, feelings can naturally be strained.

The Philistine could take no more. Petulantly, they responded to their growing concerns about Isaac by attacking his livelihood. "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" (v. 15). They chose to threaten Isaac's flocks, herds, and crops by denying him the vital water supply he needed to survive in the desert. Notice that the people of Gerar did not attack Isaac, himself. Neither did they seize the wells as they had done in the time of Abraham. This may have been out of respect, or fear, of the command Abimelech had given that Isaac and Rebekah not be harmed, or it may have been because Isaac was now a formidable force

with his many servants. In either case this was an act of desperation. A well filled with dirt was useful to nobody. The act might succeed in driving Isaac away, but it did the people of Gerar little good.

There were three main ways of obtaining water in this arid region. One was to take advantage of a natural local spring. Another was to dig a well. The third was the cistern. Springs, as natural water supplies, were most valuable, since they supplied a seemingly unending supply of water. Wells were dug to capture water from river beds. Archaeologists have discovered wells dating back to the earliest times; some four thousand years before Christ. Cisterns functioned as wells, but were hewn from rocks and lined with plaster to catch and hold rainfall. That the Philistines targeted “all the wells” (v. 15) demonstrated the extent of their wrath, and fear. That they did not dispute with Isaac over their ownership indicated that he did not dispute the treaty that Abraham had made with Abimelech some sixty or seventy years before. There was no doubt that these were Isaac’s wells, and there was no doubt that the Philistines filled them with dirt.

This act of vandalism was followed by a command from the king of Gerar. “Abimelech said to Isaac, ‘go away from us, for you are too powerful for us’” (v.16). Abimelech was frightened. The word used for ‘powerful’ is used again in the Old Testament only to describe the increase of the Hebrew people in Egypt prior to the exodus (Exodus 1:7, 20). But this was a strangely worded imperative. To order Isaac away was the act of one in authority, yet the reason Abimelech gave was that Isaac had grown “too powerful for us” (v. 16). This makes the command more of a request than a mandate. Again we can think of the Hebrews in Egypt, when Pharaoh said “⁹behold, the people of the sons of Israel are more and mightier than we. ¹⁰Come, let us deal wisely with them, or else they will multiply and in the event of war, they will also join themselves to those who hate us, and fight against us” (Exodus 1:9-10).

It is curious that it was Isaac’s prosperity, and not his deception, that had finally caused Abimelech to drive him away. Isaac’s lie he could excuse; Isaac’s success he could not forgive. Under these circumstances, Isaac responded not by fighting but by fleeing. This made sense. It was a very practical and thoughtful decision. The wells he needed to water his crops and livestock had been ruined. And the time it would take to reopen them was far too much. Besides, the people of Gerar would only come again, and they might do more than ruin his water supply. So, Isaac “departed from there and camped in the valley of Gerar, and settled there” (v. 17). It is not known the exact details of Isaac’s movement, since Scripture does not say from precisely where he began his journey. It is clear that Isaac did not immediately return to his homeland. Instead, he recognized that he was closer to the main habitation of the peoples of Gerar than was comfortable for Abimelech, so Isaac simply moved further away. The Wadi Gerar, was an area with which he was familiar. His father had dwelt there in his time. And the area had a water supply.

“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” (v. 18). That Isaac knew where to find the wells was a sign of their importance. No doubt Abraham had passed on to his son the knowledge of the best places to find water in this arid region. That Isaac renamed the wells was another way of trying to demonstrate ownership. The one who names, owns. Finally, Isaac improved upon his father’s situation. Perhaps because the older wells were

beginning to run dry, Isaac commanded his servants to begin looking for new sources of water. And God blessed his efforts. “Isaac’s servants dug in the valley and found there a well of flowing water” (v. 19). This was a reference to a natural spring, the best and most reliable source of water in the region.

The reopening of the wells and the finding of the new spring, however, provoked further conflict between Isaac and the people of Gerar. Soon after learning of these valued resources, “the herdsmen of Gerar quarreled with the herdsmen of Isaac, saying, ‘the water is ours!’” (v. 20). Isaac did not contest the disputed water rights. He did, though, “named the well Esek, because they contended with him” (v. 20). Names evoked meaning, and Isaac wanted to mark the incident by letting all know that this well was a well over which there had been contention. That is what *Esek* means. Hoping to mitigate the situation, Isaac relocated further away from Gerar and dug another well. But, after “they dug another well, . . . they quarreled over it too” (v. 21). So Isaac gave this well a name to mark the occasion, “he named it Sitnah” (v. 21). *Sitnah* means ‘enmity’ and thus Isaac again noted the controversy between his people and those of Gerar.

Isaac was retreating, and retreating without a fight, but he was also nevertheless establishing a history that future generations would recognize. 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’” (v. 22). *Rehoboth* means “broad places” and gave the impression that Isaac was able to breathe freely at last. God had been gracious. God had given Isaac enough room for his significant wealth. And God had been generous. Archaeologists have determined that the well there is the largest in the Negev.

The Theophany

Isaac had now traveled so far from Gerar, that he had practically returned home to Canaan. The traditional identification of Rehoboth is within only fifteen miles of Beersheba. We should note that he had behaved as his father had done with regards to Lot. Abraham had been gracious, and given Lot the choice of the land. So, too, had Isaac treated the Philistines. He had allowed them the water, and, trusting in God, had moved on to find other sources.

Isaac “went up from there to Beersheba” (v. 23). Scripture does not record why. Perhaps to visit his old home. Perhaps to see old friends. Perhaps to see the place where his father had made an alliance with Abimelech and there worshipped the Lord.

“³²So they made a covenant at Beersheba; and Abimelech and Phicol, the commander of his army, arose and returned to the land of the Philistines. ³³Abraham planted a tamarisk tree at Beersheba, and there he called on the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God. ³⁴And Abraham sojourned in the land of the Philistines for many days” (Genesis 21:32-34).

It could very well be that Isaac was remembering the conflicts his father had had with the Philistines, and hoped that by going to such a place to find some sense of orientation and direction.

And while in Beersheba, Isaac received a vision. “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’” (v. 24).

The vision, given presumably on the first night Isaac arrived in Beersheba, reaffirmed the promises Isaac had been given before. Three specific elements of the revelation must be noted. First, the Lord again identified Himself as the “God of your father Abraham.” This was a reference to the fact that He was the “Everlasting God” that had appeared to Abraham in the same place. Second, the Lord offered Isaac personal consolation. The Lord comforted Isaac as He had done his father. He promised Isaac, too, His divine presence. Finally, the Lord reminded Isaac of the promises of blessing and seed. As before, the obedience of Abraham was stressed, we must remember that God was not initiating anything new with Isaac but rather continuing His covenant with Abraham, but we must also acknowledge that it was God Who gave Abraham the faith to obey.

There is an important theological point to be stressed here. To be sure, Adam, Noah and the other Old Testament saints who lived in the world before and immediately after the Flood had a relationship with God. But it is with Abraham that the dynamic changed. The Lord never identified Himself as the “God of Terah,” Abraham’s father, for example. Terah had been a polytheist (Joshua 24:2). It was with Abraham that a new kind of personal relationship began.

After receiving the vision, Isaac responded as he should have done. “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” (v. 25). Building an altar as a place of worship was something Isaac had learned from his father (Genesis 12:7-8; 13:4, 18; 22:9). What he had seen his father do, he now did himself. And it was a value he would pass on to his own son, Jacob (Genesis 33:20; 35:7). Isaac also instructed his servants to begin looking for other sources of water. This action demonstrated Isaac’s eagerness to remain in the land. The digging of the well marked Isaac’s settling down in the area for the foreseeable future.

The Covenant

All seemed well. But alas it was not. We do not know how much time Isaac spent in Beersheba worshipping the Lord, but at some point he was informed that visitors had arrived. And it was a formidable entourage. “Abimelech came to him from Gerar with his adviser Ahuzzath and Phicol the commander of his army” (v. 26). As Isaac had first traveled to Gerar, so now the King of Gerar had come to visit Isaac. And this king had brought with him both his military commander and his primary civilian advisor. We can recall that Abraham had met a military personage named Phicol as well, and the same argument we mentioned regarding Abimelech last time holds true as to whether or not these two men named Phicol are the same person. This may be an aged general of at least one hundred and ten years of age (not likely), or the name Phicol may be a title given to whomever commanded the Philistine army.

Of Ahuzzath nothing personal is known, but his position was much more than that of merely a courtier. While the term used to describe him can mean a friend or companion, context suggests something more.

Both David and Solomon designated people who served as “friends of the king” in the capacity of personal and intimate advisors. Abimelech had come with these two men because he wanted to make a point. He had come to intimidate. He had come with representatives of his military and political establishment, thus manifesting the seriousness of his cause.

Isaac was unimpressed. Instead of being overcome by the presence of such personages, he challenged them. “Why have you come to me, since you hate me and have sent me away from you?” (v. 27). This was certainly not the most gracious of greetings, and did little to extend the expected hospitality that visitors might expect from a person of Isaac’s wealth and status. It seems never to have occurred to Isaac that Abimelech was justified in sending him away after he had lied about his wife. In any case, obeying the niceties of social protocol seemed to matter little to Isaac. He immediately placed Abimelech on the defensive. He demanded to know why he had been treated in such a way.

Whatever Abimelech thought of the greeting he received, he responded with an honest answer. Indeed, he conducted himself with more decorum than did his host. Quite diplomatically, he asserted that “we see plainly that the Lord has been with you” (v. 28). As with Abraham, Isaac had been blessed by God in such a way that it was plain even to this pagan that the God Isaac served was worth notice. Abimelech and his advisors recognized that the bountiful harvests and whatever other manifestations of blessing Isaac had received (perhaps his family was more healthy than normal, etc.) was not something natural. Pagans such as Abimelech were polytheistic, and there is no Scriptural evidence that Abimelech ever became a follower of Yahweh. But he did believe in many gods, and he believed that those gods frequently interacted in the natural world. That Isaac, like his father Abraham had prospered, was a sign that whatever god they worshipped was a god worth having as an ally.

The thirty or so miles that separated the city of Gerar from Beersheba was apparently not far enough to allow Abimelech and his advisors to rest comfortably. So Abimelech proposed an alliance. “Let there now be an oath between us, even between you and us, and let us make a covenant with you,²⁹ 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” (v. 28-29). Abimelech offered a nonaggression pact. He had come to realize that opposing Isaac was futile, so he determined to make him, if not a friend, at least not an enemy. Again we must appreciate the language. Abimelech talked of a sworn agreement between the two men that implied a curse if one of them broke the oath. In these pre-literate societies, oaths were vital, and few were made that did not carry significant consequences to the oath-breaker.

We must comment that the continued similarity of the narrative (wife represented as sister, quarrel over water supplies, and treaty making) has naturally led some scholars to insist that these accounts are mere redundancies. But there is no reason to think this. In fact, the treaty between Abimelech and Isaac can easily be seen as simply the renewal of the previous treaty between the King of Gerar and Abraham.

In giving his version of the past relationship between the two men, Abimelech placed a certain twist on their previous encounters. He claimed that “we have not touched you and have done to you nothing but good and have sent you away in peace” (v. 29). He omitted any reference to the disputed wells, that he certainly must have been aware of. Perhaps he was arguing that he had done Isaac and Rebekah no harm

when he could have, after the deceit they had played on him and his people. However we view Abimelech's perspective, we can see from ours that this yet another example of God's protecting His own.

Isaac accepted Abimelech's offer, even if he did not accept his narrative of the past. He "made them a feast, and they ate and drank" (v. 30). This was typical in the ancient world, where a meal marked the signing of a covenant. To eat with another was a sign of intimacy. The invitation to dine marked an invitation to join the family circle, at least for a time. Thus one only ate with one's friends, or at least one never ate with one's enemies.

In the morning the agreement was ratified. "In the morning they arose early and exchanged oaths; then Isaac sent them away and they departed from him in peace" (v. 31). After their departure, Isaac received some good news. "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'" (v. 32). This could not simply be coincidence. Rather it was a further sign of the Lord's blessing. Though the water had been found that day, no doubt the men had been digging for some time. It may have been the same well that the men had begun to dig after Isaac received his revelation on the first night he came to Beersheba (v. 25).

Isaac "called it Shibah; therefore the name of the city is Beersheba to this day" (v. 33). The name Beersheba had been known since the time of Abraham, so this is yet another example of Isaac renaming the wells he found with the names they had in his father's time. Isaac could now rest knowing that his hostile neighbors had been pacified and that the Lord had given him an abundance of water in the area he now resided.

Takeaways

As with his father, Abraham, Isaac enjoyed the opportunity to walk with God. Through favorable events like a bountiful harvest and increasing productivity from his herds, malevolent acts like the destruction of his wells, and threatening actions like the arrival of Abimelech, Isaac received the provision, protection, and presence of God. As promised, he was blessed. Let us rejoice in the fact that we worship the same God Who also provides for, protects, and indwells us.