

Genesis 26:1-11
Like Father like Son

Anyone with children sees in them, from time to time, a reflection of oneself. Whether it is physical appearance, or the way they smile or laugh, or their interest in cars or knitting, our children, in possessing our DNA, possess something of ourselves. The simple truth, though, is that they do not simply inherit what is good. Our best qualities, and our worst, can occasionally be seen in our children. Whether it is anger or lust, pride or resentfulness, our children can inherit our negative tendencies as well as our positive ones.

This is a reality acknowledged in Scripture. ¹“Then God spoke all these words, saying,

²“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

³You shall have no other gods before Me.

⁴You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. ⁵You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me” (Exodus 20:1-5).

¹“Now in the eighteenth year of King Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, Abijam became king over Judah. ²He reigned three years in Jerusalem; and his mother’s name was Maacah the daughter of Abishalom. ³He walked in all the sins of his father which he had committed before him; and his heart was not wholly devoted to the Lord his God, like the heart of his father David” (1 Kings 15:1-3).

⁸“In the thirty-eighth year of Azariah king of Judah, Zechariah the son of Jeroboam became king over Israel in Samaria for six months. ⁹He did evil in the sight of the Lord, as his fathers had done; he did not depart from the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which he made Israel sin” (2 Kings 15:8-9).

But as real as that truth is, that while every person may inherit certain predispositions to behavior, God holds each man and woman accountable for their own actions. As God revealed to His prophet Ezekiel, “The person who sins will die. The son will not bear the punishment for the father’s iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son’s iniquity; the righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself” (Ezekiel 18:20).

Introduction

In our last time together, we learned that a hungry Esau had sold his birthright to his brother Jacob for a bowl of lentil soup. After that lamentable account, the narrative of the patriarchs shifts in this selection to their father, Isaac. In fact, this is the one chapter in all of Scripture which deals exclusively with the life of that rather overlooked Old Testament saint. Indeed, in Scripture, Isaac seems a rather transitional figure between the two more important patriarchs, Abraham and Jacob. But that is unfortunate because, while the account we look at today does not show Isaac in a very favorable light, we will see that like the apostle Peter who denied Christ three times, Isaac will repent and rise to the occasion in later days.

This account related in this narrative will seem familiar to the reader, as the history of a man claiming his wife as his sister has already been told twice before in Scripture. In each of those cases, Abraham had been the perpetrator of the ruse. Here it was his son, Isaac. Naturally, those who challenge the integrity of Scripture claim that the three stories are merely the same story retold again and again. They argue that these were not real, historical events, but simply literary devices the later author of Genesis used to instruct his readers on some particular theological truth. However, modern scholars are generally agreed that the differences in the narratives are more important than their similarities, and that these are then, three different accounts, and there is no reason to believe that they did not happen as recorded.

Famine in the Land

The previous passage had involved the ‘famished’ Esau who sold his birthright for a bowl of soup. That Jacob had been able to make soup, indicated that at least to some extent, food was available in Canaan. But “now there was a famine in the land” (v. 1) begins the account. And just to remind the reader, Scripture adds, that this was not “the previous famine that had occurred in the days of Abraham” (v. 1). Famines were an all-too-routine element of the ancient world. Crop yields were slight, and a significant percentage of the produce had to be held over as seed for next year’s planting. Thus there was rarely more than enough food. The masses of people lived harvest to harvest.

That meant that if there was a drought, or an infestation of insects, or a plant disease that harmed the crop, disaster struck. With no food reserves, people starved. This affected those in animal husbandry as well. Lack of water, and we must remember that these people lived in the desert, was a constant problem. Remember the account of Abraham and Abimelech quarreling over the possession of a well (Genesis 21:22-34). If there was not enough rainfall, the grazing dried up, and sources of water disappeared. Scripture does not specify the cause of this particular drought, but any one of several factors could have brought it to pass.

The famine in “the days of Abraham” was described in Genesis 12:10-13:1. The consequences of that famine for Isaac’s father had been twofold. First, he foolishly chose not to trust that the Lord would protect him in Egypt and offered his wife to Pharaoh, claiming that Sarah was his sister. Second, despite this, God protected Abraham and even prospered him, as it was through this experience that Abraham and his family became so wealthy that Abraham and his nephew Lot eventually had to separate.

How much of this family history Isaac knew is impossible to say, as Scripture is silent on the matter. But clearly Scripture is asserting here that Isaac faced the same challenges as his father (as he had done with Rebekah’s inability to have children). The response of Isaac to that challenge, both the similarities and differences, form the basis of the narrative.

“Isaac went to Gerar” (v.1). This was unsurprising since it is quite likely that Isaac was going to Egypt. Gerar was simply on the way. If there was one place in the ancient Mediterranean world where one could survive famine, it was Egypt. The periodic, and predictable flooding of the Nile River had been used by Egyptians for centuries to make the most of what their fertile land could produce. Droughts rarely occurred, and food was usually plentiful. That Egypt was a storehouse of food in times of trouble is a recurrent motif on the lives of the patriarchs (Abraham, Joseph).

In Gerar, Isaac encountered “Abimelech king of the Philistines” (v. 1). As the reader may recall, Abraham also met the king of Gerar, and he, too, was named Abimelech (Genesis 20:2). Therefore, some have used this to argue that the narrative accounts are the same, and offer this as evidence that the author of Genesis simply repeated one story in another place in the text for some theological point. However, Abimelech means “my father is king” and therefore may have simply been a title as much as a personal name. Another consideration is that in royal families, like many others, children are named after their ancestors. History students often struggle trying to keep clear in their minds the different Henrys of England or Louis of France.

That the Abimelech of Abraham’s time and this Abimelech are not the same is likely but not certain. In Genesis 20, Abimelech was at least old enough to be king of Gerar. Assuming he was a young king, he must have been at least twenty or twenty-five years old. And he met Abraham before the birth of Isaac, so Abraham was not yet one hundred. The Abimelech mentioned in this passage encountered Isaac after Abraham’s death. When Abraham died at the age of one hundred seventy-five, Isaac was seventy-five. Isaac was sixty when the two sons Esau and Jacob were born, and they have now grown up to be young men. So, at the time of his journey to Gerar, Isaac must be at least eighty or ninety, which would make the Abimelech of Genesis 20 at least one hundred or one hundred and ten years old. This is not impossible, when one considers the biblical record, but it is, I think, unlikely.

The Theophany at Gerar

While he was in Gerar, Isaac received a theophany. “²The Lord appeared to him and said, ‘do not go down to Egypt; stay in the land of which I shall tell you. ³Sojourn in this land’” (v. 2-3). His father Abraham had experienced several such encounters with God, and certainly throughout the years Abraham must have told Isaac of them. Whether that foreknowledge helped Isaac receive the encounter calmly and serenely Scripture does not say, but the evidence of other such appearances of God in Scripture is not in his favor.

With whatever fear and trembling Isaac received the revelation, the message of God was clear. First, Isaac was commanded to not go down into Egypt. This meant that Isaac was expected to stay in Canaan and endure the famine. He was to trust in God to preserve him rather than relying on his own plans. For emphasis, God added that Isaac “stay in the land,” a command reminiscent not only of Abraham’s original call in Genesis 12:1 but also of the command to sacrifice Isaac in Genesis 22:2. It is also the same term used to describe God’s presence among His people in the tabernacle (Exodus 25:8). Finally, Isaac was to “sojourn in this land” (v. 3). This was the favorite term of Scripture to describe the relationship of the patriarchs as foreigners and aliens. Thus, while Isaac was to live in Gerar, he was not to become one of them. Clearly, God expected Isaac to stay in Gerar for the conceivable future and trust to Him to safeguard his family through the famine.

But there was more to this appearance of God than merely a command. God continued with a promise, “³I will be with you and bless you, for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath which I swore to your father Abraham. ⁴I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and will give your descendants all these lands; and by your descendants all the nations of the

earth shall be blessed; ⁵because Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws” (v. 3-5).

As with his father, Isaac was promised blessing. God would be with him. This was the promise of divine presence. God’s presence was the source of protection and guidance to many of the Old Testament saints.

To Moses, ¹⁰“Therefore, come now, and I will send you to Pharaoh, so that you may bring My people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt” ¹¹But Moses said to God, ‘who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?’ ¹²And He said, ‘certainly I will be with you, and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain” (Exodus 3:10-12).

To Joshua, ³“Every place on which the sole of your foot treads, I have given it to you, just as I spoke to Moses. ⁴From the wilderness and this Lebanon, even as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and as far as the Great Sea toward the setting of the sun will be your territory. ⁵No man will be able to stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I have been with Moses, I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you” (Joshua 1:3-5).

To Gideon, ¹⁴“The Lord looked at him and said, ‘go in this your strength and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian. Have I not sent you?’ ¹⁵He said to Him, ‘O Lord, how shall I deliver Israel? Behold, my family is the least in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father’s house.’ ¹⁶But the Lord said to him, ‘surely I will be with you, and you shall defeat Midian as one man” (Judges 6:14-16).

To Solomon, ³⁷“I will take you, and you shall reign over whatever you desire, and you shall be king over Israel. ³⁸Then it will be, that if you listen to all that I command you and walk in My ways, and do what is right in My sight by observing My statutes and My commandments, as My servant David did, then I will be with you and build you an enduring house as I built for David, and I will give Israel to you” (1 Kings 11:37-38).

Such an assurance is for believers today as well. We are promised that “I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20), and unlike the Old Testament saints who might receive an anointing of the Holy Spirit, as believers we are permanently indwelt by the Holy Spirit as a sign of God’s promise to complete the work of redemption He blessed us with when we came to faith (Ephesians 1:13-14).

God also reminded Isaac that this blessing was not for him alone, but for future generations as well. The production of numerous descendants was a requirement if one were to occupy all the lands God had promised. And this blessing was also for those outside the chosen line, and not just the descendants of Isaac particularly. God would bless all the nations of the earth. This was made even more appropriate by the fact that Isaac’s immediate order was to remain among the pagans in Gerar.

Each of these promises was a repetition of the original covenant God made with Abraham at the time of his call.

“¹Go forth from your country,
And from your relatives
And from your father’s house,
To the land which I will show you;
²And I will make you a great nation,
And I will bless you,
And make your name great;
And so you shall be a blessing;
³And I will bless those who bless you,
And the one who curses you I will curse.
And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Genesis 12:1-3).

The earthly cause of God’s blessing was the obedience of Abraham. God praised Abraham as one who kept, “My commandments, My statutes and My laws” (v. 5). The language is the same as that used by God after Abraham had proved faithful at Mount Moriah, “in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice” (Genesis 22:18). We see here the interplay of God’s sovereignty and man’s free will. God blessed Abraham because he obeyed. But it is equally true that God chose Abraham as His servant to obey Him. God is sovereign, yet man is accountable.

Isaac was reminded of the faithfulness of his father. This was to serve as a proof of Isaac’s heritage and as a motivation to do likewise. As Abraham had obeyed, so now ought his son. Implied was the idea that Isaac should live his life in such a way that God would one day boast of him to *his* children. That would be Isaac’s challenge. He was to obey God in such a way as to be a catalyst for the continuation of the blessing.

The Deception at Gerar

And, in fact, Isaac responded in obedience. Without detail, Scripture says simply that “Isaac lived in Gerar” (v. 6). That Isaac dwelt in Gerar was a direct result of the famine. There would have been no other reason for him to journey from the Negev where he had been living. We can reflect on the fact that God often uses bad things to produce good results. The persecution of the early Church led to its dispersion throughout the Mediterranean, and consequently, the spreading of the gospel. The famine in Canaan is just another example of how “God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28).

Unfortunately, the immediate obedience of Isaac was not continued for long. Despite the promise that God would be with him, “when the men of the place asked about his wife, he said, ‘she is my sister,’ for he was afraid to say, ‘my wife,’ thinking, ‘the men of the place might kill me on account of Rebekah, for she is beautiful’” (v. 7). We cannot know how it came to be that Isaac chose to repeat the sin of his father. Had the previous story been shared, perhaps even as a warning? Had Sarah brought it up in a moment of frustration with her husband and the young Isaac overhead? Scripture does not say. It could

very well be that Isaac simply resorted to the lie entirely on his own, without any previous knowledge of his father's similar episode.

Scripture makes it clear that in no sense did Isaac resort to this because he was under duress. The men of Gerar simply asked about Rebekah. Isaac was not threatened. Like his father, the fear of harm was entirely in his head. Abimelech, king of Gerar, had not threatened to abduct Rebekah. The men of the city had not surrounded Isaac's encampment and demanded her as their right. The men had asked about Rebekah, nothing more was implied. Isaac simply took their interest in her and multiplied it in his head into something more. And then he brooded on this, came up with a plan to protect himself (while putting Rebekah at risk, we must note) and lied. Scripture has moved from a famine of food, to a famine of truth.

Isaac had stayed in Gerar for a considerable, but unknown, length of time. That he did so without Rebekah being abducted by the men of that area, was evidence that the men of Gerar had not imperiled either of them. They had been perfectly safe. Thus, Isaac's lie was not only repugnant, but unnecessary. And as lies often are, Isaac was found out. Eventually, "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" (v. 8).

The way by which Abimelech discovered the lie was different than that of either Pharaoh or the Abimelech of Genesis 20. In both of those cases, God revealed Sarah's true identity. To Pharaoh this revelation had come in the form of plagues sent upon the women of his household (Genesis 12:17-18). To Abimelech the truth had been given to him in a dream (Genesis 20:3). Here, however, God allowed the king of Gerar to discover the deception for himself. And the way in which he did so, only magnified Isaac's sin.

The statement that Isaac was caressing his wife in public requires some explanation. While some commentators argue that the behavior was not sexual in nature, that seems very unlikely. If Isaac was simply behaving with Rebekah as one might expect a brother to behave with a sister (laughing, appropriate touches, etc.), then Abimelech would have paid it no attention. Clearly something must have caught his eye. Isaac was fondling, for this is what the word implies, Rebekah in such a way as only a husband would do to a wife. Scripture does not have a prurient interest, so we are spared the particulars. But clearly, such behavior was so obvious that it could be seen from a distance, and this is further evidence that it must have been overtly sexual in nature. That it was done publicly only adds to Isaac's shame, and perhaps gives us some insight into his lack of self-control that led him to lie in the first place, rather than trust in God for protection.

Understandably, ⁹"Abimelech called Isaac and said, 'behold, certainly she is your wife! How then did you say, 'she is my sister?'" And Isaac said to him, 'because I said, "I might die on account of her.'" ¹⁰Abimelech said, 'what is this you have done to us? One of the people might easily have lain with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us'" (v. 9-10). Here Abimelech played the role of Nathan the prophet in his confrontation with King David (2 Samuel 12:1-7).

Abimelech offered a blistering accusation. The term ‘behold’ is an exclamation of passion intended to leave the listener unmistakable as to the seriousness of the conversation. Abimelech’s first question challenged Isaac’s motive, “how then did you say, ‘she is my sister?’” (v. 9). Isaac responded with the same defense his father had given years before, “I might die on account of her” (v. 9). That Isaac would not be willing to die for his wife is in itself an indictment of his character. That the king of Gerar showed more moral decency than did Isaac, proved that Isaac was not only sinful, but plainly wrong in his judgment of the people.

The second question Abimelech asked was rhetorical, “what is this you have done to us?” (v. 10). Abimelech pointed out to Isaac that by trying to preserve himself, he had placed the entire population of Gerar at risk. What Abimelech knew of Isaac’s god is not discernable, but clearly he believed Him to be powerful and willing to protect His own. The kings of Gerar had known Abraham, and made a treaty with him because of the fact that “God is with you in all that you do” (Genesis 21:22). Certainly they had some sense of awe for the god of this Hebrew people who sojourned among them. And as king, Abimelech was concerned about the people he ruled. Like Pharaoh and the Abimelech of Genesis 20, this king also understood the implications of such an act as the taking of another man’s wife. Even pagans had their moral code.

Abimelech took no chances. He understood the ease with which an offense could have been given. “One of the people might easily have lain with your wife” (v. 10). He was likely surprised that no one had done so given the circumstances. Immediately, he issued a decree that “charged all the people, saying, ‘he who touches this man or his wife shall surely be put to death’” (v. 11). Abimelech left no room for doubt. Neither Isaac nor Rebekah were to be touched. The word means literally to touch, and also carries the implication of any other form of molestation, such as verbal abuse. This was generous indeed considering the treatment Abimelech had just received from Isaac. The command applied to both Rebekah and Isaac, perhaps because he thought that the men of Gerar might exact their revenge on being placed at risk by attacking Isaac. Notice also, that he did not command Isaac and Rebekah to leave. Instead, he protected them. As we have seen before, this pagan king proved more moral and of higher integrity than God’s chosen patriarchs.

Takeaways

It seems as if every week we speak of the faithfulness of God despite the wickedness of man. And so we should. It is a truth that permeates Scripture and offers us hope in the present day. As the prophet Jeremiah wrote,

“²²The Lord’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease,
For His compassions never fail.
²³They are new every morning;
Great is Your faithfulness” (Lamentations 3:22-23).

May we rejoice in the faithfulness of our God and commit ourselves to respond with gratitude and obedience.