

GENESIS 25:19-26:35
ISAAC: OVERSHADOWED BUT NOT OVERLOOKED

In the biblical narrative Isaac is overshadowed. He spends most of his life either standing in the shadow of his father, that great man of faith, Abraham or in the shadow of his famous but deceitful son Jacob. Our quarterly skips from Genesis Chapter 24 to Chapter 27. For whatever reason, it completely overlooks Isaac. But I don't want to do that. So we'll be looking at Genesis Chapters 25 and 26 this morning. Genesis Chapter 26 is the only chapter in the Bible that is devoted to Isaac alone. The fact is that when we think about the great characters of the Bible, we rarely talk about Isaac. As you will see, however, he has some really good qualities and should NOT be overlooked.

We've already seen perhaps his finest moment. That took place back when he was a teenager. Remember the story of Abraham offering up Isaac? There we saw a young Isaac willingly lay himself on the altar. He did what his father told him to do and he did it without arguing or resisting him. His submission was quite remarkable given his age and the nature of what he was being asked to do! Years went by and Isaac grew up. Last week we saw that at the age of forty Isaac married his beautiful new bride, Rebekah. As we're going to see in our lesson today, Isaac is a man who, like his father Abraham, possesses godly character. He may be the forgotten patriarch but I want to shine the spotlight on him this morning.

Even though Isaac was not Abraham's first-born son, God chose him to be the heir through whom the Abrahamic Covenant will be fulfilled. That's been emphasized throughout this study. Isaac is very important. The unconditional covenant that God made with Abraham has three major promises attached to it: (1) people, becoming a great nation, (2) land, inheriting the Promised Land, the entire land of Canaan eventually, and (3) blessing, specifically, that Abraham's descendants will become a blessing to all nations. Of course, this blessing will ultimately be fulfilled in the Messiah,

Jesus. This is huge! The Abrahamic Covenant continues to have ramifications even today as we watch events unfolding daily in Israel.

Ishmael was actually Abraham's firstborn son, born to him by his slave girl Hagar. But Ishmael was NOT the heir to the covenant promises. God made that crystal clear to Abraham. Eventually Ishmael was sent away from Abraham's household and the last we hear from him is the brief genealogy contained in Genesis Chapter 25. It records that Ishmael died at the age of 137 and was gathered to his people. Most of the Arab world (including the Palestinians) considers itself to be the direct descendants of Ishmael.

After Ishmael's genealogy the biblical narrative returns to follow the story of Isaac. For the rest of the Old Testament the focus will be on Isaac and then on his family, God's covenant people, the Jews. So, with that background, let's pick up the story in Genesis Chapter 25.

READ Genesis 25:19-20

This is where we left off last week with the marriage between Isaac and Rebekah. Right off the bat Isaac and Rebekah face a crisis.

READ Genesis 25:21

We see here that Rebekah has the same problem that Sarah had. She's unable to have children. Rather than complain and mope about the situation, to his credit Isaac prays about it. He gives it over to God. How long does Isaac pray before God answers his prayer? At first glance it appears that it isn't very long at all because the same verse goes on to say, "the LORD granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived." So, it sounds like it doesn't take very long.

I want to direct your attention back to v 20 where it said, "Isaac was 40 years old when he took Rebekah [as his wife]." Then go to v 26, which says that "Isaac was 60 years old when she bore them [twin sons]." So how long do Isaac and Rebekah wait on God before Isaac's prayer is answered and Rebekah finally conceives? It's around 20 years!

Unlike Abraham and Sarah, though, Isaac and Rebekah do NOT take matters into their own hands. Instead they wait patiently and expectantly on the LORD. Do you think there was ever any doubt in Isaac's mind that he would have children? Some people might think that. But I believe that Isaac realizes WHO he is. Knowing that he's the chosen son, the heir of God's promise; and seeing how miraculously God had been working in his life, I firmly believe Isaac knows that he will eventually have a son with Rebekah. That's why he keeps on praying. His faith in God who keeps His promises is strong. Like his father Abraham, Isaac trusts that God will come through. And, sure enough, in His time God does and Rebekah gets pregnant – she "conceives."

READ Genesis 25:22

Rebekah's having a very difficult pregnancy and, with no ultrasound technology available in that day, she doesn't understand what's happening to her. So she, like Isaac, goes to God for some answers.

READ Genesis 25:23

God reveals to Rebekah that she has twins developing inside of her. The pain she has been experiencing is these two struggling against each other. There is conflict between them even in the womb! God reveals that two nations will eventually come from them. We the audience know from reading ahead in our Bible that these two nations will be Israel and Edom. Here's the important thing that I want you to see from this passage. It points to God's sovereign choice of people, in this case, even before they're born – "the older shall serve the younger." This runs counter to the culture of that day, but it's what God ordains will happen.

READ Genesis 25:24

Only at the very end of her pregnancy as Rebekah is about to give birth does the reality of having twins set in. God had pointed this out to her earlier in her pregnancy, but now she sees that it's true.

READ Genesis 25:25-26

Only at their birth is the gender of the twins revealed. In the previous verses they were referred to as simply "children" or "twins" or "nations" or "older" or "younger." Now we know that they are twin BOYS. Esau comes out first and Jacob comes out second holding onto Esau's heel. Right from the start we can see that, though these boys are twins, they are completely different from each other.

READ Genesis 25:27-28

Esau is the rugged outdoors type while Jacob is more of a home body. Notice the parental favoritism. This is a recipe for conflict and heartache. We see the character of these two boys in the very next story.

READ Genesis 25:29-31

What is a birthright? In that culture the older son, in this case Esau, is entitled to a double portion of his father's inheritance. What's Isaac's inheritance? The whole Abrahamic Covenant! There is great prestige and honor attached to this. So basically Jacob is offering to give Esau some stew in exchange for his birthright. It doesn't sound like a very good deal to me, but Esau is hungry so...

READ Genesis 25:32-34

Esau's remark, "I am about to die," of course, is an exaggeration! The fact is that Esau's birthright wasn't important at all to him. Esau was very materialistic and worldly minded. He was short-sighted and he didn't have his priorities straight.

The writer of Hebrews when teaching the importance of striving for peace and holiness uses Esau as an object lesson for how NOT to be. He characterizes Esau this way: "See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no 'root of bitterness' springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal" (Hebrews 12:15-16). So, while Jacob is certainly no angel, we can see early on that Esau is an ungodly person.

In his commentary John Phillips says that Esau “evaluated God’s promises as cheap and worthless.” J. Vernon McGee summarizes Esau’s character this way: “[Esau] had no capacity for God whatever. He was a man of the world, only interested in the physical.”

As we move now to Genesis Chapter 26, we’re going to put Jacob and Esau aside and focus our attention on their father Isaac. We’ll get back to the two sons, Jacob and Esau, next time.

READ Genesis 26:1-2

God tells Isaac NOT to go down to Egypt as his father Abraham had done during the previous famine. He is to remain in this land. He says in v 3, “Sojourn in THIS land.” Isaac goes to Gerar which is part of the land of Canaan. It’s Philistine territory near present day Gaza. Abimelech as pointed out before is a title rather than his name. So, this is not the same Abimelech that Abraham had interacted with years before, back in Genesis Chapter 20. He’s the king of the Philistines at the time of this second famine. He is perhaps the son, grandson or nephew of that other Abimelech.

It is at this crisis time that God reaffirms the Abrahamic Covenant to Isaac.

READ Genesis 26:3-5

Notice again the emphasis on people, land and blessing. “I will multiply YOUR offspring. For to YOU and to YOUR offspring I will give all these lands. In YOUR offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.” What God promised to Abraham He promises to Isaac.

READ Genesis 26:6

So far so good. Isaac remains in the land of Canaan. He obeys God. But then something happens that sounds eerily familiar. It is almost an exact repeat of a story we read earlier.

READ Genesis 26:7

This is the same thing that had happened to Abraham in Gerar back in Genesis Chapter 20. Only Rebekah is NOT Isaac's sister! This isn't even a half-truth. It's an out and out lie.

READ Genesis 26:8

One commentary I read said that the way that Isaac is interacting with Rebekah makes it obvious that she is NOT his sister. So it becomes obvious to the king that Isaac lied about his relationship with Rebekah. And he calls Isaac out on it.

READ Genesis 26:9

Isaac confesses that he was afraid and, to his credit, he owns up to what he did.

READ Genesis 26:10-11

John MacArthur commented that the fact that a pagan king would go to such an extreme to protect Isaac and Rebekah suggests that God is at work to preserve His [God's] chosen seed.

READ Genesis 26:12-14

Just like with Abraham, God richly blesses Isaac in spite of his imperfections. This is called GRACE! Aren't you glad that we serve a God who blesses us even when we don't deserve it?

Notice that the Philistines grow envious of Isaac. In fact they got so resentful of how wealthy Isaac has become that they retaliate against him. In the verses that follow, which I will summarize for the sake of time, the Philistines fill in the wells in that region which Abraham's servants had dug years before. They do this out of spite. Isaac's servants find a well of spring water and the herdsmen from that area claim that well to be theirs. So the servants dig yet another well. Again they find more spring water and again the locals contend with them over it. This prompts Isaac and his men to relocate from that area to a location well east of Gerar. They dig a new well there and since there's nobody around to harass them, they remain there.

They pitch their tents and graze their herds and flocks. We pick up the action in v 24...

READ Genesis 26:24

Isaac is apparently fearful given all that has been happened to him and he needs some reassurance from the LORD. God gives him some at a place called Beersheba. What was Isaac's response to this much-needed word from God?

READ Genesis 26:25

Isaac builds an altar and worships God. He does this before he does anything else.

Well some time goes by. Abimelech and the people of Gerar hear that Isaac is flourishing in his new home. Despite their efforts to oppose and stop him, Isaac has successfully, with God's help, moved on and is doing quite well. The Philistines may be godless pagans, but they are not stupid, even they are smart enough to realize, "If you can't beat them, join them." And so, Abimelech sets out to make a peace treaty with Isaac.

READ Genesis 26:26-27

Isaac's like, "What are you doing here? I thought you hated me. What's going on?"

READ Genesis 26:28-29

Even the Philistines recognize that God is blessing Isaac. So, they make peace with him.

READ Genesis 26:30-31

God continues to bless Isaac. Even before the story of the peace treaty ends Isaac's servants come to him in v 32 and tell him, "We have found water." God is so good to Isaac. Like Abraham, we see that Isaac is a richly blessed man.

But lurking in the background of all of Isaac's personal successes and blessings is a family matter which is deeply troubling to Isaac and Rebekah.

READ Genesis 26:34-35

Esau, their older, worldly son – the one that the writer of Hebrews described as "sexually immoral" and "unholy" – breaks his parents' hearts. He takes multiple wives from among the Canaanites. We'll talk more about Esau and his younger brother Jacob next time.

So what can we take away from Isaac's life? Why did I want to take the time to cover these chapters? I found a lot of hope as I studied this. Isaac was a man of faith and showed great patience. He did things the right way. No, he wasn't perfect. But God doesn't require us to be perfect. He knows we are NOT going to be. Isaac wasn't particularly remarkable. But then God doesn't expect us to be remarkable. Isaac had fears. So do we. The big thing about Isaac that I want us to see is that he was a faithful follower of God. Like Abraham, he completely trusted God and relied on His promises.

That's what God wants from us. The last thing I want us to note is that God did not choose Isaac based on Isaac's merit. God chose Isaac by His divine sovereign will. Did you realize that God chose you and He chose me before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4)? As the LORD leads you in your life, simply follow Him one step at a time. You'll find that, if you'll do, He will bless you far beyond what you can imagine.

I want to close with these words from Romans 15:4-5 (New Living Translation). It says, "Such things were written in the Scriptures long ago to teach us. And the Scriptures give us hope and encouragement as we wait patiently for God's promises to be fulfilled. May God, who gives this patience and encouragement, help you live in complete harmony with each other, as is fitting for followers of Christ Jesus."

Isaac provides us with a pretty good pattern to follow.