

**“THE HEIR OF THE COVENANT”**

The fact that Jacob and Esau are not mentioned in this passage, coupled with the fact that Isaac was able to pass Rebekah off as his sister for a time, suggests that the events described here took place prior to the events recorded in the previous chapter. Moses seems to have chosen to tell this part of Isaac’s story out of chronological order.

Whenever an author does something like this, it is usually in order to make a point. In this case, the account of Isaac’s time in Gerar is sandwiched between two passages that show how Jacob tried to obtain the birthright through manipulation and deception. By way of contrast, this story about Isaac shows how it was the Lord who ensured that the covenant blessings would pass on to Isaac. We see this in the Lord’s reaffirmation, not just once but twice, of the covenant promises that he had given to Abraham. We see it in the emphasis upon how Isaac enjoyed the same kind of protection and provision that the Lord had extended to his father before him. And we see it in the fact that the Lord’s blessing was bestowed upon Isaac in spite of his own failures and in spite of significant opposition from others. All of this indicates that Moses placed this story about Isaac as an interlude between the surrounding passages about Jacob in order to make the point that all of Jacob’s scheming was unnecessary, because the blessings that God bestows to his covenant people are given by his grace alone.

After the death of his father, Isaac became the leading figure, the patriarch, in the covenant community. We see a parallel between Isaac and his father in the first verse of this chapter, where it says: “Now there was a famine in the land.” You will recall that

the very same words were used to describe what happened to Abraham back in Genesis 12, just after the Lord called him to leave his father's household and travel to the land of Canaan. Both Abraham and Isaac began their careers as patriarchs of the covenant community by having to endure a famine. When that earlier famine struck in Abraham's day, he did what many of the people around him did: he went to Egypt, because it was less susceptible to famine. But when famine strikes in Isaac's lifetime, God tells him not to follow the footsteps of his father to Egypt. Instead, he is to trust that the Lord will take care of him in the land of promise.

After giving Isaac this command, God reaffirms the promises that he had given to Isaac's father Abraham. God says that he will be with Isaac. He will bless him. He will give the land to him and to his offspring. He will multiply his offspring, so that all the peoples of the earth will be blessed through them. You can see that the wording here is nearly identical to what the Lord said to Abraham in a number of earlier passages in Genesis. But there is one thing that stands out as different. It is the ground upon which God bases all of these promises. In verse 5 God says that he will bestow these blessings upon Isaac "because Abraham obeyed my voice." Of course this does not mean that Abraham was able to earn God's blessings for his son. The Bible repeatedly tells us that our sinfulness prevents us from being able to earn salvation for ourselves. And if that is the case, then it would be just as impossible for us to earn salvation for someone else. The reason why the Bible can say, as it does here, that the faithfulness of one generation of God's people brings God's blessings upon the next generation is because Christian

faithfulness is itself the outworking of God's grace in a believer's life. The Lord works through the faithfulness of his people to build and preserve his covenant community. In other words, God is pleased to work through the family in order to build his church.

You have heard me talk about this in other sermons before, and the reason for this is because it is a principle that is repeated throughout the Scriptures. We have seen it earlier in our study of Genesis, where the Lord spoke these words about Abraham:

“For I have chosen him, 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.” [Gen. 18:19]

We see the same principle stated in a number of the psalms, including these:

“But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children, to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments.” [Psalm 103:17-18]

“Blessed is the man who fears the Lord, who greatly delights in his commandments! His offspring will be mighty in the land; the generation of the upright will be blessed.” [Psalm 112:1-2]

The Bible clearly teaches the doctrines of covenant succession and covenant nurture.

That is, it says that the Lord works through the faithfulness of one generation to bring his blessings to the generations that follow.

This is undeniably true, but it is important to add one qualification. While Christian parents do have a great responsibility in nurturing their children in the faith, we need to remember that children also have responsibilities for which they are held accountable. We see this in Paul's letters to the Ephesians and Colossians, where he gives instructions to both parents and children in how they ought to conduct themselves in their relationships with each other. And the reason why both children and parents are treated as responsible agents in the parenting relationship is because each individual bears the ultimate responsibility before God for his or her own soul. On the great day of judgment, God will not allow anyone to blame someone else for their failure to embrace the gospel. Each one of us will have to stand before God on our own. And the question that will confront every human being on that day is a question that no one else can answer for us: Is Jesus Christ your Savior and Lord, or is he not?

It is important to keep that in mind, but we also need to remember that the Bible is very clear in teaching that there is an organic quality to the covenant blessings. God promises to be God to us and to our children. The covenant promises flow from one generation to the next, and it is through the faithfulness of the preceding generation that this takes place. The Lord gives a great responsibility to Christian parents when he gives

them children. Let us see to it that we do not neglect that responsibility. Every parent should take to heart the words of Robert Murray M'Cheyne, who said:

“Ah! who can tell the blessedness of being the saved father of a saved family?

Dear believers, be wise. Surely if anything could mar the joy of heaven, it would be to see your children lost through your neglect.” [*Sermons*, 30-1]

Our text tells us that Isaac obeyed the Lord's command to not go to Egypt. This was an act of faith for Isaac. Everyone around him would have been heading to Egypt, but he settled in Gerar out of obedience to the Lord's command. He placed his trust in the Lord and he acted in faith. But it was not long before he fell into the same sin that ensnared his father on two separate occasions. We wonder at this, don't we? How in the world could Isaac have been so blind? How could he have been so foolish as to fall into the same error that had nearly doomed his father? But Isaac's failure only shows us what a powerful force fear can be in our lives. Isaac lied about Rebekah being his wife for the same reason that Abraham lied about Sarah being his wife. He lied because he was afraid that one of the Philistines might kill him in order to take Rebekah. Like his father before him, Isaac was willing to put the covenant blessings at risk in order to try to save his own skin.

At one moment Isaac is acting in faith, obeying the Lord by refusing to take the easy route to Egypt. But at the very next moment his fearful unbelief causes him to put

everything at risk. We should not be surprised to see this, because the same thing happens in our lives all the time. It is not very difficult for us to imagine how Isaac might have rationalized the lie he told about Rebekah. After all, he seems to have thought it was a matter of life and death for him. And we have an uncanny ability to find excuses for ourselves when we feel that our backs are against the wall. Perhaps Isaac reasoned along these lines: ‘I know that God does not want me to die, since I am the heir of the covenant. And it seems that the only way to ensure that I will remain safe is to lie. Therefore, this must be the right thing for me to do.’ We tend to get very pragmatic when we are worried or afraid.

This episode repeats a theme that we have seen many times before in Genesis. God’s gracious work in a person’s life is almost immediately followed by a significant failure on the part of that person. We saw this with Noah, who got drunk after being delivered through the flood. We saw it with Abraham, who lied about Sarah being his wife after God had entered into a covenant with him. And now we see it with Isaac, who lies about Rebekah being his wife right after Moses described how the Lord ensured that the inheritance would be passed on to Isaac instead of to his half-brothers. These repeated failures emphasize that the blessings that God bestows upon us in the covenant of grace are not given to us because we deserve them, but because of God’s gracious determination to give them to us. And it was that gracious determination of God that ensured that Isaac’s lie did not result in disaster for the covenant family. God protected Isaac, just as he said he would. He saw to it that Abimelech was in the right place at the

right time, so he could see with his own eyes that Rebekah was not Isaac's sister, but his wife.

After his lie was discovered, Isaac remained in Gerar during this period of famine, and the Lord poured out his blessings upon Isaac. His crops and herds abounded, and he became a rich man. Even after the Philistines sent him away out of envy, Isaac continued to live under God's blessing. As he traveled from place to place, everywhere he went his servants were able to find water, even though it was a time of famine.

But there is another side to this chapter in Isaac's life, and we see this very clearly in the text. While Isaac enjoyed significant material blessings, he also had to endure a prolonged period of trial. Every time he found a well, he was forced to uproot his household and move somewhere else. He lived a pilgrim existence.

This aspect of Isaac's story serves as a picture of the Christian life. The Lord does bestow his blessings upon us in this life. We enjoy spiritual and material blessings. Yet we have to endure various trials and difficulties. The Christian life is a life of both blessing and trial. Some Christians may have more of one than the other, but there is no denying the fact that we all experience both. We prefer the blessings, to be sure, and it is important for us to be grateful for those blessings. But we must not forget that it is through our trials that the Lord strengthens and perfects our faith. As Samuel Rutherford once wrote, "Who knoweth the truth of grace without a trial?...And how soon would faith freeze without a cross?" [*Letters*, 161]

As we reflect upon this account of Isaac's early life, we could say that it serves as a picture of the Christian life. Isaac started out as the undeserving recipient of God's grace. So do we. Isaac received God's blessings because of his father's faithfulness. Likewise, there is a sense in which God's grace comes to us through the faithfulness of others, whether it is through our parents or through other followers of Christ. Isaac failed miserably when he went to Gerar. We fail miserably too. God graciously protected Isaac from the dangerous situation that was brought about by his sin. God extends that same protection to us. And finally, the Lord did not allow the opposition that threatened Isaac to get in the way of the blessings that he had promised to give him. In the same way, God will not allow the world around us to prevent him from doing all that he intends to do for us. God ensures that the blessings of the covenant pass on to those whom he has appointed to be heirs of the covenant. As I close, listen to how this truth is expressed by theologian R.B. Kuiper:

“A ship is traversing the ocean. It has a most excellent captain. Can he guarantee the vessel's safety? Certainly not, for he has no control over the winds and the waves. Together they may conceivably dash the vessel in pieces. The church of God is a ship, let us say, traversing the ocean of the world. But what a Captain it has! He is Master not only of the ship, but of all the forces that would destroy it. It is He that commanded the winds and the waves of Galilee: ‘Peace, be still!’ and

they obeyed (Mk. 4:39). His omnipotence is the absolute guarantee of the ship's safe arrival at its destination." [Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ*, 197]