

however, have a glimpse of Isaac's fear (26:6) which is understandable given the circumstances of famine in which they lived and the risk he was taking for the Covenant. It does seem hard to fault Isaac for keeping the men of the area at bay by using this excuse, when it appears that the two of them enjoyed a clearly intimate relationship (26:8). The echoes of Abraham's not so creditable stories of handing Sarah over to a harem (12:15; 20:2) merely serve to remind us of the spiritual journey of both Abraham and Isaac, and on this occasion, the situation was rectified not by divine intervention (a plague, 12:17; a vision, 20:3) but by the providence of God (a glance out of a window! 26:8). Abimelech was very concerned about the possible consequences of what Isaac had said, but the truth was that Isaac and Rebekah were able to live 'a long time' (26:8) in Gerar, and survive the famine. God's hand was on them for protection.

Application of Scripture

It appears that chapter 26 has a pattern of showing us how Isaac walked in his father's footsteps, both physically and spiritually. He was a different person, of course, but there were also similarities and family traits which bound them together and we can see how these affected Isaac in this story. The main feature of chapter 26 so far is the faith of Isaac, which has developed and grown from the example of his father Abraham. Many people think of Isaac as something of a 'flat' character in the Bible (that is, having little to say or do), but we should credit the man with more than this. He overcame any fears he may have had (26:6), to be obedient to the Lord in the face of famine, and to deal reasonably well with a similar situation to that which dogged his father. Abraham of course, learned through these experiences and matured in faith, and Isaac learned from his father. Despite problems that would show themselves in the family line in the future, Isaac showed how it is possible for a son to learn spiritual lessons from a father. Perhaps we should look carefully at this today in an age where the connections between generations appear to be assumed as difficult rather than positive.

It is helpful for us to see how the Lord spoke to Isaac in a way that reflected his needs, and in a manner that both gave and promised him protection. The protection the Lord gave was more than just saving Isaac from famine, and was designed to encourage him for the future. In the midst of difficult or life-threatening situations, the Lord is still able to offer His people not just the protection that will bring them through the problems of the day, but the spiritual protection of encouragement that everything is 'in His hands'. It is a Covenant blessing we all need to hear.

Discipleship Challenges

Please use the programme of lifestyle challenges which can be found by following the link 'lifestyle challenge'. The downloadable 'worksheet' will help you follow through any challenge which you feel is right for you to take up.

Suggestions about discipleship and Christian lifestyle

Faith is something that we often think of as something we either have or do not have. However, the Bible teaches that our faith in God is something that needs to grow in the experiences of life. It can even be learned by a child from their parents. In what ways have you grown in faith over recent years? Are you aware of needing to grow in faith? As with Isaac, life is full of these spiritual challenges!

Final Prayer

Your protection, Lord God, is all around us. We cannot necessarily hear it, see it or feel it, but it is there. Thank You for the times when You have indeed protected us, whether we know it or not, and help us recognise the spiritual signs which give us confidence that You are indeed, watching over us; AMEN

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. From what you know of Abraham and Isaac, what are their similarities and differences?
2. Why is it that Christian people today do not talk much about the 'Covenant' when it is such an important theme of the Bible?
3. When you think of the promises of God, do you have in mind any of these promises in this text, or any variation of them?

Prayer

Lord God, You teach us that true wisdom is to be found with the humble (*Prov. 11:2*). Give us, we pray, the true humility of gracious speech, loving actions, genuine concern and a generous heart, and also the wisdom of justice, integrity, honesty and care. May we live according to these qualities of grace, and the infilling of the Holy Spirit who inspires them within us; AMEN

Further Suggestions for Prayer

Weekly Theme: Those who are ill

Pray today for those who are ill because of worry, anxiety or stress, or because of the pain and unhappiness caused to them by loved ones at home or friends at work.

Such illness may show itself in a variety of ways, and whilst a doctor can treat conditions or depression, only the Lord can 'cure' the heart. Pray for those you know who need this help.

Meditation

Save us, Jesus; Creator of all things.

For people think they own so much and can do what we want,

Yet in reality, You have given us everything:

Everyone can communicate easily using the internet,

Yet You are the One with whom we need to keep in touch:

Many drive miles for work, leisure and enjoyment,

But we do not need to travel the world to find You:

Doctors can 're-wire' the brain, and reconstruct a face,

But only You can mend the broken heart:

Engineers know how to utilise the world's resources,

Yet You hold the secrets of the wealth of the world:

Save us, Jesus; Creator of all things.

Open our eyes to see You.

Bible Study - Genesis 26:1-11

¹ Now there was a famine in the land, different from the previous one which took place in the days of Abraham. And Isaac traveled towards Gerar, to Abimelech, the Philistine King. ² The LORD appeared to him and said, "Do not go down to Egypt; stay in the land where I tell you to live. ³ Live in this land as a visitor, and then I will be with you, and will bless you; for I will give all these lands to you and your descendants, and I will confirm the oath that I swore to your father Abraham. ⁴ I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and will give the whole country to your offspring. All the nations of the earth will obtain their blessing through your offspring,⁵ because Abraham obeyed me and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws."

⁶ So Isaac settled in Gerar. ⁷ When the men there asked him about his wife, he said, 'She is my sister'. He was afraid to say, 'My wife,' because he thought, 'the men might kill me for the sake of Rebekah, because she is beautiful.' ⁸ When Isaac had been there a long time, King Abimelech of the Philistines looked out of a window and noticed him caressing his wife Rebekah. ⁹ So he summoned Isaac and said, 'So she is really your wife! Why then did you say, "She is my sister"?' Isaac said to him, 'Because I thought I might be killed because of her.' ¹⁰ Abimelech said, 'What have you done to us? It would have been so easy for one of our people to have slept with your wife, and we would have incurred guilt because of you.' ¹¹ So Abimelech warned all the people, saying, 'Whoever touches this man or his wife shall be put to death.'

Review

Isaac was the only son of Abraham who inherited both his wealth and the Covenant promises of God. Now, in chapter 26, we learn something about the character of Isaac as a man. He is compared to Abraham in all of the six stories of the chapter, but as we read them, we discover that Isaac is both similar to his father, and also very different. The six stories all echo incidents in Abraham's life, and are as follows: 1. God's instructions and promises to Isaac (26:1-5); 2. Isaac and Rebekah with Abimelech at Gerar (26:6-11); 3. Isaac's successful work (26:12-16); 4. Isaac re-establishes wells dug by his father (26:17-22); 5. Isaac builds an altar, just like his father (26:23-25); 6. Isaac makes peace with the people of Gerar and Abimelech (26:26-33). We will find these stories are not mere repetitions of those of Abraham, as they contain significant differences which are due either to Isaac's personality or to new revelations about the Covenant. Today, we read the first of these two stories, and each contains significant new information about both Isaac and the Covenant.

The first story describes a 'famine in the land' which prompted the Lord to appear to Isaac and tell him both what he should do and why. Isaac was told firstly not to go to Egypt to obtain food, which was the only logical thing to do, for Egypt and its river Nile was the nearest land where food could be obtained. He was told to stay in Gerar, which he did. Isaac's faith in accepting the Lord's word and the promise of His provision at a time of famine was considerable, and contrasted well with the example of Abraham, who went to Egypt at the first sign of the earlier famine (see 26:1, 12:10). The Lord continued however, and His speech became one of the longest in the Book of Genesis. Within it, He confirmed to Isaac many of the different Covenant promises previously revealed to Abraham; personal blessing (v3 – see 12:2,3), land (v3,4 – see 13:5f.), many descendants (v4 – see 12:2, 15:5), blessing 'the nations of the earth' (v4 – see 12:3). Also in this revelation, the Lord said something new and important to Isaac; it was 'I will be with you' (v3). This was the first time God had spoken these words to anyone, and His Covenant promise to be present with His people was eventually fulfilled by Jesus whose name 'Immanuel' means 'God with us'. This promise of God is a crucial connection between the Old and the New Testaments.

The second story is very strange, for it tells of how Isaac obeyed the Lord by not going to Egypt but fell into the trap of telling people around him that Rebekah was his sister. In so doing, he repeated a mistake his father had made twice before (12:12-20; 20:1-18). Nothing sinister happened, however, apart from Abimelech, the King of Gerar, discovering (26:8) that Isaac and Rebekah had an intimate relationship! Throughout these events, Isaac continued to show faith and trust in God, which was essential for the Covenant. We should not read these stories and forget that they tell us how God chose to break down the barriers of sin between Himself and humanity; and he did it through His own chosen people, despite their sin.

Going Deeper

There are some surprising additions to the Covenant promises of God for us to examine, which teach us about the Lord's protection of His people. The story of Isaac and Rebekah at Gerar adds more to this theme. Also, whatever we think of this passage and the repetitions within it, it tells us that Isaac walked in the steps of his father not just physically, but spiritually.

Isaac, and the famine

The timing of both of our stories, the famine and Isaac's stay in Gerar, is a little uncertain. This uncertainty continues throughout the stories of Genesis 26, as it appears that not everything is in chronological order. For example, it would surely have been obvious to the locals that Isaac and Rebekah were married, or at least that she was his concubine, if a young Jacob and Esau were around their camp, but although their birth is recorded in the previous chapter of Genesis, they do not figure in Genesis 26. It is therefore possible that these events happened before they were born! We should not be too worried, however, because the writer of Genesis is far more interested in the theological importance of making spiritual connections between Abraham and Isaac than pursuing the story of Jacob, which is taken up in chapter 27.

It is all too easy for us to read quickly past the mention of famine without recalling that in those days, a famine was a 'life and death' matter. Isaac was obedient to God, though, even when following His command to stay in Gerar, a town in the southern regions of Canaan which was known for having little water. It was an extremely high risk decision, but one that was equally high

in faith. At a similar time of famine, Abraham had travelled straight down to Egypt, and severely compromised the Covenant by allowing his wife, Sarah, to be taken into Pharaoh's harem (12:10f.). On that occasion, God had to intervene directly to save Sarah, but on this occasion, Isaac's more mature faith meant that the Lord could appear to him and tell him more about the Covenant promises He had previously given to Abraham. We should not forget that so far, Isaac had only received the Covenant by means of the blessing in Genesis 22:16-18, which was spoken to Abraham by an angel and directed towards him when he was only a young boy.

Isaac and the revelation from God

If we look at the particular aspects of the Covenant that God reveals to Isaac in this story, many of them are almost identical to what was said to Abraham at various times during his long life (as in the references given above). Some things, however, have been left out. There is no mention, for example, of circumcision; something that was presented to Abraham as an essential sign of the Covenant (17:9f.); neither is there any mention of possessing 'the gates of their enemies' (22:18). Most of the other features of the Covenant are there, however, and if we look carefully, we will notice that there are one or two additions. God specifically told Isaac that he was confirming his oath (22:3) of Covenant, and it is extremely rare for the Lord to say that he will 'confirm' His word. Also, as we have seen (above), God chose to reveal to Isaac the special Covenant promise 'I will be with you', where previously, it was Abimelech who had observed of Abraham 'God is with you' (22:21). More than this, God promised Isaac 'all these lands' (26:3) and this was then emphasised by the Lord's further promise that his offspring would have 'the whole country' (26:4), which seems to imply even more land than what we think of as Canaan. Some scholars have suggested that God was thereby extending the boundaries of Canaan to include the Philistine territories including Gerar where Isaac was staying.

This may be true, but there is one other explanation of these omissions and additions. When God speaks in this way, it is usually for a purpose, and if we look very simply at the story in front of us, Isaac had just accepted the Lord's guidance to stay in the region of Canaan despite the terrors of famine. It is not surprising therefore that the whole revelation of God was focussed on reassuring and protecting Isaac, because that is just what he needed. It was not a time for discussing circumcision, but it was a time for Isaac to be assured that he would survive the famine and bear the children who would in future bless 'all the nations' (26:6). He also needed to know that he was safe in Gerar, which was verified by God promise of 'all the land'.

The last sentence of God's revelation to Isaac is also interesting. If you read back over it from the middle of verse 4, you will discover that the Lord says that all the nations of the earth will be blessed by Isaac's offspring 'because Abraham obeyed me and kept my charge ...' (26:5) Here is an important point for us even today; the nations will be blessed by God through the obedience of God's people. It is a small but essential piece of the theological jigsaw in the Old Testament.

Isaac and Rebekah at Gerar

When Isaac travelled to Gerar, he went to 'Philistine' (26:8) territory, and it seems strange to us that Isaac and his father Abraham were able to live at peace with people who, later in the life of God's people, were sworn enemies. We should be aware however, that the word 'Philistine' in Genesis is a word that refers to the people who lived in the south western regions of Canaan, between the hill country and the sea. It is reckoned that at the time of Abraham they were peaceful peoples (the 'Caphtorim' of Deut 2:23), and not the more aggressive Philistines of later generations who were descended from Aegean warriors who crossed the Sea from Greece around 1200 BC and settled in a confederation of the five city states of Gath, Gaza, Askelon, Ashdod and Ekron. These were the people who were the Philistine enemies of Saul and David, and were very different from the peaceable people they displaced, such as the King Abimelech of Gerar (to the south of the traditional Philistine territories) who appears in our story and that of Abraham (20:1f.; 21:22f.). It is also reckoned that the name 'Abimelech' which means 'the king is my father' was a generic name for the King in Gerar rather than the name of an individual; so the Abimelech in the stories of Abraham and Isaac were probably a generation apart.

If this story is a copy of the earlier ones of Abraham's mistreatment of Sarah (12:10-20; 20:1-18) in Egypt and Gerar, then it is a pale shadow of the former stories. The whole story is quite different apart from Isaac's calling Rebekah his sister, the mentioning of Rebekah's beauty and the annoyance of the king upon discovering that Isaac and Rebekah were married. We do,