

labour of Isaac's men, but part of the blessing of God which came from the last well dug, 'Rehoboth', which celebrated the liberation and salvation of God (above). All together in this passage, there is a strong link between the miracles of God's grace and the spiritual wealth of salvation and fruitfulness! This is the true wealth that this passage describes, and it is not a simple equation between God's blessing and wealth.

Application

Earlier, I observed that this passage of scripture is closely linked with the 'prosperity Gospel', which broadly speaking, refers to that preaching which says it is God's intention to bless His people with worldly wealth now, in response to their faith. There is also a more unpleasant form of this preaching which calls on people, often the poor, to give their tithes to a preacher in order to obtain these blessings and riches. This so-called Gospel is no Gospel. It does not properly understand the spiritual links between the dramatic stories of the Old Testament and the reality of Christ's sacrifice on the Cross for our salvation from sin and peace with God. There is only one Gospel, and it is the Gospel of Jesus. The subject of wealth is well covered by His teaching (Matt chs. 5-7, e.g.), and it adequately sums up what the Old Testament says and offers the poor the unstinting love and compassion of God. It is true that the Lord will often help people better themselves by placing their worldly circumstances in His hands, but the offer of the Gospel is eternal life, not cash now. Isaac was a wealthy man because it was necessary for God's purposes for him to be so; and yet many other godly Old Testament characters were not wealthy (Moses, Elijah, Elisha, Amos etc.). God will make it clear what His purpose is for us if we yield ourselves to Him, and our faith and obedience are most important, not wealth.

Neither should this blind us from the other great truths hinted at in this passage; the importance of re-establishing our spiritual heritage when under attack, for example. Isaac is rightly regarded as a man of peace, and those who seek a Christian form of 'pacifism' do well to follow his example, but it is one that is 'worldly wise'. Isaac withdrew, but he did so tactically, and with cunning. By so doing he made strategic gains which ensured the future of his family and heritage, and gives us an example of what may best be called 'active' pacifism, which engages with real situations rather than stands back from them.

Then, in the midst of the drought, Isaac was able to deal with the problems of staying in the Promised Land by trusting God. That was probably his greatest strength.

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

When we are in difficulty financially, a 'prosperity Gospel' may seem very attractive, for it seems to say that if we do the right things for God, then we will be blessed with the things we want. Spend some time trying to work out what may be true or false within this teaching. Consider the responsibilities of the Church of God to the poor. In what ways can you and other people ensure that the real Gospel of Jesus Christ meets real people's real needs?

Final Prayer

Great Lord and Master of all; save us from thinking that we know everything. Remind us of our weaknesses so that we may address them, confront us with our sins so that we may repent of them, and embrace us with Your love so that we may yield to Your truth and wisdom. We ask this through Jesus Christ; AMEN

Questions (for use in groups)

1. In what ways are the problems of wealth different from those in Isaac's day? Does this affect how we read the text and interpret it?
2. Discuss how you would characterise Isaac after reading about him today.
3. Isaac dug a number of wells before being able to use the water. Discuss any spiritual parallels to this with your own experience.

Prayer

Make us obedient to Your will, Lord Jesus, so that we live by the example of Your love. In a world that laughs at our submission to You, may we hold our heads high and feel the touch of Your spirit as we testify in all we do and say to the One who has saved us. Grant us the peace of knowing that we have lived according to Your will, Lord Jesus; AMEN

Further Suggestions for Prayer

Weekly Theme: Those who are ill

Pray for those for whom illness means either that they cannot work, or they are not able to do the work they would like or earn the income that reflects their abilities.

The problem of illness at work is complicated, but for each individual concerned it can be a nightmare, affecting their whole life. Pray that their very real problems be understood.

Meditation

There is none like You, Lord Jesus Christ.

You are greater and more glorious than we can ever know:

All Scriptures tell us of Your saving Grace,

But it is You we worship, in the truth of Your Word:

The natural world reveals its majestic Creator,

Yet its finest displays are but a shadow of Your Glory:

We see Your presence in each other's eyes,

Though our hope is not in people, but in Your Salvation:

You graciously dwell within our hearts,

Yet we feel but a fraction of Your amazing Love:

The history of Your people is a great, but blemished story,

For although it is Your Body, it is yet to be Your Bride:

There is none like You, Lord Jesus Christ.

Bible Study - Genesis 26:12-22

¹² Isaac sowed a crop in that land, and in the same year he reaped a hundredfold. The LORD blessed him, ¹³ and he became rich. His wealth increased more and more until he became very rich indeed. ¹⁴ He acquired so many flocks of sheep and herds of cattle, and such a large household and entourage that the Philistines envied him.

¹⁵ All the wells that his father's servants had dug back in the days of his father Abraham were then blocked up by the Philistines and filled with earth, ¹⁶ and Abimelech said to Isaac, 'Move on away from us; for there are too many of you for us.' ¹⁷ So Isaac left there and camped in the Valley of Gerar and settled there. ¹⁸ Isaac then opened up the wells that had been dug in the days of his father Abraham; for the Philistines had filled them in after Abraham's death; and he gave them the same names that his father had given them.

¹⁹ Isaac's servants dug in the valley and discovered a well of fresh water, ²⁰ and when this happened, the herdsmen of Gerar disputed this with Isaac's herdsmen by claiming the water as theirs. So he called the well Esek ('dispute'), because they disputed with him. ²¹ Then they dug another well, and had a dispute over that one as well; so he called it Sitnah ('hostility'). ²² He moved on from there and dug another well, and they did not dispute this one; so he called it Rehoboth ('open space'), saying, "Now the LORD has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land."

Review

Genesis 26 invites us to see parallels between Isaac and Abraham, but it does not do this merely to tell us that the son was like the father! The passing of the Covenant from one generation to another is an important theme, but we have already seen (yesterday) that this chapter about Isaac describes profound spiritual truths. That does not mean to say that the events themselves were unimportant; on the contrary, they point to deeper spiritual truths. Yesterday we saw how God promised for the first time to 'be with' His people (26:3) and we also saw how the Lord protected His people in time of need (26:1f.). Today's stories contain further spiritual truths, all set against the background of famine.

Isaac was blessed by the Lord with wealth, as was his father before him; and he then became even more wealthy! It is tempting to combine this idea of blessing with other similar Scriptures, and conclude that the Lord intends all his people to become wealthy; the downside being the assumption that those who are not wealthy are somehow deficient of the Lord's blessing. This is wrong, for it is not a 'spiritual' conclusion from this text, but a 'material' one, and Scripture says far more about wealth than this (e.g. Ecclesiastes 4:8f, and Jesus' caution about wealth; Luke 8:12f.). God gave wealth to Abraham and Isaac not only to establish His people on earth, but also as a sign of the spiritual blessing of the Covenant which was big enough, generous enough, and loving enough to be offered, through them (in Jesus), to all people. The example of Abraham and Isaac already shows us that the key to God's Covenant plan of blessing is not material wealth, but spiritual qualities such as faith (15:6 etc.) and obedience (26:5 etc.)

When Isaac accumulated wealth, it brought him trouble! And we can learn from how Isaac dealt with that trouble. When local people became envious of Isaac's wealth, they made life difficult for him by blocking the wells used by Isaac's flocks, herds and household. This was a serious matter at a time of drought. Isaac responded not with aggression, but with the same respect they had shown him previously (26:11), and by moving away. This was not easy, but in the process Isaac found a number of springs of 'living water' (literally, in 26:19), eventually finding peace and 'open space' (26:22) within which he could be 'fruitful in the land' (26:22).

By acting in a peaceful, accommodating way, and in the face of trouble and drought, Isaac found spiritual wealth! His story therefore has a great deal to teach us. Springs of 'living water' give a picture of God's generosity used by the prophets (Jer 2:13; 17:13) and Jesus (John 4:10f.; 7:38). The word for 'open space', 'rehaboth' is linked in Hebrew to the idea of salvation (logically, someone who is restricted is liberated into an open space). Lastly, this is the first time the Lord's people are described as 'fruitful' in the stories of Abraham (from Genesis 12), in fulfilment of God's command (1:28) and in anticipation of the Gospel (Matt 7:17f.; 13:23 etc.) and the 'fruit' of the Spirit (Gal 5:22). These are rich grounds for spiritual truths!

Going Deeper

The more you look, the more you find! This passage observes the links between envy, violence and wealth; it speaks of re-establishing truth in the face of injustice, and of a path of humility which is salvation and peace. The story may be easy to read, but we can skip over it too easily!

Going over old ground

We will start by looking at the incidents of dispute between Isaac and the Philistine citizens of Gerar (26:15-18). Abraham had come to an agreement with Abimelech, the king of Gerar, some time previously about the rights of his family to live there (21:22f.). In that agreement, Abraham and Abimelech had formally promised to 'deal loyally' with each other and concluded their deal with a Covenant which included the exchange of gifts and the settlement of water rights at a well which they named Beersheba ('well of the oath', or 'well of seven'). It appears that within a generation, this agreement was abandoned, as the Philistines blocked up this and other wells (26:15). It may be that they felt deceived by Isaac after the incident with his wife (26:10), but the facts are not that clear in the text. What we do know is that Isaac and his whole household were at risk because of the blocking up of these wells at a time of drought. It was both an attack on Isaac due to envy at his wealth (26:14) and also a spiritual attack on his heritage, for the blocking of his father's wells was an insult to him and his heritage.

At the time of the conflict and the attack on the wells, Isaac was challenged to 'move away' by King Abimelech, which Isaac promptly did; however, this was not an ignominious retreat, but more of a tactical withdrawal (26:17). Isaac moved to a nearby valley (the 'Valley of Gerar')

before deciding what to do next. He had sufficient men and servants at his disposal who were capable of fighting on his behalf (his father already had an army of men, many years previously; 14:1-16); so having tactically withdrawn, Isaac then gave his men the difficult and dangerous task of digging out the wells 'of his father Abraham' (26:18). These wells were like large deep pits in the open ground (many have been found or are still used in the region today), and the task would have required good operational planning at a time of strife, for the workers would have had to be well defended. Isaac saw to it that the wells had the same names as those given by his father, reminding everyone of their true ownership.

Some might read this story and see in it a man who was weak because he did not stand his ground. This would not be a fair reflection of Isaac or of what happened. Isaac managed, with careful planning, to avoid a fight with those who were aggressive towards him and his household. He did what was necessary for the long term survival of his family, by giving them safety, and most importantly, re-establishing the family heritage.

And yet, moving on!

Despite this success, Isaac still moved on. We should remember that Isaac was still a nomad at heart, and the Lord had commanded him to live in the land as a temporary 'visitor' (26:3) or 'guest' in the Promised Land, and because he was therefore able to see the whole land as his, it was not a problem for him to 'move on'. Indeed, it may have been necessary for at a time of drought, new water had to be found as old wells were used up or ran dry.

We are told that Isaac and his servants then dug three more wells in search of the necessary water. It is remarkable that water was found at each location. This was indeed a blessing, for many people have dug wells in dry areas only to be disappointed that none was forthcoming. The excitement and joy at discovering new sources of water is found in the text which talks literally of 'living water', meaning that the water was indeed a source of new life for those who were ravaged by drought. It is difficult to put this in the translation because without explanation, it does not easily make sense, and the expression can also refer to water that is 'newly found'; that is, fresh. This is how it is therefore translated. Nevertheless, the physical salvation of Isaac at a time of drought is thereby used by Scriptures to point forward to a spiritual salvation; the living waters of God's salvation. This is the theme taken up by Jeremiah (2:13) and as we find in the teaching of Jesus, who is the 'living water' in whom salvation is found (John 7:38).

Again, it is fascinating that Isaac had to dig three wells before he found that he could live in peace. The first well was disputed with the people from Gerar, who believed the water was theirs. It was fresh and living water, but Isaac was prepared to move on. The second well also caused hostility with the local people, though on this occasion, no reason for the hostility is given. Isaac's father, Abraham, had complained about the filling in of wells and managed to regain a well from Abimelech and the citizens of Gerar (21:25f.), but this time, Isaac knew that the antipathy towards him would make any negotiation impossible. He dug for the third time, and was successful again, a remarkable achievement in itself! The fruitfulness of the Promised Land was a gift from the Lord which was available for those who would do the work and dig the wells! Isaac named the well 'Rehaboth', meaning 'open space', a further indication of the salvation of God; for he had now managed to find sufficient distance between himself and Gerar to be able to live in peace and freedom from strife.

True wealth

There is a connection between the first verse and the last verse of this passage. The first verse talks of Isaac planting a crop and obtaining a yield of a 'hundredfold'; a magnificent yield, whatever the crop used (which we do not know), and this was a key part of the escalation of Isaac's personal wealth. This, however, was gained at a time of drought, so the yield should properly be regarded as something of a miracle, and therefore an obvious blessing from the Lord and not just the product of good labour. Incidentally, it is possible that Jesus made reference to this miracle when he told the parable of the sower, in which the unbelievable maximum yield quoted was a 'hundredfold'. Certainly if Jesus had this passage of scripture in mind, Jesus was indicting that the fruit of the Kingdom was a miracle of God's grace, rather than a natural product of the world in which we live!

The last verse contains the fascinating reference to being 'fruitful in the land' (26:22 – see above). Just like the 'hundredfold' yield earlier, this fruitfulness is not simply the product of the