

though it was clearly intended to be a blessing that was handed on through Isaac to all God's people. As history unfolded, this designation became something of a title, given to the great men of faith who guided Israel path through history; Moses (Deut 34:5) Joshua (Josh 24:29), Caleb (Num 14:24), David (1 Sam 7:8). Eventually, Isaiah prophesied that God would work through a Suffering Servant (Isa 42:1; 49:3; 50:10; 52:13) who would sum up in His own life and work the mission of Israel and the prophets. He would be the light to the nations and the one means of God's blessing to the whole world; the Messiah, who we know to be Jesus Christ.

Application

Genesis 26 is almost at an end, and the last two verses sit more naturally with the story to come in Genesis 27 about the passing on of the blessings of God to Jacob. It is easily read over as if it is like a repeat of stories of Abraham, but the details show that it focuses upon the growth of faith in Isaac. The growth of faith amongst God's people is an important thing. If we do not know how to hand the faith on to future generations then the Gospel has to 'start from scratch' in each generation, and cannot benefit from the natural processes by which God would build the faith from father to son; mother to daughter, and from one church member to another. I am aware that there is great heartache amongst Christian people today as they see young people abandon the church for the world so easily in their teenage years. I firmly believe that if we teach and learn the importance of God's purposes for Christian families, then the world will have less of a draw upon our young people, and they will learn faith in its natural context, the family. This is where Isaac learned from Abraham; and it is one reason why this website promotes Bible Studies equally from both the Old and the New Testaments, for this teaching is there for us if we are prepared to embrace all God's Word, and not just part of it.

Tucked away in this passage of scripture is one other quite important reference, and it is to worship. When Isaac built an altar to worship the Lord as his father Abraham had done so often, it was no casual matter. An altar could take some time to build and the worship offered would have been accompanied by formal meals and rejoicing lasting many days, if not weeks. The example of the ancients often reminds us that our 'one hour on Sundays' is but a pale reflection of what worship should be. Neither did Isaac and his extended family have to hire a musician or anyone else before they could worship. They used what they had within the family, and were content with this. There is a lesson for us here.

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

What can you do to pass on the faith that you have received? It may be the special calling of a few people to be missionaries or pastors or prophets, but the greatest of all callings is that which all Christians share, which is to be followers of Jesus and workers in the Lord's vineyard. Everything we do with our lives will therefore have a bearing on our eternal destiny, for we face the challenge to make this a reality.

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ Saviour of the World; we thank You and praise You for the heritage in which you have placed us. May we always be conscious of our responsibilities to those who come after us and seek to pass the Gospel on through all we do and say. We ask this in Your name, Jesus Christ, AMEN

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Are there any special occasions when you have become aware of the special blessings of God. Do they have anything in common with the story we have read?
2. Is it possible to cross cultural boundaries in today's divided world so that the message of God's Love can be proclaimed? Do you know of examples?
3. If water was essential to life in the desert, what is essential to life for us now? How are these essentials protected, and can we trust this protection?

Prayer

Lord Jesus; walk the streets with me, sit at work with me, have a meal with me, share a conversation with me, and hold me close to my nearest and dearest on this earth. May Your presence be ever real to me, in these and many other ways. Thank You, O Lord; AMEN

Further Suggestions for Prayer

Weekly Theme: the Church's task of Mission

Pray for all who travel away from their homes or their own countries, to follow the call of God to preach the Gospel in another land. Pray for them and their families.

Pray that God's people will be as much ready to support the missionary work of the Church, as to receive the missionary help of those from other countries who are called to work amongst us.

Meditation

Please help us get the balance right, Lord Jesus,
Between our personal faith, and what we do for others.

When it is Your will, and it is right,
Direct our thoughts towards ourselves;
So that we may give attention to our spiritual life
And all the responsibilities of living as Your people in the world.

When it is Your will, and it is right,
Direct our thoughts towards other people;
So that we may put the faith You have given us into action,
And seek to preach the Gospel, heal the sick and cast out demons.

Please help us get the balance right between these two,
For the sake of our own spiritual health
And that of the whole church;
And the whole world.

Bible Study - Genesis 26:23-35

²³ Isaac went up from there to Beer-sheba. ²⁴ That very night the LORD appeared to him and said, 'I am the God of your father Abraham; do not be afraid, for I am with you. I will bless you and make your descendants numerous for the sake of my servant Abraham sake.' ²⁵ So he built an altar there and called on the LORD by name. He pitched his tent there, and then his servants dug a well.

²⁶ Meanwhile, Abimelech came up to him from Gerar, with Ahuzzath his adviser and Phicol the commander of his army. ²⁷ Isaac asked them, 'Why have you come to me, since you hate me and have thrown me out of your land?' ²⁸ They said, 'It is now clear to us that the LORD was with you; so we propose that there be a formal covenant agreement between us; let us make a covenant with you, between the two of us' ²⁹ so that you will do us no harm, just as we have not touched you and have done good to you, not evil, and sent you away in peace. The blessing of the LORD is on you now!' ³⁰ Isaac then made a feast for them, and they ate and drank. ³¹ Early next morning they swore their agreement; and Isaac sent them on their way, and they left him in peace.

³² That same day Isaac's servants came with news about the well they had dug, and told him, 'We have found water!' ³³ He called it Shibah; so the name of the city is Beer-sheba to this day.

Review

From the very beginning of the Covenant, God was able to do His will through His people despite the failings and frailties they showed. We saw how this was true of the life of Abraham, a man who had to grow in faith before he could be trusted with the son who would fulfil both his dreams and God's prophetic blessings. In New Testament times, after the victory of Christ on

the Cross, Paul found the same to be true for Christians living in the midst of a sinful world. He spoke poetically of 'treasure in clay pots' (2 Cor 4:7) when describing the wonderful blessings of God which we possess by faith, and the faulty vessels in which it was contained. The main difference between Christians now and the forefathers Abraham and Isaac, is our assurance in Christ that our faith is a guarantee of our eternal salvation. This is a benefit the forefathers did not have, and it is therefore all the more amazing that they demonstrated such faith.

As we reach the end of Genesis 26, we can make an assessment of the life of Isaac which this chapter was surely designed to give. All the stories of Genesis 26 are very similar to stories about Abraham; the problem of famine and Egypt (26:1-5 – see 12:1-9), misunderstandings about his wife (26:6-11 – see 12:10-20, 20:1-18), the digging of wells (26:12f. – see 21:30), appearances of the Lord (26:2f.; 24f. – see 12:2,3 etc), and in today's passage, the making of peace with the people of Gerar and the founding of Beersheba (26:26-33 – see 20:11-18). However, any careful look at Genesis 26 will show that apart from these themes, the path of Isaac's life was totally different from his father's. He did the Lord's will in almost every situation (which his father had not) except for the lack of trust he showed in the Lord when not being truthful to the people of Gerar about his wife, because of fear (26:7,8). He appears to have learned many lessons about faith from his father, but was not yet perfect! His real problem was that although the Lord made him even wealthier than his father, this was not recognised by the people he lived with. The people of Gerar and their King, Abimelech, had always honoured Abraham (20:18f.) but they initially refused to give the same credit to his son, Isaac. It is certainly true of life in general that people rarely honour a successor or a son as much as the great man who preceded him!

This is exactly what happens in our passage of scripture today. Having been chased away from Gerar by its Philistine citizens because of their fear of him, Isaac's earlier plan of dignified retreat (26:17-22) was now vindicated. Seeing the success of Isaac in surviving in the land at a time of drought, the Philistines came to the conclusion themselves that that Isaac was a worthy man; as Abimelech said to Isaac, 'the Lord was with you' (26:28). It was a confession which relieved the tensions of the situation and enabled an agreement of peace to be signed, associated with Beersheba (26:32:33), as was Isaac's father's agreement with the Philistines (21:31). Isaac was a man of faith, maybe even more so than his father, but it was still hard for him to put this faith into practice in the real world.

Going Deeper

Looking more closely at the text, there is a significant addition to God's Covenant blessing. The presence of the Lord with Isaac was clearly seen by the Philistines, who wanted to be associated with this by an earthly agreement! Much of this text reads straightforwardly, but its value lies in foreshadowing what was to come in the life of God's people.

The blessings of God upon Isaac

It is easy to forget that God had unconditionally agreed to bless Abraham's descendants. From a Christian point of view, this equates to Gods' promise that He will now bless those who have faith as Abraham had faith, and bless all who show faith like Abraham are his descendants. It is easy to make this jump given what is said by Paul in Romans 4 and the teaching of Jesus about the heart of our relationship with God which goes deeper than the Laws of Moses (Matt 5:17f.). However, we cannot just skip everything in between Abraham and Jesus! The stories of Isaac show that God builds upon faith from one generation to another, and as He does so, more of His blessings are revealed.

The passing of blessing from one generation to another is emphasised by the additional words in the blessing (26:24). The Lord gave this blessing to Isaac as he roamed through the desert seeking water to survive in the midst of the famine (26:1) and as he came to Beersheba in the far south of Canaan where his father had taken ownership of the well. Earlier, God had made Isaac's blessing conditional upon his obedience in not going down to Egypt (26:2f.), but since Isaac had been obedient (26:5), unlike his father, the Lord now confirmed his blessing. However, the blessing began in a new way. When speaking to Abraham, he had previously said 'I am the Lord ...' (15:7; 17:1 etc), but now He began 'I am the God of your father Abraham ...'; and this was the first time the Lord used this formula of words to speak to His people. It is one that we find is used elsewhere in the Old Testament, and after the death of Isaac and his

son Jacob, becomes 'I am the Lord, the God of your fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob ...' (Ex 3:6,16; 6:3 etc.) God did not say this in order to be eloquent. He wanted us to know that the blessings we receive are handed on to us and are not simply plucked out of the air. For example, when someone speaks a word of prophecy in a church, that prophecy, according to scripture (1 John 4:1), should not be accepted until it has been tested; but the means by which we can test what is 'of the Lord' are surely those of scripture and the heritage of faith in which the Church stands. God is still the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob!

Once Isaac had received the same blessings as that of his father, he 'built an altar' (26:25). Through trials of faith he had come out from behind the shadows of his father and now did openly what his father had done before him by worshipping the Lord (12:7; 13:4,17; 22:9) in the land of Canaan. It was a significant moment of his life and he celebrated it formally.

The blessing of God shared with others?

This fulfilment of the Lord's blessing was something that the Philistine citizens of Gerar noticed. Their King, Abimelech together with a more powerful complement of advisors (26:26) than had made the earlier agreement with Abraham at Beersheba (21:25f.) immediately came to Isaac and sought to put behind them the previous altercations about wells that had seen Isaac thrown out of the region of Gerar. Isaac was naturally suspicious (26:27), but after the reassurance of their accepting that the Lord's blessing (26:28) was now upon him as it had previously been on his father (26:29), he was prepared to sit down and eat with his guests and make an agreement with them by oath (26:31). The Philistines were seeking some benefit from being associated with the blessings of God, and that in itself was a fulfilment of God's Covenant Promise 'through you all the nations of the earth will be blessed' (12:3, 26:3).

Incidentally, the Covenant of the Lord with Abraham and Isaac was based upon God's Covenant faithfulness and love (in Hebrew, 'cheseth'), but the covenant agreements offered to Isaac by Abimelech were based on oaths and curses. Legal agreements between tribes of those days called down curses upon the heads of those who broke the agreements! There was a long way to go before all the Gentiles could truly benefit from the revelation of the love of God through Christ Jesus!

Looking ahead

In all of this, we see how the God's blessing was something which was intended to be shared with the nations of the earth (represented by the Philistines) but this was something that would take many years and the death of Jesus Christ to bring into effect. Tensions between the people of Israel and the other people who lived on the borders of the land and within Israel itself remained for centuries, and do so to this day. The extraordinary animosities that exist in Israel amongst some of those involved in the terrible situation there in our own day are surely far from the will of God, who has provided through Jesus Christ the true 'light for the nations' which can shine peace into the land of the Old Testament 'people of God'; Israel.

There is a great deal in Genesis 26 which points forward to later experiences of the people of Israel in the Old Testament. Animosities between the Philistines continued through the time of Samson (Judges 14f.) and then in the time of Samuel, Saul and David (e.g. 1 Sam 4:1; 1 Sam 13:2; 1 Chron 18:1). At this point in the Old Testament the Philistines represent the Gentile, uncircumcised, world with which God's people interacted with great caution. The general picture of Genesis 26 is that of Isaac moving around the southern wildernesses of Canaan (later, Judah) at a time of drought, and having to depend upon the mercies of God to survive and find water, in the face of opposition.

This was to be the experience of the people of Israel centuries later when they came out of Egypt under the leadership of Moses. If those who cried out to the Lord for help in Egypt had properly remembered the stories of their forefathers, which they apparently had not, (Ex2:23, 5:1f., 15:22f.) they would have been more prepared for the rigours of the nomadic desert experience of the 40 years they endured before entering the Promised Land. Isaac's spirit of faithfulness was also a pointer to the work of prophets such as Jeremiah who had to try and persuade God's people to remain faithful to Him despite the spiritual famine of the days in which he lived and the terrors of the Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem (Jer 33:23f.).

Finally, within the blessing of God pronounced on Isaac in verse 24, Abraham is described as 'my servant'. This is the first occasion in scripture when an individual receives this blessing,