

The story of Isaac and Rebekah's family life comes to an end in Scripture with the attempt by Esau to gain favour from his father again, but what he did was totally inappropriate. His father was not going to appreciate a family connection with the man who had but briefly tried to usurp his birthright from Abraham (17:18; 21:10) and who was married to a woman from Egypt (21:21)! This passage of Scripture identifies plainly the source of the difference between Esau and Jacob; Jacob was obedient to his father and mother (28:7) but Esau attempted to be obedient by doing what he thought was right but without checking it with his parents! Here, if we are prepared to see it, is another cautionary tale. Despite the problems, Jacob followed instructions, and Esau sought to get things done in his own way. Jacob's manner was something God could build on, but Esau's was not.

Application

I fear that in the church today, all too often we try to manage the people of God, the Church, according to what appears right for cultural or historic reasons, and our ability to engage with the Lord over serious matters of discipline, organisation, mission and other matters, is limited. I have been present at too many church meetings where God has been addressed in prayer at the beginning, and then beyond that, it is assumed that He is present in the roughly democratic processes of the meetings which follow, managed well or badly. I have rarely been present when the Lord has been prayerfully consulted about serious issues to be decided; everyone usually agonises over a matter and then when a consensus is reached, it is presumed to be God's will! I have even been taken to task for raising the objection that a decision so taken might not be the Word of God! We will see in coming studies how Jacob had to learn to take God more seriously than that in order to find peace with God.

The other main point we can take from this text is also from what happened to Jacob. He was a man who had the opportunity to receive the blessings of God directly from his father, and this included wealth and the stability of living in the Promised Land. Yet because of the man he was, he had to leave the Land of blessing and find his calling for himself before he could enjoy the Lord's blessings in their fullness. We cannot make hard and fast rules about the path that any of us will take in discovering our faith or meeting our Lord, but the story of Jacob tells us that some have to 'leave' for a while before they can return. If that is us, then we should bear in mind that the Lord is always calling us to learn our lessons and come back. If that is not us, then we should always support those who have to travel this path.

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

Have you experienced times when you feel you are a long way from the Lord? If so, then try to understand why the Lord may have allowed this to be so. If not, think of those you know who have left the church, for example, and then come back, years later. Spend time reflecting on what this means for the life of faith, and remember Paul's words which emphasise God's faithfulness: 'if we are faithless, He remains faithful; for He cannot deny Himself' (2 Tim 2:13)

Final Prayer

Heavenly Father, when all has finished at the end of this day, give me peace. When I reach a place of rest, remind me of Your care for me. When I close my eyes to sleep, take care of my soul, my body and my spirit; and refresh them for the challenges of the coming day. AMEN

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. In your opinion, was Rebekah manipulating Isaac?
2. Do you feel there is much unity between Isaac and Rebekah in Genesis 27 and 28?
3. What do you make of the character of Isaac, after reading Genesis 27 and this part of 28? What kind of character does he come across to you?

Prayer

Give us the courage to trust You in everything, Lord God, and accept the authority of Your Holy Spirit in our lives. We offer our words, our actions and our thoughts and feelings, and accept the risks and adventures of faith into which the Spirit leads us. Thank You, Lord God, for Your Holy Spirit, without whom no discipleship of Christ is possible. Thanks be to God AMEN

Further Suggestions for Prayer

Weekly Theme: the Church's task of Mission

Pray for all God's people to catch a vision of their own place in God's great task of restoring the world to Himself. Pray that all might be enabled to use their gifts in this great call.

As you do this, ask the Holy Spirit to lead to you stand against that which prevents some from fulfilling their roles; domination or manipulation, fear or ignorance, lack of love, and sin.

Meditation

The Cross of Christ stands above the world.

It stands above the wars and strife of nations

And says 'stop': your murders are an insult.

It stands above the governments of this world

And says 'pay attention': your authority comes from God.

It stands above vested interests and institutions

And says 'there is another way': consult the Lord Your Maker.

It stands above our divided, quarrelling churches

And says 'look at Jesus': there is no other way.

It stands above every preacher in the pulpit

And says 'this is your authority': listen to the Lord.

It stands above your family, your home and your work

And says 'this is reality': for it is no sign or symbol:

It is the place where Jesus died and rose again.

And nothing you or the world can ever do

Will change that glorious fact of history.

Bible Study - Genesis 27:46-28:9

⁴⁶ Then Rebekah said to Isaac, 'I am sick to death of these Hittite women. If Jacob marries one of these Hittite women, native to the land, my life will mean nothing!' ^{28:1} So Isaac summoned Jacob and blessed him, and directed him, 'You will not take a Canaanite wife. ² Go straight away to Paddan-aram to Bethuel's house, the father of your mother; and take a wife from one the daughters of Laban, your mother's brother.

³ May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and numerous, so that your descendants become a group of tribes. ⁴ May He give to you and your descendants the blessing of Abraham, so that you may take possession of the land where you now live as visitors; the land that God gave to Abraham.'

⁵ Isaac then sent Jacob on his way, and he went to Paddan-aram, to Laban son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, the mother of Jacob and Esau.

⁶ Esau then discovered that Isaac had blessed Jacob and sent him away to Paddan-aram to find a wife, and that when he blessed Jacob he told him not to marry any of the Canaanite women, ⁷ and that Jacob had also obeyed his father and mother and gone to Paddan-aram. ⁸ Esau then realised how much his father Isaac disapproved of the Canaanite women, ⁹ so he went to Ishmael and took Mahalath as his wife to add to his other wives. She was the daughter of Abraham's son Ishmael, and sister of Nebaioth.

Review

It is quite extraordinary that at the end of the heartbreak within Isaac's family over blessings and birthright in Genesis 27, Isaac freely offered the honoured Covenant blessing of God to Jacob whilst sending him away to Mesopotamia to find a wife (28:3,4). Isaac certainly knew full well what the difference was between this Covenant blessing of God and the paternal blessing of his favoured son that Esau had sought and which Jacob had taken (27:27-29); and the signs were that Isaac was deeply hurt by everything that had happened. He had been trapped by the deceptions of his wife and his son Jacob, but as a man of honour and perception, he attempted to do the right thing both for his family and the Covenant blessing for which he was responsible.

Many commentaries on this passage of scripture will tell you that Isaac was weak-willed and even incompetent in the whole story of Genesis 27 and 28, because he was gullibly deceived (27:1f.), unwilling to properly bless Jacob or Esau (27:27-29; 39-40) and unable or unwilling to handle the murderous intent of Esau (27:41f.). However, I suggest that he was a man of integrity, and it was the same Isaac who previously handled the conflict with the Philistines very well (26:17f.) who now dealt well with the fallout of the family dispute over birthright, paternal blessing, and God's Covenant blessing. He knew what he was doing in refusing to let God's Covenant blessing be handed on in the midst of a family dispute, and even here as he dismissed Jacob, he spoke of a future in which these blessings 'may' possibly and hopefully be fulfilled in Jacob (28:3,4). He did not see in either of his sons a worthy successor for the Covenant; either the deceiving Jacob or the plotting Esau (who wanted to kill Jacob as soon as his father died – 27:41) and by sending Jacob away he knew he was following Rebekah's wishes (27:43-45) to avoid strife in their home.

Isaac was also setting Jacob on a path that would make him grow up, for he had never spent significant time away from his mother's tents before (25:27,28). Isaac knew very well that his own father's servant had gone to Laban to obtain Rebekah for him as a wife (ch.24), and the servant had used tact, diplomacy and considerable social skills to outwit Laban in the negotiations for Rebekah. Jacob would have to learn the same if he was to be able to extract a wife from the same Laban! Yet this was something Isaac considered essential for the passing on of God's Covenant blessings (28:5).

Our passage today ends with the sad story of Esau's sudden realisation that he had not done what would have endeared him to his father and mother. His taking Canaanite women in marriage had been contrary to their wishes (26:34,35; 28:6), so he did what he could to marry into the family line of Abraham (28:9), in a vain attempt to gain approval; not realising that it was also an offence to his father to marry into the family of his brother Ishmael, the man who was rejected by God for the birthright of Abraham and the Covenant of God! Emotions were settling down however, and the whole of our text today concludes the story of Isaac and Rebekah and their household. From now on, Scripture turns its attention to the adventures of Jacob!

Going Deeper

So what really was going on between Isaac and Rebekah, and also Jacob and his father Isaac? And why does Scripture bother to tell us about Esau's marriage? As we look at these issues, some surprising and interesting things emerge from this passage which tells us some interesting things about the life of faith and also the future of God's people, Israel.

Rebekah and Isaac

Despite all that had happened, Rebekah and Isaac were still on talking terms! In 27:46 to 28:2, the two of them apparently discussed the situation and agreed that Jacob should go to Bethuel at Paddan-aram in Mesopotamia, in order to deal with the rift that had occurred in the family. It is also obvious that the two of them knew the full implications of sending Jacob there. Rebekah knew that her brother Laban was a devious man and it would be a hard task for Jacob to obtain a wife from him. This, however, was the impossible and miraculous route God had used to bring Isaac and Rebekah together, and it was to be the route God would use to bring Jacob to maturity and mould him into the man of God that he needed to be for the sake of the Covenant.

It is amazing that most of the commentaries I have read in preparing this Bible study insist that Isaac was a weak man, and the Rebekah was twisting him around her little finger to get him to do what she wanted. Rebekah, they say, had already decided that Jacob should go (27:43)

and merely had to persuade the old man to agree. This is mere presumption, and it adds sentiments to the story that are not there. Isaac and Rebekah both agreed that they disliked Esau's Hittite wives (see 26:34,35), and after the disruption of the disputes in chapter 27, sending Jacob to look for a wife was a good idea. Isaac agreed (28:2) and commanded Jacob to go to Paddan-aram and do just this, copying both his wife's wishes (27:43) and the words his father spoke to the servant who travelled to the same place to find Rebekah (24:4). He realised the significance of the event, and the importance to the people of God of a single and united family line. It was part of the wider picture of what had been handed on to him by his father.

The one big difference between the servant's earlier quest for Rebekah, and what Isaac was now doing with Jacob was this. Isaac had not travelled to Mesopotamia, but Jacob was himself to go outside the Promised Land and then return to it. After the recent trouble and discord, and after his part in deception, Jacob had to leave the place of God's blessing and then return to it. This theme should make our ears prick up! We have already noticed previously in parts of the story of Isaac that what happened to him was a foreshadow of what would happen to God's people in later years (e.g. the contention with the Philistines – 26:17f.). Now the 'exile' of Jacob to Paddan-aram in Mesopotamia foreshadowed the terrible experience of the Exile of God's people in Babylon, when God forced the people of Israel to leave Jerusalem (in around 587BC, see Jeremiah 27) as a punishment for their sins after the breakdown of the monarchy in Judah and Jerusalem. After many years (between 40 and 70 years), the people of Israel returned, much the wiser and therefore able to withstand the onslaught of Greek and Roman civilisation in the coming years (400-100BC) until the time of Jesus.

Jacob left the Promised Land, and it would be 20 years later, after many hard lessons, that he returned, much the wiser, and as one who 'wrestled with God' (32:22) to receive the Lord's blessing. This was the fulfilment of the blessing of the Covenant that was his by means of the birthright and blessing he took from Esau, but it was a blessing his father could only prophecy (28:3,4).

Isaac and Jacob

When Isaac spoke the words of Covenant blessing to Jacob (28:3,4), the Hebrew makes it clear that what Isaac did was to prophecy that Jacob would bear the Covenant one day, but he did not bestow it in these words. In previous instances of the Covenant being bestowed on Abraham, or offered to Isaac, for example, the words were 'I will give you ... I will make you' (e.g. 22:17 etc.). In our passage, the words are 'May he bless ... May he give ...', therefore Isaac was speaking of a time when God would do this, but it was in the future. Jacob was given a promise, but not the fulfilment of it because he was not yet worthy of God's Covenant presence in its fullness. It was as if the Covenant was 'on hold' for a time until the Lord saw fit to reveal Himself in a new way to Jacob, when he had learned some lessons of faith and experienced more of how to trust in the Lord (see Genesis 32 f.)

This too, is also typical of the experience of God's people over the years. Before the people of Israel called out to Moses in Egypt, they had forgotten God (Ex 2:23f.), and Moses had to remind them of their heritage and the Covenant blessings (Ex 3:13f.), and also of God's name! Also, at the time of the Judges, God's people cycled between calling on the Lord and falling away into sin, only for a Judge to be raised up who would call the Lord's people together again as a Covenant people (for a summary of this, see Judges 2:11f.).

Here is a pattern of the life of faith which many experience. After sin and trouble, the Lord is unable to work in His people as he would want, and they experience being at a distance from Him, perhaps feeling 'banished' from his presence. Then at a later time when the lessons of life are learned, or disaster strikes, then the Lord visits his people again and then moves them on to a deeper experience of both Himself and faith. This was certainly true of Jacob, and his story was used as a moral tale to explain the truths of faith to Israelite children.

Esau and his parents

Jacob had to leave the family home and the Promised Land and search for a bride as well as the Covenant blessings that had been prophesied for him. Esau, however, remained at home with Isaac and Rebekah. One wonders what they thought of this! Certainly they did not appreciate Esau's wives (26:34,35)! The rupture in the family life must have broken Isaac and Rebekah's hearts, for they both come across in scripture as strongly emotional people.