

His Presence 8-19-07

Genesis 26

Hey, wait a minute. Didn't we already read this chapter? No, but we read one very similar, Genesis 20. In the previous story the key character was Isaac's father, Abraham. The woman at risk was Isaac's mother, Sarah. In fact, if that story was in chronological order, Sarah would have been pregnant with Isaac at the time. Detractors would say this is just a retelling of the same story with the characters changed. If that is the case, someone had a lot of vellum (sheep hide) to waste. The very fact that it is included in spite of the repetitious factors adds to the authenticity of the story. I'm not going to tell you a story one Sunday and repeat it a few Sunday's later with a different character hoping you won't notice. But I may do that intentionally to make a point. Surely there were plenty of other things to say about the life of Isaac and Rebekah without the need to rewrite a story.

You can be sure God has a lesson for us when He had this similar story included in the accounts of the Patriarchs. (2Timothy 3:16) So what is the point that the Spirit of God is driving home by including it in the Torah? Surely there a number of things, but the two that stand out to me are the influence of our spiritual heritage for good or evil (Deuteronomy 6:7) and the power of recognizing God is with us. (Matthew 28:20) Those are the two points I hope you will take home from the message today.

Famine was a very real problem for the people of Palestine. Their stock market depended on it. (Pun intended) One dry season and you might lose 3/4ths of your wealth. The Nile Delta, on the other hand, was always watered by the Nile and would be unaffected by the draught. (Genesis 13:10) But God challenged Isaac to do something that would take a great deal of faith. ² *The LORD appeared to Isaac and said, "Do not go down to Egypt; live in the land where I tell you to live. In a theophany (manifest appearance of God), God told him to stay in the area of Gerar and not go to Egypt. Most nomadic people would not risk their herds in an attempt to stay. We have seen before the symbolism of Egypt representing the world. This is similar to God's call on His father. (Genesis 12:1) God was sending him to a specific place and saying He would tell him. It was a step of faith like the one his father took. Our father's faith can influence us, but we must have our own. God will challenge each generation to take their own step of faith.*

Then God renewed the promises that had been given to Abraham with Isaac. ³ *Stay in this land for a while, and I will be with you and will bless you. For to you and your descendants I will give all these lands and will confirm the oath I swore to your father Abraham. ⁴ I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and will give them all these lands, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed...* The unique addition is the phrase, "I will be with you."

What does it mean when the transcendent God says He will be with us. He is with everyone for He fills all things and the universe cannot contain Him. (1Kings 8:27) "I will be with you", is a future tense expression. God is asking Isaac to step out in faith and believe that God will be very real to him as he obeys.

Commented [notes1]: 16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,

Commented [notes2]: 7 Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

Commented [notes3]: 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Commented [notes4]: 10 Lot looked up and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan was well watered, like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt, toward Zoar. (This was before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.)

Commented [notes5]: 1 The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.

Commented [notes6]: 27 "But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!

Isaac did obey. He resisted the temptation to go to Egypt and stayed put in the place that God showed him. Gerar was no doubt caught up in the same famine. We don't know how much time passed while Isaac obeyed in faith. Apparently the flocks and herds he inherited from his father diminished. He probably did his best to preserve his assets by selling his stock for food before they starved, but scrawny stock doesn't bring much, especially when everyone else is selling theirs. I wonder about the struggle in his heart to obey this command. It's pretty hard to ignore a theophany, but it is also hard to watch your assets diminish. In this faithful act of obedience, he was very much like his father, Abraham. (Genesis 22:18) What an affect our father's faith can have on our life! If we see his good example and the blessing of God because of it (as God had just reminded Isaac), we are much more likely to follow in his footsteps.

Commented [notes7]: 18 and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."

Then there is the negative side of a father's influence. ⁷ *When the men of that place asked him about his wife, he said, "She is my sister," because he was afraid to say, "She is my wife." He thought, "The men of this place might kill me on account of Rebekah, because she is beautiful."* He had heard of his father's old trick. If the same Abimelech is king (it may have been a dynasty name), he would be quite old. This is more likely his heir. These women from the family of Terah must have been gorgeous. The Philistines may have had a reputation for killing someone for their wife. It was certainly common in war, and Isaac was a foreigner to these people.

By resorting to a lie, he was expressing his lack of confidence in what God had promised him. *Stay in this land for a while, and I will be with you and will bless you.* If he truly believed that, there was no need to lie. There was no need to plot and scheme to protect himself. How could he trust God for his location during the famine but not for His presence to protect him? I think we do the same thing on a regular basis. (Psalm 62:8) We trust God with our finances, but then scheme to get a better job without waiting for God's direction. We can trust God for our health, and then refuse to trust him to heal a relationship in our church or home.

Commented [notes8]: 8 Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge. Selah

Sometimes we appear to have more faith than we really do because of the way we reason things out in our own mind. I.e.: "I can do what God asked because I'm really good at this or that." (Proverbs 3:5) We rely on our own strength, but we also fear the areas where we are weak. This is the lesson of faith. It doesn't matter what your abilities or inabilities are, faith is believing God.

Commented [notes9]: 5 Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding;

Abimelech just happened to be looking down from his window, and saw Isaac "laughing" with his wife. It was a word play on his name. We are spared the details, but it must have had an appearance of intimacy. Immediately, Abimelech knew Isaac had lied. He called Isaac up and rebuked him. ⁹ *So Abimelech summoned Isaac and said, "She is really your wife! Why did you say, 'She is my sister'?" Isaac answered him, "Because I thought I might lose my life on account of her."* Isaac gave his pathetic excuse, which, like his father before him, only showed how self-centered and fearful he really was. We must remember the Scripture that says our sins will find us out. (Numbers 32:23) Isaac followed his father in faith, but also in the lack of it.

Commented [notes10]: 23 "But if you fail to do this, you will be sinning against the LORD; and you may be sure that your sin will find you out.

¹⁰ Then Abimelech said, "What is this you have done to us? One of the men might well have slept with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us."

At least the king had the conviction that God judges adulterers. It is really a sad commentary on our spiritual life when the world must rebuke us for our lack of faith. What does that convey to people about the God we profess? That is the real detriment of a poor testimony. It gives the world an excuse to ignore the true message. You can just hear the well-worn expression, "I'll never go to that church because it's full of hypocrites." Then they go on to tell you about the so-called Christian businessman that took them to the cleaners, or the pastor that were immoral, or the way they were treated or whatever. There are plenty of good illustrations to go around. Let's not give them anymore! Amen?

We are all a work in progress, and we are likely to commit the sins of our fathers. That should be a warning to us to stay on guard in those areas of our spiritual life. If you know your family had a problem with something, be extra cautious when you are tempted in the same areas. (1Corinthians 10:12)

¹² Isaac planted crops in that land and the same year reaped a hundredfold, because the LORD blessed him. Apparently, Isaac was humbled and repentant. God continued to bless him just as He had promised. While the rest of the people had very little, he produced 100 times what he had sown. That is an exceptional harvest and maybe even supernatural in time of drought. The value would be many times the non-drought price. With abundance like that in time of need, he quickly grew very rich. This is our clue that the famine had decimated his flocks. By obeying God, he may have seen losses, but he also saw a great restoration. The ancient world saw the blessing of God as the increase of material goods. (Job 1:21)

This is the fulfillment of the promise in verse 3 that God would bless him. Even after his lack of faith and risk of his wife's purity, God was faithful to keep His word. Being caught in his deceit was a blessing too.

¹³ The man became rich, and his wealth continued to grow until he became very wealthy. ¹⁴ He had so many flocks and herds and servants that the Philistines envied him. This conjures flashbacks of Lot separating from Abraham. (Genesis 13:6) Wealth is often envied and that envy results in some strange actions. The Philistines stopped up the wells that Isaac had inherited from Abraham. That makes me think this is a different Abimelech, a generation or two later, not the one Abraham met and who accepted seven ewes to confirm the ownership. (Genesis 21:29,30) This Abimelech, like the one before him, recognized the Hebrew camp was too large and therefore a threat if joined with an enemy, so he asked him to move away. This caused some bitterness in Isaac, as we read later in the text.

He reopened the wells of his father and restored their names, which was a way for him to prove ownership, but immediately found the shepherds of Gerar contending for them. They dug a new well and found a spring, a real treasure in that region. The Philistines claimed it as theirs so he named it *Esek*, meaning "dispute". They

Commented [notes11]: 12 So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!

Commented [notes12]: 21 and said: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised."

Commented [notes13]: 6 But the land could not support them while they stayed together, for their possessions were so great that they were not able to stay together.

Commented [notes14]: 29 and Abimelech asked Abraham, "What is the meaning of these seven ewe lambs you have set apart by yourselves?" 30 He replied, "Accept these seven lambs from my hand as a witness that I dug this well."

dug another and they claimed it too, so he named it *Sitnah*, "opposition". He moved on and dug another, *Rehoboth*, meaning "room". Finally he had his own space.

From there he returned to Abraham's old home of Beersheba where he experienced another Theophany. ²⁴ *That 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 will increase the number of your descendants for the sake of my servant Abraham."* Again, the addition of God's immanent presence with him was added to the promise. It was the reason given for not having fear. It is the same reason we need not fear. Last week we talked about our incredible birthright as children of God. God has promised to bless us as well for we are the seed of Abraham if we belong to Christ. (Galatians 3:29) There is no need for us to fear because we have God's presence and blessing like Isaac did. (2Chronicles 20:17) Do you live in the light of that? I think Isaac was beginning to.

Commented [notes15]: 29 If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Commented [notes16]: 17 You will not have to fight this battle. Take up your positions; stand firm and see the deliverance the LORD will give you, O Judah and Jerusalem. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Go out to face them tomorrow, and the LORD will be with you."

When he first went to Gerar, he knew it in his head, but not in his heart. After the preservation of God, the multiplication of his wealth, the gift of well after well, and now this second theophany, it must be sinking into his heart. Is the fact of His presence with you in your head or in your heart? We grow with our experiences, and as we grow in Christ the reality of His presence and blessing displaces the fear in our hearts. (1John 4:18) Like the patriarchs, we need to hear the promises again and again. We face famines too. We are challenged to walk in faith as they were. We face the injustices they faced.

Commented [notes17]: 18 There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

Did you notice how Isaac has just kept persevering? (Hebrews 10:36) I think at about the third well, I'd have been ready to rally the troops and take a stand. It seems that he had learned to trust the blessing of God that was with him. He knew God would continue to provide even in the face of difficulties and that He would bless them with everything they needed. Do you know that to be true in your life?

Commented [notes18]: 36 You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.

I want to close with story of this last week. Preachers often look in books for illustrations but I find the best ones are the ones the Lord provides at the very moment I'm preparing the sermon. Our text for today is about the presence and blessing of God in the midst of difficulty. A week before I began preparing this sermon, my son-in-law went to Indiana where his father lived to take a class on operating some software for their business. He missed a chance to attend in nearby Phoenix and Los Angeles too, so he heard of one in his hometown. It was also a chance for him to spend some time with his ailing father.

They had a great week of sharing memories and heart to heart talks. They had several really good days together. At one meal, Andrew felt he needed to tell his father that when it got too tough, he had permission to let go. The last night Andrew was there he stayed up with his father through the night because he kept waking, anxious about his difficulty breathing, but in no real pain. The next day, on the way to the airport, they got a call to have his father readmitted to the hospital. Andrew had to catch his plane back to the Verde Valley.

That night that Andrew returned to Sedona his father was admitted to the hospital and sedated so he could rest. He slipped off peacefully into the arms of Jesus, a peaceful and painless graduation from this life into His presence.

As we talked the next morning, Andrew just shared about how God had been so good to orchestrate that last week. If it hadn't been for that seminar being there, who knows if he would have gone, but God knew and orchestrated each day. God was with him and blessed him in the time of drought.

I looked back even further. His father, Al, had his first heart attack almost 10 years earlier before Andrew had made a commitment to Jesus. What if he had gone then? But he miraculously survived to see his son commit his life to Christ, his marriage, his grandson born, and his other son's marriage. Was God with him? (John 14:18) Did He bless him? (John 1:16) After the funeral, the small group Al attended dedicated their meeting that week to sharing about the blessing Al's life was to all of them.

You see, we Christians face the same things everyone else faces. We face those famines, rejection, injustice, and death, but we have something the world does not have. We have the presence of the Lord with us, blessing us. We know He is orchestrating our days. (Psalm 139:16) And even when we give in to fear, we know He will not leave or forsake us, but will see us through whatever mess we've walked into. (Isaiah 41:10) We know all things work together for good, even the famines, rejection, and injustice in our life. (Romans 8:28) If God is for us, who can be against us? (Romans 8:31) There is one reason not to fear today, tomorrow or anything to come. God is with us.

Near the close of the chapter, Abimelech and his men came to make a treaty with Isaac because they saw that "the LORD had been with him." The LORD promised to be with him, was with him, and had been with him. His walk with the Lord overcame his poor testimony in Gerar. The presence of the LORD in your life is your testimony to the world that there is a reason to be a Christian. (1Peter 3:15) Your faith and the absence of fear makes you stand out like a lighthouse. When you walk in the light of this truth, it will also be said of you, "The LORD is with him." (Philippians 2:14-16)

If you don't know the presence of the LORD with you, you can begin knowing Him today. That is why Jesus came, to make a way for you to become a friend of God. If you will accept the gift of salvation He offers you, understanding that He took the punishment you deserve, you will become a son of Abraham. Abraham is the father of the people of faith. (Romans 4:16) We become the people of faith by accepting Jesus. Then the blessing and presence that was with Isaac can be yours to see you through the famines, rejections, and injustices of this life. (Hebrews 6:12)

Commented [notes19]: 18 I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.

Commented [notes20]: 16 From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another.

Commented [notes21]: 16 your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

Commented [notes22]: 10 So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

Commented [notes23]: 28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Commented [notes24]: 31 What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us?

Commented [notes25]: 15 But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect,

Commented [notes26]: 14 Do everything without complaining or arguing, 15 so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe 16 as you hold out the word of life--in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor for nothing.

Commented [notes27]: 16 Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring--not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.

Commented [notes28]: 12 We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.