

“Abraham and Isaac – God Repeats His Promise”

Genesis 23:1–26:35

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Last week our lesson reached the peak of Abraham’s walk with God. Isaac, the promised heir, was to be offered as a sacrifice to God. Abraham answered God’s command with complete obedience and unequivocal faith and God spared Isaac’s life. Then again God confirmed His covenant with Abraham and Isaac. Today’s lesson shifts the spotlight of God’s grace in Abraham’s life to that of his son Isaac. Our outline is as follows:

Mourning for his mother - Chapter 23.

Mission to find a wife - Chapter 24.

Mourning for his father - Chapter 25.

Master of his household – Chapter 26.

Genesis 22:19 stated that Abraham stayed in Beersheba, but Sarah was in Hebron. Although both were getting older, Abraham continued to wander and oversee his flocks. Sarah remained in Hebron, not up to the nomadic life, but content to live in this cooler mountainous area year-round. Isaac helped his father and was working in Beer Lahai Roi with another part of Abraham’s vast herds.

Genesis 23:1 recounts that when Sarah was 127 years old, she died. Abraham came to Hebron and mourned her death. “She died at Keriath Arba (that is Hebron) in the land of Canaan and Abraham went to mourn for Sarah and to weep over her.” [Genesis 23:2]

Isaac was not mentioned in this account; however, no doubt the same servants who informed Abraham of Sarah’s death also traveled to find Isaac and let him know. Isaac was about 37 years old when his mother died. The death of a loved one is always a difficult time of grief and sorrow. But decisions still have to be made.

As Abraham considered where to bury Sarah, he had a major issue to address. Abraham approached the elders of the Hittites and said, “I am a foreigner and stranger among you. Sell me some property for a burial site here so I can bury my dead.” [Genesis 23:4]

In Genesis 15 God confirmed the scope of the land Abraham’s family would one day possess. “On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, ‘To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates – the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites.’” [Genesis 15:18-20] One day his descendants would own all this land.

Abraham’s faith was not without cost. Hebrews 11 states, “By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.” [Hebrews 11:9] Now, in the middle of his grief, he needed to buy property.

Abraham approached the dominate tribe in that area, the Hittites, to make his request. The Hittites showed Abraham honor for his status as owner of many herds and servants. They replied, “Sir, listen to us. You are a mighty prince among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our tombs. None of us will refuse you his tomb for burying your dead.” [Genesis 23:6] This was part of such a negotiation in the ancient culture of Canaan. Flattery and insincere generosity open the bargaining process.

But Abraham wouldn’t be swayed by their flattery. He answered in humility. “Then Abraham rose and bowed down before the people of the land, the Hittites. He said to them, ‘If you are willing to let me bury my dead, then listen to me and intercede with Ephron son of Zohar on my behalf so he will sell me the cave of Machpelah, which belongs to him and is at the end of his field. Ask him to sell it to me for the full price as a burial site among you.’” [Genesis 23:7-9]

Abraham didn't want to be indebted to Ephron, the owner of the piece of land. So when Ephron offered the land for free, he knew there would surely be some strings attached. He made a counter-offer by suggesting he pay the full, fair market value of the property. Ephron finally quoted 400 shekels of silver as its value.

Abraham had only asked to buy the cave, but Ephron included the field with the cave. Commentators state that this was quite an exorbitant price for one field with a cave. But in his grief, Abraham refused to bargain him down for a fairer price. He paid the price of 400 shekels of silver, which was weighed out, not counted in any coins in that day, and received the deed to that field including the cave at Machpelah near Mamre. It would now belong exclusively to him. And there he buried Sarah.

As Abraham's grief continued, he realized he was well advanced in years and it was time to arrange a marriage for his son, Isaac. He called on his senior servant for this special mission, perhaps this was Eliezer, mentioned by Abram as his supposed heir until Isaac was born. (Gen. 15:2) This faithful servant was trusted to see this quest for a good wife to completion.

But the parameters for an acceptable bride were pretty specific. Abraham did not want Isaac to marry a woman from among the Canaanites, (24:3); she must be from Abraham's relatives (24:4). Even if no young virgin would return with the servant, he was to make sure Isaac did not go to Haran himself, (24:6,8) because Isaac was to be the heir of this land of promise.

The servant left with these words ringing in his ear: "The Lord, the God of heaven, who brought me out of my father's household and my native land and who spoke to me and promised me on oath, saying, 'To your offspring I will give this land' – he will send his angel before you so that you can get a wife for my son from there." [Genesis 24:7] So the servant swore an oath to accomplish his master's wishes.

Preparing for this journey of six to seven hundred miles, the servant gathered ten camels, travel supplies, gifts for the bride and family from Abraham, and a few other men for security. (Gen.24:10, 59) When he arrived in the area of Aram Naharaim (which meant Aram of the two rivers), he went on to the town of Abraham's brother, and stopped by the well.

It was the custom for a stranger entering a town in that era to stop by the well and inquire about lodging from the women who came to get water. As he rested and watched the people walking by, the servant sent up a prayer of his own to Abraham's God.

"Then he prayed, 'Lord God of my master Abraham, make me successful today, and show kindness to my master Abraham... May it be that when I say to a young woman, 'Please let down your jar that I may have a drink,' and she says, 'Drink, and I'll water your camels too' – let her be the one you have chosen for your servant Isaac. By this I will know that you have shown kindness to my master.'" [Gen. 24:12,14]

In direct answer to his prayers, the young girl who approached the well, while he still was praying, was Rebekah, the granddaughter of Nahor, Abraham's brother. She fulfilled every part of the servant's prayer, plus she was a virgin and beautiful!

Rebekah willingly gave the servant a drink and continued on to water all of his camels too. When she finished, the servant paid her for her work with gold bracelets and a gold nose ring and then asked for the final piece of his request, confirming that she was a near-relation to Abraham.

She explained that she was the daughter of Bethuel who was the son of Milkah and Nahor. That made her the grandniece of Abraham! Then she added that there was room for the servant, his men and his camels at her family's home, to shelter them for the night.

Overcome by how perfectly the Lord God of Abraham had answered this servant's requests, "Then the man bowed down and worshiped the Lord, saying, 'Praise be to the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has not abandoned his kindness and faithfulness to my master. As for me, the Lord has led me on the journey to the house of my master's relatives.'" [Genesis 24:26,27]

Up until this point, Eliezer had traveled with Abraham, worked with him daily, helped supervise the household and watched Abraham grow in his firm belief that the Lord God, Jehovah had a plan for him.

But this was Eliezer's moment of personal faith. Because so much responsibility rested on him, he had to turn to "Abraham's God" for help. And he had just experienced for himself that Abraham's God would actually listen to this servant's cry for help. Abraham's God could be his God too!

Each person throughout history has to come to this same point of decision. The faith of our parents or grandparents isn't enough to establish our eternal inheritance. However, through a step of faith, we also can find out that the God of Abraham can be our God too.

And like this faithful servant we can fall down in worship of the Lord God Almighty – because He hears our prayers and is faithful to show His kindness to us in each step of our journey.

When the servant was led by Rebekah's brother, Laban, back to their home, he refused to eat until he was sure he had reached his journey's end. He must have assurance that Rebekah would come back with him to be Isaac's bride, or else he must continue to search for another young relative who would.

By now, the rest of the family had gathered for dinner, and were hearing the servant recount his story of how God had led him to their home. He explained the details of his quest. But before he would relax and eat with them, he asked, "Now if you will show kindness and faithfulness to my master, tell me; and if not, tell me, so I may know which way to turn." [Genesis 24:49]

At that, both Rebekah's brother and father considered his request and answered, "This is from the Lord; we can say nothing to you one way or the other. Here is Rebekah; take her and go, and let her become the wife of your master's son, as the Lord has directed." [Genesis 24:50,51] Immediately, the servant again bowed down and worshiped the Lord because this was God's answer to his prayers.

As believers we learn, like this servant did, that we can take anything that burdens us to the Lord in prayer. But how often do we share the answers to our prayers with others in a moment of public praise? The Lord God deserves to have our praises given before others – to lift up His reputation before the congregation.

Having completed his mission, the servant was eager to head back with the bride. He gave gifts to Rebekah and to her family. They enjoyed a meal, slept the night and started to leave in the morning. But Rebekah's mother and brother tried to persuade him to delay so that the family could celebrate this betrothal a little more. To settle the timing, they asked the bride, Rebekah herself, what she wanted to do, which seemed like an after-thought!

Her answer was simple. In verse 57 she answered, "I will go." So, they packed up her belongings and brought her nurse and blessed her on her journey to be Isaac's bride.

Verse 67 explained the simple "wedding" – "Isaac brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he married Rebekah. So she became his wife, and he loved her; and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death." [Genesis 24:67] The fact that Isaac prepared his mother's tent and for his bride, showed his faith that God would indeed provide a wife for him.

Although Abraham later married again, it was Isaac who stepped into the leadership of the family by his marriage, presuming his position as Abraham's only heir. Verse 5 explained, "Abraham left everything he owned to Isaac. But while he was still living, he gave gifts to the sons of his concubines and sent them away from his son Isaac to the land of the east." [Genesis 25:5,6] Scripture clearly declares that Isaac was the heir of the promises, not the other sons of Abraham.

When Abraham died at the age of 175 years of age, Isaac informed his half-brother, Ishmael, so that they could mourn their father together and have him buried in the same cave as his wife Sarah.

Just as God had kept his promise to Isaac, God kept his promise to Ishmael, making his sons to be "twelve tribal rulers." (25:16) Ishmael lived to be 137 years old as his family established themselves in the East, near the border of Egypt.

These accounts in Scripture, of Ishmael and Abraham's deaths, were not exactly in chronological order. Verse 20 of chapter 25 explained that Isaac was 40 years old when he married Rebekah. Verse 26 states that Isaac was 60 when his sons were born. Therefore, Abraham was still alive when Isaac's twin sons were born. He actually lived to see them enter their teenage years. Isaac's heirs would be about 15 when grandfather Abraham died.

Now let's examine the example of Isaac's faith as the Master of his household. First, he prayed for his wife who seemed to be childless, and she became pregnant with twins. [Genesis 25:21]

This part of Isaac's story touches my heart. When I was married, it was challenging for me to conceive. But God blessed us with a daughter. Then, when we tried to have a second child, we couldn't. I was very upset. I was studying this section of Genesis at the time and was struck by the fact that Isaac had to pray for Rebekah, before she conceived. The Lord took my anxiousness away by impressing on me that when my husband, Steve, asked on my behalf, we would have a son.

Our daughter often asked us, and prayed to God for a baby sister or brother. She even asked for twins at one point! But when she would ask, I would say, "God will choose when we have another baby. But until then, He has given you to us to raise for Him." But my husband commented that I was too stressed as we raised Deb and he didn't think we were ready for another child.

Finally, one day after church, our daughter asked the same question on the way home, "I wish we could have a baby." And before I could say so, Steve answered her, "When God wants us to have a baby, we will. But meanwhile, we have you and we are taking care of you." I was surprised to hear my exact words coming from his mouth!

A month later, I realized that I was pregnant. God kept His promise to me. Our son, James, was born ten and a half years after our daughter. Rebekah had to wait about twenty years before she saw God's answer to her request.

We read the story of her eventful birth. The first-born boy was named Esau, which means hairy, because he was born covered in a fine red hair. But her second born son was holding onto the ankle or heel of Esau when he was born, so he was named Jacob which means grasping!

The Lord had told Rebekah, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger." [Genesis 25:23]

When my son was born, the Lord impressed upon me that he would not be like his sister in temperament. Esau and Jacob were also very different from each other. Esau loved the outdoors and learned to be a skillful hunter. He seemed to be a passionate man and rather impatient.

Jacob, on the other hand, was more sedate and content to stay around home, even learning to cook. But these differences were amplified because Isaac and Rebekah each chose favorites! Verse 28 explained, "Isaac, who had a taste

for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob.” [Genesis 25:28] Perhaps knowing the future foretold for her younger child played a part in Rebekah’s attitude toward her children.

The differences between the twins showed up in their faith as well. When Esau came home from a particularly long day of hunting and smelled a pot of stew Jacob was cooking, he became very hungry! His impatience showed in how he asked Jacob for a serving. “He said to Jacob, ‘Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I’m famished!’ (That is why he was also called Edom.)” [Genesis 25:30]

Jacob must have been contemplating his position in the family, and the promises that his father and grandfather had told him about as he cooked the stew. He took the opportunity of his brother’s impatience by making a bargain with him.

“Jacob replied, ‘First sell me your birthright.’” And Esau replied, “Look, I am about to die, ... What good is the birthright?” But Jacob said, ‘Swear to me first.’ So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob.” [Genesis 25:31-33] Esau had sold his birthright for a serving of stew.

We will learn more about this rivalry between the two boys in next week’s lesson. But Esau also revealed his lack of appreciation for his birthright and for God’s promises by marrying women from their Hittite neighbors. (26:34,35) He didn’t value the traditions their family had of careful consideration of marriage partners and thereby brought grief to Isaac and Rebekah.

Not much is said about Isaac’s faith to this point. He too was a quiet man, content to be home. He didn’t stand out among the people around him, except for being prosperous. But the instance of the famine recorded in chapter 26 revealed both the bad characteristic of fear in his life and the positive characteristic of listening to God.

When a terrible famine hit the land where Isaac was, “The Lord appeared to Isaac and said, ‘Do not go down to Egypt; live in the land where I tell you to live. 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. 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, because Abraham obeyed me and did everything I required of him, keeping my commands, my decrees and my instructions.’ So Isaac stayed in Gerar.” [Genesis 26:2-6]

This is the first instance recorded in Scripture where God spoke directly to Isaac. God encouraged Isaac as the Master of his household by reiterating the promise of his inheritance. And Isaac in turn obeyed God.

His stay in Gerar was not without difficulties. Like his father Abraham, Isaac also lied to his generation’s Abimelech, saying that his wife was his sister because of fear. God protected both he and Rebekah, but his duplicity evoked distrust with Abimelech and the fellow herdsmen of Gerar.

Isaac never fought back, even though his household repeatedly had to move because of disputes about the water rights during the famine. But God blessed Isaac and his herds and flocks were multiplied. His family came to rest in Beersheba. Here he finally found peace.

And here he received a visit from Abimelech. The pagan king noticed that Isaac prospered although he endured nothing but persecution. So he decided that it would be better to have a treaty between them than bad blood and distrust.

Abimelech explained, “We saw clearly that the Lord was with you, so we said, ‘There ought to be a sworn agreement between us...you will do us no harm, just as we did not harm you but always treated you well and sent you away peacefully. And now you are blessed by the Lord.’” [Genesis 26:28,29]

Isaac had achieved the same status among the people of the land that the Hittites acknowledged to Abraham. So, he made the treaty of non-aggression with Abimelech. And his servants found a second well to provide for his flocks.

The lesson we can find in the life of Isaac is that God's presence in a life will shine out through good experiences and bad ones. The final result must be praise to the Lord God.

We see that Abraham and Isaac were not perfect. We know we are not perfect either. Although Isaac was passive, fearful, and showed favoritism, God used him in the genealogy of Christ. God still uses imperfect people to accomplish His purposes so that even unbelievers can't help but give praise to the Lord. Only God can accomplish His will using obviously flawed servants like us as we choose to obey Him.

Let's pray and then please stand to sing the Doxology.