

Covenant Blessings, Twists and Turns – *Genesis 26:1-33*

Introduction – Between the story of Esau selling his birthright and Jacob deceiving his father to receive the promised blessing, we have a story about Isaac and the twists and turns that come with covenant blessings and faithfulness.

First Pass Through – Consider the text and the covenant blessing to Isaac:

Covenant Blessing in a Famine – There was another famine in the land of promise (v1), so severe that Isaac knew he must depart. On his way to Egypt, Isaac goes to Gerar where the LORD tells him to remain (v2). This is reminiscent of God's call to Abraham (12:1) and to the famine Abraham endured (12:10). And God restates the covenant to Isaac (vv3-4), nearly quoting His words to Abraham (22:17-18). Isaac was the seed that was promised, and to Isaac's "seed" (note the singular) the promise is given that all the nations of the earth will be blessed (v4), because of Abraham's faithfulness to the covenant (v5).

The Philistines were a cruel, degenerate people, and so Isaac did what Abraham had done as well to protect himself and his wife. He deceived the Philistines, calling Rebekah his sister (vv6-7). This continued for "a long time" until one day when Abimelech saw Isaac "isaacing" Rebekah and accused Isaac of lying (vv8-9). But in his satanic accusing of Isaac, the king confirms Isaac's assessment of the wicked immorality of the Philistines (v10). Abimelech (maybe he remembered what happened with the other Abimelech) then declares protection of Isaac and Rebekah (v11).

Covenant Blessing Amidst Envy – There is a speedy fulfillment of the divine blessing. In a time of famine, Isaac tills the soil and is blessed with overwhelming prosperity (vv12-14). This resulted not only in covetousness, but in envy (imagine a city hating its prosperous millionaires and billionaires). The Philistines tried to stop this prosperity, filling the wells and making it unreasonable for Isaac to stay (imagine unenforced shoplifting, vandalism, and millionaire-taxes). Abimelech tells him to go (imagine, "bye"). Isaac left and pitched his tent in the "wadi" or river valley of Gerar (v17). He dug new wells, got in more trouble with the herdsmen of Gerar, and eventually moved from there to a place he named "Rehoboth" where they no longer quarreled over the land and wells (vv17-22).

Covenant Blessing and Dominion – Then Isaac went up to Beersheba, where there had been an oath of friendship before with Abraham and Abimelech (Gen 21:32). That night the LORD appeared to Isaac again with more covenant blessings (vv23-24). Isaac imitated Abraham and established a place of worship and declaration of the LORD ("called on the name of the LORD"). And another well was dug (v26). Abimelech showed up with his dignitaries and agreed that the LORD was with Isaac (vv27-28) and because they saw this blessing, they wanted to establish a covenant with Isaac (v29 - they probably feared Isaac's retribution). "You are now the blessed of the LORD" (v29) is almost conversion language. Isaac set up a feast to celebrate the oath-giving and sent them away (vv30-31) and that same day his servants came and told him about the well they had dug (vv32-33).

The Twists and Turns – There is much more going on here in the story. First, notice that it is chronologically out of order. The twins (born in chapter 25) are not yet born in this chapter, or else it would have been obvious that Isaac was married. This story is placed instead alongside the next story (chapter 27). Isaac lies to a tyrant to protect his covenant blessing (his wife and the seed that will come). Jacob will lie to Isaac who ends up acting like a tyrant stealing Jacob's promised blessing (chapter 27). Isaac is wronged and must flee his land and Jacob will be wronged and, fearing for his life, will also have to flee. Isaac and Jacob are both the second-born and so Isaac should have had much more compassion for Jacob's position. Isaac's sin is not in protecting his bride; it will be in refusing to obey God's choice and instead be swayed by his appetites.

Patterns (thanks to James Jordan for this) – There is also a pattern in this story that is a repetition throughout the stories of the patriarchs that informs the whole Gospel story. The pattern is (1) covenant, (2) prosperity, (3) envy, (4) persecution, (5) exodus, (6) dominion and greater blessing. This first happened in the Garden. We can follow it in the story of Noah, of Abraham, of Jacob's dealings with Laban, of Joseph with his brothers, of Moses and the Exodus from Egypt, and on and on. This pattern continues with Jesus and then with the church in history.

Covenant Transfer – This is the first explicit transfer of covenant inheritance in the history of salvation and so fundamental principles of covenant blessings are here disclosed that will be true forever. We see this transfer both through family lines - "I will be God to you and to your children" - and also through worldwide evangelism to all the nations (Isaiah 2:2-5). Covenant transfer is not one or the other. It's not a family line only in the Old Testament and evangelism of the nations only in the New. It is both in both (Acts 2:39).

Covenant Courage – As God renews covenant with Isaac, Isaac is strengthened with courage to live in the land of the Philistines and prosper there. We live in a land ruled by compromised backsliders and outright pagans. But what has God promised us? He will be our God and our children's God. We can therefore live in a land of spiritual famine and prosper - and as we do, we will be noticed.

Threats from Tyrants - We should expect that we will be a threat when we grow in any kind of prominence among the broader culture. And often, even though we are the minority, we will have more impact than our numbers justify, just as Isaac's family and servants became the envy of the Philistines. Isaac is attacked for his blessings but moves on in confidence when necessary to find other water and more blessings. He doesn't return evil for evil, and his witness eventually brings them into his public worship of God.

Covenant Blessings, Twists, and Turns - If you are baptized, you are in this covenant, and it is attended with blessings and curses. You are to live out this covenant life by faith and not by sight. That faith will be revealed in your obedience and loyalty to your Savior. It will require humility and courage, but you are granted both. Humility, for it is all of grace that you know the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, just as it was all of grace for them. Courage, for you know that if God is for you, who can be against you? There will be many blessings, but they will come with many unexpected (and unwelcomed, at least at first) twists and turns.

We could say that today, in our land, the church is in a time of odd twists and turns. And so, all the more, we are called to be a people of loyal faithfulness to the God of our Covenant, a God Who is gracious, Who surprises us in those twists and turns with abundant blessing, and Who promises to be our God, to be with us to the end of the age.

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