

Title: Blessings and Challenges for Isaac and Rebekah

Introduction: Maps – Greater Israel and southwestern Israel

- I'm a "maps" person. As a result of the way the Lord wired me, I like maps. Especially when I need to find out where someplace is located, and then figure out how to get to there. If I'm going to drive there, I can have an idea in my head about the steps, the process of getting where I want to go.
- That's why sometimes I don't get along too well with the Google maps lady – she and I don't always agree on the best way to get from point A to point B. Once in a while, her artificial intelligence can be like a hamburger patty made out of soybeans -- a little too artificial to satisfy.
- Now Genesis chapter 26 mentions different towns and areas in Israel, and I like to know where these places were that Isaac kept moving to. Let's start out with the bigger picture. **(MAP 1)**
- Here we are in current-day Israel. (Point out the familiar – Mediterranean Sea, Sea of Galilee, Dead Sea, Jerusalem. Then point out the places which are vaguely familiar, but only because their names show up in the news – Golan Heights (conflict with Syria), West Bank (the nation of Jordan claims ownership in spite of Jewish settlements), Gaza (controlled by Hamas).) But our geographic focus for today's lesson is not on current events, but on events that were occurring 4,000 years ago. Now let's zoom in. **(Go to MAP 2)**
- After Sodom was destroyed, Abraham moved south and settled in Hebron, shown here on the map. This area of southwestern Israel is where he and Isaac lived and traveled for the rest of their lives. From the edge of the Dead Sea to the Mediterranean is about 60 miles. About as far from here to Dallas. It's really a pretty small area, but remember that travel was mostly by done by walking. When Genesis 26 starts, Isaac is living in Beer-lahai-roi. (That's a cumbersome-sounding name for a place, but it's only one letter longer than Weatherford.) In our journey today we will also visit Gerar, Rehoboth, and Beersheba. Now for the details of life in the chapter 26.

Theme: God's blessings sustain His people through life's difficulties.

I. Isaac Leads in Strength and Weakness

A. The Land and the Promises of the Covenant (vv. 1-17)

1. Famine results in a move (vv. 1-2)

- **(Read verse 1)** So once again in this family's story, famine rears its ugly head. Famine forced Abraham to leave the Promised Land and move to Egypt back in chapter 12. Famine is a condition you and I are not familiar with, so we don't appreciate how brutal it can be. We know about the unfortunate results of tornados, or wildfires, or floods, or droughts. But we Americans have never experienced famine. Famine means there is no food available for a given group of people, and some of them are dying. There are only two solutions to this problem. 1) You travel

to somewhere else where there is food, like Abraham and Isaac did, or 2) food is brought to you, as Jacob's sons brought back grain from Egypt. If you can't do either of these two things, you will die. No exceptions. Now over the past 4,000 years there have been countless famines resulting in countless deaths. But over the past few hundred years, there have been massive improvements in the production, storage, and transportation of agricultural products. That helps reduce the occurrences of famine, but it still happens in under-developed countries and in parts of the world like arid north Africa. Bad government can also cause severe famine problems. In Communist China during the years 1958 to 1962, some very bad decisions and actions by the Chinese government officials resulted in an estimated 30 to 50 million people starving to death.

- **Implication:** Thank the Lord for providing for us so abundantly, and thank Him for those who work so hard to produce not only what we need, but even enough to overflow to other nations.
- But let's get back to verse 1. We're now in the town and area of Gerar. The last word in the verse indicates that the Philistines are there, but you shouldn't be thinking "David and Goliath" – these people with Isaac need some immigrants and another 1,000 years before they become a thorn in the side of Israel during the time of Saul and David. But there's another point of potential confusion. Abimelech, the king of the Philistines is the name of the man Abraham dealt with in Gerar back in chapter 20. (By the way, a "king" in that time could, like Pharaoh, be over a large group of people in a country like Egypt. But most "kings" in that time were more like warlords in the world today – in Somalia, for example. They ruled over a limited number of people in a fairly small geographic area.) But Abraham's encounter with Abimelech back in chapter 20 was 80 to 100 years before this meeting. How could this king possibly be the same man? John MacArthur and Charles Ryrie both commented that the word "abimelech" as used in the Philistine culture of that time was a title – not a name. Think about the word "pharaoh" as it was used in Egypt. A pharaoh would have a name like "Raamses", but he is known to us through Scripture as simply "Pharaoh". The use of a single title also strengthened the presumption of an ongoing genetic dynasty for the people in those cultures.
- Let's go to verse 2. **(Read verse 2)** Here we have some guidance from the Lord to Isaac, and it's in the form of a command. Commentator Derek Kidner has noted that Gerar was in the same general area of the famine that Isaac was trying to get away from. But to Isaac's credit, he was, by faith, obedient to God's command to stay put. In fact, as a result of his obedience, he was the only one in the first four generations of patriarchs who lived his whole life in the Promised Land! Abraham went to Egypt and returned, Isaac didn't leave, Jacob went east to find a wife and returned, and Jacob's 12 sons all went to Egypt but didn't return.
- **Implication:** Has the Holy Spirit been reminding you to do something that seems too difficult? Follow Isaac's example -- trust the Lord and be obedient.

2. God's covenant with Abraham is affirmed (vv. 3-5)

- **(Read verses 3-5)** The Lord starts by making this promise to Isaac – as you dwell in this land, I will be with you and bless you. He then restates and affirms the specific points of His covenant with Abraham. 1. This land will belong to Isaac and his descendants. 2. His descendants will be as

numerous as the stars of heaven, and 3. Through his descendants all the nations of the earth will be blessed. This covenant restatement to Isaac was foreshadowed by a specific promise the Lord made to Abraham in Genesis 17:21. When He revealed the coming birth of Isaac, the Lord said, "My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this season next year."

- One more comment on these statements by the Lord. Some might think verse 5 reveals that the Abrahamic Covenant is conditional. **(Read verse 5 again)** But the covenant is not conditional. No performance requirements were placed on Abraham's descendants which, if not completed, would void the promises. God declared Abraham righteous because of his faith. Verse 5 shows the evidence of that faith, as he lived in trusting obedience to God. So then, specifically, who will be the recipients of these guaranteed covenant blessings? They will be certain Jewish descendants of Abraham and will also be certain Gentile descendants of Abraham. All these descendants will, like Abraham, choose to exercise the trusting faith that results in righteousness. And true, Abrahamic faith obeys God's words. Most of us in this room are not physical descendants of Abraham. So how can a non-Jewish Gentile become a descendant of Abraham? Let's go for a moment to Galatians chapter 3. I'm starting in verse 6. **(Read vs 6-9, then 26-29)** So – those who will by faith trust God at His word, Jew or Gentile, will be declared righteous in His sight, and will become true descendants of Abraham. He becomes their spiritual father. Some Jews and Gentiles in the past have chosen to trust God by faith, but many have not. As time continues on into the future, some will choose to trust God by faith, but many will not.
- **Implications:** If you are already a son or daughter of Abraham through your faith in Christ, then praise Him and thank Him for drawing you to Himself. But if you have never given your life to Jesus, then you are not a spiritual child of Abraham of God. You need to get right with God by placing your faith in what Jesus did for you on the cross. Though He never sinned, He was crucified like a common criminal. On that day, the wrath of God against the sins of all people (including yours and mine) was the punishment poured out on Him. Jesus died, but was resurrected on the third day to demonstrate His victory over sin and death. He lives in heaven now, offering eternal life to anyone who will believe Him and trust Him for the forgiveness of their sins. Will you trust Him?

3. Fear and protection (vv. 6-11)

- **(Read verses 6-7)** Here we go again. Like father, like son. Abraham tried this strategy in Egypt, risking the wrath of Pharaoh when the lie was uncovered. You know how certain family incidents are told and retold as time goes along. Frequently the stories are about funny things the kids did or said when they were little, or about some crazy, unexpected thing that happened on a family vacation. I don't know if the people of that culture told such family stories, but it would be kind of surprising to me if this story had been passed on to kids and grandkids. We don't know why, but this lie about Rebekah was what Isaac wanted the men of Gerar to believe. Why did he tell this lie? Verse 7 tells us. **(Wait)** He was afraid. What was he afraid of? **(Wait)** Verse 7 again. Getting killed by the men of Gerar. Look back at verse 3. What was the Lord's first promise to Isaac? "Sojourn (Live) in this land, and I will be with you and bless you." So Isaac lied to protect

himself. The question comes quickly. Why did he give in to his fear? Had he forgotten what God said to him? Hmmm. Maybe. Well, if Isaac did know his family history, you might suspect rationalization. "It worked out ok for dad and mom and they used it twice." Or, (and I think more likely), the flesh can be very convincing when stimulated by self-preservation. I think Isaac gave in to his fear because faith and fear are like oil and water. They will not blend and mix together in coexistence. Each of the two, faith and fear, has its own power to control. That is why, despite God's promise to be with him and bless him, Isaac told such a foolish, careless lie.

- **Implication:** Is there a fear troubling you right now? By "right now" I mean often, perhaps every day. Perhaps numerous times every day. Your flesh will urge you to do something about it. But the Holy Spirit within you has a different solution. Pastor Wes taught us about that solution a few weeks ago. Phil 4:6-7. "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."
- **(Read verses 8-11)** So here we see Isaac acting like a little kid. Let me explain. All kids lie, but the truth is frequently discovered, especially when parents or other adults are dealing with the problem. Kids have trouble getting all the evidence to line up with their story, especially as a little time goes by. Isaac's lie was exposed because he wasn't careful to always treat Rebekah as his sister. And the adult who discovered it wasn't just any adult, it was a person in authority – the king of Gerar. You can tell that the king is not happy about what Isaac did, but he's more concerned about the possible consequences of that lie. What seems a bit odd about this that the king seemed worried about the possibility of God (or a god) bringing down retribution for some man in Gerar being intimate with another man's wife. But why would a pagan king be so afraid of this? Adultery has been considered wrong in most cultures throughout history, with the punishment of the guilty usually being carried out under local authority, not by supernatural action. Yes, the king could have been worried about an unknown god of this stranger. What if Isaac's god was more powerful than his god or gods? But the severity of the warning issued by the king to all citizens of Gerar in verse 11 could have been prompted by knowledge of what happened to a previous king who had a dream about that stranger named Abraham. See Gen 20. But whatever the reason, the king was God's agent in providing the protection that Isaac was promised.

Implication: In both the Old and New Testaments, God's people are commanded to not be liars.

4. Wealth and more moves (vv. 12-23)

- **(Read verses 12-14)** These verses are a little surprising. If the food shortages in the region were caused by drought, perhaps rains have come. But with or without rain, God's' promise of blessing for Isaac was surely being fulfilled. Notice in verse 13 that the text describes him as very wealthy. The New American Standard translators got a little interpretive with the word "wealthy" there. This Hebrew word is defined as "great" or "prominent", or "important", and is not usually connected to quantity of assets in other verses where this Hebrew word is used. (Notice that the translator note does mention "great" as the literal meaning.) But he was prominent and wealthy,

so much so that the Philistines envied him, as shown in verse 14. Many people in human history have believed that becoming wealthy and/or socially prominent will solve all their problems and make them happier. Isaac's life demonstrates the fallacy in that thinking. Becoming wealthy may solve certain immediate problems, but it then creates new problems to deal with. **(Read verses 15-17)** Isaac was accumulating more money, more servants, more land, more crops, and more livestock. Perhaps even more than the king himself. Abimelech decided that it was time for this foreigner to move on, and Isaac didn't resist. He went to the valley of the Gerar River, which was probably at a distance from metro Gerar. The verses that follow, 18-21, describe his servants digging well after well, only to have the herdsmen of Gerar claim that the water was theirs. (As the American settlers going west discovered, water is a crucial asset, producing many conflicts over who had the right to use it.) So, we come to verse 22. **(Read 22)** Isaac had finally come to his own territory, and the Lord had given him a good well for his large flocks of livestock. ("Rehobeth" can be translated "plenty of room".) I like commentator David Guzik's observation on this moment: "Isaac saw this well as it rightly was: the blessing of God. He saw it more as God's gracious blessing than as the result of his own hard work."

- **Implication:** Remember that the world may force you out of your current situation, but the Lord will always make the move with you.

II. **More Affirmation and a New Covenant (vv. 23-33)**

A. **Another visit from the Lord (vv. 23-25)**

1. **Promises from on high (v. 24)**

- **(Read verses 23 and 24)** Isaac reaches his final destination in this chapter, Beersheba. In Hebrew, "beer" means "well" or "spring", and "sha ba" means oath. We'll learn why the well is called this in a minute. And it is there that the Lord appears to Isaac once again, and reaffirms several facts: Isaac is the covenant son of Abraham, not Ishmael, and, God will continue to be with him and bless him, and, Isaac does have a role in the covenant, and, God's promises to Abraham will be kept!

Implication: Believers have no need to be fearful in life. The Lord has promised to be with us always (Matt 28:20), and the Lord always keeps His promises to us (2 Cor 1:20).

2. **Isaac's response to God (v. 25)**

- **(Read verse 25)** Isaac emulated his father Abraham's example. When a significant blessing came, he built an altar for sacrifice, and worshiped there. (See Gen 12:7,8)

B. **Visit from Abimelech (vv. 26-33)**

1. **A new covenant is proposed (vv. 26-29)**

- **(Read verses 26-29)** Without invitation and without warning, Abimelech and his men suddenly showed up in Beersheba. Isaac was obviously concerned (“concerned” is a Christian euphemism for “fearful” or “worried”). ☺ Isaac seemed concerned as to the possible reason for this visit, because he immediately got historical by reminding Abimelech that he hated Isaac and made him leave Gerar. From our perspective as readers of the story, hatred was not mentioned as part of the situation. Actually, at this later date, the king might have been worried about the possibility of retribution from Isaac or his God. After all, the men who kept filling in Abraham’s wells (that should have belonged to Isaac) were from Gerar. He also acknowledged that the Lord was continuing to expand Isaac’s property and power. A peace treaty with a potentially strong enemy could seem like a good idea to the king.

2. Agreement and celebration (vv. 30-33)

- **(Read verses 30-33)** Isaac chooses to not allow the problems of the past to get in the way of Abimelech’s peaceful, neighborly intentions. This unexpected visit and its surprising purpose seems to have been pleasing to Isaac, because he hosted a traditional celebratory feast that evening. I’m sure a good time was had by all.

Early the next morning, the swearing of oaths took place. This was the covenant equivalent of both parties signing the contract, by which they swore to each other to do what they had agreed to. You may remember from our Equip session on Genesis 15 that the covenant procedure in those days involved the sacrifice of an animal or animals. They would be split in two and placed apart from each other, far enough so that the parties involved could walk through them. Their oath would then be, “May it be done to me as it was to these animals if I fail to fulfill what I have promised.” Serious business. After the oaths were sworn that morning, the visitors departed and headed home for Gerar.

Isaac’s servants were digging hard that day and brought in a gusher. Well, a pool of fresh water, anyway. Thus, a title was given by Isaac to the well which became the name of the town – Beersheba – the well of the oaths.

Speaking of wells – Well, that brings us to the end of Genesis, chapter 26. I know, I know, there are two more verses. The person who created the chapter and verse divisions in the Bible way back when was obviously not led by the Spirit. Verses 34 and 35 should have been verses 1 and 2 in chapter 27, but I’ll leave that for Jim to deal with next week. Thank you for your attention to the details of these matters in chapter 26. Let’s pray.