

Like Father...
Genesis 26

Can you finish this phrase, "Like father...?" Yes, we've all heard it before, "Like father, like son." Tonight, we might get a sense of déjà vu from the text that we are reading. We will be tempted to ask, "Haven't we already read this before?" That's because much of what we read in chapter 26 about the life of Isaac parallels the events of the life of Abraham, Isaac's father. To begin, the opening words of the chapter are identical to the opening words of Genesis 12:10.

Now there was a famine in the land, besides the former famine that was in the days of Abraham. And Isaac went to Gerar to Abimelech king of the Philistines. (Genesis 26:1)

Moses points out the fact that this is a different famine from the one we read about in chapter 12 because he wants us to be aware of the fact that this is a new situation, but one that is not unfamiliar.

Here's the first way Isaac was like his father: he experienced trials. Trials are inevitable in this world. Abraham experienced famine in his pursuit of God's promises, and so did his son, Isaac. Famine came to Abraham and Isaac as they were dwelling in the land of promise. Sometimes, life just doesn't go the way we want it to in this world, even when we are trusting the Lord. Why is this? Because the world is broken by sin. We live in a world where things go wrong. Things aren't the way they should be. As the first line of the song, Is He Worthy, asks us, "Do you feel the world is broken?" And we respond, "We do." We do feel it. Deep down we all know that things are not right. Something is deeply wrong with our world.

What we don't like to acknowledge is the cause of this world's problems. We don't want to hear God's diagnosis of the problem. Adam's sin broke this world. It is our father who brought this on the world. Famine, pestilence, thorns, thistles, weeds, all sorts of hardship and calamity happen in this world because the world is broken by sin. There is a natural tendency in all of us to want to suppress this truth of the cause of our ills. The enemy is working hard today to make this truth a laughingstock in our society. He has made it unscientific, but it is not. It is the truth. We all experience trials because our father sinned, and we are all like our father.

That's the bad news. The good news is that God has a plan to bring blessing out of the brokenness.

² And the Lord appeared to him and said, "Do not go down to Egypt; dwell in the land of which I shall tell you. ³ Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and will bless you, for to you and to your offspring I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father. ⁴ I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and will give to your offspring all these lands. And in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, ⁵ because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws." (Genesis 26:2-5)

The second way Isaac was like his father is that the Lord established the same covenant with him. Just like He did for his father, the Lord entered into Isaac's life when things seemed to be falling apart, when he didn't know what to do or where to turn. Just like He did for his father, the Lord spoke both a command and a promise to Isaac.

He gave him instructions not to go down to Egypt. Do you consider it a blessing when the Lord speaks a word of command to you? It is. His commandments are life to us. They direct us on the only course that leads toward Him. This particular command is not a universal command for all of us. God doesn't tell all of us not to go down to Egypt. It was, of course, specific to Isaac's situation, and by it God intended to bless Isaac by preventing him from making the same mistake his father had made. Remember, Abraham had gone down to Egypt when he experienced a famine in the land in Genesis 12. In Egypt, he got himself into a big mess by lying to Pharaoh about his wife. Hold on to that thought until we get to the next few verses.

Here, the Lord told Isaac to stay in the promised land and sojourn. That is an important word in the Scriptures, and it's a third way Isaac would be like his father. Isaac and his father were both sojourners. In the New Testament, Peter tells Christians that they are sojourners as well.

¹¹ Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. (1 Peter 2:11) A sojourner is someone who resides in a land that is not theirs. God was telling Isaac, just as he had told Abraham, that his life in the land of promise would be a pilgrimage. He lived in tents while everyone around him was seeking to build cities and kingdoms. He was not going to see the complete fulfillment of the promise until he was long gone. We are called to be like Abraham and Isaac in this respect. Our citizenship is in heaven. That means we are sojourners here. Here we have no lasting city. We reside here on earth, and we may have citizenship in an earthly country, but our true citizenship is in heaven, and that is what should define us. We are heaven-bound and are just passing through this world. Don't adopt the world's mindset and customs. Don't conform to the patterns of this world. Be a sojourner.

Being a sojourner requires faith. Obedience to this command was going to require a good deal of faith on Isaac's part. Knowing that Isaac would need faith to obey, the Lord gave Isaac the same promise of blessing that He had given to his father. Faith lives and feeds upon the promises of God. The fourth and perhaps one of the most important ways Isaac was like his father is that he listened to God. Both Abraham and Isaac had ears to hear, and they heard. Do you listen to God? Listening to God's voice is perhaps the most important activity we can perform under heaven.

Note here that God wants us to know His purposes for us. You might say, "God hasn't spoken to me like He did to Isaac and Abraham." Has he not? Rest assured, God has spoken to you, and you can listen to Him. He wants to be heard. He has given us all access to His promises. That's why we have this precious book. In every age, the Word of God has encountered relentless assaults from the enemy. He would love it if we just disregard the Bible as old, irrelevant, and unreliable.

But the Word of God has always withstood the attacks. It has weathered every storm, and remains as trustworthy today as it was yesterday. Just like our fathers, we hold this precious and sacred book in our hands. God's promises endure to every generation because He is sovereignly keeping it and preserving it for us all. Were it not for God's providential care for His Word, this book would have been lost to the ash heap of history many ages ago, as almost every book has been. But this divinely inspired book has also been divinely protected and preserved. Your access to the Word of God is a great gift. He wants you to know His commands and promises, just as He wanted Isaac to know them. He meets with us in just as real of a sense as He met with Isaac whenever we open His Word to seek Him. He speaks in every generation. His words have gone out into all the world. This leaves us without excuse. Are you listening to the Lord? Have you believed what you have heard?

Isaac did, just like his father. He proved his faith in God's promises by obeying God's command to stay in the land of famine. He stayed in a land as a sojourner where there were enemies all around. He trusted the Lord would fulfill His words to him. Notice in verse 3 that the Lord promised to be with Isaac as he sojourned. We'll see this as a theme of Isaac's life in this chapter. The promise of God's presence is the foundational promise upon which all the promises of God are built.

Many generations later, Moses understood this. I think he learned this from his fathers. After the people made the golden calf, God said he would not go up with them into the promised land because they were a stiff-necked people, and He would consume them along the way. Moses wouldn't have this. He pleaded with God to go with them.

¹⁵ And he said to him, "If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. ¹⁶ For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?" (Exodus 33:15-16)

God's personal presence, His going with us, is what makes us distinct. When He says, "I will be with you," He is speaking of His intimate, personal, relational, communicative presence with human beings made in His image. It is the presence of communion. This is what God designed us for. He designed us to hear Him and to enjoy His presence. Again, this promise—"I will be with you"—is the promise underneath every promise—the source and root of every other promise. It is one of the foundational promises of the gospel—so foundational that God determined it should be one of the names of Christ: Emmanuel, God with us.

This is the only thing Abraham could pass on to Isaac that would make any lasting difference in his life. The only thing a father has to pass on to his children that really matters is faith in God—faith in the one who promises His presence through a Messiah. Parents, we would be wise to consider what we are investing in our children. Only by faith can we ever hope to pass on the faith. We can only hope to instill our children with an impactful sense of the divine presence by giving them opportunities to see the impact of God's presence on our lives.

Isaac had seen the impact of God's presence on his father's life. I think that's why God mentioned the oath He made to Abraham. The mention of the oath would recall to Isaac's memory the faith and obedience of his father. When did God swear an oath to Abraham? Only one time. Not in Genesis 12 when he first appeared to Abram, not in Genesis 15 when He sealed the covenant, not in Genesis 17 when He gave the sign of circumcision. The only time God sealed His promises with an oath was in Genesis 22, after Abraham offered Isaac his only son. Remember back to Genesis 22.

¹⁵ And the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven ¹⁶ and said, "By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, ¹⁸ and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice." (Genesis 22:15-18)

The promises of God were binding. But the oath of God was emphatic. It was a double-confirmation of that which was already sure. That emphatic confirmation of the promise came when Isaac had become the perfect type of God's own Son, and when he witnessed the obedience of faith in his father. Isaac could never doubt that his father loved God more than he even loved his own son. There is no question of the lasting impact that fateful day had on Isaac's entire life. Parents, fathers especially, our children need to know that we love God more than we love them. We need to show them that our love for God supersedes our love for them. They need to see, over and over again, that God comes first.

Isaac's life is proof that God's faithfulness to us depends ultimately upon His grace and not on our works. Just as Abraham's faith often faltered and failed along the way, so would Isaac's. Oddly enough, it would fail in exactly the same way as his father's had.

⁶ So Isaac settled in Gerar. ⁷ When the men of the place asked him about his wife, he said, "She is my sister," for he feared to say, "My wife," thinking, "lest the men of the place should kill me because of Rebekah," because she was attractive in appearance. ⁸ When he had been there a long time, Abimelech king of the Philistines looked out of a window and saw Isaac laughing with Rebekah his wife. ⁹ So Abimelech called Isaac and said, "Behold, she is your wife. How then could you say, 'She is my sister'?" Isaac said to him, "Because I thought, 'Lest I die because of her.'" ¹⁰ Abimelech said, "What is this you have done to us? One of the people might easily have lain with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us." ¹¹ So Abimelech warned all the people, saying, "Whoever touches this man or his wife shall surely be put to death." (Genesis 26:6-11)

Here's the fifth way Isaac was like his father: there were times when he feared men more than God, and his faith failed. If we are honest with ourselves, we know that the same tendency to repeat the foolish decisions of our parents lies within us as well. Our parents' mistakes often become our mistakes. When we are young, we see our parents make mistakes and we tell ourselves, "I will never do that." Or, "No way I'm going to ever do this to my children." But

oddly enough, no matter how resolutely we set out to change, we seem to fall into the same sinful patterns of our parents. I believe generational sin is a very real thing. It goes all the way back to the beginning. Sin is hereditary. The sin nature has been passed down to us from our fathers. The sins of a father are passed on to his children. The only power that can overcome this cycle of sin is the grace of God.

Isaac is proof of that. In spite of the mistakes, in spite of the failures of both Abraham and Isaac, God continued to be with them and blessed them. Isaac's faithlessness would certainly bring about some negative consequences down the road, but it could not cause the Lord to turn away from him.

¹² And Isaac sowed in that land and reaped in the same year a hundredfold. The Lord blessed him, ¹³ and the man became rich, and gained more and more until he became very wealthy. ¹⁴ He had possessions of flocks and herds and many servants, so that the Philistines envied him. ¹⁵ (Now the Philistines had stopped and filled with earth all the wells that his father's servants had dug in the days of Abraham his father.) ¹⁶ And Abimelech said to Isaac, "Go away from us, for you are much mightier than we." (Genesis 26:12-16)

Isaac deserved punishment. He deserved to be reprimanded, but instead, God blessed him. God blessed Isaac with the most bountiful crops imaginable. I'm no farmer, but a crop yielding a hundredfold in the midst of a famine is not something you see everyday. It's nothing short of a miracle. God blessed Isaac with miraculous provision at the moment he least deserved it. All of His blessings are undeserved.

Interestingly enough, though, these material blessings only served to bring further trouble into Isaac's life in this instance. Sometimes, the blessings God bestows only end up bringing more trouble into our lives. The blessing of the Lord made Isaac the envy of the town. He hadn't exactly endeared himself to the Philistines. So, they sent him away because he was becoming too wealthy and powerful.

¹⁷ So Isaac departed from there and encamped in the Valley of Gerar and settled there. ¹⁸ And Isaac dug again the wells of water that had been dug in the days of Abraham his father, which the Philistines had stopped after the death of Abraham. And he gave them the names that his father had given them. ¹⁹ But when Isaac's servants dug in the valley and found there a well of spring water, ²⁰ the herdsmen of Gerar quarreled with Isaac's herdsmen, saying, "The water is ours." So he called the name of the well Esek, because they contended with him. ²¹ Then they dug another well, and they quarreled over that also, so he called its name Sitnah. (Genesis 26:17-21)

Can we just admit here that people often bring trouble into our lives? People are just people, aren't they? People are naturally contentious over the blessings God provides. We all want a piece of the pie, even if we had no part in making it. Everywhere he went, God's blessing went with him, and the Philistines drove him out on account of those blessings.

Eventually, though, Isaac found room. ²² And he moved from there and dug another well, and they did not quarrel over it. So he called its name Rehoboth, saying, "For now the Lord has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land." (Genesis 26:22) I think we all could use a little room sometimes. As Christians, we know that our room is not in this world. We don't quarrel over room in this world because we know there's a room awaiting us in glory. That's what Jesus promised to us. He said He was going to prepare a room for us in His Father's house. The Lord has plenty of room in His house for us. In this world, we can often feel confined and crowded. People are always fighting for space. But it is not so in our Father's house. There, the Lord has made room for us all. Having found room in the land, here's what we read next.

²³ From there he went up to Beersheba. ²⁴ And the Lord appeared to him the same night and said, "I am the God of Abraham your father. Fear not, for I am with you and will bless you and multiply your offspring for my servant Abraham's sake." ²⁵ So he built an altar there and called upon the name of the Lord and pitched his tent there. And there Isaac's servants dug a well. (Genesis 26:23-25)

A sixth way Isaac was like his father is that he worshiped just like his father. He built an altar, which implies that Isaac offered sacrifices there. Beersheba was a place that had great significance in Abraham's life. It was the same place where Abraham made a treaty with Abimelech in Genesis 21. Perhaps not surprisingly at this point, the same thing happened to Isaac.

²⁶ When Abimelech went to him from Gerar with Ahuzzath his adviser and Phicol the commander of his army, ²⁷ Isaac said to them, "Why have you come to me, seeing that you hate me and have sent me away from you?" ²⁸ They said, "We see plainly that the Lord has been with you. So we said, let there be a sworn pact between us, between you and us, and let us make a covenant with you, ²⁹ that you will do us no harm, just as we have not touched you and have done to you nothing but good and have sent you away in peace. You are now the blessed of the Lord." ³⁰ So he made them a feast, and they ate and drank. ³¹ In the morning they rose early and exchanged oaths. And Isaac sent them on their way, and they departed from him in peace. ³² That same day Isaac's servants came and told him about the well that they had dug and said to him, "We have found water." ³³ He called it Shibah; therefore the name of the city is Beersheba to this day. (Genesis 26:26-33)

Here's a seventh way Isaac was like his father: he was a peacemaker. He made peace with people who had caused him a good deal of trouble. He made peace with those who had driven him out and continually hounded him and stolen the fruit of his labor. He was clearly a man who did not bear a grudge. Others could see the marks of God's presence and blessing in his life. God's faithfulness to Isaac was undeniable.

As we come to the end of this brief synopsis of Isaac's life, we can see that God's faithfulness is all we have to lean on at the end of the day. The same has been true for me and my family. When I was very young, my dad developed an addiction to narcotics. He hit rock bottom one night when his addiction ended him up in a prison cell after he was caught in possession of

stolen prescription drugs. He knew that night that his life had spiraled out of control, and he was putting our family on a path of dissolution and breakdown. He was going to lose everything if something didn't change. Had God not intervened, I wouldn't be standing here today. But God did intervene. Not long after that night in prison, my dad's work led us to relocate from Colorado to Modesto, California in the spring of 1994. I was 7. Upon arriving in Modesto, God sent two saints to our front door. Mildred and Elwyn Johnson lived just a couple houses down the street, and they came to welcome my parents to the neighborhood and invited them to their church, Big Valley Grace Community Church. They had no idea how vast an impact their small act of hospitality would have on our family.

My parents, seeking a fresh start in a new place, accepted the invitation, and after only a few visits to Big Valley Grace, the Holy Spirit drew my dad to his Savior, Jesus Christ. He would never again be the same man. In less than two years, he would quit his job and enter into full-time pastoral ministry. I am who I am today in large part because I watched my father step out of his sin and into the freedom of Jesus. I watched as Jesus broke the chains of sin in my father's life. The Lord was working not only in him, but in my brother and me as well. We watched him confess his sin and his need for God's grace, and we saw the power of God's grace transform him. His weaknesses and failures only served to enhance our faith as he surrendered those weaknesses and failures to the Lord and set out to serve others. He founded a recovery and counseling ministry at our church, and allowed God to use his story for His glory. Our family is proof of the power of God's grace to transform a father's life and make a generational impact on that father's children.

When I asked him if he minded if I shared his story, he replied, "Not at all. To God be the glory. When you come right down to it all I have is my testimony of His grace and love to me and us." You know, he's right. That's all we have. None of us is going to live forever in this world. This life is just a vapor. But what remains is God's faithfulness.

By God's grace, because of the finished work of Jesus Christ, God's only Son, the offspring God promised to Abraham and Isaac, we can all be transformed to be like our Father in heaven. We can be like our Father by trusting in His promises and surrendering to His Son, Jesus Christ. What my earthly father passed on to me was his faith in Jesus because I saw his humility and courage to be used by God. What are we passing on to our children? Are we passing the baton of faith through acts of faith, humbly confessing our faults and showing our children that we rely 100% upon the mercy and grace of God? Jesus was exactly like His Father, and as we are conformed to His image, we, too, are being made like our Father.

Don't let your own failures and mistakes keep you from trusting in the Lord. Don't let the mistakes and failures of your father drive you away from your heavenly Father. He is always faithful to His promises.