

"History is hereditary only in this way: we, all of us, inherit everything, and then we choose what to cherish, what to disavow, and what to do next, which is why it's worth trying to know where things come from." — Jill Lepore

Isaac: Inheriting both the Blessings and the Curse. Genesis 26:1-26:11

Portions adapted from: "From Faith to Flop" by Stephen Todd @ SErmonCentral.com

We've all been there. One minute we are being used by God to accomplish something wonderful for His kingdom. Our faith is strong. We are riding high on the wonder of God's grace working through us. Then the very next minute we do something so simply wrong that we smack ourselves on the head and say, "what was I thinking?" One minute we are serving God with all our heart and the next we are committing a sin so basic that a child would see it for what it is.

We have a just such situation like this in our scripture lesson this morning as Isaac inherits the covenant promises from his father Abraham. Interestingly, the Bible doesn't share much from the life of Isaac even though he lives longer than either Abraham or Jacob; his are rather undistinguished years. A good description for Isaac is that he was *the ordinary son of a great father and the ordinary father of a great son* (Griffith Thomas).

But here in chapter 26, as we see Abraham's covenant promises being passed on to Isaac, it is almost spooky, how Isaac's personality and to a certain extent the early events of his life replicate those of his father; both good and bad. Which will help to illustrate three truths that we should learn from his story this morning.

1. When followers of God act otherwise in front of their children, they should know that their children are watching and Children learn what they live
2. When the followers of God when they act otherwise, they should know that the world is watching. (Christians aren't perfect – just forgiven; but we also expected to do better).
3. Thankfully, when followers of God act otherwise, God in his grace can still bless us despite the situation, despite our sins, and despite the opposition.

Let's first think about what children learn from their parents.

As I said, the early events of Isaac's adult life surprisingly parallel those of his father Abraham. Let's review the text. There was another famine in the land, like the one Abraham first walked into, when

The Lord appeared to Isaac and said, "Do not go down to Egypt; settle in the land that I shall show you. Reside in this land as an alien, and I will be with you, and will bless you; for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will fulfill the oath that I swore to your father Abraham. I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and will give to your offspring all these lands; and all the nations of the earth shall gain blessing through your offspring, (1-4)

Which tells me that while Isaac inherited substantial wealth and physical possessions from his father, he apparently also inherited Dad's tendency to look for an easy way out of trouble. So when this next famine hits Isaac is ready to repeat Abraham's first mistake by attempting to follow his path down to Egypt. But this time God stops Isaac short, telling him to stay in the land -- just like Abraham, living like a foreigner wandering out in the wilderness areas -- and in return, God will not only physically bless him in this place but will also pass along to him all the promises he had earlier made his father.

Notice also that God offers this continuance of blessings to Isaac because, as verse 5 points out, *Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws."*

God says Abraham obeyed not only His personal directions -- *My voice and My charge* -- but also *my commandments, statutes, and laws*. Since we don't hear of any specific God-given laws until Moses brings the stone tablets down from the mountain, what laws were Abraham obeying?

Good question. Jewish Rabbis teach that by the days of Noah, God had already given to humanity seven moral laws, somewhat similar to the Ten Commandments. There are however some differences.

1. Worship only the One true God
2. Do not blaspheme by cursing in God's name.
3. Do not murder.
4. Do not engage in illicit sexual relations.
5. Do not steal.
6. Do not eat of a live animal.
7. Establish courts/legal system to ensure obedience to the law.

So Abraham did honor and pass along the importance of following the Noahide laws to Isaac; good for father good for son. But notice there is nothing in the code against telling lies (bearing false witness). And Abraham did tell some whoppers in his day and must also have bragged about them around the campfire -- especially the two personally enriching episodes of: "she's my sister, not my wife."

Because when Isaac's chosen town of refuge turns out – coincidentally - to be the same one Father Abraham had earlier sought out, and when Isaac still carrying his father's unjustified fears, tries out the very same lie on the very same people, "*she's my sister, not my wife.*" ... this time he is quickly caught and reprimanded for the damage that his deceitfulness could have caused innocent strangers.

So the first carry-home truth from today is that our watching children will imitate our dishonorable as well as our honorable behaviors.

In the 2nd of the 10 Commandments – prohibiting idolatry – God says:

I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

While punishment for the sins of the father is usually understood to be some inevitable consequence of the father's sin (Dad loses the farm and his children go hungry) ... God's warning may also be referring to the likelihood of children repeating both their parents strengths and their sins (Boice. vol. 2, pg. 745)."

Parents need to know that you deliver far more powerful lessons in your home than anything we can teach in Church. Because what your children hear you saying and see you doing, either reinforces or undoes whatever they learned in Sunday School. The best to instill a lively faith and Christian conscience in our children – is when we teach and model such for them in the home.

And this is certainly what happened both positively and negatively in Isaac's case. Which leads me to wonder if Jacob then learned his damagingly deceptive ways from Isaac; and next Jacob's sons from him. So Abraham's tendency to lie was passed from father to son, to son, to son's – a pattern of heartbreak only broken by Joseph (Abraham's great grandson) who finally refused to sin against God.

How might have the story of the Israelites been different, had Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, all trusted more in God's promised protection and had all valued and taught honesty?

The next time you are tempted to compromise your own integrity, think of the chain of heartbreak that the Patriarchs' lack of integrity bequeathed to their watching and learning children.

Here is an abbreviated version of the poem, "**Children learn what they live,**"

by Dorothy Law Nolte© 1972

If children live with criticism, they learn to condemn.
If children live with hostility, they learn to fight.
If children live with fear, they learn to be apprehensive. ...

If children live with honesty, they learn truthfulness.
If children live with fairness, they learn justice.
If children live with kindness and consideration, they learn respect.
If children live with security, they learn to have faith in themselves and in those about them.
If children live with friendliness, they learn the world is a nice place in which to live.

Rest assured, like Isaac, your children and grandchildren are watching and taking notes both of your faith, lack of faith, and moral choices. So carefully consider what heritage you wish to pass along to them.

Which brings up today's second take-home truth: that when non-believer's catch the followers of God in a sin -- how much damage does that do to both your future relations with them (and with God's reputation among them)?

As he takes refuge from the famine in the town of Gerar, Isaac tries out the same deception in which Abraham was caught; and receives the same response. It makes you wonder, since Isaac was born and raised around this area why did he not have a better understanding of the character of these people?

Instead of his deceit gaining any protection for himself (while placing Rebekah in greater risk), Isaac receives a stinging rebuke and future repercussions from a pagan king, who also apparently also honors the Noahide Laws. Notice Abimelech says, that if another had innocently taken Rebekah as wife – their action would have brought guilt on the whole town.

So Isaac's lie could have caused others to unknowingly commit a greater sin. Isn't it interesting how little uncorrected faults can later lead to larger problems (there's some more parental advice to found be here).

Some good however does come out of this bad situation, in that Abimelech warns all the people, saying, "*Whoever touches this man or his wife shall be put to death.*" (vs.11) Isaac's fears now have a king's guarantee of a safe living; but listen to the rest of the story.

As the story unfolds, Isaac's is blessed while living in the valley of Gerar. His flocks and wealth grows extravagantly, yet it quickly becomes obvious that both the king of Gerar and the local shepherds, wish that he would settle elsewhere.

The locals begin to fill in all Abraham's old wells and when Isaac redigs them, the locals either refill them or claim them for their own, until they have pushed Isaac's flocks far enough out of town to no longer be bothersome. It makes me wonder if Isaac's initial act of dishonesty was what soured any future relations he could have had in the region; who can trust an individual who has proved untrustworthy from the start?

Then as Chapter 26 comes to a close, we next read about Abimelech and his General (we assume also followed by a contingent of their army) riding out to demand a treaty with Isaac. And we can hear from their conversation how little each liked or trusted the other:

Isaac said to them, "Why have you come to me, seeing that you hate me and have sent me away from you?" They said, "We see plainly that the Lord has been with you; so we say, let there be an oath between you and us, and let us make a covenant with you so 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." ... [so they] exchanged oaths ... and they departed from him in peace. (26:26-31).

Thus our 2nd take-home for today is, as scripture teaches, honesty is not only the best policy, it's one of God's commands, and always the best way to maintain both a reputation and relations with your neighbors. Because as Ecclesiastes wisely notes:

*Just as dead flies in the perfumer's ointment, cause it to stink;
So does a little folly to one respected for wisdom and honor (Ecclesiastes 10:1).*

Which just leaves us with the last lesson: that even when we followers of God act other than godly, thankfully God in his grace can still bless us despite the situation, despite our sins, and despite the opposition.

One of the things that have always bothered readers of this Genesis story is that even though Isaac is caught in his falsehood, nevertheless God still richly blesses him; where is the justifiable recompense for his sins? Didn't we just read in Proverbs that *lying lips are an abomination to God (12:22)*.

One answer to notice, is that God's continuation in blessing Isaac was actually based on Abraham's previous faithfulness to God. Because Abraham had been faithful, God was faithful in keeping His promise to bless and multiply Abraham's heir. This might be another application of God's warning that the actions of the parents will affect the lives

of their children. Faithful and honorable parents do bequeath a great blessing on their children.

One of the characteristics of God, for which I am very thankful, and which the Bible proves multiple times over is that God keeps his promises. Just think of how our entire world might have developed differently had not God promised Eve that one of her seed who crush the head of the serpent. The story of our entire Bible is the story of God honoring that promise. Before anything else, Jesus was the fulfillment of God's promise to our earliest parents.

So God doesn't bless us because we deserve it but because of his love, mercy, grace and promises. AS the Bible teaches, under the law we should be treated as our sins deserve; *the wages of sin is death* (Romans 3:23) but under grace "God does not treat us as our sins deserve. . ." (Psalm 103:10)

It is good to know that even though you and I will fail and fall short, God in his mercy blesses us anyways! In this case God blessed Isaac with material gain, even providing a multitude of corn in a time a famine, and he may bless us with material gain also. However, we must keep in mind that the New Testament emphasizes our blessings in Christ are primarily spiritual; like in God's continued presence, his joy, his peace, guidance, mercy, etc. which are given to us despite our many faults (Ephesians 1:3). Isn't God good!

So God can bless us despite our situation and He can bless us despite our failures. God can also bless us despite any opposition.

There are many powers opposed to God's people receiving his blessings. Satan certainly fights against it tooth and nail. Sometimes people, even governments, are also against the blessings of God. But, despite the sometimes formidable opposition that we face, the Bible shows us that God can still bless his people.

In ancient times few things were more important than wells. Israel was an arid land where water was rare yet needed for people and to keep the livestock alive and flourishing. Wells were difficult to dig through hard earth and rock and often this was done without success. They weren't dug lightly and neither were producing wells filled back in casually.

In their opposition to Isaac The Philistines tried to stop God's blessing him by back filling his wells or stealing wells that rightfully belonged to him. Yet, everywhere he dug Isaac found water filled wells. So God's blessings on Isaac were very obvious to his neighbors and yet they still wanted him off their land; which again I think was do to

their lack of trust in Isaac's integrity. Otherwise they would have asked to share in his blessings rather than driving him away.

But notice, rather than fighting over the wells or giving up in discouragement, Isaac just moved to another location and dug another well. And there he again found water.

Why? What lessons does this teach us?

It teaches us that God can bless us even when we face great opposition.

If you are seeking to follow God's will – in spite of your own faults – you're going to face repeated opposition to God's blessing of your life; this is the nature of the spiritual warfare we have become a part of as the kingdom of God strives to grow in opposition to the kingdom of darkness. Another truth that the Bible teaches is that the Children of God have become qualitatively different from those still living in darkness. The world doesn't understand or accept us in the same way that it refused to understand and accept Christ.

So when facing spiritual opposition – not necessarily of your own creating - you have a choice: you can sit around and moan about how unfair it all is and how life is ruined for you or you could pick up your shovel and dig another well saying, "**God had blessed me once and he can do it again.**"

Friends, learn this lesson from the better side of Isaac's character, when faced with opposition, keep digging those wells because. . . God, in His grace, will bless His people despite the situation, despite their sins, and despite opposition. As scripture teaches us, *all things [will] work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose* (Romans 8:28).

So if you call yourself a "follower of Jesus Christ," you are under an obligation to live like a follower of Jesus Christ. Because your children, the world, and your Father in heaven are all watching and will respond accordingly.

Amen?