

Stress-tested promises

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Date: 15 January 2023

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[0 : 00] Claire, thank you. In March last year, I think it was just a week after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Did you see this? I think I might have circulated it. I saw on Facebook, I think, a short video of a family of Ukrainian Christian believers.

And they were gathered in a downstairs room. I guess knowing that artillery fire was coming and the invading troops were on their way. And they were in this downstairs room. They were singing that song that we sing sometimes called, He Will Hold Me Fast.

And they were singing that song that was called, He Will Hold Me.

He Will Hold Me. He Will Hold Me. I don't know what you make of that. The first time I saw that, it was so moving.

To see Christians there, reading what was going on, clinging to their God. He'll not let my soul be lost. His promises shall last. Bought by Him at such a cost. He will hold me fast.

[1 : 33] As they sat there in their downstairs room. The message of Genesis 26, I think, is something like this. Stick with God and do not be afraid because He keeps His promises.

Now, we began last Sunday what chapter 25, verse 19, if you see, calls the account of the family line of Abraham's son Isaac. What comes from Isaac.

And most of Genesis 25 to 35 is going to focus on Isaac's sons, Jacob and Esau and the story of their conflict and how God chooses Jacob to take forward his plans to save the world.

We plugged into that story in chapter 25 last week as they bashed and wrestled in the womb. And Jacob, the heel grabber, took hairy boy Esau's birthright. And all of that carries on next week in chapter 27.

Chapter 26, strangely, I think, stands alone by itself. There's no Jacob or Esau here. And likely this is a kind of rewinding flashback to before the sons are born.

[2 : 45] And chapter 26 is Isaac's chapter. He's just one man with his wife, Rebecca, and some servants. Just one man, just one little family in a harsh and hostile world with little to hold on to, as we read, apart from the promises of God.

And just see what happens at the start of this chapter. Verse 1. Now, there was a famine in the land besides the previous famine in Abraham's time. And Isaac went to Abimelech, king of the Philistines in Gerar.

So there's a famine. There's little food. It's tough to survive a shaky future for him. Will he live or will he die? And so Isaac ups and moves, likely aiming for Egypt down south until in Gerar, verse 2, the Lord appeared to Isaac and said.

It's very basic Bible stuff. But extraordinary, we should say. That the Lord God who made the earth and the heavens would see one hungry man and stoop down and appear to him and speak to him. And not just speak, but make promises. Look. The Lord appeared to Isaac and said, do not go down to Egypt. Live in the land where I tell you to live.

[4 : 09] 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'll 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. God's promises here, spoken to Isaac, they're very, very personal. Verse 3, you stay and I will be with you and will bless you.

But they're not just promises for Isaac. Because, do you see, Isaac is the son of Abraham. And Abraham is the one through whom, in Genesis 12, God had promised to save and bless our world forever.

In verse 3, the Lord promises Isaac, to you and your descendants I'll give all these lands. And in verse 4, he promises, I'll make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky.

[5 : 21] And having fulfilled these promises and created this Abrahamic nation in a land, the Lord promises at the end of verse 4, through your offspring, all nations on earth will be blessed.

And this promise of blessing right here in this ancient chapter, which will stretch forward through history, is for all nations and for us in our world today.

This is God's promise that he will come to people living in darkness and the shadow of death. And he'll deal with the evil in our hearts.

And he'll overturn the curse of death in our world. And that God will give all nations on earth life under his blessing. That together we'll be forgiven and restored to our God.

That we might know him securely and love him and walk with him forever. What God promises here to Isaac and through him to all nations is the kind of life we were created for.

[6 : 29] And the kind of life we long for to be blessed by our God. And way back then in Genesis 26, God promises that he will do this for the world through Isaac, through Isaac's descendants, and ultimately through one offspring, the Lord Jesus Christ.

But all of that in us today is getting ahead of ourselves because here in Genesis 26, rewind to this point in history, what do we have? We have a husband and wife, Isaac and Rebecca.

They've got no children and no land. And they've got little to hold on to, but the bare word of promise from a God who says, I will be with you.

But the thing is, that promise is enough. And I don't know at the start of 2023 what you're holding on to.

What kind of hope you have for this year and the next. For Isaac and Rebecca, hungry in a hostile place, God's word of promise is enough.

[7 : 39] And his promises can be enough and should be enough for Ukrainian Christians and for you and for me.

Because as Isaac discovers in this chapter, we have a God who keeps his promises. Unfailingly, unstoppably, he keeps his promises.

So with that in mind, let's follow through the action. Just want to notice what's going on in this ancient moment. Notice first here, the Lord protecting Isaac and Rebecca, his people.

See what happens. The Lord, having commanded Isaac to stay in this land, Isaac, verse six, he stayed in Gerar, but straight away in verse seven, he senses danger.

And that's because the men of that place asked him about his wife. They are not being polite. How is she? They're on the hunt for a woman. And Rebecca is new and beautiful.

[8 : 43] And Isaac is by himself with these unknown foreign men circling, wanting to know if she's available. And so straight away, there's danger here. Because what if something happens to Isaac and Rebecca?

What happens if she gets taken and he gets knifed? I mean, what would happen? There would be no Jacob and Esau. There would be no nation of Israel. There would be no Jesus.

There would be no church today. God's promises snuffed out in the beginning right back then. And so Isaac said, she's my sister.

Because he was afraid to say she was my wife. He thought the men of this place might kill me on account of Rebecca because she's beautiful. What do you think of that? Oh, come on, Isaac.

How about trusting in the God who has just promised that your descendants are going to be like the stars in the sky? But faced by flesh and blood men surrounding him, Isaac is desperately afraid and he lies to protect his skin, which is pretty human, isn't it?

[9 : 54] Now, when Isaac had been there a long time, Abimelech, king of the Philistines, looked down from a window and saw Isaac caressing his wife, Rebecca. That is not a brother and sister cuddle that they are having. He's caressing her.

So Abimelech summoned Isaac and said, she's really your wife. Why do you say she's my sister, you liar? And Isaac said, because I thought I might lose my life on account of her. Rightly angry, Abimelech says, what is this you've done to us?

Because one of the men might well have slept with your wife and you'd have brought guilt upon us. And then Abimelech gave orders to all the people. Anyone who harms this man or his wife will surely be put to death.

What's going on here? Is it well done, Isaac, you strong man of faith? No. Well done, Abimelech? Yes. And behind the scenes, not even mentioned, the Lord protecting his people, isn't he? Because God had promised. He promised Isaac descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. And through the upright decision of a foreign king, God protects this couple to keep his promise. [11:12] Which he has been doing. Keeping his promise. Because in this little moment far away in history, Isaac and Rebekah aren't harmed.

And so they will have Esau and Jacob. That's two kids. And fast forward to the end of Genesis and Jacob, the child of Isaac and Rebekah, has 70 descendants. And then at the end of the Exodus from Egypt 400 years later, 603,550 men come out of Egypt with women and children too.

All descendants of Isaac. And then under King David, another few centuries on, 1,100,000 fighting men are counted. And then fast forward a bit more and Jesus comes into the world, the offspring of Abraham and Isaac, whom all God's promises focus on.

And from him 120 believers. And then 3,000 are baptized. And unstoppably over the last 2,000 years, the number of those who belong to Jesus Christ has grown and grown.

[12:21] Until now today, there are what? One billion? Two billion? Children of Abraham? We rightly call ourselves. And though we might sit here today in 2023 and be tempted to think that Christianity may be dying or certainly going downhill in the UK.

With secular voices keen to kill off the church. And though sometimes you might feel utterly by yourself as a Christian believer in your school or your workplace.

God will continue to keep his promises until the people descended from Isaac who belong to Jesus, the Isaac offspring, the offspring of Isaac.

Those people are like the number of the stars in the sky and the grains of the sand on the seashore. That is what is going to happen. Because God kept his promise to Isaac and Rebecca.

And he does keep his promises. And first for Isaac and Rebecca here, protecting his people. Notice now secondly, how he provides for them.

[13:28] In verses 12 to 22, having been promised these lands by God, in verse 12, Isaac planted crops in that land.

And the same year reaped a hundredfold. Because the Lord blessed him. And there's famine in the land. But God provides. Not just crops, but wealth and livestock and servants ready to make Isaac into a great nation.

So much blessing, in fact, that end of verse 14, the Philistines envied him. And they start a campaign to get rid of him. And they fill up with earth all the wells that had been dug for Abraham. Which is brutal, isn't it? In a desert place for a family of people. It's like a President Putin tactic. We will cut off your water supply.

And see how you will survive then. And Abimelech, king of the Philistines, says to Isaac in verse 16, You need to move away. You want to jog on.

[14:32] Because you are too powerful for us. Get away from us. You should notice, by the way, all the way through the Bible, through Genesis, the almost unrelenting trouble and pressure that God's people face.

As Jesus did in his life. As his followers may do. And so Isaac, desperate for water, moves off to the valley of Gerar, just up the road, verse 17.

And there's some old stopped up wells there. Again dug in the time of his father Abraham. And Isaac reopens them. But it's not enough water for his flocks and herds. In verse 19, his servants dig and find a well of fresh water.

Wonderful. But this causes more friction with the herdsmen of Gerar, who say this water's ours. And so Isaac names the well dispute.

That's not good. He digs another one. There's more quarrels. He names it opposition. He names it opposition. Fighting and fighting just to survive and feed the family and find somewhere settled and safe.

[15:37] Is there no end to the hassle this family are going through? And you might imagine Isaac wondering, I thought God had told me to stay in this land. And he promised to be with me.

In verse 22, Isaac moved on from there and dug another well and finally, no one quarreled over it. Is that just a lucky break? Did the herdsmen get tired? It's not a lucky break. Isaac named the well Rehoboth, which, footnote, means room or space, saying, Now the Lord has given us room and we

will flourish in the land.

You think, what a relief. A roomy place to stay and then be fruitful in this land.

Why does that happen? It happens because God had promised. And God keeps his promises.

[16:50] You say, so what for us? Well, you've got to know you and I aren't in precisely the same situation as Isaac and Rebecca. God does not promise you a fruitful veggie patch and lots of cash now.

And he hasn't promised us a bit of roomy space in Cambridge. Because Cambridge is not God's promised land, despite what the estate agents say. In the Bible, God's promise of a land looks forward ultimately to a future heavenly country.

It's how the promise of God's land works in the Bible. It's actually what Abraham and Isaac and Jacob are looking forward to. A better city. A heavenly country.

And these verses hint at us. And the Bible says to us that in God's heavenly land, where billions of people will one day gather.

We should know. Can I put it like this? There is room for us. On the night before he died, Jesus comforted his disciples.

[17:59] He said, do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God, believe also in me. My father's house has many rooms.

If that were not so, would I have told you that I'm going there to prepare a place for you? That is, there is plenty of room for you and me in our father's homeland.

To those who belong to Jesus Christ, this room is promised and will be given to you. You will make it through the quarrels and the opposition and the how will I survive.

And you will rest there and flourish in the land God provides for you. That's all in the future. And it is true, is it not, that in the middle of challenges and quarrels and life, we do find ourselves sometimes in a pleasant place and a moment of rest, where we say, I've got space and room because the Lord has provided for me right here and now.

And all of that is because God keeps his promises. He does. For Isaac and Rebecca here, we fast forward backwards so far to their life.

[19:24] For them there, protecting them and providing for them. And thirdly now, in this last scene or two, notice how he blesses them richly.

I think verses 23 to 25 is such a beautiful little scene. From there, Isaac went up to Beersheba. And that night the Lord appeared to him and said, I am the God of your father Abraham.

Do not be afraid, for I am with you. I will bless you and will increase the number of your descendants for the sake of my servant Abraham. And so Isaac built an altar there and called on the name of the Lord.

And there he pitched his tent and there his servants dug a well. At night time is often the time when people are most afraid.

And at night time, this precious comfort and promise comes to God's servant. Do not be afraid, for I am with you. And this comfort and this promise, this simple word is not just for Isaac.

[20:31] It's for everyone who is in God's family. In Isaiah 43 verse 5, later in the Bible, speaking to all the people of Israel, God says, Do not be afraid, for I am with you.

In the New Testament, in Acts chapter 18, the Lord Jesus speaks to the apostle Paul in a vision. Do not be afraid, for I am with you.

And so for every single person then today who has put their faith in Jesus Christ, the Lord would say to us right now in the middle of today, Do not be afraid, for I am with you.

And do you need to hear that simply this morning through this chapter?

And finally, in verse 26, notice, Abimelech turns up once more. And he's got his personal advisor and his top soldier with him. And you think, no, more trouble. But this time, hostile Abimelech wants peace.

[21:39] Because he's realised that Isaac has the Lord with him. Verse 28, we saw clearly that the Lord was with you. So we said, there ought to be a sworn agreement between us, between us and you.

Let us make a treaty with you that 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.

And Isaac is. He really is. At the start of the chapter, God had promised, I'll be with you and will bless you. And now Abimelech says, you are blessed by the Lord.

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