

Isaac and Abimelech

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Date: 27 February 2011

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[0 : 00] I'm going to turn to that chapter for a few moments this evening and work our way through it. It's quite obvious that the chapter is about Isaac. We know who Isaac was.

And we'll take up the reading at verse 6, page 24, Genesis 26. So Isaac settled in Gerar. When the men of the place asked him about his wife, he said, 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 Rebecca, because she was attractive in appearance, and then so on throughout the various events that take place during that chapter.

We don't know, of course, as much about Isaac as we do about his father Abraham. His life dominates the book of Genesis, indeed. We know much about the life of Abraham, how God called him from his hometown of Ur of the Chaldees, and he made his way to a place he had never been before.

And there God was going to reveal himself to him in ways that he never expected. And there he was going to discover what an adventure it was. I'm not saying it's easy. It was not easy for Abraham at all.

But it was thrilling for Abraham to discover more and more about the God he had come to love and in whom he had come to put his trust. Because he knew that God personally.

[1 : 24] That's what the Bible is all about. Knowing God personally. Not just knowing that there is a God, but in knowing that God personally for ourselves. And following him and listening to his voice and obeying him and living by faith.

That's what kind of person Abraham was. And Isaac was born as the son of promise into that family when Abraham was a hundred years old. Completely beyond the bounds of possibility.

And yet God gave Abraham a son in his old age. And he fulfilled the promise that he made to him right at the very beginning. So whilst much is known about Abraham, not a great deal is known about him.

In fact, this is just roughly the only information that we have. I'm not saying it's exactly the same. We do have information. For example, when God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son in Genesis chapter 22.

All the emphasis on Abraham and what he did. And yet, you can see all the while, as Abraham is going to obey God in this extraordinary command.

[2 : 34] I would say the most extraordinary command that God has given anyone ever in the world. Go, he said, and take your son.

Take your only son. The one who you love. The one I have promised you in your old age. And sacrifice him. Offer him up as a burnt offering. The question that obviously arises as soon as you hear that command is, why in the world would God ask a father to take his only son and to offer him up as a sacrifice?

And Abraham obeyed. The very next morning, he saddled his donkey, took his servants, and off he went to the place God commanded him to go. And there, he took the wood and the knife and the rope, and they went all the way to the place God commanded him to go to.

And all the while, in almost silence in the background, is Isaac. Willingly, obediently, submissively going along with his father.

Not knowing what God had commanded him. Because he said, Father, here is the wood. Here are all the preparations. But where is the lamb? And it was then that Abraham said to his son Isaac, God will provide a lamb for himself.

[4 : 00] And you cannot but see the connection in that story to the coming Jesus. Where, by the command of God, the father brought his only son, his only begotten son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And led him to the place called Calvary. And there, as Jesus offered his life up as the sacrifice for our sin, without stopping, all the way he went for our sin, as our substitute and as our sacrifice, he laid down his life.

And where God stopped Abraham from killing him, from slaying him, Jesus went all the way and laid down his life at Calvary for us.

He did so willingly. And he did so submissively and lovingly. And that's one thing that you can't help but picking up from the life of Isaac. Even without hearing much of him, we know that he was submissive to the will of God.

And as such, he pointed forward to the coming of Jesus Christ, who would be our savior by dying on the cross. And so here, you cannot all roads in the Bible lead to Calvary.

[5 : 25] Even this place here, it's a road that leads to Calvary. And we cannot, as we saw last week, when we gathered and when we remembered the Lord's death and the way that he commanded us, we remembered how the Lord had come in the fullness of time and how he had given himself on the cross as our substitute.

And that means that the only way in which you can be right with God tonight is to come to faith in Jesus Christ as your savior. A question is often asked, how were the Old Testament people saved?

They didn't know about Christ. They didn't know. They didn't know when he was coming into the world. They didn't know what God, exactly what God was planning. And they didn't know about the atonement, the Calvary, the cross.

They didn't know what Jesus' name was going to be. They believed that there would be a Messiah. But they were very, very vague in their expectations. They weren't sure about exactly what was going to happen. And the question is very often asked, well, were there Christians in the Old Testament?

And the answer to me is absolutely clear. There most definitely were Christians in the Old Testament. They didn't have the same knowledge as you and they weren't able to look back on Jesus like we are.

[6 : 47] But they looked forward to Jesus coming. And with the same faith, by the same faith, through the same faith, as we look back upon Jesus, they looked forward with that same trust that God would one day, in the fullness of time, take away their sins.

And that is how they were. Don't ever believe anybody tells you that the Old Testament people worked their way into heaven. They did not. Nobody has ever got right with God by keeping God's law.

Nobody has ever worked their way into heaven. Nobody ever, ever, in any generation, has been good enough to be right with God. And the people in the Old Testament were the same.

They looked forward to the coming of Jesus. And they did so by believing in the promises that God had made to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. Here's this promise at the very beginning of the chapter.

And this promise overshadows the whole of this chapter. And it's interesting that God gave that promise at a time when Isaac was going to step out into the unknown.

[7 : 54] There was a famine in the land of Canaan at that time. Canaan was the promised land, the land that God had promised to his father Abraham, and the land in which God expected Isaac to remain.

And yet, necessity dictated that Isaac had to leave the land because there was a famine and he had to go and dwell. Now, there's two options.

There was Egypt, which was a very fertile place, as we know from the Bible. Or he could go into the land of the Philistines, which was nearer and nearer the coast where the land was more fertile.

And God said, go and dwell in the land of the Philistines. But yet he did so, reminding him once again of the promise. The promise was this.

I will multiply your offspring as the stars of the heaven and will give to your offspring all these lands. That's the first element. And in your, here we go, in your offspring, all the nations of the earth will be blessed.

[8 : 54] Now, it was by putting his faith in that promise that Isaac and Jacob and all of God's people, David and Moses and all of God's people, were saved and converted.

And they belonged to God's kingdom. And that promise was Jesus Christ. Exactly the same as we believe. They believed in him as well, although their information was not as much as ours.

I could, of course, go on and elucidate this a lot further, but there isn't time this evening. I want us to look at the life that Isaac lived under that promise.

These few years, I'm not entirely sure how long he spent in Gerard. It was a strange place. It must have been frightening for him. It was a new experience altogether. He was living amongst a people of different language, different culture, and above all, they did not recognize the living and the true God.

I believe that there are many, many lessons in this chapter which we can draw as encouragements and strengths as we live for the Lord in a world which does not recognize the living and true God.

[10 : 06] Just like Isaac had to go and step out into a world that was very, very different and at times hostile. Don't expect. Don't expect that the world outside is going to accept and embrace our faith in the Lord.

It doesn't. But like this chapter, sometimes there is hostility and sometimes there is politeness and sometimes there are real attempts to be friendly towards those who believe in Christ.

And I take a great deal of encouragement from this chapter although there's a warning as well. The first warning, of course, is this. The first thing that Isaac did was that he failed despite the promise that God gave him at the very beginning that in your offspring all the nations of the earth will be blessed.

He failed. And to me it's fascinating and it displays the kind of weakness that belongs to all of us tonight. How even despite the certainty of God's promise to be with him and to bless him and to give him his offspring and that in the future every nation will be blessed, within a few days he is struggling and he is failing and he is fearful.

And if you're looking for the one enemy that Isaac had in this chapter, it is fear. It's the kind of fear that is irrational, that doesn't, that forgets the promise.

[11 : 38] Because on the one hand, Isaac was looking at his outside circumstances and on the other hand there was God's promise that whatever would happen to him, God would fulfill his promise to him.

And it's amazing, isn't it, that Isaac lost sight of the Lord because he focused on his outward circumstances and he used the kind of what I would call the logic of fear.

Here's the logic of fear as far as Isaac was concerned. I have a beautiful wife. We are strangers in this land.

The men will want my beautiful wife. They will kill me in order to get her if I tell them that I am her husband.

Therefore, in order to save my own life, in order to make things as smooth as possible, I will tell them that she is my sister. And that's what he did.

[12 : 40] He operated by the logic of fear, the kind of logic I believe that we have all from time to time experienced. In which we allow ourselves to be carried away by the what-ifs in this world.

And we allow ourselves to think, to go down the road of the possible. And once you do that, then you become overwhelmed with what could happen if.

And you lose sight, the more you go down that road, the more you lose sight of what God has already said and what cannot change. Which is that God has promised to be with his people, come what may, from day to day, from one event to the other.

There is one thing in our lives which is absolutely constant. And that is the presence of God who has promised. Now, he's not promised an easy life. He's promised, not promised a safe life.

But that was the reason why the Lord said that we must consider, we must consider the birds of the air and the lilies of the field.

[13 : 56] And that we must seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. And that we must not, I'm not saying we don't be concerned about our lives, of course we're all concerned about our lives.

But that we must not be so worried about the events and particularly the what-ifs of this world that we lose sight of the certainty of what we have in Jesus Christ and his promise to be with us and to lead us and to guide us.

That's what Isaac lost sight of. Don't make the same mistake. Don't allow yourself to go down the road of the possible. This could happen or that could happen and if this happens then the next thing could happen and if the third thing happens then the next could happen and before you know it you're in turmoil and you're in despair.

When all the time the Lord is whispering to us to put our trust in him and to rest patiently and do not fret. The Lord has promised his presence with us and our witness depends on our ability to hold to that promise and this is what happened of course with poor Isaac.

He lost sight of that promise and his witness was spoiled because when they found out when the king looked out the window and when he saw him caressing his wife or whatever he was doing showing her affection and laughing with her whatever it is it was obvious from his behavior that she was his wife and he called Isaac and he said behold she's your what is this you have done to us.

[15 : 34] You who say that you believe in the living and the true God the God of Israel the God who promised your father and who led him from out of the colonies and who promised him that his offspring would be like the stars of the sky the sand on the seashore you who say you believe in the living God why don't you trust him?

Why don't you believe that he'll do for you what he's promised? What's this you're doing? One of my men might have easily lain with your wife and you would have brought guilt upon us and so his witness was damaged as ours can very easily be when we fail to put our trust in the Lord and to believe in his presence.

Now another thing that's interesting in this passage is this that Abimelech was a Philistine and the Philistines didn't know the Lord at all they believed in Dagon the fish god and they had no experience of the living and the true god how then did this man Abimelech know that it was wrong for one of his men to take Rebecca as his wife or lie with her or whatever they were going to do how did he know that it would bring guilt upon them?

It's interesting isn't it? Who told him? He didn't know the Lord he had no Bible he wasn't Abraham he didn't hear the voice of the Lord never heard the voice of the Lord how did he know that it was wrong and that it would make him guilty if he took Rebecca as his wife or if one of his men had done the same thing I think that's fascinating now let me tell you the answer to the question and the reason I'm going down this road is because it opens the door to another question which is very often asked and the question that people often ask is this what about people who haven't heard the gospel?

Is it fair for God to punish people who have never heard the gospel? Bible says yes it is and here's the reason why Abimelech tells us the reason why he knew within himself it was wrong for his men to take another man's wife and Paul puts it this way in Romans chapter 2 he says the law God's law is written on people's hearts I'm not saying it's written perfectly on their hearts I'm not saying that every person everywhere has a perfect knowledge of everything that God requires but what they do have is they have enough knowledge to make them guilty when they know that they do something wrong and all mankind all humankind wherever you find him or her they know a good measure of what's right and wrong and they don't live up to it so on the day of judgment when God does judge them for what they have done wrong he will punish them fairly and squarely and nobody will ever be able to point to the Lord and say that's not fair you're punishing me for something I didn't do that will not happen

[18 : 42] God will punish according to our guilt that's what the Bible says he tells us that the law is written on our hearts but then that leads me to the more immediate problem for ourselves what about us who have heard the gospel what have we done with the gospel because we have heard God's provision for our forgiveness and the way in which God can set us free from the guilt of sin and even then you haven't listened to him you haven't come you haven't put your trust in Jesus in his death on the cross as the payment for your sin how much more will your liability be than the person who hasn't heard the gospel how much worse it will be for you who know God's good news who know that there is a saviour how much worse it will be for those who have heard the gospel and still have refused to listen to it so Abimelech tells us the answer to a lot of very interesting questions in any case the matter is resolved

Abimelech warned all the people saying whoever touches this man his wife shall surely be put to death but what happens after that well what happens is quite remarkable you would imagine that God would punish Isaac for his sinfulness for his lies to Abimelech that's the natural thing that you would expect from a God of justice that's what he deserved and yet what he got was exactly the opposite of what he deserved look with me at verse 12 Isaac sowed in that land and reaped in the same year a hundred fold the Lord blessed him and the man became rich and gained more and more until he became very wealthy now how opposite is that to what you would expect God is the God of justice you would expect him to punish that's what we deserve and yet have we not experienced exactly that same thing that grace is what does not punish as we deserve but grace is

God dealing with us in kindness and in love in the Lord Jesus Christ and have you not from time to time experienced exactly a time in your life when you know that you've done wrong and when you're conscious of your own sinfulness against God and it's almost like you're waiting for God to strike you in some way and instead of doing that he doesn't he makes your life a blessing he blesses you in ways that you never even imagined now here's the question does that not utterly humble you does that not drive you to your knees when you see the extraordinary inexplicable grace of God working in your life if ever there is something that will humble you it is the grace and the kindness and the love of God and that's why tonight if God has blessed you in your life as he does from time to time then whatever you do don't allow that blessing to make you proud there are times of blessing in a person's life the book of ecclesiastes says in the day of prosperity rejoice there are times certain times in our lives when God blesses us in unusual ways

I'm not saying with material blessings but there are all kinds of great things that the Lord shows us and gives us despite our sinfulness despite our failures and what we are to do is we are to recognize where these blessings come from and I want to remind you tonight with all due respect that every time you see a blessing something good that is happening in your life it is not because you deserve it you know I hear people saying oh well I must have done something right why is all this happening to me why is this good stuff happening to me I must have done something right that's completely wrong if you're thinking that way you are in great danger it is not because you have done something right it is because God is good and through that blessing he expects you to listen to him and to open your Bible and to do what he says and to come to faith in Jesus

Christ as your savior because there's more to follow and the same is true in the life of a Christian don't think that because things are going well with you that you deserve it that you must have served God in some unusually spectacular way you haven't it is because God is good his grace is inexplicable you can't fathom God's grace but one thing is for sure when you experience God's grace then be thankful to the Lord and make that a motivation to repent and to come to a greater closeness and a greater dependence upon him and don't allow it to make you proud and to be self-reliant and self-sufficient and to be full of yourself God's grace is the most humbling experience in the world or it ought to be so if things are going well for you tonight then thank the Lord and listen to him and make sure he's your savior and make sure that you come closer and closer to him because riches can be a double-edged sword blessing can be a double-edged sword it can make you proud and it can drive you away from the

[24 : 45] Lord and drive thoughts of the Lord away from you so that you become more and more reliant on yourself and you focus become obsessed with your own riches and with all the stuff that's going on that's great and that's enjoyable in your life every good thing comes from the Lord but make sure you recognize where it has come from you know there are some people who preach that God wants you to be rich they say God's will for your life is that you be successful in business and if you're not successful in business then let me tell you they say God wants you God wants to change that he wants to make you successful in business and they'll preach that all the time that's what you call the prosperity gospel the health and wealth gospel it's a piece of nonsense don't ever ever go down that road and believing that God's will and his purpose for you is to be rich in this life it may be but that's not what

God focuses upon the focus of the gospel is this seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all that you need will be given to you not necessarily in great abundance but all that God promises is that he will supply all our needs according to his riches in mercy many as a great Christian has lived in poverty and has suffered because of their faith where is the riches there where are the riches there many as a person has died for the cause of Christ because they were Christians God has a different plan for every single different individual but after the blessing of course the next stage in the story is that that blessing led to trouble when the men of Abimelech when they saw who were neighbors of Isaac when they saw how much

God was blessing him with the fruit of his field and the harvest that he was reaping they became jealous of him and again that's what we find in a world that is full of sinfulness and jealousy and conceit and covetousness that it breeds hostility and don't be surprised if you see that from day to day in your place of work in your neighborhood amongst your friends jealousy bitterness spite backbiting all of these things that arise out of humankind's discontentment with what he's got he's looking over the shoulder and he's wanting to have what someone else has and it leads to a restlessness that's the kind of world we live in a restless world and that's the way that these men were when they saw Isaac and when they saw him becoming very wealthy and to the point where Abimelech's life was made impossible and he said to

Isaac look you're going to have to leave here I can't cope with this anymore because this is going to come to a head and you have to go away from us for you are much mightier than we so Isaac departed from there and three things happen or rather three wells happen first of all encamped in the valley of Gerar and settled there and Isaac dug again now watch this for sinful human nature watch this for the kind of things that you and I very often have to contend with both in ourselves and in other people now here we go he first of all went to the valley of Gerar and settled there and of course in a dry land the middle east of course they need water all the time they don't have the kind of abundance of water that we have and rivers and lakes and they don't have hardly any so Isaac dug again the waters the wells of water that had been there in the days of Abram his father and he gave the names that his father had given them but when Isaac's servants dug in the valley and found there a well of spring water verse 20 the herdsmen of Gerar quarreled with Isaac's herdsmen saying this water is ours so he called the name of the well

Ezek you can find out the meaning of that word by looking at number 3 at the bottom of the page Ezek means contention because they contended with him verse 21 they dug another well it's the second attempt and they quarreled over that also so he called its name Sitna which means enmity and he moved from there and dug another well and they did not quarrel over it so he called its name Rehoboth saying from now on the Lord has made room for us and we shall be fruitful in the land now I want you to notice what's going on here Isaac is having to contend with an element in sinful human nature I'm not going to say it's human nature because God created us perfectly at the very beginning but it's sinful human nature in which all reason and rationality goes out the window have you ever discovered I'm sure you have how irrational human beings are and how once their tribalism rises up within them once their emotions rise up within them there's no reasoning with them here we have a situation here these herdsmen had no need to dig a well they had enough water where they were but when they saw

[30 : 25] Isaac and his herdsmen digging a well and finding water that they knew was there they came and they said this well is ours they didn't need it it was sheer badness on their part and there was no reasoning with them at all because by that stage the jealousy and the bitterness had set into the extent that nothing short of getting rid of this man altogether was going to satisfy them and Isaac could easily have sat down with them and said look you've got plenty of land you've got what's yours that didn't enter into it because we're talking here about a world that is full and driven by bitterness and hatred and what starts off with a seed of jealousy and covetousness in a person's mind who knows where it's going to end you look at your television this week and you see carnage in Tripoli and Benghazi carnage why is that because of mankind's hatred for one another and his refusal to give in to reason why is it that Gaddafi is shooting his own people and killing his own people because he has made a decision to stand where he is there's no reasoning in it he says he's prepared to die he probably will die because humankind is immovable in his in his sinfulness and you say oh yes but that's a one-off it's not a one-off the seeds lie within all of us you simply haven't discovered it or maybe you have in your own heart

I hope we have and I hope I hope we all know what we are potentially capable of any person is capable of the most unreasoning irrational deeds which behaves in the most unpredictable way and we've got to live in a world like that and we've got to watch that we don't become the same way because we can easily get sucked into that kind of world we can easily become one of them we can easily react look what Isaac Isaac could have said I hate these men right get your swords on we're going to war but he didn't he acted in grace he acted that way because he was a child of God and because he knew that there was a God on the throne who would himself judge and who was ruling and leading and guiding Isaac had no idea why God was allowing this to happen three times it happened he could have said to the Lord you allowed me to come here you gave me this blessing

I cannot go back to my own land because there's a famine in my own land I don't understand I would have imagined that if you had led me to this land you would have made life easy for me and you're not making easy I don't understand why I'm in conflict with these other herdsmen and my life is a misery your life a misery tonight you experience the misery of what it is to live as a Christian in a hostile and in an unreasonable world I think you do from some from time to time that is our experience and the great challenge is to act in such a way that will bring glory to our saviour who loved us and died for us and the way we bring glory to our saviour is not when things go easily for us it's when the going gets tough and when we're brought to our knees and when we cry out to the lord lord I don't understand what's going on here but there must be a reason and there was a reason god was making his life uncomfortable you know why to make sure he didn't settle there to make sure that he went home back to

Beersheba back to the place where he had given his father and the place in which god's purposes were to be fulfilled even though Gerar was probably a more fertile more pleasant place to live and it would have been the easiest thing in the world for Isaac to settle there god's purpose was that he wouldn't settle there that he would go back because the first thing the first and foremost priority in the Christian life is what God wants us to do not what's easy not what's comfortable not what's pleasant but what God wants us to do and when we put the Lord first then we cannot go wrong everything else will fall into place even though there are times we don't understand it but you put God first you seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness everything else all these things that Jesus will be added unto you have you done that have you sought first the kingdom of the Lord that's the safest place to be I'm not saying that you won't let the Lord down I'm not saying that things everything will go easy for you they won't but the safest place to be tonight is under the care and within the shadow of the Almighty so make sure you're there and make sure that as the Lord's people we maintain our grace grace grace that reflects our love for a great savior marvelous amen remember that everything we do and the way we act will either bring shame upon the name of the Lord or bring glory to the name of the Lord let's go out and bring glory to His name let's pray Father in heaven bless these thoughts to us we pray tonight we thank you for your word we thank you for how useful it is for how practical it is and for how it prepares us for a life that's full of uncertainty and a life which we cannot we do not know what's going to happen from hour to hour we give thanks Lord for that we pray that you will make us dependent upon you in every way forgive us and in Jesus name amen