

God's Presence and Blessing

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[0 : 0 0] Well, there was a boy I once knew who seemed to have it all. He was a fellow student at my school and everything just came easily for him.

For most of us, we're probably, if we're lucky, good at one thing. But for him, he seemed to excel at everything. So he was good at sports, soccer, tennis, basketball.

But he was also good at his studies. Again, normally people, if they're good at their studies, might be either good in the arts or in the science, but not both. But he was good at both.

He was good at maths, competing in the International Olympiad. But then he was also good at writing poetry and winning essay writing competitions. It just wasn't fair.

And to top it off, he was also a hit with the girls. Now, I personally don't think he was particularly handsome. It was a bit chubby around the cheeks.

[1 : 0 6] But then at parties or the like, he always seemed to have the girls crowding around him, you know, laughing at his jokes, you know, that kind of stuff, whether it was funny or not. It just wasn't fair.

Now, I wonder whether you've come across people like that before. Or maybe you think you're one of them yourself. But tonight, as we look at this chapter about Isaac, chapter 26, that's the kind of picture we get of Isaac.

For this was a man who seemed to have the Midas touch, who was blessed no matter what he did. Even when things didn't seem to go right for him, he would still come out okay.

And that's even more surprising, because if you read anything about Genesis, there's really nothing special about him. Up to now, in Genesis, he's not really stood out at all.

There's not been a lot of stories about him, of his, you know, stories about whether he's had great faith or courage or character. Last week, we did see a little of his faith when he prayed to his wife to be pregnant.

[2 : 1 2] But apart from that, there's really not that much on Isaac. And it's interesting to note that this series that we're doing, this section, it's headed up in verse 19 of chapter 25.

It's called An Account of Abraham's Son, Isaac. But when you look at the rest of the section, chapters 26 to about 35, the count is largely dominated by his sons, and in particular, Jacob.

But tonight, in chapter 26, we at least have an entire account focused on Isaac. And in it, we see why Isaac appears to have a charmed life.

He has a charmed life because he's blessed by God. And so, in our first point, from verse 1 to 6, we are told it's not because he's blessed, not because of what he's done, but because of what his father, Abraham, has done.

So, look with me at verse 1 of chapter 26, page 25. And let me read it for you. Now, there was a famine in the land, besides the previous famine in Abraham's time.

[3 : 18] And Isaac went to Abimelech, king of the Philistines, in Gerar. The Lord appeared to Isaac and said, Do not go down to Egypt. Live in the land where I tell you to live. 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 will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and will give them all these lands through your offspring.

Through your offspring, all nations on earth will be blessed because Abraham obeyed me and did everything I required of him, keeping my commands, my decrees, and my instruction.

So, it's pretty clear, isn't it? First, in verse 3, we see that Isaac is blessed by God because he's confirming, God's confirming the oath he swore to Isaac's father.

God's honoring his promise to Abraham by blessing Isaac. And for good measure, God now repeats the oath to Isaac because much of what he now promises to Isaac has echoes of his promises to Abraham.

[4 : 22] So, for example, the promise to you and your descendants, I will give you these lands. Well, they're found in Genesis chapter 13, 5 and 6, and chapter 17, 7 and 8, when they were given to Abraham.

So, I've put all these references in your handout for tonight so you can follow along. Secondly, the promise in verse 4, I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky.

Well, that was first given to Abraham in Genesis chapter 15 and 5. And then, through your offspring, all nations will be blessed. That was God's word to Abraham in Genesis chapter 12 and verse 3.

God is reiterating his promises to Abraham by now promising to bless Isaac also. But second, God is also blessing Isaac because Abraham himself has responded to God's promises by keeping the covenant.

God had commanded Abraham to do that in Genesis chapter 17 and verse 1. I've got that on the slide so you don't really have to turn to it. There he says, Walk before me faithfully and be blameless.

[5 : 27] And then a few verses later, in verse 9, God again says, As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. And that is what Abraham has done.

And in particular, there was one incident where Abraham showed obedience and faith in God when he was asked by God to bring Isaac as a boy to be sacrificed at Moriah.

And he was asked to do that even though God had promised that this child, this boy Isaac, was the offspring through whom God would fulfill all his promises. And because Abraham obeyed at that time, God had sworn immediately after that incident, so chapter 22, which again I have on the slide, God had sworn again saying, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore.

Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies and through your offspring, all nations on earth will be blessed because you have obeyed me. Can you see the similarities?

Almost phrase by phrase, God is now repeating that to Isaac in verse 4 and 5. And so, there's almost like a double guarantee, if you like, both in God's promise to Abraham, but also in Abraham's obedience to God, both of these guarantee that Isaac is actually destined to be blessed.

[6 : 57] All that without Isaac really having to do anything. God blesses Isaac because of Abraham. And that's borne out in the rest of the chapter.

We didn't get a chance to read all of it, but we'll go through it briefly now. And here we see Isaac being blessed in various ways. But more specifically, and here we get to point two, Isaac is blessed in the same way that Abraham was.

That is, God blesses Isaac just like he did Abraham. And so again, I've got a table showing exactly how. And each blessing that Isaac receives here in this chapter actually corresponds to a similar one that Abraham experienced as well.

So already in verse 1, we saw that there was a famine in the land. Well, just like in Abraham's time. And Isaac goes down to Gerar where King Abimelech is. Now this is still in the promised land.

It's somewhere between Canaan and Egypt. It's actually where the Gaza Strip is today. So I've got a little... Can you see that Gerar? That's down near the word Philistia.

[8 : 06] That's where it is. And what God is saying is, He's telling Isaac not to leave the land, even though there's a famine. Why? Because he'll look after him.

Now back in Genesis 20, Abraham had gone to Gerar too. Back then, there was also a king called Abimelech. Now we're not sure if it's the same king or whether it's just a forebear who has the same name.

But regardless of that, what we now read is that very similar things happen. So Isaac, like Abraham, lies about Rebekah. Instead of calling her his wife, he calls her his sister so as not to be killed.

Abraham did the same thing. And both of them was found out by Abimelech, whether the same person or the different person. But even though they were found out, just like Abraham, Isaac gets away scot-free.

In fact, the king commands Rebekah not to be touched, just like Sarah. And so she's protected by God, the same way Sarah was.

[9 : 13] Next, we see how God blesses Isaac and makes him rich, even in the famine. So in verses 12 to 15, we see Isaac plants crops and it yields a hundredfold.

That's very good stuff in a famine, isn't it? His wealth continues to grow and so many flocks and herds does he have that the Philistines actually envy him.

And what they do is fill up all the wells his fathers dug out of spite. Now, if you go back to chapter 13 of Genesis, you'll see too that Abraham was similarly blessed.

He too became wealthy with livestock. And as a result, there were also tensions, not between him and the Philistines, but between Abraham's herdsman and Lot, his nephew.

And like Abraham, Isaac has to move on without really having a choice. But as we turn to verses 17 to 25, what we find is that no matter where he moves, where he goes, he's still blessed.

[10 : 17] God still protects and provides for him. And here we're told that as he moves from place to place, he reopens the wells his father has dug.

These are the ones that the Philistines had filled in. And so they filled it in and he's going to dig it back out again. And although the Bible doesn't tell us about Abraham's own digging of the wells, the fact that Isaac actually gives them the same names as his father indicates that actually those wells were dug in very similar circumstances.

So, verse 20, the well is named Isaac, meaning dispute, because the herdsmen of Gerar had disputed with Isaacs. Verse 21, it's called Sidna, meaning opposition, because they quarreled over that one also.

And finally, the final one in verse 22 is Rehoboth, meaning room, because now the Lord has given us room and we will flourish in the land.

And so the wells have the same name because I think Abraham must have experienced the same sort of conflict as well and finally finding a place where there's room for him to flourish.

[11 : 34] And so Isaac, in doing all this, knows that the Lord is providing for him just like he did for his father. God's fulfilling his promise to him just as he did for his father.

And Isaac is almost following in his father's footsteps, isn't it? And well aware of that. And so it allows him to keep moving even though I think every time you dig a well and you're being asked to move away, that is heartbreaking stuff, isn't it?

I can tell you from first hand because three weeks ago I dug a small hole in the garden behind us it was only this wide, I think, and this deep and it killed my back.

As a result, I've gone to see the physio this week. Now, I'm sure Isaac's servants would have been stronger than I am but in the desert, you actually have to dig really deep to get to water.

And to water and to feed flocks and herds, that's got to be a pretty big and deep well, don't you think? So this would have been a big investment of time and effort.

[12 : 42] And yet, each time, they move on because they know that God is going to keep providing for them. Finally though, God provides a place of respite.

So in verse 23, Isaac comes to Beersheba, which again you can see on the map, is to the south, just above the word Negev. Yep, Negev meaning south.

And there, they find a place of respite. And here, the Lord appears to Isaac just as he had done to Abraham and says, 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 Isaac actually responds just like his father did in Genesis 12.

What he does is he builds an altar, he calls on the name of the Lord, and he even pitches a tent. And if you go back to Genesis 12, those are the three things, the three very things that Abraham does himself.

[13 : 46] So again, you are seeing whatever is happening to Abraham is now happening to Isaac. And then finally, Abimelech comes out to meet Isaac. So he comes from Gerar to Beersheba, bringing his advisors and commander with him.

And guess what? That's right. This very thing happened to Abraham as well. Genesis chapter 21. Just like with Abraham, Abimelech recognizes that the Lord is with Isaac.

So verse 28. And therefore, he wishes to swear a peace treaty with him. He says, let's make a treaty so that you will not harm us just as we did not molest you.

Now that's probably strictly not true, is it? But Isaac, peace-loving man that he is, he agrees, and that night they drink and they feast, and then they dig another well. Seems to be a trend.

They find water, and Isaac calls the well Sheba, meaning oath, which is where the town Beersheba comes from. But again, this town name, Beersheba, is not because of the oath that Isaac now makes, but actually, it's because of the earlier oath that Abraham and Abimelech had made in Genesis 21.

[15 : 00] Because if you go back to Genesis 21, you'll find that the town there was already called Beersheba. Now I've gone through, you know, step by step, every detail, but really, can you see, can you see that all these parallels?

It's too many for it to be coincidental, isn't it? God's saying that he's intent on fulfilling his promises to bless Isaac the same way that he did his father.

And for Isaac, that's an assurance that God will be with him and that God will bless him. Well, that's pretty much the chapter in summary.

And I guess all of us, as we read it, would wish if only we had a life like Isaac. If, for example, if only we had some word from God that says, you know, relax, Vincent, relax Hannah, relax Florence, I'm going to be with you and I will bless you.

There's no need for you to worry about anything. I've got your back. It would be wonderful, wouldn't it? You know, more stress about, you know, the jobs that we have to find, having to pass exams, having to find a wife, having enough to, you know, feed your family.

[16 : 16] It would be really great if we had that kind of word from the Lord, wouldn't it? Well, friends, if you really want God to bless you, if you want that same kind of assurance that Isaac had, then let me give you the good news.

God has indeed made such a promise to you. Yes, you heard me correctly. God has promised to bless each of us. But before you get too excited and you start dreaming of flocks and herds or riches and wealth that you'll be swimming in, let me add that the blessing that I'm talking about may not be exactly what you wish or expect.

That is, it's not right to go straight from reading that God is blessing Isaac in this chapter to thinking, ah, therefore, he must bless me as well if only I claim these promises in this chapter.

To do that would be to misapply the passage because God's promises here are only given to Abraham and Isaac. And unless you are direct descendant of Abraham and Isaac, anyone here know that they are direct descendant?

Those promises are not for you. And even the Jews today, those who are direct descendants of Abraham and Isaac, well, these promises are actually now fulfilled in a different way, not in the way of sheeps and cattle.

[17 : 42] Now, actually, there's one promise in this entire chapter that's specifically for us. I wonder whether you notice it. Anyone notice? There is one promise that actually is for us. Anyone?

Someone said one? Correct. Thank you, Stephen. It's in verse 4. Look there and see what it says. Through your offspring, which is in the singular, all nations on earth will be blessed.

That's right. All of us are part of that all nations. So, actually, there is one promise for us. And so, how is this fulfilled? Well, fast forward to the New Testament and we know who the offspring is, don't we?

This anticipated descendant of Abraham and Isaac is none other than Jesus. And so, when we turn to the New Testament, we actually find page after page of God's promise that we will be blessed, but only in Jesus, only in Christ.

And when I say page after page, I'm not exaggerating because Jesus is the focus of every book in the New Testament. So, if you're here tonight and you're trying to understand what Christianity is all about, then let me sum it up in one word for you.

[18 : 57] It's all about Jesus. And what the New Testament says is that only in Jesus will we find God's blessing. Only in Jesus will we find salvation and hope and life forevermore.

Now, I'm just going to show you one example tonight. I could go through every page in the New Testament, literally, and we'll be able to be here for the rest of the week. But for tonight, I just want to show you from the letter of Ephesians what I mean by this.

So, please turn with me to Ephesians chapter 1. It's page 1173, I think, if I'm not right, wrong. So, turn to page 1173. And let me start with, let me start by looking at verse 3.

And that's where it says, Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in the heavenly realms and here's the phrase with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Now, that's how comprehensive it is. Every spiritual blessing. But notice the operative phrase in Christ. We're only blessed in Christ.

[20 : 18] And if you read the rest of the verses up to about chapter 14, verse 14, every blessing that is then described in this passage has that rider. It has either the rider in him, in Christ, or through him.

And if you want to know what it means to be in Christ, then one way to think about it is that it's actually similar to what Isaac experienced. To be in Christ is to be blessed because of Christ and just like Christ.

Let me say it again. To be in Christ is to be blessed because of Christ and just like Christ. So I could have, for instance, described earlier that Isaac was being blessed because he was in Abraham.

That's the same sort of analogy there. And so for us, we're blessed, first of all, because of Christ. He's the one who obeyed God the Father in response to the promises that God has made about him, just like Abraham did.

He obeyed the covenant. But secondly, we're also blessed just like Christ. That is, whatever Christ himself attains because of his faithfulness to God, we inherit as well.

[21 : 29] That's why, in verse 5 of Ephesians, we have adoption to sonship. That is, we have the sonship that is actually Christ's sonship. Or later, in verse 14, we're told that the Holy Spirit is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance.

That is the inheritance that we share that actually belongs to Christ. And also, in verse 20, Christ is raised and seated at God's right hand, we're told.

And then if you flick over to chapter 2 and verse 6, we're told that we too are raised and seated with Christ, that is, reigning with him. In other words, just as Isaac was blessed like Abraham, we too will be blessed like Jesus.

We share fully in Christ's inheritance. inheritance. Everything that Christ inherits, we inherit as well. That's the amazing thing, that's the amazing blessing that we have by being in Christ.

But to be in Christ, that is, what we have to do is put our trust in Jesus and acknowledge his death for us, which is what both Sherry and Florence did tonight.

[22 : 41] They've done it, sorry, they've done it before tonight, but in being baptized, they've borne witness to the fact that they've put their trust in Jesus. And so like us, they too are now being blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

They have peace with God. They are loved by him. They have a secure hope for eternity. And they have a life of purpose now. Now, these things may not sound as tangible as Isaac's blessings of flock and herds.

But do you know what? These are eternal blessings. These are blessings that will outlast any material blessing that we have on earth now. That's way, way better than sheep and herds and flocks.

But does that mean, though, that God won't bless us now? Because, after all, we think, I still have personal needs, don't I? And for many of us, the uncertainty about our present life, about our future, these things weigh on our minds, don't they?

They make us anxious and they make us worry. Well, let me encourage you by coming back to Genesis chapter 26, page 25. Because here's what God's promise on that front is founded on.

[24 : 07] I wonder whether you notice that of the four times that Isaac is mentioned as being blessed, that three times is accompanied by another promise.

Can you see that? And that promise is that God will be with him. That's what God promises in both verse 3 and verse 24.

I will be with you or I am with you, therefore I'll bless you. And then it's also found in verse 28, this time on Abimelech's lip. But each time, God's blessing follows from the fact of God's presence.

And because Isaac knew that God was with him, it actually freed him from needing certainty about his physical situation. And that's why he didn't need to run to Egypt in a famine.

That's why he didn't need to be fixated at staying at a certain place, at a certain well, once there was water that, you know, no, I can't leave this place anymore because this is where my security lies. No, he could hold on to these things lightly because he knew that wherever he went, God was going to be with him and therefore, God was going to bless him.

[25 : 17] And we have that promise too in our New Testament reading that Karen gave us tonight. That was the promise that Jesus gave his disciples as he was ascending into heaven.

And so, if we are disciples of Jesus and in Christ as well, then we have the same promise that he will be with us always until the end of the age.

And when he's with us, he will be there to bless us wherever we may be. And so, what he wants us to focus on instead, according to that verse, is to make disciples wherever we find ourselves, to go about the business of telling others about Jesus, of belonging to a church and growing as disciples, teaching others and ourselves to obey his commands.

And we can be sure that because he is with us, he will provide for all our needs, whatever that might be. And he will guide us in our future steps. Now, I'm not claiming that I'm a master at this yet.

I still have worries and anxieties. But knowing this promise of God's presence is actually a really liberating thing because it frees us from anxiety to have to know everything about our future.

[26 : 37] It helps us to trust that even if things are difficult for the moment, God is actually watching over us. And he gives us the patience then to wait on God's timing for things.

It's not that we can't plan, but it means that we can hold lightly to our plans, that if our plans should change, then God knows what he's doing.

So I wonder whether you might be in that situation tonight, that you're anxious, you're not quite sure what the future may be. We'll hear tonight the encouragement that God will be with us in Christ.

And therefore, he will walk with us and bless us. Maybe not with the flocks and the herds and the whatever or the certainty that we want, but he will watch over us and care and provide for us just as he did for Isaac.

And if tonight you haven't put your trust in Jesus, but you want this kind of blessing in your life, then let me urge you to then seek out the Lord in the Bible. Many of us in this church can help you to do that.

[27 : 45] So come and talk to me or to others in the church tonight over dinner, perhaps. But for those of us who are already Christians, then let us conclude by remembering that God is with us always and to know that peace that comes from trusting in him.

Let me pray now and ask the Lord to help us do just that. Let's pray. Father, we want to thank you for your promise to be with us. and this is a great promise because you are the creator and for the creator to be with us by your spirit is a wonderful thing.

For you not only promise to be with us, yet you know us to our innermost being and so you know all our needs and you love us and care for us because you've already sent your son Jesus to die for us.

So Lord, if we are anxious tonight, give us an assurance that you will be with us and help us for those of us who are already walking by faith to keep doing so until the rest, the end of our lives, for the rest of our lives.

We pray this and ask this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen.