**GOD BLESSES ISAAC’S FAMILY**

 February 25, 2017

Genesis 26:1-35

Key Verse 26:3a “Stay in this land for a while, and I will be with you and will bless you.

Out of 50 chapters of Genesis, Abraham’s story is written in 12 chapters and Jacob’s 9 chapters while Isaac’s story only 3 chapters. Actually chapter 26 is the only chapter that focuses on Isaac. Compared to Abraham and Jacob, Isaac seemed to live a quiet life without much excitement. But we will see that Isaac lived a very challenging life with famine, persecution and other struggles to survive. Even in the midst of these struggles, Isaac was so much blessed and his faith grew. Not only so, he was a good influence to the unbelieving world around him. We can learn from Isaac’s life among the Philistines how to live as God’s people in a godless world, and how to bear God’s blessings.

Look at verse 1. “Now there was a famine in the land besides the earlier famine of Abraham’s time and Isaac went to Abimelek king of the Philistines in Gerar.” Back in Genesis 12 we learned that there had been a severe famine in the land of Canaan and that Abraham went down to Egypt to avoid the famine. Abraham’s journey to Egypt had not been made by faith, and Abraham had been a spiritual failure there. Now there was another famine during Isaac’s time. Famines would happen in Israel when the rains did not come during the traditionally rainy months from October to April. When the food ran out, people’s very lives were at stake. Isaac had a big family. He had a wife and two sons and many servants and flocks to take care of. It became a challenge to survive.

When Isaac faced a famine, he went to Gerar. Gerar was a Philistine territory and where his father Abraham had been earlier. Look at verse 2-3a “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.” We see that evidently Isaac planned to go down to Egypt. This was a very common thing for the people of Canaan to do during a famine. They went down to Egypt because there was always food and the land was affected less by famine because of the Nile river. At that time the Egyptian economy was strong and there were many job opportunities there. It was common sense to go down to Egypt and avoid the famine. But God gave Isaac a different direction. God told him not to go down to Egypt but stay where God told him to live. The place God told Isaac to live was Gerar where Isaac was then staying. Gerar was in Philistine territory but it was a part of the land of Canaan that God had promised to give to Abraham and his descendants.

God’s command always comes with his promises of blessings. What blessings did God promise to Isaac if he obeyed? First, God promised that he would be with him and bless him. God’s being with us is the best blessing we can have. God’s being with us does not mean that we will have a trouble free life. It means that God will protect us from all dangers and lead us in the best way. Second, God promised Isaac that he and his descendants would possess all these lands including the place where he was staying now. This was the main reason why God told Isaac to stay where he was – It was his way of staking a claim to the promise land. And it was an act of faith testifying that he believed this land really was his, though others were living there. Third, God promised him that he would give him numerous descendants like the stars in the sky. Lastly all nations on earth would be blessed through his offspring. So many blessings, even to bless all peoples on earth.

In fact, it seems that God’s blessing was so abundant compared to Isaac’s seemingly small decision of just staying where he was. How was it possible for him to get such abundant blessings by his obedience? It was because he would benefit from his father Abraham. God kept telling Isaac why he wanted to bless him. God says, “For to you and your descendants I will give all these lands and will confirm the oath I swore to your father Abraham. Through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because Abraham obeyed me and kept my requirements, my commands, my decrees and my laws.” When Abraham had obeyed God by offering his son Isaac, God swore to him that he would bless him and make his descendants numerous and through his offspring all nations would be blessed. These blessings that God had given to Abraham are the same ones that God now gave to Isaac. So Isaac inherited the promise of his father. His father had done all the hard work and Isaac would reap the benefit. Here we also learn Isaac’s position in God’s redemptive history. God did not just mention Isaac himself, but also his descendants. This means that his role would be to maintain God’s blessing that he received from his father, and hand it down to his children. So we also learn how important it is to pass our faith on to the next generation; to our children, and also to college students. If we have Christian parents, then we can also learn from Isaac to honor the spiritual heritage that we have received from them.

Through Isaac’s life, we see that staying in the promised land did not mean a trouble free life. Rather, Egypt was the easy life, and the promised land was the land of famine and persecution. Living in the land of promise, some people have job problems or serious financial difficulties or they are persecuted. We should not think that following God means the beginning of life on easy street. Far from it, Jesus described Christian life as a narrow way, requiring constant effort. To say that Isaac’s mission was to maintain God’s blessing should not lead us to think that it was an easy mission.

How did Isaac respond? Verse 6 says, “So Isaac stayed in Gerar.” It must have been difficult for Isaac to stay. First he felt financial pressure. What good is a large flock if you cannot feed them? They could all die and then he would have nothing. In verse 8, we learn that Isaac stayed in Gerar a long time. This implies that it was a long famine. Isaac had to struggle daily to survive. It always seemed a good alternative to go down to Egypt and solve his food problem the easy way. But Isaac made a decision to obey God and stay in the land, holding on to God’s promises. According to verse 12, Isaac had to change his career in order to stay in Gerar. He had been a shepherd. Now he became a farmer in order to stay in Gerar. In fact, many of our missionaries changed their jobs in order to stay here as missionaries. One missionary was an artist in Korea. But when he came to Canada, he became a math teacher.

While staying in the land, famine was not the only problem that Isaac faced. He was afraid of the powerful and wild Philistines. Philistines were known for their violence and immorality. He had fear of losing his life because of his wife. So he lied that Rebekah was his sister. Earlier in Genesis, we find that Isaac’s father Abraham had made this same mistake twice. It was for the selfish reason to protect himself. Abraham also had worried about being killed because of his beautiful wife Sarah. I am sure that Isaac did not learn from his father’s mistake because he had not been born at that time. But it is amazing how quickly children pick up their father’s bad habits. I think Abimelek was a little suspicious and so he kept his eyes open and one day he caught Isaac and Rebekah behaving not at all like brother and sister. When confronted, Isaac confessed, and explained his fear, and Abimelek generously provided protection. Abimelek was not as wicked as Isaac had thought. He had some sense of morality. In this event we see the hand of God’s protection and the fulfillment of his promise to be with Isaac.

Not only was God with Isaac but God blessed Isaac. Isaac planted crops in the land and that same year reaped a hundredfold increase of what was sown. At that time people generally reaped between 25 and 50 fold of what they had sown. If we count the number of grains on one stalk, the number is usually between 25 and 50. So getting 100 fold was nothing but God’s blessing. It is especially so in the time of famine. Isaac came to possess so many flocks and herds and servants. While everyone else suffered from famine, Isaac became very prosperous. Here we learn an important lesson that when we obey God and live by faith God will bless us. And his blessing is abundant. Even if we face a famine and go through many fears and difficulties of life, he will be with us and help us to get through. When we live by faith and receive his abundant blessing, we can be joyful and happy.

Through God’s abundant blessing, Isaac became very wealthy. But Isaac’s great success brought jealousy from the Philistines. When the Philistines who owned small flocks of sheep saw Isaac’s huge flocks and herds passing by leaving a huge dust cloud in their wake, the Philistines became very unhappy. They said to each other. “This guy is a foreigner but he is richer than us. His flocks will eat up all the grass! We have got to do something.” Not long before, the Philistines had been friendly with Isaac, and he had the king’s protection. But then they became hostile toward Isaac and stopped up all his wells with earth. Then Abimelek, who had protected Isaac earlier, also became hostile and told him, “Move away from us; you have become too powerful for us.” You can imagine how much Isaac wanted to move away from Gerar. But God had said, “Stay in this land.” So Isaac moved out of the town into the Valley of Gerar. There he continued to prosper.

The Philistines became more aggressive. They began to claim his wells as their own. Isaac’s servants dug a fresh well in the valley of Gerar. But the Philistine herdsmen quarreled with Isaac’s herdsmen and said, “The water is ours!” So Isaac named the well “dispute” and moved on and dug another. We don’t know how many times this happened, but evidently it became a way of life for Isaac. How hard it must have been for him to stay in the land of the Philistines, and continually give in to their harassment! It was very hard to dig a well, and even after investing so much, there was never a guarantee that you would hit water. How unfair and unjust it was that Isaac’s servants did all the hard work of digging the wells and then the Philistines simply took them. The Philistines threatened Isaac’s survival. But God told him to stay, so he stayed—and kept digging wells. God kept his promise, He was with Isaac and blessed him.

We don’t like to give in or to see a man give in like Isaac did. He seems to be a coward. We would rather see a man fight and win. But Isaac’s way resembles Jesus’ way. He trusted in God’s blessing, so God blessed him. Isaac was fighting a spiritual battle. In other words, Isaac fought his enemies with “giving-in-faith.” He did not fight for his rights; he did not fight even for the wells that belonged to him. When the Philistines who envied him demanded a well that he had just dug, he gave in and dug another. Each time, God blessed him with abundant water—even in the time of famine. He trusted God, so he could give in. Wells of water were more precious than oil wells in that famine-ridden land. To find fresh water every time he dug a well was a miracle—and a sure sign of God’s blessing. The wells Isaac dug represented God’s life and blessing poured out on him.

But in the course of living this kind of life, great fear came into Isaac’s heart. He finally found a place where he could settle without being harassed. He named that well “Room for me,” and should have been at peace. But it was here that fear caught up with him. Perhaps it was the accumulation of fears built up during the years of giving in without a fight. It is like someone harasses you every day in front of your house, and one day he is not there. How would you feel about that? You will be fearful, wondering what he is planning to do next. When fear invades a person’s heart, it immobilizes him. It drives out faith and trust.

So Isaac went to Beersheba. He seemed to live a passive life, avoiding any struggle with men; but actually he was very active—he struggled with God. He went to Beersheba to pray and seek God. Beersheba was an important place. It is where his father Abraham planted a tamarisk tree and called on the name of the Lord. 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.” Isaac worshiped God. He accepted God’s word, built an altar and called on the name of the Lord. He pitched his tent there and his servants dug another well. This was a turning point in his life. His situation had not changed, but his heart had. His old gnawing fear was gone. He depended on God, not on himself.

The change in Isaac was perceived by the people he had feared most—King Abimelek and General Phicol. When they came to him, he took the initiative and asked, “Why have you come? You were hostile to me and sent me away.” They answered, “We saw clearly that the Lord was with you; so we said, ‘There ought to be a treaty with you, that you do us no harm.’” They recognized Isaac as God’s servant. They acknowledged that all of his blessings had come from God. These two godless men saw God in Isaac and they wanted to be his friends. They became believers in God, and men who feared God. Isaac’s humble and faithful life bore fruit in the godless society of his time. Isaac welcomed them and prepared a feast. They ate together and left in peace. And Isaac’s servants came saying, “We dug another well and found water!” Though Isaac seemed to lose small battles, he won the final war through his faith and meekness.

May God’s people live among the people of the godless world in such a way that men may come to God. God wants his people to be a holy people and a kingdom of priests in the world.