Two Lessons to Learn From Isaac

26 Now there was a famine in the land, besides the earlier famine that occurred in the days of Abraham. So Isaac went to Gerar, to Abimelech the king of the Philistines.

2Jehovah appeared to him and said, Do not go down into Egypt. Stay in the land where I tell you to live. 3Stay in this land and I will be with you and bless you; because I will give all of this land to you and your descendants—I will confirm the oath which I swore to Abraham your father. 4I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and I will give to your descendants all these lands. And by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; 5because Abraham obeyed me and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws. 6So Isaac stayed in Gerar.

7Now when the men of Gerar asked him about his wife, he told them, She is my sister. He was afraid to say, She is my wife; because he thought, The men of this place may kill me so they can have Rebekah. Such was Isaac's fear because Rebekah was beautiful in appearance. 8After he had been there for a long time, it happened one day that Abimelech the king of the Philistines looked out of a window and saw Isaac caressing Rebekah his wife. 9Abimelech summoned Isaac and said, She surely is your wife. Why did you say, She is my sister? Isaac replied, Because I thought, I might lose my life on account of her. 10Then Abimelech said, What is this that you have done to us? One of the people might easily have slept with your wife and you would then have caused us to become guilty of a sin. 11So Abimelech charged all the people, Whoever touches this man or his wife shall surely be put to death.

12Isaac planted crops in that land and that very year he reaped a hundredfold, because Jehovah blessed him 13The man became rich; and his possessions increased until he had become very wealthy. 14He had great flocks and herds, and a great many servants. And the Philistines envied him. 15So all the wells which his father's servants had dug in the days of his father Abraham, the Philistines plugged up, filling them with dirt. 16And Abimelech said to Isaac, Depart from us; for you have become much stronger than us. 17So Isaac departed from there and encamped in the valley of Gerar, and settled there. 18Isaac reopened the wells which had been dug in the days of Abraham his father, because the Philistines had plugged them up after the death of Abraham. He gave them the same names his father had given them. 19When Isaac's servants were digging in the valley they discovered there a source of spring water. 20But the herdsmen of Gerar quarreled with Isaac's herdsmen, saying, The water belongs to us. So Isaac named the well, Esek,* because they contended with him. 21Then they dug another well, and they quarreled over that one also. So he named it Sitnah.** 22He moved on from there and dug yet another well. And they did not contend for it. So he named it Rehoboth,*** declaring, Now Jehovah has made room for us and we shall be fruitful in the land.

23From there he went up to Beer-sheba. 24Jehovah appeared to him that same night and said, I am the God of Abraham your father. Fear not, for I am with you, and I will bless you, and I will multiply your descendants for the sake of my servant Abraham. 25Isaac built an altar there and called on the name of Jehovah. There he pitched his tent and there his servants dug a well. ...

27 Now when Isaac was old and his eyes were so weak that he could no longer see, he called for Esau his elder son, and said to him, My son. And he replied, Here I am. 2And
he said, Look, I am old, and I do not know when the day of my death may come. 3 Now, therefore, I ask you, take your weapons—your quiver and your bow—go out into the field, and bring me back some wild game. 4 Prepare for me some of the tasty food that I love, and bring it to me so that I may eat. Do this so that I may give you my blessing before I die. (Gen. 26:1-25; Gen. 27:1-4)

*Esek means Contention, **Sitnah means Enmity, ***Rehoboth means Room for us

Introduction

My dear father walked with me the first six miles of the way. I was on my way to Glasgow where I was to begin my missionary internship in preparation for a gospel ministry in the New Hebrides in the South Pacific. My father’s counsels and tears and heavenly conversation on that parting journey are as fresh on my heart as if it had been yesterday. Tears are on my cheeks as freely now as then whenever memory steals me away to that scene. For the last half-mile or so we walked on together in almost unbroken silence. My father’s lips kept moving in silent prayers for me and his tears fell fast when our eyes met each other with looks for which all speech was vain.

He halted upon reaching the appointed parting place. He grasped my hand firmly for a minute in silence and then solemnly and affectionately said, “God bless you my son. Your father’s God prosper you and keep you from all evil.” Unable to say more, his lips kept moving in silent prayer. In tears we embraced and parted.

The appearance of my father when we parted, his advice, prayers and tears, have often, often, all through life risen vividly before my mind. That scene not only helped by God’s grace to keep me pure from the prevailing sins, but also stimulated me in all my studies that I might not fall short of his hopes and in all my Christian duties that I might faithfully follow his shining example. (The testimony of John G. Paton, recorded in In Covenant, Feb/Mar. ’97, p.7.)

As covenant children, let us be careful to imitate the godly qualities of our spiritual forefathers—but not their shortcomings. With this in mind, let us consider two lessons to be learned from the life of Isaac.

I. Be Careful to Develop a Christ-like Meekness

What exactly is a Christ-like meekness? It means accepting God’s will, rather than insisting on having our own way. It means trusting in God no matter what He asks of us. It means patient endurance stemming from confidence in God.

Isaac exhibits these qualities—this Christ-like meekness—in the incident described in Genesis 26:12-22. When the Lord causes Isaac to prosper, he becomes the object of the Philistines’ envy (vs. 14.) Motivated by malicious envy
and fear, the Philistines plug up all the wells Isaac’s father, Abraham, had dug (vs. 15.) At the request of Abimelech, Isaac departs and resettled in the valley of Gerar—there he re-opens other wells previously dug by Abraham (vs. 16-18.) When Isaac discovers a source of spring water (vs.19,) the herdsman of Gerar claim the water as belonging to them (vs. 20.) Consequently, Isaac moves on and digs another well, but once again the herdsman of Gerar raise a controversy, and for a second time Isaac relinquishes the water rights and moves on (vs. 21-22.) Rather than demanding his rights and setting off a full-scale war, Isaac displays a Christ-like meekness—cp. Isaiah 53:7-8, where it is said of Christ,

He was oppressed and afflicted, but he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is being led to slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before her shearsers, so he did not open his mouth. By persecution and condemnation he was taken away. But who of his generation considered the fact that he was cut off out of the land of the living for the transgression of my people whose punishment was laid on him. (Isa. 53:7-8)

All the while Isaac’s confidence was in the Lord, who was faithful to provide for him: “He moved on from there and dug yet another well. And they did not contend for it. So he named it Rehoboth [meaning, “Room for us”], declaring, Now Jehovah has made room for us and we shall be fruitful in the land” (Gen. 26:22.) Notice how Isaac’s character and actions are in striking contrast to the description of Ishmael. In Genesis 25:18 the life of Ishmael is summed up with the words, “he lived in hostility towards—[literally, “he lived against”]—all his brothers.” Note, also, Genesis 16:12, which says of him, “He shall be like a wild donkey among men. His hand shall be against every one, and every one’s hand against him; and he shall live in hostility towards all his brothers.” Ishmael, we might say, was “the tough guy.” In contemporary terms, you might picture him telling his social worker, “When I was still a kid, my father kicked me and my mom out of the house (Gen. 21:14). I grew up on the ‘streets’ of the wilderness, I learned to fend for myself and I take nothing from nobody!” It appears that his hard experiences early in life turned him into a rebel: hard, embittered, alienated, self-reliant, the complete opposite of Isaac.

When confronted with the injustices described in Genesis 26:12-22, Ishmael would never have done what Isaac did, but Isaac did exactly what Abraham had done before him, note Genesis 13:5-9,

Now Lot also, who went with Abram, had flocks and herds and tents. And the land was not able to sustain them, that they might live together; because their possessions were so great, they could not live together. There occurred a conflict between the herdsmen of Abram’s cattle and the herdsmen of Lot’s cattle; (and the Canaanite and the Perizzite were then living in the land.) Then Abram said to Lot, I beg you, let there be no conflict between me and you, nor between my herdsmen and your herdsmen, for we are brothers. Is not the whole
land before you? I ask you, please separate yourself from me. If you will go to the left, then I will go to the right. Or if you will go to the right, I will go to the left. (Gen. 13:5-9)

As we have seen, Isaac’s childhood was not all that different from that of Ishmael’s; there were some significant similarities. Abraham deeply loved both of his sons, (note especially Genesis 21:10-11, printed below,) a passage describing the expulsion of his son Ishmael:

Therefore she said to Abraham, Get rid of this maidservant and her son; for the son of this maidservant shall not be heir with my son, Isaac. 11 Now this matter was very distressful to Abraham because it concerned his son. (Gen.21:10-11)

In obedience to the LORD his God, Abraham offered up each of his sons. He sent Ishmael and Hagar away into the wilderness, which would have meant certain death, had not the LORD spared the child and his mother (Gen. 21:12,14.) Abraham placed Isaac on the altar of sacrifice, (Gen.22:2-3.) The major difference between the two sons is that Isaac imitated the Christ-like meekness, which he saw in his father, Abraham.

The meekness Isaac displays in Genesis 26 is just the latest expression of the meekness that characterized his life, note Genesis 22:9, “Then they came to the place of which God had told him. There Abraham built the altar, and arranged the wood upon it. Then he bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar on top of the wood.” When you have allowed your life to be sacrificed unto God, it becomes easier to give up the things of this world for His sake. When you receive life back from God, as Isaac did (cp. Gen. 22:11-12a, printed below,) you know that you can trust Him to provide for your needs and at last bestow upon you the eternal inheritance.

But the angel of Jehovah called to him out of heaven and said, Abraham, Abraham. And Abraham said, Here I am. 12 Then he said, Do not lay your hand upon the boy, neither do any harm to him. (Gen. 22:11-12a)

As spiritual sons and daughters, let us be careful to develop the Christ-like meekness we see exhibited in our godly forefathers, 1) accepting the will of God, rather than insisting on having our own way, as Christ our Savior did in the Garden of Gethsemane when He prayed, “My Father, ... not as I will, but as you will” (Matt. 26:39); 2) trusting God no matter what He may ask of us, as Christ our Savior did, when, hanging upon the cross, He prayed, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Lk. 23:46); and 3) exhibiting a patient endurance stemming from confidence in God, as was true of Christ, who is described as the one who, “for the joy set before him, endured the cross” (Heb. 12:2.)

Note: Christ-like meekness does not mean that we may never protest against any injustice we might suffer. In Genesis 21:25 we find Abraham protesting the unjust
treatment he suffered at the hands of Abimelech’s servants: “Then Abraham rebuked Abimelech concerning the well that Abimelech’s servants had violently taken away from him.”

But Christ-like meekness does mean that we do not take matters into our own hands; rather, when we are denied justice by legitimate means, we give our cause to God, as did our Lord Himself: “when he suffered, he did not threaten; rather, he committed himself to him who judges righteously” (1 Pet. 2:23.)

II. Be Careful Not to Depart from that Christ-like Meekness

Genesis 26:1 informs us of a time of famine in the land of Canaan; and Isaac went to Abimelech the king of the Philistines, instead of looking to the L ORD. Apparently, Isaac’s original intention was to go all the way to Egypt—which in ancient times was a leading grain producer—before he was intercepted by the L ORD (vs. 2-5.)

As Isaac takes up his residence in Gerar, the men of the place inquire about Rebekah, and Isaac introduces her as his sister out of fear for his life. He does so just after the L ORD had appeared to him and promised His divine protection (vs. 2-3.)

At this point in his life, Isaac departed from a Christ-like meekness and resorted to deceit in an effort to insure his personal safety—just as Abraham had done before him (Gen. 20:1-2.) Just like his father, Abraham, Isaac’s deceit is eventually exposed to his own shame (vs. 8-11.)

Genesis 27:1-4 relates an incident that occurred in the twilight years of Isaac’s life: his effort to bestow upon Esau the covenant blessing. Esau was the elder of Isaac’s twin sons, and he was also the son who was special to him, as noted in Genesis 25:28, “Now Isaac loved Esau, because he ate of his wild game.” So it was that Isaac sought to bestow upon him the covenant blessing.

Genesis 27:4 reports Isaac’s instructions to Esau: “Prepare for me some of the tasty food that I love, and bring it to me so that I may eat. Do this so that I may give you my blessing before I die.” Later that day, thinking that he is addressing Esau, Isaac pronounces his blessing:

Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field that Jehovah has blessed. 28May God give you of the dew of heaven, and of the abundance of the earth—plenty of grain and new wine. 29May nations serve you, and peoples bow down to you. May you be lord over your brothers, and may your mother’s sons bow down to you. May those who curse you be cursed, and those who bless you be blessed. (Gen. 27:27-29)
At this point in his life, Isaac departed from a Christ-like meekness and sought to overrule God’s revealed will in favor of his own will. At the time of their birth, the Lord had revealed that it was His sovereign will that the covenant blessing should be bestowed upon the younger son, Jacob. In Genesis 25:23 we read, “Jehovah said to [Rebekah]. Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples coming from your bosom shall be separated. One people shall be stronger than the other, and the older shall serve the younger.”

This was the same thing Abraham had sought to do on an earlier occasion. Genesis 17:18-19 records his attempt to knowingly overrule the revealed will of God:

> And Abraham said to God, Oh that Ishmael might live before you! [i.e., may Ishmael receive the Lord’s blessing as the chosen heir of the covenant promise] 19 But God said, No; on the contrary, Sarah, your wife, shall bear a son to you, and you shall name him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. (Gen. 17:18-19)

As spiritual sons and daughters, let us be careful not to depart from that Christ-like meekness, which is precious in the sight of God.

Beware of those occasions of crisis when we are tempted to resort to our own ingenuity (or even deceit,) or resort to the men and institutions of this world, instead of exhibiting a steadfast confidence in the Lord our God. When so tempted, let us resist with the assurance given in Hebrews 13:5b-6a, “the Lord himself has said, I will by no means fail you, neither will I in any way forsake you. 6 So, with sure confidence we say, The Lord is my helper; I will not fear.” Note, too, such passages as Psalm 33:18-20 and Psalm 50:15,

> The eyes of Jehovah are on those who fear him, on those who hope in his lovingkindness; 19 to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine. 20 Our soul has waited for Jehovah; he is our help and our shield. (Psl.33:18-20)

> Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me. (Psl. 50:15)

Beware of those occasions when the impulse of our own will and our own desire or ambition asserts itself and threatens to pose as a rival to the revealed will of God. Let us bear in mind the promise and warning of Proverbs 28:14, “Blessed is the man who always fears the Lord; but he who hardens his heart shall fall into mischief.”
Conclusion

As the Scriptures record for us the life of Abraham and Isaac, there are two things we discover: 1) even the best of godly fathers sets an imperfect example; and 2) we are prone to imitate our forefathers both for good and for bad.

As covenant children, let us be careful to imitate the godly qualities of our spiritual forefathers, but not their shortcomings. In particular, let us be careful to develop the Christ-like meekness we see exhibited in their lives; and let us be just as careful not to depart from that meekness, which is so very precious in the sight of God.