

Isaac: With Abraham, Twins and Trials

Genesis 25-26

Focus Verse

“The LORD appeared to Isaac and said, ‘... 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.’ ” – Genesis 26:2-3

- The Passing of the Patriarch – Genesis 25:1-20
- The Battle of the Brothers – Genesis 25:21-34
- The Dilemmas of Daily Life – Genesis 26

Engage

God knows everything about everyone and everything. His wisdom transcends time and culture. He understands the invisible realities behind what is visible. He knows the deepest truths about every person. As humans, the scope of what we know is limited. What we can see, experience, study and understand informs our choices and opinions. Scientific advancement expands human knowledge, but there is so much no one really understands. Our own thoughts, emotions, motives and personalities are so complex we do not even understand ourselves. The gap between God’s unlimited knowledge and our limited understanding explains our inability to comprehend all God does. Everything God declares and dictates upholds the full spectrum of His perfect character. **God’s choices are always good and right.**

God chose Abraham, but not because Abraham was worthy. In today’s lesson, God declares the very different destiny of twin brothers before they have drawn a breath or made a choice. Are God’s choices ever arbitrary or unjust? If God causes what He declares to come to pass, can people be held responsible? These very real questions emerge from this passage. How comfortable are you with the fact that God understands what you cannot? God’s dealings with people rests on His unlimited wisdom and absolute justice. **We cannot understand all of God’s ways, but we can trust Him.**

The Passing of the Patriarch – Genesis 25:1-20

Abraham’s Final Days – 25:1-6

Abraham’s story reflects God’s faithfulness.

From his beginning steps of obedience to the end of his life, God walked with Abraham. Abraham’s faith grew, despite missteps and obstacles. His story is not a story of a perfect man, but of a perfect God who gently and consistently led him forward in faith.

After Sarah’s death, Abraham married Keturah, who bore him six sons. God continued to bless Abraham’s life and legacy. God clearly indicated Isaac was Abraham’s heir who would carry forward God’s covenant promises. Abraham left Isaac everything he owned – flocks, wealth, servants and the cave and field of Machpelah near Hebron (Mamre) where Sarah was buried. Abraham gave gifts to his other sons and sent them away to live in the east, away from Isaac. **Abraham did all he could to secure peace for Isaac, the heir of God’s covenant.**

Abraham’s Death and Burial – 25:7-11

God fulfilled His promise to Abraham, “You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age” (Genesis 15:15). Traditionally, listing the age at death honors a life well-lived. The passage captures the fullness of Abraham’s life as he “died at a good old age” and “an old man and full of years.” The later years of human life bring physical challenges but also rich opportunities. **Those who have walked with God over long years and through many life experiences can approach old age as a time to celebrate and share the wonders of God’s faithfulness.**

The common phrase, “breathed his last,” first appears here and is used throughout the Bible to mean death.¹ Another common phrase, “gathered to his people,” here refers to Abraham’s reunion with Sarah and believers in God in the unseen realm. Ishmael

joined Isaac to bury their father's body with Sarah's. **This scene forecasts the honor of Abraham and his great name shared among his descendants.**

Abraham's Legacy – 25:12-20

Abraham died, but his legacy continued through his sons. The Old Testament typically lists the lineage outside the covenant first then the messianic line last. Such is the case here, with the records of Ishmael and Isaac.

Ishmael's Descendants – 25:12-18

Ishmael's account offers important details:

- His mother is identified as Sarah's slave, Hagar the Egyptian.

- He fathered 12 tribal rulers over specific lands – just as God promised Hagar and Abraham.
- He lived a long life – 137 years when “he breathed his last” and was “gathered to *his people*.”
- His people lived in a different place than Isaac's family.
- Hostility and tribal infighting characterized his people and proved God's prophecy.

Isaac's Descendants – 25:19-20

Isaac's descendants represent God's covenant people. These two verses summarize Isaac's history and set the stage for his story, which follows.

The Doctrine of Election

Scripture uses the term “election” to describe God's divine acts of calling individuals or nations to Himself. **God intervenes in human history and individual hearts to call people into a saving relationship with Him.** Out of all the people and nations in the world, God chose Abraham to become the father of the nation God chose as His own to bring the Messiah into the world. Deuteronomy 7:7-8 indicates that God's character and love was the basis for His choice of Israel, not Israel's status.²

God's prophecy to Rebekah revealed His choice of Jacob, not Esau (Genesis 25:23). Paul later spoke to this, “Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad – in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls ...” (Romans 9:11-12). The thought that God sets His affection on some and not others can be a troubling concept. **It is impossible to grasp the mysterious wonder of the doctrine of election without feeling its tension within the realm of human understanding.** Mere humans cannot understand the ways and mind of God. Within this oft-debated doctrine lie mysteries that cannot be solved in a few paragraphs. All are equally deserving of His wrath and judgment. But, in mercy, God calls some to faith. God has infinite purposes beyond our finite minds. Our ability to accept what we do not understand fully requires our trust in God's character. Everything God does is just, holy, good and right. The fact that we cannot fully understand or reconcile this doctrine does not make it less true. We must trust God with what we cannot understand (Genesis 18:25; Deuteronomy 29:29; Jeremiah 33:2).

People are so ruined by sin that they are unable to respond by faith, even to the preaching of the gospel, unless God first gives the ability to respond. God must draw people to Himself and awaken faith in dead hearts (John 6:37-40, 44). By grace, God calls individuals to faith (Ephesians 2:8-9). This favor of God is undeserved and unearned (Romans 9:20-21). Before the creation of the world and before people had done anything, God chose those who would respond in faith (Ephesians 1:3-14; 2 Timothy 1:9). **God's sovereignty in election does not remove the responsibility of every person to believe and turn to God.** God must work in individual hearts to draw them to Himself, but every person has enough knowledge to be held responsible for rejecting God's grace.

Those who question the doctrine of election equate God's determined favor on some individuals as unfair to others. This tension is real and those questions are natural. This doctrine causes fear, even anger in those who do not balance the mystery of this truth with the perfections of God. Without God's loving intervention, all would forever be slaves of sin under the curse of death, without hope and help. **Embrace the struggle within this truth and ask God to settle your heart on His goodness and unconditional love.** Ask Him for clarity and wisdom, greater than your own, to accept in faith what you cannot understand.

This doctrine is given in Scripture to comfort those who know God and have experienced His undeserved favor in salvation. To recognize God's unmerited grace in your life does not create pride, but only humble gratitude. Understanding this doctrine gives courage to share the gospel as you recognize that only God's Spirit, not your compelling words, can awaken dead hearts and open closed minds. There is freedom in accepting truth you cannot fully understand and entrusting yourself to a God beyond the reaches of your words and mind. **Because salvation is God's work from start to finish, all the glory belongs to Him.** How does this challenging truth lead you to worship God?

Painful Childlessness and Isaac's Prayer – 25:21

The life stories of Isaac and Abraham share blessings and challenges. One shared difficulty was the despair of infertility. **Isaac and Rebekah waited 20 years for children** (Genesis 25:20, 26). In their culture and time, children provided status and security to households, communities and nations. Childlessness brought suspicion and shame upon women. The monthly disappointment compounded by unavoidable public scrutiny had to be painful for Isaac and Rebekah. Unmet desires, such as a longing for marriage or children, invite vulnerability and heartbreak but also can lead to deep dependence on God.

Customs of their day allowed for adultery or polygamy so men could produce an heir. Yet Isaac and Rebekah avoided this solution. Isaac did not take another woman to bear him a child. Instead, **Isaac patiently prayed for Rebekah and waited on God.**

Inner Struggle and Rebekah's Prayer – 25:22

God answered Isaac's prayer and Rebekah became pregnant. Challenges came alongside the joy of Rebekah's pregnancy. The babies "jostled each other within her" so violently that she took her concern straight to the Lord. The struggle within Rebekah's womb foreshadowed the future relationship between her sons. The passage reveals Rebekah's personal faith and dependence on the Lord. Her honest prayer, "Why is this happening to me?" brought a prophetic answer from the Lord. **Isaac and Rebekah offer an example of practical faith in balancing the challenges of life and the promises of God.**

God's Prophetic Answer – 25:23

Like most predictive prophecies, the full meaning only becomes clear later in history. The four clauses in God's message are now clearly understood.

- **"Two nations are in your womb"** – Rebekah was the mother of twins, ancestors of two nations – Edom and Israel.
- **"Two peoples from within you will be separated"** – The radically different nations were parted forever.
- **"One people will be stronger than the other"** – God sovereignly elected Israel to have greater power than Edom.
- **"The older will serve the younger"** – God reversed the custom that gave the firstborn inheritance of the birthright.

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The Birth of the Boys – 25:24-28

The individuality of Rebekah's twins was evident from birth. Esau was born first. Jacob was born "with his hand grasping Esau's heel." **Their struggles started in the womb, festered into sibling rivalry and led to different destinies.** Their paths in life fulfilled God's prophecy, but their own attitudes and choices contributed. Their parents' favoritism further complicated their relationship.

Esau – The firstborn came into the world with reddish skin and covered with hair. His name, thought to mean "hairy," aptly described his appearance. His other name in Scripture, Edom, means "red" (25:30). Like Ishmael, Esau was a wild, roving outdoorsman at home in the open country. His physique and personality match his occupation. Isaac's preference for wild game contributed to his partiality toward Esau over Jacob.

Jacob – His name means "he grasps the heel;" it signified the wrestling brothers in the womb and his future struggles with God and others. The name is also a Hebrew idiom for "he deceives," a meaning born out of his failures. God later renamed him Israel. In contrast to Esau, Jacob's quiet contentment at home is given as a reason Rebekah was partial to Jacob.

The Bartered Birthright – 25:29-34

Perhaps Rebekah told Jacob about God's revelation concerning his future. Jacob sought and valued the birthright in a way Esau did not. The passage does not clarify whether he sought the benefits of the inheritance or valued God's yet unfulfilled promises. However, Jacob did not wait for God to provide what He promised. Instead, he schemed to obtain both the birthright and the blessing through manipulation and self-effort. According to Scripture, the birthright of Abraham's descendants included the following:

- double portion of the father's inheritance³
- ceremonial blessing to confer authority and responsibility of the father's remaining household
- the land of promise, including future possession of the actual land of Canaan
- the covenant promise from which the Savior of humanity would come

Jacob's strategy – 25:29-31

Jacob was not wrong to desire the birthright God promised. The greatest advantages of the birthright were spiritual and relational – evident only to those with faith in God. Nevertheless, Jacob's scheme and purchase of the birthright revealed failure to trust God's way and timing. There is no record that Jacob sought God's will. Nor did he practice God's love, generosity or grace to achieve his goal. **Jacob relied on his ingenuity to selfishly capitalize on his brother's weakness.** Jacob possibly chose a time when he knew Esau would return tired and hungry to cook a favored stew.

Esau's choice – 25:32-34

Esau craved the fragrant dish Jacob prepared. We exaggerate and say, "I'm dying of hunger," when, like Esau, we are within easy reach of food. **Jacob seemed**

prepared to pounce and demanded Esau swear to sell his birthright in exchange for the stew. Jacob and Esau were extremely different, but in this moment, they both wanted what they wanted immediately, regardless of the cost or potential consequences.

"What good is the birthright to me?" Esau's words show he did not value what he should have valued. The passage reveals Esau's attitude, "So Esau despised his birthright." In the following chapters, Esau's bitterness grew, and he later blamed Jacob for taking advantage of him.⁴ People sometimes blame others for the consequences of their own choices.

There is no record that Jacob sought God's will. Nor did he practice God's love, generosity or grace to achieve his goal.

The Dilemmas of Daily Life – Genesis 26

Daily life proves what we believe. The passage now shifts to Isaac and his life as a nomad, moving around the Negev region of Canaan. Perhaps the family kept a home base in Hebron where they owned the burial cave of Abraham and Sarah.⁵ **Like Abraham and every believer, Isaac faced challenges that tested his faith in God.**

Renewed Covenant – 26:1-6

Daily life can present situations that threaten our well-being. Isaac experienced famine, a challenge that impacted daily survival. **Isaac repeated his father's response, sought a human solution and decided to move his family to Egypt.** We do not know if Abraham or Sarah ever warned Isaac about their failings in Egypt or Gerar.⁶

The Lord intervened and appeared to Isaac in Gerar, the gateway of the caravan route to Egypt. He gave a clear warning not to go to Egypt and commanded Isaac to trust Him. **God conferred to Isaac the promises given to Abraham, including the covenant terms of land, offspring and blessing.**⁷ God's presence with Isaac was rooted in the faith of Abraham, who did everything He commanded. This means that despite the sin in his life, Abraham lived a life that moved steadily toward God and His ways. After the Lord appeared to Isaac, he stayed in Gerar.

Repeated Sin – 26:7-11

Even though God directly communicated His promises to Isaac, he was gripped with fear. **Isaac repeated his father's sin.** Rebekah was beautiful like Isaac's mother, Sarah. Like his father, Isaac feared for his own life more than for his wife's honor and safety. He lied and said Rebekah was his sister.

Abimelek was likely a title for Philistine kings, like Pharaoh was a title for Egyptian kings. This was a different Abimelek than in Genesis 20. **Abimelek saw Isaac lovingly caress Rebekah and realized the truth without God speaking directly to him.** This Abimelek asked the same sad question to Isaac, "What is this you have done to us?"

As in Abraham's case, this Abimelek held marriage, the dignity of a wife and reverence for God in higher esteem than Isaac did in the famine and that fear-filled moment. Again, a man of God was rightly rebuked. For God's sake and by His grace, Isaac and Rebekah received mercy, protection and peace.

Isaac's Wells – 26:12-22

God blessed Isaac despite his faithless deception. Isaac stayed in Gerar and planted crops. **God blessed him with a hundredfold harvest despite the famine.** His success brought another test. Isaac's Philistine neighbors envied him and sought to force him out by stopping up his wells. Abimelek ordered Isaac to settle elsewhere, and Isaac did not complain or resist.

Isaac persevered in pursuing peace. He retreated to a nearby valley, reopened Abraham's wells and dug new wells. However, the Gerar shepherds continued to quarrel. Isaac humorously named his wells *Esek* ("dispute") and *Sitnah* ("opposition"). Finally, Isaac found a third well he called *Rehoboth* ("room") because the shepherds did not pursue him.

In Beersheba – 26:23-35

Isaac moved to Beersheba where the Lord appeared again to encourage Isaac and reconfirm

His promises. This promise extended beyond Isaac to God's purposes for the world. Isaac built an altar at Beersheba where he called upon the name of the Lord. God mercifully intervened in Isaac's life in timely ways to build his faith. Believers learn to trust God through the circumstances of life and by experiencing His faithfulness.

Isaac's enemies recognized God's presence with him and sought a sworn peace agreement. He generously forgave them and hosted a feast to celebrate their oath. That day, Isaac's servants found water in a place he named *Shibah* ("oath" or "seven") to commemorate God's promise.

The last verses of Genesis 26 focus on Esau.

Tragically, Esau showed little appreciation for spiritual values. He was sensual and materialistic. He placed immediate satisfaction of his physical cravings before anything else. He sold his birthright for a dish of

lentil stew. He also rejected God's will and his parents' wishes in his marriages, which caused them much grief. He married two Canaanite women who would have practiced a degraded religion that denied the living God. How much better it would have been for Esau if he had honored both God and his parents.

Every life yields a series of choices that reflect the desires of the heart. People base choices on what they know and understand, which falls far short of the complete wisdom of God. God knows everything about everyone and everything. Wise people realize the limitations of human understanding and seek God and His ways. **We cannot understand all of God's ways, but we can trust Him.** God's choice of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob rested solely on His love and wisdom, not their personal merit. The attitudes of Isaac's two sons toward God's promises determined not only the course of their lives but also human history.

Take to Heart

Hold Fast

God chose Abraham to lead the way of God's blessing to the world. His faith grew as he depended on God for direction, comfort and wisdom. He was not perfect, but when he strayed, he repented and returned to the Lord. He died content in the Lord with only glimpses of the fulfillment of God's promises. He owned a small burial plot (the first piece of the promised land) and had a son, Isaac (the start of the nation). During his time on earth, Abraham lived by faith, not by sight. Because he trusted God, Abraham's faith is now sight in the eternal presence of God.⁸

God expanded the covenant with Isaac. God promised "all these lands," which reached beyond Canaan. God made an even greater commitment, "I will be with you." Isaac needed this promise of help, security and companionship. The Lord offered Isaac these privileges because "Abraham obeyed me and did everything I required of him" (26:5). The

security and stability of God and His promises give needed strength to obey God's commands.

God included several remarkable and supernatural births in the covenant line of the Messiah. This demonstrates that God's promise of salvation does not come through human effort. Despite 20 years of childlessness, Isaac did not run ahead of God but prayed and waited patiently for God's time and provision of a child through Rebekah.

This passage introduced Isaac and Rebekah's twins, Jacob and Esau. Their story continues through the rest of Genesis. **God chose Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all who come by faith.** God does not choose people because of their merit or future behavior. Apart from God's election by grace, "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one."⁹

There is much to learn from a life well-lived. Abraham died an old man, “full of years.” **No matter how long you live, every year can be “full” of God’s faithfulness and blessing.**

A Christian’s legacy does not depend only on achievements or milestones others can recognize and emulate. We have nothing to boast in but Jesus. No one offers a perfect example in life. We battle sin at every point, sometimes the same sin again and again. Every age and stage of life offers unique challenges and ways to trust God. Are you growing not just in years, but in maturity? Can you point to conquered sin and deeper love for Christ with every passing year? Your walk with the Lord offers a story of His unwavering faithfulness. Those who know salvation in Christ can face life’s challenges, declining health and waning strength with eternal hope. Those who have lived well have much to say to those coming behind them. What is the story of your life telling others?

Esau valued instant gratification more than his birthright. What within us makes us want what we want – right now? **Sin constantly invites us to sacrifice a greater reward by choosing a lesser thrill that always fails to deliver what it promises.** God often calls us to wait. To wait on God’s better way and more excellent

provision requires faith and self-control. Waiting requires valuing something better. Waiting develops character and calls out dependence on God. Believers wait for full deliverance from the battle with sin. We wait for God to answer prayers. God commands us to wait for marriage to enjoy sexual intimacy. We wait for children, promotions and so many other things. Waiting requires putting to death the raging desires of the sinful flesh by the power of the Spirit. How are you tempted to grab what is fast and easy instead of waiting on God’s better provision? What do you value more than pleasing God?

Isaac gave into fear and made a very wrong decision, despite God’s intentional nurturing of his faith (Genesis 26:2-6). There is much in this world about which we can be afraid. Only confidence in the Lord’s nearness and sovereign control can hold our hearts steady. Interestingly, the Bible often speaks of the most important fear – “fear of the Lord.” When God is properly exalted, revered and honored, the things that scare us shrink. Psalm 23:4 tells us we can walk through the darkest valley and “fear no evil.” There is nothing anyone or anything in this world can do to separate you from the love of Christ.¹⁰ Evil people may kill Christians for their faith but cannot take away their true and abiding life. **The world cannot**

steal from you what Christ has won for you. Perhaps Scripture so often calls us to “fear not” because we are prone to fear many things more than the Lord. Can you name your greatest fears? What truth about God overcomes that fear?

We often live under a faulty assumption that the absence of problems indicates God’s blessing. We see conflict as bad and to be avoided at all costs. Most prayers regarding our trials ask for relief and solutions. Isaac, a gentle and peace-loving man, experienced God’s blessings *and* trials while living life in the Negev. The normal course of daily life brings challenging relationships, economic struggles, family needs, personal needs and too many other kinds of troubles to name. Are you surprised when you hit obstacles, even while trying to live in obedience to the Lord? Are you facing a trial you wonder if you will survive? What is God teaching you about His character and faithfulness? Often, we do not reach out to God until we need Him. **The trials of this life draw us to seek God, our only source of hope.**

Can you trust God with what you cannot understand about Him? If this lesson raised hard questions for you, keep praying and studying God’s Word. **God is strong enough to handle your hard questions.**

Check out these footnoted references for further study of God’s Word in this week’s lesson.

- 1: **Breathed his last:** Genesis 25:8, 17; 35:29; 49:33; Mark 15:37
- 2: **God chose Israel:** Psalm 135:4; Isaiah 45:4; Jeremiah 31:31; Romans 11:5
- 3: **Birthright:** Genesis 27:29; Deuteronomy 21:17
- 4: **Esau’s bitterness:** Genesis 27:36, 41
- 5: **Household in Canaan:** Genesis 23:2, 20; 25:9-10; 35:27-29
- 6: **Abraham and Sarah’s lies:** Genesis 12:11-13; 20:2, 13
- 7: **God’s promised covenant:** Genesis 17:7-8, 19
- 8: **Faith, not sight:** Mark 12:26-27; 2 Corinthians 5:7
- 9: **None righteous:** Psalms 14:1-3; 53:1-3; Ecclesiastes 7:20; Romans 3:10-12
- 10: **No separation:** Romans 8:33-39