

The Promise Continues - Kevin Miller, 30 minutes, **Genesis 26:1-35** (#515)

Introduction: One of my favorite things to do is to re-read a favorite book. In our day when everything older than about 6 months is considered irrelevant, it feels wonderfully subversive, even a bit rebellious, to not only read books as old – or older! – than I am, but then to be even more “wasteful” with my time and, heaven forbid, re-read such “out of date” books as well!

C. S. Lewis, in his famous and helpful essay titled “On the Reading of Old Books,” has this helpful tidbit to say: “Every age has its own outlook. It is specially good at seeing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes. We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period. And that means old books. ...Not, of course, that there is any magic about the past. People were no cleverer then than they are now; they made as many mistakes as we. But not the same mistakes... Two heads are better than one, not because either is infallible, but because they are unlikely to go wrong in the same direction.”

Said another way, Lewis’ point is that we need voices who have a different perspective than ours – not a different perspective in the here and now, but voices from the past who saw the world with different assumptions and understandings. That is how we learn from history. That is how we widen our view so that we can see more clearly, rather than being distorted by the particular struggles of the world we live in. And that is one massive value that old books bring to the table.

Starting today, we are going to return to an “old book.” Most broadly, I mean the Bible, which is what we spend a great deal of our time each Sunday looking in to. This is the Word of God. No other book, no matter how well it sells or how brilliantly written, has been directly inspired and preserved by God Himself. More specifically, we will return to “Genesis” – the very first book of the Bible, the book of beginnings. Many of the events here will seem otherworldly because they are so different from how we think of life today. But that very difference, I believe, is given and intended by God so that we could more clearly see our own assumptions and errors in the light of His grace. And lastly, “old” in the sense of when we were last in Genesis. We studied the life of Abraham back in 2017. Noah and Creation

were even earlier – 2011! So it's been awhile since we've been here. Let me give a brief overview of the true story of Genesis to get us up to speed...

Genesis 1-11 speaks of Creation – the fact that God has always been present and that He created everything by His own power and for His own glory. This includes man and woman as literal human beings. That woman and that man sinned, rebelling against God. In the big story of everything, these early chapters tell us of creation and fall and hint at the redemption that is to come in Jesus.

Genesis 12-25 largely tells us the story of Abraham, the one to whom God promised a land, a people, and the special protection of being chosen by God Himself. This is where we were introduced to the idea of the Abrahamic covenant, and it forms much of the foundation not only for Genesis, but of a lot of Old Testament history and a great number of New Testament references, too.

What you and I will be studying over the next few months is Genesis 26-36. Here we read the very end of Isaac's story and then spend most of our time with Jacob, the descendants of Abraham chosen by God to continue on in His promise.

After the story of Jacob, Genesis largely continues with Joseph from chapter 37 onward, which provides the segue into the book of Exodus.

So that's where we've been and where we're going. Let me invite you to grab your Bible and browse to **Genesis 26:1**, where we'll pick up the story anew...

26:1-5 This chapter is, admittedly detailed and not terribly short. But I want to take it all together because I think that one central point is being made throughout these 35 verses: God's promises to Abraham will be continued in and through Isaac. After all, that's what we see right here from the top.

First, there are a number of parallels between this chapter and what we first saw of Abraham's life in **Genesis 12**. There was a famine then, too. And just as Abraham went south to escape it, so we see that here with Isaac as well. Abraham ended up in a foreign land (Egypt) and Isaac ends up in a foreign land (Gerar). There are more parallels to come, but here from the start, you need to understand that the

pattern with Isaac very much parallels the situations that Abraham found himself in. There will be some similar parallels between the lives of Isaac and Jacob, too.

Second, notice what the Lord does: unlike with Abraham, Isaac doesn't need to venture so far. Gerar is just fine, thank you very much, because it is right there where the Lord will bless Isaac. In no uncertain terms, the Lord tells Isaac that the promises made to Abraham will be for Isaac and his descendants. In fact, **verse 4** is almost a word-for-word copy of what the Lord promised to Abraham in **Genesis 12 and 15**. Make no mistake: the Lord's promises do not change with the winds, nor do they change when our short human lives come to an end. God's promises will be upheld. You can trust Him, which is exactly what Isaac is being invited to do here.

Third: notice the quality of that trust. God has made promises to Isaac, Isaac's role is to respond to God's promises. That's crucial to understand: Isaac isn't somehow earning or deserving these blessings from God. No, God is offering them out of grace, and Isaac is to respond to that grace with obedience. So it is for you and I with the promise of the Gospel that God has given to us: we can't earn it by our obedience, but we can obediently respond and glorify Him by how we receive it. We can show to ourselves and to one another that we are being changed by Jesus with how we speak and live and hope. This same God who calls us to respond to His grace is the God who calls Isaac to respond to that same sort of grace.

Largely, the rest of the chapter will show us how God will uphold His promises. In that regard, we can thank Moses (who I take to be the author of Genesis) for laying things out so clearly for us: God's promises are spelled out once more and then they are highlighted. What are some of those highlights? Let's read and see...

26:6-16 The first picture gives us yet more parallels with Abraham. Isaac ends up in a foreign land, just as Abraham did, and Isaac lies about his wife, just like Abraham did. Like father, like son – in both good ways and bad ones. Here, the picture is of Isaac's fear: he thinks the men of the land will be so captivated by Rebekah's beauty that they'll kill him to get to her. Nevermind that this would mean God's promise would have to be broken; no, Isaac's fears are very real, very earthly. And isn't that sometimes your struggle and mine, folks? We know what

God has said, we do believe it; and yet we act as if we don't. We are like the father in **Mark 9** who cried out "I believe; help my unbelief!" Part of our curse this side of heaven is that sin is real and so is our doubt. Thankfully, the Lord's grace covers over our failings not only prior to coming to faith, but He also has grace upon us as we imperfectly follow Jesus, too.

Isaac's lie will catch up with him – most lies do, after all. Just like with his father, Isaac is found out when Abimelech (the local ruler) sees Isaac acting a little too forward and friendly with his supposed "sister." Yet, the Lord protects Isaac. Similar to Abraham, I'm always a bit puzzled at passages like these, where somebody sins or acts in ways that we shouldn't repeat, and yet the Lord's love for them is so much that they don't get what they deserve. Then again, isn't that what grace is? You and I not getting what we do deserve? So it is here. Isaac not only isn't punished for his lie, but ends up protected – even blessed!

And speak of blessing! I'm no farmer, but my understanding is that the first year of a newly cultivated field is not always a great one. But what a difference the Lord makes for Isaac: his first year is a bumper crop! So much so, in fact, that Isaac becomes rich and powerful in his own right. This turns into a problem, because the Philistines living around him start to see Isaac not simply as "that foreign guy," but instead as a threat to their own lifestyles and incomes. So Isaac is pressured to move away.

Here I want you to grasp something: God's promises aren't just theoretical. It's not as if God gave **verses 1-5** and then dropped out of the picture. No, these verses are part of the outworking – just the tip of the iceberg, really – of how the truths of God will be applied to Isaac's life. Let me suggest that God is no different today. Now don't misunderstand: I'm not speaking of some sort of health and wealth gospel. Instead, what I mean is that what God says is not only true, but it is also practical – it will change your life, though perhaps not always in the ways that you hoped or in the timing that you would want. Then again, I think one of the most amazing parts of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob's stories here in **Genesis** is that God was perfectly faithful to them – even in spite of their sin – and yet His faithfulness always accomplishes what He wants rather than what any of these men or their families might have wanted or thought was best.

To that end, let me offer two challenges for you to chew on before we move on. First: life isn't about you. Yes, I know that there is a billion-dollar ad industry every day telling you that it is. And I also realize, increasingly, our education system teaches that life is about self-discovery and being who you want to be. But the reality is that we are created by God to give Him glory. When we live that way, we'll have more joy and happiness than in doing anything else. Yet, I can almost guarantee you that to follow Christ means your life will look different than you might expect. I can certainly guarantee you that it will look different from the American Dream. First things first then: to respond to Christ will be costly. It will demand and consume your very life. But to have God's grace will be worth it.

Second: do you believe that God can be trusted? Isaac is finding out that very truth for himself and you can benefit from his experience. You and I are told to be afraid of so many things in life, and yet God promises that – if you take Christ as your Savior – even death will not separate you from His love. All across the Scriptures, we see God's faithfulness played out in issues just as large as death and on down to the nitty gritty details of finding a wife, bearing a child, or not knowing how to make important decisions in life. Resolve now to believe that God's truth is not only real, but also practical. It matters to life now and forever. And it is for you – all you need do is ask Him to grow your faith and then to live in that faith.

Let's move on to our last chunk of the chapter...

26:17-35 Isaac departs from the immediate vicinity of Gerar and ends up down in the valley. We are treated to an ongoing saga of digging out the wells that Abraham himself had originally dug, which the Philistines had filled in, perhaps out of spite. Isaac moves from one watering hole to another, until finally he is far enough away from the ranches of Gerar that he is left alone. Don't miss the point: it's not that the Philistine herdsman are getting the upper hand; instead, it is that God is using even conflict with these unbelievers to move Isaac right where He wants him – that's what is made clear by the naming of the well in **verse 22** and from the story of Beersheba that follows.

It is at this time that Abimelech and some of his advisors come to Isaac. His power has grown so great that the Philistines are concerned to have Isaac so close to them, and they are looking for some kind of treaty to keep things on an even keel. Notice what Abimelech himself says: “We see plainly that the Lord has been with you.” Whatever Abimelech’s personal beliefs, he has no doubt that Isaac’s blessing is divine in origin, and so he doesn’t want to get on the wrong side of this foreigner. What results is something of a peace treaty. No sooner is the treaty signed than Isaac’s servants come and tell him that they’ve found water, which is how Beersheba not only got its name, but confirms God’s blessing all the more.

One last incident is related, one that foreshadows what will take place in the next chapter: recall that Isaac has two sons, Jacob and Esau. In **verses 34-35**, we learn that Esau has decided to settle down with not one, but two foreign women. That should send off warning bells, both from the angle of multiple wives and from them not being a part of the people of God. True, the Law hasn’t been given yet, but the point of the story is that Esau is making unwise decisions that will take him further and farther afield from God’s promises. As for Jacob, we’ll read more about him in the next chapter.

For you and me? We need to see that God’s promises transcend generations. They are bigger than our lives or the events of our time. So it is with the promise of the Gospel: what Christ has offered is what He will bring to completion. Do you trust Him? Do you believe Him? If so, who will you share that Good News with?