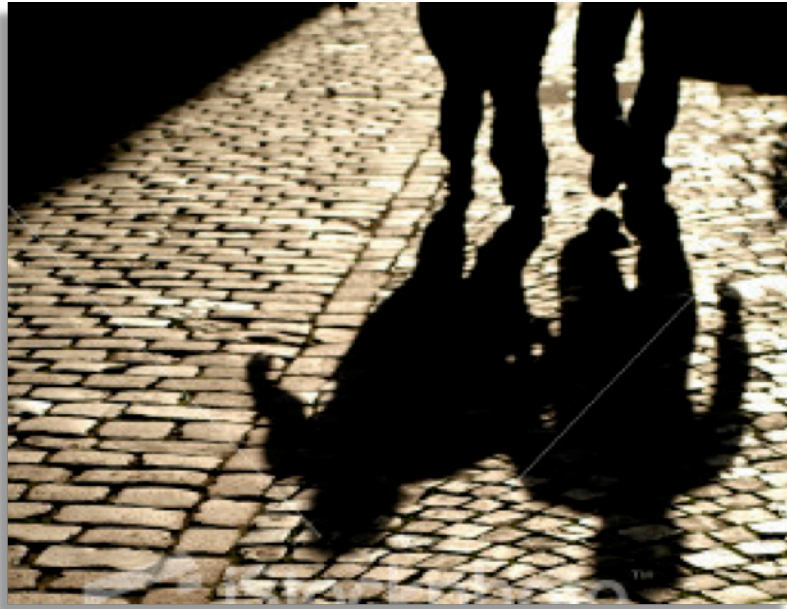


LIVED TRUTH

Mission Partners Study 4



T. M. MOORE

The Fellowship of Ailbe



Lived Truth
Mission Partners Study 4
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Welcome to *Lived Truth*

Welcome to the fourth in our series of Mission Partners Studies, *To Fill All Things*. The six studies in this series include:

Sent like Jesus – If we really want to live, we have to live like Jesus.

To Fill All Things – Jesus Christ through you to your world!

Seasoned with Grace – Talking with others about the grace of God.

Lived Truth – Our mission begins with *being* witnesses for Christ.

Redeeming Culture – We can't avoid or escape culture, so we need to transform it.

Confident Witness – How to be bolder and more effective in sharing your faith.

These studies are provided for Mission Partners to help you in identifying and working your Personal Mission Field in the Kingdom of God and Christ.

Lived Truth emphasizes the importance of *being* a witness for Jesus Christ by the way we live out the reality of Christ and His Kingdom before the people to whom God sends us each day. What we are as followers of Christ is as important as what we proclaim, and we must make sure that our *lives* bear witness to the Good News we share with the people in our Personal Mission Field.

The Mission Partners program is designed to help you understand and make the best use of those daily disciplines that can allow you to follow Jesus with into more of the presence, promise, and power of the Kingdom of God.

Here are the assignments for Month 4 of your Mission Partners project:

Video: Getting to the Gospel

Study: *Lived Truth*

- Tasks:
1. Pray daily for the people you will see in your PMF that day.
 2. Initiate or continue conversations with people in your PMF; be yourself!
 3. Make sure you have can explain the Gospel clearly and concisely.
 3. Pray through your testimony and the Gospel weekly.
 4. Talk through the Gospel with your Mission Partner.

These studies are designed for use with a Mission Partner. For more information on the Mission Partners program, visit our website, www.ailbe.org.

Work through each lesson of *Lived Truth*, then get together with your Mission Partner to discuss the study overall, using the questions for discussion at the end.

We're pleased to offer the Mission Partners program, and the studies that go with it, at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe. Information on how to contribute to The Fellowship of Ailbe can be found at the end of this study.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 Nothing to Hide, Nothing to Fear

So Isaac dwelt in Gerar. And the men of the place asked about his wife. And he said, "She is my sister"; for he was afraid to say, "She is my wife," because he thought, "lest the men of the place kill me for Rebekah, because she is beautiful to behold." Genesis 26.6, 7

Begin here

It's important to keep in mind that *all* Scripture is inspired by God and profitable to equip us for every good work (2 Tim. 3.15-17). Why I emphasize *all* Scripture will become clear momentarily. The good works Paul refers to are, in the first instance, those daily works of loving our neighbors that should flow from us as smoothly as living water flows from the throne of God (Jn. 7.37-39).

These days, when American Christianity features nearly 3,000 mega-churches and a vast and prospering Christian subculture of media, ministries, and much else besides, the good work we surely need to focus on most is how to live out the truth of God convincingly before a skeptical and unbelieving age. Scandals, hypocrisy, and shallowness in various sectors of the Church, coupled with the negative image of believers the media is wont to hawk, have made the life of faith something less than a desirable option for many of our neighbors.

Add to that the many outspoken detractors of Christianity who insist that believing in God is not reasonable, and, well, we're facing some serious challenges.

If we are going to win our neighbors to the faith of Jesus Christ we will need more than just a packaged Gospel message and a truckload of answers to objections. In this unbelieving age we need to work harder at living out the truth of the Gospel – "truing-it in love", as Paul put it in Ephesians 4.15 – so that we may provide a complete, compelling, and believable witness to the life of faith.

All Scripture – all of it

And that's why we need to pay careful attention to every story and doctrine of Scripture, be it ever so seemingly incidental, for what it can teach us about this important matter. *All* Scripture is inspired of God, and *all* Scripture has something with which to equip us for the good works for which we have been redeemed and saved (Eph. 2.10).

Take this story of Isaac sojourning among the unbelievers in Gerar (Gen. 26).

Isaac is one of my favorite characters in the Bible because, while we hear his name often enough, the Scriptures don't really offer us much information about him. It would be easy to read the account of Isaac's life as little more than a bridge over the historical gap between Abraham and Jacob.

But if all Scripture is inspired and profitable, then there must be *something* here that can give us hope and help us in living out our faith today (Rom. 15.4). In this study we're going to try to discover just what that something might be.

Defeated and outed

As Isaac entered the land of Gerar, he was already a defeated man. He feared the pagan people of Gerar more than the God Who had instructed him to sojourn there (Gen. 26.1-5), so he lied about his relationship with his wife in order to protect his own skin. He told everyone Rebekah was his sister and not his wife. By so doing he put Rebekah's wellbeing in jeopardy and fouled the air of trust between himself and his neighbors.

But God outed Isaac: The king of Gerar spotted him “having a laugh”, as the Hebrew has it, with Rebekah – a euphemism to describe their intimate embraces. Here was Isaac, whose name means, “laughter”, doing what comes naturally between a man and his wife – being himself, we might say, as T. D. Alexander points out in a note on this text in the *English Standard Version Study Bible*.

And here is our first lesson about living the truth before our skeptical and unbelieving age: *Don't allow fear of men to prevent you from being who you are.*

We need to be ourselves as children of the living God and followers of Jesus. In Jesus Christ we are *new creations*. We are citizens and ambassadors of a *new Kingdom*. We have a *new mind*, a *new outlook* on life, *new affections and priorities*, and a *new worldview* which we are daily striving to learn and to live. We must not hide our testimony, compromise our convictions, or otherwise try to conform our behavior to what we think might keep us in good standing with our unbelieving neighbors. We just need to be ourselves – nothing to hide, nothing to fear.

If we try, out of fear or self-interest, to conceal our true identities, sooner or later God will out us, and then we'll be embarrassed and explaining ourselves all over the place, confirming to every unbeliever who knows us just how shallow, disingenuous, and duplicitous Christians are.

We are created in Christ Jesus as *new creatures*, for good works and Spirit-filled witness to a desperate world! Make up your mind that you're going to be what *God* expects you to be, and not what you think your unbelieving neighbors might be willing to accept. Like Isaac, having a laugh with his dear wife, we need to be ourselves – true followers of Jesus Christ – if we're going to persuade our unbelieving age to consider the claims of the Gospel.

Be yourself: This is the first principle for living the truth in an age of unbelief.

For reflection

1. What are some reasons Christians might want to “conceal” their true identities as followers of Jesus Christ?
2. How might you be able to tell when the fear of people is beginning to dictate the terms of your relationship with Christ?
3. What does it mean to “be yourself” as a follower of the Lord Jesus? What do the images of salt, light, and leaven suggest about how we ought to answer that question?

Next steps: What do unbelievers think about the Christians they know? Don't know? Well, why not try to find out? Ask some of your unbelieving friends to give their impressions about Christianity. Is it believable? Reasonable? Do Christians present a credible lifestyle for them to consider? Share what you learn with your Mission Partner.

Prayer:

2 Be the Best!

Then Isaac sowed in that land, and reaped in the same year a hundredfold; and the Lord blessed him. The man began to prosper, and continued prospering until he became very prosperous; for he had possessions of flocks and possessions of herds and a great number of servants. So the Philistines envied him. Genesis 26.12-14

Productive and fruitful

Undoubtedly to his great surprise and relief, Isaac survived his little charade before Abimelech, the king of Gerar, and was given the freedom to “be himself” among his unbelieving neighbors. Once he got over the fear and embarrassment of failing to be honest about himself, Isaac was able to get on with his life in the midst of a people who did not know the Lord.

Isaac was a farmer; he worked the land and husbanded flocks of sheep. And, apparently, he was very good at what he did. Everything he touched turned to shekels – his crops produced a hundredfold, his flocks increased greatly, and he was able to hire many of the locals to help him manage the abundance with which God rewarded his industry.

It is to Isaac’s credit that he did not allow the embarrassment he experienced before his unbelieving neighbors to cause him to withdraw from their midst or lay low in their sight. Instead, he got busy “being himself” and doing what God had created him to do. His hard work and wise oversight of the gifts God had given him enabled Isaac to become extremely productive and fruitful. He was the best farmer and the best businessman in his area.

And his neighbors noticed.

Work your calling!

Here’s a second lesson for us as we take up the challenge of living the truth before a skeptical and unbelieving generation: We need to be ourselves and *get busy cultivating the field and working the calling* God has appointed for us. We need to work hard and be diligent to use all the gifts and resources God has given us to realize His blessings and share them with others. We are commanded to *be fruitful*, to *bring forth the virtues* of the Spirit’s indwelling presence, *use His gifts to minister* to others, and to make disciples, calling others to faith in Jesus and helping them to grow in Him.

If we are truly being ourselves as new creatures in the Lord, then bearing fruit and making disciples will come naturally to us.

Each of us has a sphere of influence, or what we are calling a Personal Mission Field (2 Cor. 10.13-16). Jesus has sent us to this Personal Mission Field in the same way the Father sent Him to the world (Jn. 20.21). Like Isaac, we must take up the work appointed to us and labor to become fruitful for the Lord.

In our Personal Mission Field Jesus calls us to *seek* the lost, to *befriend* them, *care about* them, *pray* for them, *do good works* for them, and *tell them the Good News* of the Kingdom (Lk. 19.10). He commands us to work to become holy and to live each day in the light of the Lord (2 Cor. 7.1; Eph. 5.8-10).

When we’re being ourselves in Jesus Christ we will be careful and diligent in every good work, reaching out to meet the needs of others as we are able and demonstrating the love of Christ to them (Eph. 2.10; Titus 3.1, 8, 14). We will join with our fellow believers to talk about the Lord, boast about Him in worship, and help others see the power of our love for one another (Heb. 10.24, 25; Acts 6.1-7). And we will grow in the grace

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and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, using all the gifts and abilities He gives us to glorify God and make the nations disciples (1 Cor. 10:31; Matt. 28:18-20).

Occupy, grow, bear fruit

This is who we are, and this is what we're called to do. We are the followers of Christ, the children of the living God, and just as the Lord assigned Isaac to prosper in Gerar, He has assigned each one of us to a Personal Mission Field, and He expects us to *prosper and bear fruit* there. God has gifted us with everything we need for productive and fruitful living, and He has sent us into the world to generate *a return of glory* on the investment of glory He has made in our lives (Matt. 25:14-30).

As followers of Christ and Paul, we are called to do all things for the glory of the Lord – to do the best and be the best we can in every situation, and to make the best use of the time God gives us for the purposes of His Kingdom (1 Cor. 10:31-11:1; Eph. 5:15-17; Matt. 6:33; Rom. 4:17, 18).

Like Isaac in a foreign country, Christians are called to *occupy, grow, and bring forth fruit* in the midst of an unbelieving age.

We can't expect to be fruitful and multiply the ranks of the followers of Christ if we limit our "Christian activities" to our church groups or Christian friends only, concealing our true identity when we're out among the unbelievers of our age. We have work to do, and God is prepared to bless it abundantly. All we have to do is start sowing (Mk. 4:13-20; Gal. 6:6-10).

For reflection

1. Meditate on Matthew 28:18-20 and Acts 1:8. What do these passages mean for you in your own walk with the Lord?
2. What does it mean for you to do all things to the glory of God in your Personal Mission Field (1 Cor. 10:31-11:1)?
3. What are some ways you would like to learn how to do better work in your Personal Mission Field?

Next steps: What does it mean for you to "sow to the Spirit" in every sector and with every person in your Personal Mission Field? Be prepared to discuss this question with your Mission Partner.

Prayer:

3 Just Move On

Now the Philistines had stopped up all the wells which his father's servants had dug in the days of Abraham his father, and they had filled them with earth. And Abimelech said to Isaac, "Go away from us, for you are much mightier than we." Then Isaac departed from there and pitched his tent in the Valley of Gerar, and dwelt there. Genesis 26.15-17

The fear of Isaac

We might speculate concerning Abimelech's motives here. He had been a friend of Isaac's father, Abraham, and seems to have worked out his disagreement with Isaac as well. Why would he suddenly ask him to move on?

The answer is in his own explanation: he feared the growing power of Isaac. Not that Isaac was one to throw his weight around or threaten local leaders. He was a peaceable man, concerned only to take care of what God had entrusted to him, to work his Personal Mission Field faithfully and well.

But Abimelech saw Isaac's growing wealth, which included the addition of many servants on his payroll. These men depended on Isaac for their wellbeing. The threat to Abimelech was that his own subjects, finding work and wealth within the community of Isaac's prosperity, might not be as loyal to their king as the king would prefer. If push ever came to shove between them, Abimelech might find himself on the short end of the stick.

The easiest way to secure his place of power in that part of Gerar was to tell Isaac to move on.

Which Isaac did, without resisting or grumbling.

Wearing out our welcome?

I recall an occasion in which I had been invited into the home of an older gentleman for the purpose of talking about spiritual matters. There at his invitation and his pleasure, I began asking him about his own spiritual life – which was virtually non-existent – and then proceeded to share from my own experience the wonderful things the Lord had done for me. I began to explain the Gospel and the Kingdom of God, using the words of Scripture and my own experience to help this man and his wife to understand the Good News and how they could get in on it.

The man's wife seemed more interested in the conversation than he was. She asked questions; he barely responded to the ones I asked him. As I answered her questions I kept moving the conversation from my own experience of the Lord to the Gospel and how one can come into a right relationship with the Lord.

Suddenly the man got up and left the room. I heard him in the powder room a few feet away, fumbling with something in the medicine chest. He returned shortly, and he was visibly upset. I'd stopped talking when he got up, and when he sat back down he simply said, "I think you'd better leave now."

At that point I had a choice: stay past my welcome in the belief that I needed to get the whole Gospel out and secure some sort of response before I left, or acquiesce in his discomfort and his request, and leave him in the care of the Lord. I chose the latter course. I thanked him and his wife for their time and let myself out.

Give them space

Unbelievers can sometimes become uncomfortable with our testimonies and witness, or even with the way we comport ourselves in the righteousness, peace, and joy of the Spirit, which are the hallmarks of our Kingdom citizenship (Rom. 14.17, 18). In their discomfort they may, for whatever reason, want us to back

off, let it go for now, or simply leave them alone on the subject of spiritual truths.

If we want to keep good relations with our unbelieving friends and neighbors, we must give them space, and let the Lord take it from there. When it comes to spiritual matters, some may believe our witness, and others may be open to talking about the matter further. Still others will indicate, by one means or another, that they don't want to hear about these matters any more (cf. Acts 17.32-34). We need to be sensitive to people, not pushy, at all times seeking to show the love of Christ in the most practical and appropriate ways.

This, after all, is only what we would like for ourselves when others are beginning to make us uncomfortable or even a little irritated. Doing unto others as we would have them do unto us is part of how we live out the truth of Christ in love. We're not here to bully, bluster, or bother people into the Kingdom. The Lord knows how to bring others to Himself in His way and time. Our calling is simply to be faithful, and sometimes being faithful means giving others space.

Be yourself. Be the best you can be. But be sensitive to others, and when they ask you to "back off" in your witness, don't make a fuss. Just move on.

For reflection

1. Why do you think unbelievers can sometimes become uncomfortable when we talk about spiritual matters with them?
2. What are some of the obstacles we need to overcome in talking with our neighbors, friends, and co-workers about the things of the Lord? How can believers help one another in this?
3. Is there a fine line between "giving space" to unbelievers – being sensitive to their feelings and so forth – and failing to be the witnesses God has called us to be? How can we know when we've crossed the line from one to the other?

Next steps: Today, speak to every person you meet in your Personal Mission Field – all the people you encounter today, non-Christians and Christians alike. Use their names. Ask how they're doing. Use every opportunity with them to establish a gracious, living presence of truth in ways you have not before. Continue praying for them and looking for ways to show them the love of Jesus. Be prepared to share with your Mission Partner the steps you've taken this day.

Prayer:

4 Keep the Peace

Then they dug another well, and they quarreled over that one also. So he called its name Sitnah. And he moved from there and dug another well, and they did not quarrel over it. So he called its name Rehoboth, because he said, "For now the Lord has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land." Genesis 26.21, 22

Preserving peace

Abimelech wasn't the only one who saw a threat in Isaac. Local herdsmen also observed his growing wealth and power and felt a strong need to secure what they regarded as their privileges. Wells were a precious commodity in those days, as water is in any era. The local herdsmen among whom Isaac had settled insisted that the wells he was using were theirs, even though they had been dug by Isaac's father, Abraham.

Rather than fight about it, Isaac moved on, leaving the water in those wells to the unjust locals. He could always dig new wells somewhere else, and did.

But that wasn't the end of it. His neighbors again claimed ownership over his wells, causing Isaac to move one more time. Isaac seems to have been determined not to provoke his neighbors over their claims to local water rights. He *preferred to be wronged* rather than to fight with them over what he knew to be his own property. After all, he was a guest in their land and so, in a certain sense, they probably had some prior claim to whatever wells he may have dug.

Isaac had learned that God would provide for him wherever he went, and he was more interested in preserving peace with his neighbors than insisting on, and perhaps fighting for, his rights.

Willing to be wronged?

The apostles counsel us to live peaceably with our unbelieving neighbors. Paul wrote, "If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men" (Rom. 12.18). He continued, "Repay no one evil for evil...do not avenge yourselves..." (Rom. 12.17, 19). Paul advised against getting caught up in contentious disputes with unbelievers (2 Tim. 2.24). He wrote that we should be willing even to be wronged rather than to insist on what is rightfully ours, if by doing so we can keep someone from stumbling into more sin (1 Cor. 6.1-8).

Peter says we should relate to our unbelieving neighbors with reverence and respect (1 Pt. 3.15), looking to the example of Jesus and being willing to suffer wrong rather than insisting on our own way or demanding our rights (1 Pt. 2.21-23; 3.8, 9).

This is a great challenge for any of us. Whenever someone has wronged us, either by words or deeds, our first inclination is to set them straight.

Our next is to get back at them.

Certainly we must attempt to clear up any misunderstandings that arise between us and our unsaved neighbors. And if we've wronged someone or failed in our duties of love, we should humbly admit our mistake and seek forgiveness.

But we cannot keep unbelievers from feeling discomfort with us and, as a result, sometimes treating us in unjust ways. The Gospel is not advanced, and the glory of God is not served, by the presence of born-again Christians whining about every slight and demanding their just due at every turn.

Followers of the Prince of Peace

The more we try to avoid strife and contention, the more we embody the lifestyle of the Prince of Peace. There's nothing becoming about Christians who want to argue over every issue or make a big deal out of every act of unfairness. Jesus, after all, set aside all His rights and privileges to come among us as a servant and be obedient even unto death. Paul commands us to have the mind of Christ within us at all times, and this can mean that we will be victims of injustice or petty slights, simply because we are bearing fruit and multiplying in the Lord (Phil. 2.5-11).

At such times we might need to give others space and, like Isaac, just move on. Even if we've been wronged, it's not always necessary to set things straight. We'll do more for the glory of the Lord and the peace of Christ if, by simply moving along, we keep from raising a ruckus and creating unnecessary disruptions in our workplace or with our neighbors.

We do not need to achieve vindication or just deserts in this life. God will vindicate His people in His own way and time. For our part, we must continue, like Isaac, to show God's grace and truth to an unjust age, and that can mean giving people space at times – when we'd rather stand and put up a fight.

For reflection

1. We have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2.16). What does that mean for how we should approach working our Personal Mission Field?
2. Christians are called to “turn the other cheek.” Suggest some ways you might be called upon to do that during the course of a day:
3. Meditate on Romans 14.17, 18. What are your greatest challenges in seeing this Kingdom come to expression in your Personal Mission Field? How can your fellow believers help you?

Next steps: Today you will have opportunities to work your Personal Mission Field. Are you preparing for that even now – by going to prayer, seeking the Lord's wisdom in how to relate to and serve the people around you? Today, try to initiate a conversation with some of the people in your Personal Mission Field – a conversation you might be able to turn toward spiritual things. If you feel a need to back off and give others space, don't hesitate to do so. Share your experience with your Mission partner.

Prayer:

5 Stay Close to Jesus

So he built an altar there and called on the name of the LORD, and he pitched his tent there. And there Isaac's servants dug a well. Genesis 26:25

Ready to be pushed around?

Isaac's life among the unbelievers of his day wasn't all fun and games. We saw him move from a successful location in Gerar because the local king had become fearful of his growing wealth and prowess. Then we saw him forced to keep moving when local herdsmen objected to his flocks drinking "their" water – which was really his water, after all.

I have condoned these actions of Isaac as efforts on his part to give others some space and to avoid strife and conflict. Peace is more important than perks and privileges sometimes.

Readers might get the impression that being a Christian means signing up for a life of being pushed around by unbelievers. And there is some truth to this view, if we hear Jesus and the apostles Peter and Paul correctly. We must be willing to suffer indignities and injustices if by so doing we may represent the peace and strength of the Gospel to our unbelieving neighbors.

This is an aspect of our witness for Christ which, like all the other aspects, we can only sustain by staying close to the Lord and abiding in Him.

Renewed in God's promises

Upon arriving at Beersheba Isaac must have been feeling a little wimpy and weary. His neighbors had stolen his wells and smeared his good name, and all he'd done in response was just move on.

But God came to him in a dream and restated His intention of bringing the promises of Abraham to him (vv. 23, 24). Isaac's self-image may have been on the rocks, but God had not given up on him, and His Word of promise to Isaac remained unchanged. Upon waking, Isaac responded to the promises of God by building an altar and worshiping – the same behavior his father, Abraham, had adopted as a way of signaling his trust in God and staying close to Him and His plan (cf. Gen 12).

Rather than sulk and fume in resentment, shame, or anger, Isaac took refuge in the Lord and His promises, and resolved to wait on the Lord to bring the blessings He had promised. He would continue being himself and doing his work while he waited on the Lord to fulfill the promises of His Word (cf. Ps. 27:13, 14).

Staying close

Jesus promised us that the unbelieving world would be a rough place at times. We can expect our neighbors to hate us because we pursue lives of holiness and do not live like they do (Jn. 15:18-22). At times people will try to bring trouble on us by all manner of schemes. Jesus counseled us not to be scheming, plotting, and vicious in return, but to rejoice in our trials and tribulations, and stay close to Him (Jn. 16:33).

How can believers manage the patience, long-suffering, forbearance, graciousness, and peaceableness that God expects when our unbelieving neighbors are up to no good against us? Only by relying on Jesus Christ; only by resting in Him, trusting in His Word, taking recourse to prayer, and drawing on the fellowship and encouragement of our brothers and sisters in Christ (Heb. 10:24) – only thus will we be able to know the strength we need for living the truth in an unbelieving age.

If your practice of abiding in Christ is not what it should be, you'll know soon enough. If you're consistent in living for Christ, and bearing fruitful witness for Him, the unbelieving world will test your mettle and challenge your faith. How will you respond when someone in your Personal Mission Field tells you to back off, takes advantage of you, or makes you look bad, just because you've tried to talk with him about the Lord?

It's best we give some attention to shoring up our spiritual disciplines and renewing our time with the Lord now, before we get drawn into some strife and find that we don't have the spiritual resources to pull it off with grace.

We can't stop the unbelieving world from disliking us and saying all manner of evil things against us. But we can keep ourselves from retaliating in kind. Take refuge in the Lord – through prayer and meditation – and keep your focus on His promises. Praise Him and rejoice in the face of your trials, and you'll find, like Isaac, that God's presence and promises will be with you.

And, at the end of the day, that's really all any of us needs.

For reflection

1. How would you explain to a new Christian what it means to “abide in Christ”?
2. What role do spiritual disciplines play in helping us “stay close to Jesus”? Which disciplines do you find especially helpful to this end?
3. How would you rate – on a scale of 1 to 10 – the state of your spiritual disciplines at this time? Why did you choose the number you did?

Next steps: Talk with some of your Christian friends. Have they ever experienced rebuff or insult from unbelievers? How have they dealt with this? How can you encourage one another to take refuge in the Lord and His promises when the unbelieving world is giving you its best shot?

Prayer:

6 Be Ready to Respond with Grace

But they said, "We have certainly seen that the LORD is with you. So we said, 'Let there now be an oath between us, between you and us; and let us make a covenant with you...'" Genesis 26:28

The Lord with him

In our text Abimelech has traveled from his city to where Isaac is dwelling. He who'd sent the patriarch packing now comes seeking him out. He has something very serious on his mind.

It's clear that, when Abimelech arrived at Isaac's place, the patriarch was not a little put out. Isaac said to the king, "Why have you come to me, seeing that you hate me and have sent me away from you?" You can hear the irritation in his voice, that sense of exasperation and aggravation that had been growing in him, but which Isaac had thus far managed to check.

Why was Abimelech there in the first place? Because he'd seen something in Isaac's demeanor. He had seen his humility, his industry and prosperity, the graciousness with which he had moved on, and the care he had taken to avoid strife with Abimelech's people. Abimelech must have wondered: How does a man do such things? How can anyone with that much power not use his power to assert his rights and take vengeance on those who wrong him?

Abimelech had been around Isaac and Abraham just long enough to know that there was only one explanation for their extraordinary grace and forbearance: The Lord had been with them.

Touched by God

God touched the heart of this pagan king to come and set things right with Isaac. His motives may have been entirely self-interested, but the covenant Abimelech proposed was not simply a one-way pact designed to preserve his rule and realm. In those days making a covenant like this was a big deal. When making such covenants the parties in agreement would assemble their armies and families to declare to one and all that they were now allies and friends. Any attack on one would be an attack on both; any breach of contract on the part of one or the other would mean his destruction by all.

Covenant-making was serious business, and it established strong bonds and commitments between people who deeply respected one another.

Isaac did not need this covenant with Abimelech, although he surely benefited from it. But the timing of Abimelech's initiative must have been interpreted by Isaac as a confirmation of the promises God had just restated to him, among them the promise, "I will bless those who bless you, and those who curse you I will curse."

Isaac's greatness of character, fruitfulness of life, and peaceableness with his neighbors got Abimelech's attention in a big way. And the patriarch's greatness was only strengthened in Abimelech's eyes by this confirmation of the Lord's witness between them.

Two things

If we are faithful in living the truth as Isaac did, we can expect two things to happen.

First, many of the people in our Personal Mission Fields will begin to connect the lives we live with the Gospel we keep trying to share with them. In some of them, this might provoke a question about this Gospel and the hope it conveys. We'll need to be ready to answer any questions they might raise about this matter (1 Pet. 3:15).

Second, some of them will want to have a closer relationship with us. They'll want to spend more time with us, if only to gain some advantage from our friendship. And when they do, they will also be willing to discuss our faith more openly and honestly.

When the people in our unbelieving world begin to sense the hope of the Gospel in us, they will consider that there might be something in our way of life for them, and they will want to know more.

If we have been gracious and forbearing with them, humble, loving, and even willing to be wronged, when the time comes for them to draw closer to us, because of the grace of God, let's make sure we're ready to give them the time, space, and answers they seek, in reverence and respect.

For reflection

1. Meditate on Genesis 12.1-3. Summarize these "precious and very great promises" (2 Pet. 1.4) as you expect to realize them in your Personal Mission Field:
2. How should we deal with the emotions of being mocked, looked down at, talked about, rebuffed, or offended by those who don't like what we believe or how we live?
3. In 1 Peter 3.15 the Apostle seems to think that people in our Personal Mission Field should be able to "see" the hope we have in Jesus. What will they "see" when they "see" our hope?

Next steps: Think about the people in your Personal Mission Field. Brainstorm some ways you might be able to spend a little more time with some of them – getting to know them, listening for things to pray about, considering ways to encourage and serve them. Beside each name on your map, write down one or two things you might begin doing to draw a little closer to these folks. Start doing them right away, and ask your Mission Partner to pray for you as you do.

Prayer:

7 Stay the Course

Then they arose early in the morning and swore an oath with one another; and Isaac sent them away, and they departed from him in peace. It came to pass the same day that Isaac's servants came and told him about the well which they had dug, and said to him, "We have found water." Genesis 26.31, 32

Business-as-usual

The day after making a covenant with Abimelech, guess what: Nothing changed.

Abimelech went back to his part of Gerar and went about the business of being a pagan king.

Isaac and his servants returned to keeping their flocks, sowing their fields, and looking for water. There is no indication that Abimelech became a believer in the God of Isaac, and Isaac wasn't invited back to his original place of prosperity among the Philistines.

After their brief encounter, which featured a sharper focus on Isaac's God and the promises He had made to His people, both men went back to business-as-usual. No confessions of faith. No revival. No dramatic social or cultural transformations.

This is often how the Gospel makes progress among the unbelievers in our lives – in small increments, during opportune moments of sharper focusing, bracketed about by long periods of just taking care of things in the will of the Lord.

Growing closer

Did Isaac miss a golden opportunity here to "evangelize" his Philistine neighbors? In Gospel or Kingdom terms, did Isaac "blow it"?

Hardly. Rather, by his humility, decency, fairness, self-effacing ways, and overall graciousness, he provoked an opportunity for growing closer to his neighbors. The challenge from this point would be to continue that way of life until the Lord created the next open door of opportunity.

This is the challenge we face each day: How to get closer to the people around us so that we can show them the love of Christ whenever a door of opportunity cracks open.

Someone once described war as long periods of tedious preparation, watching, and waiting, interspersed by relatively brief interludes of all-out danger and excitement.

Living the truth before an unbelieving age is rather like that.

Stay the course

We must be always preparing ourselves to live for Christ and bear witness to Him at every opportunity, growing in the Lord, praying for our neighbors, acquiring the skills, and making the plans that will help us in working our Personal Mission Fields. By being continually conscious of our Personal Mission Fields and the people who populate them, we will be more alert to the opportunities for living His truth that the Lord brings us each day (Eph. 5:1-17).

At the same time, we must guard against any inroads of unrighteousness in our lives, so that we maintain a consistent witness of goodness and truth, even as we are constantly making ready for the next opportunity to talk about the Lord.

Living the truth means being a witness with our lives and speaking a witness by our words; but these must be complementary one to the other. Our lives must uphold the reliability of our words, and our words must give the logical explanation for our lives. This way of life is referred to as a walk, a race, a warfare, and a building project in which we need to persevere, step by step, brick by brick, hill by hill, and lap by lap, always striving and always seeking to show the power of grace in a life of loving service and truthful conversation.

Staying the course, in other words, focused on Christ and serving as His ambassadors to the people around us.

The more we keep on keeping on in this way of life, the more opportunities we will have for talking with others about the hope that is within us. Setbacks and slights will come, but so will open doors of opportunity. We need to know how to respond to each, always showing the grace of our Lord Jesus and standing firm in the truth of Gospel in everything we do.

We are like Isaac, the Lord's ambassadors in a strange country. Our calling is to walk humbly with our God, to bear fruit and make disciples, and always – always – to respect the people around us, even as we work to show them the love of Christ and proclaim the message of His Kingdom to them. Let us not grow weary in this pursuit, but wait upon the Lord, encourage and pray for one another, and keep on.

For reflection

1. Read the last paragraph of this lesson again. Do you agree? What are the implications of this for you at this time?
2. Review your Personal Mission Field. What can you do to prepare better for working this calling each day?
3. Do you have a prayer partner or accountability partner to help you in living the truth? Do you think this might be a good idea? Why or why not? Where might you like to find such a person?

Next steps: Lay out a strategy for working your Personal Mission Field for the next three months. How will you prepare? What will you do to begin conversations or continue ones already begun? How will you try to demonstrate the love of Christ to the people around you? What specific kinds of transformation – in your life and your Mission Field – will you seek to achieve? Share your plan with your Mission Partner

Prayer:

Lived Truth

Next steps

Make sure you have completed each of the *Next steps* exercises before you meet with your Mission Partner to discuss the following questions. Below, list the *Next steps* efforts and results you'd like to share with your Mission Partner:

Questions for discussion

1. What do we mean by “lived truth”? How does this relate to our calling to *be* witnesses for Christ?
2. Can you see aspects of Isaac’s situation in your own? Explain.
3. What are the greatest challenges you face in living the truth before the people in your Personal Mission Field?
4. What’s the most important lesson you’ve learned from this study?
5. How you are working to incorporate that lesson to your walk with and work for the Lord?

Prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

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We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship. You can contribute to our ministry by using the donate button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

Thank you.