

GENESIS—WEEK 21

ISAAC LEARNS DIPLOMACY



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is Isaac and Rebecca spied upon by Abimelech
by Raphael (1483–1520) On display at Stanza e Loggia di Raffaello, Vatican City*

God directs Isaac to stay in Gerar, then protects him from some rather unruly neighbors. Isaac shows a bit of diplomacy by digging wells, again and again, until the locals accept that this is good.

God uses the local king, Abimelech, to protect, and then to school, Isaac.

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Thank you.

Genesis 26:1–33 — Isaac Learns Diplomacy
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1 Genesis 26:1–5 (ESV)

Now there was a famine in the land, besides the former famine that was in the days of Abraham. And Isaac went to Gerar to Abimelech king of the Philistines. And the LORD appeared to him and said, “Do not go down to Egypt; dwell in the land of which I shall tell you. Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and will bless you, for to you and to your offspring I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father. I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and will give to your offspring all these lands. And in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.”

Christians understand the meaning of the promise made to Abraham in Genesis 12 & 22 (“*In your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.*”). It’s all about Jesus.

But non-Christians don’t see it that way. They’ve come up with various theories for how Abraham’s descendants will bless all nations. They will be beneficent rulers. Their wisdom will bless their neighbors. They will do great things.

But two things in this passage contradict those theories.

- 1) The entire promise is passed to Isaac; none of Abraham’s other sons are involved.
- 2) Isaac is told to stay put and not travel to other lands.

These things dictate a single line of blessing through Isaac’s descendants while preventing the spread of those descendants who might bless all nations with their wonderfulness.

The whole Old Testament points to Christ.

That said, God’s timetable still takes a little getting used to. The Messiah is over a thousand years away.

Imagine that God told you that He was granting you a thousand year life, and that at the end, Christ would return. How would that make you feel?

<http://www.wired.co.uk/news/archive/2011-10/13/richard-seymour>

Would this try your patience? We’ve already waited two millennia for Christ’s return. What’s so bad about waiting one more? (Note: Richard Seymour’s view is not Biblical and looks to me to be way off.)

Well, there’s something intimidating about actually living through the whole thing. We like to talk about how God deals with things on a larger scale, and about how God’s ways are not our ways, but we rarely ponder how large that can get.

For the time dimension, we at least have some feel for it. We have a mental image of a thousand years—and it’s scary. That helps us see one aspect of how God’s ways are above our pay grade.

Praise God for who He is. We have no idea what His in-basket looks like. I don’t want to know either.

2 Genesis 26:6–11 (ESV)

So Isaac settled in Gerar. When the men of the place asked him about his wife, he said, “She is my sister,” for he feared to say, “My wife,” thinking, “lest the men of the place should kill me because of Rebekah,” because she was attractive in appearance. When he had been there a long time, Abimelech king of the Philistines looked out of a window and saw Isaac laughing with Rebekah his wife. So Abimelech called Isaac and said, “Behold, she is your wife. How then could you say, ‘She is my sister’?” Isaac said to him, “Because I thought, ‘Lest I die because of her.’” Abimelech said, “What is this you have done to us? One of the people might easily have lain with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us.” So Abimelech warned all the people, saying, “Whoever touches this man or his wife shall surely be put to death.”

Seriously? Must we go through the “She’s my sister,” routine again? This family sure has a lot of issues.

Except that this time, it’s different. The truth is that this is a crazy-dangerous neighborhood.

Notice the line, “*One of the people might easily have lain with your wife.*” Easily? Doesn’t sex need to be consensual? Maybe Isaac’s fear that they would kill him for his wife isn’t all that far-fetched.

That speaks volumes about Isaac’s willingness to stay where God told him to stay. Even with the LORD’s specific promises, Isaac is anything but comfortable with this place.

Still, he stays, and God protects him though Abimelech. Notice that Abimelech’s declaration protects both Rebekah and Isaac. That confirms that Isaac’s fear is legit.

Gerar has all the safety and stability of a pirate ship.

One of the greatest things about living in America is something we take for granted—stability. Everything will still be here tomorrow—our homes, our jobs, electricity, the schools.

There are exceptions (e.g., tornadoes, hurricanes, and earthquakes) but they’re extraordinary events, not the norm. And even when natural disasters strike, help shows up. Our civilization has our back.

But few people around the world have it as good. Some nations are so unstable that people die every day trying to escape. Much of the world is overrun by chaos and evil. So, what should we pray for?

The persecuted church? Sure. For the safety of our missionaries? Of course. For God to bring an end to these horrors? Always.

But what’s the point? God could end these nightmares in an instant. Why doesn’t He?

There’s something mysterious in all this, something that glorifies Him, and it’s beyond our understanding. The challenges of life (especially the challenges of following Christ) are supposed to be there.

So, obey His command to pray. It’s the secret sauce of life in Christ, even if we don’t understand it all.

3 Genesis 26:12–16 (NKJV)

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. 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."

The parenthetical comment about the wells feels off topic. Why does scripture drop that in here?

To explain the Philistines' hostility. We already know that they're a rough crowd, but trashing all of Abraham's wells seems so senseless and self-defeating. Why would they do that?

To keep people like Isaac away. A place without wells is like a highway exit with no food or gas—no one stops there. These folks don't want neighbors.

And there is a reason for that; grazing land is limited. A neighbor's flocks and herds won't just drink the water; they'll eat the vegetation. This is an arid region, and their irrigation technology is hauling water up out of a well by hand. There isn't an abundance of food for the animals.

Except for Isaac's. The LORD blesses him. His neighbors are so envious that Abimelech has to ask him to leave. Abimelech uses diplomatic words, but he's hinting that he can't continue to guarantee Isaac's safety.

This is striking, coming immediately after he announced special protected status for Isaac and Rebekah.

Abimelech's grip on power doesn't seem to be all that solid.

Notice how the Philistines view blessings. They're more interested in making sure no one else gets them than in their getting them. So they destroy wells and expel anyone who's successful.

This is "competition." For them, life is all about comparing yourself to others. Being dirt poor is just fine as long as you're richer than everyone else. How well off you are in absolute terms isn't their yardstick.

This stands in stark contrast to the eyes of faith. Seeing others benefit is a cause for joy; it's a beautiful thing, which glorifies God. Our own benefit is great too, but it mustn't come at the expense of others. Those who know God love goodness and beauty—and they love their neighbors.

But this attitude doesn't come completely on the day we're converted. Our old sinful nature is still resident. We often resent things we shouldn't. We need to grow—and we need to ask His help in this.

It's a strange (even frightening) prayer request, but it's good to ask the LORD for humility.

Ask Him for a more loving spirit toward everyone else.

4 Genesis 26:17–22 (NKJV)

Then Isaac departed from there and pitched his tent in the Valley of Gerar, and dwelt there. And Isaac dug again the wells of water which they had dug in the days of Abraham his father, for the Philistines had stopped them up after the death of Abraham. He called them by the names which his father had called them.

Also Isaac’s servants dug in the valley, and found a well of running water there. But the herdsmen of Gerar quarreled with Isaac’s herdsmen, saying, “The water is ours.” So he called the name of the well Esek, because they quarreled with him. 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.”

Isaac moves to the suburbs only to find amazingly unreasonable neighbors. He digs a well, and instead of being grateful, they insist the water is theirs. Isaac’s response to this is the perfect model of righteous behavior. He lets them have the well and digs another.

This sequence of events is puzzling—until you add one key deduction. The herdsmen apparently don’t know how to dig a well. Also, they don’t seem to be the same people who stopped up the old ones.

Without modern tools (even a steel shovel) digging a well is quite a challenge. Knowing where to dig is important too. Abraham figured all this out and he taught it to Isaac. This unique and valuable skill makes Isaac a star. The herdsmen may be arrogant about property rights, but they’re not stupid.

When Isaac is able to repeat the trick of producing water from the ground, they stop thinking of the particular wells as what’s valuable and, instead, see Isaac’s skill as “the goose that lays the golden eggs.”

So Isaac just keeps digging wells until the herdsmen get the point.

Isaac knew something the herdsmen didn’t. This gave him an opportunity to overcome hostility with charity. This is analogous to our knowledge of the gospel and of human behavior.

Nowadays, people know how to get water; it’s happiness that they can’t seem to find. It never dawns on some folks that happiness isn’t something you fight for.

We’re called to be generous with happiness. Material possessions aren’t the answer, and people who covet, hoard, and fight for those things shouldn’t be interfered with. That allows them to discover for themselves that possessions don’t deliver happiness.

We’re always ready to dig a well of living water for anyone. Just by living life as a Christian, we display what does deliver.

That’s attractive.

5 Genesis 26:23–33 (ESV)

From there he went up to Beersheba. And the LORD appeared to him the same night and said, “I am the God of Abraham your father. Fear not, for I am with you and will bless you and multiply our offspring for my servant Abraham's sake.” So he built an altar there and called upon the name of the LORD and pitched his tent there. And there Isaac's servants dug a well.

When Abimelech went to him from Gerar with Ahuzzath his adviser and Phicol the commander of his army, Isaac said to them, “Why have you come to me, seeing that you hate me and have sent me away from you?” They said, “We see plainly that the LORD has been with you. So we said, let there be a sworn pact between us, between you and us, and let us make a covenant with you, that you will do us no harm, just as we have not touched you and have done to you nothing but good and have sent you away in peace. You are now the blessed of the LORD.” So he made them a feast, and they ate and drank. In the morning they rose early and exchanged oaths. And Isaac sent them on their way, and they departed from him in peace. That same day Isaac's servants came and told him about the well that they had dug and said to him, “We have found water.” He called it Shibah; therefore the name of the city is Beersheba to this day.

Isaac returns to Beersheba and gets a clear sign confirming that this is where he's supposed to live—the LORD appears and pronounces a blessing. Then Abimelech announces that he wants to be friends.

Abimelech is right when he says, “*we have not touched you and have done to you nothing but good and have sent you away in peace.*” Isaac's claim that they “*hate*” him is outrageous. It's to Abimelech's great credit that he lets this go and stays diplomatic.

His choice of words, especially his use of God's name (YHVH—translated “the LORD”) is impressive. Isaac recognizes this and calms down, graciously hosting a feast. In the morning they exchange oaths and part as friends.

Isaac has found a permanent home.

Always pray for our nation's leaders, especially the ones we disagree with. Both Isaac and Abimelech recognized their own errors and grew as a result. Pray that our leaders will grow in similar ways.

Also, pray that God will bless them and protect them. While we may sometimes resent the way they do their job, they are overworked and underpaid compared to others of similar or even lesser stature. If we don't have the heart to truly lift them up, then we need to grow too.

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. — Romans 13:1 (ESV)

Paul wrote this while living under Roman rule. He had experienced the imperial rule of such famous nut-cases as Caligula, Claudius, and Nero and presumably wrote Romans while Nero was the emperor.

If Paul could write Romans 13:1 under conditions like that, obeying it should be a piece of cake for us.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Suppose you knew a date certain for Christ's return. How would that change your life?
2. Do you keep up with the news about the persecuted church?
3. Have you ever prayed for God to make you more humble?
4. Some material possessions are more effective than others at making people happy. Which ones are best and which ones are worst?
5. Have you ever had a hostile relationship turn friendly, or a broken one healed?