

ABRAHAM'S SON

by Steve Zeisler

Most of the book of Genesis tells the story of the first four generations of the family of Abraham. This history is the foundation for understanding the theological declarations God makes later in the Bible. I invite you to begin a study of the three generations which followed that of Abraham and Sarah, the life and times of Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. Here we will see the lessons God taught these men and their families and how their character was formed. Christians, those who have the same faith as Abraham, the Bible declares, are considered to be his children. Today's believers, then, are in the direct line of salvation history which began four thousand years ago with Abraham and his family. The life histories of the patriarchs, unfolded in chapters 25 through 50 of the book of Genesis, have, it seems, many of the characteristics of modern day soap operas. Power grabs, death threats, statesmanship, jealousies, romances, fraternal violence, illicit sex, wealth, imprisonment, slavery, together with failure, forgiveness and evidence of God's working among them all of these themes are to be found in four generations of one man's family.

Imagine for a moment that you are visiting an ancient manor home somewhere in England. You are touring the seat of a titled family which traces its roots back through hundreds of years of British history. Now, imagine I am your tour guide. Let your imagination run free. Several rooms seem to have been added on to the original structure, you observe. You look out a window at the stately gardens, the manicured lawns, the fountains. As you walk through the halls you look up at the framed portraits of the leading members of this family through the generations. At the end of the great hall, in a place of honor, hangs the portrait of the first peer of this ancient family. We are speaking of Abraham, the founder and patriarch. A close look at the oil painting reveals that this man bears a striking resemblance to Charlton Heston! He is tall and stately; he seems courageous and accomplished. While there were periods of weakness in his life, Abraham nevertheless was an outstanding man. He had a great love for God. He was courageous, wise and influential. He negotiated with kings and common folk alike, bringing God's word to bear on all situations. This man holds a place of honor for his depth of spirit in all cultures and all areas, both religious and secular.

Hanging next to Abraham's portrait are oil paintings of his two sons. Ishmael was born not to Sarah, Abraham's wife, but to her maid. A close look at his portrait reveals that he too resembles another contemporary film actor. Why, he looks like Charles Bronson! Do you see that? He is hard-nosed, assertive and aggressive. Genesis 25:16 says he was the defiant type:

These are the sons of Ishmael and these are their names, by their villages, and by their camps; twelve princes according to their tribes. And these are the years of the life of Ishmael, one hundred and thirty-seven years; and he breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people. And they settled from Havilah to Shur which is east of Egypt as one goes toward Assyria; he settled in defiance of all his relatives.

Ishmael was the father of twelve princes who settled vast territories and founded cities. He lived in defiance of his relatives, refusing to be put down, despite his inauspicious beginnings. He is a rough, rugged, defiant, Charles Bronson type.

The third portrait, and the one we will look most closely at today, is the figure of Isaac. He is Abraham's heir, the "son of the promise." He, too, bears a resemblance to a modern-day actor. Doesn't he remind you of Rodney Dangerfield? Unlike his father Abraham and brother Ishmael, Isaac just does not command a lot of respect.

I believe we are supposed to learn lessons from comparing the men we have just pictured in our minds. Compared to his half-brother Ishmael, Isaac had precious few human attributes. He was not nearly as capable, assertive, bright or gifted, yet he was the chosen one of God. In God's economy everything depends on his choosing, not on human ability. What is critical is not the vessel, but what the vessel contains. As we compare Isaac with Abraham we will learn why one man had a passion for truth and one did not; why Abraham had a "hunger and thirst for righteousness," for obedience to and glorification of God, and why Isaac's hunger was often for nothing more significant than a hearty meal. Though he is mentioned earlier, the story of Isaac really begins in Genesis 26:19:

Now these are the records of the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham became the father of Isaac; and Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel the Syrian of Padan-aram, the sister of Laban the Syrian, to be his wife. And Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord answered him and Rebekah his wife conceived. But the children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is so, why then am I this way?" So she went to inquire of the Lord. And the Lord said to her, "Two nations are in your womb; and two peoples shall be separated from your body; and one people shall be stronger than the other; and the older shall serve the younger." When her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb.

The main events in Isaac's life are but repetitions of what Abraham experienced. But the things that the great patriarch did—even the things which were wrong—were done on a grand scale. Isaac's accomplishments in life, on the other hand, were insignificant.

Isaac's beginnings, however, are quite commendable. He married the woman God intended for him, although she was unable to conceive. Shades of Abraham. But Isaac prayed that God would open Rebekah's womb, and, as he had done for his father before him, God answered his prayers. Something about her pregnancy troubled Rebekah, however, and she made inquiry of the Lord. She learned of the kind of children she would bear and, surprisingly, that the younger twin would be the greater, that upon him the promise of God would be bestowed. Here again we find similarities between this couple's story and that of Isaac's parents. Abraham and Sarah were not fearful, but incredulous when the Lord spoke to them about the child they would have. The combination of God's words and human emotions have certain similarities during the pregnancy of each couple.

Isaac's hopeful beginning soon gave way to a life that suffers in comparison to that of his father, however. In Genesis 26 we have the account of how Isaac interacted with the world he lived in, while in Genesis 27 we will see how he performed as leader of his own home. Abraham had a powerful impact on his world, and he was a very successful family man, although he was not without some failures. But what kind of influence did Isaac his son and heir have in both of these settings? Chapter 26 sets out two events which occurred during the time when Isaac was sojourning among the people of Philistia, a Gentile people among whom Abraham also lived for a period. Abimelech, the king over these people, may very well have been the same man with whom Abraham had dealings earlier; or he may have been this king's son.

The two incidents that occur during Isaac's journeying among them are, first, his deceiving them with regard to his wife, and secondly, an argument about water wells. Similar events, of course, occurred with Abraham earlier. He too lied about his wife on two occasions, claiming she was his sister; and Abraham also had a dispute over wells and land, once with his nephew Lot, and once with certain herdsmen in Philistia. We could say that Isaac is replaying his father's history. But there is quite a difference in the outcome of these apparently similar events in the lives of Abraham and Isaac.

Abimelech had been told that Sarah, Abraham's wife, was actually a single woman so he felt quite justified in taking her for himself. Let's look at the outcome of Abraham's lie. Genesis 20:3:

But God came to Abimelech in a dream of the night and said to him, "Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is married." Now Abimelech had not come near her; and he said, "Lord, wilt Thou slay a nation, even though blameless? Did not

he himself say to me, 'She is my sister'? And she herself said, 'He is my brother.' In the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands I have done this." Then God said to him in the dream, 'Yes, I know that in the integrity of your heart you have done this, and I also kept you from sinning against Me; therefore I did not let you touch her. Now therefore restore the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you, and you will live. But if you do not restore her; know that you shall surely die, you and all who are yours."

Thinking only of himself, Abraham selfishly lied and thereby set in motion a process which placed Sarah—and, by extension, the promise itself—in acute danger. This was one of the low points in Abraham's life's testimony. Yet, even in his sin, God exalted him, giving him back his wife and telling Abimelech he was a prophet. "Have Abraham pray for you," God directs the king, "or else you and your entire nation will die." Despite his wrongdoing, Abraham is restored with God and is given great influence in Philistia.

But when Isaac sins in the same way as his father there is a very different result. Gen.26:8:

And it came about, when [Isaac] had been there a long time [long enough to know that a lie was no longer necessary], that Abimelech king of the Philistines looked out through a window, and saw, and behold, Isaac was caressing his wife Rebekah. Then Abimelech called Isaac and said, "Behold, certainly she is your wife! How then did you say, 'She is my sister'?" And Isaac said to him, "Because I said, 'Lest I die on account of her.'" And 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 called all the people, saying, "He who touches this man or his wife shall surely be put to death."

How different are the results of the two incidents, Isaac's and Abraham's! Abimelech humbled himself before Abraham, beseeching him, even before Abraham's own restoration, if he would pray for him and his people. But Isaac he bawls out, calling attention to shameful cowardice. Isaac and Rebekah, if you will pardon me, bring to mind a couple of ninth graders making out in the parking lot after the school dance. Caught in the act by Abimelech, they must endure a lecture from him about their deception. He, an outsider, an unbeliever, upbraids Isaac, the promised son, for his foolishness. Isaac lacks stature and weight. Far from being a great leader, he has to be led and taught by an unbeliever. The rest of chapter 26 tells the story of an argument about wealth. Verse 12:

Now Isaac sowed in that land, and reaped in the same year a hundredfold. And the Lord blessed him, and the man became rich, and continued to grow richer until he became very wealthy; for he had possession of flocks and herds and a great household, so that the Philistines envied him. Now all the wells which his father's servants had dug in the days of Abraham his father, the Philistines stopped up by filling them with earth. Then Abimelech said to Isaac, "Go away from us, for you are too powerful for us." And Isaac departed from there and camped in the valley of Gerar, and settled there. Then Isaac dug again the wells of water which had been dug in the days of his father Abraham, for the Philistines had stopped them up after the death of Abraham; and he gave them the very names which his father had given them. But when Isaac's servants dug in the valley and found there a well of flowing water, the herdsmen of Gerar quarreled with the herdsmen of Isaac, saying, "The water is ours!" So he named the well Esek, because they contended with him. Then they dug another well, and they quarreled over it too, so he named it Sitnah. And he moved away from there and dug another well, and they did not quarrel over it; so he named it Rehoboth, for he said, "At last the Lord has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land."

When Abraham and Lot occupied the same territory and the herdsmen of each of these great families quarreled, Abraham said they had to separate. Then, in a magnificent act of faith, Abraham allowed Lot first choice of the land before them, thereby demonstrating his trust in the Lord to give him what was best for him. There follows the account, not only of Lot's failure in Sodom, but of God's blessing Abraham for his righteous decision.

In Genesis 21, then, there is the story of the quarrel between Abraham's herdsmen and those of the Philistines. Once again, the row is over water and pasture. On this occasion Abraham and Abimelech, on the patriarch's

initiative, sit down together and solve the problem. Both men make a covenant, witnessed by God, and they agree to get along with each other. Because Abraham took the initiative on this occasion, and trusted God for the results, God was honored with the outcome so much so that the Philistines saw God's hand in the matter.

Isaac's actions, on the other hand, were not essentially evil, but they were insignificant by comparison. I keep wanting to use the word "wimp" to describe Isaac, but I dare not. One day I will meet him, and I certainly don't want to slander him. But in his case when an argument about wells comes up, he just moves on to the next well, thereby avoiding conflict. And he repeats this action later. There is no sense of questioning what God was saying through the circumstances he was facing, no meeting with Abimelech, nothing. Isaac just keeps going until he finds a place where at last God makes room for him. That is how he solves the problem at hand. It is not an unrighteous solution, but neither is it a solution through which Isaac becomes a blessing to the Philistines. Isaac merely took the path of least resistance, accepted the wealth that God gave him, and moved all the way back to Beersheba without once mentioning the Lord. So we find Isaac repeating some facets of his father's history, but on a very much-reduced scale.

Here we should pause and ask questions about what we have learned. What kind of influence did Isaac have in the world? Did he display God's character? Was he a truth-teller, bringing righteousness to bear and creating a hunger among people for God? The record does not show that he was any of these things. Isaac accepted a great inheritance, knowledge of God and wealth from his father, and he squandered most of it on himself. He did not do much wrong, but it is true to say he did not do much of anything. Abraham made his home all the way across the map of the Near East, from Mesopotamia, to Canaan, to Egypt, to Syria and back, but Isaac lived 180 years in the confines of a small radius. Ishmael had twelve sons; Isaac had two. He lived in his own small world, comforted by the riches his father had given him but not doing much with them. Abraham fought kings and saved the innocent. He worshiped in public before Melchizedek. He interceded for Sodom. He saved Lot twice. He prayed for and led Abimelech in a solemn covenant before the Lord. He lived a life of constant reaching out to others, praying for them and comforting them, being God's man in his generation. But Isaac, by comparison, spent his days walking away from trouble, keeping his thoughts to himself, avoiding strife at all costs, apparently unable to offer blessing to others.

Whom do we resemble, Abraham or Isaac, in our Christian walk? What kind of influence do we have in our world? Are we a blessing? Do we pray with effectiveness? Do we speak in such a way that others feel a hunger to seek God? Do we care for their physical needs and do we find they rejoice that their spirits are ministered to also?

I have lived in my present home long enough to have put down roots in this community. I have lived here long enough even to be considered a member of the "clergy." As such, I have performed weddings and have been involved in various other activities for my neighbors. As a matter of fact, at a Little League game yesterday one of the fathers was concerned that I had my sermon finished in time for today. Recently I attended, as a member of the clergy, a luncheon welcoming another clergyman to town. As I run into more and more of these situations the awful thought has occurred to me that it's quite possible to take part in all of these things and yet be without any influence whatever. The father who asked me about my sermon did not seem to be interested in the content of it. The neighbors who asked me to perform wedding ceremonies for their children did not ask about the God who ordained marriage in the first place. I say all of this guardedly, because after the first service this morning a few people came up to me to assure me I was not such a bad guy after all!

But I am not trying to elicit sympathy; rather I'm trying to get us to ask ourselves whether we are influential in our world as Abraham was in his. Are we creating hunger for Christ? Are we burdened to pray for others? Or are we like Isaac, squandering on ourselves everything we have been given—our church, our love for each other, the truth of the Scriptures, godly friends, our family camps, our rich inheritance? That is what Isaac did. He followed the path of least resistance. Our church has a tremendous heritage. Forty years ago a group of pioneers started this fellowship in Palo Alto. The Scriptures have been faithfully taught all through those years. Each week we publish the messages preached here. We have seen transcripts of these sermons distributed all over the world. Truly, our patriarchs laid a great foundation. Will the succeeding generation imitate what they have seen modeled, or will we turn out like Isaac? How will we spend the riches we have inherited? Isaac and Abraham, Charlton Heston and

Rodney Dangerfield, ask that question of us. Genesis 27:1 relates the sad story of Isaac's inadequate leadership in his own home.

Now it came about, when Isaac was old, and his eyes were too dim to see, that he called his older son Esau and said to him, "My son." And he said to him, "Here I am." And Isaac said, "Behold now, I am old and I do not know the day of my death. Now then, please take your gear, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field and hunt game for me; and prepare a savory dish for me such as I love, and bring it to me that I may eat, so that my soul may bless you before I die." And Rebekah was listening while Isaac spoke to his son Esau. So when Esau went to the field to hunt for game to bring home, Rebekah said to her son Jacob, "Behold, I heard your father speak to your brother Esau, saying, 'Bring me some game and prepare a savory dish for me, that I may eat, and bless you in the presence of the Lord before my death.' Now therefore, my son, listen to me as I command you. Go now to the flock and bring me two choice kids from there, that I may prepare them as a savory dish for your father, such as he loves. Then you shall bring it to your father, that he may eat, so that he may bless you before his death."

What a terrible account of lies and deception! Isaac intended to disobey the intention of the Lord and secretly give the family blessing to Esau, but Rebekah and Jacob intervened with lies to deprive him of it. Esau was an outdoors type and Isaac liked that kind of man. Furthermore, Esau liked to eat, and so did his father. So both of them cook up a deal whereby Esau will get his father's blessing. Then along comes the other pair in this story, Rebekah and Jacob, and they add their embarrassing contribution to the sorry tale.

Contrast that kind of leadership in the home with that displayed by Abraham during his life. Do you remember how carefully Abraham set about the process of choosing a wife for Isaac, how cautiously he planned for the chosen son's future? But Isaac did not emulate his father's careful planning for his own sons. Esau married two Canaanite women with no word of instruction or concern from his father. Isaac took lightly his responsibility when his turn came, failing to seek the mind of the Lord. He seemed unconcerned about the next generation and God's purpose for his family line. Again, we see Isaac's habit of taking the easy way out, smoothing things over, not making any waves. His leadership in the home suffered as a result. His wife was forced to take on more than she should, and Isaac watched passively as his leadership role was usurped.

The question arising from this text to Christian husbands and wives is, Are we a godly influence in the setting of our homes or not? And are we a godly and courageous witness for Christ not only in our homes? Abraham and Isaac had a hunger for very different things. Abraham built altars; Isaac fed his appetite. Abraham hungered and thirsted for righteousness; Isaac hungered for comfort, a good meal, and an unruffled life. Abraham became a dominant figure because he had a passion for God and for truth. Isaac, despite the vast resources which he inherited, accomplished little and was content to let the world go by.

What do we hunger and thirst for? Ease and comfort? Are we more interested in career strategies, vacation plans and hobbies than we are for our interest in Scripture and in ministry? Are we looking for ways to provide ourselves with more pleasure and comfort, or are we seeking ways to maximize our usefulness in service to God? Isaac did not fight any battles. Compared to his father, he seems to have been a man without passion or goals. He did not even wrestle with God as Jacob would later. He seemed content to cruise through life, feeding his appetites. A couple of days ago former President Jimmy Carter said a very important thing when he visited this area and spoke in a church in Sunnyvale. "We can fritter away our whole life," he said, "always thinking about—even praying about—good things and never doing them. We could go to our graves without ever doing something of a sacrificial nature. I guarantee you the sacrifice you think you have made will turn out to be one of the greatest blessings of your life."

If Isaac is seen to be different from his father in his passion for God, what would comparing him with his half-brother, Ishmael, teach us? First, there is an observable difference in their capabilities. Ishmael was capable, assertive, effective, powerful. Isaac, of course, as we have seen, was none of those things. But these men were also very different in God's eyes. The inescapable fact of Scripture is that God said, "I chose Isaac." Not because

he was deserving or attractive or that he had anything which commended him to God. For his own purposes God decreed, "This is my man." I think it would be fair to say of most of us that when we look in the mirror we see much more of Rodney Dangerfield than we do Charlton Heston or Charles Bronson. We are known more for our failures than for our accomplishments. We need grounds for hoping that, even if at times we set aside hunger for righteousness and replace it with hunger for more fleshly things, we are still loved of God. And we are. In the final analysis, everything depends upon the sovereign power of God. His irresistible grace, his matchless mercy, not our paltry accomplishments, is the source of our hope. Knowing that let us begin to build lives of obedience and responsiveness to his will for us.

The final recorded word regarding Isaac comes in Genesis 28. Jacob is running for his life, fearing his brother Esau. At last Isaac realizes that Isaac is the one whom God chose for the blessing.

So Isaac called Jacob and blessed him and charged him, and said to him, "You shall not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan. Arise, go to Paddan-aram, to the house of Bethuel your mother's father; and from there take to yourself a wife from the daughters of Laban your mother's brother. And may God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples. May He also give you the blessing of Abraham, to you and to your descendants with you; that you may possess the land of your sojournings, which God gave to Abraham." Then Isaac sent Jacob away, and he went to Paddan-aram to Laban, son of Bethuel the Syrian, the brother of Rebekah, the mother of Jacob and Esau.

At last Isaac realizes the call of God upon him. From his heart he blesses Jacob, the son who should have been blessed from the first. This blessing is more spiritually discerning than the one given in Genesis 27—its focus is God's word to Abraham. Thus does Isaac pass from the pages of Scripture. The man God chose to become obedient. Abraham's son eventually came to have the same faith as Abraham.

We, too, are children of Abraham. Let us question the things we hunger for in life. And let us rise up in hope in the sovereign God in whom we put our trust.

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