

Passing Down the Faith

He Who Wrestles with God: A Study in the Life of Jacob, Sermon 2

Genesis 26:1-18, 23-29 | February 4, 2024

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I was at the barber shop on Friday, waiting my turn, when I realized I was sitting next to a dad who was waiting for his young son to finish up. The barber spun the chair around so the father could get a good look at the progress. With a nod of approval, he let the barber know the job was done.

I couldn't help but notice how much they two looked alike. Both with fresh haircuts, the boy was a spitting image of his dad, just thirty years younger.

A father doesn't have to do much to pass on his looks to his son. Nature takes care of that. But what if he wanted to pass on something else, like his vocation, practicing law, engineering, or farming? That would require much teaching. What if he wanted to pass on to his son character, patience, kindness, humility—that would take much modeling.

But what if he wanted to pass on something else...faith? What if he wanted to pass on to his son his own relationship with God? He wanted his son to also hear God's voice, experience God's love, and follow God's ways. What could the father do to pass this on to his son?

Genesis and transmissions

This is one of the questions hanging over the book of Genesis: *how is faith passed on from one generation to the next?* Genesis is not only a book about beginnings—the beginning of the world, the beginning of humanity, and the beginning of God's people. It's also a book about transmissions—how God's promises, and humanity's faith, are passed down from one generation to the next. The promises made to Abraham, after all, involved generations to come. So, each patriarch must do more than sire an heir; they must pray that God's blessing will be transmitted to their children and to their children's children.

The question of the transmission of faith is just as relevant today. Faith is not passed on by nature—the way, say, red hair is. Faith must be born anew in each new generation—an act that unfolds between God and each individual. A parent cannot, by their own power, transmit faith to their heirs.

But they can be an example that makes faith real and compelling in the eyes of those who come after them.

Genesis 26 and the transmission of faith from Abraham to Isaac

And this is the central theme of our passage today, Genesis 26. It's concerned with the transmission of faith from Abraham to his son Isaac. Remember last week, as we began our winter series on the life of Jacob, we saw, in Genesis 25, that Isaac and his wife Rebekah have twin sons, Esau and Jacob. The boys were born in conflict. But that tension simmers on the back burner in Genesis 26, to reappear in Genesis 27. But here, the young boys only watch, we hear not a word from them. Instead, the attention is entirely on Isaac—this is the only chapter dedicated specifically to his life. And with Father Abraham dying (his death is referenced in Gen 26:18), and the boys Jacob and Esau growing up, the question looms, will the faith of Abraham, and the blessings it entails, be passed down through Isaac?

We'll consider Isaac's sojourning in Genesis 26, where he follows closely in the footsteps of Abraham. We'll see that his father's faith does in fact come alive in his own life. And we'll notice how this unfolds. We'll consider three channels through which God fosters a living faith in Abraham's son, Isaac, and in each case, notice how the father proved a model for the son. These channels for the passing on of faith are (1) hearing, (2) walking, and (3) tasting. Isaac must hear with his own ears, walk with his own feet, and taste with his own heart, that the God of his father and mother, is also the Lord of his own life, too.

I. Hearing:

The son must hear the voice of God with his own ears.

From the outset, Genesis 26 invites comparison between Isaac and his father,

Now there was a famine in the land, besides the former famine that was in the days of Abraham (26:1)

Just as Abraham faced a famine (Gen 12:10), so too will Isaac. And just as Abraham traveled southeast to a Philistine outpost, Gerar (Gen 20:1), so too will Isaac,

And Isaac went to Gerar to Abimelech king of the Philistines.

And in Gerar amidst its people, Isaac will face a challenge that his father also faced, the threat of being killed so his wife can be taken (Gen 20:2-4; 26:6-11). But before we consider that scene, we need to notice what happens in verse 2, for it offers our first insight into the birth of real faith in Isaac. In verse 2, we read of Isaac's first *personal* encounter with God.

² And the LORD appeared to him and said, "Do not go down to Egypt; dwell in the land of which I shall tell you (Gen 26:1-2).

This is not the first time Isaac would have heard the Word of God. Surely his father would have repeated to him often the words God spoke over the family at Abraham's calling, "Go from your country ... to a land I will show you. And I will make you a great nation and I will bless you" (Gen 12:1-2). But that was a second-hand hearing.

What's happening now is different, it's direct. Genesis 26 is Isaac's first *personal* encounter with God's Word. And this is so, in two senses.

- This is personal because Isaac is being personally addressed, "The Lord appeared *to him* and said" (v2).
- God's word personally implicates Isaac. He's not just hearing God's voice; he's been directed by it: "stay in Gerar; don't go to Egypt" (vv 2-3).

There is a difference between God's Word coming to you through a tradition, or a parent, or a friend, and God's Word suddenly breaking into your heart because God is addressing *you*. And there is a difference between hearing the commands of God's Word as general morals, and suddenly realizing that God is placing those demands *on you*.

I took a business law course during my senior year of college. It was a big class, jam-packed, we sat in stadium seating, and it met at 8am. One could easily sit in the back and reduce Professor Freedmen's lecture to a low drone that you could daydream through. Until, of course, he called on you directly, "Mr. Ferguson, what are your thoughts on the case that concludes on page 485 of this week's reading?" it

wasn't as though he wasn't speaking before, nor that I wasn't hearing noise—but suddenly his words were personally addressing *me*!

This must happen for the faith to be passed on. Each son, each new generation, must be addressed directly by the Word of God. And from this, we can note two lessons.

First, Abraham is not, ultimately, God's voice to Isaac. He can share God's word, but at some point, it must be God speaking to Isaac, not merely his earthly father. And this is true for every generation that would pass on the faith. We are not, ultimately, the voice of God. God must speak afresh to the next generation, to our children. Yes, through the same Word of God, but it must come with the authority of His voice, not ours.

And this can be unsettling to us because it means we do not have the power, in ourselves, to transmit faith to our children. That responsibility and power lie, ultimately, on God's shoulders.

Second, however, notice that Abraham does *help* Isaac hear. The father, through his example and teaching, modeled what it means to hear the voice of God in one's life. It is moving that Isaac's sojourn in this chapter ends with him in Beersheba, "...he went up to Beersheba" (v 23). And at Beersheba Isaac for the first time "built an altar and called upon the name of the Lord" (v 25). This is moving, because Abraham had taken the boy—after the harrowing scene on Mount Moriah—to this very place (Gen 22:19), and Abraham had already made Beersheba a holy site: "Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba and called there on the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God" (Gen 21:33).

A father, in his own power, cannot transmit faith to his son; but he can model it, making it easier for his son to one day hear.

Parents, do you model hearing the Word of God for your children? Not just teaching them the Word and bringing them to a church that teaches them the Word, but modeling, by your own regular example that God really does speak.

And next generation—young people—are you listening for God to speak to *you* through His Word? Or are you simply turning the words in church, or the example of your parents, into a low drone to daydream through?

“Faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ,” Paul says (Rom 10:17). Faith was transmitted to Isaac, when, in following the model of his father, he came to hear God’s words addressing him.

Faith involves more than hearing, however, there is also walking.

II. Walking:

The son must walk obediently with his own feet.

God sets Abraham’s faith before Isaac in verse 5, “Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.” And then God sends Isaac to strike his foot on the very same stone that Abraham did. Once in Gerar, surrounded by a more powerful people, Isaac fears for his safety so he presents his wife as his sister, so the men don’t kill him for her.

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. (Gen 26:7).

Abraham had committed this same sin with Sarah, twice. One such time was in this very place, Gerar, with the same royal family, Abimelech. Now Isaac will fall into it.

What does this stage in Isaac’s life say about the transmission of faith? It draws our attention to a second channel through which faith must be transmitted—and that is obedience. Isaac must not only hear God’s Word addressing him, he must act, he must obey. And this brings him into the throes of testing and danger, where his faith can be revealed and developed. There are two things we might consider when it comes to Isaac’s need to obey, to walk in his father’s footsteps.

First, faith comes alive when the individual feels not only God’s blessing but also its responsibility. God does not tell Abraham or Isaac that he will bless them, in order to produce a privileged apathy in

the men. With this blessing comes tremendous responsibility. Their lives are no longer their own; and what they do implicates the lives of so many others.

Notice how Isaac's actions in verses 6-11 implicate his responsibility to others. By lying about his wife, he puts her in danger. And by lying about his wife, he also puts the men of Gerar in danger. Notice what Abimelech says in verse 10,

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." (Gen 26:10)

Abimelech doesn't merely say that the man who took Rebekah would have incurred guilt; but all of us.

Today we can fall into this same problem. When Christians are afraid of the world around us, we can succumb to the temptation to lie, or dumb down the truth—thinking it will make things easier for us and those around us. When in fact, it not only puts believers in harm's way, but it puts non-believers in harm's way, too, for they could do something that we've made them think is okay, while in doing it, they incur more guilt upon themselves.

Faith comes to life, when each generation takes up the responsibility that comes with the call of God.

Second, however, this scene reveals how the actions of the father spill into the life of the son. Both Abraham's obedience and his sin impact Isaac. Isaac is a beneficiary of his father's faith in more ways than one: he will inherit the physical fruits of his father's faith—as God blessed Abraham with flocks and servants. But Isaac is also receiving a type of spiritual heritage, where God's promises to Abraham, will now be held out to Isaac. Of course, Isaac will still need to walk out his own obedience, but the faith of his father is a blessing to him.

But so too do the dark fruits of Abraham's sins. It cannot be a coincidence that Isaac fails at the same place as his father. We are meant to learn a lesson from this—that the sons will face the same trials as the fathers. Also, the sons will be held responsible for their own handling of them.

For faith to be transmitted, the next generation must hear the Word with their own ears, but also walk out its commands with their own feet. And the latter will mean challenges. Abraham cannot walk out

obedience in Isaac's place, but he can model it for him, and in such a way that a father's faithfulness creates a positive momentum for a son. But also, Abraham can walk in such a way that a father's failings make life harder for the son. However, in each case—the blessing of obedience and trouble of generational sin—Isaac must walk with his own feet and take responsibility for his own faithfulness to God and others.

And there is yet a third element. And this is tied up with all the wells in this passage—for faith, finally, involves drinking—or, tasting and seeing for yourself, that the Lord is Good, and that he provides.

III. Drinking:

The son must taste and see that the Lord is good with his own heart.

This summary of Isaac's life begins with famine but ends with water: "There was a famine in the land" (v1). And after seasons of danger and difficulty, he finds a place of rest and peace, and we read: "Isaac's servants came and told him about the well that they had dug and said to him, 'We have found water'" (Gen 26:32).

But this water was hard to come by. From verses 12-32, Isaac and his men are looking for a place in the area where they can find water and rest. The terms well and water appear some ten times. And threatened by the prosperity of Abraham, and now Isaac, the men of Gerar backfilled the wells that Abraham had previously dug:

Now the Philistines had stopped and filled with earth all the wells that his father's servants had dug in the days of Abraham his father (26:15).

And Isaac spends much of the later part of this chapter, negotiating for wells with the inhabitants of the land:

¹⁸ And Isaac dug again the wells of water that had been dug in the days of Abraham... ¹⁹ But when Isaac's servants dug in the valley and found there a well of spring water, ²⁰ 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 contended with him. ²¹ Then they dug

another well, and they quarreled over that also, so he called its name Sitnah. ²² And he moved from there and dug another well, and they did not quarrel over it. So he called its name Rehoboth, saying, "For now the LORD has made room for us" (18-22).

Around the time when Isaac finds a well he can use, Abimelech and his officials come to him and make peace, assuring Isaac of enough space to co-exist in the area. The men then share a feast, and then the scene concludes: "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."(26:32).

What should we make of this bickering over water, and the eventual provision of space and water for Isaac?

This is a clear sign that the blessing of the Lord is upon Isaac. The Lord has prospered Isaac, even in a foreign and hostile territory, even before his people possess the land. And this blessing is even recognized by others, as Abimelech and his officials state: "We see plainly that the LORD has been with you" (Gen 26:28).

And here is the lesson from this third aspect of Isaac's receiving of faith. Isaac had to experience for himself, that God would take care of him, that God would provide a place and water.

And this is true for every Christian today. As we take up the faith, we must also experience that the Lord is faithful. It's as the Psalmist says, "Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him" (Ps 34:8). The faith that we pass on is more than a tradition, or moral code: it is nothing less than the water of life.

Christians have unique access to this water. It's interesting to consider how Jesus used wells and water and thirst to speak of things deeper. He told the Samaritan women, as they spoke next to a well, that he himself gives a different type of water. And that, "whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:14).

As the next generation takes up the faith, it will be in the seasons of famine and danger, when they seemingly have nowhere to go, that they learn to drink from the wells only God can provide. They

must learn to draw sustenance from Christ himself, and in doing so, “taste and see that the Lord is good,” with their own mouths and eyes.

In his later years, few things would have exercised the spiritual energies of Abraham like praying for his son Isaac—that he would come to know God in the way that he had. But Abraham would know that such knowledge is not easily transmitted. Abraham would have to pray that God would speak to his son one day—directly—and that when he did, Isaac would be able to hear. And Abraham would know that Isaac would have to work out his faith in obedience and struggle. But perhaps most of all, Abraham would want Isaac to know what it felt like, when on Mount Moriah—when all seemed to be lost—the Lord provided a lamb to be sacrificed (Gen 22). And as Abraham offered up that lamb as a burnt offering, instead of his son, and the smoke and aroma rose high in the air—he tasted, and he saw, just how good the Lord was.

So, to those who have the joy of a living faith, take steps to share it with the next generation. Do so prayerfully and humbly, knowing that you, yourself, are not the voice of God.

And to those who are of the next generation, the sons and daughters, those who have only heard about God through the voices of parents, who only know obedience because you’ve watched others walk with God—to you I say, to whose voice will you listen? To whose law will you obey? From what wells will you drink? Consider carefully the faith of your forebearers and pray that God might pass it down to you.

Questions for Small Groups

Members of your small group are encouraged to listen to the sermon if they were not there on Sunday. We also encourage you to begin your small group meeting with prayer and then by reading Genesis 26:1-18, 23-29. The below questions are suggestions for how to have a meaningful discussion about the passage—but you may have better questions that come up in your group.

1. Read Gen 26:2. Has there been a time in your life when the Word of God became more personal to you—as though God was suddenly speaking to you? What was going on in your life when this happened? How did it impact you?

2. Read Gen 26:6-11. Isaac faces the same challenge as his father and falls into the same sin. What are some areas of sin that this current generation can fight, and therefore make things a little easier for those who come after us?
3. Read Gen 26:25. Isaac builds an altar to the Lord and calls upon His name. And Isaac does this after the Lord provided water and space for him (26:22). Do you mark out times to thank God? How might you practice gratitude?
4. Genesis 26 is about a father's faith being passed onto his son. If you are a Christian, who modeled faith for you? Whose faith had a positive impact on your own? And for whom are you modeling faith?
5. What are some challenges we face in passing on the faith to the next generation? Take some time to pray that God would give us wisdom in passing on the faith.