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SERIES: Fear or Faith? (Genesis Vol. 3)- Wk 1

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Just imagine right in the middle of a football game at Memorial Stadium, God's voice comes booming out of the Heavens, and everything comes to a standstill. He introduces Himself by saying, "I am the God of Bryan Clark." [Laughter]. Now obviously, people would walk away shaken by this encounter with God, but they probably would also say, "Who is this Bryan Clark?"

Well, the likelihood of that happening seems to me to be slim, but it is true in the Old Testament that God often introduced Himself as, "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." This raises the question: Who are these men, that God would introduce Himself that way? Who is Isaac? I mean, certainly he must be a great man of faith—a hero of faith, a remarkable man of obedience. But what do we know about Isaac? We actually know very little. We know a lot about his father Abraham. From Genesis 12 to Genesis 25, it's all about Abraham. We know a lot about Isaac's son Jacob. From Genesis 27 all the way through to Chapter 50, it's about Jacob and Joseph. But for Isaac, there's only one chapter that really focuses on him. One commentator said, "He's a man that had a great father and a great son; he's just kind of a link in-between."

When we read Genesis 26, we don't come out of that chapter saying, "Wow, this was a giant of the faith; this was a great hero of the faith!" We come out of it saying, "Man, this guy had a very fragile faith—didn't do so well." But he is a "Hall of Famer." He does show up in Hebrews Chapter 11, and we wonder, *How did this guy get into the Faith Hall of Fame?*

So what's the point of Genesis 26, if it isn't about Isaac and his great faith? I'm convinced that if we can understand what God is wanting us to understand out of this chapter, it could be life changing. You have every reason to walk out with joy in your heart and a smile on your face, if you can just understand what God is saying in Genesis Chapter 26.

Genesis 26 is really not a chronology of the life of Isaac. Rather, it's just pulling out a few events that happened over a period of time, to give us a glimpse of Isaac and his relationship with God. No one knows for sure how much time elapsed through this chapter. It could be as much as 40 years in the life of Isaac covered in these events.

Genesis 26:1:

Now there was a famine in the land, besides the previous famine that had occurred in the days of Abraham. (Vs. 1a, *NASB)

That's an interesting way to open this story. Not only is this writer distinguishing this famine from the one in Abraham's day, which would have been almost a hundred years earlier, but he's

also begging us to make a comparison—to go back and say, “Just remember when Abraham experienced the famine in the land.”

In Genesis 12, it tells the story. Abraham got to the *Land of Promise* (and of course that’s a picture of our salvation in Christ). But a famine hit the land and Abraham had a crisis of faith. He didn’t trust that God would take care of him, so he headed to Egypt (which is always a picture of the world and the values of this world). En route, he stopped at Gerar where there was the Abimelech, who was the ruler. While there, he feared that Abimelech, or one of the Philistines, would want Sarai because she was so beautiful. So he said, “Honey, I need you to lie and say you are my sister.” So she did and Abimelech took her and was going to make her one of his wives. But before he could violate her, God intervenes in a dream and says, “Don’t touch this woman; she’s Abraham’s wife.” So Abimelech comes to Abraham and he rebukes him for lying. Eventually, Abraham makes his way back to the Land of Promise. It isn’t exactly one of the highlights of Abraham’s walk of faith.

Abraham went to Egypt with Lot, his nephew. And it is true that Abraham was able to get Lot out of Egypt, but he never got Egypt out of Lot. He paid a very high price for that crisis of faith. One would have to imagine that Abraham and Isaac had talked about that trip to Egypt. Perhaps as Abraham sought to mentor Isaac in his faith walk, he talked about that crisis and what he had done and the price he had paid. Maybe Isaac said to Abraham, “Father, what’s wrong with your nephew Lot? Why is he the way he is?” Maybe Abraham told the story then. We would like to think that Isaac had heard it from Abraham and wouldn’t make the same mistake. So we read on:

So Isaac went to Gerar, to Abimelech king of the Philistines. [*Abimelech, by the way, was not his name; it was a title. A hundred years later it’s not the same guy. It’s just like a Caesar—different people, same title.*] **The LORD appeared to him and said, “Do not go down to Egypt; stay in the land of which I shall tell you. Sojourn in this land and I will be with you and bless you, for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath which I swore to your father Abraham. I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and will give your descendants all these lands; and by your descendants all the nations of the earth shall be blessed; because Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws.”** (vs. 1b-5)

Isaac made the same mistake. He has a crisis of faith, heads toward Egypt and goes through Gerar, and there he encounters Abimelech. One thing that’s different about this story is God personally confronted Isaac and stopped him—just stopped him from leaving the land. It’s interesting, Isaac is the only one of the patriarchs that never left the land. Abraham left. Jacob left. Joseph left. Isaac never left.

In Genesis Chapter 25, when Abraham was trying to find a wife for Isaac, Abraham sent his servant out of the land to find this wife. The servant was supposed to bring the wife back, and the servant said, “Yeah, but what if she doesn’t want to come? Should I get Isaac and take him to her?” And Abraham said, “Don’t you dare take him out of the land.” There was this fear that if Isaac ever left the land, he would never go back—because he had this fragile faith. So Isaac was the only one of these patriarchs that never left. And here God just stops him. He keeps him in the land, but He also restates the oath, the covenant, the promise he made to Abraham: “I will bless you...I will bless your descendants...I will give you this land.”

But what was God's reason? Was He saying, "Isaac, it's because you're a great man of faith, because you walk in obedience, because you trust Me"? No, that's not what He said. He said, "I'm going to do this because you're the son of Abraham, and I promised Abraham." Isaac was simply the heir to the promise. It wasn't because Isaac performed well. It wasn't because Isaac had a great faith. He just inherited the promise because he was Abraham's son. **It's just pure grace.**

"Abraham obeyed." Now in Verse 1, the writer just forced us, in a sense, to go back and remember the famine of Abraham's day, where he didn't obey—he disobeyed. He didn't perform so well. The writer reminded us of this crisis in Abraham's walk of faith, where he didn't do so well.

So what does he mean here? What he is talking about is that Abraham obeyed not as a *means* to the promise but as an *evidence* that God entered into this covenant promise with him. You say, "Well, it doesn't really say that." Well, yes and no. The writer is assuming that we have read the story of Abraham. No biblical writer would ever assume that we start in the middle of the book. So he's assuming we know what it says in Genesis 15:6: "Abraham believed...and it was credited to him as righteousness." That is the point of conversion for Abraham. He simply believed by faith that God would keep His promise. God came and said, "Abraham, I'm going to bless you. I'm going to multiply your descendants. Through your seed, the families of the Earth will be blessed. I promise!"

Abraham believed, and that was the basis by which he was made righteous. That's the basis by which God changed his heart. It was followed by this magnificent blood covenant ceremony. It was a unilateral covenant, meaning it was only God that was sealing the deal, saying, "Abraham, if you fail to keep the covenant or I fail to keep the covenant, I will shed My blood, in order to atone for your failure to keep the covenant." It was all on the basis of faith.

Now this is confirmed for us in Romans Chapter 4. Paul is in the midst of a discussion about salvation by grace through faith. And Paul thinks to himself, *Who could I use as an example to make it very clear that salvation is on the basis of faith, not on the basis of any works? I'll use Abraham.* So Romans Chapter 4 is all about Abraham and the fact that it was by faith he believed; that he was reckoned righteous not on the basis of any performance or any works.

So that's what Moses is talking about here when he says the evidence that Abraham entered into the promise is that he obeyed. As a matter of fact, very specifically he obeyed the charge, the commandments, the statutes, the laws.

If you were to go to Deuteronomy Chapter 10, Verse 1, you'd find the exact same language used. Moses is the writer of Genesis; Moses is the writer of Deuteronomy. It's not an accident. It's on purpose. And what he is saying is that, even though Abraham lived hundreds of years before the commandments, before the statutes, before the laws were ever given, that because God had changed his heart—in the words of Jeremiah "the law was written on his heart"—he lived in obedience to those laws and statutes and commands, because **his heart was right.**

The Law was never a *means* of righteousness; it was only a revelation of the *standard* and our need for a Savior. So the writer is saying, "The evidence that Abraham entered into the promise

and was changed is that he obeyed. And the outflow of his life was obedience to the commands, the laws, the statutes.” So we go on in the story:

So Isaac lived in Gerar. When the men of the place asked about his wife, [*uh oh!*] he said, “She is my sister,” for he was afraid to say, “my wife,” thinking, “the men of the place might kill me on account of Rebekah, for she is beautiful.” It came about, when he had been there a long time, 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, ‘I might die on account 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 charged all the people, saying, “He who touches this man or his wife shall surely be put to death.” (vs. 6-11)

Wow! Like father...like son. It’s interesting that the text is very clear that the reason Isaac did this is because he was afraid. One of the things we’re going to talk about is that faith and fear are not compatible. You either have to live as a person of faith, or you will live as a person of fear. You can’t have them both.

At this point, Isaac was characterized by his fear, so he lied. He actually put his wife at great risk. Now the writer is very careful here to say, “after a long time passed,” which is a way of saying there was nothing to fear. A long time passed...nobody messed with Rebekah. He had nothing to fear. The writer is also careful to say that Abimelech looked out his window and saw Isaac and Rebekah, meaning they were pitched right next door. Now that’s a place of honor—to pitch your tent right next door to the king. Nobody was going to mess with Isaac. Nobody was going to mess with Rebekah living next door to the king. It was just his way of saying, “There was no need to lie.” But he did.

Once again you have a pagan king, a Philistine king, rebuking the patriarch of God for his behavior, just like with Abraham. It would be fair to say that at this point Abimelech seems to have a higher view of God than Isaac. So he rebukes him. Now this, again, is not a stellar moment in Isaac’s résumé. This is a great crisis of faith. He is not doing very well. What we’re expecting to read is that God is going to shoo him into the wilderness and just scrape him up a little bit. He’s going to make him pay until he gets it. But that’s not what we read.

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 possessions 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.
(vs. 12-17)

Now I think that paragraph is meant to surprise us. Isaac is struggling with one crisis of faith after another. He’s got a very fragile faith. And after being rebuked by a Philistine king, what we don’t expect is for the writer to say, “And God just poured out blessing...after blessing...

after blessing upon him.” But notice the text doesn’t say, “Because Isaac was a great man of faith, because Isaac was doing so well, making such good choices, walking in obedience.”

There’s only one explanation for this: Because *God promised*. God promised Abraham. Isaac was simply an heir to the promise. So he is struggling with decisions of faith, and God is just pouring out blessings, to the extent that the Philistines chase him away: “You’re just too powerful.” So the story goes on:

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 same 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 [which means “quarreling”], because they contended with him. Then they dug another well, and they quarreled over it too, so he named it Sitnah [which means “opposition”]. He moved away from there and dug another well, and they did not quarrel over it; so he named it Rehoboth [which means “roominess”], for he said, “At last the LORD has made room for us, and we will be fruitful in the land.” (vs. 18-22)

Notice what he says there: “At last *the LORD* has made room for us.”

Then he went up from there to Beersheba. The LORD appeared to him the same night and said, “I am the God of your father Abraham; do not fear, for I am with you. I will bless you, and multiply your descendants, for the sake of My servant Abraham.” 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. (vs. 23-25) 19:20

Nat: Bryan, it's unbelievable that Isaac almost did exactly the same thing as his father by passing his wife off as his sister. I mean, I can't imagine doing that to my own wife. Why on Earth would he do it?

Bryan: Yeah, it is fascinating and there is no question that the writer is wanting us to compare the stories. I would say in a word, it's fear. I don't think Isaac wanted to be bad. He wasn't wanting to rebel, he wasn't wanting to do the wrong thing, but he was afraid and fear often causes us to make unfortunate choices. So in that situation, his fear was greater than his faith, and he made the same basic mistake that his father did.

Nat: Yeah, I think we all struggle with fear, and though we would say, well, we would never do that, I think the reality is we are capable of doing things quite similar, if not worse.

Bryan In his mind it was life or death and that's pretty frightening stuff.

Nat: I also found it interesting as you worked your way through the text, that Isaac never left the Land of Promise. Why do you think that was?

Bryan: Yeah, that's so interesting. So Abraham did. Jacob did. Joseph did, but Isaac didn't. And I think if you look at what's recorded, so there's lots about Abraham, lots about Jacob, lots about Joseph, but almost nothing about Isaac. And what we do have about Isaac is he was fragile. You know, I referred to it as a fragile faith. So much of the world was far more civilized than where Isaac lived in the Land of Promise. So I think the concern was, if he found someplace more pleasant to live, he probably wouldn't come back. So even God Himself keeps him in the land, cuts him off, and tells him not to leave the land. And so again, you have this play between the sovereignty of God and places where God did step in, and Isaac's choices. But I think the story of Isaac's life is he was pretty fragile in his faith, but God was faithful.

Nat: Yeah. There's no doubt that Isaac struggled, but yet God continued to bless him. And I think if we're honest with ourselves, that doesn't make a whole lot of sense. We are so used to this idea of performance and a performance-based rewards system that grace is really confusing to us, isn't it?

Bryan: It is so confusing to us. So I love the Isaac story because he kind of fumbles along, but what we have is this consistent pattern of God being faithful, God blessing him. The text even talks about God making him very wealthy. That just doesn't make sense to us. So we think things like, we think we deserve more grace, which when you think about it, that's just kind of a nonsensical thing to say. **Grace is undeserved.** But when things happen to us that seem unfair, what we're thinking is I deserve more grace. It's hard to get out of that performance based reward system. We struggle to accept God's forgiveness and His blessings. We think we're not worthy. So sometimes we pass that off as humility. It's not really humility, it's disbelief. And I think part of it is we want to believe, if I do the right thing, then bad things won't happen to me. I refer to it as the *Let's Make a Deal* theology. But that's a part of it though. That rewards based system is like, if I'm a good boy, if I'm a good girl, then nothing bad's going to happen to me. And there's nowhere where the Bible teaches that. And so we don't know. So grace is accepting that God may bless me, just because He wants to bless me, but it's also the reality that life may get confusing and hurtful. That's just part of my story.