

Lesson15

Genesis 24 & 25

In the last lesson of Part I we read what is surely the climax of the book of Genesis. Everything has been leading up to the moment when Abraham throws himself on God's mercy and does the unthinkable: in obedience to God, he offers on an altar his only son, the very son God promised to build a nation from and use to bless the world. The trial is too painful, and the outcome too glorious, for us to take in all at once. "At last!" we cry; someone has stepped up to the plate. A son of Adam has stood fast on the Word of God against claims of the Enemy; he has believed God's promises against all evidence to the contrary; he has obeyed to the point of giving up something more important to him than life itself. No wonder James says that Abraham "was called God's friend (Jas. 2:23)." "God's friend." Don't miss the significance of those words. Do you remember what happened as a result of the Fall? Adam and Eve lost God's friendship. In Abraham we see that friendship restored. Things are starting to turn around.

In chapter 24, the focus shifts away from Abraham and rests briefly on his son Isaac, who by this time is 40 years old. Isaac is the original "son of the promise," and must have been deeply affected by his experience on Mt. Moriah. What is he like? We wonder. Does he know God as Abraham does? How will he fare in his role as covenant-keeper or steward of the promise?

Read Genesis 24 all the way through.

The servant Abraham entrusts with finding a bride for Isaac is probably Eliezer of Damascus, mentioned in Gen. 15:2. By asking him to put his hand under Abraham's thigh, Abraham was binding him in a strong and solemn oath to follow his directions exactly. What are Abraham's chief concerns in sending his servant to his relatives? Which of these concerns is to take precedence, should the woman be unwilling to return with the servant?

Abraham has two concerns: he wants Isaac to marry a woman from his own family as opposed to one from among the local Canaanites; and he does not want Isaac to leave the promised land. He is emphatic about this latter point, even going so far as to release his servant from his oath if the woman he finds is unwilling to leave her home and go to Isaac in Canaan. Abraham apparently does not want to take the risk that Isaac will be tempted to remain in his family's natural homeland and thereby forestall the fulfillment of God's promise to give them Canaan, even if it means not getting the wife he prefers.

What does this show about the character of the woman Abraham would like to find? What does it reveal about Abraham's trust in God?

Abraham not only wants a wife for his son from his own family, he wants one who will be willing to leave her homeland. Abraham seems to understand that God's call to leave everything and follow Him, to "[make] his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country," as Paul says in Hebrews 11:9, is not just for him but for his son also. The promise will not be fulfilled immediately, and not only Isaac but his wife as well will need to be able to live in hope, looking forward to the future.

The fact that Abraham releases Eliezer from the promise should the woman be unwilling to return with him, is evidence that Abraham has complete trust in God to keep His word. Isaac obviously needs a suitable wife if he is to have children in fulfillment of God's promise, but Abraham will not force the issue. He believes God will send an angel to prepare the way for Eliezer; if that doesn't work out, God will find another way.

What evidence can you find that God has indeed "sent his angel" ahead of Abraham's servant? In other words, what details suggest that God is steering events?

Before Eliezer had even finished praying that God would guide him by sending a girl who offers to water his camels, God sent Rebekah to him. No wonder Eliezer "bowed and worshiped the Lord" and praised him, for the very first woman he laid eyes on after praying not only did what he asked of God, but she also was Abraham's grand-niece and a beautiful, eligible young woman at that. God's hand in the matter is confirmed by Laban and Bethuel when they offer Rebekah to Eliezer, saying "let her become the wife of your master's son, as the Lord has directed (vs.51).

What kind of person is Rebekah? Write down everything you can discover about her.

The granddaughter of Abraham's brother Nahor, Rebekah has not only the requisite modesty and virtue of a potential bride, she is beautiful, thoughtful, and hospitable. She works quickly, is eager to help, and goes beyond what is expected to make others comfortable. God chose her to be mother of the man who would be Israel - Jacob, the father of the 12 tribes of Israel - as surely as he chose Abraham and Isaac, to play a part in carrying out His purposes.

In the same way, God chooses each one of us. St. Paul says that "we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:10)." And Jesus told his disciples that they did not choose him, "but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide (Jn. 15:16)." We are called into God's family that we might share in God's nature, in the fruitfulness of His love, and in His work.

Read Genesis 25

Why do you suppose God chose just one of Abraham's sons, Isaac, and excluded the others? Does that suggest an unfair partiality on His part?

Consider for a moment the ultimate result had God blessed all of Abraham's sons equally (don't forget that far from abandoning them, God did bless and prosper the other sons for Abraham's sake): Anyone in Abraham's bloodline, whoever the mother, would have been heir to God's covenant promise. Far from extending the reach of the covenant, however great and numerous the other sons' families became, this would firmly establish one family, the natural children of Abraham, as the people of God - to the exclusion of everyone else on earth.

God's goal, however, is worldwide blessing. He means to restore all of mankind to His family. By choosing Isaac over Ishmael, God confirms that all people born of faith (as Isaac was born of his parents' faith in God's promise to do the impossible) are truly children of Abraham and thus heirs of the promise. This, too, may seem limiting - but in fact it is God saying, "Forget the circumstances of your birth. Anyone who comes to me in faith is mine!"

St. Paul expands on this in Romans 9:6-8: "...For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his descendants; but 'through Isaac shall your descendants be named.' This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are reckoned as descendants." We who are not Jews by birth should be thanking God from the bottom of our hearts that God chose Isaac, for that choice opened the door for us to become true Israelites through His Son; and members of His family in the Church.

Gen. 25:21 says that "Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife, because she was barren. The LORD answered his prayer..." Read vs. 20 and 26. How many years did Isaac pray for Rebekah? What might have given him that kind of persistence in prayer? Why might God have taken so long in answering?

If Isaac was 40 years old when he married Rebekah, and 60 years old when she bore the twins, then he prayed for 20 years that Rebekah would conceive. Isaac was tested by God during this waiting period, even as Abraham was tested while waiting for the birth of Isaac. In both cases, the delayed answer demonstrated that the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham would come by grace, not by man's effort.

Isaac's prayer would have been based on what he knew was God's word and promise, and strengthened by what he knew of his own birth and his parents' prayers. It seems fitting that Isaac, the long-awaited child of the promise, would himself be strong in hope and faith that God would continue to do what He had started.

How does Rebekah respond to the fact that her sons are struggling, even before birth, in her womb? What does she learn?

Rebekah went to the Lord to find the source and meaning of the discord in her womb. God told her that the twins she is carrying would father two nations. They would be unequal in strength, and the older would serve the younger. This revelation accurately predicts the future relationship between Israel and Edom, the nations that will spring from her sons.

What does the way Jacob was born (and consequently the meaning of his name) suggest about the type of man he would be?

Jacob, "he takes by the heel" or "he supplants," grabbed his twin by the heel as though trying to pull his way out before his brother. Jacob will find it difficult to leave things to God, instead striving to work circumstances to his own advantage and pull ahead by wiliness and his own effort.

10. Read Romans 9:6b-16, especially vv. 10-13. According to the Apostle Paul, what was God's choice of Jacob based on? Was God's choice of Jacob over Esau to father His people a result of any merit on Jacob's part? How do you know? What does God's choice depend on, and what does His selection of the younger brother show?

God chose Jacob because He wanted to choose Jacob - not because of anything Jacob had done, good or bad. Jacob (and by extension Israel) was chosen by God before he was born, out of God's "sheer, gratuitous love (CCC 218)." This is the principle of election, which says that God's choice depends on His sovereign will and mercy toward us. God chose the younger of Isaac's twin boys just as He chose the second son of Abraham and would later bypass Jacob's oldest sons: to showcase His power, His sovereignty, His work in fulfilling His promises.

As the Apostle Paul shows in Romans, the same thing is true today: God chooses us not because we're born a Jew (or Catholic!) or because of anything we do, but out of His love and will and mercy.

The life of Isaac seems insignificant next to the careers of his father Abraham and his son Jacob. There are few chapters of Scripture devoted to Isaac, and most of his story is entwined with the story of the other Patriarchs. Even the Catechism moves from "God chooses Abraham" (59-61) to "God forms his people Israel" (62-64) without mentioning Isaac by name. Yet he is a Patriarch, his name forever included when Israelites call on the name of God, the father of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Isaac's main role seems to be one of a bridge between Abraham, father of those who believe, and Jacob, father of Israel. Isaac safeguards and transmits the promise through his own faithful obedience. He embodies the continuity of God's promise, the link through whom it passes from generation to generation. But there is more significance to him than that:

1. Isaac waits for God's promise, as indeed do all of the Patriarchs. Those 20 years spent praying for a son not only helped form Isaac in faith, they became an example for Israel as it waited for God's promised Messiah. As it is pointed out in Dei Verbum, "through the patriarchs...[God] taught this nation to acknowledge Himself as the one living and true God,...and to wait for the Savior promised by Him. In this manner He prepared the way for the gospel down through the centuries (DV3)."

2. Isaac is also the fruit, the evidence of God's promise. He is the impossible child, born of two people well past the age of childbearing. His name means "laughter," and his name is a perpetual reminder that God promises the impossible and keeps His promises.

3. And as the obedient son of the promise, Isaac prefigures Jesus Christ, the promised Son of God. He walked willingly and obediently up the hill to be sacrificed, even as Christ would so many years later. His life is a living testimony to "the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were (Rom. 4:17)."

He is the loving son and father and husband, the obedient son through whom God pours His blessing on a nation and on the world.