

Chapter 2: The Covenant of Isaac

Genesis 26:1–11

Like Abraham, Isaac did nothing to earn the favor of God. God chose to establish his covenant with Isaac before Isaac was even born (Gen. 17:21), counting Isaac—rather than Ishmael or the sons of Keturah—as the son through whom Abraham’s offspring will be named (Gen. 21:12). Isaac is the son of promise (Rom. 9:6–8) through whom God will fulfill his promises to Abraham. Ultimately, it will be through Isaac that God will bless all the families of the earth (Gen. 12:3; 26:4). Even so, the first part of Genesis 26 narrates a major threat to the fulfillment of the promises: Isaac’s desire to go to Egypt to escape the famine in Canaan (Gen. 26:1–2). What does Isaac stand to lose if he leaves Canaan? What does Isaac stand to gain if he stays in Canaan? What will be the implications of *any* of Isaac’s failures to trust and obey Yahweh, his covenant God? Genesis 26:1–11 teaches us something important about our own covenantal relationship with God: *in order to be saved, God requires us to abide in Christ.*

The Requirement of the Covenant (Genesis 26:1–5)

In the opening section about the “generations of Isaac” (Gen. 25:19–34), we largely skipped over the story of Isaac to reach the beginning of the stories of Esau and Jacob. In Genesis 26, however, the narrative focuses exclusively on Isaac. We read nothing of Esau and Jacob, and even Rebekah only appears as a silent, passive figure in this chapter (Gen. 26:6–11, 35). The family dynamics of Isaac’s wife and children are not the focus of this chapter. Instead, the spotlight of this chapter falls on Isaac alone. The purpose of Genesis 26 as a whole, then, is to show “how Isaac’s entire life was a repetition of that which happened to Abraham.”¹ The list of similarities between father and son begins with an explicit comparison: “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” (Gen. 26:1). The “former famine” during the days of Abraham is recorded for us in Genesis 12:10. Of course, Isaac’s son Jacob will also face a great famine (Gen. 42:1–5). That famine will even affect the generation after Jacob, since Pharaoh of Egypt will appoint Jacob’s son Joseph as overseer over the storehouses of grain to feed “all the earth...because the famine was severe over all the earth” (Gen. 41:57). Famine plays a critical role in all four generations of the patriarchs.

Remaining in Canaan

Famines are always severe hardships, but the difficulty is much greater for the patriarchs, who are “strangers and pilgrims” in the land.² Because Isaac does not own any land, he lacks key resources that would help him to endure the famine. Egypt, on the other hand, is a promising destination for escaping the famine, since the annual flooding of the Nile River creates a more stable supply of food. For this very reason, Abraham went down to Egypt to escape the famine (Gen. 12:10), and Jacob will both send his own sons to Egypt to buy grain (Gen. 42:1–5) and then ultimately move his entire

family to Egypt during the last five years of the famine (Gen. 45:11; 46:1–30).³ On paper, going down to Egypt seems like the right choice; however, the journey down to Egypt for both Abraham and Jacob’s family is a curse as well as a blessing. In the latter case, God instructs Jacob’s family to go down to Egypt to escape the famine (Gen. 46:3–4), but settling in Egypt eventually leads to their slavery when a new Pharaoh arises who does not remember Joseph (Ex. 1:8).

Abraham also found blessings in Egypt, both in avoiding the famine and also in receiving many riches from Pharaoh (Gen. 12:16). Even so, Abraham’s trip to Egypt was a disaster that jeopardized God’s promises in two ways. First, Abraham lied about Sarah’s being his wife (Gen. 12:11–13), so that Pharaoh eventually took Sarah into his house as a wife (Gen. 12:15) until God sent plagues against Egypt to force Pharaoh to let Sarah go (Gen. 12:17). Pharaoh was furious with the deception and deported Abraham and Sarah from Egypt in shame (Gen. 12:18–20). Second, it was an Egyptian maidservant—likely one whom Abraham received from Pharaoh on this journey (cf. Gen. 12:16)—who nearly came between Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 16; 21:1–21).

The difference between Abraham’s journey and Jacob’s journey, though, is that Abraham did not receive permission to go down to Egypt. Now, we should also acknowledge that God did not explicitly forbid Abraham from going down to Egypt in Genesis 12:10.⁴ Nevertheless, there are several reasons for believing that Abraham disobeyed by going down to Egypt. First, Yahweh previously commanded Abraham to “Go...to the land that I will show you” (Gen. 12:1), which made no allowance for leaving the land of Canaan. Second, Abraham’s subsequent sin in Egypt, along with all the consequences that came from bringing Hagar back, seem to indicate strongly that God did not intend for Abraham to go down to Egypt. Third, it is significant that Abraham never again leaves Canaan and that Abraham insists strongly that Isaac must never leave the land (Gen. 24:6, 8). Seemingly, Abraham learned from his earlier mistake. Fourth, Jacob twice leaves the land of Canaan, but each time he does, God explicitly authorizes the departure and promises to bring Jacob back (Gen. 28:13–15; 46:3–4). Abraham had no such authorization, suggesting that the previous command of being in the land remained in effect.

So, when our text refers back to the famine from Abraham’s lifetime, this is a charged situation that raises two questions: “Will Isaac, like his father, go down to Egypt? Will he attempt to pass off his wife as his sister?”⁵ Our passage will answer both of those questions. This time, however, God directly intervenes to stop Isaac from going down to Egypt: “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. 26:2). Yahweh’s direct instruction here that Isaac not leave the land seems to confirm that Abraham also should not have left. God clarifies for Isaac what Abraham should have deduced. Yahweh “appears” to Isaac (cf. Gen. 26:24), personally, visibly, and audibly revealing himself (cf. Gen. 12:7; 17:1; 18:1; 35:9; 46:29).⁶

Nevertheless, while Yahweh instructs Isaac not to go down to Egypt, we should notice that he does not explain this prohibition.⁷ Isaac, therefore, faces the same dilemma that his father encountered so many years before. More than that, Isaac faces the same dilemma as his *first* father faced in the garden of Eden: Did God actually say that Isaac may not eat *anything* by forcing him to remain in Canaan in the midst of this famine (cf. Gen. 3:1)? How can Isaac trust a God who won’t let him find food? So, will Isaac live by sight by going down to Egypt to seek forbidden food, or will he live by faith by remaining in the land in obedience to Yahweh’s word?⁸ The command itself—“dwell in the land of which I shall tell you”—is nearly identical to the first and last commands Yahweh gave to Abraham: “Go...to the land that I will show you” (Gen. 12:1) and “Take your son...

and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains *of which I shall tell you*” (Gen. 22:2).⁹ The lack of specificity adds one more element of uncertainty that strains at Isaac’s faith. God forbids one option, but he also does not tell Isaac what the alternative will be. The word “dwell” does not necessarily suggest permanency, but, in context, God is clearly telling Isaac to dwell permanently in Canaan.¹⁰ If Isaac will remain in the land permanently, how long will this famine last? How will he ever find food? Is this command a death sentence?

Trusting the Promises

While God does not provide the whole plan to Isaac, he does more than simply issuing Isaac a command. Graciously, Yahweh supplements his command with promises:

[3] 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. [4] 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, [5] because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.” (Gen. 26:3–5)

As Yahweh instructs Isaac to “sojourn” in the land, he promises, “I will be with you and will bless you” (Gen. 26:3). This is the first time that God has promised to “be with” Abraham or Isaac (cf. Gen. 21:22; 26:28), although God will make the same promise to Jacob (Gen. 28:15; 31:3; 46:4).¹¹ Furthermore, Yahweh will not only “be with” Isaac, but he will also “bless” Isaac as he promised to “bless” Abraham (Gen. 12:3; 22:17; cf. Gen. 24:1). We have already read that “God blessed Isaac” (Gen. 25:11) in some way.¹² Here, the promise becomes more specific: God promises to continue to bless Isaac *in the midst of famine*.¹³ This is an important promise, since the word “sojourn” describes the “alien status of the patriarchs as foreigners (cf. 35:27; 37:1; Exod 6:4).”¹⁴ Isaac’s property will not shield him from adversity. As a sojourner in the land, Isaac will remain dependent upon the presence and blessing of God for the rest of his days.

It is in regard to the land, however, that we come to the chief reason that Isaac must not go to Egypt: “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” (Gen. 26:3). Even this promise does not really explain why Isaac may not go down to Egypt. The implication, though, is that Isaac will forfeit the land of Canaan if he leaves it. To avoid forfeiting Canaan, God is re-establishing the same “oath” to give Isaac the land that God promised to Abraham and to his offspring (Gen. 13:15; 17:8; cf. Gen. 12:7; 15:7, 18–21). By “oath,” God is referring to the “covenant” that he promised to establish with Isaac (Gen. 17:21).¹⁵ Yes, it is a matter of faith for Isaac to remain in Canaan rather than going to Egypt during this famine; however, Yahweh promises that the reward for faithful obedience will be very great. By this trial, Yahweh is teaching Isaac to walk by faith rather than by sight.¹⁶

Preserving Isaac’s Birthright

For Isaac, walking by faith is not just a *better* option. Rather, disobedience would be *disastrous* for Isaac. Remember, this issue of inheritance for Isaac’s offspring was at the heart of the conflict over the birthright in the previous passage (Gen. 25:29–34).¹⁷ Additionally, Esau also faced his own mini-

famine after he hunted, causing him to be desperate for food.¹⁸ Isaac, therefore, faces the same dilemma as did Esau. If Isaac resolves his crisis of famine by going down to Egypt, he will indeed find food for the short-term, but he, like Esau, will lose his the inheritance of his birthright in the process. From a human perspective, going to Egypt is the obvious choice. Nevertheless, in order to preserve the birthright of his inheritance, Isaac must trust Yahweh for food where Esau did not.

In a deeper way, this is the same dilemma that Adam and Eve faced in the garden of Eden. They were given *land* in which to dwell (Gen. 2:15) where they could freely eat of any tree except from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:16–17). Also in that garden stood the tree of life (Gen. 2:9), which represented the full inheritance of God’s people that they would receive by promise. When Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, they not only forfeited their possession of the land God had given them, but they forfeited their access to the tree of life (Gen. 3:22–24). In the same way, if Isaac eats of the forbidden fruit in Egypt, he will not only forfeit the land of Canaan, but he will forfeit the spiritual promises of God’s inheritance to him.

Isaac’s Offspring

Finally, Yahweh makes promises concerning Isaac’s offspring: “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” (Gen. 26:4). As with the promises regarding blessing and inheritance, God’s promise to give Isaac offspring flows out of God’s promises to give *Abraham* offspring (Gen. 12:2; 13:16; 15:5; 17:19; 22:17). It is through *Isaac* that Abraham’s offspring will be named (Gen. 21:12), so the same promises that God made concerning *Abraham’s* offspring he now restates regarding *Isaac’s* offspring. First, God promises to multiply Isaac’s offspring “as the stars of heaven,” as he promised to Abraham (cf. Gen. 15:5; 22:17; cf. Gen. 13:16). Second, God promises that “in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed,” as he also promised to Abraham (Gen. 12:3). This second promise is broad, but it suggests the idea that “the nations are going to seek the protection and favor of Abram’s seed, as they indeed do here (26:26–31).”¹⁹

Abraham’s Obedience

Finally, God cites Abraham’s obedience as the grounds of these promises for Isaac: “because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws” (Gen. 26:5). Intriguingly, very similar terms appear in regard to keeping the Mosaic covenant: “You shall therefore love the LORD your God and keep his charge, his statutes, his rules, and his commandments always” (Deut. 11:1). Indeed, we have already seen Abraham acting in accordance with the Law of Moses throughout Genesis, even though Abraham lived before the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai:

In Genesis 14, when Abraham fought with the kings from a far country, his actions follows quite closely the stipulations of Genesis 20. The same can be said regarding his treatment of the nations who were nearby (e.g., the king of Sodom). He obeyed the Law from the heart, much as the ideal picture given in Deuteronomy 30:6 would have it. Thus Abraham is an example of one who shows the Law written on his heart (cf. Jer 31:33). He is the writer’s ultimate example of true obedience to the Law, the one about whom the Lord could say, “He obeyed me” (Ge 26:5).²⁰

But what does God mean when he says that he will bless Isaac “because” Abraham obeyed? The Hebrew word *because* might also be translated “as a consequence of,” and we find it describing the blessed consequences of good actions (Gen. 22:18; Gen. 26:5), as well as the cursed consequences of sinful actions (2 Sam. 12:6, 10).²¹ Does this mean that Abraham earned something from God?

Merit vs. Means

No, Abraham did not earn something from God. This passage “does not mean that Abraham’s obedience was the reason why the promise of God was confirmed and ratified to him,” but God rather speaks these words “in order that Isaac may be stimulated to an imitation of his example.”²² God’s covenant with Abraham does not depend on the merit of Abraham, since God established his covenant with Abraham by grace, not works. Remember, Abraham was justified by his faith (Gen. 15:6), apart from works. That is, God counted Abraham as righteous *apart* from the obedience that God references here in Genesis 26:5. Abraham’s justification was not partial, awaiting Abraham’s obedience to complete it. Furthermore, Abraham’s justification was not on probation, awaiting Abraham’s obedience to confirm it. God freely justified Abraham by grace through faith. Even so, God is telling Isaac that there *is* something at stake for him here. Esau genuinely lost his birthright, and Isaac can genuinely lose his birthright as well. In theological terms, neither Abraham’s obedience nor Isaac’s obedience will be the *meritorious cause* of their blessings; however, covenantal obedience by faith is the *means* by which all God’s people take possession of the promised covenant blessings.²³

To illustrate the difference between *merit* and *means*, think about what happens when you cash a check. The check itself is not currency, so that you cannot pay for groceries or utilities with a check addressed to you. In order to access the money, you are *required* to cash the check. Cashing the check is a *necessity of means* in order to lay hold of the money promised by the check itself. Even so, this does not mean that you can create for yourself unlimited money by manufacturing checks for yourself. You cannot get money by cashing a check unless (1) the check is signed by an authorized party and (2) there is enough money in the check’s account to cover the transaction. Before the bank will issue you the funds from the check, they make sure that you are cashing a valid check—a *necessity of merit*. Only if the check is *meritorious* will you gain anything from cashing it. You will gain nothing if the check bounces, and you will be punished if you forge the check. And yet, even if the check is indeed meritorious, you will not gain anything from it unless you go through the *means* of cashing it.

The Lord Jesus Christ is the only grounds (*meritorious cause*) for our salvation. If Abraham or Isaac trusted in the merit of their own works, they would be forging their check. Therefore, we are justified only by faith alone, in Christ alone, apart from any good works that we do. For this very reason, God requires that we abide (i.e., “remain”) in Christ by faith as the *means* of laying hold of salvation, for we can find salvation nowhere else than in Christ. Jesus himself warns us, “If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned” (John 15:6). Isaac faces with a real choice: if he fails to abide in the Promised Land by going to Egypt, he will forfeit the promises. Like Esau, he will be despising his birthright for food. As alluring as the food of Egypt might be in the midst of Canaan’s famine, Egypt’s wealth is utter poverty in comparison with the inheritance of God. That is, Egypt’s check will bounce.

In the same way, Jesus articulates the choice that faces each of us: if we abide in Christ, we will bear fruit in him (John 15:5); however, if we do not abide in Christ, we will be thrown away into the fire and burned (John 15:6). God’s word to Isaac matches God’s word to us: Don’t leave the promises! Abide in Christ by faith! There is no salvation if you depart from Christ! Indeed, covenant apostasy is still a possibility in the new covenant. The author of Hebrews issues the following warning to us:

[26] For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, [27] but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. [28] Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. [29] How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? [30] For we know him who said, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge his people.” [31] It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Heb. 10:26–31)

These are not people who are strangers to the covenants of promise (cf. Eph. 2:12). Instead, these are people who have been “sanctified” by “the blood of the covenant” (Heb. 10:29). More than that, these are “*his* people” (Heb. 10:30)—the *Lord’s* people. These are members of the new covenant who have professed faith in Christ. Here, the author of Hebrews is pleading with these new covenant members to keep them from walking away from their Savior. Outside of Christ, “there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries” (Heb. 10:26–27).

So, while God rejects our good works when he justifies his people by faith, God does seek the good works of covenantal obedience by faith *from* his justified people. That is, good works are not the prerequisite of our salvation, but the fruit of our salvation. We are saved by grace, through faith, as a gift of God apart from works, so that no one may boast (Eph. 2:8–9); however, we are also “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10). Abraham was justified by faith, but *by faith* he also sought to obey God’s charge, commandments, statutes, and laws to the best of his ability, in continuing reliance upon God’s grace in his life.²⁴ As Derek Kidner notes, these “heaped-up terms [in Genesis 26:5]...dispel any idea that law and promise are in necessary conflict (cf. Jas 2:22; Gal. 3:21).”²⁵ We are not saved *by* obedience to the law; however, we are saved *for* obedience to the law—that is, for obedience to *God*. Brothers and sisters, do not abandon the promises, but abide in Christ.

The Range of the Covenant (Genesis 26:6–7)

In response, we read that Isaac first obeys, but then disobeys:

[6] So Isaac settled in Gerar. [7] 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. 26:6–7)

Positively, Isaac obeys the word of the Lord and does not go down to Egypt. This is very good, especially if seeking food from Egypt would have meant forfeiting the inheritance of his birthright, like Esau! Furthermore, this means that Isaac is breaking one part of the generational sins of his father, who *did* go down to Egypt (Gen. 12:10). Sadly, however, Isaac’s “presence in Gerar becomes the occasion of his error.”²⁶

The Sin of Isaac

While Isaac does not follow in the footsteps of his father by going down to Egypt, Isaac does commit the same deception that Abraham perpetrated on two occasions—first on that fateful trip to Egypt (Gen. 12:11–13), and then in the same region of Gerar (Gen. 20:1–2). Furthermore, Abraham hints that he may have lied about his marriage to Sarah more often than just the two events that are clearly recorded for us: “at every place to which we come, say of me, ‘He is my brother’” (Gen. 20:13). Like his father, Isaac fears that “the men of the place” will kill him because of Rebekah, who is attractive in appearance. Now the third story of this kind, we find Isaac’s sin both shocking and commonplace—much the way that we begin to look at our own besetting sins. This indeed may be the goal of the narrator: “the repeated lapses emphasize (like Peter’s three denials) the chronic weakness of God’s chosen material.”²⁷

Now, Isaac put the covenant promises in serious jeopardy by considering a journey down to Egypt. Does this lapse in trusting God and ongoing deception of the men of Gerar pose the same kind of threat to Isaac’s covenant? Will God invalidate the promises because of Isaac’s disobedience here? What is the range of the promises and protections that this breach of faith will cover?

The Range of Christ’s Covenant

We may ask the same questions about the provisions of the new covenant that we have in Christ. Is Christ’s blood sufficient to atone for *all* my sins? While we have no hope of salvation outside of Christ, the promises of the gospel insist that we may take confidence in the blood of Jesus if we abide in him. The difference between abiding in Christ and apostasy from Christ is not about whether we sin; rather, the difference is about what we *do* with that sin. Those who abide in Christ continue to bring their sin back to Christ, trusting in his promises: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). Those who apostatize from Christ, however, do *not* repent from their sins. They continue their path down to Egypt without turning back to the promises of God’s inheritance in Christ. For those in Christ, the blood of Christ is sufficient to atone for *all* your sins. All those outside of Christ, however, have no hope of salvation, for there is no under name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).

The Refuge of the Covenant (Genesis 26:8–11)

Although Isaac commits the same sin that Abraham committed twice, there are two major differences between this story and those of Abraham.²⁸ First, neither Abimelech nor any of the other Philistines actually take Rebekah for a wife, where both Pharaoh (Gen. 12:15) and Abimelech (Gen. 20:2) took Sarah into their houses as wives. Second, God does not intervene supernaturally to expose

Isaac's lie, where God sent plagues on Egypt (Gen. 12:17) and a dream to Abimelech (Gen. 20:3–7) during the days of Abraham. Instead, Abimelech sees Isaac "laughing" with Rebekah:

[8] 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. [9] 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.'" [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." [11] So Abimelech warned all the people, saying, "Whoever touches this man or his wife shall surely be put to death." (Gen. 26:8–11)

The phrase "a long time" is important for two reasons. First, this phrase confirms that this Abimelech is a different Abimelech than the one who interacted with Abraham, as Victor Hamilton explains:

The adult and married Abimelech of ch. 20 enters the Abraham story before Abraham reaches the age of 100. The Abimelech of ch. 26 comes much later, after Abraham's death at the age of 175. Isaac is now 60 (25:26) and his two boys have grown up. Hence the Abimelech of ch. 20 and the Abimelech of ch. 26 are separated by at least seventy-five years, and we must be dealing with two individuals with the same name.... This is probably an instance of dynastic or royal names borne by a number of individuals such as one finds in the English monarch with Henry, George, or Edward. Note that the title of Ps. 34 is "A Psalm of David, when he feigned madness before Abimelech"; yet 1 Sam. 21:10–15 identifies the king as Achish. These texts are not necessarily contradictory; they may show that among earlier and later Philistine kings Abimelech was a favorite throne name to assume alongside one's own name.²⁹

Already much time has passed, and then another "long time" passes before Abimelech discovers Isaac's lie. Certainly, this must be a different person. Second, the passage of "a long time" without any negative consequences means that "Isaac's fear have proved groundless; yet he persists in them."³⁰ Unlike Abraham, Isaac has time to repent and to confess his lie, but he does not.

Isaac's Laughing

When Abimelech looks out the window, the text tells us that he sees Isaac "laughing" with Rebekah. Isaac's own name means "he laughs," referring to the laughter of both Abraham and Sarah over the promise (cf. Gen. 17:17, 19; 18:12–15; 21:6, 9). This "laughing" is one more installment of the ongoing wordplay that marks the theme of Isaac's life.³¹ The most important parallel passage was in Genesis 21:9, where Sarah was enraged upon seeing Ishmael "laughing" with Isaac (Gen. 21:9); now Abimelech sees Isaac "laughing" with Rebekah and becomes angry (Gen. 26:10).³² We did not know the details of Ishmael's "laughing" with Isaac, and we do not know the details of Isaac's "laughing" with Rebekah. In both cases, seemingly innocent "laughing" draws much larger reaction than we anticipate. Sarah saw Ishmael's "laughter" as something that threatened Isaac's status as the only heir (Gen. 21:10). Here, Abimelech sees Isaac's "laughter" as something that clearly demonstrates Rebekah to be something more than a sister. Potiphar's wife uses the same word

“laughing” to claim that Joseph attempted some kind of sexual advances toward her (cf. Gen. 39:14, 17), suggesting that this word “laughing” probably means some kind of sexual activity in this context as well.³³

Abimelech’s Decree

Regardless of the actual nature of the activity, Isaac’s laughing “made a mockery of Abimelech and his men by the deception.”³⁴ This is a serious issue, so Abimelech summons (ESV: “called”) Isaac in the same way that Abraham was summoned for his deception (Gen. 12:18; 20:9)—and also in the same way that God summoned the guilty Adam in the garden of Eden (Gen. 3:9).³⁵ Abimelech confronts Isaac, saying, “Behold, she is your wife. How then could you say, ‘She is my sister?’” (Gen. 26:9). As when Abraham was confronted, Isaac offers a weak justification for his actions: “Because I thought, ‘Lest I die because of her’” (Gen. 26:9). This response shocks Abimelech: “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). Victor Hamilton aptly notes, “Isaac has missed the fact that in attempting to spare his own life he was risking the lives of everybody else. A whole city was put in jeopardy because one man wanted to escape jeopardy.”³⁶ Abimelech’s exclamation, “What is this you have done to us?”, echoes the words of Pharaoh (Gen. 12:18) and the previous Abimelech (Gen. 20:9), as well as God’s words to Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:13) and to Cain (Gen. 4:10).³⁷

Remarkably, Abimelech does not punish, but rather *protects*, Isaac. Abimelech issues a decree that “Whoever touches this man or his wife shall surely be put to death” (Gen. 26:11). These words are similar to the decree that God issued to the previous Abimelech: “But if you do not return her [Sarah], know that you shall surely die, you, and all who are yours” (Gen. 20:7).³⁸ In summary, Gordon Wenham writes, “So all Isaac’s fears for his own life (vv 7, 9) are shown to be without foundation. As he promised, the LORD is with Isaac and is blessing him.”³⁹ Although Isaac believed God’s word enough to stay in the land of Canaan, he does not believe God’s promises to be with him and protect him enough to deal honestly with the surrounding nations.

The Refuge of God

Although the text tells us of Abimelech’s actions, we should nevertheless recognize that God is the one behind Isaac’s protection. God has promised to bless Isaac in the land of Canaan, and God is faithful to keep his promises. Where Isaac falters in his faith, God becomes Isaac’s refuge. Now, this does not mean that Isaac can become presumptuous about God’s promises, recklessly putting himself in danger as he waits to see how God will protect him. Indeed, God warned him precisely about that kind of presumptuousness when he told Isaac not to go down to Egypt. Isaac stumbles into sin, but he stumbles *in Canaan*—that is, he stumbles as someone who is abiding in God’s promises.

Part of what it means to abide in Christ is that we come to him as our refuge, even and *especially* when we sin. If we confess our sins to Jesus and seek his forgiveness, he has promised that his blood will cleanse us from all our sin and unrighteousness (1 John 1:7). The real danger is not so much in our sin as in our *apostasy*. Certainly, individual sins can and do grow into full-blown apostasy. Furthermore, every sin is a serious offense against God’s holiness, so we should not downplay any of the sin in our lives. The difference between the sin of apostasy and our individual sins lies in the way we respond to the sin. Apostasy means persisting in our sin without repentance. Those who abide in Christ will still sin, but they will respond to their sin with regular repentance and faith as they seek

to put it to death. So, if you are walking away from Christ, hear the thunder of God’s law speaking to you in condemnation. There is no refuge outside of Christ, and the Lord promises that he will judge his apostatized people! If, however, you are bringing your sin to Christ, hear the promises of God’s gospel. In Christ there is forgiveness, and as you remain in him you will bear much fruit. Don’t leave the promises—abide in Christ.

Discussion Questions

1. Where are you most tempted to trust in the provisions of Egypt rather than the promises of God? What fears loom most threateningly over you? What desires entice you most powerfully? How does Satan tempt you to believe that God is withholding, while Egypt is satisfying? Do the promises of the gospel provide better hope than the objects of your temptation?
2. What does Isaac stand to lose if he walks away from the Promised Land? What do we stand to lose if we walk away from Christ? If we are justified by faith alone, why must we remain in Christ in order to be saved? How do God’s warnings and threatenings help keep us in Christ? How do God’s promises help to root and to establish us in Christ?
3. Why do you think Isaac falls into the same sin that Abraham committed twice, by lying that his wife is his sister? What generational sins do you need to watch out for in your life? Even if not generational, what sins of weakness and fear do you need to guard against? What strength do the covenant promises of God offer in the midst of your weaknesses?
4. Do God’s people need to fear condemnation from our individual sins? Why is the sin of apostasy of such a different nature than the sins we commit while abiding in Christ? If we are abiding in Christ, how will we respond when we sin? If we apostatize, how will we respond when we sin? How, then, should we protect ourselves from apostasy by the grace of God?

Notes

1. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 186.
2. Calvin, *Genesis*, 58. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.iv.i.html>>
3. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 191.
4. “Some interpreters may reckon that Abraham’s descent into Egypt was evidence of a wavering faith, but there is no explicit condemnation in chap. 12 or in this passage. The emphasis of chap. 26 is the obedience of Isaac, resisting the inclusion of any negative intonation. By not escaping to Egypt, the patriarch must endure the famine, trusting that the Lord will deliver him.” (Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 403.)
5. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 189.
6. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 403.
7. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 187.
8. Kidner, *Genesis*, 163.
9. “These allusions make it clear that even if Isaac is not to walk in his father’s footsteps geographically, he must follow him spiritually.” (Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 189.)

10. “The term ‘live’...essentially means to ‘settle, dwell,’ and it often describes the presence of God among his people by means of the tabernacle (e.g., Exod 25:8). Yet it also provides a possible lexical allusion to an earlier patriarchal promise, but this time concerning Ishmael, who ‘will live’ opposing his kinsmen (16:10–12; 25:18). Although the word ‘live’ does not inherently mean a long duration, the connotation here is permanent residence.” (Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 403–04.)

11. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 189.

12. “In the Abraham story God’s ‘I will bless you’ (12:2) preceded ‘Yahweh blessed him’ (24:1). First the promise, then the fact. In Isaac’s case this order is reversed. ‘God blessed Isaac’ (25:11) precedes God’s ‘I will bless you’ (26:3).” (Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 193.)

13. “Blessing had come to Isaac in bereavement (25:11); now God again meets him in adversity.” (Kidner, *Genesis*, 163.)

14. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 404.

15. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 190.

16. “God commands him to settle in the promised land, yet with the understanding that he should dwell there as a stranger. The intimation was thus given, that the time had not yet arrived in which he should exercise dominion over it. God sustains indeed his mind with the hope of the promised inheritance, but requires this honor to be given to his word, that Isaac should remain inwardly at rest, in the midst of outward agitations; and truly we never lean upon a better support than when, disregarding the appearance of things present, we depend entirely upon the word of the Lord, and apprehend by faith that blessing which is not yet apparent. Moreover, he again inculcates the promise previously made, in order to render Isaac more prompt to obey; for so is the Lord wont to awaken his servants from their indolence, that they may fight valiantly for him, while he constantly affirms that their labor shall not be in vain; for although he requires from us a free and unreserved obedience, as a father does from his children, he yet so condescends to the weakness of our capacity, that he invites and encourages us by the prospect of reward.” (Calvin, *Genesis*, 59–60. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.iv.i.html>>

17. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 402.

18. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 191.

19. Walton, *Genesis*, 552.

20. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 187.

21. F. Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2005; reprint: Boston, MA: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1906), 784.

22. Calvin, *Genesis*, 60. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.iv.i.html>>

23. “[The orthodox] uniformly reject the necessity of merit [for salvation] against the Romanists....Hence it is evident that the questions here does not concern the necessity of merit, causality and efficiency—whether good works are necessary to effect salvation or to acquire it of right....Rather, the question concerns the necessity of means, of presence and of connection or order—Are they [good works] required as the means and way for possessing salvation? This we hold.” (Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrace Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., vol. 2 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1994), 702.)

24. “Thus, by showing Abraham to be an example of ‘keeping the law,’ the writer has demonstrated the nature of the relationship between the Law and faith. Abraham, a man who lived in faith, could be described as one who kept the Law. The view of faith and the Law reflected in this narrative is the same as that in Deuteronomy 30:11–14, where Moses said ‘this commandment is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach....It is in your heart to do it.’ It is also in keeping with Paul’s understanding of Deuteronomy 30 in Romans 10, where he writes that the ‘word’ which Moses said was ‘in your heart’ is ‘the word of faith which we are proclaiming’ (Ro 10:8).” (Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 187–88.)

25. Kidner, *Genesis*, 163.

26. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 190.
27. Kidner, *Genesis*, 163.
28. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 405.
29. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 192.
30. Kidner, *Genesis*, 164.
31. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 405–06.
32. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 196.
33. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 406.
34. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 460.
35. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 190.
36. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 196–97.
37. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 190–91.
38. “The word of warning for violation of this command (*shall be put to death*) is much like God’s word to the first Abimelech—“you shall surely die” (20:7). The difference between the two is that God uses the Qal of *mût* (i.e., an active form, with God presumably the agent of the action), and Abimelech uses the Hophal of *mût* (i.e., a passive form, with man presumably the agent).” (Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 198.)
39. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 191.