

THE FAITH OF ISAAC

"By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come" (Hebrews 11:20).

Isaac was the ordinary son of a great father. Like the rest of us, Isaac's experiences were marked by light and shadows, by sin and discipline, by grace and mercy. When a famine arose in the land of Canaan, the difficulty about food became urgent with Isaac and his household. Trials are permitted to come into the life of the best men, and it is by means of them that God sometimes teaches His most precious lessons. This famine provided a test for Isaac's faith and obedience. It was God's sovereign will that the famine came about.

As a result of this famine, Isaac journeyed southward. The Lord appeared to him and prevented him from going into Egypt, as his father had done under similar circumstances. There were dangers to body and soul in Egypt from which it was necessary that Isaac be safeguarded. This incident is a warning to us. In times of difficulty we ought not to go down into the world and adopt worldly methods of protection or alleviation. It is our duty to rely on God and trust Him to deliver us from trouble and to supply our needs.

God said to Isaac: "Dwell in the land," meaning the land of promise. Accompanying this command was the promise of two blessings, namely, "I will be with thee," and "I will bless thee." There can be no higher good than the presence of God. In Him is all we need. Having Him, we have all. God's presence gives protection from harm and keeps alive a happy relationship of reverence and love. God's blessing brings happiness, success, increase and usefulness.

There were two reasons for God's blessing of Isaac -- His purpose and His promise. God had a great purpose for Isaac. God was with Isaac and blessed him in order that He might fulfill a promise that He had made to another in the past. God said, "I will make thy seed to multiply."

After the death of his illustrious father, Abraham, Isaac received his inheritance. He enjoyed the blessings of God upon his efforts, whereupon there was a tremendous increase in his flocks, herds and servants. Isaac's prosperity irritated the Philistines. Success and prosperity always provoke jealousy. Envious of Isaac, the Philistines resolved that they would get him out of the country. A most effective method of displaying the diabolical sin of envy was by filling the wells which Abraham had left with earth and debris, for the flocks and herds would die without water. This was done with the intention of driving Isaac out of their midst. How terribly blind envy makes those whom it possesses and rules. To stop up the wells was a great injury to the Philistines themselves, for they too needed an adequate supply of water. An envious person will rob himself of many blessings he would enjoy, simply because he cannot bear to see others enjoy them. How foolish!

Aware that trouble was brewing, the king ordered Isaac to leave the country in the interest of peace. With this order there seemed to be an implication that Isaac was the cause of the trouble. In order to avoid strife, Isaac gave up the place which he had occupied and departed thence as he had been commanded. However, he did not go

very far. He decided to reopen those wells because of the blessing they had been in the past, as well as for the sake of those who needed the water then, and for the benefit of all who might come that way in the future. In other words, it was both a personal necessity and a public service.

Soon after Isaac had initiated this program of redigging the wells, he encountered additional trouble. The Philistine herdsmen contended for the well that had been reopened, demanding it for their own use. Being essentially a man of peace, and much preferring to suffer injury rather than to do wrong, Isaac moved on instead of fighting for his rights. He was willing to yield his rights in order to avert serious trouble, knowing too that there was more water to be had for the digging. He left the fruits of his labors to the enjoyment of others. How much happier many Christians would be today, and how much greater blessing they would be to others, if they would only emulate the example of Isaac!

Isaac sincerely believed that it was far better to trust the providence of God than to engage in fighting for his own rights, as his natural reaction to injustice would prompt him to do. He much preferred to leave his case in God's hands for future settlement. He wisely left his enemies in the hands of God and was richly rewarded with a wonderful peace, satisfaction and joy, and was given a larger and better place.

In due time Isaac returned to Beersheba. There the Lord appeared unto him that very night, encouraged him and blessed him in a great way. God assured Isaac of His presence with him. This assurance eliminated all grounds for fear, because when God is with one he has all that he needs and more. God's blessing always accompanies His presence.

Our text is arresting. It says, "By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau, even concerning things to come." There is not a lot to be said about Isaac. He was certainly not an impressive character. As to temperament, he was passive rather than active. There is not anything in the record of his life that speaks of initiative. All the early triumphs which he had were of a passive nature. If the triumph of faith is maintained, as when he climbed Mount Moriah with Abraham, to be offered as a sacrifice, we know that there was consent on his part. He entered into his father's plan by faith, but he yielded himself. It was not an initiative action, but it was passive faith.

I. The Story. Genesis 27:15-40.

Genesis 27 opens by presenting unto us Isaac in his old age, and declares that "his eyes were dim, so that he could not see" (Verse 1). This illustration of faith came when Isaac had arrived at that period of life when he was looking across to the life that lies beyond, when he was aware that he was nearing the end of his pilgrimage. He had almost completely lost his sight, and was trembling on the verge of eternity. When his flesh was failing, and his sight was dim, faith suddenly shone out; and the underlying principle of his life was manifest in that closing hour.

Isaac presents to us a solemn warning of the evil consequences which follow the failure to master and control our natural appetites. If we do not mortify our members, if we do not abstain from fleshly lusts that war against the soul, then the fine edge of our spiritual life will be blunted. If we live to eat, instead of eating to live, our spiritual vision is bound to be defective.

Instead of keeping his body in subjection, Isaac indulged it. More than a hint of this is given in Genesis 25:28, "And Isaac loved Esau because he did eat of his venison." In other words, Isaac loved Esau because he ministered to his fleshly appetite. Then, when Isaac thought that the end of his days was near, and he desired to bestow the patriarchal blessing upon his son, instead of giving himself to fasting and prayer, and then acting in accord with the revealed will of God, we are told that he called for Esau and said, "Behold now, I am old, I know not the day of my death: Now therefore take, I pray thee, thy weapons, thy quiver and thy bow, and go out to the field, and take me some venison; And make me savoury meat, such as I love, and bring it to me, that I may eat; that my soul may bless thee before I die" (Genesis 27:2-4). Rebekah overheard the charge of Isaac to their son Esau and took measures to direct the blessing into another channel.

In what follows we see how Isaac was deceived by Jacob posing as Esau. Though uneasy and suspicious at first, Isaac's fears were largely allayed by the falsehoods of Jacob. He was convinced that the voice was that of the younger son, but his hands appeared to be those of the elder. Pathetic indeed is it to see the aged patriarch reduced to the sense of touch in his efforts to identify the one who had now brought him the longed-for venison. It is this which should speak loudly to us, telling us that he who yields to the lusts of the flesh injures his spiritual instincts, and opens wide the door for Satan to impose upon him and deceive him with his falsehoods.

II. The Significance.

It was an experience of faith. "By faith Isaac blessed Jacob." The blessing which Isaac gave Jacob was not determined by reality of sight. It seemed to be Esau, but it was Jacob. The raiment was Esau's, the hairy hands felt like Esau's, and the suspicioned voice was accepted as Esau's. He pronounced the father's blessing upon the son. He attempted to change the purpose of God from the instrument through whom it had been revealed that God would carry out His purpose. At the birth of the twins it was made known to Isaac that the divine activity would be carried on through Jacob, and not through Esau.

Did Isaac deliberately pit himself against the known counsel of God? Did he defiantly purpose to bestow upon Esau what he was assured the Lord had appointed for Jacob? Whatever excuse may be offered in behalf of Isaac, it is certain that he failed greatly in two things: first, in his inordinate love for Esau, whose venison he enjoyed so much; and secondly, in that he had not sufficiently inquired into the mind of God, in the oracle that his wife received concerning their sons. Isaac's spiritual discernment was dim, as well as his physical vision.

Isaac pronounced the father's blessing upon the son. The blessing Isaac gave Jacob was real. Isaac blessed Jacob "concerning things to come." Isaac gave Jacob the blessing God had purposed he should have. He did so thinking that he was blessing Esau, thereby attempting to change the purpose of God from the instrument through whom it had been clearly revealed to him God would carry out that purpose.

Soon after Isaac had pronounced the major blessing on Jacob, Esau entered the tent, bringing with him the savoury meat which he had prepared for his father. Isaac then realized the deception which had been played upon him, and we are told that he "trembled very exceedingly." He realized that he had been out of harmony with the divine will, and that God had providentially intervened to effect His own purposes. Isaac was awed to the very depths of his soul. He had tried to bestow the blessing upon one whom God had not appointed, but he failed in that attempt, and the blessing had been pronounced upon the one whom God had appointed. Isaac accepted the interference of God, and the blessing was pronounced upon Jacob.

Instead of bursting out in anger at Jacob, Isaac said: "I have blessed him, yea, and he shall be blessed." That was the language of faith overcoming his natural partiality for Esau. It was the recognition and acknowledgement of the unchanging decree of God. "By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come." Faith insisted upon the fulfilment of the divine purpose, even though the attempt had been made to change the channel of faith. Faith recognized the wrong and the failure of what it had done, and when God had overwhelmed it, would not stay the blessing. Sometimes the deepest faith a man has in God is seen in his attitude toward his own wrong-doing. Faith triumphs eventually over personal weakness.

Isaac's faith was fixed upon the covenant God and was exercised upon His sure Word, and this was not to be changed because of the father's mistaking of Jacob for Esau. This also illustrates the fact that the faith of God's people is usually accompanied by some infirmity; in Isaac's case, his partiality for Esau. Third, after he discovered the deception which had been played upon him, he did not make any effort to recall the blessing pronounced upon Jacob, but he confirmed it; and though with tears Esau sought to change the mind of his father he could not.

III. The Sequel.

The sequel of Isaac's experience is striking. Isaac's blessing of faith was followed by family trouble. "And Esau hated Jacob... and Esau said in his heart, ... I will slay my brother Jacob." The trouble caused Jacob to leave the country and it was not healed for years. Experiences of faith are still followed by family troubles, but God can correct them as he did this.

Isaac's blessing of faith promoted providential purpose. It made God's purpose primary and sight's blessing secondary. Isaac loved Esau best, but God had chosen Jacob for His purpose. The purposes

of God by God were interwoven with the blessing of Jacob -- both for the Israelites, His chosen people, and for us His elect saints. Faith does not stop short of the purpose of God in Christ Jesus. The world is richer because of Isaac's faith and his blessing of faith. As soon as Isaac perceived the providential hand of God crossing his natural affections, instead of murmuring and complaining and rebelling, he yielded and submitted to the Lord. This is ever the work of true faith: It makes the soul yield to God's will against our fleshly inclinations, and against the bent of our own reason.

Isaac's feat of faith brings a needed message to this faithless world. It tells us where faith functions and what it does. True faith triumphs over human weakness and wrong and brings blessing. True faith accords with divine design and overcomes the world.

How much faith have you? God gives us the faith that functions as Isaac's --- the faith that is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen -- the faith that overcomes the world.

The greatest joy in the Christian life is found in service for God. One of the most beautiful epitaphs is inscribed to General Gordon in St. Paul's Cathedral in London. I was greatly impressed when I stood there and read it. It says, "He gave his strength to the weak, his substance to the poor, his sympathy to the suffering, his heart to God." Such a life is worth living in the sight of both God and man. Moody said he would like to have carved on his tombstone the words, "A young man walking about the streets witnessing to Jesus Christ." God calls each of His children to serve Him faithfully.