

Genesis 26:1–11

Preservation of the Saints by the Perseverance of the Savior

Main idea: Believers often stumble in surprising failure, but the Lord often shows them surprising mercy.

¹ There was a famine in the land, besides the first famine that was in the days of Abraham. And Isaac went to Abimelech king of the Philistines, in Gerar.

² Then the Lord appeared to him and said: “Do not go down to Egypt; live in the land of which I shall tell you. ³ Dwell in this land, and I will be with you and bless you; for to you and your descendants I give all these lands, and I will perform the oath which I swore to Abraham your father. ⁴ And I will make your descendants multiply as the stars of heaven; I will give to your descendants all these lands; and in your seed 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.”

⁶ So Isaac dwelt in Gerar. ⁷ And the men of the place asked about his wife. And he said, “She is my sister”; for he was afraid to say, “She is my wife,” because he thought, “lest the men of the place kill me for Rebekah, because she is beautiful to behold.” ⁸ Now it came to pass, when he had been there a long time, that Abimelech king of the Philistines looked through a window, and saw, and there was Isaac, showing endearment to Rebekah his wife. ⁹ Then Abimelech called Isaac and said, “Quite obviously she is your wife; so how could you say, ‘She is my sister?’”

Isaac said to him, “Because I said, ‘Lest I die on account of her.’”

¹⁰ And Abimelech said, “What is this you have done to us? One of the people might soon have lain with your wife, and you would have brought guilt on us.” ¹¹ So Abimelech charged all his people, saying, “He who touches this man or his wife shall surely be put to death.”

Introduction

Things seem inside out and upside down in this passage. Isaac was supposed to be the one in whom all the nations of the earth were to be blessed, but he almost became the one who led Gerar into incurring God's curse (v10). Abimelech is the one caring about guilt before God and repaying evil for evil. But the best upside-down thing is that the just and holy God is merciful to His failing servant, even in the midst of his sin.

1. Isaac's Surprising Failure. It is irrational and indeed blasphemous for those who belong to God to operate out of fear, rather than godly faith that trusts God's faithfulness or godly fear that reverences God's holiness.
 - a. The irrationality of Isaac's fear in the face of God's faithfulness
 - i. Yahweh had protected Abraham before, both in famine and among Philistines
 - ii. Yahweh had stunningly spared Isaac's life before
 - iii. Yahweh had made promises specifically about Isaac (cf. Gen 17:19, 21:12)
 - iv. Yahweh had just appeared to Isaac and made promises to him in v3–4
 - b. The irrationality of Isaac's fear in the face of God's holiness
 - i. The necessity and instrumentality of believers' obedience, v5. Yes, we are about to see amazing grace. But this can never be excused to justify looseness or laziness in the Christian life. God will be patient, but He will not be mocked (Ananias/Sapphira, the churches of Asia, the Lord's Supper, the PCUSA).
 - ii. The patriarch should have had just as much fear of guilt as Abimelech.
 - iii. Isaac was willing to sacrifice his wife's morality and safety to preserve himself. He ought instead to have been willing to defend her morality and safety with his life.
 - iv. Thus we see that Isaac's failure not just surprising but severe. We are so fleshly in our remaining sin that we are more easily horrified that he would do this to his wife, than that *both the lie itself, and especially his logic for lying, are blasphemies against the holiness of God who had identified Himself with Isaac*. The Lord says you must be holy for I am holy. And what is part of God's holiness?
 1. God never lies. It is true that God sometimes kills, because sometimes killing is the just and right thing to do. So killing is not always wicked, not always murder. But God never tells an untruth. He who is good often ordains to do good according to His own goodness, even through the free and willing choices of those who are wicked and do wickedly according to their own wickedness. “You intended it for evil, but God intended it for good.” But God Himself never lies, never speaks a single untruth. God is not a man that He should lie (Num 23:19). God cannot lie (Titus 1:2). It is impossible for God to lie (Heb 6:18). Those who wish to justify man's lying had better be careful of their minds and their lips concerning our holy God; for, they often justify themselves by claiming that God Himself is a deceiver and a liar. So, otherwise good and wise men will sometimes run roughshod over the first commandment in order to justify their breaking of the ninth commandment. It is the devil who is not only a liar, but the father of lying (John 8:44).
 2. Jesus never lied—how many opportunities He would have had to tell a lie that would have accomplished a righteous end, but answered instead with a question, or a different truth, or a truth that the other person's own wickedness would twist, or even not at all. He who is the perfect revelation for the Father is also the pattern for

our own morality. 1John 2:3–6, “Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, “I know Him,” and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked.”

3. This is why we confess in Larger Catechism 144 that the ninth commandment requires us to speak only the truth—not only in matters of judgment and justice, but also in all other things whatsoever. This is why we confess in Larger Catechism 145 that the ninth commandment forbids not only lying generally, but speaking untruth specifically. And this is why our fathers in the faith have often said, “Duty is ours; events are God’s.” That is to say, “it does not belong to us to determine outcomes; it belongs to us to obey God’s commandments.”
 4. The severity of his sin was not merely that he lied, but that he put himself in the place of God. He actually operated by the idea that he could change the outcome by disobedience. Lying feels like an easy way to change an outcome, because words are powerful, and we are so weak. God has made words powerful—what a powerful thing is the tongue!—in fact, He Himself uses words as instruments in the greatest works of His own power. So, we operate under the illusion that when we need to change an outcome, we can do it by lying. But determining outcomes belongs to God alone! We must, like Jesus, entrust ourselves to God who judges justly and who is able to save us. This is what Corrie Ten Boom and her sister did, and God saved them and the Jews they were hiding. And, even if He had not, God is God, and we are not. Duty is ours; events are God’s.
 5. The idea that we may lie to prevent an outcome or to change an outcome is precisely what was behind Isaac’s lie here. He lied precisely because he was not trusting God; he had forgotten that events are God’s. God had said in v3, “Dwell in this land, and I will be with you and bless you.” But Isaac had said in v7 “lest the men of the place kill me for Rebekah” and in v9, “lest I die on account of her.” Isaac lied, because He did not trust the outcome to God; Isaac was more concerned with outcomes than obedience; he had forgotten that duty is ours, and events are God’s
- c. The necessity of both confidence in the Lord and fear of the Lord. In which are you more lacking? They are ultimately the same thing: faith that treats the Lord as real and the Lord as great. Lack of trust treats the Lord as small. Lack of trembling wonder/worship as a way of life treats the Lord as small.

2. The Lord’s Surprising Mercy

- a. The location of the mercy is itself merciful. The Lord promises to take care of Isaac in the place where he had already gone. Isaac was already there (v1). Yahweh says dwell in the land “of which I shall tell you” (v2). But then says “Dwell in this land” (v3).
- b. The repetition of the promises, and attachment to “this land” in v3 is merciful. We sometimes fail to apply specifically, to where we are, God’s good promises to us.
- c. The method of keeping the promise is merciful. Not only does God keep the Philistines from touching Rebekah, but He moves Abimelech to respond not with revenge but with a threat of vengeance upon anyone who harms them.
- d. And this mercy is especially surprising in a context in which we might have expected discipline. The death of his wife, the loss of a child, financial disaster. All of these, the Lord might rightly have brought upon His servant to chasten him for his sin, and still ultimately kept His promises, but God is pleased instead to surprise with a display of His mercy!

Conclusion

The Lord often displays surprising mercy to us. Often, He does not allow to fall upon us and our children consequences that we might rightly and justly have expected for our actions.

And when He does, He calls our attention back to Himself. “I, who have shown you this mercy in time, have done so, because I am the One who has redeemed you by the blood of Christ. Trust in Me! Even if you die, death cannot separate You from My love in Christ!”

When God displays surprising mercy, He stirs up our hearts to love Him, to see His worthiness. He calls our attention back to Himself. “I who love to display my mercy am the holy, holy, holy God. I am worthy of Your obedience, whatever it might cost you in the wisdom of my providence!”

You may stumble in a surprising failure, but in this passage God calls you back to Himself, as He displays His surprising mercy!

Behold your God, who has not only offered you everlasting and unimaginable happiness in Himself through the Lord Jesus Christ, but who even now fills your life with so much surprising mercy!