

- f. From Abraham, the writer shifted his attention to Isaac and Jacob, Abraham's son and grandson (11:20-21). This is a natural transition, and not simply because Isaac has already been mentioned, but because of the writer's focus on the covenant with Abraham as fundamental to his faith and faithfulness. If faith is directed toward God's revealed purposes and promises – and it is, then it is also *covenantally-oriented*. The reason is that, from the time of Noah, God has situated all such revelation within covenant structures and relationships.

Abraham's faith was set within God's covenant with him, and Isaac was the centerpiece of the covenant and its promises. He was the heir through whom all of the covenant's particulars would be realized. This being the case, it is perhaps surprising that Isaac has such a small role in the Genesis record. His life spans fifteen chapters in the text (Genesis 21-35), but the last seven of those speak almost nothing of him personally. Once Isaac bestowed his blessing on Jacob (Genesis 27-28), the narrative moves him into the background and Jacob assumes center stage. Isaac had served his role in the covenant and the salvation history, and so little more needed to be added except to note his death (Genesis 35).

And yet Isaac is important as a man of faith. Like his father before him, he had many shortcomings, and some of his challenges and failures of faith closely paralleled those of Abraham (cf. Genesis 12:10-20, 20:1-18 and 26:6-11). These parallels suggest that Isaac shared his father's weaknesses and flaws, but the Genesis narrative wants the reader to see in them the *covenant* connection between the two men. The God of Abraham had now become the God of *Isaac* (cf. Genesis 17:15-19 with 26:1-5, 24; cf. also 21:22-33 with 26:23-33).

The Hebrews writer focused on the covenant in his consideration of Abraham's faith, and so it was with Isaac. One might argue that there were many things in Isaac's life that attested his faith, but the writer chose to mention only one: his act of blessing his sons Jacob and Esau. It was customary in the ancient Near East for fathers to bestow their blessing on their sons, so this act doesn't in itself demonstrate faith in God. But it did in the case of the patriarchs, for their blessing involved their ownership of their own place in God's covenant and His intent to continue the covenant in a chosen offspring. Isaac knew his father's God; he was old enough at Moriah to understand and recall what had happened there, and afterward his father surely instructed him in his place in the covenant and its fulfillment. Now, sensing that his life was drawing to its close, Isaac was anxious to impart his blessing to the next covenant heir.

Genesis 27:1ff recounts this episode, and it focuses on the fact that Jacob received the blessing counter to what Isaac believed and intended. Isaac sought to bless *Esau*, the firstborn (though Esau had long since sold his birthright to Jacob), but God had chosen Jacob to inherit the covenant, and He saw to it that the younger son received the blessing. It came about through ignorance, conspiracy, deception, and unbelief, but God's will prevailed. Jacob was the covenant heir, but Esau also obtained his father's blessing (11:20), albeit not the one he desired (27:38-40).

Again, the writer was drawing from Genesis 27, and the first thing that jumps out from this account is that Isaac's blessing of his sons doesn't seem in any way to have been an act of faith. Quite the opposite, Isaac's intent to bless Esau – and his belief that he'd done so – suggests his *unfaithfulness*, given the prophetic word given to Rebekah before the twins were born (Genesis 25:21-23). Of course, it's possible that Rebekah never shared that word with Isaac, in which case his intent makes sense. For Esau was the first-born, and therefore the rightful heir of his father's house, even though his birth preceded Jacob by only a few moments. But whether or not Isaac was aware of God's choice (or the fact that Esau had sold his birthright), his blessing still doesn't appear to be an act of faith. Faith owns God's purposes, and Isaac was committed to bestowing the blessing on Esau; Jacob obtained it only because he deceived his father. Yes, God saw to it that His decision of covenant election stood and the covenant blessing fell to Jacob. But Isaac's part was one of ignorance (if not unbelief) and contrary intention, not faith. What, then, from the Genesis account convinced the Hebrews writer that Isaac had acted in faith? Two observations perhaps help to answer that question:

The first is the fact that Isaac didn't retract his blessing after he learned that it had been obtained by deceit. This indicates that he believed his covenant blessing, once bestowed, couldn't be recalled, and would indeed bring to fruition that which it proclaimed and pronounced. Thus he declared to Esau, "*Yes, and he shall be blessed,*" apparently before he even knew who had received the blessing (Genesis 27:30-33). The suggestion, then, is that Isaac saw God's hand in this particular outcome. Yes, it resulted from sin and deceit, but it was the outcome God intended, however it came about.

The second observation is more general, which is that this episode of blessing was the culmination of Isaac's life of faith. Since that day on Mount Moriah when he was just a youth, Isaac had walked before Yahweh as the covenant heir. Like his father Abraham, Isaac's faith and faithfulness fell short in various ways, but he clung tightly to his God and His covenant. Now, in his old age, that persistent faith compelled him to pass the covenant inheritance to the next heir. Yes, Isaac believed Esau was that heir, but he nonetheless issued his blessing *in faith*. So that same faith led Isaac to conclude that God had insured that the blessing went to the right person, regardless of what he may have believed.

It was from this vantage point of faith that Isaac responded to the objections of his eldest son and bestowed his blessing on him (Genesis 27:34-40). Whatever he believed before that moment, Isaac now understood what God had disclosed to Rebekah while the twins wrestled inside her womb: By His own determination for His own reasons, and contrary to human convention, the older would serve the younger. But just as with Ishmael before him, Esau, too, would become a great and royal nation, and God would give him and his descendents the whole region of Edom around Mount Seir (cf. Genesis 36; Deuteronomy 2:1-6). But the covenant and its promises belonged to Jacob; it was *his* seed through whom God's blessing would flow to all the nations of the earth (Genesis 28:10-15).

This covenant distinction is crucially important, not least because it is the context for understanding God's disposition of love toward Jacob and hatred toward Esau (ref. Malachi 1:1-3). The natural tendency is to treat these dispositions in a personal and ethical sense. That is, God's love for Jacob and hatred toward Esau expressed something about the men *themselves*. Indeed, the Hebrews writer himself seems to reinforce this perspective (ref. 12:15-17). But to view God's love and hatred that way is to miss their true significance: These antithetical dispositions toward the two brothers concerned His *covenant* intent for them, not His moral assessment of them or sentiment toward them as human beings. Paul made this clear when he insisted that God's love and hatred preceded the twins' birth, and so had nothing to do with them as individuals (Romans 9:10-13). Rather, these opposing dispositions reflected His *covenant* election (not election unto "salvation" as commonly understood). That is, God's election of Jacob was His sovereign determination of Jacob's place in His intention for the world as bound up in His covenant with Abraham. With respect to the covenant, He was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This is the interpretive lens for Hebrews 12:15-17; God's hatred of Esau neither resulted from nor provoked his godlessness respecting the birthright. Yes, Esau's actions served God's design and determination, but they were entirely his own.

Thus God's hatred of Esau must not be understood in personal terms, much less as biblical support for the Calvinistic doctrine of reprobation. Indeed, God's "hatred" of Esau took account of his Abrahamic heritage (ref. again Deuteronomy 2:1-6; cf. Joshua 24:1-4), and God included Esau's descendents in His design to gather to Himself people from all nations and tribes (cf. Amos 9:11-12 with Acts 15:7-18). Esau's offspring, just like the rest of the Gentiles, had a share in God's promise that Abraham would one day become the father of a multitude of nations. Abraham's non-covenant descendents could also become his true children, because this status results from union with the Seed promised in the covenant (Galatians 3). But for this same reason, Abraham's *covenant* descendents aren't automatically his true children; they, too, can find themselves outside of the covenant household, having Abraham as their father only according to the flesh (cf. Galatians 3:15-29 with Romans 2:28-29, 9:1-33; ref. also Luke 13:22-30; John 8:31-56).

A future ingrafting for Esau's descendents (in this way, Esau's being included in the covenant household) wasn't evident in the blessing Isaac gave to him, but it's quite possible that the Hebrews writer had it in mind when he spoke of the blessing pertaining to "things to come." But whether or not this was the case, he perceived that Isaac bestowed his respective blessings "by faith," speaking the words of blessing as prophetic utterances that drew on the covenant, Isaac's share in it, and God's intent to pass the inheritance and its vocation on to the next generation.

God's eternal purposes, which He determined to accomplish by means of a sovereign covenant with Abram, the Chaldean, would not fail. At each step, His electing determination would preserve and advance His designs. He was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, whom He ordained to be *Israel*, the father of the Abrahamic nation. And, at the appointed time, Israel would become Israel *indeed* in the Seed at the heart of the covenant. In that day, Ishmael and Esau would see their father's blessing come to *their* households, together with all the households of mankind (Isaiah 11:1-12, 49:1-7).