

IMPARTING FAITH TO ISAAC

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I. Introduction

A. In the series of classes, we are now looking at offspring that remained faithful to God. We're trying to see if we can learn anything about how the parents in these cases successfully transmitted their faith to their children.

B. My assignment for tonight is to focus on Isaac. Terry is going to fill in for me next week and look at Esau, another example of *failed* faith. I plan to follow Terry's class on Esau with a class on Jacob and then a class on Joseph, two more examples of faithful sons. Terry will wrap things up in the final class.

II. Abraham's Faith

A. Abraham is, of course, renowned for his faith in God. Indeed, Paul in Gal. 3:9 calls him "the man of faith," and says in Rom. 4:11, 16 that Abraham is the father of all who share his faith (see also Gal. 3:7). Abraham is cited twice in the list of paragons of faith given in Hebrews 11.

B. As you know, Abraham, who earlier was known as Abram, was originally from the city of Ur in southern Mesopotamia. He lived there with his father, Terah, his wife, Sarai, who later was named Sarah, and his brothers, Nahor and Haran (Gen. 11:26-29).

1. We know from Gen. 11:26 that the first of Terah's three sons was born when Terah was 70 years old, but whether that son was Abraham depends on whether the original text of Gen. 11:32 said Terah died in Haran at age 205 or at age 145. The Masoretic text has 205, but the Samaritan Pentateuch has 145.

2. If the Masoretic text of Gen. 11:32 is original – that is, if Terah was 205 when he died – then Abram was born when Terah was 130. That follows from the fact Gen. 12:4 says Abram was 75 when he left Haran and Acts 7:4 says he left Haran after Terah died. If Abraham was 75 when Terah was 205, then Abraham was born when Terah was 130. That means the son born when Terah was 70 was Nahor or Haran. (As Nahor married Haran's daughter [Gen. 11:28], Haran is probably older than Nahor, making him the elder brother.) Note that Scripture never states that Abraham was the eldest son.

3. On the other hand, if the Samaritan Pentateuch text of Gen. 11:32 is original – that is, if Terah was 145 when he died – then Abram was the eldest, being born when Terah was 70. That follows because Abraham would then be 75 when Terah was 145. One thing that makes me think the Samaritan Pentateuch text probably is original is that in Gen. 17:17 (see also Rom. 4:18-21) Abraham seemed to think it was impossible,

or at least very unlikely, for one to father a child at age 100. If Terah fathered him naturally at age 130, I don't see why Abraham would think 100 was too old to have children.

C. Genesis 11:28-31 says that after Terah's son Haran died Terah moved the family from Ur intending to go to Canaan, but he ended up settling in the city of Haran about 600 miles northwest of Ur. If it is correct that Abraham was the firstborn and was born when Terah was 70, then Terah was probably over 110 when he moved the family to the city of Haran. That follows from the fact the Haran was born after Abraham, and thus after Terah was 70, and that Haran's daughter Milcah was old enough to have married before Terah left Ur. How much Terah was over 110 is impossible to say.

D. We are not told why Terah decided to go to Canaan or why he wound up settling in Haran rather than going to Canaan. Stephen reveals in Acts 7:2-3 that while Terah's family was still in Ur God appeared to Abraham and said "Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you." Gen. 15:7 and Neh. 9:7 state that God brought Abraham *out of Ur*. Hebrews 11:8 says, "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, *not knowing where he was going*."

1. So it seems that Abraham's going out to an unknown place in response to God's call coincided with Terah's moving the family from Ur. Abraham went expecting God to indicate the destination, and perhaps God did so during the family's journey. That would explain why Terah was intending to go to Canaan. It also fits with the fact that when God in Gen. 12:1-5 calls Abraham after Terah's death to go to the land he will show him, they headed out for the land of Canaan.

2. But if God had revealed previously that Abraham's destination was Canaan, one wonders why Terah ended up settling the family in Haran and why Abraham went along with that decision. Maybe Terah's condition was such that he could not accompany Abraham and so they chose to settle in what was possibly Terah's original homeland so he could die there. (Note the command that he "go from his kindred" meant that he leave their territory not that he not take any of them with him.) If that is correct, then Abraham did not consider God's directive to him to rule out the stay in Haran.

3. With Terah's passing, Abraham headed for the land of Canaan pursuant to God's revelation. Genesis 12:1 can be translated "The Lord *had* said to Abraham" (as in KJV, NKJV, NIV, TNIV), in which case it's a reference to the earlier command to Abraham in Ur. If it is translated "The Lord said to Abraham," it probably is a renewal of the earlier command given after Terah's passing.

E. According to Josh. 24:2, 15, Terah and his ancestors "served other gods," meaning they were not worshipers of Yahweh, the one true God. You also can see this in Gen. 31:19 which refers to the household gods of Rebekah's brother Laban, who lived in Haran. God's revealing himself to Abraham broke that chain of idolatry.

F. Hebrews 11:8-12 praises different expressions of Abraham's faith.

1. Verses 8-10 praise his faith in leaving his homeland. By faith he obeyed God's call to leave the security of his family territory and move to a place with which he was completely unfamiliar. Though that land remained for him only a promised land, not a land over which actual ownership had been secured, he endured living there as a nomad, living as a tent dweller between the time of promise and fulfillment, because his eyes were set on a city of true permanence, an eternal city built by God. Now that's faith, trust with skin on it, trust that is translated into living.

2. Verses 11-12 can be translated with either Abraham or Sarah as the subject of v. 11, and I think the better translation has Abraham as the subject (as in NIV and NRSV). That translation says that by faith Abraham was enabled to do what naturally was impossible, to father a child at a very advanced age. He trusted God to fulfill his promise that he would give him a child by Sarah, and the result was a multitude of descendants.

G. This aspect of Abraham's faith also is cited by Paul in Rom. 4:16-22.

H. Another great act of faith on Abraham's part was his willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac in obedience to God. This act is praised in Heb. 11:17-19 and Jas. 2:21-23.

1. Of course, when God tested Abraham by telling him in Gen. 22:2 to offer his son Isaac as a burnt offering, he intended all along to stop him before he actually killed Isaac. After all, God says clearly elsewhere that child sacrifice is an abomination (e.g., Deut. 12:31, 18:10; 2 Ki. 16:3).

2. In addition, it was understood by Abraham, based on God's repeated promise and assurances, that Isaac would grow to adulthood so as to be the one through whom God's promise to bring a great nation from Abraham would be fulfilled. So he trusted that even if the Lord allowed him to kill Isaac he would bring him back to life. Remember how Abraham in Gen. 22:5 told his servants before he headed to Mt. Moriah with Isaac, "We will worship and then we will come back to you." Hebrews 11:19 says flatly that Abraham in that situation considered that God was able even to raise the dead.

3. When God through his angel intervened and stopped Abraham from offering his son, he said, in effect, "Abraham, you passed my test. You get an A+. You have demonstrated that your commitment to me is unlimited and unqualified. You have not held anything back, not even the most important person in your life. Abraham, you feared me rather than fearing the consequences of sacrificing your child." It is no wonder that we are pointed repeatedly back to this great expression of faith.

III. Isaac's Faith

A. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born (Gen 21:5). Abraham named him Isaac (Gen. 21:3), which means laughter, in keeping with God's prior instruction (Gen. 17:19). Abraham circumcised Isaac on the eighth day as God had commanded (Gen. 21:4; Acts 7:8).

B. When Isaac was forty (Gen. 25:20), Abraham sent the senior servant of his household to his homeland of Haran to find a wife for Isaac (Gen. 24:1-4; Gen. 31:19 identifies Haran as the dwelling place of Rebekah's brother Laban). He insisted that the servant not take a wife for Isaac from among the Canaanites (Gen. 24:2-3), which is interesting given that Abraham's family back in Haran apparently continued in polytheism (Gen. 31:19). Presumably a wife from his clan who was displaced from her family would more readily embrace faith in Yahweh than a wife who was not from his clan and who continued living in the midst of her pagan family. It may also be that the Canaanite culture was more debased than that of Abraham's ancestors.

C. Isaac married Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel, Abraham's nephew (his brother Nahor and Milcah's son), and sister of Laban, when he was forty years old (Gen. 25:20). Rebekah was unable to have children, and Isaac prayed to the Lord for her (Gen. 25:21). The Lord granted his prayer, and Rebekah gave birth to the twins, Jacob and Esau, when Isaac was sixty years old (Gen. 25:25-26).

D. Throughout the twenty years of infertility, Isaac did not seek to have children by another woman but remained monogamous. Apparently he learned from what God had done with Abraham and Sarah that infertility is no obstacle to the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham that Isaac's offspring would be members of God's covenant (Gen. 17:19, 21).

E. In Genesis 26 there was a famine in the land, and Isaac went to Gerar to Abimelech the king of the Philistines. The Lord appeared to him and told him not to go to Egypt but to dwell where he would tell him to dwell. He told him in vv. 3-5: 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."* Verse 6 says simply: So Isaac settled in Gerar.

F. Isaac prospered so greatly in Gerar that Abimelech ordered him to leave (Gen. 26:16). Isaac eventually winds up in Beersheba, where the Lord again appeared to him. Genesis 26:24 states: *And the LORD appeared to him the same night and said, "I am the God of Abraham your father. Fear not, for I am with you and will bless you and multiply your offspring for my servant Abraham's sake."*

G. Isaac, of course, was not perfect. As Abraham had done in Genesis 12 when he went to Egypt, Isaac in Genesis 26 lied to the people in Gerar by telling them that

Rebekah was his sister (at least Sarah was Abraham's half-sister – Gen. 20:12). Though God had told him to dwell there, Isaac felt he needed to take his personal protection into his own hands.

H. In Gen. 27:1-4 Isaac intended to bless Esau, meaning he intended to confer on him the covenant blessings of God, to identify him as the child of promise in the covenant lineage. This blessing would by birthright normally be passed to the eldest son, but in this case the Lord had told Rebekah that the older, Esau, would serve the younger, Jacob (Gen. 25:23). This suggests that Jacob would assume the rights of the firstborn.

1. It is true that Isaac favored Esau over Jacob because he liked to eat the game Esau killed (Gen. 25:28), but it is not certain that Isaac was intentionally bucking God's will here. He presumably was aware of the divine oracle after so many years, but he may have misunderstood it or forgotten it. In any event, Isaac's intention is frustrated by Jacob's deceit in pretending to be Esau (Genesis 27).

2. Though Jacob used deception to secure "the blessing," Heb. 12:16-17 makes clear that this was God's rejection (theological passive) of Esau for Esau's earlier rejection of his birthright by selling it to Jacob for something as worthless as a bowl of stew (Gen. 25:29-34). And all of this was in keeping with the Lord's prophecy to Rebekah that the older would serve the younger.

I. Isaac died at the age of 180 (Gen. 35:28), and Esau and Jacob buried him (Gen. 35:29).

J. The only place I know of where Isaac is expressly praised for his faith is Heb. 11:20. Hebrews 11:17-20 says: ¹⁷*By faith Abraham, when being tested, offered Isaac; indeed, the one who received the promises was offering his only son,* ¹⁸*about whom it was said, "Through Isaac your seed will be called."* ¹⁹*He reckoned that God is able even to raise [someone] from [the] dead, from which he also in a figure received [him] back.* ²⁰*By faith Isaac, also regarding things to come, blessed Jacob and Esau.*

1. As an old man, Isaac, like Abraham, trusted God's control of the future and in that faith blessed Jacob and Esau regarding their future.

a. Esau did not receive the covenant blessing, the blessing of being in the covenant lineage, being the child of promise. On the contrary, he sold that right to Jacob for a bowl of stew and was unable to inherit it despite crying aloud for it as the Hebrew writer notes in 12:15-17 (see Gen. 27:34-35).

b. He did, however, in Gen. 27:40 receive a blessing of sorts regarding the future. Isaac told him in response to his plea for a blessing in Gen. 27:38 that though he would serve his brother Jacob, the brother of the covenant blessing, he would at some point break his yoke from his neck. To bestow even this somewhat backhanded blessing regarding the future is to express faith in the God of the future.

2. What I think is especially interesting for our purposes is that the inspired writer of Hebrews associates Isaac's faith in God as the one who controls the future to the faith expressed by Abraham in being willing to sacrifice Isaac, the child of promise. Because God controls the future and thus is able to fulfill his promises, Abraham reasoned that God was able to raise Isaac from the dead in the event he killed him.

3. This never left Isaac. Hebrews 11:20 says that he by faith, *also regarding things to come* – that is, just like Abraham's faith regarding things to come – blessed Jacob and Esau regarding their future.

K. I am sure that Abraham and Sarah both built Isaac's faith in many ways during their lives. The story of his birth alone, which story was embodied in his name, meaning laughter, was a powerful testimony of God's reality and faithfulness. From naming him Isaac and circumcising him in compliance with the Lord's command to caring enough to protect him from the danger of a Canaanite wife, Abraham conveyed to Isaac the reality and importance of God. But I doubt anything had as dramatic an effect on him as Abraham's willingness to sacrifice him in obedience to God's command. The association in Hebrews of that event with Isaac's faith points in that same direction.

L. Parents, you need to have your spiritual priorities on straight and be committed to living as God calls you to live despite whatever consequences you may fear. Live for him in every aspect and circumstance of your life trusting that he who controls the future ultimately will bless you. That will have an impact on your children.

M. And that includes not putting your child above God, not making an idol out of your child. However much we love our children, whenever they choose to go against God we must side with God rather than with our children.

N. Of course, one cannot underestimate the impact of God appearing to Isaac on two occasions. I think of the Lord Jesus appearing to Paul on the road to Damascus and Paul being given a vision of heaven that was so real he didn't know whether he had been transported there physically (2 Cor. 12:1-4). This had to have had a profound effect of him.