

Foundations: Blessings on Repeat
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 128; Luke 21:10-19; Genesis 26:17-33

Our final Scripture reading today is Genesis 26:17-33. We're actually going to start a couple of verses back so that we get the full picture that we heard at the end of last week. May God bless the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect word. "Isaac planted crops in that land and the same year reaped a hundredfold, because the LORD blessed him. The man became rich, and his wealth continued to grow until he became very wealthy. He had so many flocks and herds and servants that the Philistines envied him. So all the wells that his father's servants had dug in the time of his father Abraham, the Philistines stopped up, filling them with earth. Then Abimelech said to Isaac, "Move away from us; you have become too powerful for us." So Isaac moved away from there and encamped in the Valley of Gerar and settled there. Isaac reopened the wells that had been dug in the time of his father Abraham, which the Philistines had stopped up after Abraham died, and he gave them the same names his father had given them. Isaac's servants dug in the valley and discovered a well of fresh water there. But the herdsmen of Gerar quarreled with Isaac's herdsmen and said, "The water is ours!" So he named the well Esek, because they disputed with him. Then they dug another well, but they quarreled over that one also; so he named it Sitnah. He moved on from there and dug another well, and no one quarreled over it. He named it Rehoboth, saying, "Now the LORD has given us room and we will flourish in the land." From there he went up to Beersheba. That night the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am the God of your father Abraham. Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bless you and will increase the number of your descendants for the sake of my servant Abraham." Isaac built an altar there and called on the name of the LORD. There he pitched his tent, and there his servants dug a well. Meanwhile, Abimelech had come to him from Gerar, with Ahuzzath his personal adviser and Phicol the commander of his forces. Isaac asked them, "Why have you come to me, since you were hostile to me and sent me away?" They answered, "We saw clearly that the LORD was with you; so we said, 'There ought to be a sworn agreement between us' -- between us and you. Let us make a treaty with you that you will do us no harm, just as we did not molest you but always treated you well and sent you away in peace. And now you are blessed by the LORD." Isaac then made a feast for them, and they ate and drank. Early the next morning the men swore an oath to each other. Then Isaac sent them on their way, and they left him in peace. That day Isaac's servants came and told him about the well they had dug. They said, "We've found water!" He called it Shibah, and to this day the name of the town has been Beersheba."

"God bless you." Usually that's something we hear when we sneeze. We're not sure where it came from; most of us learned it as good manners. Probably it has something to do with hoping that whatever's making someone sneeze isn't serious. But it's a pretty trite phrase, right? We don't even think about it; we just say it. We aren't praying; we aren't lifting up someone's cold to the LORD. It's instinct. It has little to do with true blessings.

I think we actually don't know much about what blessings of the LORD really are or how they come to us. We know that there are things we'd like to receive – a good family life, nice home, nice car, good schools, faithful church, good friends – but how do we respond to those things when we have them? How do we respond to others when they receive them? This passage gives us the opportunity to look a bit more closely at God's blessings. I think there's plenty here for us God intends us to chew on.

As we might remember from last week, Isaac and company had moved to Gerar to wait out a severe famine in Canaan. He ran into some trouble with Abimelech, the local ruler, when he tried to pass his wife Rebekah off as his sister, but God had promised Isaac blessings if he did not go down to Egypt but continued on in Gerar as God instructed. Isaac obeyed.

What we see as the result are immense blessings on Isaac. The crop he planted comes back a hundred fold, far far more than anyone's wildest imagination. He becomes incredibly wealthy, because a man with tons of wheat and barley in the middle of a famine suddenly becomes very popular. He has flocks; he has herds; he has servants. He has it all. God's promises come true very quickly.

But there's trouble brewing from the green eyed monster of jealousy. The Philistines look at all the wealth Isaac has accumulated and their anger gets the better of them. They stop up all the wells that Abraham dug, which is kind of like shooting yourself in the foot. You live in an arid place; water is at a premium. You'd really stop up a well because you were jealous of the family who opened it? Wow. But that's what they did, and eventually Abimelech asks Isaac to move away because he's become a threat. While this might seem mean-spirited on Abimelech's part, it was probably to keep Isaac from danger from those who envied his wealth. (For foreign kings, the line of kings named Abimelech were not as harsh as they could have been with the issues having Abraham's people in their country brought.)

So Isaac and company move, and guess what? God blesses them with more wells. They find more water everywhere they go. But even though they did nothing for the water, the local tribesmen keep arguing that it's their land and their water. So Isaac's contingent keeps moving until finally they seem to have some peace and some water of their own. They reach Beersheba, and that's where the LORD speaks to Isaac.

I'm guessing that Isaac is pretty discouraged. He's received blessing after blessing, but all this calamity has followed him. Where can they go? God encourages him. God tells him, "Don't be afraid; I am with you and will bless you." And right then and there, Isaac sets up camp. He pitches his tent and he builds an altar for the LORD. Now Isaac has worshiped God all along, but this is where he makes his faith known to the community; this is where he will settle; this is where he will do like his father did and make God's name known. And his servants dig another well.

Around this time, Abimelech shows up again. Isaac is nervous considering their last encounter. But Abimelech is no dummy. He's seen how many times God has blessed Isaac. He knows he needs Isaac on his side. He makes peace with Isaac and they both leave each other's societies alone. And right then, the servants come back with news that they have once again found water. It's no coincidence. Just as the treaty is signed acknowledging the goodness of God to Isaac, God provides for his family and his entourage yet again.

If we read this at a surface level, we might just take it as the dealings of Abraham's family with rival clans in the ancient Near East and not give a second thought to it. And it's true that the history itself has little to do with us. But the concepts flowing through this passage have everything to do with the blessings of God. Everything we see happening in this passage is a direct result of blessings that God bestows upon Isaac. And since the blessings of God are something we very much want ourselves, let's see what we can find here.

The first thing I see is this: *blessings start with God but are fulfilled through work*. Isaac doesn't just happen to buy a field that magically sprouts up so much barley that he could feed all of Canaan's refugees. He and his servants plant it. They discover water several times along the way at the places their caravan stops for a while, but guess what? Isaac and his servants reopen the wells and dig new ones. These are gigantic blessings; they receive far more than they would expect for the work they put in. And yet work they did.

This doesn't mean that God never blesses us out of the blue. God can do whatever He wants. Scripture tells us that the rain falls on the just and the unjust; the wicked still sometimes benefit from the blessings of God. (The Canaanites who didn't go hungry because of Isaac's grain certainly benefited from it!) God can and does surprise us. Yet this is not the pattern we see here. There's work involved. Does it always involve physical labor? No. Worship is called "the work of the people" for a reason. When we pray, when we praise, when we give ourselves to God in worship, we are working. God sometimes blesses us due to our diligent prayers. But that's still work. Anyone who has wrestled with the LORD in prayer for months or years knows.

The point is, we cannot expect blessings when we do nothing. You know, it's easy to pick on megachurches with terrible theology, to say, "Yeah, they have a lot of people because they're just telling people what they want to hear and not the full gospel." I've picked on them before, I know. But there are megachurches that have faithful theology who have spread the Word of God and seen huge results, primarily through a lot of hard work.

I remember reading about Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, a place that is so secular that we would all agree it would be really hard to plant a church. It started in 1989 with 15 people praying in an apartment on the Upper West Side. Tim Keller, who was a professor at Westminster Theological Seminary, started attending and felt the call to come and help plant a church. By that Christmas, the church had 250 attending. By 2017, over 5,000 people were attending Redeemer locations across the city. But they believed that a pastor needed to be incarnational, that he needed to be with his flock, so Pastor Keller rode the New York subway system all day Sunday going from location to location to preach. That hard work helped Redeemer become the church in the city that welcomed skeptics and helped the doubting find their faith.

It makes me wonder – what blessings do we wish for but do not see because there’s work to do? We may desire to see more people come to Christ – but are we praying for it? Are we asking our friends and family and neighbors? Are we trying to find different circles in which we can make faith known? I ask these questions of myself, and I ask them of you. The blessings may come a hundred fold, but are we willing to do that which the blessings require? Even when the sheaves came in from Isaac’s crops, someone had to harvest them or they would have rotten there in the fields.

If we desire to see God’s blessings in our lives, we also must be willing to do something. Sometimes there’s little we can do and we call out to God regularly and fervently, and that’s enough. Sometimes our own sin or our rebellion stands in the way of receiving God’s blessings. And sometimes, it’s just an unwillingness to do what we need to do. As we learned in our Bible study this last week, work – good work, fruitful work, enjoyable work – existed before the fall of humanity into sin. God intends for us to do His work. And sometimes, God has in mind that He will give us the blessings that work was meant to have, the blessings work was going to have before we ruined it by choosing our own way rather than God’s way. Because even though we’re sinful, God is good, and He pours out blessings we neither expect nor deserve.

Another thing I see here: *don’t expect blessings to come without consequences and hardships*. We don’t like this idea, but it’s certainly true here. Isaac gets so many blessings that he becomes a threat to his neighbors who want him out. Everywhere his men dig, they find a new well, only to find the locals demanding they hand it over to them. With every blessing, it seems, someone has their hand out; someone wants a piece of the action. Isaac’s family have to move a lot until they find a secure place to land.

But what’s really telling to me about this is that Isaac never fights any of the people groups that come after them. His contingent is so large that a city-state feels threatened by them, so they could have just gone to war with someone and said, “These blessings are mine and you can’t have them.” But that doesn’t happen. It’s like Isaac says, “OK, well, I know God and God will keep blessing me, so we’ll just move on from here and see what happens.” Isaac isn’t threatened that everyone else wants his blessings; he just keeps traveling and trusting. And before too long, before Isaac gets too discouraged, God speaks to him to reassure him that the blessings will continue flowing.

Jesus tells us that we should expect the same kind of things. The disciples start to get in Jesus’ face when the burdens of leaving everything behind and the all-or-nothing surrender God requires start to weigh on them. And Jesus tells them that everyone who leaves behind family and friends and wealth of various kinds will receive them back in various ways, and would receive eternal life. But Jesus put in an aside that even along with those blessings would come persecutions. I’m sure that’s not what the disciples had in mind, but Jesus promised them both.

This means that we shouldn’t expect everything to be perfect in this life. It’s not going to happen because it’s a fallen world. Sometimes we see someone who seems to have it together, who obviously makes God a part of their life, and everything seems to go well for them, but we rarely get a look at the big picture. Very few Christians I know have it “made in the shade.”

With the blessings come other burdens. Maybe they have money, but someone in the family is sick. Maybe they have a great family life, but rent is hard to come by. Maybe they deal with a difficult employer or co-worker. Maybe they deal with stress and anxiety. Any number of things can come up. And so, as I think about this, perhaps another thought is this: *hold God tightly and His earthly blessings lightly.*

God is always going to be there; He promises never to abandon or forsake us. He sent Jesus for many reasons, but one was to show us that He loves us and is making a way through our sin for all His people to come into His Kingdom restored and made whole. We are promised by the apostle Paul that neither death nor life, nor angels nor demons nor principalities and powers, nor things past nor things to come, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. The blessing God gives us of Himself is eternal; the life He gives us in His Son Jesus is eternal.

The earthly blessings we receive are temporary. They are reminders of His goodness and love. They demonstrate God's care for His people as we live as aliens and strangers in this world, as people who belong to another Kingdom. But they come and go. We greatly appreciate them while we have them. But we also realize that they are not a substitute for God; they don't take the place of God. God gives and God takes away; blessed be the name of the LORD.

When we have the right attitude about earthly blessings – when we live like Isaac who is willing to leave behind a blessing for someone else to have because he knows God will provide – we develop a trust in God that will not be shaken. Because God comes through. He provides what we need when we need it. When God gave Isaac flocks and servants galore, He didn't leave them to die of thirst. Everywhere they went, God provided more. If we trust God to provide, we will find our faith growing as He comes through each time.

So this leaves us with the challenge of the morning: *how do you react when other people are blessed?* Are we going to follow the command in Romans 12:15 to rejoice with those who rejoice? Or are we going to follow in the footsteps of the Philistines who were so envious that they denied themselves blessings just so they could get payback on someone they knew had more than them? We can go either way, right?

We'd like to be happy for someone else's great news, we write them a text saying "congratulations," we put a like on their Facebook post, but inside we're frustrated. Frustrated that we're still waiting for God to come through, waiting for our hopes to be fulfilled, waiting on that dream that may never come true, and it's hard. But when we place our hope in Christ and not in the material blessings of Christ in this world, we start to get our hearts in the right place.

How we react to other people's blessings affects our spiritual lives in ways we can only start to comprehend. When we are grateful for other people's blessings, when we can be thankful that someone else got a break, got a job, got a home, it changes our whole attitude. When we can be just as thankful that our brother in Christ was blessed as when we are, it's a sign of the Holy Spirit's work. I believe that if we as Christians were more excited about the blessings others receive and their blessings increased our faith, we might receive more of them.

So friends, if we want to see more of God's blessings in our lives, we have some pointers here. Expect that even the best blessings rarely fall in our laps, but they require some effort on our part. Remember that blessings do not come with a promise of permanent bliss free from the trials we all face in the world. Hold Jesus tightly and blessings lightly. And live grateful not only for your blessings but for the blessings of those around you. As we do those things, I believe we will start to see just how many blessings we have been missing that God has been pouring out on us all along.