

Foundations: Déjà Vu...Again
By Jason Huff
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Hebrews 6:10-19a; John 14:1-3; Genesis 26:1-17

Our final Scripture reading comes from Genesis 26:1-17. May God bless the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. “Now there was a famine in the land -- besides the earlier famine of Abraham's time -- and Isaac went to Abimelech king of the Philistines in Gerar. The LORD appeared to Isaac and said, "Do not go down to Egypt; live in the land where I tell you to live. Stay in this land for a while, and I will be with you and will bless you. For to you and your descendants I will give all these lands and will confirm the oath I swore to your father Abraham. I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and will give them all these lands, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because Abraham obeyed me and kept my requirements, my commands, my decrees and my laws." So Isaac stayed in Gerar. When the men of that place asked him about his wife, he said, "She is my sister," because he was afraid to say, "She is my wife." He thought, "The men of this place might kill me on account of Rebekah, because she is beautiful." When Isaac had been there a long time, Abimelech king of the Philistines looked down from a window and saw Isaac caressing his wife Rebekah. So Abimelech summoned Isaac and said, "She is really your wife! Why did you say, 'She is my sister'?" Isaac answered him, "Because I thought I might lose my life on account of her." Then Abimelech said, "What is this you have done to us? One of the men might well have slept with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us." So Abimelech gave orders to all the people: "Anyone who molests this man or his wife shall surely be put to death." 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.”

If you've ever had déjà vu, it can be unsettling. When you feel like somehow you're living the exact moment again, it throws off everything for a while. Maybe it's God's hand that we're speaking about déjà vu right around Groundhog Day, which reminds us of the famous Bill Murray movie where he keeps reliving the same day over and over again until he gets it right, living who knows how many days again in Punxsutawney, PA until he starts to become a genuinely kind person.

Today's passage might trigger déjà vu for us because if you've been with us throughout our study of Genesis, you've heard a very similar story not once but twice before. You might be thinking, “Are we studying the same passage again?” We're not, I promise you. Scholars have sometimes thought that the three stories of the forefathers of Israel passing off their wives as their sisters all originated as one incident – that it got repeated as the stories got told again and again and they changed in the repetition. But each one has its own unique details that suggest that's not the case – and the three incidents also suggest patterns we are to learn from.

If you were with us last week, you'll remember that we heard about the birth of Jacob and Esau, Isaac and Rebekah's sons, and how their rivalry would greatly affect their lives. But we also saw a loving portrait of Isaac. Rebekah was barren for twenty years, and Isaac prayed for her to have children. They knew that all the promises of Isaac's father Abraham were to come through Isaac, yet Isaac makes a much better choice than good ol' dad. Rather than trying to make the promises of God come about himself, like Abraham did in the fateful choice to marry his wife's maidservant, Isaac remains true to Rebekah and relies on the LORD to provide the children He has promised them. And of course, God is faithful and gives them Jacob and Esau.

But now, trouble comes. A famine ravages the land. Isaac, attempting to care for his family, goes into the land of the Philistines, to Gerar, much further south and west. God warns Isaac not to travel to Egypt, which wasn't typically struck by the same famine patterns as Canaan. It would have seemed the safer place to ride out a famine for a season or two, but God says no. Instead, God says He will bless Isaac for staying here, that his descendants will one day inherit these lands. God will bless all the nations, He says, through Isaac's descendants because of his father Abraham's faithfulness. Isaac trusts God. Though the famine is far more likely to hit Gerar than Egypt, Isaac stays put.

But suddenly, there's a catch to Isaac's trust in God. Isaac pulls a play out of his father's playbook and tries to pass off Rebekah as his sister rather than his wife. Apparently, this charade lasted for a long time, but eventually they're found out. Abimelech – probably the descendent of the Abimelech that Abraham attempted to deceive 75+ years ago – looks out from a high window, perhaps from his palace, and he sees something he isn't supposed to see.

What exactly we don't know, but Abimelech immediately knows, and he confronts Isaac, who comes out with the truth. Abimelech puts out an edict warning no one is to touch Isaac or Rebekah, probably because the Philistines believed that adultery would bring down the wrath of their gods. God blesses Isaac so completely that Abimelech eventually tells him to leave because his wealth and status have become a threat. Next week, we'll see more of the Philistine reaction to God's grace on Isaac's family.

We might wonder, why did Isaac wind up doing the same thing that his father had done twice nearly a century before, even though his mother Sarah was nearly married off to foreign kings because of it? Maybe Isaac didn't have as much faith as it appeared. Or maybe Isaac did have faith, but it was strained because of the circumstances. When Abraham pulled this stunt, Isaac hadn't been born; the child God had promised had not yet arrived. Abraham should have trusted that God would protect him. In comparison, Isaac already has Jacob and Esau. His descendants are secure. But that meant Isaac's life was in real jeopardy. God could fulfill the promises He had made to Abraham without Isaac being in the picture any longer. Isaac might have thought he was on his own.

But it brings up a more serious subject that the Bible addresses several times, and it's the topic of generational sin. It's controversial because if we misunderstand it, it seems to go against God's promises of perfect love and perfect justice. But when we do understand it properly, it leads us to want to break patterns of generational sin from the past and to make certain not to pass them down to our children – which is easier to do than we might think.

A particular phrase pops up four times in the Old Testament, and it's most clear in Numbers 14:18, which says, "The LORD is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation." God also repeatedly promises to show steadfast love to a thousand generations of those who love Him and keep His commands. For these to be repeated many times in the laws that God gave Israel means they were to take it very seriously.

There are some caveats to this idea. Repeated as well is this, from Deuteronomy 24:16 – "Fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their fathers; each is to die for his own sin." And from a spiritual perspective, hear Ezekiel 18:20-21 – "The soul who sins is the one who will die. The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous man will be credited to him, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against him. But if a wicked man turns away from all the sins he has committed and keeps all my decrees and does what is just and right, he will surely live; he will not die."

So what is all this pointing to? First, I think we have this concept: *the punishment of generational sins primarily comes as natural consequences*. God isn't pouring out wrath unmercifully on sinners. If that were the case, we'd all be in big trouble! But the punishment of sin comes through the fallout. When there's a nuclear accident or a nuclear explosion, there's always fallout, radioactivity that contaminates things far past the point of the original blast or center of the accident. Radioactive material from Chernobyl spread throughout almost all of Europe. They have found new forms of fallout from the Japanese reactor breach eleven years after the fact. The bigger the incident, the more the contamination.

Sin is like a nuclear blast that comes from defying God, and it poisons our relationships. We see it all the time. Children of divorce are more likely to divorce because that was the pattern set for them. Children who smoke often saw a parent or grandparent smoke at a young age. Violence in a household often follows generation after generation. Much of the time, we imitate what is modeled for us.

Let me give you a simple example. Part of the reason I'm a big guy is, I eat fast. There's only one person I've known who ate faster than me, and that was my dad. I knew from a young age that if I wanted seconds, I had to beat my dad to them. My dad learned it growing up the middle of three boys. Now I was told, verbally, not to eat so fast. I was told I didn't have to clean my plate. But what I was told didn't line up with what was modeled, so I followed what I saw. I knew things were tight, so I ate everything fast. Eating isn't a sin, but being gluttonous can be. I ultimately learned that I might not be able to trust that God would always provide.

I have a feeling that Isaac got himself in this mess because he'd heard Abraham telling stories around the dinner table. "Remember how we got so rich off the Pharaoh?" "Yeah," Sarah would say, "and I nearly wound up a part of his harem!" And they had a good laugh about it, now decades in the past. Isaac remembered, and when he was in the same situation, he thought, "My parents made out like bandits when they did it and nothing bad happened. Why not?" But that kind of trickery would haunt Isaac in his later years, as we'll see in a few weeks. The core sin – tricking others for your own benefit – passed down the generational line.

This might sound discouraging. Are we stuck in a déjà vu loop with no chance of getting out? Has God predestined us to continue in the ways of our family sins forever? The wonderful answer is no, we're not. The next key thought is this: *generational patterns of sin can be broken*. The truth of that can also be seen in Isaac's life.

Isaac had a front and center view of the damage that his father's choice to have a son with Hagar had on his family. While Hagar and Ishmael were out of the immediate picture when Isaac was born, we know that those connections never completely went away. Ishmael came back for Abraham's burial, at very least. Isaac knew that that decision, which his parents made together, had come at a deep price in terms of relationship and trust. Instead of waiting on God's timing, they took matters into their own hands, and look what it cost them!

So when it comes to his own wife, when it comes to their infertility that last twenty years, Isaac turns to the LORD. He prays for Rebekah. He doesn't decide to make the promise happen by his own schemes. He does the right thing, and they are blessed with two sons. Isaac's story takes up far less of the Bible than either Abraham's story or Jacob's story, and I think it's because, on the whole, Isaac had far less drama in his life. Despite his failings, his obedience to God meant there was less to report. When there was drama, it was typically because of the sins and schemes of his sons.

When we were young, teenagers probably, if you were like me, there were times when you were like, "I'll never parent my kids like my folks parented me." We see all the issues and problems because none of us came with an instruction manual, and we're determined somehow to do better. Except, many times, we look at ourselves as parents and are in shock at how we do the exact same things! It's easy to get stuck in those ruts.

But the truth is, it doesn't have to be that way. We can change. Even if we start in sinful patterns that have been modeled for us, we don't have to continue in them. God's intention for us is to live new lives under the leadership and direction of our savior Jesus. The whole point of God's salvation of us is that we are made new, set free from sin by the perfect sacrifice Jesus made on our behalf and spiritually reborn into God's children who, unbound from sin's chains, can make choices that honor God as we are empowered by His Holy Spirit.

So what is the solution? How do we go about getting out of sinful patterns established for us in our youth? How do we keep from being the parents, friends, co-workers we never wanted to be? How do we go from faithless to faithful? *The key is repentance and faith*. Those are the keys to overcoming not only cycles of sin we've inherited, but new sins we've picked up along the way and are likely to pass down to our children and grandchildren if we aren't careful. If you can remember repentance and faith, you can remember the things that flow from them.

Repentance means to change your mind and then to change your ways. We sometimes think that repentance is simply to stop doing something bad, but that's only half of it. If we don't change our mind about something, soon we'll likely do it again. If I don't think smoking is bad for me, or if I determine I like it despite the negative side effects, I might quit out of pressure, but I might come back to it. That's not what we want. If our minds genuinely change about something, then quitting those habits are so much easier.

Before our minds can change about something, though, we have to be aware of ourselves in the first place. Repentance requires self-awareness and deep honesty. We might ignore a sin because it was patterned so often in front of us, we assume it's normal. If you went out as a family to eat four times a week, you probably assumed everyone did. If your parents had alcohol with every meal, you probably assumed everyone's parents did. It requires honesty and self-awareness to see that some patterns that were set before us, that may have been taught to us, were sinful. Not because our parents wanted to harm us, but because we all have the sin nature, and patterns were demonstrated to them too. What we see when we have genuine mindful repentance is a great sorrow that we and our families have disobeyed God, and we have a genuine desire to see our relationship with God restored.

When we become aware of a sin, whether one that was inherited or one that we've picked up from our own temptations, we change our minds, then our actions. Once we've determined something should change and we're convinced of it, the next step is to do something about it. Sometimes it means putting that temptation out of reach. Get rid of the alcohol stash kept in the cupboard. Set up accountability software on your Internet connections. Get off that dating app. Make it harder to sin, whatever it is that tempts you.

And sometimes it means changing our lifestyles. We stop going to places we used to go and seeing people we used to see that encouraged some sin in our lives. It means confronting old thought patterns we inherited from our parents and choosing a new way of thinking. It means coming to grips with our disordered lives and getting a fresh start. I'm going to say this – Jesus preached repentance hand and hand with faith. If you aren't willing to repent, no amount of so-called faith is going to get you far.

But with a deep desire for repentance, faith steps in and gives us hope. Because forgoing sin is hard. Isaac wasn't a bad guy; he feared for his life and so he put his fear ahead of his faith. But when we put faith ahead of our fear, we move forward. Faith tells us that we can conquer our sins with the help of the Holy Spirit. Faith tells us that God will see us through when the temptation seems overwhelming. Faith reminds us that it is God, not us, who is in ultimate control. Faith says, "I cannot see clearly ahead to safety, but I trust God who will lead me there." Repentance without faith falls apart because the power of sin is strong – stronger than every human being, but far, far, far less than the power of God. Without faith, repentance only lasts as long as our willpower. But with faith, we can get through the seemingly impossible.

Like Isaac, we are frail people, people of conviction and belief who nevertheless see their faith fail in the light of fear sometimes. But take heart! Through Jesus, we have already overcome the world. So do not despair when the patterns from your past, from your family, from your old life seem too strong to conquer. Through repentance and faith, through laying hold of the promises of God and clinging to Jesus Christ, we have eternal life even now, and the déjà vu of sin will cease.