

THE PATRIARCHS ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND JACOB



Byzantine mosaic of Isaac blessing Jacob and then Jacob fleeing

STUDY 2 - ISAAC WEEK 1

Faith, & The Promise Inherited

Abraham's Faith...

Over the last eight weeks we have been thinking about and learning about the life of Abraham, the father of the Israelite Nation, today's Jewish peoples. We looked at many key-words, but one seems to stand out from the rest, and that is **'FAITH'**

Now today the World uses this word, amongst other ways, to mean 'Trust' - as in 'Do you have faith in the witness?' but also as in 'World Faiths' where they mean a particular collection of beliefs and traditions. So there is the 'Islamic Faith', the 'Christian Faith' and 'The Jewish Faith', and so on, each with their own tenets of faith that define their Faith by their Beliefs.

However, in the story of Abraham we never get any proper outline of his 'Beliefs' There is no such thing as an 'Abrahamic Creed' The best we get is that '*Abraham believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness*'

A question that has to be asked by each generation is 'How do we pass on the Faith that has been entrusted to us to the next generation?' The cry from the body of any church I have ever been involved in when they have been asked about the future of their particular church is almost always 'We need to get the young people interested!' i.e. the 'Next Generation' And I think it has ever been thus! Modern commentators have described this as 'A decline in belief', or 'A Crisis of Faith', the problem often being put as 'No one believes in it any more!'

But if there is one thing I hope we learned over the past eight weeks it is that Abraham's story is not about what he believed, but about Abraham's Faithfulness to a Faithful God. The 'Faith of Abraham' cannot be defined by a written creed. It is defined by his story. It is all we have and all we can go on! We have now reached a point in the 'Story' where Abraham is no longer present. Yet the Story goes on. Maybe, as we read on, we might find something about this problem of the passing on of the Inheritance of Promise, especially when even the Promise itself seems... well, not quite here yet!

Read Genesis 25; 12 - 18...

Here we have the genealogy of Ishmael the son of Hagar, and the eldest son of Abraham. God's promise to Hagar and Abraham regarding Ishmael is here seen fulfilled. Ishmael joins Isaac to bury their father, Abraham, which is as it should be with the eldest son taking the lead in this final action, yet the narrator puts Isaac first. Then we hear no more of Abraham in the story. However, the question of the Promise still hangs in the air. What will that promise look like in the following generations? In the closing words of the Song of Mary - the Magnificat' -

*...The promise made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and his seed for ever...*

Read Genesis 25; 19 - 26...

After the lengthy accounts of the episodes in his father's life, Genesis is almost terse with the story of Isaac. One paragraph deals with the first sixty years of his life! **In that one paragraph what do we learn?**

Once his father, Abraham, has died, Isaac must take up the mantle of leadership of the family group, which by now is extensive. They are still wanderers, and it must have been quite a task that Isaac found himself landed with. How was he to fill his

father's shoes, both practically, but more to the point from our point of view, Spiritually? Would he carry on with the traditions and ways of his father, or would he go his own way? Well,...

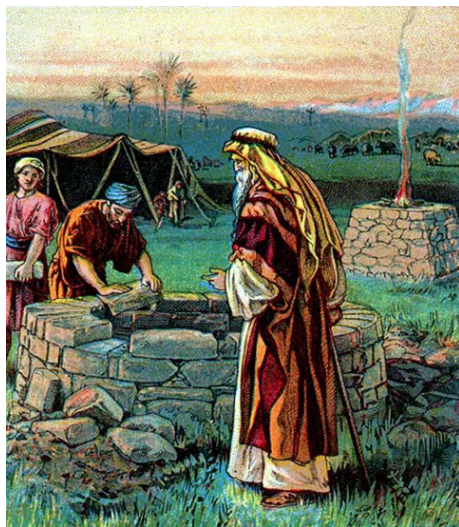
Read Genesis 26 - a bit at a time... up to 22

Another famine, and another forced migration. And Rebekah and Isaac seem to use the same ruse as Sarah and Abraham had to ensure their safety when amongst strangers - 'She is my Sister'! At first glance this seems like the same story just with some characters names being changed. But as we read the story has some important differences!

We already know that Rebekah is beautiful. The men amongst whom they live now as 'Brother and Sister' noted this! But this time no-one takes the girl for themselves. Instead, Abimelech, the local King, looks through his window and 'Wow - look at that!' Isaac and Rebekah are seen 'playing' together, as man and wife!

The King is horrified, but his words to Isaac are almost gracious, but with underlying tones of disappointment that the couple should have felt they needed to descend to such deception. Was this the way that the Hebrews saw the people of the land? 'Don't you trust enough yet? Are we savages?'

Isaac 'sowed in that land...' and even digs wells, comfortable for now enough to settle, yet still not as a land owner. Is this for ever to be the life of the Faithful? It is a state that Paul alludes to in his letters, where he talks about being 'travellers' through this world, still looking to that Promise of a Heavenly City! Isaac, and Rebekah, it seems, must learn some of what it is to live a Faithful life before God under the Promise, yet still looking to it as a future hope. Abraham could only give them so much. The rest - the taking as a possession of the Promise - must be something those who have inherited it have to work out for themselves.



Our faith too is usually something that, whilst we in some ways 'Inherit' it, is something we have to wrestle with ourselves and make our own. The 'Treasures' of one generation may be handed on to the next for them to inherit, but how can that previous generation ensure that those treasures will be valued and preserved

for future generations to come? I guess that all that can be done is to hand it on and show through our faithfulness to them and then trust that those who follow on will understand and be faithful in their turn. Then it is up to them and we can do no more.

Then it is time for the next generation to find their place in the Promise. And that is rarely (never!?) an easy thing. The wells from which the Fathers drank have to be re-dug for each generation. The finding of our place in an unbelieving world often leads to conflict, and like Abraham, Isaac too has to leave an apparent place of blessing to return to where it all started.

Read Genesis 26; 23-26...

How does God introduce himself to Isaac?.....

What two four things does Isaac do after this encounter with God?

So it appears that things are back to normal for the Promise. It continues through Isaac, and the next generation have already arrived!, You might think that all is plain sailing now. All the requirements for the continuation of the promise to the next generation are in place, and Isaac is still only 70 years old or there abouts! But.....

But let us go back to that ‘Promise’ or oracle that we read at the beginning of this story...

*‘Two nations - in your womb,
two peoples from your loins shall issue.
People over people shall prevail,
the elder, the younger’s slave’*

Rebekah’s pregnancy is not easy and she feels this is a premonition of things to come. From most translations it appears obvious that once again there will be a turning upside down of the usual order of inheritance, but the translators have the advantage over Rebekah in that they know the rest of the story. It is far from clear in the original that this is so pre-ordained. The original does not actually say which of the two will be master and which the slave. Like so many ‘Oracles’ here even the LORD answers Rebekah with an enigma to be puzzled over as the future unfolds for her and Isaac and the Promise and the following generation. But that is another story!...