

Isaac and Rebekah: Rearing Rivals



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Genesis 26–28.*

Memory Text: “ ‘May God Almighty bless you, and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may be an assembly of peoples’ ” (*Genesis 28:3, NKJV*).

Isaac and Rebekah duplicated many events of Abraham's and Sarah's lives. (1) Isaac laid claim to the covenant promises that had been made by God to Abraham. (2) Both Sarah and Rebekah were barren an unreasonably long time. (3) Both families endured disputes about ownership of wells with local people among whom they had been instructed by God to live. (4) Both Abraham and Isaac took their families to a foreign land to ride out a famine. (5) Abraham informed the people of Gerar that Sarah, his wife, was his half sister. Isaac told the same people, a generation later, that Rebekah, his wife, was his sister. (6) Both families had to deal with sibling rivalry.

At the same time, too, Isaac and Rebekah had a lot going for them in their marriage and home. Too bad some wrong choices were made, choices that led to painful consequences for the whole family.

Let's learn what we can from their mistakes, in hopes of not doing the same thing ourselves.

The Week at a Glance: However different their environment from ours, we can learn some good spiritual lessons from the story of this dysfunctional family.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 21.*

The Arrangement

Read Genesis 24 and then answer the following questions:

1 Why would Abraham be so adamant that his son not take a wife from among the Canaanites?

2 What was the key to the servant's success in finding the right woman for Isaac?

3 What do we learn from this story about the character and faith of Rebekah? How might these attributes have contributed to making her the right choice for Isaac?

Sarah had been dead three years when Abraham called his trusted servant, probably Eliezer of Damascus, to whom he had thought to bequeath his estate (*Gen. 15:2*). Though Abraham would live another 35 years, he was an old man at this time. Isaac had reached the age of 40 and needed a wife to carry on the covenant line. A messenger had earlier reported to Abraham that Nahor, his brother, and his wife, Milcah, had been blessed with eight sons (*Gen. 22:20–24*). Now Abraham instructed his servant to fetch a wife for Isaac from among those relatives.

Of course, there was always the outside chance that the girl would be unwilling to accompany him back to a strange land, and Eliezer needed clear instruction how to proceed if that turned out to be the case. If so, he would be released from the oath. Under no circumstances was Isaac to leave the land that God had covenanted to them. Abraham picked his agent well; the servant was determined to do God's will in such an important matter.

It's one thing to say, *I want to leave everything in God's hands regarding important matters*; it's another to actually do this. Next time you face an important decision, what practical steps can you take in order to place yourself in a position where you can discern God's will and be surrendered enough to accept it?

I Have to Teach Tomorrow . . .

► **Key Text:** *Genesis 28:3*

► **Teach the Class to:**

Know: Parents need to be united in raising children.

Feel: A desire to renew your dedication to God.

Do: Resolve to always be truthful in your decisions.

► **Lesson Outline:**

I. Femme Fatales and Beauty That Binds (*Gen. 24:3, 4*)

A Lot's wife. Hagar. Isaac need look no further than his own family to see how disastrous it is to marry outside one's faith. He submits to his father's wish to entrust a God-fearing servant to find him a bride. What does this teach us about seeking godly counsel in choosing our spouse?

B Rebekah means "to fetter (by beauty)." This beauty draws water for Abraham's servant and his camels and is a balm to Isaac's bereaved heart, binding it in love. In what ways does Christ's beauty bind us to Him and shine out to draw others to Him?

II. Jacob and Esau (*Genesis 16, 18:11–14*)

A In Isaac's day the cure for infertility was a concubine. Isaac goes to the Lord instead of another woman. How does this show the power of prayer?

B Two brothers fought in Rebekah's womb. Esau came out first in this life but sold the precious for the perishable. Jacob coveted the unseen realities of heaven. How can we train our hearts to covet what we can't see?

III. Stealing the Blessing (*Gen. 27:11–14*)

A Isaac's blindness may have been caused by cataracts, milky membranes that cover the eye. But his failed eyesight is nothing compared to his inner blindness as far as his sons are concerned. His affection for his eldest son blinds him to God's true design. What are the things that keep us from seeing God's true will for us?

B Jacob supplants his brother with a bowl of lentils. Christ offers something more priceless: His own blood, supplanting Satan as ruler of this world. Why must Christ supplant our old nature to make us joint heirs with Him?

► **Summary:** "Marriage, instead of being the end of love, will be as it were the very beginning of love."—Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home*, p. 106.

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Jacob and Esau

Rebekah, unlike Sarah, had no rival wives or concubines to contend with and no stepchildren to compete with. Theirs should have been a happy home. Yet, even in this “ideal” situation, strife arose.

Read the story of Esau and Jacob in Genesis 25:19–34. In what ways were the parents to blame for the strife that arose among the brothers?

At the birth of those boys, the Lord gave Rebekah a message about their future. What was that message, and what do we see in the story about the character of these boys that helps explain their fate?

What we see in this story isn’t God’s *determining* the future but simply *predicting* it. It was the choices of the boys that led to their fate, not God’s predestination of that fate for them.

The sale of the birthright confirms that Esau is disinterested in spiritual matters; his actions certainly revealed him unfit to be the spiritual leader of the clan.

Jacob, on the other hand, is farsighted. He desires the spiritual leadership, is cunning enough to trick his brother out of it, and even gets the transaction sealed by an oath. Esau eats and goes away, not the least bothered about what he has given up.

“Because of his indifference to the divine blessings and requirements, Esau is called in Scripture ‘a profane person.’ . . . He represents those who lightly value the redemption purchased for them by Christ, and are ready to sacrifice their heirship to heaven for the perishable things of earth. Multitudes live for the present, with no thought or care for the future. Like Esau they cry, ‘Let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we die.’ 1 Corinthians 15:32.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 181, 182.

How seriously do you take the redemption you have in Christ? How can you be careful not to sell it for a bowl of porridge? Why is that easier to do than one might think?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate!**

Just for Teachers: The lesson this week focuses on what makes or breaks a family. As you study the characters of Isaac and Rebekah, Esau and Jacob, help class members to concentrate on the competing forces of spiritual maturity and spiritual vanity.

The covenant defined Abraham’s movements in life. As that life was drawing to a close, the old patriarch was driven to one final duty: to prepare Isaac as the inheritor of that covenant. That preparation involved his marriage. Abraham makes his servant promise that the bride shall not be from a pagan people, and that under no condition would he take Isaac to the land out of which God called Abraham. With life’s every movement so conditioned by faithfulness to God’s call, no wonder Abraham is called the father of the faithful.

Our lesson this week is on the immediate inheritor of the covenant, Isaac, his marriage, and his family. The couple did not necessarily build a model home, but God used them in spite of themselves to preserve and pass on the covenant. As the lesson moves, watch both maturity and immaturity play out an unpleasant drama; and yet, God’s mysterious purpose does get fulfilled.

► **STEP 2—Explore!**

Just for Teachers: As you progress in the lesson, help your class members to focus on one issue: What can I learn from the complex and competing forces that mark the lives of Isaac, Rebekah, Esau, and Jacob?

Bible Commentary

The story begins well because it is rooted in pleasing God and in preserving the covenant. Isaac’s marriage is viewed, not from a worldly perspective but from a divine purpose. But even good beginnings and noble purposes do not guarantee a healthy home and faithful children. The secret is always the same: “Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it” (*Ps. 127:1, NKJV*). With that in mind, let us raise two questions: What contributes to a happy marriage? What causes unhappy homes?

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The Birthright—Content and Context of the Contest

The events in Genesis 26 surely took place before those in chapter 25. Isaac could not have hoped to pass Rebekah off as his sister if they had twins. The repetitions of the Abrahamic covenant to Isaac clarify what exactly Jacob bargained with Esau for. These promises are what Jacob hoped to inherit. This was a spiritual heritage with a serious responsibility. This is the privilege that Esau despised and Jacob coveted.

What promises in the Abrahamic covenant were confirmed to Isaac?
Gen. 26:4.

These promises were not easy to believe. Isaac and Rebekah had no children yet—but *these children would become as numerous as the stars*? They were nomads wandering from country to country—but *God would give them “all these lands”*? (*Gen. 26:4, NKJV*).

Note the similarities in the experience of Isaac and Rebekah and Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 20, 21, and 26.

Name of the place (20:1, 26:1) _____

Name of the king (20:2, 26:1) _____

Lying about (20:2, 26:7) _____

Explanation for the lie (20:11, 26:9) _____

Remonstrance because of the lie (20:9, 26:10) _____

The Lord has just appeared to Isaac and given to him a wonderful promise. Isaac now knows not only the reality of God but His promises. He should have been a man of faith, trusting in God’s ability to fulfill those promises. (After all, when was the last time God “appeared” to any of us and spoke to us?) Yet, soon afterward we see Isaac resorting to lies.

Maybe because of the promise, that he would have a great seed, Isaac lied to protect himself from death. What lesson can we learn from this story about how easy it is to show lack of trust in God?


Learning Cycle CONTINUED**Happy Marriage: Some Basics**

A marriage is not a haphazard event, something one enters hastily in the heat of emotion, without preparation and understanding. Preparation for Isaac's marriage begins with Abraham's assurance to his servant that God "will send His angel before" him to obtain a bride from his people (*Gen. 24:7*). A person of faith knows that life is not a series of accidents but a planned journey in which God plays the key role. The God who promised great things for Abraham's life shall also plan the way. With that key role conceded, Isaac's marriage shall come to pass. But that marriage must be from within Abraham's people and not from the uncovenanted Canaanites. A marriage is too sacred to risk an alliance with someone who does not share the commitment of the same faith. To be happy, it must be said of a marriage: "The thing proceedeth from the Lord" (*Gen. 24:50*). "No one who fears God can without danger connect himself with one who fears Him not."—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 174.

Discuss: Esau's marriage brought "a grief of mind to Isaac and Rebekah" (*Gen. 26:35, NKJV*). Read the context and find out why.

Prayer. Constant prayer is the atmosphere in which Isaac's marriage is accomplished. The search begins with Abraham's prayer and plea for faithfulness to the covenant (*Gen. 24:1–9*). Eliezer's mission is marked by three acts of prayer and worship (*Gen. 24:12, 26, 52*). Isaac comes out of his prayer to accept the bride (*Gen. 24:63–67*). When marriage, or for that matter, any act of life, from planning to fulfillment, is so filled with prayer, can there be any doubt that it will not be happy and successful? But what is this prayer? Is it just a religious routine? A compulsion of tradition? A counting of beads? Prayer in the Bible—from Abraham to Moses to David to Jesus to John—is an intentional, constant, seeking of God's will and reaching out for His empowering to follow that will. Nothing is too small, no one is too busy, to come before the altar of prayer.

Love. The road to Isaac's life partnership begins with four simple words: "And he loved her" (*Gen. 24:67*). The fountain of life and the wonder of love merge to advance God's purpose in the lives of Isaac and Rebekah. The story is as simple as it is sweet, as romantic as it is reverent. The love of Isaac is undying, and we cannot assume anything

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Stealing the Blessing

Read Genesis 27 and then answer the following questions:

1. Why did Jacob show some hesitancy in perpetrating this fraud on his father? What does that reason say about his character?
2. What were the material advantages that came with the blessing? How might that have explained each one's desire for it?
3. What did Isaac do that showed he had his suspicions? What reasons might he have had for them?
4. What reasons did Rebekah have for instigating this deception?

In the opening verses of Genesis 27 Isaac has two thoughts: (1) he is getting old and needs to pass on his blessing, and (2) his mouth is watering for some tasty food. Here we encounter a play on words. While Esau sold his *bekorah* (birthright) for a bowl of lentils, Isaac will give his *berakah* (blessing) in exchange for some venison. Rebekah will try to get the *berakah* for her favorite son.

We could defend Rebekah. After all, she is fighting the unjust institution of the blessing by which one child gets everything and the other nothing (*Gen. 27:37*). This is especially unfair in the case of twins. Maybe she thought she was carrying out the will of God, who had predicted the dominance of the younger. Maybe she knew, as Isaac must have known, that Esau was unsuited for the birthright and the blessings that came with it but that Jacob possessed those necessary qualities.

In the end, everyone suffered because of the deception. What lessons can we learn from this story about the consequences of our actions? Take heed. Watch and pray before you act!

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

contradictory in the response of Rebekah. Isaac never took another wife, and their monogamy endured because of their mutual devotion, affection, and respect.

Review: Rebekah was barren. “Isaac pleaded with the Lord . . . and the Lord granted his plea” (*Gen. 25:21, NKJV*). What can you learn from this about God, prayer, and love in the life of a couple?

►STEP 3—Practice!

Just for Teachers: Discuss with your class the following so as to bring out practical lessons helpful in day-to-day Christian living.

Thought Questions:

Why did Abraham and Isaac insist on a marriage among their own people? Is this any different from the Nazi doctrine of racial purity or the Hindu insistence on caste preservation?

Application Questions:


At Beersheba, after receiving the covenant from God, Isaac “built an altar . . . pitched his tent . . . and . . . dug a well” (*Gen. 26:25, NKJV*). An altar, a tent, a well—these are what Isaac considered as basic essentials to life. What does each one symbolize? How can you transfer the significance of each to your own life and home?

Witnessing

Think of ways in which your home can be a witness to God’s promises. How can we ensure that our homes reflect God’s purposes and love?

►STEP 4—Apply!

Just for Teachers: Let the class reflect on the following, and note the lessons that are applicable to daily life.

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Wives and the Covenant

When Esau was 40, he got married (*Gen. 26:34, 35*). The problem was not just that Esau married two wives. Polygamy existed as early as the time of Lamech (*Gen. 4:23*). Abraham had several wives, and Jacob himself would end up in polygamy. The main problem was that Esau's wives were Hittites and probably not worshipers of Yahweh.

Bringing outside blood into the family was risky. But Abraham, too, had brought in Hagar, an Egyptian, and thought to make her son his heir. The worst problem, however, was that the Hittite daughters-in-law of Isaac and Rebekah endangered the worship of Yahweh among their descendants, possibly insisting on worshipping their own gods. Since they were two, it may have been easier to get their way. This threat is what must have caused grief to Isaac and Rebekah. Keeping their sons' marriages within the family would have served to protect the Abrahamic covenant.

How did Rebekah use this issue as an excuse to get Jacob out of angry Esau's reach? *Gen. 27:46–28:5*.

Isaac readily agreed to the plan, and he himself charged Jacob, instructing him to go quickly. The earlier blessing Jacob had stolen from Esau said nothing about the covenant blessings. Now, as Jacob prepared to leave, Isaac gave him the blessing he wanted all along.

What were the blessings given to Jacob? *Gen. 28:3, 4*. How did these differ from the blessings given to Esau?

Before Isaac gave Jacob the covenant blessings, he specifically charged him not to take a wife from among the Canaanites but to get one from among their own clan. It was afterward that he gave him the promised blessings. Could there have been a link between this admonition and the blessings? If so, what?

What promises of God are especially important to you? At the same time, ask yourself, How can I make the kind of choices that will allow these promises to be fulfilled in my life?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

- Isaac comes through as a meditative, praying, soft person. He remains loyal and loving to one wife at a time when polygamy was common. Culture and common practices are not to dictate his ways and form his character. Jot down what lessons you can learn from this.
- Rebekah, at the well, is tender, simple, and a model of courtesy. But the later Rebekah is scheming, cunning, and plays favoritism. The change is a disturbing lesson in Christian character development. How can you guard against such a danger in your life?

Further Study: Ellen G. White, “A United Front,” pp. 312–316, in *The Adventist Home*.

“What a contrast between the course of Isaac and that pursued by the youth of our time, even among professed Christians! Young people too often feel that the bestowal of their affections is a matter in which self alone should be consulted—a matter that neither God nor their parents should in any wise control. Long before they have reached manhood or womanhood, they think themselves competent to make their own choice, without the aid of their parents. A few years of married life are usually sufficient to show them their error, but often too late to prevent its baleful results. For the same lack of wisdom and self-control that dictated the hasty choice is permitted to aggravate the evil, until the marriage relation becomes a galling yoke. Many have thus wrecked their happiness in this life and their hope of the life to come.”—Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home*, p. 80.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Think about all the strife and suffering that could have been avoided had Rebekah and Isaac made wiser choices. What principles did they violate, and what can we learn from their mistakes that could help protect our homes from unneeded suffering?
- ❷ There’s a certain irony in the attitudes and actions of Rebekah. She was upset that Esau had married foreign women, because they could lead him away from the true God. And yet, she was the one who pushed Jacob into this horrible deception. What kind of inconsistency do we see there? In what ways can we be in danger of doing something similar? *See also Matt. 23:23.*
- ❸ Is there someone you know who is facing an important decision? If so, what can you as a class do to give that person the best possible guidance? What can you do to help that person discern the will of God in making that choice?

Summary: Isaac and Rebekah could have avoided much trouble in their home if they had followed principles of truth and honesty. God had spoken, and they should have trusted Him and cooperated with Him.