

Part 26: Trusting the Promise

Tyler Velin | Genesis 25:1-34

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I just returned from a conference in Atlanta where I visited the original Chick-Fil-A restaurant. On the walls they showed how the mom-and-pop shop grew into what it is today. What started with one shop in 1967 has now grown into 3,000 stores with revenues exceeding \$18 billion annually. The rapid growth hasn't been without challenges. Still family owned, the Chick-Fil-A empire is now in its third generation of the Cathy family.

What made Chick-Fil-A so successful was the family-first approach. But now the question is: how can you continue to build on that vision without losing that vision?

I wonder if you've ever faced a similar fear: How can I make it to the next level? How can I secure what I have? How can I gain what I don't? And what happens if it seems I made a mess of what I already had? How can we keep a good thing going without losing it ourselves?

In Genesis 25, it's not a family chicken recipe that goes three generations deep, it's the promise of God to Abraham and to his offspring. This promise is a big deal for all the characters in the text this morning, and it's a big deal for us. The promise God gave Abraham was something that only God can give, redemption and life itself. It's something that we can claim today by faith in Jesus Christ.

There are moments where all of us feel like we've been given a task too big to carry. Maybe some of you feel like you've already dropped the ball and you won't get another chance. But what does it look like to wrap our lives around the promise of God while we still have to manage the problems of this world? Our passage today answers that.

Here's our main point today: **Give all your life to the God who gives you his promise.** As time goes by, and challenges arise, you'll be tempted to question God's recipe for success. But in moments when it feels like God's promise is all that we have, we come to realize God's promise is all that we need.

To give you a quick outline of the text three things: a death, a birth, and a stolen birthright. All of these are meant to show us how God's promise is advancing from Abraham, to Isaac, and then to Isaac's children. As we work through this we will learn three results of God's promise: **The Stability of a Good Death, The Prayers of Hopeful Sufferers, and The Hope for Shortsighted Sinners.**

Abraham was the man of promise. We often have a phrase for people like that. We might call them, "The Promised Child." When we say that phrase, it's typically not meant as a compliment. It's the one person you hate to be compared to because they don't even seem real. They do no wrong, and they always succeed.

But as Abraham dies, we are reminded that he is not that kind of promised child. After the pure love story of Isaac and Rebekah we are reminded of Abraham's messy trail of romantic relationships and past sins. Abraham might have been the man of promise, but he was also a man with problems. But in his death we see the God's promise of redeeming grace.

Genesis 25:1-11, “Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah. She bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah. Jokshan fathered Sheba and Dedan. The sons of Dedan were Asshurim, Letushim, and Leummim. The sons of Midian were Ephah, Ephher, Hanoch, Abida, and Eldaah. All these were the children of Keturah. Abraham gave all he had to Isaac. But to the sons of his concubines Abraham gave gifts, and while he was still living he sent them away from his son Isaac, eastward to the east country. These are the days of the years of Abraham’s life, 175 years. Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people. Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, east of Mamre, the field that Abraham purchased from the Hittites. There Abraham was buried, with Sarah his wife. After the death of Abraham, God blessed Isaac his son. And Isaac settled at Beer-lahai-roi.”

Here we see our first point this morning: **The Stability of a Good Death.**

Father Abraham had many sons—but in this case that wasn’t good. If you remember, almost as soon as Abraham received the promise from God that he and his wife Sarah would conceive, they doubted it. The genealogy of Abraham *should* have been short: This is the generation of Abraham: Isaac, and then Abraham died.

But that’s not what we see here. Abraham’s family tree has a lot more branches than it should. We are introduced here to other wives and other children he had beyond Sarah and beyond Hagar.

None of us come to God as sinless, and unfortunately, not even those who have faith in Jesus walk in a way that is sinless. But by God’s grace, those who trust in God’s promise can sin less because they have learned the beauty and power of God’s promise.

By the time Abraham died, his joy was transformed. The nearer he approached death, the less reliant he became upon the worldly comforts that once drove his sin. For most people death is a reminder of what the world will inevitably take from you. But for the Christian it is a reminder of what the world can never take from us.

We see this in the gifts he gave his kids. In **Genesis 25:5-6**, we see that Abraham gave gifts to all his other sons while he was alive. But to Isaac, Abraham gave all that he had.

Wouldn’t you like that? Kid’s wouldn’t you like it if your parent looked at you right now and said, “I’m going to give you all that I have.” What do you think that would look like? Parents, mom’s, what would it look like for you to give “all that you have”? What would your children receive?

What do you think Isaac would have expected at the reading of that will. He sees Ishmael, Zimran and Midian getting these sleek camels, some strong servants, and tons of money. And then the lawyer reading the will says, “Isaac, your dad said that he’s given all he has to you.” Isaac says, “That’s great, what exactly is that?”

“Well,” the lawyer stumbles a little bit, “Let’s see, it says here that, ah, you get it all.” “You’ve made that clear,” Isaac says, “But what is it all?” Well, the author of Hebrews tells us doesn’t he? Speaking of Abraham and Sarah he says: **Hebrews 11:13**, “These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.”

Abraham was possession rich, and land poor. He gave Isaac what remained of the camels and riches, but the other boys received some too. The only additional thing Isaac got was a small burial site, the only land Abraham owned. Isaac got some goods, a double-wide grave site, and a promise. But this, this is “all” that Abraham had.

What does that mean? It means that Abraham left nothing much for Isaac except that which would lead him to God’s promise. While I’m sure there was some material goods that Abraham left Isaac, don’t miss the significance of what Abraham did with the majority of his riches—he sent them away from Isaac. He gave them to others and shipped it away.

Why? Because he knew that we are all too tempted to find the promise of God in the provisions of man. But here is a man who has emptied his purse, who owns only a grave filled with a dead wife, who has but one legitimate son, and who has made every mistake one could possibly make and yet he dies in a good old age and old man and full of years. That’s what a trust in God’s promise gets you.

Every other gift you might give your kids is a good gift, and a kind gift, but no other gift that you can give anyone is a gift that gives even when you’re dead. But when we point people to the promise of God, the joy we have in Jesus, the redemption of our sins and the satisfaction of heaven that is a gift that endures.

Mom’s this mother’s day—think about the stability your life might bring your children. Does your life bear witness to those around you of the God who gives a kind of life no mother ever could? Abraham’s gift was pointing Isaac to a gift he could never give. It wasn’t trust funds, vacation homes, or worldly inheritances. It was what we saw in **verse 11**, “And God blessed Isaac.”

Do the gifts we give, and the legacy we leave, does it point others to the only God who truly gives? God blesses according to his promise. Trust his promise. You will fail, your riches will fail, your health will fail, but God never does.

That’s all we want to leave with our children. That’s the greatest gift our gravestone could ever point people too. Our hope is not in the world we create for our children or the wealth that we leave for them, but in the blessing of God held out to them in Jesus Christ. Does your life bear witness to that joy.

There’s an old hymn that says, “Fade, fade each earthly joy, Jesus is mine. Break every tender tie, Jesus is mine. Dark is the wilderness, earth has no resting place, Jesus alone can bless, Jesus is mine.”

How might our happy graves preach what George Mueller reflected on as he neared his own death, after he watched his wife die. He says we often consider the most important priorities in life to be these: the welfare of our families, the prosperity of our businesses, and our work and service to the Lord. While those are all good things he continues to say this: **But, according to my judgment, the most important point to be attended to is this—Above all things, see to it that your souls are happy in the Lord. Other things may press upon you; the Lord’s work, even, may have urgent claims upon your attention; but I deliberately repeat, it is of supreme and paramount importance that you should seek, above all other things, to have your souls truly happy in God himself. Day by day seek to make this the most important business of your life. This has been my firm and settled conviction for the last five-and-thirty years. For the first four years after my conversion I knew not its vast importance; but now, after**

much experience, I specially commend this point to the notice of my younger brethren and sisters in Christ.

Or as another pastor once put it: “Fear God and walk in his ways, and it will be well with you while you live, better with you when you die, and best of all in eternity.”

The days of Abraham’s life was 175 years. But those years were not the end of it. Though he died, the author of Hebrews reminds us, he still speaks even though he is dead. How does he speak? By showing us the contentedness and stability that comes from dying with nothing but the promise, and enjoying everything in the promise.

We know Abraham’s life spoke, because we see how his view of God’s promise changed the way Isaac encountered his own challenges to the promise.

With Abraham now passing, Moses focuses on his two most significant sons: Ishmael and Isaac. In Genesis 25:12-18 we read of Ishmael’s line. If anyone looked like they had the promise, it was him. He had sons, and they were powerful sons: 12 princes. Ishmael was himself, as God said, a conquering and mighty man who ruled over and against his kinsmen.

Things are going great for Ishmael. But not so much with Isaac. His generations begin in verse 19 and in **Genesis 25:21** we read “Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren.”

From a worldly perspective it looked like Ishmael was the one who had it all. If we had to pick a lot for our children, we’d want Ishmael’s. But it is Isaac who had the promise, and it was Isaac who received from his dad the joy of giving all of his life to the promise of God—even when it seems the promise isn’t profitable. Here’s our second point: **The Humble Prayers of Sufferers.**

If you have found yourself in sin, be encouraged by the sin and humble ministry of Abraham. We often have conversations about generational wealth. It’s the kind of wealth that you can come into that might change your family for centuries. But how much more do we see in this passage the power and change of generational grace.

Abraham tried to solve things in his strength, and he made a mess of it. And Isaac learned that from his dad.

It’s a good thing for all of us to avoid sin. But, God in his mercy, works even our sin to his glory. We can often take pride in avoiding sin, and sinfully so. But when we sin, and as Hebrews 4 calls us to, we seek the throne of grace and find Jesus and there receive grace and mercy to help in a time of need—we are helped, and we are humbled.

Abraham’s public sin, lead to a humble strength that Isaac himself picked up on. How we avoid sin preaches the gospel to others. But, so too, our responses of repentance publicly preach the power of gospel to others.

After 20 years of wrestling with barrenness despite God’s promise, Isaac and Rebekah didn’t turn to bitterness. They turned to prayerfulness. You will have trials in this life, the smaller ones are ones we are able to solve and muscle through on our own. But big ones, big ones like barrenness remind us that

some of life's problems cannot be fixed by human willpower. We cannot cause ourselves to conceive try as we may. This is the work of God.

God alone gives new life, God alone causes new birth. This is true for every physical baby conceived, and it is true for every spiritual convert to whom God gives new birth through faith in Jesus Christ. And when it felt like there was no hope, Isaac leaned in to the only place hope he found. He led himself, and he led his wife to the Lord in prayer.

Brothers and sisters, do you have such a firm commitment to God and his promises that your life does the same? I want you to notice three quick things about Isaac's prayer here.

First, it was persistent and passionate. The grammar here is intensive, it's an urgent pleading. Kids, have you ever pleaded with your parents in such a way where you almost sounded disrespectful. Maybe it sounded something like this: "Dad, if I don't get water now, I'm going to die." That's not just a request, that's an urgent plea. That's the kind of tone that Isaac takes with the Lord.

When God bring suffering into our life, it affects us. We feel it, and the Lord would have you feel your need for him and express all of that to him in prayer. God is far more offended by prayers not offered than prayers that might be at times too impassioned.

Second, notice the position of prayer. It says that he prayed for his wife. That word is used in two ways, it is either "on behalf of," which is fitting. Or it is, "in front of." I'm inclined to think both were true. It's one thing to tell someone you'll pray for them, it's quite another thing to show someone you'll pray for them. Both are effective, but public prayer in the face of sorrow and suffering is a powerful witness to our hope in Jesus. When you hear someone bring something up in discussion after church—are you eager to pray for them right then and there. It doesn't more powerfully demand God's action, but it does powerfully direct our attention.

Do your children hear you pray when things are hard? Your roommates see how you act when you're anxious—but do they hear you pray when you're anxious? This is why we have pastoral prayers at church. I can't tell you how many times I've been discipling someone and I ask them to pray and they say, "I'm not really sure how to do it." I expect my kids to know how to talk to their mother by the way I talk to their mother. I expect them to know how to speak with respect to their teachers by how I address their teachers. Do you expect your children, or those who you are discipling to know how to speak to God when things are hard because they've seen you speak to God when things are hard?

Third, notice the persistence of prayer. God answered their prayer. He has not promised to answer all our prayers in such a way here on earth. Isaac and Rebekah has a special promise from God. He said they would conceive. But notice how God's answer to prayer didn't immediately solve the problem.

In Genesis 25:22, we read the first ultrasound in human history and it's a wrestling match, **Genesis 25:22**, "The children struggled together within her, and she said, 'If this is thus, why is this happening to me?' So she went to inquire of the Lord." In all of our unanswered prayers, we are to remain persistent in them. In all of our answered prayers, we are to remain persistent in them. Because prayer exists not to solve our problems—but to keep us reliant upon the God who has already solved our problems according to his kind and good promise.

Even here, the explanation of Rebekah's distress is explained by means of God's promise: **Genesis 25:23**, "And the Lord said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger."

She's pregnant with twins! But in a unique twist, God hints that his blessing will not fall on the older one, but on the younger one: "the older shall serve the younger."

Even inside the womb of promise, there's competition. There's one promise to give, one line that will continue—but there's two boys. The promise is going to be contested, and challenged, and it's in this context that we see the next scene: **The Hope for Shortsighted Sinners**.

One author introduced what followed as the story of "hairy and grabby." Which is a title so interesting that it demands our attention: **Genesis 25:24-28**, "When her days to give birth were completed, behold, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy cloak, so they called his name Esau. Afterward his brother came out with his hand holding Esau's heel, so his name was called Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them. When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents. Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob."

So here we meet the twins, and they have two very distinct personalities. Esau looked like he lived in Darby. Jacob looked like he lived in a downtown studio apartment. Esau grew up to be a hunter with the mannerisms of a cave troll, and Jacob was a homebody who ironed his shirts and had opinions about throw pillows. They couldn't be more different.

Those differences, when viewed outside of the promise of God, produced dog-eat-dog competition that manifested itself one day in the field: **Genesis 25:29-34**, "Once when Jacob was cooking stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was exhausted. And Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stew, for I am exhausted!" (Therefore his name was called Edom.) Jacob said, "Sell me your birthright now." Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" Jacob said, "Swear to me now." So he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright."

I want you to notice the shortsightedness of each of these boys. First, notice how Esau assumed in desperation that if he didn't get stew in that moment—he would die. Esau was a good hunter, but this day he wasn't good enough to provide for himself. Our greatest strengths might hold-us over for a time, but one day they will run out. So he runs to Jacob in the belief that his very salvation was dependent upon a bowl of stew.

Then, there's Jacob. Remember, Isaac and Rebekah already know Jacob is the son of promise. The younger one will be served by the older. But despite that promise, Jacob was not content with waiting. He wanted what he thought was the promise, the inheritance of the birthright, and he wanted it now. Jacob did what we often do, we equate the eternal promise of God with the immediacy of worldly possessions. We want our security not according to what God provides, but what man provides. That's why Jacob says in **Genesis 25:33**, "Swear to me now."

Esau had the birthright, but it didn't save him from his moment of need. Jacob had God's promise, but it didn't satisfy him. So Jacob tries to get from Esau what we can only get from God, "Swear to me now."

How often are our dealings with this world summed up in that small phrase: “Swear to me now.” Isn’t that what Sarah said to Abraham, “Swear to me know that you’ll go into Hagar and secure offspring for us?” Isn’t that what we say to our next big purchase, “Swear to me now, and I’ll pay what you want for me to have peace.” To our next lover, “Swear to me now that you’ll satisfy me and I’ll do whatever you want.”

But all such attempts to gain those things only cause us to sin against the God who alone gives those things. The shortsightedness of sin is that we attempt to gain by sin that which is only given to us by grace.

If we think God’s favor, and our joy, are tied up in our performance or in the provision of the world all we will do is beg, barter and steal. But Esau didn’t need to sell and Jacob didn’t need to deceive because God had already promised.

Paul speaks of this in Romans 9 and says that the promise went through Jacob not because he was innately better or because Esau was innately worse. They weren’t even born yet. But God chose Jacob. Why? **Romans 9:11**, “In order that God’s purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls.”

If we do not understand that the promise God calls us to in Jesus is the only promise which will finally and fully satisfy us in this life and the next—we will never feel like we belong enough. At Chick-Fil-A, the chicken sells itself. Don’t blow it. In the gospel, God does the work. He’s the one who grants salvation, and he grants it freely and openly to those who he has elected. If it doesn’t depend on us—and praise God it doesn’t because we have already blown it—then it must depend on God.

And if you are wondering, like Jacob did that one day in the field, “Am I really chosen for the promise?” Then consider the call. Those who are chosen are those who are called and those who are chosen and called respond to the call. What is the call to? How do you know?

The call has gone out into all the earth—we have a better brother. The firstborn of all creation: Jesus Christ. He was perfect, and we were not. He was holy, and we were not. He had a rightful inheritance by his birth which we did not deserve. And he doesn’t bamboozle us. He doesn’t hoard it for himself. He freely opens it to us, he offers it to us by faith.

The security you want so deeply in life has been found in no one else, and no where else than what Jesus has done and in the response of faith to his offer on the cross. And if you believe that—just as it was for Jacob in that moment when he didn’t believe it—the promise of salvation is yours. God doesn’t barter. He’s not selling holiness, and he’s not buying good works.

Don’t shortchange what you’ve been given in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Trust the promise. I promise. The promise endures. That’s the point of this passage. It reformed Abraham, it reinforced Isaac, and it is going to rescue Jacob. Whatever life gives, the promise of God gets us through.

Here’s my big conclusion on Mother’s Day. I trust the promise because my mom trusts the promise and I see it in her life. My mom, watched her mom pass away, and despite the difficulties in that relationship as my grandmother passed—we saw in her the comfort and peace of the promise swallow up the pain and bitterness of sin. My grandmother, she saw her mother trust the promise. Graves filled with bones bear witness to a heaven filled with joy.

But here's the beauty of this passage, you might not have that legacy in your home. You might have been a lousy mom, and a dumb dad. You might have had lousy parents. You might know that there is nothing deserving or desiring in your own heart of this promise but God still offers it to you, Christ has promised to win it for you, and when you have it my friends, you have it. Hold it. Give your all to it. Rest not until you rest in it.

Find in it your joy. Find in it your prayer. Find in it your future. Give your all to the promise of God because God has given his all to you in his promise.