

CHAPTER 67

THE FAITH OF ISAAC

(~~812~~ **HEBREWS 11:20**)

Though Isaac lived the longest of the four great patriarchs, yet less is recorded about him than any of the others: some twelve chapters are devoted to the biography of Abraham, and a similar number each to Jacob and Joseph, but excepting for one or two brief mentionings before and after, the history of Isaac is condensed into two chapters, ~~1261~~ Genesis 26, 27. Contrasting his character with those of his father, and of his son, we may remark that there is noted less of Abraham's triumphs of faith, and less of Jacob's failures. Taking it on the whole, the life of Isaac is a disappointing one: it begins brightly, but ends amid the shadows — like that of so many, it failed to fulfill its early promise.

The one act in Isaac's life which the Holy Spirit selected for mention in the Scroll of Faith takes us back to ~~1020~~ Genesis 27, where, as the Puritan Owen well said, "There is none (other story) in the scripture filled with more intricacies and difficulties as unto a right judgment of the things related, though the matter of fact be clearly and distinctly set down. The whole represents unto us Divine sovereignty, wisdom and faithfulness, working effectually through the frailties, infirmities, and sins of all the persons concerned in the matter."

Genesis 27 opens by presenting unto us Isaac in his old age, and declares that "his eyes were dim, so that he could not see" (verse 1). It ought not to need saying that we have there something more than a mere reference to the state of his physical eyes, yet in these days when so many glory in their understanding the Word "literally," God's servants need to dwell upon the most elementary spiritual truths. Everything in Holy Writ has a deeper significance than the "literal," and we are greatly the losers when we limit ourselves to the "letter" of any verse. Let us contrast this statement concerning Isaac's defective vision with what is recorded of another servant of God at the same advanced age:

“And Moses was an hundred and twenty years old when he died: *his eye was not dim*” (^{<1634P>}Deuteronomy 34:7).

Genesis 27 shows us the low state into which a child of God may get. Isaac presents unto us a solemn warning of the evil consequences which follow failure to judge and refuse our natural appetites. If we do not mortify our members which are upon the earth, if we do not abstain from fleshly lusts that war against the soul, then the fine edge of our spiritual life will be blunted, and the fine gold will become dim. If we live to eat, instead of eating to live, our spiritual vision is bound to be defective. Discernment is a by-product, the fruit and result of the denying of self, and following of Christ (^{<4882>}John 8:12). It was this self-abnegation which was so conspicuous in Moses: he learned to refuse that which appealed to the flesh a position of honor as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter; that is why *his* “eye was not dim.” — He saw that the brick-making Hebrews were the people of God, the objects of His sovereign favor, and following his spiritual promptings, threw in his lot with them.

How different was the case with poor Isaac! Instead of keeping his body in subjection, he indulged it. More than a hint of this is given in ^{<0123X>}Genesis 25:28, “And Isaac loved Esau because he did eat of his venison”: this brought him under the influence of one who could be of no help to him spiritually, and he loved him because he ministered unto his fleshly appetites. And now in ^{<01270>}Genesis 27, when he thought that the end of his days was near, and he desired to bestow the patriarchal blessing upon his son, instead of giving himself to fasting and prayer, and then acting in accord with the revealed will of God, we are told that he called for Esau and said,

“Now therefore take, I pray thee, thy weapons, thy quiver and thy bow, and go out to the field, and hunt me some venison; and make me some savory meat, such as I love, and bring it to me, that I may eat; that my soul may bless thee before I die” (^{<0127B>}Genesis 27:3, 4).

This is what furnishes the key to the immediate sequel.

“And the Lord said unto her (viz., Rebekah), Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger” (^{<0123>}Genesis 25:23).

This is the scripture which supplies the second key to the whole incident recorded in ^{<0120>}Genesis 27 and opens for us ^{<8112>}Hebrews 11:20. Here we find God making known the destiny of Jacob and Esau: observe that this revelation was made unto the mother (who had “inquired of the Lord”: verse 22), and not to their father. That, later on, Isaac himself became acquainted with its terms, is clear, but as to how far he really apprehended their meaning, is not easy to say.

The word that the Lord had spoken unto her, Rebekah believed; yet she failed to exercise full confidence in Him. When she saw Isaac’s marked partiality for Esau, and learned that her husband was about to perform the last religious act of a patriarchal priest and pronounce blessing on his sons, she became fearful. When she heard Isaac bid Esau make him some “savory meat” — evidently desiring to enkindle or intensify his affections for Esau, so that he might bless him with all his heart — she imagined that the purpose of God was about to be thwarted, and resorted unto measures which ill become a daughter of Jehovah, and which can by no means be justified. We will not dwell upon the deception which she prompted Jacob to adopt, but would point out that it supplies a solemn example of a real faith being resolutely fixed on the Divine promises, but employing irregular ways and wrong means for the obtaining of them.

In what follows we see how Isaac was deceived by Jacob posing as Esau. Though uneasy and suspicious at first, his fears were largely allayed by Jacob’s lies: though perceiving the voice was that of the younger son, yet his hands appeared to be those of the elder. Pathetic indeed is it to see the aged patriarch reduced unto the sense of touch in his efforts to identify the one who had now brought him the longed-for venison. It is *this* which should speak loudly to our hearts: he who yields to the lusts of the flesh injures his spiritual instincts, and opens wide the door for the Devil to impose upon him and deceive him with his lies! He who allows natural sentiments and affections to override the requirements of God’s revealed will, is reduced to a humiliated state in the end. How often it proves that a man’s spiritual foes are they of his own household! Isaac loved Esau unwisely.

But now we must face a difficult question: Did Isaac deliberately pit himself against the known counsel of God? Did he defiantly purpose to bestow upon Esau what he was assured the Lord had appointed for Jacob?

“Whatever may be spoken in excuse of Isaac, it is certain he failed greatly in two things.

First, in his inordinate love to Esau (whom he could not but know to be a profane person), and that on so slight an account as eating of his venison: ~~1238~~Genesis 25:28.

Second, in that he had not sufficiently enquired into the mind of God, in the oracle that his wife received concerning their sons. There is not question on the one hand, but that he knew of it; nor on the other, that he did not understand it. For if the holy man had known that it was the determinate will of God, he would not have contradicted it. But this arose from want of diligent enquiry by prayer, into the mind of God” (John Owen).

We heartily agree with these remarks of the eminent Puritan. While the conduct of Isaac on this occasion was far from becoming a child of God who concluded his earthly pilgrimage was now nearly complete, yet charity forbids us to put the worst possible construction upon his action. While his affection for Esau was misplaced, yet, in the absence of any clear scriptural proof, we are not warranted in thinking that he sinned presumptuously, by deliberately resisting the revealed will of God; rather must we conclude that he had no clear understanding of the Divine oracle given to Rebekah — his spiritual discernment was dim, as well as his physical vision! As to the unworthy part played by Rebekah and Jacob, their efforts are to be regarded not so much as the feverish energies of the flesh, seeking to force the fulfilment of God’s promise, but as well-meant but misguided intentions to *prevent* the thwarting of God’s purpose. Their fears remind us of Uzzah’s in ~~1086~~2 Samuel 6:6.

The one bright spot in the somber picture which the Holy Spirit has so faithfully painted for us in ~~1271~~Genesis 27, found in verse 33. Right after Isaac had pronounced the major blessing on Jacob, Esau entered the tent, bringing with him the savory meat which he had prepared for his father. Isaac now realized the deception which had been played upon him, and we are told that he “trembled very exceedingly.” Was he shaking with rage at Jacob’s treachery? No indeed. Was he, as one commentator has suggested, fearful that he might suffer injury at the hands of the hot-headed Esau? No, his next words explode such a theory. Rather was it he now realized that he had been out of harmony with the Divine will, and that God had

providentially intervened to effect His own counsels. He was awed to the very depths of his soul.

Blessed indeed is it to behold how the spirit triumphed over the flesh. Instead of bursting out with an angry curse upon the head of Jacob, Isaac said, "I have blessed him, yea, and he *shall be* blessed." That was the language of faith overcoming his natural partiality for Esau. It was the recognizing and acknowledging of the immutability and invincibility of the Divine decrees. He realized that God is in one mind, and none can turn Him: that though there are many devices in a man's heart, nevertheless the counsel of the Lord that shall stand (^{<01921>}Proverbs 19:21). Nor could the tears of Esau move the patriarch. Now that the entrance of God's words had given him light, now that the over-ruling hand of God had secured His own appointment, Isaac was firm as a rock. The righteous may fall, but they cannot be utterly cast down.

"By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come"
(^{<08120>}Hebrews 11:20).

Jacob, the younger, had the precedency and principal blessing. Strikingly did this exemplify the high sovereignty of God. To take the younger, and leave the elder to perish in their ways, is a course the Lord has often followed, from the beginning of the world. Abel, the junior, was preferred before Cain. Shem was given the precedency over Japheth the elder (^{<01021>}Genesis 10:21). Afterwards, Abraham, the younger, was taken to be God's favorite. Of Abraham's two sons, the older one, Ishmael, was passed by, and in Isaac was the Seed called. Later, David, who was the youngest of Jesse's eight sons, was selected to be the man after God's own heart. And God still writes, as with a sunbeam in the course of His providence, that He will have mercy on whom He will have mercy.

The "blessing" which Isaac pronounced upon Jacob was vastly superior to the portion allotted Esau, though if we look no deeper than the letter of the words which their father used, there appears to be very little difference between them. Unto Jacob Isaac said,

"God give thee of the dew of heaven, and the fatness of the earth;
and plenty of corn and wine" (^{<01228>}Genesis 27:28);

what follows in verse 29 chiefly concerned his posterity. Unto Esau Isaac said,

“Behold, thy dwelling shall be the fatness of the earth, and of the dew of heaven from above: and by thy sword shalt thou live, and shalt serve thy brother” (⁰¹²⁷⁹Genesis 27:39, 40).

Apart from the younger son having the pre-eminence over the elder, wherein lay the peculiar excellence of his portion? If there had been nothing *spiritual* in the promise, it would have been no comfort to Jacob at all, for the temporal things mentioned were not his portion: as he acknowledged to Pharaoh, “few and evil have the days of the years of my life been” (⁰¹⁴⁷⁰Genesis 47:9).

What has just been before us supplies a notable example of how the O.T. promises and prophecies are to be interpreted; not carnally, but mystically. That Jacob’s portion far excelled Esau’s is clear from ⁸¹²⁷Hebrews 12:17, where it is denominated, “the blessing.” What that is was made clearer when Isaac *repeated* his benediction upon Jacob, saying, “And give the blessing of Abraham to thee and to thy seed” (⁰¹²⁸⁴Genesis 28:4). Here is the key which we need to unlock its meaning; as ⁸¹⁸⁰Galatians 3:9, 14, 29 clearly enough shows, the “blessing of Abraham” (into which elect Gentiles enter, through Christ) is purely a spiritual thing. Further proof that the same spiritual blessing which God promised to Abraham was also made over by Isaac to Jacob, is found in his words, “I have blessed him, and yea, and he shall be blessed” (⁰¹²⁷³Genesis 27:33), for Jehovah had employed the same language when blessing the father of all believers: “in blessing I will bless thee” (⁰¹²¹⁷Genesis 22:17). To this may be added Isaac’s “Cursed be every one that curseth thee, and blessed be he that blesseth thee” (⁰¹²⁷⁹Genesis 27:29), being part of the very words God used to Abraham, see ⁰¹¹²⁸Genesis 12:2, 3.

Now in seeking to rightly understand the language of Isaac’s prophecy, it must be recognized that (oftentimes) in the O.T. heavenly things were referred to in earthly terms, that spiritual blessings were set forth under the figure of material things. Due attention to this fact will render luminous many a passage. Such is the case here: under the emblems of the “dew of heaven and the fatness of the earth,” three great spiritual blessings were intended.

First, that he was to have a real relation to Christ, that he should be one of the progenitors of the Messiah — this was the chief favor and dignity bestowed upon “Abraham.” It is in the light of this that we are to understand ⁰¹²⁷⁹Genesis 27:29 as ultimately referring: “let the people serve

thee, and nations bow down to thee,” that is, to the top branch which should proceed from him — unto Christ, unto whom all men are commanded to render allegiance (⁻¹⁹²⁰Psalm 2:10-12).

Second, the next great blessing of “Abraham” was that he should be the priest that should continue the worship of God and teach the laws of God (⁻⁰²⁰⁶Genesis 26:5). The bowing down of his brethren to Jacob (⁻⁰¹⁷⁹Genesis 27:29), was the owning of his priestly dignity. Herein also lay Jacob’s blessing: to be in the church, and to have the church continued in his line. This was symbolically pointed to in “that thou mayest inherit the land” (⁻⁰²⁰⁴Genesis 28:4). “The church is the ark of Noah, which is only preserved in the midst of floods and deep waters. The church is the land of Goshen, which only enjoys the benefits of light, when there is nothing but darkness round about elsewhere. It is the fleece of Gideon, being wet with the dews of heaven, moistened with the influences of grace, when all the ground round about is dry” (Thomas Manton). As to how high is the honor of having the church continued in our line, the Spirit intimates in ⁻⁰¹⁰²Genesis 10:21 — Eber being the father of the Hebrews, who worshipped God.

Third, another privilege of Jacob above Esau was this, that he was taken into covenant with God: “the blessing of Abraham shall come upon thee.” And what was that? This,

“I will be *thy God, and the God of thy seed*” (⁻⁰¹⁷⁰Genesis 17:7).

This is the greatest happiness of any people, to have God for *their* God — to be in covenant with Him. Thus when Noah came to pronounce blessings and curses on his children, by the spirit of prophecy, he said,

“Blessed be the Lord God of Shem” (⁻⁰⁰⁹⁶Genesis 9:26).

Afterward the same promise was made unto all Israel:

“I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (⁻⁰²¹⁰Exodus 20:2).

So under the new covenant (the present administration of the everlasting covenant), he says,

“I will be to them a God, and they shall be to Me a people” (⁻³⁰⁸⁰Hebrews 8:10).

To be a “God” to any, is to supply them with all good things, necessary for temporal or spiritual life.

The fulfillment of Isaac’s prophetic blessing upon his sons was mainly in their descendants, rather than in their own persons: Jacob’s spiritual children, Esau’s natural. Concerning the latter, we would note two details. First, Isaac said to him “thou shalt serve thy brother”; second, “and it shall come to pass when thou shalt have the dominion, that thou shalt break his yoke from off thy neck” (⁰²²⁰Genesis 27:40). For long centuries there seemed no likelihood of the first part of this prediction being fulfilled, but eight hundred years later, David said, “over Edom will I cast out my shoe” (⁰³⁰⁸Psalms 60:8). which meant, he would bring the haughty descendants of Esau into a low and base state of subjection to him; which was duly accomplished — “all they of Edom become David’s *servants*” (⁰⁰⁸⁴2 Samuel 8:14)! Though their subjugation continued for a lengthy period, yet, in the days of Jehoshaphat, we read,

“In his days Edom revolted from under the hand of Judah, and made a king over themselves” (⁰²⁸⁰2 Kings 8:20)!

“By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come.” This “blessing” was more than a dying father expressing good-will unto his sons: it was extraordinary: Isaac spoke as a prophet to God, announcing the future of his posterity, and the varied portions each should receive. As the mouthpiece of Jehovah, he did, by the spirit of prophecy, announce beforehand what should be the particular estate of each of his two sons; and so his words have been fulfilled. Though parents today are not thus supernaturally endowed to foretell the future of their children, nevertheless, it is their duty and privilege to search the Scriptures and ascertain what promises God has left to the righteous *and to their seed*, and plead them before Him.

But seeing Isaac thus spake by the immediate impulse of the Spirit, how can it be said that “by faith” he blessed his sons? This brings in the human side, and shows how he discharged his responsibility. He gathered together and rested upon the promises which God had made to him, both directly, and through Abraham and Rebekah. The principal ones we have already considered. He had been present when the Lord said unto his father what is found in ⁰²¹⁶Genesis 22:16-18, and he had himself been made the recipient of the Divine promises recorded in ⁰²⁰²Genesis 26:2-4. And now, many years later, we find his heart resting upon what he had heard from God,

firmly embracing His promises, and with unshaken confidence announcing the future estates of his distant posterity.

That Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau “concerning things to come,” gives us a striking example of what is said in the opening verse of our chapter. “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”

“Abraham was now dead, and Isaac was expecting soon to be buried in the grave he had purchased in the Land given to him and his seed. There was nothing to be seen for faith to rest on; nothing that gave the smallest ground for hope; nothing to make it even probable (apart from what he had heard and believed) that his descendants, either Jacob or Esau, would ever possess the land which had been promised to them” (E.W.B.)

There was no human probability at the time Isaac spake which could have been the basis of his calculations: all that he said issued from implicit faith in the bare Word of God.

This is the great practical lesson for us to learn here: the strength of Isaac’s faith should stir us up to cry unto God for an increased measure thereof. With most precious confidence Isaac disposed of Canaan as if he already had the peaceable possession of it. Yet, in fact, he owned not an acre of that Land, and had no human right to anything there save a burying-place. Moreover, at the time he prophesied there was a famine in Canaan, and he was an exile in Gerah.

“Let people serve thee, and let nations bow down to thee”
(~~0127~~Genesis 27:29),

would, to one that viewed only the outward case of Isaac, seem like empty words. Ah, my brethren, we too ought to be as certain of the blessings to come, which God has promised, as if they were present, even though we see no apparent likelihood of them.

It may be objected against what has been said above, that, from the account which is supplied in ~~0127~~Genesis 27, Isaac “blessed” Jacob in ignorance rather than “by faith.” To this it may be replied, first, the object of faith is always God Himself, and the ground on which it rests is His revealed will. So in Isaac’s case, his faith was fixed upon the covenant God and was exercised upon His sure Word, and this was by no means negatived by his mistaking Jacob for Esau. Second, it illustrates the fact

that the faith of God's people is usually accompanied by some infirmity: in Isaac's case, his partiality for Esau. Third, after he discovered the deception which had been played upon him, he made no effort to recall the blessing pronounced upon the disguised Jacob — sweetly acquiescing unto the Divine Sovereignty — but confirming it; and though with tears Esau sought to change his mind, he could not.

Here too we behold the strength of Isaac's faith: as soon as he perceived the providential hand of God crossing his natural affections, instead of murmuring and rebelling, he yielded and submitted to the Lord. This is ever the work of true faith: it makes the soul yield to God's will against our fleshly inclinations, as also against the bent of our own reason. Faith knows that God is so great, so powerful, so glorious, that His commands must be obeyed. As it was with Abraham, so in the case of Isaac: faith viewed the precepts as well as the promise; it moves us to tread the path of obedience. May our faith be more and more evidenced by walking in those good works which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.