

### 3The Famines of Life Genesis 26:1-35

A famine is generally described as a “widespread scarcity of food, caused by several factors that can include such things as war, inflation, crop failure, population imbalance or government policies. It is usually accompanied by regional malnutrition, starvation, epidemic, and increased mortality. Every inhabited continent in the world has experienced a period of famine throughout history. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was generally Southeast and South Asia, as well as Eastern and Central Europe that suffered the most deaths from famine.” Beginning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, death from famine sharply fell. However, some countries, particularly in the Sub-Saharan region continue to experience extreme cases of famine. In 2017 the United Nations warned that over 20 million people were at risk in South Sudan, Somalia, Nigeria and Yemen. Conflict in those areas greatly restrict food supplies arriving to help with the crisis.

Between 1932 and 1933 over 7 million died in the US from draught during the great depression. The Bible records a number of such events. Of course, the one we are most familiar with occurred in Egypt when Joseph was placed in a position of authority to guide the nation through their seven-year feast and seven-year famine. The Bible records two earlier famines as well. One during the life of Abraham and the other found in our text today. We read about it in **Genesis 26**. This famine sets the stage for Isaac’s baseless fear.

#### I. ISAAC’S BASELESS FEAR – vs. 1-6

This is a time in which God will test Isaac’s faith. We don’t have a lot of information about Isaac readily available to us. He essentially only shows up in four different chapters. That’s not a lot to go on, but one thing we know here is that he is no longer under the shadow of Abraham. While this is a test of his faith, the real test was back **chapter 22**. That’s when he and his father took a trip to Mt. Moriah, the place, where as a young teenager, he willingly offered to get up on the altar and become a sacrifice. That was perhaps the height of his faith, a

truly mountain top experience for his trust in God. Since that moment etched in time we honestly don’t know what has happened in his walk of faith from that point until now. *But bear in mind as I have said before that faith is never static, it never stays the same, it can’t stay the same. A static faith is a stagnant faith. A faith that isn’t tested isn’t growing.* There is an ebb and flow to faith that moves with our trust or lack of trust in God in any given situation. It would be great if it was always flowing, always growing, but the hard reality is that some days we have mountain moving faith, and other days we seem to trip over the little mole hills.

Warren Wiersbe writes “A faith that can’t be tested can’t be trusted. God tests us to bring out the best in us.”

Isaac will now be given a similar test that his father, Abraham, had faced. It’s a time for an assessment.

#### A. An Assessment Is Made – v. 1

The opening scene of our text is about a famine. As I said earlier, this isn’t the first one mentioned in Scripture, nor will it be the last. **Verse 1** says there was a famine in the land. You may be wondering what land they’re talking about. For that we go back to **25:11** where it says that after Abraham’s death, Isaac “**lived near Beer Lahai Roi**”. It’s the same place where God met Hagar decades earlier who was running away from Sarah on her way back to Egypt. She had given the place that name because God saw her need and provided water. Lahai Roi literally means “**the one who sees me**”.

When you see a name begin with the word “**Beer**” in Scripture it simply means well or water source. It’s pronounced “bee-ayr”.

That’s where Isaac and Rebekah have been living for quite a few years when this famine hit. Some scholars have suggested that this is the same famine we read about in **12:10** that drove Abraham and Sarah to flee to Egypt. Moses, who authored this book, is careful to distinguish this famine from the earlier one by stating “**Now there was a famine in the land – besides the earlier famine of**

**Abraham's time."** Those scholars suggest that the event itself and the names of the characters involved are more than just circumstantial, so it must be the same event. However, these two famines occurred between 80-90 years apart. Because people were still living to at least 150 years old, it's possible this is the same King, who would be very old by the time of this second famine. Most likely this is either a son or grandson who carried on the name.

Isaac was living in Beer Lahai Roi, which is down in the land of Shur near Egypt and traveled up to the city of Gerar, which was in the Philistine area. It's assumed he had heard that there were better provisions near the coast so headed to a place where he could provide for his family. It seems like a logical decision, but in **verses 2-5** we see that this was a test of his faith, a test where God appears.

## **B. An Appearance Is Made – vs. 2-5**

The difference between this situation and the one with Abraham is that here, God speaks. It goes without saying, but I'll say it anyway, when God appears, take notice and listen up. First there is a command given.

### **1. A command is given – vs. 2-3a**

Scripture is silent as to Isaac's intentions here, but from what God says we can assume that the all-knowing God knew that Isaac was considering a venture down to Egypt. Maybe he had heard from some traveling caravans that there was plenty to go around there so he was preparing to head south. God's command was simple. Stay put. Don't leave. In fact, God would tell him where to settle.

From the example of Abraham and now from Isaac I hope we have come to believe and trust God in what He says and decide to follow Him. **So, why, does it seem to be easier to walk by sight than to walk by faith?** I don't know about you, but I'm guilty and if I were a betting man, I'd venture to say that we're not all that different when it comes to our waffle like faith. We want to see before we believe, but God says believe without seeing and follow. Isn't that the premise of **Hebrews 11:1?** **"Now**

**faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see?"**

Isaac could have reasoned with God and said something like "look around, there isn't anything here; the grass is burned up, the fruit trees are barren and the crops are pitiful; I have a household to care for, so it seems logical to move where there is available food." And God simply says stay put.

Maybe you're in a famine of your own right now and you're looking around at the famine God has you in and you're wondering how God can provide, is God there and does He care. God will always use some kind of famine in our lives to test our faith.

It could be a famine of wealth.

It could be a famine of health.

It could be a job famine.

The famine might occur in some kind of loss in your life.

**What will it take for us to completely trust God in the famine? Will we trust the Word of God which carries the power and authority of God to see us through whatever that famine is?**

**What was the message that God gave Jeremiah to pass on to the Israelites?**

**"For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future." Jeremiah 29:11**

God says **"I know"** which simply means He has not forgotten us and He uses the circumstances of life as His plans to grow our faith.

We could interpret **Proverbs 3:5-6** in the same way. Trust God with your whole heart and He'll guide you down the right path.

Let me ask some rhetorical questions.

**Did God have a plan for Isaac?**

**Did God want to prosper Isaac?**

**Did God want to harm Isaac?**

**Did God have a future for Isaac?**

God was saying to Isaac, "I know there is a famine, but trust Me and stay in the land and I'll show you where to go." He not only gave a command to Isaac, He also gave him a confirmation.

## 2. A confirmation is given – vs. 3b-5

Notice three important truths that God confirmed with Isaac.

He confirmed His presence – **“I will be with you.”**

He confirmed His provision – **“I will bless you.”**

He confirmed His promise – **“I will give all these lands and confirm the oath I swore to your father Abraham.”**

**What better confirmation did Isaac need than God’s word?** Since God said it, believe it. God would be with Him. Charles Spurgeon helps us here: **“The firmest things in the universe are the promises and purposes of God, and these are the safe-guard of the obedient believer.”**

Scripture states it in different ways.

Don’t be anxious.

Don’t be afraid.

Don’t worry.

Trust Me.

Rely on Me.

I am your Rock and Fortress.

I am a strong tower.

I am Your defender.

I am with you always.

I will never leave you or forsake you.

As a matter of fact, what He said to Moses, He says to all who will trust Him and follow Him – **“I am”**.

Again from Warren Wiersbe, **“The will of God will never lead us where the grace of God can’t provide for us.”**

He was to stay in the land because the same promises God gave to Abraham with an oath were the same promises God had given to Isaac. God was now giving Isaac a choice. Trust or don’t trust. Follow or don’t follow. Obey or don’t obey. God always gives us a choice. He won’t force His will or ways on us. But just remember that if we choose to go our own way and not trust Him, we will not experience His presence, His provision or His promises. That was made abundantly clear to the Israelites as they approached the Promised Land.

This past week I was reading through Numbers in devotions. In **chapter 13** Israel is on the doorstep

of the Promised land. Moses sent 12 spies to search the land and bring back a report. You remember the account. Ten of them saw only the big problems and the big people. Two saw the big potential and bigger promise of God. The people decided to follow the advice of the ten and rebel. They talked about stoning Moses and Aaron and choosing another leader to take them back to Egypt. God showed up at the Tent of Meeting ready to destroy them and make Moses into a great nation. Moses spoke to God of His great mercy and forgiveness. God then said that no one over the age of 20 would enter the land because of their rebellion and disbelief. They would all die in the wilderness. When they heard that, the people changed their minds and said they would obey God so they could enter the Promised Land. They would fight, but Moses told them that God would not be with them because of their rebellion. But they got up in the morning anyway against the advice of Moses to storm the land, but were soundly defeated.

My point is this: if we want God’s presence, and provision and promise, we need to obey Him. The choice is ours whether or not to follow. We can’t run away from our trials. They’ll follow us.

Once more from Warren Wiersbe who wrote **“We can never successfully run away from trials, because God sees to it that His children learn the lessons of faith regardless of where they go.”**

**So what did Isaac do?** It’s in **verse 6**.

## C. An Agreement Is Made – v. 6

The verse speaks for itself. **“So Isaac stayed in the Gerar.”**

He listened to God. He obeyed God. He was going to trust God, at least for the time being.

God will bring some kind of famine in our lives to test our faith, to grow our faith, to season our faith.

**Will we trust that He knows what’s best for us and obey Him or will we go our own way?**

**God’s way or our way, which one do you think will bring God’s blessing?**

**Which way will assure us of God’s presence?**

Which way will assure us of God's provision?

Which way will we experience God's promises?

Isaac's fear of the famine really is baseless so long as he walked with God in faith. But as I have said before, and it bears repeating again, that after we pass one test, along comes another. Just when we think we might have arrived at the end of our faith journey along comes another test. It seems that the proverbial apple really doesn't fall far from the tree because Isaac takes a page out of his Dad's playbook. He resorts to lying. What's perhaps even more troubling is that while it didn't work for Abraham in the two recorded events we discussed in earlier chapters, Isaac thought it would somehow be different for him. If you remember, I said that some have defined insanity as doing the same thing again and again expecting different results. So, for me, as I look at **verses 7-22**, we see Isaac's bewildering falsehood.

## II. ISAAC'S BEWILDERING FALSEHOOD – vs. 7-22

I want to believe that in their many fireside chats with Isaac growing up, they would have related their journey of faith and their attempts to walk in fear and not by faith. I'd like to think that they talked about how lying got them nowhere except into deeper trouble. If we want our kids and grandkids to learn about walking with God, don't be afraid to talk about failures. So it really is bewildering why Isaac tries the same ruse. It's in Proverbs that we read about a pig returning to the mud even after getting all cleaned up. I'd like to think that I'm somehow different, that I wouldn't return to some of the same sins I've committed in the past, but the reality is that for all of us, when we're not walking in faith following the Lord, we tend to return to those same sins. We might return to anger or envy or lying or gossip or lust or unforgiveness. What's so troubling about the matter is that, like Isaac, we have been given promises from God to hold onto and yet we falter or fail.

So here's Isaac lying. I'd like to suggest first an unconscionable ruse.

### A. An Unconscionable Ruse – vs.7-10

I say it's unconscionable because it was premeditated. He thought about it and planned it all out in full agreement with Rebekah ahead of time. Don't take me wrong here, lying is lying and it's all wrong, but to lie on the spot when you get caught doing something is different than planning to lie ahead of time when the opportunity comes up.

There's a loud crash in the living room and Mom rushes in to see her lamp smashed into a thousand pieces with little Johnny and Billy standing there.

You know how the conversation goes.

How did the lamp break?

I don't know, we were just standing here and it fell over and broke. They hadn't thought about it ahead of time, so in the moment it seemed like the right answer knowing full well they had been wrestling in the house when they knew they weren't supposed to and knocked the lamp over.

But let's say Johnny and Billy decide ahead of time that if they ever broke anything, they would just say that it was the cat.

They're both lies, but one is premeditated. Let me see if I can put it to you this way. When the Law was given, God viewed premeditated murder different from an accidental murder.

So, they lied, and for a long time our text says, their lie was believed. What it really demonstrated was a lack of faith on their part that God would protect them. Isaac feared for his life. They kept the brother/sister ruse going for a long time. Then one day the whole thing quickly unraveled. How many know that will happen when we tell a lie? One day the King was taking a walk around the palace when he looked out and saw his next door neighbors, Isaac and Rebekah, engaged in what would have been considered questionable activities for a brother and sister. Now understand something here. Moses chose a word that is a play on Isaac's name.

Remember his name means laughter and the word here can be interpreted to mean laughing and that's how the ESV translates the word as if they had been sharing some jokes with each other having a good belly laugh together. But the context of the passage

means much more as the same word can be translated sporting, which isn't very descriptive. It suggests they may have been playing badminton or croquet. Other translations offer a more vivid word, using terms like caressing, showing endearment, fondling, or making love. What the king saw from his window showed that they were more than just brother and sister. They were caught red-handed. Rightly so the King was angry. Even as a pagan king he had more moral astuteness than Isaac and Rebekah who professed faith in God.

Let me say this about lying. We know it, but it will serve as a good reminder to us. Lying is damaging.

### 1. Lying damages our reputation.

It takes a long time for broken trust to be rebuilt. From that point on, everything we say will be scrutinized by others wondering whether or not we are telling the truth. While the passage is about the character of an overseer in the church, it provides practical advice for all of us to heed.

**II Timothy 3:7 “He must also have a good reputation with outsiders (unbelievers), so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil’s trap.”**

Lying damages our reputation.

### 2. Lying damages our relationships.

It damages our relationship with God.  
It damages our relationship with our family.  
It damages our relationship with others whether it be our neighbors, our boss or co-worker, our peers, our classmates, our customers, our friends.

Learn the lesson from Isaac and Rebekah. One little slip on their part and the whole thing fell apart.

When you don't lie you never have to worry about getting caught. Their ruse was unconscionable.

In **verse 11** we see an unquestionable response.

### B. An Unquestionable Response – v. 11

It is somewhat surprising that this pagan king would respond in this way. If you lie to your employer, you can lose your job. Lying in court carries with it stiff penalties. We might expect the king to enact some kind of revenge or punishment on them, but

instead he tells his people that anyone who harms Isaac or Rebekah would receive capital punishment.

Even though he didn't follow God, he understood enough that this God had the power to destroy them. If this was the same King Abimelech of Abraham's day, perhaps he was recalling the earlier plague that Abraham's God had placed on them. If this was the son or grandson, maybe they had heard about what happened during that earlier experience. In any case, the response is unquestionable. It was not to be disputed and there were no exceptions. Death was the penalty for any who violated his ordinance.

Now you might look at what happens next and wonder how God could bless Isaac after committing the sin of lying. I want to suggest that what I see here is undeniable repentance.

### C. An Undeniable Repentance – vs. 12-22 Psalm 66:13-20

Isaac was already wealthy from all his father had given him, but we read in **verse 12** that he planted crops and they increased a hundredfold. He had been successful with his livestock now he was successful at being a farmer. It's quite a return on investment. In **verse 12** we read that the Lord blessed him so that when we come to **verse 13** we read that he became **“very wealthy”**. A man who has walked by faith and then chosen to willfully walk in sin, will not receive the blessing of the Lord. If I cherish sin in my heart the Lord will not hear me. So I have to conclude that Isaac had a serious talk about his sin and confessed, which resulted in God pouring out abundant blessing.

But the problem with success is that someone is always going to be jealous and that's the case here as the Philistines become envious. They were so envious of him that they sabotaged all the wells so Isaac couldn't irrigate his crops. The king became afraid of Isaac's power and demanded that he leave and go somewhere else to live.

Isaac moved and dug a well. The men of the valley quarreled about who owned the well Isaac had reopened so he called the well Esek which means

contention and he moved away.

He dug another well and again there was a dispute, so he named it Sitmah which means contempt or hatred. In the Hebrew it means to lie in wait for an adversary. And he moved away.

The Philistines didn't want anyone else to benefit from these wells, so they buried them.

An unbeliever is much the same. **How often do they want to stop up the life-giving flow of eternal blessings that would otherwise be theirs in abundance if they drank from the well of eternal life?** There is enough for all who go to this well to drink. Jesus told Samaritan woman **"If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink you would have asked Him and He would have given you living water."** John 4:10

Come to the water, you who are thirsty, and you will thirst no more. Sadly, too many stop it up.

Isaac dug a third well and called it Rehoboth which means room or enlargement because now God had given him a place to settle. From there he moved on to Beersheba which means place of the seven or oath of the seven. Decades earlier it was the place where Abraham and Abimelech had made an oath with each other not to do any harm to the other. Abraham sacrificed seven sheep to confirm the oath. Now it became the place where Isaac's future would be blessed.

### III. ISAAC'S BLESSED FUTURE – vs. 23-35

The first blessing about his future is seen in the promise given by God.

#### A. The Blessing Promised By God – vs. 23-25

Once again God appears to Him with words of affirmation.

##### 1. God's words of affirmation – vs. 23-24

A reminder from God is always encouraging. The fragility of our lives, even our faith requires it. So how very important it is to go back to God's Word daily to be reminded of His presence, His promises

and His provision. That's what he does here for Isaac.

- a. God affirmed His abiding presence – **"I am with you."**
- b. God affirmed His absolute promise – **"I will bless you."**
- c. God affirmed His abundant provision – **"I will increase your descendants."**

Here's the thing about God's promises. They're always based on God's power. He will faithfully do what He promised. His omnipotence will make sure they happen just as He said. Nothing is too hard for Him.

Notice Isaac response. They are words of adoration.

#### 2. Isaac's words of adoration – v. 25

The natural response of someone who is blessed by God is worship. Isaac called on the name of the Lord and built an altar. When God blesses, worship.

And when we are blessed by God, others will take notice. In **verses 26-31** there is blessing provided by others.

#### B. The Blessings Provided By Others – vs. 26-35

Well, who should show up on his doorstep but the same guy who sent him packing – King Abimelech? He had been watching Isaac's prosperity and wanted to make an agreement with Isaac, the same as was made with Abraham years earlier – neither would harm the other. He recognized God's blessing on Isaac. Isaac responded not with contempt for how the king had treated him, but with consideration and prepared a feast to honor their agreement. His actions display an attitude of forgiveness toward the king. That day, we are told, Isaac's servants found water. God indeed was blessing Isaac. But with every blessing, comes other challenges of their own. In Isaac's case it's his children. Esau married pagan women.

There will always be famines in our lives that test our faith in God's presence, provision, and promises. **Will we believe and follow Him?**