

# Genesis 26: Inheritance and Individualism

By

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*“There was a famine in the land, besides the first famine that was in the days of Abraham. And Isaac went to Abimelech king of the Philistines, in Gerar. Then the LORD appeared to him and said: “Do not go down to Egypt; live in the land of which I shall tell you. “Dwell in this land, and I will be with you and bless you; for to you and your descendants I give all these lands, and I will perform the oath which I swore to Abraham your father. “And I will make your descendants multiply as the stars of heaven; I will give to your descendants all these lands; and in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed; “because Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws.” So Isaac dwelt in Gerar. And the men of the place asked about his wife. And he said, “She is my sister”; for he was afraid to say, “She is my wife,” because he thought, “lest the men of the place kill me for Rebekah, because she is beautiful to behold.”*

*-Genesis 26:1-7*

As we move through the book of Genesis, this particular chapter can seem a bit familiar. In fact, this is almost a word for word retelling of a sin that Abraham committed twice both in Genesis 12 and in Genesis 20. However, by showing this same sin in the life of Isaac, the writer of Genesis (whom we believe to be Moses) is giving us a bit more insight into a theme that he has been exploring throughout the book, and that is the idea of inheritance and free-will. Many of the stories of Genesis lean heavily towards the concept of inheritance and determinism. After all, Genesis 3 describes the original sin of man that was passed on to subsequent generations, the rivalry of Cain and Abel is rehashed in the story of Jacob and Esau as well as Joseph and his brothers, the given names of particular figures tend to describe their destiny. Examples of this would be Noah (meaning “rest”) who gave rest to his offspring by building the ark, Abram (meaning “father”) and his ultimate destiny to father Isaac, Jacob (meaning “heel catcher”) becoming a trickster and usurper of his brothers inheritance, and so on.

Taken together, these facts would seem to suggest that the Bible teaches a message of predetermined fate that subsumes our identities and freewill. That we aren't truly free, but we are destined (or doomed depending on your perspective) to repeat the mistakes

and tragedies of those who came before us. And yet, the Bible also seems to teach that we do have freewill:

*“If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it.”*

*-Genesis 4:7*

In the above passage, God tells Cain that his destiny is not set in stone, that he has the ability to fight his sin, and even beat it. It wasn't Cain's inherited nature that determined his fate, but his own freewill that solidified his legacy. The concept of choice is treated as very real by Moses as he recounts these events. God offers the choice of obedience to Adam, to Cain, to Abraham, to Lot, and in this chapter, he offers the choice to Isaac when he commands Isaac not to go down to Egypt. But how do we reconcile these seemingly contradictory ideas together? And what does this chapter teach us about our own destiny and our inheritance?

## The Tension

*“The mind of man plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps.”*

*-Proverbs 16:9*

This tension that Moses is exploring in Genesis is found throughout the Bible and is expressed in seemingly paradoxical ways. But I don't think any singular passage of the Bible details this tension better than the above Proverb. If the LORD directs our steps, is our path not predetermined? And yet, if our mind plans our way, are we not free? But like many other things within Scripture that describe the nature of God and His actions, reality passes our understanding and we are forced to accept a paradox lest we fall into a false belief. The trinity is the ultimate example of this type of tension. It is important that we believe that God is one lest we believe that Jesus and the Father are separate gods, and yet it is also important to believe that Jesus and the Father are distinct lest we believe that the Father and the Son are the same person.

Because we can't resolve this tension in our own finite understanding, we have a tendency to lean one way or the other, but we must fight this urge and learn to live in awe of the mystery of God. This tension is no different, and trying to artificially resolve this tension has some pretty dire consequences that we will explore.

# Inheritance

*“But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, “Why have you made me like this?” Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?”*

*-Romans 9:20-21*

For many people, the idea of predeterminism is somewhat attractive, comforting, or maybe just an unavoidable truth. Because of this, we can see this idea throughout human history. Think about Karma in the Hindu world. In Karma, the circumstances that you are born into are predetermined based on the content of your previous lives. Which means that you bear both the guilt and the goodness of your previous life and your destiny is to reconcile your Karma in order to achieve “moksha” or to transcend the cycle of death and rebirth.

*“In those days they shall say no more: ‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes, And the children’s teeth are set on edge.’*

*-Jeremiah 31:19*

Many other cultures believed that this predetermined inheritance is not from their past selves, but instead from their ancestors. It is this thought that seemed to have permeated the culture surrounding the Israelites and one that they continuously entertained. In this way of thinking, we have inherited everything from our families and therefore our destiny is laid out because of our bloodline. This is an incredibly widespread belief, and for good reason.

When we think about the parts of ourselves that are truly outside of our freewill, like our looks, the location of our birth, our given gender, and so on, all of these incredibly important elements to our identity are things that we inherit from our parents and we have no real autonomy over. Because of this, it is easy to understand why mankind would believe that our entire destiny is predetermined by our inheritance. This is the reason for royal and noble bloodlines, caste systems, class systems, and even racial division.

The idea is simple, your life is a continuation of the lives that came before you and therefore you inherit the goodness and the badness of your ancestors. Therefore, if you are born poor, that must be a result of your parent’s badness and so it is right that you are stuck in that particular caste as penance for your ancestors’ sins. If you are born rich, this is because your ancestors were good and so it is equally right that you should

be showered in luxury your whole life as an inheritance of your family's positive legacy. This idea is summarized in the quote by the ancient philosopher Euripedes:

*“The gods visit the sins of the fathers upon the children.”*

## Inheritance in the Modern World

Although modern culture has widely rejected this idea in favor of a more individualistic ideology, this belief still has some relevance in our modern age, both in the secular world and the religious. For Christians, the language that was thrown around a little bit ago was “generational curses”. This ideology basically stated that we do inherit the sins of our ancestors and therefore our struggles in life are predetermined by our families. For people who believe this way, Genesis 26 represents key evidence that we are burdened by the sins of our forefathers, and our responsibility is to repent of their sins and break the cycle.

For secular people this idea has a more inverted form. The modern form of this idea goes back to Karl Marx and his critique of all social/political structures that he viewed as oppressive.

*“The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guildmaster and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the struggling classes.”*

*Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels - “The Communist Manifesto”*

In Marx's view, (as opposed to the more traditional view), wealth is not a symbol of inherited goodness, but inherited oppression. Marx viewed human social structures as a system of oppression of the lower class from the upper class. Therefore, (for Marx), it was the poor who were necessarily virtuous and the rich who were necessarily oppressive, which is why he preached a revolution of the noble lower class that would supplant the evil upper class. This idea went through a series of transformations in the subsequent centuries, but it is very much alive and well to this day.

In our culture, since we aren't a society with clear inherited class structures, this idea has morphed into our views of gender, sexuality, and race. There are some today who believe that we, in essence, do inherit the morality of our ancestors. So, if you come from a traditionally marginalized group, like racial minorities, women, or identify with some form of queer sexuality, then you have inherited moral worth due to the

oppression of your “ancestors”. But, if you are male, white, and/or heterosexual, then you have inherited the consequences of all the previous oppression done by your ancestors. Therefore, you have to “do the work” and atone for the sins of the past, and elevate marginalized voices so that the society can be restructured in a more just and equitable form.

This is a bit of an aside, but there are even some today who are trying to link this connection to our very DNA through the science of epigenetics. I have no special expertise in this, admittedly, complex field, but I will offer what I do understand about this and its impact on our current conversation. Epigenetics comes from a conjunction of two words “epi”, which is a Greek preposition for “above” or “beyond”, and genetics which refers to our DNA, or our biochemical makeup. Apparently, scientists have recently discovered that our DNA isn’t as fixed as we once thought. We are born with a type of genetic “code” that gives us our physical attributes, but this “code” has certain parameters that can be turned on and off through shifting various proteins. This is how one scientist in this field describes it:

*“In general, epigenetics is the global manipulator that does everything to DNA. Epigenetics is like genetics in that it stores information. But there’s a key difference. Your genetic information - your DNA - is largely a fixed chemical code. Epigenetic information, on the other hand, changes throughout your life. Epigenetic changes can be stable and persist for long periods of time; the epigenetics of your cells remembers how you live, eat, and move. And yet, epigenetic changes can also be reversible. This gives you great power over your own biology.”*

*-Dr. Charlotte Mykura - “Epigenetics: How Environment Changes Your Biology”*

The reason why this is relevant to our discussion, is that epigeneticists have been trying to figure out if some of these epigenetic changes can move across generations. If they could prove this, it would show that things like trauma, oppression, guilt, and malice can actually transcend the individual and be inherited in the epigenetic “memory” of their descendants. And there are certain experiments that seem to show this. For instance, after the Dutch famine at the end of World War 2 (called the “Hungerwinter”), some scientists observed that the children of the survivors were more predisposed to obesity and type 2 diabetes.

It seems that their parents surviving starvation changed some of their epigenetics in utero, preparing them for a future of starvation. But when they were well fed, their bodies found it difficult to adjust and caused them to inherit bad qualities for the relatively better conditions that they were born into. It is important to point out however, no real evidence has been found that true “transgenerational” epigenetic shifts can

occur. The shifts mentioned above can happen, but they aren't stable enough or ubiquitous enough to prove this theory. Instead, it seems like, while epigenetics plays some role, we still don't know how powerful a role it plays in participation with the nurture we receive from our environment.

Still others try a more abstract route and focus on our issues that are inherited not primarily through our biology, but through our psychology which was given to us by our family of origin. To put it another way, they try to show how the way that we were brought up and the dynamics that we witnessed in our childhood, (good and bad), fundamentally shift the way that we see and interact with the world around us. And if this isn't addressed, we are doomed to repeat the dysfunction of our past.

## Individualism

*“But every one shall die for his own iniquity; every man who eats the sour grapes, his teeth shall be set on edge.”*

*-Jeremiah 31:30*

Our modern culture, especially those who are more conservative, are more predisposed to reject this idea of inheritance. The reason is really simple: we have elevated personal liberty to a higher extent than any previous society. We like to believe that we are in control of our own destiny and therefore we reject any idea that our struggles or our fate is in any way predetermined by decisions that came before us. This is not to say that we reject the consequences of the past, only that we emphasize our own decisions and our personal responsibility.

Therefore, someone's wealth, race, gender, upbringing, etc. are not considered to a high extent. We tend to think that no matter where someone comes from, they are free to choose whatever path they want, and to reap the consequences, (good and bad), of those decisions and are therefore ultimately responsible for all that they do. The evidence for this type of thinking is also prevalent throughout Scripture and history. We have many verses like the one above where God specifically says that He will only judge individuals for their own sins and will only reward people on the basis of their own faith and decisions.

Historically we can also see that good and evil don't seem to be as inherited as some think. The easiest way to observe this is to look at families with multiple children. In those children, who all have the same DNA and upbringing, we see massive diversities of outcome. Some children of rich families end up greedy, lazy, and entitled, while others end up intelligent, grateful, and magnanimous. Some children in poor families are

hard-working enough to raise themselves out of their circumstances, while others are trapped in the same cycles that placed their families in those unfortunate circumstances.

As I mentioned earlier, there are some who try to contradict this information through some of the disciplines that I mentioned earlier like epigenetics and psychology. However, try as they might, they have been unable to provide the kind of overarching data that they would need to prove their fatalistic premise. Instead, all these studies prove is that although we are the products of our environment, our decisions have a far greater impact on our lives than our inheritance. It seems that everything in our current society, from capitalism to democracy, is all based on this one essential idea, that we are the product of our choices more than we are the product of our inheritance.

## The Works of God

*“Now as Jesus passed by, He saw a man who was blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, saying, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him.”*

*-John 9:1-3*

The above account seems to call into question both perspectives. For the individualists among us, we have to reckon with the truth that no matter what this man's decisions might have been, his disability (especially in the ancient world) doomed him to a life of poverty. For those who believe in inheritance, they have to reckon with the fact that Jesus flatly rejects the notion that this disability was a result of any type of inherited guilt from before he was born. Instead Jesus tells His followers: *“Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him.”*

Jesus never addresses the tension of our free-will versus our inheritance, instead He reveals the purpose of both. God has predetermined reality for His glory and His own purposes. It is true, we are not in control of any of the most important aspects of our nature. We don't control our gender, the year we were born, where we were born, our parents, our given talents, etc. But we also don't control the most important parts of our nurture. The most formative parts of our childhood, we didn't choose our family or the school, church, or after-school activities that we participated in. It is in these places that we developed our most important friendships and received some of our most valuable mentorship.

All of this is given to us. However, we have profound choices in all of that, we can choose which friends we stick close to, which advice we receive and ultimately what we do with all that influence. And it is ultimately that choice that we have that participates with God's will and reveals His works and glory. Look at how Jesus heals this man:

*“When He had said these things, He spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva; and He anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay. And He said to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which is translated, Sent). So he went and washed, and came back seeing.”*

*-John 9:6-7*

Jesus demonstrates the work of creation itself. For just as God formed man from the earth and His Spirit, so Jesus fashioned a clay from the earth and His own spit in order to bring a divine healing to this man. But this action alone did not heal the sight of this man. Instead, Jesus tells him to go wash his own eyes in the pool of Siloam in order to be healed. It is a participation between this man's free choice to heed the word of Jesus and the divine actions of Christ that bring about the healing of this man which in turn brings glory to the God who works in nature and the freedom of mankind.

## The Ministry of Christ

*“Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned—(For until the law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come.”*

*-Romans 5:12-14*

This is the perfect representation of the overall ministry of God to man. When God made man free, Adam used his freedom in order to turn away from God. That decision was passed on to all of his descendants who are born into this world of sin and death as a consequence for his action. But, we participate in that rebellion by sinning against the law of God given to us in our conscience as well as revealed to us in Scripture. So in one sense we are the victims of inheritance, but in another sense we are the products of our own choices within that inheritance.

*“Therefore, as through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous. Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded*

*much more, so that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”*

*-Romans 5:18-21*

Our salvation works in this same way, yet in the reverse. For it isn't by our choice that we are saved, but instead by the free choice of the Son of God to obey the Father unto death. This choice produced a new inheritance to all who would believe in Christ for their salvation. But, just like our inheritance from Adam, we are born into a world where this gift is offered, but only those who participate with Christ in their faith will receive this gift. It isn't one or the other, but both, we are born into an inheritance, but we must choose which inheritance we act upon. Will we participate with the inherited sin of Adam, or the inherited righteousness of Christ? Each and every day we have that choice. This is not to mitigate or ignore the obstacles that our inheritance might create for us, only to acknowledge the power of God to overcome these obstacles that He might receive glory in our choice.

## Isaac and the Glory of God

With all that in mind, let's end this paper by briefly going over Genesis 26 in order to see how these two seemingly contradictory things harmonize with one another. This is an aside, but this is one of the things I love most about the bible. Instead of trying to explain to us all of these complex ideas, the biblical authors *show* us these nuanced realities in beautifully told narrative accounts. This is what art and beauty can do, art can represent the nuances of reality and the inner experience of mankind in such a way that we can actually begin to understand the deeper truths of reality. When someone tries to merely explain truth, it is far too easy to reduce reality down into an overly simplistic explanation that fails to represent nuance properly and bends towards excess far too easily.

This is why the Bible begins with the narrative accounts of Genesis as opposed to a more philosophical or theological book like Deuteronomy or Romans. This is also why Jesus teaches in parables as opposed to answering questions directly. By doing this, the Biblical authors are able to dance around all the pitfalls of these various topics that have confounded mankind since our creation, and give a perfectly calibrated account of God's reality and our being. The above account is a great example of this. As we have talked about in this paper, it is far too easy to move into the excessive beliefs of individualism or inheritance, while Moses doesn't fall into either trap, but perfectly balances these realities within the narrative of Isaac's life.

## Corrupted Inheritance

*“There was a famine in the land, besides the first famine that was in the days of Abraham. And Isaac went to Abimelech king of the Philistines, in Gerar. Then the LORD appeared to him and said: “Do not go down to Egypt; live in the land of which I shall tell you. “Dwell in this land, and I will be with you and bless you; for to you and your descendants I give all these lands, and I will perform the oath which I swore to Abraham your father. “And I will make your descendants multiply as the stars of heaven; I will give to your descendants all these lands; and in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed; “because Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws.” So Isaac dwelt in Gerar. And the men of the place asked about his wife. And he said, “She is my sister”; for he was afraid to say, “She is my wife,” because he thought, “lest the men of the place kill me for Rebekah, because she is beautiful to behold.”*

*-Genesis 26:1-7*

In the first couple verses we can see clearly how Isaac has inherited a corrupted inheritance from his father. Through no merit of his own, Isaac is the child of Abraham and therefore he is given the inheritance of Abraham which includes knowledge of the true and living God, the bloodline that will bear Christ, and the land Israel. However, this Godly inheritance is also marred by the corruption of Abraham's sin. The same fear and cowardice of his father that led him to lie about Sarah seems to have passed down to Isaac and tempted him towards the same folly. This is the reality that we are born into. To repeat the seemingly paradoxical Proverb from before:

*“The mind of man plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps.”*

*-Proverbs 16:9*

It seems as though our “steps”, or the specific placement and direction of our feet, is inherited from our ancestors. Since all of our “steps” ultimately lead us back to the fall in the garden, these steps all bear the goodness of Adam's creation, and the corruption of his fall. This means that our inheritance is neither purely good or bad, but a corrupted goodness, a spoiled inheritance, a blood that is polluted by the serpent's venom. This is why even our highest virtue is polluted by self-interest and even our worst sins are inappropriate movements towards good things. This is also why we are all doomed to die.

But it also seems that our “way” is planned by our own mind. Even though we can't choose the direction of our steps, the overall way that we move is something chosen by our will. Which means, for good or ill, we can resist and even overcome our natural direction and predispositions. However, what we see from the great men and women of

the Bible, is that even though we have a high ability to direct our way in a more positive direction than our ancestors, we can't overcome our overall nature, we are stuck going in the same direction of the grave, which is why all the works of men, no matter how good or evil, are destined to pass away.

This is why Jesus comes through the "steps" of man. By coming into history through a specific bloodline that traces back to Adam (Luke 3:23-38) Jesus inherits the "steps" of man that ultimately leads to His death. However, because He retains the fullness of His Godhead in the flesh (Colossians 2:9) He can follow the steps of man all the way to the grave without corrupting His way. By doing this, He rises from the dead, as a man, and has now become the new "way" for mankind.

*"Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."*

*-John 14:6*

As mentioned before, we now have a brand new inheritance, that is not from Adam, but from Christ. By our natural birth, we inherit the corrupted goodness of our past, but by our faith, we can be born again into a new incorruptible inheritance from Christ.

## Inheriting Repentance

*"So Abimelech charged all his people, saying, "He who touches this man or his wife shall surely be put to death." Then Isaac sowed in that land, and reaped in the same year a hundredfold; and the LORD blessed him. The man began to prosper, and continued prospering until he became very prosperous; for he had possessions of flocks and possessions of herds and a great number of servants. So the Philistines envied him."*

*-Genesis 26:11-14*

How much of Isaac's inherited sin was biological versus the result of upbringing, we aren't told. But what we do see is that Abraham, being the father of the faithful, also allows his son to inherit his repentance. Notice that Isaac's original plan was to go to Egypt, where he would have more than likely repeated Abraham's exact error in Genesis 12. However, God stops Isaac and tells him not to leave the land of Canaan. As a result of this divine intervention, while Isaac does repeat the mistakes of his father, he only commits this sin once whereas Abraham committed this sin twice. Once again, Isaac did have to participate with this process of repentance through his own will, but the "steps" were prepared for him by the faithfulness of his father.

This can be a great relief, and motivation, for us as parents. For many parents today we are trying our best to remove all difficulties from our children. We tend to believe that if we raise our kids just right and remove all negative influences, we can stop them from repeating our mistakes. Unfortunately this isn't the case. This isn't to say that we shouldn't be wise in raising our children, only that this wisdom, in order to truly be wisdom, must exist in the knowledge of our limitations:

*“Trust in the LORD with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths. Do not be wise in your own eyes; Fear the LORD and depart from evil.”*

*-Proverbs 3:5-7*

We don't have control over many things within our kid's lives, and yet, we are responsible for our kids. This paradox is what it means to accept the tension of God's word. We should not err as individualists and think that we have no accountability for how our kids will turn out, but we also shouldn't fall into the error of those who believe in inheritance and think that it is all up to us to shape our kids perfectly. Wisdom and peace comes to the person who can both acknowledge their responsibility while also accepting their limitations. That means we must take seriously the passages like the following:

*“And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, “keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation.”*

*-Exodus 34:6-7*

It is an unfortunate reality that our children will pay for our mistakes. If I decide to abandon my kids or I feed a terrible addiction, while God won't hold my kids accountable for that behavior, He also can't insulate my children from my sin. This is the heavy responsibility of parents, we must take seriously the sin within our lives, not only for our own sakes, but for the sake of our children. However, the beginning promise of that passage is equally applicable. The forgiveness of God is real and, and one crucial thing that the lives of the patriarchs can teach us is that the faithfulness of one man can ripple through thousands of generations.

As such, the main thing that we want to pass onto our children is the reality of repentance. Since our faults and failures will necessarily be passed down to our children, we should also pass onto them the necessary steps to changing their ways.

Many parents struggle to tell their children their faults out of a fear that their kids won't respect them if they know their frailties. However, the best way to help your kids grow is to exemplify the growth that occurs through genuine repentance. By revealing this process to our children, we can hope that if they start down the familiar path of our own failures, they will turn around faster than we did and embody the lesson more powerfully than we did. This also means that the most important element of parenting is not what we teach our kids, but what we show our kids within our own lives. If I want my child to learn the most important lessons of life, I must be walking the path towards God legitimately and reveal to my children my successes as well as my failures. It seems like Abraham did this and therefore, while Isaac participated with this same mistake he did, since he also participated in the repentance of his father, he only did this once, and none of Isaac's descendants made the same mistake.

## Encountering God

*“Also Isaac’s servants dug in the valley, and found a well of running water there. But the herdsmen of Gerar quarreled with Isaac’s herdsmen, saying, “The water is ours.” So he called the name of the well Esek, because they quarreled with him. Then they dug another well, and they quarreled over that one also. So he called its name Sitnah. And he moved from there and dug another well, and they did not quarrel over it. So he called its name Rehoboth, because he said, “For now the LORD has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land.” Then he went up from there to Beersheba. And the LORD appeared to him the same night and said, “I am the God of your father Abraham; do not fear, for I am with you. I will bless you and multiply your descendants for My servant Abraham’s sake.” So he built an altar there and called on the name of the LORD, and he pitched his tent there; and there Isaac’s servants dug a well.*

*-Genesis 26:19-25*

We have talked about this concept before, but wells were considered a meeting place with the divine in ancient cultures. We see this throughout the text of Scripture, but we also see this in various superstitions that we still practice today. When someone goes to a well and throws a coin into it and makes a wish, this is a repetition of this same superstition. And if we think about it, it makes sense. Wells are kind of mystical. They are a hole in the earth that connects us to a source of life and nourishment. It made sense for ancient man to consider this a place where they could encounter God and even pray to Him. So people would offer a sacrifice, like a coin, and then speak their wish into the waters and wait for the echo, which was supposed to be the “response” of the divine.

In this chapter, after Isaac's failure he is, in a sense, seeking an encounter with God by digging wells. Each time he digs a well though, he is thwarted by the greed and jealousy

of those who surround him. In fact, we are told in verse 15 that the Philistines had even filled in one of the wells that Abraham had dug earlier. This was a sign of “cutting off” Abraham and his descendants from that area due to their jealousy of his success and prosperity.

But this can also be a symbol of Isaac trying to encounter God through his own inheritance. So he travels to Gerar, which is where Abraham seems to have ended his life, and tries to possess the well that his father dug. This isn't a bad thing for Isaac to do in itself, but it is an incomplete action which is why he is prevented from doing so. In other words, while we can inherit the wisdom and the faith of our fathers, we can't inherit their relationship with God. The gift is freely offered, but we must develop our own relationship with God. So God supernaturally stops Isaac from doing this through adversaries, but He “shows” Isaac the area where he would be allowed to prosper, which is why he names the first two wells “Esek” and “Sitnah”, which essentially mean “conflict” or “quarreling”. And then he names the final well “Rehoboth” which means “wide space”, signifying the space that God had given him to grow within the land.

It is here, at this well, that Isaac has another encounter with God after his sin. Here, God reiterates His promise to Isaac, but this time, Isaac responds to this calling by building an altar to God. He recognizes that it isn't enough to simply know about God or to be a part of a divine inheritance, he knows now that he has to practice his faith and serve his God directly. This is the beauty of the gospel. We are not offered a mere material blessing like wealth or eternal life, but instead we are offered a chance to know the true and living God and to be in relation with Him forever. A relationship is not something that we can inherit though, it is only something that we can choose for ourselves and grow in through our own will. So, while a great many things are outside of our control, the most important thing in the universe, our eternal union with God, is one that is offered freely, but must be freely received.

*“That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.”*

*-John 1:9-13*