

Our Obsession with Escaping

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[0 : 00] Well, we now come to really the central point in our service this morning as we open up God's Word and spend some time seeking to understand it with His help.

Remembering, of course, it always strikes me when I think of this that God's Word is the only perfect thing we have in this world. And so it should be something that we listen to and pay attention to.

And so let's do that now as we get ready to tackle this long chapter. Well, I think we live in an age, a time in history that is particularly obsessed with escaping.

You know what I mean? We always tend to be looking for ways to escape things we don't like. The first option when we face discomfort is to find a way to escape it.

Whether it's by medication to escape particular discomfort, whether that medication is legal or not. Or whether it's by our screens, which give us escapism from our stressful lives as we absorb ourselves in the stories of others.

[1 : 04] Going on a holiday in our world has all become about the best way to escape, hasn't it? In fact, it's no surprise two popular travel magazines are called Getaway and Escape. Many people in South Africa are looking for ways to escape the crime and corruption here, going to Australia and the UK.

People in difficult marriages look for ways to escape through divorce rather than try to work through their difficulties together. And the tragic rate of abortion in modern society also shows how keen people are to escape the consequences of their own actions.

Even in religion, you see this idea of escape feature quite prominently. Most religions are based on some idea of escaping from this world and its troubles, whether it's paradise in Islam or Nirvana in Buddhism.

Even many brands of Christianity wrongly believe that the end goal is all about escaping from this world and this body and floating off to a spiritual existence in the clouds. But that's not actually what the Bible says.

The Bible tells us that God's plans for us are not for us to escape this world, but to stay here and to die here and to wait for Jesus to raise our bodies from the dead into a restored creation when He returns so that we can rule and care for this world like we were made to.

[2 : 29] That is what we're doing here. But we were never meant to escape this world, you see. God doesn't call His people to escape. Rather, primarily, God calls His people to endure.

When you read Scripture, that's what you realize God is wanting you to focus on as a Christian, not escaping this world and your troubles, but enduring them. And that's why the story of Isaac is so important, Genesis 26, because it's exactly what this story shows us.

I invite you to open your Bibles there because I'm going to refer to a number of verses and I'd like you to follow along. Genesis 26. And in the story of Isaac, so we've read up until now, the past few weeks, we've read about Abraham.

We read about how Isaac got his wife, and then we read about the birth of his children. But this chapter almost takes a pause from carrying on the story and tells us some interesting accounts in the life of Isaac before we move on to concentrating on Jacob, which is Isaac's son, and after we finish concentrating on Abraham.

So this chapter is pretty much the most we'll find out about Isaac and his life. And we see in it, God is calling Isaac to endure some very difficult situations in faith that instead of him having to escape those difficulties, God would actually deliver him through those difficulties in his good time.

[3 : 56] So it begins with him wanting to escape. And for good reason as well. Look at verse 1. Now there was a famine in the land. Besides the previous famine in Abraham's time, and Isaac went to Abimelech, king of the Philistines, in Gerar.

Okay, so the first difficulty, right in the first verse, that Isaac finds himself in in this story is famine. A famine in the land. Now remember, this is the land that God had promised to his father Abraham, the land of Canaan, in a sacred covenant.

And you'll remember as well, back in Genesis 12, it wasn't just the land that God promised, but great blessing and a future kingdom, which would eventually be a blessing to the whole world.

This is the covenant by which God is going to restore the world back to what it should be. This covenant that he made with Abraham right at the beginning of the Bible. And the whole rest of the Bible is about God working out that covenant.

And that's still in process today. But what we've got to realize is God's plan of salvation, this covenant that he made with Abraham, obviously all started thousands of years ago with Isaac and Abraham in this land of Canaan, which to be fair, wasn't the nicest place to live.

[5 : 10] It wasn't the easiest place to live, especially now with the famine. So Isaac does what anyone would do. He decides to up and move to somewhere better. And the best place back then, especially during a famine, was the land of Egypt.

Egypt was very much the land of opportunity. So you would head south to Egypt, like his dad did, in fact, and like his son is going to do as well. The Nile Delta, if you know anything about geography.

Back then, still today, a very fertile land, the land of opportunity. So basically, to people living in Canaan in the ancient world, Egypt was kind of like what Australia is to a lot of South Africans.

A place to escape and find better opportunities. And you can't blame them, just like you can't blame Isaac for wanting to escape to Canaan. Or escape Canaan to Egypt, rather.

Okay, so off he goes. He packs his bags and he gets as far as a place called Gerar in the south. But it's there, something very unexpected happens. God shows up and changes Isaac's whole itinerary.

[6 : 17] Look at verse 2. The Lord appeared to Isaac and said, Do not go down to Egypt. Live in the land where I tell you to live. Stay in this land for a while and I will be with you and I will bless you.

Okay, so that's God's command to Isaac. Don't go. Just because there's troubles. Stay here. And notice that God's promises to bless Isaac are actually on condition that he stays in the land.

That he doesn't try to escape. And a more accurate translation of this is, Live in the land where I will tell you to live. Stay in this land for a while so that I will be with you and I will bless you.

It's a purpose clause. So, what it's saying is that for Isaac to receive God's promised blessings, He has to stay in the land that God has put him in. Even though the land he was in was going to mean trouble for him.

And more so than just a famine. The famine was bad enough, But his neighbors also caused him a whole lot of problems. In fact, he even has to resort to lying about Rebecca, Like father, like son.

[7 : 24] Remember, Abraham did this with Sarah. Rebecca, in the very same place a few decades before. And he lied about Rebecca, Out of fear that the men of the city will kill him in order to get her.

Anyway, so he does that. They go in and he says, No, no, no, no, she's my sister. It doesn't care about if she goes and gets married illegitimately now to some Canaanite, Philistine.

As long as he's saving his own skin. But he says, Okay, she's my sister. But then we read on and it causes him even more problems when the king happens to look out his window And see Isaac and Rebecca fooling around.

Realizing, of course, that he was lying and he confronts Isaac about it. And you think, Ooh, Isaac's going to be in a lot of trouble now. But in the end, because he knew Isaac's dad, Abraham, And because he knew that Abraham and Isaac had this special relationship with God, He didn't want to harm Isaac.

In fact, he actually ends up protecting Isaac and passing a law that protects Isaac and Rebecca. And God ends up blessing Isaac abundantly despite his bad decisions.

[8 : 36] So that if you scan down by the end of verse 14, he's the richest man in Gerar, in the land. And so staying in the land, like God told him to, didn't turn out too bad after all.

Except that's not the end of the story. Because he soon finds himself in another predicament. People start to get so envious of his wealth and his riches that they eventually kick him out of their city.

They say, Isaac, we can't handle you anymore. Get out. And so basically Isaac becomes a homeless millionaire. But he still can't leave the land, remember, because God told him to stay in this land.

And so he camps out in a desert valley and starts looking for a source of water. It's a crazy picture, isn't it? This millionaire with abundant wealth and he's in the desert and all he needs is water.

It's this guy. He needs his most fundamental need is not being met. So he starts looking for a source of water. Of course, you can't survive long in the desert without water.

[9 : 41] Only to find himself in even more trouble because of that. So we pick it up. Have a look in your Bibles from verse 19. Isaac's servants dug in the valley and discovered a well of fresh water there.

But the herders of Gerar quarreled with those of Isaac and said, the water is ours. So he named the well Eshek, which means argument, because they disputed with him.

Then they dug another well, but they quarreled over that one also. So he named it Sitna, which means hostility. Okay, so Isaac's feeling quite sorry for himself at this point.

He's leaving behind a trail of wells named after all the troubles he's facing. And he's being pushed around and bullied, essentially, by these Philistines. The moment he digs a well, they're probably looking over the hills, waiting for him to finish the digging of the well.

And then they show up and they say, oh, sorry, this is our well. Big bullies, basically. And it's here in the story, after the string of troubles with his neighbors, it's here that you'd expect him to decide, you know what?

[10 : 43] That's enough. I'm going to Egypt. I tried, God, but it just hasn't worked out. And I think that's what any of us would be tempted to do, but that's not what he does. He doesn't try to escape.

No, he carries on. No, he stays and he keeps looking for yet another well. He perseveres, basically. He's persevering in faith that God will provide for him sooner or later.

And it turns out that's exactly what God does in the very next verse, 22. He moved on from there and dug another well, and no one quarreled over it.

He named it Rehoboth, saying, now the Lord has given us room and we will flourish in the land. So that's a kind of nice conclusion to all the difficulties that happen in the story.

But what Isaac probably didn't know at that point was that he had just passed his test of faith. Remember Abraham and how Abraham had to have his faith in God's promises tested?

[11 : 46] Remember that? We've been covering that over the last few months. To show that he was a worthy covenant partner. To show that he really believed in God's promises. Because, remember, the way that covenants work is that God chooses people to enter into covenants.

And all those people need to do is to believe in God's abundant promises to bless them in that covenant. But that faith isn't as easy as it seems. Because it will often be challenged.

And there will be things in life that cause God's covenant people to doubt his covenant promises. Like happened in Abraham's life. But his faith was tested and shown to be true. Ultimately, remember when he was asked to go and sacrifice Isaac.

And he went and he almost did it when God intervened and provided a ram as a substitute. But Abraham's faith was tested and proven true.

Well, now it's Isaac's turn. Here we're reading about Isaac's test of faith. Not as drastic as his father's, but important nonetheless. So, the question is, you know, will Isaac ride out all of these difficulties that God is allowing him to go through and not run away in faith that God will deliver him in God's time?

[12 : 58] Or would he disobey God and chase after what the world can give him in Egypt? That's the test. Do you see that? That's the test that's going on here. And it turns out he passes it.

He endures. And in response in verse 24, this is very important. God confirms his promises to bless him, but there's a difference. So, God, right at the beginning of the story, promised Isaac these great blessings that he had promised to Abraham.

And he says, if you stay in the land. But now, God confirms his promise to bless Isaac with no conditions attached.

Because Isaac's faith has now been shown genuine. Verse 24. That night, the Lord appeared to him and said, I am the God of your father Abraham.

Do not be afraid, for I am with you. I will bless you. And I will increase the number of your descendants for the sake of my servant Abraham. Because Isaac has shown that he too has the faith of his father Abraham, the covenant blessings God made to Abraham now count for him too.

[14 : 04] And from this point in the story, once this test of faith has been passed, from this point, things start to get better. All the troubles Isaac found himself in, one by one, famine, hostility with his neighbors, difficulty finding water, are all solved by God in the next few verses.

He makes a covenant with his neighbors. The land starts to produce and the well starts to give him water. Reminding us, of course, that God's in control of this whole thing.

And it was God who sent these trials to Isaac in the first place to prove Isaac's faith genuine and to show that he was a worthy covenant partner like his father. And that is the point of the story.

But what's it got to do with us? That's the question. What's the story got to say to Christians? Why is it here in the Bible? Why is a whole chapter in the Bible devoted to it?

What is God trying to tell us through this story that we shouldn't move to Australia? Well, no, that would be a very superficial application of this story. Rather, in this story, God is wanting us to learn what it looks like to be in a covenant relationship with him.

[15 : 19] Especially when things are going pear-shaped in our lives. And that is a very important lesson for us to learn, particularly at a baptism service.

Because a baptism is God bringing someone into a covenant relationship with himself where he promises to save them, wash them clean of their sins so that they can live in his restored creation one day.

And enjoy him and his blessings without end. But what Isabella's parents need to know, and what we all need to know, and what Isabella needs to grow up knowing, is what it really means, what it really looks like to live in a covenant relationship with God.

And that's what this story shows us. And it shows us that in at least two ways. Firstly, the first lesson we learn about being in a covenant with God is that God's covenant blessings are for those who don't deserve them.

And that is a hugely encouraging thing. Because I don't think any of us would say we deserve God's covenant blessings, would we? One striking thing about this story is that God makes incredible promises about Isaac's future.

[16 : 27] And even gives him abundant present blessings in the story without Isaac actually doing anything to deserve them. Look at it again in verse 12.

Look at the wording. Actually, when God promises him in verse 4. But before we get there, look at verse 12. Isaac planted crops in the land and the same year reaped a hundredfold because the Lord blessed him.

The man became rich and his wealth continued to grow until he became very wealthy. He had so many flocks and herds and servants that the Philistines envied him.

So it's clear God is with Isaac. God is blessing Isaac. And it's also clear Isaac doesn't do anything to deserve those blessings. The question is why has God decided to do all these things for Isaac?

Because God is not actually obligated to bless people. I think that's something we just need to stop and remember. Because in this world, many, many people think that God is their big vending machine in the sky.

[17 : 31] That he's their big kind of bearded grandpa with a knitted jersey who's there to give them presents. It's rubbish. God is not obligated to bless us. In fact, God is just and if we sin against him, he's obligated to punish us.

And he's not obligated to bless us, especially if we've done nothing to earn those blessings. And that should make us wonder why people like Isaac, who are clearly flawed and clearly make mistakes, clearly aren't the most admirable characters, why God chooses to bless them.

Well, we don't have to wonder because the passage tells us. He says why he's choosing to bless Isaac back in verse 5. If you read from verse 4 with me, very important to see this.

He says, I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give them all these lands and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed. Here's the reason.

Because Abraham obeyed me and did everything I required of him, keeping my commands, my decrees and my instructions. So it was because of the obedience of Abraham to everything God told him to do in his life that Isaac, his son, could benefit from that.

[18 : 45] Isaac's blessing was a result of Abraham's obedience, not his own. And there's a theological term for that, actually.

It's called imputed righteousness, where someone like Isaac can benefit from the obedience of another. And we might think, well, that's a bit unfair.

But we all benefit, or at least we grew up benefiting from the work of another. That's how a family works, isn't it? I mean, the parents go out and work and earn money and the kids basically get to freeload, don't they?

The kids get food on the table and a roof over their head, not because they did anything to earn it, but just because they're in the family. And therefore the benefits earned by the head of the household count for everyone in that household.

Well, that's how a covenant works as well. That's how God works in covenants. The benefit, the work of the head of the covenant benefits those in the covenant.

[19 : 48] And it's just as well. It's like that because none of us deserve God's blessing. We've all turned away from him. We've all sinned against him. We know that. So if it were up to us to earn his blessing in a place in his restored creation, none of us would make the cut.

Through no amount of religious works we could do would undo the sin and our rebellion against God and living our lives ignoring God and the world that he's made. And so it's just as well that he makes covenants, isn't it?

So that we can benefit because of the righteousness of another. Our covenant head, of course, is the Lord Jesus Christ. And it's because of his actions that we can benefit, not because of our own actions.

It's very important we realize that that is how God works in the Bible. You know, today God didn't promise Isabella the forgiveness of her sins and eternal life because of anything she's done.

But because of what Jesus did on her behalf. Because he not only obeyed, but Jesus went to the cross and died for her sins and removed the penalty of all the time she is going to fail.

[20 : 59] And that's what her parents need to bring her up. Understanding. That when she fails, and she will, that she has a Savior who has paid for her sins.

And it's because of his righteousness that she can have the sure hope of salvation. Romans 5.19 tells us, For just as through the disobedience of one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.

It's because of the obedience of the one man, Jesus, that we can know God's blessing and favor on us. And have the sure hope of eternal life. And you know what? No other religion in the world dares to give its people that kind of assurance.

Apart from biblical Christianity. Because for every other religion, it's all about what you do to earn God's favor. But for Christians, real Bible-believing Christians, it's about what Jesus has already done for us.

And it's just believing in that as one of his people. Knowing and resting in the salvation that Jesus has earned for us. Rather than trying to earn our own.

[22 : 12] Now, that of course doesn't mean that we can just do what we want now. Because, well, it's not about what we do. So let's live however we want, right? Well, no. The Bible says if you've come into God's covenant, now you must live as a member of that covenant.

It's like a family. If you've brought up in a family, you've got to take on the family likeness. And you've got to live as a member of that family. And that's how it works in a covenant.

You've got to live as a member of that covenant. Or there's a very real risk that you will lose your place in it. And the primary way you live as a member of the covenant is doing what Isaac did in this story.

And persevering in your faith even when things get tough. Which is the second thing we learn from this story. That God's covenant people are called to persevere in trial.

So even though Isaac received all these blessings and promises about his future through no merit of his own. He still now had the responsibility to believe them and live in light of those promises.

[23 : 14] And the way God wanted him, particularly in his situation, to show that he really believed the promises. Was to see whether he trusted God to provide for him in difficult situations.

Rather than trusting in what the world could give him. It's very interesting if you compare God's original promise to Abraham.

Remember God's original promise to Abraham in Genesis 12? If you compare that promise to God's promise to Isaac here. They're similar but they're also different in a key way.

In what God expects of each man. So Abraham was told. We can put them up behind me. You'll see. Abraham was told. Leave your country. Your people.

And your father's household to the land that I will show you. That's what Abraham had to do in order to benefit from the covenant. He had to leave. Isaac was told the opposite. Do not go. Do not leave.

[24 : 07] Stay in this land. Do not leave. But stay in the land that I will show you. That I will tell you about. You see the difference. Between God's condition to Abraham and his condition to Isaac.

The reason why it's different of course is because Isaac was born into the covenant. He didn't have to leave anything to be in the covenant like his father did. Rather his job was to stay in the covenant by trusting God even when things go bad.

And that is the call to all Christians. All members of the covenant today. Especially those born into the faith. And baptized as children like Isabella. And raised in a Christian home.

But also those have been Christians for a long time. God calls us to stay. Because there is a very real risk that we will be tempted not to.

God calls us to stay in the faith. To persevere. And time and time again. Throughout scripture and the New Testament to Christians. There is this call. Persevere.

[25 : 11] Persevere. Persevere. Persevere. Hold on to your hope and your confidence. Don't slip away. Don't abandon the faith. And follow God's instructions.

Especially in the times when it seems the world can give you more than God can. Because let's be honest. There are many times. When it seems we can get more from the world than God is willing to give us.

And that is when our faith in God is really tested. That is when our faith in His favor towards us. And Him wanting to bless us is really tested.

And shown to be genuine or not. Not when everything is going well and it's easy to obey God. No. You don't get to see if your faith is the real deal then. No. It's when things are difficult.

When God doesn't seem like He's coming through for you. When you don't see His provision for you right away. And when the world looks far more attractive. That is when your covenant faith is tested.

- [26 : 10] Earlier we read the parable of the sower. And Jesus said exactly that. He said many people come to church and hear the word and accept it. But they don't endure.
- Because they fall away, He says, in time of testing. When difficulties come or when sin is more attractive than following Jesus. That's when you get to see if someone's faith is real.
- I wonder which one of those you are this morning. You can be baptized. You can come to church on a regular basis. You can believe in Christ.
- The question is, is that faith real today? Well, you'll only really know once difficulties and temptations come and see how you handle them.
- And you'll only really know when you keep enduring and trusting God and listening to Him. Rather than running off to how the world can solve your problems and satisfy your desires.
- [27 : 08] Which one are you? It's through testing. Like that. That not only is your faith shown to be genuine. But it is also strengthened. Like Peter says.
- It is like gold being refined through fire. Fire. Your faith is shown to be genuine. But also purified and tested through those trials that God puts in our lives. And so when those difficulties come, don't get angry with God.
- But persevere. Pray that He will help you to persevere through them. Realizing that He's sending you those things as a way of confirming to you as you trust in Him. That you are one of His.
- And His promises to you are sure and certain. That's why James says we should consider it joy when we face trials. Because we get that confirmation again and again. We see our faith come through stronger for it.
- And we see that throughout Scripture. I want to actually end by reading something from the letter to the Hebrews. Which is another letter where the writer to the Hebrews is encouraging Christians to make sure they persevere.
- [28 : 12] And they don't let go of the faith. And it was written to Christians going through some really tough times. In the ancient world before sort of halfway through the 4th century, Christians were heavily persecuted for what they believed.
- Which, by the way, I think is coming again to the church. Since probably for the first time systematically since the 3rd century.
- As it becomes less and less acceptable to believe what the Bible says. Because let's be honest. Persecution is starting again. Not just in countries like Somalia and Iraq.
- But now in the UK. In America. People who are just simply saying what the Bible teaches are starting to be arrested more and more. And you look at history.
- And it's way overdue. Persecution of the Christian church. And so these words in Hebrews chapter 10. You can turn there if you want. Are really ones that we should take to heart.
- [29 : 15] In our generation. Hebrews chapter 10 from verse 33. You were publicly exposed to insult and persecution. At other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated.
- You suffered along with those in prison. And joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property. Because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. So do not throw away your confidence.
- And it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere. So that when you have done the will of God. You will receive what he has promised. For as God says.
- In just a little while. He who is coming will come and not delay. And. My righteous one will live by faith. And I take no pleasure in the one who shrinks back.
- But we. Do not belong to those who shrink back. And are destroyed. But to those who have faith. And are saved. Well I hope and pray.

[30 : 18] That that's what can be said of all of us. In this church. When troubles come. That we like Isaac. Will not seek the escape to Egypt. To what the world can give us.

But rather that we will persevere in difficulty. And stay where God calls us to be. Doing what he calls us to do. Even when it's hard. As we eagerly anticipate the return of Christ. So let's pray for God to help us in that.

Lord we do thank you for the life of Isaac. And the story of Isaac. And how we see your amazing grace. To Isaac as a covenant member. Through nothing that he did to deserve it.

You make amazing promises to him. And we thank you for the reminder. This morning in the baptism. That you make amazing promises to your people today. Through what Jesus has done for us.

And just like Isaac had to persevere. And not run off to the world. Help us to do the same. Help us not to let go of our confidence. But to eagerly await your coming Lord Jesus Christ.

[31 : 21] And give us the strength by your Holy Spirit. To persevere when trials come. Amen. Amen.

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