

Riches and Envy

Read: Genesis 26:12-35, Matthew 11

H/N 16/11/03 pm

Study: Genesis 26:12-25

Psalms: 126, 107:1-7, 107:31-38, 131

Isaac dwelt for a long time with the Philistines in the city of Gerar. Relations were good until his deception regarding his wife was found out by Abimelech. Still he was not sent away when the truth was revealed. He went on to sow in that land and to prosper. It was then that he was sent away – because of envy and fear. The Lord blessed him and gave him this abundance but it turned out to be somewhat of a mixed blessing from a human perspective.

Prosperity

Isaac went down to this land because of a famine- maybe caused by a drought. But now he sows in this land and reaps 100-fold; *and the Lord blessed him*. This is a rich harvest for you will remember from the 'parable of the sower', that some yielded 30, some 60 and some 100-fold. Each seed sown produced 3 tillers on average each with a full ear of about 30 grains.

It is interesting to read of Isaac sowing crops in this land – something that his father never did. It indicates a more settled lifestyle although he still had vast flocks and herds like his father Abraham. It is also interesting in light of the fact that he owned no land. He was cultivating in this foreign land – indeed the Promised Land. And this rich harvest indicates the fertility of this land promised to his descendants.

The Lord blessed Isaac and he *began to prosper – and he continued to prosper until he became very prosperous* vs. 13. And in the next verse we read of his great possessions – vast flocks and herds and a great number of servants. He inherited a lot from his father but the Lord continued to bless Isaac and all the work of his hands.

Now we are aware that in some churches today a so called prosperity doctrine is taught. People may deduce from such a text as this that Isaac's prosperity was a sign of Gods blessing – therefore prosperity is an indicator of Gods blessing. We might ask all prosperity? We might also remind such people that this is the grace of God. We cannot draw up a simple casuistic formula saying that all prosperity is a sign of Gods blessing and that poverty is a sign of his cursing. That would be to fall into the trap of Jobs comforters. It is not the teaching of a passage such as this.

The wicked may also prosper as we well know and as is acknowledged by Scripture. Psalm 73:3 *for I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked*. The Psalmist fell into this trap also – momentarily. Not all prosperity comes from the Lord and when he does send prosperity we dare not be boastful or arrogant like the wicked.

The Lords servants are not always blessed with prosperity – earthly prosperity as we see with Isaac and as the prosperity gospel people focus upon. Jeremiah is one example of a man of God who suffered all his life for the sake of the gospel. He was never blessed with earthly prosperity. And our Lord himself did not have the best house in the street as a sign of Gods approval – he had no place to lay his head. And it has been so with many of Gods people down through the ages.

God chose to bless Isaac greatly with worldly goods but he did not boast or become proud. Even though others became envious and feared him, he remained humble and gentle – before the Lord and before men.

We do well to remember the words of Proverbs 30:8-9 which point out the danger of riches (as well as of poverty). The writer says in effect do not give me riches lest I be full and deny you, my Lord. Remember it is possible to keep on saying the right things and claiming to worship the Lord while in your heart denying him – denying his sovereignty and grace. That is the danger of a prosperity gospel.

So there are moral and spiritual dangers which come with prosperity – and indeed even physical dangers as we see here with Isaac. He became prosperous but what happened in his life?

Envy and Fear vss.14, 16

When Isaac became prosperous the Philistines envied him and the king became fearful of him. As a result he was told to pack up and move out. We are reminded that his prosperity did not include land. He was still a sojourner in the land.

Isaac became victim of what we might call the tall poppy syndrome. His neighbours envied him. They became jealous. There is no indication at this stage that they attributed his prosperity to the blessing of the Lord – although we will see Abimelech acknowledging this later vs. 28. They were not attracted to his God because of his prosperity.

This is a fallacy of the prosperity gospel – to think that people will be attracted to Jesus because of the earthly blessing you have and they want to have also. It did not happen to Isaac and it does not happen today. Listen to what unbelievers say about churches that display this doctrine.

It is a problem in mission work among poor people. People can be distracted rather than attracted by the prosperity of western missionaries.

Let us remember how Jesus called people unto himself. The prosperity gospel focuses upon that promise of abundant life in John 10 in their gospel preaching, but Jesus called upon his disciples to leave everything and follow him. He called them to follow the life that he was living – without a place to lay his head.

The Philistines envied Isaac because of his prosperity. Their envy turned to spite as they filled in the wells from which he watered his vast flocks. They sought to make his life difficult and bring him down a peg or two. A supply of water was essential for man and his livestock in this semi arid region. Wells were dug with considerable effort and carefully guarded. They were often the subject of bitter disputes as we see in this passage and in other places in the Old Testament.

The king himself also resented the prosperity of Isaac. He in fact feared that Isaac was more powerful than he. Isaac had great numbers of loyal servants. They would fight for him as they did for his father Abraham (Genesis 14). So Abimelech asked Isaac to go *away from us, for you are much mightier than we.*

Years later the King of Egypt had similar fears when God's people increased in number and were fruitful in that foreign land (Exodus 1:7). *The children of Israel were fruitful and increased abundantly, multiplied and grew exceedingly mighty.* The king was in fear so sent them off to a separate district and made them slaves. Their prosperity and fruitfulness did not endear them to the ungodly people in Egypt.

Isaac Departed Peacefully. He did not resist even though he could have – at least Abimelech had such a fear. He went to the valley of Gerar and re-dug wells that Abraham had dug years before. These wells had been filled in by the Philistines probably to stop anyone else coming into their territory.

But again the Philistines harassed him. They claimed the first well, a well of running or fresh water as theirs. So it was called *Esk* or quarrel. He dug another well and they came again to trouble him yet again. This well he called *Sitnah* meaning enmity. Isaac did not enter into a fight with these people even though it appears he was the more powerful. He simply moved on, trusting in the Lord. Finally he dug a well in a place where the Philistines did not come to bother him. He called this place *Rehoboth* meaning room or space.

The Lord was with Isaac and continued to prosper him, but the promise was not yet fulfilled. It was a relative prosperity for he had no land. Clearly he had no security, being forced to wander in the wilderness. His descendants would have a similar experience when they came up out of Egypt. His seed, Jesus Christ would have a similar experience when he came into this world. He was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil (Luke 4:1).

This wilderness experience taught trust in God and dependence upon him. The Lord prospered Isaac but more importantly he taught Isaac to depend upon the Lord as he wandered in the wilderness. Isaac did not seek to defend himself but trusted in the Lord to watch over him and provide for him.

That is what the seed of Abraham did when he came into this world. Jesus did not seek to defend himself against those who opposed him. He rebuked the Scribes and Pharisees seeking to open their eyes to the reality that was before them, namely that here indeed is the seed of Abraham, the messiah, the one in whom all the promises are fulfilled.

Jesus went humbly to the cross, like a lamb to the slaughter. He did not revile those who reviled him. He did not threaten. He was mightier than the Jews and the Romans but he submitted himself to him who judges justly. Jesus suffered because of the jealousy of the Jews. He was aware that his miracles, his healing of the blind, the lame and the lepers, his preaching to the poor would offend some. He said in his report to John in Matthew 11:6 *blessed is he who is not offended because of me.* The Jews were offended by his ministry. They rejected him and put him to death.

Can we expect any different from our ministry. We must press on like Isaac trusting in the Lord. We must entrust ourselves to him who judges justly, for our good works and preaching will be the cause of envy and fear to many.

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