

Déjà Vu

Genesis 26:1-17, 26-35

I'm not sure that I ever used a French word as the title of my sermon, but it seemed appropriate today. Déjà vu literally means "that which has been already seen." More specifically, déjà vu is the impression of having already experienced something that is actually being experienced for the first time. So goes one of the many famous sayings by Yogi Berra: "It's déjà vu all over again."

Genesis 26 certainly causes us to think that, doesn't it? Déjà vu. We've been here before, haven't we? Some would say yes. In fact, most of the scholars who do not think that the Bible is inspired or infallible believe that it was written by a collection of writers over a long period of time, and the final edition which we have is just a edited copy of human writings, sometimes containing various contradicting accounts of the same story.

One such example of their foolish thinking is their explanation of Genesis 26. "Yes, we have been here before," they say. In fact, these are actually the very same events described in chapters 20 and 21, just written by a different author and included by the editor as a separate event. Actually, they view the whole thing as a legend, not an actual event but a prominent example of popular folklore, told by different authors in different places.

Well, of course, all that is foolishness. The details of what happened to Isaac are very different from what happened to Abraham. Yet, the overall situations are very similar. Isaac, like his father Abraham, encounters the Philistine King of Gerar named Abimelech. Like his father, he lies about the identity of his wife. And like his father, he enters into a covenant of peace with the Philistines.

But the emphasis of chapter 26 is not upon Isaac, nor Abimelech. The emphasis falls upon the nature of God's blessing. And the most obvious lesson which we learn from the Lord's appearance to Isaac is that,

I. GOD POURS OUT HIS BLESSING UPON HIS PEOPLE WHEN WE ARE OBEDIENT.

You should note that this was the first recorded appearance of God to Isaac since Isaac had been taken up by his father upon Mt. Moriah to be sacrificed. That was probably more than 50 years earlier. And this is the only chapter devoted to the activities of Isaac's life.

Isaac's personality doesn't stand out or dominate the pages of Scripture like the towering figure of Abraham, but he was a man of great faith and great obedience. He seems to be a quiet and unassuming man, patient and submissive in his contact to others, but he was a worthy example of the patriarchs, the father of God's people. Spiritually, he is a true son of his father.

Never is that shown more clearly by his willingness to obey God's call. Just like his father. It was a call to be a sojourner, an alien and a stranger wandering in a foreign land. Waiting by faith to receive the inheritance. And because of that obedience, he was richly blessed. The connection between obedience and blessing is made quite clearly, and it's made first by referring to Abraham.

A. Abraham proves the connection between obedience and God's blessing.

v.2-5

Now, there might be a sense of a backhanded rebuke in that to Isaac, an exhortation to live in faithful obedience as his father Abraham did, but in a positive sense, it is simply an exhortation to

imitate that worthy example. God renews his covenant promises to Isaac, the promise of immeasurable land and uncountable descendants. And he gives his assurances based upon Abraham's obedience. He would keep his promise and pour out his blessings because Abraham was obedient.

And notice how the Lord defines Abraham's obedience, making reference to four different words for the law. First, most simply, he "obeyed my voice and kept my charge." The emphasis there that God's voice was to be observed and kept. The voice of God was not merely giving suggestions nor merely good advice. His voice was to be observed. Obeyed.

They are then called my commandments, or commands, emphasizing that they had been divinely commanded. They are also called my statutes, emphasizing that they were unchangeable. And then called my laws, referring to divine instruction and teaching.

Abraham obeyed. And therefore God blessed him.

But you should ask an important question at this point? What about faith? Wasn't Abraham justified by faith, NOT by works? Wasn't the promise of the covenant given to Abraham because he believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness, not because of his own works?

And to bring this into our own experiences, aren't we saved by grace, through faith, and not by works? The answer to all those questions is an unhesitating YES!

Ultimately, God chose Abraham according to his sovereign grace. Ultimately, the covenant with Abraham was established because Abraham believed God. He was justified by faith, he

was saved by faith. And so are we. Don't miss that, not for a second. Don't doubt that for a single instant. Otherwise, you will fall into a system of works salvation, and destroy the whole message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. But, there still is a connection between obedience and God's blessing.

It is the obedience which grows as the fruit of faith. Obedience which is the natural consequence and inevitable result of faith. It is the obedience that demonstrates the true nature of faith and proves the genuineness of faith. It is what we learn through the words of James,

James 2:14 "What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? 17 Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. 18 But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. 19 You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! 20 But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? 21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? 22 Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? 23 And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." And he was called the friend of God. 24 You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only. 25 Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way? 26 For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also."

So in that sense, as the result of true faith, our obedience is the ground upon which God pours out his blessing upon us. God's richest blessings come to those who live their lives in obedience to his revealed will, who obey his law. And there is no conflict between the law and the gospel.

v.4-5

Isaac lived up to his father's worthy example. In fact,

B. Isaac proves the connection between on-going obedience and continued blessing.

This chapter is, after all, about Isaac. So let's read about him.

v.1-3

So much in those verses. Another famine, though it's been nearly a century since the last one. Isaac decided to go to the seacoast, in the Philistines' land, so he went to Gerar. Abimelech was the name of the king, though likely that was more of a personal title, like Pharaoh in Egypt. It had been nearly 100 years since Abraham encountered Abimelech King of Gerar, and it is doubtful that this is the same man. Just the same title.

Evidently, from the Lord's instructions, Isaac had planned to go farther than Gerar, even down to Egypt, in order to escape the famine. God told him not to.

v.2

God promised Isaac the fullness of his blessings if he would obey.

v.3-5

Isaac obeyed. Short and simple explanation.

v.6

Then what happened? How did he weather the famine? Evidently, very well. He got into agriculture, and prospered greatly, all at the hand of God's blessing.

v.12-13

The extent of his wealth is magnified by the envy which the Philistines developed for him.

v.14

The point is, on-going obedience and God's continued blessing are directly connected.

Now, we need to be careful that we don't attempt to measure God's blessing according to the standards of the world. That is, obedience doesn't automatically bring health, wealth, and prosperity. I'm not talking about any form of the prosperity gospel, thinking that God's will for every person is worldly wealth and success. Obey his word, and you will get rich. That's not what I'm trying to say.

But I don't want to miss the point here, either. God's blessings come upon those who are living lives of faithful obedience! It's unmistakable.

I hope the application for your life is just as unmistakable. I don't want you to put the cart before the horse. That is, your motivation for obedience should not be a selfish desire for blessings. But to say it as clearly as I possibly can, if you wish to experience God's blessings upon your life, then obey him!

And if you are not experiencing God's blessings, it would be appropriate to examine your own life for disobedience. Be careful, because sometimes the apparent absence of God's blessing is simply his testing of your faith. But sometimes, that

absence of blessing might well be an indicator of disobedience.

One example, found in Isaiah's prophecy. It has to do with obeying the sabbath command, the fourth commandment. And the exhortation is put in such a glorious way, such a positive frame. Indeed, God pours out his blessing upon his people when we are obedient. And God's protection is part of that blessing, protection from our enemies.

II. GOD'S BLESSING UPON HIS PEOPLE GUARDS US FROM OUR ENEMIES.

As we just read, the blessing upon Isaac actually provoked his enemies to envy, and brought him danger and oppression. Isaac was forced to leave.

v.14-17

But just as it happened with Abraham, Abimelech came back to find Isaac in order to establish a non-aggression pact. That is, he came to Isaac to establish peace. To cut a covenant.

v.26

Isaac understood the strangeness of that request, for he understood how hostile Abimelech was toward him. He understood the hatred that the Philistines had for him. So the question is, "Why?"

v.27

And the answer is profound, just as it was in the case of Abraham.

v.28

The point is that,

A. Even people who hate us can recognize God's presence among us.

Even though they hated him, even though they were hostile toward him, even though they had driven him away, still they had to realize that God was with him.

They recognized God's power. Even unbelievers can sense it. Obviously, that isn't always the case, in every circumstance. But the reality emphasized here is that even those who hate God's people can recognize God's presence. And,

B. Even people who hate us can seek to be at peace with us.

Now, don't take this as a promise that applies in every situation. Many people will simply refuse to be at peace with you. But there may well be occasions like the one Isaac faced. Because of God's presence, Isaac's enemies sought him out to be at peace.

v.28-33

Remember from chapter 21 the meaning of Beersheba, the "well of the oath." Also, the well of the seven, since Sheba means seven. From Abraham's example, we learn that the oath or covenant was actually confirmed by the gift of seven animals.

What a testimony of God's faithfulness! The riches of God's blessings.

But something else here is even more amazing. Isaac actually repeats the sin of his father. Despite everything we've seen so far this morning, still there is a blemish on Isaac's record. And because of everything we've seen so far this morning, that sin is amazing.

v.7

But something is even more amazing than Isaac's sin. And

that is God's grace. God's mercy.

How does God respond to Isaac's sin? Well, to be consistent with what we've already studied about his blessings being poured out upon the obedient, you would expect his blessings to be withdrawn from the disobedient. But that's not what we find here.

Instead, what we discover is that,

III. GOD IS MERCIFUL TO BLESS HIS PEOPLE DESPITE OUR DISOBEDIENCE.

First, God protects Isaac and then brings him to repentance.
v.8-11

Then he blesses him, as we've already seen.
v.12-13

God's ways really are amazing. He really is merciful.
Ps. 103:10 "He has not dealt with us according to our sins,
Nor punished us according to our iniquities. 11 For as the
heavens are high above the earth, So great is His mercy toward
those who fear Him; 12 As far as the east is from the west, So far
has He removed our transgressions from us."

But that mercy, of course, can never be used as an excuse to go on sinning.

Rom. 6:1 "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? 2 Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?"

Still, it is useful to identify the source of this sin, which is the same source as it was for Abraham. Fear. Specifically, the fear of man.

A. The fear of man will lead us away from God into disobedience.

v.7

v.9

Cowardly fear. Insecure fear. Fear which contradicted his very faith. Surely he believed God. Why, then, did he have to fear man? His response should have been that which was later written by the Apostle Paul as an encouragement to the church at Rome,

Rom. 8:31 "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?"

Indeed, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" Such a faith will certainly removed the fear of man. There is such encouragement in Paul's exhortation to Rome, for he continues in,

Rom.8:33 "Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. 35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? 36 As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter." 37 Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. 38 For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, 39 nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

If only Isaac had displayed that faith, this sorry event never would have taken place. But it did take place, and stands are a great warning to us, a warning against the fear man. Scripture abounds with warnings against fear, usually in the form of a great encouragement from a man looking to God.

Ps. 27:11 “The LORD is my light and my salvation; Whom shall I fear? The LORD is the strength of my life; Of whom shall I be afraid? 2 When the wicked came against me To eat up my flesh, My enemies and foes, They stumbled and fell. 3 Though an army may encamp against me, My heart shall not fear; Though war may rise against me, In this I will be confident. 4 One thing I have desired of the LORD, That will I seek: That I may dwell in the house of the LORD All the days of my life, To behold the beauty of the LORD, And to inquire in His temple. 5 For in the time of trouble He shall hide me in His pavilion; In the secret place of His tabernacle He shall hide me; He shall set me high upon a rock. 6 And now my head shall be lifted up above my enemies all around me; Therefore I will offer sacrifices of joy in His tabernacle; I will sing, yes, I will sing praises to the LORD.”

Such encouraging faith. Now remember, the troubles are real, it's just that the man of faith keeps his eyes upon God and not upon those troubles. For as we read in Psalm 118, you see the presence of very real problems and very real enemies, but his eyes never left the Lord.

Ps. 118:8 “It is better to trust in the LORD Than to put confidence in man. 9 It is better to trust in the LORD Than to put confidence in princes. 10 All nations surrounded me, But in the name of the LORD I will destroy them. 11 They surrounded me, Yes, they surrounded me; But in the name of the LORD I will destroy them. 12 They surrounded me like bees; They were quenched like a fire of thorns; For in the name of the LORD I will destroy them. 13 You pushed me violently, that I might fall, But the LORD helped me. 14 The LORD is my strength and song,

And He has become my salvation.”

If you can sing those words, then all your troubles will be kept in their proper perspective. So, the obvious question is, “What is the nature of your troubles? What is it that you fear?”

If you fear man, if you fear what man can do to you, you must realize that that fear can actually lead you away from God into disobedience. The fear of man is a temporary contradiction of true faith. So how do we get rid of that fear? How do we end that contradiction? First and foremost, by believing God's promise, and by being assured of God's presence. As we read in,

Hebr. 13:5 “Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” 6 So we may boldly say: “The LORD is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?”

Those words are so practical, and so encouraging. Think about it, next time you are afraid. “What can man do to me?” And with that thought, don't let your fear lead you away from God into disobedience.

But again, from this occasion, we realize that even in our fear, even in our disobedience, God's blessing continues. For Isaac, that blessing meant protection.

B. Even when we disobey, God's protection is not removed.

Just as God protected Sarah when Abraham lied about her identity, so he protected Sarah.

v.8-11

Abimelech delivers a well-deserved rebuke to Isaac. It's a sad

commentary on the sinfulness of man when the pagan, unbelieving Philistine king is called upon to rebuke the father of our faith. It is grievous thing to realize that the unbelieving king had a higher moral standard in this instance than the promised son in the line of Abraham.

So it is today, a terrible thing when unbelievers actually demonstrate more obedience to God's laws than believers. But in all of this, God is using that unbelieving king's rebuke to protect Isaac! And to protect Rebekah. Even when we sin, God's protection is not removed.

So, despite your disobedience, God is still merciful to bless you. And that is the very definition of grace. That is the distinctive element of the covenant of grace which God established with mankind immediately after the fall. The whole message of the gospel is that disobedience does not cancel the blessing of God.

And so I want to end with the right balance. I want the exhortation of Scripture to be clear--the call to put away your sin and walk in obedience, for God's blessings are poured out upon us when we are obedient. Stop sinning! But I also need to say to you that even if you do sin, when you sin, the promise of the gospel is that in Christ, you shall be forgiven.

That balance is so well stated by the Apostle John, an exhortation I pass on to you,

1John 2:1 "My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. 2 And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world."

With that example, I would wish for my preaching always to cause you to know and understand two things. Two very important things. First, you must stop sinning. You must live in obedience to God's laws. And second, when you sin, you have an advocate, "one who speaks to the Father in our defense -- Jesus Christ, the Righteous One." And forgiveness is promised because "he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world."

And so, having studied the example of Isaac, I would have you leave this morning with this thought, reading,

Hebr. 12:1 Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith."

"I [say this] to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous."