

Transferring Power from One Generation to the Next

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Genesis

Isaac was the son of a great father and the father of a great son, but he himself left a mixed record. In contrast to the sustained prominence that Genesis gives to Abraham, the life of Isaac is split apart and told as attachments to the stories of Abraham and Jacob. The characterization of Isaac's life falls into two parts: one decidedly positive and one negative. Lessons regarding work may be derived from each.

On the positive side, Isaac's life was a gift from God. Abraham and Sarah treasured him and passed on their faith and values, and God reiterated the Abrahamic promises to him. Isaac's faith and obedience was exemplary when Abraham bound him as a sacrifice. Isaac must have truly believed what his father had told him: "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son" (Genesis 22:8). Throughout most of his life, Isaac followed in Abraham's footsteps. Isaac expressed Abraham's same faith, praying for his childless wife. Like his father, Isaac became a successful farmer and shepherd. Like Abraham, Isaac entered into a sworn agreement with Abimelech about treating one another fairly. From Abraham, Isaac inherited a large family business and considerable wealth. Like his father, he did not hoard it, but fulfilled the role that God had chosen for him to pass on the blessing that would extend to all nations.

In these positive events, Isaac was a responsible son who learned how to lead the family and to manage its business in a way that honored the example of his capable and godly father. Abraham's diligence in preparing a successor and instituting long-lasting values brought blessings to his enterprise once again. When Isaac was a hundred years old, it became his turn to designate his successor by passing on the family blessing. Although he would live another eighty years, this bestowal of the blessing was the last meaningful thing about Isaac recorded in the book of Genesis. Regrettably, he nearly failed in this task. While God had revealed to Rebecca that, contrary to normal custom, their younger son, Jacob, was to become head of the family, somehow Isaac remained oblivious to this. It took a clever ploy by Rebecca and Jacob to put Isaac back on track to fulfill God's purposes.

Isaac's failure to recognize that Jacob should receive the birthright and blessing arose from Isaac putting his personal comfort above the needs of the family organization. Isaac preferred Esau because he loved the wild game that Esau the hunter got for him. Although Esau did not value the birthright as much as a single meal—meaning that he was neither fit nor interested in the position of leading the enterprise—Isaac still wanted Esau to have it. The private circumstances under which Isaac gave the blessing suggests that he knew such an act would invite criticism. The only positive aspect of this episode is that Isaac's faith led him to recognize that the divine blessing he had mistakenly given to Jacob was irrevocable.

Generously, this is what the writer of Hebrews remembered him for. "By

faith Isaac invoked blessings for the future on Jacob and Esau” (Hebrews 11:20). God had chosen Isaac to perpetuate this blessing and tenaciously worked his will through him to pass the blessing onto Jacob, even despite Isaac’s ill-informed intentions.

Isaac’s example reminds us that immersing ourselves too deeply in our private perspective can lead us into serious errors of judgment. Each of us is tempted by personal comforts, prejudices, and private interests to lose sight of the wider importance of our work. Our weaknesses may be for accolades, financial security, conflict avoidance, inappropriate relationships, short-term rewards, or other personal benefits that may be at odds with doing our work to fulfill God’s purposes. Isaac’s life shows that when it comes to handing down power and fulfilling God’s purposes, both individuals and organizations need to put the truly important ahead of personal preference.