

THE GRAND ESCAPE.

No. 3. The Bud Blossoms.

Three years had passed since Sarah's death. Genesis chapter 24 begins, "Abraham was now old and well advanced in years, and the Lord had blessed him in every way." There was just one small hitch – Isaac, on whose shoulders rested the sole responsibility of carrying on the family of God's promise, was 40 years old, and still single. Something had to be done.

As we read the story of Isaac he appears to be a rather insipid character, his virtues all passive ones. Perhaps he had lived for too long in the shadow of his colossus of a father, with Abraham being over-protective and shielding him from the pagan society around them. It was quite usual for a father to find a bride for his son, but 40 years seems a long time to keep Isaac at home.

At any rate, at last Abraham set some wheels in motion. His chief servant, Eliezer of Damascus, had proved his loyalty and faithfulness over the years, and from the text we see that he had a meaningful faith in God, no doubt caught from his Godly master. To him Abraham entrusted the huge responsibility of finding a wife for Isaac. But not from the godless nations around them: Eliezer must go back to the land of Abraham's family, bound with an oath to bring a girl from there. Only if she was unwilling to come, would the servant be freed from his commission. The depth of Abraham's trust in Eliezer can be gauged from the gifts he gave him to bear as incentives – gold and silver jewellery and clothing amongst other things, with 10 camels to carry it all.

Eliezer set out northwards and came to the town of Nahor, perhaps named after Abraham's brother, in the vicinity of Haran, Abraham's first stopping place out of Ur so many years ago. Eliezer set his camels to rest by the well and then, in verses 12-14, he prayed a humble, unselfish and sensible prayer to God for guidance.

God was quick to answer his uncomplicated faith. He hadn't even finished praying before who should come out to fill her jar from the well, but Rebekah, the grandniece of Abraham! Now for the test. Eliezer asked her for a drink and she not only obliged graciously, but went on to draw enough water for all his camels. As camels can drink up to 200 litres in 3 minutes, this was no mean task! Wonderingly, Eliezer asked her name, and when Rebekah recounted her family's connection to Abraham and an invitation of hospitality, the servant bowed down and worshipped the Lord in praise and thankfulness.

Have you ever asked God for a definite sign to point you to His will? Notice that Eliezer was sensible in his request: any girl willing to water 10 camels would be strong, kind and generous, an asset in an agrarian household! If our desire to know God's will is genuine He will give us the answer, but He does expect us to use our common sense: "supernatural" signs should be measured against other relevant factors.

Rebekah ran home to warn her mother of the coming guests. She had a brother, Laban, whom we shall learn later, was of a grossly acquisitive nature: when he saw the gifts Eliezer had given her – the expensive bracelets and nose ring which she was already wearing, he raced out to the benefactor with the fatuous words, "Come, you who are blessed by the Lord!" Eliezer was welcomed as an honoured guest, and his men and camels were all fed sumptuously.

Eliezer, however would not eat until he had delivered his message from Abraham – whom, he stressed, was by now abounding in riches. Very simply he testified to his prayer and God's gracious answer, praising Him "Who had led me on the right road to get the granddaughter of my master's brother for his son." It would have been hard to argue against that! We might

wonder how much these relatives of Abraham knew about God, but it appears they had enough respect for Him to be prepared to abide by His choice. Eliezer then brought out more gold and silver jewellery and clothing for Rebekah, her mother and brother, who in turn wined and dined him well.

Next morning Eliezer was anxious to complete his mission, and while her mother and brother suggested a farewell period of 10 days, Rebekah herself was willing to go to her future husband at once – another sign that Eliezer had prayed for - and with her nurse and maids they set off straight away for home.

Verses 62-67 are idyllic. Isaac in the cool of the evening went for a walk, and saw the caravan of camels advancing. Rebekah naturally wanted to know who that was, and Eliezer was quick to tell her, whereupon she veiled her face, a sign that she was unmarried. Eliezer related the story of his journey to Isaac, who lost no time in taking the girl – half his age! – into his dead mother Sarah's tent (indicating that she was now the matriarch of the family) to become his wife. Verse 67, says "She became his wife, and he loved her." This appears to be the very first Bible reference to love; it is rather special in that it portrays the love of husband for wife!

Back in chapter 17:19 God had told Abraham even before the son was born, , "Isaac ... I will establish My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him." Isaac, though just a shadow of his father, still enjoyed God's blessing in his domestic life: we are told Rebekah was a comfort to him in the loss of Sarah, a mother who would have been totally devoted to him! God's plan is for happy, fulfilled and productive families: if that is our situation, we owe Him a great debt of gratitude!

Now in chapter 25, verses 19ff, we come to a déjà vu, in that for 20 years Isaac and Rebekah were childless. We wonder how Abraham felt – he had waited 25 years from God's first promise to its fulfilment in Isaac! Isaac prayed to the Lord and once again God's answer had special significance. Rebekah became pregnant with twin boys, but even in the womb they were struggling with each other. In answer to Rebekah's search for the reason, God gave her the prophecy in verse 23, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger." As God had chosen Isaac alone of Abraham's children, so Jacob was His chosen one of Isaac's 2 sons. Such a choice before the boy had even had a chance to earn it, highlights the grace and the foreknowledge of God, Who acts toward mankind according to His sovereign will – a will always motivated by His love. Paul drives this home in Romans chapter 9.

The beginning of this chapter 25 tells us Abraham had more than the 2 sons in our story. He had taken Keturah as another wife and she had borne him 6 sons and in verse 6, he had given gifts to "the sons of his concubines and sent them away from his son Isaac to the land of the east." God had chosen Isaac for His purpose and accordingly Abraham had treated him as special, leaving everything he owned to this son of promise and even specifying the background of the woman he should marry. As Abraham had been called to separate himself from Ur, so now Isaac was called to live a life separated to the worship of God. When God calls us to His work, it is a condition that we separate ourselves from anything that would hinder us carrying it out to our best for Him. Ministry for God can be sabotaged by having to compete with conflicting interests: God wants us to enjoy a fully rounded life, but always He must come first.

So, with Isaac at the age of 60, Rebekah bore her sons, the first Esau and the second Jacob, who somehow managed to grasp Esau's heel as he was born: apparently an expeditious birth! As the boys grew they exhibited opposite natures, Esau being the outdoorsy type, a hunter of the open country, and Jacob being a quiet stay-at-home with a rather facile mind. We may wonder

how much Abraham saw of them, how much could he exert his influence. The twins were 15 years old when their grandfather died.

The contrast is heightened in verses 29-34 of chapter 25. One day Esau was hunting and came home famished. The aroma of the stew Jacob was cooking was too much and he begged his brother for some. But Jacob, whatever his faults, had a longing, entirely missing in Esau, for the fulfilment of God's promise of blessing to his father and his grandfather and at the time applying to Esau. Taking advantage of Esau's hunger he bargained with him – one pot of stew in exchange for all the advantages of being the eldest son. Uncaring, Esau readily paid such a price for a good feed. Verse 34 concludes "So Esau despised his birthright", and in so doing he threw away for ever the chance of God's unending blessing on him and on his descendants.

We too have a birthright – eternal life through becoming children of God. God forbid that we should ever forfeit that treasure for some trifling pleasure on earth!

There is more déjà vu in chapter 26. A famine in southern Canaan drove Isaac to Gerar in the fertile land of the Philistines and his friendly neighbour Abimelech. But here God met him and warned him against copying Abraham and resorting to Egypt. In verses 2-5 God confirms with Isaac the promises He had made to Abraham – "I will be with you and bless you... To you and your descendants I will give all these lands ... I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky ... and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed."

Amazingly, just like his father, Isaac still resorted to trickery to save his own skin, presenting Rebekah as his sister and not his wife. Fortunately all round, Abimelech caught the two of them canoodling one day and was quick to reprimand Isaac for his deceit. Amazingly again, the two remained good friends and Isaac was able to stay long enough in the land to plant crops – which by the blessing of God reaped a hundredfold! Twice the envious Philistine shepherds tried to drive him away by filling up the wells he had dug; Isaac showed himself to be a man of peace as he moved back towards Beersheba to dig a third well which the Philistines left undisturbed.

More blessing came from God at that point, verse 24: "I am the God of your father Abraham. Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bless you and will increase the number of your descendants for the sake of my servant Abraham." Isaac in response built an altar right there and worshipped God. There Abimelech came to him and the pair settled on a sworn agreement of mutual friendship. Isaac at last attained the status of a landowner and was able to exercise his own personal faith in God.

Meantime, Esau proved his unworthiness of the birthright by marrying 2 pagan women, much to the grief of Isaac and Rebekah. In chapter 27 Isaac, well over 100 years old and nearly blind, decided to put matters right himself by giving his official blessing to his errant but favoured son. Esau was to hunt down some wild game and cook Isaac's favourite dish before the declaration of the blessing. Rebekah however overheard Isaac's plans and, with Jacob as her favourite son, decided to put her own spoke in the proceedings. Under his mother's cunning domination Jacob put on Esau's clothes, used goatskins to imitate Esau's hairy arms and offered his father tasty young goat's meat cooked by Rebekah "just as his father liked it."

Suspicious at first, Isaac ate the meal and, convinced by the smell of Esau's clothes, gave to Jacob the blessing he had intended to give to his eldest son. Unwittingly Isaac echoed the blessing given to Abraham by God – the dew of heaven, the richness of the earth, nations to serve him, his brothers to be subject to him, and blessing on those who blessed him and curses on those who cursed him.

Jacob got out of the ceremony in the nick of time, for just then Esau appeared with the trophy of his hunt and prepared a tasty meal for his father. "Who are you?" Isaac wanted to know, and Esau replied, "I am your son, your firstborn, Esau." Isaac's violent trembling was only exceeded by Esau's bitter cry as they both realised Jacob's deception. On top of the birthright, Jacob had now stolen by trickery his father's intended blessing for his firstborn. There was no unscrambling the egg. In response to Esau's anguished, "Bless me too, my father!" Isaac uttered a prophecy that was an echo of God's word to Rebekah before the twins were born - a dwelling away from the abundance of the earth, a life of fighting, and servitude to his younger brother until an eventual throwing off of the yoke of Jacob. History would prove the verity of his words: Esau's descendants became the nation of Edom, a constant thorn in the side of Israel, defeated by Israel under King Jehoshaphat and breaking free again under his son King Jehoram. 2 Chronicles 20 and 2 Kings 8:20-22 give us the facts.

This is just one of many instances where one self-centred person brought about eventually bitter warfare between nations. There is only One completely selfless Person who can bring about international peace.

The enmity between the two brothers had now come to a head. Esau would contain his grudge only until his father died, and then he would avenge himself by taking Jacob's life. There was only one solution as far as Rebekah could see, and that was to send Jacob away until Esau's anger cooled, on the pretext of seeking a wife from her own family back in Haran. Cunningly she complained to Isaac that Esau's wives were driving her mad and that Jacob must not be allowed to add any more pagan women to the household. Very clever of her, but she was to suffer for her part in the whole sorry scheme; she never saw her beloved son again.

In chapter 28 Isaac took up the idea and sent Jacob off on his mission, ironically enough with yet another blessing (verses 3 and 4) which would be fulfilled in the years to come. But Jacob could not know that yet. Alone, hated, his copybook well and truly blotted, the fugitive set out across the wild and lonely desert, ashamed to look back and afraid to look forward, his life seemingly in ruins. Let's end with another cliff-hanger; what would happen to this man on whose shoulders now rested the fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham?

