

## What Is Your Name? *Set Free from Family Flaws*

### Genesis 26:1-11

When I used to visit my Dad at his retirement home, I would walk into the senior center and immediately people would say, “Oh, you’re Charlie’s son – you walk just like him, smile just like him, etc.” People could quickly see the family traits passed down to me. Then, earlier this year, when I went to Oregon to visit my son Brandon, I walked into the university where he teaches, and a group of students and faculty members said, “Oh, you must be Professor Waybright’s father. You look alike, walk alike, gesture alike, etc.”

I think most of us cannot appreciate fully how deeply our lives are affected by our families. Some of what we get passed down to us is beautiful or is fun. But, some of it is not. Ever since people walked away from God, family after family has passed on not only the positive distinctive traits of our families but also the broken parts, the tendencies toward anger, racism, unfaithfulness or deceit. This is such a reality in this imperfect world that God spoke of it both when gave the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 as well as when God made his name known to Moses in Exodus 34. Here is a part of what God said:

*I, the LORD your God... visit the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but show love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.*

Exodus 20:5-6; cf, 34:6-7

That Bible passage has troubled people for centuries. But, in my mind, it merely speaks to the way things happen in our world. Some versions translate the Hebrew word, “paqad”, that I’ve translated as “visit” as “punished”. But, the word originally referred to something that is deposited, something that will come back and be present later. God was saying that the effects of a person’s sin will be present in future generations too. And, I imagine most of us know that this is true. I think most of us will admit that we see a lot of our parents’ characteristics in ourselves – and that we see a lot ourselves reemerging in our children’s lives.

As a pastor, I have recognized how devastating it is for a lot of people to think, “There is a pattern that has been present in my family for generations. I see it in me. Am I therefore trapped? Am I a victim of my own heritage; of my genetic make-up?” That’s what I want us to consider briefly today.

In this message, I want you to know that one thing Jesus came to do is to set us free from that kind of bondage and to the hopelessness it brings. That’s why I’ve called my message, “*Set Free from Family Flaws*.”

I can only introduce this huge topic in one message – but, I think there is some value in a brief introduction. Sometimes, we simply need to get big issues like this out into the open so that we can begin seeking wisdom together from God’s Word about it. As we turn today to Genesis 26, we see an insight-filled story that opens up for us the topic of generational sins and flaws. In our series about Jacob, we’ll take a few moments to look at his family heritage. You will see that Jacob’s father Isaac’s story sounds like his father’s story. You might even feel like you’re reading a sequel because so many things sound alike.

**Genesis 26: Patriarch II: Son of Abraham** -- *There was a famine in the land—besides the previous famine in Abraham’s time—and Isaac went to Abimelek king of the Philistines in Gerar. The LORD appeared to Isaac and said, “Do not go down to Egypt... Stay in this land for a while (26:1-2).”*

One thing that every Jewish and Christian Scripture scholar has always noticed is how similar this story of Isaac is to the story of his father Abraham as recorded in Gen 12:10-20 and 20:1-18. It’s not the same story though because the biblical narrator makes sure, in v. 1, that we know this will be the report of a different famine in the land involving a different set of characters.

I want you to know that there is a strong line of thought among rabbis that this is one of many stories that shows how the ways of fathers “visit” the generations that follow. Let’s see what Abraham and Isaac shared:

- **The Stress-filled Decision** – So, a famine had hit Abraham and his family – and then the same happened to Isaac. Their desires to save their families drove them to migrate, a point made often in the Bible. Most people love their homelands and don’t want to leave – but things happen that make them feel they have to migrate in order to survive. This happens a lot in Genesis and Exodus. And, throughout their history, God would often remind the people of Israel of this when “strangers” migrated into Israel. He would say, “Remember, you were once strangers and sometimes slaves. So, welcome the stranger.” This insight might help us as we navigate similar issues in our own day.

- **The Faith-filled Obedience** – When God told Abraham to leave his country, he obeyed out of faith. After that whatever else Abraham would ever do, God commended and blessed his obedience and faith. So, in v. 2, God commands Isaac not to go to Egypt -- and Isaac obeys. When you read the whole of Gen 26, God blessed Isaac's act of faith too.
- **The Blessing-filled Promise** –Using similar language as God had used with Abraham, God reasserts that Isaac is in the line of blessing that will ultimately result in all the nations of the earth being blessed (26:3-4). All this is to say that there are positive things being passed down in this family.
- **The Sin-filled Flaws** -- **The flaws of the father recur in the son too. What is the foundational family sin visited on Isaac: We see in both generations a tendency to lie and deceive when under pressure.**

No sooner had Isaac obeyed God's command not to go to Egypt than he immediately falls into the same pattern of sin that his father had engaged in. On two separate occasions in Abraham's life, he lied to save his own neck. In **Genesis 12**, when Abraham was in Egypt, he thought he might be killed by the Egyptians because he thought they would want to take his beautiful wife, Sarah. Abraham said to her in **12:12-13**, *"The people in this land will see you and see you are beautiful and then they will kill me but let you live! So, let's say you are my sister so that I may be treated well."* So, that's what they said and, let me simply tell you this: The deception did not go well.

But in spite of that, in **Genesis 20**, Abraham moved his family to the land of the Philistines and did exactly the same thing! He told the Philistine King Abimelech that Sarah was his sister because he was afraid that the Philistine king would kill him in order to have her. Well, that lie didn't go well either.

So later, when Isaac felt he had to get his family out of their homeland to survive the famine, he does the same thing as his father Abraham had done. Isaac's wife was a ravishing beauty. Indeed, the name Rebekah means "captivating." When Isaac took his family into the same Philistine country where his father had earlier taken the family, **he did the same thing, in the same city and for the same reason as his father had -- he told the king and his men that Rebekah was his sister.** But, then, the king saw Isaac carrying on with Rebekah in an unbrotherly way and he knew this was no sister. This rather upright pagan king said in **v. 10**, *"What is this you have done to us? One of the men might have slept with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us."*

Do you see it? The sin of the father was being visited on the son. And, in coming weeks, we will see the same pattern in the next generation, in Jacob, as well as in the generation that would follow him. The pattern of lying and deceiving that we see in Abraham and Isaac will be a part of what leads to Jacob being drawn to the same tendency to lie and deceive. It was a strong pattern of the sin of one generation visiting the next. It makes you wonder whether this kind of pattern can ever be broken.

### **My Question Today: Does this Ancient Story Have Any Relevance to You?**

When I was with a group of our pastors and staff studying this story last Tuesday, I read the passage and then asked, "Should I speak about the generational aspect of the story? Does it have any relevance to any of us and our families?" And, there was silence. So, I said, "Oh, I guess not. Maybe I should talk about something else." Immediately everyone said, "Our silence isn't saying that! It's a very personal subject though. This is a very deep and personal issue – but we need to talk about it." So, I am.

As I have talked about this issue in a variety of settings over the years, I've learned that people often go quickly to blaming others – and, please know that if we look for flaws in our families, we all will find them. There is a lot of blame to go around. And, as I've said, the patterns that we see in ourselves, that we also see in our parents and grandparents, often are deeply engrained in us. The stories I've shown you this morning are powerful reminders of that. You might think that the messes that Abraham's deceptions had brought about would have been enough to have scared his son Isaac out of doing the same things. But, we quickly, and almost instinctively, act out what we've seen modeled in our homes.

I often read the pre-Jesus stories like those of Abraham and Isaac and how they recur throughout the Old Testament and am reminded of how Jeremiah 31 owned up to the fact that, though the people of God had been given God's laws, they had been unable to live for God no matter how hard they tried. So, Jeremiah prophesied of a day when God would enter into a new covenant with his people, one written on our hearts – one that would offer a new hope for our lives to be different. That's what Jesus came to bring about. Jesus says he is able to

set us free, even from family flaws. Quite simply, he started by living the life no one else had been able to live, life as God intends it to be lived, i.e., without sins like deception and lying. Then he died the death we all deserve but he died in our place. So, he offers all who trust him forgiveness and a new beginning. When we place our faith in him, we are “born again” – born into a new family, the family of God.

Then, after his death and resurrection, Jesus gave us two gifts, given for our re-making: 1) the gift of the Holy Spirit, and 2) the gift of the church. The Holy Spirit offers us the power that raised Jesus from the dead – and he can raise us up out of our old family patterns so that we can begin to be like our Heavenly Father. And, within the family of God, we should find the kind of community that will facilitate our growth in Christ. All this starts when you trust Jesus and make a commitment to life in his church.

But, how then do we get from where we are to where Jesus promises we will be, i.e., freed from family flaws? We’ll be talking more about this in coming weeks. Today, I offer two words: 1) insight and 2) skills.

### **To Take Home: Gain Insight; Gain Skills**

**Gain Insight** – *Identify specific areas of generational failure.*

The stories of Isaac and Jacob point out a specific area of vulnerability that came through the sins of one generation visiting future generations. For them, it was the tendency to deceive, especially when they were under great pressure. Today, I encourage you to take time and prayerfully consider where you might be vulnerable as well. Ask God for insight into this. It might be lying, unfaithfulness, pornography, anger, etc. Please, don’t do this so that you can say, “Well, my Dad had this problem so it’s his fault that I’m like this!” No, it’s not all his fault. And, remember that he too was a product of generations of generational flaws.

Identify the problem and then take personal responsibility for your actions. You’re made in God’s image. You make real choices that aren’t forced on you in spite of what’s gone on before. So, don’t adopt a victim’s mentality. Yes, **your family affects you. But, your family is not you!** I’m not saying you should excuse the sins of your forefathers. They are serious. Isaac placing Rebekah in a place of danger was serious. But, you can be a part of the solution. **With the power of the Holy Spirit operating in you in the context of the life of the church, you can change.** You no longer have to be a slave to fear, anger or deceit. You are now a child of God.

**Gain Skills** – *Utilize the resources God provides to develop skills to live differently.*

1. One God-given resource is supposed to be **the life of the local church**. Paul said that in church we are to experience the love of our Father in such a way that “*we become filled to the measure of the fullness of God (Eph 3:14, 19).*” **I encourage you to continue to come regularly to our gathered worship services.** When we’re together opening our Father’s Word, we hear him speak to us. I pray he is speaking to you today. **I encourage you to find a small group** – and I pray it will be a very open and grace-filled group of people. All of us are still being re-made. None of us is fully Christlike yet. I pray that, more and more, in our LAC small groups, we’ll be able to talk about things like generational problems, pray together for God’s help, and hold one another accountable for holiness.
2. **Prayer Support** – Each time we meet in worship, we offer prayer at the end of the service. Please don’t dismiss the importance of this. My view is that some of the generational bondages we face have to do with the fact that our struggles are not just against flesh and blood. There are many kinds of forces that lead to evil in our world. Often, prayer is the place we must start if we will find freedom. And, often, you need your church family to pray with you, prayer to be set free. When God speaks to you about such matters, be sure to draw upon your brothers and sisters in Christ to pray with and for you.
3. **Books** – A sermon like this cannot begin to address all the questions you might have or knowledge you might need. Let me suggest two books: 1) For those who come from “extended family heritages” (which is almost everyone other than those whose heritage is from North America and Western Europe), I suggest *Following Jesus without Dishonoring Parents*. [https://www.amazon.com/Following-Jesus-Without-Dishonoring-Parents/dp/0830813586#reader\\_0830813586](https://www.amazon.com/Following-Jesus-Without-Dishonoring-Parents/dp/0830813586#reader_0830813586) For those of us who come from “nuclear family heritages”, I suggest *Unlocking Your Family Patterns. Finding Freedom from a Hurtful Past* by Henry Townsend. [https://www.amazon.com/Unlocking-Your-Family-Patterns-Finding-Freedom-from-a-Hurtful-Past/dp/0802477445/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1527874779&sr=8-1&keywords=unlocking+your+family+patterns#reader\\_0802477445](https://www.amazon.com/Unlocking-Your-Family-Patterns-Finding-Freedom-from-a-Hurtful-Past/dp/0802477445/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1527874779&sr=8-1&keywords=unlocking+your+family+patterns#reader_0802477445)
4. **Referral** – You may need some one-to-one help from Christ-centered counseling professional. We will seek to help you locate one if you will call 626.844.4794.

I conclude by taking us back what God revealed about himself:  
*I, the LORD your God... visit the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation... but show love to a thousand generations of those who love me.*

I want you to leave with a newfound hope today. Notice the way that the visiting of sins goes only to the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> generations – but the love of God goes to a thousand generations. The love and grace of God is greater than human sinfulness. Our heavenly Father binds the wounds of the brokenhearted and sets free those imprisoned in darkness. So, call out to Him as your Father, and pray for his renewing grace to be at work in you and your home. Trust in His love for you and never give up. Our Father sent His only Son to die and rise again to forgive your sins, to heal what is broken, and to set you free.