

Genesis 26:1-3
Covenant Grace, pt1

In Grace-o-logical Order. Perhaps you've seen one of those Bibles where the passages are all chopped up and rearranged in chronological order. I don't recommend them.

The arrangement of the events in the books of the Bible isn't designed to help you pass an exam on the order in which they occurred. That's called chronology, and though books are *often* in chronological order, *sometimes* they are not.

Bible books do teach us a lot about history. In fact, the history you get in a Bible book is more reliable than the history you get in any history book. Bible books teach us a lot about history including dates and ages and chronology—but they do so because God acts in history, and Bible books are given by God to make Himself known to us. So, although Bible books are *often* chronological. They are *always* theological. “Theo-” from “theos” meaning God. They are always in an order to teach about God, for God to reveal himself to us.

I think we have a case of that here. It seems that Genesis 25:27-34 probably happen *chronologically* after 26:1-33, or at least chronologically after 26:11. And we have chapter 26 before this morning. So why is it possible that 25:27-34 appear before 26? There is a theological order here as well. You don't have to accept this idea that 25:27-34 probably come between 26:33 and 26:34 to see that there is a theological order here. But *the theological order* of Genesis is designed here to show us something about the birthright that Esau had just despised. You see at the end of 25:34 says “thus, Esau despised his birthright” and then it start Genesis 26 by describing in this event of Isaac's life what that birthright was, and how Isaac receives it not by earning it but by God's promise and God's action.

You might even say that the passage is in *grace-o-logical order*. That is not an actual word. *Grace-o-logical* is a word that I made up for us to see that God arranges these passages that the order they are in to show us about his grace--God does not tell us everything that happened in Isaac's life and this chapter is the only thing that we hear about Isaac in Genesis. God's favor, God's relationship with us, and God's promises aren't because of our good behavior; they're despite the fact that we deserve is punishment, not favor; and abandonment, not relationship; and curses, not promises. And the fact that God does this—He gives favor and relationship and promises to people who deserve punishment, abandonment and curses—That's called grace.

In 25:28, we read that Isaac loved Esau for game in his mouth. And now the way this begins, there is a famine in the land. And as we read in 26:1-3, it's as if Moses has pulled us aside and said, “Now, I'm going to tell you about the covenant promises that God made to Isaac, but I want you to see something about Isaac first.” Food is a weakness for

Isaac, and in this passage, the food has run out. There's a famine. Isaac's weak on this point. And for all of his other virtues, Isaac's not the father you might have thought he was. And so He has told us ahead of time that Isaac is not as spiritually perfect as we might have thought he was if we didn't have 25:27-34 come before these covenant promises that we get in the first five verses in the chapter 26.

And you're about to find out that goes for the kind of husband that he is, too. So, this birthright that Isaac got, and that Esau has despised. This is God showing us that you don't get it because you're strong, and you don't get it because you're good. In fact, it's nearly the opposite. The birthright actually is part of God's plan to substitute His strength for our weakness, and His goodness for our wickedness."

Dear congregation, that's called grace. You remember what God told Paul when he wanted his thorn in his flesh taken away: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." And those of you who have been here for a while know that we have a working definition of grace. Good stuff for the Hell-deserving; power for the helpless. That is called Grace.

And the first thing that we see God graciously give Isaac is law. A command. Instruction. Look at verse 2 (verse 1 is a summary of the situation through verse 6). "Yahweh appeared to him and said 'Do not go down to Egypt; dwell in the land of which I shall tell you.'" The first thing God graciously give Isaac is law. What a sweet thing to be instructed, commanded by God. To have him tell you what to do. Not to live according to our own will. What a sweet thing not to live according to our own wisdom. Our own will is wickedness, and our own wisdom is folly. But God in His grace gives us law.

Grace is the difference between being Saul and being David. Saul, late in his life, did not know what to do because he is without an instruction from God. Saul, earnestly seeking a word from God anyway he can get it—a prophet, a priest, a medium, or a diviner—because God won't speak to him. Grace is the difference between not having God's commands and having God's commands as a kindness of God.

We would rather be like David who, at the very same time, would ask Yahweh about everything. David was with words from God all over the place. It is almost like David wouldn't do anything unless he asks God first. He is so glad to have instructions of God. "Should I go up?" And Yahweh says "Go up." "Should I go out?" And Yahweh says "Go out." "Should I meet them in battle?" And Yahweh says, "Actually I got a better plan. Go around their flank and come up from their rear," and when he does, Yahweh goes before him and panics the ranks. And so on. Instructions and commands from God is great grace from God.

Here, Isaac's in danger. Because game in his mouth is a weakness and now there is a famine. Abraham didn't even want to leave the promised land to get Isaac a wife. But game-in-his-mouth Isaac is hungry, and there's good eating in Egypt. The promised land isn't exactly the first thing on his radar at the moment. So he is not in danger of just starving to death, but he is in spiritual danger.

I wonder if you had a week like that this past week. Or maybe you will have a week like that this week. When God, and His glory, and the glory that we will enjoy forever with him, and the holiness that we must all have if we are to see God in glory... have you had a week that in which those things took a back seat? What a gracious thing then when God gathers you to Himself among His people and resets the game for you, refocuses the lenses so that the game-in-your-mouth stuff is pushed to the background for a while, and God's promises and God's gospel come back into crisp clarity. And we get to see who He is in Exodus 1 and 2, and we get to hear that He is God and we are not and He dictates the terms in Mark 8. And we get to see that He is God of grace in Genesis 26, the God who gives good stuff to hell-deserving people, the God who makes His power to shine the most perfectly when He exercises it in the midst of our weakness.

Isaac's in spiritual danger. There's a famine on, and the promised land isn't the first thing on his radar. But it's about to be. Because God's about to make some huge promises to Isaac, bigger even than the ones He made to Abraham.

But first God gives Isaac a command. First He says do not go down to Egypt. First He says dwell in the land of which I shall tell you. This is what it means to be in relationship with God: to count His promises better strength and more joyful hope than all the world; and then because of His promises, because He is the god who makes promises like that, who has brought us into relationship like that, to receive His commands is pleasant protection. For the believer, God's commands are indeed pleasant protection. They don't make us pleasing to God. Obeying commands can't make us pleasing to Him; only Jesus can make us pleasing to Him; but, His commands do tell us what pleases God. And therefore we love God's commands, because we love to please Him. His commands are pleasant.

But they are also protection. Sin is so dangerous, so deadly—soul killing and hell bringing for the unbeliever, and even for the believer sin is fruit-killing and effectiveness-nullifying. You remember the opening passage in 2 Peter 1 we studied that if aren't growing in the virtues of grace, we will be unfruitful and ineffective. So sin is dangerous, nullifying and deadening even in the life of a believer.

So God's commands aren't just pleasant for the believer but a protection. What is sin? Any want of conformity to or transgression of the law of God. So God's law and His commands are pleasant protection.

So that is what Isaac's is getting here in v2: When God says "Do not go down to Egypt; dwell in the land of which I shall tell you," he is receiving pleasant protection. Now we see even in this command that obedience requires faith. We know, because v1 has summarized it for us, that "the land of which I shall tell you" that God talks about is Gerar. Isaac doesn't find that out until v6. All Isaac knows is that the God who is telling him where not to go, Egypt, and where to go, "the land of which I shall tell you," is the God who has made all of these promises in vv3-5.

I wonder, dear children, if you've figured out yet that one of the reasons God gives you parents to obey is because in learning to obey *them*, you're learning the greater thing of obedience in general. You are learning the discipline of obedience itself, which of course this is important, because learning obedience is necessary if you are to obey God from your heart. Learning obedience to your parents trains you in obeying God. Honor your father and your mother. Obey your parents in the Lord. These are pleasant protections.

Sometimes, mom and dad will tell you to do things, and you do it just because they are mom and dad. Just like Isaac is going to go to the land where I shall tell you, just because it is the God who made these promises who is telling him where to go. Sometimes mom and dad tell you to do things that seem to you not to be the best plan. And at those times you need to remember that part of obedience is understanding that your parents have been set over you by God for your good, often for the very purpose of *protecting you from* what you would have preferred or thought would be better to do. I am sure if Isaac had thought about it, his plan to go down to Egypt and how God prevented him from that plan and he had remembered how Abraham himself wouldn't leave but sent his servant to go get Rebecca. Abraham didn't send Isaac. He didn't want his son to leave the promised land either. I am sure he would have seen it in the hindsight and did see it in hindsight His pleasant protection.

You see, Isaac thought the best plan would be to go to Egypt. Isaac didn't even know where he would end up. God says, "dwell in the land of which I shall tell you." But he goes anyway. He goes because the one giving the command is God, and not just any God but the God who has made these wonderful promises to him.

And I wonder, dear congregation, if do we obey God like this. Maybe obeying mom and dad isn't the only thing that doesn't make sense to you. Maybe taking a lower grade by not cheating sounds to you like a poor plan. Doesn't sound like a good plan to take a lower grade. Maybe Sabbath keeping sounds boring to you, maybe ignoring how you want to worship and going instead to the Bible to find out how God wants you to worship sounds stuffy, maybe looking at lustful photos or videos sounds exciting, maybe having a bitter heart sounds satisfying, maybe wishing your circumstances were different sounds normal. But what we have just heard is how our hearts, how our will, how our wisdom leaves us to break the 5th, 8th, 9th, 4th, 2nd, 7th, 6th, and 10th commandment.

And I just described several things that I have been tempted to do myself. I don't doubt that every one of us has broken to some extent these commands in our hearts this week. So I can tell you from experience that these are good commands. These are pleasant protections. I can tell you how they will protect you from heartache. I can tell you that they will preserve you from disease, and tend toward a long and pleasant life. And all of these things would be true.

But we can decide to obey God's commands we can come from this text this morning and say I am determined to obey God for a simpler and better and higher reason on top of all of these. We need to obey God's commands, and we want to obey God's commands, because they're *God's* commands.

They're the commands of the One who made us.

They're the commands of the one who has revealed Himself to us, and invited us into relationship with Himself in His son.

They're the commands of the God who has given His Son and invited us to call upon His name and be saved.

They're the commands of the God who has promised astonishing things in Jesus—things like that we who believe in Him will shine like the sun in the kingdom of our Father, having been conformed to the very image of Jesus Himself. They are the commands of God. They are the commands of God the One who has made these kinds of promises.

So, let's move on to v3 and look at some of these promises that God made Isaac.

First, **the presence promise**. "Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you." Ok, I cheated. "Sojourn in this land" is actually a command. But it belongs to the promise. "I will be with you."

Sojourn. We don't say 'sojourn' anymore. I wonder if any of you children know what the word 'sojourn' means. You don't hear American's going to work in Iraq for a year saying, "I'm going to sojourn in Iraq." It means to be somewhere temporarily and not really have property there, not put down roots, and have very few actual rights. So basically God is telling Isaac, be an immigrant in this land, have nothing to speak of for your self in this land, or nothing permanent to speak for your self in this land. And that is how we can understand the promise in light of the command at the beginning of v.3. Because God is saying, "Be an immigrant in this land, and I will be with you." And the Bible tells us that Christians are immigrants on earth. We are not citizens ultimately or first, at least, of any country here. We are citizens first of heavenly country. So we are

sojourners and immigrants of this land. But the command He gives us is be an immigrants in this land, and I will be with you.”

And when we see it that way, we can see what God is saying here to Isaac. God is saying, “I, God, am more stabilizing than any roots that you can put down; I am more prospering than any land that you can own; I am more liberating than any right of citizenship that you can have; Go ahead and go without any of these things; you don’t need them; be an immigrant; and *I will be with you.*”

This is the first time in the Bible we have seen the presence promise stated so plainly in these words: “I will be with you.” And it’s a theme of this passage. God will say it again in v24: “*I am* with you.” And even a Philistine king will recognize it about Isaac in v28, looking back at the events of the chapter, a Philistine king will say “Yahweh has been with you.” God with us. The presence promise is a major theme in this passage.

God with us! He by Himself is true blessing. He alone is the original source of every other blessing. We have nothing if we do not have God with us. And if we seem to have nothing else, yet we may be sure that if we have God with us, we have everything! What a promise this is that He makes Isaac: “I will be with you.”

Now some of you have had a little Hebrew instruction, though you don’t know it, because as soon as I said, “God with us!” some of in your minds have said, “Immanuel.” The Hebrew lesson from Matthew chapter 1 or perhaps something you learned in Bible class in your schooling or Bible class at church. It is Isaiah’s prophecy in chapter 7 and 8 that the messiah would be God with us. It is Gabriel’s words to Joseph that one of Jesus’ names is Immanuel: God with us. And God with us is everything. We learn that In Jesus is *all* the blessedness that God promises. In Jesus is *all blessedness, period!*

So that’s promise one, here: the presence promise. God with us. And next we see: **the promise of blessings now and later**. God says, “Sojourn in this land and I will be with you and will bless you.” That’s now. That’s in this land. That’s in the time that God is with Isaac. Then God says, “for to you and to your offspring I will give all these lands.” That’s not coming until later. Isaac isn’t actually going to get all these lands himself as an individual. The timing that God described to Abraham in chapter 15 makes that clear, and v4 does too, because it is going to repeat this. And it says “to your offspring I will give all these lands.” Isaac will receive the land in his offspring.

So what we see here in v.3 is promises for now and for later. And this brings up something that we see throughout the Bible: God’s promises in God’s promises and special relationship with His people, don’t start over with every individual.

They endure, they carry over, from one individual to the next. We saw that this morning in Exodus 1. When it says Joseph died and all his brothers and all that generation died,

but and then it describes the covenant promises happening. God made them fruitful, God made them strong, as Pharaoh said, “there are too many of them and they are too mighty!” So God’s promises do not start over with every individual, but they endure, they carry over from one generation to next. That special relationship is called covenant, and Isaac was born into it. Abraham wasn’t. God had to cut covenant with Abraham, but “cut” is not the word in v3 where we see “establish.” “And I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham, your father.” That word means make something stand that already exist or to keep something stand even.

What will God make to stand? The oath, the covenant, that He originally cut with Abraham. And doesn’t end with Abraham and start over with Isaac that the covenant that endures and carries over from one generation to the next.

You see the impact of this upon Isaac, don’t you? Because God says I am making promises to you, Isaac, that don’t include a blessedness for you, they include a blessedness for your children, and their children, and their children. And by the way, Isaac, you know that this is the way I operate as a covenant God, because the relationship that you have with me didn’t start with you; it started with your father Abraham. I am establishing, making to stand, the oath I swore to Abraham, your father.

You see, Isaac was born into the covenant. He was born ahead of his father. He didn’t grow up as an idolater in Ur. Isaac grew up worshiping Yahweh, trusting Yahweh, resting in the promises, knowing and submitting to God’s commands, recognizing even in his circumcision that by grace God provides blood to atone for sin, and so on. Isaac grew up in special relationship with Yahweh. It was his *birthright*. It was that birthright that Esau was despising. Remember, Esau despised his birthright for the bowl of the red, children. Here is the birthright; I will be with you, and I will bless you, and I will bless your offspring.

Conclusion. And many of you have just such a birthright. You have been born or adopted into covenant families as you are covenant, children.

God is the One who chose what home you’d end up in with which parents. He decided that He would place you in the special relationship with Himself. Because of the home that you grow up in, you start out as a part of His visible church. You start out in covenant with God. He gave you that birthright.

Now, just having that birthright doesn’t save you; if anything, it makes your danger greater, and your need for Christ more urgent. Because remember, Esau was born into the covenant too. Esau grew up with the same things in Isaac’s house that Isaac grew up in Abraham’s house. He had the birthright. You see, you can be in covenant with God, and become a covenant breaker. You can have the birthright, and become a birthright despiser.

I suppose that although being a covenant child is a great privilege, this is one way that being a covenant child might actually be a bit dangerous. Every child comes into this world as a cosmic rebel. Every child comes into this world wanting to be their own God, wanting to live for their own pleasure, wanting everything around them to praise them. So we all have that danger together.

But children who don't have God as a birthright aren't birthright despisers when they reject Him. Pagan children who didn't grow up with covenant with God, did not grow up in God's church, they are not birthright despisers. They did not have the birthright. Children who aren't in covenant with God can't become covenant breakers. These are things, dear children, who are in covenant with God, these are things that add to the urgency of your resting in the things that you hear about week by week of your taking advantage of the great blessedness of hearing the gospel from your youth in the home and gathering with God's people as part of His church on the Lord's days.

Children who are not in covenant with God cannot become covenant breakers, but you can. So here is a simple application for you.

Don't!

Don't despise your birthright. Understand what the grace-o-logical order of Genesis 25 and 26 is showing you. That God gives grace: God gives good stuff for the Hell-deserving, and God gives power for the helpless.

Understand that part of this grace is His commands, that they are a pleasant protection, not because they can make you pleasing to God, but because they come from the God who promises to be pleased with all who trust in Jesus, for Jesus' sake. So obey His commands simply because they come from this wonderful God.

Don't despise your birthright. Lay hold of His promises. Decide that you would rather be an immigrant on earth and have God with you, than have everything the world has to offer and not have God.

Don't despise your birthright. Look at Jesus, "God with us"—Immanuel Himself—and behold in Jesus the fullness of who God is. Behold in Jesus and trust that in Jesus for everyone who believes in Him, He is the complete guarantee and enjoyment of all of God's promises.

Don't despise your birthright; rather, determine to treasure it yourself and to pass it on to your own children.

Ask God to make to stand with you the same promises that He has made to your parents. The same promises that He cut originally in Christ.

Determine that your children will be born into homes where they will worship the living God. Children. Determine that your children will be born into homes where they learn to trust God in Christ, where they learn to rest upon God's promises in Christ. Determine that your children will be born into homes where they learn to submit to God's commands in Christ, where they recognize even in their baptisms that by grace God has provided His Son's blood to wash away sin and His Spirit to join us to Jesus.

Determine that your children will be born into a special relationship with God that belongs only to the children of believers, that one day you will be both instructing them of the blessedness of their covenant belonging to God and warning them of the dangers of despising *their* birthrights, of the dangers of *their* becoming covenant breakers.

Don't despise your birthright. It is a glorious thing to be in covenant with the living God.

It doesn't mean you're perfect; in fact, it's a covenant in blood, and our sin is so bad that for covenant keepers this blood couldn't be ours; it had to be the blood of Jesus.

But it's either His blood on the cross for you, or you spending eternity in Hell.

Don't despise your birthright!