GENESIS

Chapter 26

*Isaac and Abimelech*

**Now there was a famine in the land—besides the earlier famine of Abraham’s time—and Isaac went to Abimelech king of the Philistines in Gerar. 2 The Lord appeared to Isaac and said, “Do not go down to Egypt; live in the land where I tell you to live. 3 Stay in this land for a while, and I will be with you and will bless you. For to you and your descendants I will give all these lands and will confirm the oath I swore to your father Abraham. 4 I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and will give them all these lands, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, 5 because Abraham obeyed me and kept my requirements, my commands, my decrees and my laws.” 6 So Isaac stayed in Gerar. 7 When the men of that place asked him about his wife, he said, “She is my sister,” because he was afraid to say, “She is my wife.” He thought, “The men of this place might kill me on account of Rebekah, because she is beautiful.” 8 When Isaac had been there a long time, Abimelech king of the Philistines looked down from a window and saw Isaac caressing his wife Rebekah. 9 So Abimelech summoned Isaac and said, “She is really your wife! Why did you say, ‘She is my sister’?” Isaac answered him, “Because I thought I might lose my life on account of her.” 10 Then Abimelech said, “What is this you have done to us? One of the men might well have slept with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us.” 11 So Abimelech gave orders to all the people: “Anyone who molests this man or his wife shall surely be put to death.” 12 Isaac planted crops in that land and the same year reaped a hundredfold, because the Lord blessed him. 13 The man became rich, and his wealth continued to grow until he became very wealthy. 14 He had so many flocks and herds and servants that the Philistines envied him. 15 So all the wells that his father’s servants had dug in the time of his father Abraham, the Philistines stopped up, filling them with earth. 16 Then Abimelech said to Isaac, “Move away from us; you have become too powerful for us.” 17 So Isaac moved away from there and encamped in the Valley of Gerar and settled there. 18 Isaac reopened the wells that had been dug in the time of his father Abraham, which the Philistines had stopped up after Abraham died, and he gave them the same names his father had given them. 19 Isaac’s servants dug in the valley and discovered a well of fresh water there. 20 But the herdsmen of Gerar quarreled with Isaac’s herdsmen and said, “The water is ours!” So he named the well Esek, because they disputed with him. 21 Then they dug another well, but they quarreled over that one also; so he named it Sitnah. 22 He moved on from there and dug another well, and no one quarreled over it. He named it Rehoboth, saying, “Now the Lord has given us room and we will flourish in the land.” 23 From there he went up to Beersheba. 24 That night the Lord appeared to him and said, “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.” 25 Isaac built an altar there and called on the name of the Lord. There he pitched his tent, and there his servants dug a well. 26 Meanwhile, Abimelech had come to him from Gerar, with Ahuzzath his personal adviser and Phicol the commander of his forces. 27 Isaac asked them, “Why have you come to me, since you were hostile to me and sent me away?” 28 They answered, “We saw clearly that the Lord was with you; so we said, ‘There ought to be a sworn agreement between us’—between us and you. Let us make a treaty with you 29 that you will do us no harm, just as we did not molest you but always treated you well and sent you away in peace. And now you are blessed by the Lord.” 30 Isaac then made a feast for them, and they ate and drank. 31 Early the next morning the men swore an oath to each other. Then Isaac sent them on their way, and they left him in peace. 32 That day Isaac’s servants came and told him about the well they had dug. They said, “We’ve found water!” 33 He called it Shibah, and to this day the name of the town has been Beersheba.34 When Esau was forty years old, he married Judith daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and also Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite. 35 They were a source of grief to Isaac and Rebekah.**

**26:1–33** The events of these verses took place before the birth of Esau and Jacob. They are narrated here to highlight the fact that the birthright and blessing Jacob struggled to obtain from his father (see 25:22, 31–33; 27:5–29) involved the covenant inheritance of Abraham that Isaac had received. (CSB)

**26:1** *the earlier famine of Abraham’s time.* See 12:10. (CSB)

Like his father before him, Isaac lived in the Negev, in south Canaan. And like his father when famine struck, Isaac was minded to head for Egypt to seek relief. His route took him through Philistine territory, along the Mediterranean coast. (PBC)

 *Abimelech.* Probably the son or grandson of the earlier king who bore the same name (see 20:2). (CSB)

C 97 years have passed since Abraham’s encounter with an Abimelech of the Philistines. Either “Abimelech” was a dynastic title, or this king was a descendant with the same name. (TLSB)

 *Philistines.* See note on 10:14. (CSB)

 *Gerar.* See note on 20:1. (CSB)

**26:2** *appeared.* See note on 12:7. (CSB)

It was in Philistine territory that God appeared to Isaac and change his plans to go to Egypt. (PBC)

**26:3-5** The Lord renewed the promises He previously made to Abraham. Isaac was blessed to carry on the covenant (AE 5:16-18). (TLSB)

**26:3** *I will be with you.* God’s promise to be a sustainer and protector of his people is repeated often (see, e.g., v. 24; 28:15; 31:3; Jos 1:5; Isa 41:10; Jer 1:8, 19; Mt 28:20; Ac 18:10; see also Ge 17:7 and note). (CSB)

 *the oath I swore to your father Abraham.* See 22:16–18. (CSB)

**26:4** *descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky.* See 13:16; 15:5 and notes. (CSB)

 *through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed.* See note on 12:2–3. (CSB)

**26:5** *because Abraham obeyed me.* See note on 17:9. (CSB)

 *requirements … commands … decrees … laws.* Legal language describing various aspects of the divine regulations that God’s people were expected to keep (see Lev 26:14–15, 46; Dt 11:1). Addressing Israel after the covenant at Sinai, the author of Genesis used language that strictly applied only to that covenant. But he emphasized to Israel that Abraham’s faith, “credited … to him as righteousness” (15:6), proved its sincerity by being obedient to God’s will in his time and that the Israelites must follow Abraham’s example if they were to receive the covenant promises. (CSB)

**26:1–5** When a severe famine forces Isaac to relocate his family, the Lord appears to him with words of comfort. In this adversity, the Lord promises to Isaac the same favor He did to Abraham: His caring presence, land, offspring, and blessedness to all people. In times of adversity, we should not doubt the Lord’s care for us. He promises that nothing will separate us from His love. • Thanks be to God that the blessing of the cross covers even our sins of doubt and forgetfulness! Lord, we praise You for Your boundless love. Amen. (TLSB)

**26:6** Instructed by God’s command and encouraged by His promises, Isaac changed his travel plans and remained in the land of the Philistines. (PBC)

**26:7** SHE IS MY SISTER – Like his father, Abraham, Isaac doubted the Lord’s protection and hid the truth regarding his wife. Cf. 12:10-20; 20:1-18. (TLSB)

It was a pathetic attempt to deceive, considering that he and Rebekah had two children. The vessels through which God transmitted and later implemented His promise were frail jars of clay, indeed. (PBC)

 *because she is beautiful.* See 12:11, 14. (CSB)

**26:8** *caressing.* The word in Hebrew (a form of the verb translated “laugh” in 17:17; 18:12–13, 15; 21:6 and “mock” in 21:9) is yet another pun on Isaac’s name. (CSB)

Laughing was a polite expression for intimate teasing or flirting appropriate for married people. “Laughing” is reminiscent of Isaac’s name (cf. 17:17; 18:12-13; 21:9). (TLSB)

**26:10** SLEPT WITH YOUR WIFE – Not knowing she was married, somebody else could have taken Rebekah to be his wife. (TLSB)

 GUILT UPON US – Since Abimelech knew that Isaac had the Lord’s favor, Abimelech assumed that such adultery would result in guilt before God. Isaac’s sin almost caused a curse rather than a blessing to all people. In contrast to Isaac, Abimelech demonstrated thoughtfulness. (TLSB)

**26:11** Although Isaac made a mockery of his faith, and although his pitiful attempt at deception put his wife and marriage in jeopardy and endangered the work of God, the Lord preserved His people and His plan. (PBC)

**26:12** PLANTED CROPS – Unlike Abraham, Isaac planted and harvested crops, signaling an important change in the family’s life. The abundant harvest is a sign of God’s favor and blessing. (TLSB)

 THE LORD BLESSED HIM – We might have expected that God’s Creator-name would be used. It was the covenant God who was keeping His promise to this important man, reminding him that God didn’t need his dishonesty, that He was very able without Isaac’s scheming to keep His promise to bless the family of promise. (PBC)

**26:13** BECAME RICH – In this way the Lord demonstrated faithfulness to His promise of vv. 2-5). (TLSB)

Psalm 103:10, “he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.”

**26:15** Ancient nomadic groups would fill in the wells of adversaries in order to drive them away (cf. 2 Kings 3:25). (TLSB)

Understandably much of the trouble centered around water rights. Water has always been a problem in Canaan, and it surely was here. (PBC)

**26:16** *you have become too powerful for us.* An indication that the covenant promises were being fulfilled. A similar complaint was voiced by an Egyptian pharaoh hundreds of years later (Ex 1:9). (CSB)

Isaac’s neighbors showed their spite in several ways. They stopped up the wells from which Isaac’s cattle drank, and when that failed to check his prosperity they asked him to leave. (PBC)

**26:18** NAMES – By reassigning the names given by Abraham, Isaac honored his father and indicated that God’s promise to Abraham continue with him. (TLSB)

**26:20** *The water is ours!* In those arid regions, disputes over water rights and pasturelands were common (see 13:6–11; 21:25; 36:7). (CSB)

**26:22** THE LORD HAS GIVEN – The fact that his servants had found water each time they attempted to dig a well was to him evidence that the Lord of the covenant was blessing Abraham’s descendants as He had promised. (PBC)

**26:23** BEERSHEBA – Once again Isaac moved with his large household and all his flocks, this time to Beersheba, on the edge of the desert. We are not told why he moved. Had the old rivalries with the local herdsmen over grazing right flared up again? (PBC)

**26:24** LORD APPEARED – The Lord appeared to Abraham to confirm His covenant promises after he separated from Lot in the water depute (13:14-17). Now, to assure continuity and equal favor in this uncertain time, the Lord renewed these promises to Isaac after a similar contentious water dispute. (TLSB)

 I AM WITH YOU – Now he was reassured that although he would remain a stranger in the land of promise he was not alone. (PBC)

**26:25** *built an altar.* See note on 12:7. (CSB)

After God revealed Himself, the patriarchs often built altars to the Lord in response to His gracious care (cf. 35:7). (TLSB)

Isaac had learned from his father to give God the credit not only for individual blessings of body and soul, but also for revealing his sacred truth to chosen people in each generation. (PBC)

 *called on the name of the Lord*. See 4:26 and note.

Where the Lord locates His name, there is grace. Luther: “For wherever mention is made of the erection of an altar and the building of a tabernacle, there the establishment of a little church is pointed out – a church in which people came together to teach and hear the Word of God, to pray, to praise God, and sacrifice” (AE 5:78). (TLSB)

**26:26** *Phicol.* See note on 21:22. (CSB)

Either an official title or a family name that a descendant bears here. (TLSB)

**26:27** WERE HOSTILE TO ME – Isaac thus interpreted his expulsion from Gerar. (TLSB)

**26:28-29** Abimelech acknowledged the superiority of Isaac because of the Lord’s favor for him. (TLSB)

Proverbs 16:7 tells us: “When a man’s ways are pleasing to the Lord, he makes even his enemies live at peace with him.” One day at Beersheba Isaac experienced the truth of this proverb when he received a surprise visit from the king of Gerar with two of his top officials. Even after Isaac had deceived them, the showed him the courtesy of permitting him to live in their land. True, they had stopped up his wells and later asked him to leave, but they had dismissed him in peace. Now they wanted an alliance of friendship, and Isaac was willing to make that. (PBC)

**26:28** BE A SWORN AGREEMENT – Initial oath in which participants invoke a curse on themselves. (TLSB)

**26:29** BLESSED BY THE LORD – By declaring Isaac to be blessed of the Lord, Abimelech also hoped for a blessing because he acted kindly toward Isaac. He recognized and confessed that the Lord was fulfilling His promises to Isaac. (TLSB)

**26:30-31** FEAST…SWORE AN OATH TO EACH OTHER – This sworn pact is binding, mutual agreement often ratified by an oath and a meal of friendship (cf. 31:53-54; Ex. 24:11). (TLSB)

**26:30** *made a feast.* Covenants were often concluded with a shared meal, signifying the bond of friendship (see 31:54; Ex 24:11). (CSB)

**26:33** *the name of the town has been Beersheba.* See note on 21:31. (CSB)

**26:34** *When Esau was forty years old, he married.* As had his father Isaac (see 25:20). Forty years was roughly equivalent to a generation in later times (see Nu 32:13). (CSB)

Isaac would have been age 100. (TLSB)

 *Judith … Basemath.* In addition to these two wives, Esau also married Mahalath, “sister of Nebaioth and daughter of Ishmael” (28:9). The Esau genealogy of ch. 36 also mentions three wives, but they are identified as “Adah daughter of Elon the Hittite,” “Oholibamah daughter of Anah … the Hivite” and “Basemath daughter of Ishmael and sister of Nebaioth” (36:2–3). Possibly the lists have suffered in transmission, or perhaps alternate names or nicknames are used. It may also be that Esau married more than three wives. (CSB)

 HITTITE – The Hittites were a powerful, diverse people whose kingdom’s center was in Asia Minor. Their religion included a pantheon of deities, foremost of which were a weather god and a sun goddess. The Canaanite names of these women (Judith and Basemath) likely indicate that this Hittite clan ha d adapted to Canaanite culture. (TLSB)

The chapter ends on an unhappy note involving Isaac’s older son Esau. Although he was the object of his father’s special love, Esau did not return that love. Without the knowledge of his parents and against their will, he married two Hittite wives. With this action he first of all showed disrespect for God’s wishes regarding marriage as the lifelong union of two people devoted to each other. But with his action Esau showed disrespect also for God’s promises to his grandfather and his father. Esau had little interest either in being a part of the covenant nation or in having his descendants share the promised blessings. The Hittite wives he chose were unbelievers who couldn’t train their children to love the Lord’s word and to cling to His promises. Instead they were members of Canaanite tribes who would fall under the judgment of God. (PBC)

**26:35** *They were a source of grief.* We are not told what the wives of Esau did. Very likely they continued to practice idolatrous religion with its abominations. (CSB)

By marrying Hittite women, Esau openly defied the tradition of the family and corrupted the line of Isaac. Cf. 24:4. (TLSB)

**26:6–35** Although Isaac doubts the Lord’s protection and lies to Abimelech, the Lord provides Isaac with agricultural prosperity and the respect of local rulers. When Isaac is displaced because of a water dispute, the Lord shows His care by promising His presence. Although we sometimes lack confidence in the Lord’s providential care, He daily and richly provides for all our needs of body and soul. He is richly present with us because He has placed His name on us in Baptism and feeds us with the true body and blood of Christ in the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper. • For all Your gifts we thank You, dear Savior! Amen. (TLSB)