

reading the Bible with Luther



Session 6: The Child of Promise Comes of Age (Genesis 23 - 36)

by Virgil Thompson

The Ordinary Life of Faith

Luther observes that the Bible describes the lives of the first believers—Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and his family—“*in a very ordinary covering.*” What, for example, do we learn from the Bible about Isaac, the child of God’s promise, but that he was born to his father and mother, that he grew up more or less in the normal way, that he eventually married, begot and raised children, tended cattle, and wandered about in various regions before he died an ordinary death? We see from this story, Luther concludes, where God gives faith to live and die—right smack-dab in the midst of family and friends, doing the ordinary work God has given us to do, serving the well-being of creation.

Faith does not take us out of ordinary life. Faith takes us down into the joy and the muck of ordinary life with all its complications, challenges, heartaches and delights, compromises, impossible dilemmas, surprises—pleasant and unpleasant—discoveries and successes, uncertainty and ambiguity. You can be sure, Luther assures his students, no one is going to live this life without sin. “*But,*” he is quick to add, “*so great is the power of the Word that it devours all these [sins], so that you can say, ‘I have my ... life ... in peace, in fear of and trust in Thee, and thus I know that all is well’*” (LW 5:5).

God Blesses Isaac

After Abraham and Sarah died, the Bible reports that God blessed Isaac and he settled down into family life at Beer-lahai-roi. If Isaac’s experience tells us anything, then we may be assured that—whether in Beer-lahai-roi or in Bemidji—settling into family life is when a saint’s real troubles begin.

To be certain, family life draws us into the deepest and highest joys of love and companionship. And no doubt Isaac and

Rebekah enjoyed their life together with family and friends as deeply as any of us. But if Christian family life today is anything like the family life of Isaac and Rebekah, then we may be certain that God’s blessing does not spare us from trouble. By the end of his life, Isaac had suffered his full share of adversity and heartache. The church may regard him as a saint, but you could not say that he was an innocent victim of the trouble he suffered in his life. He himself certainly would not have said so.

It would take a higher perspective than mine to draw the line between the troubles Isaac brought on himself and the troubles brought on by the trespasses of family and friends against him—to say nothing of the troubles stirred up by the devil and the enemies of faith. The Bible isn’t of much help in drawing the line; in fact, it isn’t even particularly interested in the question. Usually the Bible is content merely to chalk up the troubles suffered by people of faith to “*sin, death, and the power of the devil.*” And I guess that’s probably sufficient.

Of course, the down-to-earth necessity of fairness, harmony, and safety requires that down-to-earth judgments be made about right and wrong—who is to blame, and who is the victim. But with respect to the troubles that assault and call into question our faith in the promise of God, then the blame is all the same. Our troubles stem from sin, death, and the power of the devil. One thing we know for sure—as Isaac’s story bears testimony—in the life of faith, as Luther points out, “[when] *everything seems to have been achieved and overcome, then a new cross and new distress begin.*”

The Blessing of Trouble

Ordinarily, we do not think of trouble as a blessing. It is not something we would seek out, nor would Christians ever wish trouble on their friends—or their enemies for that matter. But

when troubles arise, faith views them in a different light than they could be seen apart from faith. As the Bible tells the story of these first believers, the blessing of God does not save the saints from trouble, affliction and distress. Rather, God defeats the devil by using trouble, affliction and distress as the means to make us real believers.

Luther sums up God's use of affliction to save sinners in one word: *tentatio*. It works this way: The continual assault of affliction compels us to confess that we cannot save ourselves. We are reminded that our sin has put us outside paradise. Here there are thorns and thistles, pain and hardship, conflict, and the flaming sword blocks the way to the tree of life. But if trouble and affliction prove we are unable to save ourselves and free ourselves from the bondage of our sin, in the same breath they drive us deeper into the Bible, prayerfully seeking refuge in the promise of God for us.

Dying and Rising to Deliverance

God did not spare Isaac trouble and heartache, not even on his deathbed. As his death was approaching, Isaac was preparing to pass along God's blessing to his eldest son, Esau. However, unbeknownst to Isaac, his wife was also cooking up a plan to trick him into bestowing his blessing on her favorite—the younger son, Jacob. When Isaac realized that the trick to deceive him had worked, he was devastated. And that is practically the last we hear about Isaac until his death is reported (35:27-29). While from this point forward Isaac's life may be the quiet life of a grandfather, he remains a blessing to his children and grandchildren. He seeks to pass on to them the promise of God's certain triumph over sin, death and the power of the devil, that faith may live in loving service of creation, here and now.

Isaac did not see the disappointment and heartache of his wife and family as reason to divorce them in search of greener grazing. As one sinner to and with other sinners, Isaac saw the disappointment and heartache as opportunity to love his family in the promise of God's love for him. He believed that without merit of his own, God had loved him freely, no strings attached, and that was all the reason he needed to remain in love with his family.

This is the life of the saints as reported in the Bible. They struggle against adversity to be—however quietly—of some good earthly service—however ordinary—to their neighbors. But they do not entrust their destiny to the legacy of their good works. They leave their good works where love is always happy to leave them: in the well-being of the neighbor. They entrust their destiny solely to God's gracious justification.

Like Father, Like Son ~

Mothers and Daughters, Too

This is what the trickster, Jacob, had to learn on the way to saintly distinction in the Bible's story of faith. Actually, "learning," is not a very good word to use in describing what has to happen to people in the course of becoming saints. Sinners do not learn to become saints, as though a sinner could take a course on discipleship—even if it were taught by Jesus himself. The original 12 disciples should be proof enough of that. As Peter and all the rest, including Jacob here, had to find out the hard way—sinners become saints by dying and rising in the promise of Jesus' forgiveness.

For Jacob, the dying and rising occurred on the shores of the Jabbok. We have the story of it in chapter 32 of Genesis. As the story is told, Jacob had come to the end of his rope. His life of trickery and betrayal had finally caught up to him. The sinner had nowhere else to turn, and no other way into the future but by the blessing of God's forgiveness. But that's never a thing that can be taken for granted. As Jacob learned—when it comes to the blessing of God's forgiveness, sinners haven't a leg to stand on. In the encounter with God at the Jabbok that night, Jacob had only one hope: to wrestle forgiveness out of God's final judgment of him. He knew he did not deserve it. Nothing could have been more apparent to him by that point in his life. His only hope was to wrestle forgiveness from the mercy of God.

The remarkable thing is that he succeeded! Jacob wrestled from God's mercy a future that he did not deserve. And ever-after, that has become the very name of the people of faith—*Israel*, which means "striving against the God who strives to have mercy on us." So you see, when we strive to wrestle from God the blessing of His unmerited forgiveness, then God has spoken His final judgment over us. It is the judgment He has been striving to speak over us since the day we were baptized: "Now, I have you just where I want you, child of promise, creature of my unmerited grace" and

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“forgiven sinner freeloading on the grace of your Lord,” as a friend of mine defines saints in the tradition of the Christian faith and God’s Gospel of truth.

Looking Ahead: Jealous of Joseph

In the next session we will study the portion of the story that features the third generation in faith, focusing especially on Joseph. You perhaps know that his brothers “sold him down the river” into slavery. It wasn’t merely that they were jealous of him. They were. And there’s nothing like jealousy to land family and friends in a sea of trouble. But to make matters worse, both Joseph and his father, Jacob, seemed to flaunt the way God had especially blessed Joseph. Joseph had it

all—good looks, physique, charisma, wisdom—and on top of it all he had the golden touch. But the blessing may have been too much. His family found him exceedingly hard to live with. So, they sold him down the river, only later to become completely beholden to him.

How strange the Bible’s story of faith, so full of twists and turns that it would be impossible to boil it down and box it up. As Leander Keck has said, when it comes to experiencing what is important, life-giving, and emancipating in the Bible’s story of faith, “Nothing can replace reading the [story] again and again, questioning and being questioned, objecting and being objected to, discovering and being discovered.”

reading the Bible with Luther — Bible study



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Bible Study and Prayer

Each installment of our series offers suggestions for reflection and discussion.

1. Luther observes of Isaac’s experience in faith: “*When everything seems to have been achieved and overcome, then a new cross and new stresses begin*” (LW 5:89). Could you say that Isaac’s experience is also true of your own life in faith?
2. I recall from seminary days a discussion in which some of us worried that perhaps we didn’t sufficiently suffer for the faith. To which the old sage, Arndt Halvorson, observed rather wryly: “*Oh, I wouldn’t worry too much about a thing like that. Suffering has a way of finding you.*” That certainly seemed to be the case for Isaac. Isaac didn’t go looking for affliction. It found him. And when it did he never complained about it, but looked upon it as the opportunity to live out his faith in trust of God’s promise and loving service to his neighbors. Luther attributes this to the power of the Word, which devours resentment, self-pity and anger to make us free for the

life of loving service. What do you think of Luther’s take on the story of Isaac?

3. Our study of Genesis 23–36 has focused on the “*blessing of trouble.*” Consider:
 - a. *What do I find most comforting, most disturbing about these chapters?*
 - b. *What background knowledge would help me better hear the message of these chapters?*
 - c. *What do these chapters promise to faith?*
 - d. *What do these chapters demand of faith?*

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