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How God Uses Ordinary People

Genesis 26:1-35

By

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Genesis Lesson 51

How God Uses Ordinary People Genesis 26:1-35

Have you ever felt that God couldn't use you to serve Him because you were just too ordinary? When I was in seminary, I heard a parade of gifted, dynamic, successful pastors and Christian leaders. Sometimes I would think, "I'll never be where they're at, because I'm not that gifted." Sometimes you wished they would bring in Joe Average, pastor of the Podunk Bible Church!

One reason the story of Isaac is in the Bible is to show us how God can use an ordinary person. Isaac was the ordinary son of a famous father, and the ordinary father of a famous son. Alexander Maclaren began a sermon on Isaac by noting, "The salient feature of Isaac's life is that it has no salient features." (*Expositions of Holy Scripture* [Baker], 1:202.) Although he lived longer than Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph, Isaac's life is pretty much covered in one chapter whose most exciting feature is some squabbles over some wells. You might say that Isaac was the Calvin Coolidge of his day. As you know, "Silent Cal" wasn't noted for much other than being quiet and sleeping eleven hours a day. When someone reported to Dorothy Parker the news that Coolidge had died, she replied, "How can they tell?"

Isaac was kind of blah. He wasn't bold like his father Abraham, who made a daring raid against the kings of the east. He wasn't shrewd like his son, Jacob, or a gifted leader like his grandson, Joseph. Yet God used him to work out His covenant promises. His life shows us that there's hope in the Lord for all us ordinary people!

Moses wrote Genesis 26 mainly to show the nation Israel how God was faithfully working out His covenant promises. Isaac lagged behind God, even as his son Jacob tended to run ahead of God. Yet in spite of Isaac's slowness—and even sin—God blessed him because of His covenant with Abraham. Abraham's descendants would be blessed because of their relationship to him; but, like Isaac, they had to grow in faith and obedience. As God's blessed people, they were to become a blessing to others.

Christ has promised that He will build His church. In spite of our slowness—and even sin—God will bless and use us to fulfill His purpose of blessing all nations through Christ, because of our relationship to the Father through the Son. But we need to grow in faith and obedience. So the emphasis of the chapter is on God's working out His purpose through ordinary people who obey Him.

To accomplish His purpose, God uses
ordinary people who obey Him.

1. God uses ordinary people.

Note how Isaac was an ordinary man with ordinary problems:

A. Ordinary people have ordinary trials.

Isaac had ordinary trials. Verse 1 tells us that “there was a famine in the land.” Critics argue that Genesis 26 is some editor's confused combination of the stories about Abraham's going down into Egypt during the famine or of his going to Abimelech (see Gen. 12:10-20; 20:1-18). But the text is careful to distinguish this situation from the earlier famine, and many details differ, so there's no reason to doubt the historical accuracy of these events.

But the interesting thing is to note that there was a famine in the land. Which land? The promised land! The land God had promised to Abraham and his descendants, later described as flowing with milk and honey. There was a famine in that land. While God easily could have supplied Isaac with plenty of food in spite of the famine around him, He did not do that. God's chosen man had to suffer along with all his pagan Canaanite neighbors.

Trials are the ordinary lot of God's people; they always have been and always will be, until Jesus returns. Isaac did not question, “God, why are You allowing this famine in the promised land?” Isaac didn't rebuke the famine in the name of the Lord. Granted, he didn't respond properly. But this wasn't the first nor would it be the last trial of this sort to come on God's people in the promised land.

Trials are the normal experience of God's people, even when they're right where He wants them to be. Somehow we've picked up the notion that if God has called us to a place or to a certain ministry, we won't encounter any problems. Everything will be

milk and honey. When the road gets rough, we wonder what's wrong. "Maybe I'm not in God's will."

Former Supreme Court justice, Louis Brandeis, once said to his frustrated, impatient daughter, "My dear, if you would only recognize that life is hard, things would be so much easier for you." Our Sovereign God has always used trials, even with His servants who are in the center of His will, to drive us to greater dependence on Him. I encourage you to read missionary biographies and learn of the trials that these dear saints have endured for the kingdom of God. When you read of what Adoniram Judson, Hudson Taylor, and others have gone through, it helps put your "famine in the land" in perspective. Trials are the ordinary experience of God's people.

B. Ordinary people have ordinary fears.

Isaac had ordinary fears. What do ordinary people do when trials hit? They panic. What did Isaac do? He panicked. It would be wonderful to read, "There was a famine in the land, so Isaac sought the Lord." But the text plainly states, "So Isaac went to Gerar, to Abimelech king of the Philistines." And it's clear that he wasn't planning to stop there. He was heading toward Egypt, when the Lord intercepted him at Gerar.

You also see Isaac's fear when he pawns off Rebekah as his sister (26:7), following in the footsteps of his father. Why do such a despicable thing? He was afraid for his life. And, after a section which describes repeated quarrels about wells with the local shepherds, the Lord appeared to Isaac and said (26:24), "Do not fear, for I am with you." The Lord never says, "Do not fear" unless somebody is afraid. Isaac had many fears.

Do you have any fears? If you say "no," you're like the guy in a Dr. Seuss book we used to read our kids. He meets a pair of pants which walks around with no one inside them. He says, "I do not fear those pants with nobody inside them. I said and said and said those words. I said them, but I lied them." We ought to take our fears to the Lord in prayer, and be open to ask for prayer for our fears. The people God uses are ordinary people with ordinary fears.

C. Ordinary people have ordinary sin.

Isaac had ordinary sin. I'm not implying that it's all right to tolerate a little bit of sin in your life. We should confess and forsake all known sin. But we need to remember that the only people God uses are redeemed sinners. Sometimes the enemy gets us thinking that God can't use us as long as we're such a mixed up bundle of good and evil. One minute we're in church singing "Holy, Holy," and the next minute a horrible thought pops into our minds, and we think, "Maybe someday I'll be holy like the preacher [yeah, right!], and then God can use me, but that day is a long way off."

Thank God He uses us while we're growing, before we've arrived! Look at the mixture of sin and obedience in Isaac's life. He starts off for Egypt without consulting the Lord. The Lord graciously appears to him and tells him not to go any farther. He obeys. The Lord even reaffirms the covenant which He had made with Abraham, and applies it to Isaac. But the next thing Isaac does is to lie about Rebekah because he's afraid he'll get killed!

There's a humorous word play in the Hebrew of verse 8, which says that the Philistine king saw Isaac "caressing his wife Rebekah." The King James Version quaintly translates it, "sporting with his wife Rebekah." The word comes from the same root word translated "Isaac," which means "he laughs." Here it clearly has a sexual connotation. Howard Hendricks said in our marriage class in seminary, "Whatever this sport was, it's obvious that you don't play it with your sister. And Isaac was a real pro at the sport—in fact, the sport was named after the guy!"

The nuance of the word play is not that it was wrong for Isaac to be "sporting" with his wife, but rather that his faithless behavior made a mockery of the great promise of God embodied in his name. Abraham and Sarah's laughter of doubt was changed to the laughter of faith as God fulfilled His promise in Isaac. But now Isaac was sporting his lack of faith in God's protection before this pagan king.

Just like his father, Abraham, before him (who did it twice), Isaac lied about his wife to protect his own hide and was rebuked by a pagan king. Critics say that it's the same story repeated with different names. But you don't need to look very far to see how true to life this is. Years ago I was going somewhere with our first-born behind me in her car seat. I rounded a blind curve on the

mountain road just below our house to almost rear end a car that had stopped in the road to admire the scenery. I hit the brakes and the horn and yelled, "You jerk!" From the back seat came a sweet little voice, imitating dad, "You jerk!" A knife went into my conscience! The sins of the fathers ...!

Again, the point is not that we tolerate our sin, but rather that we not despair that God cannot use us because we wrestle with sin. The ordinary people God uses are ordinary sinners just like you and me, but, as I'll show in a moment, sinners who are working at obeying God.

D. Ordinary people have ordinary hassles.

Isaac had ordinary hassles. The chapter shows the repeated hassles he had with neighboring shepherds over his wells. The Philistines had stopped up the wells which Abraham had dug. Isaac dug them out again. He dug some new wells, only to have the Philistines hassle him by claiming that the wells belonged to them.

Do you think Isaac ever wondered as he was covered with sweat and dirt from digging out one of these wells, "What does all this have to do with the purpose of God?" The purpose of God sounds so glorious, so spiritual! But Isaac spent his time hassling with neighbors and digging out wells they had stopped up. That doesn't seem very glorious!

Do you know how God was using these hassles? Each one forced Isaac to move a bit closer to the promised land, until finally he was so close to Beersheba that he decided to move back there again. The same night he moved to Beersheba, in the land of promise, God appeared to him and reconfirmed the promises made to Abraham (26:24). If Isaac hadn't had any hassles in Gerar, he probably would have been content to stay there all his life. God used the hassles to move him back where he was supposed to be.

Have you ever thought about why God allows hassles in your life? Maybe it's a hassle with your car, or with the plumbing in your house, or a hassle at work. If you'll submit to the Lord and be teachable, you'll discover that He uses everyday hassles to move you closer to the place where He wants you, the place of His blessing. Isaac never built an altar until the Lord got him back to

Beersheba. But when he got there, after all his hassles, he built an altar and called upon the name of the Lord (26:25).

So Isaac had ordinary trials, fears, sin, and hassles.

E. Ordinary people have ordinary family problems.

Isaac had ordinary family problems. The chapter ends by telling of Esau's marriage to two pagan women who brought grief to Isaac and Rebekah (26:34-35). These verses are inserted here to tell us the bent of Esau's life and to prepare us for the next chapter, where Isaac stubbornly persists in his desire to give his blessing to Esau. But there are years of heartache capsulized in the few words of verse 35. Here is the chief family on the face of the earth as far as God's purpose went, and yet they had problems. They were far from being a model family.

Again, I'm not suggesting that it's okay to shrug off your sin. If you are sinning toward your family, you need to deal with it. But I do want to encourage those whose homes are not perfect—and that's all of us! Many come to church every Sunday with smiles on their faces and sorrow in their hearts. We see the smiles and assume that their homes must be perfect Christian homes. But our home is hurting. So we mask our hurts and prevent the healing that could take place if we would learn to bear one another's burdens in Christian love. The Lord shows us here that the patriarch Isaac had trials and fears and sin and hassles and family problems. Yet the Lord was pleased to use Isaac as he learned to obey the Lord.

2. God uses ordinary people who obey Him.

Isaac's growth in obedience was slow, and it was never perfect. As an old man he was still partial to blessing Esau over Jacob, in spite of Esau's godless ways. But, in spite of his imperfection, you can see progress in obedience, and the Lord responded to it. When the Lord first appeared to Isaac to tell him not to go to Egypt, the Lord emphasized Abraham's obedience (26:5). The next verse reports Isaac obedience. It wasn't automatic. Remember, there was a famine. To obey, Isaac had to trust the Lord and change his plans. But he did it. When the neighbors contended with Isaac, he didn't fight for his rights. He sought peace by yielding his rights and moving on.

When Isaac finally moved back to Beersheba, where Abraham had lived, the Lord appeared to Isaac a second time, reconfirming His blessing and protection (26:24). The peace treaty with Abimelech and the news of water being discovered were two more evidences that Isaac was where God wanted him, in the place of obedience, where Abraham had obeyed the Lord. Beersheba means, "Well of the Covenant." If you have been wandering from the Lord, come back to the place of obedience and the Lord will bless you and confirm His promises to you.

Maybe you're wondering, "Why did God bless Isaac immediately after Isaac disobeyed God?" (26:12-13). There are two answers. First, it shows us that God's covenant promises are based on grace, not on works. God wants us to obey Him, and He blesses those who obey. But at the same time, He wants us to remember that His sovereign purposes do not depend on our obedience, but rather, on His sovereign grace.

Second, note that while God blessed Isaac materially, the very blessing was also a source of chastening, because it made the Philistines envy Isaac and stop up his wells (26:14-15). This chastening served to move Isaac back toward Beersheba, where God wanted him. The main point is how God was sovereignly working to accomplish His purpose through this ordinary man, Isaac. If it had been up to Isaac, he would have been content to stay in the land of the Philistines. But God graciously used the blessing as a chastening to move Isaac to the center of His will.

3. God uses ordinary people who obey Him to accomplish His purpose.

God's purpose is the theme of this chapter. He repeats it to Isaac in verses 3 & 4: "... I will be with you and bless you, ... and by your descendants all the nations of the earth shall be blessed." God's purpose involves blessing His people and using them to bless others through the Seed of Abraham, the Savior. The wells which played such a central role in Isaac's life were a tangible symbol of divine blessing. Abimelech, the foreign king, saw this evidence of God's blessing in Isaac's life, and sought peace with him so that he could share in those blessings. So this chapter shows God slowly but steadily working behind the scenes with this ordi-

nary man who was the son of Abraham to bring about His plan of blessing the nations.

It was not an instant process. Frankly, I'm not sure how much Isaac understood concerning God's plan for history. It would be 2,000 years before the Savior would be born as the descendant of Abraham. But through it all, God was steadily moving history forward according to His sovereign plan, using a bunch of ordinary people to bring it all about.

Today, we need to see ourselves in the stream of what God is doing in history. He has blessed us, not just so that we'll be blessed, but so that we can become a blessing to others. We can't bottle it up. He wants us, ordinary though we are, to be His channel for taking the message of the Savior to all nations. That sounds glorious, but all too often it involves hassles as mundane as digging wells and contending with aggressive people. God didn't give the land to Abraham, Isaac or Jacob in one magic swoop of His divine wand. Those to whom Moses was writing had to go through the battles of taking Canaan bit by bit.

And we have to struggle inch by inch, hassle by hassle, in taking God's message of salvation to those in Flagstaff and in every part of the earth. So remember to view the hassles of your life in light of God's bigger plan for history. If you'll obey Him, He will use those everyday problems that you, His ordinary child, go through, to accomplish His purpose of blessing all nations.

Conclusion

Dr. Howard Hendricks of Dallas Seminary is an extraordinary man who has had a worldwide impact for Christ. The beautiful thing is, God used an ordinary man who obeyed Him to reach Dr. Hendricks. Howie was from a broken home, raised by his grandmother in Philadelphia. He often wandered from tavern to tavern, looking for his alcoholic grandfather. A man named Walt, who taught a Sunday School class, came upon young Howie and some other boys and invited them to his Sunday School class. Howie didn't know what Sunday School was, but since it sounded like school, he wasn't in favor of it.

But Walt took an interest in those boys, challenged them to a few games of marbles, beat them at it, and then taught them how

to play better. Eventually, there were 13 boys off the streets of Philadelphia who attended Walt's Sunday School class. Nine were from broken homes, five were Roman Catholics.

Even though Walt never went beyond high school, 11 of those 13 boys went on to vocational Christian service, becoming pastors, missionaries, and seminary professors. God was accomplishing His purpose by using an ordinary man who obeyed Him.

God wants to use you like that. If you struggle with trials and fears and sins and hassles and family problems, you qualify, as long as you're also growing in obedience. As God blesses you, commit yourself to be His channel of blessing to others.

Discussion Questions

1. Where do you feel most inadequate as a Christian? How can God use you at the point of your inadequacy (2 Cor. 11:30)?
2. Why does God's blessing not necessarily mean a hassle-free life? Discuss in light of Gen. 26:12-21.
3. What current hassles or problems in your life could God want to use to help accomplish His purpose through you?
4. How can we achieve the proper balance between accepting our imperfections without excusing them?

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