

Hugo Bouter

Isaac, or fruitful in the land

“And he moved from there and dug another well, and they did not quarrel over it. So he called its name Rehoboth, because he said, For now the LORD has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land.”

Genesis 26:22

Living as a stranger in the Promised Land

The history of Isaac took place exclusively in the land of Canaan – when we include the southern land (the Negev) and the coastal strip. This is a peculiarity that attracts our attention, because in the lives of the other patriarchs it was different. In Genesis 24 we see that Isaac was not allowed to leave the land by his father. Someone else had to go to Haran and find a wife for him there (Gen. 24:5-9). In Genesis 26, he received a warning from the Lord Himself to remain in the land and stay there as a stranger. He was not to go to Egypt, as his father Abram had done earlier (Gen. 12:10-20; 26:2-6).

Accordingly, Isaac remained in Gerar, a place that can possibly be located south of Gaza. Later, at the request of Abimelech, king of the Philistines, he moved eastward and settled in the neighboring valley (Gen. 26:16-17; 26-27). This fact, that Isaac did not leave the promised land, is not without significance. We as Christians can also draw important spiritual lessons from it. Isaac is a type of Christ as the beloved Son of the Father, Who was willing to give His life as a sacrifice for sin. And as the risen Lord He is now the Heir of all things (Heb. 11:17-19). He possesses all power in heaven and on earth. The land of Canaan is a picture of the heavenly places,

where God has also given us an inheritance with Christ. The letter to the Ephesians confirms this parallel (Eph. 1:3, 20; 2:6; 3:10; 6:12).

There are two doctrinal applications to be made in connection with this truth. The first relates to Christ Himself as the beloved Son, the Heir of the world that is to come; the second to ourselves as "descendants" of Abraham, as children of promise (Gal. 3:29; 4:28).

1. Isaac is a type of Christ as the glorified Lord in heaven; we see Him there now with the eye of faith. He does not return to the earth in this dispensation to seek a bride down here, and acquire His heavenly companion. That is the work of the Holy Spirit who gathers the church into one. Christ does not leave His place in heaven, although He is already Heir of all things. As the heavenly Man, He waits at God's right hand until all things are subdued under His feet (Ps. 8:5-7; 110:1 and quotations in the New Testament).
2. As Christians, we are united to our heavenly Lord by faith. In Him we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (Eph. 1:3ff.). Like Isaac, He is the Blessed of the LORD (Gen. 26:29), and we have also been blessed in Him and through Him. Therefore, we are already now a heavenly people, citizens of a kingdom in the heavens (Phil. 3:20). But we experience this citizenship in the circumstances of life here on earth! In this respect, we are like the patriarchs. We are pilgrims with an "altar," a "tent" and a "well of water" (cf. Gen. 26:25). We are strangers and pilgrims (Heb. 11:13; 1 Pet. 2:11), just as Isaac lived as a stranger in the land of the Philistines.

This is why the lives of the patriarchs are so instructive for us as Christians, who on the one hand own nothing here and yet on the other possess everything (cf. 2 Cor. 6:10). Abraham, Isaac and Jacob lived in tents in the land of promise, as in a foreign country (Heb. 11:9). They had God's promises; they were richly blessed. Basically, they were the heirs of the promised land. Yet they wandered around in the land of Canaan as pilgrims, for they did not own the land. So it is with us. We are heirs to a heavenly homeland, a better land than the land of Canaan. All our riches, our treasures, our blessings are to be found there. We are a rich and blessed people of God. In every respect we have become rich in Christ (1 Cor. 1:5).

In this connection, compare what is said of Isaac himself in the book of Genesis: "The man began to prosper, and continued prospering until he became very prosperous" (Gen. 26:13). By the power of the Holy Spirit, we too may take possession of our riches and enjoy our blessings in the heavenly places. We thus possess our inheritance in the power of faith, while we make our way down here on the earth as pilgrims and strangers. Heavenly blessings belong to us, but we walk

by faith, not by sight. We know that at this time, as far as our earthly circumstances are concerned, we are absent from the Lord (2 Cor. 5:6).

This is also the key to understanding many passages in the New Testament, especially in the letter to the Ephesians. We are people with a heavenly inheritance, but we possess it as pilgrims. Indeed, we represent a heavenly Christ here on earth where He was rejected. We show His image in a world that has nailed Him to the cross. Soon we will appear with Him in glory, but now already we reveal the life of Christ here on earth. The characteristics of the new man are manifested in us by the power of the Holy Spirit, Who dwells in us.

Sowing and reaping in the Land

As soon as the Israelites entered the land of Canaan, the manna ceased and they ate from the produce of the land (Josh. 5:12). The land supplied all their needs; henceforth they ate of what the land of Canaan provided. Here in Genesis we read that Isaac could sow and reap in the land. The promised land amply supplied all his needs, for he reaped a hundredfold in the same year (Gen. 26:12). It was a particularly rich harvest that he reaped, especially if we consider that it was not a very fertile area where he lived as a stranger. But the secret of the blessing lay simply in the fact that the Lord blessed him.

As Christians, we too are richly blessed, and with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ. A "hundredfold harvest" is available to us. We may likewise, so to speak, "sow and reap" in this heavenly land. The yield of the promised land will certainly not disappoint us. The letter to the Galatians uses the imagery of sowing and reaping in spiritual life through the Spirit (Gal. 6:8). In the parable of the sower, we also read about a hundredfold harvest. The seed that fell into the good earth gave fruit, partly a hundredfold, partly sixty-fold, partly thirty-fold (Matt. 13:8). So the hundredfold fruit is the highest yield that is possible. So it is with the believer who hears and understands the Word of God. He has been sown in the good earth and can bear fruit to God, some of it a hundredfold. Such a person can sow in the field of the Spirit and there reap the glorious and rich fruit of eternal life (Gal. 5:22; 6:8-9).

There is also a prophetic application to be made in this context, for the land of Canaan will again bear rich fruit in the Kingdom of Peace. The Lord will have mercy on the remnant of His people. He will hear the heavens, and they will answer the earth, and the earth will answer with grain, with new wine and with oil, and they shall answer Jezreel (Hos. 2:20-22). The threshing floors shall be full of wheat, and

the vats shall overflow with new wine and oil (Joel 2:24). Israel will eat in plenty and be satisfied. God will bring a turn in the lot of His people. The days will come when the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him who sows seed. The mountains shall drip with sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it. God will plant His people in their land, and they will no longer be pulled up from the land He has given them (Am. 9:13-15).

Wells of water in the Promised Land

When we now return to the history of Isaac, we can see another important feature of his life as a stranger in the land of the Philistines, namely the possession of a good number of wells. The well at Beersheba, the well of the oath, can even be seen as the seventh well dug by Isaac's servants (Gen. 26:23-33). As noted above, three important features of Isaac's pilgrim life are indicated in this chapter: he owned an altar, a tent and a well at Beersheba. He was a worshipper: he had an "altar". He was journeying to a better, that is, a heavenly, homeland. He was just a stranger, and dwelled in "tents." But he also found "wells of water" all the time. So on the way, as a redeemed person, he could joyfully draw water from the wells of salvation (cf. Isa. 12:3).

The wells that Isaac dug dated back to the days of his father. They had been stopped up and filled with earth by the Philistines after Abraham's death (Gen. 26:15). The Philistines are a picture of nominal Christians who set their mind on earthly things (Phil. 3:19); they put their trust in the flesh. The Philistines were considered the arch-enemies of the Israelites. Thus flesh and Spirit are still opposed today.

Isaac dug again his father's wells and called them by the same names which his father had called them (Gen. 26:18). This was not traditionalism, but a return to what he had possessed from the beginning thanks to the efforts of his father and his servants. Thus, we still find the same ancient treasures in God's Word, wells of living water, which God's people have possessed "from the beginning" (for this term, see 1 John). There were also some wells about which he had quarrels with the Philistines. The disputes of the shepherds of Isaac with the shepherds of Abimelech can be compared to the conflicts between the apostles, the true shepherds of God's people, and false teachers and false apostles – even if they pretend to be pious. Even in the time of the New Testament there were conflicts and dangers that threatened the flock (Acts 20:29-30; Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 15:12; Gal. 1:6-9; Phil. 3:2; Col. 2:4ff; 1 Tim. 1:3-7; 4:1-5; 2 Tim. 2:14f; 3:1-9).

Isaac's servants dug in the valley and found a well of running water there (Gen. 26:19). This is the water that is most appreciated: the fresh water of bubbling springs and streams (see also Song 4:15). We find the same expression "living water" in the New Testament, in the conversation of our Lord with the Samaritan woman and also in His announcement of the coming of the Spirit on the last, the great day of the Feast of Tabernacles (John 4:10ff; 7:37-39). The streams of living water are a picture of the quickening work of God's Spirit.

The Philistines – nominal believers, false teachers – cannot assert any rights to this. They have no knowledge of the refreshing and quickening work of the Spirit. Esek (meaning "quarrel"), and Sitnah (meaning "enmity"), precede another well about which they had no disagreement. This one Isaac called Rehoboth (meaning "spaciousness"), because he said, "For now the LORD has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land" (Gen. 26:22). Thus, these conflicts ultimately resulted in room and fruitfulness in the land. This will also be true for us when we stand firm in the spiritual battles and continue to delve into the land given to us. We will then find both the upper and the lower springs there (cf. Judges 1:15). This will enable us to live in the realm of the Spirit – not that of the flesh –, and bear fruit to the glory of our Lord.
