

Hanging out With Heros

ISAAC

God's Blessing on
an Ordinary Life



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Peterson

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ISAAC: GOD’S BLESSINGS ON AN ORDINARY LIFE

Introduction

As you read this book, you may notice many great heroes of faith were strong-willed, natural leaders. Therefore, if you're easygoing, happy-go-lucky, and not overly ambitious, you may have trouble identifying with some of them. Don't despair. Not all people of great faith were leaders.

Isaac was not a leader. Gentle and passive, he didn't like to make decisions to tell other people what to do. He lived an ordinary, uneventful life. But to God, Isaac was as important as his remarkable father. When God introduced

himself to Moses, He said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Exodus 3: 5). Isaac’s life shows that God is just as interested in the average student, the second-string football player, and the unpopular kid as He is in the senior voted the most likely to succeed. So, whatever your personality, you can learn from Isaac.

Because Sarah, Isaac’s mother, was ninety when he was born, Isaac was a miracle baby, a child who would grow up with a sense of destiny. He was the fulfillment of God's promise. Through him, Abraham would become the father of many nations and the ancestor of the Messiah, Jesus.

When God’s Command Seems Illogical

As a young man, Isaac's faith in God received a severe test when God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son on an altar. (For a discussion of this sacrifice, see the introduction to “Abraham: The Ups and Downs of a Friend of God.”) Isaac “aced” the test. Although he was physically strong enough to resist his father, and although this command seemed to contradict everything God had promised to his father, Isaac obeyed. But when Abraham was about to stab Isaac, a voice from heaven directed that his life be spared. Isaac learned that God always keeps His promises.

Forty and still unmarried, he again passed a great faith test. Abraham did not want him to marry a woman who worshiped idols – thus narrowing the selection drastically. In fact, the only eligible women would be among Abraham’s relatives, far away in Haran. So, Abraham sent his trusted servant to find the right girl, certain that God had already chosen a bride for his son. Isaac, however, was not allowed to go along. In obedience and faith he stayed home, believing God would overrule any chance of error in this seemingly risky procedure. God rewarded his faith and obedience. For Isaac found that he truly loved Rebekah, the wife chosen for him by God.

After twenty years of marriage, Isaac and Rebekah had no children, though God had promised to make Abraham the father of many nations. So Isaac reminded God. Soon, Rebekah conceived, and then gave birth to twins, Esau and Jacob. Even before their birth, God told Rebekah “... the older will serve the younger” (Genesis 25: 23). Jacob, the younger, would therefore receive the inheritance and the special blessing usually reserved for the firstborn son.

When a famine ravaged the land, Isaac moved (sound familiar?) elsewhere in Canaan to Gerar, governed by Abimelech, king of the Philistines. But Isaac wasn't satisfied. Because the annual flooding of the Nile means good crops and plenty of food in Egypt, Isaac began thinking of going there. Such a move, however, would mean leaving the land God had promised Abraham. As Isaac was pondering this idea, God appeared and told him not to go to Egypt. Moving from a land of famine to a land of plenty seemed sensible, but God had other plans. Isaac obeyed God.

Temptation to Take the Easy Way Out

Isaac did not trust God for every problem he encountered in Gerar. Scared that some man might kill him in order to marry beautiful Rebekah, Isaac employed a scheme his father had used – he lied, telling everyone Rebekah was his sister. This plan backfired for Isaac just as it had for Abraham. One day, King Abimelech looked down from his window and saw Isaac kissing Rebekah – definitely not brother-sister stuff. Realizing that Rebekah was Isaac's wife, the king called Isaac in and chewed him out for lying. How humiliating for Isaac, a man who knew God, to be admonished by a pagan!

Faith grows only when a person actively seeks God and puts faith into practice. In his later years, Isaac grew careless, neglecting to put his faith into action. Those years were characterized by blunders. First, Isaac showed favoritism by doting on his older son Esau, the strong outdoorsman. He failed to recognize favoritism as a sin. Second, Isaac didn't attempt to prevent Esau from marrying a pagan woman. Because of Isaac's carelessness and weakness, Esau married two Hittite women. Third, Isaac embittered his wife, Rebekah, against himself – he favored Esau the outdoorsman, and she favored Jacob the homeboy. A divided family always leads to trouble.

Fourth, Isaac, because of his favoritism, did not take seriously God's word, which said the older son would serve the younger. Tradition required that the older son receive the inheritance and a special oral blessing, so Isaac did not have faith or courage to defy tradition and disappoint his favorite son. When the time came for the blessing, Isaac told Esau to kill wild game and prepare him a special meal. To correct Isaac's disobedience, Rebekah resorted to deceit: She cooked goat meat as Esau would cook his game, disguised Jacob

in Esau's clothes, and sent Jacob in to dishonestly receive the blessing from his blind father. The scheme worked perfectly. When Isaac realized he had been tricked, it was too late. The enraged Esau vowed to kill his brother, so Jacob fled for his life.

Isaac's life shows the value of great faith and the need to exercise faith always, even in everyday matters. Heed the warning of Isaac's life: Put faith into practice or suffer the consequences.

The Vision and the Visible

“Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, ‘Father?’ ‘Yes, my son?’ Abraham replied. ‘The fire and wood are here,’ Isaac said, ‘but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?’ Abraham answered, ‘God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.’ And the two of them went on together. When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, ‘Abraham! Abraham!’ ‘Here I am,’ he replied. ‘Do not lay a hand on the boy,’ he said. ‘Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.’ Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son” (Genesis 22: 6-13).

Sometimes God calls you, as He called Isaac, to obey without explaining to you the outcome. When this happens, you must not start trying to give God “help”. You'll get into big trouble if you try to work out the details and plan the steps that will lead to God's ultimate goal for your life. You may not see, for instance, how mopping the floor at Taco Bell every night will make you an effective Christian leader, but God does. You may not understand how studying chemical formulas or practicing on your tuba can affect your future,

but God does. As you live out the plot for the story of your life, you won't know how things are going to turn out, but God sees far ahead.

God's ways seem very puzzling. Joseph found that the path to the palace led through prison. Moses discovered that leading God's people meant leading sheep first. David learned that becoming king required him first to spend years in the wilderness hiding like a common criminal. Young Isaac found that living a deeper life with God meant facing death.

As he walked up the mountain with his father, Isaac finally realized he was the sacrifice. The father who had always shown him great love and tenderness now explained that God had commanded him to sacrifice his only son – but Abraham believed there would be a miracle. (For a discussion of this sacrifice, see the introduction to “Abraham: The Ups and Downs of a Friend of God.”) Isaac could have justified running away at that point. He could have thought, *If God went to all the trouble to work a miracle for me to be born, why would He want me sacrificed? After all, God needs me to carry on the family line that He promised my father. Maybe my father is imagining he heard God – Dad is getting old. Besides, it hurts to get stabbed. I don't think I want to be part of this faith experiment.*

But Isaac didn't succumb to such thoughts. He knew he'd been a miracle baby, and that he owed his entire life to God. He had complete faith. Theodore Epp writes about such faith: “(It) can subdue every passion of the human heart and every imagination of the carnal mind by bringing everything into an obedient subjection to God.” As the child of promise, the heir through whom God would bless the world, Isaac could see no reason why he should become a burnt offering. In fact, it seemed to contradict the plan God had revealed. But he complied. As he felt the ropes tightening around his wrists, the firewood poking his back, and his muscles tensing in anticipation of his father's knife, Isaac gave up the right to think things through for himself, and instead trusted God.

God had planned the plot with a wonderful surprise ending. He knew exactly what He was doing – just as He always does. What a wonderful walk down the mountain Abraham and Isaac must have had! Imagine how close to God they felt, how glorious the plan of God seemed. Yet it never would have

happened without faith that reached beyond human understanding. All this joy could have been spoiled by a little logical scheming and manipulating.

Keep the vision God gives you, but don't forget to obey Him right now, even when that obedience seems to be leading in another direction. When God expects you to obey without your seeing how He'll work things out, your job is not to connect the visible with the vision. God will do that. Your job is to make certain you hear God's voice and obey without question.

"He said to me: 'It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End'" (Revelation 21: 6).

"For I know the plans that I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29: 11).

"In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory" (Ephesians 1: 11, 12).

1. Why don't you have to work out your own future, and each step from the present reality to the goal God has for you?
2. Write down the promises contained in the above verses.
3. How can the promises in your list help you when something happens that apparently spoils all your dreams and plans?
4. Talk to God, telling Him you want to trust Him with your future.

An Arranged Marriage – God's Way

"He said to the chief servant in his household, the one in charge of all that he had ... 'I want you to swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I am living, but will go to my country and my own relatives and get a wife for my son Isaac.' 'The Lord ... will send his angel

before you so that you can get a wife for my son from there.’ He set out for Aram Naharaim and made his way to the town of Nahor. Then he prayed, ‘O Lord, ... May it be that when I say to a girl, “Please let down your jar that I may have a drink,” and she says, “Drink, and I’ll water your camels too” – let her be the one you have chosen for your servant Isaac.’ Before he had finished praying, Rebekah came out with her jar on her shoulder. The servant hurried to meet her and said ‘Please give me a little water from your jar.’ ‘Drink, my lord,’ she said, and quickly lowered the jar to her hands and gave him a drink. After she had given him a drink, she said, ‘I’ll draw water for your camels too, until they have finished drinking.’ Then the man bowed down and worshiped the Lord, saying, ‘Praise be to the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has not abandoned his kindness and faithfulness to my master’” (Genesis 24: 2-4, 7, 10, 12, 14, 15, 17-19, 27).

You probably have imagined it all: Someday you'll meet him, or her – attractive, polite, charming, intelligent, with interests like yours. You'll look into each other's eyes and feel special. As you get to know each other you'll fall in love, and you'll know *this* is the one for you! But maybe you've forgotten the most important ingredient in your idea of a “marriage made in heaven” – God's will and plan for your life.

Isaac trusted God to choose a wife for him. According to the custom of that time, parents arranged a marriage, usually with the consent of the children they'd matched up. Abraham wanted to make sure his son didn't marry a local idol-worshiper, so he sent his servant to Abraham's relatives to find the woman God had chosen for Isaac. God arranged it beautifully, and everyone recognized God's guidance. When the servant asked that Rebekah come with him to marry Isaac, her brother answered, “This is from the Lord; we can say nothing to you one way or the other. Here is Rebekah; take her and go and let her become the wife of your master's son, as the Lord has directed” (Genesis 24: 50-51).

God's choice was the best. The Bible says they were married “... and he loved her” (Genesis 24: 67). Their love didn't fizzle out after the honeymoon, either, as King Abimelech of the Philistines could testify. He looked out his window one evening “and saw Isaac caressing his wife Rebekah” (Genesis

26: 8). After forty years of marriage Isaac still couldn't keep his hands off her!

God chose the right woman for Isaac. Isaac was quiet and easy-going, but Rebekah had spunk – any girl who offered to water ten camels must have been hardworking and decisive! Isaac and Rebekah therefore complemented each other. No one can arrange a marriage better than God can.

Read Genesis 24 – then reread it. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you how the principles in that chapter apply to the issues of dating and marriage in your life. Then change your attitudes. Decide not to date the girl you're first attracted to; instead, ask God whom to date. Determine not to trap the guy you have a crush on, but instead ask God to sort out your emotions and to give you the dates that would be best for you.

Make up your mind now that you will not date or marry anyone – unless God tells you to. Don't make a list of qualifications and start hunting. Seek God's will, remembering He is all-powerful. Isaac was forty years old and living in a country without one suitable marriage partner! But that posed no problem for God. Even if you, like Isaac, live in a Christian-less wilderness, God can find for you the right friends and the right person to date – if you're willing to wait in faith and cooperate with Him.

“So they called Rebekah and asked her, ‘Will you go with this man?’ Then Rebekah and her maids got ready and mounted their camels and went back with the man. So the servant took Rebekah and left. Now Isaac had come from Beer LaHai Roi, for he was living in the Negev. He went out to the field one evening to meditate, and as he looked up, he saw camels approaching. Rebekah also looked up and saw Isaac. She got down from her camel and asked the servant, ‘Who is that man in the field coming to meet us?’ ‘He is my master,’ the servant answered. So she took her veil and covered herself. Then the servant told Isaac all he had done” (Genesis 24: 58, 61-66).

1. List all the prerequisites you've decided are necessary for a perfect marriage. Read Genesis 24: 50. Cross out your list and write

“Genesis 24: 50” in its place.

2. In what ways did Isaac and Rebekah demonstrate great faith?
3. In what ways do you need to exercise faith about your desires for dating or marriage?

Conquering Confusion

“Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife because she was barren. The Lord answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant. The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, ‘Why is this happening to me?’ So she went to inquire of the Lord. The Lord said to her, ‘Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger’” (Genesis 25: 21-23).

Isaac and Rebekah had no children, and in their culture, childlessness was a tragedy. This bothered Isaac. But he was also concerned because God had promised to bless the whole world through his descendants. Yet, after twenty years of marriage, Isaac and Rebekah had no children. The situation confused him.

When she became pregnant, Rebekah had a problem that was very personal, something women who had birthed many children might have laughed about – there seemed to be a fight going on in her womb. This confused her.

Isaac and Rebekah knew what to do about the things that bothered them. They prayed. Instead of stewing and worrying, instead of seeking advice and sympathy from neighbors, they asked God. Their prayers weren’t “Dear Abby” sessions, spent trying to help God clarify the problem, but were requests to an Almighty God who had the right answers. They prayed expecting God to intervene. And, as He always does, God answered such prayers.

Isaac preferred meditating in the field to planning decisive action. He was prone to accepting whatever came along instead of taking positive steps to change things. Praying, for him, meant bucking the routine he preferred – endlessly mulling over the problem. Praying meant leaving his thoughts

behind and, in faith, asking God to clarify the situation. And God did just that.

This episode in the lives of Isaac and Rebekah teaches that you can pray about anything and expect God to clear up your confusion. If you're wondering how to get along better with your parents, how to view capital punishment, how to handle feelings of inferiority, or how to be more outgoing, God is ready to help you. But, so often, you do everything but study what the Bible says about the issue and pray. You worry, read books on the problem, get everyone's advice, spend hours trying to think things through – everything, except pray. And if you do pray, you don't expect an answer. You only think of God as one more friend who will listen to your explanation of the problem.

With God, you are not helpless, for Jesus, not the devil, controls the situation. When Jesus died on the cross and rose again, He defeated the devil and his demons (Colossians 2: 13-15). Now Jesus is the head of the church, which is the body of the people who truly believe in Him (Ephesians 1: 22, 23), and has put within each believer the same power that raised Jesus from the dead (Ephesians 1: 8-10). That power is available to you! As a Christian, you have been transferred from Satan's realm to the kingdom of light ruled by Jesus (Colossians 1: 13). The devil, therefore, has no legal power over you, so you can resist him and he will run from you (James 4: 7). You have the authority.

When you face confusion, here's what to do: say out loud, "Devil, in the name of Jesus and by the power of His blood, I command you to leave." Then thank God that He will rule completely in this matter. Next, ask God if there is sin you must confess, or wrong attitudes and habits you must change. And let Him change you. Then, ask Him if you've been blinded by ingrained responses to problems. Ask for new ways to handle problems – God has promised the Christian that "the old has gone, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5: 17). Finally, pray for other people who may be involved in your problem. Pray they would see God's will and follow it – so God will be glorified, not so your life will be easier!

You don't have to continue to accept confusion, because God has provided all the power you need to deal with it. Confusion can be conquered in Jesus'

name!

“Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me – put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you” (Philippians 4: 9).

“May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 5: 23).

“You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you” (Isaiah 26: 3).

1. Since God is a God of peace, is it His will that you stay confused?
2. What proof do you have that God cares about every part of you – body, soul, and spirit?
3. What formula does Isaiah 26: 3 give for coming out of confusion and into peace?
4. Are you confused about something? Take a stand in faith now that God will clear away that confusion.

Angelic Visitors, Neon Lights, and Thunder from Heaven

“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. The Lord appeared to Isaac and said, ‘Do not go down to Egypt; live in the land where I tell you to live. 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’” (Genesis 26: 1-3).

A famine is no fun. People who are addicted to food will do almost anything to avoid being hungry. Isaac learned about the hardship of famine by experience. When lack of rainfall caused a crop failure and a shortage of grass for his animals, he had to make a decision. Egypt had plenty of grain,

so he considered going there. God, however, had promised Isaac's father Abraham that Canaan was the land for him and his descendants. If Isaac moved to Egypt he would leave this Promised Land. He would also leave God's special blessing, for God wanted Isaac to trust Him, and life in Egypt wasn't conducive to trust – Egypt wasn't conducive to trust – Egypt symbolized luxury, ease, worldly pleasure, and spiritual compromise. While Isaac was trying to decide what to do, God appeared and told him to avoid Egypt, even though it meant giving up the security of knowing where his food would come from.

You may wish life could be that simple for you – if only you could hear a voice from heaven thundering out God's commands, or see an angel, or read flashing neon signs in the sky, you'd obey God perfectly. Everything would be clear if God would communicate His desires to you. Wrong. You're forgetting a couple of things.

First, you're forgetting communication involved receiving a message as well as sending it. Unless you are in tune with the Holy Spirit, who interprets God's Word for you, neon sky-signs won't impress you a bit.

Second, you're forgetting that you already have God's message – His Word. If your father wants you not to use the car for a month, it doesn't matter how he tells you. Whether he walks into your room, or calls you on the phone, or writes you a letter, the command is the same: You can't use the car. People would consider you weird if you said, "If only Dad would walk into my room and tell me not to use the car, then I would know what he wants. But all I have is a letter." Your father's word is enough. It's the same with God. When you have His Word – and the Holy Spirit to make it real to you – that's all you need.

One command God has made clear is not to "go to Egypt" – in other words, not to pursue the first idea that pops into your head. He has said, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Romans 12: 2).

Don't let the world squeeze you into its mold. Instead, let God's Word guide you. Here's how it works: "His divine power has given us everything we need

for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires” (2 Peter 1: 3, 4).

To escape evil you must stick close to God's Word. Some people get out of balance by creating “One-Hundred-and-Fifty-Rigid-Rules-for-Righteousness” lists, instead of asking the Holy Spirit to guide them as they study and obey God's Word. Others try to control their environment by having contact only with Christians, instead of letting God's Word make them strong against temptation. The Bible doesn't say you will escape the corruption of this world through legalism, or tradition, or isolation. It says He has given wonderful promises so you can “escape the corruption in the world” (2 Peter 1: 4).

If you apply God's Word to your life, He will keep you from filth and corruption. If you rejoice in the Lord always (Philippians 4: 4), make the joy of the Lord your strength (Nehemiah 8: 10), and pray in Jesus' name so your joy will be complete (John 16: 24), you won't be tempted to attend the party where everybody gets high, because the emptiness you once felt will be gone.

If you give thanks in all things (Ephesians 5: 20), show contentment with what you have (1 Timothy 6: 6-8), and trust God to provide your needs (Philippians 4: 19), you won't be tempted to shoplift.

If you practice “love your enemies” love (Matthew 5: 44), you won't be tempted to spread the gossip you heard or to say something nasty to get even with your classmate.

If you keep your mind on whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, gracious, excellent, and praiseworthy (Philippians 4: 8), you won't be tempted to see the movie loaded with sex and violence, or to visit porn sites on the computer.

You don't need an angel, or a thundering voice, or neon lights to tell you not to go to Egypt. You already have God's clear command. You can know what to do and how to live because you have the Holy Spirit to lead you into the truth of God's Word. And that is enough.

“You are already made clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you” (John 15: 3, 4).

“How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word. I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you” (Psalm 119: 9-11).

1. Why are God's commands the same whether they are spoken audibly from Mount Sinai or read from the Bible?
2. Why will hearing, absorbing, declaring, and obeying God's commandments enable you to live a pure life?
3. Are you straying from one of God's commandments and heading toward “Egypt”? Get this matter straightened out with God right away.

New Software for Old Habits

“So Isaac stayed in Gerar. 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.’ When Isaac had been there a long time, Abimelech king of the Philistine looked down from a window and saw Isaac caressing his wife Rebekah. 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.’ 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’” (Genesis 26: 6-10).

A friend of mine says, “Your greatest strength is your greatest weakness.” This is often true. It was true of Isaac.

Isaac's easygoing nature made it easy for him not to rebel against his parents or his God. He showed great obedience and faith as he allowed his father to bind him to an altar as a sacrifice, and as he trusted his father's servant to carry out the all-important task of choosing his wife. Trust and obedience came naturally to him.

But such a temperament was also a pitfall. When obeying God required pioneering a new path and standing against pressure, Isaac didn't have the "right stuff"; in the land of the Philistines, he followed his father's example, right into trouble just like Abraham had told people his wife was his sister – for the same reason. He knew it was wrong. But instead of praying about the danger he was facing, and finding God's solution, Isaac jumped at the only solution he knew. When the king saw Isaac embracing Rebekah, he knew Isaac had lied. So, Isaac, the man of God, had to face the humiliation of being corrected by a pagan.

Isaac did what many children do. He repeated the mistakes of his parents whom he respected and found out it's sometimes better not to be "a chip off the old block."

Statistics show that children who were abused by their parents often become child abusers, that children from divorced parents often end their own marriages in divorce. This is puzzling, for young people usually have lofty dreams of doing things very differently from what their parents did. Why, then, does this scenario occur? Because the first idea that comes to a person's mind when a problem strikes is to work it out the way he has seen someone else handle a similar crisis. Very often that someone else is a parent.

Isaac did exactly that. He and his beautiful wife were in a foreign land, and he felt himself in danger. He no doubt had heard how his father told everyone that Sarah was his sister. Without thinking, Isaac did the same.

You, however, don't have to repeat your parents' mistakes. The Bible says, "For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect" (1 Peter 1: 18, 19). Your parents' bad habits were not passed to you from their genes. You acquired those habits. But Jesus has set

you free from the natural inclination to follow the easiest and familiar answers to problems.

To start walking in this freedom, to begin solving problems Jesus-style, you must retrain yourself to think as the new creation in Christ which the Bible says you are (2 Corinthians 5: 17). You're no longer bound by tradition, or by the examples of others, such as the method your mom uses to handle her emotions. You are free in Jesus. But you must learn to use this freedom. You must reprogram your mind as you would a computer. Instead of reacting according to the computer information stored from previous experiences, learn to pray, "Jesus, how would you solve this problem?"

God's Word is the secret of the reprogramming process. It renews your mind and gives general guidelines for problem-solving: "Overcome evil with good," "serve one another in love," "share with God's people who are in need." And so on. As you meditate on God's Word it will fill your "software" with God's guidelines for action, and God's methods will become your natural reactions. After that, when you meet a problem you'll know the general guidelines, so you'll simply ask God to fill in the specifics.

All this is not to say you should start cutting down your parents. You are to respect, love and obey them, not point out their shortcomings. You can, however, channel that special ability (that all teenagers seem to possess) to see the inconsistencies of authority figures by looking for similar tendencies in yourself. Ask God to show you which undesirable traits you observe in others are present in you. (For example, if you think your mother yells at you for every little mistake, forgive her, then see if you may be treating your little sister the same way.) And let Him show you how to avoid falling into a similar pattern.

Isaac's bad habit, using the first reaction that popped into his mind, led to lying. Dishonesty, as always, is hard to hide. The hug he gave Rebekah gave him away. As a result, his pagan neighbors weren't impressed by Isaac's God who apparently couldn't protect one of His followers. But you can learn from Isaac. Decide not to repeat his mistake. The Lord has freed you from the tendency to automatically react according to familiar patterns. Give God a chance to reprogram your mind.

“You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4: 22-24).

1. What are you commanded to do with old reactions and methods of handling problems?
2. Would God command you to do something He hasn't given you the power to do?
3. What is the next command?
4. Since you can get new attitudes only by letting God's Word become part of you, you must spend much time meditating on passages from the Bible. Are you willing to do that?

Personality Plus, Personality Minus, and Too Weird to Categorize

“The boys grew up, and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was a quiet man, staying among the tents. Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob” (Genesis 25: 27, 28).

How do you feel about teachers who have “pets”? If you have ever taken a class where *A*'s were reserved for apple polishers, you know the anger favoritism causes.

The same problem occurs elsewhere, such as in families. Maybe your parents give your little brother all the attention and allow him to do things you never were permitted to try. As a result, you feel neglected and forgotten.

Favoritism also occurs at work, and even at church, when those in charge make special allowances for the people they like best. Sometimes, however, you may be the favorite, and the jealous person becomes your enemy even though you have tried hard to prevent it.

Before you judge others for the sin of preferring someone over another, examine yourself. Playing favorites is one of the easiest traps to fall into. Do you go through the yearbook classifying the seniors – personality plus, personality minus, and too weird to categorize? Do you resent the history teacher’s assigning you to work with George on the Civil War project – because George just isn’t your type? Do you refuse to do your geometry homework because you have a “personality clash” with the teacher? Do you avoid the new girl at church because she makes nerdy remarks and doesn’t dress in style? Do you plan to witness to Jill because she’s the kind of person you’d like to have for a friend, but ignore Ellen because you don’t especially care for her? You, as everyone, are tempted to cater to the people you enjoy, and to ignore the people you don’t like.

Isaac was guilty of the sin of favoritism; he loved Esau more than Jacob. He was proud of this brave, athletic hunter, and he enjoyed the wild game that Esau prepared for him to eat. Isaac made his choice only on personal preference. Jacob, however, was quiet, and he enjoyed staying around the tents – nothing wrong with that. But Isaac admired an expert hunter, so he loved the son who fulfilled *his* expectations.

Isaac failed to deal with his sin, and thus caused great trouble in his family. Because Isaac found it hard to say no to Esau, his favorite, the rejected Jacob followed the example of his father. Out of his twelve sons, Jacob favored Joseph. The next chapter shows how much trouble that caused.

If you don’t deal with your tendency to choose one person over another, and thus withhold your friendship from people whom you don’t appreciate, you, like Isaac, will cause friction and heartache. Remember, you are a child of God who sends rain on the just and the unjust, the God who shows no partiality. You, therefore, are to act like your heavenly Father. Scripture is very clear on this issue – “do nothing out of favoritism” (1 Timothy 5: 21).

Examine yourself before God. Have you been trying hard to impress someone, while ignoring other people? Is there somebody you just can’t stand? God doesn’t put people into categories, and you mustn’t either. God is in the business of changing people and He wants to use your love and acceptance to help someone become likable and friendly. Think about it. Can

you serve a God who “does not show favoritism” (Acts 10: 34) if you befriend only those who favorably impress you?

“Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited” (Romans 12: 16).

“My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don’t show favoritism” (James 2: 1).

“If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers” (James 2: 8, 9).

“These also are sayings of the wise: To show partiality in judging is not good” (Proverbs 24: 23).

1. Why is favoritism sin?
2. What are some ways in which you excuse your favoritism? What’s wrong with these excuses?
3. Ask God to convict you of any preference you have shown for one person over another. Thank God for the good friends He has given you and determine that you and your friends will not make anybody else feel left out.

Whom Are You Leading into Temptation?

“When Isaac was old and his eyes were so weak that he could no longer see, he called for Esau his older son and said to him, ‘My son,’ ‘Here I am,’ he answered. Isaac said, ‘I am now an old man and don’t know the day of my death. Now then, get your weapons – your quiver and bow – and go out to the open country to hunt some wild game for me. Prepare me the kind of tasty food I like and bring it to me to eat, so that I may give you my blessing before I die.’ Rebekah said to her son Jacob, ‘Look, I overheard your father say to your brother Esau ... Go out to the flock and bring me two choice young goats, so I can prepare some tasty food for your father, just the way he likes

it. Then take it to your father to eat, so that he may give you his blessing before he dies.’ After Isaac finished blessing him and Jacob had scarcely left his father’s presence, his brother Esau came in from hunting. He too prepared some tasty food and brought it to his father. Then he said to him, ‘My father, sit up and eat some of my game, so that you may give me your blessing.’ His father Isaac asked him, ‘Who are you?’ ‘I am your son,’ he answered, ‘your firstborn, Esau.’ Isaac trembled violently and said, ‘Who was it, then, that hunted game and brought it to me? I ate it just before you came and I blessed him – and indeed he will be blessed!’” (Genesis 27: 1, 4, 6, 9, 10, 30-33).

Although Isaac showed great faith when God required passivity, he had a hard time exercising faith when God required action. God had told Rebekah before the twins were born, “The elder shall serve the younger” (Genesis 25: 23). This was God's plan. The inheritance and the blessing would be Jacob's. In carelessness and weakness, however, Isaac ignored God's Word and prepared to give the blessing to Esau. Obeying God in this matter would mean bucking tradition and trying to explain the reasons to Esau, the strong-willed son whom he loved more than Jacob. Instead of acting in faith, Isaac took the easy way out.

Rebekah was dead wrong in devising a scheme that involved deceit in order to ensure God's will was fulfilled. She wanted Jacob to receive his blessing. “She was not going to leave anything to chance. However, neither did she leave anything to faith.” 3) *Ibid.*, p. 202. Her lack of faith was sin, but since we're talking about Isaac, it's only fair to note that wishy-washy, indecisive people who just let things slide, valuing convenience above all else, make life very difficult for others. A person, such as Isaac, who is out of the will of God puts great temptation in the way of others. The people close to Isaac found obeying God very hard because he was disobeying.

How about checking your life for omissions that make other people want to step in and do “God's will” for you, even if their method is wrong? Your mother may be trying to run your life for you, but maybe your laziness and irresponsibility tempt her beyond endurance. Your father may not trust you as much as your older brother, but maybe your carelessness and indecision keep

him from giving you important responsibilities. Your parents and teachers may be constantly nagging you, but maybe your endless procrastinating leaves them no choice. That pushy girl may always be trying to run the youth group that elected you president, but maybe your poor performance constrains her to act before things fall apart.

Don't be an Isaac who sets things up so some Rebekah finds it easy to sin. Examine your life. Whom are you leading into temptation? Determine by God's grace to root out the things in your life that invite others to sin. Then live to encourage those around you to do God's will. Your example should be leading people into victory, not into temptation!

“When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray” (Galatians 2: 11-13).

1. In the above case, how did Peter make it easy for others to sin?
2. Can you recall an instance in which you sinned because someone you respected made it easy for you to disobey God?
3. Prejudices, customs, and traditions can be very blinding. Ask God to show you if your lack of courage in standing up for something that is right, rather than following your group of friends, is helping someone else to follow the wrong path.
4. Which is more important to you, what's right or what people think?