

## Beautiful Things: A sermon on Genesis 26

by Heather Thomsen

*Was this the face that launch'd a thousand ships,  
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?  
O, thou art fairer than the evening air  
Clad in the beauty of a thousand stars;  
Brighter art thou than flaming Jupiter,  
More lovely than the monarch of the sky.*

This is a beautiful poem. But lest you be fooled into thinking I am smarter or nerdier than I actually am, I had never heard it until I came across it on Google the other day. But some of you might recognize these famous lines from Doctor Faustus by the 16th century writer Christopher Marlowe. The poem is about Helen of Troy, who, in Greek mythology was considered the most beautiful woman in the world. Helen's beauty caused the Trojan War, one of the most enduring stories of love and war in our collective conscious.

If Doctor Faustus and greek mythology seem a bit of a stretch, perhaps the story of Gollum is more accessible to a modern audience. In JRR Tolkien's Middle Earth saga, the character Gollum was enchanted by the "the precious," a ring of incredible power that he considered beautiful and more dear to him than his own life. His addiction to the ring determined the fate of an entire world.

Or consider the fairy tale about Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, from which we know the phrase, "mirror mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?" The evil queen's obsession with beauty drove her to attempt great harm to the young Snow White.

Our imaginations are captivated by beautiful things. Our fables, legends, stories, and even our hearts often center on things of beauty. But as fairy tales and facts together remind us, beauty can often lead to brokenness. We see this in the stories of Helen, Gollum, and Snow White. Isn't this the sweeping story of the human condition? Beauty giving way to brokenness. The motif of this tragic song echoes back to the beginning of time. Just after God summoned the world into being and sang it to life with the deepest of melodies that still resonates in our bones; just after God filled the fresh, new earth with beautiful things that scampered and sang and soared on the winds and sank deep roots into the fertile soil; just after God smiled on the world's goodness and entrusted his beautiful creation to his beloved people to care for and love and steward; just after the magnificent concerto of creation, we tremble, for we know what comes next. When human voices join the melody, we feel the agonizing twist of goodness into evil, we feel the darkness invading the light, we see beauty being distorted. Echoing in the empty garden are the terrible tones of humanity's fall into sin. Beauty giving way to brokenness.

Our text today is from Genesis is like a small motif within the dark symphony of Eden. It whispers hauntingly of the brokenness that followed when goodness and beauty were taken for granted, when people turned away from the source of all that is good and beautiful and true. But, as we will hear, Genesis 26 does not remain in this mournful key. It crescendos into a masterpiece by the God who transforms brokenness again into beauty.

From Genesis 26:

**1** Now there was a famine in the land—besides the previous famine in Abraham's time—and Isaac went to Abimelek 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[a] all nations on earth will be blessed." **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, Abimelek king of the Philistines looked down from a window and saw Isaac caressing his wife Rebekah. **9** So Abimelek 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 Abimelek 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 Abimelek gave orders to all the people: "Anyone who harms this man or his wife shall surely be put to death." Isaac planted crops in that land and the same year reaped a hundredfold, because the Lord blessed him.

**14** He had so many flocks and herds and servants that the Philistines envied him. **16** Then Abimelek 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, where he settled.

*This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!*

On first blush, this story seems bizarre, and perhaps irrelevant. But you know those Russian nesting dolls that get smaller and smaller the more there are? It seems that Genesis 26 is punctuated with smaller and smaller motifs of the melody of beauty and brokenness, the great song in which our voices are all caught up.

Let's first consider what may be the smallest of the nesting dolls in this story: Rebekah's fair appearance leading to Isaac's fear-based deception. Rebekah's physical appearance is a gimme if we're looking for an example of goodness and beauty. The text tells us straight up that she is beautiful. And of course the brokenness is also immediately evident: Afraid for his own life because of his wife's beauty, Isaac's reaction was to lie, to deceive the men in order to preserve his own safety. If it feels like you've heard this story before, it's because you basically have. This is the third time in 16 chapters that readers of Genesis encounter a patriarch of Israel fearfully pretending that his beautiful wife was his sister to avoid the threat of murder. At least twice does Isaac's father Abraham play this ruse, and here we have the son following the example of his father.

I don't think we can chalk this up to mere stupidity or bull-headedness. Isaac's deception is not a one-off instance of disobedience. There is a pattern of brokenness here. This practice of lying about one's wife to protect oneself is a part of Isaac's family legacy. He seems to be inheriting a habitual behavior from his parents, which I think makes for an interesting psychological study.

Throughout the Old Testament we read about children being "punished for" or "visited by" the sins of their parents to the third and fourth generation. This notion goes against the grain of our western culture which emphasizes individual responsibility. The idea of children suffering for the sins of their parents seems unjust and even cruel. But if we think about it through the lens of psychology or even our own family experience, this concept makes a bit more sense.

David Augsberger, a psychology professor at Fuller Seminary, has said that "Psychologists have found that familial dysfunction gets passed down from as little as three to as many as ten generations." What this means is that "Children are influenced and formed by parents, grand parents and great grandparents" behavior, habits, and values, by their function and dysfunction. We've all experienced people who seem to have inherited their family's dysfunction: alcoholism, financial irresponsibility, infidelity, anger, or dishonesty.

Think about it: if a child grows up seeing those practices habituated in her home, how much more prone will she be toward making those same choices? A man who was abused by his father becomes the abuser of his own children. A woman who suffered under a parent's alcohol addiction finds herself turning increasingly toward alcohol herself.

A child who repeatedly overhears her parents reacting toward each other in anger later perpetuates anger in her own marriage.

It seems to be the case, as we see in this story of Isaac and Rebekah, that the disordered desires and values of parents can influence the desires and values of their children. But the miracle - the good news - is that God does not leave his people in their brokenness. This is the Gospel, the epic narrative of God's rescue mission to restore the world through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The more we read of this chapter, the more we will see the hope of beauty being borne from brokenness, of life emerging from death. But first, we return to Isaac.

You remember those Russian nesting dolls? The story of Isaac lying about Rebekah might be the smallest in the pattern of beauty and brokenness in this story. Let's consider a bigger example here in Genesis 26: the theme of covenant. As we consider this pattern of beauty leading to brokenness, we will see how Isaac's sin jeopardizes God's beautiful covenant with Abraham's family.

Here's a quick refresher on covenant. It's a promise of land, offspring, and blessing to the world. Here's how it plays out: after decades of nomadic wandering through near-desert terrain in the midst of famine, God promises Abraham and Sarah a home in a land of abundance. After decades of barrenness, God promises the weary couple an heir in their old age, and not only an heir, but an entire nation through whom all the nations of the world would be blessed. These promises, first made to Abraham and later spoken to Isaac, are beautiful things indeed, ringing with hope and provision and abundance.

Isaac's lie about Rebekah jeopardizes this covenant in at least two ways. The first is the promise of offspring. By pretending that Rebekah was his sister, Isaac risks the possibility of his wife becoming pregnant by another man. As we saw in the earlier account of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar and Ishmael, God makes it abundantly clear that He will provide the child who is promised as Abraham's heir. When Abraham's family takes matters into their own hands, God rejects the outcome of their intervention. We see the same pattern here. Isaac gambling with that same promise, potentially risking a pregnancy that is outside God's covenant. The motivation for Isaac's action is fear: he is afraid for his safety; he acts out of self-preservation. Yet we know and Isaac knows that he is the promised child of God's covenant. Will God not protect and provide for the very one who is instrumental in fulfilling his covenant? Of course! But Isaac's fear prevents him from remembering and trusting in the God who has demonstrated that he keeps His promises.

The second way Isaac's lie puts the covenant in jeopardy has to do with the promise that God would bless all the nations of the world through Abraham and Sarah's family. As we see in verses 10-16, Isaac's deceit upsets King Abimelech, leads to envy among the Philistines, and eventually causes Isaac to get kicked out of the region. Clearly, and in stark contrast to what God desires to do through Isaac's family, Isaac is bringing anything but blessings to the Philistines.

So, in multiple ways, Isaac's brokenness jeopardizes the beautiful promises of God's covenant. Isaac perpetuates cycles of death, even with the promises of life ringing in his ears. This trembling melody is yours and it is mine: our voices repeat the sad refrain of beauty that leads to brokenness. But thanks be to God, this is not God's song, for God, the Beauty before whom lesser beauties fade, is the one who brings life out of death. God, from the very beginning, has been at work to restore the world to the goodness for which it was designed. This is the key change from minor to major, the coda to which the song returns. This is the symphony of creation, fall, and redemption that climaxes in the work of Jesus Christ, and which is merely foreshadowed here as God composes beautiful melodies out of the tragic song of Abraham's family.

From Genesis 26:

**19** In Gerar, Isaac's servants dug in the valley and discovered a well of fresh water there. But the herders of Gerar quarreled with those of Isaac 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, Abimelek had come to him from Gerar. **27** Isaac asked them, "Why have you come to me, since you were hostile to me and sent me away?"

**28** Abimelek and his men 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 harm you but always treated you well and sent you away peacefully. 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 went away peacefully.

**32** That day Isaac's servants came and told him about the well they had dug. They said, "We've found water!"  
*This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!*

Looming large in the background of these verses is God's covenant with Abraham and Isaac. We remember how earlier in the chapter, even as God's promise swelled in his ears, Isaac turned away in fear, deceit, distrust, and desire for self-gain. But here in the second half of the chapter, we see God transforming Isaac's brokenness into beautiful things.

The first motif of transformation is in verses 28 and 29. The King of the Philistines acknowledges that Isaac is blessed by God. There are two important things here. The first requires a brief excursions into the Hebrew text. In Hebrew, there are multiple designations to refer to the God of Israel. The first is "elohim" which literally means "deity." But there is another way to designate a name for God in Hebrew. In Exodus 3, the God of Israel reveals himself to Moses in the burning bush, and for the first time in the biblical narrative gives himself a name, or in other words, reveals his identity. This name is Yahweh, which means "I am who I am." In the ancient near east, names carried power. So out of respect and reverence for God's divine name, the scribes who recorded the Hebrew scriptures would never write down God's name. They would only write the consonants, so the name appears like this: YHWH. When reciting the text aloud, a Hebrew reader would know not to pronounce the name YHWH, but would substitute the generic term, adonai, which means "lord."

So, anytime God's divine name - "I am who I am" appears in the Hebrew text, a reader would know to say "adonai" or "lord" instead of "YHWH." This is why, all through the Old Testament, in our English Bibles we see this designation: LORD which indicates that the Hebrew text contains not the generic "elohim" but the the divine name of God YHWH.

If you noticed as we were reading this passage, King Abimelech refers to God by name: YHWH. This is significant because the Philistines were a Canaanite tribe who worshipped gods such as Baal and Molech. These idols represented opposition to YHWH. The people of Israel were warned over and over not to worship Canaanite gods. And yet here we have a Canaanite King recognizing Isaac's God by name. In calling him by his divine name - YHWH- Abimelech is acknowledging God's presence and power, and the clear fact that Isaac's God has protected and blessed him. So out of the deceit and hostility between Isaac and Abimelech emerges a beautiful revelation of God's divine power to someone who would never otherwise have acknowledged Israel's God.

The next movement in the text is yet another mark of beauty. Isaac - who was sent away by a threatened King Abimelech, envied by the Philistines, and who quarreled with the local sheep herders - establishes a peace treaty with these very same people. This treaty brings rest and harmony to a socio-political relationship punctuated by bitterness and discord. Here we see the beginnings of the fulfillment of God's promise to bless the nations through Isaac. Out of these fractured relationships emerges a beautiful treaty of peace that foreshadows God's promise to bless all nations through Abraham's family.

And finally, we have the wells - a source of water in a near-desert climate that received rained about 10 days a year. Isaac digs four wells in the dusty ground and finds water in them all. In such arid terrain, water was an incredibly value resource, a means of life and abundance for everyone in the area. The fact that Isaac found water in not just one but four wells is a sign to Isaac and to others of God's provision and presence with him. Out of the dry and dusty ground, emerges a beautiful source of life and abundance from God.

This second half of the chapter resonates deeply with the melody of beauty emerging from brokenness.

Do you hear it? It's like when Aslan uses Edmond's treachery to rescue all of Narnia from the icy clutches of the White Witch, or when Gollum's addiction to the precious ring of power proves the only means of vanquishing the evil Lord Sauron, or when Severus Snape's bitter relationship with Harry Potter is somehow used to accomplish good in the fight against Voldemort. Beautiful things are born out of the dust.

As we conclude, we are going to spend a few minutes reflecting on patterns of beauty and brokenness in our own lives, considering how God's beautiful song may have become trapped in rhythms of death. And, thinking beyond your own experiences, I also encourage you to consider what brokenness and disordered love may exist in your own family and even in our greater society. For some of us, this may be a difficult or painful thing to acknowledge patterns of sin within our selves, our families, even our city. And that's ok. The first step in the process of healing - of restoring beauty - is to be honest with ourselves, with others and with God. So we're going to take a few minutes before God to do that. The ushers are going to come forward to receive our tithes and gifts and offerings. As the band plays and the offering is collected, I encourage you to invite the Spirit to breathe new life into areas that are dusty and dry. Invite God to give you eyes to see the ways He is making beautiful things in your life, in your family, even in our country and our world. Take a deep breath. Close your eyes, Remember that the God to whom we cling has demonstrated faithfulness even in the midst of our fallenness. This is the God whose song that summoned the world into being still echoes with beautiful things being made out of the dust. Amen.