

“ISAAC: THE ESSENTIALS OF LIFE”

Genesis 26 Romans 8:28-32

Series #1 “When Life's a Zoo, God Still Loves You”

Galit Frydman, a biological sciences major at Carnegie Mellon University (MCS '08), is analyzing the effect of human contact on elephant stress levels at the Pittsburgh Zoo. By better understanding elephants' physiological response to humans, she hopes to determine whether or not human contact is beneficial to captive populations.

There is much debate within the zoo community about the proper way to handle elephants. Some experts argue that elephants should be handled as little as possible because it raises the animals' stress levels and therefore endangers the lives of the handlers. Others argue that research based on horses and dogs indicates animals may benefit from human contact.

The thing that confuses me about the study is what they mean by “handling an elephant.” I mean, it's not exactly the same as handling a kitten, is it?

Nevertheless, the reality is that life today is stressful for everyone. According to one source,

- Globally, more than 3 out of 5 doctor visits are for stress related problems.
- Stress can affect any part of the body, in fact, 85% of the diseases we know about have stress-related factors.
- A landmark 20-year study conducted by the University of London concluded that unmanaged reactions to stress were a more dangerous risk factor for cancer and heart disease than either cigarette smoking or high cholesterol foods."
- A recent study at a manufacturing plant, showed that employees who reported high levels of role conflict, physical environment stress, and overall work stress had significantly higher physician-excused absences.

The Bible records the history of God's dealing with men and women under all sorts of conditions and experiences. Consequently, stress was no stranger to the characters in

Scripture.

Given the presence of stress in our world and all the statistics reporting its damaging effects, it might be worthwhile to stop and consider how people in the Bible dealt with stress. That's what this Winter Sermon Series is about.

Today's case study in stress is the patriarch, Isaac.

In order to get the sweep of what was going wrong we had to read the entire chapter which is a mosaic of 7 different episodes from Isaac's life.

If you think people in the Bible had it simpler just stop and ponder a day in the life of this patriarch, who incidentally, has less written about him than either his father Abraham or his son Jacob.

In a snapshot, here's a day in the life of Isaac:

1. A famine forces him and his entire family to move, but he is warned not to go down to Egypt where his dad went during a famine in his day, but to hang out in Gerar. Who isn't familiar with the stress created by moving?
2. While in Gerar, Isaac, is stressed out that these strangers will kill him to get Rebekah (who is evidently more attractive than any of the locals). So Isaac does something his father once did, he spreads the lie that Rebekah is his sister. Then one day, King Abimelech sees the couple in a tender moment together and exposes the lie. The king reads the riot act to Isaac for lying and possibly creating a real mess...hence, more stress.
3. That spring Isaac starts farming and is blessed with a bumper harvest. His livestock and herds also increase. With his increase in wealth the Philistines turn ugly and block up his wells with dirt and rocks. To add insult to injury, King Abimelech now serves Isaac with an eviction notice. Reason: "Move away from us; you're too powerful."
4. Moving time again, this time to the valley of Gerar. The search for water starts and Isaac goes about reopening the wells originally dug in the time of his father which the Philistines

had vandalized. Isaac's servants also dig new wells which kicks up dust with the local herds-men.

The first two wells are named "Argue" and "Fight" so he moves on and digs and third which he names "Rehoboth" meaning "room enough."

5. In the midst of all this, God appears to Isaac and assures him that He is with him and will bless and prosper his posterity.

6. Old King Abimelech drops in for a visit, sees the increased wealth and power of his old tenant and announces there ought to be a peace pact between them. So, peace loving Isaac obliges and invites him in for a big feast.

7. Finally, if things aren't hectic enough, Isaac's oldest son Esau decides he's going to marry Canaanites girls. When his father and mother hear about it they are completely vexed.

Now, that's the lay of the land for Isaac and you almost feel like he needs a couple of weeks in the Bahamas just to calm down and regroup.

Naturally, most of us think of leaving. Even David once said, "Oh, that I had wings like a dove that I might fly away and be at rest." Psalm 55:6

The events of a man or woman's life may seem random and senseless, but what we must remember is that for the child of God, nothing is random and senseless. The Bible clearly teaches that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, those who have been called according to his purpose.

The purpose of God for Isaac was blessing. He was led along on a journey that had definite points of contact with his father. But each of us must establish a personal connection with God and that is precisely what Isaac did between the 5th and 6th incident we just reviewed.

Notice, how Isaac was able to put everything that went on before and everything that came afterwards into perspective.

Vs. 25 tells us that after God had appeared to Isaac, he did 3 things:

1. He built an altar.
2. He pitched his tent.
3. He dug a well.

Let's think about his life for a moment.

With Isaac, as with all Israel, God was no afterthought. Any new stage in life including a time of unparalleled stress, requires a new commitment.

In building an altar, Isaac was expressing here the inherited impulse which he received from his father Abraham and which gave Abraham his stature in faith's hall of fame.

Man can successfully build a career without God, but a successful career doesn't guarantee success if a person is miserable, stressed out and constantly on the edge of their seat.

Isaac's altar is declaration of dependence on God that absorbs the stress and tensions created by trying to manage our own lives and livelihood.

The altar represents our commitment to put God back in the center of the picture and to remember that his will ultimately determines our future.

In Psalm 31:15 we read, "My times are in your hands; deliver me from my enemies and from those who pursue me."

The greatest discovery of life is not our strength or wit, but the power of God to save, to keep and to develop us in faith so that obedience brings a degree of peace and security that nothing can rattle.

The second thing that Isaac did was to set up his tent.

If this world seems to us permanent and fixed forever, we need to let this image of a tent sink deep into our conscious.

You and I are sojourners here, and family life with all its duties, responsibilities and pressures find their true significance when they are approached through the altar.

To answer all our feverish activity and concerns, Jesus simply points a finger to the air and says

“Look at the birds of the air”

...they do not plant and they don't harvest or store things away in barns, yet your heavenly father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?”

(Matt. 6:26).

Thirdly, Isaac dug a well.

Water in the Bible is symbolic of thirst.

Every living being experiences spiritual thirst.

The Psalmist said, “As the deer pants after the water brooks so pants my soul after thee, O God.” Psalm 42:1

Samuel Rutherford, quoted in *Prodigals and Those Who Love Them*, Ruth Bell Graham, 1991, Focus on the Family Publishing, p. 106.

“Duties are ours, events are God's; When our faith goes to meddle with events, and to hold account upon God's Providence, and beginneth to say, ‘How wilt Thou do this or that?’ we lose ground; we have nothing to do there; it is our part to let the Almighty exercise His own office, and steer His own helm; there is nothing left for us, but to see how we may be approved of Him, and how we roll the weight of our weak souls upon Him who is God omnipotent, and when we thus essay miscarrieth, it shall be neither our sin nor our cross.”

There is no situation I can get into that God cannot get me out. Some years ago when I was learning to fly, my instructor told me to put the plane into a steep and extended dive. I was totally unprepared for what was about to happen. After a brief time the engine stalled, and the plane began to plunge out-of-control. It soon became evident that the instructor was not going to help me at all. After a few seconds, which seemed like eternity, my mind began

to function again. I quickly corrected the situation.

Immediately I turned to the instructor and began to vent my fearful frustrations on him. He very calmly said to me, “There is no position you can get this airplane into that I cannot get you out of. If you want to learn to fly, go up there and do it again.” At that moment God seemed to be saying to me, “Remember this. As you serve Me, there is no situation you can get yourself into that I cannot get you out of. If you trust me, you will be all right.” That lesson has been proven true in my ministry many times over the years.

James Brown, Evangeline Baptist Church, Wildsville, LA, in Discoveries, Fall, 1991, Vol. 2, No. 4.

Trust Him when dark doubts assail thee,
 Trust Him when thy strength is small,
 Trust Him when to simply trust Him
 Seems the hardest thing of all.
 Trust Him, He is ever faithful,
 Trust Him, for his will is best,
 Trust Him, for the heart of Jesus
 Is the only place of rest.