



## Isaac: Our Patriarch of Strength

**I**saac (*Yitzchak* in Hebrew), the second patriarch in the Jewish Bible, had a critical role as the link between his father Abraham and his son Jacob, the first and third patriarchs. Isaac is the conduit through which God’s knowledge and promises were passed down through generations.

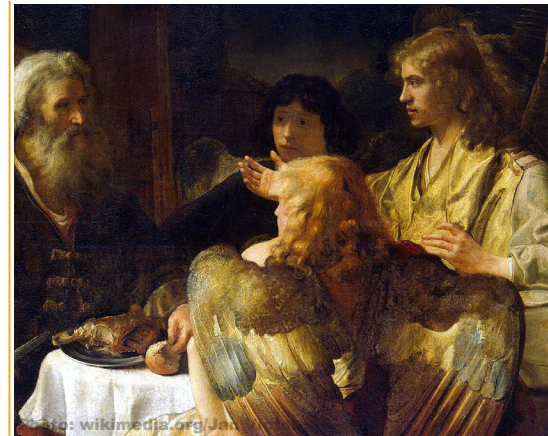
*Yitzchak*, יִצְחָק, means, “he will laugh.” When Abraham and Sarah learned they would have a child in their old age, their first response was laughter. But the name Isaac was not chosen just because Abraham and Sarah laughed. As the name implies—“he *will* laugh”—it also refers to the future.

Everything that happened to Isaac was unexpected, beginning with his birth. When Isaac was offered as a sacrifice to God only to be saved at the last minute, Isaac learned that every day is an unexpected gift from God. Isaac’s love for Rebekah, a woman he had never met and who was chosen for him, was certainly not expected.

Isaac prayed for Rebekah, who had not borne children. He waited 20 years before his prayer was answered. Then Rebekah unexpectedly had not one, but two sons. When Isaac was old and about to bless his sons, his intention was to bless Esau with the material blessings of the world while Jacob would receive the spiritual blessing. Isaac thought both sons would carry on the covenant that God promised. But in events Isaac certainly was not expecting, Jacob deceived him and received both blessings. It became clear that Jacob would become father to the nation of Israel.

Isaac’s life was filled with an undercurrent of laughter at the unexpected gifts he received. But when the Jewish sages chose one attribute to describe Isaac, they chose strength. Isaac’s inner strength allowed him to overcome life’s unexpected challenges with laughter.

Join us in this month’s Fellowship Study as we take a deeper look at the patriarch Isaac, and discover how he passed on the covenant given to his father, Abraham, to his son, Jacob, and finally, to us, God’s children.



*Then God said, “Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him.”*

— GENESIS 17:19



# Strength in Obedience

As previously mentioned, Isaac, the second patriarch in the Jewish Bible, is typically associated with the character trait of strength. Yet, of the three patriarchs, Isaac seems the least likely candidate to exemplify this trait.

Abraham was the first monotheist, who refused to conform and who fought against the entire world for the sake of truth. Jacob faced a life of challenges, starting with his twin brother Esau, his epic wrestling match with God's angel (Genesis 32:22-26), his years of labor under his treacherous father-in-law Laban, the death of his beloved wife Rachel, and the agony of believing that his favorite son Joseph was dead.

In contrast, Isaac's life was relatively devoid of such drama. Isaac was born into a righteous family, never left the land of Canaan, had his wife handpicked and brought to him, and even prospered during a famine. For 180 years, Isaac lived not only a more tranquil life than his father and his son, but also a longer one. So how does Isaac represent strength? So in what way does Isaac represent strength?

Jewish tradition asks, "Who is a strong person? One who has mastered his inclinations." True strength is the ability to control our natural tendencies and desires. In the Christian Bible, self-control is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), and one of the defining characteristics of a leader (1 Timothy 3:2). In this way, Isaac was a paragon of strength. In this way, Isaac was indeed a paragon of strength.

The first main event in Isaac's life is found in Genesis 22—Abraham's test from God in bringing Isaac as a sacrifice to Mount Moriah. While we typically focus on Abraham's experience during this difficult test, the event was also critical to Isaac's life. In both Hebrew and in English, this incident is referred to as "The Binding of Isaac," not "The Test of Abraham." Isaac's experience is at least as significant as Abraham's was.

In Genesis 22, Isaac asked his father Abraham, "...where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" (v.7). Abraham replied, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son" (v.8). Isaac understood he was the sacrifice, yet he did not run away or even protest. On the contrary, after Abraham answered Isaac, "the two of them went on together" (v.8). Clearly, Isaac was a willing partner in fulfilling God's plan.

Had Isaac not been in agreement with Abraham's intentions, surely there was ample opportunity for him to escape. He was old enough for a three-day journey by foot and carry the wood for the sacrifice. Abraham was well over 100. Surely, Isaac could have overpowered his father.

Isaac had the ability to change his situation, yet chose not to do so. Isaac's strength was his mastery over his natural inclination for survival and his willingness to be the sacrifice.

Isaac was not sacrificed. As the angel of the Lord told Abraham, "Do not lay a hand on the boy...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" (v. 12). Ultimately, what God desires is our obedience.

Obedience like Isaac's requires strength. Like Isaac, we must put God's will before our own—even if we must make difficult sacrifices. When Isaac gave himself to God, he gave us the example to do the same.



*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, on top of the wood.*

— GENESIS 22:9

# Strength in Perseverance

It's easy to overlook Isaac's story and his part in the foundation of Israel. Little is written about him in the Bible. He figures prominently in two of the major incidents of his life, the binding and the blessing of his sons, but he plays a subordinate role to the more dominant figures of his father, Abraham, and his son, Jacob.

Yet, Isaac's unique character can serve as a model for us. Isaac's wife, Rebekah, like Sarah, was childless. But Isaac reacts in a very different way from Abraham and Sarah.

What did Isaac do? He prayed. In verse 21, we read, *"Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was childless."* And in the very same verse, we read, *"The LORD answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant."* What is missing between the beginning and end of verse 21 is that 20 years passed from the time Isaac uttered his prayer and Rebekah became pregnant. (See Genesis 25:20; 26.) Twenty years is a long time to wait for an answer to prayer, but not once did Isaac stray from the course. He trusted in God and with extraordinary patience waited upon the Lord.

Then, a famine strikes the land. While Isaac intended to go to Egypt to wait out the famine, as Abraham had done, instead he remained obedient to God, who told him to stay in the land of Gerar where *"I will be with you and will bless you"* (Genesis 26:3). And, indeed, while the rest of the country suffered, Isaac prospered.

Isaac's actions provide us with an example of his strength, a model to follow. In the face of challenges, Isaac never gave up. He moved on and moved on again, tried and tried again, until he was successful in achieving his goals. This required commitment, determination, will power, and inner strength.

Like Isaac, we can also muster the inner strength to persevere when life is difficult. We can choose peace in the face of disappointment, perseverance in the face of opposition, patience in the face of obstacles. Isaac provides us with an example worthy of following, worthy of his role as patriarch to Israel and to all God's children.



Photo: [wikimedia.org/ Francesco Bassano the Younger, c. 1575](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Francesco_Bassano_the_Younger_-_The_Younger_-_c.1575.jpg)

*So Isaac moved away from there and encamped in the Valley of Gerar, where he settled.*

— GENESIS 26:17

# Strength in Faithfulness

The story of Isaac in the Bible will at times seem very familiar, particularly if you have read the story of his father, Abraham.

Scripture seems to point us toward this connection starting with the famine in the land of Canaan: “Now there was a famine in the land – besides the previous famine in Abraham’s time” (Genesis 26:1). As this verse reminds us, both Abraham and Isaac experienced a harsh famine in the Promised Land. Isaac reacted just as his father did and began to head toward Egypt where he could ride out the famine until it was over. However, in Isaac’s case, God commanded him: “Do not go down to Egypt; live in the land where I tell you to live” (Genesis 26:2).

While Abraham found himself in Egypt and Isaac stayed in Canaan, they both faced an identical challenge. Abraham was concerned that the pharaoh might have him killed because of his beautiful wife, Sarah. Isaac was concerned that Abimelek, the King of Gerar, might have him killed in order to steal away the beautiful Rebekah. Both Abraham (Genesis 20:1-2) and Isaac (Genesis 26:7) solved their problem in the same way—by passing their wives off as their sisters.

And both patriarchs invested a significant amount of time digging wells and both endured conflicts with the Philistines regarding ownership of the wells. Ultimately, both Abraham (Genesis 21:27) and Isaac (Genesis 26:26-29) formed peace treaties with Abimelek and formalized the agreement in the exact same place—Beersheba, “well of the oath.”

These parallels between the lives of both patriarchs are not by chance. They reveal Isaac’s patriarchal role and provide insight into his character.

In Genesis 25, we read, “This is the account of the family line of Abraham’s son Isaac. Abraham became the father of Isaac” (v. 19). Here, the Bible is teaching us two separate ideas using two similar terms.

The first reference, describing Isaac as Abraham’s son, introduces the subsequent verses talking about Isaac’s life. The second reference to Abraham being the father of Isaac is a description of Isaac himself.

First and foremost, Isaac was the son of Abraham, Yitzchak ben Avraham. Everything he did throughout his life was dictated by this identity. Isaac understood that his role was to continue and consolidate the work of his father. Abraham was the innovator, the trailblazer, the dynamic teacher who introduced the idea of one God. But there was no way for Abraham to ensure that his message would continue after his death. Only Isaac, the critical link between the first patriarch and the third, could fulfill that mission.

As biblical scholar Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut wrote in his book, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, “Of the three patriarchs, Isaac’s personality is the least clearly defined.” Rabbi Plaut calls Isaac “the bridge between Abraham and Jacob, the essential link in the chain of greatness.” Another example of Isaac’s inner strength? No doubt he was tempted to make his own unique mark. Surely, it wasn’t easy always being in the shadow of his father. Isaac may have been tempted to create a following of his own. Yet, he held himself back because he understood that while Abraham was the initiator of the mission, Isaac was to be the sustainer, ensuring that God’s message through Abraham took root and would continue to blossom.



Photo: wikimedia.org/Govert Flinck, c. 1638

*This is the account of the family line of Abraham’s son Isaac. Abraham became the father of Isaac.*

— GENESIS 25:19

# Think About It

1. **Think about the people in your life.** Who do you consider an example of a strong person? Why? What characteristics do you most associate with strength?
2. **Does defining a strong person as someone “who conquers his will” change your perception of what it means to be strong?** Does it change who you think of as strong?
3. **What do you think your God-given role is in revealing the glory of His Kingdom?**
4. **How do you react when something unexpected happens?**
5. **How is your life similar to your parents’ and grandparents’ lives?** How is it different? How do these insights inform your life and purpose?



## Apply It

1. **Live your values.** Ask yourself what you would be willing to sacrifice your life for. Now live with powerful dedication to those very values. (Proverbs 4:26; 1 Corinthians 15:58)
2. **Appreciate every day.** When we recognize that each day is a gift from God, we can live with more joy and greater contribution. (Psalm 118:24; Philippians 4:4)
3. **Exercise your inner strength.** The New Year is a good time to think about exercising our body to build physical strength. Consider how you can exercise more of your inner strength to become stronger spiritually as well. (Job 17:9; Colossians 1:10-11)
4. **Put God first.** Like Isaac, we must be willing to put God’s will before our own. We may think we know best, but God knows better! (Proverbs 3:5-6; James 4:7-8)
5. **Pass it on.** We must pass down the traditions, teachings, and values of those who came before us, passing along a spiritual legacy. (Deuteronomy 3:9; Ephesians 6:4)

