BITTER GREEN MANGOES

A missionary family, called to work in a tropical country, considered mangoes an exotic foretaste of heaven. As this fruit was expensive and difficult to find in their homeland, they were thrilled to know that mangoes were now common and cheap. They were even more excited when they discovered a mango tree in their backyard. They couldn’t wait to pick and eat mangoes from their tree!

But their anticipation shifted to bitterness when they discovered that all “their” mangoes were picked by their neighbors while still green. Apparently the locals used green mangoes to prepare an appreciated dish from that country. How should the missionary family have reacted? Wasn’t it their right to eat ripe mangoes from their own tree? Wouldn’t their protests impair their ability to exemplify the gospel to their neighbors, which essentially is God “giving” eternal life to those who do not deserve it?

They decided that “giving” up their mangoes was nothing compared to what Christ gave up for them. After a while they even tried the green mangoes according to the local custom and ended up loving them!

This week’s theme will focus on Isaac and his interaction with Abimelech (Genesis 26). This account will reveal how the love of money and material gain will ruin the reason we are in this world—our purpose and our mission. At the same time, we will learn important lessons about altruism—the selfless concern for the good of others. This important virtue is practiced by all of Christ’s true representatives, who trust in His promises to provide for them, and are preparing to live in heaven.
Write out Romans 12:9–21 from the translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out Romans 12:14–19. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map it.
THE RIGHT TO DIG

The circumstances were against Isaac and Rebekah as they looked for the best place to live and sustain themselves. Because of famine, Isaac decided to move to Gerar, a region governed by Abimelech, king of the Philistines. While there, Isaac received an important message from God: “Do not go down to Egypt; live in the land of which I shall tell you” (Gen. 26:2). Even though the place intended by God for them to live was not specified at that moment, two things were clear. First, God told him not go down to Egypt. Second, God promised to be with him and to bless him (vv. 3, 4). But this promise was implicitly linked to following God’s future directions about where to live (v. 2).

Those who consider material gain as their supreme goal in life will end up placing themselves and their families where God cannot bless them. Like Lot, they expose their families to spiritual risks. Satan takes control of the situation, and the result is frequently poor health, broken families, temporal failure, and eternal loss.

Isaac knew that God’s part in the transgenerational covenant with his father, Abraham, included two things: giving him descendants and providing possessions to live on. But possessions were secured only if they fulfilled the condition—to teach their descendants after them to keep the way of the Lord (Gen. 17:4–9; 18:19).

Still without any additional information from God about where to go, Isaac stayed in Gerar and sowed in that land. He “reaped a hundredfold; and the Lord blessed him. The man began to prosper and continued prospering until he became very prosperous; for he had possessions of flocks and possessions of herds and a great number of servants,” (Gen. 26:12–14). We can only imagine how he loved that place, as the conditions for material growth were tremendously favorable! Would this be the place intended by God for him to live?

As it always does, signs of wealth attracted envy. The Philistines stopped up the wells dug by his father Abraham, without which he couldn’t thrive! Additionally, Abimelech asks Isaac to depart from them, which would be a serious risk to his prosperity. Imagine Isaac’s feelings while facing this kind of unfair treatment. He could brag that it was his right to own the wells dug by his father. After all, had not God promised all that land to his descendants? But avoiding conflict not to compromise his mission, Isaac departed to the Valley of Gerar. There he opened again wells that were dug by his father, which were later stopped by the Philistines. His servants also dug a new well, but the herdsmen of Gerar quarreled about it likewise. Isaac “dug another well, and they quarreled over that one also” (v. 21). Should he have pretended that nothing was happening? Shouldn’t he have stood his ground, defending his rights from this kind of treatment?

Some people are so conscious of their rights that they don’t mind ruining any relationship to preserve them. But true servants of Jesus Christ will always consider relationship with God and fellow humans as of higher importance than material gain. As Abraham did with Lot, and Isaac with Abimelech, they will not hesitate to suffer material loss, if necessary, to reflect their Master’s generous character and to lead others to Him. That kind of loss is credited to their account by Jesus as an offering made to Him. At end of the day He will not leave them in want.
A “WELL” OFFERING

Isaac’s story indicates that we should not fight for a well, even if it was taken from us unjustly. It also teaches that by modeling Christ, we are enabled by His Spirit to put others first, even when they are trying to harm us. It is by no means out of weakness or cowardice that we are called to do it. It is simply done from faith.

This attitude comes from the belief that there is a God in heaven who actively interferes in human business, takes care of our rights, and in due time will fix all human injustices. It also comes from the assurance that circumstantial gains or losses have not the power to interfere in God’s decision to bless us.

On the other hand, those who do not trust in the Lord as their defender will keep fighting to position themselves in privileged place, or will damage relationships while fighting to defend what they believe are their rights. They will always put money and material gain ahead of persons.

This combativeness may be part of an evolutionist mindset that in practice ignores God, prayer, and His supernatural actions on behalf of His creatures. Even nominal Christians may inadvertently adopt a Darwinist mentality of the struggle of the species and the survival of the fittest, fighting for their rights as if there were no God to defend them.

Shouldn’t God’s representatives deal with the unrighteous as they deserve to be treated? Or should we treat others as we have been treated by God’s grace? Paraphrasing Goethe: If we treat people as they deserve, we may remove from them the opportunity of becoming what they could become.

How did this week’s account end? After multiple annoying experiences, Isaac moved again “and dug another well.” When his enemies “did not quarrel over it,” he immediately attributed this outcome to God’s supernatural intervention: “For now the Lord has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land” (Gen. 26:22). As it happens in our life also, God used all those annoyances, not only to develop Isaac’s character, but also to lead him to the place(s) where he was supposed to live (v. 2). The best places in the world are the ones God points us to be in.

Isaac moved to where it would later be known as Beersheba. God appeared to him there, telling him not to fear, “I am with you. I will bless you and multiply your descendants” (v. 24). Now, to Isaac’s surprise, Abimelech came to him in peace, accompanied by two dignitaries. Isaac didn’t miss the opportunity to ask, “Why have you come to me, since you hate me and have sent me away from you?” The answer was revealing: “We have certainly seen that the Lord is with you” (vv. 27, 28).

Is our goal in life to show to others how accurate our sense of justice is and our ability to fight for our rights? Or is our first goal to reveal Christ in our interaction with others? Are we ready to “eat green mangoes” (cont. on p. 45)
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What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Acts 17:26
Psalm 25:8–14; 32:8–10
Romans 8:28, 31, 32
2 Corinthians 10:3, 4
Philippians 2:5–11
1 Peter 2:19–24
Romans 12:9–21

What other verses/promises come to mind in connection with Romans 12:9–21?

Review your memorized verse from Romans 12:9–21.

(Cont. from inTerpret p. 44): or to “dig wells” as a precious offering presented to our Savior? Would those around us, such as Abimelech, say, “We have certainly seen that the Lord is with you”?

Before sending the entourage away, Isaac offered a feast, sealing with them an oath of nonaggression. In that same day his servants found more water, and he called that place Beersheba, or Well of Oath! God did not leave His children in want!
A BITTERSWEET VIRTUE

Altruism, which was perfectly exemplified by Christ at the cross, is a bittersweet virtue. While it frequently generates pain, it also produces peace and joy when practiced in faith. It is often painful because it fights against our natural inclination to selfishness. Ellen G. White points to the power of selfishness as “the strongest and most general of human impulses” and “the essence of depravity” (Counsels on Stewardship, 24, 25).

Satan brings temptations, abuse, or injustices, leading us to fear loss. This kind of fear prevents the truth of God’s goodness and His loving care settling in our mind. He knows well that by placing us in the moving sands of fear, he easily leads us to use physical weapons and to adopt worldly strategies to manage conflicts and finances during crises. By resorting to physical weapons, we leave God’s protective umbrella!

The Lord, on the other hand, allows us to experience unfavorable events so that our characters may be developed and that we may learn how to trust. As it happened with faithful Job, even unexplainable losses may become part of His big plan in the context of the great controversy. So why fear or complain?

As all of us are born in God’s kingdom as missionaries, we are to look more to the necessities of others than to our own. No one can be a missionary while retaining “self.” Every desire for gain, even the preservation of life, must be surrendered to Jesus. It is when, like Jesus, we become ready to die for the world that we are enabled to reflect Him as Isaac did. Because he trusted God and practiced His principles in dealing with his enemies, they were led to recognize God in his life and were amazingly drawn to him—God’s representative.

After realizing what Christ did for us on the cross, we are compelled by His love to lead others to Him. As Spurgeon once said: “If you have no wish to bring others to heaven [or Jesus], you are not going there yourself.” It doesn’t matter if you are a sponsored missionary by the church or a self-supported missionary like Isaac. The kind of relational/material generosity shown by Isaac is possible only when someone understands God’s power, His immense love, as well as their role of being a blessing to all nations of the earth.

It is impossible to impart the knowledge of Jesus to others if our love of money or worldly gain becomes evident to them that we don’t know Jesus. Let this mind be in us, which was also in Christ Jesus!
**DEPRAVITY AND DIVINITY**

Satan’s aim has been to lead men to self first; and yielding themselves to his control, they have developed a selfishness that has filled the world with misery and strife, setting human beings at variance with one another.

Selfishness is the essence of depravity. . . . Nations, families, and individuals are filled with a desire to make self a center. . . .

Selfishness has brought discord into the church, filling it with unholy ambition. . . .

Seeking the good of others is the way in which true happiness can be found. Man does not work against his own interest by loving God and his fellow men. The more unselfish his spirit, the happier he is, because he is fulfilling God’s purpose for him. The breath of God is breathed through him, filling him with gladness. To him life is a sacred trust, precious in his sight because given by God to be spent in ministering to others. (Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Stewardship* [Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1940], 24, 25.)

The followers of Christ are not to despise wealth; they are to look upon wealth as the Lord’s entrusted talent. . . . But we are to bear the fact in mind that God has not given us riches to use just as we shall fancy, to indulge impulse, to bestow or withhold as we shall please. . . .

Those who put their riches to a selfish use in this world are revealing attributes of character that show what they would do if they had . . . possessed the imperishable treasures of the kingdom of God. . . .

God has given directions as to how they are to appropriate His goods in relieving the wants of suffering humanity, in advancing His cause, in building up His kingdom in the world, in sending missionaries into regions beyond, in disseminating the knowledge of Christ in all parts of the world. (E. G. White, *Counsels on Stewardship*, 133, 134.)

Christ, our example, did nothing to vindicate or deliver Himself. He committed His case to God. So His followers are not to accuse or condemn, or to resort to force in order to deliver themselves.

When trials arise that seem unexplainable, we should not allow our peace to be spoiled. However unjustly we may be treated, let no passion arise. By indulging a spirit of retaliation we injure ourselves. We destroy our own confidence in God, and grieve the Holy Spirit. There is by our side a witness, a heavenly messenger, who will lift up for us a standard against the enemy. He will shut us in with the bright beams of the Sun of Righteousness. Beyond this Satan cannot penetrate. He cannot pass this shield of holy light. (E. G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons* [Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1900, 1941], 171, 172.)
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Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

If our inclinations or perceptions may be deceiving, how can we choose the place to live and generate income?

Which kind of people, if any, is God unable to guide, even if they ask for guidance?

Why do we leave God’s protective umbrella if we adopt worldly strategies and carnal weapons to solve conflicts? Isn’t He powerful enough to bless us anyway?

If a righteous person treats an unrighteous as he or she were righteous, would not the righteous become unrighteous?

If selfishness is the essence of depravity, how can you fight against it? Is “giving” a solution to eradicate selfishness, or is it a sign that it was eradicated? Explain.

Why is altruism such a difficult virtue to be practiced?

Isaac: The Altruistic Giver