

Jacob and Esau: Genesis 25:19-34
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The book of Genesis is such an important and such a fascinating part of our spiritual heritage. We get to read of the great promises God made to the patriarchs, and how He kept those promises. And we see today how He is continuing to keep those promises. This morning we're going to cover a lot of ground as the story transitions from Abraham and Sarah to Isaac and Rebekah, and then to their sons Jacob and Esau.

The story of Abraham and Isaac in chapter 22 was the climactic event in Abraham's journey of faith. God called Abraham in Genesis 12, and God tested Abraham's faith in chapter 22. And by God's grace Abraham exhibited tremendous faith in God's promise, even trusting that God would raise Isaac from the dead. But God instead provided a substitute to be sacrificed in the place of Isaac. The angel of the Lord stopped Abraham at the last moment, and then Abraham looked and there was a ram caught in a thicket. And he sacrificed the ram instead of his son. What an amazing example of faith. What an amazing life of faith! The Bible, of course, shows us the good, the bad and the ugly. And there certainly are bad and ugly parts of Abraham's story. But looking at the big picture of his life, this is a life of faith. It is a life profoundly impacted by the grace of God. God's hand was unmistakably upon this man and upon his family. Chapter 22 is the climax of the story of Abraham's faith, and then chapters 23, 24, and 25 record Sarah's death, Isaac's marriage to Rebekah, Abraham's death, and then the story of Rebekah giving birth to Esau and Jacob, and finally the story of Esau selling his birthright to Jacob.

It's that last section that I want to focus on this morning, the section dealing with Jacob and Esau. But I don't want to totally skip over chapters 23-24. So let me tell you the story of Sarah's death, and Isaac's marriage to Rebekah, and Abraham's death, and then we'll look in more detail at Abraham's grandsons, Jacob and Esau.

Abraham and Sarah were coming into the winter of their lives. They had traveled and wandered from place to place for most of their days. Earlier in life they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans (in present day Iraq) and traveled northwest along the Fertile Crescent and settled in Haran. Then God called them to leave Haran and they traveled south into Canaan. And you remember that God promised to give that land to Abraham's offspring. Then Abraham continued south and traveled to Egypt, and then back to Canaan. At the beginning of chapter 20 he sojourned in Gerar, and at the end of chapter 21 it says, "he sojourned many days in the land of the Philistines." Then after the climactic events on Mount Moriah, Abraham went and lived in Beersheba, in the southern part of Canaan.

And then at the time of Sarah's death they were in Hebron, a little further north. The point is: they were nomads. They had traveled around with no piece of land to call their own. And that reality becomes very plain in the event of Sarah's death because Abraham has no place to bury her. He doesn't own any land. But instead of going back to Haran to bury his wife in his "homeland," he looks to the future inheritance that God has promised him and buries his wife here in his true homeland. He doesn't own any of this land, so he has to buy a plot of land to bury his wife. The Hittites were very cooperative. They offered to give him a burial plot. Abraham paid the four hundred

shekels of silver, and the field was given to him which contained the cave of Machpelah, where he buried his wife.

About 38 years later Abraham died and was buried in the same cave with Sarah. But there was a critical task that Abraham had to complete in his old age. He had to find Isaac a wife. He had to find a wife for the son of promise. God had promised to multiply Abraham's offspring, and to bless all the nations of the earth through his offspring, and it was going to be through Isaac that this would happen. So this meant that Isaac would have to have some kids. And therefore Abraham needed to make sure Isaac found a wife.

In chapter 24 Abraham, in his old age, made his servant swear to him that he would find a wife for Isaac, not from the Canaanites, but from Abraham's own people. Abraham didn't want Isaac to marry one of the local girls there in Canaan. He wanted his servant to travel all the way back to northern Mesopotamia and bring back a wife for Isaac. He also wanted to make sure, though, that Isaac stayed in Canaan. He didn't want Isaac to marry a Canaanite, but he did want Isaac to live in Canaan. Why? Because Canaan was the Promised Land. Again, we see Abraham believing the promises. He buried his wife there in Canaan, because he was looking forward in hope to the fulfillment of the promise. And he sent his servant to bring a wife back for his son, so that his son could remain in the land of promise.

Chapter 24 is an exciting story of how God provides a wife for Isaac. It's a story of God's sovereignty and God's blessing on Abraham's family. The servant packed up and went to Mesopotamia to the city of Nahor. Nahor was Abraham's brother. And the servant prayed for a sign. He said, "Let the young woman to whom I shall say, 'Please let down your jar that I may drink,' and who shall say, 'Drink, and I will water your camels'—let her be the one whom you have appointed for your servant Isaac." And that's exactly what happened. Rebekah, Nahor's granddaughter, came out with her water jar. Abraham's servant asked for water, and she gave him a drink and then also offered to water his camels. They went back and met Laban, Rebekah's brother. The servant told him the whole story of what was going on and how God was answering his prayers. Then Laban and Bethuel, Rebekah's father, both agreed that this was from the Lord, and Rebekah agreed to go, so the servant took her back to Isaac.

As they got close to home, it happened that "Isaac went out to meditate in the field toward evening" (v. 63ff). "And he lifted up his eyes and saw, and behold, there were camels coming. And Rebekah lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac, she dismounted from the camel and said to the servant, 'Who is that man, walking in the field to meet us?' The servant said, 'It is my master.' So she took her veil and covered herself. And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. Then Isaac brought her into the tent of Sarah his mother and took Rebekah, and she became his wife, and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death."

It's a great love story. Isaac and Rebekah. God provided a wife for the son of promise, a wife who would become the mother of the next patriarch, Jacob, whose name would be changed to Israel. God is creating for Himself a people and keeping His promises to Abraham.

The beginning of chapter 25 records Abraham's death. After Sarah's death Abraham took another wife and had some more children. But the text also tells us, in verse 5, that "Abraham gave all he had to Isaac." To the very end Abraham believed

God's promises and believed that Isaac was the son through whom those promises would be fulfilled.

At the ripe old age of 175, Abraham died. Isaac and Ishmael, together, buried Abraham in the cave of Machpelah, with his wife Sarah. Abraham and Sarah were not buried in the land of their fathers, but in this new land, this Promised Land, that points beyond the physical real estate of Canaan to the eternal inheritance that God has for His people. Hebrews 11 tells us this, that they were seeking a homeland and that they desired a better country, that is, a heavenly one (Hebrews 11:13-16). Abraham must have died a happy man as he looked to this spiritual inheritance. He had seen God work amazing miracles in his life. He watched God keep His promises and provide for him in supernatural ways. And he died, rejoicing in the fact that Isaac had a good wife, and fully trusting that God would bless them and multiply their descendants and eventually bless all the nations of the earth through their offspring.

And as in the story of Abraham and Sarah, the story of Isaac and Rebekah does not happen according to human plans but according to God's plan. The passage gives an interesting contrast between Isaac and Ishmael. It gives the generations of Ishmael first, and we find out that he had 12 sons, just as God had promised. And then in verse 19 the narrative turns to the generations of Isaac. And here we find out that Isaac was 40 years old when he married Rebekah, and yet it wasn't until he was 60 that they had Esau and Jacob. Twenty years of waiting! This sounds familiar, doesn't it? Years and years of barrenness, just like Abraham and Sarah. Fortunately in this case there was no Hagar incident. Isaac and Rebekah didn't take matters into their own hands and try to produce an heir by some foolish plan. They may have been tempted to. We can imagine the confusion in Isaac's mind. He knows that he is the son of promise, and yet it's his brother, Ishmael, whose wife is having all the babies.

And so, as God loves to do, He orchestrates the details of history to highlight His power and sovereignty and goodness. He makes it plain that He is in control and He is going to fulfill His promises in His own timing and in His own way. Look at Genesis 25:19-28.

The Nature of Prayer

First, I want to say something about the nature of prayer. Isaac was 40 when he married Rebekah, and there were two decades of barrenness. Verse 21 says that "Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren. And the Lord granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived." This is an amazing answer to prayer. We can't conclude from this that God will immediately grant all of our requests. Many couples pray for children and don't receive children at the time they would like. Many parents pray that their wayward children would repent and turn to Christ. Workers pray for a promotion. Students pray for a good job opportunity after graduation. And as we pray for these things and wait for these things I think we need to remember two important truths. First of all, God will provide in His timing and according to His plans. God is sovereign over your circumstances. And secondly, God DOES work through our prayers. He uses our prayers to accomplish His will.

In chapter 24 Abraham's servant prayed that God would provide a wife for Isaac. And God did! And now Isaac prays for Rebekah to conceive, and she does. God, in His sovereignty, is pleased to use our prayers as a means to accomplish His ends. On the one hand, we must not think that our prayers change God's mind or change His plans in any

way. But on the other hand, we **MUST** believe that our prayers change circumstances. Our prayers are used by God to change people and change situations. So let us pray with all our might for the things that God lays on our hearts, and let us trust in His plan and His timing.

God's Sovereign Choice

Now, the main point that I want to focus on in this sermon is: God's Sovereign Choice. Rebekah conceived, and it was an interesting pregnancy. She was going to have twins, and these two babies were struggling with each other inside of her.

I remember a woman telling Stacy and me about her pregnancy, and saying that she had a very active baby inside of her. And this baby apparently enjoyed music because it would get all the more active when it heard up-beat music. And this lady went to a church where they had one service with contemporary music and another service with more traditional music. And she had to go to the traditional service during her pregnancy because the baby in her womb would get so energetic during the contemporary music that it was just too exhausting for the mother.

Well, that's what Rebekah must have felt like, and much more. She had twin boys who were fighting inside of her. She wondered what this was all about, so she inquired of the Lord, and this is what the Lord said to her, verse 23, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger."

This statement must have been shocking, because it went against the customary rights of the firstborn. The rights of primogeniture mandated that the firstborn get special treatment. The firstborn would be the head of the family after the father died and would receive a double portion of the inheritance. In other words, the younger served the older; not the other way around. That's why it would have been so shocking to hear that the younger would serve the older.

God shows His sovereignty in election by choosing the younger son rather than the older son. God goes out of His way to show that He is not constrained by human custom. He shatters the box that we try to put Him in.

What is God doing in this situation? What is His purpose with these twin boys in Rebekah's womb? The purpose is to highlight God's sovereign choice and God's sovereign grace. He chooses one brother over the other, not because one is better than the other, and not even because He looks ahead through the corridors of time as only He can do and sees that one will trust Him while the other won't. God's choice is not based on anything about these individuals. Rather, it is simply God's free choice to elect some and reject others. In the book of Exodus God says to Moses, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy" (Exodus 33:19).

This is a controversial point among Christians. We ask the question, "Does God choose us, or do we choose God?" And the answer is: YES. Yes, it's both. For a person to become a Christian, he or she must choose to repent of sin and turn to Jesus Christ for forgiveness. The human will is most certainly involved in conversion. But that is only half the story. The point that we see in our passage this morning is that God's choice comes first. Yes, we choose God. We must choose God. And it's also true that the ones who choose Him are those whom He has first chosen. God has to choose us before we can choose Him. We're in such bondage to sin that God has to change our hearts and change our desires, and THEN we will choose Him.

Turn to Romans 9:10-13. Paul gives us a very clear commentary on Jacob and Esau that highlights God's choice. "And not only so, but also when Rebecca had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of his call—she was told, 'The older will serve the younger.' [And then Paul adds this quote from Malachi 1:2-3) As it is written, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.'"]

God chose to save Jacob, and He chose to reject Esau. And that choice came BEFORE either of them was born. It came long before that time. Ephesians 1 says that God chose us before the foundation of the world. And then God announced His choice to Rebekah while the brothers were still in her womb. God wanted to be clear that His choice did not depend on any human custom or any human achievement. It wasn't because Jacob was the oldest. He wasn't. And it wasn't because Jacob did more good works than Esau, because [Rom 9:11] "they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad."

Augustine wrote about this and said, ". . . the younger was chosen, through no merits of his own, and the older rejected. So far as original sin goes, both were equal. As for personal sins, neither had any" (*City of God*; quote found in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Genesis 12-50*). In God's eyes these two boys were exactly the same. As Augustine points out, they were both guilty as sinners because they were descendants of Adam. They both had a sinful nature, as we all do. And they were also identical in that neither of them had actually committed any sin yet, because they weren't even born. They hadn't done anything good or bad. And God chose one rather than the other, contrary to human custom, in order that his "purpose of election might continue."

Let me tell you why this truth about God's electing, saving grace should be so encouraging to us. This is very good news, and I want you to see it as good news. It's good news because nobody deserves to be chosen. God would be perfectly just to condemn each and every one of us to hell. But He has chosen to save sinners like me and you. That should amaze us! We should be in awe of the fact that God chooses anyone at all. We don't deserve His grace. And yet He pours out His grace on so many unworthy sinners.

This should also remind us that our salvation is not something we can take credit for. If you are trusting in Christ, it's not because of your good works or your will power or anything about you. It's because of God's sovereign choice.

This truth ought to inspire in us a tremendous love for God and thankfulness to Him for His grace that has been poured out in our lives.

This should also cultivate humility in our hearts, knowing that we don't deserve this grace.

And it should embolden us in evangelism, because those whom God has chosen WILL believe. It's our privilege to be used by God as He draws the elect to Himself.

God's sovereignty in election is a beautiful and biblical truth that I hope we will understand and appreciate more and more.

Don't Despise the Promises

Let's close by briefly looking at one more point from the last section of Genesis 25. Esau sells his birthright (vv. 29-34).

The lesson that we're supposed to take from this passage is not what we might think at first. We read the story and we're appalled at how Jacob took advantage of his brother in Esau's time of need. He should have given generously to his brother without asking for anything in return. But instead he seized on this opportunity and used it as a way to get the precious birthright.

But notice at the end of the passage, the emphasis isn't on what Jacob did wrong. It doesn't say, "Thus Jacob swindled his brother." Instead it says, "Thus Esau despised his birthright." Jacob WAS manipulative and conniving. But the real problem was how casually Esau parted with the birthright. In effect, he was saying, "This bread and stew is more valuable to me than inheriting the great promises that God made to my father Isaac and my grandfather Abraham." Esau did not value those promises. He did not desire them or delight in them as he should have.

The lesson for us is that we need to hold on to the promises of God and hold on to the hope we have in Him. Don't despise the things of God. Don't minimize the importance and value of God's promises, God's truth, God's Word, God's church. It is a dangerous thing to trade these precious things for the savory pleasures of the world. The writer of Hebrews warns us of this, and uses Esau as an example.

This is found in Hebrews 12:15-17. "See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no 'root of bitterness' springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears." This is a solemn warning for those who profess to be Christians but casually turn away from the things of God and give greater attention to the things of the world. Don't be like Esau. Don't exchange the everlasting and majestic promises of God for a bowl of stew, or a better job, or a nicer house, or fame or riches, or a boyfriend or girlfriend, or comfort or entertainment. Don't be duped by the lies of sin. Don't despise the promises