

## Divided from the Womb (Jacob & Esau)

*Two boys, two paths and two destinies*

**Text:** Gen. 25:12-34

### Introduction:

1. Verse 12-18 record the “generations of Ishmael”. It is interesting that this historical record comes after Abraham’s funeral. It is possible that funerals in ancient times were used as opportunities to collate family records. The Bible notes that Ishmael had 12 sons referred to as ‘princes’ who were the progenitors of 12 people groups called ‘nations’. It is of interest to note that Ishmael had 12 sons and that Jacob, the rightful heir of Abraham also had 12 sons who would become the heads of the 12 tribes of Israel.
2. After a brief summary of the “generations of Ishmael”, the narrative moves on to “generations of Isaac” (Vs. 19). This forms the heading until we get to the “generations of Jacob” in Genesis 37:2.
3. The account of the birth and growth of Isaac’s sons Jacob and Esau is now given in the inspired record (Vs. 20-34). This forms an important foundation to understanding events that will transpire later, especially in relation to the life of Jacob who will soon be the focus of the narrative.
4. We will divide the account into three parts for our study of this early period in the lives of Jacob and Esau and the spiritual lessons we can learn.

### I. THE PRAYER FOR JACOB AND ESAU (VS. 20-23)

Both Isaac and Rebekah were people of prayer. Praise God for praying parents.

#### A. A Father’s Prayer – Isaac (Vs. 20-21)

1. The infertility that motivated Isaac to pray.
  - a. Isaac married Rebekah when he was 40 years old (Vs. 20) and 20 years passed before Rebekah gave birth to the two boys (Vs. 26).
  - b. Divine delays are a reoccurring theme in Genesis. There is a perception of a delay on our part but in reality, God is not bound by time and brings things to pass according to His Divine schedule. From our end we need to learn to trust and wait. When we try and help God fulfill His promises in the wisdom and strength of the flesh, disaster is the result.
  - c. Matthew Henry writes, “Though the accomplishment of God’s promise is always sure, yet it is often slow, and seems to be crossed and contradicted by Providence.”
  - d. Griffith Thomas writes, “God’s delays are not necessarily God’s denials. God often delays in the bestowal of His grace in order that we may the more thoroughly rely upon Him and the more definitely realize that our expectation is from Him, and not merely from secondary causes or natural laws.”
2. The intercession that moved God to perform.

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- a. Thankfully, prayer was Isaac's response to the trial of infertility, not polygamy like Abraham (Hagar). Prayer is the most important treatment for infertility!
- b. God's answer to Isaac's prayer is a timely reminder of God's sovereignty over the womb and that He is the one who ultimately gives conception.
- c. Isaac had the revealed will of God as a firm foundation for his prayers. God had promised that the seed line would continue through Isaac (Gen. 21:12). 1 John 5:14 "And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us:"

### **B. A Mother's Prayer – Isaac (Vs. 22-23)**

1. The prenatal conflict between the twins (Vs. 22)
  - a. A struggle took place between the two boys in Rebekah's womb that was more than the normal fetal movements. The words "struggled together" in verse 22 come from one Hebrew word which according to Thomas Whitelaw in *The Pulpit Commentary* "is expressive of a violent internal commotion, as if the unborn children had been dashing against one another in her womb." Wilson defines the word as "to break; to oppress; to dash one another"; and Brown says, "The children crush one another within her."
  - b. Rebekah wisely takes the matter to the Lord in prayer and seeks His wisdom and insight. God delights to answer the prayer for wisdom (James 1:5). Prayer for our children starts when they are still in the womb.
  - c. Note: This passage highlights that unborn children are real human beings, capable of even expressing something of their character in the womb.
2. The prophecy concerning the twins (Vs. 23)

In response to Rebekah's prayer, God revealed that she was pregnant with twins and that there would be some very important differences between the two.

  - a. Two nations were in her womb. From Isaac would come the nation of Israel and from Esau the nation of Edom.
  - b. Two manner of people would be separated from her bowels. The future separation between the two boys is highlighted. "The twins in the womb were of two utterly different and antagonistic temperaments. The nations which they would establish would inherit these tendencies. The struggle which had begun in her womb would continue throughout their lives and throughout the histories of their respective nations." (Henry Morris)
  - c. One people group from one son would be stronger than the people group from the other son. The descendants of Jacob and Esau were not equal in political strength. The domination of the nation of Israel (Jacob's descendants) over the Edomites (Esau's descendants) was especially evident in David's time (2 Sam. 8:14) and was also evident in the time of King Uzziah (2 Chro. 25:11-12).

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- d. The elder would serve the younger. A very important detail that will help us better appreciate the drama that unfolds in Isaac's family. Normally, the superior honour went to the firstborn but not here. It reminds us that God does not always honour in the way man does (See 1. Sam. 16:7).

## II. THE PERSONALITIES OF JACOB AND ESAU (VS. 24-28)

The differences prophesied before their birth became apparent from the time of their birth. Consider...

### A. The Profile of the Pair (Vs. 24-27)

1. A profile of Esau (Vs. 25, 27a)
  - a. As revealed in his babyhood (Vs. 25). Esau came out of the womb first with a reddish appearance and hairy all over.
    - i. The colour red would forever be associated with Esau. He would later be called 'Edom' meaning "red" (Vs. 30).
    - ii. His hairiness was something that would be noted later when Jacob and Rebekah concoct a plan to deceive Isaac into giving the patriarchal blessing to Jacob instead of Esau (Gen. 27:11). Esau's hairiness also seemed to be symbolic of the rugged, outdoor man he would become.
  - b. As revealed in his manhood (Vs. 27a). As Esau grew into manhood, he became a "cunning (meaning skilled) hunter". While being a skilled hunter may not have been sinful in itself, it revealed something of Esau's character.
    - i. Esau's was not hunting for food because the family needed it. Isaac had inherited his father Abraham's vast resources which included flocks and herds well able to sustain their needs. Esau's pursuit of hunting reveals something of his character as a wild and restless fellow who was primarily concerned with the pursuit of his own heart desires. "Esau represents those who are talented in their head and hands but not in their heart." (Butler) Leupold says this phrase describes "a man roving about everywhere" which is typical of the worldling.
    - ii. Further, there is only one other man specifically called a hunter in the Bible and it is found in Genesis 10:9 in reference to Nimrod who was "a mighty hunter before the LORD." "One Biblical hunter (Nimrod) was a rebel against God, the other was a sportsman unconcerned with God (Esau)." (Morris)
2. A profile of Jacob (Vs. 26, 27b)
  - a. As revealed in his babyhood (Vs. 26)
    - i. The prominent feature of Jacob's birth was his rapid birth following Esau (dear Rebekah!) and the fact his little hand was hanging on to his brother's heel. It appears from the reference in Hosea 12:3 that this action began in the womb shortly before birth – "He took his brother by the heel in the womb" (Hos. 12:3).
    - ii. As a consequence, he is named 'Jacob' which means "heel gripper". "The picture is that of one grabbing the

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heel of another to trip him up. The word supplanter describes the action. And the word “supplanted” is what Esau used of Jacob when Esau missed out on the blessing from Isaac.” See Gen. 27:36. The word ‘supplant’ means “to trip up the heels; to remove or displace by stratagem; or to displace and take the place of” (Webster’s 1828).

- iii. This action of Jacob as he came out of the womb was indicative of his inner nature in Adam. He would be a calculating, deceiving individual who was skilled in getting the best out of a situation. God is His love and grace would work on Jacob to transform him from Jacob, a supplanter, to Israel, a prince with God.
- b. As revealed in his manhood (Vs. 27b)  
Two things are said about Jacob as a man.
  - i. He was a plain man. This does not mean ‘plain’ in the way we tend to use the word in our day (e.g., she’s a plain Jane). The word ‘plain’ in old English has the sense of ‘pure’. The same Hebrew word is translated ‘perfect’ nine times in the O.T. (Job. 1:1, 8; 2:3; 8:20; 9:20, 21, 22; Ps. 37:37; 64:4), ‘upright’ once (Prov. 29:10), ‘undefiled’ twice (Song 5:2, 6:9). For example, Job is described in Job 1:1 as “**perfect** and upright...one that feared God, and eschewed evil.”
  - ii. He dwelt in tents. This does not mean he was a lazy man who sat around the tent all day with mummy. There was more of a stability and constancy with Jacob. He was not wild and restless like his brother. He was happy to be in the company of his parents and serve in the day to day domestic duties with the flocks and herds. Evidently, he also learned how to cook (Vs. 29).
  - iii. Unlike his brother Esau who was a ‘fornicator’ (Heb. 12:16), married Canaanite women (Gen. 26:34-35) and a man primarily concerned with the things of this life (a hunter), Jacob was a clean-living man who did have a desire for the Lord despite his character flaws. There was a spark of spirituality in Jacob’s heart with which the Lord could work.

### B. The Partiality of the Parents (Vs. 28)

Sadly, the differences in personality between the two boys became the catalyst for divided affection in the home with one parent loving one of the boys more than the other.

1. Isaac’s favouritism towards Esau – a fleshly desire was met (Vs. 28a). Sadly, Isaac’s preferential treatment of Esau was on account of the fact he could indulge his appetite for venison. Favouritism in a parent stems from selfishness. There is something wrong when as a parent we are content in our children’s secular accomplishments and care little for how much they have grown in spiritual stature.

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2. Rebekah's favouritism towards Jacob – an emotional desire was met (Vs. 28b). No specific reason for Rebekah's partiality towards Jacob is stated but evidently, he was his mother's son, likely keeping her company around the home and absorbing some of the tension of her highly strung personality. She also had been given special insight concerning Jacob's future so may have been inclined to give him more attention than Esau.
3. Griffith Thomas makes an interesting suggestion that a parent tends to be drawn to a child who is similar in character to the spouse. He states, "Esau was his father's favourite, Jacob his mother's. Isaac, the quiet, passive man, saw in Esau, the bold hunter, the energetic nature of the woman whom he had loved as a wife all those years. Rebekah, the strong, self-assertive woman, saw in the quiet, gentle Jacob the quiet, passive husband whom she had loved so long. It is often found that the father loves the boy or girl who resembles the mother, while the mother is frequently found to favour the boy or girl whose nature is most akin to the father; but when, as in this case, partiality is carried to great extremes, nothing but trouble can be the result." This is not a hard and fast rule and parents can also be partial because a son or daughter is like them and excuse their behaviour!
4. Sadly, Isaac and Rebekah were sowing the seeds of division and bitterness in their home through their actions. Parents be warned, the same thing happens in Christian homes today! Beware of the subtleties of your own flesh nature as a parent and be sure your parenting is done with God's help and grace or you may find yourself engaged in the sin of partiality in the home.
5. Note: There is a sense where you can only get as close to a child as they will let you. If you have a prodigal, you will not be able to have as close fellowship with them as you do with a child who is walking with God but a Spirit filled parent will love all their children with Christ's love and not engage in a carnal favouritism that breeds bitterness in the home.
6. All of this demonstrates how the Bible deals plainly with the dangers that lurk within man's fallen nature that our eyes might be opened to our own potential and by the grace of God, avoid similar mistakes.

### III. THE PRIORITIES OF JACOB AND ESAU (VS. 29-34)

The differences between Jacob and Esau, not only in personality but more importantly in their spiritual heart condition come into even sharper focus with this incident involving the birthright. Let's seek to understand what the birthright was and then the incident that took place between Jacob and Esau.

#### A. The Details of the Birthright (Vs. 31, 32b, 33b, 34b)

The 'birthright' is mentioned four times in these verses and this is the first time it is mentioned in the Bible. What is the birthright?

1. The material privileges of the birthright. The birthright according to Deuteronomy 21:17 involved a double portion of the inheritance and it was usually bestowed upon the firstborn but it was at the father's discretion to bestow it upon another child if the eldest was not

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worthy. From the case of Jacob and Esau we learn it also involved a patriarchal blessing. In Reuben's case, as the eldest son of Jacob, he was first in line for the birthright but forfeited it due to his immoral relationship with one of his father's concubines. The birthright was then given to Joseph. 1 Chronicles 5:1-2 "Now the sons of Reuben the firstborn of Israel, (for he was the firstborn; but, forasmuch as he defiled his father's bed, **his birthright was given unto the sons of Joseph** the son of Israel: and the genealogy is not to be reckoned after the birthright. For Judah prevailed above his brethren, and of him *came* the chief ruler; but **the birthright was Joseph's:**")

2. The spiritual privileges of the birthright. This was by far the most important aspect of the birthright. It meant the high privilege of being the one to carry on the Seed Line. It meant spiritual leadership in the family. In the case above with Reuben, it appears the material part of the birthright was given to Joseph while the spiritual part was bestowed upon Judah through whom Christ would come.

### B. The Desire for the Birthright – Jacob (Vs. 29-31)

1. The scene (Vs. 29-30). An unplanned incident occurred that formed the catalyst for what happened in relation to the birthright. How our character flaws can come to the surface in a situation that presents itself in day-to-day life. The Bible paints the picture. Jacob was cooking a pot of lentils when Esau came in hungry from the field. Esau appeals to his brother to share some of the pottage with him. Jacob, quick thinking and calculating, detected an opportunity to get the birthright from his twin brother.
2. Jacob's actions were deceitful and despicable and yet beneath it all, what was commendable was the fact that Jacob so highly prized the birthright with its spiritual privileges and responsibilities. It again highlights that in spite of the fact Jacob was operating in the energies of the self-life at this time, there was underneath it all a desire for the things of God. His desire was honourable, his method for obtaining his desire was dishonourable and wrong.
3. Principle: Don't try to secure spiritual blessings through carnal means.
4. At this stage of Jacob's life, we could say that he was a real mix of spiritual and carnal.

### C. The Despising of the Birthright – Esau (Vs. 32-34)

1. Esau devalued his birthright (Vs. 32)  
This involved:
  - a. The magnification of the temporal – "Behold, I am at the point to die". People who are dominated by fleshly appetites are inclined to exaggerate their "felt needs" to others. No doubt Esau was very hungry but it is very doubtful he was anywhere starvation. How the world exaggerates the passions of the flesh and elevates them to a "must have" status! Butler writes, "The words "Feed me" in the Hebrew mean "let me swallow", almost, "let me gulp" (Leupold). This is the language of those given to the appetites of the flesh. They are too impatient to fill their fleshly

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appetite the proper way. Esau was in such a hurry to satisfy his physical appetite that he was willing to give up the eternally significant birthright." Griffith Thomas notes, "There is no likelihood that Esau was going to die for lack of food. He was a man who wanted **instant gratification for his bodily appetites** and couldn't care less about trading the birthright which was primarily spiritual in nature for the temporal satisfying of those appetites."

- b. The minimization of the eternal – "and what profit shall this birthright do to me?" Esau got his priorities around the wrong way! The spiritual was of far more value than the temporary satisfying of a physical appetite. Dr. Bob Jones Senior famously said, "**Don't sacrifice the permanent on the altar of the immediate.**" Esau sacrificed the eternal for the material.
  - c. Woe to the man who expects to get rich trading with Jacob. **Remember!** If you do a trade in with the world and the devil, you will always be the big loser in the deal! A bowl of red lentils was hardly equivalent in value to the birthright. Yet how often Christians trade the eternal for a bowl of the devil's stew!
  - d. John Butler writes, "Junk in exchange for Jesus' could be the epitaph written on the tombstone of Esau and Judas."
2. Esau despised his birthright (Vs. 34)
- a. This takes Esau's error beyond just a devaluing of the birthright. He 'despised' it in his heart and that led to him despising it in action with the choice he made to sell it for so little. Clearly, he had not arrived at this attitude overnight but over time came to be of the settled opinion that his birthright was useless, even distasteful. To 'despise' means "to contemn; to scorn; to have the lowest opinion of" (Webster 1828).
  - b. This is why the Book of Hebrews calls Esau a 'profane' man. Heb 12:15-16 "Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble *you*, and thereby many be defiled; Lest there *be* any fornicator, or **profane person, as Esau**, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright."
    - i. The word in the New Testament means "irreverence towards the things of God. Only showing regard to earthly things. Secular. It comes from the root word 'threshold' and thus denotes that which may be trodden under foot, that which is unhallowed."
    - ii. Webster defines the word as meaning "Irreverent to anything sacred...A man is profane when he takes the name of God in vain, or treats sacred things with abuse and irreverence."
    - iii. You may not be profane with your lips as a Christian but you can be profane with your life by placing little value on the eternal and spiritual and much value on the temporal.

**Conclusion:** Are you trying to obtain God's blessings through carnal means? Are the things of God a priority in your life or is it primarily about material/carnal things?