

Thursday Morning Bible Study:

Jacob: Exile and Return (Genesis 25-35)

1. Jacob and Esau: Genesis 25:19-34; 27:1-46

The driving impetus of the events in Genesis is the covenant made by the LORD with Abraham and his family. It is a promise that comes “out of the blue” (i.e. by the free choice and decision of God, i.e. by His grace) in Genesis 12:1-3, 7, and which is then (repeatedly!) repeated in 13:14-17; 15:1-7, 13-16, 19-20; 17:4-8; 22:15-18. In 26:2-5 we see that the LORD extends this line of promise and blessing to the family of Isaac. Isaac who has inherited the blessing of God finds (25:21) that his wife Rebekah was barren, unable to have children—just like Abraham had been with Sarah. The story of the promise here reaches what is becoming a regular feature of it—an impossible point, a cliffhanger where the story seems to go over the cliff. The story of God in the world, the story of saving grace and mercy does not occur because of human planning and activity. It can only occur because of the faithfulness of God, His own action and purpose that He alone works. When God makes covenantal promises, He Himself undertakes their fulfilment.

In the face of Rebekah’s barrenness, Isaac cast himself on God, praying to the LORD for his wife. “And the LORD granted his prayer—Rebekah his wife conceived.” Prayer is holding God to His promises; it is not holding God to our vision of the future, but to His promise for the future. Isaac’s prayer arose from the promises of God to him. He wanted and needed that future. “The prayers of a righteous man availeth much!”—Rebekah actually conceived twins!! And the two children in her womb struggled with each other, so much so that Rebekah sought spiritual insight into what was happening “She went to enquire of the LORD...” The LORD’s word came that the two children in her will become two nations, and that they’ll be in contest with each other, but that the older will serve the younger. God’s future promises don’t transfer simply according to bloodline and birth order, but by the mysterious and free choosing of God Himself.

When the boys were born, they vied with each other from day one, almost racing each other to enter the world. Esau was born first and the hand of his brother, Jacob is on his heel. As the boys grow up, they become very different people. That’s quite proper for people—we are all different. But the difference was also around the promise—for Jacob the promise was something that he took hold of and let shape his future, but Esau, rather than seeking to be blessed through the blessing of Jacob, seem to be indifferent, even resentful of the promise.

So, we are told that Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents. As one commentator showed quite clearly, the contrast can’t really be understood in our cultural and psychological frameworks. Jacob is actually being praised here, and Esau is being criticised. To be a quiet (*tam*) man is to be “complete”, i.e. self-disciplined and focussed, to have integrity and inner strength. To be a tent-dweller means that he was nomadic and a herdsman. Esau was a skilled hunter, and a man of the fields, meaning he was an adventurer, living wild, hunting for his food, and really having his life in some peril for much of the time. Jacob’s self-discipline might look boring and weak, but he really wanted the future that was promised him. He couldn’t live for the here and now, for the thrill of the moment. The future of the world hung on the promise of God coming to him and through him.

Esau was a man of the moment, an ill-disciplined man in the sense that he didn't give a lot of thought to the future. He should have heard the word of God to him, that the future blessing lay with Jacob, and that blessing would come to him through Jacob. But he seems to either have resented or despised that promise. That is seen so clearly in the event at the end of this chapter, when Esau came in from one of his hunting trips, obviously unsuccessful and ravenously hungry. Jacob was cooking a lentil stew, and Esau wanted it. Jacob asked him for the birthright—the privileges of being the first-born when the inheritance comes—in exchange, and Esau says, “My life is always at risk, what's the use of the birthright.” He despised, “treated with contempt, was recklessly careless of” his birthright. “Meh to the future, I want my cravings filled now.”

The writer to the Hebrews takes up this story to exhort us. “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.” He is really urging us today, as is the whole of Scripture, to set our hope on the future, to shape our lives here and now by the future that will be ours when Jesus Christ is revealed, and we will be like him. He is urging us, the Holy Spirit is urging us to not jeopardise the future for some momentary pleasure, some passing satisfaction of some desire here and now. Rather we are being called to take up the hope of the future, and to shape our lives by what we will be. “It does not yet appear what we shall be. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall seem him as he is. And those who have this hope in them purify themselves as he is pure.”

And this is still all the work of God. Scripture is first and foremost the narrative of the way God's word of promise and blessing shapes the history of the people of God. Our story is not the story of the triumph of our spirituality, morality, ethics, organisation, intensity, zeal or commitment. Our story is the story of the triumph of the God of all grace working out His purposes among us. “I am sure of this, that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” (Philippians 1:6) Paul's testimony about his own vigorous ministry: “By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, *but the grace of God that is with me.*”

It is this truth that helps us understand the seeming amorality of some of the Old Testament narrative. And not just there, but even that of our own lives, the life of the church, and the story of the world. Deep down we still have “Little Jack Horner theology”: a belief that God is good to the “good” and that if you're bad then things should go “bad” with you. So in a text like Genesis 27 we find it perplexing that outright lying, deceit and manipulation results in the tricky one getting blessing. In fact, all blessing is due entirely to the grace of God and for the working of His purpose. That's been the point of the story up to this point. And remains the point even up to our own lives. Blessing in the Scriptures comes always to the undeserving.

In Genesis 25:23, the word of the LORD to Rebekah had clarified His purposes that the older son (Esau) would serve the younger (Jacob.) And it is this promise and purpose that is the real dynamic in the very murky events of chapter 27. There is a real tussle going in this chapter about how the blessing of God will flow through to the generation following Isaac. Will it flow according to the word of God given to Rebekah, or will something else happen?

At the opening of the chapter it seems that Isaac resented the purpose of God, seeking to subvert it through his determination to bless Esau. He was fond of Esau, the first born of these twins, and favours him. And Esau had found ways of encouraging that favour, particularly in cooking up some of the wild game he captured into a stew that Isaac finds delicious. On the other side of this blessing tussle was Rebekah who held on to the word given her, and who was not afraid to push moral boundaries to make sure it happens. She'd even be cursed if meant Jacob is blessed (v. 13.) And Jacob himself was keen for the blessing too, and, in order to get hold of it, lied at least three times to his father (vv. 19, 20, 24), let alone going through the charade of dressing up like Esau. But he wanted the blessing. Esau who had shown no interest in the blessing up until now, became resentful and jealous for what he thought was always his right (against the word of God) when he found he'd been tricked out of it. And at the end of the chapter, rather than seeking the blessing through the blessed one (as all the world is called to do), he thumbed his nose at the blessing, hating and plotting to kill his scheming brother, and married two Hittite women, as far from the line of blessing as he can go. It's all a moral confusion, but at the end of the story the one certain thing is that the purpose of God has progressed as He said it would.

None of what happens in this chapter can be justified ethically; every player is at best murky in how they proceed. And the writer makes no attempt to do so; but nor, on the other hand, does he move to condemn it. He simply isn't interested in ethical justifying or moralistic tut-tutting. His interest is in the action of God and the progress of the promise of blessing that began with Abraham. His interest is in the salvation of the world, for all the nations of the world will be blessed through Abraham's seed. And what is certain is that the deceptive and tricky Jacob is according to the word of God's promise the inheritor of the blessing, and that those who curse him will be cursed (passive, implying *by God*) and that those who bless him will find blessing *by God*. All that is simply by the choosing and grace of God.

As we will see in the following chapter, the "amoral" choosing, the gracious choosing by God does not then simply work out in an amoral destiny. In fact this chapter begins dealings of the LORD in the life of Jacob so that he is brought out of his con-man identity into a new place. Through the chapters ahead Jacob who has been chosen by grace will be brought under God's strong hand, and face discipline and judgments—all designed to connect him with the future that the grace that has chosen him is working towards. In electing His people God begins a work to conform them to the likeness of His Son. His purpose in election is that we be holy and blameless before Him (Eph. 1:3-6)

This is part of the scandal of the gospel—the choosing of God to make himself known to the completely undeserving, and to make them the recipients of blessing. The *wrong* people hear and believe the gospel all the way through the record of Jesus's ministry in the four gospel accounts we have in the New Testament. And in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians it is clear that this strange choosing continued in the days of the Spirit-filled proclamation of the gospel to the world: "But God chose what is foolish in this world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God." John tells us that Jesus' own people, his own did not receive him, but that to all who did receive him, all who believed on his name he gave the right to become the children of God. This did not happen by human effort or striving—but by

the free and gracious act of God. They were born “not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”

In this chapter Rebekah does a remarkable thing—as she plots the scheme to wrestle the blessing away from Esau and onto Jacob, Jacob fears lest the scheme fail, that the trick be detected by Isaac, and that he come under his father’s curse rather than blessing. But the scheming mother calms his fears saying, “Let your curse be on me, my son; only obey my voice...” (27:13) There is something fearfully bold about her words here. But something prophetic happens here too—Rebekah seems to have the same Spirit in her that fills her great descendant, the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus was no con-artist, and acted openly and honestly, with no guile in his heart or in his actions. But Jesus in desiring to bring blessing to this world, seeing a world full of graspers, con-artists and despisers of God and His blessings, obeys His Father’s voice, and goes into the place of curse, the cross where all the sin of the world is judged, in order that blessing may flow to us. And here all “amorality” is swallowed up in the most holy, most moral, most righteous deed in the whole of human history— a deed which, when received by faith, starts to work out grace’s glorious fruit in us.