

Genesis 25:12-34 Sibling Rivalry

The family I grew up in was not a happy family. It was characterised by tension and fighting. Five of my siblings ran away from home. By contrast, praise God, my own family is a place of peace. In contrast to the family I grew up in my own family is a Christian family. The Lord makes an enormous difference to family relationships. But does the Lord always bring peace and harmony to families? No! Remember what Jesus said: *“Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law”* (Lk 12:51-53). Jesus’ words particularly apply to non-Christian families in which one or two become Christians and are rejected by the rest of the family.

In Genesis we constantly see brothers in conflict; brothers killing or seeking to kill each other. Cain kills Abel. Ishmael is hostile towards Isaac and his descendants were hostile to the descendants of Isaac. Jacob and Esau become intense rivals and Esau tries to kill Jacob. One of Jacob’s sons, Judah also has twins, Perez and Zerah who, at birth, struggle with each other, as it were, as to who will come out first from the womb. Joseph’s brothers hate him, think of killing him and end up selling him into slavery. The greatest threat faced by those whom God has chosen comes from within the family. Abel was favoured by God, and Isaac, Jacob and Joseph were chosen by him. Each one of these men is seriously threatened by the action of a brother or brothers. Brother against brother. Sibling rivalry is clearly of great importance in the book of Genesis.

During Operation Desert Storm “friendly fire” killed 24% of American soldiers and accounted for 15% of all their wounded. Often Christians are most deeply hurt not by the people of the world but by other Christians. Brothers against brothers, sisters against sisters. Unfortunately, it happens in churches as well.

1. Isaac’s Rival Brother (vv12-18)

Look at the way Ishmael’s history starts, as recorded in verse 12: *“This is the history of Abraham’s son Ishmael, whom Sarah’s maidservant, Hagar the Egyptian, bore to Abraham.”* Contrast this with verse 19: *“This is the account of Abraham’s son Isaac. Abraham became the father of Isaac.”* Ishmael was indeed Abraham’s son but he lacked the same status as Isaac. He was not born through Abraham’s own wife Sarah, but through Sarah’s maidservant, Hagar. Further, the text stresses that Hagar was an Egyptian, the land which in the Pentateuch poses a particular threat to the fulfillment of God’s promises through Abraham. Isaac carries none of these complications. We read that his wife Rebekah was *“the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-Aram, the sister of Laban the Aramean”* (v20). So Isaac married within Abraham’s broader family network. Later Paul makes much of the contrast between the two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Hear what he has to say in Galatians 4:

²²*For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman.* ²³*His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise.*

²⁴*These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar.* ²⁵*Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children.* ²⁶*But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother.*

Ishmael is the son of the slave woman, that is, the son of Sarah’s female slave, Hagar. Isaac is the son of a free woman. We know Ishmael’s birth was completely ordinary. Paul says *“he was born in the*

ordinary way.” But the birth of Isaac was utterly miraculous given the ages of his father and mother. Paul says Isaac *“was born as a result of the promise.”* In other words, the only way to account for Isaac’s birth is to say that God made a promise and kept it.

Paul continues, *“These things may be taken figuratively.”* Paul is saying, “I invite you to use your imagination and see Hagar and Sarah, with their sons, as symbols.” Hagar, as the slave woman, represents the slavery that comes from being bound to law and, therefore, the vast majority of Jews in Paul’s day right down to the present time are sons of the slave woman, Hagar, and not true sons of Isaac. All Jews would be greatly shocked by what Paul is saying.

Ishmael himself was hostile towards Isaac. What about his descendants?: *“they lived in hostility toward all their brothers”* (v18). Ishmael and Isaac are polar opposites. The history of Ishmael is a history of movement towards Egypt. The history of Isaac eventually leads to the need to get as far away from Egypt as possible. The hostility of Ishmael towards Isaac is something which Paul also emphasizes: *“At that time the son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now.”* Nothing changes. Just as Isaac was persecuted by Ishmael so Christians are persecuted by those who hate us for the good and the truth they associate with us, falsely accusing us of being self-righteous, intolerant people.

The history of Ishmael specifies the geographical areas in which the descendants of Ishmael later settled. Because they are not children of the promise there is no future for them in the promised land. Or, as Paul puts it, *“the slave woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman’s son.”* You must understand that if you do not know Jesus then you are the son or daughter of slavery and you will spend the rest of eternity in slavery. Our inheritance as Christians is an eternity spent in the glorious presence of Jesus in his wonderful kingdom.

2. Isaac’s Rival Sons (vv19-34)

a. Rivalry in the womb

Like Sarah, Rebekah was barren. After 20 years of marriage she’d had no children. So *“Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife, because she was barren. The Lord answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant.”* The true descendants of Abraham are always supernaturally produced. The birth of Isaac’s offspring is supernatural. The children of God are supernaturally produced. It has always been this way. Nothing is different today. You must be born from above, born by the power of the Holy Spirit if you are to share in the inheritance and enter the kingdom of God.

An extraordinary thing, however, happens when God answers Isaac’s prayer: *“The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, “Why is this happening to me?”* It seemed to Rebekah as though the twins were already fighting with each other inside her womb. So she inquires of the Lord as to what was happening to her. In the Bible this is an extraordinary thing to report, for we only read of great prophets like Moses and Elisha and of great kings like David inquiring of the Lord. The Lord then spoke directly to Rebekah – the only woman in the entire Bible to whom God spoke directly - and explained what she could expect to happen in the future:

*“Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples from within you will be separated;
one people will be stronger than the other,
and the older will serve the younger.”*

In the movie *Back to the Future - Part 2* Marty McFly travels with Professor Emmet Smith to the future in a time machine. There he discovers that his enemy, Biff, is rich and powerful because he succeeded in smuggling a Sports Almanac to himself in the past. This changed the whole course of history because Biff of the past could bet on sporting events knowing the results beforehand. So he

won all his bets and became very rich and powerful. The focus of the movie is that of undoing what had been done to alter the future. If you had been there to hear God's word to Rebekah you could have become immensely rich and powerful by betting that Jacob would become God's favoured one. God is the God who was, and is, and is to come – the Lord of the past, present and future. The God of the future controls the past and the present. Nobody can undo what God has already purposed to do. Isaac tries to undo what God has purposed. He tries to treat Esau as the one to be blessed by God but inevitably fails because we know the matter has already been decided.

Why are twins born to Isaac and Rebekah? So God can emphasise that he chooses whom he will bless. Everything depends on God's grace. Paul makes a great deal of this background in Romans 9:

⁶It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. ⁷Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned."⁸In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring. ⁹For this was how the promise was stated: "At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son."

¹⁰Not only that, but Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. ¹¹Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad--in order that God's purpose in election might stand: ¹²not by works but by him who calls--she was told, "The older will serve the younger."¹³Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

¹⁴What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! ¹⁵For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."

Paul says: *"before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad – in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls."* Esau did not do anything which caused God to treat him as the weaker nation. Similarly, Jacob did not do anything which caused God to treat him as the one who would become the stronger nation. But God's plan of salvation must operate this way. Otherwise salvation would be dependent not on what God does but on what we do, and that would be utterly disastrous because we all deserve to be damned for ever in hell.

Two nations were in Rebekah's womb but only one is chosen by God. So these two peoples will need to be separated, and one will be stronger than the other. But we are also informed: *"the older will serve the younger"* (v23b). God is effecting a reversal. All ancient people followed the practice of leaving a father's estate to his eldest son. This culture was deeply embedded in Isaac's own heart. He tries to make sure that his oldest son will inherit the family estate and receive his primary blessing. But it is God not culture that predetermines who his people will be.

In our culture we have developed a cultural way of trying to make sure spiritual blessing reaches churches, by theologically training and ordaining individuals to pastor churches. But we must recognise that God is not bound to this system. God may well choose to bypass this system when he blesses us as his people. Don't ever become overly dependent on your pastoral staff.

b. Rivalry at birth

Our passage goes on to indicate the rivalry of the twins at birth. A pregnant woman from Washington D.C. gets in a car accident and falls into a coma. When she wakes up, she sees she's no longer pregnant and she asks the doctor about her baby. The doctor replies, "Ma'am you've had twins! a boy and a girl. Your brother from Maryland came in and named them." The woman thinks to herself, "No, not my brother... he's an idiot!" She asks him, "Well, what's the girl's name?" "Denise." "Wow, that's not a bad name, I like it! What's the boy's name?" "Denephew. "

In the same way Rebekah doesn't get to name either of her sons. Her first son looks like he came from the Planet of the Apes. He's really hairy, hence the name "Esau", and his body has a reddish tinge, anticipating his other name "Edom" which means "red." As Esau comes out of the womb the second son pops out as well clutching his heel. So he gets called "Grasper", that is, Jacob. The association of redness and hairiness with Esau is preparing us for the next two incidents.

c. *Rivalry as young men*

The story jumps into the future when Hairy and Grasper were young men. Hairy has developed a talent for hunting. Grasper likes to stay at home. In verse 27 many translations describe Jacob as "a quiet man." But this is very dubious. Everywhere else in the Old Testament it is translated with words such as "perfect" or "blameless." The idea seems to be that while Esau was a narrow man fixated on hunting, Jacob was a complete man – intelligent, relational, a good cook, physically very strong – as later becomes clear – and possessing a fine moral character. Because of the way Jacob, at Rebekah's instigation, deceives his father it is often supposed that Jacob was incorrigibly deceitful. His behaviour in Genesis 27 is indeed strongly censured and he later experiences poetic justice when he is treated in similar vein by his reprehensible relative Laban. But apart from this one incident Jacob is consistently presented as a man of noble character. This is how he is introduced. God had directly revealed to Rebekah that Jacob is the one he has chosen and now she sees in Jacob's character the confirmation of this. Rebekah loved and preferred Jacob seeing him with the eyes of faith. Isaac loved and preferred Esau because he was guided by his physical senses, including the pleasure he took in eating the meat Esau brought him back from the hunt. There is poetic justice in the fact that Isaac ended up being duped on the basis of his sense-experience.

Back to the story. Grasper is cooking a lentil stew. Esau has been out hunting but for once has not been very successful and he's starving. Esau's big problem is that he sees red, that is, he sees the red stew, hence the name Edom. This obsesses him. He exaggerates, "Look, I am about to die" (v32), like we might say, "I'm dying for some food." The point here is that for Esau meeting his present needs by filling his stomach with red stew is more important than life itself. For that's what the birthright is all about – Life from God. To be the head of Isaac's family, to inherit the blessing of Isaac, the Abrahamic promise – that is to be the receiver of life and the one who channels that life to others. Jacob longs to grasp this life, this birthright. He is indeed the Grasper and he strikes a deal with Esau. But here let's have done with some of the traditional nonsense said about Jacob. He doesn't steal the birthright. He doesn't even trick Esau into giving it to him. Jacob is completely up front. Esau's dad, Isaac, possibly never knows about this conversation between his sons. But God sees, God knows. Esau swore an oath in the presence of God and God takes this very seriously. So even though Isaac tries to pass on headship of the family and his blessing to Esau, he necessarily fails.

Once there was a traveler in Africa who noticed a pretty rock that a kid was kicking down the street. The traveler offered 50 cents for the rock, which the kid readily accepted. Then the traveler took the rock, which turned out to be one of the biggest diamonds ever found, and cashed it in for millions. Esau trades the most precious gift in the world for some red stew. Or to change the image, imagine I was to exchange my wedding ring for say an iPad 2 or something else I might crave to have. What would that say about my attitude towards my marriage?

The writer to the Hebrews makes much of what Esau did and issues us with a very serious warning: *"See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. He could bring about no change of mind, though he sought the blessing with tears"* (12:15-17).

The decisions you make today may have eternal consequences. Don't miss the grace of God. Is there something else you have chosen to do rather than surrender yourself to Jesus? We shake our heads at Esau's short-sightedness but . . .but haven't we been known to do the same things?

- When we choose the pleasures of passion over the purity of marriage
- When we choose the applause of our friends rather than stand true for the Lord
- When we choose what is easy over what is right
- When we indulge our appetite for more stuff over the commands of financial responsibility
- When we choose the extra time to sleep over worship or our daily time with God
- When we chose to fill our minds with garbage rather than devote our minds to the Lord
- When we choose to hoard what we have rather than to reach out to the needy

Esau had to choose between living for the moment and living for eternity. That same choice faces each of us. Every day we must choose between temporary pleasures and holiness before the Lord. Esau reminds us to keep our focus.

Instead of thinking of Jacob's grasping nature as undesirable see it rather as it is exposed to us in Genesis 32. There Jacob is wrestling with a man who turns out to be an angelic manifestation of God himself. The man wrestles with Jacob all night and Jacob will not release him from his grasp. Then he dislocates Jacob's hip and do you know what? Even despite this Jacob holds on. The man then says, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied – and listen to this and take it to heart – yes, Jacob replied: "I will not let you go unless you bless me." That's why he got Esau to give him his birthright; that's why, fine man though he was, he acceded to his mother's plea and deceived his father to secure through him God's blessing on his life. Unlike Esau, Jacob longed with all his heart to be blessed by God. Is that you? Is that me? Do you, do I wrestle with the Lord and say, "I will not let you go unless you bless me"? How shamefully we take the Lord's blessing for granted. Oh, may the Lord makes us graspers too – those who long with all our hearts to know and experience God's blessing!