

Isaac's Descendants

Jacob and Esau

Genesis 25:19-34

Rev. Freddy Fritz

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Jacob and Esau

Scripture

Today we begin a new series of sermons on “Isaac’s Descendants.” Isaac was the promised child born to Abraham and Sarah in their old age when Sarah was long past the age of bearing children. Eventually a bride was secured for Isaac from Abraham’s family in Mesopotamia. Rebekah left her family and friends, moved to the Promised Land and married Isaac. However, like her mother-in-law, Sarah, Rebekah was also barren, unable to bear children. So, would God’s promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:2 to make of him a great nation come to an end with Isaac and Rebekah? No. Eventually God gave Isaac and Rebekah twin boys, named Esau and Jacob.

Let’s read about Jacob and Esau in Genesis 25:19-34:

¹⁹ These are the generations of Isaac, Abraham’s son: Abraham fathered Isaac, ²⁰ and Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, the sister of Laban the Aramean, to be his wife. ²¹ And Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren. And the Lord granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived. ²² The children struggled together within her, and she said, “If it is thus, why is this happening to me?” So she went to inquire of the Lord. ²³ And the Lord said to her,

**“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.”**

²⁴ When her days to give birth were completed, behold, there were twins in her womb. ²⁵ The first came out red, all

his body like a hairy cloak, so they called his name Esau.
²⁶ Afterward his brother came out with his hand holding Esau's heel, so his name was called Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

²⁷ When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents. ²⁸ Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

²⁹ Once when Jacob was cooking stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was exhausted. ³⁰ And Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stew, for I am exhausted!" (Therefore his name was called Edom.) ³¹ Jacob said, "Sell me your birthright now." ³² Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" ³³ Jacob said, "Swear to me now." So he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob. ³⁴ Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright. (Genesis 25:19-34)

Introduction

Three weeks ago, my wife and I had the privilege of attending the Global Missions Conference of the Presbyterian Church in America in Dallas, TX. Kevin DeYoung addressed the attendees during the first plenary session. His opening statement caught my attention. He said, "If every Christian in the entire world (and that is defining 'Christian' in the most generous way) shared the gospel with every single person he or she knew (family, friends, colleagues, neighbors), and if God marvelously granted salvation to every single person who heard the gospel, there would still be 3 billion unconverted people in the world." Almost half the people in the entire world do not have any contact at all with Christians.

If that fact is not discouraging, I also looked up to see what the rate of church growth is in the USA. Did you know that more churches close their doors than open their doors each year in the USA? In an article on church decline, Dr. Richard J. Krejcir states

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that “every year more than 4000 churches close their doors compared to just over 1000 new church starts!”¹ The church today has a lot of work to do, and it hardly appears to be victorious.

God’s people in the Old Testament often wondered about the promises of God. God had called Abraham to himself out of Ur of the Chaldeans. God gave Abraham seven promises in Genesis 12:2-3. He said: “(1) And I will make of you a great nation, and (2) I will bless you, and (3) make your name great, (4) so that you will be a blessing. (5) I will bless those who bless you, and (6) him who dishonors you I will curse, and (7) in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

However, several hundred years later, after their enslavement in Egypt, their exodus out of Egypt, and their wandering for forty years in the Sinai desert, Edom refused to allow the people of God safe passage through their land so that the people of God could get back to the Promised Land. The narrative that we are studying today addressed God’s people who felt defeated.

Lesson

The birth of Esau and Jacob in Genesis 25:19-34 teaches us that by his sovereign grace God chooses the least to be his victorious people.

Let’s use the following outline:

1. The Prophecy about the Two Sons (25:19-23)
2. The Difference between the Two Sons (25:24-28)
3. The Exchange among the Two Sons (25:29-34)

I. **The Prophecy about the Two Sons (25:19-23)**

First, let’s look at the prophecy about the two sons.

Moses began this narrative by saying in verse 19, “**These are**

¹ See <http://www.churchleadership.org/apps/articles/default.asp?articleid=42346>.

the generations of Isaac, Abraham’s son: Abraham fathered Isaac.” You may recall that Moses structured the book of Genesis by the use of **“generations”** (*toledot* in Hebrew). So, there are ten generations in Genesis: (1) the heavens and the earth (2:4-4:26), (2) Adam (5:1-6:8), (3) Noah (6:9-9:29), (4) Noah’s sons (10:1-11:9), (5) Shem (11:10-26), (6) Terah (11:27-25:11), (7) Ishmael (25:12-18), (8) Isaac (25:19-35:29), (9) Esau (36:1-37:1), and (10) Jacob (37:2-50:26). Typically, Moses would have said, “These are the generations of Isaac. Isaac was the father of Esau and Jacob.” However, as you can see, Moses drew attention to the fact that Isaac was **Abraham’s son**. And by doing so, he reminded God’s people of God’s promises to Abraham. As commentator Sidney Greidanus says, Moses “wants Israel and us to recall the history of Abraham: how the Lord called him to go to the land of Canaan; how the Lord gave him rich promises of land, a great nation, and being a blessing to all the families of the earth; how the Lord above all promised to be his God and the God of his seed; and how the Lord began to fulfill these promises with the miraculous birth of Isaac, the opportunity to buy a little plot of the Promised Land, and finally how the Lord led the servant’s search for a suitable wife for Isaac.”²

Moses wrote in verse 20, **“...and Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, the sister of Laban the Aramean, to be his wife.”** Perhaps a timeline will be helpful. Isaac’s mother, Sarah, died 3 years before he married **Rebekah**. Isaac and Rebekah remained childless for 20 years before their twins were born, when Isaac was 60 years old. Isaac’s older half-brother, Ishmael, died when Isaac was 123 years old. Isaac sent his son Jacob to Haran when he was 137, and he was 144 years old when his grandson, Joseph, was born. Finally, Isaac died when he was 180 years old.

² Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 255.

Like her mother-in-law, Sarah, Rebekah was also barren. But unlike his father, Abraham, who sired a child by a concubine, Isaac simply went to the Lord in prayer. Verse 21 says, **“And Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren. And the Lord granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived.”**

What do you do when you experience a time of barrenness in your life? Perhaps you would like to have children, but God has not yet given you a child. Or perhaps you would like to get married. Or perhaps your children are not walking with the Lord. James Montgomery Boice writes, “This does not mean that God has abandoned you, or even that you are less well off than others. God is teaching you to depend on him. He is showing you that he is more interested in what is happening inside you than what is happening around you.”³ That is not an easy lesson to learn, is it?

After twenty years of barrenness, Rebekah became pregnant. Moses said in verse 22a, **“The children struggled together within her, and she said, ‘If it is thus, why is this happening to me?’”** Rebekah was experiencing a very painful pregnancy. Perhaps she was aware that she was having twins. Nevertheless, **she went to inquire of the Lord. And the Lord said to her** in 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.”**

By the time that Moses wrote these words about Rebekah’s twins, the law of primogeniture was established. In Law, primogeniture is “the system of inheritance or succession by the firstborn, specifically the eldest son.”⁴ In fact, Moses wrote about the inheritance rights of the firstborn in Deuteronomy 21:15–17, “If a man has two wives, the one loved and the other unloved, and both the loved and the unloved have borne him children, and if

³ James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 732.

⁴ See <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/primogeniture?s=t>.

the firstborn son belongs to the unloved, then on the day when he assigns his possessions as an inheritance to his sons, he may not treat the son of the loved as the firstborn in preference to the son of the unloved, who is the firstborn, but he shall acknowledge the firstborn, the son of the unloved, by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the firstfruits of his strength. The right of the firstborn is his.”

So, God made it clear to Rebekah that in this case his blessing would fall on the younger and weaker child. And so, as Greidanus rightly says, “If the younger will indeed rule the elder, it can only be the result of God’s sovereign grace.”⁵

II. The Difference between the Two Sons (25:24-28)

Second, notice the difference between the two sons.

Verses 24-25 say, **“When her days to give birth were completed, behold, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy cloak, so they called his name Esau.”** The meaning of **Esau** is not known. It is perhaps a sound play on the Hebrew word for “hairy” (*sa’er*). But he was also red when he was born, and Moses noted in verse 30 that **“his name was called Edom.”**

When Moses wrote these words he wanted to remind the people of God that Esau, also known as Edom, was Israel’s enemy. When the people of God left Egypt, Moses politely requested that king of Edom allow the people of God to pass through his land. “Thus says your *brother* Israel: ... Please let us pass through your land. We will not pass through field or vineyard, or drink water from a well. We will go along the King’s Highway....” But Edom said to him, “You shall not pass through, lest I come out with the sword against you.” (Numbers 20:14–21). And throughout the following centuries there was enmity between Edom and Israel.

⁵ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis: Foundations for Expository Sermons*, 257.

Moses also noted in verse 27a that **“when the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field....”** Esau was an outdoorsman. He was the guy who featured in the ads about the great outdoors. He was tough, rugged, and capable. Moreover, Moses noted in verse 28a that **“Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game.”**

In verse 26a we read about the birth of Jacob, **“Afterward his brother came out with his hand holding Esau’s heel, so his name was called Jacob.”** Jacob means “He takes by the heel,” or “He cheats.”⁶ Unlike his brother Esau, **“Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents”** (25:27b). He was conventional, controlled, and crafty. And Moses also noted that **“Rebekah loved Jacob”** (25:28b).

Two sons and two parents. Each parent undoubtedly loved both sons, but Moses noted that each parent had a definite preference for one of the twins.

The description of the twins and their parents sets the stage for what is to come in the future.

III. The Exchange among the Two Sons (25:29-34)

And third, let’s examine the exchange among the two sons.

Moses said in verses 29-30a, **“Once when Jacob was cooking stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was exhausted. And Esau said to Jacob, ‘Let me eat some of that red stew, for I am exhausted!’”** Actually, the Hebrew text is more graphic. Esau literally said, “Let me devour some of that red, red.” That is why Moses added the parenthetical statement in verse 30b, **“Therefore his name was called Edom.”**

This is where we first see the cunning and craftiness of Jacob. Undoubtedly, his mother (and perhaps his father) had told him and Esau about God’s prophecy before the twins were born that

⁶ Footnote in *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).

the older shall serve the younger. In verse 31, **Jacob said** to Esau, **“Sell me your birthright now.”** Greidanus notes, “The way Jacob states his demand suggests long premeditation and a ruthless exploitation of his brother’s moment of weakness.”⁷

In response to Jacob’s demand, **Esau said, “I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?”** (25:32). Noticing that he has the upper hand in bargaining for Esau’s birthright, **Jacob said, “Swear to me now”** (25:33a). Jacob knew that Esau could easily go back on a verbal agreement, but he could not reverse a legally binding commitment. Moses noted in verse 33b, **“So he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob.”** And just like that Esau relinquished his birthright to his younger, weaker brother.

Moses said in verse 34a, **“Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank and rose and went his way.”** It was a tragic exchange. A birthright for bread and stew. Moses rightly noted in verse 34b, **“Thus Esau despised his birthright.”**

Ordinarily, the writers of the Old Testament books seldom evaluated the actions of their characters. But, when they did comment about their actions, we need to pay careful attention. Commentator Robert Alter observes, “Esau, the episode makes clear, is not spiritually fit to be the vehicle of divine election, the bearer of the birthright of Abraham’s seed. He is altogether too much the slave of the moment and of the body’s tyranny to become the progenitor of the people promised by divine covenant that it will have a vast historical destiny to fulfill. His selling of the birthright in the circumstances here described is in itself proof that he is not worthy to retain the birthright.”⁸ And my Old Testament professor, John Sailhamer, said, “When in God’s plan Esau lost his birthright and consequently his blessing, there was no injustice dealt him. The

⁷ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis: Foundations for Expository Sermons*, 260.

⁸ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 45.

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narrative has shown that he did not want the birthright. He despised it.”⁹

The writer to the Hebrews comments on Esau’s tragic exchange in Hebrews 12:15–17, where he says, “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.”

Esau was not worthy of the grace of God.

But Jacob was not worthy either. The “heel grabber” could not wait for God to fulfill his promise in his way at his time. He would get the birthright by his own cunning and craftiness. He plotted to get the birthright from his brother. Later, he would deceive his own father in order to obtain the blessing of the firstborn. Still later, he would trick his own uncle Laban so that he might accrue financial wealth. Jacob was a “heel grabber” and a deceiver. He was also not worthy of the grace of God.

The point of the narrative is that even though neither brother was worthy of the grace of God, God nevertheless chose the younger instead of the older to be the recipient of his grace. The Apostle Paul explained God’s sovereign, electing grace this way in his letter to the Romans in Romans 9:10–13, “And not only so, but also when Rebekah 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 him who calls—she was told, ‘The older will serve the younger.’ As it is written, ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.’”

⁹ John H. Sailhamer, “Genesis.” In *Genesis-Numbers: The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*. Vol. 2. Gen. ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 184.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the birth of Esau and Jacob in Genesis 25:19-34, the church may be assured that by his sovereign grace God has chosen her to be his victorious people.

God frequently chooses the weaker and younger over the older and stronger. God chose Jacob over Esau, Abel over Cain, Isaac over Ishmael, Joseph over his brothers, Ephraim over Manasseh, David over his brothers, and Solomon over Adonijah. Greidanus continues, “This trail continues into the New Testament when God chooses Jesus—born in a stable, raised in despised Nazareth, poor and lowly—to be *the* Seed of the woman. And Jesus in turn chooses lowly disciples to be his representatives to the nations.”¹⁰

As God assured his people in the Old Testament of their ultimate victory, so Jesus assures his people in the New Testament of our ultimate victory. Jesus promised his disciples that “the gates of hell shall not prevail against [the church]” (Matthew 16:18). Jesus acknowledges to his disciples, “In the world you will have tribulation.” Yet he immediately assures his disciples, “But take heart; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). In Revelation, the Apostle John received a vision that unbelievers will make war on the Lamb. But “the Lamb *will conquer* them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful” (Revelation 17:14). Let us not be discouraged or despair. By his sovereign grace God has chosen his weak and despised people to be his victorious people. Amen.

¹⁰ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis: Foundations for Expository Sermons*, 261.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

Answers for Life!

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org

Web site: www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org