
The Circle of Life - Passing the Torch

Genesis 25:1-28

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Introduction

Thirty-Five years ago I hired a twenty-something as an administrator when I was the Director of MIS at the Miami Valley Regional Transit Authority. Over the years she followed to the company I managed for the past twenty years. Last year as I began a phased-out retirement in that company, she took my position as Chief Operating Officer. I have, in the business world, passed the torch.

What does it look like to live a life well lived? What does it really mean to pass the torch?

We see that this this morning.

The link of two generations of families unfolds in this text. One generation goes home to God and the next gives birth to twins. Let's think about this together.

Growing Old with Grace (v.1-18)

Many years ago I read an article whose premise was that the first thing that happens to men after age 40 is that they become cranky.

How do you grow old with grace? How do you keep from becoming cranky, complaining, self-focused and self-centered?

Billy Graham writes, "When granted many years of life, growing old in age is natural, but growing old with grace is a choice. Growing older with grace is possible for all who will set their hearts and minds on the giver of grace, the Lord Jesus Christ."

What I want to observe from Abraham is the richness of his own end. While Moses does not intend to provide a manual for Christian seniors, he does show us the wisdom of a man whose life is "full of days".

Providing for His Own (v.1-6)

Moses records that Abraham marries Keturah who was never more than a concubine-wife (1 Chronicles 1:32). She gives him 6 children whose families are also recorded. Each of these become tribes and eventually, people groups, known to Israel as they are preparing to enter the Promised Land.

As he approaches death, Abraham is careful to secure the rights and inheritance of Isaac. He designates him as the true heir and actually transfers ownership of all to him. To the sons of his concubines he lavishes them with gifts, the word here indicating extravagant wealth. He then sends them away into the east country leaving the Promised Land to Isaac alone. All this is recorded by Moses for the sake of Israel as they approach the Promised Land

to conquer and settle it and for the sake of the descendants that they might understand whose land it actually is.

Abraham then secures the covenantal promise for Isaac. He believes God and moves forward in trust. Abraham's faith causes practical actions. He believes Isaac is the son of promise; he believes the land is theirs; so, he ensures that Isaac alone inherits and inhabits the land.

Believers have a responsibility in this area as well. We are not the heirs of physical land, but of heaven. Believing God means that we do what we can to ensure that the spiritual heritage God has given us is transmitted to our children. So we guard the gospel and we give the gospel in hope that God will be pleased to grant grace to our children.

Further, we have a responsibility, as much as lies in our power, to ensure that our children actually receive what God has been pleased to entrust to us. This believing and obeying God means we do the practical things in our culture such as keeping our wills up to date, taking care of the blessings God has given us, and teaching and training our children on being good stewards.

Going Home to God (v.7-11)

Abraham lives 38 years after Sarah died, his life full and complete. His last years are not a decline, but an ascent. I love the language here: an old man and full of years. He goes home to God and is gathered to his people. His sons, Isaac and Ishmael, gather to bury him beside his beloved wife.

Moses records that the inheritance Abraham gave Isaac is accompanied by the blessing of God. This is God's affirming Isaac's status. The blessing of God lies with those who are in the covenant. Isaac then settles where God has manifest himself.

Settling Outside the Homeland (v.12-18)

As a final securing of the covenant and its promises, Moses bookends the death of Abraham with Ishmael's descendants. He appears at the funeral, but is not an obstacle to Isaac receiving what was his. Ishmael and his twelve sons inhabit the region to the west and continue, in their generations, to be "over against" all their neighbors. This is not a location phrase, but a relation phrase showing that his descendants turn out to be what God has said to his mother.

But God still blesses Ishmael on account of Abraham and God's promises to Abraham. He has twelve sons, comparable to Jacob's twelve later. They all become leaders over tribes, just as Israel will have later. But the blessing, while real, provides a counterpoint and a counterfeit to Abraham's decedents. They will eventually challenge and even go to war over the land. This conflict which has marked the middle-east has extended even to today.

Giving Birth with Pain (v.19-34)

The second element in the cycle of life is birth. This chapter is a massive transition in the book of Genesis. The Abraham section is closing and the Isaac section is beginning. In three chapters, the life and character of Isaac is unfolded for us. We do not have a biography yet; Isaac is largely seen as a praying and spiritual man who is also oddly weak and self-indulgent. Isaac, as we will see, is an excellent case study on the heart.

Situations that are Difficult (v.19-21)

As with his father, Isaac's wife is barren. She has no children. She and Isaac are the line of covenantal descent. So this is a grave concern. They are married when he is forty (v.20). They are married for almost 20 years without children (v.26).

But we have seen Isaac to be a man who communes with God. So he prayed to God – prayers based on God's promises. The word is used elsewhere in the Old Testament to speak of entreaty and agonizing. It is linked to sacrifice and worship. Isaac is not just casual about his request and its need. He is passionate before God. We don't know how long he prays. But we can be encouraged in our own praying that God may interrupt our prayers with immediate answers like the servant in the prior chapter. Or God may, because of His agenda and purposes, allow us to pray for years before granting what He has promised.

Situations then can be difficult because of the need. They can be difficult because of the intensity of our prayer to God. They can be difficult because of the waiting for God to intervene and act.

God is pleased to answer. Rebekah conceived and is carrying twins. So while Isaac and Rebekah are the designated covenant recipients, God wants to demonstrate that His giving of the heir is at His own timing and with His direct intervention. God's providences may be in the natural and ordinary flow of life. Sometimes, God's providences are direct and even miraculous. In both of these last two chapters, we see men of God, desiring and even needing God's intervention, praying with earnestness based on the character and the commitments God has made. This makes Biblical praying different from all others. We are not, through ritual means, trying to satisfy a distant and uncaring deity. We are engaged with the Sovereign God who is poised to hear, yet acts in accordance with His own counsels of wisdom and purpose.

Struggles that Need Help (v.22-23)

But from the beginning, there is trouble. The twins are struggling together in the womb. The Hebrew describes the idea of a huge struggle – smashing into one another. The children almost seem to be battling in her womb. The narrative here begins to anticipate the life-long struggle between these boys.

It is possible at this point that she does not know that it is twins. She only knows the terrible discomfort and pain she is experiencing.

So, she inquires of the Lord. She is struggling. She goes to the Lord seeking an answer. And the Lord answers her.

Two nations and two peoples, one stronger than the other, the older serving the younger are trashing about in her womb. This is not just a physical problem, but the titanic struggle of redemptive history, in this moment of time, focused in her womb.

This text is loaded with theological truth which the rest of the Bible unpacks. At the heart of that is God's sovereign and free choice to elect the younger instead of the older, Jacob instead of Esau. In the natural order, Esau would be the heir. The lineage would pass through him. But, in God's sovereign freedom, he chooses Jacob instead. He does so, not because he saw anything in them, but because of His own freedom to choose and love whomever He pleases.

Paul reads this cluster of texts and writes in Romans 9:6-18:

But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, ⁷ and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." ⁸ This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring. ⁹ For this is what the promise said: "About this time next year I will return and Sarah shall have a son." ¹⁰ And not only so, but also when Rebecca had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, ¹¹ 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— ¹² she was told, "The older will serve the younger." ¹³ As it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

¹⁴ What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! ¹⁵ For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." ¹⁶ So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. ¹⁷ For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." ¹⁸ So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills. [ESV]

Paul sees here that God has exercised His free choice before either of the boys have sinned or done anything right or wrong. The conclusion they draw is massive. God is free to set His heart on whomever He pleases. He does so of His own will, not foreseeing any of their actions and not based on their worth or merit. This weighty (and to some, worrisome) truth is not just applied to these two boys, but to Israel as a nation, to Jesus as the elect servant and then, by Paul to us.

Sons who are Different (v.24-28)

She perseveres and the boys are born. “Behold, it is twins!” God’s words to Rebekah are now very clear. There are two of them. No wonder the trouble, No wonder the pain and discomfort. And look at them. Look at how different they are.

Moses means for us to see more here than just a physical description of Esau at birth. He describes him in a way that is almost animal-like. It is intended to have the audience sort of gasp – here is a baby that at birth is covered in red hair, like a fur cloak. The word for red here is closely associated with earth. He is of the dirt; he is Adam-like. So, this red haired baby is called Esau. Also, these two words, red and hairy, are forms of the words Edom and Seir. This boys descendants would be known as Edomites and would live in the region called Seir. They would become the mortal enemies of Israel.

Jacob is born second. But he comes out grasping the heel of Esau. The struggle in the womb goes on at birth. He is named Jacob. It is from a word that means, “God will protect” and “standing behind”. That word and Jacob’s name rhymes with the word for “grabbing the heel.” So, at this point, the astonished and happy parents, recognizing the fulfillment of God’s word, name their son with a positive name.

Jacob also means, “deceiver, supplanter, sneak.” Someone who grabs another by the heel is attempting to trip them up, to cause them to stumble. So he will become famous in the psalms as the one God loves, you sinner, you worm, Jacob.

Verse 27 tells us that the boys were not only different at birth, but also grow up to be very different in their character and conduct. Esau becomes an outdoorsman. Jacob, a homebody. But there is more here. Esau is being described as wild and uncouth, a man ruled by his wants, his immediate perceived needs. Jacob is being described as tamed, controlled, civilized, a man of thought, reflection and self-control.

The hearts of their parents start to be exposed – Isaac loves the hunter because he brings him his favorite game; Rebekah loves Jacob, presumably because he is a quiet man around the “tent”. But the division between the boys begins to drive a wedge between the parents. They will carefully look out after the interests of the one they love the most. This will lead later, to a whole nest of deceit, intrigue and hatred.

Reflect and Respond

As we close, how does a life well lived impact us so that we will be pleasing to our God?

An important idea emerges from this text and shapes the rest of the Bible. The New Testament book of Hebrews talks it in language like, the Old is passing away and the New is being established. Just as God chooses the younger and supplants the older, so the Old Covenant is fulfilled and completed in the New Covenant. God is pleased to carry out all that He has promised, centering it on the Lord Jesus and completing it in the church.

Redemptive history centers on the birth and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Why is that? Because the great problem for people is not psychological wholeness, self-esteem and worth, health, wealth and prosperity. Your greatest problem is not the gas prices, the job market, or the latest song. Your greatest problem is your sin and the separation from God. It is what the Bible calls, spiritual death. This alienation, this separation from God will end ultimately in your separation from God in the eternal torments of hell. But Christ has come, died on the cross and was raised from the dead so that you can be restored to a relationship with God. But it requires that you believe in God and these facts and that you bow to God as Lord and Master of your life.

Will your life be one that is well lived?