

Jacob on the other hand must learn everything the hard way.
He is aptly named Jacob (the one who grasps the heel –
or to use the English equivalent – the one who pulls the leg:
if you ask someone “are you pulling my leg?”
you are asking them “are you deceiving me?”)

But God’s purpose with Jacob is to show us that God trains his son through discipline.
That’s why we are singing Psalm 119:73-80.

God disciplines his son and teaches him his paths.
That is why we rejoice even under the discipline of God,
because his discipline shows us that he cares for us.

This emphasis on God’s loving discipline is also found in Hebrews 12:1-17.
(read)

The contrast between Jacob and Esau (also known as Edom)
would have resonated with Israel as they heard this story.
After all, the Edomites (the descendents of Esau)
had been a perennial thorn in their side.

Edom refused to let Israel pass through their land on their way to Canaan (Numbers 20)
and throughout Israel’s history the Edomites were usually adversarial.

But God’s promise was that the elder (Edom) would serve the younger.
God chooses the weak and despised things to shame the strong.

1. The Barrenness of Rebekah (25:19-21)

19 These are the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son:

As we have seen, “the generations of” means “this is the story of his descendents.”
There is no “These are the generations of Abraham.”
The story of Isaac is never told!

Why?

There isn’t much to tell!
Some think that this is because Isaac fails.
But Isaac’s failures do not appear any worse than Abraham or Jacob’s!

But this does raise an interesting point.

Genesis 12-50 is not structured around “Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob”
as many often claim.
Genesis 12-50 is structured around “Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph.”

And the reason why is actually very simple:

the Generations of Terah (the story of Abraham) establishes the covenant promise,
but by the time of the death of Abraham,
the covenant line has been firmly grounded in Isaac.

That point was determined by God's oath and promise.
Isaac himself had nothing to do with it!

Isaac has returned from death and therefore lives peacefully in the land.
In this way Isaac is a picture of the resurrected Christ
who has inherited all things from his Father.

Therefore the story of Isaac's life doesn't really matter.
And so Genesis doesn't tell it!

If you want to understand the covenant promise and how it gets from Abraham to Israel,
then you need to understand not the story of Isaac, but the Generations of Isaac –
in other words, you need to understand about Jacob and Esau.

*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.*

The first thing that the text wants us to see is that Isaac prayed.
We discover in verse 26 that Isaac was 60 years old when the twins were born.
This means that he prayed for 20 years.
No doubt Isaac remembered the story of his own parents.
Sarah was barren until she was 90.

Isaac believed God's promise – and so he prayed.
Think about that.

God has promised.
It would be easy to say, "well, God has promised, so why pray?"

God calls us to pray for what he has promised!

The word for prayer here is not the normal word for prayer.
It is a word used to refer to supplication or entreaty,
normally by the covenant mediator.
(It is used in Exodus 8-10 to refer to Moses entreating the LORD
asking him to withdraw plagues after Pharaoh has "repented.")

So Isaac is the one who has returned from death,
and now intercedes with God on behalf of his bride.

Notice also that the theme of barrenness continues.

Rebekah will be barren for twenty years.

While barrenness was (and is) a terrible trial,

I should ask you:

when you hear in the Bible that a woman is barren,
what do you think?

By now you probably think,

“Hmm. God is about to do something!”

Scripture recognizes the sorrow and pain that comes with barrenness.

But God has determined that through that barrenness and emptiness

he will bring life and bounty.

There are three barren women in Genesis:

Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel.

And yet these three women will bear Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.

Salvation will come to Israel (and in fact, to the nations) through these three barren women.

And through these barren women,

including Hannah and Elizabeth,

God is preparing the way for the virgin birth.

He is teaching us that he brings life to the barren womb

so that we might not be surprised when even the virgin conceives and bears a son.

And the Lord granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived.

And not only did she conceive, but she conceived twins.

And our second story shows that the relationship of the brothers

is prefigured by the events in her womb!

2. The Birth of Hairy and Leg-Puller (25:22-28)

22 The children struggled together within her, and she said,

“If it is thus, why is this happening to me?”

Jacob and Esau were at each other’s throats from the womb.

And because she feels this warfare within her,

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.”

Here at the beginning of Book 8, the Generations of Isaac,

we hear the Word of the LORD.

We heard the Word of the LORD at the beginning of the Generations of Terah
back in chapter 12.

We will hear the Word of the LORD again at the beginning of the Generations of Jacob
in chapter 37.

In each of these three patriarchal narratives
the Word of the LORD sets the course of history.

And the word that we hear is that God has made a division between Esau and Jacob.
Before either one does anything good or bad,
God has chosen Jacob.

And while ANE emphasized the rights of the firstborn,
God will demonstrate that *he* chooses his own.

With Isaac and Ishmael
God displaced the son of the slave woman with the son of the free woman
(not especially surprising in the ANE)
but with Jacob and Esau God will displace the firstborn son.

In Romans 9:10-16 Paul tells us that the point of this story
is to demonstrate God's purpose of election.

*10 And not only so, but also when Rebekah 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 him who calls—
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.*

Paul argues that while the election of Jacob and Esau was focused on the inheritance,
the principle should be applied to our salvation as well.

Election is not based on what we do.
Rather, election is based on God's call.

God has mercy on those whom he has mercy.
It is not based on what we have done (or what we will do).

It is based on his compassion and mercy.

This should provoke us to humility.

God has had mercy on us.

He has called us.

Therefore our response should be to humble ourselves before him
and walk in his ways.

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.

And verse 27 offers a prelude to the future:

*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.*

Esau is a skillful hunter.

While this is a valuable ability,

it is not particularly prized in the OT.

The only other great hunter in Genesis is Nimrod,

the builder of Ninevah – and perhaps of the Tower of Babel.

This does not bode well for Esau.

But Jacob is a quiet man.

This word translated “quiet” is especially interesting.

In every other usage in the OT, it refers to a man’s moral character -
and is often translated “blameless.”

In fact, earlier in Genesis

Noah was called blameless (Genesis 6:9),

and Abraham was called to walk before God and be blameless (Genesis 17:1).

Thus Jacob is associated with Noah and Abraham –

and as a dweller in tents he is connected with Abraham and Isaac his fathers.

28 Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

Remember this!

Isaac’s taste for game will come back in chapter 27!

One thing that we should note from this:

God does not do things the way the world does things.

The ancient world expects to see Esau inherit the blessing from Isaac.

And quite frankly, Esau is the “manly man” – the hunter.

But God chooses the “wimpy” things of the world to shame the strong.

Remember that,

because it has been true ever since!

For those of you who are of northern European descent,

the gospel came to your fathers through a very unlikely source:

monks –

celibate monks.

The Germanic world of the day prized a man’s virility and ability to father children.

They initially looked on the monks as weak and weird for taking vows of chastity.

But through the preaching of these “wimpy men”

the Germanic peoples came under the sway of the Kingdom of Christ.

Tonight we’ll be looking at Jesus’ call to his disciples

to deny yourself, take up your cross and follow him.

The gospel will always look weak and foolish

to those who think that this age is what really matters.

And this contrast between “this age” and the “age to come”

is the centerpiece of our third story.

3. Red Sells His Birthright for a Stew (25:29-34)

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.)

Esau was famished.

He sees Jacob cooking a stew and demands “quick, let me have some of that red stuff!”

(Edom means “red.”)

Esau is famished – he is exhausted –

but that is no excuse for what he does.

Moses would fast for 40 days on the mountain.

Elijah fasted for 40 days on his travel to Horeb.

Jesus fasted for 40 days in the wilderness.

If your eyes are fixed on the coming of the Kingdom,

then you can endure hunger in this age.

But Esau cannot.

He is obsessed with this age.

Jacob, on the other hand, is heavenly minded:

31 Jacob said, "Sell me your birthright now."

The birthright was the right to the double portion.

In the family of Abraham it was also the right to inherit the covenant promise.

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.

Without an oath, Esau could have said, "Oh I didn't mean it!"

But the oath demonstrates that Esau really didn't care about the covenant promise.

The care with which Jacob insists upon the oath

also indicates that Jacob is not acting deceitfully.

He is acting in good faith.

He sees that his brother does not care about the Kingdom of God.

His brother is not looking for a heavenly city.

Think about it:

what is the promise worth?

What is the inheritance?

In your lifetime you will get nothing.

Abraham was told that his descendents would be enslaved for 400 years.

(That clock hasn't started yet)

And only *after* those 400 years, will your descendents inherit the land.

Okay –

think about it this way.

Your ancestors came over on the Mayflower.

They were told that 500 years from now their descendents

would receive a great piece of land in Massachusetts.

We think the Mayflower came a long time ago – right?

If you were in line for that property –

you would still be waiting *for another 120 years!*

Maybe your great-grandchildren would see it!

Esau says,

What do I care about a promise that won't even go into effect for another 500 years?!

*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 rarely comments on a person's motives or attitudes.

This rare comment is designed to show us that Jacob did not "swindle" Esau out of his birthright.

He sold it to him fair and square.

Esau didn't care about his birthright.

All he cared about was immediate gratification.

Plainly Esau is unworthy of being the heir of the promise.

But really is Jacob any better?

Jacob is called blameless –

but throughout the centuries

many commentators have not been entirely comfortable with this.

Jacob is a heel-grabber, a leg-puller, they say,

in a word, a deceiver.

Yes, Jacob is a crafty fellow.

But Ephrem the Syrian – the great 4th century commentator
points out that

“Jacob saw that the right of the firstborn was despised by Esau,
and he contrived to take it from him, trusting in God who had said
‘The older shall serve the younger.’” (ACCS 152)

You don't have to say that Jacob is entirely right in his deeds.

But you do need to see that Jacob believes God's promises.

At times Jacob tries too hard to “hurry” the promises along!

But, you see, this is the point of discipleship!

Over the course of the next several weeks

we will see how Jacob becomes Israel –

Jacob starts with faith in God's promises,

but Jacob must still learn to rest in those promises –

to believe that *God* will do what he has promised!

Jacob is blameless.

That is not a statement about his moral perfection.

That is a statement of who he is as the Seed of the Woman –

the Seed of Abraham.

The message of the gospel is being preached in Genesis.

God is bringing his son through suffering to glory.

The path of discipleship is the path that the son must tread.

And the path of discipleship is the path of exile.

Isaac never leaves the land: why?

Because he has already passed through death and been restored to life.

But Jacob must be exiled – he must endure the discipline of death.

The Son of God must be made perfect through suffering.

And that is the path that our Lord Jesus Christ has walked.

Looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith,

who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross,

despising its shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

And because Jesus has been made perfect through suffering,

therefore you must not “grow weary or faint-hearted.”

Because the Lord disciplines every son whom he loves.

God is treating you as sons.

For what son is there whom his father does not discipline.

God is making you more and more like Jesus.

Your suffering is to conform you to the likeness of Christ!

For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant,

but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness

to those who have been trained by it. (Heb 12:11)

It is interesting that when the author of Hebrews thinks about the importance of discipline,

and the danger of rejecting the Lord’s discipline,

he immediately thinks of Esau.

Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

(Note that holiness is not optional!)

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;

(this echoes Deuteronomy 29:18 which warns against idolatry as the root of bitterness –

if Israel does not deal with idolatry promptly, it will spring up

and contaminate the nation.

Hebrews says that this is equally true of the church!

If we allow idolatry – putting something other than God first –

to thrive in the church, then we are in trouble!)

But this warning against idolatry then leads us to Esau,

See to it *that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau,*

who sold his birthright for a single meal.

We'll hear in future weeks of Esau's sexual immorality.

But Hebrews suggests that there was a fundamental idolatry revealed in Genesis 25.
Esau preferred something else to God
(represented in his willingness to sell his birthright for a meal).

We are called to look out for one another.

God's purpose for you is that you would strive for the holiness
without which no one will see the Lord.

God is training you.

He is developing holiness in you.

The trials that he sends are supposed to yield the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

This is the point of our midweek studies.

The Men's Leadership Study

is going through Ed Welch's *Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave*
as we look at the problem of Idolatry.

There are a couple of women's studies that are coming together
(if you are interested, please see Betty Rowley)

And the Wednesday night Shepherding Group is working through

"the Shorter Catechism for Discipleship" –

how do we live as Christians in the midst of an increasingly pagan culture?

But quite frankly, I would not pretend to claim that all the "programs" the church can offer
will be able to do this.

The point is that we need to encourage each other in all sorts of daily interactions!

Seeing two of you going for a walk with your babies nearly brought tears to my eyes.

Hearing that a few couples are going to have their own Bible study together
makes my heart rejoice.

Indeed, getting together with other Christians for Bible studies or service projects is great!

The point of discipleship is – as Jesus said it –

"teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."

There are two parts to this:

1) teaching – that is essential!

2) But the danger is that all we do is teach.

But Jesus said that we must teach people to *observe* all that he has commanded.

It is not enough that you get all this Bible knowledge stuffed in your head.

You must then *use it*.

You must then *do it*.

If all you want is to come to church to get knowledge – don't bother.

The point of our studies must be that we put these things into practice.