

In the midst of this story we might easily forget that we are talking about the Covenant of God with his people, and it is here being bought and sold as a plaything! We are now tempted to wonder what God is doing and how things will turn out. However, the prophecy given earlier to Rebekah is there to help us understand that God makes His sovereign choices according to His will, and not according to our moral or social judgements. He sustains His plan of salvation despite the sins of those who bear it, so that His grace may be made known. In a famous passage, Paul speaks of God's sovereign will and grace by which salvation is achieved:

Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad (in order that God's purpose and choice might stand, not by works but by him who calls) she was told, "The older will serve the younger." As it is written: "I loved Jacob, but I hated Esau." What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." (Rom 9:10-15)

Application

One important theme of Scriptures begins in earnest with this story, and it is the theme of 'family characteristics'. Whilst it is clear that the Lord does His work whatever happens, He works through real people with real characteristics, just like you and me. Now, Abraham was a man of faith, and that was passed down to Isaac who we find as a man of prayer; and Sarah was barren and had to await the Lord's blessing to conceive, and so did Rebekah (see text). There is no moral comment on these characteristics; they are traits which are passed on through the generations. What we find is that this theme broadens as the book of Genesis unfolds, and there are now hints of good and bad moral characteristics in the family line of Abraham. Jacob, for example, was a deceiver from early days and this was also true, to a certain extent, of Abraham. The great man certainly deceived his own wife Sarah (12:10-20) and later, Abimelech (20:1-7). There is much more of this theme to come, but we should watch Scripture closely to see what happens, as it was God's purpose to deal with Jacob's sin.

The message for us is that we all have a variety of characteristics which we have inherited, or even ones that have grown in us through our life experience. Some are good, some are bad, many are neutral, and it is how we use them that counts (such as 'being inquisitive', which can be either a good trait or a difficult one!). However, if the Lord has His hand on our lives, as He first did with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, then it is His purpose to guide us in the right use of our gifts and characteristics, and redeem the bad ones. This is the work of grace that he does in the life of the believer, and it is an important part of our salvation.

Discipleship Challenges

Please use the programme of lifestyle challenges which can be found by following the link 'lifestyle challenge'. The downloadable 'worksheet' will help you follow through any challenge which you feel is right for you to take up.

Suggestions about discipleship and Christian lifestyle

It is hard for any of us to 'analyse' ourselves, but I suggest we can prayerfully ask the Lord to help us identify our characteristics, good, bad and neutral; some of these may be 'family' traits, some not. We can also ask Him to help us identify how and when we use our characteristics well or badly. Having done this, we can offer these things to the Lord in prayer and ask Him to redeem our characteristics and our moral weaknesses, to help us walk in His ways.

Final Prayer

We ask You, Lord God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to help us walk in the light of the Covenant promises, by which you led Your people despite their earthly circumstances. Give us the confidence to trust in Your ways, and stay close to You for ever; AMEN

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What does the birth of Esau and Jacob say to us about the choices God makes?
2. If possible, look up 'Edomites' and 'Arameans' in a Bible concordance or dictionary, to find out more about these people in the later years of the Old Testament.
3. Are you conscious of family traits being carried through the generations in your life? How can we use this insight in a godly way?

Prayer

You know each of us, Lord God, you have known us from before we were born. We praise You for thinking about us, loving us, creating us, sustaining us and giving us a place in Glory. May we rest in the peace of knowing that our Saviour is our Maker, and He waits for our return. Thanks be to God; AMEN

Further Suggestions for Prayer

Weekly Theme: Those who are ill

Pray today for those who are in hospital. Some are there for minor routine procedures, some for grave illness or injury, and some are dying due to serious disease.

Ask the Lord to bless those who are ill; those who you know about and others. Pray for all who seek to follow the Lord's command to visit their neighbours and heal the sick.

Meditation

Save us, Jesus, and renew us in our Faith:

Let us see the perfection of love as a worthy goal,
Instead of an unreachable dream;

Let us read and study the Word of God,
Instead of feeding our souls on novels, TV, films;

Let us pray and talk to Almighty God,
Instead of gossiping in church on Sundays;

Let us talk with the name of Jesus on our lips,
Instead of speaking the profanities of the world;

Let us do what is honest and right and true,
Instead of getting away with second best;

Let us honour those who give their lives to the Lord,
Instead of placing our own failings on them;

Save us Jesus, and renew us in our Faith.

Bible Study - Genesis 25:19-34

¹⁹ This is the account of the relatives of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham was the father of Isaac, ²⁰ and Isaac was 40 years old when he married Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. ²¹ Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren. The LORD answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. ²² The children struggled together within her; and she said, 'If this is going on, what will happen to me?' So she went to seek the LORD's help. ²³ The LORD said to her, 'Two nations are in your womb, and they will be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger.'

²⁴ When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. ²⁵ The first came out red, all his body was covered in hair; so they named him Esau. ²⁶ Then his brother was born, with his hand grasping Esau's heel; so they named him Jacob. Isaac was 60 years old when they were born. ²⁷ When the boys grew up, Esau became a skilful hunter, a man of the open countryside. Jacob on the other hand was a quiet man, who stayed around the household tents. ²⁸ Isaac loved Esau, as he liked game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.

²⁹ Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the countryside, famished.

³⁰ He said to Jacob, 'Let me eat some of that rich red meat stew now, I'm famished!' (Which is why he is also called 'Edom'.) ³¹ Jacob replied, 'First sell me your rights as the firstborn!' ³² 'I am at death's door,' Esau said; 'of what use is the right of the firstborn to me?' ³³ Jacob said, 'Swear to me right now.' So Esau swore to him, and sold his firstborn rights to Jacob. ³⁴ Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and lentil soup. He ate, drank, got up and left; and in this way, Esau treated his firstborn rights with contempt.

Review

Isaac and Rebekah's marriage began in dramatic fashion with their romantic meeting in the Negev (24:62-67). Abraham, through his servant, had successfully found a wife for Isaac from the line of his father Terah, his father, who was called to 'leave home' for Canaan (11:31,32). The future of the Covenant of God now lay with Isaac and Rebekah, and they had much in common. Isaac was conceived through a miracle, and Rebekah was found through a miracle! Also, Isaac was blessed by an angel of the Lord to become 'a great multitude' (22:17), and Rebekah received the same blessing from her family (24:60). However, when it came to having children, the two of them, just like Abraham and Sarah, had great difficulty.

Today's passage of Scripture is the story of the birth Isaac and Rebekah's twin sons Jacob and Esau; and the story of their feuding from birth. Right at the beginning, we are told that Rebekah was barren, but Isaac prayed for her and she then became pregnant. It sounds as if Isaac's prayer was answered almost immediately! A closer look at the text however tells us that Isaac prayed for her from the beginning of his marriage, when he was 40 (25:20), but that the twins were born when he was 60! Isaac had to pray with persistence and patience,

When Rebekah gave birth to her sons, it would normally have been a time of great rejoicing, but both the pregnancy and birth were difficult (25:22-26). The Lord gave Rebekah a prophecy for her children which spoke of them as 'two nations' (25:23). It was a prophecy that may have seemed incomprehensible, but it came true; Jacob became the Covenant nation of Israel, and Esau became Edom. God chose one of these to bless (Jacob) but it was not according to the social norms of the day which always favoured the elder. Indeed, Isaac favoured Esau, and Rebekah favoured Jacob, which all added to the tensions!

The story of what would happen to the two sons and the nations that would come from them is played out in a remarkable cameo sketch focussed around a pot of stew (25:29-34). Jacob famously managed to deceive Esau into selling his rights as the firstborn son for little more than some lentil soup and bread (25:34). The story sounds like some teenage 'playing about', for the birthright was not Esau's to sell; it was Isaac's to give. We will discover the truth of this later on in Genesis (27) where Jacob had to perform another trick to get the real birthright blessing. Scripture however is blunt in its judgement of Esau for treating his birthright, which was the Covenant of God with Abraham his grandfather, with contempt.

What is interesting, however, is the speed with which the story now moves with the passing of the Covenant from one generation to another, because previously in Genesis, this has been agonisingly slow. All of the characters of our story have their good and bad points; Isaac was a man of prayer, but was weak in controlling his family; Rebekah was a good mother but childless for 20 years, Esau was a hunter, but derogatory towards the Covenant and Jacob was a refined but devious character. Yet in the midst of all this, God appears now to be pursuing his Covenant plan of redemption with increased vigour. Nothing stands in his way.

Going Deeper

There are many fascinating details to this story. The details of Jacob's and Esau's names tell us much about them, as well as what happens in the story. We will find that Jacob did not give Esau what he promised, for example! Also, this whole incident is an important one for the theology of the New Testament, because Paul uses it to describe God's 'election' of His people.

Arameans

It is very important for the writers of Scripture to tell us afresh the family ties that link the first generations of God's people, and this is the purpose of the first few verses of our text, if not the whole passage. We know the outline of these relationships from various places in Genesis (11:10,27, 24:15 etc.), but there is one interesting detail here which is not found anywhere else. Verse 20 describes Rebekah as the 'daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddam-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean.' It is the identification of Bethuel's family as 'Aramean' which is new, for it is the first place in Scriptures that we hear of a tribal group by this name.

It appears that the 'Arameans', broadly speaking, were Abraham's relations who had not moved south with him to Canaan to follow the Lord's command. Because they were related to Abraham in this way, Moses taught the people of Israel a prayer beginning 'My father was a wandering Aramean ...' (Deut. 26:5; - the father being Abraham), and without the family connection being made clear in this passage here, we would not know what was meant by this prayer, which became important for the people of Israel after the Exodus. The Arameans

became a powerful state centered upon Damascus which vied for power with Judah and Israel in later years, but was finally swallowed up in the Assyrian Empire of the eighth century BC.

The birth of Jacob and Esau

We will find that Scriptures identify common features in the stories of the forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The first and most easily discernable one is that of difficult childbirth, and this story of the birth of Jacob and Esau is no exception. The difficulties of childbirth in ancient times was far greater than today because of the conditions in which women had to give birth, so each time a child was born was cause for not just great rejoicing on the part of the parents, in this case, Rebekah and Isaac, but an example of the protection and guidance of the Lord. Certainly, Isaac put a great deal of intercession into the birth of his sons, over at least 20 years. In this case, the birth of twins who were 'struggling' within the womb (25:22) was a matter of much trepidation for Rebekah who would have rightly feared for her life in these circumstances. She was reassured by a prophecy from the Lord. We can well imagine that the details of which one would be the stronger were not the most important to Rebekah, merely the promise that the turmoil she felt in her womb was indeed two sons who would father two nations. Through this, the blessings said to her when she left her home (24:60) would be fulfilled.

The birth of Jacob and Esau is a story filled with word-play. Esau was born first and although one of twins, was by right, the firstborn. His was rather red at birth, but his name Esau is related to the Hebrew word for hair 'e'se'ir', which was the other one of his infant features! The Hebrew word for red, 'admoni' crops up here and later in the story (the famous 'red stew' – see later) and is the reason why Esau was also named 'Edom' and became the father of the 'Edomites', a tribe of people who lived to the far South East of the Dead Sea in tension with the people of Israel over many years. Esau was described as a skilful hunter, someone who was a natural explorer an outdoors person. His father favoured him, perhaps admiring in him a strong and adventurous spirit; something he did not appear to have himself.

Jacob was born famously grasping Esau's heel. This action is prophetic of the whole of Jacob's life, an indication yet again that the Scriptures see great connections between the conception and birth of a child and their consequent life. We are not to think that Jacob spent his whole life hanging on to Esau, but he certainly did live his whole life hanging on to the firstborn birthright that he deceptively stole from him. In the end, God blessed him, and gave him a new name, 'Israel', meaning 'he who struggles, prevails' (Gen 32:32). When we recall the name of God's people, we might recall its meaning and the reason it was given. Jacob was loved by his mother, and was also described as a quiet man (25:27) which is a strange description. The Hebrew word used here indicates that Jacob was a 'self-possessed' person who was content in himself; a useful quality for someone who was a great schemer, as we shall see!

The selling of a birthright?

The story of Esau selling his rights as the firstborn is famous. These are sometimes called the 'birthrights', but it is more accurate to describe them as rights of the firstborn. In ancient times, firstborn birthrights varied. There are some ancient records which indicate that the normal apportionment was 'twice as much for the favoured firstborn'; yet the stakes were higher in the Bible, as we have seen in the division of Abraham's inheritance, where by far the majority went to Isaac (25:1-18) because of the spiritual significance of the Covenant.

Jacob had begun life grasping at Esau's heel, and the grasping, according to this story, continued. One day, when Esau came in from the fields, he saw in front of Jacob a rich meat stew. Most translations simply say 'red stuff', but the Hebrew words describe a sumptuous red stew! Also, the 'redness' of the stew is a play on Esau's second name, Edom. It is impossible to fathom why Esau entered into a bargain with his brother for family food that should be shared, which is why the story sounds like a youthful squabble. The real focus of the story is firstly on the brief and uncivil words of Jacob; 'sell me your rights', 'swear to me now'; by comparison, Esau talks with some humanity 'I'm famished', 'I am at death's door ...'. Then, when Esau had sworn over his rights, Jacob did not give him a rich meat stew, but a meal of bread and a meagre lentil soup! It certainly seems to be a trick played by Jacob, and we who read the story are aghast at this deception, and even more so by Esau's meek acceptance of it. Four short verbs conclude the story, indicating Esau's disgust at Jacob and his trickery as well as the rights of the firstborn which he had needlessly given away. The Scripture then adds a rare moral comment. Esau is condemned for his stupidity and contempt of God's Covenant. This may all have been a prank, but this points forward and paves the way for Jacob to practice even further deception in obtaining the real blessing of his father Isaac upon his deathbed (Gen 27); but this time using his mother's cooking skills!