



## LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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### Trusting in the Sovereignty of God Genesis 25:19-28

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A number of years ago I was talking with an experienced businessman who worked closely with a large, prominent, and family-run steel company. He was telling how pleased he was that this company had managed to make its way successfully through several years of hard times brought on by the transfer of ownership from the founder's children to his grandchildren. My friend pointed out that it often seems to be the third generation that destroys a successful family business. The founding generation is usually responsible for building the company and making it great. The second generation is usually closely connected with the first, knows the business, and shares the values that built the company. But it's often the third generation that has grown up living off the company profits without having the experience of running the business. When the company is handed to them, family squabbles, inexperience, and a loss of the founding values often bring the company down.

The second half of Genesis 25 brings us to the third generation in this family venture that God began with Abraham. And as the storyteller introduces this new generation to us we see God's promises put in jeopardy by family conflict and personal character flaws. Once again, God's covenant is in jeopardy. And, of course, the point of the story is to show God at work, overcoming obstacles, turning conflict to peace, and shaping character through the sanctifying influence of

his grace, all to ensure that the things he has promised will come to pass.

Verse 19 begins the story or the account of the "generations of Isaac". Remember that this statement "these are the generation of..." serves as the introduction to each of the main divisions in Genesis—to each of the family stories. The account of the generations of Noah tells us the story of his three sons; the account of the generation of Terah tells us the story of his son, Abraham; and the account of the generations of Isaac tells us the story of his sons, Jacob and Esau. What's interesting is that there is no account of the generations of Abraham, which would tell Isaac's story. Instead, the storyline goes straight from Abraham to Jacob with a single detour to tell us about the "generations of Ishmael". What little we're told about Isaac is incorporated into the stories of his father and his sons. It's particularly odd, considering that Genesis tells us about the generation of Ishmael, Isaac's spiritual dead-end brother. Genesis itself doesn't give any direct answers as to why the story is told this way. It's not that Isaac's life was uneventful or unimportant. His early life is centred on his miraculous birth and, his near-sacrifice by Abraham, and his being rescued by God at the last moment. His mid-life is full of the evidence of God's providence at work, especially as God provides him with Rebekah as a bride and brings about the birth of his two sons. In Chapter 26 we'll see God assure Isaac that the blessings he had promised to Abraham will be his as well. And yet, as the story goes on and Isaac becomes an old man we see him playing favourites with his sons, letting conflict fester in his family, and refusing to submit to God's plans. Genesis may pass over Isaac's story simply because he failed to remain faithful; because he failed to walk in his father's footsteps. It's telling that after Isaac's attempt to thwart God's election and blessing of Jacob, we don't hear about him again until his death in Chapter 35.

Whatever the case, the story of Isaac's sons begins at verse 19:

**These are the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham fathered Isaac, 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. And Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren. And the LORD granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived.**  
(Genesis 25:19-22)

Abraham was 75 years old when he received God's promise of a son and relocated to Canaan. Sarah was barren for another 25 years before the miraculous birth of Isaac. Now the same pattern follows in Isaac's life. He marries at the age of forty, but Rebekah remains barren for twenty years. Barrenness runs in the family, so to speak. And yet barrenness can only run in the family because God is at work. Just as Abraham was patient and waited on God, so does Isaac. The story of Sarah's barrenness was full of uncertainty and concern that took *nine* chapters to work out. In contrast, Rebekah's barrenness lasts almost as long, but is worked out in just *one* verse. We can probably read everything we were told about Sarah's barrenness into Rebekah's.

But we do see that Isaac seems to have learned from the mistake his parents made. Abraham and Sarah had taken matters into their own hands and Abraham had fathered Ishmael by Sarah's servant, Hagar. That led to all sorts of trouble. Isaac could probably remember the conflict that situation had brought into his family. He remembered how Ishmael had teased and made fun of him and then been sent away into the wilderness by his father. Abraham had been patient in the face of Sarah's barrenness, but not *perfectly* patient. Now Isaac, instead of taking matters into his own hand, intercedes for Rebekah—he puts his faith in God's ability to bring about what he had promised. Just as Sarah's

barrenness had been, Rebekah's barrenness is part of God's sovereign plan to show his hand and to build trust on the part of the men and women whom he had called and to whom he had made promises. As Bruce Waltke puts it: "Barrenness here is not an occasion for anxiety but for sovereign grace. This generation also has to learn the lessons of faith and to understand that theirs is not a natural but a supernatural seed."<sup>1</sup>

Rebekah's barrenness should be a reminder to us that God's goal is to draw us closer to himself and his greater goal in general is to show forth his glory to Creation. We're prone to forgetting this. Someone was telling me recently that if we aren't seeing God's promises fulfilled in our lives or if we aren't fully healthy, or if we aren't living prosperously, it's because we lack faith. Brothers and sisters, we need to remember that God is far more concerned with the eternal state of our souls than he is with the state of our perishing bodies or our earthly prosperity. If allowing us to struggle faithfully and patiently through hardship and privation will teach us to trust him more fully and draw closer to him, God will often allow us to struggle faithfully and patiently through hardship and privation. And if we aren't seeing the fulfilment of God's promises, it's not because we lack faith. As we see throughout Scripture, God's promises are fulfilled not because we are faithful, but because *he* is faithful. God will fulfil every one of his promises in his own way and in his own timing. He is sovereign over his Creation.

And this is exactly what we see as a result of Rebekah's barrenness. Isaac knew God's promise. Isaac knew that God was sovereign. He was himself an example of God's sovereign and miraculous provision and, no doubt, knew it. And so instead of worrying and becoming anxious; instead of

sleeping with Rebekah's maid to father a son; Isaac takes his concern to God in prayer. He goes to the one who made the promise and who controlled the situation. Childlessness became an opportunity to exercise faith in God. The lesson learned, God allows Rebekah to conceive in his own timing. And this is a fitting way for the story of Jacob to begin. If Abraham's story was primarily about faith, Jacob's story is about the sovereign election and calling of God.

But now that she's pregnant, it's Rebekah's turn to pray. Look at verses 25:22-23.

**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.**

**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."**

When God answered Isaac's prayers, he did so abundantly. Rebekah isn't just pregnant; she's pregnant with twins. And yet as the twins grow, she becomes troubled at the violent conflict in her womb. Literally, the twins were struggling—kicking and shoving—within her. The violent struggle of the babies is so great that she seeks an explanation and assurance from God. The text doesn't explain the details. She may have gone to one of Abraham's or Isaac's altars. She may have sought out a priest from one of the towns or villages nearby. Again, we don't know the specifics, but God speaks. And he tells her is that the conflict in her womb foreshadows the conflict that will exist between her two sons and their descendants.

God first confirms the fulfilment of his promise that Abraham would be the

father of nations and that one of them would be particularly great. Through the seed of Abraham's miraculous son, God would create a people through whom he would work out his plan of redemption. Isaac and Rebekah now know and trust in that promise themselves. And so as Isaac's conception and birth were seen by Abraham and Sarah as part of the fulfilment of God's promise, the conception of these two boys is seen by Isaac and Rebekah as the continuing fulfilment of that same promise. But God also throws them a curve: there are *two* nations being born here, not one. And they as they strive with each other in the womb, they will strive with each other in the world. And yet this isn't the rebellious striving of a second son for the rightful and natural inheritance of his older brother. No, God sovereignly decrees before the boys are even born: "the *older* shall serve the *younger*".

Genesis teaches us something about election here. When God elects and calls us, it's not based on our standing in family or society and it's not based on anything we've done to deserve it. He declared to Rebekah: "the older shall serve the younger". God chose Jacob and he did it against every societal and cultural convention. By all rights, Esau, the older son should have inherited God's covenant blessings and promises, but God instead bypasses the cultural expectations of the day and chooses the younger son. And as we'll see in the story of these two men, God didn't choose Jacob because he was somehow more worthy of the covenant. Right from the start, both of these boys are painted in a negative light and it doesn't get any better as they grow up. God's election is completely independent of their merit. As St. Paul writes in Romans:

**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***

<sup>1</sup> *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), p. 357.

*of works but because of him who calls—she was told, “The older will serve the younger.”* (Romans 9:11-12)

Paul also wrote to the Ephesians, saying that God’s election is “according to the purpose of his will” (Ephesians 1:5). And while the will of God in election remains a mystery to us, we can be certain that he “works all things according to the counsel of his will” (Ephesians 1:11). Despite how it may look to us, there is nothing arbitrary about God, how he works, or whom he chooses to work through. When we can’t understand what God is doing, the one thing Scripture certainly teaches us is that God works all things to bring out what is good for his people and what displays his glory. We need to trust him. In his will is our peace.

Eventually the twins were born, but these were no identical twins. Right from the start they were very different, as we read in verses 24 to 26:

**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. 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.**

Ancient people usually gave their children names that said something about the gods they worshipped, but it was also common for names to be a commentary on the circumstances of their birth or an expression of the hope or expectation of the parents for the child. If the parents were clever, all these things might be tied up in one name. And that’s what we see here. Unfortunately, we no longer know what the connection was between the word for “hairy” (*šē’ār*) and the name Esau or what the name Esau might mean literally. The name Jacob, on

the other hand, was a common name in that culture and means “May El Protect”. In naming Jacob, Isaac and Rebekah recognised God’s divine election of him. And yet at the same time, the name is a play on the word ‘*āqab*, which means “to seize someone by the heel” or “to go behind someone...to betray”.<sup>2</sup>

While Jacob and Rebekah undoubtedly intended these names to be positive, both names really do foreshadow the characters these men will become. Both names were, no doubt, as descriptive as “Jacob” when it came to Isaac’s desire to see God at work building faith in his sons and working out his promises, and yet, knowing where the story will go, we the audience can’t help but notice that Isaac and Rebekah have appropriately named their sons “Hairy Monster” and “Back-stabber”.

This all becomes more apparent as the boys grow up. Look at verses 27 and 28:

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

Esau became an outdoorsman—he was a “redneck”. He spent his time huntin’ n’ fishin’ and as we’ll see in Chapter 27, he looked and smelled like a man who lived in the outdoors. From a biblical perspective, this is not a favourable description. Waltke writes, “While the law made provision for eating game, the biblical writers commend pastoralists and condemn predators. Nimrod, the founder of the cities that stood opposed to God, is identified as a mighty hunter. Later, Esau is described as one who lives by the sword. The biblical ideal for a

leader is symbolized by that of a shepherd. True Israel, like his God, behaves like a shepherd, not a hunter.”<sup>3</sup>

Jacob, in stark contrast, stayed in the camp. But his description is no more favourable. The ESV translates the Hebrew saying that Jacob was a “quiet” man. The Hebrew is difficult. The word in other places means something like “perfect” and here is most likely referring to Jacob growing up to be “civilized” or “cultured”,<sup>4</sup> which stands in contrast to Esau, the wild, hairy man perpetually stalking game in the wilderness.

Esau grew up to be a “man’s man”. He was rough and tumble, he thought only for the day, but he was honest and straightforward. In contrast, Jacob grew up into a civilised and cultured young man. Rather than going out and getting his hands dirty like his brother, he stayed in the camp. As his father got older, he may have overseen the slaves and hired hands who cared for the family’s flocks and herds. But where Esau thought only for the day and was honest in his dealings, Jacob was making plans for the future and secretly scheming to bring them about.

Not only were they very different sorts of men, but their parents fed the conflict between them by playing favourites. Isaac favoured Esau, while Rebekah favoured Jacob. Their favouritism sets up the story we’ll read in Chapter 27. Isaac wasn’t willing to accept God’s election of Jacob and manipulates events so that he can bless Esau instead. Rebekah’s favouring of Jacob leads to a deceptive plot to slip Jacob into Isaac’s blessing, conniving to bring about God’s covenant promises rather than waiting on God to fulfil them in his own way.

<sup>3</sup> *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), p. 362.

<sup>4</sup> Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary*. J.J. Scullion, trans. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 415.

<sup>2</sup> Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), p. 872.

The story of the birth of Jacob and Esau is a story of God's sovereignty and of his mercy and it teaches us the need to depend completely on him. He is the one who is always at work to bring his will to pass and to fulfil his promises. We've seen this over and over. While Abraham and Sarah were scheming to bring about the son of promise through her maid, Hagar, God was planning a miraculous reinvigoration of Sarah in her old age. Even as Isaac was a young man, we saw God at work far away in Padan-Aram preparing his future bride. As Abraham's servant arrived at the well, God ensured that it was Abraham's own niece who approached him and offered to water his camels. And here as twins struggle in Rebekah's womb, God has already made his sovereign decree that Jacob will be the heir of the covenant. God is *always* at work. And to top it off, God works according to his own purposes. We see that particularly in his bypassing of the natural son, Ishamel, by providing a supernatural heir, Isaac. And in this case, as we see him naming and calling not the first son, Esau, whom custom placed in the position of heir, but the second son, Jacob. And none of it is based on merit. As Jesus tells us in St. John's Gospel: "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you" (John 15:16).

And so not only is God sovereign, but he is *merciful*. He doesn't choose us because of our merit or because we deserve to be chosen. If that were the case, no one would ever be deserving of God's calling. No, he calls his people even as they walk in rebellion and even as their lives are characterised by the sorts of flaws we see in Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Esau. God doesn't call righteous men. He calls sinners, he calls the humble and lowly, he even calls the "Backstabbers" and he turns them into righteous men.

And so, Brothers and Sisters, in the knowledge that God is sovereign and merciful we ought to be driven to total dependence on him. Despite what the world may tell us, there are no guarantees outside of the will and purpose of God. Being a firstborn son is no guarantee of privilege if God wills otherwise. As Samuel's mother, Hannah, declared in giving praise to God:

**The LORD makes poor and makes rich;  
he brings low and he exalts.  
He raises up the poor from the dust;  
he lifts the needy from the ash heap  
to make them sit with princes  
and inherit a seat of honor.  
For the pillars of the earth are the LORD's,  
and on them he has set the world.**  
(1 Samuel 2:7-8)

In his sovereignty he cast Saul, the great king, from his throne and lifted David, the shepherd boy, to his place. In his sovereignty he chose and called Saul of Tarsus, his greatest opponent and one of the chief persecutors of Christians, and turned his zeal and passion to the Gospel, making him the great Apostle to the Gentiles. Dear friends, it is God who gives, in his grace and according to his will. Let us depend on him. Let us steep ourselves in his Word that we might know his promises and then wait on him in patient faith, sure in the knowledge "that for those who love him all things work for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

Let us pray: Sovereign God, thank you for calling us to yourself. Give us grace to live in faith knowing that your election and calling are sure. When things look bad from our perspective, remind us that you are always working things out for good in our lives. When we struggle to wait for the fulfilment of your promises, give us grace to be patient, and remind

us that you are eternally faithful. Grant these things, we pray, for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.