

Jacob-His Birth and Birthright

Genesis 25:20-34
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We are beginning a series of studies on the life of Jacob, that great patriarch of Israel. Jacob is an outstanding character in the Old Testament. One fourth of the book of Genesis is given over directly to his story. He was a man who exerted great influence, not only upon his own time but ours as well. God changed his name from Jacob to Israel, and that name was given to the Jewish people. They still bear it today. His other name, Jacob, was one of the names borne by the ten northern tribes of Israel. His twelve sons were the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel. It appears that even in his own day he was known and respected by his Canaanite contemporaries among whom he lived in the land of Canaan. There is some evidence that those pagan people named a city for him two or three hundred years after his death. There was a place there called "Jacob-el" - "Jacob's God." There is even some evidence that one of the Pharaohs of Egypt, who reigned some years after Jacob died in Egypt, took his name. So he must have had a very profound influence upon his own time. He certainly does today.

I particularly enjoy studying and teaching the life of Jacob, because he is so easy to identify with. It is sometimes a bit difficult to identify with Abraham, the friend of God; or Moses, to whom God spoke face-to-face; or David, who was the man after God's own heart. But anyone can identify with Jacob, because he is our kind of man. His name means "supplanter" or "one who grasps by the heel," or "one who trips people up." He was a very devious, deceitful personality, and we can see ourselves repeatedly in his character. Jeremiah says,

**The heart is deceitful above all things,
and desperately corrupt;
who can understand it?
I the Lord search the mind
and try the heart . . .**

The term translated "deceitful" is taken from the same root as Jacob's name. I believe it may be a play on Jacob's name, for it means "Jacob-like." This is a characteristic we all share in common; we are "Jacob-like." And the Lord knows the heart; yet he loves us anyway. In fact, the Scriptures tell us that God loved Jacob. This is encouraging to know. God is not ashamed to be identified with Jacob. He calls himself "the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob." I can understand why it might be praiseworthy to be the God of Abraham or the God of Isaac. But who wants to be the God of Jacob? Yet, as the book of Hebrews tells us, God is not ashamed to be identified with him. He loves Jacob-like people. That is the truth we will see time and time again throughout the life of Jacob. Despite all his deceit and duplicity he was a devious, scheming sort of man - God loved him deeply, because above all else Jacob sought the things of God.

Let us turn to Genesis 25, and begin with verse 20. Before we begin, note the formula which occurs in verse 19: "Now these are the records of the generations of Isaac This is an important phrase in the book of Genesis. It occurs ten times, each time referring to a different section. Chapter 2, verse 4:

"These are the generations of the heavens and the earth Chapter 5 begins: "This is the book of the generations of Adam." Chapter 6, verse 9: " These are the records of the generations of Noah." Chapter 10 begins: " Now these are the records of the generations of Shem, Ham, and Japheth, the sons of Noah Chapter 11, verse 10: " These are the records of the generations of Shem"; verse 27: " . . . of Terah. Terah became the father of Abram." Chapter 25, verse 12: " Now these are the records of the generations of Ishmael"; verse 19: " . . . Isaac." Chapter 36: " . . . of Esau (that is, Edom)." The last occurrence is in chapter 37, verse 2: "These are the records of the generations of Jacob."

It was long believed that this formula introduces a new section of Scripture, and is a heading or title to what follows. But now it is thought that, rather than preceding the material, it ought to come at the end, that it

was actually a kind of tag-line placed at the bottom of a clay tablet to indicate to whom that tablet belonged, whose history it contained. In archaeological digs in the Near East they have discovered clay tablets with very similar colophons at the bottom: "These are the generations of They believe that this formula denotes the owner of the tablet and the family history of the man whose name is subscribed. The term translated "generations" actually means the "chronicles", or the "family history" of this particular individual.

It appears, then, that these ten references denote the various sources Moses used, the cuneiform tablets which were the basis of the book of Genesis. Moses had in his possession a number of clay tablets the patriarchs had compiled and handed down. These were his sources. Our view of divine inspiration, as you know, does not preclude the idea of sources. We know that Luke certainly used sources to write his Gospel.

What we have here in Genesis 25:19b-37:2, then, are Jacob's own tablets - his own autobiography. It bears all the marks of an eyewitness report. Among many other indications, there are direct verbatim quotations. I will note these as they occur. What we have, you see, is Jacob's own history.

Now let us begin reading with verse 20:

. . . and Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel the Syrian of Paddan-aram, the sister of Laban the Syrian, to be his wife. And Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord answered him and Rebekah his wife conceived. But the children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is so, then why am I this way?" So she went to inquire of the Lord. And the Lord said to her,

**"Two nations are in your womb;
And two peoples shall be separated from your body;
And one people shall be stronger than the other;
And the older shall serve the younger.**

When her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb. Now the first came forth red, all over like a hairy garment; and they named him Esau. And afterward his brother came forth with his hand holding on to Esau's heel, so his name was called Jacob; and Isaac was sixty years old when she gave birth to them.

First, here is a reference to the chronology of Isaac's life - a brief statement that he was forty when he was married, and sixty when his first child was born. The background is in the preceding chapter - the account of Eliezer, the steward of Abraham, who traveled to Aram, modern Syria, where he found Rebekah. He brought her back, and Isaac and Rebekah were married. This passage tells us that Rebekah was barren. Hidden away in the statement, "Isaac prayed...and Rebekah conceived," is the fact that he prayed for twenty years. For twenty years Isaac prayed for his wife. I am sure Abraham prayed, too, because he was alive at this time, and he knew what it was to wait for the promised seed. Rebekah was the second barren woman in the line through whom the seed was to be perpetuated. Isaac prayed for twenty years that her womb would be opened, and after twenty years the Lord answered that prayer, and she conceived and bore twin sons.

That tells me something of the nature of faith. Faith involves patient endurance. Hebrews tells us it is by faith and patience that we inherit the promises. It also tells me something about the nature of prayer. Prayer is believing what God has promised, even though we may not secure the promise for a long period of time. As a matter of fact, Hebrews also tells us that some of the patriarchs never in their lifetimes saw what God promised. But they continued to believe right to their death that God was going to fulfil his promise. That, basically, is what prayer is: laying hold of a promise of God, and patiently waiting until he fulfils his promise. I do not know about you, but if I pray for twenty minutes and do not get an answer, I get restless. Abraham prayed for twenty-five years, and Isaac prayed for twenty, before God fulfilled his promise. So if you have been praying and are about to give up because you think God does not hear you, don't faint! Isaac persisted, and God granted his request. He gave him not one but two children.

The passage tells us that the children struggled within her. She experienced what all young mothers-to-be experience - the awakening of life. What a delightful thing it is for a mother to feel life within her womb! And yet there was something very different, something portentous about this life, because there was a struggle going on within her. She could feel it. They were wrestling, and she sensed that there must be something important about this. So she went to inquire of the Lord. The old Rabbis used to say that she went to inquire of Shem, who evidently was alive at this time. But the passage merely says that she went to inquire of the Lord. I believe she had the same kind of firsthand relationship with God that we have today. She was disturbed, and she needed to know what her destiny was. Her question, "Why then am I this way?" means, "What then is my destiny? What am I to be?" Out of her confusion she inquired of the Lord, and the answer was given in the four-line statement of verse 23.

First, "Two nations are in your womb." Now isn't that like the Lord? You ask for a baby and he gives you two nations! Historically this was fulfilled. One nation, Israel, sprang from Jacob, and still exists today. The other nation sprang from Esau, his twin brother, and became the Edomites, a proud, powerful people who lived to the east of Israel, occupying the area southeast of the Dead Sea. That particular area was known in the ancient world for wisdom. Eliphaz the Temanite, one of Job's counselors, was from Edom. There is some indication that Job himself may have come from Edom. That type of "wisdom literature" sprang out of that part of the world. They were exceedingly wise and gifted people, powerful and strong.

But the tragedy is that throughout their history they were the enemies of Israel. This is why the oracle that was given to Rebekah goes on to say, "And two peoples shall be separated from your body," i.e., they will be incompatible. They will never be able to live together. The Edomites hated the Israelites and warred against them. And though Israel was forbidden to go to war against Edom, the Edomites raided and plundered Israel. When the nation of Israel fell to the Babylonians in 586 B.C., when Jerusalem was sacked and burned, the Edomites looted the city and stood along the way and harassed the Jews as they were trying to flee. It was for this that Obadiah predicted their ultimate destruction. The Herods, who were the kings of Jesus' day, were Edomites, called "Idumaeans" in the New Testament. This nation endured until the Romans destroyed them sometime after A.D. 70. They were a powerful people who sprang from Rebekah's womb along with Jacob, father of the nation of Israel.

The oracle goes on to say, "And one people shall be stronger than the other," which you might expect to be the case. But the twist is in the last statement: "And the older shall serve the younger." That was something different, because traditionally the older, the firstborn, had the right of inheritance, and he ruled over the younger members of the family. But the Lord predicts that there will be an inversion of this pattern, and something new will happen. This sets the stage for what follows in verse 24:

**When her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb.
Now the first came forth red, all over like a hairy garment; and they named him Esau.**

This baby looked as if he were wearing a little fur coat, all red and fuzzy. Jacob took one look at the child and called him "Hairy" - that is what Esau means. I have long suspected that Isaac had a great sense of humor. His name means "Laughter". He received that name when his mother, Sarah, laughed at the promise that she would conceive. She was past the time when she could bear children, so when she heard the promise from the angel, she laughed. But the Lord granted her this son, and in memory of the event he was named Isaac, "Laughter". Perhaps that colored his whole personality.

And afterward his brother came forth with his hand holding onto Esau's heel, so his name was called Jacob . . .

When the second child was born, evidently just a few moments after the first, he emerged with his little hand gripping the heel of his brother. So Jacob, with his puckish sense of humor, named him "Little Heel Grabber", for that is what Jacob means - "He shall grab by the heel." I do not believe that Isaac, at this point, had any idea of the significance of that name. While it did not actually determine the character of this young man, it certainly was characteristic of his life at a later date. He spent his life tripping people up, grabbing their heels. He was devious, deceitful, untrustworthy; his life was characterized by scheming and manipulating people, getting what he wanted, getting his own way by his own efforts. Later on, in chapter 27, Esau says to his father, "You well-named him Jacob, because he has cheated me these two times." He was a crook, what today we would call a "con man". That is why I can identify with Jacob so easily.

In verses 27 and following we have the account of Jacob's first act - he took away his brother's birthright:

When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the field; but Jacob was a peaceful man, living in tents. Now Isaac loved Esau, because he had a taste for game; but Rebekah loved Jacob. And when Jacob had cooked stew, Esau came in from the field and he was famished; and Esau said to Jacob, "Please let me have a swallow of that red stuff there, for I am famished." Therefore his name was called Edom. But Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." And Esau said, "Behold, I am about to die; so of what use then is the birthright to me?" And Jacob said, "First swear to me", so he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew; and he ate and drank, and rose and went on his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

Verses 27 and 28 set the stage for what occurs. They say Esau was "a skillful hunter, a man of the field; but Jacob was a peaceful man, living in tents." Esau was a sportsman, an outdoors man who loved to hunt and fish, was a member of the local rod and gun club, read Sports Afield - a man's type of man, a wild sort of man. Jacob was different. Often he is characterized as being an introvert, in contrast to Esau the extrovert. He is thought of as a Casper Milquetoast, a mother's boy who hung around the tents while Esau was out doing manly, virile things.

But if you have an American Standard Version, look at the marginal note which indicates that "peaceful" man could be translated "complete" (or perfect) man. That is what the Hebrew term conveys - not that he was gentle, in contrast to Esau's wildness, but that he was a total man. He was "together". He was brilliant, a shrewd, keen analyst, a clever thinker, a well-rounded person. Kids would say today that he was a "mellow dude". In addition to having intellectual strength, he was physically able. Later on there is an account of the time when he saw his bride-to-be, Rachel. He became so excited that he lifted the cover off a well - a feat which normally required several men. So he must have been gifted physically as well as mentally. He had it all, in contrast to Esau, who appears to be on the slow-witted side. Jacob was constantly taking advantage of his brother. Verse 28 tells us that his parents perpetuated this difference instead of correcting it: "Now Isaac loved Esau, because he had a taste for game; but Rebekah loved Jacob."

Isaac is pictured in Genesis as a man of patient faith, and we will see how his faith operates in contrast to Jacob's tendency to run ahead of the Lord and force the Lord's hand. But Isaac had his weaknesses, too, and this was one. He preferred the older son, even though God had predicted that the younger son would rule. He preferred him because he loved to eat the venison or other wild meat Esau brought. But Rebekah loved Jacob and, as we will see later on in the story, this was one of the factors which caused the breakup of the family, because Rebekah took his side against Isaac.

Beginning in verse 29 there is one of these events which appear to be so trifling when they occur, but yet have such great significance. Jacob was home, cooking up some stew, and Esau came in after a day of hunting in the fields. The next chapter indicates that there was a famine in the land, and perhaps the famine had already begun and game was so scarce that Esau was unable to find any. He was hungry, so hungry that he said, "I'm about to die!" But it seems very clear from the passage that he was not in such dire straits. He was a man accustomed to being out in the fields, to being deprived of food and water; he could have endured a few minutes longer. He was like a husband who comes home after a hard day at work, lifts the lid of the stew pot and says, "What's for dinner? I'm starved!" You know he is not actually starving; he is merely hungry. He can wait until dinner is ready. And Esau could have waited. But he saw the stew cooking, and he said, literally, "Give me a gulp of that red there." This evidently is a direct quote as Jacob remembered this terrible event. The passage says that is why they called him "Edom", because Edom means "red". And the Edomites took their name from this event. It is indicative of the character of the Edomites from that point on - they rejected the birthright and became Israel's enemy.

Jacob, seizing the opportunity, said, "I'll give you something to eat if you sell me your birthright." I am sure they had discussed this matter many times before. This was not the first time this issue had come up. Perhaps on many other occasion's Jacob had tried to con Esau out of his birthright. But he saw that this was the ideal opportunity. He had Esau up against the wall, and so he bartered. He agreed to give him that stew for the birthright.

Traditionally the birthright stood for two things: a double share of the inheritance, and the headship of the family. That would have been Esau's, because he was the firstborn. But in this family, the family of the patriarchs, the birthright stood for far more than material blessings. The birthright had been given first to Abraham. He had been promised two things. First, he was promised the land which extended from the River of Egypt to the Euphrates. That is the land of Canaan, the Promised Land. Abraham was told that he was to have that land. Isaac was told, "That will be your land." It was passed on from one patriarch to the next as a part of the birthright. The land of Palestine belongs to the Jews because it was promised to the Jews. That is what it meant to Esau - that he could have the land. Now, he knew that he would never possess it in his lifetime, but he knew that his descendants would. Secondly, possession of the birthright meant that through that individual the promised seed would come, the seed promised to Abraham which would bless all nations - Messiah.

So you can see how much Esau was giving up. He knew what he was giving up. He was not merely foregoing some temporary, visible, material blessing; he was giving up spiritual realities - the land which belonged to his people, and the possibility of being in the lineage of the Promised Redeemer. And for a mouthful of pottage . . . he sold out. It did not take him one moment to make up his mind. The text says, ". . . he ate and drank, and rose and went on his way." It was that simple. He turned his back on all that God had promised, all the spiritual blessings that were his, for a momentary pleasure. The final word is, "Thus Esau despised his birthright."

Hebrews 12:16 commands,

See to it . . . that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal.

Talk about the high price of food today that was the costliest meal ever served! Esau lost everything . . . and he did not think he had lost anything. He turned his back upon everything God had for him, in favor of a momentary, transient, sensual experience. Are you tempted to do that? All of us are at times. Frequently we are tempted to turn our back on what we know to be true, on the great spiritual realities that we have in Christ, in favor of something which looks as if it will satisfy, yet is something temporal and transient which will not last. How often we are tempted to sell out! The tragedy of Esau's life is that his sellout was total. He really did not care. He ate and he drank and he rose up, and he despised his birthright and never looked back. His mind was made up. He lived for the here and now, and turned his back on everything God had for him. That is a tragedy.

The Hebrews passage goes on to say, with reference to a later event, that though he sought repentance, it was not to be found - not because God would not grant it, nor because Isaac his father could not have granted it in that case, but because Esau's mind was made up. He chose what he could see, what was real to him, rather than the things of God. What a tragedy!

But let me ask you, was Jacob's action any better? Jacob cheated his brother out of his birthright, though nothing in particular is made of it in the account. But can we say, with fairness, that Jacob's actions were any better than Esau's? No, we cannot. What was the difference? The difference was that though Jacob was wrong, and he violated his relationship with his brother, in his heart he really sought the things of God. He wanted the birthright. His heart was hungry for spiritual things. Esau did not want God; he wanted his own things. That is why the Scripture tells us God said, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." The difference was not so much in their actions as it was in their attitudes.

Malachi wrote the last book in the Old Testament at a time when skepticism was rife in Israel, when love had declined. People did not love each other, they did not love their children, husbands and wives were full of hatred, homes were breaking up. There was very little family love to be found in Israel. And they had come to the place where they doubted that God loved them. Malachi 1:1 -3a:

The oracle of the word of the Lord to Israel through Malachi. "I have loved you," says the Lord. But you say, "How hast Thou loved us?" "Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" declares the Lord. "Yet I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau . . . "

This commentary on God's relationship to Esau and his statement that he hated Esau is based on the history of Esau and the Edomites' persistent rejection of the truth, their tooth-clenched determination to resist God and everything he stood for, and to fight his people. God's final statement is, "I have hated Esau, but I love Jacob." Jacob? With all of his chicanery, his devious methods, his failures? He lied, cheated, stole and yet God loved him. Because God saw underneath those actions a heart that hungered for spiritual things. God did not leave him there; he delivered him, set him free. It appears from Hebrews 11:21 that it took his entire life to do it. The only thing said there of Jacob in regard to his faith is: "By faith Jacob, as he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff." He was dying when he stopped trying, but he learned to trust.

As we look back over this past week, I am sure many of us have behaved like Esau. You may have sold out maybe for some momentary pleasure, power, or passion. Yet in your spirit you, like Jacob, long to be set free. You long to please God. You need to know this: God loves you. ("Jacob have I loved.") He wants to set you free. He accepts you right where you are.

Some years ago I sat in the second row of the PBC congregation as Dr. Jack Mitchell was speaking on Isaiah 49 - the Lord's statement to Israel: "Though a mother should forget her child, I will never forget you. Behold I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands." A young man sitting right behind me burst into tears. He put his face down into his hands and began to sob. Those of us who knew him knew that over the past years he had struggled repeatedly with homosexuality. He longed to be set free, but he continued to fail. And now the truth of this passage broke upon him and he realized that God loved him despite his failures and wanted to set him free. Those of you who know the story know that God delivered him in a miraculous way the next day. This was God's way of handling that situation. God has many ways to set us free.

So, as you look back over the past week and recall your failures, remember, God loves you. "Jacob have I loved."

Father, it is such a comfort to know that you love us anyway. We thank you that you have promised to deliver us. Father, assure us of that love. Help us to respond to it and to lay hold of all of your resources, in order that we may act according to the truth. We ask in Christ's name, Amen.

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