

Jacob and Esau – *Genesis 25:12-26*

Introduction – Chapter 24 introduced Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel, energetic and enthusiastic, willing for the adventure to go with Abraham’s servant to the land of Canaan to marry Isaac. This is the match made in heaven. Remember how unmistakably God controlled the events and answered the servant’s prayer at the well, so that immediately he found a beautiful bride for Isaac. Rebekah then left her home with the blessing ringing in her ears, “*may you become the mother of thousands of ten thousands...*” (24:60). Sometimes God answers a prayer, like the servant’s, before it leaves one’s lips. Other times, if not more often, God loves a cliffhanger to remind us of our utter dependence upon Him alone – and to reveal His sovereign control according to the good pleasure of His will (Eph 1:3-4, Deut 29:29). And in the midst of His electing love, the Bible drips with this theme of birth from the barren, bread from the sky, water from the rock, return from the exile, and resurrection from the dead. This story becomes the case study of the truth and glory of God’s sovereign election and by-grace-alone salvation.

The Setup (vv12-19) – We are setup to see the parallels with these next two “toledots” (remember: “generations” as bookmarks to sections). We begin with the two sons of Abraham, Ishmael and Isaac. Ishmael, while the firstborn (though of the slave-woman), was not chosen, but Isaac was the child of the promise. We remember that Ishmael was cruel to Isaac, and we will see Esau become increasingly cruel to Jacob. Ishmael and Esau are both firstborns and both will become the father of nations. Isaac and Jacob are counterparts, both the second born, both under God’s calling, and both of them despised. The similarity between Isaac and Jacob should have helped Isaac to be a compassionate father to his son Jacob.

The toledot of Ishmael reveals the answer to the prayer of Abraham and the promises of God to Abraham that Ishmael would be blessed (Gen 25:16, 17:20). God’s promises are “yes” and “amen” (2 Cor 1:20) and if He kept these more minor promises, how much more will He fulfill His much greater promises through the line of Isaac.

And then there is the toledot of Isaac through which the story of God’s promises to Abraham continues. And this story will continue through chapter 34.

The Barren Womb and the Blessing and Troubles of Answered Prayer (vv20-26) – God knows we need to hear His lessons over and over again. Just as Sarah was barren, so the next woman who must bring forth a child for the promise to Abraham to move forward, Rebekah, is barren. A perfect match made in heaven and yet no child. Isaac pleaded for his wife and if you do the math, he did so for 20 years. And the LORD granted his plea – and yet. Maybe she knew she had twins but regardless, she knew something was up with this pregnancy. We are told that the children “*smashed themselves*” within her, so much so that she worried, possibly that she would miscarry. The LORD answered her inquiry – and yet. She would be the mother of nations (remember 24:60) but they would be divided and the older would serve the younger. God was choosing. And God draws straight with crooked lines.

Twins are born and the first one comes out “*like a hairy garment*” all over (possibly an extreme case of hypertrichosis or “werewolf syndrome”), and so they name him Esau (sounds similar to “hairy” in Hebrew). The second one is born holding to the heel of the first and so is named Jacob, “one who takes the heel.” These details are not accidental. Esau is bestial and that will come out later. Jacob will seek to displace, supplant, and take the place of the firstborn. And the conflict will go far beyond these two individuals but will grow into the wars between Edom and Israel.

What are we invited to see here? Two seeds were in Rebekah and there is enmity between them (Gen 3:15a). One will be stronger than the other and supplant the other (Gen 3:15b, Rom 16:20, and recall the struggle in the womb). One will replace the other (Rom 5:18-21, 1 Cor 15:21-22). We should see the Antithesis, the Victory of the Gospel over Sin, and the Replacement of a fallen Adam with a New Adam.

The Glory of Sovereign Election (Rom 9:10-16) – “*People treat God’s sovereignty as a matter of controversy, but in Scripture it is a matter of worship*” – J.I. Packer.

In the chapters ahead there is much debate regarding the character of Jacob. But here, at the beginning of the story, we see that God had declared that Jacob would be the one who would carry the promise given to Abraham and become Israel, the father of a nation that would one day bring forth the Messiah for a blessing to all nations (Gen 12:2-3). And so, the central issue Paul will bring out in Romans is the glorious mercy of election. Paul uses the prophecy of Gen 25:21 to prove that election stands “*not of works but of Him who calls*” (Rom 9:11). This completely eliminates the possibility that God looks down the corridor of time to determine who will be good enough to choose Him and so chooses them. “*for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of election might stand...*” Even stronger, Paul declares that God chose His people for salvation before the creation of all things (Eph 1:4).

In Romans, Paul continues with another quote, putting together Gen 25:21, "*The older shall serve the younger*" with Mal 1:2-3, "*Jacob I have loved, but Esau I hated.*" Putting the two together helps understand this "hate" language. When they were conceived, God did not despise or violently reject Esau, but chose to place the blessing on Jacob. This sense of hate means to treat second. Later we will be told that Jacob "hated" Leah (Gen 29:30-31), yet he still had children by her and buried her in the honored tomb with Sarah and Abraham (Gen 49:31). We are told to "hate" our parents, that is, to treat them second to God (Luke 14:26).

God's Sovereign Election and By-Grace-Alone Salvation - First of all remember the original audience of Moses' Pentateuch. It is Israel, freed from slavery in Egypt and on their way to the Promised Land. They were chosen, not because of any good in them, but because of the electing love of God (Deut 7:6-8). God chose them because He chose them. His electing love was placed on them according to His good pleasure. These are the secret things of God (Deut 29:29).

Second, the same electing love is how you were chosen. Christian, you were saved by grace through faith and even that was a gift, for you would not have believed had you not been given the gift of faith (Eph 2:8-9). The argument is the same as that of Jacob and Esau, "*...not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil...*" - "*not of works, lest anyone should boast.*" Blaise Pascal said, "*To make a man a saint, grace is absolutely necessary; and whoever doubts this does not know what a saint is, or what a man is.*" And what he meant by "grace" there was God's sovereign choice of a person for salvation and then God's sovereign working to save him by Christ and by the Holy Spirit's transformation of his or her heart.

Third, this electing love, this salvation by grace, does require that you believe. It does require that you call on the name of Jesus to be saved. It does matter that you realize you need to be saved. It does matter that you receive Jesus as Savior and Lord - with knees humbly bowed. It does matter what you do with this good news. You will only do so if God grants His gift of faith (not a counterfeit version you drum up). It is mercy and grace all the way down, from beginning to end. It is the most humbling and most precious gift in all the world. And at the same time, you are the gift of the Father to the Son. It is this gift given to the one who would be stronger, who would grab the heel of the other and overcome, who would crush the serpent's head, and who would save the world.