A Study of the Book of Genesis
Sermon # 24

“The Story of Jacob and Esau.”
Genesis 25:19-34

In our last study in Genesis 24 we learned how Abraham had sent his servant on a quest to find a bride for Isaac from among his own people. The study ended as we witnessed the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah. In the course of time God continued to provide completion of His promise.

It's interesting and somewhat surprising to note that the story of Isaac is basically skipped. The Biblical record focuses on Abraham and then upon Isaac’s son, Jacob; and Jacob’s son, Joseph. Tonight we are introduced to Isaac’s sons, Esau and Jacob.

First, Problem Pregnancy (25: 19-21)

“This is the genealogy of Isaac, Abraham’s son. Abra-ham begot Isaac. (20) Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah as wife, the daughter of Bethuel the Syrian of Padan Aram, the sister of Laban the Syrian.

(21) Now Isaac pleaded with the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his plea, and Rebekah his wife conceived.”

Given the promise of a mighty nation through his descendants given to Abraham and the God’s mira-culous provision of Isaac and the divine selection of Rebekah, one might have expected that NOW every-thing would be easy. But in fact Isaac and Rebekah have difficulty having children. When several years went by without children, they turned to the Lord. They pled their case with the Lord and trusted that He would be faithful to his promise.

A comparison of (v.20) which says that Isaac was forty years old when he and Rebekah were married and (v.26) which says that Isaac was sixty when the boys were born reveal that he kept praying for her for twenty years. To his credit, Isaac did not resort to surrogate wife as his father Abraham did with Hagar. Verse twenty-one says, “Now Isaac pleaded with the LORD for his wife, because she was barren.” The result was that Rebekah’s barrenness was ended by the direct inter-vention of God, “…and the LORD granted his plea, and Rebekah his wife conceived.”

The present application of course is people today still face lots of problems. Such as: financial struggles, sickness, family tensions and we could go on and on. But whatever the
trouble you face, the question is: Where do you turn for help? Some turn to a bottle, (prescription or otherwise), a credit card to distract you (at least for 30 days – when the bill comes in), a psychic, a scheme, a new relationship, or do you look to the Lord?

Isn't it true that for the most part we view turn-ing to God as a last resort? If we are honest we have to admit that more often than not we will turn to our own schemes and devices BEFORE we turn to the Lord. Why is that? We may say, “I don't want to bother God,” but in truth, we don't want to have to depend on God.

Isaac’s prayer is answered, but note that the next sentence begins with “but.”

Secondly, Powerful Struggle (25: 22-23)
“But the children struggled together within her; and she said, “If all is well, why am I like this?” So she went to inquire of the LORD. (23) And the LORD said to her: “Two nations are in your womb, Two peoples shall be separated from your body; One people shall be stronger than the other, And the older shall serve the younger.”

- The Pain (v. 22)

Isaac’s prayer is answered but he gets even more than what he prays for: He gets not a child but “child-ren.” And even more important these children struggle with each other inside Rebekah’s womb. Rebekah’s joy quickly turns to pain. The Hebrew graphically says, “The children smashed themselves inside her.” [Gordon Wenham. Genesis 16-50 Vol. 2 Word Biblical Commentary. (Dallas: Word, 1994) pp. 174-5]

Rebekah felt as if her womb had become a battlefield.

In pain and perplexity she, like her husband, turned to God for answers. Rebekah was no wilting flower, but the struggle within her is so great that it causes her to ask, literally, “If all is well, why am I like this?” (v. 22a). The question has within it the meaning, “Why is this happening to me?” She doesn’t understand why this pregnancy is so painful, and she even questions whether there’s any reason to continue living.

- The Prophecy (v. 23)

Her pain causes her to seek an answer from the Lord, who gives her an explanation in the form of a four-line poem of two couplets. The second line in each couplet amplifies the first line.

Her pregnancy is so problematic because her womb has become the battlefield in an earth-shattering conflict. Two nations are in her womb. They literally “crush” each other in their struggle for supremacy. The struggle goes back to Genesis 3:15, where two lines destined for conflict would proceed from Eve: the children of Eve and the children of the serpent. The conflict is seen in Genesis 4:8, where Cain kills his brother Abel. Now these two children are facing off inside their mother’s womb, and two nations would proceed from
them, those who worship God and those who oppose him. These two peoples, together in their mother’s womb, would be separated from her body, which indicates

A struggle begins between this two brothers before they are even born, literally beginning in the womb. There is rivalry in the womb that will literally continue through the reminder of their lives and even continue into the lives of their descendants. Jacob and Esau were brothers who became the head of nations. Esau’s descendants became the nation of Edom and Jacob’s family became the nation of Israel.

The most troublesome part of this passage is the prophecy of verse twenty-three, “Two nations are in your womb, Two peoples shall be separated from your body; One people shall be stronger than the other, And the older shall serve the younger.” God told Rebekah that two nations would come from her twin boys and that the older (Esau) would serve the younger (Jacob).

Jacob was chosen by God (election) not because of merit or good works, the twins were not even born when the choice was made. The selection of Jacob individually and the Israelites corporately was solely a divine prerogative. The ninth chapter of Romans is the New Testament commentary on the birth of Jacob and Esau. In Romans 9:10-13, we read, “And not only this, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, even by our father Isaac (11) (for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls), (12) it was said to her, "The older shall serve the younger." (13) As it is written, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated." Verse thirteen is especially troublesome to us today. The hatred of God must be understood in a relative sense. Compared with the love God had for Jacob (and ultimately Israel) He hated Esau and the Edomites. Jesus also used the relative use of hate when He said in Luke 14:26, “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple.”

Donald Grey Barnhouse stated it these way, “The text flatly states that the choice of God was not depend-ent on their birth or their character. The choice was in the heart of God and based entirely on His sovereign authority. He decided that Jacob was the child who was to carry the line of Messiah and be the heir to blessing, and in the same way, He determined that Esau was not to carry the line nor inherit the blessing...This was God's divine purpose. The works and characters of the individuals had nothing to do with the choice.” [Donald Grey Barnhouse, God’s Covenants (Grand Rapids:Eerdmans, 1963) p. 27]

Undeniably this goes against our human ideas of fairness and justice but God offers no explanations for his choice and certainly no apologies either!

Third, Prophesied Birth (vv. 24-26)
“So when her days were fulfilled for her to give birth, indeed there were twins in her womb. (25) And the first came out red. He was like a hairy garment all over; so they called his name Esau. (26) Afterward his brother came out, and his hand took hold of Esau’s heel; so his name was called Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.”

The story of birth of Isaac’s sons is the first record in the Bible of the birth of twins. But there was nothing identical about these two boys. They are different in almost every conceivable way. Note how different Esau and Jacob were. They looked different, even though they were twins. They had different temperaments, interests, and values.

The first born, Esau liked the outdoors; he was big, strong and hairy. He was to borrow a term “a man’s man” or as we in the South would say he was a “good ole boy.” If he lived today he would dress in Carhart, chew tobacco and drive a jacked up 4X4 truck. Despite his faults Esau was probably more likable than Jacob.

Jacob was a man who liked the comforts of being inside. He would more comfortable in the white collar world, dressed in a suit and tie working in office.

One thing that I want us to take notice of in the difference in these two young men is that this biblical story flies in the face of our culture which wants to believe that if children go wrong that it is because of their early environment. But here we have two boys born at the same time, in the same place, to the same parents, raised in the same home and given the same opportunities; yet one of them sets out on his own misguided notions of serving God and the other is only interested in pleasing himself.

Fourth, Parental Favoritism (25: 27-28)

“So the boys grew. And Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field; but Jacob was a mild man, dwelling in tents. (28) And Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.”

Parenting is not an exact science and even Christian parents are at best imperfect instruments. But it is none the less tragic when we read, “Isaac loved Esau because he had a taste for game; but Rebekah loved Jacob” (25:28). This must of have done something to Esau to grow up with his father’s love and approval but without his mother’s. And conversely it must have done something to Jacob to grow up with his mother’s love and approval but without his father’s.

This favoritism sits off a cycle of a family dysfunction that carried over into the second and third generations. When parents play favorites with the children, it breeds bitterness and hatred. Rebekah’s fondness for Jacob pitted her against her husband, Isaac, and led her to deceive him in order to help Jacob against Esau. Jacob later played favorites with his sons, so that they wanted to kill his favorite son, Joseph.
**Fifth, Premeditated Plan (25: 29-33)**

We need to understand one bit of biblical back-ground in order to fully understand this story. To an oldest son, the birthright was his most prized possession. According to Deuteronomy 21:17, the oldest son was given two distinct honors just due to the virtue of his being the first-born: First, as firstborn he would be given a double inheritance. And secondly He was considered the head of the family after the death of the parents. The birth-right could be transferred or sold, but only for something of great value. Normally a first-born son would never under any circumstances consider selling the birthright because it guaranteed both his future security and his future leadership of the family.

- **Ensnaring Esau (vv. 29-33)**
  
  “Now Jacob cooked a stew; and Esau came in from the field, and he was weary. (30) And Esau said to Jacob, "Please feed me with that same red stew, for I am weary." Therefore his name was called Edom. (31) But Jacob said, "Sell me your birthright as of this day." (32) Esau said, "Look, I am about to die; so what is this birthright to me?" (33) Then Jacob said, "Swear to me as of this day." So he swore to him, and sold his birth-right to Jacob.”

  I think there is one thing we have to assume even though it is not specifically spelled out in the text. I think we have to assume that Jacob had been scheming in his mind, looking for an opportunity to talk his bro-ther out of the birthright. I think it is safe to assume that the this plan did not just pop into Jacob’s mind fully blown at the moment he saw his brother coming in from another hunting trip. This was a premeditated idea, waiting to come to fruition at just the right moment. All those years of witnessing his father favor his brother, Jacob had been dreaming of a way to get the birthright for himself.

  In Jacob’s favor at least he saw the birthright as something worth having. But the way he gained it was ugly in that he took advantage of Esau’s weakness to get from him something he couldn’t have obtained any other way.

  One has to suspect that this is not the first time this matter had come up. Perhaps on other occasions Jacob had sounded him out: “Hey, Esau, how much would you take for your birthright?” If Esau had said flat out, “It’s not for sale for any price,” that might have ended it there. But he had left the door open a crack. Jacob could tell that it just wasn’t that important to Esau.

  One might be tempted to say, “But, didn’t God promise to bless the younger over the older?” (v. 23) Yes, it is true that before the twins were even born that God had revealed this truth to Rebekah. That is what makes this action even more inexcusable. If God had promised it, and He did, then Jacob didn’t need to trick Esau out of it. God did not need his
help he would have accomplished giving Jacob the blessing in His own way and in His own
time.

Jacob was right to want the birthright. He was wrong to want the birthright for the
personal advantages it would bring him; and, he was wrong to take it in the way he did. In
future chapters God dealt with this deceiver by giving him a dose of his own medicine. Later
Jacob will be outwitted at the bargaining table by his uncle, and future father-in-law, Laban
(Genesis 29:15-30). Jacob was always scheming to work things out for his own advantage. He
needed to learn that God could work things out if he would trust Him.

- Exchanging a Birthright (v. 34)
  “And Jacob gave Esau bread and stew of lentils; then he ate and drank, arose, and went his
way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.”

Esau’s life is the story of a man who sold his birthright, which included not only
material benefits and family privileges, but spiritual blessings as well, for a bowl of soup. It
says that “he ate and drank, and rose and went on his way” (25:34). He didn’t have a second
thought about what he had done. He did it, it felt good and only much later did he come to
regret it. What is perhaps the most bizarre to contemplate is that Esau exchanged his
birthright for a bowl of stew, something so transitory that in just a few hours he would be
hungry all over again.

What are you willing to trade in order to get what you want in life? What kind of deal
are you willing to make to get to where you really want to go in life? How much are we
willing to give up? Your family? Your friends? Your marriage? Your integrity? Your purity?
Your testimony?

Verse thirty four says Esau “despised his birth-right.” “Despised” means to count as
nothing or to treat with contempt. But we are not really left to wonder what that means
Hebrews 12 spells it out in no uncertain terms. Hebrew 12:16 says, “lest there be any
fornicating or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright.” The
reader is told that Esau was an immoral “fornicator” and godless “profane” man. Yet as we
read Genesis 25 we find no place that Esau acts like an immoral and godless man. He never
curses, how then can he guilty of blasphemy? All he did was make a deal for a bowl of soup.
He ate it and went his way. How is this “godless”? The answer is that in the Bible, profanity is
an attitude not just an action. You don’t have to swear to be profane. You don’t have to
declare yourself an atheist to be “godless.” You can be godless and come to church every
Sunday morning.

Every day you’re trading your life-your soul-for something. The question is, “For
what?” Life is a process of trading one thing for another. We’re all given a certain amount of
time and ability which we exchange to gain other things, such as money, food, shelter,
relationships, leisure, and pleasure. The scary thing is, it’s easy to fritter away your life, exchanging your time and abilities for things that really don’t matter, or even worse, for things that cause you and others great harm.

Someone has said that the difference between school and life is that in school, you’re taught a lesson and then given a test. In life, you’re given a test which teaches you a lesson.

Esau may have had some excuses for disregarding these privileges. He could have blamed God: “God predestined me to do it!” After all, the Lord had told his mother while he was still in the womb that the older shall serve the younger (25:23). He might have blamed his parents for their errors in raising him. We read, “Isaac loved Esau because he had a taste for game; but Rebekah loved Jacob” (25:28). They did without a doubt make some serious mistakes, yet their mistakes do not absolve Esau of his wrong choice. In reality Esau’s decision was his own. Our parents may have made parenting mistakes, even terrible mistakes, but that does not mean we have to repeat those mistakes. We really can’t blame the way our parents treated us. They may have acted piously on Sunday and like pagans the rest of the week. They may have been abusive. They may not have loved us as they should. They may have played favorites. But God holds us accountable if we despise our spiritual heritage and walk away from Him.

What is perhaps the most frightening about Esau’s impulsive decision are the lasting consequences. Hebrews 12:17 says that “afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears.” As Esau later looked back on his decision he felt badly about what he had given up. He could see that his decision had been foolish and hasty. But even though he felt badly, he had operated so long on the principle of living for immediate gratification, he was simply unwilling to turn from his selfish ways to God. He later wanted what God could give him, but he didn’t want God. That would mean yielding his life to God, and that was too big a price to pay.
“The Story of Jacob and Esau.”
Genesis 25:19-34

First, Problem __________ (25: 19-21)
(Compare v. 20 and v. 26) - Isaac prayed for _____ years for children.

Secondly, Powerful __________ (25: 22-26)
  ● The Pain (v. 22)
  ● The Prophecy (v. 23) (Romans 9:10-13)

Third, Prophesied __________ (vv. 24-26)

Fourth, Parental _________________ (25: 27-28)

Fifth, Premeditated ______ (25: 29-34)
  ● Ensnaring Esau (vv. 29-33)
    ● Exchanging the Birthright (v. 34)
    Esau may have had some excuses for disregarding these privileges.
    He could have blamed _____ (25:23).
    He might have blamed his ___________.
    But in reality Esau’s decision was his own.
    Esau’s impulsive decision has lasting consequences. (Hebrews 12:17)