

A Twist to God's Promise

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[0 : 00] Well, many of you would be familiar with the idea of the recap. That seems to be at the start of every show nowadays, you know, whether it's MasterChef, Survivor, or The Bachelor.

The first 30 seconds, you know, you're brought up to speed with what's happened so far, just in case you missed it or you forgot. Well, tonight, by way of recap, we're resuming our series in Genesis.

And if you've joined us over the last 12 months, you may wish to know that actually this is our fourth year in the book of Genesis. Those who were here at the start may actually recall that we were two congregations when we started.

Some of you were here back then, and some of you were actually in the Hudson Taylor Room.

Seems like such a long time ago, doesn't it? In the first series from Genesis chapter 1 to 11, we read about creation, then about the fall of humanity.

And then the spiraling of sin, which culminated in the flood, where only Noah and his family were saved. But eventually, at the end of that first installment, we met Abraham, chosen by God to bring salvation to humanity.

[1 : 12] And so, in the key passage of this book, Genesis chapter 12 and verse 1 to 3, which I put on the slide, God promises that he will make Abraham a great nation, and that through him, or more specifically, through his offspring, all the nations will be blessed.

He also promised to give Abraham and his descendants the promised land that we now know as modern Israel. But there was a problem. Sarah, Abraham's wife, was childless.

And so, in the second series, we charted the ups and downs of Abraham's faith, as he waited for God to fulfill his promises, to give him that heir. This heir, Isaac, finally arrives in series 3.

And at the end of that series, chapter 24, Abraham finds a wife for him, in the person of Rebekah, who is actually a rather resourceful and courageous lady.

And by that time, Isaac's mother, Sarah, she dies. And so, we read, just in the chapter before, chapter 24 and verse 67, Isaac brought Rebekah into the tent of his mother, Sarah, and he married her.

[2 : 26] So, she became his wife, and he loved her. And Isaac was comforted after his mother's death. Now, Abraham's life now is about to draw to a close too, as we begin this series.

And so, chapter 25 contains, at the very start, a final testimony to his life. And more importantly, actually, it's a testimony to God's faithfulness to him.

And so, in verse 1, we find that Abraham remarries after Sarah's death to a woman by the name of Keturah. She's fruitful in birth and bears five children.

And glance at some of the names there. We wouldn't go through all of it. And I spared Derek the job of having to read them all. But if you glance through them, you may spot some familiar names, which became future nations and kingdoms.

So, names like Midian and Sheba are names of nations. And in verse 3, we are told that the descendants of Dedan become tribes in their own right.

[3 : 31] The same goes for the list later, in verse 12 to 18 as well. Those are of Ishmael's descendants, Abraham's very first child, true Hagar. And we read in verse 16 that they become 12 tribal rulers.

And all this is to indicate that God has fulfilled his promises to Abraham to make him a father of nations. A promise that God gave in Genesis chapter 17, verses 4 to 6, which I've got on the slide again.

And that was when he changed Abraham's name, that was actually his name originally, to Abraham, which means father of many or father of many nations.

Now, of course, the promise that really mattered was that of a offspring or special child through whom the nations will be blessed. So, again, if we go back to Genesis chapter 12 and verse 7, we'll see the promise to Abraham, which says, God said to him, To your offspring I will give this land. And the word there, offspring or seed, is actually in the singular. And this seed, we know, is Isaac, Sarah's only child. And now, back here in chapter 25, in verses 5 and 6, we see God's faithfulness to that promise.

[4 : 49] Isaac is living in the land, although not quite owning it. And Abraham, trusting in God's promise, sends his other children away.

He still loves his other sons, of course, which is why he gives them gifts as he sends them away. But he leaves his inheritance for Isaac. Because he knows God will fulfill his plans through him alone.

Now, this is actually quite a big deal for Abraham. Because as Peter Costello, some of you remember him as the treasurer, once said, when he tried to get Aussies to have more babies. Do you remember that? One for mom, one for dad, and one for the country. He said that. He actually did. And then he said, population is destiny. That is, the bigger your tribe or country, the more powerful you'll be.

And living as Abraham did in the land surrounded by nations, the easiest way for his descendants to possess the land was to have them multiply and take it over.

[5 : 54] But Abraham knew that this promise was actually for Isaac alone. And so trusting in God to fulfill that, rather than through human means, he sends the other sons away.

The Bible then describes the end of Abraham's life in verse 8. And it's actually quite a beautiful verse. Abraham breathed his last and died a good old age.

An old man, full of years, and was gathered to his people. It's actually a beautiful, you know, maybe one day that could be said of me, I hope.

But it's a declaration, isn't it, of a blessed life. An old man, but full of years. He died a good age. And in a final sign of God's faithfulness, Isaac and Ishmael bury him in the cave at Machpelah.

And it's a small piece of land which Abraham had bought himself. And it's like a little deposit of foothold into the land that God had promised his offspring would inherit.

[7 : 02] It is also where his beloved Sarah is buried. And so we turn our attention now to Isaac and Rebekah.

The book signals a new section in verse 19 with the words, This is the account of Abraham's son, Isaac. God has been faithful to Abraham.

But the question now is, what will happen with Isaac and his descendants? Well, immediately, a problem presents itself. Because Rebekah, the wife God had found for Isaac, was childless, just like Sarah before her.

Now, Isaac was 40, we read, when he marries Rebekah. And if you look down to verse 26, it's not actually until he turned 60, sorry, he was 40 when he was married, it was not until he turned 60 that his sons actually are born.

So this was a 20-year wait for a child. But to Isaac's credit, he turned to the Lord. He prayed on his wife's behalf. Now, how long he prayed for and how long God took to answer, we don't quite know.

[8 : 15] But we see the Lord's providence in answer to Isaac's prayer. Because Rebekah becomes pregnant. Now, it's easy for us, isn't it, to take things for granted.

Especially if they come easily. Perhaps you're smart. Perhaps you're talented in sport. Perhaps you don't have trouble finding work.

People give you a job even though you don't want it. Or no trouble finding life partners. Or, sorry, singular, life partner. Or having children. Plural you, life partners, plural.

Anyway. But really, whether it's hard or easy, everything comes from the Lord, doesn't it? Because without him, we really have nothing. And if you're currently, like Isaac, finding something hard to come by or to overcome, then actually you could do no worse than follow his example, can you?

And turn to God in prayer. Prayer, as some of you may have heard me say before, is an acknowledgement of God's providence. So whether something comes easy or hard, when we pray, it shows that we acknowledge that he's the one who provides.

[9 : 36] And therefore, we should turn to him at every instance. And that's not to say that just because we do pray, then we always get what we want. No, we pray, trusting God to be faithful to his word, to his promises.

Just as he does here, since his promise to bless Abraham with offspring through Isaac. So Rebecca falls pregnant.

But God's answer to Isaac's prayer has a twist. Because instead of one, Rebecca has twins in her womb. And what's more, they're having a war within her.

Let's talk about sibling rivalry. Now, no doubt you mothers out there can tell us that whenever you get an active baby in your womb, it's often quite active, isn't it?

Like, some mothers have told me, for example, that they're unable to sleep through the night because the baby's moving around all night. So imagine if there were two active babies.

[10:46] And imagine, in Rebecca's case, them having a real tussle with one another. I don't know. It would be... I think the verse that she has there in verse 22 is one of a cry of desperation.

It seems quite plain here where she says, what is this happening to me? I think the sentiment is, what the heck is going on in there? Is sort of how she really says. And so she turns to the Lord and in answer to that, verse 23, what is revealed to her is this.

Two nations are in your womb and two peoples from within you will be separated. One people will be stronger than the other and the older will serve the younger. So there are two things there to note.

First, each son will form a nation in their own right. But second, and this is the twist to God's promise, the older will serve the younger. And so what happens is that there is a reverse in the order of inheritance.

In other words, God's promise to Abraham will be fulfilled through the younger. Now, nowadays, parents try to be fair. So they share the inheritance equally among all the children, right?

[11:58] That's what I think I'll try and do. But in those days, everything went to the firstborn. Because what it means was that the estate would be protected.

The land and the wealth don't get divided the more children you get into ever-decreasing parcels. And so that's why today, for example, when the queen dies, her title and all that she owns will go to Charles.

She doesn't give England to Charles and then Scotland to Andrew and Wales to Edward, does she? Because that would end up not being the united kingdom, but the divided kingdom or dividing kingdoms.

Now, this is what happened in those days as well because they wanted to protect the estate. But God has reversed the order because what He wants to do is to show clearly that He is sovereign. What we read here is God being sovereign in how He decides for His promise to be fulfilled. He is the one that will be free to choose how the promises will come to pass.

[13:12] And if we read that, go back to Romans chapter 9, that is what is being clearly said there. That passage actually interprets what's going on here. God, in Romans chapter 9, you don't have to turn to it, I've got it on the slide, yep.

God chose before the twins were born, before they had done anything good or bad. And why was this? Well, to demonstrate two things. First, to show that God's election might stand, that is, God is sovereign and chooses who He chooses.

And second, that this choice is based not on works, not on the works of the chosen one, but on Him who calls, that is, on God, who chooses freely by grace and not by works.

And the more we look at this story, the more we actually see how much of a close run thing this actually is. Because Esau and Jacob's birth are actually separated by the mere length of a baby's outstretched arm.

That's all there was. So don't think Jeff or Jesse's arm, which is... But a baby's arm. See how...

[14:24] That's how much... How short... That's barely... That much. I've got a picture of a baby.

Yep. I didn't notice this until I had children, but do you know that babies can barely touch the top of their heads when they're born?

Like, they can't stretch the top. It's only when we grow longer that we can, you know, go further. And so, if you think about it, because Jacob was actually grasping the heel of Esau as they were coming out, that is all that separated them.

Normally, I think... I just checked with James and Jackson. When twins are born, they're actually... They're actually separated by not just a few seconds, but minutes, and sometimes even hours.

Right? The mom needs to push, rest, and then push again. Right? So it's a few minutes, at least. I think James said it was seven minutes between him and Jackson. And James is the older brother,

by the way.

But here, I don't know. It's probably a matter of seconds. That's how close it was. Jacob, as we read, his name means to grasp the heel or also deceiver.

[15:46] And so, it's all quite ironic, isn't it? Because in his eagerness, Jacob was so close to actually being the firstborn himself. He was literally jostling to get out ahead of Esau.

And it could have happened. And if you notice the prophecy, it actually doesn't say that Esau will serve Jacob. No, it actually says that the older will serve the younger.

And so, humanly speaking, if Jacob had actually come out first, he would have forfeited the very thing he was hoping for. That is how close it got for them.

That was how much they were separated by. And yet, God deliberately reveals his plan ahead of time. He gave this prophecy to Rebecca before the twins were born to show us clearly his sovereignty.

and to make us realize over and over again that God so often works against all human expectations and norms. Because this isn't the first time this is happening, is it?

[16:53] Because we've seen that God has chosen the younger over the older before. So think Abel over Cain. Think Isaac over Ishmael.

He chooses the weak over the powerful. So think, for example, Abraham. Abraham, he was not chosen for his might or power, but actually he was chosen because he was a nobody. And who does he?

He chooses Abraham who has a wife who, what? Couldn't have babies. Who was childless. And here again, he chose Rebecca for Isaac, knowing that Rebecca would have trouble conceiving. And so this trend now continues as we see the manner in which the boys grow up. So look at verse 27. And we find that Esau, as he grew up, became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country. Sounds grand, doesn't it? Now, ladies, if you happen to be living in those times, then Esau was the kind of guy all guys wanted to marry. He was literally the sort of guy...

[17:57] girls, sorry, I'm getting all mixed. I wasn't that funny, I thought, but anyway. He was literally the sort of guy that could put food on the table, right?

No doubt if there were posters on tent walls, then his poster would be on every girl's wall. If they had a show like The Bachelor, he would have been their Maddie J.

That's what the words of verse 27 are actually saying to us. Esau would have been the ideal son to carry on the promises of Isaac.

By contrast, we read that Jacob was content to stay among the tents. That means he was a homely kind of guy, you know, good around the house, could do the chores, that kind of thing.

Now, that's not necessarily a bad thing. He could cook and all that, but that's not quite measuring up to Esau's prowess. That's why we read that Isaac loved Esau because he could hunt wild game for him.

[19:01] But Rebekah, well, she loved Jacob because probably he was hanging around her all the time. Maybe he was a mummy's boy as well. I don't know. But the comparison is quite clear.

On the one hand, we have Esau, the natural choice of an heir, someone who is capable of taking on the nations and perhaps inheriting the land and then on the other, someone who doesn't quite sort of look the part.

And God goes and chooses the one who doesn't seem to be worthy. God chooses, as it were, the weaker person. But that's the point, of course, isn't it?

Because it underlines God's sovereignty and grace. But I want to look at the rest of the story now because I think the point isn't simply that God chose the underdog. Instead, God also chose someone who was deeply flawed.

Jacob himself was not without his flaws. His real limitations were not actually physical but lay in the shortcomings of his character. You see, true to his name, Jacob was also a deceiver by nature.

[20:13] And so we see verse 29 that it came to pass that Esau comes in one day, famished from hunting, from a hard day's work. Imagine yourself doing the same. You know, you come home and the dinner is in the oven.

Just the smell of it. You'd be hungry even if you weren't to start with. And then there's only one thing in your mind when that happens. All you want to do is tuck in and fill that belly of yours.

And that's exactly what Esau could think of when he smelt the cooking. For he says to Jacob, quick, let me have some of that red stew. I'm famished.

The literal translation is actually pretty crude the way he says it. I just want to gobble it down as the way it's expressed. But as we read it, there's something quite intriguing about the story because up to now we're not quite sure if Rebekah actually passed on the prophecy to anyone.

perhaps she may have told Jacob and that's why Jacob is doing this. And perhaps she didn't even tell Isaac and Esau which could be the case if you read on later on.

[21 : 29] We simply don't know but regardless of whether Jacob knew or not, he decides to be deceiving and conniving. And he craved the right that was Esau's by birth.

And so now seeing this opportunity, he tries to wrest it from Esau. And so before giving Esau the stew, he demands of Esau, first sell me your birthright.

Esau tries to deflect it by saying, look, I'm about to die which is certainly an exaggeration. So what good is the birthright to me? To which Jacob would have been thinking precisely.

So swear to me first. Now I don't know about you but every time someone asks me to swear of something, I remember back in school in the playground kids would always say, swear on your life that you do this or you wouldn't do that.

Whenever someone says to me, swear on oath that you would do this or not, it was always a sure sign to me that I was going to be giving something important away. And therefore I had to really, really think about it before I did it.

[22 : 37] And normally I would never swear because it always smelled fishy when you're being asked to swear. And so again, this should have been a warning to Esau to think carefully about what he was doing.

But again, it doesn't appear to have crossed Esau's mind at all. So focused was he on the stew. And so he does that. He just swears and he trades his birthright away to Jacob.

And then what he does is he gobbles down his stew, lentil stew, and then he just got up and left. Like I said two weeks ago, he had just given away a Turek mansion for a happy meal.

But the way the story is told, it's almost as if he doesn't even realize the magnitude of what he's done. He simply ups and then he leaves.

Now let's leave Esau for a moment because I want to think about Jacob for a minute. This story doesn't paint Jacob in a good light at all. It's not good for Esau either.

[23 : 45] But for someone who's just been told, we've just been told that God is about to bless, it's certainly not quite what we would expect of him. We would expect that if God was going to bless someone, that he would be a man of faith, someone of upright character, someone with special qualities.

instead, what we find is a schemer, a hustler who would do anything to get what he wants. And this is no isolated incident either because as we come again to other stories of Jacob in future weeks, we see him doing that again and again.

salvation. And yet, this is the one that God chooses. This is the one through whom God will fulfill his promises to bring salvation to all humanity.

Now, does that surprise you? Or does that comfort you actually? Because if God could choose even a schemer like him, then actually there's hope for me, there's hope for you, there's hope for everyone.

Because in God's sovereignty, he chooses not based on human perfection, but by grace. And the truth is, all of us need to be saved and chosen by grace, don't we?

[25 : 10] Because no one is worthy of God's blessing. All of us, without exception, need to depend on God's grace to be blessed. But what about Esau then, you may ask?

If Jacob is truly no better than Esau, and I agree that that's true, then why wasn't Esau chosen as well? Surely, he would have been entitled to God's grace as well.

But of course, when I say it like that, I've just made a mockery of God's grace, haven't I? Because the words entitled and grace never belong together.

grace, by definition, is receiving something even when you're not entitled to it, even when you don't have a claim or right to it. And if God is compelled to show grace to all, then, well, it's no longer grace, is it?

But let's make it personal, because at the end of the day, what we really want to know is this, what about me? If God is sovereign and He dispenses His grace at will, His will, then how can I find God's grace?

[26 : 21] Does what I do matter at all? And the answer to that is yes. Because even though God is sovereign, human responsibility and human choice matters.

Yes, God chooses freely, but how we respond and the choices we make as a result still matter. Now, at first, it's hard to get our minds around this.

And to be honest, this is one of those questions that I had growing up that really texts me. And my friends and I would spend hours talking about this, trying to circle or square the circle.

And yet, the Bible declares both of them to be true. And as Christians, it's actually vital that we believe both of them to be true. God is sovereign and humans are responsible.

It may not fit neatly into our finite brains, but the Bible declares both of them to be true, without apology or contradiction. In fact, they're right here in our passage tonight.

[27 : 25] God sovereignly chooses the younger over the older, but Esau is solely responsible for his actions. Both are true. Esau had no one to blame but himself.

Neither God nor Jacob made him sell his birthright. Esau was solely responsible.

Verse 34, the end of verse 34, gives us the truth of the matter. Esau, it says, despised his birthright. Perhaps he was cocky and thought, you know, I'm just entitled to this.

Perhaps he thought nothing about the consequences of swearing to Jacob. But God knew what was in his heart. And God knew that he thought nothing of his promises, of God's promises.

Whereas Jacob, conniving schemer that he was, at least he valued God's promise and the birthright. Now, God still had a lot of work to be done on him so that he could learn the way that God truly blesses, not through human scheming but by grace.

[28 : 40] But at least his heart desired and valued God's blessing. And so it is with us as well. We too have God's blessing freely available for us.

The gift of salvation and eternal life is ours to have, all of us, simply through faith in Jesus. Anyone can believe and be saved from their sins. Anyone can benefit from God's grace.

And yet, it's also true that God has predestined some to believe and others to reject him. But knowing this truth should not deter us or make us anxious.

Because the truth about God's sovereignty is given to us to guard us from pride and overconfidence. It's there so that having believed in Jesus, we then don't turn around and go, well, I was blessed because I'm better than others.

God's sovereignty is actually a great comfort, isn't it?

[29 : 50] Because if God is sovereign, then your faith is a gift from God. Let me say it again. If God is sovereign, your faith is a gift from God. It is not down to your strength or your ability, but rather your faith is sustained by God himself.

And just as we've seen how he's been faithful to Abraham, so he too will be faithful to us. Well, the scene is now set for the next 11 chapters.

I hope you're looking forward to it. Each week, we'll see God's sovereignty at work, God's hand if you like. And at the same time, we also see the result of human choices.

As our heroes of the faith struggle in their faith or with one another or even with God, we'll see how God's sovereignty or God's hand is at work even in the midst of human struggles.

And that's going to be the same with us as well. In the ups and downs of our lives, in the midst of our flaws and failures, God is sovereign. We need to keep remembering that.

[30 : 56] And yet, he calls us to respond to him rightly, to desire the blessing that he gives to those who trust in him, who put their faith in him, who do not despise the blessings or the birth rights, just as Esau did.

So let me pray for us as we head into the week doing just that. Father, again, we want to thank you for your sovereignty, for that is who you are.

Even as we look around the world, as we look at our own lives and see things that we just wish wasn't there, could be made right. And yet, we know that in the midst of that mess, in the ups and downs, you are doing what you know is best.

And so, Lord, help us to glory and to take comfort in your sovereignty. And help us to respond by faith. Help us to know that what you called us to do in the midst of life is to trust in you, to look upon your promises, to really desire and not to despise it.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.