

God's Gracious Choice

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[0 : 00] Please grab a Bible again and turn back to Genesis chapter 25. It's a pretty straightforward story, but it raises some complex issues for us today.

So why don't we pray again that God might help us to understand. Gracious Father, we do thank you again for your word. And we do pray that you'd help us to understand what we can, but also to trust you to be God with what we can't.

Help us to respond in light of your word, we pray for Jesus' sake. Amen. Well, as of this week, there is a new member of the Price family.

Here she is on the next slide, Ruby the Rabbit. And then on the next slide, this is Ruby being held by Megan, the daughter. My kids have been bugging me for years to get a dog, but this is as far as I could go, a rabbit.

Now, the way we got Ruby was that my daughter Megan jumped onto the RSPCA website and simply chose her. There was lots of bunnies to choose from, equally as cute as each other.

[1 : 06] We'd never met Ruby before, knew anything about what she was like. It was a sovereign choice of Megan's, if you like. She freely chose Ruby simply because she could.

And it was an act of grace because this rabbit has already cost me a fortune. I mean, apart from the hutch, the food, the litter tray, I had to pay to get this thing microchipped.

It's a rabbit for crying out loud. And then they said we should keep it inside because it's winter and so now we've given it our laundry as well. And the word grace means undeserved generosity.

And let me tell you, Ruby has seen grace. But this grace actually started with choosing her because Ruby didn't deserve to be chosen any more or less than the other rabbits there, like Sasha or Cherry or whatever their names were.

And so both choosing Ruby and keeping her are both an act of grace, albeit slightly resentful grace on my behalf. Well, today, as we come to the next section in our story of Genesis, it traces the family line of Isaac.

[2 : 17] And as we look at Isaac's family, it will focus on one of his sons in particular, Jacob. And as we look at Jacob's story, we'll see God's sovereign grace throughout it all.

Hence our series title. For his story is a story about how God keeps his promises by both graciously choosing Jacob, that's our passage today, and keeping Jacob, which we'll see later.

And in a sense, his story is our story. Because just as God graciously chose and keeps Jacob, so he does to us. But our passage, as I said, focuses on the God choosing bit today.

But before we get to that, our author does a bit of a recap. So at point one in your outline, verse 19 in your Bibles. This is the account of the family line of Abraham's son, Isaac.

Abraham became the father of Isaac, and Isaac was 40 years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel, the Aramean from Padam Aram, and the sister of Laban, the Aramean.

[3 : 21] Now, most TV shows these days start with a recap, don't they? Like previously on MasterChef or whatever it is. Well, this is our author's recap. At verse 19 begins with that phrase, this is the account of the family line of...

And he uses that phrase all the way through Genesis to break up his book. It's like his chapter mark. But notice he doesn't just say, of Isaac.

He says, of Abraham's son, Isaac. And by adding the name Abraham, he's reminding us of what has happened previously with Abraham. So what has happened?

Well, God gave Abraham some big promises. I just keep your hand in chapter 25 and flick back with me to chapter 12. Just a few pages in your Bible. It's, I think, at page 11.

Page 11, Genesis chapter 12 from verse 1.

[4 : 19] It says, The Lord had said to Abram, before his name went to Abraham, Go from your country, your people, and your father's house to the land I will show you.

And I will make you into a great nation. And I will bless you. I will make your name great. And you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you. And whoever curses you, I will curse.

And all peoples on the earth will be blessed through you. And he says down in verse 7 as well, The Lord appeared to Abram and said, To your offspring I will give this land.

There's the land again. And so last year I tried to summarize those promises on the next slide with the acronym GLOB. So G is for great name, which God promised there in verse 2, And which he kept during Abraham's lifetime.

He became very wealthy, very well known. His name was great. But the next three promises, the LOB, Are in the process of being worked out in history. So land, offspring, and blessing.

[5 : 26] We're in the process of being kept throughout Genesis and the Old Testament. And notice in verse 3 of Genesis 12, That this blessing was to be for all peoples on earth.

Will be blessed through Abraham. Through one of his descendants. You see, because sin entered the world through Adam and Eve, Back in Genesis chapter 3, Then the world is under God's just judgment or curse.

But God doesn't want to leave us there. In fact, even in Genesis 3, Where humanity fell into sin, God promised a seed or descendant of Eve, Who would crush Satan's head.

And now in Genesis 12, Of that seed or descendant who would reverse the curse and bring blessing, Would come through Abraham. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you, Says verse 3.

Of course, that descendant of Abraham is none other than, Starts with G's, ends with us. Jesus. Yep, good. You're still with me. Excellent.

[6 : 31] And so back in chapter 25, verse 19, The author mentions Abraham to remind us of these promises, Land, offspring, and blessing, That were intended to reverse the curse.

And the promise of offspring or nation was underway. It was in process. Because we're told Isaac is Abraham's son. Isaac is a living proof that God has begun to keep this promise of having a nation from Abraham.

And then in verse 20 of chapter 25, We're reminded of Rebecca, sister to Laban. Laban will come up later in Jacob's story. But Rebecca married Isaac. And now she is the one through whom this promised nation or offspring will come.

In fact, even when she left her home to go and marry Isaac, We read on the next slide from chapter 24, And so our author's recap reminds us of God's promises to Abraham, And particularly the promise about offspring nation.

Why? Well, to highlight the fact that God will need to keep this promise By his sovereign intervention or grace. Because just as Abraham's wife Sarah was childless, So too is Isaac's wife Rebecca.

[7 : 57] Verse 21.2 Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife. Why? Well, because Rebecca was childless.

So God's going to have to intervene to keep his promise. And he does. The Lord answered his prayer. And his wife Rebecca became pregnant. You see, God graciously causes Rebecca to conceive.

And this is God's sovereign grace at work to keep that promise of offspring and nation. Of course, we forget that conception is an act of God's grace.

Most couples these days simply expect to have kids without any problems. And certainly medical advancements have helped. But we still live in a broken world where it's not guaranteed.

So it's still an act of God's grace, whether people realize it or not. I just ask couples who have struggled to have children. Like one couple I know tried for six years before they were able to have kids.

[8 : 55] And when they did, they would tell you it was a sign of God's grace. Of course, it's grace that you can't give back. And in Rebecca's case, a grace that she's not sure about.

Verse 22. Here we come to God's sovereign choice.

God tells Rebecca that she has twins within her who will become the fathers of two separate nations. God's promise of offspring or nation is on view again, isn't it?

But God has chosen the younger to be both stronger and be served by the older one.

And this was opposite to the culture of the day. In that culture and even in some cultures today, it was the older sibling who had the birthright.

[10:10] The one who was to be served. The one who inherited all the blessings. But here God chose the younger one to receive that birthright and those blessings.

He chose the younger one even before they were born or done anything good to deserve it. Why? Well, to show that his promise would be kept not by human effort or the culture of the day, but by his grace.

And like with Ruby the rabbit, our choosing her was an act of, well, resentful grace to be sure. But here God's choice was an act of genuine grace, of undeserved generosity towards the younger Jacob.

And his choice is even more gracious when we realize the type of person Jacob would become. So verse 24. When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb.

The first to come out was red and his whole body was like a hairy garment. So they named him Esau. After this, his brother came out with his hand grasping Esau's heel.

[11:19] So he was named Jacob. Isaac was 60 years old when Rebecca gave birth to him or to them rather. And so it took 20 years before Rebecca could have children.

And what a pair they are. When my son Tim was born, he came out with a whole lot of black hair on his head. But Esau takes the cake. I mean, he's like a rug, isn't he? Had hair all over his whole body.

No wonder they named him Esau, which as your footnote says in your Bible, means hairy. But the name Jacob is actually worse. The name Jacob, again, as your footnote says, means he grasps the heel, which was a phrase used in those days for someone who was a deceiver, a heel grabber. Now, grasping a slippery heel is not easy to do, unless I suppose it's Esau's heel. Plenty of hair to grab, I guess. Perhaps that's how Jacob did it. But grasping his heel was symbolic for grasping at his birthright.

And as we'll see, Jacob grows up to be a schemer, a heel grabber, a deceiver. Now, God has ended up choosing a cheat. But Jacob didn't need to do any of that cheating because God had chosen him to receive the birthright.

[12:34] But his subsequent behavior only serves to highlight just how gracious God's choice is. So why does God choose him then?

Well, again, to show that he's going to keep his promises by his grace, not by human merit or deserving or culture. And we saw this in our second reading from Romans. So on the next slide, we read, Rebecca's children were conceived at the same time by our father Isaac.

Yet before the twins were born or had done anything good to deserve it or bad, that in order that God's purpose in election might stand, not by works, their works or merit, but by God who calls, Rebecca was told the older will serve the younger.

And so it does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy. You see, God choosing Jacob before they've done anything good or bad shows us that he will keep his promises not by human effort or works, but by his mercy and grace.

And it's the same for us. We are saved because he first chose us. And so we read on the next slide in Ephesians 1, he chose us in Christ.

[13:52] This is what Annette read at the beginning of the service, actually. Before the creation of the world, before we had done anything good to deserve it, to be holy and blameless in his sight.

In love, he predestined us for adoption, a two-sonship. That's not a gender thing. That's the birthright thing, to inherit God's blessings through Jesus Christ in accordance with his pleasure and will.

Now, I realize this teaching of choosing or election predestination is something that many Christians struggle with. And I realized my first Sunday back at Doncaster, I had this passage and I went, oh, great.

And in fact, I remember talking to someone who just flat out refused to believe it, even though the Bible clearly teaches it. But it is a necessary doctrine or teaching because we would never naturally choose God left to our own devices if he did not first choose us, work in our hearts.

I mean, often when we've become Christians, we can look back in life and see how God has led us to believe in him. It's God's work in us. I mean, do you really think people would go against our sinful nature and naturally believe in Jesus if God did not first take the initiative?

[15:03] Of course not. We're spiritually dead in sin. And so this is a necessary doctrine. But it's also a comforting one because if it does not depend on our effort, it means we're not left wondering, are we good enough to be saved and given access to heaven?

Because it doesn't matter how good we are, which is a relief. It's a comfort that it does not depend on how good we are, but on God's grace. It doesn't mean we do what we like.

We saw that with Galatians last week. But this is actually a comforting doctrine. It doesn't depend. We don't have to be perfect to be chosen. And it's also a revealing doctrine because it reveals again God's mercy or grace as we've just seen.

By choosing Jacob over Esau and us over others, even before we had done anything good to deserve it, before we were born, shows his grace towards us.

Just like with Ruby the rabbit. What's more, God then called us in life after we definitely didn't deserve it because we'd ignored him and turned our backs on him.

[16:15] I mean, we've all got a bit of Jacob in us, don't we? Who here has never deceived nor fudged the truth, you know, to get ahead or to save face?

I mean, you forget to do something and someone asks you about it, but instead of saying, I'm sorry, I forgot to do that, you say, oh, I was just about to do that. Jacob. Or when you leave work, you leave your computer on so people still think you're working.

Jacob. Or there's a car trying to get in front of you, merge in front of you, and so you just tap the accelerator ever so slightly to speed up. Jacob.

And they're just the little ways. You see, God choosing us before we deserved it and then calling us when we definitely didn't deserve it, it all shows how gracious he is towards us.

The doctrine of election reveals God's grace in order to fill our hearts with humble thanks that he would bother to choose you and me. But hang on, what about our choice?

[17:27] What about our choice to believe or not? What about our friends and family's choices? What about Esau who was not chosen? You know, we might well think poor Esau because if it's God's choice then it's God's who is responsible, not Esau.

Well, the rest of our passage points out that we too have a real choice that we are responsible for. So we're at point three in your outline, verse 27 in your Bibles.

It says, the boys grew up and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country while Jacob was content to stay at home among the tents. Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebecca loved Jacob.

Here, Esau is described as the ultimate country guy. He would have done real camping. The last time my family went camping, we had a powered site and I took my coffee machine with me.

I think they call that clamping. But Esau, he was the ultimate country guy while Jacob was the stay at home guy. He is content or literally complete. He is the type of self-sufficient guy.

[18:35] God made them two very different people. Here we see the beginnings of God's promise about them becoming separate nations. But this separation was fueled by their parents' favoritism.

Did you notice that? Dad loved, you know, wild game, a good roast and so he loved Esau. He favored Esau while mum favored Jacob. This favoritism was wrong and unnecessary.

The boys were so different they would themselves choose to separate by their own choice. And so too is Jacob's manipulation wrong and unnecessary because as we're about to see, Esau would choose to give away his birthright.

Verse 29, once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country famished. He said to Jacob, quick, let me have some of that red stew.

I'm famished. That is why he was also called Edom. The word Edom means red and that was the name of the nation that came from Esau. Jacob replied, first, sell me your birthright.

[19:41] Look, I'm about to die, Esau said. What good is the birthright to me? But Jacob said, swear to me first. So he swore an oath to him selling his birthright to Jacob.

Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank and then got up and left. So Esau despised his birthright. Now here we're not given a positive picture of either brother, are we?

While Esau wanted the stew Jacob had, wanted that birthright that Esau had. But instead of just giving his brother, so instead of just giving his brother something to eat because he's family, he used Esau's hunger against him.

Jacob was a rat bag. He was calculating and manipulative, a real heel grabber, deceiver. And so we should not mistake the author's silence about his actions here as approval.

Because later on in his story, the Jacob story, we'll see Jacob suffer for it by being deceived many times himself. But for the moment our author draws our attention to Esau to show us that while God did not choose him to inherit the birthright, at the same time Esau also did not choose to keep it.

[21 : 01] For Esau is ruled by his appetite so much so that he says he's so hungry he's about to die. That's what my kids say when they're starving. It's an exaggeration. But more than that, Esau cares nothing for his birthright for he agrees to trade it even though it's worth so much more.

His birthright meant he would be the one to receive his father's blessings and double if not all his father's inheritance. It was worth loads. I mean, if he cared about it at all he would have gone and gotten something else to eat.

But he cares nothing for it so he sells it to satisfy his present appetite and for a bowl of red lentil stew of all things. I mean, red lentils are okay if you're desperate but it's not on many restaurant menus for a reason is it?

So how little must you regard your birthright to sell it for a bowl of lentil stew? Unless we think that Esau just got caught up in the heat or hunger of the moment you know, we've all done those things, made a foolish choice that we've regretted in the heat of the moment but Esau doesn't regret it. Even after his appetite is satisfied we're told in verse 34 that he ate and drank then got up and left as though it was nothing. He never seeks to repent never seeks to get it back until years later when it's all too late.

[22 : 31] And in case we haven't got the point our author highlights it for us with his very last sentence so Esau despised his birthright. You see God may not have chosen Esau to inherit the birthright but Esau also chose not to keep his birthright.

The author wants us to know that Esau is the one who has a responsible choice and he is the one to blame. And so we see two truths in this one passage God chooses and Esau chooses and it seems contradictory to us but it's not to God.

As I've said before it's 100% God's choice 100% our choice bad maths good theology. It's kind of like the Trinity how can three persons be one God?

Well because that's God. God tells us lots of things we can know lots of things but we don't know how everything works otherwise we would be God wouldn't we? And even though this does somersaults intellectually in our heads it doesn't actually worry us in reality because we still pray for God to save people don't we?

Because it's God's choice but we also do what we can to share Jesus with people and encourage them to believe don't we? Because it's their choice so we actually live it out without much worry.

[23 : 56] And since our choices are real and responsible then Esau serves as a warning to us. In Hebrews chapter 12 on the next slide this is what the New Testament does with Esau as well.

See that no one is sexually immoral or is godless like Esau who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. After as you know when he wanted to inherit this blessing he was rejected even though he sought the blessing with tears.

He could not change what he had done it was just too late. Hebrews is written to people who are facing persecution and they are tempted to throw away their future heavenly inheritance in Christ to satisfy their present earthly appetite for relief.

And so Esau is the perfect illustration because that's what he did. He threw away his future inheritance for a present appetite for food and he could not get it back.

And so he's a warning to us then. Don't throw away our future heavenly inheritance in Christ for any present earthly appetite. Our inheritance in Christ is worth so much more.

[25 : 06] I mean the medical industry spends billions of dollars with the sole purpose of helping people live healthier and longer lives. Billions of dollars. And yet our future inheritance comes with perfect bodies in a perfect world that lasts forever.

forever. And what's more it costs Christ his own life to give it to us. And so don't trade it for anything. Whether it be money or acceptance with family and friends or career or whatever it is. Because I've seen some who've had an appetite for success end up trading time at church and Bible study for more time in the office to get ahead and earn more money. And for two of those people I know they no longer call themselves Christians.

They've ended up trading their heavenly inheritance worth billions for a few extra thousand dollars now. I've seen others who had an appetite for acceptance among family members and all their social clubs or colleagues.

And so they slowly traded away the truth of the Bible. You know the bits that are less socially acceptable. Traded away those bits for acceptance with their friends. And for some of them I don't see them in church anymore.

[26 : 20] I can't even get hold of them. I've seen others whose appetite for sex or marriage has meant they've traded contentment in Christ for well for an affair in one case.

And now he no longer calls himself Christian. It seems all these people have traded their future inheritance in Christ for some sort of present earthly appetite.

Some sort of bowl of lentil stew. Now of course God can bring people back to Christ. For those God has chosen he will keep. And those he's chosen will heed the warning.

But to heed it we need to hear it first don't we? We still have to hear it and choose to live in light of it. So do hear this warning. And don't ever throw away your future inheritance in Christ for any sort of earthly appetite.

It's not worth it. And so as we finish Genesis 25 really teaches us to pray two prayers. At first a prayer of humble thanks for God's amazing grace in choosing us when we did not deserve it.

[27 : 30] And second a prayer for ongoing help to be watchful that we might never ever trade our heavenly inheritance for any present earthly appetite in this world.

God why don't we pray those prayers now. Let's pray. Our gracious Father we do thank you for your amazing grace in choosing us and calling us working in our lives to enable us to believe in Jesus.

And with that to have a great future heavenly inheritance. But help us we pray never to trade that future heavenly inheritance later for any earthly appetite now.

For it's not worth it. Help us we pray not to be an Esau. We ask it in Jesus name. Amen.