

Jacob and Esau

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[0 : 00] Our reading this evening is in the 25th chapter of Genesis.

We're going to read from verse 19, and that is on page 19 in the Pew Bibles. Genesis chapter 25, and reading from verse 19.

Genesis chapter 25, and reading from verse 19 to 34. These are the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son. Abraham fathered Isaac, and Isaac was 40 years old when he took Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan Aram, the sister of Laban the Aramean, to be his wife. And Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren. And the Lord granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived. The children struggled together within her, and she said, If it is thus, why is this happening to me?

So she went to inquire of the Lord, and the Lord said to her, Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided. The one shall be stronger than the other.

[1 : 18] The older shall serve the younger. When her days to give birth were completed, behold, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy cloak, so they called his name Esau.

After his brother came out with his hand holding Esau's heel, so his name was called Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man dwelling in tents. Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

Once when Jacob was cooking stew, Esau came in from the field and he was exhausted. And Esau said to Jacob, Let me eat some of that red stew, for I am exhausted.

Therefore his name was called Edom. And Jacob said, Sell me your birthright now. Esau said, I am about to die. Of what use is a birthright to me?

[2 : 30] Jacob said, Swear to me now. 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 his way.

Thus Esau despised his birthright. Amen. We thank God for his word to us.

Now there have been many famous or infamous sibling rivalries throughout human history. Cain and Abel, Joseph and his brothers, David and his brothers.

Perhaps obvious examples from scripture. The Boleyn sisters who competed for the affection of Henry VIII. His daughters Mary and Elizabeth who were divided by their religious loyalties.

Nolan, Liam Gallacher of Oasis. The Dassler brothers whose feeding resulted in the brands Adidas and Puma. But perhaps the one which should be most infamous, however, is the one which begins here in the womb in Genesis 25 between Jacob and Esau.

[3 : 42] Not only did their behaviour result in tension and division throughout their own lives, their decisions of Israel and Edom respectively continued to be bitter rivals throughout the Old Testament.

Now if you have siblings yourself, hopefully it will strike you as sad to see so much division between brothers.

And although Esau is clearly portrayed as the brother who found the disfavour of God, Jacob hardly strikes a sympathetic character for much of his life.

So we may find it hard to read their story and find any clear division of the right and wrong, which is more obviously present in Joseph's story, for example.

I wonder if any of you are into art. I wonder if you know what anamorphic art is.

[4 : 45] If you don't, it's fine because I'm going to explain it and you'll have seen it in many other places other than art anyway. Anamorphosis involves distorted image projection requiring the viewer to occupy a specific vantage point or a special device in order to view a recognisable image.

An obvious example of this that everybody will have seen is the word ambulance written on the bonnet backwards. You're required to view it in your rearview mirror in order to be able to read it correctly.

Also an aims room employs this technique. That's where forced perspective is used to make one person standing in the right-hand corner of the room look significantly larger or smaller than the person apparently standing right next to them in the left-hand corner of the room.

When used in sculpture, it can be particularly fascinating because what appears to be an ugly lump of clay set in a semicircular form, when viewed with a cylindrical mirror, forms a recognisable object of exquisite detail.

Why am I telling you about art? Well, I think it illustrates life in general, but Jacob and Esau's life is particularly rather well.

[6:14] You see, their rivalry is ugly and unpleasant to observe. However, by God working through their sinful behavior to accomplish his purpose in putting Jacob over Esau and turning him into a great nation of Israel.

So what is ugly, and it does remain ugly, is transformed into something more beautiful, as God's will is worked out in the story of salvation history.

As human beings, we would only see the lumps of clay, so we remain largely unaware of the greater design of God's purpose. But some times, we're afforded a small glance in the mirror of Scripture, where we see God's greater design worked out through all the failings of human nature. And ultimately, I don't really want to talk particularly about Jacob and Esau this evening. Instead, I want to talk about God and how his faithfulness and his sovereignty are revealed in this story. But finally, we will look also at how Jacob and Esau demonstrate what mankind's true need is. Although I want to focus on God's faithfulness, I think it's appropriate to take a moment to consider the faithfulness of Isaac and Rebekah, since it is largely through them that God's faithfulness is seen in this story.

[7:54] And although neither of Abraham's sons, Isaac or Ishmael, are written about in great detail in the Bible, particularly in contrast with their father Abraham, and in contrast with Jacob, I think that Isaac stands out in contrast particularly to his father in this passage.

In case anybody here does not know of the promise to Abraham, he was promised that he would become the father of a great nation, and that his descendants would be like sand on the seashore. However, like Rebekah, Isaac's wife, Abraham's wife Sarah was also barren, and therefore unable to have children. And while Abraham undoubtedly stands out as a man of faith, he and his wife do appear to have taken God's plan into their own hands at one point, by having a child through Sarah's maidservant, and this child was Ishmael.

But God, as you can probably imagine, did not require any assistance in accomplishing his plan for Abraham, and so Sarah was made able to become pregnant with Isaac when she was older.

But the conception of Ishmael stands out as a moment of the apparent faltering of Abraham's faith. In contrast to his father then, what we see here in Genesis 5 is that Isaac and Rebekah have the exact same problem as Abraham and Sarah.

[9:31] Rebekah is unable to have children. And since Isaac was the child of promise, from whom Abraham's great nation would come, this might have seemed like another obstacle to the fulfillment of God's promise.

And yet, the passage that we read this evening would suggest that Isaac had no such doubts, because you'll notice that he prayed his wife would become pregnant.

And if you read it more closely, you'll realize that probably he prayed for 20 whole years, from when they were married, when he was 40, until she conceived when he was 60.

Now, even if Isaac only had a tenth of his father's means, he would still have had all he needed to repeat his father's mistake and try to force God's hand.

Yet, Isaac does no such thing. Instead, he remains diligent in his prayer to God for a child knowing that God works in his own time and trusting that he will do what he had promised.

[10:40] After all, Isaac has experienced this firsthand in his own birth. And we need to recognize, too, what Isaac recognized.

That God is always faithful to his promises. When we pray, we're not putting money into some cosmic vending machine which drops out the exact answer we desired and does so immediately.

The Bible is one single story, but it spans thousands of years. And as the writer to the Hebrews helpfully points out, some of God's people do not live to see the fulfillment of God's promises, even the ones which were made directly to them.

Yet, in the Gospels, we see roughly a thousand years after the promise was made to David, a king come in his line whose kingdom will never end, just as God had promised to David.

Abraham, too, lived a long life, a lot longer than any of us are ever likely to live. Yet, he did not live long enough to see his descendants become much bigger than a large extended family.

[11:58] Not a great nation. We have the chronological advantage of many of these people since we can look across the generations in Scripture and see how God made Israel a numerous people and how he gave them the land of Canaan as he had also promised to Abraham.

Better still, we can read the first promise of salvation in Genesis 3 as God announces the one who would crush the head of the serpent.

And we can read of Jesus who came in the flesh to dwell among men, who was tempted as we are, and yet was without sin, who was handed over by his own people to be killed on a cross.

And here we have the advantage again, since even his own disciples, who had been told of the resurrection, fled when Jesus was taken away as their own faith faltered.

And we can read what they at the time could, we can, yes, we can read, sorry, what they at the time could not and see how Jesus was raised from death on the third day, as he had said, how he ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of the throne of God.

[13:10] And where the disciples may be despaired that God's plan was failing as Jesus hung dying, we know that God's plan for salvation was being fulfilled as the punishment for sin was placed on Jesus at the cross.

And how he was raised to life so that all who are his people, who call him Lord and Saviour, do not suffer the eternal death, which is the just punishment of their sins.

And we can see how God was faithful in his promise to build his church as many come to faith in the book of Acts. And we can see God's faithfulness to his promise that the gates of hell will not prevail against his church as it has defied persecution from without and corruption within over 2,000 years, even from Christ.

and still stands today as a demonstration of the faithfulness of God. Let us now consider then God's sovereignty since this is the very passage which Paul goes on in Romans 9 to demonstrate God's sovereignty.

And Paul in Romans 9 he is demonstrating that not everyone who is descended from Abraham is a child of God.

[14:38] That is, not every Israelite is saved purely because of their genetic heritage. And Paul points out that if descent from Abraham was all that was necessary then the Ishmaelites would count themselves God's children too.

Paul then shows by the way of Jacob and Esau as illustration that God makes his own sovereign choice according to his own will and counsel and not according to what people do.

Thus Jacob was chosen to be over Esau before he was even born though he was to be the younger son. And Paul was keen to stress that it was before the twins were born and before they had done anything good or bad that God chose Jacob as the one who would continue the line of promise and not his brother.

Jacob had done nothing to deserve such grace and Esau had done nothing particular to warrant rejection except of course that he was human and therefore born a sinner.

But God chose based on his own will and not upon the behavior or actions of either man. And if you're familiar with Romans 9 then you'll know that Paul quotes from Malachi a verse which can seem very harsh on the reading of it.

[16:16] and yet Paul contextualizes it to show how it too demonstrates God's sovereignty in election. He quotes Malachi saying Malachi where God says Jacob I loved but Esau I hated and once again I need to stress that this is not the capricious or reactionary hatred of a mere mortal God is not a man the hatred here is to be understood in terms of God's covenant that is he chose Jacob and he rejected Esau God graciously chose Jacob a sinner and he chose also to reject Esau a sinner and the story in Genesis 25 is not about pitying Esau because he was deceived or even because he was rejected by God nor is it about looking resentfully at Jacob because he did not deserve his brother's birthright or God's favour because if that's how we read this story or any other passage of scripture from this purely human dimension then we're looking at scripture far too

horizontally when we ought to be looking up the doctrine of election has been a difficult one for the church for many generations and many people find it fear and consternation rather than the peace and assurance which it ought to bring but that small wonder if we look at God's choice from too human a perspective where we look for motive or for some means of deserving or for some reason for being rejected

God's sovereign choice in election does not mean looking at Jacob and Esau and seeing in one some merit for salvation I suspect that if any of us were asked to choose between the two of them we wouldn't want either of them but God's sovereign choice in election means that he will have mercy on whom he will have mercy and compassion on whom he will have compassion and it means that we should not expect to understand why some are chosen and some are passed over and perhaps that too that not knowing is why people do not take comfort in the doctrine of election as they should because we cannot know who will be rejected or chosen nor why but if that is the case then we've forgotten something incredibly important about our heavenly father and we've forgotten that he does everything for his own glory and we have forgotten that his glory is also our chief end our true purpose so when he chooses between the children of Adam it's for his glory sake and we have also forgotten that God is just and merciful that he is jealous and compassionate and we have forgotten that there is only one who is in such a position so as to make the decision between one soul and another and we have forgotten that there is only one whose right it is to make that decision and therefore there is both warning and comfort to be had here the warning is that we are mere mortals and it is not our place to peer into the mind of

God nor to question any of his judgments but the comfort is that if we have read the Bible then we can see all that God has done in scripture throughout history we can know that God can be trusted to do what is good and right because he is the only one who is truly good because it is God who chooses we may be assured that he does not change his mind like people do so when he chooses us we are his forever and on that line I think there is one more lesson to be had from Jacob's life about God and his sovereignty you may have read 1 Corinthians 1:27 where it says God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things and the things that are not to nullify the things that are so that no one may boast before him

I was reading one commentator who I will not name but they seem to understand this to mean that all believers must necessarily fall into these categories and that any who don't fit them can't be believers somehow and I say that because he suggested that Jacob represents the foolish weak lowly and despised somehow I would like to humbly suggest that that person was incorrect because even in our reading today we see Jacob demonstrate that he is indeed worldly wise since his cunning gains his brother's inheritance he is guaranteed a financially prosperous future for himself and in terms of strength he may not have been a hunter like Esau but if you look ahead to his encounter with Rachel at Laban's well as he rolls the stone away from the top of the well by himself which ought to have taken four men to do he demonstrates that he was a man of great physical might and I don't think anybody could call

Jacob lowly either since he was the son of a very well-off man who was highly respected also the son of a highly respected well-off man and the only person who truly despised him that I can see is his brother Esau and that was quite frankly completely deserved I think if anything we might be tempted to look at Jacob and think that he couldn't possibly discover the humility to see his need for God and that's probably true and yet this too is the wonder of God's sovereign power that he changed the heart of such a man as Jacob that he humbled him and brought him near to his throne and how many of us know someone like Jacob someone who seems to so successfully rely on their own strength and wisdom hard work and we despair that they could ever come to know

[23 : 25] Jesus and his saving grace well let us take heart for God is able to save even such as these and he is able to transform them and use them for his purposes as he did Jacob finally this evening having considered God's faithfulness and his sovereignty I want us to look at how Esau and Jacob demonstrate what man's true need is because both men Esau and Jacob demonstrate a material desire one of the things I'm struck by about Jacob and Esau is that despite what verse 27 tells us about how different they were in terms of personality one a hunter in the field the other one dwelling in the tents and quiet they appear fundamentally similar in their desires although it's manifested in very different ways both of them show during the stew incident that their

God is their belly both of them are interested in their own material benefit Esau is hungry and wants food Jacob is greedy and wants Esau's inheritance at this point in their lives it's not a matter of one of them representing sinful desire and the other godly wisdom as if what one of them does in the situation is acceptable and the other not I feel like I have often heard preaching on this passage where Jacob absolutely gets the rousing he deserves for his behaviour but Esau is almost used as a contrast as if he's the victim to be pitied here but that's simply not a fair representation of events both men do evil it's perhaps more obvious to us that Jacob blackmailing his brother when he is allegedly on the point of death though

I would suggest that Esau is probably being over dramatic is wrong and is to be held up as an example of how not to behave and how not to treat your brother because effectively Jacob robs his brother of his future possessions no question that he then is doing wrong his despicable behavior no matter how shrewd he is but again Esau is not an object of pity here he is frankly a fool and it should be telling to us that the writer to the Hebrews condemns Esau as unholy because he sold his birthright to his brother not Jacob for his ruthlessness and the writer to the Hebrews helpfully makes clear the connection between the inheritance Esau sells here his birthright and the blessing he loses out on later so we see that

Esau is not simply rejecting future prosperity and possessions he is showing contempt for the blessing which would have been part of his birthright that blessing came by the voice of his father Isaac but ultimately the one enacting the blessing is God and Esau rejects this for some stew not only that but later on in Genesis and also in Hebrews we discover that when it came to losing his blessing it was not forgiveness that he asked from his father for selling his birthright in the first place so that Jacob really was entitled to his blessing is a blessing which will benefit him materially which he seeks with tears moreover since he is the firstborn son it ought to be him who is the natural candidate humanly speaking for continuing the line of

God's promise to Abraham and Isaac and he sells this right also to his brother showing contempt for God's promise Jacob and Esau are not separated here by conflicting desires in fact they are united by the same desire for worldly pleasure one once is now and the other is more patient that is the only difference both believe that their needs are something they can get for themselves in order to see the transformative power of the gospel to see how God in his sovereignty changes the hearts of men and in order to understand mankind's true need then we must fast forward slightly to later on in the story of Jacob and Esau as they meet as older men in Genesis 33 by this point in time both men are described as having many possessions and many children they both have found the material gain which they once sought now however there is something which divides them for

[29 : 27] Esau this material possession and prosperity is satisfactory but Jacob has discovered something greater than wealth and prosperity Esau is so satisfied in fact with what he has that he tries to dissuade his brother from gifting him with more I already have plenty my brother he says and this is as much as we get from him and it comes in stark contrast with the language of Jacob Jacob says these are the children God has graciously given me when his brother asks him who all these are with him when he offers a gift to Esau he says God has been gracious to me and I have all I need not only does Jacob recognize the true source of his earthly prosperity and acknowledge him if we look at his prayer before his meeting with

Esau in Genesis 32 we find there his faith in the promises of God demonstrated and at the end of his life also Jacob was found praising God for his faithfulness even though he's had to leave his own land due to famine and flee to Egypt see what Jacob recognized that Esau did not is what has been called the great gain of godliness Esau's descendants have the ignominy of being called Edomites after Esau's nickname gained for his love of red stew they carried his desire for gratification in their very name Jacob's descendants on the other hand bear the name that God gave to Jacob the morning after they contended at

Peniel Israel and here is where we are once again reminded of the faithfulness and the sovereignty of God because not only did the line of Israel not fail but God also kept his promise to gather in those who were not his people that is the Gentiles you and I greatly increasing the number of his chosen people and let me extend to you tonight therefore an invitation to take the mercy which God offers as Jacob did and not to reject him as Esau did because all will be held to account and God has promised that all who confess him with their mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in their heart that God raised him from the dead will be saved so do not let your God be your belly that is your desires but instead take hold of the one true living

God who is faithful to all those who are his answers 2Dave