

Sovereign God, stew-pid choice

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[0 : 00] Okay, thank you. I'd love you to keep your Bible open at that passage and follow it along with me. In a week, when details of Prince Harry's new book have leaked, a story of two fighting brothers does not get more bang up to date, does it?

Quote, He set down a glass of water, called me another name, then came at me. It all happened so fast, so very fast. He grabbed me by the collar, ripping my necklace, and he knocked me to the floor.

I landed on the dog's bowl, which cracked under my back, the pieces cutting into me. I lay there for a moment, dazed, then got to my feet and told him to get out. That's William and Harry.

This is Genesis 25. And over this coming couple of months, what we're going to do is walk through the middle chapters of this first book of the Bible, chapters 25 to 35, and the life of Jacob.

For sure, we'll see that family life back then is like family life now. But you might still ask, this old story that Kate's read to us, well, what's it got to do with us?

[1 : 14] How on earth could this ancient history in a far-off world help us with the reality and pressures of our 21st century daily lives?

Because what happens here, which we've just read the start of, it does take place almost 4,000 years ago in the ancient Near East, in Israel, Syria, Turkey.

And over this coming couple of months, we're simply going to be following what happens to one little family as they travel around, camp out, dig wells, argue, couple up, and have kids.

Why focus in on them back then? And the answer is, unsurprisingly, maybe. Because in these chapters in the book of Genesis, we plug into and come face to face with the living God.

We're going to meet him as he deals with people and acts in our world for our good. You've got to know, the story of Genesis to this point is absolutely foundational to the whole of life and human history.

[2 : 25] It tells first of our creator. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. That is, we have a loving maker and rightful ruler to whom we belong, our God.

Genesis tells secondly of sin and death entering our world. As the first humans disobey and turn from him. And how now, under God's curse, we live in darkness and the shadow of death, and we feel that.

Genesis tells us of our world today. Created and ruled over, yet fallen. But Genesis tells thirdly, wonderfully, of God's promise, the promise of God.

God's wonderful promise to overturn sin and death. Back in Genesis chapter 12, God promises to bless his world once more.

To bless our world. As he restores people like you and me to himself. And these promises God made so far back in human history.

[3 : 35] He made them to a man called Abraham. To one chosen man, renamed Abraham. Saying to him that all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

Through your offspring. Through your family. This is absolutely foundational to the whole of human history. Genesis teaches us that it's through the family of Abraham.

That the Lord God will act to make us right with him once again. And to put our world right for good. And that is why Genesis 25, and in Genesis 25 onwards, we are not following the irrelevant story of some random ancient family.

Rather, we come face to face with the living and unchanging God. As he acts in history. As he acts in the life of this family back then.

To take forward his plan to save and bless our world. A plan that finds its fulfillment ultimately in Jesus Christ as he comes into the world to save us.

[4 : 46] So skating over introduction. What I'd love us to do is to dive together into the narrative with these verses open. And I'd love us firstly this morning to meet the sovereign Lord.

Because these verses show us the character of our God. Who today, just as back then, rules powerfully, acts freely, and will have his way in our world.

Our big chunk of Genesis, chapters 25 to 35, begins. Look, this is the account of the family line of Abraham's son, Isaac. This is what comes from Abraham's son, Isaac.

And straight away you're meant to know we have a God who keeps his promises. Because, verse 19, Abraham became the father of Isaac. There's a backstory to this.

Sarah, Abraham's wife, had borne him no children. And when she was 89 and worn out, and Abraham 99 and very old, God had promised in Genesis 17, you will have a son, and you'll call him Isaac.

[5 : 56] And my promises to bless the world will move forward through him. And Abraham had laughed. And Sarah had laughed through her childless tears.

There's no chance of that. But God had promised. And lo and behold, verse 19, Isaac arrives. A miracle boy.

And then, verse 20, Isaac was 40 years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel, the Aramean, from Paddan Aram, and sister of Laban, the Aramean. And so, right at the start of this little bit of Genesis, the next generation on from Abraham is in place.

Because God keeps his promises. And so, in a world like ours of twisted words and broken promises, we ask, is there anyone we can rely on?

Is there anyone around us we can trust to do as they say? And in the book of Genesis, time and again, and all the way to the coming of Jesus and beyond, the unchanging sovereign Lord keeps his promises.

[7 : 06] No word from God will ever fail. You can rely on him. First thing, this sovereign Lord, he keeps his promises. In the next scene, this same God perplexes.

Then answers. Then baffles. Look, verse 21. Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife because she was childless.

So, like Sarah before her, Isaac's wife Rebekah is barren, unable to conceive. And you imagine them thinking, what's going on, Lord?

You're meant to be the God who blesses and we belong to you, yet nothing. If you know the Lord today, if you follow him, do you not find his ways perplexing sometimes?

Do you not find his dealings with you painful? Why does he not bless us? Why does life seem so hard? Why does he not bless you? Why does he not bless you?

[8 : 12] This is what he's like, you know. Sometimes we just can't understand why he makes things easier. And yet, rather than turning away in unbelief, Isaac prayed.

He prayed. Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife because she was childless. And now look, the Lord answered his prayer and his wife Rebekah became pregnant.

Now, what you've got to know is this isn't one quick prayer and ta-da-ha-ha, life is better. Because Isaac is 40 years old when he marries Rebekah. And we'll see in verse 26, he's 60 years old when Rebekah gives birth.

So the Lord answered Isaac's prayers for sure. But it took years and years with Isaac on his knees, crying out to God in heaven.

Got lots of questions this morning. I wonder if you're tempted to take prayer for granted. We should say at the start of 2023, how remarkable that you and I can pray to this same God who seems so perplexing to us.

[9 : 28] And know that you're not speaking to the ceiling, but that on his throne in heaven, he hears and listens. And may straight away, or in 20 years, answer our prayers.

He may do that because he rules and sees us and knows us. And he's powerfully able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine.

Yet for Rebekah, finally and wonderfully pregnant, prayers answered, what happens now? Look, the babies jostled each other within her.

Don't know what you think jostling is. It's not polite English jostling to the front of the queue like that, pretending you're not. They're smashing each other inside. And feeling some kind of war in her womb and not knowing what's going on.

She said, why is this happening to me? The Lord has answered. After 20 years, happy days. Yet now this. He perplexes us.

[10:33] He answers. He baffles sometimes. Why have you made this happen to me? Next, our sovereign Lord chooses surprisingly.

As the babies fight, Rebekah went to inquire of the Lord. And verse 23, the Lord said to her, So important, these verses.

By the way, it's not God guessing or predicting here. It's 50-50. I'll tell you what I think is going to happen. He is deciding and choosing freely that the elder, Esau, will serve the younger, Jacob. Unconventionally, surprisingly, God chooses the spare to become the heir. He chooses the younger one to become the family leader and protector, the one who will carry God's blessing.

And he chooses Jacob, not because Jacob will be nicer or better or anything like that. Further forward in the New Testament, the apostle Paul looks back on this moment to show how God chooses people and sets his love on them.

[12:04] The verses are on the sheet from Romans chapter 9. That is, our God chooses.

And he chooses. And he elects. He decides whom he will love for all eternity. Before even you've been born or done anything good or bad.

Did you know that? That if you're a Christian believer this morning, you are so because he has chosen you personally. Even you, surprisingly.

How can God do that? How can he choose some people and set his love on them? The answer is because he is God. He's the creator.

And we're his creatures. He's the potter. And we are his clay. Point one this morning. At the start of the Jacob story, we're introduced to, we meet the sovereign Lord of history.

[13:37] The God who powerfully and freely rules our world today. Get that inside you and it makes all the difference in the world. So at the start of 2023, just think about this.

Don't believe that there is no one up there and above us only sky. That would be terrifying. And don't believe that he's distant from us and uncaring.

As you experience childlessness or jostling or other trouble in your life or in the world around you. And please don't believe that you are in charge of your own destiny.

Moulding your environment and moulding your future. With a God you don't really need. Who respects your freedom too much to get involved. No, no, no. It's not like that.

At the beginning of 2023, as it was 4,000 years ago, the creator of heavens and the earth rules powerfully and personally and purposefully.

[14:39] He answers prayer. He opens wounds. He acts freely. He chooses surprisingly. He perplexes us and baffles us.

And we cannot work out what he is doing or why. But he is absolutely sovereign and absolutely in charge of all things. And that is very, very good.

Because having promised to deal with sin and death. And having promised to restore humanity to himself through the family of Abraham. He has acted in history.

And he continues to act faithfully and unstoppably through the Lord Jesus to fulfil his promises even today. And he absolutely holds our lives.

And he absolutely holds our future in his hands today. He is the sovereign Lord of history. As he was way back then.

[15:43] In Genesis 25. Not just in the abstract. But with the lives and future of this family. Whom we also meet in this opening section.

Two things I'm trying to say this morning. First, meet the sovereign Lord. Then second, meet what I'm calling his smashing people. And I don't mean smashing as in English slang for wonderful. Because really this specially selected offspring of Abraham, family of God. Well they're not quite the nice family you'd like to sit next to in church.

Are they? At all? So first off, just follow this through. We've noticed already the brothers and their in the womb smashing of each other.

In verse 22, the babies jostled each other within her. They're crushing each other. Head crushing on purpose. I was going to say this morning. Have you ever seen brothers at each other like that?

[16:50] Where any room is too small when they're together. But William and Harry are all over the news. And people are commenting. Do you know what? It's like that in my family as well. Because it's not unusual.

This in the womb conflict, Jacob and Esau, is going to spill over into adulthood. And parents will be drawn in.

And there'll be deceit and grudge and tears and plans to kill. And it leaves you asking, what kind of family is this that God comes close to? That's in the womb.

Fast forward to the birth. When out come hairy boy and the heel grabber. Look, 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. So they named him Esau. And the name means hairy. He's animal-like.

[17:48] He's a hairy monster. After this, his brother came out with his hand grasping Esau's heel. I remember going swimming with my little sister when I was a boy.

Let's have a race. And she gets ahead, which is not right because she's younger than me. And she's my sister. So I grab onto her heel and try to pull her back and overtake her in the swimming pool.

You ever done that? No. It's not fair. Of course it isn't. I'm fighting to win. I want to get ahead of Katie. His hand was grasping Esau's heel.

So he was named Jacob. And the name means heel or heel grabber. Isaac was 60 years old when Rebecca gave birth to them. So the womb, the birth.

Now fast forward to adulthood. And these two brothers, what would you say about them? They're so different. They're so different. The boys grew up and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country.

[18:50] He's hairy boy. And he's out in the field trying to trap wild, hairy animals, while Jacob was content to stay at home among the tents. Maybe better, Jacob is, he's whole.

Blameless, even, the sense might be. He's cultured and civilised and involved with the livestock. You think, well, aren't they different, these two lads?

And they are. But now look. Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau. But Rebecca loved Jacob, which is a nightmare, isn't it?

That is the long-term poison of parents having a favourite child. And so just in these bringing-you-up-to-speed snapshot scenes of this family, womb, birth, grown-up, you can see the trouble coming, can't you?

The seeds of envy and deceit and manipulation and struggle and violence. And so on the one hand, you think, come on, God, what on earth would you want to do with smashing people like that?

[20:03] Until you look at your own heart at the start of 2023. Or you think of your meant-to-be-lovely Christmas family time together, and the arguments and the tensions, or how you go to bed and just secretly to yourself, you think, why is she still like that?

Or you reflect on the long-term, decades-long, ugly power struggles in your closest relationships.

And if you think about that, then you think, or you should think, thank God that he gets involved with families like Isaac's, and mine, and people like me.

Because the remarkable thing is he does get involved with us in his sovereign grace. Our sovereign Lord, who knows our hidden family histories and our hidden secret thoughts, he is prepared to attach himself to people like Isaac's family, and even people like us, and say, I am your God.

Isn't that remarkable? And then forwarding on 1,800 years from Genesis 25, he will send his son into the world to die for hellish families and fighting brothers, that he might restore us to himself for all eternity.

[21:30] You get a place in his family for good, even you as you are. It's just the intro to the Jacob Esau story this morning, but do you see how relevant it is?

Meet the sovereign Lord, under whose rule we live today, don't doubt that. And then meet his smashing, unlikely people so like us.

Okay, last thing. Finally, check out the last family scene, and godless Esau, godless Red's stupid choice.

It's such a stupid thing he does. Look at this, verse 29. Once, when heel grabber was cooking some stew, hairy boy came in from the open country famished.

He's like an animal at feeding time. And he said to Jacob, quick, let me have some of that red stew, I'm famished. That red stew, let me gulp it down. That's why he was also called Eden, which means red.

[22 : 34] Well, he's all bluster and givey, givey, givey, give it to me. And verse 31, Jacob replied very calmly, first sell me your birthright. What's that?

The birthright is the God-given position of honour in the family. For the firstborn, the oldest. You'll get double the inheritance. You'll become the family leader, the protector.

You're William, not Harry. You're the heir. You're not the spare. And Esau has the birthright.

Because he's the elder. He came out first, just, his heel being grabbed.

Sell me your birthright, says heel grabber. Esau replies, look, I'm about to die. I'm going to die.

What good is the birthright to me? What do you think?

In the moment, Esau's famished and drooling. And he sees the stew and he wants it. And all he can think about is his desires met now. And his God-given place in the family, he values so little.

[23 : 40] Jacob, cold and calculating, swear to me first. So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob.

What are you doing? Esau trades away his place in the family. For what? Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew.

There's not even any meat in it. It's lentil stew he's traded it all away for. No offence to vegetarians.

But like a dog in its bowl, he's traded it all away.

And now hairy boy, look, he ate and he drank and he got up and he left. Doesn't think about anything. Gone. Gone. What do you make of that? Do you say how sly and deceitful Jacob was and we shouldn't be like that?

Maybe. But that's not the focus, really. Final comment, end of verse 34. So Esau despised his birthright.

[24 : 41] He thought lightly of that which was his. In Hebrews 12 in the New Testament, the writer picks up this moment from Genesis 25.

He applies it to Christian believers. Listen. Hebrews 12 verse 16. See that no one is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son.

And what God is saying to us here is do not be godless like Esau. If today at the start of 2023 you count yourself a Christian believer.

If you've come with your family quarrels and secret envies and manipulating character and you've put your trust in the sovereign Lord. If you're part of this little local church. If you're raised in a Christian family even.

Do not despise your birthright. Don't treat lightly the inheritance God gives you. Do not trade in the glory of your place in his family for something else tasty and short term.

[25 : 50] Which will leave you in tears with nothing. That is what people do, you know, stupidly. You're raised a Christian. You say for years I belong.

Yet bit by bit the things of God become boring. Or not much use. Or I don't really care anymore. And then you.

Hungry for a secret fulfilling relationship. With that person at work. Or drooling for an illegal thrilling high. Or desperate for more money and more approval and then you'll feel full.

Or famished to satisfy your curiosity of what life is like without a nasty Christian God. You make a stupid choice. And you end up in tears with nothing.

Don't make a stupid choice this year. Don't trade in your Christian faith for something else that looks tasty and ends up just being lentil stew.

[26 : 53] Stick with the sovereign Lord. Stick with this God who acts freely in his world and rules us. This God who loves sinners like us.

Stick with him. Don't go from him. Right now in a moment. Share in the Lord's Supper. Have a taste of his love for you. And then this week and into this year.

Come what may. Be satisfied in him. And serve him. This Lord your God. Let me lead us in a prayer together.

And then we're going to sing. Almighty God, you are unchanging in your character and plans and purposes.

You are the sovereign Lord of history. You have promised that you will save a whole family, a whole nation, a whole world of people. And make them yours.

[28 : 02] Through a descendant of Abraham. Through the Lord Jesus Christ. Thank you that you choose surprisingly. Thank you that you get involved with families like Isaac's and families like ours.

Please make us those who value the things of God, the things of you this year. Save us from stupid choices. May we cling to you and this such undeserved love that you pour on us. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.