

***Foundations: Birthright***  
***By Jason Huff***  
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***1 Corinthians 1:26-31; Luke 11:27-28; Genesis 25:19-34***

Our final Scripture reading today is Genesis 25:19-34. May God bless the reading of His holy, precious, and sacred Word. “This is the account of Abraham's son Isaac. Abraham became the father of Isaac, and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah daughter of Bethuel the Aramean from Paddan Aram and sister of Laban the Aramean. Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren. The LORD answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant. The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, "Why is this happening to me?" So she went to inquire of the LORD. The LORD said to her, "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." 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; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when Rebekah gave birth to them. The boys grew up, and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was a quiet man, staying among the tents. Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob. 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.) Jacob replied, "First sell me your birthright." "Look, I am 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.”

Sometimes, we're just not sure who to root for. Most of the time, we root for sports teams not because they are morally superior but because of where we're from. I know a lot of people who root for Michigan or Michigan State who never went to either one but picked on something from a family member or friend who had a connection. There was no Major League Baseball team in Indianapolis when I was growing up. I became a St. Louis Cardinals fan because when I started playing little league in 1982, my team was the Cardinals – and because the Cardinals won the World Series that year, I knew I'd picked well.

But sometimes, it's a moral dilemma to decide who we support because human beings are complex and ambiguous and sinful. Not every villain has a twirly moustache and a big evil laugh. Not every hero is a physically dashing Superman. In our own day, as we revisit American history through different lenses, sometimes we pay more attention to the flaws in our national character rather than the amazing strides we've made and accomplishments we've achieved. Most people's stories are full of deep ambiguity when we look at them.

Today's passage is the start of the tale of Jacob, through whom the nation of Israel comes, and his brother Esau, born moments first. We're going to see a lot of ambiguity in the coming chapters of Genesis as the story unfolds. It will remind us that we must look to Jesus for true perfection, because He is the only person, the God-Man, who was able to live a life that was completely pleasing to the Father in Heaven. But in today's passage, we see how God operates in ways different from the world, and how we are called to live as Kingdom citizens.

We begin with Isaac and Rebekah and their twenty year wait for children. This is obviously a very difficult thing to deal with, and it reminds us a lot of the story of Isaac's parents. After all the waiting for Isaac's birth, after the rejection of Ishmael as the heir, after knowing that the chosen people of God would come through Isaac, this is another hard test. All of the promises of God are wrapped up in this couple having children.

But we also see that the family dynamics Isaac grew up with have made him a different man from his father, at least in some ways. He doesn't pursue another wife to establish the family of the promise. Instead, he stands by Rebekah and prays for her over the long course of many years. This means there has been spiritual growth in the family, at least with Isaac. This is so significant that we would spend more time on it, if it weren't for the fact that we'll discuss it more in next week's passage. For now, what's important is that we aren't seeing a repeat of the bad choices Abraham and Sarah made in trying to fulfill God's promises for Him, rather than waiting on the Lord's timing.

When Rebekah does get pregnant, though, it's rough going. The babies are constantly fighting, it seems, even in the womb. She's like, "What is going on?" The Hebrew is very terse; it speaks to her pain. It explains why she starts asking the LORD about it. It also establishes that the family is dramatic, because it could be translated, "If it's going to be this way, why live?" Knowing that dramatic side helps us understand what's to come too.

And God answers her inquiry. We're not sure how, but He does. God tells her that there's essentially an ongoing fight between the two nations that will come from them even now. What's happening in her body is what's going to happen over the centuries between these people. Nothing like having a war going on with your children while they're yet to be born! But there's another key piece – God tells Rebekah that the older will serve the younger. We're not sure when (or if) she told anyone else about this prophecy, but in many ways, she lives by it.

Let's stop for a moment and think about one key idea that comes up throughout the Bible and has a huge impact on our lives: *God's Kingdom sets the world's ways upside down*. We are chosen by God not because of our personal merit or niceness or rank or status but solely by God's grace. We've already seen this once with Isaac and Ishmael. Ishmael was Abraham's firstborn son, but he was not the child of God's promise. Esau was Isaac's firstborn son, yet he is not the one chosen by God.

We see this play out throughout Scripture. God chooses Moses, who commits manslaughter forty years before God sends him back to Egypt. God chooses judges for Israel that are sometimes cowards and sometimes kind of loathsome. When God has the prophet Samuel go and find a replacement for King Saul from the house of Jesse, Jesse doesn't even have his son David come out to greet the prophet because he's the youngest, surely not the one that God would choose.

When choosing His disciples, Jesus didn't choose the top scholars from the leading candidates from Jerusalem to follow Him but fishermen, a tax collector, and a member of a questionable political party bent on driving out the Romans from Israel. He hangs out with notorious sinners and eats with them. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians in the letter we heard a bit from today, "God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong."

We come back to this theme probably a few times a year. I know most of you have been a part of CrossWay for a while, you've heard it, you might wonder why I keep mentioning it. Well, it just shows up in Scripture over and over again, so God must be trying to get our attention. We often don't really understand things or believe them until we've heard them enough for them to settle deep in our souls.

Before we can accept the gospel as true and believe thoroughly and uncompromisingly in Jesus, we have to accept that God's view is totally upside down from ours. The world says that someone dying on a cross to atone for the world's sins is absolute lunacy; yet it is the heart of the Christian faith. The world lives by power; the church grows by giving itself away. The world lives by fame; the most beautiful gifts of Christians to others go unseen. The world says, "Live for your own happiness;" Jesus says, "Die to yourself daily." Unless we grasp that things are not the way the world says, we will never grasp the gospel, even if we've said a prayer or believe some things about Jesus in our heads. Because God picks the poor and humble, the meek and lowly, the things that were not, and raises them up to glorify Himself, to show that He has all power and authority over all things.

And when we look at the description of Jacob and Esau, we get that view in full. Esau is a man's man from birth. He arrives on his birthday hairy as can be; he needs a shave before he's old enough to crawl! He loves to hunt, which makes him his dad's pride and joy, because Isaac is all about the venison dinner. He is the sportsman, the outdoorsman, if he lived in our day and age he would have started Cabela's. He is what everyone in the ancient world expects the heir to look like. Meanwhile, Jacob is a quiet guy, he hangs around the tents, he learns how to cook from his mother who dotes on him. He's reserved, maybe because he never gets invited on Isaac and Esau's fishing trips. Doesn't at all look like the one God would choose, but He does.

So when you're thinking of who you might invite to church, think twice. God loves cleaning up the wayward and the difficult, the hard-luck cases and the downtrodden. God isn't in the business of making nice people a little nicer; He's in the business of saving people who know they need saving and know they can't save themselves. And if you're the one wondering if God can still reach you, know that He absolutely can and will. He doesn't require us to have a moral past or a good background – He just calls us to have faith. Turn to Him and He is there.

So we get to the heart of the story, and this is where things get complicated for us as readers. We aren't sure who we should be rooting for, exactly. We also have to look closely at the story and realize that there is a whole lot of drama going on between Jacob and Esau. Maybe they learned it from their mother? (I won't say that too loudly.) But this conversation we get a glimpse into sounds like a couple of teenage brothers who don't get along very well going at one another. Before we make any judgments, we have to stop and see that the drama is amped up to 11, and while neither brother acts righteously, one brother's attitude is far worse than the other.

So I'm thinking that Esau wasn't maybe the great hunter he made himself out to be, because he comes home famished after being out in the open country. Maybe he went rock climbing rather than hunting that time, who knows. But he gets back and he demands Jacob's stew. "I'm starving!" he says. And he literally says, "Give the red guy a swallow of that red stuff." Doesn't that sound like a teenager coming in from football practice looking for the first thing around to eat? He's wildly dramatic about it. The very way he puts it doesn't give us reason to believe that he is genuinely going to die of starvation, though he is hungry.

Jacob turns it around on him the way a rival brother might. "Sell me your birthright and you can have it." This sounds like a joke. There is no way Esau would give up his birthright, right? In ancient Israel, in the law that would come several hundred years after this, the birthright was defined as a double portion of the father's inheritance. In a situation like this, Esau qualified for 2/3rds and Jacob 1/3<sup>rd</sup>. Huge difference. The birthright also came with certain important rights like acting as the family's priest, their spiritual leader, before the time of the priesthood. A father's biggest honor was his firstborn.

Is Jacob cruel here? He's not acting like a noble, righteous, God-fearing man at the moment who would give Esau his meal for the asking. But we know that they have been rivals all their lives. Jacob's asking for the birthright is taking advantage of the situation. It is not a nice move nor a Christian move.

But the real surprise is that Esau takes him up on it. "I'm dying here! What good is it to me?" It would be funny if the results weren't so serious. Esau is not dying. Esau is hungry, but he's back among the tents. He could go to his mother or his father and find food. They are a very wealthy family. It is not an issue of Esau's life being on the line. It is Esau's radical impatience and his hunger bringing to light an amazingly bad attitude. For the son who is the delight of his father's eye, this is an incredible insult.

And so Jacob takes full advantage of the situation. He makes Esau swear it over to him. Then Esau gets the food, eats, and leaves. Over and done. No asking for it back, no care or concern for what he's done. It's the reason that Scripture says he despised his birthright. If you want to put it in modern terms, he hands over an estate worth a fortune and the honors that go with it for a meal worth ten bucks. Maybe he thought his own strength and fortune would eventually win the day, that he'd get it back. Maybe his father's fortune was so grand that any portion of it would make him a wealthy man. Or maybe, as the passage points to, Esau was an unthinking, deeply callous person who sold off his future for a bowl of stew. Thousands of years later, the author of Hebrews would warn us about being an ungodly, profane person like Esau who would do such a thing.

This brings up our final key thought for today: *Do not refuse, abuse, or despise your birthright in the Kingdom of God.* What do I mean by that? We can choose to live like Esau, or we can go a different path. We can choose eternal life or we can choose eternal destruction. And if we become true believers, we can either enter God's Kingdom by the skin of our teeth, or we can have fine rewards in the Kingdom. Much of it has to do with how we treat our birthright.

Every person on the planet has the longing for God implanted deep in their souls. We see God's handiwork and provision all around us. Despite that, we reject God. Romans 1 states, "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities -- his eternal power and divine nature -- have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse." But we do not follow the ways of God; we reject Him. Romans 1 says that we are by nature destined for God's wrath if we continue to live forever in our sin and our sin nature. We give up our birthright from birth, as it were, because we choose to sin.

But through Jesus and His perfect life, death, and resurrection, God has given us an opportunity to claim the birthright. John's gospel says, regarding Jesus, "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." Our forefather Adam decided for us that the whole human race would be under the curse of sin, but God has given us the opportunity to be born again, to be regarded by God not as a part of Adam's line but of Jesus' line.

The gospel is an announcement, not a question for us to answer but a proclamation – "The Kingdom of God is at hand! Repent of Your sin and believe the good news that God saves you through the gift of His son Jesus. Come claim your citizenship in this Kingdom; come claim your birthright as children of the King of Heaven." We can by faith trust in Jesus and rely on Him rather than ourselves, and by doing so we accept the birthright. Or we can say, "Nope, don't want it." The announcement tells us that the birthright is there for the taking. What will we say to it? If you've never put your trust in Jesus, by all means, do so today, and start following Him into the gates of the Kingdom of God.

For those of us who have decided to follow Jesus, though, there is still the temptation to despise our new birthright or to abuse it. When Jesus claims us, we are given the rights and privileges and responsibilities of being children of the King. But that means living in such a way that honors God. The worst thing we can do when we've accepted the grace of God is to start living sinfully and saying that God will excuse it. That's abusing the birthright we have. Becoming a child of God doesn't give us license to sin; it gives us the ability to start living in holy and righteous ways, like God, that were previously impossible for us due to our sin.

Paul deals with this in Romans 6. He says, "Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" To the Ephesians, Paul writes, "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption." How we live now will determine in great measure how we live when God's Kingdom fully arrives. It will be paradise; we will all rejoice when we live there. But we also know that some will have greater honor and glory there because of how they lived their lives for Christ here. If you are a believer but believe there are sins you can hold on to, sins that don't seem that big, repent now! Don't abuse the grace God has given you.

We started off today talking about not knowing who to root for. We've got the opportunistic schemer son on the one hand and the arrogant, unappreciative son on the other. Maybe we don't have to root for either. Maybe today we just realize that we thankfully aren't saved by our own schemes but by God's grace. And maybe today we start paying closer attention to how we live our lives, so that we might not reject or abuse our calling as children of God and instead might live into it, bringing glory to our God and finding peace as we do.