

A Tale of Two Sons

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[0 : 00] 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. And 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. One shall be stronger, and the other. The older shall serve the younger. And when her days to give birth were completed, behold, there were twins in her womb.

And the first came out red, all his body like a hairy cloak. So they called his name Esau. And afterward, his brother came out with his hand holding Esau's heel, so that his name was called Jacob.

[1 : 03] Isaac was six years old when she bore them. And when the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man dwelling in the tents.

And 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'm exhausted. Therefore his name was called Edom. And Jacob said, Sell me your birthright right now.

And Esau said, I'm about to die. Of what use is a birthright to me? And Jacob said, Swear to me now. So he swore an oath 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.

[2 : 01] Let's pray. Lord, we're thankful even for the failures of technology. Father, we're thankful for your word, for it shows us that you work through imperfection.

That same gospel message that gives us life to sinners that are in need of grace, that are imperfect, permeates through all of life. Even in brothers that fight against each other.

Lord, we ask that you might show us Jesus this morning through the story of Jacob and Esau. And it's in Christ's name we pray. Amen. Amen. Full disclosure, this morning is going to be a little bit nerdier than I normally am.

Which probably some of you are like, oh yes, thank goodness. And some of you are like, oh no. If you're in the oh no category, you might not recognize where this is from.

But you've heard it before. It was the best of times. It was the worst of times. Now if you never read a single book in high school, not that I commend that, you know that phrase.

[3 : 09] But it's from Charles Dickens' Tale of Two Cities. It's a book about two men, two countries really, that want the same thing. One Frenchman, one Englishman.

They couldn't be any more different than each other. And yet, they want the same thing, the same woman. It's a paradox really. They even look like each other.

How could they be so different and yet the same? So even if you're not a literature person this morning, you've felt the tension of a paradox like that.

You've walked through difficulty in life and thought to yourself, how is God working or maybe even seeing God working through the midst of difficulty. If you've walked on this earth, you've felt sadness and happiness all at the same time.

And those two things are being held together. And you don't know how they're the same. In the same instance, they both can be true. You might have even heard the phrase, you have to spend money to make money.

[4 : 19] How can you spend money and make money at the same time? Or maybe something like, he was too smart for his own good. He was so studied that he had no common sense.

Or maybe on a bigger scale, how can a sinner be holy? How can a follower of Christ still struggle with sin?

We've talked about that time and time again in Romans. But that contrast, those two things being held together at the same time, is at the center of this story. But it's in the form of these two brothers, Jacob and Esau.

How could they be brothers when they're so, so different? Almost different in every way. But even in the midst of all of that, God is working.

And God is at work even now. So this morning, we're going to see that God is at work in the story of Jacob and Esau. But he's at work in two things that seem kind of silly.

[5 : 22] He's at work even in the midst of sin. And he's at work in the midst of a big stew incident. Okay? Sin and stew.

But I want us to remember this morning, the main point is that God is working to accomplish his purposes in spite of sin and even in spite of stew.

Those are the divisions of this section of Scripture. Your Bible might even highlight those. And as we think through this, I mentioned it earlier, that we're jumping back from the book of Romans back to Genesis.

And as we do so, I want us to keep in mind what we've learned so far in our earlier time in Genesis. That God has promised Abraham and his descendants a great blessing of children and something that's eternal.

And now we have Abraham's descendants. Not too far removed, but forgetting all that was promised to him. So this morning, let's first look at sin.

[6 : 27] Look with me at that first part of the story. It's a story that doesn't begin with Jacob and Esau at all. In fact, it begins, this is really the story of Isaac. But in Isaac, the most important thing that comes from Isaac is Jacob.

If you remember, Isaac is that long-promised son of Abraham. Not simply a promise of blessing, but descendants and a family and a kingdom that would be everlasting.

Except there's one problem, right? He's got no kids. And that new family tradition of great promise of blessing and fruitfulness continues with Isaac.

He has that promise, but he has no children. Look back with me at verse 19. These are the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son.

Abraham fathered Isaac, and Isaac was 40 years old when he took Rebekah. That's important. We'll come back to that later. The story is less about Isaac and more about his children.

[7 : 37] Apart from what will be a little short snippet about Rebekah and her family relations, it immediately goes in verse 21. Look with me. Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife because she was barren.

That family tradition of not having children now is fulfilled because it says the Lord granted his prayer and his wife conceived. There's a lot of information in this first section, and this should be a little bit of a preview of what's going to happen in Jacob's life.

Laban is really irrelevant to this story right now, but in a couple chapters, a couple verses later, Laban is going to figure very prominently because he's going to make Jacob's life miserable.

It's a foreshadowing of what's in store for Jacob, but there's this longing for a family, and that familiar storyline for Abraham is now true in Isaac, and we might see those similarities and think, hey, what's going on here?

And if you know a little bit about Scripture, this is going to happen again. And sometimes, that causes us to question the truthfulness of Scripture. How could this happen so often?

[8 : 52] And it's caused some to question the authenticity of these accounts. But it's really a literary technique where we draw in similarities to then highlight the differences of what's going on.

So it's drawing us back to the story of Abraham, and he's trying to highlight not a difference, but a similar theme. That God was at work in Abraham and Sarah just like God is at work in Isaac and Rebecca.

And the means that he uses to bless them is their prayer for a child and their prayer that he's going to grant some 20 years later. God is the one that's in control over infertility.

God is the one that sovereignly grants children. That fact's unchanged from Isaac to now. I know that's difficult for some of us. The high hopes and then falling each time the test comes back negative.

Doctors appointments, endless doctors appointments, maybe even praying with me, others in this room. I don't know why that happens. And Rebecca's in the same spot.

[10:03] She doesn't know why either. But I do know it's not just you. It's also this family. But even in the midst of that heartache, God is still at work.

That fact is unchanged as well. But Rebecca's story is happy. Rebecca conceives a child. We see that at the end of verse 21.

What great joy! But then there's something wrong that we see. The children inside of her, she doesn't know it yet that they're children, but there's a great struggling inside of her.

Literally, they're smashing each other together inside of her womb. Like demolition derby, two cars just driving at each other with no care for safety.

And the struggle that began with these two brothers inside the womb will continue. It will slip out into real life. And it's so much that she's asking herself, why is this happening to me?

[11:07] If we think we're the only ones that struggle and ask God why, think again. Rebecca here asks the same thing. Even on the heels of such a blessing, there's so much turmoil inside of her, she questions what is going on.

Now, Rebecca seeks the Lord and read the Lord's response to her. Look at verse 23 with me. The Lord said to her, Two nations are in your womb and two peoples from within you, you shall be divided.

The one shall be stronger than the other and the older shall serve the younger. Now, think about this. It's the days before the ultrasound. She doesn't know yet for sure that she has two children. She just knows something's going on inside of her and she doesn't know what to do. But us as the reader know the pain that she's experiencing is because those two are already fighting against each other and that battle is just more than sibling rivalry.

It's a division of God's people. It's a division of people that God promised that's already begun. And the most odd thing about this whole promise that we see is a reversal of the birth order.

[12:28] First is one of the brothers is going to be really stronger, a lot stronger than the other. And the second is a reversal of the traditional order. The younger brother will prevail in strength and the older will serve the younger.

That's a weird promise just on its face. Now, throughout this passage, and this is what I was alluding to earlier, there's all these weird connections between the words and how they're structured or how they rhyme, but we don't get that when we read in English.

And so I'm going to help us out. Now, the word serfs is really slave, but guess what? It also rhymes with Jacob. So the author is trying to make this connection between what's going to happen with Jacob and the younger, it rhymes with the word for another name for Esau.

And so in granting this kind of weird promise, God is tipping off Rebecca what will really happen, except it's a weird reversal. Esau. Esau will be the slave and Jacob will be the one that's stronger. Jacob, the one that's younger, will be the one that is mightier. Okay, that's all good and well. This kind of weird promise. We have this God working through and granting children, but what about these two brothers?

[13:49] Here comes the long awaited day of the birth and Rebecca has this promise that she doesn't know what to do with and inside of her they're smashing against each other and remember, she doesn't know yet for sure that she's going to have two.

She believes God's promises, but she hasn't seen them yet and then they're twins and the first one is Esau. What do we know about Esau? He's red. We don't know if he's red-headed or red-skinned, but he's red and he's hairy all over and his name, actually his other name, Edom, where we get to Edomites, the people that will oppose God's people for really all of time.

Those people are named after him and it's a play on the word red. And so the image here is this wild, crazy man, uncivilized, out in the wilderness.

Verse 27 tells us that Esau grew up and all of that was channeled into hunting, a skillful hunter, a man of the field. And as he grows, this wild, untamed personality comes to full fruition.

So that's one brother. The other brother is Jacob. And the reason I'm spending so much time on the names is something that we've seen before in Genesis.

[15:10] The names are actually prophetic. They say something that's either going to happen to them or that they will become. And Jacob is no exception, right? Verse 26 tells us he comes out of the womb and he's doing what?

He's grabbing Esau's heel. It's as if this newborn kind of bar fight spills out not into the street but out into the real world. It just continues from her womb.

And his name is from that event. And not only does his name look like the word for heel, but it also alludes to him being a deceiver, a trickster.

So we have this deceiver, trickster who's grabbing his brother's heel who's been fighting inside the womb and we get this impression from Esau that he's this wild kind of mountain man.

And then we get this impression from Jacob that he's very different. It says he's quiet, dwells in tents. It doesn't mean that he's like an inside kind of kid because he's going to grow up and be like a shepherd like his father, like a farmer.

[16:16] But he doesn't live out in the open field. He doesn't live hunting under the stars like his brother. And if we think that Jacob is the perfect child, let me remind us, he is not.

He's tricky, he's deceptive, and he fights his brother even before he's born. This is a great family, right? The parents are even more awesome.

We see kind of bubbling up what's bubbling underneath the surface of this contrast. Esau is this way, Jacob is that way, and then the parents, quite honestly, might even be worse.

And why do I say that? Look with me at verse 28. Isaac loved Esau because, why? He ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

This is not a recipe for anything but disaster. One parent loves one, and the other loves the other. It's more than sibling rivalry.

[17:19] Here is the first installment of clear sin that Isaac loves Esau because he loves to eat, and that's why he loves his son.

It's ironic that the thing that he loves him for is the thing that's also going to trap his own son that he loves to eat. This great family dynamics here.

God's preserving his line, he's preserving his promise through two children that can't get along from the womb and that continue to fight for a really long time.

And then we have parents that separate them and love one more than the other, and the parents are pitted against each other. And yet God preserves his people.

It's kind of like going to a car lot. Is anybody bought a used car? When you do, you're kind of thinking, okay, where's the play here, right? How do I know this guy who's selling me this car isn't selling me a lemon?

[18:22] I have to go through the smoke and mirrors, and despite his kicking the tires and doing all those things, I have to figure out if this thing is good or if it's a piece of junk.

He might be trying to sell me something that looks good, but it has engine trouble. It's been in accidents. And this scene that we have here is not dissimilar to that.

We as the reader are trying to sort through, who's the good guy here? Is it Jacob? Is it Esau? It's definitely not the parents. But this story is different than us trying to find that one shining new new to us car, right?

They're all lemons in this story. Jacob is a lemon. Esau is a lemon. The parents are lemons. They're all junk. Jacob has problems just like everyone else.

He's a deceiver. Esau is wild and the parents are against each other. So what are we supposed to do with this? How do we make sense of God preserving his line through these people when they're all bad?

[19:31] God is at work. Not because Jacob's the perfect child or the likable child or the obedient child. God is at work just because there's dotting parents?

No, not even that. He's at work in this mess of a family to bring about his promises. It's kind of similar to the story of Jesus if we think about it. We as sinners don't deserve grace, but it's offered to us.

And this story should inform how we think about the good news of Jesus. We're not a gleaming new car on the lot. We're broken down, marked by sin, and yet God plucks us out, not because we look new and shiny, not because we're worth it, but because he loves us.

Nothing in ourselves. And Paul reminds us of that in Romans. For while we were still weak at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly.

We are sinners and God has offered to work through us to give us eternal life, not because of our great wealth, of our appearance, because of our confidence, our competence, our character, our intellect.

[20 : 48] None of that matters. God gives us eternal life because he's God. And he gives it to each of us. So if you're here this morning, take it.

Put your faith in Jesus. Now, our family this morning is messed up. We know that. To the earlier comment I made about the trustworthiness of the Bible, it's a more complicated argument than that. But if I'm simply embellishing a story and trying to convince you of this, I'm not putting this story of this family in there. In fact, I'm going to leave that on the cutting room floor.

But even in the midst of all of this, God is still at work. And that should give us great confidence in our own lives. So God is at work in the midst of our sin, in spite of our sin.

But now we come to the great stew incident of Jacob and Esau. I don't know how many of you and your families have these things of lore, this great incident. Maybe it's a decision you've made.

[21 : 56] Maybe it's a decision in your marriage. Maybe it's something that's funny. I have a friend that refuses to call arguments arguments or fights. He calls them by the word Ingalls, which if you're from the south, that's a place.

It's not a thing. Ingalls is a grocery store because for generations, his family always called fights Ingalls. Why? Because they got into a fight in the Ingalls parking lot.

Now that's funny, but some of us have stories that are marked by heartache, pain, defining choices to marry this person and not another, a job, maybe moving to Colorado, Colorado Springs, maybe an accident.

In all of those things, God is at work. work. It might seem silly or infamous, but in our family, the thing that we keep going back to is the butter dish incident.

The butter dish incident is not actually an incident surrounding a butter dish, but a decision that I made as a husband to go to an army school right before I was going to leave for a really long time.

[23 : 16] And it was a source of great disagreement and I thought I should go. Now to be fair to myself, I had been canceled from this school many times over and over.

And I went and I thought the whole time I was going to fail as God's judgment on me for going. But I passed and I felt guilty the whole time.

So what did I do? I brought back my wife some nice pottery. pottery. And this butter dish. And what did it do in my suitcase? It broke.

And it's broke every time we've moved since then. And it's still broken and I keep gluing it back together. That's funny, right?

But it's marking a more serious thing. Kind of like this stew. It's not really about the stew. It's about something far greater. It's about Jacob and Esau struggling over a birthright.

[24 : 16] Birthright, inheritance, same thing. It's not really about the stew. So we have the stew pointing to this much greater reality just like the butter dish is reminding me every day of my own selfishness.

So what comes next in the life of Jacob and Esau? But the stew incident. Look with me at verse 29. Once Jacob was cooking stew, Esau came in from the field and he was exhausted.

And what does he say? Remember, he's this wild man, uncivilized. He says, I, and he's also obsessed with food, and he says, I'm about to die.

He's led by his stomach just like his father. And Jacob is deceptive. So he comes home and demands food. And how many of you parents have ever heard your kids come in and say, I'm about to die.

It's the same concept here. He's not really about to die, but he's starving and he's thinking with his stomach. And what does he eat? Well, what does he see that Jacob has?

[25 : 29] Verse 30, Esau said to Jacob, let me eat some of that red stew for I'm exhausted. So the red man wants the red stew. The connotation is that he has something like a meaty stew.

Maybe Esau had killed it the day before. The great stew incident is Jacob's time when he deceives his brother.

Read verse 31. The connotation is he's seizing the opportunity. So he says, sell me your birthright right now. And Esau responds with what we'll see in a second.

It's got no use to me. He seizes the opportunity. He's been waiting and watching and waiting to strike at Esau. And Esau overcome with hunger and he's about to die.

He says, what use is this birthright to me? Because I'm about to die. You know, the birthright, your future inheritance, the double portion, not food at the dinner table, but of riches.

[26 : 30] He exchanges his future blessing for immediate gratification. And Jacob seizes the opportunity. Every time I read this story, I think about Esau just so quickly giving away that which is so important.

And I think about the missionary Jim Elliot. He was the missionary to South America who lost his life. And then by losing his life, the expansion of the gospel went out to this Indian group, but he wrote this in his journal.

He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose. It's the exact opposite of Esau. Esau gives away the thing that's most important to him, the thing that he should not lose.

He gave up eternal blessing for a pot of stew. But remember, it's not simply the inheritance. If we track all the way back to Abraham, it's this promise, not of riches, but of greatness, a kingdom of power, eternal ruling over one another.

We get all that from the context, but it's this promise that there would be a people, a great kingdom that goes on forever.

[27 : 44] And he traded this for a bowl of soup. And as if the trick to get the inheritance wasn't enough, what does Jacob turn and then give him? Not red stew with meat in it, but he gives him lentil soup and bread.

So we see that Esau has just traded that which was most precious to him for a bowl of vegetable soup. He doesn't even get the red stew.

He's a wild man. And so it's keeping with his character that cements what we know about Esau, that he trades away all of this in a moment.

And in closing, he says, or the writer says, he despised his birthright. Esau trades things that are eternal for soup. He trades the promises of God not simply for the meaty stew, but for that vegetable soup.

And as I think about that, I keep saying that God is at work, but it's hard to see in the midst of this. It's hard to see in the midst of the sin of favoritism of the parents, the sin of the brothers, the sin of Esau.

[28 : 58] And this is why the writer of Hebrews calls him unholy. Esau has chosen, but he didn't choose God. He chose his stomach. To be fair, this should serve as a warning to us, that we don't exchange things that are unfading, that are eternal, that are life-giving for things that are temporary and fleeting.

But we do that every day, even if we're Christians. We think about what we're going to eat, which is important. We think about what we're going to wear. We think about what we're going to go and do. And those things captivate our minds and our attention. But we need to fix our eyes upon Christ. We think about security and better jobs and better homes.

Those are all good gifts, but those are not eternal. If we walk away from this, though, and think Jacob is perfect, we've missed the story.

I have a friend that's an Old Testament guy, and he calls Jacob positively obnoxious. And we'll see why in the coming chapters.

[30 : 09] But even in this instant, he is obnoxious. And we'll see that more and more as Genesis unfolds. God is at work in spite of Esau's sin.

God is at work even in Jacob's failing, in his character flaws, in his own sin. And he uses us, he uses him, he uses others, because God is at work in spite of people.

And God is holding out this promise that will come later. That even in a family tree full of tricksters and cheats and bad parents, he's holding forth this promise that he will make all things right.

And that one day he would bring a redeemer from this family. family, yes, even this family, to offer salvation and to bless the entire world.

God is at work. Even in the midst of sin, God is at work. Even in stew, he's at work to bring us to Christ.

[31 : 15] To bring Christ to us. Let's pray. Lord, we're thankful this morning for the reminder that you are at work.

That you're in work in spite of sin, our own sin, the failings of this world, and you use very unimpressive people to make these grand promises come true.

And we pray that you might remind us of that through the person of Jacob and Esau. God is at work and we pray this in Christ's name.
Amen. Please stand as we sing in response to God.