

## **A Tale of Two Brothers – Genesis 25:19-34 – July 16, 2017**

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We live in a conflicted world. We live in a conflicted nation. Indeed, conflict often seems to be at the heart of humanity. It exists on multiple levels. On the global platform as nations and powers struggle for supremacy and domination, to the socio-economic levels as the haves are at odds with the have nots, to the familial level where competition and fractured relationship lead to dysfunction. The human family has been no stranger to conflict – we see examples of dysfunction in the earliest chapters of the Bible, the story of Adam and Eve estranged from their Creator. Willfulness robbed them of their innocence, and our ultimate grandparents quickly learned that selfish choices have spawn negative consequences. That tragic tale continues with the account of their two sons Cain and Abel – where jealousy and anger lead to violence.

As we've been taking a closer look at the Abraham and Sarah story, we've seen that it has not been immune to conflict. This family born of God's promise of blessing to the multitudes is not without its issues. But it is in this third generation that conflict seems to take the center stage.

Not unlike the story of Abraham and Sarah, the story of Isaac and Rebekah begins with barrenness. Isaac was forty years old when he and Rebekah married. From his parents, Isaac learned that he was the child of promise. He knew his father's God. He knew that he was to be the ancestor of a great nation. But like his parents before him, Isaac and Rebekah remained childless for 20 years.

When Rebekah finally conceived, she experienced great discomfort during her pregnancy. The twins she carried seemed to thrash about in her womb, a foreshadowing of the struggle that would typify the lives of these twin brothers. In her agony and her distress, Rebekah cried out to God. "What is going on within me? Why am I like this?" Even though this was her first pregnancy, she realized something wasn't quite right. She wondered, in fact, if something was terribly wrong. Instead of suffering in silence, Rebekah asked God why she had to experience this ongoing struggle within her.

God heard Rebekah's lament. God explained to her what was happening inside her womb. She carried twin sons. Each would grow to be the father of a nation, and these two nations be at odds with one another. The struggling sons represented the coming struggle between the nation of Israel and the nation of Edom. But not only that, God also told her that the younger son, the son born second, would be the master over the firstborn son. Now this statement was indeed remarkable.

The cultures of the ancient near East followed the rules of primogeniture. The first-born son always had the advantage. He was the one to inherit a double portion of his father's estate.

This divine message – that the younger son would be served by the elder was scandalous to the culture of the time. But in the biblical witness, that is, through the stories of the Bible, it became normative. We find many biblical stories in which the younger sons are chosen over their older brothers. Isaac himself was the heir to the promise rather than his older brother Ishmael. King David was a younger son. Joseph was a younger son.

This theme of the reversal of expectation is a major one. God does not work according to the laws of humanity. God often works contrary to what is expected. We see this theme of the lesser overcoming the greater strongly represented throughout the ministry of Jesus. Jesus often taught that the kingdom of God would be made up of the lowly and the oppressed. He taught that those on earth who seemed to be the nobodies, the ones considered to be of no-account, would in fact be the ones who inherit God's promises. The Gospels remind us that "the first will be last, and the last will be first." Paul writes in chapter one of 1 Corinthians "God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God." Again it is a reminder that what the world expects is not always in line with what God has ordained. But as you can imagine, whenever the expectations of society are crossed, conflict is very often a consequence.

So from before he was even born, Jacob was to be the one through whom the promise was to be fulfilled. And from before he was born, Jacob was set on a course that would be full of conflict. In her time, Rebekah gave birth, and perhaps no twins were ever as different as Jacob and Esau. Esau was born first, his skin was red and he was covered with hair. As he grew, he became a hunter, a man of the fields, and he was favored by his father Isaac. Esau wasn't the brightest fellow by any stretch, but he was a man of action, living for the moment. Esau was a manly man. A son of which his father could be proud.

Jacob on the other hand, exited his mother's womb hot on the heels of his older brother. He grew to be a quiet and thoughtful man, cunning and crafty. Perhaps a bit of a mama's boy, he preferred to stay near home, around the tents where he learned to cook. He was favored by his mother Rebekah. We are not given a specific reason why, but perhaps it was because Rebekah knew of his future. God had told her that Jacob was to be the superior one, and no doubt she had kept that bit information to herself.

And here it is, the dysfunctional family. Siblings at odds with one another. Parents favoring different children. Spouses keeping secrets from one another. All the different pieces in place for a bit of drama to erupt.

So one day, Jacob was preparing a nice, hearty lentil stew. Esau had been out on a hunt, and apparently had been unsuccessful, because he was famished. Perhaps lured in by the aroma of the soup, Esau came up to Jacob and said, "Gimme some of that red stuff. I am starving

to death here.” Now, Jacob’s response was really strange. He said, “First, sell me your birthright.”

There must be more to this than meets the eye. That is not an “off the top of your head” kind of response. It seems calculated and deliberate. Almost as if Jacob had for a time been considering some kind of deception, but was just waiting for the right moment to implement it. He knew his brother was a man of action and not prone to thoughtful consideration. If he could just catch him off guard...Finally, a moment presented itself to Jacob. His brother was ravenous with hunger and could think of nothing more than the gnawing pain in his stomach. So in an almost flippant way, Jacob said, “Sure, have some of this nice stew. Just give me your birthright in exchange.”

And, just as anticipated, Esau commented, “What good is my birthright at this moment? I’m starving to death. Feed me and you can have it!” Yet that wasn’t good enough, Jacob knew that he had to have some assurances for when Esau eventually realized what he had done, so he said, “Swear to me first.” So Esau swore, ate his soup and a slab of bread, and went on his way. Was Esau such a dullard that he didn’t understand what Jacob was doing to him? Or did Esau care so little for his own birthright that he was prepared to trade it for a simple meal? Neither scenario casts Esau in a positive light. Before we condemn him too harshly, I wonder if any of us have made a hasty decision or chose to do something without considering its consequences – one that we would come to regret at a later time. In the heat of the moment, perhaps we too have made some really inane choices.

It really was a nasty trick that Jacob played on his older brother. And it won’t be the last time that Jacob takes something that belongs to Esau. It might make us wonder why God would choose such a man to be part of the lineage of promise. Jacob is a scoundrel and is not really the poster boy for righteous living. He just doesn’t seem to be right for his calling. Certainly God could have chosen a more likely candidate in Abraham’s family tree.

But as will be reinforced in future stories, God isn’t so much worried about who is worthy according to the how the world judges worthiness. If God’s choices were made based on worthiness, all people would fall short, for no one is completely flawless. God’s work in the world isn’t based on some system of rewards and punishments, despite what some would have us believe. People don’t attain worldly success or status because they deserve it and were rewarded by God for it. In most cases, much of what we would call success is based upon when and where we were born.

God’s work in the world isn’t based on zapping some people into poverty and hardship and blessing a select few for worldly success. God’s work in the world is focused on redemption - how can all people experience recovery from the brokenness that keeps them weighed down,

forgiveness and wholeness that can restore their relationships, and an abundance of God's love which spills over as a blessing to others?

And this story of Abraham's family, through each successive generation, all the way down to the birth of Jesus Christ. This is a story about redemption. God's promise to Abraham and Sarah is that through them, all nations, all people will be blessed. All will be redeemed. Conflict is a part of our world, because sin is a part of our world. Instead of doing what we know we ought to do, we simply do what we want. Multiply that by all the people who live in the world, and you can begin to see why some pretty terrible things take place. We are more like the scheming and conniving Jacob than we would like to admit. But Jacob was a work in progress, and so are we. In the next few chapters in Genesis Jacob and his family will continue to experience much conflict, but God will continue to work through them, forging a nation through which God's redemptive purposes will reach out to all the nations of the world.

Our world has become polarized with little effort in trying to find a common ground upon which to compromise and begin to repair the damage that has been done to one another. We grab at the heel of the one who seems to be in our way of attaining worldly greatness. We make hasty decisions in the heat of the moment without thought to the consequences. And connive and scheme, looking for an opportune time to take advantage of someone's weakness. Are we forever doomed to repeat our mistakes? Will we always exist in conflict, sibling against sibling? Can we find a way to accept others for who they are, and find a way to live with them in harmony, or will we continue to play our game of one-upmanship, in our personal lives, in the church, and on the world stage? Or will we join with God in the work of redemption? Friends, there is much work to be done.