

Chapter 1: The Birthright of Jacob

Genesis 25:19–34

In the second half of Genesis 25, we turn the page from the life of Abraham to the lives of Isaac, Rebekah, Esau, and Jacob. These new generations will deal with many of the same problems that Abraham faced. Indeed, the narratives of Genesis deliberately portray the many similarities between Abraham, his children, his grandchildren, and his great-grandchildren.¹ At the close of Abraham's life, we have seen God fulfill only *part* of his promises to Abraham. The rest of the Genesis—and the rest of the Bible—will detail God's work to fulfill *all* his promises to Abraham.

For as many ways as these new generations follow in the footsteps of Abraham, they also take their own paths. They lead their own lives, making their own choices for their own reasons. We must recognize the generational continuity in Abraham's offspring after him, and yet we must study each of these figures on their own. Right from the beginning of the “generations of Isaac” (Gen. 25:19), the narratives put forward not only Isaac and Rebekah (the second generation), but Esau and Jacob (the third generation). Therefore, while we considered Abraham extensively on his own, the Scriptures now want us to evaluate and learn from Isaac and Rebekah in the light of their children, especially Jacob.

In these opening introductions to the generations after Abraham, we find a critical, basic distinction: heavenly-mindedness versus earthly-mindedness. Ever since God put enmity between the offspring of the woman and the offspring of the serpent (Gen. 3:15), we have seen this enmity divide brothers (e.g., Gen. 4:1–26; 21:8–21) and even nations (e.g., Gen. 10–11; 25:5–18). This basic struggle comes once again to the forefront in the sharp distinction between Esau and Jacob—that is, between brothers who will become the fathers of two nations (Gen. 25:23). Although our Lord Jesus was not speaking about this passage, he articulated the main lesson we should glean from Genesis 25:19–34 in his Sermon on the Mount: “*Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you*” (Matt. 6:33).

Praying for the Promises (Genesis 25:19–23)

In one sense, the “generations of Isaac” in Genesis 25:19 introduces the “family history” of Isaac in the same way that we have already seen four other family histories in Genesis (cf. 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 11:27):²

[19] These are the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham fathered Isaac, [20] and Isaac was forty 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. (Gen. 25:19–20)

Still, there are three unusual elements to this new “generations” introduction. First, Genesis does not

narrative for us the “generations of Abraham,” since Abraham’s story is included under the “generations of” his father, Terah (Gen. 11:27).³ This is a remarkable point, given Abraham’s central role in the history of redemption. Perhaps God wants to make sure that our attention does not fall exclusively on Abraham, but that we see God’s work in and through Abraham. We should remind ourselves frequently of Charles Wesley’s sobering comment: “God buries his workmen, but carries on his work.” Certainly, we cannot overstate Abraham’s importance in redemptive history. Notice even the way that the narrative describes Isaac as “Abraham’s son” and then redundantly adds that “Abraham fathered Isaac” (Gen. 25:19).⁴ Now, if we have read Genesis up to this point, we can have no doubts about the father of Isaac. Even so, the link from Abraham to Isaac is so critical that the narrator sees fit to remind us of Isaac’s paternity twice more before moving on to Isaac’s family history. In fact, this is the only time that the phrase “these are the generations of...” includes information about the subject’s father, since the “generations” of a man are his offspring after him, not his ancestry before him.⁵

Second, while these are the “generations of Isaac,” we do not read much about Isaac himself until Genesis 26. Instead, the narrator forces our attention first on the birth of Isaac’s children, Jacob and Esau.⁶ While the narration kept us in extended suspense about Abraham’s promised offspring, the narrator tells us immediately of Isaac’s promised offspring. Third, we are reading about the “generations of Isaac” before Abraham is actually dead. The narrator of Genesis has already recounted for us the death and burial of Abraham (Gen. 25:7–10); however, Abraham does not die until Jacob and Esau turn fifteen.⁷ We are not only moving quickly past Isaac’s story to get to Jacob and Esau; we are also moving past the end of Abraham’s life in order to study the next generation.

Heavenly Promises

Taken together, these elements underscore the extreme importance for God to provide the promised offspring to Isaac. Just as God provided Isaac as the promised offspring for Abraham, so God must also provide for Isaac the next generation of promised offspring. We already know that God blesses Isaac (Gen. 25:11), but no amount of personal prosperity will matter if Isaac does not have a son who will perpetuate the line of Abraham. If Isaac does not have offspring, God will be breaking his promises to give Abraham’s offspring the land of Canaan (Gen. 13:15; 15:13–21; 17:8) and to make Abraham’s offspring innumerable (Gen. 13:16–17; 15:5; 17:4–7; 22:16–18). Only through Isaac’s offspring does God promise to bless all the other families of the earth (Gen. 12:3; 22:18). Certainly, Abraham has other sons, including Ishmael (Gen. 16:15–16; 17:20; 21:8–21; 25:12–18) and the twelve sons of Keturah (Gen. 25:1–6). Nevertheless, God insisted that he would establish his covenant only with Isaac (Gen. 17:21), explaining to Abraham that “through Isaac shall your offspring be named” (Gen. 21:12). Since only Isaac qualifies as Abraham’s offspring, then God must also give Isaac offspring in order to fulfill his promises to Abraham.

The promise of offspring for Abraham and for Isaac, then, represents more than simply providing children to childless men. The promised offspring represent God’s plan for breaking his heavenly kingdom into this fallen world. In order to abolish the curse of sin and death that entered the world through the sin of Adam, God must establish an altogether new human race. This plan will not take place quickly, nor will it be easy. Restoring the full glory of God’s image in his people will require nothing less than God’s taking on a human nature through the incarnation so that he may extinguish the wrath of the curse for us. These narratives in Genesis are *not* about ancient fertility treatments;

these are about how God will bring his own Son into the world as *the* promised offspring (cf. Gal. 3:16). Therefore, to seek the offspring of Isaac is to seek the heavenly kingdom of God and his righteousness.

Rebekah's Barrenness

A familiar threat stands in the way of God's plan, however. Like Abraham's wife Sarah, Isaac's wife Rebekah is barren: "And Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren. And the LORD granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived" (Gen. 25:21). If we look at this verse alone, we might come away with the impression that Rebekah's inability to conceive only lasts a short time. In fact, Isaac marries Rebekah when he is 40 (Gen. 25:20), but Rebekah does not give birth to Esau and Jacob until Isaac is 60 (Gen. 25:26) for a total of 20 years of waiting for God to fulfill his promises.⁸ When Abraham's servant brought Rebekah back from Mesopotamia with an extraordinary story of God's providential guidance (Gen. 24), there must have been no question that Rebekah was God's choice to be the mother of Isaac's promised offspring; however, these twenty years of infertility must have raised many questions about Rebekah.⁹

It is possible that Abraham may have given his son and daughter-in-law encouragement during this time from his own painful experiences with Sarah, although the text of Genesis does not record any such conversations. The pain of Sarah's infertility drove Abraham and his wife to desperate, sinful measures (cf. Gen. 16). Ultimately, though, God used Sarah's long childlessness to enhance the glory of Isaac's eventual birth, so that Sarah laughed for joy (Gen. 21:6) and wondered aloud, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age" (Gen. 21:7). There was no question that God alone had miraculously brought about Isaac's birth. Now, as Isaac and Rebekah must also wait a long time for their promised offspring, God is setting up the same scenario for the same purpose of glorifying himself. God's people may grow slowly, but their humble beginnings will only demonstrate the great power and grace of God when he brings their growth to fulfillment. As John Calvin writes, "this small and contemptible origin, these slow and feeble advances, render more illustrious that increase, which afterwards follows, beyond all hope and expectation, to teach us that the Church was produced and increased by divine power and grace, and not by merely natural means."¹⁰

Isaac's Prayer

The text places an unusually strong emphasis on the effectiveness of Isaac's prayers in Rebekah's eventual conception. The Hebrew makes this point by describing Isaac's action ("prayed/pleaded/supplicated") and Yahweh's action ("granted his prayer/was supplicated") with the same root verb, albeit in slightly different forms.¹¹ Therefore, a more literal translation of Genesis 25:21 might read like this: "And Isaac *supplicated* the LORD for his wife, for she was barren. And the LORD *was supplicated* by him, and Rebekah his wife conceived." We may take three important lessons from this. First, we should recognize that Isaac prays for the very thing that God has promised to do. In fact, God uses Isaac's prayer instrumentally to provide his promises. When God promises something, that does not mean that we should neglect to pray for those promises. On the contrary, God calls us to pray for his promises: "And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us" (1 John 5:14). We often treat God's promises presumptuously while devoting our energy in prayer toward the things that God has *not* promised. By doing this, we act

like the pagans who have no certain promises, but who believe that they may manipulate their gods by the strength of their prayers (cf. Matt. 6:7–8). We should pray in a strikingly different way, fervently supplicating God to lay hold to the good gifts he has promised to us.

Second, we should recognize the importance of prayer in bringing about God’s promises. The verb “supplicate” (ESV: “prayed”) elsewhere “involves a request to remove some serious ill; it occurs most frequently in Exodus of Moses entreating God to sent away the plagues (8:4, 5, 24, 25, 26...).”¹² These are serious prayers, but even so, God does not answer Isaac for twenty years (Gen. 25:20, 26). John Calvin writes that, “as Isaac teaches us, by his example, to persevere in prayer; so God also shows that he never turns a deaf ear to the wishes of his faithful people, although he may long defer the answer.”¹³ By contrast, Abraham never prayed for God to open the womb of his wife Sarah, although he did pray that God would open the wombs of the Philistine women (Gen. 20:17–18).¹⁴ On this point, Victor Hamilton makes a fascinating observation: “In order to alleviate barrenness God visited Sarah (21:1–2) and remembered Rachel (30:22). But no verb is used with God as subject and Rebekah as object. Instead, the urgent prayer of Isaac is highlighted.”¹⁵

Third, we should recognize that Isaac’s prayer demonstrates his heavenly-mindedness. In prayer, he is pursuing more than just a child; he is pursuing God’s redemption of the world. Through the offspring of Abraham and Isaac (Gen. 12:3; 21:12; 22:18), God promised to bless all the families of the earth. There is no question that Isaac prays for offspring for personal reasons, but he is also praying for God to bring his heavenly kingdom by accomplishing his will on earth, as in heaven. Moreover, Isaac pursues God’s heavenly kingdom through the right method by praying. In theory, Abraham took Hagar as another wife (Gen. 16:3) also in pursuit of those promises. Isaac, however, pursues God’s heavenly promises by God’s heavenly provision of prayer.

War in the Womb

In the previous story of Abraham’s wife Sarah, and in the forthcoming story of Jacob’s wife Rachel (Gen. 29:31–30:24), the barrenness of the wives of the patriarchs are central to the narratives. In the story of Rebekah, however, “the point is slipped over quickly. The narrative here focuses on the struggles of her sons.”¹⁶ The narrative sets aside both Isaac’s story and Rebekah’s story in order to direct our attention to their children. During the course of her pregnancy, Rebekah realizes that the children she is carrying are not normal:

[22] 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. [23] 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,
the older shall serve the younger.” (Gen. 25:22–23)

A struggle between brothers is a theme that occurs throughout the book of Genesis, including Cain and Abel (Gen. 4:1–8); the sons of Noah (Gen. 9:20–27); Abraham and Lot (“brothers”; Gen. 13:8); Isaac and Ishmael (Gen. 21:9); Jacob and Laban (“my brother”; Gen. 29:12, 15); and Joseph and his brothers (Gen. 37–50).¹⁷ In the case of Jacob and Esau, their struggle begins in the womb. The verb

struggle means “smash, crush” and “is most frequently used figuratively of the oppression of the poor. Literally, it is used to describe skulls being smashed (Judg 9:53; Ps 74:14) or reeds being broken (e.g., Isa 36:6).”¹⁸ Rebekah’s question is barely intelligible, as though she is grunting out words through great pain. Literally, she asks, “If thus, why then/this (am) I?”, by which she means, “What good is my pregnancy?” “Will the children survive? Will I survive?”¹⁹ For Rebekah, the pain of barrenness must have been great, but the pain of conception is greater.

Isaac’s wife matches her husband’s heavenly mindedness by also taking her concerns to the LORD in prayer (Gen. 25:22). Sarah’s barrenness raised questions for twenty years about God’s faithfulness to fulfill his promises through her, and now the complications of her pregnancy raise those questions again. Often, the phrase “inquire of the LORD” means that the inquirer is consulting a priest (cf. Num. 27:21–23) or a prophet (cf. 2 Kgs. 8:7–15); however, the text implies that Rebekah inquires of the LORD “directly, not through an intermediary.”²⁰ God answered Isaac’s prayer by granting conception to Rebekah, but now God answers Rebekah’s prayer with revelation.²¹

God’s Election

Gordon Wenham observes that God’s oracle “is cast in two pairs of lines. In typical poetic style, the second half of each couplet develops and intensifies the ideas in the first half.”²² The first line explains that Rebekah has “two nations” in her womb—two nations that will subsequently divide from each other. Given the struggle in her womb, this probably does not surprise Rebekah. The second line, however, is a bit more unexpected, explaining that one will be stronger than the other. This first part of the second oracle would also be unsurprising in itself, for the birthright guaranteed that the firstborn would gain wealth and power beyond the rest of his brothers. God, however, overturns this human system here by choosing Jacob over Esau. Surprisingly, the second half of the oracle reveals that it is the *younger* who will be the stronger, for the older will serve the younger. As the general struggle between brothers is an ongoing theme in Genesis, so also does God’s election of the younger over the older run throughout Genesis, as John Sailhamer points out:

Another important motif is present in this account: “The older shall serve the younger” (25:23). As far back as chapter 4 the narrative has portrayed God as choosing and approving the younger and the weaker through whom to accomplish his purpose and to bring about his blessing. The offering of the older brother Cain was rejected, whereas the offering of the younger brother Abel was accepted. The line of Seth, the younger brother, was the chosen line (4:26–5:8); Isaac was chosen over his older brother Ishmael (17:18–19); Rachel was chosen over her older sister Leah (29:18); Joseph the younger brother was chosen over all the rest (37:3); and Judah was chosen over his older brothers (49:8). Behind each of these “reversals” was the recurring theme of God’s sovereign plan of grace. The blessing was not a natural right, as a right of the firstborn son would be. Rather, God’s blessing was extended to those who had no other claim to it. They all received what they did not deserve.²³

Why, though, does God choose Jacob? John Calvin writes:

If we seek the cause of this distinction, it will not be found in nature; for the origin of both

nations was the same. It will not be found in merit; because the heads of both nations were yet enclosed in their mother's womb when the contention began. Moreover God, in order to humble the pride of the flesh, determined to take away from men all occasion of confidence and of boasting.²⁴

Remember, these two brothers are twins. From a human perspective, there is no reason to choose one over another. When God chose Isaac and rejected Ishmael, the two had different mothers; however, Jacob and Esau are born to the same mother, inhabiting the same womb at the same time.²⁵ The only distinction between the two has to do with which will be the firstborn, but God does not even discriminate on that basis. Rather, God's choice of the younger brother, Jacob, flows exclusively from God's own free grace and mercy toward Jacob.

The Apostle Paul cites this verse in Romans 9:12 to illustrate that God's purposes in election transcend human works:

[6] But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, [7] and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." [8] This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring. [9] For this is what the promise said: "About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son." [10] And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, [11] though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls—[12] she was told, "The older will serve the younger." [13] As it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." (Rom. 9:6–13)

Notice the phrase in verses 6–7: "For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring." While God promises offspring to Abraham and to Isaac, not all who trace their biological lineage to Abraham and Isaac are counted as the promised offspring. Ishmael was excluded as offspring, since "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named" (Gen. 21:12), while Esau was excluded in favor of Jacob, on the basis of the word that "The older shall serve the younger" (Gen. 25:23). This is not because of biological descent or works done by the people, but exclusively because of God's own purposes and for God's own glory. John Calvin rightly asks, "Who does not see that Paul descends from a general to a particular adoption, in order to teach us, that not all who occupy a place in the Church are to be accounted as true members of the Church?...Let it therefore remain as a settled point of doctrine, that among men some perish, some obtain salvation; but the cause of this depends on the secret will of God."²⁶

Through the rest of Jacob's story, we will witness how God brings about the fulfillment of these promises. Specifically, we will see that God's blessing for Jacob will not come without conflict, even from the womb: "On the divine side, we learn how the blessing was guaranteed to Jacob; on the human side, we learn how the conflict between brothers threatened the blessing for Jacob."²⁷ Jacob will indeed inherit the promises, but like us, he will inherit the promises through many tribulations (cf. Acts 14:22).

Pursuing what is Perfect (Genesis 25:24–28)

Rebekah eventually completes her pregnancy, giving birth to twins. The conflict that brought Rebekah such pain, however, continues outside her womb:

[24] When her days to give birth were completed, behold, there were twins in her womb. [25] The first came out red, all his body like a hairy cloak, so they called his name Esau. [26] Afterward 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. (Gen. 25:24–26)

While it is difficult to translate words that relate to color, the same word for “red” also appears to describe David (1 Sam. 16:12; 17:42).²⁸ Esau is not only red, however, but also so hairy that his body appears to be covered by a cloak. On the whole, the narrator describes Esau “more like an animal of the field than an ordinary baby.”²⁹ Jacob, on the other hand, emerges from the womb grabbing at Esau’s heel. The name “Jacob” means “May he be at the heels”—i.e. ‘May God be your rearguard’....But it also lends itself to a hostile sense, of dogging another’s steps, or overreaching, as Esau bitterly observed in 27:36.³⁰ The birth story, then, foreshadows something about their futures: Jacob will drag down his brother’s birthright with soup that is as red as Esau (Gen. 25:29–34).

Non-Identical Twins

The boys’ differences become more pronounced as they grow older: “When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents” (Gen. 25:27). These descriptions portray starkly contrasted individuals, as Allen Ross notes: “We thus meet the aggressive hunter versus the reflective nomad. Esau is the sportsman, rough, wild, free, boisterous, and exciting; Jacob is the settled man, stable, quiet, thoughtful, and civilized.”³¹ Literally, the phrase “skillful hunter” is “a man knowing game.” He should remind us of Nimrod, “a mighty hunter before the LORD” (lit., “a champion of game”; Gen. 10:9). This is not a good comparison, since Nimrod’s kingdom included Babel in Shinar (Gen. 10:10; cf. Gen. 11:1–2) and Assyria, two wicked nations whom God later used to judge the tribes of Israel.

The description of Jacob is quite different. The word for “quiet” in the phrase “quiet man” (*’ish tām*) most often means “blameless” (*tām/tāmīm*) in a moral sense, describing the righteousness of Noah (*tāmīm*; Gen. 6:9), Abraham (*tāmīm*; Gen. 17:1), and Job (*’ish tām*; Job 1:1, 8; 2:3).³² As we will see, Jacob is not as blamelessly righteous as Noah, Abraham, or Job; however, “quiet” is probably too weak. Rather, John Walton helpfully suggests that we interpret this as in some sense *socially* blameless: “sophisticated and refined, perhaps being an organized, administrative type of person who is conscientious, detail-oriented, well-rounded, and efficient.”³³ That is, Jacob is “at his best, toughly dependable, and at his worst a formidably cool opponent.”³⁴ Even so, we should not be too quick to condemn Jacob for what we perceive to be his flaws. The narrator never explicitly condemns Jacob either for stealing Esau’s birthright (Gen. 25:29–34) or Esau’s blessing (Gen. 27); however, the narrator *does* condemn Esau for despising his birthright (Gen. 25:34).³⁵

Earthly-Mindedness vs. Heavenly-Mindedness

In Esau and Jacob, then, we have a contrast between the heavenly-minded and the earthly-

minded. Esau is a man whose mind is set on the things of this earth, for he is “a man of the field.” Jacob, on the other hand, is a heavenly-minded man, a “perfect man.” Again, this does not mean that Jacob acts perfectly in every situation. Rather, the text is drawing a contrast between the earthly-mindedness of Esau and the “perfect,” heavenly-mindedness of Jacob. As we will see, these two very different sets of desires explain the different attitude toward the birthright.

Non-Identical Love

Perhaps worst of all, the brothers divide the love of their parents: “Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob” (Gen. 27:28). As Abraham preferred Ishmael (Gen. 17:18; 21:11) while Sarah fiercely protected Isaac (Gen. 21:9–10), so once again the father prefers the non-elect son, Esau, while the mother prefers the elect son, Jacob.³⁶ How could this be, since God clearly expressed that the older (Esau) must serve the younger (Jacob)? Earlier, the text portrayed Isaac as the righteous man of faith, praying for the healing of Rebekah’s barrenness (Gen. 25:21), but now “another side of Isaac’s character emerges. He is not only a passive, peaceable man of prayer but a gourmand who loves his food.”³⁷ That is, Isaac’s affection grows out of his own earthly-mindedness for Esau’s delicious food. The mind of Isaac, like all believers, is not set exclusively on heaven, but falls pray to temptations to seek after what is earthly. In Isaac’s earthly-mindedness, we see vividly the danger of neglecting what is heavenly for what it earthly. Calvin accurately captures the shock of this statement: “Isaac, preferring food to the inheritance destined for his son, would pervert (as far as he had the power) the gratuitous covenant of God!”³⁸ Esau will follow in his father’s foolishness by selling the inheritance of his birthright for a little food (Gen. 25:33). After that, Rebekah will trick Isaac into giving the blessing to Jacob through food (Gen. 27:1–29). In this way, both Isaac and Esau are following in their first father’s foolishness, who also sold the inheritance of Eden in order to taste the fruit that God had forbidden him to eat (Gen. 3:6).

The narrative probably does not want to see Rebekah innocently in this matter, either. The text does not give any kind of clarification for why Rebekah loves Jacob, but in Genesis 27:6–13 we will see that her love for Jacob leads her to deceive and manipulate her husband in order to secure Isaac’s blessing for Jacob. That is, she uses earthly-minded means (deception) to pursue heavenly-minded goals (granting Jacob the blessing). Her actions, then, are similar to Sarah’s giving Hagar to Abraham in that both seek the *right* ends through the *wrong* means. Therefore, Rebekah’s love for Jacob is, in one sense, an example of heavenly-mindedness to the extent that she sets her hope on the one whom God chose (cf. Gen. 25:23); however, in another sense, her love for Jacob is tainted by her earthly-mindedness in preferring the tent-dwelling son over the son who lived for the hunt.³⁹

Protecting from what is Profane (Genesis 25:29–34)

The clearest display of the difference between heavenly-mindedness and earthly-mindedness appears when we turn to the story of how Esau sells his birthright for a bowl of soup:

[29] Once when Jacob was cooking stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was exhausted.

[30] And Esau said to Jacob, “Let me eat some of that red stew, for I am exhausted!” (Therefore his name was called Edom.) (Gen. 25:29–30)

As Esau comes in from hunting, he is exhausted and demands food. Where pain affected the words of his mother's prayer to God (Gen. 25:22), exhaustion now affects Esau's prayer to Jacob, which is more brutish than our English translations put it: "Let me gulp some of the red stuff, this red stuff."⁴⁰ Because "red" Esau (Gen. 25:25) demands "the red stuff, this red stuff" (Gen. 25:30), people come to call him "Edom," which means "red."⁴¹ The earthly-minded man sets his heart exclusively on physical food.

Selling the Birthright

Jacob is willing to sell the food, but for a costly price:

[31] Jacob said, "Sell me your birthright now." [32] Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" [33] Jacob said, "Swear to me now." So he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob. (Gen. 25:31–33)

The birthright "was the status of firstborn: it meant the headship of the family and, in later Israel at least, a double share of the estate (Deut. 21:17)."⁴² When Isaac died, Esau's birthright meant that he could claim two-thirds of Isaac's estate, where Jacob could only claim one. As with the promised offspring, the promised birthright and Isaac's inheritance is not just about earthly wealth; rather, the birthright has to do with the way in which God will ultimately bring forth the promised offspring who will bless all the nations of the earth (cf. Gen. 25:5–6, 11). The heavenly-minded man sets his heart exclusively on the spiritual blessings.

Now, this does not mean that Jacob pursues the heavenly blessings through heavenly means. Rather, Jacob uses earthly-minded methods in the way that he takes advantage of his brother's exhaustion. Contrasted with Esau's ranting demand, "Jacob's reply is brusque....The way Jacob states his demand suggests long premeditation and a ruthless exploitation of his brother's moment of weakness."⁴³ Ironically, the skillful hunter Esau comes in from the field empty-handed only to walk into a trap: "The cunning hunter fell into a better hunter's trap, becoming prey to his own appetites."⁴⁴

Esau's reply is utterly foolish: "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" (Gen. 25:32). Esau dramatically overstates his condition to justify squandering a huge amount of future wealth for a bowl of soup *now*. Importantly, the consonants for the Hebrew word for "birthright" (*bkrh*) are nearly identical to the Hebrew word for "blessing" (*brkh*), which suggests that Esau is ready to give up even more than his father's inheritance, but even God's blessing, which Jacob steals in Genesis 27.⁴⁵ On the whole, this interaction illustrates that Esau loves the pleasures of this present world more than the blessings of God. John Calvin writes this:

Although, however, both the brothers were by nature equal, yet Moses represents to us, in the person of Esau, as in a mirror, what kind of men all the reprobate are, who, being left to their own disposition, are not governed by the spirit of God. While, in the person of Jacob, he shows that the grace of adoption is not idle in the elect, because the Lord effectually attests it by his vocation. Whence then does it arise that Esau sets his birthright to sale, but from this cause, that he, being deprived of the Spirit of God, relishes only the things of the earth? And whence does it happen that his brother Jacob, denying himself his own food, patiently

endures hunger, except that under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, he raises himself above the world and aspires to a heavenly life? Hence, let us learn, that they to whom God does not vouchsafe the grace of his Spirit, are carnal and brutal; and are so addicted to this fading life, that they think not of the spiritual kingdom of God; but them whom God has undertaken to govern, are not so far entangled in the snares of the flesh as to prevent them from being intent upon their high vocation. Whence it follows, that all the reprobate remain immersed in the corruptions of the flesh; but that the elect are renewed by the Holy Spirit, that they may be the workmanship of God, created unto good works.⁴⁶

Jacob capitalizes on his brother's foolishness, demanding that Esau swear over his birthright: "Jacob's curt three-word reply, 'Swear/to me/at once,' confirms that he is cold and calculating, determined to cash in on his brother's folly."⁴⁷ By making this deal, Esau "betrays a profane desire entirely addicted to the earth and to the flesh" and "to gluttony."⁴⁸ For this reason, the author of Hebrews warns us against following the foolishness of Esau:

[15] See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; [16] that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. [17] For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears. (Heb. 12:15–17)

We must protect ourselves from seeking after what is "profane," which is how the King James Version translates the ESV's "unholy" (Heb. 12:16). The lure of this world is powerful, but we will forfeit much if we allow ourselves to give up heaven in order to pursue the cravings of this earth. As Allen Ross writes, "Profane people are willing to relinquish things of lasting spiritual value because they live to satisfy their basic appetites."⁴⁹

Despising the Birthright

As we come to the end of this story, we might expect that both brother deserve an equal share of condemnation. Yes, Esau gives away his birthright, but Jacob cruelly takes advantage of his brother to gain it. Nevertheless, the text says nothing in condemnation of Jacob, but only of Esau:⁵⁰ "Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright" (Gen. 25:34). Earlier, Esau ranted and raved about his hunger, but now he is silent.⁵¹ Does he recognize what a poor trade he has made? The word "despise" suggests that Esau held his birthright in very little esteem throughout this transaction:

The rapid series of verbs prior to the report that Esau despised the birthright both lead up to and explain his despising. That is, by eating and drinking and rushing out, Esau showed that he had no interest in the birthright. He was more interested in feeding himself, like a brutish beast of the field. The report that he despised the birthright seems to summarize the entire event. "To despise" (*bāzâ*) something means to treat it as worthless or to hold it in contempt. The word often describes an attitude of contempt for the things of God, such as the law, the sacrifices, or the temple. In this passage the object is the birthright. Not only did Esau

consider it worthless—a fair trade for lentil soup—but afterward he came to despise it, perhaps looking back in angry remorse over his foolish act.⁵²

Or, as Gordon Wenham summarizes, “Esau has treated with flippancy something of great worth.”⁵³

Esau’s despising of his birthright—and Jacob’s ruthlessness in gaining the birthright—also illustrates something important about God’s sovereignty in this story. John Sailhamer explains this well:

The story of Esau’s rejection of his birthright is purposefully attached to the end of the narrative that introduces the motif of the older serving the younger. It is a narrative example that God’s choice of Jacob over Esau did not run contrary to the wishes of either of the two brothers. It is clear from the narrative that Esau was one who “despised” his birthright, while Jacob is portrayed as one who would go to great lengths to gain it. The importance of the contrast between the two brothers can best be seen in that the writer himself explicitly states the point of the narrative in the story’s conclusion: “So Esau despised his birthright” (25:34). In few cases in Genesis do we find such a clear and forthright statement of the writer’s own understanding of the sense of the individual stories. We are left with no doubt that the writer sees in this story of Jacob’ trickery a larger lesson—that Esau, though he had the right of the firstborn, did not value it over a small bowl of soup. Thus, when in God’s plan Esau lost his birthright and consequently his blessing, no injustice was dealt to him. The narrative has shown that he did not want the birthright. He despised it.⁵⁴

Esau is a tragic figure in the way that his actions bring about his own losses. Therefore, he is not a mere puppet who is acted upon, despite his efforts otherwise. God sovereignly chooses Jacob over Esau, but Esau freely gives up his birthright along the way. Esau is not tricked out of the birthright—he *despises* it. At the moment of decision, Esau eagerly exchanges heaven for earth.

Still, this does not mean that we should imitate Jacob’s actions here. Certainly, we should imitate his heavenly-minded desire to gain the blessings of God for himself, and to some extent, Jacob may demonstrate the spirit of the dishonest manager whose shrewdness is commended, even if his dishonesty is not (Luke 16:1–9). Through the rest of Jacob’s story, we will see that God will uphold his redemptive purposes in and through Jacob, and that Jacob will suffer as he receives the blessings that he cheats and steals to gain.⁵⁵ Jacob’s story is not about justice, but grace. Even so, God’s grace will not be Jacob’s ticket to an easy life,. Rather, God graciously calls Jacob—as he calls *us*—to *lose* everything in this life in order to *gain* everything in the next.

This story illustrates the truth of Jesus’ words: “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matt. 6:33). Esau seeks after “all these things,” and loses everything. Jacob seeks “first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,” and he gains everything. C. S. Lewis summarizes Jesus’ teaching well: “Aim at Heaven and you will get earth ‘throw in’: aim at earth and you will get neither.”⁵⁶ The rest of the story of Jacob and Esau will confirm this insight, so we must be careful in learning. Do not be profane like Esau, but give yourself to seeking what is perfect: not Jacob, but the *offspring* of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: the Lord Jesus Christ.

Discussion Questions

1. What do you pray for? Do you pray more for things that God has promised, or for the things that God has *not* promised? In prayer, are you seeking to lay hold of what *God* wants, or to manipulate God into giving you what *you* want? What does Isaac's twenty years of prayer for the promised offspring (Gen. 25:20–21, 26) teach us about how we should pray?
2. Why do you think the Bible places such an emphasis on God's election? Here, why does God tell us that he chooses Jacob to serve Esau, even before either of them have been born, or done anything good or bad (Gen. 25:23; cf. Rom. 9:11)? How should the doctrine of election humble us? How should the doctrine of election shape our prayers and our worship?
3. How would you define heavenly-mindedness? How do we see heavenly-mindedness in Isaac? In Rebekah? In Jacob? Do we see any heavenly-mindedness in Esau? Where might someone see heavenly-mindedness in your life? Where do you need to repent in order to seek after God's kingdom and righteousness? Is it worthwhile to forsake this world for God's kingdom?
4. How would you define earthly-mindedness? How do we see earthly-mindedness in Isaac? In Rebekah? In Jacob? In Esau? Where might someone see earthly-mindedness in your life? What makes earthly-mindedness so alluring to us? Why are we willing to sell eternal goods for temporal goods? How might you seek to protect yourself from what is profane in this life?

Notes

1. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, WBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 256–57.
2. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, WBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 172.
3. Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, NAC, vol. 1B (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 370.
4. Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 175.
5. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 174.
6. “The story hastens on to the new generation before pausing for Isaac himself, whose affairs can wait to the next chapter: such is the importance of the succession.” (Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 161.)
7. Abraham was 100 years old when Isaac was born (Gen. 21:5), Isaac is 60 years old when Jacob and Esau are born (Gen. 25:26), but Abraham does not die until he is 175 (Gen. 25:7). (Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, WBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 158.)
8. Kidner, *Genesis*, 161.
9. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 175.
10. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, trans. John King, vol. 2 (Reprint: Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 41. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.iii.i.html>>
11. “The difference lies in the verbal stems; the *qal* form means]to plead, supplicate,’ and the *niphal* (+ prep. *lamed*) indicates ‘to be pleaded with,’ i.e., answered prayer or accepted prayer (e.g., 2 Sam 21:14; 2 Chr 33:13,

19; Ezra 8:23). The *niphal* usage of the deity is often tolerative, ‘allowed himself to be entreated by him’ (*IBHS* §23.4h).” (Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, p. 386, footnote 45.)

12. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 174–75.

13. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 41–42. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.iii.i.html>>

14. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 175.

15. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 175–76.

16. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 172.

17. “A central theme of the remainder of the book—the struggle between brothers—is introduced in the brief account of the wrestling of the two twins in the womb. The conflict between brothers or within families is not a new motif in Genesis. Already in chapter 4 the struggle between Cain and Abel foreshadowed a whole series of such conflicts within the book: the sons of Noah (9:20–27), Abraham and Lot (13:7–12), Isaac and Ishmael (21:9), Jacob and Laban (chaps. 29–31), and Joseph and his brothers (chaps. 37–50). This emphasis on enmity and struggle appears to stem from the first words of judgment in the book, namely, God’s statement: ‘I will put enmity between your seed and her seed’ (3:15). The writer waits patiently until the end of Genesis to express the lesson behind these struggles in the words of Joseph to his brothers: ‘You meant it for evil but God meant it for good’ (50:20). Out of each of the struggles, God’s will was accomplished. The point is not that the struggles were necessary for the accomplishment of the will of God, but rather that God’s will was accomplished in spite of the conflict.” (John Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 185–86.)

18. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 175.

19. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 387.

20. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 177.

21. “A question here arises respecting the way in which Rebekah asked counsel of God. It is the commonly received opinion that she inquired of some prophet what was the nature of this prodigy: and Moses seems to intimate that she had gone to some place to hear the oracle. But since that conjecture has no probability, I rather incline to a different interpretation; namely, that she, having sought retirement, prayed more earnestly that she might receive a revelation from heaven. For, at that time, what prophets, except her husband and her father-in-law, would she have found in the world, still less in that neighborhood? Moreover, I perceive that God then commonly made known his will by oracles. Once more, if we consider the magnitude of the affair, it was more fitting that the secret should be revealed by the mouth of God, than manifested by the testimony of man. In our times a different method prevails. For God does not, at this day, reveal things future by such miracles; and the teaching of the Law, the Prophets, and the Gospel, which comprises the perfection of wisdom, is abundantly sufficient for the regulation of our course of life.” (Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 43. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.iii.i.html>>)

22. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 175.

23. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 185–86.

24. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 44. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.iii.i.html>>

25. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 372.

26. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 46, 47. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.iii.i.html>>

27. Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 433.

28. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 176.

29. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 440.

30. Kidner, *Genesis*, 162.

31. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 448.

32. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 177. My note: while Job 1:8; 2:3 describe Job as a “blameless

man” (אִישׁ תָּם) the phrase is slightly different in Job 1:1: “and that man was blameless” (וְהָיָה הָאִישׁ הַהוּא תָּם). The phrase in Genesis 25:27 to describe Jacob is אִישׁ תָּם.

33. John H. Walton, *Genesis*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 550.

34. Kidner, *Genesis*, 162.

35. “I am persuaded, however, that we should give the same meaning to *’ish tam* in Gen. 25:27 as we do to *’ish tam* in Job 1:8. As Evans has pointed out, only various characters in the Jacob story condemn and accuse Jacob; the narrative never articulates that point of view. Furthermore, the narrator does not hesitate to use a verb or phrase that shows his condemnation of Esau—‘he spurned his birthright’—in this particular incident, but employs no corresponding verb that shows a negative evaluation of Jacob.” (Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 181–82.)

36. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 372.

37. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 177.

38. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 50. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.iii.i.html>>

39. “For we commonly find the affections of parents so divided, that if the wife sees any one of the sons preferred by her husband, she inclines, by a contrary spirit of emulation, more towards another. Rebekah loved her son Jacob more than Esau. If, in so doing, she was obeying the oracle, she acted rightly; but it is possible that her love was ill regulated. And on this point the corruption of nature too much betrays itself. There is no bond of mutual concord more sacred than that of marriage: children form still further links of connection; and yet they often prove the occasion of dissension. But since we soon after see Rebekah chiefly in earnest respecting the blessing of God, the conjecture is probable, that she had been induced, by divine authority, to prefer the younger to the firstborn. Meanwhile, the foolish affection of the father only the more fully illustrates the grace of the divine adoption.” (Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 50. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.iii.i.html>>)

40. Kidner, *Genesis*, 162–63.

41. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 444–45.

42. Kidner, *Genesis*, 162.

43. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 178.

44. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 449.

45. “It may also be significant that בכרה [‘rights of firstborn] is an anagram of ברכה ‘blessing,’ the subject of chaps. 26–27 and a key theme in Genesis. What Esau is prepared to forfeit here will pave the way to his greater loss, the loss of the blessing, in chap. 27.” (Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 178.)

46. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 52. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.iii.i.html>>

47. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 178.

48. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 53, 54. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.iii.i.html>>

49. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 451–52.

50. “This chapter does not comment ‘So Jacob supplanted his brother’, but ‘So Esau despised his birthright’; and Hebrews 12 shares its standpoint, presenting flippant Esau as the antithesis of the pilgrims of Hebrews 11.” (Kidner, *Genesis*, 163.)

51. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 178–79.

52. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 451.

53. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 178.

54. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 186.

55. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 178–81.

56. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000), 134.