

Lesson17

Genesis 25, 26, 27

The Death of Abraham

Read Genesis 25:1-18

The lists of descendants of Abraham through Keturah and Ishmael show that God is fulfilling His promise to Abraham to give him a multitude of descendants and to make Ishmael the father of nations as well. How does this chapter make it clear that of all his descendants, Isaac is the true heir?

The author records three ways in which Isaac was preferred over his half-brothers as the true heir of not just Abraham's property but of the promise as well: he received the bulk of Abraham's inheritance; he made his home near Beer Lahai Roi, in Canaan, while the other sons were sent away to live outside the promised land; and he was the recipient of God's blessing after Abraham's death.

Why do you suppose God chose just one of Abraham's sons, Isaac, and excluded the others? Does that suggest an unfair partiality on His part?

Consider for a moment the ultimate result had God blessed all of Abraham's sons equally (don't forget that far from abandoning them, God did bless and prosper the other sons for Abraham's sake): Anyone in Abraham's bloodline, whoever the mother, would have been heir to God's covenant promise. Far from extending the reach of the covenant, however great and numerous the other sons' families became, this would firmly establish one family, the natural children of Abraham, as the people of God - to the exclusion of everyone else on earth. God's goal, however, is worldwide blessing. He means to restore all of mankind to His family. By choosing Isaac over Ishmael, God confirms that all people born of faith (as Isaac was born of his parents' faith in God's promise to do the impossible) are truly children of Abraham and thus heirs of the promise. This, too, may seem limiting - but in fact it is God saying, "Forget the circumstances of your birth. Anyone who comes to me in faith is mine!"

St. Paul expands on this in Romans 9:6-8: "...For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his descendants; but 'through Isaac shall your descendants be named.' This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are reckoned as descendants." We who are not Jews by birth should be thanking God from the bottom of our hearts that God chose Isaac, for that choice opened the door for us to become true Israelites through His Son; and members of His family in the Church.

The Birth of Jacob and Esau

Read Genesis 25:19-26

Gen. 25:21 says that "Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife, because she was barren. The LORD answered his prayer..." Read vs. 20 and 26. How many years did Isaac pray for Rebekah? What might have given him that kind of persistence in prayer? Why might God have taken so long in answering?

If Isaac was 40 years old when he married Rebekah, and 60 years old when she bore the twins, then he prayed for 20 years that Rebekah would conceive. Isaac was tested by God during this waiting period, even as Abraham was tested while waiting for the birth of Isaac. In both cases, the delayed answer demonstrated that the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham would come by grace, not by man's effort.

Isaac's prayer would have been based on what he knew was God's word and promise, and strengthened by what he knew of his own birth and his parents' prayers. It seems fitting that Isaac, the long-awaited child of the promise, would himself be strong in hope and faith that God would continue to do what He had started.

How does Rebekah respond to the fact that her sons are struggling, even before birth, in her womb? What does she learn?

Rebekah went to the Lord to find the source and meaning of the discord in her womb. God told her that the twins she is carrying would father two nations. They would be unequal in strength, and the older would serve the younger. This revelation accurately predicts the future relationship between Israel and Edom, the nations that will spring from her sons.

What does the way Jacob was born (and consequently the meaning of his name) suggest about the type of man he would be?

Jacob, "he takes by the heel" or "he supplants," grabbed his twin by the heel as though trying to pull his way out before his brother. Jacob will find it difficult to leave things to God, instead striving to work circumstances to his own advantage and pull ahead by wiliness and his own effort.

Read Romans 9:6b-16, especially vv. 10-13. According to the Apostle Paul, what was God's choice of Jacob based on? Was God's choice of Jacob over Esau to father His people a result of any merit on Jacob's part? How do you know? What does God's choice depend on, and what does His selection of the younger brother show?

God chose Jacob because He wanted to choose Jacob - not because of anything Jacob had done, good or bad. Jacob (and by extension Israel) was chosen by God before he was born, out of God's "sheer, gratuitous love (CCC 218)." This is the principle of election, which says that God's choice depends on His sovereign will and mercy toward us. God chose the younger of Isaac's twin boys just as He chose the second son of Abraham and would later bypass Jacob's oldest sons: to showcase His power, His sovereignty, His work in fulfilling His promises. As the Apostle Paul shows in Romans, the same thing is true today: God chooses us not because we're born a Jew (or Catholic!) or because of anything we do, but out of His love and will and mercy.

Ancient laws directed that the birthright - which included the right to at least a double portion of the father's inheritance, as well as the position of superiority and leadership over any siblings after the father's death - belonged to the first-born son. Does Esau seem to appreciate the value of his birthright? Why or why not? Contrast his priorities with Jacob's.

Esau is interested in satisfying his own needs, and thus sold his future for a meal; according to vs. 34 he not only did not appreciate the value of his birthright, he despised it. His number-one priority is himself, and the needs and pleasures of the moment, whereas Jacob will do anything to get the future, lasting benefit that the birthright will provide.

Chapter 26

To a nomadic wanderer like Isaac, it would be natural to live where food was available, and move when it was not. His father Abraham moved to Egypt during an earlier famine, and Isaac here begins to follow in his footsteps. Why did God stop him? What did He promise if Isaac stayed?

God's plan was to give Isaac and his descendants the land of Canaan, and He meant them to set down roots there. This sounds like it might be a test of Isaac's faith; this is, after all, the second time Isaac has a compelling reason to leave, but has been told to stay (the first was when it was time for him to find a wife from among his people). Will Isaac stay in the place where God wants him, even though it is as a stranger and there is a famine in the land? Now it is Isaac's turn to trust God's word when he can't see the reasoning behind it. We aren't given the details that we were with Abraham; we don't know if he struggled. We do know that God promised to be with Isaac and bless him if he stayed, and that God confirmed his intention to carry out all he had promised Abraham, through Isaac. And we know that Isaac trusted those promises, for he stayed in Gerar (vs. 6).

How does Isaac handle disputes over water rights in the area Abimelech had allowed Abraham to live in? How does God reward him?

Isaac gives up his right to the disputed wells, moving on until he finds a place over which there is no argument. And even though Abimelech has sent him away, Isaac is conciliatory and accepts the oath that Abimelech proposes to establish peace between them.

What do you suppose is the significance of Esau's actions in v 34?

Isaac, as a son of the covenant, recognizes that to marry a heathen from Canaan is displeasing to God. Why? Could it be because they would find it hard to leave their own gods to embrace the God of their husband? Remember that Abraham refused to allow Isaac to marry a Canaanite, instead sending his servant back to Paddan-Aram to procure a wife for him. Esau's entire personality was one of nonchalance. He assumed that the first-born blessing would cover any of his actions. He didn't value his birthright because he thought his firstborn blessing would return it to him. In the same way, Esau's personality, assumed that he could marry not one but two Hittite women and his first born blessing would make it OK. He fully expected to make the rules when he came into power.

Chapter 27

Jacob has traded with Esau for the birthright; now he goes for the blessing. Did Jacob have any rights, humanly speaking, to these things? Why do you think Rebekah pushed Jacob to deceive Isaac and get the blessing?

As the second-born son, Jacob had no right to expect blessing or birthright as long as his older brother lived and was in his father's favor. Presumably he knew the circumstances of his birth that led to his name, and possibly Rebekah had told him of the Lord's words to her as well. "The older will serve the younger," God said while the twins fought in her womb (Gen. 25:23). Rebekah loved Jacob more than his brother (Gen. 25:28) and she would have held God's words close in her heart those 40 years. She is determined that Jacob - and not Esau - will get his father's blessing, and is even willing to take the risk of being cursed to make sure he gets it (Gen. 27:13).

The word for "birthright" in Hebrew is bekorah; "blessing" is berakah. Throughout this account, the two words and ideas are played against each other. They both involve the inheritance of the "firstborn," which was a position or title and not just a word denoting birth order. The firstborn became head of the family on his father's death, and as such was both leader and spiritual head of the tribe. He received a double portion of his father's inheritance (cf. Deut 21:17) along with a blessing: in this case leadership, prosperity and - the ultimate blessing - God's promises originally given to Abraham.

The word God gave to Rebekah about her sons was born out in their temperaments and actions. Esau, who by all rights should have received the birthright and accompanying blessing, did not appreciate either the position or the privileges associated with it or he would not have held it so lightly as to sell it for a bowl of stew. And Jacob stepped solidly into his name "he supplants," as he first bought the birthright and then deceived Isaac into blessing him over his older brother, thus legally sealing the transfer of position and inheritance.

Isaac's role in the drama is not often mentioned, but it must be asked why, knowing God's words to Rebekah, he determined to bless Esau. His haste and secrecy in arranging the blessing seem out of place for such a grave occasion. Clearly Isaac loves his eldest son - and just as clearly, God intends to bless and promote the younger.

While Scripture does not justify Rebekah's scheme or Jacob's deception, God uses them to further His plan to elevate the undeserving Jacob. The birthright, inheritance, and blessing all are gifts of God, given by His grace and not due to any merit on the part of the recipient.

Isaac unwittingly blesses Jacob in vss. 27-29. Describe the blessing he gives. Are any elements similar to those of God's blessing on Abraham in Gen. 12:2-3?

Isaac blesses Jacob with richness and abundance from God; he will rule over not just nations and people but over his brothers as well. Those who curse him will be cursed, and those who bless Jacob will be blessed. This benediction of fruitfulness, leadership and blessing echoes God's blessing on Abraham and its promise of a great name and nation and of blessing/cursing on those who bless/curse him.

How does Esau react to his brother's deception? Does he repent of despising his birthright? (See also Heb. 12:16-17.)

Esau cries bitterly and begs for even a single blessing that his father may have held back from Jacob, whom he clearly sees as deceiving him out of not just the blessing but the birthright as well. Esau's sorrow seems to be over his loss; he does not appear to see his own fault in the matter or that he lost his birthright because he did not value it. Instead, he falsely accuses Jacob of having tricked him out of it. It's a case of too little too late for Esau. Now that he sees what he's lost, it's too late to get it back and he is "rejected." (Heb. 12:17)

Are Esau's pleas effective? Why or why not?

However hard Esau might cry and plead, his father's blessing cannot be revoked. It is legally binding and would be effective even given under mitigating circumstances. To the ancient world, blessings (and curses as well) had even more power than we give our legal documents: it was believed that the words themselves, spoken under God's authority, actually accomplished what they pronounced.

Compare Esau's blessing to Jacob's. How are they similar or different?

Isaac answered Esau's cries with a blessing that served only to highlight the greater blessing given to Jacob: where Jacob will be blessed by God of heaven's dew and of the earth's richness, Esau will dwell away from these things. Where Jacob will rule nations and be lord over his brothers, Esau will live by the sword and serve his brother. There is but one hope given him, that at some point he will throw off Jacob's yoke from his neck.

How does Esau deal with his frustration and anguish over losing the birthright and blessing?

Far from forgiving Jacob, Esau "hated Jacob" after losing their father's blessing. He holds onto his grudge, letting it fester into anger and bitterness, then plots to bide his time until Isaac dies, when he plans to kill his brother.

In vs. 45, Rebekah asks, "why should I be bereft of you both in one day?" What does she mean? How does Rebekah save both her sons from Esau's wrathful plot? b. What justification for sending Jacob to Laban does Rebekah give to Isaac?

If Esau were to kill Jacob, he would deserve death in return. By sending Jacob away to Laban until Esau calms down, Rachel saves not only Jacob's life but Esau too, from becoming a fugitive from vengeance and punishment. Sadly she will never "send, and fetch" her beloved son home again as she intends; she will die before he returns.

What justification for sending Jacob to Laban does Rebekah give to Isaac?

Rebekah frames her suggestion to send Jacob to Laban by saying he should find a wife from among her people and not from among the Hittites. This is a veiled criticism of Esau, who had married two Hittite women who have made her life weary (Gen. 26:34 and 27:46), and further reason for blessing Jacob over his older brother.