



The Patriarchs | The Gospel According to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob

The Birthright

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Genesis 25.19ff

Now these are the records of the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham became the father of 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. 21 And Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD answered him and Rebekah his wife conceived. 22 But the children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is so, why then am I this way?" So she went to inquire of the LORD. 23 And the LORD said to her, "Two nations are in your womb; And two peoples shall be separated from your body; And one people shall be stronger than the other; And the older shall serve the younger." 24 When her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb. 25 Now the first came forth red, all over like a hairy garment; and they named him Esau. 26 And afterward his brother came forth with his hand holding on to Esau's heel, so his name was called Jacob; and Isaac was sixty years old when she gave birth to them. 27 When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the field; but Jacob was a peaceful man, living in tents. 28 Now Isaac loved Esau, because he had a taste for game; but Rebekah loved Jacob. 29 And when Jacob had cooked stew, Esau came in from the field and he was famished; 30 and Esau said to Jacob, "Please let me have a swallow of that red stuff there, for I am famished." Therefore his name was called Edom. 31 But Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." 32 And Esau said, "Behold, I am about to die; so of what use then is the birthright to me?" 33 And Jacob said, "First swear to me"; so he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. 34 Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew; and he ate and drank, and rose and went on his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

We're looking at the Book of Genesis and we have referred to it as The First Book of Moses...as the church has always called it...

And it's VERY helpful to think about Moses'...original audience...If he was writing during the time of the Exodus...and he's writing to the people who came from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the Patriarchs.

Once, they were just a very old child-less couple but now, years later under Moses, a huge nation. And they're leaving Egypt, where they've been enslaved and God is leading them to the Land He promised the Patriarchs...and they're learning their spiritual history and heritage... and God is going to give them freedom and victory and the Land...and they pass through the territory of the Edomites (the descendants of Esau, "Edom", as he's called in today's reading)... and these Edomites say, "NO! We will not give you safe passage!" (Num 20.14ff)

And that Exodus generation...expecting liberation and success in a new home...found instead, big, big opposition from Edom and from other people and from within (their own infighting and doubt and weakness). And it must have been very discouraging to be a member of that church...the Israelites in the wilderness.

I'm so glad the modern church has worked out all her problems! ... Truth IS: we have all the problems they had and more. The church in America is in decline (at least from some measurements). Lucas sent me an article this week that says Protestants are no longer the majority in America (as they have been from the start). What tipped the scales is the growing number of "nones" (not nuns) but people who have no affiliation to any faith tradition at all. Is the church losing relevance and what will our grandchildren find...will the church be around? Would anyone even miss us?

THIS story is meant to encourage the people in Moses' day who wondered whether God's church in their generation was going to survive the opposition they faced. AND it's there to inform and encourage OUR generation... "Yes, the church will always be relevant and despite appearances, the church WILL thrive because God has a plan for it".

Let's look at: 1) A Little Story With Big Incongruities 2) Just what IS this birthright and why so important? 3) How to get help from this story

This is a little story in two parts: the birth of these twins and then (27ff) a scene when they were grown up.

And the stories are comprised of unexpected elements that don't seem to belong. First, there's this woman, Rebekah and she is infertile. That's not so unusual but last time (ch. 24) we learned that she was the appointed bride for Isaac. She was the ideal person that God Himself had planned for Isaac to marry so that the promise to Abraham could be fulfilled...There had to be a mother in Israel. But the appointed mother...can't have children...and they've been trying for 20 years! Why appoint a mother who can't...mother?

And this incongruity is solved through prayer. Isaac prays for his wife, Rebekah, and the LORD answered and she conceived. Why? Maybe God wants them to be very clear that children are a gift from God. They're not an automatic biological product.

So now she's pregnant...and that's a blessing...that's a blessing she could do without! This is an extremely traumatic pregnancy! The children are smashing or crushing (Heb) within her. And she asks, basically, (22) "If this is such a blessing then why does it hurt so bad!" (Isn't that a question we've all asked?) - a second incongruity.

So, she inquires of the LORD. And she receives a kind of prophecy: (ANOTHER absurd feature) she doesn't have two children in her womb but two NATIONS! No wonder it hurts! AND they are incompatible, like oil and water, TWINS but somehow not similar at all.

And the prophecy contains yet another incongruity: the one will be strong, the other weak but the one who is first will be last (like a riddle!) – the older will serve the younger! It's a mystery... an oddity!

And THIS seems to be the crux of the whole two-part story: according to nature and according to custom and according even to divine Law – the strong survive, the firstborn gets a double inheritance. It's called the law of primogeniture and it was deeply embedded in Middle Eastern culture (and may others) and even in the Mosaic Law (Deut 21.17). If there are 11 children, the inheritance is divided into 12 parts and the oldest son gets two shares. And if there are only two sons then the inheritance is divided into three parts and the oldest gets TWO of the THREE – 2/3 of the total.

And all that is a bummer for the younger child but what if you're younger by just a few seconds? How sad is that? But that's the law of primogeniture!

And yet the point of this passage seems to be that God would not be bound by that law, that custom, that natural way of doing things. This would not BE NATURE but GRACE! The victory of God's people over all the forces that oppose them – troubles with OUT and fears and temptations within – the victory would not come by superior breeding, or by simple cause and effect or by following conventional wisdom and custom. Their victory would be due to grace – God reversing things and turning them upside down!

We've already seen it with Cain and Abel (the younger brother, Abel, offered the pleasing sacrifice. Then Ishmael and Isaac – it was the younger, Isaac, who was chosen to be the baton-carrier. We'll see it again and again throughout the whole Bible – Joseph's sons at the very end of Genesis when grandpa Jacob blesses them – Jacob crosses his hands and puts the right hand on the head of the younger. David will be the youngest brother...and... "But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity."

God is setting it up for us right here...alerting us to look for it in all of Scripture. God's Kingdom will not depend on human effort and achievement, human custom but instead on the upside-down way of grace. The way of God with His Church – grace – is the ultimate Cinderella story!

And so these sons, Esau the elder, the hairy-one and red... like a hyena...tough. He's an outdoorsman and hunter and a "man's man" and older and stronger. Then Jacob, an inside guy, homebody and a mama's boy and refined...and he's chosen. Jacob means "heel" as if to say God is backing you up, God is right behind you protecting you...but also, as one who grabs the heel, like someone who can trip you up and trick you.

And this whole two-part story sets us up for things to come...the oracle (prophecy) their descriptions...the names... all portents/omens of things to come.

And then a final incongruity – it turns out, just as the prophecy said, the older is NOT going to be the leader. Turns out he is not qualified to be a patriarch because he doesn't even care to be one. He has no appreciation for the position. He thinks NOT of heritage and future and of receiving the promises of God. (BTW – this is the moment in time when for 15 years Abraham – Isaac – and Jacob were alive at the same time). But Esau comes in from the field, ruddy and red...and sweaty and STARVING!

He smells that red lentil stew and says, "Please, gimme, some of that RED...RED!" (That's why they called him Edom, it says, because he loved the red stuff and he was red...Edom means red!)

Jacob, the heel-grabber, the snatcher, sees his moment: "First, sell me your birthright!"

Esau says, "It's not gonna help me if I'm dead...and I'm about to die of HUNGER...come on...how bout it?"

Jacob, cunning, like the big bad wolf, "First, swear to me."

Esau says... “Whatever...”

Jacob says, “Uh-uh-uh! Not ‘whatever’! Say it like you mean it...IN FACT, MEAN IT!”

So he swore to him and he sold his birthright to Jacob. And Jacob, the wolf, says, “Take off your coat, sit a while...have a nice steaming bowl of savory stew...isn’t that nice...isn’t it worth it...what good is that old birthright gonna do a dead man...almost starved to death...didn’t ya’?!”

Then Edom...Esau stood up and left... “Thus Esau despised his birthright”...just didn’t care.

So what’s the big deal about this birthright? Well, it wasn’t for Esau. It had to do with the future with a heritage...and he was a man for NOW!

And yet for Jacob...and his mother who knew the prophecy and probably shared it with Jacob...it was a material thing...mostly. It was an insurance policy. It was a way to “feather your nest” for the future. Was it a spiritual thing...well, probably not, at least at this point... and that’s another odd thing about this story: Esau isn’t qualified...but neither is Jacob. He’s not living by faith...he’s living by manipulation and he’s moved by selfishness.

But what he’s going to learn is that the birthright is his stepping INTO the way of grace. The seed of the woman who will bruise the serpent’s head and save the world – Jacob has just stepped into that family line. He has secured, even though unwittingly, has secured a place in the line of promise.

And for US the birthright is our being adopted into the family of Abraham and into the line of Jesus Christ. Somewhere along the way, it dawns on us that we are being offered admittance into the very family of God. The door to the upside-down Kingdom of grace is opened to us.

God calls us and says, “All the world can offer you is a gulp of red-stuff...but I am offering you a new life, to be re-born with a pedigree...a place in My family tree...so come.”

Jesus Christ comes into the world...the One True Son and unlike Esau, He sees the all-surpassing value of this birthright. And yet, He becomes weak, becomes little and He empties Himself in order to give us what we really don’t fully understand or appreciate but what is INFINITELY VALUABLE AND PRECIOUS.

To Esau, it was a light and worthless thing to sell his birthright...to Jesus Christ it was the eternal weight of glory...it was inestimably significant. He can not give it to us until He first lives the beautiful life of love IN OUR PLACE...obeying in order to fulfill our obligations...and then bleeding and dying...like a sponge he is absorbing my guilt at the same time He is being wrung out...He’s losing His birthright...He is being drained of His Sonship until He no longer has the right to address God as Father...and says, instead, “My God My God why hast Thou forsaken Me?” He loses that place of intimacy and birthright in order that I might have it.

If you receive it from Him...the birthright...the privilege of calling God, “Abba! Father”, you have received the most valuable gift and honor you could ever receive. Not a double-share but an infinite share – all that Jesus Christ has is now yours...Intimacy with God is now yours.

Over the next few weeks...little by little...we'll see that Jacob seems to get it...He begins by wrestling with Esau...eventually, he will wrestle with God and then come to rest in God, a man sweetly vanquished by grace and secure in who God has made him to be. It won't be an easy life but enormously rich.

And how this story might be most helpful to you is if you could say, "Lord I am a Jacob...a hack who little knows the value of what I hold...but I want to get it...as we walk with Jacob...Lord, I want to get it over these next few weeks...I want to appreciate the status that is mine as a child of God.

I see that Jesus gave me His birthright...I want it to mean everything to me...I want it to change everything for me...I want to wrestle with You Lord and be vanquished in your grace."

So, we'll close in a minute and maybe you could pray that way.

OR...you may see that, maybe you grew up in the church...went away...thought of it as irrelevant...tried to find significance in stuff...or in a relationship or in pursuing pleasure...or being cool...were a hunter for something that was right here all along...

Maybe you were an Esau...traded your birthright for a swallow of red-stuff...Maybe today you could start to call on God for help and restoration.

I was there once...and I found that God was ready to kill the fattened calf and welcome me into the house of joy...So, come...call on Him and let new life begin.