

Lesson 10: November 4, 2018

A Troubled Birth

Bible Background • GENESIS 25:19–34

Printed Text • GENESIS 25:19–34 | Devotional Reading • MATTHEW 16:13–20

We are often discouraged when our lives do not go smoothly but are disrupted by human conflict and struggle. How can our efforts amount to anything worthwhile when riddled with human frailty and error? In spite of their selfish actions, God was present in the lives of Esau and Jacob.

Words You Should Know

- A. Sod Pottage nazid (Heb.)—Lentil stew.
- B. Birthright bekorah (Heb.)—Certain privileges within a family, in this case an inheritance.

Say It Correctly

Padanaram. pad-em AIR-em.
Esau. EE-saw.

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: CONTRAST the carelessness of Esau with the planning of Jacob; APPRECIATE relationships where selfishness is not the driver; and CONSIDER opportunities to bridge broken relationships with family members.

In Focus

Jasmine was very close to her mother; they spoke every day and spent time together at least once a week. Erica, the eldest daughter, was a bit of a “wild child.” Erica was never quite sure what she wanted to do, and seemingly only contacted her mother to ask for things. Jasmine decided for her mother’s 70th birthday that they should all go on a cruise. Her father, mother, and younger brother all got ready for the trip. Erica emailed, texted, and talked about how excited she was to go, too. However, when time for the trip finally came, Erica had not purchased her plane ticket. She was frantic because she wanted to go and asked Jasmine for help. “I can’t lend you money for a plane ticket right now,” Jasmine replied. “The airfare is really high and we’ve been planning for months.” “So you would just leave me here?” Erica stammered.

“You are leaving yourself. Mom will be celebrating with me and the rest of the family. Who knows if you’ll even be here when we get back!”

Erica was heartbroken. She walked out of the room and did not look back. Jasmine felt emotional and began to think about what she had said. She did not know if there was any way to help the situation, and it wasn’t her fault Erica was unprepared. But she knew she would miss having her sister on the trip. She knew the first thing she had to do was pray.

Oftentimes family members can bring the greatest joys and challenges in our lives. Why is it sometimes more difficult to give to our families than our friends?

Keep in Mind

“And the Lord said unto her, Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger” (Genesis 25:23, KJV).

Focal Verses

KJV

Genesis 25:19 And these are the generations of Isaac, Abraham’s son: Abraham begat Isaac:

20 And Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah to wife, the daughter of Bethuel the Syrian of Padanaram, the sister to Laban the Syrian.

21 And Isaac intreated the LORD for his wife, because she was barren: and the LORD was intreated of him, and Rebekah his wife conceived.

22 And the children struggled together within her; and she said, If it be so, why am I thus? And she went to enquire of the LORD.

23 And the LORD said unto her, Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger.

24 And when her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb.

25 And the first came out red, all over like an hairy garment; and they called his name Esau.

26 And after that came his brother out, and his hand took hold on Esau’s heel; and his name was called Jacob: and Isaac was threescore years old when she bare them.

27 And the boys grew: and Esau was a cunning hunter, a man of the field; and Jacob was a plain man, dwelling in tents.

28 And Isaac loved Esau, because he did eat of his venison: but Rebekah loved Jacob.

29 And Jacob sod pottage: and Esau came from the field, and he was faint:

30 And Esau said to Jacob, Feed me, I pray thee, with that same red pottage; for I am faint: therefore was his name called Edom.

31 And Jacob said, Sell me this day thy birthright.

32 And Esau said, Behold, I am at the point to die: and what profit shall this birthright do to me?

33 And Jacob said, Swear to me this day; and he sware unto him: and he sold his birthright unto Jacob.

34 Then Jacob gave Esau bread and pottage of lentiles; and he did eat and drink, and rose up, and went his way: thus Esau despised his birthright.

NLT

Genesis 25:19 This is the account of the family of Isaac, the son of Abraham.

20 When Isaac was forty years old, he married Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean from Paddan-aram and the sister of Laban the Aramean.

21 Isaac pleaded with the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was unable to have children. The LORD answered Isaac’s prayer, and Rebekah became pregnant with twins.

22 But the two children struggled with each other in her womb. So she went to ask the LORD about it. “Why is this happening to me?” she asked.

23 And the LORD told her, “The sons in your womb will become two nations. From the very beginning, the two nations will be rivals. One nation will be stronger than the other; and your older son will serve your younger son.”

24 And when the time came to give birth, Rebekah discovered that she did indeed have twins!

25 The first one was very red at birth and covered with thick hair like a fur coat. So they named him Esau.

26 Then the other twin was born with his hand grasping Esau’s heel. So they named him Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when the twins were born.

27 As the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter. He was an outdoorsman, but Jacob had a quiet temperament, preferring to stay at home.

28 Isaac loved Esau because he enjoyed eating the wild game Esau brought home, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

29 One day when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau arrived home from the wilderness exhausted and hungry.

30 Esau said to Jacob, “I’m starved! Give me some of that red stew!” (This is how Esau got his other name, Edom, which means “red.”)

31 “All right,” Jacob replied, “but trade me your rights as the firstborn son.”

32 “Look, I’m dying of starvation!” said Esau. “What good is my birthright to me now?”

33 But Jacob said, “First you must swear that your birthright is mine.” So Esau swore an oath, thereby selling all his rights as the firstborn to his brother, Jacob.

34 Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and lentil stew. Esau ate the meal, then got up and left. He showed contempt for his rights as the firstborn.

People, Places, and Times

Jacob. He was the younger son of Isaac and Rebekah, and Esau’s twin brother. God changed his name from Jacob to Israel (which means “God prevails”) after Jacob proved his perseverance by wrestling with an angel (Genesis 32:22–32).

Esau. He was the eldest son of Isaac and Rebekah, and the twin brother of Jacob. A rugged outdoorsman, Esau was favored by his father. Eventually, Esau went to live in a mountainous region south of Moab along the Dead Sea. The area came to be known as Edom, which means “red” or “ruddy,” characterized by the red sandstone that covers much of the terrain, as well as Esau’s red hair and complexion.

Background

Isaac married Rebekah, a woman from his father’s family, in keeping with Abraham’s wishes (she is the granddaughter of Milcah, who was introduced in Genesis 11:29). He had survived the tension created by Abraham fathering a child (Ishmael) by Hagar, the result of Abraham and Sarah’s feeble attempt to help God fulfill His promise of an heir.

Ishmael was conceived in accordance with tradition of the time, when a handmaiden could be used to birth an heir in the case of a barren wife. In ancient Middle East, the firstborn would be the intended heir to receive a double portion of the inheritance (land, livestock), the greater covenantal blessing, and headship of the tribe. Typically, the inheritance would be divided by the number of sons, plus one. Isaac’s estate would have been divided into thirds, with Esau intended to receive two-thirds of the estate upon Isaac’s death. Esau failed to value its importance in the present, because he would not receive it until the unforeseen future.

Both Isaac and Jacob would deviate from tradition, by God’s supernatural intervention, in birth and blessing. Interestingly, Jacob would also follow in his grandfather’s footsteps by taking spiritual matters into his own hands to secure a promise made by God, creating strife that would last for generations.

Jealousy and sibling rivalry is not new— Cain and Abel, Rachel and Leah, Joseph and his brothers.

How has sibling/familial rivalry impacted your family, either your family of origin or in your own home?

At a Glance and In Depth

At-A-Glance

1. Jacob and Esau’s Birth (Genesis 25:19–26)
2. Esau Sells His Birthright (vv. 27–34)

In Depth

1. Jacob and Esau’s Birth (Genesis 25:19–26)

Isaac’s wife, Rebekah, was barren (like Isaac’s mother), which seemingly endangered the Lord’s promise to make Abraham into “a great nation” (Genesis 12:2). Isaac sought God, perhaps learning from Abraham’s experience, and pleaded with Him. As with Abraham, it would be two decades before God answered.

Rebekah’s pregnancy was tumultuous, which prompted her to “inquire of the Lord” to find out what was wrong with her baby. God responded with an oracle, telling her that she was carrying the fathers of two nations who would be at odds with one another. It is interesting that God says that they will “be separated” — a prediction of what will later occur as a result of Jacob and Rebekah’s deception.

Naming children during those times was a weighty task, as many believed it could control a person’s destiny. A name could pronounce blessings or hope for the future. Other times it was a way to honor or connect with ancestors. Sometimes it was a way to mark something significant about the birth or events surrounding it.

The names given to Jacob and Esau were wordplays on other Hebrew words. Esau’s name sounded like the Hebrew word for “hairy.” Jacob’s name sounded like the word for “heel-catcher,” a meaning which can be fleshed out as “may God be at his heel (protect)” or “he who catches the heel (tricks).” In God’s sovereignty, their conception and births would be a foreshadowing of their futures.

Do you know what your name means? Is it true to who you are? What about your child or children?

2. Esau Sells His Birthright (vv. 27–34)

The differences between the twins were evident from birth and time would reveal more. Esau, the more rugged one, was the hunter and outdoorsman who was favored by his father. Jacob, described as plain and quiet, had tasks that allowed him to stay near the tents and spend more time with his mother, making him her favorite. The favoritism shown by both parents would later be the undoing of their family.

Narratives indicate that Esau is impulsive and short-sighted. Here, he allows his immediate need and hunger to overshadow wisdom and future provision (“I am at the point to die: and what profit shall this birthright do to me?”). Later, he marries an Ishmaelite woman (Genesis 28:9), strengthening the family ties between the two sons who did not receive God’s blessing, Ishamel and Esau.

Because he sold his birthright for red lentil stew, Esau receives the name “Edom,” which means “red” in Hebrew. It was also the name of an area known for its red sandstone, where he would eventually settle. His descendants would be the Edomites, and that nation would struggle with Jacob’s descendants, the Israelites, throughout history.

Perhaps knowing about the prediction that he would be the stronger nation, Jacob seizes an opportunity to help bring it to fruition. He willingly takes advantage of his brother’s weakness to secure a better future for himself. Both brothers neglected to count the cost their decisions would have on future generations.

Consider a time when you were short-sighted or impulsive, perhaps even taking advantage of someone. What was the outcome?

Search the Scriptures

1. What did Jacob and Rebekah do when they faced difficult situations (Genesis 25:21–22)?
2. What does the name “Edom” refer to (vv. 25, 30)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. How does this story of sibling rivalry or family strife that impacted a family for generations make you think about your own family or families around you?
2. God had already revealed the destiny of the twins Esau and Jacob (Genesis 25:23). Why did Jacob then resort to deceit and trickery instead of prayer and trust in God for the outcome?

Lesson in Our Society and Make it Happen

Liberating Lesson

Our society has become woefully individualistic, expressed in mottos such as, “Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps” and “It’s a dog eat dog world.” It is completely contrary to Scripture and to many African cultures (and African American communities) that embrace proverbs like, “If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” Many of our communities are struggling because of Jacob and Esau mentalities—focusing only on self and the present. The abolishment of slavery and the civil rights movement succeeded because people came together with a focus on making life better not just for themselves, but for future generations.

Application for Activation

Paul warns the church, “Don’t be selfish; don’t try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don’t look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too” (Philippians 2:3–4). We see how Jacob and Esau failed to apply this verse. How have you been affected by others looking out for themselves more than you? How did it impact the relationship? Search your heart and see if you need to forgive someone.

What have you pursued, or what are you pursuing out of selfish ambition? How well do you apply the Philippians verses to your daily life—work, home, school and church? Ask God to bring to mind those you have offended. Seek forgiveness from Him and them.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light On The Text

Genesis 25:19–34

The section introduces the whole cycle of Jacob and Esau and offers glimpses of three episodes in their early years that both determine and illustrate the subsequent course of their careers. In these sixteen verses, we have their future lives in a nutshell.

19 And these are the generations of Isaac, Abraham’s son: Abraham begat Isaac: 20 And Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah to wife, the daughter of Bethuel the Syrian of Padanaram, the sister to Laban the Syrian. 21 And Isaac intreated the Lord for his wife, because she was barren: and the Lord was intreated of him, and Rebekah his wife conceived.

The opening, “These are the generations of Isaac” is one of the ten headings marking a new division within Genesis (see Genesis 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 11:27; 25:12). The introduction here is designed specifically to connect Isaac’s offspring with Abraham. Isaac’s sons are the central characters and the reader’s attention is on them.

The story begins by summarizing Isaac’s marriage to Rebekah. It looks forward to Jacob’s future journey to Paddan-Aram and his dealings with his uncle, Laban (Genesis 29–31).

The word “intreated” (Heb. ‘athar, aw-THAR) is not commonly used for prayer in the Old Testament. It occurs often when specifically praying that God remove some bad thing, whether plague (Exodus 8:8–9, 28–30; 9:28; 10:17–18), curse (2 Samuel 21:14), or as here barrenness. Its usage also suggests the earnestness with which Isaac sought the Lord for the fulfillment of His promise. There is an important lesson: Though God had already

promised to multiply his family, Isaac prayed for it. It is also significant that although Isaac prayed for many years and his request seemed to go unnoticed, he did not stop praying or believing God for an answer. The fulfillment of God's promise is always sure, even though it may appear to be slow.

22 And the children struggled together within her; and she said, If it be so, why am I thus? And she went to enquire of the LORD. 23 And the LORD said unto her, Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger. 24 And when her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb. 25 And the first came out red, all over like a hairy garment; and they called his name Esau. 26 And after that came his brother out, and his hand took hold on Esau's heel; and his name was called Jacob: and Isaac was threescore years old when she bare them.

Rebekah's happiness was soon clouded by the agonies of the twins that she carried, as the children struggled within her. The words "struggled together" (Heb. ratsats, rawts-ATS) elsewhere refers to political oppression and shattering objects into pieces. The children in her womb dashed against or bruised each other, suggesting a violent agitation occurring inside her, so much so that she was apprehensive about her own safety and for the safety of her unborn children.

Concerned about the situation, Rebekah went to inquire of the Lord. Note the uniqueness of the conflict here. The prenatal fight between twins rages so vehemently that their mother is driven to despair. "Why am I thus?" Rebekah wonders in despair. Even in the womb there didn't appear to be enough room for Esau and Jacob. Their mother's womb became their first battlefield, an ominous sign of what was to follow among their descendants.

How the Lord communicated with Rebekah is not explicitly stated. More important was the message: The "two nations" inside her womb were struggling with each other. The word "nations" (Heb. goy, GO-ee), as used here, generally refers to "a people, tribe, or nation at large" (cf. Genesis 10:5). Rebekah had not one but two manner of "people" (Heb. le'om, leh-OME) struggling inside her. The use of the Hebrew word le'om has a particular significance. At its root, le'om implies togetherness or a cohesive unit, and indicates an ethnic or cultural bond. God was letting Rebekah know that the struggle between her unborn sons had implications far beyond mere sibling rivalry. The two were embarking upon a journey that would last throughout their lives and the lives of their descendants. Jacob is the father of the Israelites. His older brother is the father of the Edomites.

Next we find the power that biblical people placed in names. Esau was the firstborn: "And the first came out red." The word "red" (Heb. admoni, ad-mo-NEE) means of a reddish color. They called him Esau, the hairy one. This simply means that he was covered with red hair. The name Esau has a loose connection with a place called Seir, the early name for Edom to the southeast of the Dead Sea, where Esau later settled (Genesis 32:3; 36:8). At birth Jacob did not simply follow close upon the heels of Esau, but seized Esau's heel, as if he would trip him up. He had his brother's heel by the hand while in his mother's womb; the name Jacob means "heel-catcher." Esau interprets his brother's name to mean "supplanter" (Genesis 27:36). As with Esau, so, too, Jacob's name would take on a meaning later in life as his deceptive nature became evident. From the very beginning, the twins' birth had great significance for later events in their lives. Twins were considered by some ancient people to be a blessing from God.

27 And the boys grew: and Esau was a cunning hunter, a man of the field; and Jacob was a plain man, dwelling in tents. 28 And Isaac loved Esau, because he did eat of his venison: but Rebekah loved Jacob.

As the boys grew up, their different personalities began to emerge. Esau, the rough and hairy child, became the great hunter and sportsman. On the other hand, Jacob is described as a “plain man,” that is, someone who dwells in tents. This word usually has the moral connotation of uprightness or perfection (Genesis 6:9; Job 1:1, 8; 2:3), which used here may mean Jacob was a blameless or plain nice man.

We also see here the parental attachment to one child in preference over another. Isaac loved Esau, and Rebekah loved Jacob. Parents must carefully guard against such partiality and realize it as both sinful and dangerous. The reason for Rachel’s special love for Jacob is not stated. Nevertheless, whatever her motives, the scene is now set for Rebekah to use her husband’s appetite to acquire the blessing for the son she admired most (Genesis 27). The brothers are already moving inexorably toward realizing the prophetic announcement of their division. The conduct of both parents was less than commendable. Their favoritism led to the strife that existed between the two brothers. While siblings can exhibit vastly different personalities, no one child should be slighted, neglected, or preferred by their parents.

29 And Jacob sod pottage: and Esau came from the field, and he was faint: 30 And Esau said to Jacob, Feed me, I pray thee, with that same red pottage; for I am faint: therefore was his name called Edom.

When Esau returned from hunting, he was “faint.” That he was faint (Heb. ‘ayeph, aw-YAFE) simply means that he was worn out. It is a type of hunger combined with parched throat that results in total weariness. Jacob had food. The Hebrew word nazid (nah-ZEED), translated “pottage” refers to soup. The phrase then in a modern translation might say Jacob boiled (sod) soup (pottage). The writer sets the story by pointing out that Esau got into trouble, trying to show not so much Jacob’s deceitfulness but Esau’s lack of self-control.

Esau asked Jacob to feed him. The Hebrew word la’at (law-AHT), which Esau uses, comes from the root that means to swallow greedily. Simply speaking it means gluttony. It looked good, and Esau had to have some. This moment of greed followed him through generations. His greed not only affected him, it affected his posterity.

31 And Jacob said, Sell me this day thy birthright.

Jacob knew that he had his brother where he wanted him. Jacob knew that Esau was not thinking straight. Jacob made him an offer he could have refused. Jacob’s words were “sell me.” To a speaker of the English language the impact of this word is not obvious. But in the Hebrew language the word makar (maw-KAR) could imply slavery in this context. What Jacob was saying is for Esau to turn over his life to him on account of food. In the African culture it was immoral to use food as punishment or as a means of blackmail. Jacob did blackmail Esau.

In biblical times to have a birthright (Heb. bekorah, beh-ko-RAH) meant that one had certain privileges. These privileges usually belonged to the firstborn male child in a family. In the Old Testament, the privileges of the firstborn were clearly defined. They included the official authority of the father, a double portion of the father’s property, the functions of the domestic priesthood, and authority and superiority over the rest of the family (Genesis 27:27–29; 49:3; Numbers 8:14–17; Deuteronomy 21:17). Included in the birthright was a double portion of whatever inheritance the parents may have to give. Sometimes deceit and intrigue developed—even murder — as each family member sought to be the one to inherit double portion. Another aspect of the birthright was the spiritual blessing that the father, and in some cases the mother, usually bestowed. At stake for Esau and Jacob was not just their father’s material possessions but also the spiritual legacy of their grandfather, Abraham. When Jacob asked for Esau’s birthright, he was positioning himself to be the direct spiritual heir of the Abrahamic covenant. In African cultural terms Jacob was inverting the natural order of the family. He was saying to his brother, “Make me your senior.”

32 And Esau said, Behold, I am at the point to die: and what profit shall this birthright do to me?

Esau insisted that he was barely alive. The Hebrew for “at the point to die” could be translated “walking toward death.” In his own eyes his hunger meant that he was continually in conversation with death. Here we find the amazing power that uncontrolled desire exercises over the self. He did not understand that the spiritual blessing that was his was the only security he had over the power of death. Esau saw eating Jacob’s food as the only cure for his death. Esau then adds the clincher: “What profit shall this birthright do to me?” Esau’s not knowing how the birthright would benefit him leads one to consider that he did not deserve it.

33 And Jacob said, Swear to me this day; and he swore unto him: and he sold his birthright unto Jacob.

Jacob saw his brother’s weakness. He wanted the birthright. It was serious to him. He was not going to take a mere promise. The only thing he knew that could bind Esau to his word in the presence of God and in community was an oath. Jacob calls him to swear an oath.

In the Old Testament oaths were sacred appeals to God to make sure that promises would be kept. African societies have oral laws that surrounded the enforcement of oaths. It was also believed that God paid attention to the spoken word of an individual. In the Old Testament, word is power. One’s word was intricately bound with one’s life. So the oath that Jacob asked his brother Esau to swear was binding. Breaking it would lead to serious consequences, though these are not specifically stipulated in the text.

The Hebrew words for swear (shaba, shaw- VAH) and for the number seven (sheba, SHEH-va) might be related (cf. Genesis 21:30–31). Seven is often regarded as the biblical number of completion, such as in creation. There is an old Igbo custom in which a promise is made seven times in order to put it into effect.

34 Then Jacob gave Esau bread and pottage of lentiles; and he did eat and drink, and rose up, and went his way: thus Esau despised his birthright.

After the oath-taking, Jacob gives Esau the simple meal. Then the narrative lists four verbs in a matter-of-fact list, as Esau completes these simple, straightforward actions with as little thought as he gave up his birthright. He “ate” (Heb. ’akal, aw-KAL). Figuratively speaking, he burnt up the food. He satisfied his lust. Having been consumed and devoured by his lust, he freely fed his lust.

He also drank. The word shathah (shaw- THAW) means to drink or feast. He had himself a banquet. This speaks more to the inner character of Esau as one who was controlled by his appetite. Then, he simply got up and left. Amazingly, he had just lost his birthright over a pot of stew, and he just arose and went away.

The writer concludes the story by saying “thus Esau despised his birthright.” The word despise is quite important. It is translated from bazah (Heb. baw-ZAW), which has the root idea of treating something more lightly than it should be treated, without reverence to the importance of the matter. Esau, by being so flippant, despised his spiritual and cultural heritage. By ignoring his own spiritual heritage, which was tied to his birthright, Esau became a person of scorn and subject to the judgment of God.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Water Issue Resolved Peacefully, Peoples
Blessed (Genesis 26:6–22)

TUESDAY

Jacob and Esau Reconcile, Families Blessed
(Genesis 33:4–11)

WEDNESDAY

Too Late for Repentance
(Hebrews 12:14–17)

THURSDAY

Commit to God's Love and Justice
(Hosea 12:2–6)

FRIDAY

Differences Settled Peacefully
(Genesis 26:28–33)

SATURDAY

God Blesses Ishmael and His Descendants
(Genesis 21:8–13; 25:17–18)

SUNDAY

Different Traits Rooted in Conception
(Genesis 25:19–34)