

**Sermon Notes: Cameron Webber,
“Birthright Robbery (part 1)”****28 April 2024****Readings: Genesis 25:19-34, Heb 12:14-17, John 10:27-30**

Series Introduction

Today we start a series on the life of Jacob, possibly best known for his dream of a stairway to heaven and for wrestling with an angel. But why have a Series on Jacob?

We noted in the ‘Insight’ (in the bulletin) a couple of weeks ago that the story of Jacob is a ripping yarn! Who doesn’t love peering in on someone else’s dysfunctional family? The story of Jacob has all the elements: plotting, scheming, deceiving, and struggling; dreams, angels, bigamy, revenge and reconciliation.

But more than being a good story, it is part of God’s word to us; part of the unfolding story of God’s plan of salvation that makes up the Old Testament, and Jacob is a key character in that narrative of salvation history. Some ten chapters of Genesis given to his story. He is one of the ‘Patriarchs,’ one of the Fathers of God’s chosen people. God is called the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

But the Old Testament historical accounts are not an end in themselves. They firstly point us forward to Jesus in whom everything is fulfilled. And secondly, Paul tells us (1 Corinthians 10:11) that the Old Testament contains ‘examples that were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfilment of the ages has come.’

There is much to learn from the Old Testament and we’ll keep those two aspects in mind through this series. There are parallel Bible study notes in the foyer and available online.

One thing I would encourage you to do is to read the all of Genesis 25-35 in one sitting. Become familiar with the overall story as we then delve into it week by week. And it’s always helpful to pre-read for each Sunday particularly as we will be dealing with some pretty big blocks of the text on some Sundays. And don’t forget to bring your Bible or have your Bible App open as the word is preached.

Prayer**Introduction**

What’s in a name? Have you heard of those people whose name suits their job? It’s called ‘nominative determinism.’ I’m not sure if some of these are urban myths or not, but...

- At an eye clinic in Liverpool there is a senior nurse called W. Iball.
- Here in NSW there is a dog show judge by the name of B Woof.
- A school in England has a Miss Beat as the Music Teacher and a Mr Sentence in their English Department.
- The Bureau of Meteorology employs an A Rainbow.
- Neil Gamble was the head of the Sydney Casino.
- And in New Scientist Magazine there was a report of a research paper on incontinence, by JW Splatt & D Weedon!

What’s in a name? These days people don’t put as much emphasis on the meaning of names as they did in time past. Names are chosen because people like the sound of it, or because of family connections. My parents certainly didn’t choose my name for its meaning! But in biblical times meanings were important. So what’s in a name?

What's in the name Esau? Have a look at verse 25, with the footnotes. He's red and hairy – so let's call him 'Hairy' which is what Esau means. And let's nick-name him 'Red' (which is what Edom means) and doubly so, because he likes red stew (v30).

And Jacob, he's born grasping at his older twin brother's heel (v26) so let's call him 'Grasps the Heel' which is what Jacob means and as the footnotes explain, Jacob/Grasper is also an idiom for 'Deceiver.' And all of that becomes real as the story unfolds, even today as Esau's birthright is stolen by Jacob.

1. The Sovereignty of God

But even before we get to the birth of the boys, there is a problem. Isaac and Rebekah are unable to have children. Rebekah is barren (v21). And it's not the first time we encounter such a problem in the book of Genesis, and it won't be the last: Rebekah is barren, as Sarah was before her and as Rachel will be after her.

This repeated difficulty in having children shows the sovereignty of God - his 'in-controlness'.

God had made promises to Abraham about uncountable descendants and finally Isaac was born – the son of promise – 25 years after the promise was made. Isaac is born in God's time, not Abraham's and Sarah's. The miraculous birth of Isaac showed it must be of God. God is sovereign and in-control.

And no doubt Abraham had told Isaac all this, so when Isaac marries Rebekah and no children come along, he does the sensible thing: 'Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was childless. The LORD answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant (v21).

Isaac didn't have to wait as long as his father. Isaac and Rebekah were not as old as Abraham and Sarah, but it was still a twenty year wait (see v20, 26).

We can't be sure, but it doesn't read as though Isaac only decided to pray after a nineteen year wait. It seems that he spent the majority of those years praying for God to fulfil the promises made to Abraham.

God is sovereign; He is in control. He opens the wombs and closes wombs so that his promises and purposes are fulfilled in his time and in his way. Interestingly here (and elsewhere) we see God acting sovereignly, yet also acting in response to the prayers of his people.

And we see God's sovereignty and his complete knowledge as the babies jostled each other in the womb. Rebekah enquired of the LORD (v22) and the answer given, the prophetic word of verse 23 will become programmatic for all that follows. 'Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the elder will serve the younger.'

2. The Sinfulness of God's People

And though God is seen to be Sovereign as the prophetic word is given, it also points to some problems. Because as much as we see the sovereignty of God, we also see the sinfulness of people, even of God's chosen people.

God is sovereign, but he doesn't always override our weakness, our failures, our sin. And whilst this is a story of a sovereign God, the context of the working out of God's sovereign plan is a fallen world of human frailty and human sin.

Jacob the 'grasping deceiver' is the one through whom God fulfils the promises to Abraham. Through devious Jacob comes the nation promised to Abraham and finally Jesus, through whom the promise of blessing comes.

The family is divided. The boys have different personalities (v27) which is fine, but leads to parental partisanship, 'Isaac ... loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob.' (v28)

This is a sinful family, yet God works out his purposes and even uses their shortcomings, their sin as the means to bring about his purposes.

As we heard (v29), 'Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished.' He'd probably returning from hunting, exhausted and hungry, he sees Jacob cooking and says (v30) 'Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I'm famished!'

This red stew sounds like a good meaty stew that Esau, the man's man, Esau the hunter would enjoy. And brotherly affection would surely demand that Jacob freely meet his brother's need but with callous calculation he insists that the stew be exchanged for Esau's rights as the firstborn son (v31). It sounds like a premeditated demand, exploiting his brother at his moment of weakness to gain his brother's birthright.

In the ancient near east the first born son had a special place that is echoed in the later Law of Moses. There is an inheritance advantage for the first-born and Esau is invited to exchange that birthright for a bowl of red stew.

No doubt Rebekah had told Jacob of the LORD's word to her, that there would be a reversal in the order, so maybe Jacob thought he would ensure it would happen in his own devious way, rather than waiting on the LORD.

In response Esau prattles on, 'I am about to die. What good is the birthright?' (v32) Though if he really was about to die he wouldn't be raving on. Rather than being at the point of death what we see is a careless indifference to something the ancient world held dear.

But Jacob is cold and calculating and determined to cash in on his brother's folly. 'Swear to me first' (v33a) is his curt reply, and the inequitable exchange is made (v33b): 'Esau swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob.'

And so Jacob gives Esau some stew, not the red meaty stew we might have thought but a bowl of lentil stew and some bread (v34a). Baked beans on toast. The vegan option!

And so Esau surrenders something of long term value, something that is tied up with God's covenant, for the immediate appeasement of his hunger. Babbling on earlier, Esau is now silent. 'He ate and drank, and then got up and left (v34b).

Explicit moral comment is rare in Old Testament narratives so the final phrase of verse 34 is important: 'So Esau despised his birthright.'

Jacob has been portrayed as heartlessly exploitive, but the narrator finds it unnecessary to comment on that here. The results of his action will become clear as the story unfolds. But here the most decisive aspect is mentioned. In his response to the choice offered to him by Jacob, Esau despises his birthright, and he despises himself and he despises the LORD and so Esau must change places with Jacob.

Already the older is becoming the slave of the younger. Seeds of animosity have been sown and as they grow the whole family will be torn apart further fulfilling the prophetic prediction of division from birth. Division that will end, not in one family but in two nations; division that will have an ongoing impact throughout the OT; division whose reverberations are not forgotten in the New Testament.

3. The Grace of God

And when we put those two things together - God's sovereignty and human sinfulness – the fact that there is a story to tell at all shows us that this is a story of God's grace. Grace, the free, undeserved goodness and favour of God to us.

The story of Jacob is one of conflict, but it culminates in ultimate triumph as God works out his purposes. And that ought to be a big encouragement to us as we too are recipients of God's grace and we know that if it depended on us we would be in major trouble!

Paul picks that up in Romans 9 when speaking of Jacob and Esau he says: 'Before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad in order that God's purpose in election might stand, not by works but by him who calls - Rebekah was told, 'The older will serve the younger.' It does not depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy.'

God works out His purpose. He is the one who calls, not according to our works, but according to his grace – 'before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad.'

Yes, Esau does the wrong thing, but there is no disguising the failures of the chosen line. Abraham goes astray more than once. Even in the little bit we have read Isaac and Rebekah are partisan. Jacob is, at times, positively obnoxious.

Yet despite all their sinfulness, God's chosen are preserved and blessed. God's ultimate saving purpose is not thwarted by human weakness, God chooses the patriarchs not because they are particularly loveable characters but because of his declared intention that in them all the families of the earth could find blessing through Jesus, because, as Paul reminds Titus, it is in Jesus that 'the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, so we can be saved, not because of our 'righteousness', but because of his mercy. ... We are justified (made right with him) by his grace, and have the sure and certain hope of eternal life. (Titus 3:4-7)

And so Jacob emerges from Scripture not as a perfect hero but as a real person, and with him and his failings we can identify, because none of us deserve salvation. It is all God's grace.

The fact that God was able to use someone like Jacob to forward his purposes may shock us, but it should surely encourage us, for at times we fall as badly as he did. If God could use him, he can graciously save us and use us in his purposes. And in it all, we must rely on God's grace, not our own so-called goodness because we all have a bit of Jacob or Esau or both in us.

In the life of Jacob, we see the God of Grace, working out his Sovereign purposes despite human sinfulness, our failings. I trust that it is (and will be through this series) an encouragement to us.

4. The Responsibility of God's People

God is sovereign, his grace covers our sin, but the Grace of God not an excuse for slackness or presumption on our part.

Jesus has given himself to redeem us, and to purify us, not so we can do what we like, but so we can be his people eager to do what is good. (see Titus 2:11-14). And that same grace that saves us is also the grace that 'teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives.'

As Christians, we have a responsibility, a responsibility to live for Him, and the writer to the Hebrews in the New Testament picks up on this account of red stew (as we heard read from Hebrews 12:14-17): Make every effort to live in peace and be holy; See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God, no bitterness, no immorality, don't be like Esau!

Right through Hebrews 12, the writer is drawing attention to the peril we expose ourselves to through careless disregard of the blessings of the new covenant, with Esau given as the classic Old Testament example of someone who showed careless disregard for the old covenant.

And the warning is there for us to not miss the grace of God through our persistent disobedience, through unbelief. This warning (and others like it in Hebrews) don't negate the promise of Jesus that 'no one can snatch them out of my hand' (John 10:28) but is serious and does need to be heard because we can put ourselves out of God's hand, we can miss the grace of God, when we turn away from relying on Jesus.

Esau is described as godless. But we are to be the opposite, we are to make every effort to be holy. As Christians we are given the holiness of Christ as we accept him, as we trust him, relying on his perfect life and his death in our place. And because of what God has done, we seek day by day, in the strength of the Holy Spirit, to live that out, as we are transformed more and more into the image of Christ.

And it is not just some kind of personal piety. The call in Hebrews 12 is a call to the Christian community, to God's family to look out for one another.

- See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God.
 - Look out for one another. As the writer has said a couple of chapters earlier: Spur one another on to love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:24-25).
- See to it that no bitter root grows up to defile,
 - We know the pain of bitterness, of division within a church. We must do the best we can avoid bitterness, part of which is being forgiving.
- See that no one is sexually immoral.
 - In our sex saturated society it's easy to be dissatisfied with the being celibate in singleness and faithful in marriage. The whole media tell us that such is unnatural, but if we follow the world's lead, knowing that it is out of place for those called to be God's holy people, we put ourselves at risk.
- See to it that no one is godless.
 - We are to be vigilant, not just for ourselves but for one another, so that none of us become like Esau - godless, preoccupied with personal gratification and the present moment, allowing our appetites to dictate our desires and our behaviours, turning our back on what is holy for the sake of the moment, and thus showing reckless disregard for the covenant blessings secured for us through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Conclusion

Yes we have a responsibility, and yes we know we continue to sin, but we have a God who is sovereign, we have a God of Grace, a God who is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. (Psalm 103)

And as we look at Jacob, we are reminded that God takes frail people, he takes Jacob as he takes, as someone has said, he takes failed sinners and turns them into trophies of his grace.

Prayer