

We continue our journey through Genesis. Last week we looked at the life of Abraham and his struggle to trust God but eventual obedience to God and the sparing of Isaac. Now we look at this promise that God has made, to make a nation out of Abraham’s descendants, and how it begins to unfold. And as you might imagine, the problem of human sin will continue to challenge this relationship between God and his people. I will begin with the end of Abraham’s life in Genesis 25 and then read passages from Genesis 27.

Genesis 25:5-8, 19-23, 27-34

5 Abraham left everything he owned to Isaac. 6 But while he was still living, he gave gifts to the sons of his concubines and sent them away from his son Isaac to the land of the east. 7 Abraham lived a hundred and seventy-five years. 8 Then Abraham breathed his last and died at a good old age, an old man and full of years; and he was gathered to his people. 19 This is the account of the family line of Abraham’s son Isaac. Abraham became the father of Isaac, 20 and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah daughter of Bethuel the Aramean from Paddan Aram and sister of Laban the Aramean. 21 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. 22 The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, “Why is this happening to me?” So she went to inquire of the LORD. 23 The LORD said to her, “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 older will serve the younger.”

27 The boys grew up, and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was content to stay at home among the tents. 28 Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob. 29 Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished. 30 He said to Jacob, “Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I’m famished!” (That is why he was also called Edom. ) 31 Jacob replied, “First sell me your birthright.” 32 “Look, I am about to die,” Esau said. “What good is the birthright to me?” 33 But Jacob said, “Swear to me first.” So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob. 34 Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, and then got up and left. So Esau despised his birthright.

Genesis 27: 1-19, 30-35

1 When Isaac was old and his eyes were so weak that he could no longer see, he called for Esau his older son and said to him, “My son.” “Here I am,” he answered. 2 Isaac said, “I am now an old man and don’t know the day of my death. 3 Now then, get your equipment—your quiver and bow—and go out to the open country to hunt some wild game for me. 4 Prepare me the kind of tasty food I like and bring it to me to eat, so that I may give you my blessing before I die.” 5 Now Rebekah was listening as Isaac spoke to his son Esau. When Esau left for the open country to hunt game and bring it back, 6 Rebekah said to her son Jacob, “Look, I overheard your father say to your brother Esau, 7 ‘Bring me some game and prepare me some tasty food to eat, so that I may give you my blessing in the presence of the LORD before I die.’ 8 Now, my son, listen carefully and do what I tell you: 9 Go out to the flock and bring me two choice young goats, so I can prepare some tasty food for your father, just the way he likes it. 10 Then take it to your father

to eat, so that he may give you his blessing before he dies.” 11 Jacob said to Rebekah his mother, “But my brother Esau is a hairy man while I have smooth skin. 12 What if my father touches me? I would appear to be tricking him and would bring down a curse on myself rather than a blessing.” 13 His mother said to him, “My son, let the curse fall on me. Just do what I say; go and get them for me.” 14 So he went and got them and brought them to his mother, and she prepared some tasty food, just the way his father liked it. 15 Then Rebekah took the best clothes of Esau her older son, which she had in the house, and put them on her younger son Jacob. 16 She also covered his hands and the smooth part of his neck with the goatskins. 17 Then she handed to her son Jacob the tasty food and the bread she had made. 18 He went to his father and said, “My father.” “Yes, my son,” he answered. “Who is it?” 19 Jacob said to his father, “I am Esau your firstborn. I have done as you told me. Please sit up and eat some of my game, so that you may give me your blessing.”

30 After Isaac finished blessing him, and Jacob had scarcely left his father’s presence, his brother Esau came in from hunting. 31 He too prepared some tasty food and brought it to his father. Then he said to him, “My father, please sit up and eat some of my game, so that you may give me your blessing.” 32 His father Isaac asked him, “Who are you?” “I am your son,” he answered, “your firstborn, Esau.” 33 Isaac trembled violently and said, “Who was it, then, that hunted game and brought it to me? I ate it just before you came and I blessed him—and indeed he will be blessed!” 34 When Esau heard his father’s words, he burst out with a loud and bitter cry and said to his father, “Bless me—me too, my father!” 35 But he said, “Your brother came deceitfully and took your blessing.”

So, how many of you out there have experienced dysfunctional families? My family experienced lots of dysfunction when I was growing up and I remember that I assumed that God probably resonated better with “normal” families than with mine. It was not until later in life when I got to read Genesis in more detail that I began to appreciate that God has been working with and despite dysfunctional human beings since almost the beginning of time. And the family in which Esau and Jacob grow up is no exception. And no one escapes the blame in this passage either. There is plenty of sin to go around.

To go back, Abraham dies. He has left almost everything to Isaac, the son of Sarah. Now remember there were other sons. He had Ishmael with Hagar as well as other sons with another concubine, because he and Sarah got anxious about having descendants and did not wait for God to do what God promised. Now these others that are given gifts and sent away, you can be sure that these become nations that will be a challenge to Israel later. All of our sins have consequences, many of which we cannot possibly know from our limited view point. In fact, in an ironic twist, the Ishmaelites, who descend from Ishmael the son Abraham has with Hagar, they are the ones to whom Joseph will be sold to as a slave later in Genesis. They then later become an enemy nation in the time of King David. So the disobedience and sin of Abraham has long reaching consequences.

But Abraham did show his ability to trust and obey in last week’s passage and now we are up to Isaac. And in verse 21 of Genesis 25 we find Isaac praying to the Lord because they have not had any children. The problem of being childless...have you heard this one before? This was Sarah’s issue as well. This challenge of being childless after being promised many descendants is a theme in Genesis. It happens to Sarah, to Rebekah, and will happen again to Rachel, Jacob’s wife. So this is a theme. It seems like God is really pushing them to rely on God for the promise to happen. But notice the difference here, Isaac prays to the Lord and God answers

his prayer and she is pregnant with twins. Very different from Sarah and Abraham taking matters into their own hands with Hagar the Egyptian. Isaac turns to the right solution when he encounters a struggle. He turns to God in prayer. Now we can be tempted to see prayer as an ask-and-receive system. I want something, I pray for it, and I hope I get it. But we need to remember to still give God the sovereignty that God deserves. Just because I want something does not mean it is in my best interest. And God is also not locked into my timing for an answer. In the case of Isaac, God's will is to bless him and keep the promise of a long line that will be blessed, so in this case the prayer is answered and they have twins.

The strife between these twins Esau and Jacob seems to begin in the womb. And God warns that the two will separate from each other and that the older will serve the younger. Is this a self-fulfilling prophecy? Or is this God knowing what will unfold and already knowing that the covenant made with Abraham will have to continue, even if it is through an unlikely hero such as Jacob? Last week we looked at Abraham and Sarah's long journey of faith and how only after a long and struggled relationship did Abraham learn to trust God. Jacob will have a long journey of faith as well. Some would argue Jacob has one of the toughest and most tumultuous relationships with God in Genesis, obedient one moment and deceptive the next. Yet God will somehow continue the covenant. And perhaps the lesson will be that we need to learn not just from Jacob's sin and failures, but also accept that God can work even in the most messed up of circumstances.

Jacob and Esau are born and grow up and we are told they are very different. Esau likes to be outside hunting. Jacob is a home boy. He likes to cook. And in verse 28 we get a taste of the dysfunctional family we are about to get to know. The Bible says "Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob." So we have an obvious problem...each parent has a favorite. And we learn in Genesis 27 that each of them is willing to deceive the other. This problem of favoritism and how it destroys familial relationships will show up again later in the story of Joseph. And here the favoritism begins on the part of Isaac. In verses 1-4 Isaac tells Esau to go get the game and prepare the meal so he can receive the blessing. Normally a blessing would be a family event, but here it seems to be a secret plan between Isaac and Esau, his favorite son. Isaac is no doubt aware of what God has told Rebekah, that the older son will serve the younger son. So perhaps Isaac is trying to get his way instead.

Esau is not without blame here either. Remember the part of the story where Esau gives up his birthright to Jacob? Going back to verse 29: "Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished. 30 He said to Jacob, "Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I'm famished!" (That is why he was also called Edom. ) 31 Jacob replied, "First sell me your birthright." 32 "Look, I am about to die," Esau said. "What good is the birthright to me?" 33 But Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob. 34 Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, and then got up and left. So Esau despised his birthright." So Esau does not respect his birthright. He will easily give it up in this case for something as little as the instant gratification of eating. Esau is not just a victim in this story. He also cares more about what he wants than what God might want and what will be expected of him as the first born.

So Isaac and Esau are conspiring to get Esau the blessing. Then we have Rebekah and Jacob, with the counter-conspiracy. And Rebekah and Jacob are quite the pair. When Isaac tells Esau what to do for the blessing verse 5 says that Rebekah was listening. The Hebrew word used for listen there is a word used for attentive listening. We Americans would call this eaves dropping. As much as Isaac plans for the son that he

loves to get the blessing and as willing as he is to be secretive to make it happen, Rebekah has every intention of secretly thwarting him. This is quite a cast of characters. And the one that takes the cake is Jacob.

Did you notice Jacob's reaction when Rebekah unveils her plot? He is not concerned about it being wrong. He has no problem cheating his brother, who he has already trying to get the upper hand on his whole life. His only concern is what? That he might get caught. Starting in verse 11 this is Jacobs reaction to the plot: "But my brother Esau is a hairy man while I have smooth skin. 12 What if my father touches me? I would appear to be tricking him and would bring down a curse on myself rather than a blessing." Jacob is worried about getting caught. He has no other moral concerns.

One of the most famous aspects of this story is the Esau is hairy and Jacob is smooth. This is of course the detail that worries Jacob in the deception and makes Rebekah's plot worthy of a CIA mini-series on TV. But Jacob being smooth it is actually more significant than just part of the plot. The Hebrew word used here for smooth is the same word used in other parts of the Old Testament to refer to deceptive speech. In other words a "smooth talker." So Jacob is not just smooth in appearance. It would appear by the choice of words here that he is also a smooth talker with deceptive speech. And deception has obviously become a big part of this story.

CS Lewis once wrote that "a little lie is like a little pregnancy." Leave it to CS Lewis to know how to put something into words. A little lie is like a little pregnancy. In other words, it is still a lie and has the same amount of consequence. Deception and lying make a mess of things. And this theme of deception is going to continue into Jacob's life with ongoing consequences. Later on Jacob will be the one that is deceived. He will work seven years to marry one wife and Laban will deceive him and slip in a different wife. Then Jacob's wife Rachel will deceive her father in order to steal from him. Jacob's sons will deceive an entire town to get what they want. And then Jacob's sons will deceive Jacob himself and convince him that his favorite son Joseph is dead, when indeed they have actually sold him into slavery. What a tangled web we weave! So much deception! And what is ironic is that God sees all of it. We can't hide our deception from God. So what results is God still knows about it, while the deception makes a mess in our own lives.

So God has made a covenant with Abraham; a promise. A promise to stick with Abraham and his descendants to make a great nation that will be God's people. Abraham, after a long faith journey, learns that obedience to God is the way to go. But now look at who God has to work with. A dysfunctional family where everyone is being deceptive in order to get what they want. How is God supposed to work with this? What is amazing about the book of Genesis is that no matter how messy it gets. Despite all the sins and faults of these people, God finds a way to fulfill the promise. Despite all these sorted details about the sins of Jacob and his family, look at how it plays out, look at how he is remembered: in Exodus God says to Moses "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." God does not say the father of Jacob the idiot. Jacob is admired. God has worked through Jacob despite his faults, to make the promised blessing happen. And in Matthew 8:11 Jesus says to his disciples "I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven." The kingdom of heaven. This guy Jacob? Yes, God has made a way.

So the first important lesson from this passage is that God can work with anything. I don't know about you, but my past and my background are not spotless. I have plenty of sins I regret. I have been disobedient to God many times. And I am so thankful that God can and does work with sinful people. Now does this mean I should go ahead and be as sinful as I want because I know God can work with it? No. Because the

consequences of my sin are still a reality. The consequences of Jacob's sins and deceptions play out from Genesis 27, which we read today, all the way to Genesis 35 and I encourage you to read that far this week. Sin has consequence. So no, we should not sin even though we know we have a forgiving God. But when we fail, when we think on past sin with regret, we can be encouraged and confident that God can work with us. God has done this for a long time and the track record of working with and redeeming sinful people is the story of the Bible.

The second lesson we get from this passage is that God is sovereign. God's will happens whether or not human beings cooperate and obey or not. God is at work in many ways which we do not know and never will. But the good news of this book we call the Bible is that God's will wins. Despite all the sins and all the failings of the humans that came before us and the ones we know and are today, God sees fit to win. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ conquers sin. One day we will no longer see sin and its consequences. And that is because no matter what gets thrown at God, God is sovereign and God's plan, which we can trust to be better than anything we come up with, will be fulfilled. Jacob, who was quite flawed, was unwittingly caught up in God's covenant. Today that covenant is still being fulfilled. God fulfilled his promise in Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God fulfilled his promise through that line to Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection. And God is still fulfilling this promise until he comes again. God is truly faithful. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen.