

Educating Isaac
Genesis 25:19 – 34

Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church
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Life Goes On

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.

What does the Patriarch Abraham leave behind when he dies? He leaves a new way of seeking righteousness and holiness. Responding to the call of God in his life, Abraham turned his back on the pagan religions of Mesopotamia. This was symbolized in his leaving of Haran and traveling to Canaan. He became a wandering Aramean, walking, following, the God of the Bible. The question remains: will Isaac be a man of faith like Abraham? Will Isaac follow the same path?

I speak regularly of the goal of Christian parenting: to raise our children into honorable, faithful adulthood. Every Christian parent desires that their children be both: honorable adults and faithful adults. And yet, I know a number of young adults who were raised in Christian households and have embraced honorable adulthood, but have not embraced faithful adulthood. These young adults are married, building their own families, are dependable in their occupation, they vote and take care of the property they own: just as their parents modeled for them. The question I want to ask them is this: *“You have followed your parent’s example in these areas of life, why have you not followed your parent’s example in embracing the Christian faith?”* Passing the baton of faith from one generation to the next is challenging.

The covenant has been passed from Abraham to Isaac. However, will Isaac embrace it, making it his own? And, when the time comes, will Isaac seek to pass the covenant on to the generation? Passing the covenant on from one generation to the next is always volitional. It is a choice. There is no force involved. Abraham has done his part. Will Isaac do his? At this point, the verdict is yet to be rendered.

And, it is important to remember that every person's story of coming to faith is unique. Isaac is not the same man as Abraham. And, Isaac's son Jacob's story will be different again. There is a place for differences of temperament. There is no single template. Not everyone fits the mold. Read people's conversion stories and it is remarkable the variety ways God draws men and women to himself.

It is clear that Isaac does not, as yet, have the same spiritual vitality as his father, Abraham. His interests, like many young adults, are elsewhere. Isaac must be educated. There are things he must learn. Isaac has yet to take the reins of his own spiritual chariot.

The next point is given to us by the example of Isaac and Rebekah. Trust God, pray, and resist the temptation to bend the rules.

Trust God, Pray, and resist the temptation to bend the rules

²¹ And Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren. And the Lord granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived.

Sometimes, the spiritual lessons of Genesis are hidden in plain sight. Here, in verse 21, is one such lesson.

After their marriage, it is discovered that Rebekah has issues in becoming pregnant. Issues of fertility are a recurring theme in Genesis and in the stories of the patriarchs. Why?

Each of us carries within us a sense of how the world runs – or at least how it should run. We have a vision of how our life ought to unfold. For many, marriage and children are a large part of that vision. But what if life does not unfold as you wish or expect? How will we react when the story of our life is not unwrapping in the sequence or manner we expected and wished? Isaac prays and, we are told, the Lord granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived. In addition to praying, it is important to note what Isaac does not do: he does not take a second wife, or concubine. That was the path taken by Isaac's father Abraham in the face of Sarah's infertility. The step was taken at Sarah's initiative. She gave her Egyptian handmaid Hagar to Abraham as a second wife. That, in turn, created all sorts of consequent family troubles. And, in the next generation, Isaac's son, Jacob will take two wives – unintentionally – and two concubines – with all sorts of intra-family competition, intrigue, trouble, drama, and difficulties as a consequence. Through his wives and concubines Jacob is the father of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. God is at work in all the drama. At the same time, Isaac and Rebekah do not resort to concubinage. They play by the rules. And are blessed in doing so.

Rebekah and Isaac's prayers are answered, but not as they expected. As children of the covenant they, and we, learn that we are part of a larger story.

As God's children, we are part of a larger story

²²The children struggled together within her, and she said, "If it is thus, why is this happening to me?" So she went to inquire of the Lord. ²³And the Lord said to her, "Two nations are in your womb,

and two peoples from within you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger.”

We believe God is at work in the world. We believe that God is at work in our lives. Our stories unfold according to a script God has written. This is natural. We seek to understand our world and our place in it. Rebekah is pregnant and she senses that something out of the ordinary is unfolding. Rebekah senses an intrauterine struggle going on within her as her pregnancy unfolds. We are told that; she went to inquire of the Lord. In response to her prayer, she is given a prophesy that she will be the mother of two nations, two peoples. She will be the mother of twin boys. They are already contending with one another in her womb. What is begun in her womb will continue in time and space. Rebekah is the mother of Jacob and Esau. Both boys will be renamed later in life: They will become Israel and Edom. Their descendants being two nations. Two peoples. Jews and Arabs. And we live with the consequences of their birth today.

That said, I need to add an important caveat before we move off this point. God is at work in our world and we believe that as God’s people, as people of his covenant, we are part of a larger, unfolding story. At the same time, we must be content to take ***our place*** in the unfolding story. We are called to walk faithfully with God, taking our respective stations in life. We are not called to be world changers. Not every pregnancy will produce a Jacob and Esau. I do not want to change the world. I want to walk faithfully with God until my final breath. It is okay to be ordinary.

Ordinary folk can sometimes be called upon to do extraordinary things. This is one of Tolkien’s themes in **The Lord of the Rings**. *Frodo, Sam, Pippin and Merry* are

ordinary *Hobbits*. Their story does not begin with their ambition to “do something great for God.” They were called upon for their grand adventure. They did not seek it. They were chosen. As Gandalf says, “*Frodo was meant to have the ring; and that is a comforting thought.*” Similarly, the book (or movie series) **Band of Brothers** tells the story of *Easy Company* during **World War II**. Theirs is a remarkable story. They were *ordinary* men placed in extraordinary circumstances, and they served honorably and admirably.

This leads naturally to the next observation: we enter the world as unique individuals.

We enter the world as unique individuals

²⁴ When her days to give birth were completed, behold, there were twins in her womb. ²⁵ The first came out red, all his body like a hairy cloak, so they called his name Esau. ²⁶ Afterward his brother came out with his hand holding Esau’s heel, so his name was called Jacob.

Every person hearing this message (or reading it) is made in the image of God. We all share a common humanity; we carry a common dignity. We bear God’s stamp upon us. But, we are not all the same. Esau and Jacob come out of the womb different. Made by God that way. God made both Esau and Jacob. They were brothers. They were twins. And they were very different from one another. God gave to each his particular abilities, gifts, interests and skills. Esau is a skilled hunter. Good with the grill. Jacob is cunning. Good at getting his way. He is born holding Esau’s heel and, in one sense, he never let’s go. Different men. Different gifts. Different limitations. Different potentials.

And, in contrast to the world’s declared opinion, I am not saying that you can be anything you wish to be. The

world places its emphasis upon the individual and strength of his or her desire, ambition and willingness to pursue the goal. On game show competitions it is common to ask a contestant, "*Why do you think that you are going to win?*" Inevitably, each says essentially the same thing: "*I will win because I want it so completely.*" Modern Americans do not wish to talk about, or even acknowledge, the reality of limitations. I know that it is heretical to say it, but not everyone can grow up to be president.

The modern world in which we live does not like inherent limitations and restrictions. This can be seen clearly in the unrelenting pursuit of "full" equality between men and women. The modern world believes that men and women as men and women are infinitely malleable. It wants no distinction between men and women. Should there be full legal equality? Certainly. But in an absolute sense, men and women will never be fully equal for the simple and unremarkable fact that men and women are different. The world, as God made it, will always draw us back into its reality. Women bear children. Men do not. Women do not have the upper body strength of men. Men are more competitive, more willing to take risks. Women are more nurturing, interested in creating and sustaining community. Men and women are different.

If I had spoken the sentences above in an academic environment, then undoubtedly someone would object, declaring that my comments above were "*very gendered.*" To be "*very gendered*" is not a good thing in the modern academy. Many progressives and liberal academics wish to sweep away the use of male and female pronouns. They want a single pronoun, used for both boys and girls. The politically correct moderns want to talk about gender, not male and female, not boys and girls. Why? When we speak

of sexual identities, male and female, the differences are self-evident. Say the word “boy” or the word “girl” and you are making a distinction. But the word *gender* not reveal the obvious sexual difference between men and women. Gender can go either way. In this way, our modern world is insisting on being self-deceived regarding the realities of sexual differences. Maintaining the self-deception requires the use of politically correct language. This is what political correctness inevitably does. It hides information.

The modern world wants to tell us that we can be anyone we wish. We are not bound or limited. In today’s world it is permitted, even applauded, to cross the boundaries of sexual identity, to become trans. In contrast, the Bible says to us that God has formed us for his purposes. Esau and Jacob, and Rebekah and Isaac, are who they are because God has created them so. And that, is a good thing.

The clear contrast between Jacob and Esau leads us to note a biblical theme that returns repeatedly in the story the Bible tells: there are two paths in life.

There are two paths in life

²⁷ When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents.

A recurring biblical theme is that there are two paths that may be followed in life. One path is to walk with God. The other path is to walk without him. Jacob and Esau illustrate this biblical contrast. They are two people on different life paths. Jacob and Esau are both given new names later in life. Jacob becomes Israel. He is the father of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, the Jewish people. Esau is renamed Edom. He becomes the father of the Arab people.

The land of Edom is on the far side of the Jordan River from the land of Canaan. In this way, Jacob and Esau (Israel and Edom) represent two ways of life: with God, or without him; the narrow path of faith, or the wide way of destruction; the stairway to heaven or the highway to hell.

In saying that they represent the two ways of spiritual life, do not make the mistake of thinking that one is morally better, or spiritually superior, to the other. I suspect that Esau would have been the more likable of the two. Jacob might have been very difficult to have around, someone always looking to gain an edge or advantage over others. Indeed: at this stage of life, Jacob is not a man of faith. Part of his story is God's remarkable pursuit of him. *Francis Thompson* wrote a famous poem called "*The Hound of Heaven*." The imagery is that of a tracking dog pursuing its quarry. The idea is that God pursues the human heart, no matter how decidedly or forcefully it flees from him. Jacob is certainly an example of one who was pursued by the Hound of Heaven until he was brought to faith. In Genesis 32:22 – 30, we read.

²⁴ And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. ²⁵ When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶ Then he said, "Let me go, for the day has broken." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." ²⁷ And [the angel] said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸ Then he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." ²⁹ Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. ³⁰ So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered."

In the passage we see the angel put Jacob's hip out of joint. What would you do, if your hip went out of joint while you

wrestled someone? You would immediately grab hold of your opponent, to keep from falling. After all the years, Jacob is finally holding on to God: because he has to do so!

Finally, this passage gives us a reason as to why Jacob is the preferred son, though it is not so much about the person Jacob is as the person Esau is not. Beware of despising your spiritual heritage.

Beware of despising your spiritual heritage

³¹Jacob said, “Sell me your birthright now.” ³²Esau said, “I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?” ³³Jacob said, “Swear to me now.” So he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob. ³⁴Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

This is a very sobering story. And, I wonder if many modern folk understand it. We modern Americans attempt to treat all of our children more or less equally, but such attempts at uniform equality within a family has not always been the norm. For most of human history, rank accompanied birth order. The oldest son was given certain privileges. These privileges were his birthright in being the oldest. The birthright privilege is a spiritual grace. The oldest son did not do anything to earn or deserve its blessing. In the story of Jacob and Esau, the birthright is real, though it was based upon a very slight distinction. Esau was born with Jacob holding onto the heel of his foot. You could almost say that they were born at the same time. But, Esau emerged first, so to him the privilege of birthright was attached.

A birthright of course is not something that you earn. You are born with it. It is a blessing that you cannot claim by merit. Esau had the privileges of birthright, but he did not

sufficiently value them. After a hunting trip he returns home tired and hungry. Jacob has been cooking up a stew. Esau desires something to eat. Jacob proposes a trade: the stew for Esau's birthright. Esau agrees. He trades his birthright for a meal. He gives up his spiritual privilege as first born. Esau's willingness to do so is a key indication that he was unworthy to be the bearer of the covenant. He does not understand spiritual matters. The Bible characterizes his action as "despising his birthright."

Sadly, regrettably, there are many Christians in our world today who follow Esau's example. When a child is born into a family where at least one of the parents confesses faith in Christ, we mark and celebrate the arrival the child through the sacrament of baptism. The child is presented before Christ in a service of worship. The baptismal formula is repeated as water is applied to the child's forehead. In baptism, the child is marked as being born into a Christian family. The child has received the covenant as a birthright. We call baptized children "covenant children." The covenant is their birthright.

Many who are born as children of the covenant grow up despising their baptismal birthright. Like Esau, they give it away in easy trade. Esau traded his for a kettle of stew. What exchange do modern folk make for their baptismal birthright? They trade it for quiet Sunday mornings with Starbuck's coffee and the Sunday New York Times. They trade it for sports competitions and tournaments. Some trade in the title of being "Christian" for the title of being "spiritual." Whatever they may receive in trade, it is less than what they were given in baptism as their birthright.

We began noting that every son of the covenant faces the same choice. Will he embrace the covenant

passed on to him by his believing mom and dad? Abraham passed the covenant on to Isaac. And Isaac embraces it for his own. The covenant is next passed from Isaac to Jacob. Esau did not value the covenant. He voluntarily sold his birthright as leader of the clan. The birthright passed from Esau to Jacob.

As we close, I want to ask you to take a brief spiritual inventory. How have you valued your spiritual birthright as a Christian? Your mom and dad sought to pass the Christian faith, the covenant, on to you. You were presented and baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In baptism you were marked as belonging to Christ. You were set a part as one member of the community of the covenant; a covenant that began so long ago when Abraham followed God's call and left Haran to travel to Canaan. Have you embraced the covenant that God, through the faithfulness of your parents and all those who have gone before us, entrusted to you? Have you taken charge of your own spiritual chariot? What has been your spiritual choice on these matters? Do you, like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, continue to walk with God in faith?

I am inviting you to turn to Jesus Christ in faith and believe.

Say "Amen!" Somebody.

Genesis 25:19 – 34

¹⁹These are the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham fathered Isaac, ²⁰and 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. ²¹And Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren. And the Lord granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived. ²²The children struggled together within her, and she said, "If it is thus, why is this happening to me?" So she went to inquire of the Lord. ²³And the Lord said to her,

"Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples from within you shall be divided;
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²⁴When her days to give birth were completed, behold, there were twins in her womb. ²⁵The first came out red, all his body like a hairy cloak, so they called his name Esau. ²⁶Afterward his brother came out with his hand holding Esau's heel, so his name was called Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

²⁷When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents. ²⁸Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

Esau Sells His Birthright

²⁹Once when Jacob was cooking stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was exhausted. ³⁰And Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stew, for I am exhausted!" (Therefore his name was called Edom.) ³¹Jacob said, "Sell me your birthright now." ³²Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" ³³Jacob said, "Swear to me now." So he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob. ³⁴Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew,

and he ate and drank and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.