

Genesis, Part 24

Last session we saw Abraham send a servant to get a wife for his son Isaac from his country and his kindred. He did not want a bride from among the godless Canaanites. We saw how this was a picture of the acts of the Holy Spirit in gathering a bride for the Lord Jesus Christ. Now we will skip ahead a few years and see the death of Abraham and the birth of two grandchildren by Isaac and Rebekah. But first, Abraham takes another wife.

Genesis 25:1 Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah.
² She bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah.
³ Jokshan fathered Sheba and Dedan. The sons of Dedan were Asshurim, Letushim, and Leummim. ⁴ The sons of Midian were Ephah, Epher, Hanoch, Abida, and Eldaah. All these were the children of Keturah.

The list of Keturah's sons and peoples descended from them as given here is for two reasons. First, several of these peoples are mentioned in later Biblical history. This list also demonstrates the fulfillment of the promise that Abraham would become the father of many nations. Abraham ultimately has a very large family. Evidently, the rejuvenation of his ability to procreate was not a one-shot event.

Abraham was 138 when Sarah died, and he died at 175. Abraham lived 35 years after the marriage of Isaac, and all that is recorded concerning him during the time is found here in a very few verses.

Sometime after Sarah's death Abraham married Katurah. She was his concubine according to First Chronicles 1:32. That union resulted in the birth of six more sons. And they fathered some nine more grandchildren. There were likely more children, and here only the males are named. While some of their descendants will be seen again in Scripture and play roles in our story, the focus will be on the line to Christ through Isaac and Jacob. One of them that does show up later is Midian to play an important role in Scripture. He is the father of the Midianites, and we will find Moses going to the land of the Midian to take a wife there for himself. But the Lord has said

it is through Isaac that Abraham's seed is called—not Ishmael or through any of the others.

Gen 25:5 Abraham gave all he had to Isaac. ⁶ But to the sons of his concubines Abraham gave gifts, and while he was still living he sent them away from his son Isaac, eastward to the east country.

⁷ These are the days of the years of Abraham's life, 175 years.

⁸ Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people. ⁹ Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, east of Mamre, ¹⁰ the field that Abraham purchased from the Hittites. There Abraham was buried, with Sarah his wife. ¹¹ After the death of Abraham, God blessed Isaac his son. And Isaac settled at Beer-lahai-roi.

Isaac was Abraham's heir. He inherited all his father's wealth. Before he died, however, Abraham bestowed generous gifts upon the sons of his concubines. The plural certainly includes Keturah and Hagar, and possibly other unnamed concubines not mentioned in Scripture. These sons of Abraham occupied the desert to the east of Canaan. Many were leaders of nomadic tribes. Abraham loved all these boys, but they and their descendants may have posed a threat to Isaac, and Abraham sent them away, as he had done with Ishmael (21:8–14), thus preserving Isaac's primacy and his right as Abraham's heir.

“Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years” (v. 8). He was 175. Ishmael came back for the funeral of his father. He and Isaac buried Abraham alongside his wife Sarah in the cave purchased from Ephron for that purpose. The term “gathered to his people” means not just that Abraham's body rested with his relatives in the family grave, but that his soul was reunited with theirs in the afterlife.

After the death of Abraham, God blessed Isaac who was still residing near Beer-lahai-roi at this time (v. 11). Isaac was seventy-five when his father died, and 123 when his brother Ishmael died. Some forty-eight years of Isaac's life are passed over in silence in Genesis 25. After the funeral, Isaac and Rebekah returned to Beer-lahai-roi. This was a place where God

was known to respond. God had heard Hagar there and had delivered her (16:14). And Isaac meditated there when waiting for his future wife (24:62). Thus Isaac lived at a special place, a place where God had answered prayer.

Gen 25:12 These are the generations of Ishmael, Abraham's son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's servant, bore to Abraham. ¹³ These are the names of the sons of Ishmael, named in the order of their birth: Nebaioth, the firstborn of Ishmael; and Kedar, Adbeel, Mibsam, ¹⁴ Mishma, Dumah, Massa, ¹⁵ Hadad, Tema, Jetur, Naphish, and Kedemah. ¹⁶ These are the sons of Ishmael and these are their names, by their villages and by their encampments, twelve princes according to their tribes. ¹⁷ (These are the years of the life of Ishmael: 137 years. He breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people.) ¹⁸ They settled from Havilah to Shur, which is opposite Egypt in the direction of Assyria. He settled over against all his kinsmen.

While on the subject of genealogy, we have that of Ishmael listed here. Ishmael was also a son of Abraham, so God told what became of him and his line before returning to the chosen line, the succession of Isaac. Ishmael had 12 sons, as God had predicted (17:20), and died at the age of 137. Like his father, Ishmael was "gathered to his people." The narrator mentions three points in which the prophecies regarding Ishmael found fulfillment:

1. Twelve tribal rulers came from Ishmael (cf. 17:20).
2. His descendants lived in the desert area from Havilah (location unknown) to Shur near the border of Egypt (cf. 16:12).
3. The Ishmaelites lived in hostility toward all their brethren (cf. 16:12).

The Birth of Esau and Jacob

The first chapter of Matthew begins, "Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers" (Matt 1:2). Each of these men had other sons as we have seen, but the genealogies of those others are not followed. The line we are going to follow is the line that leads directly to the "seed of the woman," Jesus Christ.

Just as the account of Terah is largely concerned with Terah's son Abraham, the account of Isaac tells the story of Isaac's sons, Jacob and Esau. It begins with two boys fighting each other in the womb and continues with Jacob cheating Esau out of his birthright and his blessing.

Gen 25:19 These are the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham fathered 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 for his wife, because she was barren. And the Lord granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived.

Isaac was forty when he married and sixty when his twin sons were born. For twenty years, his faith, like that of his father before him, was tested by the barrenness of his wife. But Isaac knew that covenant promises demanded that he and Rebekah have children, therefore, he went to his knees on behalf of his barren wife. God answered that prayer and Rebekah became pregnant (25:21).

When Abraham's wife Sarah was barren, instead of going to the Lord in prayer for a divine solution, they devised a human solution in that Abraham would sire a son through Sarah's handmaiden, Hagar (16:1–4). In stark contrast to the schemes of his father and mother, Isaac prayed, and God responded. This shows that births were sometimes supernatural provisions. Later, Rachel, Jacob's wife, was also temporarily barren (29:31).

Gen 25:22 The 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. ²³ And 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."

Rebekah experienced a difficult pregnancy. The twins "struggled together within her" (v. 22). Evidently, the "struggles" going on between the two boys in her womb was intense, even violent, for Rebekah to complain so. She

regarded her pain as an ominous sign and went to inquire of the Lord, possibly at the home of some prophet.

Her petition was simply, “Why is this happening to me?” Others translate it more desperately as a cry of despair, “Wherefore do I live?” It should be noted that the translation “struggled” (or “jostled” in some translations) is a little weak. Rebekah’s plea seems to confirm that. The Hebrew speaks of something much more violent than, “The children struggled together within her.” This was a foreshadowing of future difficulties between the brothers.

Through the prophetic intermediary, the Lord gave Rebekah a fourfold response:

1. Rebekah would bear twins who would be ancestors of two great nations.
2. Two separate and distinct people would emerge from these twins.
3. One of these people would exceed the other in strength.
4. The older son would serve the younger.

The Hebrew here is ambiguous and could just as well be rendered, “The small shall serve the great.” This might account for the differences in the way Rebekah and Isaac regarded the two boys. Indeed the Israelites (Jacob’s descendants) and the Edomites (Esau’s descendants) fought continuously.

“The older shall serve the younger” (v. 23) tells us that contrary to cultural tradition, God determined that the younger of the twins would receive the birthrights normally the property of the elder. God’s election of Jacob the younger over Esau the older was against the natural order.

The struggle between these two boys, which began before birth, represents the struggle that still goes on today, the struggle between light and darkness, the struggle between good and evil, between the Spirit and the flesh. Every one of us knows about this struggle; we deal with it every day ourselves. Paul speaks of his own experiences with this struggle in Romans Chapter 7, but verse 15 pretty much sums up what we all experience.

Rom. 7:15 For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

Like Rebekah and Paul experienced, the forces of light and dark “struggle” within our own souls. As much as we might hate our sinfulness, we find ourselves drifting back into that same sinful behavior that we hate instead of doing what we want.

Gen 25:24 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. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them. 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. ²⁸ Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

Isaac and Rebecca had been married about twenty years when she had the twins. The parents observed the strange situation and commemorated the event by giving them appropriate names. The first of the twins was red and hairy, like a little animal, so they named him Esau which means hairy. The mention of “red” anticipated the future rugged nature of Esau (vv. 27–34). Jacob’s laying hold of Esau’s heel (as though to catch him and trip him) gave him the name “Jacob”—the “heel-gripper” (supplanter, schemer, deceiver).

Fascinating wordplays were used to describe the first twin. The name Esau (*‘ēšāw*) has a loose connection with the word “Seir” (*śē’îr*), the early name for Edom to the southeast of the Dead Sea, where Esau later lived (32:3; 36:8). The Hebrew word “red” (*‘admônî*) is related to the word “Edom” (*‘ēdôm*; cf. 25:30); and “hairy” (*śē’ār*) is similar to “Seir.” Those words were carefully chosen to portray in the child the nature of Edom, a later arch-rival of Israel.

The second twin was born grasping Esau’s heel (v. 26). Given the oracle the parents had received (v. 23) it seemed appropriate to give this child a name that would preserve the memory of this event. The name Jacob

(ya'ăqōb, meaning “may He [God] protect”) was selected because of its connection in sound and sense to the noun “heel” (*āqēb*). The verb *āqab* means “to watch from behind.” As with Esau, Jacob’s name would take on a different sense later in life as his deceptive nature became more evident. His name also meant “one who grabs the heel” or “one who trips up.” So the twins’ births had great significance for later events in their lives.

These two boys are as different as twins can be. They struggled in the womb and struggled in life with different viewpoints and philosophies of life. Esau was “a skillful hunter, a man of the field,” while Jacob was “a quiet man”. “Quiet” is the Hebrew word *tom* /tome/ which means integrity, completeness, fulness, and even innocence, or simplicity. J. Vernon McGee sees him as a “momma’s boy,” and that may be largely driven by the next verse, “Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.” Jacob became a cool, calculating stay-at-home, whereas Esau became an impetuous, active countryman. The father favored the more active outdoorsy Esau. He especially liked to eat of the wild game he brought home. Rebekah, however, preferred the more pensive (and cunning) Jacob.

Esau loved the outdoors, especially hunting and eating the game he brought home. He was more physical and athletic than his brother and probably had a physique to match his heart’s desire. That lifestyle is what he lived for.

His brother Jacob, however, was very different. Above we described him in somewhat negative tones, and he was indeed a cunning man, but down underneath that negative personality, he had a desire for things spiritual. It took God a while to “clean him up” and get down to where that spiritual desire was. Before we are finished with Jacob, and he will be with us through to the end of our study of Genesis, we will see that he was God’s man all along, although he didn’t demonstrate it until the end.

Esau Sells His Birthright

The incident we are about to look at reveals the nature of these two men, Esau and Jacob. The attitudes displayed in this tableau tell of their personalities and values.

Gen 25:29 Once when Jacob was cooking stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was exhausted. ³⁰ And Esau said to Jacob, “Let me eat some of that red stew, for I am exhausted!” (Therefore his name was called Edom.) ³¹ Jacob said, “Sell me your birthright now.” ³² Esau said, “I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?” ³³ Jacob said, “Swear to me now.” 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 his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

We have here a bargain made between Jacob and Esau about the birthright that was Esau’s by birth but Jacob’s by promise. The birthright and a double portion of the inheritance go to the firstborn. It was a spiritual privilege, including the excellency of dignity and the excellency of power. Esau was technically the firstborn and due the birthrights of that position, however, Jacob was designated by God to receive the birthrights of the firstborn. “And the Lord said to her (Rebekah), ‘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’ ” (Gen 25:23).

What does this birthright mean? It means that the one who had it was the head of the house. Furthermore, it meant that he was also the priest of the house. And, in this particular family, it meant the one who had it would be in the line that leads to Christ. Do you think Esau valued that? Jacob knew he attached no importance to it whatsoever, and had no desire to be the family priest. After all, it might interfere with his hunting.

(Been there and experienced that myself. God took care of that barrier to service and made hunting a less-than-thrilling experience for me.)

Back to our story...

Jacob, evidently an accomplished chef, had prepared a pot of “red stew” made from lentil beans. “Red” is the Hebrew *’adom* /aw·dome/ which, as stated above, relates to Edom, the eventual home of the Edomites, the descendants of Esau. His connection with the red stew (“pottage” in some translations) gave him the nickname “Edom”. “Therefore his name was called Edom” (v. 30).

Jacob is cooking up a red stew and in walks Esau from one of his hunting trips, and he immediately takes notice of the red stew on the stove. Either he had not been successful in taking any game that day or he was too lazy to take the time to prepare a meal for himself—I believe the latter—plus the “red stew” smelled good. He claimed he was very hungry—“exhausted” and “about to die”. Esau was not about to die from any hunger. No one in wealthy Abraham’s house would die from hunger. Esau was not as desperate as he sounds here. I believe his “desperate” tone displays an arrogant urgency driven by his sense of privilege. He wanted to eat, and he wanted to eat—NOW!

And that “red” stew in the pot appealed to the “red man”.

Jacob sees his chance and takes advantage of his brother’s spiritual weakness. “Jacob said, ‘Sell me your birthright now’ ” (v. 31). Considering the spiritual state of Esau, we can safely assume, as had Jacob, that Esau had zero interest in his birthright. He had no desire to be the family priest or devote his days to spiritual matters, so the drama queen replied, “I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?” (v. 32).

Jacob must have thought then, “Got-cha!” He then said something on the order of, “Tell ya what I’m gonna do. If you give me your birthright, I will give you a bowl of this delicious red stew. But ya have to swear on it. Deal?”

Esau had no interest in anything spiritual. His birthright meant nothing to him. Verses 33 and 34 conclude our little story with, “So he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank and rose and went his way.”

He ate, wiped his mouth, probably belched loudly, and walked out! He traded everything of any real value for a bowl of stew, some bread, and some wine. “Thus Esau despised his birthright” (v. 34). Esau despised his spiritual privileges as the firstborn and chose the flesh, not the Spirit. He viewed his birthright with contempt and as worthless to him. He would rather feed his body than enjoy the promises of God. We never read of Esau having a tent or an altar, and Genesis 26:34–35 and Hebrews 12:16 indicate that he loved worldly women.

Gen 26:34 When Esau was forty years old, he took Judith the daughter of Beerli the Hittite to be his wife, and Basemath the daughter of Elon the Hittite, ³⁵ and they made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah.

Heb 12:16 that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal.

Esau may have been a success in the world but was a failure with God.

Esau, “the red man,” was overcome by his physical appetite for red stew (v. 30) and sold his birthright. And Jacob, “the heel-grabber,” cunningly overtook his brother and gained the birthright. He took advantage of his brother’s weak character and his “hunger-unto-death” plea for food. Though Jacob was not righteous, he was not deceptive, at least in this instance. He was open and obvious, but he was unscrupulous. However, he must be given credit for knowing what was of value and going after it. Esau, however, was totally “godless”.

“The elder shall serve the younger.” The birthright is coming to Jacob, God had promised it to his mother, but it would be granted in God’s timing. Jacob acquired it in an unscrupulous manner. He should have waited until God gave it to him. It is always better to wait on God’s timing.

Jacob probably thinks of himself as clever enough to get whatever he has coming to him, but he will himself be “schooled” by his Uncle Laban at the “college of hard knocks,” as we shall see later in our story.

God told Rebekah that two nations were to be born and that, contrary to custom, the elder would serve the younger. This is clear evidence of God’s sovereign election.

Rom. 9:10 And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, ¹¹ though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God’s purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of

him who calls— ¹² she was told, “The older will serve the younger.” ¹³ As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

¹⁴ What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God’s part? By no means! ¹⁵ For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” ¹⁶ So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.

His choice was not based on the deeds of the boys. They were unborn and had done neither good nor evil. As far as character is concerned, Esau was the more acceptable of the two, at least he was honest about his desires— yet Jacob was the one chosen by God.

Eph. 2:8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

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