



GENESIS 25-27 JACOB AND ESAU; THE BIRTHRIGHT AND THE BLESSINGS

After Isaac took Rebekah as his wife, he was comforted again since his mother, Sarah, had died. Abraham, as a widower, then took a concubine named Keturah (1 Chronicles 1:32), and they had several children. The Bible says he later sent them away so they would not vie for the inheritance given to Isaac. "But Abraham gave gifts to the sons of the concubines which Abraham had; and while he was still living he sent them eastward, away from Isaac his son, to the country of the east" (25:6). These other sons of Abraham would become the founders of other neighboring nations--the Midianites, Dedanites, and Sabeans, who settled the southwestern part of the Arabian Peninsula. He was truly the father of many nations then and also today.

Abraham died at the ripe old age of 175. It would still take centuries before the *maximum* age God set for man after the Flood would descend to 120 years (Genesis 6:3), and the *average* age would be around 75 years old (Ps. 90:10). Abraham was buried by Isaac and Ishmael at Hebron, in the same cave where his beloved wife Sarah lay.

Next, the Bible focuses on the life of the second patriarch, *Isaac*. He would have similar problems as Abraham since his wife Rebekah was also sterile. But being a man of faith, he earnestly prayed to God for her healing, and after 20 years, she conceived.

The Bible explains, "Rebekah his wife conceived, but the children struggled together within her, and she said, 'If all is well, why am I like this?' So she went to inquire of the Lord. And the Lord said to her: '*Two nations* are in your womb, two peoples shall be separated from your body; one people shall be stronger than the other, and *the older shall serve the younger*.'...And the first came out red. He was like a hairy garment all over; so they called his name Esau [literally, *hairy*]. Afterward his brother came out, and his hand took hold of Esau's heel; so his name was called Jacob [literally, *supplanter or deceiver*]. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them. So the boys grew. And Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field; but Jacob was a mild man, dwelling in tents. And Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob (25:21-28). This favoritism would bring disastrous consequences on the family.

Also note the term describing Jacob as a *mild* man, in the Hebrew is the word *tam*, that normally means "blameless," and implies he was obedient to God's law. Esau, in contrast, is later mentioned as a "sexually immoral and godless man" (Hebrews 12:16, NIV) and certainly not a man of faith.

God saw these two opposite tendencies even before the twins were born, and declared to Rebekah that Jacob would be the one selected as the heir. *Halley's Commentary* notes: "Esau, being the firstborn, was the legal heir of Isaac, and the apparent heir of the Abrahamic promises. But God, who knew before they were born *their proclivities*, chose Jacob to transmit this great inheritance. He implied as much to Rebekah and she transmitted this to Jacob from his youth. It was a determining factor explaining how Jacob treated Esau." We have here an example of how God is not a respecter of persons when He calls, because He looks at the person's heart, or the overall attitude (1 Samuel 16:7). Even though Esau was the firstborn by a few seconds, his worldly tendency disqualified him from becoming one of the righteous patriarchs. The same thing would happen with Jacob's sons, and Reuben, because of his worldly ways, lost the birthright to Joseph's children. Paul, talking about God's election mentions *He has the prerogative*, since He is all-knowing. That is why God said, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated" (Romans 9:13). We will understand why as we continue the account.

"Now Jacob cooked a stew; and Esau came in from the field, and he was weary. And Esau said to Jacob, 'Please feed me with that same red stew, for I am weary.' Therefore his name was called Edom [literally, *red*]. But Jacob said, 'Sell me your birthright as of this day.' And Esau said, 'Look, I am about to die; so what is this birthright to me?' Then Jacob said, 'Swear to me as of this day.' So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. And Jacob gave Esau bread and stew of lentils; then he ate and drank, arose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright" (25:29-34). As someone said, "There has never been a more expensive morsel of food, except for the forbidden fruit, than this lentil soup." Let us note several things: Esau was inside the camp, and could have gone over to

another tent to be fed, but he really lusted over his brother's delicious stew. He also exaggerated his condition that he was about to die, and thus justified his decision. He also *despised* his birthright—since it brought many binding responsibilities, including spiritual ones, and Esau was a very independent, free-spirited, and worldly person.

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia mentions about the birthright: "On succeeding to the family property, the firstborn receiving the birthright was responsible for maintaining the younger sons, the widow or widows, and any unmarried daughters, as well as exercising authority over the household as a whole...As firstborn he inherited a double portion of the paternal estate. Discoveries at Mari, Nuzi, and Alalakh, show the father could disregard the law of primogeniture and divert the birthright to a younger son, as in the case of Reuben and of Joseph's children" (p. 516).

The Life Application Bible adds, "The oldest son could sell his birthright or give it away if he chose, but in so doing he would lose both material goods and his leadership position. By trading his birthright, Esau showed complete disregard for the spiritual blessings that would have come his way. He acted on impulse, satisfying his immediate desires without pausing to consider the long-range consequences of what he was about to do. He exaggerated his hunger to the point he thought he might die, and this thought made his choice much easier and appeared to be more urgent" (p. 53).

Unger's Commentary makes one final point: "Esau sold his birthright which included (1) paternal blessing and the place as head of the family; (2) the honor of being in the promised line out of which the Messiah should come (Shem—Abraham—Isaac); (3) the exercise of family priesthood. Esau carnally despised all these blessings as a lover of pleasure more than a lover of God" (p. 73).

Imagine for a moment if Esau had spurned his brother's offer and retained the birthright. Then, from his lineage would eventually have come Jesus Christ. He would have become the spiritual and physical heir of Abraham, and the Bible would have instead said, "The God of Abraham, Isaac, and *Esau*." He would have become "Israel" instead of his younger twin brother and be the ancestor of the modern nations of Israel such as the U.S., Great Britain, France, etc. But, as we previously noted,

God knew Esau would not turn out to be a godly man. Unfortunately, many still sell their magnificent spiritual inheritance based on faith and keeping God's laws for this world's tempting bowl of soup.

Next, Isaac finds himself in another similar predicament as his father faced. There is a famine in Canaan, which is not so unusual since the land has few rivers and must depend on timely rainfalls. He goes back to the Philistine city of Gerar, where the reigning king has the same hereditary title as before, Abimelech, that means, "Father King, or My Father is King." In Psalm 34 we find the name Abimelech applied to the king of Gath, elsewhere known by his personal name Achish (1 S. 27:2).

Apparently, Isaac wanted to go down to Egypt, as his father had done, where food was readily available since the crops depended, not on rainfall, but on the annual inundation of the Nile river. But God forbade him from going to Egypt and told him, "Dwell in this land, and I will be with you and bless you; for to you and your descendants I give all these lands; and in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed; because Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws" (26:3-5).

The Expositor's Bible Commentary has an interesting note on this verse: "Abraham 'kept my requirements [*mishmarti*], my commands [*miswoth ay*], my decrees [*huqqoth ay*] and my laws [*weth oroth ay*].' It is remarkable that this is precisely the way in which *obedience* to the *Sinai covenant* is expressed in Deuteronomy 10:1: 'Love the Lord your God and keep his requirements [*mishmarto*], his decrees [*huqqoth ayw*], his laws [*mishpatayw*] and his commands [*miswoth ayw*]...Abraham obeyed the law from the heart, much as the ideal picture given in Deuteronomy 30:6. Thus he is an example of one who shows the law written on his heart (Jer 31:33). He is the writer's ultimate example of true obedience to the law, the one about whom the Lord could say, 'Abraham obeyed me' (v. 5). Thus, by showing Abraham to be an example of 'keeping the law,' the writer has shown the nature of the relationship between the law and faith. Abraham, a man who lived in faith, could be described as one who kept the law." Isaac also obeyed God commands and stayed in Gerar.

Yet, he also had a beautiful wife and was afraid he would be killed if he admitted it, so he resorted

to lying as his father had done and said she was his sister. The king became indignant when he found out but granted Isaac protection. Then, God blessed Isaac so much the Philistines began to envy him and they stopped up his wells. Even the king was afraid of Isaac's growing economic wealth and entreated him to leave. So, "Isaac departed from there and pitched his tent in the Valley of Gerar, and dwelt there." God was with him and wherever he dug, he struck water, the most precious commodity around. The king was afraid and decided to make a pact with him, as a previous king had done with his father. They took an oath and Isaac also opened some wells in Beersheba and dwelt there.

Esau married at the same age as Isaac had, but instead of marrying within the family faith, "he took wives Judith the daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Basemath the daughter of Elon the Hittite. And they were a grief of mind to Isaac and Rebekah" (26:34).

Abraham had prohibited Isaac from marrying pagan wives, and now Esau went ahead and did this very thing. This is an additional proof that Esau was a godless man who neither desired obeying God's laws, nor feared being cursed by God."

Then, God's final prophecy about the twins is fulfilled. Jacob, though resorting to personal manipulation and assistance from his mother, nevertheless receives God's favor in eventually fathering the chosen nation. Isaac was 137 years old and practically blind, but he still had a soft spot for Esau and his wild venison. So he asked him to hunt down a prey and prepare a meal and he would give him a special blessing. Rebekah overheard the conversation and realized with this prophetic blessing, Jacob would be left out. "She prized the blessing as invaluable; she knew that God intended it for the younger son (Gen. 25:23) and in her anxiety to secure its being conferred on the right object—on one who cared for religion—she acted in the sincerity of faith but in crooked policy—with unenlightened zeal on the false principle that the end would sanctify the means" (JFB Commentary).

The Expository Commentary of the Bible adds, "To *bless* means to grant prosperity or well-being through God, who bestows physical and spiritual favor upon man in the form of long life, affluence, and power...this blessing is given by the father when he transfers goods and authority to his children prior to his death."

Rebekah realized Isaac, now virtually blind, would recognize Esau by his hairy arms, the smell of the wild venison, his clothing, and by his voice. So she has Jacob disguise himself as Esau, covering his arms with woolly hair, and preparing some wild venison. Isaac is suspicious, but says, "So Jacob went near to Isaac his father, and he felt him and said, 'The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau.' And he did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau's hands, so he blessed him...and said: "Therefore may God give you of the dew of heaven, of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine. Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be master over your brethren, and let your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be those who bless you!" (27:22-29).

Just after Jacob left the tent, Esau returned and prepared the hearty meal his father loved. When Isaac realized he had been deceived, "he trembled exceedingly" and told the bad news to Esau. "Your brother came with deceit and has taken away your blessing." And Esau said, 'Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has supplanted me these two times. He took away my birthright, and now look, he has taken away my blessing!" All Isaac can do is give him a smaller blessing, for he would become the father of the Edomite tribes, a nation that would have a constant enmity against the Israelites, be subdued by them and eventually, gain their freedom. Many of the Edomites would eventually settle the modern nation of Turkey and play a prophetic role.

Esau plans to kill Jacob and get back all his rights after Isaac dies, and Rebekah hears about the plan and urges Jacob to flee to her family in Haran. She says, "Flee to my brother Laban in Haran. And stay with him a few days, until your brother's anger turns away from you, and he forgets what you have done to him; then I will send and bring you from there. Why should I be bereaved also of you both in one day?" (27:45). Rebekah then complains about Esau's worldly wives, and Isaac agrees to send Jacob to Haran to find a wife. We will see in the next study what happens next and how it turns out.