

Sermon:

Beans, Birthrights, Blessings and the Plans of God

Three men were sitting in the room for expectant fathers waiting for word on the arrival of their infants.

A while later a nurse comes in and announces to one of the men that his wife had just given birth to twins. *"What a coincidence,"* he said, *"I play for the Minnesota Twins!"*

About twenty minutes later another nurse comes in and announces to the second gentleman that his wife had given birth to triplets. *"That's amazing,"* he said, *"I work for the 3M company."*

Upon hearing this the third man fell off his chair and fainted - after those who were present were able to revive him, they all inquired as to why he had fainted. He said *"Because I manage a 711 store!"*

Our story today is about twin brothers: Esau and Jacob.

- At the surface it is also a story about how, undeterred by the participants' twists and turns, the blessings of God were still passed along according to the promises He had made to Abraham.
- But more importantly, this is also a story which teaches that OUR receiving of God's blessing is always wholly dependent upon HIS grace, not our efforts.
- No matter who you are – good or bad – your successes in life have only come to you through God's love for you.
- No matter what you think of yourself you are constantly being guided through life, by God, even if many of the bumps in your road are a result of your own doings.

So let's begin untangling this Peyton Place of a Biblical drama, this mess of bad decisions which will still lead to God's results.

The story opens with Isaac, who by God's grace was miraculously born to a couple well past childbearing age as the singular fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham that his descendants would one day be as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore.

However, in order for God's promise to ultimately be fulfilled, it would have to continue being passed along through multiple generations. So next Isaac had to sire children, but just as was the case of Isaac's mother, Rebekah at first was barren. However, unlike his parents who tried to fix the problem themselves, Isaac trusted God to provide. Verse 21 says, Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived.



Isaac and Rebekah did everything right. Isaac was the son of promise. Rebekah was from the right family and was handpicked by God himself to be Isaac's wife. Yet from the start of this pregnancy, their family life would be troubled because the twin brothers conceived in her were so different that they viciously fought each other even in the womb, so much so that Rebekah feared for her own life.

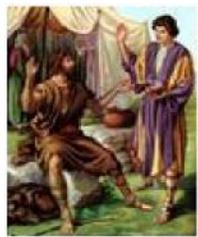
Rebekah, now seeking God's assurance in this matter is told that two nations were at war within her and, in spite of their outward appearance, one would be stronger than the other and the

elder would serve the younger; which is the way things ultimately worked out for these two brothers but not until many years after their deaths.

Esau, the first born was his papa's proud son: redheaded and hairy, he was a rough rugged man's man who loved to hunt but he was also vengeful, impulsive, and negligent of his responsibilities in life.



The other brother Jacob, was a Mama's boy: fair skinned and quiet, preferring to stay at home and take care of the farm. But he was also a schemer always looking for ways to reverse the tables on his elder twin, who simply by being born a few minutes earlier was unfairly destined – according to Jacob's thinking – to become the head of the household, the recipient of a double inheritance and his boss for life.



You know how the story plays out. Both brothers having now grown to adulthood, Jacob was probably at one of the family's shepherd camps when Esau staggers in from the hunt demanding to be fed lest he die. Jacob seizes the opportunity to require of Esau, in exchange for food, first an oath giving up his birthright. You might also know that God greatly disapproves of such thoughtlessly given oaths and requires that they be honored (Ecclesiastes 5:4-6).

Esau said, "I'm feeling faint."
"Aw," said Jacob, "no you ain't."
"Poppa's blessing," Esau cried,
"Is mine by rights, but I'll have died
Of hunger first. For pity's sake—
My birthright for your lentils, Jake."
"Your birthright?" Jacob murmured. "Sold!"
"Dig in before the stuff gets cold."
(Jeanne Steig, "Twins".)

The moral of this little poem is that since he was still walking and talking, Esau was not on the verge of death. But even as an adult, all he ever cared about rather than anyone else or any future responsibilities were his own immediate wants – in this case his hunger. Thus, as the Bible noted, he sold his birthright for a bowl of beans.

At the age of forty, Esau would again prove his self-serving self-absorption by taking two wives for himself from among the local populace, a stunt that deeply grieved his parents and one which he would later again repeat simply as an act revenge against them for letting Jacob go with the blessing. These acts of defiance against his parent's wishes tells a lot about Esau's basic personality and why he did not qualify to be the head of the household. Which is why it was Rebekah, perhaps also remembering the earlier prophecy, who instigated and then guided Jacob into stealing the blessing. Jacob may have stolen the blessing, but it was Rebekah's plan and persistence which brought it to pass.

For a little something more than what you learned in Sunday School, realize that the occasion for the theft of the blessing was that Isaac now being 140 years old, blind, and thinking that he was

near death, thus wanted to settle his estate. While this picture depicts Jacob as a much younger person, by this time he would have been 77 years old, single and still living at home... talk about a slow bloomer.

But regardless of God's plans, sin must have its recompense. So at the age of 77, having captured both the blessing and in theory a double portion of his father's estate, Isaac instead finds himself penniless and fleeing for his life into a time of exile, never again to see his mother and for the next 20 years to in his turn be tricked and robbed by his uncle Laban. But along the way he also sires twelve sons and a daughter. One of them being Joseph, whom through his own series of Godly guarded misadventures would not only end up saving all the people in Egypt during a time of famine, but would also by moving his entire family down to Egypt begin the 400 year period of exile in which the sons of Israel would grow into the nation of Israel to one day return to the land ... just as God had prophesied to grandfather Abraham so many years previously.

It will take three more episodes to tell you all the stories of Jacob's misadventures at the home of his Uncle Laban which began with his falling madly in love with Rachel Laban's youngest daughter, only to be tricked into first marrying Leah, her older sister. This then launched Rachel, Leah and two of their handmaids into a baby making contest that ended with 12 sons and a daughter. But along the way, by hard work and shrewd management of Laban's flocks, Isaac earned enough money to return his now very large family and holdings back home that is if Esau doesn't kill him when he gets there. But all these are stories for another day.

What remains for us today is to take a personal lesson from Esau and Jacob's lives according to the prophecy given about them before their birth.

We know from the Biblical record that some 80 years before these brothers' birth, God had told grandfather Abraham of his descendants' eventual journey down to Egypt only to emerge some 400 years later as a nation ready to claim the Promised Land. We also know how the path to that fulfillment traveled through Isaac, to Jacob, and on to Joseph and his eleven brothers.

What you may not know is that brother Esau, as prophesied also grew into the nation of Edom which flourished for over 500 years in the region just east of the Promised Land. The beautiful city of Petra carved into the red cliffs of Jordan - one of the wonders of the ancient world that has also played a bit part in several movies – was the capital city of Edom.

400 years later, Edom would oppose Israel's return to the land that would eventually be defeated and subjugated by King Saul of Israel and his brilliant general David. Thus in accordance with the prophecy given before their birth, the younger brother's nation proved to be stronger of the two and older brother's nation would be their servants.

So how does God's grace, providence, and dare I say it even predestination, play out in your life as it did in the lives of these warring siblings?

First you should note that like Esau and Jacob, even from our very start, God sees the whole of our life, not only who we are now but who we will become someday. All this figures into His plans for shaping our life and future.

In Psalm 139, King David would write

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made... Your eyes beheld my unformed substance and in your book were written all my days, when none of them as yet existed. Psalm 139:14-16

So what we become has everything to do with God's grace directing our lives.

All that you are, all that you will become. All that you have, all that you will ever attain – all is due to God's grace. Above all, salvation is due entirely to God's grace so that it depends on nothing in human beings. I know of no teaching in scripture that arouses more anger and opposition; but opposed or not, it is true and most practical... (JM Boyce, Genesis, vol. 1, p. 735).

Phillip Yancey describes grace in his book 'What's So Amazing About Grace'. ...

"Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more—no amount of spiritual calisthenics and renunciations, no amount of knowledge gained from seminaries, no amount of crusading on behalf of righteous causes. And grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us less—no amount of racism or pride or pornography or adultery or even murder. Grace means that God already loves us as much an infinite God can possibly love."

While there are theologians who actively oppose this idea of God having so much control over our lives, declaring that it stifles initiative while encouraging irresponsibility, even sin, the truth is that a proper understanding of God's grace can make us into much more god honoring people.

- Because grace **discourages boasting** when we realize that we have only achieved everything we have in life and even our salvation only through God's loving intervention in our lives.
- Thus a proper understanding of how grace works in our life not **only encourages our love for God**, but also **our desire to share this message of God's love with others**.

Remember that "grace" and "mercy" are ultimately terms of love not judgment; MERCY is not getting what you deserve. GRACE is getting what you do not deserve. Neither brother deserved the successes they would enjoy in later life, nor to sire the nations that would grow out of them. But by God's grace both brothers ended up playing their part in moving His covenant with Abraham forward to its eventual fulfillment in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

And while we do not know what kind of faith Esau ended up with, we do know that Jacob who in one sense wrestled with everyone he ever met – even God – came to the end of his life humbly dependent upon the God of his grandfather Abraham, to guard and bless his life. This lively faith he also passed along at least to his next youngest son Joseph, which would help Joseph not only prosper in the midst of great oppression but also in his turn to keep moving God's promises forward.

We may never be privileged to know the part we are playing in moving forward God's - our ultimate loving Father's - plans for the salvation of our world ... but rest assured each one of us is doing so, as we seek to honor Him in all aspects of our life. Let's pray about this.