

## An Unexpected Choice

Lesson for September 11, 2022

**Unit I:** God Calls Abraham's Family

**Scriptural Background:** Genesis 25:19-34

**Printed Text:** Genesis 25:19b -34

**Key verse:** 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." (Genesis 25:23, NKJV)

### Word Study

#### Hook

The words of Eleanor Roosevelt ring true: One's philosophy is not best expressed in words. It is expressed in the choices one makes. In the long run, we shape our lives, and we shape ourselves. The process never ends until we die. And the choices we make are ultimately our responsibility.

There are two choices in today's that impacted the entire world. The first choice of Jacob, rather than Esau to receive the birthright was God's choice, though inconsistent with Jewish culture, and quite unexpected. The selfish choice of Esau regarding the birthright illuminates God's choice of Jacob.

#### Key Terms

1. **Barren** (v. 21) – Could not have children
2. **Conceived** (v. 21) – Became impregnated
3. **Cunning** (v. 27) – Skillful
4. **Faint** (vv. 29–30) – Tired and hungry
5. **Garment** (v. 25) – Clothing
6. **Intreated/inquired** (v. 21) – Seek; ask questions; prayed to
7. **Pottage** (vv. 29–30, 34) – Stew
8. **Separated from thy bowels** (v. 23) – Born
9. **Serve** (v. 23) – To work; become a slave
10. **Sod** (v. 29) – Cooked by boiling
11. **Took hold** (v. 26) – Grasp; take possess of; grip.
12. **Venison** (v. 28) – Red meat
13. **Why am I thus** (v. 22) – Why is this happening?
14. **Were filled** (v. 24) – Filled; accomplished; finished; time came.

## Lesson Background

Genesis 25 tells us that after Sarah died, Abraham takes another wife named Keturah, and she bears him many more children. Not much information is given about Keturah, or the timing of Abraham's second marriage since his posterity through Isaac is already established.

After giving his possessions to Isaac, Abraham dies at age 175. Isaac and Ishmael bury Abraham with Sarah in the cave of Machpelah. Afterward, Isaac settles at Beer-lahai-roi. Ishmael, son of Abraham and Hagar, has 12 sons, all of them princes and leaders of tribes, and dies at age 137. His sons settle on either side of the Red Sea.

The story turns to the next generation of Abraham's family. Like Sarah, Rebekah is barren and must rely on God to help her conceive. The conflict in Rebekah's womb sets the tone for her sons' ongoing relationship.

In the lesson for this week, one of the most important individuals in Genesis comes on the scene. Jacob, son of Isaac and Rebekah, dominates the next thirteen chapters of the book and he continues to be a major figure in the story of his son Joseph. Jacob's story occupies fully half of the whole book of Genesis.

Especially compared to his father Isaac, Jacob is a fully realized, complicated, very human character. The stories about Isaac portray him primarily in passive relationship to those around him — he is nearly sacrificed in chapter 22, a wife is found for him in chapter 24, and he is duped by his wife and son in chapter 27. It is to Rebekah, not Isaac, that God reveals the future of their sons (chapter 25). And, perhaps most notably, it is from Jacob/Israel, not Isaac (and not Abraham) that the nation takes its name.

Jacob, in contrast to his father, is anything but passive in his relationships. His conflict with his twin brother Esau begins even in the womb, where they wrestle with one another. When they are born, Jacob comes out holding on to Esau's heel. Hence his name, Jacob (*ya'aqov*), which shares the same Hebrew root as *'aqav*, meaning "heel." (The same root can also mean "to supplant" or "to cheat.")

### I. The Legacy Continues (Genesis 25:19b – 21)

Isaac married Rebekah when he was 40 years old. God renewed His promises to Isaac. God promised Isaac that he would have as many descendants as there were stars in the sky. He promised to give Isaac's descendants the land of Canaan, and that all people would be blessed through them. God remained with Isaac and blessed him greatly.

Isaac and Rebekah had been married for 20 years, yet they had no children. Remember, after Abraham and Sarah had waited for their child for 10 years, they wrongly took matters into their own hands and Abraham fathered Ishmael by Sarah's maidservant, Hagar. Ishmael was not the child of the promise.

**She was barren:** Confronted by 20 years of his wife's barrenness (verses 19, 26), Isaac rose to the test and earnestly turned to God, obviously acknowledging thereby God's involvement and timing in the seed-promise.

**Now Isaac pleaded with the Lord for his wife, because she was barren:** Isaac did not do as his father had done. Isaac had faith that God would send him a child. Perhaps he learned from the sins of his parents. Surely Isaac saw how much trouble the sin of Abraham and Sarah had caused their family. This time, Isaac kept his eyes focused on God and His promises.

**The Lord granted his plea, and Rebekah his wife conceived:** This prayer was answered, some 20 years after Isaac and Rebekah first married (Genesis 25:20, 26). Their faith and persistence in prayer was tested and invited to grow through many years. As well, these were the only children born to Isaac and Rebekah.

## II. Struggling for Supremacy (Genesis 25:22 – 26)

**And the children struggled together within her:** Rebekah felt a lot of movement going on inside of her belly. She didn't know what was happening.

**So, she went to inquire of the Lord:** The struggle that seemed to take place in Rebekah's womb made her seek God. As she sought Him, the Lord spoke to her regarding number of children in her womb, their gender, and the destiny of those sons in her womb. The Lord had an interesting explanation for her. She was going to have twin boys!

She learned directly from the Lord that the severe jostling in her womb predicted the future antagonism between the two nations to arise from her twin sons (verse 23). Each son's descendants would become a nation of people, one nation would be stronger than the other, and the younger son would rule over the older son. This was a very interesting prophecy.

Also, "the elder shall serve the younger" was a startling revelation; for it went contrary to ancient Near Eastern custom. In Romans 9:10-13, the Apostle Paul used this choice of Jacob over Esau before their birth as an illustration of God's sovereign choice. This forms the basis for our understanding of the New Testament application of the term firstborn to the Lord Jesus Christ.

It refers to rank, not origin. Normally, the eldest son was given preferential treatment. He assumed more responsibility and was rewarded with honor and given two shares in the family inheritance, instead of the single share that each of his younger brothers received.

**And when her days to be delivered were fulfilled:** The truth of the unseen promise was fulfilled by something that could be seen. When the time came for them to be born, there were in fact twins in Rebekah's womb and God's word was proved true. Esau and Jacob were born around 2005 B.C.E.

**And the first came out red:** The circumstances surrounding the birth of each child were responsible for their names. **Esau** referred to the hairiness and hair color of the first-born child. **Jacob** referred to the way the second-born was holding on to the heel of his brother.

### III. Maligned Priorities (Genesis 25:27 – 34)

**And the boys grew:** In stature, became strong and fit for business, and devoted themselves to different employments. Like so many siblings in a family, Jacob and Esau were very different from each other in their personality and tastes; and as is sometimes the case, each parent had a favorite child.

**Esau was a skillful hunter:** He chose to range about the field and hunt after beasts and birds, in which he was very expert, and contrived traps and snares to catch them. This course of life was most agreeable to his temper and disposition, being active, fierce, and perhaps cruel. According to the Targum of Jonathan, he was also a hunter and slayer of men, as were Nimrod and Henoch his son.

**Jacob was a mild man:** The Hebrew word for **mild** has the idea of “wholeness,” instead of someone who is weak or effeminate. Keeping at home and attending the business of the family, as we afterwards find him boiling pottage (Genesis 25:29). An honest plain hearted man, whose heart and tongue went together. A quiet man, that gave no disturbance to others. A godly man, sincere, upright, and perfect, that had the truth of grace and holiness in him.

**And Isaac loved Esau, because he did eat of his venison:** Better than Jacob, not only because he was his firstborn, but because he brought him of the flesh of creatures, which he took in hunting, and being dressed, were savory food to him. It is in the original, “because venison (or what he hunted), was in his mouth”, into which he put it, and was very grateful to his taste. You can understand the daddy appreciating the outdoor young man. Men like their boys to be tough, able to withstand problems. Esau killed fresh game, and brought it to Isaac, also.

**But Rebekah loved Jacob:** More than Esau, being more at home with her, and of a milder disposition; and more especially being a good man, a partaker of the grace of God, and to whom she knew by the prophecy, the blessing and promise belonged.

This was a very unhealthy situation. Parents should never pick a favorite and love that child more than the other. This causes jealousy, and bad things can spring from that.

**And Jacob sod pottage:** Or boiled broth; this he did at a certain time, for this was not his usual employment. This pottage was made of lentils, as appears from (Genesis 25:34).

**And Esau came from the field, and he was faint:** For want of food, and weary with hunting, and perhaps more so, having toiled and got nothing.

**And Esau said to Jacob, Feed me, I pray thee, with that same red pottage:** Esau had been out hunting, he was tired, and very hungry. He begged food of his brother, Jacob.

**Sell me your birthright as of this day:** Because Esau was the oldest son, he received the birthright of the family. That means when the father of a family died, all of his property, money, and belongings were given to his sons. The son who held the birthright would receive twice as much as the other sons. Jacob knew that the birthright was valuable, and he wanted it. Deuteronomy 21:17 and 1 Chronicles 5:1-2 tell us the *birthright* involved both a material and a spiritual dynamic. The son of the birthright received a double portion of the inheritance, and he also became the head of the family and the spiritual leader upon the passing of the father.

**And Esau said, behold, I am at the point to die. And what profit shall this birthright do to me:** Esau wasn't going to die of starvation. He revealed his character in this incident. He was living for the moment, driven by his appetites and incapable of valuing what was of great worth.

We have here the bargain made between Jacob and Esau about the right, which was Esau's by birth, but Jacob's by promise. It was for a spiritual privilege; and we see Jacob's desire of the birth-right, but he sought to obtain it by crooked courses, not like his character as a plain man. He was right, that he coveted earnestly the best gifts; he was wrong, that he took advantage of his brother's need. The inheritance of their father's worldly goods did not descend to Jacob and was not meant in this proposal. But it includes the future possession of the land of Canaan by his children's children, and the covenant made with Abraham as to Christ the promised Seed. *Believing Jacob* valued these above all things; *unbelieving Esau* despised them.

Esau did not think about what was really important. He wanted what seemed good to him at the moment. He chose to fill his belly for a couple hours rather than prepare for his entire future. Esau did not value what was really important. He was foolish and impatient. In our lives, it is wise for us to rely on God to show us what is truly important, and to give us patience and self-control.

**Swear to me as of this day:** Jacob acted in the character of his name, acting like a heel-catcher. He was acting like a scoundrel or a rascal in taking advantage of his brother. Jacob was guilty of scheming in the flesh to gain something God said was already his. Yet we should remember the far greater blame was placed on Esau, who despised his birthright.

**Jacob said, Swear to me this day; and he swore unto him:** It wasn't enough that his brother agreed, Jacob dragged the LORD into the sordid affair by forcing Esau to swear a solemn oath. According to Leupold, this was not a valid transaction, because Jacob tried to purchase what was already his, and Esau tried to sell something that didn't belong to him.

**And sold his birthright to Jacob:** Esau was more interested in HIMSELF in that moment than his future. It was all about him and what he could get. He considered the responsibilities and honors unimportant, or he was totally uninterested in them. Esau thought little of the spiritual heritage connected to the birthright. He valued only material things, so a spiritual birthright meant little to him when his stomach was hungry. He took what God considered sacred and made it common. Being so totally concerned with his temporary and material needs, he gave them priority over his rights as the firstborn son and his responsibilities as heir to the blessing of the Abrahamic covenant. Many, if not most people, also place little value on spiritual things.

Every Christian must beware lest he count as unimportant what God considers sacred. We must rely on God's Holy Spirit to guide us through every decision we make.

**Then Jacob gave Esau bread and pottage of lentiles; and he did eat and drink, and rose up, and went his way:** What is important for the moment is that Esau treated the birthright as unimportant. Candidly, neither of these men is seen in a positive light. Esau was shallow—a man governed by his feelings. He didn't value the things that were truly valuable.

Jacob doesn't appear in any better light; his character invites a flood of negatives—opportunist, cheat, schemer, heartless, self-seeking, self-serving. It is difficult to be attracted to him. The wonder is that when you see these two men side-by-side that God could love either of them! Indeed, when we think of our own lives, we marvel that God loves us. However, as was undoubtedly true for these two men, we minimize our flawed character traits and exalt what we consider our best features.

God had promised that the older would serve the younger. Jacob didn't need to intervene. He didn't trust God or the divine promise. What Jacob did was to take Satan's shortcut to get what he felt was rightly his. Despite God's promise, which Jacob surely knew since he was favored by Rebekah. Jacob acted like so many of us and thought he would "help" God to fulfil the divine promise. Jacob seems to have thought that his craftiness and his skillful schemes would accomplish the divine work.

## **Lesson Summary**

### **You can lose great blessings if you do not appreciate them.**

Esau was born into a situation with great blessings. He wasn't born into a pagan home, where his parents worshipped idols and abused him. He was the son of Isaac and Rebekah, grandson of Abraham, the friend of God. No doubt, during the first 15 years of Esau's life, while Abraham was alive, his grandfather had taught him about God and His covenant promises. Surely that teaching had been reinforced by Isaac and Rebekah. Esau had great spiritual privileges. But he threw them away because he didn't appreciate them.

Esau may have had some excuses for disregarding these privileges. He could have blamed God: "God predestined me to do it!" After all, the Lord had told his mother while he was still in the womb that the older shall serve the younger (25:23). But that would have been a cop out. While God is sovereign, men are responsible for their sin. The text assigns the blame to Esau when it says that he despised his birthright (25:34).

He might have blamed his parents for their errors in raising him. They did make some serious mistakes, although their mistakes do not absolve Esau of his wrong choice. We read, "Isaac loved Esau because he had a taste for game; but Rebekah loved Jacob" (25:28). What a tragic sentence! It covers untold grief and conflict in that home. When parents play favorites with the children, it breeds bitterness and hatred. Chapter 27 tells how Esau wanted to kill Jacob. Jacob later played favorites with his sons, so that they wanted to kill his favorite son, Joseph. Rebekah's fondness for Jacob pitted her against her husband, Isaac, and led her to deceive him in order to help Jacob against Esau. No doubt Isaac often defended his adventuresome but godless

son by telling Rebekah, “Get off his back! The boy just likes to have some fun in life.” It wasn’t a perfect home!

Two applications: First, for parents. We need to realize that *our sin affects our children, and we need to deal with that sin*. We aren’t free to excuse it by saying, “That’s just the way I am.” If we explode at our kids, we need to confess it to the Lord and ask forgiveness from our kids. If they see us bending the truth, we need to admit our sin, and make it right by being truthful. If they see us argue as a couple, they need to see us seek one another’s forgiveness and talk through our differences in gentleness and love. If our kids don’t see genuine Christianity- repentance, brokenness, the fruit of the Spirit-worked out in our daily lives, they probably won’t be eager to follow the Lord.

The second application is for children (including *adult* children): *We can’t blame our disobedience to God on the way our parents treated us*. They may have acted piously on Sunday and like pagans the rest of the week. They may have been abusive. They may not have loved us as they should. They may have played favorites. But if I walk away from the Lord and the spiritual blessings He offers me in Christ, God will hold me accountable for despising my birthright.

At best, even the most godly parents are imperfect. Child rearing is not a matter of plugging in a formula. Every child, even among twins, is different from the womb. Note how different Esau and Jacob were. They looked different, even though they were twins. They had different temperaments, interests, and values. Esau liked the outdoors; Jacob liked to hang out in the kitchen. Esau liked physical activity; Jacob liked to use his head to outsmart others. Esau was impetuous and lived for the here and now; Jacob was more goal-oriented. He thought about how to gain advantage for himself down the road.

The tricky thing for parents is that loving your children equally doesn’t mean treating them equally. It’s wrong to play favorites, but not playing favorites isn’t a matter of equal treatment, because every child is different. As a parent, you’ve got to study each child and do all you can to help each one come under the lordship of Christ. While there are solid principles for parents in the Bible, it requires a lot of wisdom. And you don’t get the experience you need for the job until the job is over!

The point is that even though our parents-even Christian parents-were at best imperfect or at worst wrong in the way they raised us, God holds us accountable if we despise our spiritual heritage and walk away from Him. Sinful parents need to deal with their sin, but sinful kids need to deal with their sin, too! The fact is, each of us has great spiritual privileges: We’ve heard the gospel. We have the Bible. We live in a free country where we can attend a church where the Bible is taught, where we can get to know other Christians who can help us grow in our walk with God. But, like Esau despising his birthright, we can forfeit all these spiritual blessings if we don’t appreciate them.

## **2. Small choices can have drastic consequences.**

Warning signs don't always flash. On the surface, it doesn't seem like a big deal. But it's a critical moment, and your decision can shape the rest of your life. Maybe it's an offer from a friend to try drugs. Perhaps it's an occasion to go to bed with your boyfriend, or to cheat on your marriage. It may be a chance to make a lot of money in a wrong way. Often, you've got to make a quick decision. The decision you make may turn around and make or break you!

Esau's decision was impulsive, and yet it stemmed from years of disregarding spiritual things. Hebrews 12:16 calls Esau a godless (= profane) person. He lacked God's perspective on life. He was not concerned about spiritual matters. He lived for the here and now. "Who needs a birthright?" he thought. "After all, I may be dead tomorrow. What I need now is a good meal. What good is a birthright if I starve to death?"

Those who cast off God's moral standards often excuse it by saying that they had to meet their "need." We're buying into the notion that our needs take priority. In fact, I've heard that if you don't love yourself first, you *can't* love God and others! But Jesus says, "God knows your needs and you can trust Him to take care of them. Your real need is to seek first His kingdom and righteousness" (see Matthew 6:31-33).

What's frightening about Esau's impulsive decision is the lasting consequences. Hebrews 12:17 says that "afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears." Later he felt badly about what he had given up. He could see that his decision had been foolish and hasty. But even though he felt badly, he had operated so long on the principle of living for immediate gratification, he couldn't turn from his selfish ways to God. He later wanted what God could give him, but he didn't want God. That would mean yielding his life to God, and that was too big a price to pay. The series of small choices over the course of his life had drastic consequences.

Some people think that God is like a shopping mall. If you decide you don't like something, just bring it back for a full refund. They buy into living for themselves. When the thought of eternity comes up, they push it away by thinking that when their time to die comes, they'll take all their selfish living into God's store, ask for a refund, and buy into eternity then. But it doesn't work that way! We all face eternity every day, and we need to make daily decisions in that light. Otherwise, we may find that, like Esau, we come to the place where we want God's blessings, but we can't yield our lives to God.

Thus, you can lose great blessings if you don't appreciate them. Small choices can have drastic consequences.



### **3. It's easy to mistake as essential that which really is not.**

Esau thought that he needed food. That sounds like an essential need, but it isn't. His essential need was to obey God and seek His purpose. Esau mistook as essential that which really was not, and he shrugged off as not essential that which really is. Spiritual matters were nice, but not necessary, for Esau. So, he traded his soul for a bowl of soup.

The people to whom Moses was writing were in danger of doing the same thing. They had left slavery in Egypt and were headed for the promised land. God had taken them on a detour to teach them to endure hardship and warfare so that they would be ready to conquer the land. But a lot of them grumbled. They thought they needed good drinking water, food, shelter, and protection from their enemies. Those are essentials. If Moses couldn't provide those things, they would go back to Egypt. They were willing to give up their spiritual heritage of God's promises to Abraham in order to gain the comforts they lacked. But Moses is showing them that the essential thing is that they do the will of God, even if it's difficult. If they do His will, He will take care of the other essentials of life.

We get mixed up in our ideas of what is essential and what is not. To look at our hectic lives, you would think that it's essential to make a lot of money. We work long hours to make a few extra bucks-and ruin our families and our health in the process. We spend hours watching inane TV shows, but don't have time to nurture our souls or serve the Lord. Some people endanger their health and even their lives through drugs, drinking, and sexual promiscuity, because they put feeling good right now as essential, but feeling good throughout eternity as secondary. Each one of us needs to think carefully about what is really essential in life in light of God's Word. Write it down. Then periodically evaluate your life against those few essentials.

### **4. It's easy to grab for the right things for the wrong reasons and in the wrong way.**

Jacob was right to want the birthright. He was wrong to want the birthright for the personal advantages it would bring him; and, he was wrong to take it in the way he did.

Jacob would probably protest: "I bought that birthright fair and square! Esau didn't have to agree to the deal. Besides, he didn't really want it and I did. Everything was done out in the open." But Jacob went after the birthright for the wrong reasons and in the wrong way. He took advantage of his brother's impetuous personality and hungry condition. He should have waited on the Lord to fulfill His promises. God dealt with this deceiver by giving him a dose of his own medicine. Jacob was always scheming to work things out for his own advantage. He needed to learn that God could work things out if he would trust Him.

The people Moses was writing to faced the same problem. Many of them weren't even sure they wanted to conquer Canaan. Of those who did, my guess is that many wanted Canaan for the comfortable lifestyle it would provide them. They were willing to fight to get it, but they weren't thinking of God's purpose to bless all nations through Abraham's descendants. They wanted the homes and vineyards, and other amenities Canaan would provide. They wanted a right thing for the wrong reason. And some tried to obtain that right thing in the wrong way, blundering ahead when God said to wait (Numbers 14:39-45).

We face the same temptation. Some people are Christians, not because they want to see God fulfill His purpose through His people, but rather for what being a Christian will do for them. Don't misunderstand-being a Christian has wonderful benefits! God gives peace and joy. He puts broken marriages together. He gives you wisdom for raising your children. There's hardly an area of life where God's Word will not have a positive impact if you apply it.

But God doesn't make us happy and comfortable so that we can live for ourselves. He blesses us because He wants to use us to fulfill His purpose of blessing all nations through the Seed of Abraham, the Lord Jesus Christ. If we're into Christianity just for what it can do for us, then we're grabbing a right thing for a wrong reason. We need to pray, "Lord, bless me so You can use me in Your purpose of reaching all nations."

Even though it was God's will for Jacob ultimately to have the blessings of the birthright, he grabbed it in the wrong way, by taking advantage of his brother. In the same way, we need to be careful to go about God's work in God's way. Methods are just as important as the results. American Christians, especially, are highly pragmatic. If it works, it must be right. But it's important that we wait on God and do God's work in God's way.