

Book of Genesis – Part XI - Genesis 25-26

“Deception and Promise”

The story of the community of faith continues now with Isaac following the death of Abraham. Isaac and Rebekah give birth to Jacob and Esau whose conflict foreshadows future struggles among God's chosen people.

- I. The descendents of Abraham – 25:1-18
 - a. After the death of Sarah, Abraham takes another wife, Keturah. In spite of his advanced age, his wife gives birth to six sons.
 - b. There remains a key difference between Isaac and these later children as there was between Isaac and Ishmael earlier. Isaac alone is the son of promise. Abraham gives him everything he has (25:5). However, Abraham does not neglect his other children to whom he gives gifts (25:6). Nonetheless, he has to send them away. Isaac alone must remain as the heir (25:6).
 - c. Abraham dies at the stated age of one hundred and seventy-five years. This is a hundred years after God first appeared to him and told him to go to the promised land (Gen. 12:4). Again, numbers here may well be symbolic.
 - d. Isaac and Ishmael bury their father with his wife, Sarah (25:9-10). After the death, God blesses Isaac. The blessing God graciously gave to Abraham now is passed on to the son of promise (25:11).
 - e. We next have an extensive list of the descendents of Ishmael. His sons are twelve princes (25:16). This suggests a parallel with the later twelve sons (or twelve tribes) of Jacob.
 - f. Ishmael dies at the age of one hundred and thirty-seven (25:17).

- II. God's Plan of Election: Jacob and Esau – 25:19-34
 - a. The unfolding of God's promise never seems to be easy. Rebekah is barren, as was Sarah (25:21; cf. Gen. 11:30).
 - b. Isaac prays and the Lord grants his request. Rebekah becomes pregnant with twins. However, her pregnancy is very difficult to the point where her life seems to be at stake (25:22). This underscores the basic truth that having our prayers answered may not make our lives easier. For that matter, as Abraham experienced with the call to sacrifice Isaac, faithfulness to God doesn't necessarily make our lives easier (Matt. 10:37-39).
 - c. The situation of Jacob and Esau underscores the basic truth of God's election. They represent two nations. More to the point, God says, “the elder shall serve the younger.” This is symbolized by the baby Jacob gripping Esau's heel (“Jacob” in Hebrew is similar to the word for “heel”).
 - d. The reality here is summarized by God's statement later in Scripture: “Yet I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau” (Mal. 1:3). Esau actually will

be the ancestor of the Edomites who will later be adversaries for Israel. Paul dramatizes this picture in Romans when he writes,

“Even before they had been born or had done anything good or bad (so that God’s purpose of election might continue, not by works but by his call) she was told, ‘The elder shall serve the younger’”
(Romans 9:11-12).

Paul defends God’s action by stating that we are in no position to argue with God (Rom. 9:14-21). In fact, Paul operates from the fundamental conviction that all of us are guilty before God. None of us deserves any favor from God. God is then free, and indeed just, to have mercy on whom he chooses to have mercy” (Rom. 9:15).

- e. The truth is that neither Jacob nor Esau is all that admirable. On top of that, their parents’ attitude toward them is clearly dysfunctional. Isaac favors Esau, presumably because he is a hunter, while Rebekah favors Jacob, who chooses to live quietly at home (25:27-28). Needless to say, this could not be a contented household.
- f. The first critical encounter between the sons occurs when they are adults. Esau comes in from hunting very hungry. Jacob is cooking a stew. Esau, understandably, asks for something to eat (25:30). Jacob, outrageously, asks Esau to sell him his birthright as payment for food. Just as outrageously, Esau agrees to sell his birthright for a bowl of stew and some bread (25:32-34). We read that Esau thereby “despised his birthright” (25:34). Though he would seriously regret his rash act, it could not be undone. This doesn’t excuse Rebekah and Jacob’s later deception but, at the same time, that deception is an outworking of Esau’s decision here. The later verdict on Esau is a harsh one (Heb. 12:16).

III. Déjà vu All Over Again

- a. The events of chapter 26 are more than a little familiar. Isaac, during a time of famine, goes with Rebekah to Gerar where they encounter King Abimelech of the Philistines. We read that Rebekah was attractive (We already knew that, chapter 24:16, and I will refrain from speculating whether she still wears a nose ring). Isaac therefore tells the men in Gerar that she is his sister.
- b. After “a long time,” Abimelech, looking out a window, sees Isaac fondling Rebekah. Actually, “fondling” may be a euphemism since the same Hebrew word is used later for more explicit sexual contact (Gen. 39:14-17).
- c. Abimelech confronts Isaac with his deception (26:10).
- d. Subsequently, there is a dispute over a well. Isaac is able to reconcile this with Abimelech and his general, Phicol (26:26-31). The place of the well is named Beer-sheba (26:32-33).
- e. With a number of variations, this is remarkably similar to Abraham’s encounter with the same people in chapters 20:1-18; 21:22-34 (not to

mention chapter 12:10-20). It's hard to imagine these are two separate events since, among other things, we have not only the same king but the same commander of the army as well as the oath they all swear (21:22, 31; 26:26, 31). It seems more likely to see these as two versions of the same event. The critical theme in both stories is God's unwavering promise to Abraham *and* Isaac (20:7; 21:22; 26:3-5, 12, 23-25).

- f. It is not unusual in Scripture to have differing versions of the same events. We see this in a story as basic as Jesus calling the first disciples (cf. Matt. 4:18-20 with John 1:35-42). Needless to say, Scripture is not interested in a literal recounting of historical events (although historical events are clearly alluded to). It is hard to harmonize the specifics of the various Resurrection accounts (one angel or two, before or after sunrise, etc.). The community of faith, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, clearly saw a benefit in retaining the different accounts without trying to reconcile all their details.
- g. The final comment in this chapter refers to Esau's two wives who make life bitter for his mother Rebekah (26:34-35). This may explain why Rebekah later schemes against Esau.

Questions for us –

1. A key theme in this section is God's election. God chooses Isaac, not Ishmael or any of Abraham's other sons. God chooses Jacob over Esau. This is often a difficult concept for some people. Yet God chooses Jesus Christ to be the Savior of the world (I Peter 1:18-20). God also chooses us and that choice is not based on anything we have done. How does this truth both comfort and convict us?
2. Esau makes a rash decision and cuts himself off from his birthright. What other examples in Scripture do we see of people making similar kinds of rash decisions? What are examples of this in our own lives? What can we learn from these examples?
3. Why do you think we have three versions of the "she's my sister" story? What lessons can we take from the various versions as well as looking at them as a group (Gen. 12:10-20; 20:1-18; 26:1-11)?