

Genesis 25B (2011)

- It's been some time since we left Chapter 25, so a short review is in order
 - Abraham's story in the book of Genesis has come to an end, as he died and was buried with his wife Sarai
 - Abraham carried the promises of God and received His blessings
 - The true fulfillment of God's promises won't come for Abraham until he is resurrected and enters the Kingdom of Christ on earth
 - Abraham's death introduces a new and important question, which Moses addresses in the second half of the chapter
 - The question is, what becomes of the promises God spoke to Abraham?
 - Remember, God extended His promises both to Abraham and his descendants
 - But the promises were – by their very nature – limited to a single individual
 - Two children couldn't inherit the promise of God's blessing given the way God expressed it
 - The promise included the prospect of being in the line of the Messiah
 - Only one child could inherit such a promise
 - As Moses begins to trace the movement of the blessing from generation to generation, he uses a common term to describe the inheritance of God's promises
 - Moses refers time and again to the "birthright"
 - The birthright is a position of honor among those who stand to inherit from the father
 - The birthright entitled a person to receive a double portion of the father's inheritance
 - So if there were six children, the estate is divided seven ways, and the oldest received two portions

- Ordinarily, the first born male held the birthright automatically
 - Only if the first was disqualified by the father for some reason could the birthright transfer to another
 - Finally, in that culture the father held the power to decide who would receive the birthright
 - But in the case of God's promises, God Himself determined where His promises and blessing would rest
 - Not even the patriarch himself could override the Lord's choice
 - Remember that Abraham earlier tried to persuade God to select Ishmael as Abraham's descendant
 - But God flatly told Abraham no, it must be Isaac instead
- So now following Abraham's death, Moses makes clear that God's choice for the birthright is Isaac

[Gen. 25:16](#) These are the sons of Ishmael and these are their names, by their villages, and by their camps; twelve princes according to their tribes.

[Gen. 25:17](#) These are the years of the life of Ishmael, one hundred and thirty-seven years; and he breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people.

[Gen. 25:18](#) They settled from Havilah to Shur which is east of Egypt as one goes toward Assyria; he settled in defiance of all his relatives.

- We read these verses in our previous study, but let's briefly consider Ishmael's mention here
 - Moses inserts the description of Ishmael's end between Abraham's death and the story of Isaac's family
 - The point is clear: let's get Ishmael's story out of the way so we can move on to the important story of Isaac
 - Once we address Ishmael's end, we can see clearly that God's work continues through the line of Isaac alone
 - Moses gives us a footnote for Ishmael's life
 - We're told he settled in the east, an ominous sign
 - And he lived in defiance of all his relatives
 - For many of us, we know relatives who live like this

A couple drove down a country road for several miles, not saying a word. An earlier discussion had led to an argument and, stubbornly neither of them wanted to concede their position.

As they passed a barnyard of mules, goats, and pigs, the husband asked sarcastically, "Relatives of yours?"

"Yep," the wife replied, "in-laws."

- But in Ishmael's case, the statement is a fulfillment of God's statement to Hagar at the well years earlier when the boy was young
 - God said that Ishmael would be a wild ass of a man, as he would be inclined against Isaac's family as a perpetual adversary
 - God intends to use this adversarial relationship to His own good purposes over the history of Israel
- Then Moses moves his focus to Isaac

[Gen. 25:19](#) Now these are the records of the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham became the father of Isaac;

[Gen. 25:20](#) 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.

[Gen. 25:21](#) Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD answered him and Rebekah his wife conceived.

- Obviously, we know the details of how Isaac came to be married to Rebekah
 - But now we learn something surprising about their marriage
 - Isaac and Rebekah are unable to have children
 - Like father, like son
 - Or more accurately, like mother, like wife
 - Because Sarah was the one who couldn't bear children
 - And we're told here that Rebekah was barren as well
 - This situation seems like too much coincidence
 - And as Christians who read our Bible, we know that there's no such thing as coincidence

- For everything happens according to God's plan
- Furthermore, we know God intends to bring the seed promise through the line of Isaac
 - God has already pronounced in Genesis 17:19 that Isaac will have descendants
 - So why bring Isaac a wife who was barren?
- We get the answer in the rest of the verse
 - After twenty years of childless marriage (v.26), Isaac decided his wife's barrenness required the Lord's intervention
 - So Isaac prays for the Lord to solve the problem
 - Isaac's response to his situation was a far cry from the one Abraham pursued
 - When Abraham faced the same issue, he listened to the voice of his wife and took a concubine
 - And the result was Ishmael, a son who will produce a legacy of pain for Israel
 - Isaac took the right approach and appealed to the Lord
 - And Isaac's response was exactly what the Lord was seeking and it explains why Rebecca was made barren
 - As Rebecca conceived, the Lord is clearly seen to be the author of this birth
 - Just as God wanted Isaac's birth to be an undisputed miracle, this pregnancy will carry a similar significance
 - Thinking about Isaac's situation, we must consider that God will work at times in our life in similar ways
 - When we lack what we desire or even the basics of what we need, God may be withholding these things simply to encourage us to ask Him
 - And the reason He desires our prayers is so that we can grow in spiritual discipline and strength by giving Him the opportunity to answer prayer

- Furthermore, the Lord receives all the more glory when we witness Him working through our prayer life
- This principle is reflected throughout Scripture

[Matt. 7:7](#) “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.

[Matt. 7:8](#) “For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.

[Matt. 7:9](#) “Or what man is there among you who, when his son asks for a loaf, will give him a stone?

[Matt. 7:10](#) “Or if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he?

[Matt. 7:11](#) “If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!

- The Lord isn’t promising to give us everything we want, since this wouldn’t be the good and proper thing for a father to do for a child
- But Jesus is stating that those who are inclined to ask and to seek God’s answer will receive
 - As compared to those who are not so inclined and therefore will not find God responding
 - God’s solution will be far better than our own

[Gen. 25:22](#) But the children struggled together within her; and she said, “If it is so, why then am I this way?” So she went to inquire of the LORD.

- As we examine Rebekah’s situation, give a moment’s thought to the prospect that Isaac and Rebekah are to have twins, the first mention of twins in the Bible
 - When Abraham went outside God’s counsel, he and Sarah produced an “extra” child, Ishmael
 - This extra child was not the promised child, and his arrival complicated life for Abraham and will trouble Israel for centuries
 - But we understood this consequence was the result of Abraham’s sin
 - And we assumed that if Abraham hadn’t taken this sinful step, then Ishmael wouldn’t have been born
 - But now we have Isaac and Rebekah with twins

- Isaac did the correct thing praying to God
- He waited on the Lord to answer
- So naturally, we expect the Lord will grant Isaac the one, true appointed child to carry the promise forward in the family
- But now we hear the Lord caused Rebekah to conceive twins
- And as with Ishmael and Isaac, only one of these boys can carry the promises of God forward
 - Only one will receive the birthright
 - And this fact will lead to a struggle for the patriarch and his sons
- A theme is emerging in Moses' narrative concerning God's choice
 - The number two in Scripture signifies God's choice and here we see it clearly at work
 - God has produced these two sons so that His choice is clearly seen by the outcome of their lives
 - No one will be able to look at Abraham, Isaac and later Jacob without recognizing the Lord's sovereignty and His choosing
- We see this plainly even in the words the Lord uses in speaking with Rebekah
- Turning to the question, Rebekah encounters a strange situation
 - The children are struggling within her womb
 - Most brothers wait until they are outside the womb to fight, but these two got a head start
 - She asks "if it is so, why then am I this way?"
 - In Hebrew, the question is a little more nuanced
 - She asks what is this struggle about, and why do I live?
 - The struggle inside her womb is so striking, she is asking why her womb is alive, as in alive with activity
 - Now notice where Rebekah brings her question?
 - She brings it to the Lord

- Doesn't it make sense for her to go back to the Lord if the Lord was the One responsible for bringing the children in the first place?
- Naturally, and it's encouraging to see that both Isaac and Rebekah have become accustomed to seeking their answers from the Lord
- This moment further confirms how the Lord's purposes are being fulfilled in this situation
 - First, God waited for Isaac's intervention before producing the pregnancy so that we might know that this birth is something God is at work to create
 - Secondly, He creates twins and then brings them to a struggle in the womb precisely so that Rebekah would petition Him with this question
- And by these maneuvers, God has gained an opportunity to make clear His purposes in advance of their births
 - Without Isaac's prayer and Rebekah's question, we would never have gained the background story on what God was at work doing here
 - And in God's answer, He makes clear why there are twins in her womb warring

Gen. 25:23 The LORD said to her,

**“Two nations are in your womb;
And two peoples will be separated from your body;
And one people shall be stronger than the other;
And the older shall serve the younger.”**

- God delivers Rebekah a surprising answer and each line of the answer carries significance
 - First, God has placed two nations in her womb
 - Each son will become the father of a nation
 - One will become the father who gives birth to the nation of Israel
 - The other will become the father of the Edomites

- God has purposes for these two boys that go far beyond merely expanding Isaac's household
 - God is at work in eternal ways to produce these two lines of men who will ultimately serve eternal purposes
- Secondly, He says these two people groups will be separated from your body
 - God is saying that He will have separated them into their respective identities and futures from the moment they leave her body
 - God's assignment will take place right from the start
- Third, the nations will not have equal strength or equal prospect in the future
 - In fact, one of the nations will be much stronger than the other
 - Historically, there have been times when Israel was more powerful than the Edomites and times when the opposite was true
 - But God has always shown that Israel would dominate Edom
 - In fact, today Edomites are extinct having been assumed into other Arab peoples
 - God promises Rebekah that He will ensure this outcome to suit His purposes
- Finally, and most importantly, God sets forth a simple and utterly profound stipulation to ensure God's role in all this isn't overlooked
 - The older shall serve the younger
 - The phrase is a reference to the birthright
 - In normal cultural practice, the first born child is always the one to receive the birthright and the greater blessing
 - So in this case, whichever son is born first will be granted by custom the benefits of the birthright including the Lord's promises

- But when the Lord says the older shall serve the younger, man's rules are being ignored
 - No man would choose nor expect this outcome
 - But remember that God has orchestrated this conversation so that He can bring these things to light before the births take place
- Taken in context, God is saying that all that He has presented above concerning these sons is His choice
 - That there are two nations, that they are to be separated from birth, that one will have greater power...these are God's choices
 - And God is making these decisions in advance and sharing this prophecy with Rebekah so that God rightly receives the credit for the outcomes
 - If the older child had been God's choice, then men would have naturally missed the point, because we would have assumed that God was merely giving the first born what he deserved
 - So God is going to take the least worthy and assign that child the blessings of the covenant
 - And the child with the natural right to obtain the blessing will be set aside
 - This is evidence of the theme I mentioned earlier
 - The stark dichotomy of God's choice; a choice of two
 - The natural child vs. the child of promise
 - The child of flesh vs. the child of Grace
- Remember that Abraham also saw God at work to produce a choice between two children
 - But in Abraham's case, the reality of God's choice is potentially obscured by Abraham's sin
 - We may be tempted to explain God's preference for Isaac over Ishmael as a result of Abraham's sin
 - If our only story of choice was in Abraham's story, God's sovereignty would be lost

- But now, God creates a perfect circumstance to make His sovereign choice clear
 - The pregnancy is not the product of sin
 - It came only after Isaac prayed and God answered
 - The twins prompted Rebekah's questions and God's answer
 - Which demonstrated that God had already made determinations concerning the children
 - Finally, the counter-intuitive nature of the outcome will drive us to the conclusion that this is God's work, not a product of chance or human will
- Therefore, as these prophecies come true, we are left with only one interpretation: God choose the younger over the older
 - Moreover, God created twins and placed the older child in the womb so that His choice could not be dismissed as God reacting to man
 - Rather, God is acting apart from man
- Paul gives us this same truth in his well-known commentary on the story of Rebekah's twins

[Rom. 9:8](#) That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants.

[Rom. 9:9](#) For this is the word of promise: "AT THIS TIME I WILL COME, AND SARAH SHALL HAVE A SON."

[Rom. 9:10](#) And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac;

[Rom. 9:11](#) for though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls,

[Rom. 9:12](#) it was said to her, "THE OLDER WILL SERVE THE YOUNGER."

[Rom. 9:13](#) Just as it is written, "JACOB I LOVED, BUT ESAU I HATED."

- Paul begins speaking of who are the children of God
 - The children of God are those who come under the promised blessing of God

- They are not the children of flesh, that is the children created in the flesh of men
 - Abraham and Hagar produced a child of flesh, in that Ishmael was a product of their sin and of their sin natures
- But Isaac was a child made possible by the word of God, by the promises of God
 - These are the children of God, because they are chosen by God and made a child by the faith that comes from God's promises
- And then Paul goes forward to our example of Rebekah
 - She had conceived twins by Isaac, and then the Lord appeared to her with His statement concerning these children
- Paul says that the twins were in a state where neither could be said to have earned God's favor or to have sinned and lost the opportunity to receive the blessing
 - Yet it was at this time, God declared that the older will serve the younger
 - In v.11 Paul gives us the reason God made this decision
 - So that God's purpose would stand
 - The word stand could be translated abide or remain
 - The point is so that we would see and understand that entrance into the promises of God comes only by God's gracious choice and not by anything men can do
 - The younger son of Isaac will enter into the promises of God while the older will be excluded by God's choice
 - As Paul states, so that this choice could be understood not by because of works but because of who God calls
- The reality of God's sovereignty in the lives of men is a deep and important truth, one that often requires a lifetime of study and great humility to accept, but it is the testimony of Scripture
 - We will see this truth emerge over and over again in the course of our study, and it appears on virtually every page of Scripture

- If you feel God calling you to explore a full study of this truth, the Lord provided us with a thorough examination of the truth in Romans
- And I highly recommend our Romans study to every Christian interested in examining the Scriptures' testimony of grace
- Next week, we see these boys born and the prophecy God made coming true