

FIRST LESSON: Genesis 25:19-34  
SECOND LESSON: Romans 8:1-11  
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***“You Think Your Family Has Issues”***  
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A father suggested to his adult children that maybe the best way for them all to save money would be to live under one roof. After some discussion the children nixed the idea, saying that the cost of therapy would outweigh any potential savings.

Abraham’s family did all live together and they really seemed to excel at dysfunction. First, they had a difficult time even producing children. Sarah didn’t have her son Isaac until she was past menopause, and then Isaac’s wife Rebekah was unable to have a child for a very long time. Isaac prayed, and Rebekah finally conceived. It was twins, but it was not an easy pregnancy. In fact, the two children she was carrying seem to be struggling with one another even in the womb. Rebekah was so concerned she sought God about the matter, and God told her that the reason behind the difficulty was that she would not just be giving birth to two sons, but two competing nations. Unlike the natural order of things, in this case the older would serve the younger.

Firstborn sons always had the pre-eminent spot. They received a double portion of the inheritance. This was true regardless of whether or not the father liked his firstborn. It was a protected right. Firstborn animals were either redeemed, that is, purchased back from God, or sacrificed. Firstborn sons had to be redeemed (or bought back) from God. (Exodus 34:19-20) Mary and Joseph did this for Jesus. To be the firstborn was to hold a place of honor. By claiming the firstborn, God was reminding people that God comes first. All blessings come from God.

The idea that the eldest son in the family has a unique status is not an entirely strange concept in our world. Consider how the aristocracies and royal families that still exist today, function. It is the firstborn son who inherits the title and lands. The British Royal family just changed the rules so the firstborn of either gender can now inherit the crown, although in this case Prince William’s firstborn is a boy. Elizabeth became queen because she had no brothers. But even among ordinary people it is often the case that it is the eldest son who takes his place in the family business.

Preference for the firstborn in terms of inheritance is laid out in scripture, but scripture breaks its own rules in practice. These might have been the general rules, but technically Isaac was the second son and Ishmael the first. King David was the youngest among his brothers. King Solomon was David’s second born. And Joseph, who saved his family in the famine in Egypt,

was the second to youngest son. The rules may have really been cultural in origin, because God broke the rules constantly.

When it came time for the twins to be born the first boy came out red and hairy. Esau is a play on the word for “hairy.” His brother Jacob came after him, holding on to his heel, and his name is a play on the word for “heel.” It is also suspiciously close in sound to another Hebrew word meaning devious or deceptive, and he lived up to it.

The boys grew up. Esau was a skillful hunter, an outdoorsman. He was a man’s man, and his father’s favorite. Jacob preferred life in the tents. He was referred to as a smooth man. Basically, we have the twins Hulk Hogan and Bill Gates. Isaac probably didn’t understand his geeky son at all. He may have considered him not manly enough. And it is true that a quiet reserved man in this world couldn’t get a job in computer programming or finance. His skills may not have been valued by anyone but his mother. But Jacob was smart. He had the ability to plan long term and strategize. Jacob had both brains and patience.

Parents are not supposed to take sides and favor one child against another. Apparently, no one told Isaac and Rebekah this. The temperament of the two sons was very different. Esau was impetuous. Jacob was thoughtful. Esau was probably loud and enthusiastic and Jacob quiet, weighing each situation. And while Esau was the hunter, Jacob farmed. The stew he made was of red lentils. He grew the beans and cooked the food himself, traditionally a more feminine role in this world. And so, one day, in all his loud and confident glory Esau swept in from what was likely an unsuccessful hunt, since he had no meat, and said, “Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I’m famished!”

And Jacob the devious, well aware of the fact that his brother had no forethought whatsoever said, “First sell me your birthright.”

Esau replied, “Look, I am about to die. What good is the birthright to me?”

Of course, this is ridiculous. Esau was in no danger of dying. He just had no tolerance for discomfort and no thought for anything beyond immediate gratification. He was hungry. He wanted food and he wanted it now. Jacob wanted to ensure his position, so he said, “Swear to me first.” So Esau swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, and then got up and left. And so, we are told, “Esau despised his birthright.”

Esau may have thought, “Well who’s gonna know?” Jacob thought, “God will know.” Neither one of them come out of this looking particularly good. Jacob’s actions reveal that he had been coveting Esau’s birthright for a long time. Esau’s response shows that he did not take his rights and responsibilities seriously and was incapable of dealing with delayed gratification, a characteristic essential for getting anywhere in the world. Esau was the worst kind of frat boy, and Jacob the devious geek who tricked him. Traditionally, Esau was considered the father of the Edomites, a competing nation to the south of Israel. Jacob, on the other hand, was the father of the Jewish nation. His name was later changed to Israel.

Jacob is the archetypal character of the trickster. He is the underdog living by his wits. In Jewish culture he's the hero. He's Peter Rabbit up against Farmer MacGregor. He's Brer Rabbit. He's Coyote in native American lore. He's the detective everyone underestimates who outsmarts the criminal network. The nation of Israel understood itself to be the perpetual underdog overwhelmed by the massive and powerful nations around it. This was a historical reality. Israel survived on its wits alone many, many times.

While Esau was the "victim" here in some sense, he could have said no. He could have placed a higher priority on his family honor and position. The fact that he thought with his stomach does not commend him to us. Paul said in Romans, "Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires." While it is not clear that Jacob's goals were exactly spiritual, Esau's were focused on immediate physical gratification. Esau was only interested in what was in front of him. His mind was set on what the flesh desires.

The bible is amazingly frank in how it portrays its heroes. I do the genealogy in my family and I'm still trying to find out who the parents of two illegitimate girls were, girls that my great-great-grandmother took in. That they were family is obvious. They came from out of state. But apart from that I can find nothing. There appears to have been no official adoption, and the answer disappeared when my grandmother and great-grandmother burned the diary that told the story. They didn't want anyone to know that there had ever been illegitimate births in the family. Family histories are known for sanitizing out all of the interesting bits. They will tell you that great uncle Harold owned a corner store. They won't tell you he was a notorious drunk. They'll tell you that great uncle James moved out of state for awhile. They won't tell you he robbed a bank and was locked up. But the family stories in the bible aren't like that. Jacob may have been the father of the nation of Israel, but the fact that he was also a bit of a scoundrel is not covered over. The bible is chocked full of dysfunctional families.

It doesn't matter to God if our family history is a bit dubious. Everyone's family history is dubious. Some just cover it up better than others. It doesn't matter if we are the underdog. God seems to like underdogs. This should encourage Philly fans. Recently the Eagles borrowed the slogan "No one likes us and we don't care" from the English Millwall football club of the 1970s, another underdog.

What God does care about is that we take God seriously and that we do not live for instant gratification. Esau was said to "despise" his birthright because he didn't value it. God wants us to look beyond what is in front of our face to what is really valuable. When our minds are focused on what we want next, they are not focused on what God is doing. Instant gratification and spiritual growth are not compatible. Jacob might have been a rogue, but Esau was a fool. Amen

Genesis 25:19-34

<sup>19</sup> This is the account of the family line of Abraham's son Isaac.

Abraham became the father of Isaac, <sup>20</sup> and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah daughter of Bethuel the Aramean from Paddan Aram and sister of Laban the Aramean.<sup>21</sup> Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife, because she was childless. The Lord answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant. <sup>22</sup> The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, “Why is this happening to me?” So she went to inquire of the Lord.

<sup>23</sup> The Lord said to her,

“Two nations are in your womb,  
and two peoples from within you will be separated;  
one people will be stronger than the other,  
and the older will serve the younger.”

<sup>24</sup> When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb. <sup>25</sup> The first to come out was red, and his whole body was like a hairy garment; so they named him Esau. <sup>26</sup> After this, his brother came out, with his hand grasping Esau’s heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when Rebekah gave birth to them.

<sup>27</sup> The boys grew up, and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was content to stay at home among the tents. <sup>28</sup> Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

<sup>29</sup> Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished. <sup>30</sup> He said to Jacob, “Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I’m famished!” (That is why he was also called Edom!)

<sup>31</sup> Jacob replied, “First sell me your birthright.”

<sup>32</sup> “Look, I am about to die,” Esau said. “What good is the birthright to me?”

<sup>33</sup> But Jacob said, “Swear to me first.” So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob.<sup>34</sup> Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, and then got up and left. So Esau despised his birthright.

Romans 8:1-11

**8** Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, <sup>2</sup> because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. <sup>3</sup> For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, <sup>4</sup> in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

<sup>5</sup> Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. <sup>6</sup> The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace. <sup>7</sup> The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. <sup>8</sup> Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God.