

TURNING RED

GENESIS 25:19-34 MAY 4, 2020

A legend is told of a man who traveled through southeast China many centuries ago. He kept all his food in a clay jar. When it was time for a meal he would put the jar over a fire and warm what was inside. The jar held a variety of ingredients, but - being near the coast - one night it had shark fins, scallops, abalone and ham, along with a grab bag of other items.

After setting up camp just outside a Buddhist monastery, the man began to warm his meal. The smells wafted up to where the Monks were meditating. Though bound by their religion to live as vegetarians, the delicious smell proved to be too great a temptation for one hungry fellow. He ran from the monastery, jumped over the wall, and asked for a bowl of what has since become a celebrated but controversial delicacy known as *Buddha Jumps Over The Wall*.¹ Back in 2005 you could get a bowl from a restaurant in London, but it would set you back about \$200.²

In our text tonight we'll take a look at the most famous soup in the Bible. There are others: Gideon offers soup to the Lord in Judges 6. In 2 Kings 4 a bunch of prophets get food poisoning from one. But Jacob's red stew is the signature soup of the Old Testament. It's why Esau picks up the name 'Edom,' which would become the name for an entire nation! Over *this* soup the course of history changes. Talk about a power lunch!

This soup scandal is the culmination of a family that has drifted into selfishness. Both sons and parents show themselves to be driven by self-centeredness in this text. They've drifted away from a spiritual mindset. The result is strife, rivalry, and taking advantage of one another. Meanwhile, God remains faithful. God remains gracious and accessible, showing us His way is the better way: Better for us, better for our families, better for our nation, better for everyone around us and after us.

Genesis 25:19-20 - ¹⁹These are the family records of Isaac son of Abraham. Abraham fathered Isaac. ²⁰Isaac was forty years old when he took as his wife Rebekah daughter of Bethuel the Aramean from Paddan-aram and sister of Laban the Aramean.

In the passages that follow we'll get a little more of Isaac's story, but really the book is pivoting to focus on Jacob now. The truth is, we don't have a full picture of Isaac. We know the circumstances of his birth. We admire his submission to Abraham in chapter 22. But beyond a few, small pieces, we don't have a great assessment. Reading between the lines, it seems like his spiritual beginning was better than his end. It's hard to finish well. Not impossible - not only something a few really special Christians can do. We all can do it, but often we lose pace with the Lord, we drift from our first love, we take up legalism or license or laziness and become slack in our pursuit. It seems that happened to Isaac. We want to be the kind of Christians who guard against that and run hard to the end.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddha_Jumps_Over_the_Wall

² <https://www.campbellsoup.co.uk/blog/world-expensive-soups/>

Genesis 25:21 - ²¹ Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife because she was childless. The Lord was receptive to his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived.

Isaac was the *only* patriarch who was monogamous.³ To his credit, when Rebekah was unable to conceive, Isaac did *not* make the Hagar mistake. He didn't say, "Well, God promised me that I would have kids, so I'll go find someone else." No, it was clear that the Lord intended Isaac and Rebekah to be together. One commentator calls them "a marriage made in heaven."⁴ So, rather than try to solve his problem with human planning, Isaac went to the Lord in prayer.

It took 20 years for Rebekah to have kids. This scene raises some questions about God's work and our prayers. Did Isaac *pray* for 20 years or did he *wait* for 20 years and then finally get to praying? If he prayed for 20 years, and God was 'receptive' to his prayer, does that mean that God is sometimes *withholding* of His good work in our lives? Doesn't Psalm 84 say:

Psalm 84:11 - the Lord God...does not withhold the good from those who live with integrity.

If we're *not* getting what we pray for, does that mean we must be failing in some way to do what God wants? After all, God said He planned on Isaac having kids. That was a *good* thing. So why the hold up? What about those situations *you've* been praying for month after month, year after year?

The Bible is clear that God hears our prayers. 1 Peter 3:12 says His eyes are on us and His ears are open to our prayers. The theological reasons why we do not always get a "yes" to our prayers are, first, that God works according to a specific timeline which takes into account an innumerable combination of particulars that we cannot possibly know. The second theological reason why it often seems like God is 'withholding' a good thing from us, even when we pray again and again about it, is because what seems *obviously* good to us may actually not be good at all!

Consider King Hezekiah of Judah. He got sick. Very sick. Isaiah came to him and said, "You're going to die." Hezekiah prayed like he never prayed before that he would be healed. And the Lord gave him 15 more years. During that time, Hezekiah made some terrible, terrible mistakes, which led to the destruction of the nation of Judah. He *could've* spent those years in Paradise. Instead, that which he thought was *obviously good* was actually the opposite.

We can trust God to do what is right and good, because He cares for us more than we care for ourselves. We can trust His timing, even if we have to pray about something for 20 years.

But, maybe Isaac waited and then, two decades into this thing, he finally prayed about it. Does that mean God acts on whims? That He was just waiting around until someone prayed about Rebekah's situation? Well, we can't know for sure what was going on in the Lord's mind, but, we are reminded of what James said: In *some* cases, we have not because we ask not. Prayer really matters. Think of those times in the Bible where someone came to Jesus and He said, "What do you want Me to do

³ Bruce Waltke *Genesis: A Commentary*

⁴ *ibid.*

for you?" Now, I don't mean to suggest that God has set Himself up as a Genie or a cosmic butler or Someone who exists to do what we want. James goes on to say, "[Sometimes] you ask and don't receive because your motives are wrong." At the same time, the Bible shows that prayer matters. One of the shortest verses in the Bible is 1 Thessalonians 5:17. It simply says, "Pray constantly." Paul goes on to say *that* is God's will for you. Because prayer is a significant part of how the Lord matures us and teaches us to walk in faith. It is something we can do which brings our thoughts and our desires and our choices into their proper place, which is in trusting submission to God.

Isaac's prayer shows us the tender grace of God. The Lord promised to give children to this family, but He waited until Isaac partnered in prayer. God didn't *need* to wait. He didn't need Isaac's help or approval or interest. But He *wanted* to include His servant. So, Isaac gets to enjoy spiritual dividends by prayerfully involving himself in the Lord's work.

Then something unexpected happens:

Genesis 25:22 - ²²But the children inside her struggled with each other, and she said, "Why is this happening to me?" So she went to inquire of the Lord.

They got what they prayed for, but they didn't expect it to be hard. Rebekah didn't expect to suffer. Her prayer is a desperate one. She says, "Why me!?"⁵ She had wanted a pregnancy, but she wanted it a different way. That's natural. God doesn't want us to *desire* suffering. But this verse shows a weakness of our humanity. Even when we get what we want, we often don't like the way we have it. "God, give me this job." Then He does, then it's, "Well, give me a different boss."

To Rebekah's credit, in her frustration, she seeks out the Lord. She is looking for God's perspective on her suffering. And He is faithful to give it. Now, as Believers in the age of grace who have the completed revelation of Scripture, we should have a transformed mentality when it comes to suffering and difficulty. Rather than thinking, "why me," we want to train ourselves to think, "What God wants, I want." That way our focus isn't on *suffering*, but on following God's *leading* in our lives.

Genesis 25:23 - ²³And the Lord said to her: Two nations are in your womb; two peoples will come from you and be separated. One people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger.

When we seek God, we will find Him. The Lord was ready to reveal answers to Rebekah. He loves to explain Himself *and* to show us how His work is bigger than the circumstance we're in. This wasn't just a *pregnancy*, something much greater was going on.

Now, this message would've been a hard one for a family to deal with. God is demanding that human conventions be tossed out. He's changing what would've been the normal, go-with-the-flow dynamic of parents and sons and brothers. But He's the One in charge. And they should've made it a point to rally together around this prophecy. Instead, it seems like everyone started drifting from

⁵ Robert Alter *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation With Commentary*

the Lord into selfishness, and though the passage starts with parents in prayer, by the time we turn the page, there's a lot of self-centeredness and dysfunction.

Genesis 25:24 - ²⁴When her time came to give birth, there were indeed twins in her womb.

As usual, this Bible prophecy was fulfilled literally and actually and physically.

Genesis 25:25-26 - ²⁵The first one came out red-looking, covered with hair like a fur coat, and they named him Esau. ²⁶After this, his brother came out grasping Esau's heel with his hand. So he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when they were born.

They had a sense of humor in naming the boys. Hairy and Heel!⁶ Esau looks like a little animal when he comes out. His name speaks of his carnal nature.⁷ He had no interest in spiritual things.

Jacob's name, on the other hand, has different shades of meaning. It can mean "heel grabber," or, "the one who trips up." It can also mean, "May God be your rearguard."⁸ And certainly, we'll see that God had this man's back, even though Jacob didn't deserve it.

Genesis 25:27 - ²⁷When the boys grew up, Esau became an expert hunter, an outdoorsman, but Jacob was a quiet man who stayed at home.

Based on this description, it *seems* like these guys ended up being trust-fund kids. Who is tending the flocks? Who is planting the crops? Instead of carrying on that calling, we have Esau hunting game day in and day out, while Jacob dabbles as a chef and stay in the tents. Personality-wise, the boys are presented as opposites. One loved the fields, one loved the finer things. Esau would grow to be a bit wild, Jacob a bit wiley.

Genesis 25:28 - ²⁸Isaac loved Esau because he had a taste for wild game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

This is a sad verse. There really aren't a lot of examples of good parents in the Old Testament. A statement like this should remind us that when Christ comes into our hearts, He transforms who we are and intends to reshape everything about us, including our relationships. He enables us to love the way He loves - unconditionally. There's *no* place for this kind of favoritism in a Christian home.

We're told Isaac loved Esau "because he had a taste for wild game." The Hebrew says, "For the game in his mouth."⁹ And so we have to conclude that Isaac has become somewhat carnal and materialistic. Even in his favoritism - he doesn't prefer Esau because of *who he is*, but because of

⁶ Waltke

⁷ *Bible Knowledge Commentary*

⁸ See *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Kidner

⁹ Alter

what he does. If Rebekah's line was, "Why is this happening to me?" Isaac's is, "What have you done for me lately?" So we're seeing these flashes of selfishness in each character.

Bruce Waltke points out that Adam failed in eating, Noah failed in drinking, Isaac failed in tasting. Those moments where God's people chose to give in to sensual temptation, they really fouled up what should've been glorious, spiritual experiences. John, in his first epistle, warns us about the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life and, in the end, says, "Little children, guard yourselves from idols." When we let those sinful seeds into our minds, they will grow and reroute our thinking and will pervert our relationships and cripple us in our walk with the Lord.

Genesis 25:29-30 - ²⁹Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field exhausted. ³⁰He said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, because I'm exhausted." That is why he was also named Edom.

Now let's think for a minute: Esau comes from the field, but where does he come to? He comes into a home with astounding wealth, tons of servants, no lack of provision. He was worn out, but he could've walked into the next room where there was a sack of grain or some raisin cakes. Instead, he saw some soup right in front of him, and *that* became his focus. Esau was about immediate gratification.

Esau and his descendants and the region where they lived with forever be known as Edom. "Red stuff." It reminds me of when George Costanza orders a T-bone steak, hoping his coworkers will give him the nickname "T-bone."

Genesis 25:31 - ³¹Jacob replied, "First sell me your birthright."

Jacob was ready to exploit his brother's weakness for his own gain. Whenever there's a natural disaster the news inevitably runs a story about price gougers. Esau just wants what's in front of him, Jacob has a longer view in mind. He wants that position that he had been fighting for since he was in his mother's womb. He wanted the birthright, granting him a double portion of the inheritance and the place of honor and leadership in the family. His price tag here is selfish and uncompassionate. After all, his brother *is* hungry, and he *has* a full pot of stew.

Had this family submitted to God and trusted in His commands, all this rivalry and posturing and resentment could've been avoided. According to God, the birthright *already belonged to Jacob*. But, clearly, the parents were not moving in that direction. And, though Jacob wanted something that God had said he would ultimately have, he was trying to snatch it up in a fleshly, immoral way.

If we use selfish, worldly methods to try to do God's work, it's *not* God's work.

Genesis 25:32 - ³²"Look," said Esau, "I'm about to die, so what good is a birthright to me?"

This is stupid. He's *not* about to die. He is simply too selfish to even walk into the next room. Hebrews 12 tells us that it wasn't about hunger - but that Esau was a godless, immoral man who cared nothing about the birthright, particularly when it came to the covenant of God that passed through that birthright. Hebrews says, outright, "make sure you don't live like Esau!" He cared about the single meal in the here and now. What about 10 years from now? What about his family or the generations after him? None of that crossed his mind. Instead, he was all about his belly.

Genesis 25:33-34 - ³³ **Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to Jacob and sold his birthright to him.** ³⁴ **Then Jacob gave bread and lentil stew to Esau; he ate, drank, got up, and went away. So Esau despised his birthright.**

Lunch that day was like a meal at *Panera*. You get a soup, a sandwich and a drink but spend a lot more than you should have.

Interestingly, we note that Esau didn't consider his promise to be worth very much. Later on when it's time to receive the blessing, *he still expects to get the firstborn share*. He's a selfish man, driven by physical appetites. God doesn't matter. His family doesn't matter. His words don't matter. He just wanted immediate, physical satisfaction. But living that kind of life never leaves you satisfied.

Now, Jacob did a trashy thing and we'll spend a bunch of weeks seeing him make mistakes and how the Lord brings him back from spiritual ruin. But, as Derek Kidner comments: "*The chapter does not [close with] 'So Jacob supplanted his brother,' but 'So Esau despised his birthright.'*" This was a significant historical moment. It was a major turning point for this family and for the drama of redemption. Jacob's price gouging is not so wicked as Esau's contempt of covenant.

But when we look at these verses, we have to conclude that selfishness has infected this family. Rebekah says, "Why me?" Isaac says, "What have you got for me?" Jacob says, "Why wait for what God has promised?" Esau says, "What good is a birthright?" Everyone is thinking about self and it leads them down these sad roads where parents are preferring one kid over another, where brothers are taking advantage of each other, where individuals aren't thinking at all about how their choices might impact their families and futures. So, the great "family of faith," at this point in time, is defined by individualism.

Had this family paused and remembered the Lord, remembered His will and His ways and His revelation, remembered to worship, they would've known the satisfaction they each wanted. Their suffering would've been put in perspective. Their waiting would've had purpose. Their relationships would've been healthy and fruitful. And, in the end, they would not be a family torn apart but one thriving in the grace of God.

What happened? Well, they drifted into selfishness. They didn't think it was necessary to pay attention to what God had said and then orient their lives around it. They started to prize temporal gratification over spiritual growth. The Bible tells us - plainly - don't go that way. Don't jump over the borders of God's leading to get your hands on some soup. It's not worth the cost.