

The Book of Genesis

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 19 August 2012

Preacher: Mark Chew

[0 : 00] Dear God, as we begin this series, looking at the first five books of the Bible, we ask that, Lord, you will open our eyes to your word, and then, Lord, that you might, by your spirit, give us strength to take it, soak it in, and have our lives transformed by it.

In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen. Okay. Okay, there's going to be a further Bible reading tonight, and actually, I'm going to get a few people to help me dramatize it.

So I'm going to ask Isaac and Rebecca and Jacob and Esau to come forward, and just bear with Isaac, because he's a bit blind, so let's just...

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. And the microphone. All right.

[1 : 20] When Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see, he called his eldest son Esau and said to him, My son. Here I am.

See, I'm old. I don't know the day of my death. Now then, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field and hunt game for me.

Then prepare for me a savory food such as I like, and bring it to me to eat, so that I may bless you before I die. Now Rebecca was listening when Isaac spoke to his son Esau.

Jacob, I heard your father say to your brother Esau, bring me game, and prepare for me savory food to eat. That I may bless you before the Lord before I die.

Now therefore, my son, obey my word as I command you. Go to the flock and get me two choice kids, so that I may prepare from them savory food for your father, such as he likes.

[2 : 23] Look, my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I am a man of smooth skin.

Perhaps my father will fill me, and I shall seem to be mocking him, and bring a curse on myself, and not a blessing. Let your curse be on me, my son.

Only obey my word, and go get them for me. Thank you. My father.

Here I am. Who are you, my son? I am Esau, your firstborn. I have done as you told me. Now sit up and eat of my game, so that you may bless me.

How is it that you found it so quickly, my son? Because the Lord your God granted me success. Come near that I may feel you, my son, to know whether you really are my son Esau or not.

[3 : 54] The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau. Are you really my son Esau? I am. Bring it to me, that I may eat my son's game and bless you.

Come near and kiss me, my son.

Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field that the Lord has blessed. May God give you of the dew of heaven and of the fatness of the earth and plenty of grain and wine.

Let people serve you and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers and may your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you and blessed be everyone who blesses you.

As soon as Isaac had finished blessing Jacob, his brother Esau came in from his hunting. Let my father sit up so he may eat some of his son's game and then he may bless me.

[5 : 06] Who are you? I am Esau, your firstborn son. Who was it then that hunted game and brought it to me? And I ate it before you came. And I have blessed him.

Yes, and blessed he shall be. Bless me, bless me also, father. Your brother came deceitfully and he has taken away your blessing.

I don't love the food. Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he supplanted me these two times. He's taken away my birthright. And now look, he's taken away my blessing.

Have you not received a blessing? Oh no, so it's your mind. Have you not reserved the blessing for me? I have already made him your Lord. And I have given him all his brothers as servants.

And with grain and wine I have sustained him. What then can I do for you, my son? Have you only one blessing? What about a blessing for me? See, away from the fatness of the earth shall your home be.

[6 : 07] And away from the dew of heaven on high. By your sword you shall live. And you shall serve your brother. But when you break loose, you shall break his yoke from your neck.

Thank you, guys. The rose pork smells really good.

Well, thanks, Eric, Allison, Jimmy, and Trent. Thanks for dramatizing Genesis 27 for us. Now, I wonder what you made of that story in Genesis 27. Particularly if you haven't already heard what was read in Genesis 25.

It looked a bit like a good old family squabble, doesn't it? One brother against the other. All the drama of a good soap opera like Dallas or The Bold and Beautiful.

There's not much sign of God in all of that, is there? But then when you put Genesis 25, 19, and 34 in the mix, it puts Genesis 27 in a totally different light, doesn't it?

[7 : 13] All of a sudden, Genesis 27 looks like the fulfillment of God's word in Genesis 25. Behind the rough and tumble of human life, behind the cut and thrust of human rivalry, we see God's hand at work.

Well, Genesis 25 and 19 to 24 will still be our focus tonight, but I just want you to keep that picture of Genesis 27 in the back of your mind as we look at Genesis 25.

So you've got a sermon outline with you tonight, and if you can, turn back to Genesis 25, verses 19 to 34. Well, as Adam has said tonight, we begin a five-week series, and we're going to look at the first five books of the Bible, what we call the Pentateuch.

One book each week, and each week what we'll do is look at one passage in each book, and in addition to explaining what that text means, we're going to try and show how that passage relates to the rest of the book and to the main message of the book.

And hopefully by the end of five weeks, we're going to understand a bit better of how these five books fit together and hopefully understand how it fits in with the rest of the Bible as well. So it's a big ask, but hopefully with God's help, we'll get there.

[8 : 27] Well, before we look at the passage in depth tonight, let's just look at the passage in its context. So let's look at the whole book of Genesis. Many of you, some of you might know that Genesis is actually broken up into ten sections.

So I've got a slide there showing the ten sections. That's a bit small, unfortunately. But each section begins with the same Hebrew phrase, Toledot.

And generally it's translated, for example, in the NIV by, this is the account, or in the NRSV, these are the descendants. In fact, the NRSV sort of uses different words, but they're actually all the same word in italics there.

And the sections either are, in general, a story or a genealogy. And in fact, they alternate between the two. Well, the ten sections are then preceded by what we call the introduction, Genesis chapter 1 and verse 1 to chapter 2 and verse 4.

This is the account of the creation. Or, better, if you could think about it, it is the section, the introduction by which we are introduced to the creator of the heaven and the earth.

[9 : 38] It's a very clear sense when you read it, that there is a creator in full control of his creation. He speaks and things come to pass, and what he creates is good.

And when he gets to creating human beings, what he creates is very good. And then what we have in chapter 1 and verse 28 is God then speaks directly to humanity, that one part of his creation.

And it's the only time that that happens in chapter 1. And it is the creation mandate. So I'll read that to you. In 28, God says, And so the creation mandate has these three components, to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it, and then lastly to rule over the rest of creation.

And so this is God's plan for creation. God is the ultimate ruler, but he then appoints humans as regents or co-rulers in his place.

Now, unfortunately, this order is disrupted when we get to Genesis chapter 3. And that's the next point in the sermon outline. Sin is introduced into the world. Adam and Eve rebel against God's command and eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

[11 : 05] And in so doing, what they do is invert God's created order. And so instead of ruling over the rest of creation and obeying God, so God, humans, and then the rest of creation, they disobey God and they listen to the voice of the serpent, listen to the voice of the rest of creation.

And so with that, sin enters the world, and with it, there's a disorder that's created in the world. Instead of living under God's rule, humans strike out on their own and rebel against God's order.

And as a result, then God curses humanity. They are expelled from the garden, and things like suffering and death are their experience.

And so what we have with each successive section in Genesis is all that playing out. So we see in Genesis 1 and 3, sin, beyond Genesis 1 and 3, sin sparring out of control.

And each time, God steps in to judge. And so we have, for example, the flood of Noah, God at the Tower of Babel when he disperses humanity, and then again at Sodom and Gomorrah when he judges those two cities.

[12 : 17] At the same time, though, we get God being still faithful to his creation mandate. So he still blesses, and he still multiplies humanity. And so we see that in the genealogies as people continue to procreate and fill the earth.

And then also we see that God chooses particular individuals to bless them and to give them and to promise them blessing through them to the rest of humanity.

Promises, in effect, to restore his creation. And so, for example, here we see with the story of Noah where God singles him out and his family for salvation and then through them for them to fill the earth again.

And then finally, not finally, but next in Genesis chapter 12, we get Abraham where God singles one person out of all humanity to be the father of his chosen people and to, through him, bring salvation, as we know, through Jesus, eventually to the rest of the world.

And so this careful alternating between genealogy, on the one hand, and story conveys God's work in history. So we have it working at the macro level, God working through the table of nations, through the genealogies, and then working again at the micro level when he comes in and deals with individuals, chosen individuals.

[13 : 45] So with that kind of context, let's now dive into Genesis chapter 25 and verse 19. Let's look at the passage in depth. And it begins by saying, these are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son.

Abraham was the father of Isaac. And I guess when we hear those opening words of verse 19, that should immediately alert us to all the things that I've just talked about. This is the start of the eighth section.

And the words, these are the descendants, remind us that God is again fulfilling his creation mandate. We also remind us that this is Isaac, Abraham's son.

This is Abraham, God's chosen individual in chapter 12, the one in whom the promises of blessing and salvation for the world will come, where Abraham will be made into a great nation.

And then when the verse goes on to talk about Isaac's marriage to Rebecca, we recall Genesis 24, where God provided, it is God who provided Rebecca to be Isaac's wife.

[14 : 52] And so all these sections are really links in a long chain, where link by link, God brings his plan together in history. Well, so far so good, until we find out that Rebecca is barren.

Now if you read both verse 20 and 26, you find that her period of barrenness is actually 20 long years. Isaac was married at 40 years old, and Jacob and Esau are born when he was 60.

Now many of us, I think, tend to take childbirth or children for granted. We go to the shopping centers and we see prams galore everywhere, and children are, you know, we hear of children being born sort of in our church and our workplaces.

We hear of people being born, with children being born very often. But I think we only need to hear the pain of someone like Rebecca. Friends we may have, or perhaps we are going through it ourselves, to realize that every child, every life, is a gift from God.

And all of us are here because God intentionally created us. Men and women procreate, but it is God who is the creator. Now this is not a judgment, I don't think, on Rebecca, but it's still just with God's creation mandate.

[16 : 11] And furthermore, it is an obstacle to God's plan for Abraham. Now we know that God doesn't always answer our prayers in the way we want. But in Isaac's case, God does answer his prayer, but not providing just one, but two children for Rebecca.

So just like Sarah before her, and then later on, Rachel, her daughter-in-law, God will open Rebecca's womb just as he opens every womb. But with two children also comes a war which erupts in her womb.

And so verse 22 reads, the children struggled together within her and she said, if it is to be this way, why do I live? And actually, those words are very strong.

The word struggling, actually in the Hebrew, is more like crushing, as if they were having, I don't know, a wrestling or a boxing match in her womb. And the words, why do I leave?

Actually, they're just three Hebrew words. It's sort of, why, this, me, that strength of what she's trying to say comes through there. And so with that, we get to the next verse, which is really the key verse in this entire story.

[17 : 23] And this is the big twist in the plot. God reveals his mind to Rebecca in verse 23. And he says, two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided.

The one shall be stronger than the other. The elder shall serve the younger. Now, this is the key verse because it totally changes our interpretation of the story.

So not only is God behind this chapter and chapter 27, what is going to happen will be contrary to expectations. The younger will be blessed, not the older, but he will be blessed not because of how good he is, but because of God's choice.

Now, the Bible then goes on to, as if to demonstrate how little separates these two sons, the Bible now recounts the circumstances of their births. And so here we have two sons, so boys, so both entitled to the inheritance.

But not only that, they're twins, which means that in one sense, either could have come out first. And the struggle in the womb, I guess, was intended to show that they were actually jostling, perhaps, to be the first.

[18 : 32] In the end, Isaac comes first, but not by much, because Jacob lunges up after him, grasping at his heels. He's the James Magnuson of childbirth.

Not quite .01 second, but missing gold by that much. So not much separates Esau and Jacob. And you know, if you think about it, it could easily have been the other way around.

Yet how ironic, because the older will end up serving the younger. Well, all the incidents here from now on are actually crucial to the story in Genesis 27.

And I'm not sure whether you've picked them all up when Nate read them to you. So Esau is red and hairy, but Jacob is smooth. And we saw that with the skin, with Rebecca putting skin on Jacob.

Esau loves hunting game, which Isaac loves. And on the other hand, Jacob is the homeboy, spending lots of time with mom in the tents. So Isaac loves game boy, while Rebecca favors homeboy.

[19 : 47] It's sort of similar in our lives, isn't it? All these little coincidences in our lives that at the time we don't know that it might somehow turn up to be as crucial or as significant as we think it does.

Chance, encounters, unexpected turn of events, a timely word here or there that changes the course of history. Well, the narrator having laid the groundwork now goes on to recount the events.

And so the wheels of history begin to turn. And I love it how casually it begins. You know, it's at once, once when Jacob was cooking stew and Esau wanders in from the field.

You know, it just so happened. It all seemed a bit random. Jacob was cooking stew and Esau came in famished, famished to the point of death. And what do you know? He asked Jacob for the stew.

And guess what? It just so happens that Jacob, this opportunistic and cunning brother that he was, uses that very moment of Esau's weakness to deceive him.

[20 : 58] And then just as amazingly, Esau falls for it. I mean, Jacob probably couldn't believe his luck. But the thing is that this in itself doesn't get Jacob very far, does it?

Because in order for God's prophecy to happen, Isaac needed to bless him, not Esau. But again, amazingly, in chapter 27, everything unfolds according to verse 23 of this chapter.

But it only happens after Esau has sold his birthright. Now, we've just read verse 23, and so I guess we're all expecting this episode in chapter 25 and then later on Genesis 27 to happen.

But what surprises us, I think, and I don't know about you, but it did for me when I first read it, is God's verdict on Esau's choice. Esau chooses exactly how God prophesies in verse 23, but then God judges his choice harshly.

And so the other key verse in this passage is verse 34. And it says, Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil soup or lentil stew, and he ate and drank and rose and went his way.

[22 : 15] Thus Esau despised his birthright. Esau despised his birthright. Now, this is, if you understand how narrative works in Genesis or in the rest of the Old Testament, this is a deliberate interjection by the narrator.

Esau's loss is directly related, directly of his own making, directly related to his choice. God condemns what Esau does even though it is exactly what is in accordance with verse 23.

And we know this because this interpretation is actually given to us in Hebrews chapter 12 and verse 16. The writer in Hebrews is warning his readers not to fall away from the faith.

And then, in chapter 12 and verse 16, he gives Esau as an example. And so, he says, see to it, if we can have the next slide, see to it that no one becomes like Esau, an immoral and godless person who sold his birthright for a single meal.

So, very clear there that Esau is responsible for his actions. And amazingly, there is a further New Testament passage which we read tonight in Romans which also explains this passage in another way.

[23 : 35] And so, we'll read from Romans chapter 9 and 11. Nor is that all. Something similar happened to Rebecca whom she had conceived children by one husband, our ancestor Isaac.

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.

As it is written, I have loved Jacob but I have hated Esau. That's slightly problematic, isn't it? Because how can God hold Esau responsible when Esau does exactly what God intends?

He takes credit for Jacob's election but then holds Esau responsible for his choice. And yet, we have here in the space of less than 12 verses God's sovereignty sitting side by side with human responsibility.

Both are held out without any contradiction. It's hard to reconcile but that's what happens again and again not only in Genesis but the rest of the Bible.

[24 : 45] Time and time again we see God in full control of history and yet holding humans responsible for their actions and their sin. So I'll give you just one example which is what Peter says of Jesus' death in Acts.

And there are two times when he does that. In chapter 2 and verse 22 and 23 he says, this man Jesus he's referring to handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law.

And then again in chapter 4 he says, for in this city in fact both Herod and Pilate with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel he's included everyone there gathered together against your holy servant Jesus whom you anointed to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

Well friends if all this sort of troubles you then can I say you're probably in good company because Christians throughout the ages have wrestled with this very issue. The issue of election what we call election predestination and free will.

You know in times past it seriously hurt my brain to try and square these things off logically. But I have to admit that if you ask me to explain it logically fully I can't.

[26 : 07] For me there is an element of God's mystery in all of this but I am content to hold both truths together. God's sovereignty and human responsibility. Well if you want to talk further on this come and talk to me afterwards or speak to Andrew or someone else and we'll be more than delighted to keep talking.

But for tonight I think it's important for us to realize that these truths are important not because they're just an intellectual exercise but they're important because they've got practical application.

They're important for us to live out our Christian faith and to understand the way God works in this world. And so with that I want to turn to just the application from this passage.

Friends it's very important to know that God is sovereign in the world to know that he created it and even though we've stuffed it up that he didn't leave us to our own devices.

He still cares for us he cares for his creation and so God is actively working to save and to restore his creation. He's at work even though sometimes when we look around us we can get a bit depressed and wonder what's going on around the world.

[27 : 21] Or we can look at our own lives and wonder what God is doing in our lives. But the message of Genesis is that God is in control. For him there is nothing accidental about what is going on in this world.

They may look like random events to us but for God it is working out according to his plan. And it is a plan that cannot fail because he has secured it by Christ's death on the cross.

The victory has already been won through Jesus Christ. And for those of us who believe in his son Jesus we have the added comfort of knowing that we fit into that plan.

What may seem like random events in our lives are actually part of God's plan even though we don't understand them fully. In that sense there are sort of no wrong turns or detours in our life.

God is using all of it for our good. Now of course mistakes are mistakes and sort of we have to take responsibility for them and we have to confess when we do wrong. But in Christ even those mistakes have their place in God's plan.

[28 : 30] And so my thing is that one day I think I'll be able to look back and see God's hand in all of that and to see that everything even the bad has worked out because of what God was trying to do in my life and to give thanks to God for that.

But knowing that God is in control doesn't mean that we don't have any responsibility to choose wisely. As Christians we're not faithless. Our choices matter to him.

And so knowing God's promises to us we actually need to respond in faith to those promises. You know I could have chosen a lot of passages tonight from Genesis.

You know I could have chosen Genesis 1 Genesis 3 or Genesis 12 and all those would have been great passages from which to launch to understand the book of Genesis. But I decided to choose this story of Jacob and Esau because I think in many ways that is the position that we find ourselves in life.

Esau knew God's promises to him through Abraham and he knew the blessing that he stood to inherit. And likewise we too know our inheritance through what God has promised in Christ and in his word.

[29 : 45] Some of us have gotten here because we were born to faithful Christian parents. Others are here tonight because you might have been brought by a Christian friend to know Christ.

But unlike Esau we don't want to give up our inheritance for the sake of a simple meal. Now I'm not talking of course about the hunger for a bowl of red lentil stew.

The hunger that I'm talking about is the hunger and the desires of our lives for security, for comfort, for money, status, for human affection, for approval.

Our hunger for these things apart from God, our grasping after these things instead of trusting in God for them. You know, these choices that come to us are really going to come with a big warning sign.

You know, we're not going to make these choices with a sign saying, choose wrongly and you will lose your spiritual inheritance. You know, when Esau had to choose, he didn't think that that bowl of lentil stew was going to cost him that dearly.

[30 : 55] That in effect that was a choice between life and death for him. And so similarly, many of our mundane choices in life are unlikely to appear as life and death choices, at least not literally, at least not immediately.

But for many of these choices, it can actually set us down the path of death if we aren't careful. Little decisions or, you know, simple decisions like how we spend our spare time, the type of company we keep, who we'll marry, what job we'll take, how many hours we'll choose to work, how we spend our money.

I know that our salvation is not based on, you know, just each one of those decisions as if everyone was critical. But cumulatively, they all might lead us either down the path of death or down the path of life.

Our salvation is not based on one decision, and it's not based on that one decision we made to trust in Jesus back then, but it is an ongoing life of faith, of constantly choosing to follow Jesus with our choices and our actions.

Do we choose things which nurture our faith, or do our choices reflect that we don't value our faith at all? So there, friends, we have it, the first foundation of faith, God's sovereignty, sin, God's sovereign plan to save us from sin, God's sovereign plan of salvation in spite of our sin, God's sovereignty on the one hand, human responsibility on the other, and in the midst of it, our response of faith in God's sovereignty.

[32 : 45] Let's pray. Amen. Father, we thank you that even though our mind cannot conceive it, that you are in full control of this world, that you are in full control of history, the history in this world and the history that is our life.

And yet, Lord, you ask us all the time in your word to trust you, to put our faith in you, to make choices, that will grasp or cling on to our inheritance.

And so, Lord, on the one hand, we want to trust in your sovereignty and on the other hand, we continue to live a life that hopes and longs for the inheritance that we will have in Christ Jesus.

We pray this, Lord, in Jesus' name. Amen.