

# Genesis 25-28 Brothers in Conflict

## An Outline

- I. Death of Abraham (25:1-11)
  - A. After Sarah's death, Abraham marries Keturah and has six more boys (25:1-4).
  - B. Abraham gives full inheritance to Isaac but sends the sons of his concubines away with gifts (25:5-6).
  - C. Abraham lived to a good old age of 175 and is buried with his wife by Isaac and Ishmael (25:7-11).
- II. Ishmael's Sons (25:12-18)
  - A. Ishmael has 12 sons who become tribal rulers (25:12-16).
  - B. Ishmael lives to 137 and his descendants live south/west of Canaan in hostility to his relatives (25:17-18).
- III. Jacob and Esau (25:19-34)
  - A. Isaac prays and Rebekah bears twins, where a prophecy is given that the older will serve the younger (25:19-23).
  - B. Esau is older and an outdoorsman and favored by Isaac while Jacob is younger and a homebody and favored by Rebekah (25:24-28).
  - C. Esau gives up his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of stew (25:29-34).
- IV. Isaac and Abimelek (26:1-33)
  - A. God commands Isaac to remain in Canaan during famine and reaffirms His covenant with him (26:1-6).
  - B. Isaac tries unsuccessfully to hide his marriage to Rebekah from Abimelek, but is lightly rebuked by the Philistine king rather than killed (26:7-11).
  - C. God makes Isaac wealthy causing envious reprisals and fearful overtures of peace from the Philistines (26:12-33).
- V. Jacob Takes Esau's Blessing (26:34-28:9)
  - A. Isaac determines to Bless Esau (26:34-27:4).
  - B. Rebekah persuades Jacob to deceive his father to obtain Esau's blessing (27:5-17).
  - C. Jacob deceives Isaac and receives the blessing of the first born (27:18-29).
  - D. Esau is dejected and seeks in vain to get another blessing from his father (27:30-40).
  - E. Esau plans to kill Jacob but Rebekah rescues him by having him sent away (27:41-46).
  - F. Isaac counsels Jacob against marrying a Canaanite woman and sends him to Laban with his covenant blessings (28:1-5).
  - G. Esau adds Ishmaelite wives in view of Isaac's displeasure with his Canaanite wives (28:6-9).
- VI. Jacob's Dream at Bethel (28:10-22)
  - A. The LORD reiterates His Covenant with Jacob (28:10-15).
  - B. Jacob vows to make God his God and to pay a tenth from all that God gives him (28:16-22).

## Questions for Study

1. **A Lesson on God's Overwhelming Miracles:** If it was impossible for Abraham to conceive with Sarah when he was 100 years old and she was ninety years old (cf. Genesis 17:17; Romans 4:19), how much more absurd would it be for him to conceive when he was over 137 years old with Keturah to bear not one but six more sons (25:1-4)?
2. **A Lesson on God's Faithfulness to Keep His Promises:** Since Ishmael is not the son of promise, why does Moses take precious space in Scripture to list the sons of Ishmael in Genesis 25:12-28? Clue: See Genesis 17:20.  
  
\* **A note about the Ishmaelites and the Midianites:** Ishmael's descendants live in the region between Canaan and Egypt (25:18). This becomes relevant when Jacob's sons sell their youngest brother Joseph to a caravan of Ishmaelites (Genesis 37:25). These Ishmaelites inhabited the land of Midian, who was also their brother through Abraham's third wife, Keturah (Genesis 25:1-2). Even later on, when Moses flees from Pharaoh as a fugitive for killing an Egyptian, he flees to this land of Midian and marries a Midianite woman, Zipporah (Exodus 2:15-16,21). Interesting how all these things happen within the family tree of Abraham as guided by the sovereign hand of God.  
  
\* **A note about Genesis 25:18:** Ishmael's descendants "lived in open hostility toward all their relatives." This is the NIV translation, which is consistent with the prophecy of Genesis 16:12, "his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him." But there are some discrepancies with the translation of this verse because the verb can be translated "in the presence of" (KJV) as well as "in hostility toward" (NIV). I believe in view of the context and previous prophecy, the latter is the preferred translation.
3. **A Lesson on Casting Blame and Trusting Human Effort:** Since the LORD told Rebekah that the older (Esau) would serve the younger (Jacob), why does Isaac favor the older and later determine to bless him over his younger brother (Genesis 27:1-4; cf. Deut. 21:15-17)? Is Rebekah to blame for the deception?
4. **A Lesson on the Dangers of Presumption and Irresponsibility:** The birthright conferred the following benefits: (1) Precedence over the other children, (2) A double share of the inheritance, (3) Headship over the clan at the father's death and responsibility over the family (Gen 43:33; Deut 21:15-17). Why in the world would Esau "despise" his birthright and give it up for a bowl of soup? Esau may have had something else in mind, namely, the future blessing by Isaac, who favored him over his brother (Genesis 25:28). Isaac's blessing could have made the birthright null and void. In addition, since the birthright conferred the responsibility over the family, perhaps Esau thought he could avoid the responsibility and just get the benefits.
5. **A Lesson on Prayer and Patience and Faith:** Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, and he wasted no time in baby-making, which is suggested by Genesis 24:67; however, Rebekah was barren (Genesis 24:21). Isaac prayed and God heard his prayer and Rebekah became pregnant (Genesis 25:21). Yet, we learn that Isaac was sixty years old when Rebekah gave birth to Jacob and Esau (Genesis 25:26). Now it is possible that Isaac waited nineteen years before praying for Rebekah to be pregnant, but it is also possible and more likely that he was praying the greater part of that time.
6. **A Lesson on Truth, Deception, Silence, and Ends and Means.** Is it always right to tell the truth? Is it always good to share everything? Abraham resorted to deception to save his skin before Pharaoh (Genesis 12:10-20) and then did the same before Abimelek (Genesis 20:1-18). Even though Sarah was sixty and ninety respectively, she must have been quite the looker even in her old age. Both kings grabbed her for their harem. Now, God rescued Abraham and Sarah from both situations, even though they

received a muted rebuke from the kings who were deceived. Rather than punishment, Abraham received riches from both situations. What is more, Abraham likely lied again when he said Sarah was his half-sister, daughter of his father and not his mother, since Genesis 11:31 clearly tells us that Sarah was Terah (Abraham's father)'s daughter-in-law. Cf. Midwives (Exod. 1:15-21) and Rahab (Joshua 2; James 2:25; Heb. 11:31).

So Isaac decides to do the same thing in Genesis 26:1-11 before Abimelek, who was likely the son of the Abimelek Abraham deceived many years before. "Abimelek" (lit. "my father is king") may not be a name but a title for the Philistine king. Again, Isaac suffers no repercussions for his ruse.

7. **A Lesson in Patient Faith:** Isaac does not fight with the Philistines over the wells Abraham dug up, which the Philistines filled. He reopens these wells, and when the Philistine herders complain, he moves on. Why? After this God comes to him and tells him not to be afraid and reaffirms His covenant with him (Genesis 26:24). Did Isaac live to see the promises of God? (cf. Heb. 11:13-16, 39).
8. **Moral Questions Surrounding the Blessing:** Was Isaac wrong to bless his first born son (Esau) in view of the prophecy given to Rebekah in Genesis 25:23, where God said the younger (Jacob) would rule over the older (Esau), or was he simply being obedient to tradition and a possible command of God, as recorded in Deuteronomy 21:15-17? Were Jacob and Rebekah wrong in trying to enforce the prophecy of God by deceiving Isaac? We are not told whether Rebekah ever shared the prophecy with Isaac, but Isaac's blessing in Genesis 28:4 suggests that he understood by then that Jacob was the one to carry on the Abrahamic covenant. Once again, as is often the case in these early Old Testament events, no moral instruction is provided alongside the accounts.

However, Rebekah virtually disappears after securing Jacob's flight to Laban. Jacob would be a fugitive from his brother for twenty years, being deceived and cheated himself many times over by Laban and his sons. And even after his return to Canaan, Jacob's people (Israel) would be perpetual enemies of Esau's people (Edom). Then later, Jacob's own sons deceive him with respect to Joseph. We are led to speculate whether Jacob's cheating and Rebekah's deceiving may have contributed to the talionic ("eye for an eye") outcome to his life.

9. **God reiterates His covenant to Jacob and Jacob takes an oath.** This is now the third occasion for God to declare His covenant: First to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3), then to Isaac (Gen. 26:2-5), and now to Jacob (Gen. 28:13-15). These three iterations may be the reason why Israel often refers to the LORD as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is notable that none of these patriarchs received any of what God had promised. While we speak of God's promises to Israel as temporal blessings (a people, a land, and a kingdom), these patriarchs had a heavenly reward most in mind, as we understand from Hebrews 11:13-16 (cf. 11:39-40). This should encourage all of us today to not put our hopes on earthly rewards or treasures but heavenly ones (Matthew 6:19-20; Colossians 3:1-3)

After seeing the angels and hearing God's covenant, Jacob takes an oath that if the Lord brings him safely back to that place (Bethel – "House of God"), he would make the LORD his God, set up God's house there, and give him a tenth of all that God gives him. We see him follow through on at least the first two parts of this oath (Genesis 35:2-4). Note that while we have a mention of "tithes" here, we should not presume this is normative for all believers. Similarly, when Gideon tested God with a fleece, that was not to be normative. When the disciples cast lots in Acts 2 to determine who would replace Judas Iscariot, that practice too was not designed to be normative for all believers.

10. **The correct understanding of Hebrews 12:17.** Hebrews 12:16 describes Esau as "godless" (more literally "profane"), evidenced by his selling his birthright for a single meal, but then the second part is where the confusion lies. There is a dangling pronoun, "it," which can refer to either the word "blessing" or the word "repentance." Most modern translations (*NAS*, *KJV*, *ESV*, and *NLT*) keep you guessing, except the *NIV*.

*NAS:* For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears.

vs.

*NIV*: Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. Even though he sought the blessing with tears, he could not change what he had done.

The *NAS* makes it sound like Esau sought to repent, even with tears, but there was no place for it; however, in Genesis 27 there is no indication of Esau repenting of anything, and his tears were for the blessing not for doing anything wrong. If there was any repentance, which literally means “change of mind”, it was not Esau’s repentance but Isaac’s that was at issue. Esau hoped Isaac would “change his mind” and give his blessing to Esau rather than Jacob.

Why is this significant? Consider this true story:

One man was distraught and depressed about his faith. Though he had experienced a dramatic conversion a few years back, the last year had been full of trials and temptations which lead him back into a lifestyle which he thought was in his rear-view mirror. Along with his return to some former habits, he had entered into a nightmare of doubt. His primary doubt was his ability to return to the Lord, having, according to him, “rejected the gift of God” and “returned to his own vomit.” He believed that like it was with Esau, it was too late for him. He believed that the repentance that he sought had been removed from the table. In other words, he believed that there is a time when repentance is no longer possible. The verse he referred to in support of this pain was this one: “For you know that even afterward, when he [Esau] desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears.” (*NAS*). This despondent man believed that there was no more place for repentance for him.

## Question for Discussion

Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, and Jacob - all believed in the LORD, but they sought to manipulate their circumstances and each other to achieve the purposes of God rather than simply trusting in God and waiting on Him to fulfill what He promised. Compromises were made. None of their efforts thwarted God’s promises or sovereign will, but their actions may have delayed blessings and created unnecessary heartache along the way. Their actions, recorded in painful detail, remind us of the many chances for potential disaster and that only God’s grace and providence ultimately sustained and carried forward the promises of God.

Take a moment in your groups to discuss how you try to control or manipulate your circumstances, your spouse, your children, your co-workers, etc. rather than praying, trusting, and waiting on God. Be sensitive in how you share, and exercise grace. Remember, our goal is to help, benefit and bless one another and draw each other closer to God.

Then consider, rather than try to manipulate things, what and how might you do better?



