

“Born to be Wild” (Genesis 25:19-34)

You may have noticed that we live in an “instant” society. We have instant coffee, instant breakfasts, instant soup, instant oatmeal, instant pudding, and microwave popcorn. We also have instamatic cameras, cable Internet and e-mail, universal cell phone coverage, cable TV, iPods, DVDs, Play Stations, and Palm Pilots. We have become conditioned to “fast food,” “Quick-Print,” and “Express Mail.”

As efficient as all this can be, we have become products of an “instant” society. We want everything quicker and faster. We cannot and will not wait for desires to be met. We demand instant gratification. If there is a complication in our lives, we believe there must be an instant solution. What is especially disturbing is that we seem to believe we have an inalienable right to be happy. Thus, no one wants to wait for anything, and for the most part no one has to. Waiting is interpreted as pain.¹ Yet, as Richard Hendrix has said, “Second only to suffering, waiting may be the greatest teacher and trainer in godliness, maturity, and genuine spirituality most of us ever encounter.”²

In Gen 25:19-34, we will learn that *we must accomplish God’s will, God’s way*. Make no mistake, God is going to work out His will, in His way, and in His time, but we must wait upon Him to accomplish it.

Our story begins in 25:19 with these words: “**Now these are the records of the generations of Isaac, Abraham’s son:³ Abraham became the father of Isaac.**” I would encourage you to underline the word “**generations.**” The title “Genesis” (Gk. *Geneseos*) means “generations.”⁴ Genesis is a record of ten successive “**generations.**”⁵ The point being: generations come and go but the Lord remains and never changes (Ps 90:1). The book of Genesis is a record of the faithfulness and patience of God. He is the star!

Moses goes on to write, “**And Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram,⁶ the sister of Laban the Aramean, to be his wife**” (25:20). Isaac was 40 when he married Rebekah. So Isaac waited a long time to find “Miss Right.” If you are single, don’t lose hope. Don’t worry about looking for the right person. If God’s will is for you to marry, He’ll bring you the right person at the right time. Your responsibility is simply to become the right person yourself and *make sure you accomplish God’s will, God’s way*.

After waiting 40 years to marry, no doubt Isaac wanted to have children ASAP. Yet, 25:21 states that Rebekah “**was barren.**” Just as Sarah before her and Rachel after her (29:31; 30:1-2), Rebekah had been unable to provide the all-important male offspring promised by God.⁷ Can you imagine how difficult this must have been for Rebekah? She was an intelligent and capable woman. Remember, she was the woman who volunteered to water the ten camels of the bridal caravan (24:15-20). She performed the equivalent to a two-hour *Pilates* workout! So when Rebekah met Isaac and heard him reiterate the divine promise of offspring—that his seed would be as the stars (cf. 22:16)—she fully expected to soon be pregnant. But it did not happen and now 20 years has passed. Isaac is approaching 60 and Rebekah is still barren. Worse yet, Isaac’s brother, Ishmael, had produced 12 sons to Isaac’s zero (25:12-18).⁸

Fortunately, Isaac prayed. The word translated “**prayed**” (*athar*) means “to plead.”⁹ The term is used in Exodus to describe Moses’ powerful entreaty of the Lord to remove the plagues (Exod 7-10). Isaac prayed to the Lord “**on behalf of his wife...and she conceived.**” Husband, the best thing you can do for your wife is to pray for her. Don’t try to solve her problems, just pray! God desires us to pray and not just assume His blessing (Jas 4:2). But He longs for us to pray according to His will and not our wants. While Isaac wanted children, just like every other Jewish couple, he was more concerned about God’s plan for fulfilling His covenant and blessing the whole world through the promised Messiah (3:15; 12:1-3). Are you concerned about God’s will being done on earth, or your will being done in heaven (see Matt 6:10)? God wants you to pray for those things that are on His heart. As you do so, He will respond.

The entire book of Genesis emphasizes the sovereignty of God and the wisdom of His “delays.” Sarah and Abraham had to wait 25 years before Isaac was born; Jacob had to labor for 14 years to obtain his two wives; and Joseph had to wait over 20 years before he was reconciled to his brothers. Our times are in God’s hands (Ps 31:15), and His timing is never wrong.¹⁰ Today, maybe you’re waiting for something to happen. Perhaps you want to have a baby, to get another job, to have a prayer answered, but you have come to a dead end. You may ask, “Why?” Yet, maybe that which looks bleak is God’s way of saying, “Just wait a little while longer and you will see all that I have done. I do everything with a particular strategy in mind.” So what is God doing to bring you to the place of prayer? Unanswered prayer is often God’s way of getting our attention. You see, when we don’t get what we want we are more teachable, whereas when we are blessed we can become more unteachable.¹¹

In all of this a question that begs to be answered is: Why did God close the wombs of Sarah, Rebekah, and later Rachel? Answer: So the chosen family would recognize their children as the fruit of His grace rather than simply the fruit of nature.¹² God was teaching His people that the promised blessing, through the chosen seed of Abraham, could not be accomplished by mere human effort. *God accomplishes His will, His way.*

In 25:22, Moses writes, **“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.”** The struggle going on in Rebekah’s womb was more than just normal, fetal movement.¹³ The Hebrew says the children smashed themselves inside her.¹⁴ Literally, it is used to describe skulls being smashed (Judg 9:53; Ps 74:14) or reeds being broken (e.g., Isa 36:6). The use of such a term vividly indicates the violence of the struggle within Rebekah’s womb.¹⁵ There was “womb warfare” going on! This leads Rebekah to ask a question: **“If it is so, why then am I this way?”** The sense of her question is, “Why then did I ever become pregnant?” Or, “Why do I go on living?” Now keep in mind, Rebekah is no wilting flower. She is a bad mama-jama! However, there was mayhem in her womb. So she went to **“inquire of the Lord.”**¹⁶ Did you catch that? Rebekah was so puzzled by this internal struggle that she prayed to God for an answer. In the face of infertility, Isaac’s response is to pray. In the face of a difficult pregnancy, Rebekah’s response is to pray. Isaac and Rebekah both know God and worship Him as God. Their faith is real and they take it seriously. At the key junctures of their lives, what we’re told about them is that they went to God. Do you need wisdom for some area of your life? God is just waiting for you to petition Him (Jas 1:5). *He wants you to accomplish His will, His way.*

In response to her prayers, the Lord offers a prophetic word in 25:23: **“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.”**¹⁷ The reason for the womb warfare that Rebekah is experiencing is that she is pregnant with two nations. The Lord then informs Rebekah that the older shall serve the younger. There is plenty of biblical precedence for this. The offering of Cain, the older brother, was rejected, whereas the offering of the younger brother, Abel, was accepted. The line of Seth, the younger brother, was the chosen line (4:26-5:8); Isaac was chosen over his older brother, Ishmael (17:18-19); Rachel was chosen over her older sister, Leah (29:18); Joseph, the younger brother, was chosen over all the rest (37:3); and Judah was chosen over his older brothers (49:8). The intention behind each of these “reversals” was the recurring theme of God’s sovereign plan of grace. The blessing was not a natural right, as a right of the firstborn son would be. Rather, God’s blessing is extended to those who have no other claim to it. They all received what they did not deserve (cf. Mal 1:1-5; Rom 9:10-13).¹⁸

Significantly, the New Testament is painstakingly clear that God esteems the weak and that Jacob was the underdog. This is a consistent theme in the Bible. God is not neutral. Faced with a choice, He always seems to side with the underdog. He chose the nation of Israel not because they were great, but because they weren’t great, and He promised to help make them great. The greatest king in the Old Testament, King David, was the youngest kid in his family, the one his father didn’t even think of when asked to line

up his boys to see which one might become the next king. When Jesus came and talked about the coming of the kingdom of God, it wasn't the social or religious elite who got it...it was the people on the margins of society. There seems to be a special place in God's heart for people who are overlooked, for people in low positions. Do we share that heart? Do we share God's concern for the overlooked, for the downtrodden?¹⁹

In 25:24-26, our story continues, **“When her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb.”**²⁵ **Now the first came forth red, all over like a hairy garment; and they named him Esau.**²⁶ **Afterward his brother came forth with his hand holding on to Esau's heel, so his name was called Jacob; and Isaac was sixty years old when she gave birth to them.”** As was predicted by God, Rebekah gives birth to twins. Esau means “hairy one.” Just how hairy was he? Well, keep in mind that Jacob would later pretend to be Esau by wearing goatskins on his hands and neck! This was one hairy guy! Jacob means “God will protect.”²⁰ Now while Esau's name reflects his appearance, Jacob's name later came to reflect his character. The Hebrew word for “Jacob” is similar to “heel.” From Jacob's grasping of Esau's heel, at birth, came the nickname “heel holder” (i.e., one who outwits by trickery).²¹ To understand this idea better, you may want to go to your local high school and watch a wrestling match. When high school wrestlers come out onto the mat, the intent is to try to get the opponent down and to pin him on the mat, to trip him up somehow or another. One of the best moves is to fake one way and then move another way, and quickly grab the ankle of the opponent. There's a bit of a deception, and then as he goes for the heel he's able to trip his opponent up. That's really what Jacob's name came to mean. It isn't a matter of just coming alongside someone and saying, “Here, can I hold your heel?” You know, we haven't heard any songs saying, “I want to hold your heel.” It's nothing like that. It's more of a wrestling kind of thing, a deceptive move, a reaching out, a grasping of the ankle of the other person, a tripping them up. We must be careful not to follow in Jacob's trickery. Rather, *we must accomplish God's will, God's way.*

Verses 27-28 provide some interesting background. Moses writes, **“When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the field, but Jacob was a peaceful man, living in tents.”** Well, there's a contrast right at the beginning between these two twins. Esau was what the world might label as a “man's man.” He was an outdoors kind of guy who loved to do the things a father could take pride in. He was a skillful hunter, and he knew how to handle himself in the outdoors.²² He had that sort of rough, fiery nature, liked the wild areas of the country, and liked the adventurous sort of life. I think if Esau were around today, he'd be driving a 4 x 4 with massive tires on it and a gun rack in the back window! If you got in Esau's truck, you probably had to move things off the seat and wondered where you'd put your feet on the floor, because there's so much stuff there. And if you went to his house, he'd have a magazine rack filled with *Field and Stream* type of magazines. That was Esau but not Jacob.

Jacob, on the other hand, was orderly. He was well disposed. He was the kind of man who liked to stay at home. He was a man of peaceful habits. If you got in Jacob's car, it would be neat and clean and everything would just be right. And if you'd stop by Jacob's house unannounced, he wouldn't have to worry about dirty dishes in the sink because he was that kind of guy. You just get the impression everything's going to have its place, and it's going to be in its place; he was neat and he was orderly. His house was a quieter sort of place. If you went there maybe you'd have some nice background music. There is a real *contrast* between these two.²³ Jacob is the homebody; Esau is the hunter.

In 25:28, we come to a red flag that we can't miss: **“Now Isaac loved Esau, because he had a taste for game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.”** Despite Esau's ungodly character, Isaac loved Esau more than Jacob. The only rational we are given in the text is: Isaac had a taste for wild game. And while Isaac knew God's desire to pass on the physical and spiritual blessing of the inheritance to Jacob, Isaac failed to obey God's will and to transfer the birthright on to Jacob. Tragically, Isaac and Rebekah, who had prayed so long and persistently for offspring, chose sides. No doubt each loved both of his/her sons.²⁴ But they each preferred

one over the other.²⁵ Of course, their favoritism served to further exacerbate the boys' differences. Parents please don't be guilty of this type of favoritism. While a child's interests or disposition may tempt you to be partial, do not succumb. Love each of your children with equal fervor...anything less causes division and disunity.

In 25:29-30, **“When Jacob had cooked stew, Esau came in from the field and he was famished; and Esau said to Jacob, ‘Please let me have a swallow of that red stuff there, for I am famished.’ Therefore his name was called Edom.”** The incident with the stew appears to take place away from home; otherwise Esau could have appealed to his parents. Jacob is not the hunting type, so it would be unusual for him to be out in the countryside alone. He has been described as a man “staying among the tents,” which may indicate he was more closely associated with the shepherding business. The shepherds moved their camps over a broad area of land in order to find water and grazing for the flocks. It is most likely that Jacob would be out supervising some of the shepherds at such a camp when Esau stumbled upon them. Jacob would be the one in charge at the camp, so the decision would be his, and there would therefore be witnesses to the agreement made between Jacob and Esau.²⁶

In 25:30, Esau literally demands Jacob's food. The *NASB* softens the force of the imperative to a request: **“Please let me have a swallow.”** This is no polite request, however; it is a forceful demand.²⁷ Not only does Esau demand food but he demands to devour it. The word translated **“swallow,”** or better yet, “gulp down,” contains a Hebrew verb, which normally describes the feeding habits of cattle. Although lentil stew was a well-known staple, Esau called it literally “this red stuff”—hardly something that a sensitive adult would say.²⁸ Jacob responds to Esau's demands with a demand of his own: **“First sell me your birthright”** (25:31). The way Jacob states his demand suggests that he has long premeditated his act and ruthlessly exploited his brother's weakness.

Our story concludes on this tragic note: **“Esau said, ‘Behold, I am about to die; so of what use then is the birthright to me?’ And Jacob said, ‘First swear to me’; so he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob.”** (25:32-33). In what he sensed were his dying moments, Esau didn't value his birthright. Again, Jacob sought to take advantage of him.²⁹ His insistence that Esau swear to him strengthens this impression.³⁰ One question that must be answered is: What was the birthright, and why did Jacob want it so badly? Deuteronomy 21:17 and 1 Chronicles 5:1-2 tell us the birthright involved both a material and a spiritual blessing. The son of the birthright received a double portion of the inheritance, but he also became the head of the family and the spiritual leader upon the passing of the father (Gen 43:33). And, in the case of this family, the birthright determined who would inherit the covenant God made with Abraham, the covenant of a land, a nation, and the Messiah. Rather than showing his brother any mercy or grace, Jacob saw this as an opportunity to gain the advantage. How many times I have been tempted to take things into my own hands, to make sure that I get my rights, or to make sure that I am not taken advantage of. But God's ways are very different. *He wants us to accomplish His will His way.*

Despite Jacob's premature longings, his trickery was successful: **“Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew; and he ate and drank, and rose and went on his way”** (25:34a). It was just another meal to Esau. It was all so casual. You may be inclined to ask, “How can God allow this deceiver to succeed?” From Jacob's story we can see that God at times allows others to succeed because He has a greater lesson to teach that person at a later time. God's timing is strategic. None of us experience an immediate response from God every time we sin. Rather, at the proper time God brings our sins to our attention or brings the full fruits of consequences into our lives. That inevitably means that sin has the capability of temporary success. God, in His impeccable sovereignty, will bring each sin to light in His time so as to serve His optimum purposes in our lives and in His plan. If you are in sin today, will you come clean with God so that He doesn't have to expose you with His loving discipline?

The final words of our account are these sobering words: “**Thus Esau despised his birthright**” (25:34b). Explicit moral commentary is rare in the Bible, so the writer’s inclusion of it here marks something about Esau that he did not want the reader to miss. The cunning hunter fell into a better hunter’s trap, becoming prey to his own appetite.³¹ Esau valued his birthright so cheaply that he sold it for a bowl of stew in the same way. He “**despised**” it. We can understand the word’s usage perhaps by looking at how we use the word “contempt.” The English verb can refer to a sentiment or mood, but it can also be used in the legal context of being held in “contempt of court,” which means that one is not showing the judge and the legal process the respect they deserve.³²

At the very heart of Esau’s demise is the sad reality that he did not believe the word of God. God’s promise was, to him, intentional and unreal. Many believers are like Esau. There is a wreckage of lives to prove this. [Hold up a jar of lentils.] There are many people who have traded their blessings for what amounts to a bowl of lentils. When we exchange our purity, our integrity, our family, or our relationship with God or His church, the benefit we receive is nothing more than a pile of beans! Satan is constantly tempting us to forfeit the eternal riches of our spiritual inheritance in Christ for the pleasure of immediate gratification: An evening of watching ungodly programming on the TV, an illicit affair, financial compromise to get ahead, lusting after money or material things, letting loose our anger in abandonment of reason, succumbing to depression without check, or cursing God in despair or disappointment. We are in constant danger of being tempted to give up something very precious in order to indulge a sudden strong desire. The pile of beans that is dangerous to you and to me is any temptation to gratify the “feelings” of the immediate moment in a way that shows we “despise” the promises of the living God for our future. Whatever you do *make sure that your life is bent on accomplishing God’s will God’s way.*

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Notes

¹ Preaching Today citation: Psychologist Kim Hall, interviewed in The Door (Sept.-Oct. 1992). *Christianity Today*, Vol. 37, no. 9.

² Preaching Today citation: Richard Hendrix, *Christian Reader*, Vol. 31.

³ “The greatest thing in the world is being the father of a famous son. And the worst thing in the world is being the son of a famous father.” Woodrow Kroll. “When You’re Surrounded by Headline Grabbers Isaac: Living in the Shadows of Others,” *Back to the Bible*: <http://www.backtothebible.org/radio/today/24683>.

⁴ Nearly the entire Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew, and Genesis is no exception. The original Hebrew title of Genesis is *bereshit*, which means “in beginning” (see 1:1a). This is an appropriate title for the book of beginnings. But our English Bibles do not follow the Hebrew title; we follow the Greek title. The Hebrew Old Testament was eventually translated into Greek (about 250 years before the time of Christ). The Greek translators then gave their own title, “Genesis” to the first book of their Old Testament text. The Greek word *geneseos* means “origin, source, generation, or beginning.” *Geneseos* is a translation of the Hebrew word *toledot* (“generations,” 2:4). This title is also quite appropriate because Genesis is indeed a history of origins, births, genealogies, and generations.

⁵ See Genesis 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 19; 36:1; and 37:2.

⁶ Paddan-aram means “the flat (land) of Aram.” Aram was the area near Haran. People from this region became known as Arameans, and later the Greeks called them Syrians. Bethuel was a semi-nomadic herdsman, and he probably lived in the open fields at least part of the year.

⁷ Bill T. Arnold, *Encountering the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 119.

⁸ R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning & Blessing* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 332.

⁹ See HALOT: Exod 8:26; 10:18; Judg 13:8; and Job 33:26.

¹⁰ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Authentic: Genesis 25-50* (Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor, 1997), 12.

¹¹ R.T. Kendall, *All’s Well that End’s Well: The Life of Jacob* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1998), 8-9.

¹² Isaac was the only monogamous patriarch among the first three: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Dr. Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Genesis* (<http://www.sonilight.com/constable/notes/pdf/genesis.pdf>, 2005), 182.

¹³ Jewish legends say Jacob and Esau tried to kill each other in the womb. Also, every time Rebekah went near an idol’s altar, Esau would get excited in the womb, and when she would go near a place where the Lord was worshipped, Jacob would get excited.

¹⁴ The verb “smash, crush” is most frequently used figuratively of the oppression of the poor.

¹⁵ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, Vol. 2: WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1994), 175.

¹⁶ Heb. *darash*: “to seek with care, inquire, require” (HALOT).

¹⁷ A woman once said to the great Charles Spurgeon, “I cannot understand why God should say that He hated Esau.” Spurgeon replied, “That is not my difficulty, madam. My trouble is to understand how God could love Jacob.”

¹⁸ John H. Sailhamer, *Genesis*: EBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), Electronic ed.

¹⁹ Mark Brouwer, “Sibling Rivalry: Putting the Fun Back into Dysfunctional: Genesis 25:19-34”: http://www.bridgewood.org/index.cfm?PAGE_ID=374&EXPAND=371

²⁰ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 18-50*: NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 178.

²¹ It also meant “trickster,” “con-man,” “scoundrel,” or “rascal.” It definitely wasn’t a compliment!

²² It is worth noting that the only other hunter mentioned in the Bible is Nimrod who was a rebel against God (Gen 10:8-9). Unfortunately, Esau appears to have followed in Nimrod’s footsteps because he was unconcerned with the things of God. Hebrews 12:16 describes Esau as sexually immoral and godless.

²³ Tony Beckett, “The Tale of Two Brothers, Part 2: Finish Well—Lessons From Jacob”: <http://www.backtothebible.org/radio/today/19846>.

²⁴ The verb translated “love” is indicative of favor, choice, and preference. Rebekah undoubtedly loves both her children, but Jacob is her favorite and receives preferential treatment from her.

²⁵ This favoritism also brought about disharmony between Isaac and his wife. Later Rebekah was to conspire with Jacob to deceive her husband (Gen 27).

²⁶ John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), Electronic Ed.

²⁷ See Jeffrey S. Olson, “Esau Was A Glutton: Narrative Representation in Genesis 25.” A Paper Submitted to the Northwest Regional Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society February 28th, 1998.

²⁸ Paul Wright, ed., *Genesis: Shepherd’s Notes* (Nashville: Broadman, 1997), 64.

²⁹ Martin Luther well said, “This was not a valid transaction, because Jacob was buying what was already his, and Esau was selling something that didn’t belong to him.”

³⁰ Jacob's lack of compassion and hospitality contrasts with that of Abraham (18:1-8) and Lot (19:1-8).

³¹ Allen P. Ross, *Creation & Blessing* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988 [2002 ed.]), 449.

³² John H. Walton, *Genesis: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 551.