

## TWO DIFFERENT BROTHERS

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The text that is before us today begins with a couple named Rebecca and Isaac, and, at first glance, they seem like one of those couples who are a bit too perfect. Isaac is the son of Abraham and Sarah, the father and mother of our faith. It was to them that God promised to make of the Hebrew people a great nation as numerous as the stars in the sky, and when Sarah and Abraham die, Rebekah and Isaac become the inheritors of that same promise. Casual readers of this story may observe that they are the stars of this plot—the leading family in a tribe that is growing. Furthermore, it appears that when they pray to God, God answers them. So these people seem to have every conceivable advantage in the world. In the colloquial of our own time, these are the “Joneses,” the people with whom everyone would like to keep up. Their house is a little bigger, their kids are a little smarter and better at sports, their marriage and social life seems to be more exciting than yours. But peel back a layer or two, and it usually turns out that the Joneses are a lot like everybody else. Every family is messy, and so it is with Rebekah and Isaac.

As the story begins, Rebekah and Isaac are unable to have a baby. Reading the story closely, it appears that they try to conceive for about 20 years. Reading even more closely, it appears that though Rebekah desperately wants a child, Isaac, who is the one who has God’s ear, waits about 20 years before he prays about it—this could be the first indication that this isn’t a very happy marriage.

Then it finally happens. Rebekah gets pregnant, but that’s just the beginning of the tough times. The pregnancy is difficult, enough so that Rebekah, who had wished for so long to have a baby, now wishes she was dead. She goes to inquire of the Lord why the struggle in her womb is so great, and is told something no expectant mother wishes to hear: “Two nations are at war 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.”

This is unusual news from your obstetrician.

Rebekah is pregnant with twins, and in this culture, even when you were born only seconds before your sibling, the firstborn child was destined to inherit two-thirds of the property and the honor of being leader of the family. This is called the firstborn child’s *birthright*. To add emphasis to our understanding of the struggle that is about to begin, we are told that when these twins are born, the younger child, Jacob, comes out

clinging to the heel of the older one, Esau. Through this instinctual grasping for power, we know right away, these two boys are not going to get along.

Finally, the opening of the story ends with two other important details: the boys not only look very different from one another, but they *are* different. Esau is a hunter and Jacob is a homebody. And without any embarrassment about telling the truth, the Bible says Isaac, the father, loved Esau the most, and Rebekah, the mother, loved Jacob. This home is going to be an interesting place to grow up.

The Bible now skips from how the boys are born to a story about them in adolescence. Characteristically for both, Esau has been out on the hunt and Jacob is at home cooking. It apparently wasn't a good hunt because Esau comes home very hungry; and Jacob, who has the food, takes advantage of the situation: he sells his brother a bowl of soup in exchange for his birthright, that two-thirds of the family wealth, and the place as head of the family. As some of you may know, sometime later this act of treachery will repeat itself in another form: Jacob will steal Esau's special family blessing by dressing up like his brother and tricking their elderly father Isaac, who is now nearly blind. Rebekah, the mother, encourages this act of deception, causing a fight that will drive the brothers apart for more than a decade. Esau threatens to kill Jacob, and Jacob is forced to flee the family home and go live with an uncle, Laban. Then we get one other story of what things are like in this family: Jacob works his tail off for his uncle for seven years in order to marry his daughter, Rachel. When the seven years of hard work are up, Uncle Laban will get Jacob drunk and trick him into marrying another of his daughters, who Jacob does not love, all in service of getting another seven years of free labor out of his own nephew, Jacob. By this time, it doesn't even seem worth mentioning that Jacob wants to marry his cousin.

I hope you are seeing by now, this family, who at first glance may seem to have it all together, this family may be the Joneses, but they are definitely not the Cleavers. There are a lot of things about this family that are "messed up." And very much like messy family stories in our own time, there are some things we know about this family, but much of the real information is missing—the hows and whys of this family history are unclear. We shouldn't assume too much. Let's look at just a few of the questions:

First of all, considering Esau and Jacob and this struggle for the birthright: when Esau comes in from the hunt that day, it is not clear if he is really starving to death, or if he is just hungry, so we don't know if he is just a weak character wanting instant gratification, or if he makes a desperate decision to save his own life.

As for Jacob--is Jacob really just an awful and deceitful person, or is something deeper happening here? Bible stories, and many ancient stories for that matter, feature a character who is a trickster, who uses cunning to challenge aspects of the culture that need to change. Perhaps Jacob is meant to upend this unfair system of family inheritance that has no basis in merit.

The parents complicate the story as well. Why does Rebekah encourage this kind of behavior among her children, and if she does, can they really be blamed? As for the father, Isaac seems to have little control over or even awareness of these problems in his family. At what point did dad become so out of touch and ineffective, and what's that all about? Perhaps the parents, and not the children, are really to blame.

Whose fault was all of this bad behavior, really? Who is responsible for how things go wrong in this family? That's a question of nature and nurture, upbringing and chance, and divine providence, and that question turns us to God's role in the story.

Beyond the family itself, this story presents another significant problem: God seems to be playing favorites. Jacob is declared to be the favored son even before birth, and Jacob's favored status continues regardless of his dishonorable behavior. Again, how are we to interpret these elements of the story? Does God really make these kinds of determinations about our lives, choosing some of us to succeed over others, even before we are born? Perhaps it just seems that way to us, because we want so badly to make sense of it when we see wicked people succeed. On the other hand, all over the Bible, God works through less-than-perfect people to bring about justice. So perhaps it is God working through Jacob to overthrow a system of family inheritance.

All of these things are unknowns in the story. When it comes to God's work, our choices, and pure chance, if this story does nothing else, it shows how difficult it is to understand why things work out the way they do. It's a good reminder: messy people and messy families are rarely simple. Human flourishing is rarely simple.

I imagine Jacob and Esau must have been in about ninth grade when Jacob steals his brother's birthright; that occurred to me when I heard a story last week. This year, Chief Justice John Roberts spoke at the ninth grade graduation of his son, at the Cardigan Mountain School in New Hampshire. Bucking many trends common to commencement speeches, Roberts refused to wish the boys good luck. Instead, he had this to say to them:

*"From time to time in the years to come, I hope you will be treated unfairly so that you will come to know the value of justice. I hope that you will suffer betrayal because that will teach you the importance of loyalty. Sorry to say, but I hope you will be lonely from time to time so that you don't take friends for granted. I wish you bad luck, again, from time to time so that you will be conscious of the role of chance in life and understand that your success is not completely deserved and that the failure of others is not completely deserved either."*

What a profound statement. What a simple and true assessment of the complexity of human life. And it is all the more profound for what Roberts said next:

*“Over the last couple of years, I've gotten to know many of you young men pretty well. And I know you are good guys. But you are also privileged young men. And if you weren't privileged when you came here, you're privileged now because you have been here. My advice is don't act like it. When you get to your new school, walk up and introduce yourself to the person who is raking the leaves, shoveling the snow or emptying the trash. Learn their name, and call them by their name during your time at the school. Another piece of advice - when you pass by people you don't recognize on the walks, smile, look them in the eye, and say hello. The worst thing that will happen is that you will become known as the young man who smiles and says hello.” (Chief Justice John Roberts, June 3, 2017)*

There's startling resonance between the message of this commencement address and the story of Jacob and Esau. Beyond a doubt, Jacob and Esau are privileged young men. It's not for nothing that these two brothers are at the top of the family tree in what will become God's chosen people. But their pedigree is far from all that matters. Over the course of this story they will discover that there are ways in which hard work and good moral choices shape a life, and they will see places where hard work and good behavior fails. Also, Jacob and Esau will learn that every one of us is a mix of God-given gifts: advantages and disadvantages we carry into life, and those include the positive and negative contributions of our parents, neighbors and friends, where we were born and what resources we have. And finally, they will learn the role of chance in life. From lucking into good looks or a great sense of humor, to being struck with cancer or depression, some things in life seem to be just dumb luck. The lesson here seems to be that human flourishing is a complicated thing, and growing up is about the mature recognition of these deep complexities of life—in your own life, and in the lives of other people.

This is only the beginning of a long story in the Bible, but for today, the takeaway seems to be this: all the people in this family are a part of God's story, and so are each of us. So no matter what combination of fate, choice, and chance, nature and nurture is really true, know this: that it will be okay. God will see you through it. Additionally, it seems like even if you can't figure out the recipe for success in life, it's still worth thinking about it. For examining these things is what helps us understand and care for other people. For, as John Roberts noted to those ninth graders (and their parents), none of our successes are completely deserved, and neither are the failures of others.

Finally, as we look forward to the rest of this story, a word of hope. Yes, this is a messy family, and so are many of ours. But in this messy family, along the way, everyone will grow and change, and the least likely of people are about to engage in acts of love and forgiveness great enough to secure a future for the people of God. I hope you'll come with us as we study this story together.

Amen.

