

God Chooses the Younger Twin

Fall Quarter: God's Exceptional Choice

Unit 1: God Calls Abraham's Family

Sunday School Lesson for the week of September 11, 2022

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Lesson Scripture: Genesis 25:19-34

Key Text

The Lord said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger."
Gen. 25:23

Lesson Aims

1. To recognize the importance of context when reading an O.T. narrative.
2. To recognize the three sins present in the narrative for the purposes of avoiding and overcoming.
3. To recognize God's grace and divine purpose at work in spite of our sins and frailty.

Author's note: This lesson is to supplement the lesson in the book.

Introduction

The Bible never attempts to hide the sins of its most notable characters. The men and women God used to reveal the Lord's divine will all had feet of clay. We will examine the three destructive sins operative in the narrative. The recognition of these sins serves a reminder to avoid them and to minister to those effected by them. One of the grand dynamics in Scripture is the reality that God accomplishes the divine purpose in spite of frail, and at times sinful, people. Often God transforms our sins and weaknesses into good.

Studying the Narrative in Context

It is important to realize there are two worldviews present when studying scripture, especially the Old Testament. First, there is the worldview of the Old Testament near-eastern people. Secondly, there is the worldview of the student. Thus, the narrative is written by an author that holds a different worldview than the teacher and reader. We possess a western worldview that can prove drastically different from the Old Testament people. Here is a sampling of the important distinctions:

1. In the Old Testament world, the community was more highly valued than the individual. An individual was expendable if they became a threat to the community. For example, the story of Achan troubles us when we read it. Achan and his entire family are killed for bringing a threat to the Israelite community. Read Joshua 7 for an account of Achan's sin and death. The Israelite community believed if a member of the community sinned

against God their sin would corrupt the community and possibly bring God's judgement upon them. Therefore, Achan and his family were killed for the protection of the community.

In the western world, we highly value the individual - at times more than the community. We place great emphasis and value upon the rights of the individual. We protect the individual's way of life and thinking even if they stand in contrast to the larger community. We worry far more about the sin and injustice of the larger community and its effect upon the individual.

2. The Old Testament worldview was very patriarchal. The male possessed far more power and was treated as having higher value than the female. Few examples are more poignant than the passing of the birthright. The firstborn male received the entire birthright. Even if the first born was a female, she received no birthright. The concept of a shared inheritance is western and was commonly not practiced in the ancient near-eastern world. Daughters were of value as dowery when given to another in marriage. A dowery was paid to the bride's father, and she was given to her husband. These marriages were almost always arranged, and she had little or no say regarding the person she married. This does not mean that parents possessed no affection toward their daughters. It also does not mean exceptions to this cultural perspective did not exist. However, the treatment of a daughter was drastically different from a son.

A woman's major role was to give birth to a male child for her husband. The inability to give birth, or give birth to a male, was always considered the woman's fault. This type of thinking continued to exist into the 1600s and beyond. You may recall Henry the VIII divorced Katherine of Aragon for her inability to give birth to a son. He then had his next wife Ann Boleyn beheaded for the same reason. The culture never considered the fact that the inability to give birth, or birth a male, could reside within the husband. Consequently, it is difficult for us to fully understand the pain experienced by a married woman who could not have children, or not give her husband a male child. She would have felt a depressing sense of worthlessness. Her life would have felt purposeless. If her husband divorced her, she could not remarry. Our western culture again lives in stark contrast to the Old Testament world in relation to the role of men and women.

These customs should not be accepted as God's will. They were adapted behaviors among people attempting to survive in a hostile world. Yet, God used these cultural norms to accomplish His (generic) redemptive purposes. As stated in last week's lesson, God's revelation is progressive. That is, the Lord reveals the divine will to us in a way we can understand at the time. Each revelation enlightens and moves God's people forward in a shared life of love, compassion, respect, and mission. For example, we begin with a foundation of law and move toward a day when the law will be written in the heart. This internal law is the Shema found in Deut. 6, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart soul, mind and strength." Jesus will add, "and, they neighbor as thyself." This internalization of this law is fully revealed in Jesus. The events in our lesson occur during the period of law. As a matter of fact, the events unfold prior to the giving of the Mosaic Law. Consequently, God moves His people from a life of law to a life of grace and love.

3. Naturally, the Old Testament world was not a fully developed “scientific” world. They reached conclusions about nature and life from observation. This is the foundation for all science. However, during this era so much remained unknown. Our vision was very limited. In our lesson, Rebekah has no way of knowing she is pregnant with twins. Our modern scientific world allows us to understand what we observe and its causes. We understand fertility and childbirth whereas Isaac and Rebekah could not. Rebekah will learn of the twins through a dialogue with the Lord. Thus, the movement of the sons in her womb was difficult to understand.

Not only is it important to recognize the differences in worldview when studying our lesson, it is also important to remember the narrative is written “looking backward.” The events and consequences of the story have already unfolded. The author is writing with greater knowledge than the actual people in the story. He knows Rebekah is with twins and thus understands the actions of Isaac, Rebekah, Esau and Jacob and where those actions lead.

Can you articulate the problems that can arise when failing to consider these differing worldviews? The Bible is a near-eastern book being read by us, with western eyes. What can we do to help us avoid imposing our worldview upon the Bible? Realizing the existence of differing worldviews when studying the Bible is important in order to read the Bible in proper context. What are some questions we can ask to ensure we are reading a text in proper context? What mistakes can occur when we fail to consider context?

The Three Sins Present in the Narrative

Our lesson reveals the presence of three major sins and dysfunctions:

1. First, we encounter the sin and dysfunction of “parental favoritism.” This does not mean that when a parent feels closer to one child over another that it is sin. However, in this case the favoritism is not hidden or shunned. Isaac favors Esau. Esau was a “man’s man” in Isaac’s world. He was a hunter of wild game, what we might call an outdoorsman. Rebekah, on the other hand, favored Jacob. Jacob shared little in common with his brother. Jacob held far more in common with his mother than his father. Jacob was sly, and some might see him as a conniver. Not only does our story reveal that the two parents favored different sons, it also reveals Isaac’s favoritism toward Esau led Rebekah to clandestinely plot against him regarding the birthright. Later, she will plot with Jacob to steal the birthright from Esau. In our narrative, Jacob makes the first move toward taking the birthright. His actions raise certain questions. What made him think he could accomplish such an unusual task? What type of character did he have to plot such an endeavor in a culture that greatly frowned upon it? Had Jacob been speaking of stealing the birthright with Rebekah? He uses the food he cooked as an enticement to make famished Esau give the birthright away. However, later, after these initial events in our

narrative, Rebekah and Jacob plot together to steal the passing of the birthright from Isaac to Esau.

It can be argued Rebekah's plot emerged from her conversation with the Lord. Rebekah did not know she carried twins in her womb. Undoubtedly, the babies were overly active in the womb, leading Rebekah to fear something might be wrong. Thus, she inquired of the Lord. It was in this time of prayer that she learned of the twins. However, in our story, she was also informed that the second-born male would rule the firstborn. This conversation possibly led to the strong favoritism she felt toward Jacob. Still, this information should not have led to favoritism. The favoritism that existed within Rebekah most likely was birthed as a result of Isaac's favored treatment of Jacob. Consequently, she might have felt a need to "balance the scales." Often, when one parent openly favors one child over another, the other parent will seek to compensate. Whatever the reason, both Isaac and Rebekah engaged in favoritism. This favoritism led to destructive consequences. The two sons lived in tension and engaged in enmity toward one another most of their lives. Even their descendants engaged in such animosity.

Can you list the consequences of overt parental favoritism? Can you recognize the long-term effects of such favoritism? Why do you think the Bible makes no attempt to hide such sins from the reader? What can we learn about God's purposes in light of Isaac's and Rebekah's favoritism? What do their behaviors and the emergence of Jacob as the inheritor of the birthright teach us about God accomplishing His divine purposes in spite of human sin? Where is God's grace present in the story of Isaac, Rebekah, Esau and Jacob? What can we learn about God's purposes being fulfilled through our frailty?

2. The second major sin is actually birthed by the first. Parental favoritism almost always gives birth to jealousy. Rebekah almost certainly felt Jacob was not equally favored by his father. Thus, jealousy could creep into her heart. Likewise, Jacob also certainly felt jealous of Esau. Though Rebekah had learned of Jacob's important future, the family functioned as though that knowledge did not exist. In other words, Isaac treated Esau as his firstborn and as if the child would receive his birthright. Rebekah would have observed Isaac's actions, and though God revealed to her that Jacob would rule over Esau, she said nothing. Consequently, Esau and Jacob were normal boys being raised in a normal Hebrew household. Jacob would have witnessed Isaac's preferable behavior toward Esau. It would have proved natural for him to feel slighted, less important, and perhaps ignored. His ability to accept the reality that his brother was the proper recipient of the birthright did not mean he did not have feelings. However, as most boys would have accepted this favoritism in spite of their feelings, Jacob did not.

Nothing good emerges from jealousy. Jealousy always leads us to stand in places we would never otherwise stand. When considering the sin of jealousy, I often think of the religious leaders standing by a cornfield watching Jesus and his disciples pick corn. You might remember they accused Jesus of breaking Mosaic Law by picking corn on the Sabbath. I asked myself the question, "Why are they standing there?" That is not where religious leaders often stood. They stood in places of learning and sat in the high places during banquets. They were standing at a cornfield because of their jealousy. They were

determined to entrap Jesus in order to discredit him among the people. Thus, they stand at the cornfield. Jealousy causes us to stand in places that are not pleasing to God.

Jealousy makes us look for mistakes and shortcomings within those toward whom we feel jealous. Seeking the sins and mistakes of others requires time and energy. If we seek these sins and mistakes it means we are “not seeking” that which is productive and constructive. It also means we are not engaging in self-examination. In the words of Jesus, we are not looking for the “log in our own eye.” All jealousy is a waste of time, causing us to become diverted and distracted in our walk with the Lord.

In the narrative, jealousy eventually leads Rebekah and Jacob to plot against Isaac and Esau. They plot to interrupt the normal order and custom of life in order to accomplish their desire. Again, we can offer leniency toward Rebekah by claiming she was simply attempting to fulfill what God had told her about Jacob. However, God never asked Rebekah to plot and scheme. The Lord informed Rebekah that Jacob would become the leader of his brother. God never called Rebekah and Jacob to ensure this occurred through their own actions. It was their own jealousy and Rebekah’s favoritism that led to the plot.

Can you share how family favoritism and jealousy are related? Can you share some places in life you chose to stand because of jealousy? Can you share the destructive consequences of jealousy as they have occurred in your own life? What are some ways and disciplines that can help us avoid jealousy?

3. The third sin is that of taking advantage of another due to their vulnerability. We are most vulnerable when one of our most basic human needs is not being met. Hunger is among our most basic human needs. Undoubtedly, Esau is desperate for food. We don’t know how long Esau has been hungry. We can go up to 8 days without food before hunger becomes unbearable. Either Esau was a man of such weak character that he would sell his inheritance for a bowl of stew, or he was a man truly hungry. Perhaps he was both. Selling one’s birthright was a serious breach of custom. Esau was most likely suffering severe hunger. Listen to his statement to Jacob, “Look, I am about to die! What good is a birthright to me?” It is difficult to believe Esau was just “a little hungry” in our narrative. He is severely hungry and thus very vulnerable.

Jacob chooses to take advantage of that vulnerability. A good brother, a good man, would feed another suffering from such hunger. In Hebrew culture, the laws of hospitality required a person to provide shelter and food for the visitor, especially when the visitor was in need. The law of hospitality allowed people in the near-eastern world to survive in such a hostile world. The descent act would be that of providing food for the visitor to the camp, especially when that visitor is one’s brother. However, Jacob takes advantage of his brother’s vulnerability. Esau’s behavior reveals that this was indeed a moment of vulnerability. However, following this event, Esau returns to his normal life and lives as though his birthright is still intact. Thus, later Rebekah and Jacob have to create a plan to properly steal it. Esau most likely recognized the moment for what it was. It was a moment of desperation and need. It was such a dire moment that his rash actions could be

dismissed in his own mind. He probably also believed his actions could in no wise nullify his right to the birthright.

Though a desperate moment, the selling of his birthright does not speak well of Esau's character. Again, he went against custom and his father's desire in selling his birthright for a meal. Likewise, the moment does not speak well of Esau's character. He doesn't appear concerned or even guilty that he had done the unthinkable. Likewise, Jacob's actions reveal a flawed character. He is taking advantage of his own brother, in a vulnerable moment, using a basic human need.

All sin is serious, leading to destructive consequences. Few are more grievous than preying upon the vulnerable. Those who prey upon vulnerable children in our society are guilty of a most serious sin and social breach of law. Counselors and pastors who prey upon their vulnerable clients and parishioners are guilty of this painful destructive sin. The arms of this particular sin can reach broadly and deeply through a society. For example, taking advantage of the vulnerable occurs when there is price gouging. When people are in need of a commodity, and one seeks excessive gain from that need, it is a sin. Many will remember the individuals who sought to buy all of the hand disinfectant at the beginning of the Covid pandemic in order to make a great profit. This sin can manifest itself in a myriad of ways.

Without doubt, though Esau dismissed the selling of his birthright, he almost certainly did not forget his brother's taking advantage of him. The animosity between the two was not the result of a single action, but rather the consequence of many actions that drove them apart. Still, Jacob's refusal to feed his brother without gain would have inflamed the distrust and dislike.

Can you recall a time when you felt vulnerable and believed a person took advantage of that vulnerability? Can we recall, in a repentant spirit, when we took advantage of someone in a vulnerable moment? Can we share how we felt when we witnessed someone taking advantage of the vulnerable? What do you believe is our Christian and church responsibility to the vulnerable? Can you identify the most vulnerable in our society? What can we do in ministry to lessen that vulnerability? What can we do to protect them? What actions and disciplines can help us identify the vulnerable?

God's Grace at Work

Our lesson reveals the painful sins of Isaac, Rebekah, Esau and Jacob. We might conclude that the severity of their sin would exclude these characters from God's will. However, the Bible presents a story of grace. Our key text for this lesson can mistakenly be understood as a statement of what God desired. God did not desire division, nor two nations at enmity with one another. The key text is merely a statement of fact. The text is the author revealing to us what God said would happen. God consistently works in spite of human sin and mistake, and often even uses our frailty to bring hope and redemption to the world. The severity of our sin should

make us more aware of the depth and breadth of God's grace in choosing to include us in His divine will.

The good news of our lesson is that none are excluded from God's purposes. Naturally, the Lord uses our faithful obedience as a powerful means of redemption. Yet, we are all imperfect. However, our imperfection is not more powerful than the grace and love of God. The love of God is unstoppable, and the reach of God's grace beyond measurement. We should never embrace our sins and weaknesses as acceptable. We should be engaged in confession and open to the forgiveness of God. We would rather God use our faithfulness. But, the fact that God never excludes us should fill our hearts with profound gratitude and appreciation for grace. This gratitude and appreciation lead to greater and deeper devotion to Christ.

God would use the events of this story, as unattractive as they prove to be, to create a nation. This nation would become a major instrument for the revelation of God's love and grace to and for the world. Today, we are the recipients of that same grace, and participants in God's will to redeem the world. The new nation God has created is the Church. As members of the Church, we are participating in the most important endeavor present in life. We are being used to bring hope and redemption to the entire world.

Can you recall moments when God used your weaknesses or even failures to accomplish good? Do you believe your sin and failure are excluding you from the mission of bringing the Kingdom of God upon earth as it is in heaven? Since God uses even our sins and failures, what is the importance of confession and forgiveness in our life? Is your heart filled with gratitude for God's unstoppable grace? Do you fully appreciate the grace present through forgiveness?

Prayer

Almighty God, how great and wonderful is your redemptive purpose! We give thanks for grace that forgives and restores. Increase our thanksgiving and deepen our devotion to you and your Kingdom. When life appears to move into the shadows and our mistakes and sins are glaring, open our eyes to the gift of forgiveness and our hearts to transformation, that we might walk in your light and loving purpose. In Jesus name, Amen.