

September 11 Lesson 2 (NIV)

God Chooses the Younger Twin

Devotional Reading: Psalm 75

Background Scripture: Genesis 25:19–34

Genesis 25:19b–34

^{19b} Abraham became the father of Isaac, ²⁰ and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah daughter of Bethuel the Aramean from Paddan Aram and sister of Laban the Aramean.

²¹ Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was childless. The LORD answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant. ²² The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, “Why is this happening to me?” So she went to inquire of the LORD.

²³ 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.”

²⁴ When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb. ²⁵ The first to come out was red, and his whole body was like a hairy garment; so they named him Esau. ²⁶ After this, his brother came out, with his hand grasping Esau’s heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when Rebekah gave birth to them.

²⁷ The boys grew up, and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was content to stay at home among the tents. ²⁸ Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

²⁹ Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished. ³⁰ He said to Jacob, “Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I’m famished!” (That is why he was also called Edom.)

³¹ Jacob replied, “First sell me your birthright.”

³² “Look, I am about to die,” Esau said. “What good is the birthright to me?”

³³ But Jacob said, “Swear to me first.” So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob.

³⁴ Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, and then got up and left.

So Esau despised his birthright.

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.”

—Genesis 25:23

God’s Exceptional Choice

Unit 1: God Calls Abraham’s Family

Lessons 1–4

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How to Say It

AbimelekUh-bim-eh-lek.

ArameanAr-uh-me-un.

BethuelBeh-*thew*-el.

KeturahKeh-*too*-ruh.

Laban *Lay*-bun.

Paddan Aram *Pay*-dan A-ram.

Seir *See*-ir.

Introduction

A. Unhappy in Its Own Way

A popular English translation of Leo Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina* begins with the following observation: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." The statement highlights an important concept for the novel: numerous factors might affect a family's relationship and well-being. Any of these factors might go awry and lead to a family's dysfunction.

From my experience ministering to families, I have seen Tolstoy's generalization lived out. I have seen that a family's happiness correlates to its levels of commitment, love, and respect for one another.

Conversely, I have seen that unhappy families experience turmoil in a variety of ways: bad attitudes, unfaithfulness, favoritism, anger, and addiction. Regardless of what may have caused the families to experience these things, the negative effects were noticeable.

God is at work, even in unhappy families. This week's lesson introduces us to a family that experienced strife and conflict. As a result, the direction of whole nations would forever be affected.

B. Lesson Context

The second half of Genesis introduces audiences to Abraham (originally known as Abram) and his family line. God promised that this family would be the way by which he would bless the world (Genesis 12:1–3; see lesson 1). Despite Abraham and Sarah's fertility issues and their advanced age (11:30; 12:4), God provided them with a son, Isaac (21:1–7).

However, Abraham would have other sons by other women. Hagar, a servant of wife Sarah, gave birth to Ishmael (Genesis 16:1–4, 15–16). After Sarah died, Abraham took another wife, Keturah, who bore him other sons (25:1–2). However, Abraham held Isaac in the highest regard (25:5–6). Isaac eventually married Rebekah (24:67). Together they settled in the southern part of Canaan, near the Sinai Peninsula (25:11; see 16:14).

Throughout Genesis, family lines and the concept of generations serve as transition points in the text. For original audiences, these served as markers for moments of great significance, and each marked a new focus in the narrative (see Genesis 5; 6:9–10; 11:10–27; 25:12–18).

The underlying Hebrew word translated as "account" (Genesis 5:1; 6:9; 10:1, 32; 11:10; etc.) reminds audiences to focus their attention on the upcoming narrative and the individuals depicted. This lesson focuses on "the account of the family line of Abraham's son Isaac" (25:19a).

I. Unexpected Declaration (Genesis 25:19b–23)

A. Two Generations (vv. 19b–22)

19b. Abraham became the father of Isaac,

God had promised *Abraham* that he would become “a great nation” (Genesis 12:2) with numerous descendants (15:5). The fulfillment of this promise seemed impossible. However, God was gracious to the couple, and he fulfilled his promise: Sarah gave birth to *Isaac* (21:2–3).

20. and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah daughter of Bethuel the Aramean from Paddan Aram and sister of Laban the Aramean.

Abraham sent a servant to his ancestral homeland, Aram Naharaim, to find a wife for *Isaac* (Genesis 24:1–10). At *forty years old*, Isaac might be considered an elderly bachelor. However, considering the marriage practices of the era (compare 26:34) and his eventual length of life (35:28), his seemingly advanced marital age was likely not uncommon.

Rebekah, the *daughter* of Abraham’s nephew *Bethuel* (Genesis 22:20–23; 24:15), was chosen to marry Isaac. Her family—especially her brother *Laban*—would be important for Abraham’s descendants (see 29:10–12; 30:25–31:55).

The region of *Paddan Aram* was in northwest Mesopotamia. One of the principal cities of the region was Harran, the place where Abraham (as Abram) began his journey (Genesis 12:4; see lesson 1). As this was the patriarch’s ancestral homeland, Paddan Aram serves as a critical location in the family’s narrative (see 28:1–7; 31:18; 35:9).

The repetition of the title *Aramean* differentiated Rebekah’s family from neighboring Canaanite families (see also Genesis 31:20, 24; compare Deuteronomy 26:5). Abraham considered Canaanite women inappropriate for Isaac to marry (Genesis 24:1–4; compare 27:46–28:2).

21a. Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was childless.

Although a suitable *wife* for *Isaac* was found, that was no guarantee regarding the continuation of the family line. Infertility had also affected Isaac’s mother, Sarah (Genesis 11:30). Both generations had to depend on God’s power in order to conceive.

Just as his father had done years before (see Genesis 15:1–4), Isaac *prayed to the Lord*. However, there is no record of Rebekah’s approaching the Lord in prayer, unlike other women in the Old Testament (compare 30:22; 1 Samuel 1:10–11).

21b. The LORD answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant.

Isaac’s prayers were *answered by the Lord* (compare Judges 13:8–9). That *Rebekah became pregnant* highlighted God’s work in doing what people might consider impossible.

22. The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, “Why is this happening to me?” So she went to inquire of the LORD.

The underlying Hebrew word translated *jostled* is fairly common in the Old Testament, but its rare construction in this verse alludes to conflict that is more intense than ordinarily expected. Rebekah’s physical distress was more than would be anticipated by a pregnant woman; something deeper and more serious was at hand.

Hagar experienced a divine interaction during her pregnancy (see Genesis 16:7–14). That interaction provided her with hope and encouragement. Perhaps Rebekah was trying *to inquire of the Lord* and experience the same kind of comfort that Hagar received.

B. Two Nations (v. 23)

23a. 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,

The Lord’s response set up future conflict between Rebekah’s children (see Genesis 27). The internal conflict she experienced would someday continue outside her *womb* as her children would become *two peoples*. God was not necessarily addressing the conflict that would immediately occur, but conflict between the *people* of their descendants (see commentary on 25:30, below).

The text does not immediately describe how the two people groups would come from her two unborn children. *The Lord* was not directing Rebekah regarding her future parenting practices. Further, the text is not describing a form of divine predeterminism by which people have no role and responsibility. Instead, God was describing the future realities of generations and thereby reinforcing the promise that Abraham would “be the father of many nations” (Genesis 17:4).

23b. “and the older will serve the younger.”

Primogeniture—the right or inheritance of the firstborn—was a crucial element of the ancient Near East’s social and legal systems (see Genesis 27:19; Deuteronomy 21:15–17). Rebekah, along with the text’s original audience, would have anticipated that her first child would receive greater status and acclaim than the second child.

However, the Lord overturned those expectations. Rebekah’s *older* child would not receive the expected firstborn blessing. Instead, the blessing would be given to (actually, taken by) *the younger* child (compare Genesis 17:18–21; 49:3–4).

God did not provide details regarding the younger child’s acquisition of power. God’s intentions will come to pass, regardless of human structures (see 1 Corinthians 1:27–31). He transforms broken situations because his ways are superior to ours (see Isaiah 55:8–9). As a result, humans are to respond to him in love and faith (see Deuteronomy 7:7–9; John 3:16–18; Ephesians 1:3–14).

The apostle Paul elaborates on today’s text in Romans 9:10–12. The significance of this text for Paul was that God chose the younger child (Jacob) before he was even born. God’s purpose for the world resulted in his call of Jacob as the individual through whom God’s promises would be fulfilled.

II. Undeniable Differences

(Genesis 25:24–28)

A. Physically (vv. 24–26)

24–25. When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb. The first to come out was red, and his whole body was like a hairy garment; so they named him Esau.

Scripture describes instances when a child's name indicated something about the parents' relationship with God (see 1 Samuel 1:20; 4:21) or the circumstances surrounding the child's birth (see Genesis 35:18). The naming of Rebekah's *twin boys* reflected similar practice.

The name *Esau* reflected a physical attribute of the *first* child: his skin, hair, or both appeared *red*. The pronunciation of this underlying Hebrew word sounds similar to another name given to Esau (see commentary on Genesis 25:30, below). This Hebrew word was also used to describe David's "glowing" health (1 Samuel 16:12; see lesson 9). Esau's *hairy* physique would become key in how he would lose his firstborn blessing (see Genesis 27:11).

26a. After this, his brother came out, with his hand grasping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob.

The name of Esau's *brother* also demonstrates wordplay and foreshadowing. The underlying Hebrew word for *Jacob* has multiple connections. It is related to a verb concerning the act of *grasping*—either for protection or restraining movement (see Hosea 12:3). Another similar sounding Hebrew verb describes fraud or trickery (see Jeremiah 9:4). Later texts would describe how Jacob demonstrated the latter sense (see Genesis 27:35–36).

Further, Jacob's name has similarities to the Hebrew word for "heel," thus relating his name to his actions during his birth. Jacob's act of grabbing *Esau's heel* during birth foreshadows future dealings between the brothers and Jacob's interactions with others—Jacob would be shrewd and cunning as he took what he desired.

26b. Isaac was sixty years old when Rebekah gave birth to them.

That *Isaac was sixty years old* highlights the 20 year period that the couple had to wait before having children (see Genesis 25:20). This time was reminiscent of the long wait Isaac's parents endured before his own birth (see 21:5). God was faithful to this family, even if his timing was not what they desired or expected.

B. Personality (vv. 27–28)

27a. The boys grew up, and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country,

The brothers' differences became apparent as *the boys grew up*. In a nomadic culture, having a family member serve as a *hunter* was important for the family's livelihood (compare Genesis 10:8–9). That he was *skillful* alluded to his knowledge of the land: the surrounding *country* and its resources (see 27:3, 5). Considering his perception, pulling a fast one on Esau would be difficult—or so one might think.

27b. while Jacob was content to stay at home among the tents.

One meaning of the Hebrew word translated here as *content* describes a guiltless and upright person who was not liable for wrongdoing (see references to Job in Job 1:1, 8; 2:3). Its usage regarding Jacob was an ironic descriptor, considering that his future actions were anything but guiltless.

In contrast to his outdoorsman brother, Jacob preferred to live a life *among the tents* of the *home* camp. As a result, he may have had a propensity for administration, an aptitude later demonstrated by his son Joseph (see Genesis 39:4, 22–23; 41:33–40, 46–49).

28. Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

The favoritism demonstrated in that each parent *loved* a particular son would be repeated years later by *Jacob* (renamed Israel; Genesis 37:3–4). Isaac’s love for *Esau* and his hunting would be a factor in how Jacob and *Rebekah* plotted against Esau and *Isaac* regarding the father’s blessing (see 27:2–13).

III. Unruly Disregard (Genesis 25:29–34)

A. Desperate (vv. 29–32)

29. Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished.

Similar to modern recipes, the *stew* that *Jacob was cooking* might have consisted of herbs, vegetables, and lentils (see Genesis 25:34, below; compare 2 Kings 4:38–40).

This encounter might have occurred at a shepherding camp where the brothers tended livestock. That *Esau* was an outdoorsman made it natural for him to go out into *the open country*. This left Jacob to manage the chores around camp, including meal preparation. As a result of Esau’s hard work, he felt *famished* and was faint with exhaustion (compare Judges 8:5).

30. He said to Jacob, “Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I’m famished!” (That is why he was also called Edom.)

Esau’s pleading made him appear impulsive as he focused on immediate physical concerns. His request could be read as exasperated begging. Instead of making a level-headed request, Esau sounded like a beggar.

The Hebrew word translated here as *red* was used to describe Esau at his birth (see commentary on Genesis 25:25, above). An alternative name for Esau sounded similar: *Edom* (see 36:1, 8, 19).

Esau’s descendants were the Edomites (Genesis 36:9, 43). They would eventually settle in the region of Seir (Deuteronomy 2:22), southeast of the Dead Sea. During the era when kings ruled Israel, a constant state of tension and frequent warfare existed between the Edomites and the Israelites (see 1 Samuel 14:47; 1 Kings 11:14). As a result, God’s promise to Rebekah regarding her sons (Genesis 25:23b, above) came to pass. The descendants of her older son would serve the descendants of her younger son (see 2 Samuel 8:14; 2 Kings 14:1, 7).

31. Jacob replied, “First sell me your birthright.”

In contrast to Esau’s desperate pleading, *Jacob* is portrayed as opportunistic and manipulative. It is unknown whether Rebekah revealed to him the nature of God’s promises. But what is certain is that Jacob drove a hard bargain. This was an expensive bowl of soup—it would cost Esau the rights that only a firstborn would enjoy.

The firstborn’s *birthright* would include a double portion of the father’s estate (Deuteronomy 21:15–17). Isaac was a wealthy man (Genesis 26:12–14), therefore the birthright would have been sizable.

32. “Look, I am about to die,” Esau said. “What good is the birthright to me?”

Esau was driven by his physical urges. It is doubtful that he was *about to die*. Surely someone known as “a skillful hunter” (Genesis 25:27) would have been better prepared for his hunger! His desire for immediate gratification led him to disregard the most important earthly thing that was his to lose: his *birthright*.

The writer of Hebrews depicts Esau’s attitude and action here as “godless” (Hebrews 12:16–17). Esau was so focused on immediate profit and pleasure that he gave up lifelong blessing.

B. Despised (vv. 33–34)

33. But Jacob said, “Swear to me first.” So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob.

Jacob made the deal permanent by having Esau *swear* an oath. Esau risked divine judgment, should he later try to deny or break the agreement.

The act of swearing *an oath* or vow was not uncommon. Abraham swore that he would deal truthfully and kindly with Abimelek and his descendants (Genesis 21:22–24). Additionally, Abraham’s servant swore that he would not procure a wife for Isaac from among the Canaanites (24:3–9). These vows were irrevocable and would result in a curse if broken (see Nehemiah 10:29). While God allowed for his people to take oaths and vows, he had certain stipulations (see Numbers 30).

34. Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, and then got up and left. So Esau despised his birthright.

Following the oath, the exasperated *Esau* received his temporary relief—*bread and some lentil stew*. However, the shrewd *Jacob* received permanent blessing—the transferred *birthright*. The older brother would continue to be at the mercy of his younger brother (see Genesis 27).

Conclusion

A. Unworthy but Chosen

Readers should be unimpressed with the attitudes and actions of the individuals described in this lesson. Isaac and Rebekah each favored one of their sons over the other. Esau desired immediate relief over long-term benefits. Jacob schemed and manipulated his brother for personal gain. A story that began with God’s love and power transitions into a story of people pursuing selfish interests.

However, we need not idealize any one human character, because the Lord is the protagonist of this story. He alone can make good out of less than ideal circumstances and less than ideal people (see Romans 8:28; compare Genesis 50:20).

God worked through this deeply flawed family, and he will work in the lives of all people whom he has called. People of God should not strive to force his hand. Instead, we should trust that his plans and purposes will be fulfilled, regardless of any attempts to circumvent or force those plans.

B. Prayer

Father, we celebrate that you have chosen to work through us, your people. Thank you for your faithfulness to us, even when we fail to live holy lives. Prepare us so that we can live out your purposes in the world. In Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

God's plans will be fulfilled, either through or despite your efforts.¹
