

Sibling Rivalry

Genesis 25:19b-34
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Christian author J.R. Miller is quoted as saying, “Christ is building his kingdom with the broken things of earth. People desire only the strong, successful, victorious and unbroken things in life to build their kingdoms, but God is the God of the unsuccessful – the God of those who have failed.”¹

“... His wife Rebekah conceived,” and “the children struggled together within her...,” says Genesis – two brothers battling it out for who’s the strongest.

These two brothers will go on to become the leaders of two great nations – Jacob leading Israel and Esau leading Edom, two nations that the Bible chronicles as being in continuous conflict with each other.

Family relationships are messy. International politics are messy. The world is full of brokenness and conflict. And God is at work in it all, to redeem the world, as he promised.

In today’s Old Testament lesson, we see God using “the broken things,” as Miller says, to build his earthly kingdom – his earthly realm – which is the place where our lives play out.

Genesis tells us that Abraham’s son Isaac – the bearer of the covenant that God’s people will be as numerous as the stars of heaven – Isaac is now 60 years old, and Rebekah – his wife of 20 years – is barren, they have no children.

Now, we know many women who choose not to get pregnant and many men and women who can’t have children. There’s nothing wrong about that – people make choices and there are lots of things in life out of our control.

But for Isaac and Rebekah, this was a problem, not being pregnant. For the people of Israel – our spiritual ancestors – this was a problem, a family problem with huge implications.

And the problems were just beginning. Not only had they not gotten pregnant as expected, but when they prayed to God and finally conceived, Rebekah had a difficult pregnancy. It was so painful, in fact, that she cried out to God, saying, “If it is to be this way, why do I live?”

Family troubles, painful health issues, uncertainty about our lives and our world – messiness creeping into our friendships and families; struggles weighing us down, financially, emotionally and spiritually – we can all relate to that.

¹ J.R. Miller as quoted in *Streams in the Desert* by L.B. Cowman, ed. Copyright © 1997. Used by permission of Zondervan, www.zondervan.com.

The world is a messy place, even as we maintain faith in God's promise to deliver us from life's hardships, those painfully rocky patches we all go through.

So much of this pain and struggle is out of our control, just part of life, something only God knows how to deal with. And as life goes on and personal and worldly troubles take hold, it's not uncommon to wonder just how is God going to manage all this. Does he have the earthly, raw material to continue building his kingdom here among us, continue to bring us moments and glimpse of heaven on earth, as he redeems all the weakness and brokenness around us.

Given the world today, that's a tall order for anyone, with all the wickedness we see and experience.

Take for instance the man who returned to his BMW to find the headlights broken, the front end crunched and glass all over his parking spot. No sign of the car that did this. But to his relief, there is a note stuck under the windshield wiper.

"Sorry," it says. "I just backed into your Beamer. The witnesses who saw the accident are nodding and smiling at me because they think I'm leaving my name, address and other particulars. But I'm not." End of note. No sign of the "prince-of-guy" who left it.

That's the world we live in, folks. That's what God has to work with in redeeming creation. Thank God, that with God, nothing is impossible, and his promises are sure, even amid all the wickedness this world has to offer. Hard to believe sometimes, but true.

Just look at what God did to set his plans in motion through the pregnancy of Rebekah and Isaac. As Genesis tells us, "The Lord said to her, 'Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided. One shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger.'"

Right there, God foresees and acknowledges how messy our lives can be, how crazy this world is. And yet, with Isaac and Rebekha, he doubles down on his promise, even if he has to use their two unruly offspring to get it done.

Esau is the first of the twins to be born, coming out red and hairy. Jacob is born next, coming out gripping Esau's heel. We're invited to imagine the babies fighting even then over who would be first. Oh, our lives are so messy and contentious!

And things didn't get any better from there. The boys grow up to become very different young men – Esau a skilled hunter and outdoorsman, and Jacob a quiet young man who spends his time around the family home.

Not only were Esau and Jacob at odds with each other, but Genes tells us Mom and Dad were playing favorites with the boys, something parents these days never do, right? Geneses says Isaac loved Esau best and Rebekah favored Jacob. What a mess!

Oh, and there's more. Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from a failed hunting trip so hungry he was willing to sell his birthright for a bite of food.

Well, the birthright is what determines who among the brothers will become the leader of the nation of Israel. That's a pretty important factor, don't you think? Not something God would want to leave to chance.

So you see, God has a real problem here. On one hand, he's got Jacob willing to trick his brother in order to inherit the family name and all the power and wealth that goes with it. And on the other hand, he's got Esau willing to give up a secure and blessed future just to satisfy his immediate, earthly wants and needs.

The point is God's plan and purpose is sure, even if we're not, even if all he has to work with is our messy, tricky, uncertain, mistake-ridden lives.

It turns out that God loves us more than anything in all the world, and God will never give up on any one of us as being useful and instrumental in the fulfillment of his plans and purpose.

As J.R. Miller also said, "Heaven is being filled with earth's broken lives, and there is no 'bruised reed' (Isaiah 42:3) that Christ cannot take and restore to a glorious place of blessing and beauty. He can take a life crushed by pain or sorrow and make it a harp whose music will be total praise. He can lift earth's saddest failure up to heaven's glory.

Such is the power of God through our Lord Jesus Christ, as he turns even our failures and struggles and limitations into instruments of his glory. Now that gives you faith and hope, doesn't it? It does me.

The Lord knows our lives are not perfect; we are flawed in many ways. There are things about everyone here and everyone in your life that need to be worked on, need to be changed for the better.

And still, you are God's beloved child, and you and all those messy and annoying people you know, are and have been and will continue to be instrumental in God shining forth his glory, giving us a glimpse of heaven on earth. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Let us pray:

Gracious God, evidence of your compassionate love is all around us – in a stranger’s unexpected kindness, in a caregiver’s patience, in a gentle word of encouragement, in generosity of time and giving.

We thank you for the care and compassion shown for people in fragile moments of live. We praise you that your compassion is boundless, that your love is limitless, and that you never, ever give up on us. May we hold that hope for ourselves and for the world, committing ourselves to be a reflection of Christ’s light to our neighbors both near and far.

We pray for your peace and mercy in the midst of a world dominated by self-interest, power and greed. Teach us to be gracious toward others, loving in all our relationships. Send your Spirit of acceptance and unity to nurture our self-respect and our respect for others.

We pray your Spirit of light and healing for those going through dark places and struggling in mind, body or soul.

And as we pray, O Lord, we join our voices together, as you taught us, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.