

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Esau?

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Genesis 25:19-34

This is the family line of Isaac, the son of Abraham.

Abraham fathered Isaac. And Isaac was forty years old, when he took as his wife Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel, an Aramean from Paddan-aram, and the sister of Laban the Aramean.

Isaac pleaded with the Lord about his wife, because she was barren. And the Lord responded to his plea. His wife Rebekah conceived.

The children battled within her. She said, "If it's like this, why do I . . . ?" And she went to inquire of the Lord. The Lord said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, two separate peoples will come from your belly. One people will be stronger than the other, the older will serve the younger."

The time came for her to give birth, and there were twins in her womb. The first to come out was red and hairy all over. They named him Esau. Then his brother came out, his hand gripping Esau's heel. They named him Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when they were born.

The boys grew up. Esau became a skilled hunter, an outdoorsman. Jacob was a simple man who stayed among the tents. Isaac loved Esau, because of the game in his mouth. Rebekah loved Jacob.

Jacob was cooking a stew, and Esau came in from the open country, tired and hungry. Esau said to Jacob, "Let me devour some of that red stuff! I'm tired and hungry!" (That's why he was named Edom.) Jacob said, "First, sell your birthright to me." Esau said, "I'm about to die. Why do I need a birthright?" Jacob said, "Swear to me first." And he swore to him. He sold his birthright to Jacob.

Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew. And he ate. And he drank. And he got up. And he left. Esau spurned the birthright.

Children's Story

One day at school, Tammy had to choose a team of ten people. Here's how she did it.

She had all the other kids stand in a circle around her. Then she closed her eyes, twirled around a few times, and began to point. She chose ten people without even seeing who they were!

Tammy didn't choose the tallest people. But that was okay. She wasn't choosing a basketball team. Tammy didn't choose the strongest people either. But that was okay. She wasn't choosing an ice hockey team. And Tammy didn't choose the smartest people. But that was okay, too. She wasn't choosing a chess team.

Altogether Tammy chose ten people who were tall and not so tall, who were strong and not so strong, who were smart and not so smart. What a strange team! A team of ordinary people.

Ordinary people might make a strange team, but some teams are like that.

One of those strange teams is the church.

Sermon

For most of my school years, I hated gym class – or "phys. ed." I especially hated it when we had to "choose up sides." Two captains would be named, and they would take turns choosing their teams. It was an agonizing process, a process that seemed designed to leave the last people chosen embarrassed all over again. Embarrassed that they were physically uncoordinated. Embarrassed that they were mentally clueless about sports. Embarrassed that they were socially without friends, at

least without friends who were ever made a team captain. I hated that process of choosing up sides because I was never among the first chosen. I always, almost always, had to wait for an uncomfortably long time.

On the other hand, I did get to be a captain once in a while. But I hated that, too. It wasn't easy being a captain and having to choose a team. There were competing agendas. You could choose your team guided by kindness and sympathy. And you would wind up with a lousy team! Or you could choose your team the usual way. And you would stand a good chance of winning. But at the cost of inflicting more hurt on the people who were chosen last.

Choosing a team is no simple task for us. I wonder if it's any easier for God.

In the case of Jacob and Esau, God clearly picked a winner. God had the inside track when it came to those twins. They were rivals before they were even born, slugging it out in utero. God knew that the rivalry would be long-lasting, lasting for generations. God also knew who would come out on top. It would be the younger one. He and his descendants would triumph. And God would be known as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

From the time of the twins' birth, it was clear that the die had been cast. Esau, hairy and red, was born first. That meant nearly everything. In a race, to win by a nose is still to win. Though Esau was born only a few moments before Jacob, he still was firstborn. As firstborn, Esau would be first in line for everything: for wealth, for honor, for the family name, for the choicest blessings and promises.

Not so fast, though. Jacob was born close behind. In his tiny hand he clutched Esau's heel. As it turns out, figuratively speaking he would not let go of that heel. Not until he had secured blessing for himself. And so the rivalry that began in the womb would be an enduring one.

And the parents of the twins, of course, only contributed to the rivalry. Isaac had a special place in his heart for Esau, his firstborn. Esau was rugged, as well as ruddy. Esau had a decisive character and an aggressive streak. Esau was everything his passive father was not. And Isaac loved him for it. Esau's hunting prowess was a case in point. The Hebrew text pictures Esau as a young lion who carries freshly killed game home in his mouth, like a trophy, to his father. And Isaac loved him for it. He "loved Esau because of the game in his mouth." Rebekah, on the other hand, loved Jacob. Though we're not told why. Whether they had good reasons or not, these two parents were slanted in their affections, slanted in opposite directions, which only encouraged the rivalry between Jacob and Esau.

God, too, had made a choice – for Jacob. Jacob, the "simple man," the outwardly-innocent, shy one "among the tents." But there among the tents, the wheels were turning. And Jacob was biding his time.

In the story of the stew and the birthright, the contrasts between Jacob and Esau come most clearly into focus. Jacob is cooking – cooking something up, as it turns out. It's a red lentil stew, and it has Esau's name all over it. Esau has been out in the open country, hunting probably, though this time without success. Tired and hungry, he demands some of Jacob's stew. But he's an animal. He wants to eat like an animal: "Let me devour it!" And like an animal, he doesn't care what his meal is called: "Gimme some of that red stuff!" is all he can say.

Jacob, who has been waiting for this moment, seizes the opportunity. He's not in a hurry though. He takes his time. He acts calmly and patiently. All the while Esau's frustration level is rising. But Jacob negotiates. "First sell your birthright to me," he says. A full belly for Esau will come with a price, a steep price, and that price must be paid first.

Esau is driven by hunger. He's blind to and careless about what's really valuable. "I'm dying here! Why do I need a birthright?" To Esau, the birthright, with its future focus, has no value at all. Jacob, on the other hand, sees the value in it and is willing to wait for that value, as he would later

work and wait for seven years in order to marry Rachel. Jacob is willing to wait. The only immediate thing for Jacob is sealing the deal. “Swear to me first,” he says. And, of course, Esau swears. He sells his birthright to Jacob.

Then Jacob gives him the stew and some bread. And Esau, like an animal, buries his face in the dish. “And he ate. And he drank. And he got up. And he left.” *He came. He saw. He was conquered.* Esau spurned the birthright, while Jacob tucked it away for the future.

God had picked the winner. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Choosing a team apparently is not so hard for God. Or is it?

God’s choice of Jacob was complex – and troublesome. This first Jacob and Esau story is only part of the story. It highlights Esau’s coarse character and his foolishness. Esau hardly seems a worthy heir of Abraham! Jacob, on the other hand, is merely clever. He is driven. But his drive is tempered by patience.

Yet the story will unfold with more nuance. Esau will become a worthy man. A man of honor. A man who has learned his lessons. A man who is willing to forgive. Jacob, on the other hand, will always be in the midst of conflict. He will be a sneak who is always wheeling and dealing. He will fail to learn the lessons of the home he grew up in. He will foment dangerous rivalries among his own sons.

In the end, God’s choice of Jacob will be revealed as mysterious. God’s choice of Jacob was anything but the obvious picking of a likely winner. The Apostle Paul works with this story in Romans 9. His conclusion? The choice of Jacob rather than Esau was by and for God’s own reasons and purposes. The choice was made before they were born. And it wasn’t about what either of them would turn out to be or to do. According to Paul, God loved Jacob. And in that love God made his choice.

And so Jacob, of all people, winds up on God’s team. Jacob, who by his character didn’t deserve to be there. Jacob, who by his actions didn’t deserve to be there. Jacob, who because he wasn’t the firstborn didn’t deserve to be there, certainly not to the exclusion of Esau. Jacob, who could make no claims on God – yes, there were the promises to Abraham, but God would as easily have fulfilled those promises through Esau as through Jacob – Jacob, who could make no claims on God, was claimed by God.

There was a methodless madness evident in God’s choice of Jacob, a methodless madness that continues to this day. The Apostle Paul describes God’s way of choosing in 1 Corinthians 1. God chose “what was foolish in the world,” God chose “what was weak in the world,” God chose “what was low and despised in the world,” to be his church. In other words, God doesn’t choose a team that looks designed to win.

For years now, the Boston Red Sox and the New York Yankees have been spending multiple millions of dollars trying to buy championship teams. And they’ve had reasonable success. God, however, does not work that way. God gathers a motley assortment of winners, losers, and middle-of-the-roads. People who eat too much, drink too much, love too much. And people who are proper in every respect. And people who have more ups and downs than the stock market. God molds these people – us – into a team. A team that is always in training. A team that is always breaking in new members, always treating the injured, always learning new plays, always relying on foundational skills. A team that wins and loses. A team that one day will enjoy championship success. Yet not because we are so good, but only because our captain is Jesus Christ. Through Jesus Christ, God does for us what we could never do for ourselves.

Let me conclude by saying a few words about the doctrine of election and what we are chosen for. The doctrine of election is central to the Reformed tradition. The basic idea is this: God, for his own reasons, chooses his own people. God chooses his own people. Not one of us qualifies for this team, to return to that metaphor, and there are no try-outs. God just chooses. God chooses his own people. And God loves the people he has chosen. In that love he saves us. He promises us life and gives us life, life for now and life forever through Jesus Christ. But it doesn't stop there. God also gives work to the people he has chosen.

A blind spot in my church schooling, a blind spot in the history of the Reformed tradition, a blind spot in first century Israel, has been a tendency to see clearly that we have been chosen to be blessed, but a failure to see, or to see more than dimly, that we have been chosen especially in order to be a blessing. God chose Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He chose them in order to bless the world through them. He chose them in order to prepare the way for Jesus Christ. He chose them for the sake of the salvation and renewal of all things.

God chooses us similarly. We are not chosen in order to go to heaven. (Just forget about that one. Heaven is not our home. And "going to heaven" is a terribly misleading expression.) And we are not chosen merely in order to have eternal life. We are chosen so that through us – and by that I don't mean just the few of us here, I mean the whole church of Jesus Christ – we are chosen so that through us, somehow, the blessing of Jesus Christ can reach all people. We are chosen so that through us, through the church of Jesus Christ, somehow, the life of the coming world can be made visible in this world. We are chosen so that we can be a sign and foretaste of what's coming. In other words, we are not chosen for our own sake, but for the sake of the mercy of God, so that it will reach all the world.

Now that all sounds high and mighty. We tend to have lower expectations than that for the church. After all, you can't expect too much of a church when it is made of of people like you and me! But we're missing an important aspect of the doctrine of election, we're missing an important aspect of the Jacob story, if that's what we think. The church is a lofty institution with a lofty purpose. The church is critical to God's intentions for the world. Not because of who we are, though, but because of God's design. And what's amazing is that God intends to accomplish his intentions exactly through a church made up of people like us!

The team God chooses for this purpose isn't naturally of championship caliber. Instead it reflects the surprising nature of God's mercy, mercy that reaches in all sorts of unexpected directions. So doing, that mercy winds up choosing a difficult team. A team that's hard to manage. A team that it's sometimes hard to be proud of. A team that is not always sure just what game it's supposed to be playing anyway. Nevertheless, it is a team that God intends to stick with, to stick with all the way. Because it's the team he's chosen. And it's the team he loves.