



# TWINS AT WAR

SERIES: THE JACOB STORY

Genesis 25:19–34

1st Message

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This week we begin a new series on the Life of Jacob: Encountering God in the ordinary and often messy stuff of life. Paul Stevens writes,

The Bible is not an instruction manual that contains principles of spirituality. It is a story—a story about God in search of humankind and his progressive establishment of his kingdom on earth...And the amazing thing about this God is that he condescends to come right into the midst our mundane, messy worlds of home, work and play as the stage where this ‘holy’ work occurs.<sup>1</sup>

Each week we will discover how God is at work forging Jacob’s identity in the midst of a very dysfunctional and fragmented family, one that may be strikingly similar to our own. Jacob grows up with an emotionally distant father, an overbearing mother and an overpowering brother. Exiled from home, he finds himself with wives he cannot please, a father-in-law who enslaves him and children alienated from God and one another. It is in this messy complexity of family life that Jacob’s identity, vocation and spirituality are forged and hammered in the heat of everyday life from the womb to the tomb. Jacob’s journey is a gateway and invitation for us as well. Anyone could walk up the mountain with Jacob and see their own story reflected multiple times along the way.

In this series, we’re going to do something new. In our Wednesday night class on the Jacob story last year, we worked through reflection questions in small groups. They opened people up and helped them see how God was at work in their life even at the most difficult and painful moments. When we took the Jacob story to Romania last summer, these reflections broke people open in a way we never could have anticipated. Don’t worry, I’m not going to make all of you break open publicly on Sunday mornings. But each week I will include the questions for you to take home, in hopes you’ll work through them and find God in all parts of your story.

So now let’s enter into Jacob’s world the way he did—in the womb. I’m always amazed at how much God shapes and teaches us through carrying children, often by derailing our plans. When Emily and I were newlyweds, I planned to attend seminary. We had hoped to use her teaching credential to support us through this; then, following graduation, we would start our family. But Emily had a strong desire to begin our family immediately. This was scary for a young husband, but I felt I should at least pray about it. I shared my concern with our pastor’s wife, Elaine Stedman. She just smiled and asked, “Why do you think God gives us children when we have no experience and can least afford them?” I said I had no clue. Then came her uncanny wisdom, “So that you learn to trust him!” That is what we did. I had no idea what I was embarking on, but what happened in Emily’s womb did more to shape me spiritually than any seminary could have.

Such is the case with all the patriarchs’ wives: What went on in their wombs would give each a graduate degree in theology. We pick up the story immediately after the story of Abraham, when the narrator gives the account of the wondrous things happening in Rebekah’s womb.

## Introduction: The “Toledoth” of Isaac (Gen 25:19–20)

Before describing the birth, the narrator introduces the next round of stories in Genesis with a surprising title:

**These are the generations of Isaac, Abraham’s son: Abraham fathered Isaac, and Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, the sister of Laban the Aramean, to be his wife. (Gen 25:19–20 ESV)**

The book of Genesis consists of ten divisions, each titled with the Hebrew term *toledot*.<sup>2</sup> The word is derived from the verb *yalad*, “to give birth to.” Translated “begettings” or “generations,” it speaks of the family history that issues forth from a particular individual. Thus the “generations of Noah” speak about the stories of Noah’s sons, and the “generations of Terah” speak about the life of his son Abraham. At this juncture in the text we would expect to read, “These are the generations of Abraham,” with detailed stories of Isaac, but instead we find “the generations of Isaac,” which details the stories of Abraham’s grandson, Jacob. Isaac’s life appears to be passed over (with the exception of one minor digression, Gen 26:1–33). This is shocking when we consider how wondrously his life began. Isaac was the promised son whose birth was announced by God and angels and whose conception was a miracle of life from the dead. As a youth, his silent submission on Moriah became an icon of faith and trust, previewing the Lamb of God who was yet to come. The narrator’s decision to skip most of his adult life tells us something went wrong, giving us a mystery to solve.

There is a second discordant note in verse 20. When relaying Isaac’s age when he married, the narrator gives a strangely long description of Rebekah’s birthplace and family. Nine words separate the name Rebekah and the word “wife,” foreshadowing the tremendous difficulty Jacob will have in securing his wife from the devious Laban.

After those two ominous details we come right to heart of the birth narrative.

## I. The Birth of Twins (Gen 25:21–26)

### A. Isaac’s Prayer and Rebekah’s conception (v. 21)

**And Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren. And the LORD granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived. (v. 21)**

Once more the couple bearing the promise is struck with the same plague as their parents: Rebekah is barren. Walter Brueggemann comments:

There is an incongruity here. The father is the special child of promise (21:1–7). And the mother is of good stock (25:20). But in this best possible arrangement, there is barrenness. There are no natural guarantees for the future and no way to secure the inheritance of the family. They must trust only on God... Other families might have been free to invent and govern their own future. But this family is marked by promise. It receives life as an

unexpected gift. Promise requires an end to grasping and certitude and an embrace of precariousness. It is only God who gives life.<sup>3</sup>

Faced with Rebekah's barrenness, Isaac prays. He probably learned from his parents not to manipulate God's promise. Thus he will not use Rebekah's maid as a surrogate; rather, he prays for God to intervene (*'atar*) on behalf of his wife. The prayer is effective. God does intervene (*'atar*).<sup>4</sup>

The narrator's use of the same verb for both the request and the answer reveals how the Creator of life is moved by our petitions, and how prayer powerfully engages God's promises. First it looks quite simple. One prays for God to answer his promise at their point of need; God hears from heaven and intervenes on earth. But lest we become naïve, this scene's last verse (26) reveals Isaac had to persist in prayer for twenty years before God answered. Like his parents, he had to learn God's promises are not inherited by faith alone, but by faith and patience. And the waiting intensified their affections.

After twenty years of waiting we can only imagine Rebekah's elation when she finally becomes pregnant. But the joy is short-lived, for she is soon overcome by tumultuous tremors within her womb.

#### B. Rebekah's prayer and the LORD's oracle (vv. 22–23)

**The children struggled together within her, and she said, "If it is thus, why is this happening to me?" So she went to inquire of the LORD. (v. 22)**

Although conception is a gift for this couple, it is also a mystery filled with conflict. The Hebrew description of the turmoil is more violent than our English translations. The verb "struggled" (*ratzatz*) would be better translated "crushed." It is used in Judges 9:53, when a certain woman dropped a huge millstone from a tower on Abimelech's head and "*crushed*" his skull. It is also used of "grievous oppression" of the poor (Job 20:19). These boys in Rebekah's womb are practically crushing each other and her. Her pain is so severe that it shatters her sensibilities. She wonders if she will survive. Her anguished cry is so painful she can't even complete her thought (literally: "If this be so, then why am I..."). Translators usually fill in the gap using phrases like, "Why is this happening to me?" (ESV, NIV) or "Why do I exist" (JPS.)

So while Isaac prayed for fertility, Rebekah prays for understanding. God is faithful to grant her request and gives her an oracle. But, as Fokkelman writes, though "God seems easily accessible through prayer, his answers can be mysterious and even disturbing."

**And the LORD said to her,  
"Two nations are in your womb,  
and two peoples from within you shall be divided;  
the one shall be stronger than the other,  
the older shall serve the younger." (v. 23)**

The first explanation Rebekah hears is the word "two." They are having twins! Isaac had prayed for a son, and he will receive twice what he asked for. The Lord then details the boys' destiny in four poetic lines. As is typical of Hebrew poetry, each line develops and intensifies the first with a surprising twist.

First, we learn the two boys represent two nations. What a confirmation of fertility. But the second line reveals a conflict so intense that it will force a separation right from birth. Fokkelman comments,

"Behold, good how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell together in unity" as the psalmist says, but for Jacob and Esau any room is too small when they are together. The first battlefield is their mother's womb. How cruelly the sweet expectations of children, the

greater after twenty years of hope and despair, are dashed for Isaac and Rebekah! As early as the pregnancy their parental happiness is threatened."<sup>5</sup>

Then Rebekah learns these two boys will differ in strength, which is natural, but the oracle has a twist ending: "The older will be a slave to the younger." This final word would have brought great anxiety to an expectant mother in that world, for God's promise subverted the entire social order. The first-born in the ancient world received certain rights and privileges (primogeniture rights), so that the leadership and inheritance rights in a family were carefully managed from one generation to the next. The first-born was the key person around whom the social world was ordered.

But now God claims the right to totally subvert that order, and he makes no apology for the disruption it will cause. "The older will be a slave to the younger." (Waltke notes how the verb "*will serve*"—*ya'abod* sounds much like Jacob, *ya'aqob*; while the noun "*younger*," *sa'ir*, sounds much like *se'ar*, "hairy," in reference to Esau).<sup>6</sup> Therefore the son of promise is destined for conflict. The point could not be clearer. In God's kingdom our destiny is not shaped by worldly privileges, but on God's promise. God often aligns himself with the insignificant (another translation of the term "*younger*") and disfranchised (orphans and widows – Exod 22:22; Deut 10:18; 14:29; 16:11). These actions by God greatly disrupt the cultural norms, and the world shakes its fist in anger (Psa 2:1–3).

Imagine the emotions this oracle created for this expectant mother. Rebekah seeks an answer to the physical tremors in her womb, and the answer brings emotional tremors as weighty to bear as the twins she is carrying. She must now reflect on how her twins will forever be at war because of God's choice. Who wants to bear children destined for conflict? Conflict will fill Jacob's life from beginning to end, as we will see in the coming weeks. For now, we focus on the beginning.

#### C. The birth and naming of the twins (vv. 24–25)

**When her days to give birth were completed, behold, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy cloak, so they called his name Esau (vv. 24–25)**

God keeps his word. Indeed there are twins in Rebekah's womb, and at their birth, their different destinies are painted in bold colors. The first son comes out red (*'admoni* – ruddy, related to the word Edom, v. 30) covered with hair from head to toe. So they name him Esau (the meaning of the name and its relation to "hairy" is not clear).

**Afterward his brother came out with his hand holding Esau's heel, so his name was called Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them. (v. 26)**

The second son comes out grabbing the heel of the first, so they name him Jacob, a pun with the verb *'aqab*, which means "*to follow at the heel*," or figuratively, "*to assail insidiously*," "*to circumvent*," or "*to overreach*." If Rebekah has any doubt about the oracle's truth, this birth removes it. Jacob has already been fighting "for the best starting position!"<sup>7</sup> But Jacob loses the prenatal race. The birth narrative concludes with the mention of Isaac's age, a surprising detail of the prolonged agony of waiting. But family conflict, not patience, will drive this story.

From the birth narrative, the narrator moves to boys' childhood to show how great the divide between them had become by the time they reached puberty. The divide is apparent as they relate to their world, their parents, and each other.

## II. Twins Divided from the Womb (Gen 25:27–34)

### A. Differing passions (v. 27)

**When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter** (lit. “a *man* knowing game”), **a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents.** (v. 27)

As they grow up, each twin develops different passions. Esau becomes a man’s man. Twice the Hebrew word “man” is used to describe his love for the hunt and the field. Esau is a man of the woods, a gifted hunter. Jacob, on the other hand, is a peaceful, civilized man, one who dwells in tents. The tent is a positive description. It evokes the memory of his grandfather, Abraham, who dwelt in tents as a symbol of his status as an alien and sojourner in the land and his “civility,” in contrast to Esau. The word peaceful is the Hebrew word *tam*<sup>8</sup>, which normally speaks of a person’s integrity (someone who is complete and sound). In this case it probably refers to Jacob’s singleness of purpose, as one who seizes the day, for “even at his birth, Jacob is in all seriousness busy fulfilling the oracle, and he stubbornly keeps pursuing this object”<sup>9</sup> for twenty years.

The second thing we learn is that each parent had a favorite.

### B. Divided parents (v. 28)

**Now Isaac loved Esau, because he ate of his a game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.** (v. 28)

As Brueggemann writes, “the two parents who prayed so passionately for a son have now chosen sides.”<sup>10</sup> We learn Isaac has sensual appetites that direct his passions toward the oldest. Isaac has a “taste for game” (lit. “for the game in his mouth”). The Hebrew is unclear as to “whether the idiom suggests Esau as a kind of lion bringing home game in its mouth or rather bringing game to put in his father’s mouth.”<sup>11</sup> In either case, the point is clear: Isaac’s love is based on bodily appetites that seem to have dangerously taken root in his old age. Rebekah, on the other hand, loves Jacob. The narrator omits the reason for this, but it isn’t a leap to speculate that the divine oracle shaped her affections. So these two twins not only have different passions, they have divided their parents’ loyalties. Favoritism on both sides will leave a legacy of damage for generations.

Finally, the narrator reveals their differing priorities as the twins’ destinies collide over a pot of stew.

### C. Differing priorities (vv. 29–34)

**Once when Jacob was cooking stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was exhausted. And Esau said to Jacob, “Let me eat some of that red stew, for I am exhausted!” (Therefore his name was called Edom.)** (vv. 29–30)

Jacob, the heel grabber, becomes the opportunist lying in wait for his brother, a sibling he knows all too well. While Esau is out hunting, Jacob prepares a meal for the hungry hunter. But his is not an act of hospitality that was characteristic of his grandfather. It is a manipulative act to acquire what he desperately wants. Then Esau arrives exhausted from the hunt. He is portrayed as coarse and crude. Though he at least says “please,” he can’t even express the proper word for stew. He grunts, caveman style, “Let me gulp down some of this red stuff.”<sup>12</sup> Fokkelman captures the irony well: It is “because of his weariness he loses sight of proportion and of his self-respect. But of course, Esau himself was *‘admoni*, red! Jacob outwits his ‘red’ brother with his own nature.”<sup>13</sup> From this the pun is born, “which forever associates crude, impatient appetite with Israel’s perennial enemy” Edom.<sup>14</sup>

**Jacob said, “Sell me your birthright now.” Esau said, “I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?”** (vv. 31–32)

Here at last is the opportunity Jacob has waited for. He has something Esau craves, but he will not give it without extracting a heavy price. Unlike the impetuous Esau, his words are carefully weighed and calculated: “Sell **today** your birthright to me.” Esau’s desires make him a man of the moment, so Jacob makes “today” his day to sell. Esau’s response is astounding. His crying need drives him to hyperbole. He acts like he is on his deathbed and will not live beyond this moment. Thus he evaluates his birthright with the exact formula Rebekah used to describe the terror in her womb, “*What is this to me...*” But while Rebekah spoke these words to describe actual life-threatening trauma, Esau uses them to devalue the eternal, elevating his screaming hunger that has him at the edge of “death.” Having his brother right where he wants him, Jacob makes one more move to seal the deal.

**Jacob said, “Swear to me now.” So he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.** (vv. 33–34)

Jacob plays once more on the present moment. He asks for an oath: “today.” He is like a shrewd businessman who requests a written contract signed and notarized. He knows the value of postponing momentary pleasure for future reward. Esau responds immediately, not calculating the consequences. The agreement is struck and the exchange of destinies takes place over a meal. Once the deal is sealed, Jacob adds a few items to the modest broth and turns it into a generous feast, lest his brother feel cheated. The terse report that Esau “ate and drank and rose, and went on his way,” is an apt description of what it meant for Esau to despise his birthright. It is spoken with the same emotion of a man engaging a prostitute, casting away his lifelong mate for five minutes of sordid pleasure. Esau will forever remain the icon of what it means to throw away eternal reward for the sensual appetites of the moment.

**See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal.** (Heb 12:15–16)

We will conclude with five observations these twins teach us about our spiritual journey, all centering on the theme of election and God’s mysterious call.

## III. Lessons from the Twins

### A. The gift of being called – life from the dead

For Isaac and Rebekah, whose marriage was made in heaven, being chosen does not exempt them from pain. Like their parents, they are plagued with barrenness. It is protracted barrenness of twenty years, but it provoked years of prayer and waiting. As children of promise we learn that for every generation life is God’s gift, one that man can never manipulate.

This was the profound lesson I learned with each of our children. After our first-born son died, Emily and I discovered we have a rare enzyme deficiency that creates a one in four risk of our children not living. But I thought because God is sovereign, the odds were good, and we “gave” our first-born to the Lord, he would not “require” another. When our second child died, I knew I had no rights and God could require anything. When we received Rebecca through adoption and prayer, I discovered all children are the gift of God (Psa 127:3). When God gave us Jenny, I thought “God did for us what he did for Job. He doubled our family with two in heaven and two on earth.” When he gave us Katie, I was overcome with gratitude and had no clear categories to thank him for his grace. Rebekah’s barrenness is a

pillar of the spiritual life, to demonstrate that we cannot produce life apart from the sovereign work of God. This was what I learned in the seminary of my wife's womb. This is the clear testimony of John,

**But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:12–13)**

#### B. The weight of being called – “*the older will serve the younger*”

Secondly, we learn being chosen does not ensure a life free from conflict, but one destined for conflict. God's choices defy the social conventions that hold societies together—and he doesn't seem to care or apologize. God will deliberately align himself with the younger, or insignificant, which will destine that individual for conflict. “The first shall be last.” We will see this principle played out also with Joseph, the nation of Israel (called the “*fewest of all the peoples,*” Deut 7:7), David, who was the youngest of his brothers, and the greater David, Jesus Christ.

**For he grew up before him like a young plant,  
and like a root out of dry ground;  
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,  
and no beauty that we should desire him.  
He was despised and rejected by men,  
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief;  
and as one from whom men hide their faces  
he was despised, and we esteemed him not. (Isa 53:2–3)**

In Jesus' birth narrative there is mention of another Edomite, Herod, who is at war with the chosen seed, so that he carries out a bloodbath, killing all male infants in Bethlehem. On that day the streets of Bethlehem turned “red.” Finally, in a supreme act of grace, God has now chosen the gentiles to be among his elect people, as Paul says,

**But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. (1 Cor 1:27–29)**

#### C. The ambiguity of being called

The third thing we observe is that this election not only brings a weight to bear, but a certain ambiguity as well. From a human standpoint, Jacob looks extremely flawed. It is easy to understand why Esau is disqualified, but hard to imagine why Jacob is chosen. Though he wants the best thing, he goes about it entirely the wrong way. There is no prayer and no waiting; just planning, manipulating and seizing. Grasping that which only God could give leaves the wreckage of human relationships in its wake. Jacob demonstrates little evidence of the faith that characterized his grandfather Abraham. Rather, he is the “heel grabber” who seizes the initiative from others. In our day he would have been the shrewdest businessman in Silicon Valley.

But perhaps the ambiguity is a spiritual lesson for us. God has chosen us and placed his holy seed within our souls, but the flesh remains at war against the spirit in a never ceasing battle, like these two twins. So Paul writes to the Galatians,

**For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do” (Gal 5:17)**

Sometimes we can get so muddled in the battle we hardly know who we are. But that brings me to my fourth point.

#### D. The hope of being called

Despite all the ambiguity in life, God's election still shapes history. The Spirit is stronger than the flesh. Though it will take a lifetime for Jacob to be conformed to the faith of his grandfather, in the end God's purposes will win. As Paul writes,

**though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls— So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. (Rom 9:11, 16)**

#### E. Competition gives way to mutual appreciation

Throughout the Old Testament whenever we get stories of barren women, they often appear in the painful context of competition (Sarah/Hagar; Rachel/Leah; Hannah/Peninnah). But with the inauguration of the New Covenant competition gives way to mutual appreciation and unending praise. When the aged Elizabeth, now large with child, meets the youthful Mary, who has just conceived, she is overcome with ecstatic praise and her baby leaps in her womb with joy (Luke 1:44). Later when the boys are grown, rather than competing, each knows his proper place. Jesus says of John, “among those born of woman, none is greater than John” (Luke 7:28); and John says of Jesus, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). When the gift of the Spirit is given to us, it pours out the love of God without measure (Rom 5:5) and endows us with divine gifts that complement one another in the new family (1 Cor 12:4–7). When you feel that you are a precious son or daughter in God's heart, it is then you are delivered by the tyranny of competing for love and you can serve with freedom and joy.

This, my friends, is the greatest truth taught in the womb, and I must say I wouldn't have traded that education for any seminary.

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1 R. Paul Stevens, *Down-to-Earth Spirituality, Encountering God in the Ordinary, Boring Stuff of Life* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 13–14.

2 The ten *toledots* are found in Gen 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10; 11:27; 25:12; 25:19; 36:1, 9; 37:2.

3 Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 212, 214.

4 On this verb “*to intercede*” Bruce Waltke quotes Albertz as he summarizes its usage, “Isaac entreats the LORD for the infertile wife...and Moses on Pharaoh's behalf for the aversion of the plagues (Exod 8:4f., 24f., 26)...*atar* here, then, describes the powerful, appeasing effect on God of a man of God. It always transpires in private.” Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 357.

5 J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis, Second Edition* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1991), 88.

6 Waltke, *Genesis*, 358.

7 Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 90–91.

8 “Integrity” = *tam*, perhaps the author chose this word as a pun on the word for “twins” which is *tomim*.

9 Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 91.

10 Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 217.

11 Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 128.

12 Alter, *Genesis*, 129.

13 Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 96.

14 Alter, *Genesis*, 129.