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The Family of Abraham: Part 15—Abraham Dies and Esau and Jacob are Born

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Today, I comment on Genesis 25, where we see Abraham's death and the beginning of the great struggle between Esau and Jacob.

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Transcript

Welcome back to this, the 15th in my series on the story of the family of Abraham. We've arrived at chapter 25, which concerns the death of Abraham and the birth of Esau and Jacob. The story begins with Abraham taking another wife for himself after the death of Sarah, Keturah, and Keturah bears a series of children to Abraham, among them Midian, who later becomes a significant character or significant nation in biblical history.

We'll see Moses, after he flees from Pharaoh in Egypt, he takes refuge in Midian with the Midianites and Jethro, priest of Midian. We'll also see characters like Jael, who is associated with the Midianites and that group of people that come from Keturah. The Midianites and the Ishmaelites also seem to be associated in various places, not least in the sale of Joseph, and we might comment upon that at some later points.

Reading this story, we might wonder at the miraculous birth of Isaac previously in the narrative. Isaac was born many years previously to this, but yet Abraham seemed to be thinking of his body as dead at that point. Why might that be the case? He had already had a child with Hagar and clearly Sarah's womb needed to be opened, but what is it about Abraham's body that needed to be addressed? Well, I suggest it maybe shifts some of the weight from the miracle very much to the covenant status of the child, that this child to be a child of promise has to occur through some sort of intervention in Abraham's body, and I would suggest that that is focused upon the gift of circumcision immediately beforehand, that the cutting off of the flesh is something that prepares Abraham's body for that event.

There's a symbolic castration, a pruning that prepares him for fruitfulness, and I would imagine that that is what is taking place within Abraham's body. His death is associated with more covenantal death than an actual lack of virility or impotence or something like that, or no longer being fertile. He gives gifts to the children of the concubines and sends them towards the east, away from the land of Isaac.

Isaac, on the other hand, inherits everything that Abraham possesses. So there is a distinction made at this point. Abraham is his sole heir, true heir, is Isaac, whereas the children of the concubines are sent off and they have gifts given to them, but they have a different destiny to pursue.

They do not bear the legacy of Abraham to the same degree. Abraham at that point dies at the age of 175 years. He dies in a good old age, full of years, and is gathered to his people and his sons Isaac and Ishmael, who presumably joined together at this point, and it's interesting the way that we see the brothers joining together in the burying of their father.

We see the same thing in the story of Esau and Jacob and also in the story of Jacob later on, in the burial of his sons burying him. They bury him in the cave of Machpelah with Sarah, which he had bought from Ephron, son of Zohar the Hittite. Isaac then settles in Beelahelroy.

This maybe suggests a closer association with Ishmael, as this was the place that Hagar had named earlier on in chapter 16. At this point we have the genealogy of Ishmael, Abraham's son, and the list of the children born to Ishmael are 12 princes according to their nations. The royal themes are interesting here.

We have both in the genealogies of Ishmael and later on in the genealogies of Esau, there's an emphasis upon kingly type figures, chiefs and kings and princes. Likewise in the story of Cain, Cain and his descendants are very much associated with cities, rulers, they're king type figures, whereas the descendants of Seth, the descendants of Abraham and Isaac and the descendants of Jacob are more priestly figures. Ishmael dies at 137 years and he breathes his last and gathered to his people and his people live in a wide

area in east of Egypt.

The genealogy of Isaac is then given. Now this is a sort of maybe a false symmetry, it's not given in the same way as the genealogy of Ishmael, but you have forking paths. You have the genealogy of Isaac and then the, well the genealogy of Ishmael first and then the genealogy of Isaac.

We'll see that later on. It might be worth looking back at this point upon what is taking place here because it's described as the genealogy of Isaac, Abraham's son, Abraham begot Isaac. It's a strange way of writing this that Abraham begot Isaac, that doesn't really seem to be the genealogy of Isaac himself.

It is an odd way of putting it, it's not the usual way that we'd expect and we have a number of ways in the book of Genesis where this formula introduces something that is surprising. It doesn't take the form that you'd expect. Now what does it mean that Abraham begets Isaac, that that is the genealogy of Isaac? Well it may be stepping back and say this is the lineage of Isaac and that's part of the point I'm sure but there's something about the legacy of Isaac that may be involved here.

The legacy of Isaac is found in the fact that he is Abraham's son. He is the one who bears this legacy. His legacy is what Abraham has given him and he is the one who consolidates what Abraham has established.

We'll see that later on in the story. Looking back in the story of Abraham, something that we can notice is just how much his life is defined by sacrifice, particularly the sacrifice of his past. At the very beginning he sacrifices his land, his father's house, his people and he goes to a place that God will give to him and then later on at the end of his story he sacrifices his son, he sacrifices his future and all that his son represents.

The future possibility of a positive relationship with God, his legacy, his heir, his seed, all these things. His relationship with his future. If Abraham had lost his wife, how would that recover? If Isaac was lost? He's the one who sacrifices his son.

Now when we think about our lives, our lives are very much defined by sacrifice. What does it mean to have a consistent life? What does it mean to have a life that has meaning? Very often it's about making sacrifices in the present for something and we sacrifice often in order to give our lives meaning, to transcend ourselves. Now who we sacrifice to is a matter of great importance because if we're sacrificing to a sort of idol then we can have some sense of integrity but in a way that is destructive.

So many people will sacrifice for the sake of their nation because their nation gives them a sense of integrity, of purpose, identity, peoplehood and yet that sacrifice for the nation can be a wicked thing if it involves laying down your life and killing for an evil cause. The sacrifice is then a very significant aspect of personal identity. It's a means by which you

lay down something in the present in order and in the hope that something will be given back in the future and that relationship between Isaac and Abraham is an extremely close one.

You can imagine Abraham has so much of his confidence and his purpose and his sense of worth and identity riding upon this son and then God asks him to give up that son. That is a radical thing to do but yet if we do not truly sacrifice things they can never actually prove fruitful. For instance if you never give up your son, if you never give up something that you have created then it will never be truly fruitful.

You can stunt the thing that you have created, brought into the world. If you do not let it go and the story of Abraham is a story of sacrifice, of giving up his legacy, surrendering his legacy to God's hand and then what we'll see in the story of Isaac is that God consolidates and builds up the legacy for Abraham. He makes Abraham's name great.

Now for our lives I think this has deep ramifications. There are many people who struggle to let go of things, to sacrifice and yet sacrifice is something that is necessary to find a true identity, a full consolidated identity. It's difficult to find consistency in ourselves over time without making sacrifices, without making sacrifices to something and without sacrificing for something and in the story of Abraham I think we're seeing something of the radical nature of that.

He's bound up with this son and yet to become what he is supposed to be he has to give up that son. He has to have that son taken from him, snatched from him and then receive that son back and receiving that son back means that he must first let him go and this story I think of Isaac is in part a story of Abraham being returned to him. That Abraham's son is brought back, consolidates what his father sacrificed and this again has implications for us as those who are often tempted not to sacrifice, to gain things in the present and not lay down our lives, lay down the things that we have created, let them go in order that they might be made great and returned to us.

There is a challenge in doing this. Often we want to grasp hold of things and not let them go. We want to make our own name great and that story of Abraham playing out against the background of the story of the tower builders of Babel that they try and make their own name great yet God will make Abraham's name great.

It's a salutary contrast and juxtaposition of two different ways to approach our legacy. Are we going to try and seize our legacy to establish it ourselves or are we going to act in a faithful and committed way acting towards God and make sacrifices to let things go and trust that God will return them to us at a good time and that will often be God establishing our legacy many years after we have died, that there is something about that letting go that you're surrendering these things to God's hand, trusting that he will act on your behalf rather than trying to seize and establish your legacy for yourself. At this point we arrive at the birth of Esau and Jacob.

There is first of all a struggle that Rebecca is barren and we've had this same problem with the story of Sarah, a barren wife who's not bearing any children and the need for children that if they're going to continue the covenant line there needs to be children and so Isaac intercedes for his wife Rebecca and God hears and Rebecca conceives but the children are struggling within her and she says if all is well why am I this way and she goes to the Lord and inquires of him and God says that there are two nations in her womb and these peoples will be separated and one people will become stronger than the other, the older will serve the younger. This story is an interesting one in a number of respects. It's interesting because one question that we maybe don't ask enough is are Esau and Jacob identical twins? Now we presume that they're not.

At first glance they don't seem to be. Later on we see one described as hairy, one described as smooth. We see that one is red and comes out ruddy and the other is not.

One is more and maybe sallow and thin by comparison. There seems to be something that is very different between them but yet there are other features that would seem to suggest that they are identical twins. They're struggling in the womb and it would seem to make sense that they're sharing the same amniotic sac.

Maybe they're also fighting over the resources of the mother, the placenta and then they've also got, some have suggested that there's a twin-twin transfusion issue here that in that sort of case you can have identical twins coming out at very different sizes, one being red and more developed and the other having a very different sallow and thin and that might be what's taking place here. It's quite possible and it would help to explain certain features of the narrative. What else can we see at this point? That we have a number of stories within the history of the patriarchs, generation after generation of barren women, women who are struggling to bear seed and the struggle on that front suggests that there's maybe something more thematic going on.

First of all there's the fact that God miraculously intervenes in these cases, that these are children of promise, these are children of divine intervention, that's part of it. I think other aspects might be the fact that God places these women on the front line of redemptive history. As you look through the story of the Old Testament you'll see this repeated on several occasions, that the great women of history are struggling to bear birth, that bear seed, come to birth and we read these stories in various places of whether it's the Hebrew midwives, whether it's Jochebed and the threat to the children, whether it's Rachel dying in childbirth, whether it's Rachel struggling with infertility, whether it's the wrestling between the two sisters with Rachel and Leah, whether it's Rebecca struggling to give birth and being barren and then later on having these children struggling in her womb.

These stories are difficult stories, stories of women fighting to give birth and the rivalries and the complications and the tragedies that are associated with that. That draws our

minds back to Genesis chapter 3 and the pain that will accompany conception and the multiplication of conception but that is not necessarily all that's going on. It's also a sense that the seed that will crush the serpent and this seed as it comes forth is, there's a challenge, is this seed going to be brought forth? The woman is on the front line of redemptive history, she has to bear this seed, she's responsible for bringing this into history and that is one of the reasons why at the very outset of key events in the key eras of history we see women struggling in birth.

Whether that's in the patriarchal narrative where generation after generation we see women struggling in birth and references to their experience in this, that this is the place where women are laying down their lives, sometimes literally, in order to bring God's salvation into the world and then we see it in the story of the Exodus, we see it in the story of the Kingdom with Hannah, we see it in the story of the Gospel as well. All these stories foreground the significance of women struggling in birth and that is not accidental. This draws our minds back to Genesis chapter 3 verses 15 to 16, that this is the way the woman is struggling in her pain and her difficulty, her labour and it's also the way in which the serpent is going to be brought down through the women bearing the seed.

This story then leads to the birth of two sons that are divided from each other, become two separate nations and the events in the womb here are of great consequence. We'll see this womb story being played out on at least two further occasions within the Esau and Jacob narrative. This isn't just a once-off event, this is a repeated story and this story that ends with the birth of Esau first and Jacob coming out clutching his heel is one that should remind us of other things.

The fact of birth following barrenness may be connected with the creation narrative, that you have the barrenness of the world that's just covered with water, there's no life on it or later on we see the barrenness of the land that there's no, it hasn't yet born. In Genesis chapter 2 we see that the earth hasn't yet produced plants of the field and no herbs of the field have grown and so there's a barrenness there. We see the barrenness after the flood as well and in each of these cases I think we're reading something similar to birth narratives.

The creation is a birth narrative and it follows the barrenness of the world and then there's a birth, a womb and within the womb covered within the darkness of the deep you'll have the earth coming forth from that. You'll have humanity being brought forth from the earth as well and later on we'll have other events that are similar to that as the ark is a symbol of birth as well. People come forth from the ark to become the new population that fills the earth and they come out in twins as it were.

When we read these stories then I think we're seeing deeper patterns playing out. A birth narrative is a creation narrative and these birth narratives then lead into other

events. In both cases I've mentioned the story of the original creation, the story of the flood.

There is a fall narrative that follows. The fall narrative in the first case concerns the forbidden fruit and the Garden of Eden and in the Garden of Eden there's food that's eaten and it calls nakedness, shame, all these sorts of things and there's a judgment that occurs. In the second story we have Ham, his sin concerning his father and Ham then is judged and we see similar themes there.

Drinking of the fruit of the garden, drinking the wine and then nakedness and all these sorts of things that play out there. I think we see a similar thing here. When we look on through the story of Esau and Jacob they're described first of all, we'll go back into their descriptions, first comes out red.

He's like a hairy garment all over and we need, when we read the story of Esau, we need to think about the word plays because he lives in the land of Seir and so it plays upon the word for goat, the word for hair and the word for his country are all being played upon and in the same way Edom is red so he's red and hairy, Edom and Seir. These are connected terms, it's playing upon these themes as it goes through and we'll see also doing that with the story of Laban. His brother then comes out, his hand takes hold of Esau's heel.

Where have we seen a heel mentioned before? It's the bruising of the heel by the serpent. The serpent is the one who bruises the heel of the seed, the woman's seed. They're both named, the first is called Esau, they call his name Esau but then his brother comes out and his hand takes hold of Esau's heel and his name is called Jacob.

The suggestion is it may not be them calling him Jacob, it may just be Isaac. If you look at the text it's not entirely clear and it may just be Isaac that's calling him Jacob and Jacob isn't exactly a positive name. Heel, supplanter, someone who takes the heel, someone who supplants the other.

We'll see Esau makes reference to this later on and this is something that maybe the significance of Jacob's name. Keep that in mind. There's a birth event, there are these two twins that struggle and maybe they're identical twins and one is they're competing for resources in the womb.

One comes out and twin twin transfusion issues and one comes out red and more fully developed and hairy and the other comes out underdeveloped and there's something about the older of the two twins, he seems better favoured than the younger but yet he's a man of the field, he's a man of hunting, he's a man who's a hunter of game and he's a man of weaponry, these sorts of things. He's a man who's associated with the earth. When we look through the story of Genesis who might he remind us of? A number of figures.

First of all Cain, Cain is associated with the field, Cain is associated with hunting later on and we have his line of the family associated with hunting and weaponry and these sorts of things. On the other hand it might remind us of Nimrod, a mighty hunter before the Lord. Whereas Jacob is a man who dwells in tents, he's a mild man, he's a more domesticated man, he's a man who's defined more by his voice than by his hands and we'll see that theme playing out in chapter 27.

That Esau is a man of his hands, he's a man of action, he's a man of warfare, he's a man that can go out and fight, he's a man that hunts, he's a man who's gifted with his hands and he's a man who hunts game, wild game that pleases his father Isaac. Whereas Jacob seems to have more of a particular relationship with his mother. His mother has received a prophecy concerning the two sons that the older will serve the younger.

So she knows that Jacob is destined to become the lead brother even though when he's born he seems the ill-favoured one. He seems to be the one that's lost out in the lottery of birth and not just in being the second born but also being underdeveloped. Whereas his older brother is highly developed and seems to be throughout his life far more of an active go-getter, a kingly warrior type figure perhaps.

And reading through this, these themes continue to play out. Esau is loved by Jacob, is loved by Isaac because Isaac likes his game. Whereas Rebecca loved Jacob.

The connection between father and mother and the two sons, Esau being his father's son and Jacob being his mother's son, these are themes that we need to consider as they play out because Jacob will end up going to his mother's household to get wise for himself. And that relationship between him and his mother and that close bond between them raises some interesting questions. And it's not until he in some ways incorporates some Esau into himself and becomes more like his twin brother that he truly comes of age and we'll see them exploring the tensions of their birth throughout this narrative.

Now Jacob cooks a stew and Esau comes in from the field and he's weary. And this story is one that happens at a particular place. We've seen, again I've mentioned that we have these patterns playing out generation after generation or in key points in the narrative, there's a birth or creation event and then there's a fall.

So we see it in the original creation, we see it in the story of Noah. We also see it in the story of Abraham, that there's a covenant made with Abraham. The animals are brought to him or he brings the animals together.

That there's a deep sleep placed upon him and then God acts within that and there's division and all these sorts of things. And then he sees the fruit and he takes and his wife gives to him the fruit which is Hagar. Hagar is the forbidden fruit within that story.

And so there's a full narrative and here I think there's a very similar thing and we need

to consider what role the different characters are playing. Esau said to Jacob, feed me with some of that red stew or that red red stuff literally for I am weary. Therefore his name was called Edom.

What's happening there? The red red stuff, the colour of the stew is stressed. The stew is defined not by its contents but by its colour. It appears red.

What does he think it is? David Daube has argued that this is possibly Esau presuming that the stew is blood stew, that he wants blood stew and blood of course is forbidden food after Genesis chapter 9. Maybe that's what it is. That would certainly strengthen the forbidden food connections and the fall connections that are taking place here. Also we've seen Jacob as the one who takes the heel.

He's the one who like the serpent takes the heel. Then in this story he plays the role of the deceiver. Not so much the deceiver as the one who tempts.

The one who tempts the person to despise the birthright. Now Adam had a birthright. The birthright that he had was inheriting the world that God had placed him within the garden, given him a privileged status and he despises the birthright in order to get the food.

Here we see that Esau sees the food and he wants to take the food, the red red stuff and as he takes that food he despises his birthright. He's immediately described as his name is therefore called Edom and it's Edom because it's connected with red. Red red stuff.

Edom. And pay attention to the naming of these characters because Laban has something similar later on. Laban is deceived or outwitted using white things whereas Edom is deceived and outwitted or outwitted using red things.

And these two characters are played off against Jacob in different ways. This conflict between Esau and Jacob is one then that takes the character of a fool type event. Esau is playing the Adam character and the name Edom that he's given at this point is like Adam.

It's pretty much the same. It's pretty much the same consonants. It's a term that draws your mind back immediately to the story of Genesis chapter 3. That here is food.

Here is someone despising their birthright and then immediately afterwards we're told he's called Edom. His name is connected with that of Adam. And Jacob is certainly not without blame in this story.

He's taking advantage of the situation and what he does is not exactly um you might say it's not exactly kosher but he is also the one who's far from the worst. He's not the worst character within the story by any means. I think there is some blame to be given to him.

He is outwitting his brother. His brother however is despising the covenant. He's despising the birthright.

He's acting in a way that is quite dishonorable. And as we see the relationship between characters like Saul and David we'll see similar dynamics. The danger of despising what God has given to you.

Jacob says swear to me as of this day and he swears and sold his birthright to Jacob. And Jacob gives Esau the bread and the stew of lentils. Esau wolfs it down and the way it describes just series of events ate and drank arose went his way.

And then the text casts judgment upon the situation. It doesn't judge Jacob. It judges Esau.

Now that doesn't mean that Jacob is without um that he's without fault in this situation. But by far the worst blame falls upon Esau. Esau is the one who despises his birthright.

Look I am about to die. So what profit shall this birthright be to me? This story then the story of the birth, the creation type event, struggling in the womb and then the story of the fall that follows are playing out these consistent patterns that we see. And this story will be replayed at least two more times within the story of Esau and Jacob as they try and work out their relationship to each other.

As they're struggling for the limited resources of their parents. Just as they struggled in the womb over the resources of their mother. So they are struggling throughout the rest of their lives and we'll see how it ends up.

How this story eventually gets resolved. And there is some sort of resolution, a partial resolution, not a complete one. But this awaits many decades.

It happens many decades hence. Lord willing I'll be back again tomorrow with a discussion of chapter 26. Thank you very much for listening.

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Thank you very much for listening. Lord willing I'll be back again tomorrow. God bless.