

A Tale of Two
Genesis 25:19-34; Romans 8:1-11

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Jacob and Esau. Esau and Jacob. What do you think? What kind of people are they? Would your mother have let you play with them when you were a kid, and they were growing up next door? Would you want to be friends with them as an adult? What do you think? Let's look at their story.

We begin with a struggle with infertility. Remember, we've seen this before. Abraham and Sarah also had infertility issues. Which makes it surprising Isaac and Rebekah also have them. Isaac is the child of promise. Through him, Abraham is going to become a great nation. Rebekah comes from good stock. They went all the way to Mesopotamia to find her. You would think, with such important characters, and so much riding on them, children wouldn't be a problem. But it is. Very much so.

Let me say right now, this is not a story about infertility. Infertility is a very different subject and a very painful subject for those couples facing it. This story is not an answer for those who are struggling.

The point of this story is the same as it was with Abraham and Sarah. The point is what it tells us about God. Increase comes from God. Increase, growth, is not something we humans can take for granted. It comes from God. Humans do their part, certainly. Prayer is good. But ultimately growth, the fulfillment of the promise, comes from God.

This is a good message for us and especially for our churches. Organized religion in America is at an all-time low. Mainline religion is plummeting. And we can't slow it, much less turn it around, by ourselves. Growth is a gift from God. If we're serious about expanding our ministry and making a greater impact on our community, the first thing we have to do is share our concerns and plans with God. We're not going to do it on our own.

Finally, then, Rebekah conceives but it's a difficult pregnancy. In desperation she goes to a shrine and prays. God speaks 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.’*
(Genesis 25:23, NRSV)

Hmm. That’s interesting. God has upset the natural order, which is fine if you’re the younger son. But if you’re the eldest son, like me, it’s upsetting. Why has God gone and turned things around?

Honestly, we don’t know. We don’t know why God has decided to favor the younger over the older. God’s ways are inscrutable.

Which, again, is a good reminder for our churches. Just because we’re the oldest and most traditional, just because we’re respected and have a lovely sanctuary, doesn’t mean we’re always going to be the vanguard of Christianity. There’s a place for churches meeting in the High School gym, churches with guitars and dry ice. God has a place for them. And maybe God wants us to learn something from them.

Finally, the twins are born. The eldest is Esau who’s covered in hair and red all over. That’s how he gets his name. The next is Jacob, holding onto his brother’s heel. That’s how he gets his name. Jacob, Yacov, means something like ‘grasp’ or ‘supplant’.

And so, the two boys grow up and develop, as brothers often do, very different personalities.

Esau is not concerned about the future. He wants instant gratification. He wants what he wants, and he wants it now. “I’m hungry! Give me some of that red stuff.”

Jacob, on the other hand, does care about the future. But he’s not a big believer in being patient or working hard. Jacob is always striving, conniving, grasping for what he wants. “Sure, I’ve got some extra stew. But it’ll cost ya.”

Isn’t that how some people approach faith? Some people don’t care at all about faith until something happens. They don’t care about God until someone dies, or they lose their job, or they’re plagued by infertility and suddenly they want God and the church to spring into action, working overtime and making all their problems go away. But as soon as the funeral luncheon is over, as soon as the miracle baby is baptized, as soon as they’re back on

their feet, they forget all about God until the next crisis. They treat God like a 7/11. It's open 24/7, but why go in if you don't need anything?

Others care intensely about the future, and they care intensely about God, but they're always working an angle. They have to have their way at every council meeting. Their interpretation of Scripture is always correct. They're glad to give to a special project or offering if they get enough recognition and the pastor does enough groveling.

Sound familiar? Do we know people like that? On the one end is Esau who doesn't care about God or the future until there's an emergency. On the other end is Jacob who cares intently about God and the future but is always trying to manipulate them.

So where are we on that spectrum? Are we closer to one end or the other? Or are we off that line altogether? Is it always other people who are like that, but never us?

How about our church? Does our church lean towards one end or the other? Some churches only care about today. They're not thinking about what's best for their congregation five or ten years from now. They only care about now. What's gonna pack 'em in?

They have all the technology and the music, but the message gets lost. The staging is so captivating the good news of God is drowned out. The story of how much God loves us is overwhelmed by the pyrotechnics.

Other churches are very concerned about the future. They're especially concerned about not losing any of their congregation in the future. So, they work really hard at never upsetting anyone, or giving them any reason for grappling with their faith. They preach the Prosperity Gospel and if you're not healthy, wealthy and satisfied you just need to be more spiritual. The people are fed a steady diet of spiritual Snickers Bars. Satisfying, sure. But only for a moment. And you have to keep going back for more.

Again, where is our church? Are we somewhere between these two extremes? Do we lean more towards one or the other? Have we found a happy, healthy place somewhere in between? These are hard questions, and there are no easy answers.

The good news is we can be relaxed about our future because we know God is with us. This is what Paul is getting at. If Christ is

in us, our future is assured. Yes, Paul is long and convoluted and hard to follow but this is where he's going. If Christ is in us, if we are in Christ, then Christ will look after us in this world and the next.

Eventually, all organic beings die. That means we as individuals must someday stop living our earthly life. And it means our churches, which are also organic beings, will also someday stop their earthly ministry.

But as Christians, we know death is not the end. Our future does not end with our last breath. Our future continues forever in God's loving embrace.

Should we be indifferent about our future? Should we be Esau and care only about what makes us happy right this moment? Of course not. The future is a gift from God, and we should care for it accordingly.

But nor do we need to be Jacob. We don't need to be so anxious about the future we are always trying to manipulate it and control it. We can relax because we know our future is in God's loving hands.

My friends growth, increase, comes from God. Of course, we have to do our part. So, let's do our part to make our future pleasing to God, neither indifferent nor overly concerned, but trusting God to sustain us and give us the increase God wants us to have. Amen.