

“God’s Long Game”  
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Genesis 25:19-34  
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

*Is there a blessing for me?* Rebekah, who had married Isaac, but then was barren for 20 years, likely wondered this, moon after moon when her body reminded her that she was without child. If the parable of the sower talks about the good soil that bears fruit and yields, Rebekah seems like the field of her womb is rocky, or like the field where seeds get sown but have no root, and wither, or fall upon thorns and are choked. I would say to ask anyone who has struggled with infertility what it is like. But really, don’t ask them unless they offer, because the pain may still be too raw, even years later. Though the culture and the time tended to blame infertility on the women, let’s keep in mind that the genetic link here— remember Abraham and Sarah were elderly before they had any children?— is through the men.

*Is there a blessing for me?* Many of us wonder this question when we offer our prayers and devotion to God, only to be met by empty silence. Genesis tells us that Isaac prayed to God for his wife, and the Lord granted his prayer— with not one, but two children. *Was that all it took?* The bible makes it sound easy— as if they had not already been praying for 20 years.

It wasn’t exactly easy. Rebekah indeed conceived, but the pregnancy made her so sick she asked whether it would be better to die. God explained to her, “two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger.” Sure enough, out pop those twins, seconds apart: first Esau, born red and hairy, and then Jacob, who is grabbing Esau’s heel. Jacob’s name means “he supplants” or *takes over*.

Now for all of you who get riled up about the parable of the prodigal son— you know, with the elder brother who does everything right, and the younger brother who goes out and spends his inheritance, comes home, and instead of treating him like a servant, their father throws this boy a party? Well, I have bad news for you. Jacob, like the prodigal son, is a taker too. He takes gifts he didn’t deserve. Not that birth order is really *earned* in a deserving kind of way.

Just as his birth story indicates, Jacob does supplant Esau. Now twinship is a special kind of relationship. My college friend Janet just had twins, and her pictures on social media show that even when she lays these tiny babies a foot or so apart, they manage to wriggle toward each other, so that some part of their bodies is always touching. There is a West African village that has the custom, for a set of young twins, to carry a long, terracotta plate, with two bowls, one on either side. “They hold it together at all times, using it as a leash to each other and eating their meals from its cavities until the age of seven, when the object would be broken in two and each twin can go their own way.” (Jean Garnett, “Giving Away My Twin” in *The New Yorker*, July 10,

2023). But I am guessing for Esau and Jacob, there never was such unity. Esau is a brawny man, red, hairy, great at hunting, his father Isaac's favorite. Jacob is a man of the tents— maybe that's bible speak for a Mama's boy. Esau is also a man of the moment, driven by his passions, and in this case it's a bowl of lentil stew. The chance to savor this momentary pleasure his stomach craved— "give it to me or I will die!" he demanded of Jacob— cost Esau his birthright.

*Is there a blessing for me?* A distraught Esau roared this question to his father, Isaac, after his twin Jacob tricked him again; Jacob had, under Rebekah's instruction, put on his twin brother's clothes, worn a baby goat's skin to make his arms and hands feel hairy, and cooked and served the wild game that Esau was known for hunting. His father's sight had grown dim. And so upon feeling and smelling Jacob, who was clothed in the feel and smell of his brother, Isaac granted the blessing, meant for the elder, to Jacob the younger. When Esau realized "Have you only one blessing, father? Bless me, me also, father!" What Isaac offers to Esau, however, is that he will live away from the fatness of the earth, earning his living by the sword, made to serve his brother... but that one day he will break free from the yoke that binds him to his brother.

That's not much in the way of blessing! I wonder whether Isaac had been conditioned to believe that there is *only* room in the family economy, in God's economy, for one favorite, one blessed, one chosen. Remember, Isaac had played with his half-brother Ishmael as a child— only to see him banished to the wilderness, maybe to die, because there did not seem to be enough room in the household for two beloved, chosen sons. To you whose families have your own share of skeletons in the closet? Take heart: the family of the patriarchs and matriarchs also has dysfunction in every generation, and they are not afraid to share it, generously, with each generation. Isaac has been busy his whole life surviving, settling, saving, that maybe he hasn't even had time yet to ponder the childhood trauma of his father almost sacrificing him on the altar. Genesis says that Isaac's vision is dim, and we can assume it's due to old age. But maybe he never saw his sons for who they were to begin with— if he had, perhaps Jacob wouldn't have felt he needed to trick his dad in order to access the covenant passed from Abraham, through his father, in order for it to land on him.

What is God trying to tell us here? Some say this tidbit from the bible is an etiology— its purpose is to tell a story about how things came to be. In this case, it gives background to where the Edomites are from— these are the descendents of Esau, and they are powerful enough that Israel is often having to defend itself against them. The Talmud says that the Edomites are the ancestors to the Romans, and later settled all of Europe. Maybe Esau's blessing and inheritance wasn't too shabby, after all.

God seems to take the long game here— not only with Jacob, who clearly had the cleverness to point the tiny clan of Abraham toward a nation of multitudes, versus Esau, who seemed to choose the satisfaction of that which is immediate. But God wasn't done with Esau yet either, and we later see he also brings forward a nation that is large and powerful.

I guess we could also say that God takes the long game with many of our prayers, too. Like the sower who flings seeds onto the ground, not sure whether they will fall on good soil, or get

eaten by the birds, or fall on rocky soil, or fall upon thorns, we cannot always know what prayers will take root. Sometimes, we have to see what will sprout from our spiritual efforts, and not everything will sprout and bear fruit. I have had a few points in my prayer life when the silence coming from God was deafening. I felt abandoned. I even considered leaving this faith I have carried with me in some form for my whole life. But sometimes, when time moves me forward in my life, I am able to look back and say, "Look at that time, when I was in so much pain! Look, when I was in so much fear! Look, when I thought God had abandoned me! What I could not see then was that God was birthing something new through me." Like Rebekah, who could only feel suffering when in fact God was bringing forth two nations through her womb, it sometimes takes the long game to see that there are, in fact, times when God does answer prayer.

When we pray to God, we also have to consider that each one of us is one of many siblings, each of us a son, a daughter, a child of a God who values all, but has a special fondness for the underdog: the widow, the immigrant, the disabled, the orphan, and— at least in biblical times, the youngest— who really was at a social and financial disadvantage. Therefore, as we consider what we hope God will do for us, we also need to consider what God hopes to do for those who are on the underside of history, and if we are not on the underside of history, whether we can use some of our power to help *change* history. In that effort, we may in fact find our blessing, too.

*Is there a blessing for me?* As we approach the communion table, as the servers look into our eyes and declare that this is the bread of life, the cup of salvation, as the juice-soaked bread dissolves in our mouth and leaves its robust aftertaste of yeast and grape as a reminder that it was just there, we may wonder this question. Is there a blessing for me? Remember that this meal is no act of trickery by God, no chance to pull the chair out from beneath us just as we are to sit and satisfy the flavors of our craving. There is not even a trade involved— in this church, you don't have to give up something to come to this table— but you probably should be open to the possibility that you might be changed through it.

God's love is not a zero-sum game. There is no one favorite. There is no one chosen. There is no one blessing. Because at Christ's table, *all* are beloved. *All* are chosen. *All* are blessed. It is a promiscuous table, and without any one of us, we are not whole.