

***Intro: It's the quiet ones you have to watch***

I'm sure we've all heard the saying; *"It's the quiet ones you have to watch."* I've never really liked the saying because I've always been one of the quiet ones. It suggests us "quiet ones" are always up to something, always scheming. Yet our Bible reading this morning seems to lend a bit of credence to this idea. For in this story we learn it is indeed the quiet one you have to watch. In verse 27 we are told **"Jacob was a quiet man"** & in the verses & chapters after we certainly learn why this quiet man needed watching. Yet as we get deeper into the story of Jacob I believe we will all see something of ourselves in this complex character no matter what our natural temperament is. For the truth is we all need watching & we all need wrestled by the God of Jacob if we are to see true & lasting transformation in our lives & relationships!

I've divided this sermon under four things that happen in our reading. 1. Isaac Prays (21). 2. Rebekah enquires (22). 3. Jacob exploits (29-33). 4. Esau despises (34).

**1. Isaac Prays (v21)**

Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah (v20) & he was sixty when their twin boys were born (v26). This means there were 20 years of barrenness. This of course was a miserable condition for a woman in the time & culture; but it would have been even more so for a couple who believed they had divine promises concerning their offspring. The earlier part of the chapter informs us of Abraham's death & now this new generation of the promise begins with 20 years of barrenness. To their credit Isaac & Rebekah did not try to take matters into their own hands like Abraham & Sarah. Instead we are told in verse 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."** We are not given the timescale of Isaac's prayer & God's answer but what we are shown is the connection between prayer & the end of barrenness, the connection of prayer to the unfolding of God's sovereign purpose.

The Jews have a tradition that Isaac took Rebekah with him to mount Moriah, where God had promised to multiply Abraham's seed & there they pleaded the promise made in that very place. We can't be 100% sure of the accuracy of this but what we can be 100% sure of is that prayer aligned with God's promises will be answered. Align your prayers with the promises of God & you might get a **"wait"** or **"have patience"** from him... but you'll never get a "no"! All the promises of God are "Yes" in Jesus (2 Cor. 1:20)! Remember the apostles John's words in 1 John 5:14-15; **"And this is the confidence that we have towards him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked for."** Isaac's prayer & God's

answer are a great illustration of this truth & a great incentive for us to pray God's will & plead his promises.

Philip Eveson applies these verses this way; *"It is what the church must do in its concern to see spiritual children & the revival of God's work. Twenty years is a long time to wait. Some have waited longer. Others have not lived to see their requests granted. Prayer that is based on his Word will be answered. God had promised descendants to Isaac (17:19), but Isaac did not know how or when. He did not shrug his shoulders in a fatalistic way & say, 'Whatever will be will be.' Isaac pleaded with God & 'The LORD granted his plea, & Rebekah his wife conceived. God uses our prayers to fulfil his purposes."*

In a similar way if we find ourselves in a time of barrenness, or facing some other impossible challenge, the only answer is prayer. We know Christ has promised to build his church & other promises associated with it. Prayer is the primary thing we can always do to help fulfil the purposes of heaven. Our attention to prayer shows where our dependence really is. We can try lots of things but prayer is the only thing we can be sure will work. Things might look bleak at times like they did for Isaac & Rebekah but the testimony of this story is this: It is prayer that turned barrenness into new birth. We don't know how quickly Isaac's prayer was answered because all the Bible is concerned about is us seeing it was Isaac's prayer that led to the fulfilment of God's purpose. This is why our Lord Jesus tells us in Luke 18:1 that we **"ought always to pray & not lose heart."** Isaac had I'm sure learned from his parents story that trying to shortcut fulfilling God's purpose didn't work so he did the only thing he could; he **"pleaded with the LORD for his wife. And the Lord granted his prayer..."**

Another thought I had when thinking about this story in the context of what went before & after is this: Sometimes a few generations need to struggle so that future generations can flourish. By the time we get to chapter 29-30 we can hardly keep up with the new births. Are we prepared for this pattern if that's what it takes? I'm not suggesting we settle for less than God has promised, for struggling in prayer & settling where we are do not fit in the same sentence. It's simply an observation to consider.

## **2. Rebekah Enquires (v22-28)**

If there is a word that sums up the story of Jacob perhaps it is the word *struggle*. He struggled with his brother Esau in & outside the womb & there was struggle in his family connected to this. He also had to struggle to marry the woman he loved & of course he struggled with God when he wrestled with him. The initial joy of realizing God had answered Isaac's prayer quickly moves on to Rebekah's uncomfortable pregnancy. Verses 22-23 says; **"The children struggled together within her, and she said, "If it is thus, why is this happening to me? So she went to enquire of the LORD. 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 will serve the younger."** This helps teach us that sometimes God's answers are not what

we expect & we can wonder, like Rebekah; *“what is going on?”* Rebekah did the right thing & enquired of the Lord & the answer she got regarding her twin boys was more informative than any scan. She learned that the struggle within her was a struggle between two kingdoms!

As a man I cannot identify with being pregnant with twin boys struggling within, but as a Christian I can identify with the idea of two kingdoms struggling within. Matthew Henry comments that; *“This struggle between Jacob and Esau in the womb represents the struggle that is maintained between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan.”* This is a struggle we experience within (the old man with the new man) & this is a struggle we see in the world. To be committed to God’s purposes is at the same time to know something of this struggle. As Paul says in Ephesians 6:12; **“For our struggle is not against flesh & blood, but against rulers, against authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces in the heavenly realms”** (NIV). Paul says **“our struggle”!** There is a struggle than comes with being a Christian.

Within Rebekah’s womb there was a struggle. With the fulfilment of promise came a threat to the promise, this is the repeated story right up until the birth of Jesus, the Messiah. Then afterwards in the NT we also see a struggle between two kingdoms. Yet one thing that is clear from this story & all the others in the Bible is that in & through all the conflict, struggling, dividing & wrestling it is God’s promises that prevail, it is God’s Word that is proven true, it is God’s work that ultimately prospers & it is God’s unstoppable purpose that keeps moving forward. This should give us great confidence.

Isaac had prayed for the promised child, yet his prayer led to conflict not comfort. This is something we need to be aware of when we commit ourselves to pray as individuals or a church. A. W. Tozer wrote; *“Show me an individual or a congregation committed to spiritual progress with the Lord... & I will show you where there is a strong & immediate defiance by the devil.”* A friend recently posted in Instagram; *“God never said the weapons wouldn’t form, he said they wouldn’t prosper.”* We should hold these two truths in our minds when we commit ourselves to praying God’s will & therefore wrestling with spiritual forces etc.

### **3. Jacob Exploits**

The story moves on but the theme of struggling is only beginning. The differences between Esau & Jacob are starkly highlighted in the verses we read & so is the ongoing struggle that would now continue outside the womb (v24-26). The stark differences between their sons did not help Isaac & Rebekah’s marriage. Up until the twins came along Isaac & Rebekah seemed very holy - praying & enquiring of God. Yet afterwards their imperfections quickly showed & they seem very human as we see them favouring different sons (v27-28). We’ll think about all this more next time.

In the remaining verses in the chapter Esau the hunter comes in hungry looking for meat. Ironically it was Jacob's cooking that trapped the Esau the hungry hunter & so Esau ending up selling his birthright. Jacob exploited Esau when & where he was most vulnerable. Jacob's name literally means; 'cheat', 'he takes by the heel' or 'deceiver'. He certainly lives up to that here & we will see more of this behaviour in chapter 27, although on that occasion his mother is the main instigator. So this is our introduction to Jacob. He was the quiet one that needed to be watched & he is found exploiting his brother in these introductory verses.

#### 4. Esau Despised

The account does not comment on Jacob's manipulative behaviour, but it does comment on Esau's attitude to his birthright. Some point out that at least Jacob valued the birthright even if he went about things in the wrong way. The text tells us however that **"Esau despised his birthright."** The writer of Hebrews mentions this incident as an example of despising God's grace (Heb 12:16).

The birthright was the special status which belonged to the first-born son. It meant becoming the primary heir to the father's inheritance as well as head of the family when the father died. This was an important matter in Near-Eastern culture, but there was even more importance attached to it in God's chosen line. It involved divine promises. The covenant God has made with Abraham & Isaac was wrapped up in the birthright. Jacob at least valued the birthright; Esau sold it for a pot of stew.

Esau sacrificed long-term blessing to satisfy his short-term appetite & there is a lesson in that for all of us. Let's not let the temporal things of this life cause us to despise our spiritual inheritance in Christ. Let's value what is lasting, eternal & truly valuable. Although he went about it in the wrong way, Jacob's priorities seemed to be right. He was not short-sighted like his brother, he was thinking ahead while Esau was thinking about his stomach. We are warned in those words in Hebrews 12:16-17 not to be like Esau **"who sold his birthright for a single meal. For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears."** God does not want that to be our story & therefore he graciously places this warning in the NT.

#### Conclusion: The Quiet Man

This section marks the beginning of a fierce struggle between Jacob & Esau which would only subside after Jacob wrestled with God. Although it is a completely different story it reminded me of the story of *The Quiet Man* (staring John Wayne). In the movie there was an ongoing relational struggle over a dowry because of what it represented. In the movie it wasn't until after the famous fist fight that relational difficulties really worked themselves out. Likewise in the story of Jacob it wasn't until after he wrestled with God that things worked out. Yet in the midst of it all God was in control & therefore the story ended well.

***Study sources used for this sermon:***

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