

Love for the Unlovely: The Story of Grace in the Life of Jacob

God's Sovereign Grace (Genesis 25:19-34)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC English Service on February 2, 2025

Introduction

- ❖ This morning, we're starting a new sermon series on the life of Jacob in the book of Genesis. Over the past few years, we've dipped into Genesis. We started with a series on chapters 1-11. Then, we did a series on the life of Abraham out of chapter 12-25. Now we're coming back around and planning to study Genesis 25-36. We're calling the series *Love for the Unlovely: The Story of Grace in the Life of Jacob*.
 - As we get into the details of Jacob's life, it quickly becomes apparent that he's not a very admirable character. In fact, some of his actions are downright despicable. And yet, God inexplicably shows love to this unlovely patriarch of the faith. **Jacob's life story is one big illustration of God's sovereign grace.** That's the main theme.

- ❖ **In today's text, we're first introduced to Jacob's parents, Isaac and Rebekah.** We ended our previous series on the life of Abraham with chapter 24 and the lengths to which Abraham and his trusted servant went to secure a bride for his son Isaac. Not from among the Canaanites. But from his own kindred, among the Arameans living in ancient Mesopotamia. **In that story, there were moments where God supernaturally intervened to make it abundantly clear that Rebekah was his handpicked choice for Isaac.** So she returns to Canaan with Abraham's servant and marries Isaac by the end of Genesis 24.
 - But the focus shifts fairly quickly from Isaac to his twin sons, Esau and Jacob. **These fraternal twins couldn't have been more different.** They share the same birthday but little else in common. Their appearance. Their complexion. Their personality. Their hobbies and interests. Couldn't be further apart. And their parents didn't help bring them closer together. Instead, they played favorites. Likely driving a deeper wedge between the brothers.
 - **If you thought you had a sibling rivalry while growing up, these two brothers took it to a whole new level.** Their rivalry started in their mother's womb and continued long after they passed. Their descendants, representing two rival nations, continued to struggle for generations after.

- ❖ **But only one of these brothers could be in the line of succession.** To be the channel of the covenant blessings God promised to their grandfather Abraham. Abraham was promised that, through his offspring, all the nations of the earth will be blessed. That his descendants would be God's people and inherit God's kingdom in God's land. **So the question of which brother will carry on this Promise to the next generation drives the narrative.**
 - But, at the same time, we can learn so much, from this story, about the grace of God. About his unmerited kindness. His willingness to bless the undeserving. To love the unlovely. **We're going to learn about both the *sovereign and abundant* nature of his grace.** How it knows no bounds and how God's grace will always surprise us.
 - In this morning's passage, we're going to see God's sovereign grace on display in three circumstances: (1) in our barrenness, (2) in our election, and (3) in our inheritance.

God's Sovereign Grace in Our Barrenness

- ❖ Let's begin by considering God's sovereign grace in our barrenness. **Isaac and Rebekah were dealing with literal barrenness.** They were childless. That's a huge problem. How can you carry on the lineage of God's covenant blessings if you don't have any children? So theirs was a literal barrenness. **For us, it could be the same. But the barrenness we struggle with could also be more figurative.** It could be a feeling of emptiness. Or constant disappointment. Or perpetual regret. Where is God's grace in those seasons of life?

- ❖ **Now even before we're informed of Rebekah's barrenness in v21, we, as readers, are already set up to wonder if Isaac is really the child of promise that he's been presented as.** Is he really going to be the channel of blessing? Because, in v20, we're told that Isaac didn't get married until he was 40 years old.
 - Maybe that's not that big a deal today. But you have to put yourself in that ancient Jewish culture. Where a man not married by age twenty would've been considered cursed. **So when Isaac hit his fortieth birthday, I'm not surprised if his father Abraham was dealing with some doubts.** Is Isaac really the child of promise?

- ❖ And after his son got married – but after years of infertility – **I'm sure Abraham began to doubt if Rebekah really was God's hand picked choice of a wife for Isaac.** He and his servant had received so many signs of confirmation. But maybe we misread God's signs? For how could the right woman be barren? **If she's God's choice to bear a child – who would pass on the promise to future children – then how can she, of all women, be barren?** It doesn't make sense. But has it ever, so far, in the book of Genesis?
 - Let's not forget that Isaac's mother, Sarah, was the right woman *and yet* she was also barren. She was over ninety years old when Isaac was born. That didn't make sense. **It didn't make sense that Sarah would be God's hand picked choice.** Which is why Abraham took matters into his own hands and tried to conceive the child of promise through his concubine Hagar. He relied on what made practical sense.

- ❖ **But there's this theme running throughout Scripture where the right woman is usually barren.** That's God's M.O. He tends to promise children to barren women – in order to demonstrate his power over insurmountable odds. To demonstrate that his promised line is a supernatural line. That his grace is sovereign and has no limits.
 - **Friends, that's the same lesson God is trying to teach you whenever you face similar doubts.** When you're doing your best to follow God's Word and do his will, and yet the results aren't what you expected. You feel constantly disappointed, empty, barren. I get it if you're starting to doubt whether God's will is really the right way to go. Maybe you misread the signs? Maybe taking things by faith is just not sensible. Not practical. **Or maybe – maybe the path you're on is God's will, and his goal is to demonstrate the power of his sovereign grace in your life.**

- ❖ That was true for Isaac. **He could've responded like his father and turned to a more practical solution.** But thankfully, he learned from his father's mistake. Instead of relying on human effort, Isaac trusted God's promise that the covenant blessings would pass through him and the wife of God's choosing. Even though she's barren and it doesn't make sense.
 - Isaac trusted. And he prayed. Look at v21. *“And Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren. And the LORD granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived.”* **Now note that this wasn't just one fervent, heartfelt prayer. No, Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife – for twenty years!** Look at the end of v26. Isaac got married at forty and was sixty years old when the twins were born.

- ❖ **Isaac waited and prayed for twenty years.** He didn't take matters into his own hands. He didn't resort to using a concubine, even though that would've made more practical sense. **No, he trusted in God's promise and eventually witnessed the power of his sovereign grace.** When the LORD finally granted his prayer, and his wife conceived.
 - So, up to this point, there's a lot to commend in Isaac. But, as we'll see in later chapters, he begins to waver in his trust. Years later, when the boys have grown up, Isaac doesn't agree with God's choice of Jacob. He prefers his own preference for Esau and seeks to override God's plans. Which results in even greater disharmony and division in his marriage and family.

- ❖ **So while Isaac should be commended for his faithfulness in the past, it would be unwise for him to rest on that in the present.** It's similar to the message last Sunday in our anniversary service. We talked about not resting on the laurels of our past faithfulness as a church. But to continue pressing forward and holding fast to God's promises into the future.
 - Friends, that same exhortation applies to us here. **Keep holding fast to God's promises. Trust in his ways. Even if they don't make practical sense right now.** Trust that just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are his ways higher than your ways and his thoughts higher than your thoughts (Isa 55:9). And just wait to see his sovereign grace at work in your life.

God's Sovereign Grace in Our Election

- ❖ Now we already alluded to the second circumstance where God's sovereign grace is on display. **That's in his choosing of Jacob over Esau.** Which takes place before either twin does anything good or bad. It takes place in their mother's womb. Look at v22. We'll see God's sovereign grace in our election. In his choosing of a people for himself.
 - *“²²The 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. ²³And 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.””*
 - Rebekah knew she was pregnant, but they didn't have sonograms so she had no idea she was having twins. All she felt was a struggle in her womb. The Hebrew for “to struggle” can also be translated “to crush or to oppress.” These unborn twins were crushing each other. There was great tension from the start.

- ❖ So Rebekah seeks answers from the LORD and learns that there are two nations, two peoples, in her womb. **These twins will be the designated ancestors for two rival people groups – the ancient Israelites and the ancient Edomites.** In the subsequent books of the OT, the ancient struggle between these two nations is recorded for us. It's a bitter rivalry that goes back all the way to these two boys.
 - Now in any struggle between two brothers, it's no surprise when one eventually comes out on top. When one ends up stronger than the other. **But what's surprising, in this case, is that the younger twin prevails.**
 - But with any careful reading of the OT, you quickly realize that that's no surprise at all. **There's another consistent biblical theme of the older serving the younger.** There's Isaac over Ishmael. Perez over Zerah (Gen 38:29-30). Joseph over his older brothers. Ephraim over Manasseh (Gen 48:19). David over his older brothers. Solomon over Adonijah (1 Kg 1).

- ❖ **Time and time again, we see the LORD overturning the rights of primogeniture.** That's the ancient human custom that gives preference to firstborn children, usually firstborn sons. So, naturally, you'd expect Esau to be God's chosen child. The one through whom the covenant blessings given to their grandfather would flow to the next generation.
 - So by intentionally overturning primogeniture rights and ignoring birth order, the LORD is sending a loud message. **He's teaching us something about his grace – his sovereign grace.** As one commentator puts it, he's teaching us that *“The order of nature is not necessarily the order of grace.”*
 - God's election of a people – his choosing of whom he will bless and include as a member of his covenant people – does *not* depend on who you're parents are. On your birth order. On any human customs or rights. **God's choosing of his own people solely depends on God's grace.** His sovereign grace.

- ❖ Now, in the case of Isaac and Ishmael, one might argue that Isaac was chosen over his brother is because Ishmael had the wrong mother, Hagar. When the right father and mother combo was Abraham and Sarah. **So there's a human rationale for Isaac over Ishmael.**
 - **But that rationale flies out the window in the case of Jacob over Esau.** They have the same father and mother. They shared the same womb. And the Apostle Paul, commentating on this story, makes the point, in Romans 9, that even before the twins were born, before they had done anything, *“either good or bad – in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls – ¹²she was told, “The older will serve the younger.””* (Rom 9:11-12)

- ❖ **God chose one twin and not the other to underscore the fact that – when it comes to being a part of the people of God – it doesn't matter who your parents are.** Just because your parents are Christians, that doesn't guarantee you will be too. And just because they're *not* Christians, that doesn't disqualify you or make it harder for you to be saved. **Because salvation doesn't depend on your first birth. It's all about a second birth.** Being born again. Which is ultimately a gift of sovereign grace.

- ❖ **And God chose the younger twin over the older – he defied human custom and rationale – to make clear that his choosing of you is *not* a reward.** It's *not* based on you living a good life. No, it's based on him who calls. On God's sovereign choice.
 - But someone might argue that maybe God *did* have their works in view since he knows the future. Maybe he knew that Jacob would grow up to be a much better person than Esau. **But even that human rationale is swept off the table in the following verses.** Look at v24, "²⁴*When her days to give birth were completed, behold, there were twins in her womb. ²⁵The first came out red, all his body like a hairy cloak, so they called his name Esau. ²⁶Afterward his brother came out with his hand holding Esau's heel, so his name was called Jacob.*"

- ❖ **It's comical the way the two boys are described coming out of the womb. Neither description is flattering.** Esau is covered in hair and likely it was the hair that was red. His hairiness and redness was meant to correspond with the impulsive passion that he would display when he grew older. More akin to a wild animal.
 - And Jacob's name means *heel-clutcher*. He was clutching his brother's heel on his way out. As if he were trying to pull Esau back to surpass him. Grabbing heels was an ancient idiom for being a cheat. For going behind someone's back to betray them.
 - Like I said, neither twin is described in positive terms. **One is a hairy little monster. The other is a tricky little cheater.** Neither one grows up to display any kind of character that we would deem worthy of being chosen by God. But that's the point, isn't it? **God's choice – his election of a people – is not dependent on us being deserving but on him being gracious.**

- ❖ Friends, that ought to encourage every one of us. **Because, if we're honest with ourselves, we know we don't deserve to be a part of God's people.** If all we had to rely on was the order of nature, we know we've sinned to such an extent that none of us measure up to the most basic rationale for being chosen. That being a good person. You would think a good person would be chosen by God. **But the testimony of Scripture is that, because of the ruinous effects of sin, there are no good people – that is, if we're to understand goodness in relation to the goodness of God.** Not just compared to fellow man.
 - Just consider the three founding patriarchs of the faith: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. **None of them are depicted in Genesis as good people deserving to be chosen. They're depicted as flawed people desperately in need of grace.** So if you feel like you can identify with that, then be encouraged. According to the order of nature, we're doomed. But according to the order of grace, we're hopeful and secure.

God's Sovereign Grace in Our Inheritance

- ❖ Which leads us to a third circumstance in this story where we see that grace on display. We see God's sovereign grace in our inheritance. Now, by inheritance, we can speak specifically of the birthright that Isaac would pass down to one of his boys. But more generally, by inheritance, we're referring to the inheritance of salvation. **The point is that our share in the inheritance of God's kingdom depends solely on his sovereign grace.**

- ❖ In v27, we're given a glimpse of these of twins after they grow up, and we see how different they are. It says, "*Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents.*" And that difference contributed to the parents playing favorites. Look at v28, "*Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.*"
 - **And then, in vv29-34, we're given a short vignette that puts on display their differences.** One day, Esau returns from the field exhausted and utterly famished. Jacob is cooking some red stew that must have smelled delicious to his brother. "*³⁰And Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stew, for I am exhausted!"*"
 - **But Jacob – that little heel-clutcher – exploits his brother's hunger, taking advantage of him.** "*³¹Jacob said, "Sell me your birthright now." ³²Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" ³³Jacob said, "Swear to me now." So he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob.*"

- ❖ **Now this depiction of Esau is not flattering. He's an impulsive man driven by appetite.** By immediate wants and desires. He has no vision and little concern for the future. Especially when it pertains to the Abrahamic covenant. To the Promise to be God's people, secure in God's kingdom, settled in God's land.
 - **When you calculate all the ages we're given in Genesis, you realize Abraham was still alive when the twins were growing up.** They were fifteen when their grandfather died. That means Abraham had plenty of opportunities to tell them about the Promise. I can just imagine him pointing to the night sky, telling his grandsons about how God promised to grow his people as numerous as the stars in the heaven.
 - **But apparently Esau didn't believe God's Word.** He didn't care for God's promises. It says, at the end of v34, that he "*despised his birthright.*" Bottom line, he didn't share in the faith of Abraham. He wasn't looking forward to the kingdom to come. Since he was too busy living in the moment.

- ❖ Once more, this is where Jacob differed. Jacob did look forward. He had vision. He believed his grandfather's stories and wanted a share in that Promise. **Unlike Esau, Jacob shared in the faith of Abraham.** His mother probably told him the prophecy about the older serving the younger. He had faith in that.
 - **But the problem is that he thought he had to make it happen.** And he was going to use any means necessary to secure that blessing. Even if that means exploiting his brother's impulsive nature. His plan is pretty cruel and calculating.

- ❖ **You see, Jacob had the foresight to know that if he didn't secure the birthright, then he'd end up with nothing.** Later on, in Deuteronomy 21:17, Mosaic Law codifies the custom that a father treats his firstborn son as his principal heir and grants him twice the inheritance compared to any other sons. So let's say a man had six sons. The inheritance would be divided into six portions. The oldest gets two portions, and the remaining sons have to split four portions. But that means if there are only two sons, the oldest gets everything.

- ❖ Jacob had the foresight to figure this out. And enough faith in the Promise to seek the birthright for himself. **But let's be clear: He's not a good guy at this point.** He has a long ways to go. He still needs spiritual renewal and transformation. That won't come until later.
 - But at this point in the story, **Jacob is purposely portrayed as an unsympathetic protagonist. He's not godlier or nobler than his brother.** Esau might be rash and impulsive. But Jacob is manipulative and conniving.

- ❖ But the fact that Jacob manages to secure the birthright – the fact that he's a recipient of grace at this point in his life – that just proves God's grace is *not* a reward. **Grace is not a response to your noble character and godly behavior. No, grace is the very source and power behind such character and such behavior.**
 - Just think about it. Jacob received grace when he was behaving selfishly. When he was only thinking of himself and acting so cruelly towards his brother. That's when grace found him. If you think that doesn't make sense. If you think that's not fair. That only good people deserve such grace. Then you still don't know what grace is. **God's grace doesn't come afterwards to reward the godly. His grace comes first, and that's what makes you godly.**

- ❖ When you hear people complain about the church being full of selfish, cruel people, there's no need to get defensive. Just acknowledge it and then immediately thank God for his grace. For how it's not repelled by our selfishness or cruelty. **But rather how his grace draws near to wretched sinners like us, who are prone to grasp after heels.**
 - **In fact, Grace came so near that it took on flesh in the person of Jesus.** Who was betrayed by another heel-clutcher. Not a brother but a friend in his inner circle. Which resulted in Jesus's arrest and trial and his eventual death on a cross. It appeared that all was lost. That is, until he rose from the dead on the third day. Then it became apparent that Jesus was fulfilling the ancient Genesis 3 prophecy of the promised offspring who would, one day, bruise the head of the serpent. **Even as that ancient enemy will bruise his heel (Gen 3:15).**

- ❖ That's good news to all heel-clutchers out there. To all of us who (if we're honest) are just as selfish and cruel as Jacob. **To us, Jesus embodies grace by taking our place.** Receiving the penalty we deserve. His heel took the bruising. Not ours. That's grace.
 - **And anyone who receives that grace simply can't stay the same. Sovereign grace changes you.** It's more powerful, more sovereign, than our natural selfish impulses. That means, **slowly but surely, anyone who has experienced sovereign grace will be a different person.** But, as we'll see in Jacob's story, transformation takes time.
 - That's what encourages me when I encounter the really long lifespans of these patriarchs in Genesis. **Because whether it's Abraham, Issac, or Jacob, it's clear that these men of faith are works-in-progress throughout the course of their long lives.** Even at old age, they make grave mistakes. We'll see that happen to Isaac next week in chapter 26.

- ❖ Friends, I want to invite you to receive God's sovereign grace. **For those who aren't Christians, please don't brush this invitation aside and assume you're not good enough.** That you're not deserving of God's grace. You're still missing the point. **Grace is only for the undeserving. Otherwise it wouldn't be grace.**
 - If you can be like Jacob. Like someone who's still pretty selfish at times – but someone who earnestly *seeks* the inheritance of heaven – then you're a perfect candidate for God's grace. You can receive his grace today by faith.

- ❖ And for those of you who are believers, who have received his grace in the past, I invite you to receive it anew. **You and I are still works-in-progress. We always need fresh encounters of God's abundant grace.** So no matter how far you've grown apart from God – no matter how unlovely you might feel – just know there's love for you here in the arms of our good and gracious God.