

The Promise Continued!

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 28 July 2024

Preacher: Joe Hall

- [0 : 00] Well, I don't know how you're feeling about God's work in the world this morning, but looking around, it's easy, isn't it, to be confused and perhaps a bit disappointed.
- If God is God, why isn't the growth of his family simple and straightforward? Perhaps we see division over faith in our own families, those who we love who don't as yet love the Lord Jesus.
- We experience, don't we, frustration in the progress of the gospel beyond our families. Not everyone that we reach out to responds rightly.
- Some people take months or years to get there. Some people show great promise and then turn back and say, no, thank you. Others, perhaps, are frustrated or angry that we would even say anything about Jesus to them at all.
- We hit setbacks in the work of the church. Sometimes there just aren't the people to do what needs to be done. Sometimes there isn't the money. Sometimes scandals muddy our witness.
- [1 : 13] And we wonder, if God has promised to grow his family, to build his church, why does his promise seem to be such a struggle?
- This morning, we're dropping back into Genesis chapter 25. If you've joined us recently, you wouldn't know that we finished chapters 12 to 25 about this time last year.
- And I couldn't believe this, but we covered chapters 1 to 11 two whole years ago. So I'm not expecting you to remember Genesis up to this point.
- But verse 19 in our passage helps us find our bearings, doesn't it? This is the account of the family line of Abraham's son, Isaac. This is the eighth bookmark in Genesis.
- There are 10 altogether. Genesis uses the word toledot, which means something like the genealogy of or the family history of. This is a book about a family.
- [2 : 17] And today we're coming to the family history of Isaac, Abraham's son. Now, do you remember this family? Remember this family?
- Last season in Genesis, we saw how God chose a total stranger called Abraham and called him out of the world to the place where he would show him.
- And God made a great whopping big promise to Abraham, didn't he? The blessing included three M's. Three M's.
- Now, is this all flooding back? Three M's. What were they? Do you remember? No. That God would multiply him, grow his family, he'd have more children than there are stars in the night sky.
- That God would magnify him, make him great. He'd be the father of nations, of kings. And Abraham would be the mediator of God's blessing to others.
- [3 : 18] Through him and his family, God would bless every family of the earth. But that hasn't been plain sailing. God has faithfully kept his word.
- But time and time and time again, Abraham has failed to trust God to keep his promises. One effect of that is there in verses 12 to 18, just before our reading.

If you look there, it's the family line of Abraham's son, Ishmael, who Sarah's slave, Hagar the Egyptian, bore to Abraham. A reminder that God's family has often lived by the creed of Sinatra.

Sarah, I did it my way. Abraham and Sarah decided God was just taking too long to keep his promise to grow the family. So together they forced their slave, Hagar, to become a kind of surrogate for their child.

But despite their sin, God still kept his promise. He gave Sarah a child, Isaac, in her old age, who would inherit the promises that God had made to his dad.

[4 : 27] So now this is picking up the story of Isaac, the second generation in this family of faith. And by this point, we're probably hoping now we're good to go, right?

Right, now we're free, right? They've got Isaac, the promised son. Isaac's got a wife, Rebecca. They can carry on the family. Nothing's going to stop us now. Now, that within a few short verses, very, very quickly, we hit that same question that hung over the whole of Abraham's life.

Did you see it? Infertility. Sarah couldn't have children. Now Rebecca seemingly can't either. But within an equally short space of time, that question is resolved.

Not quickly in time, I should say. Did you see verse 20 tells us Isaac was 40 when he married Rebecca? And verse 26 tells us that he was 60 when Rebecca gave birth.

So for 20 years, they prayed for children. I think we can certainly say that they were confusing and painful years.

[5 : 43] But Genesis covers those 20 years in 14 words, which tells us that infertility isn't going to be the test for Isaac in the way it was for his mom and dad.

Their test will, in fact, be the opposite. Rebecca conceives, but verse 22, the babies, plural, jostled within her.

And she said, why is this happening to me? Do you see that question? If God is God and he has promised, why isn't the growth of his family simple and straightforward?

We've gone from having none and tearful prayers to having two, and they're wrestling within me. It's a struggle. Why does it seem so difficult?

Well, thankfully, God tells us in these verses, he answers Rebecca's prayer. And then we begin to see how God's answer works itself out in the life of his family.

[6 : 51] And so those are our two points this morning. Let's listen to God. And firstly, see it's part of his plan. Part of his plan. Now, in lots of ways, Isaac and Rebecca, they're great parents.

Unlike Abraham and Sarah, they seem, don't they, to trust God implicitly. When they were struggling to conceive, Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife.

And when Rebecca conceived and started to feel the babies not just kicking, but wrestling in her womb, she went to inquire of the Lord. Now, they'll have their own issues, as we'll see, but it's reassuring, especially perhaps if you are a parent, to see that your own past failures and doubts don't determine the strength of your children's faith.

Abraham and Sarah were hardly the godliest mom and dad at times, and yet Isaac has grown up to be a prayerful man of God with a godly wife.

But if our failures don't determine our children's future, well, neither do our successes. Isaac and Rebecca were, in lots of ways, the kind of parents that you would look up to.

[8 : 09] The family at church, your younger parents would go to and ask, how do you do it? How do you keep worshiping, praying, when you've got children that young at home, twins even? But when Rebecca went to ask the Lord, why is this happening to me?

The Lord's reply isn't so straightforward, is it? Just look at verse 23 with me. It's such an important verse. The Lord said to her, two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated.

One people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger. The reason they're fighting now, says God, is because they will be fighting for the rest of their lives.

And not only them, but their families, the nations that would come from them, will be tussling for supremacy for hundreds of years to come. You see that straight away, don't we?

These brothers can't even sit down over a bowl of soup together without bickering. See, this is God's promise about the future of his family. The last big section of Genesis started with words that the next 13 chapters were really just the fulfillment of.

[9 : 30] Linda read them greatly for us earlier. God made a promise to Abraham, and the rest was history. Well, friends, 25 verse 23 holds the same position in this section.

God speaks right at the start and says, this is what's going to happen. It's his plan. This is how my promise to Abraham is going to continue into the next generation.

God has made decisions about these children's lives before ever they were born. Just like he's made decisions about their father and their grandfather's lives, right?

There was nothing special about Abraham. Got no reason to think he was any different from anyone who lived where he was. It wasn't that God knew that he would be the best of a bad bunch.

In fact, the record shows that he was worse than many of the people that he met on his travels. But God chose him to be the father of the faithful.

[10 : 40] And God chose to give him a son in his extreme old age. My mom remembers being called an elderly prima gravida, an elderly and old age first time mom.

She had nothing on Sarah. He was 90 when she gave birth. Abraham was 100. But it's clear that wasn't a weird accident or a lucky try.

It was God giving two people way beyond the natural time a miracle child. Because God had chosen Isaac to inherit the promises.

Even though Abraham already had a son, Ishmael. So now God says he has made a choice between Isaac's two sons. Normally the firstborn would be first.

Not only out of the womb, but in life. Poor position, the best chances. But against the run of play, God has said the older shall serve the younger.

[11 : 43] The firstborn will come second this time. Now why is that? Because it proves that God is in control of seeing his promises through and not us.

Human norms and culture and tradition would have chosen the older son. Daddy Isaac would have chosen his older son. He favored his firstborn.

But against that, the faithful God has chosen for his promises to carry on into the future through the younger son. And not the older.

And not because of these kids' potential, what they would do in life. But because it shows that there is no fluke. There is no accident in God's purposes.

It shows that the Lord himself is completely in charge of keeping his promises in exactly the way that he chooses.

[12 : 49] Now that raises loads of questions. I can see it on your faces. Okay, first Sunday back and we're in really deep, aren't we? It was actually a relief for me to read in our kind of subordinate standard, the Westminster Confession of Faith this week, that this doctrine, which we call predestination, it calls it a high mystery.

A high mystery. If you're not completely sure that you get God's decision, that's okay. Because none of us really do.

But here are three truths from these verses I just want to press into to help us. One is as long as history. One is as high as heaven.

And one is as big as your home. Okay, the truth that is as long as history is that God is 100% in charge of seeing through his promises.

Not one detail of history is left to chance. But how much more, friends, is that true when it comes to God's number one promise to grow his family, build his church, bless every family of the earth in Christ?

[14 : 06] Right? God did not say, did he? I'll see how these twins get on and decide after a few years. You know, who's the better bet? Who can I rely on out of these two? No, if he had, I'm pretty sure it would have been neither of them.

Neither brother covers himself in glory. Can't even eat a bowl of soup together without fighting. They are not the heroes of the story. No, the Lord is.

The Lord is the hero of his own story. And he does not leave a single punctuation mark to the mercy of human error and corruption.

You know, sometimes we are uncomfortable, aren't we, with the idea that God takes these choices out of our hands. You want to say, what about free will?

You know, these brothers, they didn't get a say in their own future. But Genesis, I think, turns that question around. Isn't it a much less comfortable thought that God might leave the success of his plan down to the choices of people like Jacob and Esau?

[15 : 13] People like us? Friends, the way God's family grows isn't how you or I would choose for it to grow, but left to our own choices, would we even be part of it at all?

The past week of our lives says we wouldn't even be part of it unless God had first loved and chosen us. The Lord has promised to give human beings his blessing again after we have forfeited it through our sin and he has not left the success of that plan down to chance or human choice.

It's his church to build. It's his family to grow. And no one can mess with his plan. He is in charge of keeping his promises. And brothers and sisters, we can trust God with his own story even when we don't get why he's doing it like this.

The second truth that is as high as heaven is that if God's choice is to bless us, that is a choice that we do not deserve.

The younger brother Jacob was born gripping his brother's heel, which is where he gets his name. Jacob means something like heel grasper, which in Hebrew is what you would call someone sneaky and deceptive.

[16 : 35] And Jacob lives up to his name. If Esau is sort of the Uruk-hai of the family, a bit of a brute, comes in from the field dripping sweat, gobbling down bread and stew, well, Jacob is the worm tongue, sneaky, scheming in the shadows, tricking his brother into making a choice that will destroy his life.

I don't know about you. I wouldn't want either of them to be my brother. We don't grow to love Jacob. And yet God has chosen Jacob worm tongue to receive his blessing.

Over the next few weeks, you will wonder how could God love him? Why would God choose him? But God chooses freely to love him.

Friends, God's choice to love us, to bless us in Christ, is a choice that we have done nothing to deserve. God did not look at your life and think, you're going to do great things for me. You're going to have a once in a generation faith.

You're going to change the world to me. So he saw you before ever you were born, before you had done anything good or bad, and said, I set my everlasting love on you.

[17 : 54] You will be mine in Christ. God's love is his love to give.

He loves us because of his free grace and not because of anything in us. Now that should deeply humble us if we're Christians today.

The difference between you and your neighbors, your friends, your colleagues, is not something that was ever in your power to decide. You are not a Christian because you got something right, because you made a better decision.

You are a Christian. You are a Christian in spite of doing everything wrong. If you think that you're here because of the sort of person that you are, the sort of family that you came from, well, you've got it all upside down.

Possibly we wouldn't choose each other to be part of God's family. Possibly we wouldn't choose ourselves. But if you're in Christ, your place in God's family was decided before the beginning of time.

[19 : 02] You were chosen before the foundation of the world for the praise of his glorious grace. After calling it a high mystery, the confession goes on.

This doctrine, it says, is to be handled with special prudence and care so that men, from the certainty of their calling, may be assured of their eternal election.

That is not in doubt of it. So it says, the doctrine shall provide reason for praise, reverence, and admiration of God, and for humility, diligence, and abundant consolation to all who sincerely obey the gospel.

Because if God has chosen to love us, it is purely, purely of his grace. The third truth to press into that is as big or as small as your home, briefly, is that your influence over your children's or your grandchildren's, your nieces, your nephews' lives comes second to God's plans for them.

Having children in your life or younger people you've seen grow up in church, prayed for, disciplined, we know that relationship, it comes with a sense of responsibility, right, that doesn't leave us when those children leave.

[20 : 26] And especially if those children are not walking with the Lord, we will wonder, was it something that I did or didn't do?

If I'd done it differently, could it have changed things for them? Friends, these verses remind us that we are not in control of our children's destinies.

We have real responsibility, but our responsibility for our children lies underneath and within God's sovereignty. You think about it, some of you grew up in homes where there was, there were no family prayers.

The Bible was never opened. You never heard about Jesus. But since then, you have come to hear about him and you have fallen in love with him. And yet, we know others too, don't we, where the Bible was always open in the family home.

So many, so many prayers prayed. And yet, since then, those have turned away from Christ. Can you explain that?

[21 : 31] Or what about children who grew up in the same home with the same influences, the same prayers prayed for them, the same gospel shared in the same way, and some will trust it with their whole hearts and others will push it away with both hands.

And with all the unanswerable questions that that raises, friends, God's sovereignty gives us a place to rest from having to find an answer that we can understand.

Jacob and Esau were conceived in the same womb at the same time. They were born on the same day. You couldn't get two people with a more identical start in life.

Yet, their future was not ultimately down to Isaac and Rebecca, however hard they tried to make it that way. Friends, we should try hard to provide the best environment for our children to know and love the Lord.

But God does not leave the outcome of our children's destinies in our weak hands. Isn't that a freeing truth?

[22 : 35] we still have so many questions, but in this Lord, we have somewhere to take them. We can entrust our children to his purposes, leave our anxieties in his hands because he is in control and he keeps his promises.

I hope today these verses help us to trust him, to rest in his plans. But God's plans play out, don't they, through our priorities in life.

We're not robots. We have wants, we have feelings, plans of our own, and as much as Genesis comforts us today with the truth that God's plan is foolproof, it also challenges us with the truth that who we are and our priorities do matter.

Secondly, then, that's considered God's priorities, our priorities, sorry, our own priorities in life. Now, our two boys, Caleb and Samuel, they get on most of the time, but some of you know they are chalk and cheese.

How does that happen in a family? They're so different. And so with Jacob and Esau, right, they're their own people, they're different. Esau was outdoorsy, a man of the open country.

[23 : 56] I met a pastor once from the States, who had a kind of hideout in the woods where he would go to prepare his sermons and he kept a crossbow there in case a deer would walk past and he should stalk it.

Right, Jacob is like that. He's that kind of guy, dirt under his fingernails, bow slung over his shoulder. Jacob is an indoor cat, right?

He is content to stay at home. He likes cooking. He's quiet, withdrawn. If literacy had been a thing, right, you could imagine him, you curled up in an armchair with a stack of books by the window drinking a fancy coffee.

Right, that's who he is. And whatever your own kind of interests or personalities, notice the Bible doesn't comment on that. People have different personalities and that's okay.

Right? But the point is they were really different. And as I said, Isaac and Rebecca weren't perfect parents. And we see that they got it so wrong in verse 28.

[24 : 56] They had their favorites. Jacob loved what Esau brought home for the freezer. Rebecca loved Jacob. And as we'll go on, we'll see how that distorted experience of love shapes how their son's lives play out very much for the worse.

But Genesis wants us to see how these guys' differences shape their priorities and the decisions they make for themselves. God has made a choice between them, but they still have very real choices to make.

So it was that one day when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country famished. You can picture it, can't you? Esau, covered in dirt and sweat, he spent the day out in the field to get to eat a horse.

And literally, he says in verse 30, give me some of that red stuff. He's about to just down this entire cauldron of soup. Meanwhile, Jacob is putting the finishing touches on his signature stew.

Now it's not obvious whether Jacob has set this all up. He is a cunning trickster. And the soup is red soup, just like Esau. Or perhaps the thought occurred to him just then, this would be the perfect time to strike a deal with my brother.

[26 : 17] He's got a pot full of food. Esau's stomach is calling the shots, not his head. So Jacob uses his leverage and says, if you want some of the red stuff, sell me your birthrights.

And it's as if history holds its breath. Will God's promised reversal come true? will it be that the older will serve the younger, sell his inheritance to his younger brother?

It's a crazy deal. Quite literally, Jacob is saying, cross your name off dad's will and put my name in there instead and I'll give you some soup and bread.

And not a lifetime supply of soup and bread, a bowl of soup and a chunk of bread and I'll have your inheritance. Now, you would really have to be at death's door to take that deal, wouldn't you?

Right? Esau says, doesn't he, I'm about to die. I don't think he means that. He's a bit lightheaded, right? Low blood sugar. It's like when we say, I'm starving. We're not starving. It's hyperbole.

[27 : 30] We're just hungry. To say his inheritance as the firstborn son is worth nothing if he doesn't eat that red stuff right now is absolutely mad. But Esau swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob and ate his fill and went away.

Now, notice, there's so much that Genesis has not said a word about, right? The differences between these brothers, their personalities and interests, even mom and dad's mistake, Isaac and Rebecca's favoritism, not a word, but it does have something to say about this.

So Esau despised his birthright. Translation, he has made a catastrophic choice. Genesis is clear, isn't it?

Esau is responsible for sealing his own fate even though Esau's choice set God's plan in motion that the older would serve the younger. Friends, I can't stand in front of you and say anything else than that.

That is what Scripture says. The Bible says it's both true. God was in control and Esau made a terrible choice. The kind of person that Esau was and the way he ordered his life and priorities led up to the choice he made and that choice was the unfolding of God's plan.

[28 : 59] Listen in the Bible to the way the book of Hebrews warns us then from these verses. It says this, make every effort to live in peace with everyone and be holy.

Without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.

See to it that no one is sexually immoral or is godless like Esau who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son.

It doesn't say, does it, don't worry about your choices because God's got a plan. It doesn't say let go, let God. It says make every effort. See to it.

Don't be godless like Esau who gave up his inheritance for a bowl of soup. Think about it. You can't blame God's plan if you didn't know what it was before you took the decision.

[30 : 00] God's plans for us are hidden but we deal, don't we, with what's right in front of us. We make choices. So if Esau's choice was mad, how much infinitely crazier then, says Hebrews, to give up your inheritance in heaven just so you can hold on to a grudge or indulge your secret lusts or follow the crowd at school, at uni, at work.

Friends, you have real choices to make this week. Imagine giving up eternal life just to satisfy your sinful appetites for a few short years.

You know what people in the church say, don't you? I've prayed about it and I feel that this is what God wants for me. I've prayed about it.

That's the last word. Now the Bible doesn't deal, does it, precisely with every single decision that we might make in life but it does give us priorities.

It does give us principles, teaching that shape every single decision that we make. So however much you've prayed, if what you're doing goes against the word of God, it is not God's will for ye.

[31 : 23] And so if that is ye and today you are selling off the family silver to live your best life now, maybe in secret, maybe in the open, you need to turn around, take the warning.

Jesus says this, what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? I hope for every single one of us sitting here right now, the answer is nothing, Lord.

I wouldn't sell my soul for the world. There is nothing that I would give to lose my eternal inheritance with you.

If you can't say that now, don't just shrug it off. turn back, his love for you will be seen unfolding in the decisions you begin to make as you turn back to him.

Even the desire in your heart to do that is a sign of his call back to you. Come back, he says. We don't know all of God's plan, do we?

[32 : 29] It is a high mystery. But God has written down what we need to know in his words. So friends, decide today that you want to do life differently and put him first and let the sovereign Lord be Lord over your life and value his promises more than life itself.

And we will see his eternal love unfolding, working itself out then in our lives, in our families, in our church, as we turn to him, as we trust him and walk with him.

We're going to see more of that in the pages of Genesis in the coming weeks. But for now, let's pray together that that would be true of our lives and true of our church. Let's pray.

Paul writes, for I, as I have often told you before and now tell you again, even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ.

Their destiny is destruction, their God is their stomach, and they glory in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and we eagerly await the Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

[34 : 18] And our Father, we come even with tears, and our hearts hurt, Lord, as we think of those who we know who are enemies of the cross, Lord, those who have given themselves over to their own appetites, Lord, whose mind is on the things of this world.

Father, we grieve that, and we know, our Father, that in your plan you are patient, you are gracious and loving. Father, we long to see your love worked out in the lives of those we love, and we commit them to you, and we ask, please, Lord, that in your mighty power you would bring many to the feet of Jesus to acknowledge him as Lord and to set their hearts on him.

Father, we pray for ourselves who have done that, and we ask, Lord, that you would keep that inheritance always before us, the promise, Lord, that Jesus will come, that our bodies will be made like his, that the world will be put right, Lord, that we will be with him forever.

Lord, how we pray that that promise would be more real to us than anything in this life. Father, we thank you that there's nothing that we could do, Lord, to twist your arm, that you might give it to us, but Lord, freely and graciously, Lord, you give us your promise in Jesus.

So, Lord, help us, we pray today, to take it with both hands and to trust you with our whole hearts, and Lord, that that would be seen in our decisions this week, that we would choose, Lord, that you would be the Lord of our life and that your word would rule over us.

[36 : 11] This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.