

Grace (Eventually)

Genesis 25:21-26

Rev. Dan Schumacher

Genesis chapter 25, verse 28: "Isaac loved Esau...; but Rebekah loved Jacob."

It was several years ago now. I had been invited to preach in our weekly chapel service for our seminary. I no longer remember the passage or even the point of the sermon, but in the midst of it I shared with my classmates and professors that Christen and I had reached the place in our lives where we had decided to try and have children.

We didn't know then what we now know. We had no idea where that road would take us back in those early days. We didn't know it would lead us down the emotionally freighted path of infertility, with all its pills, its needle pokes, and its never-ending source of discouragements. At that early stage, we were blindly optimistic and blissfully ignorant. And so, I openly shared with my classmates and my professors of our decision to become parents.

Afterwards, one of my professors, Dr. Israel Galindo, walked up to me in the hallway and put a book in my hand. "For your future journey," he said as he gave me the gift. It was a book written by him with the tongue-in-cheek title, *10 Best Parenting Ways to Ruin Your Child*.

The first one on his list? "Put your child's happiness first as the guiding value in your home."

To give an example of what this rule for ruining your child looks like, he told a story of when he was still the principle of a large, academically-elite, private Christian school. On the first day of school, not twenty minutes after the first bell had rung, a young mother, new to the school walked into his office, sat down, and said, "I want to take my daughter out of school."

She said she was making the decision because her daughter didn't like it there. Never mind the great education it would provide her daughter or the fact that she'd already paid the first and last month's tuition or had already bought the school uniforms and purchased the books, and never mind that the young girl had only been in the school for a whole whopping twenty minutes; she wanted to pull her daughter out. Galindo said that it became clear to him in that moment that this mother had zero tolerance for seeing her daughter unhappy (5-6).

Can you imagine what kind of teenager that young girl turned into with parents who saw it as their primary responsibility to ensure their daughter was always happy? If she were in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, she would have been Veruca Salt: "I want it, and I want it *now!*"

The other rules on Galindo's list of ways to ruin your child include:

- Making your child the focus of your marital relationship.
- Doing things for your child that he or she can do for him or herself.
- Mapping out your child's life based on your own dreams and aspirations.
- Getting involved in fights between siblings.
- Arguing with your child.
- Allowing your child to see that he or she can make you feel guilty.
- Calling on your spouse to be the disciplinarian. ("Just wait until your father gets home." or "You better not let you mom see you do that.")
- Telling your child to do something two or three times.
- And his last one: Dropping your child off at church – and then go get coffee or play golf or mow the lawn.

If I were Galindo, I might add an eleventh rule to the mix for how to ruin your child: "Leave no question in the minds of your children as to which one is your favorite."

"Isaac loved Esau...; but Rebekah loved Jacob" (Gen. 25:28).

The story of Esau and Jacob is one of my favorite stories in all of scripture, because it feels a whole lot like real life: twins who ended up being polar opposites; a marriage strained by parents doting on each of their favorites; boys born into a feud that lasted well into adulthood; a family simultaneously striving to live under faith in God *and* marred by utter dysfunction.

Christen's dad used to have a little ceramic vase with a cork lid that he kept on his book shelf. On the front, it read, "Our family puts the 'fun' in dysfunctional."

If we read them right, the Biblical stories do not hide us from ourselves. They *expose* us to ourselves. If I read it slow enough, see some of myself and my family in the story of Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Esau – and I'm guessing you do, too.

The story of Israel is the story of a dysfunctional family redeemed by God. Here's the thing: that's our story, too. H. Stephen Shoemaker says it like this: "All God's children got dysfunction." And, if God left us to our own devices, we might never escape it.

Honestly, it's hard to know where to put the blame for the dysfunction in that family.

Surely Jacob should be held accountable for his own choices. As a young man, he was clearly a liar and cheat who would do whatever was needed to get what he wanted.

Esau wasn't much better. Whether he was just as dumb as a brick or was really so famished that he believed he might actually die without a bowl of his brother's stew, he still traded his entire inheritance for a bowl of tomato soup. How dense can you be?

And, Isaac and Rebekah's practice of choosing favorites surely didn't help the two polar opposite brothers reconcile any of their differences.

Everyone was at fault, *everyone* was to blame. It seems even *God* had a hand in the chasm that formed between the twin brothers.

While still in the womb, Rebekah could feel them “struggling” against each other. That image isn’t meant to be understood so much as a physiological problem as much as a *theological* one.

Rebekah sought the LORD’s council. And what did God say?

God said: “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” (Gen. 25:23).

That’s not what I would call a *good* word from God. It’s the kind of prophetic oracle you don’t want to hear; the kind you wish you could *un*-hear.

What we want to hear God say is: “Don’t worry. Everything will be fine. They’re just brothers is all. Sure, they’re going to fight. Sure, they’re going to have ups and downs, but all brothers do. Rebekah, you are a great mom. It’s all going to work out just fine.”

But that’s not what God said. God said, “It’s worse than you think, Rebekah. They’re going to be divided, and that division is only going to get worse, and it’s not going to be pretty.”

I have to tell you, I struggle with God’s words here, because I can’t tell if God is merely *describing* what will be or if God is *prescribing* it.

In a song he wrote called “Sames and Opposites,” the comedian, Demetri Martin, has a line that goes, “Saying ‘I apologize,’ is the very same as saying, ‘I am sorry.’ They’re the very same... unless you’re at a funeral.”

Think about it. Saying, “I apologize” in the context of a funeral suggests *agency* — as in I was the one who caused this funeral in the first place, so I am apologizing.

What I can’t tell and what isn’t explained and what scripture just won’t make clear for me is if God is *describing* the divide between Jacob and Esau or *declaring* it, as if it is by design of God’s will.

I think it’s easy to lay this family’s dysfunction at God’s feet. After all, they *are* the family living under God’s promise to Abraham. They are supposed to be set apart to help achieve God’s purposes in the world. Why wouldn’t God be calling the shots?

And if we look only at the start of the story, it’s easy to say that God’s words to Rebekah are clearly *prescriptive* — that God has destined the divide between the brothers. After all, that’s exactly how the story plays out early on.

Jacob tricks Esau out of his birthright for a bowl of soup. Then he steals Esau's blessing from their father. This sends the physically domineering Esau into a murderous rage. Jacob has to flee for his life. All plays out just as God had *predestined* back before they were even born (Gen. 25:23).

But, that's not where their story ends. That's only where it begins. The rest of the story is much more complicated, and we'll get into it another day, but let's stop to remember that Jacob and Esau had another encounter some twenty years later, when Jacob caught wind that his brother was coming for him with 400 of his biggest, baddest men (Gen. 32:6).

I wonder what Jacob felt like when he heard Esau was coming after him with an army. I wonder if he felt the blood rush from his face, if he felt his knees go weak, if he felt that knot in the pit of his stomach.

We don't know, but we have hints. He moved his entire family — all fifteen of them including children — across a river in the middle of the night to try and protect them from his brother's wrath (Gen. 32:22-23). He sent an ark's worth of animals to his brother, too, to try and appease him (Gen. 32:13-14).

And Jacob prayed a foxhole prayer: "Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother... for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all" (Gen. 32:11).

Then he spent the night wrestling with God (Gen. 32:24) — the very same God who had told his mother how bad things would get between her two sons. And on that night when he wrestled with God, we find the situation at its worst — brother coming to kill brother and to slaughter his entire family.

But that's not what happened. After twenty years of separation and division, Esau ran across the field to hug his wayward brother in an act that foreshadows the parable of the prodigal son. Instead of retribution, what Jacob experienced was reconciliation — reconciliation twenty years in the making.

What had happened in those twenty years? What was lost by them?

God had once declared that the brothers would be divided — that two nations would issue from Rebekah's one womb. But that's only where the story began. It's not where the story ended.

You see, the truth is, God is not so much interested in where our stories begin, but in where they end.

In his book on how to ruin your children, Israel Galindo makes the claim that "faith is the single most critical human dynamic that we possess. It is formed in the first six

months of life and it is the last and only personal resource we will have during our last six months of life.”

He goes on to say, “At the end of life, little else matters — not the amount of liquidity in your portfolio, not your faded golf skills, not your past professional accomplishments, not your collection of china, antiques, or coins. All those material things, along with all the illusions [with which] we surround ourselves throughout life, fade away and leave us with the only personal resource that gives life meaning: our personal faith” (52-53).

He’s not wrong. I’ve never once sat at the side of dying person and heard them tell me how much they will miss their baseball card collection or their souvenir spoon collection.

When I sit down at the bedside of someone who is looking death square in the face, more often than not, they tell me how much they will miss their spouse and their children, how much they will miss their grandchildren, how much they will miss their church family.

— OR —

They tell me how much they *wish* they’d made amends with their children before death was so close, how much they *wish* they’d worked to reconcile their broken relationship with their mother or father before they’d died, how much they *wish* they’d made peace with God before now.

And — here is the truth — if you are hearing this, if you’re reading it or watching it, then it’s not too late. It’s not too late to make amends with those you’ve hurt and who have hurt you. It’s not too late to reconcile a broken relationship. It’s not too late to make peace with God, because our God is not nearly as interested in how our stories begin as in how they end.

Amen.