

## A Divisive Answer to Prayer?

### Genesis 25:19-28

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Sunday, July 13, 2008

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Last week, you may remember that I promised I would have a letter to you this week regarding the General Assembly. I apologize—I've been working on that letter all week; it's not quite finished. It's a little tougher than I thought, and I hope to get it out tomorrow, if you're anticipating that. Let us join together in prayer. Now, Lord Jesus Christ, as you have taught us and led us into the depths of your prayers, may you show us through your Word, even from ancient times, how you have guided people through the answers to prayers, in the growth of life. Now minister to us, in the name of the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit—in whose name we gather and hear. Amen.

We know that doing God's will is not easy. As we discovered this past week, in Genesis chapter 24, there is a fine life fabric developed in the interwoven threads of God's purposes...God's answers...God's actions... our prayers... and our actions. You have heard some people say: "Be careful what you pray for." And I would put it another way: "Be careful when you pray. God will answer you in a way that may drive you to pray even more and more." In answering your prayers, God will set in motion hidden patterns of life—some even conflicted and dissonant—to invite you into a deeper lifelong partnership that will demand everything you are and all that you have—body, mind, soul, spirit—all of your strength. I believe that this is what God is inviting Rebekah and Isaac to experience. And let us see how God answers their prayer. For their prayer is birthed poignantly in the crisis of need, and born patiently in the crucible of everyday life.

Isaac and Rebekah are not able to have children. It is in the quandary of these unforeseen circumstances, particularly in light of God's promise that their children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren will be more multiple than the stars of the heavens; it seems strange to them that God has not provided a child. Over the years, I have known dozens of couples who wanted to have children but they could not conceive. The frustration, anger, blame, despair, grief, and manipulation due to unrequited desire for a child drives couples to do some crazy things. I have witnessed husbands and wives having affairs in hopes to get pregnant by another person. I have seen husbands and wives blame themselves and enter into personal depression. I have seen them blame each other and recess into separation and even isolation. I have seen them go through extraordinary, complex, repetitive, and expensive medical procedures; I know one couple who had to file bankruptcy because of the cost of trying to have a baby. I have seen couples lose their faith and drop out of the church because they become disillusioned with God and wonder if God is even listening to their prayers. I have also seen many couples who have heard God's answer to their prayers as a call to adopt children; and some, by a miracle of God, have actually had a child biologically in their midlife.

And often in God's very response to their prayer, there is a new seed planted in the gracious answer of God that seemingly grows like a weed into a new life dilemma, conceived within God's very solution to their problem. Sometimes we make the assumption that when God responds to a prayer, in that divine answer there is an implied guarantee that all future ramifications of that answer will be problem-free. As Walter Brueggemann says about this text in Genesis: "The simultaneous and paradoxical marks of gift and conflict dominate this story at the same time. One might have expected that births given in such graciousness would be for children who are removed and protected from conflict. But these children are called for the sake of conflict." These children are conceived and birthed, in fact, to have conflict.

Somewhere in our romanticized faith, we have misconstrued expectation that God's answers to prayer will somehow bring permanent joy and happiness. While the miracle of God will bring joy, it will also bring new challenges and new consternations. The answer to prayer will invite us into the next step of risk of what it means to follow Jesus into the counterculture of heaven, through the valley of the shadow of death... and continuing to wonder how we will carry the cross that Jesus has given to us, even in the face of answered prayer.

As we see here in Genesis, the answer to Isaac and Rebekah, and their prayer, brings further turmoil to their lives. The joy of the moment was that, in fact, the Lord granted Isaac's prayer and his wife Rebekah conceived— a wonderful, wonderful response from God. But then the new, urgent pattern of the answered prayer was, in fact, the children struggled together within Rebekah. And she said, "If this is the way it's going to be, why should I live?" And in addition, when Rebekah inquired of the Lord herself what was going on inside of her, she received an answer from God that probably made her wonder: Is the bad news greater than the good news? For you see, the Lord said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, two peoples born of you shall be divided. The one shall be stronger than the other, and the elder shall serve the younger." How can this be? How can God's wonderful answer to prayer lead to a conflicted and divided family... and even to a divided world? Lord, what kind of answer to prayer is this?

I know a couple who could not have children. They prayed for years, asking God to help them conceive. God did not answer their prayer but did lead them to adopt two sons, each from different foreign countries. There was great joy in their lives as they watched their two sons grow. It was only after a few years that they discovered that their older son did seem not have the ability to smile and enjoy life. At times he acted strange. There were other times he was even dangerous to himself and others. They were beside themselves with anxiety as to what they could do for this destructive son. "Why is this happening to us, Lord? You've answered our prayers and why have you given us a son who seems to be lost in darkness? What did we do wrong?" What could they do to remove this cloud that haunted their oldest boy? They consulted with doctors, counselors, psychiatrists, pastors, and friends, and yet there was no clear, emergent answer. The older he became, the darker his psyche grew. Some thought he was possessed by demons; they prayed for him to have those demons exorcised. Hundreds of hours of prayers and consultations were offered by friends, church, and family— for their son's release from this pervasive darkness in his life. Eventually, it was assessed that the boy had been terribly abused, either before he was born, or at his birth, or just after he was born. Unless God intervened, he was destined to be a narcissistic sociopath for the rest of his life; and the parents struggled with the dark implications of this outcome to prayer. How could this happen? How could the wonderful answer to the couples' prayer for a child become such a terrible burden for him, for them, and for those around them?

I believe Isaac and Rebekah had to be asking a similar question. Rebekah said and prayed repeatedly over the streaming years of their lives, that she was weary of the struggle between the two sons. The life choices of her eldest son, Esau, and the continued tensions between her and her husband about their opposite preferences for each of their sons became a recurring daily battle. How could such a wonderful answer to prayer become such a nightmare of family dissonance? The long-term dissonance and division in the family had to take its toll. Why would God answer such a deep longing of the human spirit for children with such a divisive and conflicted future? The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says, again, about this passage: "This family is marked by promise. It receives life as an unexpected gift. Promise requires an end to grasping and certitude, and embrace of precariousness. It is only God who gives life."

In the answer to prayer, as much as we want to control how it's all going to play out, in fact, only God is sovereign in how it moves into the future. This way, God answers prayer and gives life, with NOT a guarantee that excludes human will, error and tragedy, but, in fact, includes it. God works with us in the reality of our moral vulnerability... in a delicate artistry... in visceral perspicuity... with a temporal and daily acuity to what is really going on. In answer to our desperate prayers for life, God will give solutions. But contained within the womb of our Lord's responses, will be the embryonic cells of long-term additional conflicts, frustrations, and seemingly disintegrative destinies, as if predetermined by some demonic fate.

But, in fact, it's all part of God's plan— his providential and sovereign plan. This is not to say that God is the author of evil; but it is to say that God is the author of difference. And if we work with God prayerfully and assertively through the difference and the dissonance, God will transform us... transform the situation... and bring unexpected new, powerful, gracious answers beyond our wildest expectations. Jesus himself had something to say that was strikingly unusual for us, regarding the family and conflict. He said, "Do not think I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household. Whoever loves his father or

mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” Our Lord Jesus Christ himself accomplished God’s will by bringing conflict and division into a family. Why? Because, in the conflict and the division... in the prayers as they continue to unroll from our lips as we experience the pain and difficulty in life... we are driven into the very presence of God in deeper and deeper ways. We do not have the answer and we recognize only God being with us in the trouble can really bring solution and health. The pressure of the conflict moves us to ask for God’s help, and to find God’s life-changing solutions beyond our comprehension. In the midst of life’s troubles, we seek God with all of our hearts. And the presence of ongoing and pervasive conflict and division in a family or an organization drive us to disciplined, daily prayer; because God wants us to discover the life-giving surprise of his presence in the midst of the conflict. God does not want us to avoid or deny that; God does not want us to pretend that the dissonance does not exist. God wants us to pray without ceasing in the midst of the long battle; even where there may be no end in sight. God does not want us to abandon ship. Jesus not only creates the conflict, but brings the truth and the grace to solve it.

The metaphor of sibling rivalry permeates all of Scripture, from the beginning to the end; you know those stories: Cain and Abel; Ishmael and Isaac; Esau and Jacob; Jacob’s ten older sons; and Joseph; and then Jesus’ story of the elder brother and the prodigal son. The sibling strife in the Bible is always around who should be blessed by human standards, and who is really blessed by God’s plan and sovereignty. Esau should have gotten the nod, but God gives it to Jacob, even though he was deceptive, conniving; he was a scoundrel, in fact. God sets up such a battle from the beginning so we will prayerfully recognize what Jesus said about the culture of heaven being different than what our earthly expectations are: “The first shall be last; the last shall be first. Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, just as the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

In 1978, Vida and I became members of the UPC(USA) in California. That was the denomination preceding the denomination that this church is in today. Becoming Presbyterian Christians was a dramatic answer to our lifelong hunger to find a church that we could call ‘home,’ in which we were comfortable. God had given us a profound mutual answer to both of our prayers. There’s a deep sense in which our commitment to each other was interwoven with our commitment to becoming part of the Presbyterian Church. God answered our prayers. We soon discovered after we joined the church that, pregnant within our answer to prayer was the battle that the PC(USA) had been fighting over for many years— even since the 1900’s. We didn’t understand it well at the time, but we soon discovered not all mainline Presbyterians were evangelical like us. That was a frightening discovery. It seemed like there were two children in the family: one conservative and orthodox about Biblical authority; and one liberal and progressive. We had joined a divided family and we’d become participants in the war— this war to inherit God’s blessing somehow; to claim that the first-born birthright would belong to us and not to the ‘other’ person in the family. At the recent General Assembly where I was a Commissioner of the Presbytery, the battle continued to rage, albeit with more civility and grace, but with no less passion of difference. Will the blessing go to the conservative, who are orthodox? To the elder brother... or to the prodigal son who seems to be going a way that isn’t acceptable? Who will walk away with the primogeniture birthright? For me, God’s answer to prayer has led me to realize that the answer to my wife’s prayer and my prayer led us into a cosmic larger struggle that has moved us to grow, and to expand, and to deal with difference at a different level than we had ever anticipated.

I believe as an evangelical, I am part of the ‘right’ side of the family, the righteous inheritor of the mantle. But as I read the story of Jacob and Esau, sometimes I wonder to myself: is my righteous defense wrong? Jacob is not chosen by God because he’s so good; Esau is not sidelined by God because he’s so bad. God has plans that are beyond human imagination, assumptions and manipulation. While prayer seems initially and maybe even superficially about God healing our immediate hurt and solving our problems, prayer is pregnant with the astounding future. Through prayer, God invites us to enter into the deeper and more ultimate human struggles of life, and cosmic battles that haunt the universe—where heaven and hell seem to be fighting it out. In prayer God invites you into the deeper issues of human struggle.

An amazing thing happens in this spiritual war: we are drawn into the very presence of God. We are invited into the inner sanctum of the divine family. We are led to go where Jesus went— into the deep recesses and resources of the Father who loves all of his children. After all was said and done, Jacob learned God loved him and that he could love God. He discovered that he was, in fact, a manipulative,

devious, and deceptive man. He had been wrong to his brother. He, who had made Esau bow to him, was now to be humbled and bow before Esau to ask Esau for forgiveness and mercy. The last, in fact, did become first; but the first also became servant of his alienated brother. Don't be surprised when you find out that your prayers for God's help are given answers loaded with bigger concerns and greater conundrums. In those answers you will recognize that God is in the polarization, and God is in the trouble, even in the midst of the church... or the family... or the world. Because in prayer, God is inviting you to become a full participant in heaven's struggle: to bring every knee to bow, and every tongue to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord of all. Not just Jacob or Esau... not just conservatives or liberals.

Yes, we will find that the family is divided; but deeper than that, we will find that God is consistently and powerfully present in the midst of our struggle, our debates and our differences. And we will find God there. This is the reason why prayer often leads to further difficulty and pain—so that God can draw us in to a more dramatic sense of God's power, love, grace and sovereignty. So let us pray. And so we pray, our Lord Jesus Christ, that you would meet us in our deepest needs, beyond our expectations, in the midst of our worst pain and difficulties—that we would find you there. Even when the solution is not clear, even when the answer is not evident, help us to meet you, in the darkest place, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.