

# GENESIS—WEEK 20

## THE FAMILY SPLITS



F. Michael Slay  
*A DEEP Study*

**The Fellowship of Ailbe**

*The Cover Picture is Esau Selling his Birthright to Jacob by Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn (1606–1669) On display at The British Museum in London, England*

Isaac and Rebekah are married, and the family continues to grow. Abraham lives many more decades and is buried with Sarah. Rebekah is barren for a while, but God hears Isaac's prayers and she has twins.

Despite being the most blessed family in the whole world, the kids just can't seem to get along. The first-born, Esau, even sells his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of stew. Is he crazy or what?

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T. M. Moore, Principal  
[tmmoore@ailbe.org](mailto:tmmoore@ailbe.org)

Thank you.

Genesis 24:62–25:34 — The Family Splits  
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1 Genesis 24:62-67 (NKJV)

*Now Isaac came from the way of Beer Lahai Roi, for he dwelt in the South. And Isaac went out to meditate in the field in the evening; and he lifted his eyes and looked, and there, the camels were coming. Then Rebekah lifted her eyes, and when she saw Isaac she dismounted from her camel; for she had said to the servant, “Who is this man walking in the field to meet us?”*

*The servant said, “It is my master.” So she took a veil and covered herself.*

*And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah’s tent; and he took Rebekah and she became his wife, and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death.*

Comforted? Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death? What’s that all about?

Using scripture to interpret scripture, we find some solid clues. First, from Genesis 17:17, 23:1 and 25:20, we see that Isaac married Rebekah about three years after Sarah died.

Second, when Rebekah first asks who Isaac is, the servant says, “*It is my master,*” not “It is my master’s son.” Also, the servant described Isaac inheriting Abraham’s wealth in the past tense with the words “*to him he has given all that he has.*” The mantle has already been passed.

Third, Genesis 37:35 and 38:12 indicate that “comforted” refers to the completion of mourning. Isaac wasn’t neurotic about the death of his mother, but there was some unfinished business.

*Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah’s tent;*

That’s the key. Remember, God clearly appointed Rebekah to be Isaac’s wife. All that drama with the servant and Rebekah and her family confirms this. The family has a matriarch again—one clearly chosen by God.

This fills the void left by Sarah’s death and completes the transition.

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One of the main callings of a Christian is to help and comfort those in need. Grieving people almost always could use a little comforting—and sometimes more than that.

Don’t be afraid of trying to help. If you don’t know what to say, don’t say anything. Still, it’s good to ask questions such as, “How can I pray for you?”, “How can I help?”, or “Is there anything you need?”

And be prepared for a real answer. People in your church are comfortable with being loved.

Also ask God to show you what you can do to help. He may open your eyes to something new. If you feel called to this kind of ministry, check out the training programs that teach how to help hurting people.

Two good ones can be found at <https://stephenministries.org> and <https://www.hopelowcountry.org/>

2 Genesis 25:1-11 (ESV)

*Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah. She bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah. Jokshan fathered Sheba and Dedan. The sons of Dedan were Asshurim, Letushim, and Leummim. The sons of Midian were Ephah, Epher, Hanoch, Abida, and Eldaah. All these were the children of Keturah. Abraham gave all he had to Isaac. But to the sons of his concubines Abraham gave gifts, and while he was still living he sent them away from his son Isaac, eastward to the east country.*

*These are the days of the years of Abraham's life, 175 years. Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people. Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, east of Mamre, the field that Abraham purchased from the Hittites. There Abraham was buried, with Sarah his wife. After the death of Abraham, God blessed Isaac his son. And Isaac settled at Beer-lahai-roi.*

Abraham has a whole passel of sons by Keturah, but they're not important. Abraham is nice enough to them, but the passage reiterates that Isaac is the sole heir. These other sons are sent away to the east—specifically away from Isaac.

The Bible doesn't say why Abraham did this, but it sure sounds like it was to protect Isaac. Abraham has functioned like a king his whole life. When a king does this, the motive is obvious—to protect the heir to the throne from potential rivals.

But that makes the next paragraph all the more surprising. What's up with Ishmael showing up to help bury Abraham? Being the actual first born, isn't he “the big threat” to the throne? Yet here he is. He's been gone since Chapter 21. Why has he come back?

Scripture doesn't say, but we do have one clue. Sarah was the one who wanted Ishmael sent off. With her gone, they may have reconciled. While Ishmael isn't the covenantal heir, and he doesn't inherit the family fortune, God told Abraham, “*And I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring.*” — Genesis 21:13 (ESV)

Ishmael is family in a way that Keturah's sons are not.

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As crazy as all this drama seems, it's less crazy than much of the family drama we see today. People seem determined to ruin their lives. That's no surprise, given our sinful nature, but it's tragic.

The family is under attack in our society. That's a threat to everything because families are the foundation of our civilization.

No, that's not strong enough. Families are the foundation of civilization, period.

No, that's not strong enough either. Families are the foundation of life. Families are to us what schools are to fish. They are how we are supposed to live. Destroy the family and everything starts to unravel.

And guess what, everything is unraveling.

3 Genesis 25:12-18 (ESV)

*These are the generations of Ishmael, Abraham's son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's servant, bore to Abraham. These are the names of the sons of Ishmael, named in the order of their birth: Nebaioth, the firstborn of Ishmael; and Kedar, Adbeel, Mibsam, Mishma, Dumah, Massa, Hadad, Tema, Jetur, Naphish, and Kedemah. These are the sons of Ishmael and these are their names, by their villages and by their encampments, twelve princes according to their tribes. (These are the years of the life of Ishmael: 137 years. He breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people.) They settled from Havilah to Shur, which is opposite Egypt in the direction of Assyria. He settled over against all his kinsmen.*

The sons of Ishmael settled *from Havilah to Shur, which is opposite Egypt in the direction of Assyria*. Shur is Sinai; Havilah probably means the northern Arabian Peninsula. With both an Egyptian mother and grandmother, they are now “*settled over against all his kinsmen.*”

That last sentence is translated charitably in the ESV. The Hebrew word translated as “settled” is literally “fell,” and can indicate conflict. The NIV renders this as, “*And they lived in hostility toward all their brothers.*”

Ishmael’s line still rates being referred to as Abraham’s descendants—something Keturah’s sons don’t get—but it’s all downhill from there. In Genesis 37:25-36, when Joseph’s brothers sell him into slavery, the slave traders are called both Ishmaelites and Midianites. Midian was one of the sons of Keturah.

“Ishmaelites” seems to be the generic label for all of Abraham’s non-covenantal descendants, while Midianites is a specific reference to who these traders are.

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This passage lifts the lid on the Pandora’s Box of ethnic warfare. We’ve seen some wars already, such as Abraham rescuing Lot, but they ended. This is the dawn of a war that’s still going on. This manifestation of sin would qualify as the most unfortunate ever, except that it is such an airtight example of something that can’t be explained using secular reasoning (such as evolution). As horrible as it is, it’s useful because it’s such a perfect illustration of the doctrine of sin.

As Sherman said, “War is all hell.” But at least war about money or land or resources or some other valuable thing makes sense. People are just being violently selfish. That’s evil, but it’s not crazy.

But ethnic war is often costly with no prospect for gain. It’s stupid in the way robbing a gorilla is stupid; even if you succeed, he has no money. There’s no way to explain this in terms of people just being evil and selfish. It’s not rationally evil or selfish; it’s just nuts.

That’s sin.

Ethnic warfare and genocide go hand in hand. We all know the examples, and they are nauseating. Pray for an end to these horrors. It seems too far-fetched to even ask, but we are called to pray for such things.

Ask God to give mercy to the afflicted and to open the eyes of those duped by the forces of evil.

4 Genesis 25:19-23 (NKJV)

*Now Isaac pleaded with the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his plea, and Rebekah his wife conceived. But the children struggled together within her; and she said, “If all is well, why am I like this?” So she went to inquire of the LORD.*

*And the LORD said to her:*

*“Two nations are in your womb,  
Two peoples shall be separated from your body;  
One people shall be stronger than the other,  
And the older shall serve the younger.”*

Remember, the last part is the LORD answering the question, “*If all is well, why am I like this?*” The twins aren’t doing the usual twin thing in Rebekah’s womb; they’re really struggling. God tells her that they will become two nations; one will be stronger and the older child will “serve” the younger. They’re just the struggling kind.

The idea that *the older shall serve the younger* violates the normal order of things in that culture. The oldest son is assumed to be the principal heir. Esau will be born first, even if only by minutes, but he *shall serve the younger*.

God has this thing about overruling human traditions. The examples of non-firstborn greats in scripture are striking—Jacob, Joseph, David, etc.

God’s ways are not our ways.

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We should always be open to second-guessing ourselves. The United States was birthed by the words, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Yet, slavery wasn’t abolished nationwide until the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment was ratified in 1865, and women didn’t have universal suffrage until the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment was ratified in 1920.

Our sinful nature makes us overconfident, especially about our goodness. We tend to be sure we’re in the right even when we haven’t thought that much about something. This is an example of the classic idea, “You don’t know what you don’t know.”

CS Lewis illustrates this brilliantly with the behavior of Ransom, the main character in *Out of the Silent Planet*. He’s the hero, yet shows some amazing cluelessness—which the reader doesn’t even recognize until it’s pointed out. This is eye-opening and humbling. We would have done just as badly as he did.

Ask God to humble us and to open our eyes to errors we’ve never noticed before.

Pray that He will teach us to be less self-sure and more dependent on Him.

5 Genesis 25:24-34 (ESV)

*When her days to give birth were completed, behold, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy cloak, so they called his name Esau. Afterward his brother came out with his hand holding Esau's heel, so his name was called Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.*

*When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents. Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.*

*Once when Jacob was cooking stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was exhausted. And Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stew, for I am exhausted!" (Therefore his name was called Edom.) Jacob said, "Sell me your birthright now." Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" Jacob said, "Swear to me now." So he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.*

Think about what “*Esau despised his birthright*” means. Every father teaches his children about their family history, especially when it’s as awesome as this family’s is. Isaac had surely told them about their grandfather Abraham, about why they’re circumcised, and about how Abraham’s servant found their mother.

And that’s just the beginning. Their family history makes Alex Haley’s *Roots* look like a short story. Esau is a prince. He’s the eldest son and, don’t forget, *Isaac loved Esau*. His birthright isn’t just any old birthright; he’s the heir of **the** covenant. From birth, Esau has been taught that he’s special. Besides, Jacob’s command, “*Sell me your birthright now,*” doesn’t even make sense unless Esau’s birthright is a known commodity.

But Esau doesn’t care. He makes the fatuous claim, “*I am about to die.*” Give me a break. Isaac inherited all of Abraham’s wealth. No one in that family knows serious hunger, much less starvation.

The cold truth is that Esau doesn’t value his birthright because he doesn’t believe it.

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Esau’s real problem was lack of faith. Instant gratification was so much more important to him than religion that he traded his priceless covenant promise for a worthless bowl of stew.

This is how the health and wealth gospel attracts people; they don’t really need to believe all that much. Many modern American Christians are closer to that attitude than they’d like to admit. “I’ll make sacrifices for Christ; just don’t ask me to give up ...”

But Christ promised suffering and persecution in this life, not health and wealth. Health and wealth can happen; there’s nothing wrong with health or wealth. They’re good.

But Christianity isn’t about those things.

*Questions for reflection or discussion*

1. How can you tell when someone in mourning isn't handling things well and needs something more than just friendship?
2. What is the greatest threat to families?
3. Do you pray for big things, like revival or world peace?
4. Have you ever discovered that you were wrong about something you had been sure you were right about?
5. How did Christianity in America get so "soft"?