

SECOND EDITION

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO THE OLD TESTAMENT

LIVING IN
THE GRIP OF
RELENTLESS
GRACE

THE GOSPEL
IN THE LIVES OF

ISAAC & JACOB

IAIN M. DUGUID

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THE OLD TESTAMENT

*A series of studies on the lives
of Old Testament characters, written for
laypeople and pastors, and designed to
encourage Christ-centered reading, teaching,
and preaching of the Old Testament*

IAIN M. DUGUID
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FOREWORD

*The New Testament is in the Old concealed;
the Old Testament is in the New revealed.*

—Augustine

C oncerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look. (1 Peter 1:10–12)

“Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning, and when they did not find his body, they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see.” And he said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them

in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.
(Luke 24:22–27)

The prophets searched. Angels longed to see. And the disciples didn't understand. But Moses, the Prophets, and all the Old Testament Scriptures had spoken about it—that Jesus would come, suffer, and then be glorified. God began to tell a story in the Old Testament, the ending of which the audience eagerly anticipated. But the Old Testament audience was left hanging. The plot was laid out, but the climax was delayed. The unfinished story begged for an ending. In Christ, God has provided the climax to the Old Testament story. Jesus did not arrive unannounced; his coming was declared *in advance* in the Old Testament—not just in explicit prophecies of the Messiah, but also by means of the stories of all the events, characters, and circumstances in the Old Testament. God was telling a larger, overarching, unified story. From the account of creation in Genesis to the final stories of the return from exile, God progressively unfolded his plan of salvation. And the Old Testament account of that plan always pointed in some way to Christ.

AIMS OF THIS SERIES

The Gospel According to the Old Testament series was begun by my former professors, Tremper Longman and Al Groves, to whom I owe an enormous personal debt of gratitude. I learned from them a great deal about how to recognize the gospel in the Old Testament. I share their deep conviction that the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is a unified revelation of God and that its thematic unity is found in Christ. This series of studies will continue to pursue their initial aims:

- to lay out the pervasiveness of the revelation of Christ in the Old Testament

- to promote a Christ-centered reading of the Old Testament
- to encourage Christ-centered preaching and teaching from the Old Testament

These volumes are written primarily for pastors and laypeople, not scholars. They are designed in the first instance to serve the church, not the academy.

My hope and prayer remain the same as Tremper and Al's: that this series will continue to encourage the revival of interest in the Old Testament as a book that constantly points forward to Jesus Christ, to his sufferings and the glories that would follow.

IAIN M. DUGUID

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Almost every time I stand to preach in front of God's people, I pray the same simple prayer: "Lord, these are your sheep and this is your Word. Please feed your sheep from your Word and may you be glorified." The material in these chapters originated as sermons delivered to Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Oxford, England, which were then reworked and developed for Grace Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Fallbrook, California. The two congregations were very different geographically and demographically but are linked by a common love for God and his grace and a delight in his Word. God's Word remains good food for his sheep the world over. It is my prayer that you too will be fed from this solid food and that God will receive all the glory.

Many people have contributed to the making of this book. Al Groves and Tremper Longman were my teachers in seminary and had a formative influence on my thinking about Christ in the Old Testament. As I have taken over from them as series editor, I have sought to continue faithfully what they began. My former student and teaching assistant at Grove City College, Amanda Martin, has shepherded this revision and is always a joy to work with. My wife, Barb, has now clocked more than thirty years as my most discerning critic and best friend, which attests to her remarkable grasp on the gospel and ability to apply it to herself first, and then to others all around her. Growing up, my children Jamie, Sam, Hannah, Rob, and Rosie were the best front-row audience any preacher could wish for; these days, with the addition of our son, Wayne, and

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daughter-in-law, Peggy, they are forging their own pathway, safely in the grip of God's relentless grace.

It is now more than thirteen years since my mother, Eileen Duguid, went to be in God's closer presence. I still miss her. She encouraged and nurtured my earliest interest in God's Word and eagerly distributed her little boy's books to anyone who could be persuaded to read them. This new edition of the book is therefore once more affectionately dedicated to her memory.

INTRODUCTION: RELENTLESS GRACE

With the death of Abraham and his burial in the Promised Land (Gen. 25:7-11), his part in the story of redemption came to an end. Abraham fought the good fight and persevered to the end, and the torch passed on to his descendants. In the last part of Genesis 25, therefore, we move into a new era, marked by the formula “These are the generations of Isaac, Abraham’s son” (Gen. 25:19). Here the story begins of Isaac and Rebekah and of their sons Jacob and Esau. This is the story of the next generations, those who are assigned the task of following in the shadow of greatness. How will they measure up to the spiritual legacy they have inherited from their father?

The Bible is not particularly flattering to those whose lives it records: the account is faithful, warts and all. In *The Gospel According to Abraham*, we saw that there were quite a few ups and downs in the life of Abraham, the great man of faith. But at least Abraham had some ups. The few events recorded of Isaac’s life are mostly downs, and Jacob is no great hero, especially in his early life. They do not begin to live up to the pattern set for them by their spiritual forefather.

There should be great encouragement here for those of us who are all too aware of our shortcomings. Has God called you to perform tasks for which you feel totally inadequate? Cheer up! You are almost certainly right in your assessment. In yourself, you do not have the power

INTRODUCTION

to do what God is asking you to do. I become daily more aware of my assorted weaknesses, failings, and sins, and I marvel that God could nonetheless use someone like me in ministry. But our God delights in writing straight with a crooked pencil. He specializes in using clay pots in which to store his treasure. The reason for this strategy is simple. His strength is most abundantly seen in our weakness, and his glory becomes most apparent when he uses the most insignificant and flawed people to bring about his wonderful purposes (2 Cor. 4:7).

In the lives of Isaac and Jacob, this principle is crystal clear. We will see time and time again how God in his grace and for his glory overrules the weakness and sinfulness of his chosen instruments. Step by step, God was continuing to fulfill his promise to Abraham to turn a small family into a mighty nation (Gen. 15:5). There is substantial progress toward the goal of God's plan in these pages. But from the outset of their journey to the Promised Land, it is to be made clear to Israel—as it should also be clear to us—that the gospel triumphs not through might or through human goodness but through God's relentless grace.

CHAPTER ONE

DÉJÀ VU ALL OVER AGAIN (GENESIS 25:19–34)

In a few story lines of the popular *Peanuts* cartoon strip, Linus and Lucy have a little brother who goes by the rather odd name of Rerun. I don't think that that was necessarily the name his parents gave him; more likely it expresses Lucy's sense of disappointment in discovering that her second younger sibling is *another* boy. But there is a sense in which all our children could legitimately be named Rerun, expressing the fact that in our children we see a reflection of ourselves. In many ways, their attributes and their skills, their strengths and their weaknesses, their interests and their passions—not to mention their looks—are often a rerun of our own. They are, as we might say, a chip off the old block.

A CHIP OFF THE OLD BLOCK

Isaac was, in the fullest sense of the phrase, a chip off the old block. In fact, the few events of his life that Scripture records for us are a great deal like his father's life. His life is, in Yogi Berra's memorable phrase, "déjà vu all over again." The result of this juxtaposition of the lives of Abraham and Isaac is that we can see clearly the ways in which Isaac shared his father's strengths and weaknesses.

First, there was the same problem of a barren wife, threatening the fulfillment of God's promise of numerous descendants (Gen. 25:21). Then, like his father before him, Isaac was faced with famine. God's promised land seemed unable to support him, and he had to decide whether to stay there or leave for the perennially greener pastures of Egypt. Instead of going down to Egypt, Isaac stayed in Gerar in the southern part of Israel, which was then the territory of Abimelech—the same region that Abraham visited in Genesis 20 and 21. While he was there, Isaac faced the same temptation that his father had to pass off his wife as his sister in order to protect himself (Gen. 26:1–11) and was involved in similar quarreling between his herdsmen and those of Abimelech over scarce resources (Gen. 26:12–35). Isaac's life is thus in almost every sense a rerun of the life of Abraham.

Isaac's life is not merely a compilation album of Abraham's greatest hits, however. Rather, in Isaac's replaying of Abraham's experience we see God's faithfulness extended to a new generation. As Isaac relived his father's faith and his father's failures, he came to see that he too could rely on God's faithfulness to his promises. That surely was an important lesson for the original audience of the book of Genesis, the wilderness generation, who stood with Moses on the brink of the Promised Land. They had not personally experienced the exodus out of Egypt, with its plagues and the parting of the Red Sea; they had to rely on their fathers' testimony for that. Would the God who had done great things for their fathers also do great things for them, so that they might enter and possess the land? The answer was that just as Isaac could count on the God of Abraham, so also the God of Moses would continue to be with his people as they attempted to conquer the land under Joshua.

That is an important lesson for us and for our children as well. Like them, we too can rely on the God of Abraham and Isaac, the God of Moses and Joshua, to fulfill faithfully

his promises to us in our day and situation. God does not change; his faithfulness endures forever. Indeed, many Christians are evidence of God's faithfulness. We come from families in which our parents trusted in Christ before us. Our mothers, our fathers, or both told us from our earliest days about the grace of this God, and now we are engaged on our own journey of faith. Other Christians are trophies of that incredible grace, for we did not come from a Christian family. Yet at just the right time, God reached down to us and opened our eyes to see the truth of the gospel. In us, God is starting new families that will testify to his covenant faithfulness in generations yet to come.

REBEKAH'S BARRENNESS

The story of Isaac starts in Genesis 25:21 with Rebekah's barrenness. She was unable to bear children. This is a tragedy at any time, a pain that cannot be completely understood except by those going through it. Yet in Isaac and Rebekah's case the problem was worse. God's promise, after all, revolved around their having children, an uncountable multitude of descendants. Yet they were in the same boat in which Abraham and Sarah had found themselves forty years before. We are back face-to-face with the question that repeatedly faced Isaac's father, Abraham: can God fulfill the promise in his own strength, or does he need a little assistance from us to help him out?

During his lifetime, Abraham was presented with that choice over and over again and slowly learned to make the right choice. He found that it was one thing to "believe God and have it counted to him as righteousness" (see Gen. 15:6) but quite another to move that belief from his head into his heart and trust God completely in the everyday decisions of life.

Perhaps that is where you find yourself. You have trusted God completely for your salvation, but you're

discovering that it's not quite so easy to trust him with the day-to-day decisions. How are you to find a wife or a husband? How are you to find a job? How are you to behave in a particularly difficult situation that faces you at work or in a relationship? The reality of our faith is daily put to a multitude of little (and not so little) contexts in which God exposes our hearts. Of course, when what God has promised doesn't seem to be materializing, Satan is immediately on hand offering us deceptive shortcuts that seem at first sight to bring us to the same point. For Abraham and Sarah, as the years of waiting dragged on, he presented the shortcut of Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian maidservant (Gen. 16). It seemed to human wisdom a practical way of bringing about the desired result. The true outcome, however, was disaster in the form of household disharmony, followed by the birth of Ishmael.

In many situations, the choice that faces us is essentially the same as that which faced the patriarchs: believe God, even when it doesn't seem likely to work, or follow Satan's shortcut. We imagine that the options placed before us are to obey God and have a miserable life, or follow Satan's strategy and get what we really want. The possibility never occurs to us that believing God might work out in a way beyond our imagining. So how does Isaac respond to his testing situation? He is a model of faith. He prayed to the Lord for Rebekah; the Lord answered his prayer, and she became pregnant (Gen. 25:21).

The text makes it sound so easy. Isaac prayed, and God gave him the desires of his heart. It is only when you get to Genesis 25:26 that you discover that it wasn't quite as straightforward as that. Like Abraham and Sarah before them, Isaac and Rebekah waited a long time to see their prayers answered, twenty years in all. Year after year went by, and nothing seemed to be happening. But unlike Abraham and Sarah, there was no Hagar for Isaac and Rebekah. They had learned from Abraham and Sarah's example that God could be trusted. So they waited with

sufficient patience that there is nothing much to report between the praying of the prayer and its answer. God gave them the grace to refuse Satan's shortcuts. They believed God and were willing to wait for him. With such an attitude, it sometimes turns out that the longest-delayed answers to prayer are the most faith-building, because when they are finally answered we see in them most clearly the hand of God.

DEALING WITH DISAPPOINTMENT

But what if God should see fit not to give us in this life what we earnestly seek from him? What if even after long years of waiting, we are still disappointed? God is, after all, not the great slot machine in the sky, whose arm you twist until you hit the jackpot and he gives you the desires of your heart. I once sat with a woman who had been suffering from cancer for ten years. She had at times been paralyzed by the effects of the cancer and was now in excruciating pain from the course of treatment she was undergoing. The pain was so intense that she had not slept for several nights. What responses could I give her for the natural questions: Why, Lord? How long will I have to endure this pain? Why can't you be glorified by healing me, instead of making me continue to suffer? There are no simple answers. God doesn't give explanations. But he does promise that he will be with us in and through the worst suffering and that nothing in all creation—neither death, nor life, nor sickness nor health, nor riches nor poverty—nothing can separate us from the love of God (see Rom. 8:38–39). We will often have to live by faith in that statement rather than by sight, as to outward appearances it is hardly self-evident. But as we tread the hard road by faith, we can look back again and again to the cross where that love was demonstrated for all to see, once and for all time.

TURMOIL WITHIN

Finally the long years of waiting were about to come to an end for Isaac and Rebekah. Rebekah discovered that she was expecting the double blessing of twins (Gen. 25:22). Even before the twins were born, though, there seemed to be some family disharmony. It is illuminating to contrast the first appearances of Abraham and Jacob onto the stage of biblical history. When we first meet Abraham, he is seventy-five years old and about to step out in faith. When we first meet Jacob, he's not even born and already he's involved in a struggle with his brother, Esau. He is born grabbing his brother's heel, either trying to overtake him or to trip him up. In many ways, that first encounter sets the stage for all that will follow, both for Abraham and for Jacob. Abraham shows us faith in human form, journeying toward the Promised Land. Jacob, the man stumbling from one family conflict to another, demonstrates quite a different virtue. He shows us the triumph of grace over all obstacles. Jacob, with all his sinning, scheming, and plotting, is the perfect model of how God's undeserved favor can succeed even with the most unpromising material.

When Rebekah sought to find out why this turmoil was taking place inside her, she was given an oracle from the Lord: "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided; the one people shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger" (Gen. 25:23). This revelation made it clear to her that this was not just a routine brotherly squabble, such as happens even in the best of families. Rather, there were two future nations involved. What is more, God was going to reverse the usual pattern of things: the older would serve the younger.

This theme of conflict between brothers or within families is not new at this point in Genesis. Such a struggle was evident already between Cain and Abel in Genesis 4; there too the younger child was the one who bore God's favor. Throughout the rest of the book of Genesis, there is a

series of family conflicts. From the sons of Noah, through Abraham and Lot, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Laban, and on down to Joseph and his brothers, there is a constant pattern of rivalry and discord within the family. And the ultimate reason for all such discord is election. Those whom God has not chosen, or who are living out of step with God, are always at war with those whom God has chosen, even when they grow up within the same household. But out of those struggles, God's purposes to bless his people stand secure. Though the seed of the Serpent do its worst, it cannot prevail against the power of the living God. As Genesis 50:20 articulates it, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good."

THE OLDER SHALL SERVE THE YOUNGER

Repeatedly the pattern emerges that "the older shall serve the younger" (Gen. 25:23). Abel was accepted while Cain was rejected; the line of Seth was chosen over the line of Cain; Isaac is chosen over Ishmael, Rachel over her older sister, Leah, and Joseph over all his older brothers. This completely overthrew the accepted cultural patterns of the day, in which the firstborn son received the lion's share of everything, and other children had to make do with the leftovers. Why does God act in this way? Paul lays out the reasons for us in Romans 9:10–12:

When Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls—she was told, "The older will serve the younger."

God wants to make it clear from the start that there is no favoritism with him. There are no privileged positions in

God's family. Being born of Abraham is not enough; being born of Isaac and Rebekah is not enough; being the oldest child is not enough. God will have mercy on whom he will have mercy, and he will harden whom he will harden. Our salvation is all of grace, not of our merit. God is no respecter of persons. He chooses the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; he chooses the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chooses the unfavored younger sons who have neither status nor strength to show that all is of grace from start to finish.

In the context of everything Isaac and Rebekah knew about God and God's purposes, what did the oracle mean? What did it mean to say that "the younger will serve the older"? Surely it should have been clear to them that this was God's way of telling them that the promised Savior would come of the line of the younger. In order once again to show God's absolute sovereignty in salvation, God would choose not only the family through whom the promise would come but even how the promise descended in that family. What should have happened, then, was that as the boys grew up they should have been prepared for their destinies in God's plan. Esau should have been prepared for his need to find a blessing in Jacob and particularly in Jacob's descendant through whom salvation would come. Jacob should have been prepared for his role as godly ancestor of the Messiah, recognizing in humility that he had been given a high calling not because of his greatness but through God's choosing.

But that did not happen. Instead of being trained for God's calling, the boys were allowed to develop in their own ways. Esau was the strong one, the outdoors type, good at hunting, gifted at life in the field. He is, after all, the original redneck, as he is described at the time of his birth: he was ruddy in complexion and thoroughly hairy (Gen. 25:25). When you think of Esau, think pickup trucks, biker bars, and tattoos. Just as in our culture, in the ancient Near East excessive hairi-

ness was a feature generally associated with boorish and uncouth behavior.

As for Jacob, the text describes him with the deliberately ambiguous Hebrew word *tam* (Gen. 25:27), which the English translations usually render as “quiet.” It means essentially “single-minded” or “single-hearted” and thus usually has positive overtones describing a man of high moral character. It describes someone whose desires and actions are thoroughly integrated, as does the root of the English word *integrity*. In Jacob’s case, however, his single-mindedness would lead him in a less positive direction, as we shall see. What is more, unlike his brother, his natural habitat was the tent, not the field. Once again there is a certain ambiguity in that description. It could describe his occupation as a (civilized) nomadic shepherd rather than as a hunter like his brother. But in what follows, his perpetual presence in the tent is also crucial to his efforts to rob his brother of his birthright. Because of his passion for staying at home, he was able to be in the right place at the right time to pursue his single-minded schemes.

The differences between the boys also led to the poisonous presence of favoritism on the part of the parents. Genesis 25:28 tells us that “Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.” The children were valued for what they could do for the parents. Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau. The text doesn’t tell us why Rebekah loved Jacob. Perhaps she remembered the oracle concerning him. Perhaps she liked his propensity for hanging around the tents where she was. Children are all different in their temperaments: some are sporty and outgoing, others are shy bookworms. Some are passionately musical or artistic, while others prefer surfing the Internet or tearing apart a car engine. How easy it would be to love those best whose interests and aptitudes are closest to ours and to use our children for our own gratification and pleasure. How terrible are the consequences of such favoritism. Isaac and Rebekah themselves prepared

the ground for a lifetime of strife between their children. In time, their sin would come home to roost in a fitting judgment of God: Isaac would be deceived by his taste for wild game, while Rebekah would find her stay-at-home son propelled far away from her.

Yet even their sin could do nothing other than accomplish God's purposes. Isaac and Rebekah were responsible for their own failure before the Lord, but even their sin would become the means that God used to further his own gracious purposes. This is good news, especially for those who have been shaped in profound ways by our parents' sins against us or who are realizing the toxic impact we have had on our own children. God is sovereign even over the ways in which your parents wounded you or you damaged your children, and he will bring his own good fruit out of the painful conflict that is its bitter result. God never wastes the suffering of his children.

LET'S MAKE A DEAL

It is the boys' respective aptitudes that form the backdrop for the next scene. They had each been doing what they did best. Esau had been out in the fields hunting and came home famished. The pickup skidded to a halt outside the tent. When he went inside, he found that Jacob had made a pot of his favorite lentil soup. Immediately he wanted to have some (Gen. 25:29–30). There was nothing unusual or wrong with that; this is a normal family interaction. Just how dysfunctional this particular family was, however, can be seen from what follows. In a situation like that, most people would say, "Here, brother, draw up a stool and help yourself. How was your day? Did the hunting go well?" What Jacob said to Esau, though, was, "Sell me your birthright now" (Gen. 25:31). What is more, even when Esau made what sounded like a verbal commitment to do so in response, Jacob demanded that Esau

swear an oath, dragging the name of the Lord into this shoddy enterprise.

What was Jacob doing? He was taking Satan's shortcut. He was not willing to wait for God to fulfill the promise that "the older shall serve the younger" in God's time. Instead, Jacob wanted to close the deal for himself now by his cleverness. Equally, of course, Esau should not have agreed to any such sale. He should have preferred to eat a crust of dry bread than willingly give up his birthright, the expectation that, humanly speaking, *his* should have been the line to bear the promised Messiah. He counted that privilege of less value than a bowl of soup.

What makes it all worse is the fact that, in spite of his protestations, this was hardly a matter of life or death for Esau (Gen. 25:32). He was not going to die if he didn't get the soup. This was rather a matter of a man driven by his appetites to exchange what is of eternal value for a brief moment's pleasure. He didn't even linger to savor the culinary experience. He gulped his food down and was gone without a thought for what he had left behind. But before you and I judge Esau too quickly for that, do we not do the same thing daily? There are cherished sins that you and I are unwilling to part with for the sake of the kingdom. There are appetites and momentary pleasures that you and I count of greater weight than the kingdom of God. It may be food, or sex, or the adulation and approval of others, or a thousand and one other things that we weigh more highly than our birthright as the children of God. People shipwreck their careers, their reputations, and their lives in pursuit of a moment's satisfaction. Some of us have done so in dramatic fashion. Yet the reality is that every day we *all* make that same choice in much less dramatic fashion; we give ourselves over to lust, pride, anger, bitterness, or whatever our own personal "lentil stew" is, instead of being willing to be hungry and wait for God's provision. Let those who are without sin in this area cast the first stone.

DESPISING THE BIRTHRIGHT

So Esau despised his birthright (Gen. 25:34). It was fitting that that which he despised should ultimately be taken from him. God's choice of Jacob to inherit the birthright is not unfair, because it merely takes from Esau something that he counted of no value. That is how the process of election always works. Those who remain outside God's kingdom, who have not received his election and calling to become part of his people, do not lose something they desire and want but rather something they despise. Noah did not have to fight to keep the masses out of the ark, as if it were the last lifeboat to leave a sinking ship. He did not have to stand by the gangplank with a shotgun. In fact, it was quite the reverse: he begged and pleaded for the people of his generation to repent, but only those whose hearts God changed wanted to take shelter within the ark's confining walls.

Isn't this what we see all around us? There are multitudes who have no real interest in God and his way of salvation, even as they pursue all kinds of other spiritual paths. God continues to choose and call those who are his, but those who are passed over by God will never complain that God is being unfair. Left to themselves, they have no desire to be chosen.

But Jacob paid a terrible price for taking Satan's shortcut. He gained the birthright and subsequently the blessing by one crafty stratagem after another, but it was a very long time before he was free to enjoy them. Unlike Isaac and Rebekah earlier in this chapter, Jacob was not willing to wait patiently for God to do what he had promised. He wanted that blessing, and he wanted it *now!* Perhaps you too know that temptation. You desire to see God's healing, or for God to give you a spouse, or a child, or to deliver you from a really tough situation. It is appropriate to have those longings and to pray for God to act in your

life. But if you have to have it *now*, then beware. You are in danger of desiring the blessing more than you desire God, and when that happens you may be easy prey for Satan to offer you a shortcut.

Invariably Satan's shortcuts don't work. They promise much and deliver little. They promise a shortcut into the Promised Land but leave you with another forty years to wander in the wilderness. They promise an easy way to acquire the blessing but leave you running for your life. Obedience often seems like the hard choice at the time. Leaving everything to God in faith seems ever so difficult, but it is far easier in the long run, as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob each found. Living by faith may not be the easy way, but it is ultimately the only way to live at peace with God and with those around you.

Yet at the same time, Jacob's sin does not leave him sidelined from God's plan. He cannot derail God's purpose for him through his impatience, sinful self-confidence, and grasping greediness. The tough road that Jacob launches himself on through his own sin will ultimately prove to be God's chosen pathway of sanctification for him, the means by which God breaks his self-confidence and shows him his absolute need of God's undeserved mercy.

THE SAVIOR JACOB NEEDS

What is God to do with such a pair as Esau and Jacob? One of them regards his spiritual birthright as less valuable than a bowl of soup, and the other regards it as a commodity to be bought and maneuvered for. Which of these two should God choose to save? A neutral bystander would have to say neither. Neither one deserves God's work in his heart. Neither one is qualified to be the ancestor of God's chosen people, except insofar as sin and depravity are suitable qualifications. What clearer evidence could

there be that God's calculations are not the same as ours? He doesn't just choose the weak to shame the strong—he chooses sinners to shame those who trust in their own goodness. What more proof do we need that our salvation is all of grace?

But how can God save such great sinners? There is only one hope. He must send a Savior who is quite unlike Jacob and Esau, and unlike us. We need a Savior who regarded his birthright—being equal with God and receiving the eternal praise of the heavenly hosts—as something not to grasp greedily but to freely give up for others. We need a Savior who did not view people as commodities to be used and abused to accomplish his own ends but rather happily donned a servant's towel and not only cooked for his disciples but performed the even more menial task of washing their feet. We need a Savior who regarded the birthright of his chosen people to be God's holy children—a birthright that we despised and trampled underfoot—as so precious that he gladly purchased it at a price not measurable in gold or silver: the cost of his blood. Such is the Savior Jacob needs. Only the irresistible grace of God can cover his sin and self-centeredness. Such is the Savior we need. Only the irresistible grace of God can cover my sin and self-centeredness. Thanks be to God, such is the Savior he has provided for us in Jesus!

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. Why is it significant that Isaac's life is parallel in so many ways to Abraham's life?
2. What did Isaac do when God's promises seemed unlikely to be fulfilled in his life? In what areas of your life are you tempted to doubt the likelihood of God fulfilling his promises?
3. What is the key to learning to wait patiently?

4. Why does God reverse the natural order and choose Jacob? Is it because of anything in Jacob? Why is this aspect of God's character good news for us?
5. In what ways are Jacob and Esau wrong in the incident of the bowl of soup? How might we as Christians despise our birthright? How might we seek to manipulate God into giving us blessings?
6. How do Jacob and Esau point us to Jesus as the answer to our need of a Savior?

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