

The Book of Genesis, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 15: Isaac, Jacob, and Esau

Genesis 25:1-34

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This chapter covers the death of Abraham, the birth of Jacob and Esau, and Esau's selling of his birthright, and it raises one of the most important and most misunderstood doctrines in Scripture: God's choosing of Jacob. Doctrinally, the lesson teaches the place of persevering prayer, God's sovereign freedom to choose the instruments of His covenant purpose, the danger of despising spiritual blessings for momentary gratification, and the destructive power of favoritism in the home. The heaviest doctrinal load falls on the question of election, where careful teaching is essential.

Handle God's choice of Jacob over Esau, and Paul's use of it in Romans 9, with great care, because Calvinism appeals to this text to teach unconditional individual election, that God decides before birth, apart from any response, who will be saved and who will be damned. Teach instead what the text actually says: God declared, 'two nations are in your womb,' and 'the older shall serve the younger.' This is, in the first place, about nations and about which son would carry the covenant line, not about the eternal salvation of two individuals. God's choices of Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were calls to a covenant purpose, that through their line all nations would be blessed and the Messiah would come. They are not the unconditional election of some individuals to heaven and others to hell. Throughout Scripture the gospel call is real and universal, and human beings are genuinely able to respond (Joshua 24:15; Isaiah 55:1; Matthew 11:28; Acts 2:38-39; Revelation 22:17). Affirm both God's sovereign freedom over His plan and human responsibility and ability to answer the gospel.

Formationally, this passage warns against the Esau-spirit that trades the eternal for the immediate, and it calls students to value their spiritual birthright, to persevere in prayer, to guard their homes against the poison of favoritism, and to trust God's purposes even when His choices surprise them. Lead them to weigh what they are trading away, and to treasure what God offers in Christ.

Question 1

Student Question:

For twenty years Isaac prayed for his barren wife, and then "the Lord granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived" (25:21). What does this teach us about the place of prayer in God's purposes, and about waiting on God when answers are long delayed?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

After the death of Abraham, the promise passes to Isaac, and immediately the old obstacle reappears: Rebekah is barren. The line of promise, once again, cannot continue by natural means. And Isaac responds rightly: 'Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren, and the Lord granted his prayer' (25:21).

Note the perseverance. From the chronology of the chapter, Isaac and Rebekah were childless for about twenty years before the twins were born. Isaac did not pray once and quit; he kept bringing the need to God over long years of waiting. Persevering prayer is the pattern of the faithful.

Draw out the place of prayer in God's purposes. God had promised Isaac descendants; the promise was certain. Yet God brought it about in answer to prayer. This is the mystery and dignity of prayer: God ordains the means as well as the ends, and He invites His people to participate in His purposes through asking.

Help students see the encouragement here. The God who answered after twenty years is the same God who hears our long-delayed prayers. Delay is not denial. We are called to keep asking, trusting that God hears and will answer in His time and way.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The place of prayer in accomplishing God's purposes.
- Persevering prayer over long years of waiting (about twenty years).
- God ordaining the means (prayer) as well as the ends.
- Delay as not denial; God hears and answers in His time.

Discussion Prompts

- What does Isaac's long praying teach us about perseverance?
- How can prayer matter if God's promise was already certain?
- How does this encourage you in your own delayed prayers?

Question 2

Student Question:

Where do you need to persevere in prayer for a long-standing need or hope? What tempts you to give up, and how does Isaac's example encourage you to keep praying?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question applies Isaac's perseverance to the student's prayer life. Most of us have prayers that have gone long unanswered, for a wayward child, a healing, a job, a changed heart, a reconciliation, and the temptation in long waiting is to give up.

Help students name what tempts them to quit: discouragement, doubt that God hears, weariness, the assumption that the answer is no. Isaac prayed for two decades; his example dignifies the long, unspectacular faithfulness of continued prayer.

Encourage the heart that sustains persevering prayer. Jesus taught that we 'ought always to pray and not lose heart' (Luke 18:1), and He told the parable of the persistent widow precisely to encourage continued asking. Persevering prayer is not nagging an unwilling God; it is trusting a good God who answers in His time.

Invite a concrete recommitment: a long-standing prayer the student has been tempted to abandon, and a renewed resolve to keep bringing it to God, trusting His timing and His goodness.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Persevering in prayer for long-standing needs.
- Naming what tempts us to give up: discouragement, doubt, weariness.
- Jesus' call to always pray and not lose heart (Luke 18:1).
- Persevering prayer as trust in a good God, not nagging an unwilling one.

Discussion Prompts

- What long-standing prayer are you tempted to give up on?
- What most tempts you to stop praying?
- How does Isaac's example encourage you to persevere?

Question 3

Student Question:

Before the twins were born, God declared, "The older shall serve the younger" (25:23), choosing to advance His covenant purpose through Jacob (Romans 9:10–13). What does this reveal about God's freedom to choose the instruments of His plan, and how is this different from saying God arbitrarily decides who will be saved or lost?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

During her difficult pregnancy, Rebekah inquired of the Lord and received a remarkable oracle: 'Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger' (25:23). Before the boys were born or had done anything, God declared that His purpose would run through Jacob, the younger.

Establish first what this is primarily about. The oracle speaks explicitly of 'two nations' and 'two peoples.' It concerns which son will carry the covenant line and how the nations descended from them (Israel and Edom) will relate. 'The older shall serve the younger' was fulfilled

historically as Edom came to serve Israel. This is, in the first instance, about God's choice of the covenant line and the destiny of nations, not about the eternal salvation of two individuals.

Draw out the doctrine of God's freedom. God is sovereign over His plan of redemption; He chooses the instruments and the channel through which He will work. He chose the younger over the older, overturning human custom, to make clear that His purposes rest on His grace and will, not on human merit or natural privilege. The promise advances by God's choice, not by human achievement.

Now distinguish this clearly from a doctrine of arbitrary salvation, which the next-to-last question will treat fully. God's choosing Jacob to carry the covenant line is not God deciding, apart from any response, that Jacob will go to heaven and Esau to hell. It is God's sovereign selection of the line of promise, through which, ultimately, the Savior of all nations would come. Hold together God's sovereign freedom over His plan and the genuine, universal offer of salvation.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's declaration as primarily about two nations and the covenant line (Genesis 25:23).
- 'The older shall serve the younger' fulfilled in the nations (Israel and Edom).
- God's sovereign freedom to choose the instruments and channel of His plan.
- God's purpose resting on His grace, not human merit or natural privilege.
- Distinguishing the choice of the covenant line from a decree of individual salvation.

Discussion Prompts

- What does the oracle to Rebekah say it is about?
- How does God's choice of the younger display His sovereign freedom?
- How is choosing the covenant line different from deciding who is saved?

Question 4

Student Question:

God's choices often overturn human expectations, favoring the younger over the older, the weak over the strong. Where do you need to trust God's purposes even when they surprise you or upend what you assumed should happen?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question applies God's surprising choices to the student's trust. Again and again in Scripture, God overturns human expectations: choosing the younger over the older, the weak over the strong, the obscure over the prominent. He chose Jacob over Esau, David the youngest over his brothers, a manger over a palace.

Help students see why God works this way. He delights to use the unexpected so that the glory clearly belongs to Him and not to human strength or status. 'God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong' (1 Corinthians 1:27). His ways are not our ways (Isaiah 55:8-9).

Apply it to the student's expectations. We often assume how things 'should' go, who should be blessed, who should lead, how our lives should unfold, and God's actual workings can surprise or even upend us. Faith trusts God's wisdom even when His choices confound our assumptions.

Invite reflection: where is the student tempted to resist or resent God's surprising ways, and what would it look like to trust His purposes there, believing that He sees what we cannot and works for good in ways we would not have chosen?

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God overturning human expectations in His choices.
- God using the unexpected so the glory belongs to Him (1 Corinthians 1:27).
- God's ways being higher than ours (Isaiah 55:8-9).
- Trusting God's wisdom when His choices confound our assumptions.

Discussion Prompts

- Where has God surprised or upended your expectations?
- Why does God so often choose the unexpected?
- Where do you need to trust God's surprising purposes?

Question 5

Student Question:

Esau "despised his birthright," and Hebrews 12:16 calls him "unholy," a man who sold his inheritance for a single meal. What does it mean to despise spiritual blessings, and why is trading them for momentary gratification so serious?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The birthright scene is one of the most vivid in Genesis. Esau comes in famished from the field, sees Jacob's red stew, and wants it desperately. Jacob, the schemer, seizes the moment and demands the birthright in exchange. And Esau, ruled by his appetite, says, 'I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?' and swaps his inheritance for a single meal (25:31-34).

Define the birthright so students grasp the magnitude of the trade. The birthright was the firstborn's privileged status: a double portion of the inheritance, the leadership of the family, and, in this family, a share in the covenant promise itself. It was a sacred, future-oriented blessing. Esau traded all of it for one bowl of soup.

The text's verdict is devastating: 'Thus Esau despised his birthright' (25:34). To 'despise' is to treat as worthless. Esau did not value what he had; ruled by the appetite of the moment, he counted the eternal as nothing next to the immediate. Hebrews calls him 'unholy,' a man who 'sold his birthright for a single meal' (Hebrews 12:16).

Draw out the timeless danger. The Esau-spirit lives whenever we sacrifice lasting, spiritual good for immediate gratification: trading purity for a moment's pleasure, integrity for quick gain, our walk with God for comfort or escape. The tragedy is not merely the trade but the heart that values the soup more than the inheritance.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The birthright as a sacred, future-oriented blessing, including a share in the covenant.
- Esau despising (treating as worthless) what was precious (Genesis 25:34).
- Being ruled by the appetite of the moment over the value of the eternal.
- The Esau-spirit: trading lasting spiritual good for immediate gratification (Hebrews 12:16).

Discussion Prompts

- What exactly did Esau give up, and for what?
- What does it mean that he 'despised' his birthright?
- How does the Esau-spirit show up in our own choices?

Question 6

Student Question:

Where in your life are you most tempted to trade a lasting spiritual good for an immediate pleasure, comfort, or relief? What "bowl of stew" most easily captures your appetite?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses Esau's trade into the student's life. Each of us has a 'bowl of stew,' the immediate thing whose appetite is strong enough to tempt us to trade away something lasting. Naming it is the beginning of resisting it.

Help students identify their particular vulnerability. For one it is the pleasure of lust or indulgence; for another, the relief of escape; for another, the gain of a compromise; for another, the comfort that crowds out devotion. The stew differs, but the dynamic is the same: a present craving overriding eternal value.

Expose the lie behind the trade. Esau told himself, 'I am about to die; what use is a birthright?' We tell ourselves similar lies: 'It doesn't matter,' 'I deserve this,' 'just this once.' The appetite distorts our sense of value, making the lesser thing feel essential and the greater thing feel negligible.

Offer the corrective: counting the cost in advance and treasuring what God offers. 'What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?' (Mark 8:36). Encourage students to name their stew and to pre-decide, in clear-headed moments, to value their birthright in Christ above it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Identifying our particular 'bowl of stew,' the appetite that tempts us to trade away the lasting.
- The lies the appetite tells to distort our sense of value.
- Counting the cost in advance (Mark 8:36).
- Treasuring what God offers above immediate gratification.

Discussion Prompts

- What 'bowl of stew' most easily captures your appetite?
- What lie do you tell yourself in the moment of trading?
- How can you pre-decide to value your birthright in Christ?

Question 7

Student Question:

Isaac loved Esau, and Rebekah loved Jacob, and that parental favoritism helped tear the family apart (25:28). What does this teach us about the dangers of favoritism and partiality, and about the importance of godly relationships in the home?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 28 contains a quietly tragic line: 'Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.' Each parent had a favorite, and that favoritism would help tear the family apart, fueling the deception of chapter twenty-seven and the long estrangement of the brothers.

Draw out the danger of favoritism. Partiality in the home wounds the unfavored, inflates the favored, and pits family members against one another. It teaches children that love is earned by performance or temperament rather than given freely. The seeds of bitterness sown here yield a bitter harvest for decades.

Note how favoritism distorts judgment. Isaac's preference for Esau, the impulsive, worldly son, over Jacob, blinded him; Rebekah's preference for Jacob led her into scheming. Favoritism does not only divide; it corrupts the favoring parent's wisdom and integrity.

Help students see the contrast with God's heart. God 'shows no partiality' (Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11), and He calls His people to reflect that impartial love. Godly homes and churches are

marked not by favoritism but by a love that seeks the good of each person without playing favorites.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The destructive power of favoritism and partiality in the home (Genesis 25:28).
- Favoritism wounding the unfavored and inflating the favored.
- Partiality corrupting the judgment and integrity of the one who favors.
- God's impartial love as the model for our relationships (Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11).

Discussion Prompts

- How did favoritism damage this family?
- How does favoritism affect both the favored and the unfavored?
- How does God's impartiality call us to a different kind of love?

Question 8

Student Question:

Where might partiality or favoritism be at work in your own relationships, in your family, friendships, or church? How does showing favoritism damage people and contradict the heart of God (James 2:1, 9)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question applies the warning against favoritism to the student's own relationships. Partiality is not only a parenting problem; it shows up in how we treat people generally, favoring some and slighting others based on appearance, status, usefulness, or personal preference.

Help students examine their own hearts and homes. Parents may favor one child; we all may favor the impressive over the ordinary, the strong over the weak, those who can help us over those who cannot. James rebukes exactly this when he condemns showing partiality in the assembly (James 2:1–9), calling it sin.

Connect favoritism to the gospel. The gospel levels us all: 'There is no distinction... all have sinned,' and all are saved by the same grace (Romans 3:22–24). A people who have received impartial grace are called to extend impartial love. Favoritism contradicts the very heart of the God who welcomed us when we had nothing to offer.

Invite a concrete reckoning: where partiality may be at work in the student's family, friendships, or church, and one way to begin treating people with the impartial love God has shown them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Recognizing favoritism in our families and relationships.

- Favoring people by appearance, status, or usefulness.
- Partiality as sin (James 2:1-9).
- Impartial love flowing from the impartial grace we have received (Romans 3:22-24).

Discussion Prompts

- Where might favoritism be at work in your relationships?
- How does partiality damage people and contradict God's heart?
- How does the grace you have received call you to impartial love?

Question 9

Student Question:

God's choice of Jacob over Esau (Romans 9:10-13; Malachi 1:2-3) has been used by some to teach that God unconditionally decides, before anyone is born, who will be saved and who will be lost. How should we rightly understand God's choosing of Jacob, Noah, Abraham, and others, as a call to a covenant purpose through which all nations would be blessed, while still affirming that the gospel call is real, universal, and able to be answered?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal question, and it must be taught with clarity and care, because God's choice of Jacob is one of the main texts to which Calvinism appeals. Some teach from Romans 9:10-13 that God, before either child was born or had done anything, unconditionally decided to save Jacob and to damn Esau, and by extension that God arbitrarily selects certain individuals for heaven and the rest for hell. We must show why this misreads the passage.

Start with what the original text in Genesis says. God told Rebekah, 'two nations are in your womb,' and 'the older shall serve the younger' (25:23). The language is national and about service, not about heaven and hell. 'The older shall serve the younger' was fulfilled historically in the nations of Edom and Israel, not in the eternal damnation of Esau the man. When Malachi later says, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated' (Malachi 1:2-3), the very next verses make clear he is speaking of the nations of Israel and Edom, not the eternal fate of two individuals.

Now read Paul rightly in Romans 9. Paul's point is that God is free to choose how His covenant purpose advances, that the promise runs through the line God chooses (Isaac, then Jacob), not automatically through physical descent or human custom. God's choosing of Jacob, like His choosing of Noah, Abraham, and Isaac, was a call to a covenant purpose: through this line, all nations would be blessed and the Messiah would come. It is about God's sovereign selection of the instruments and channel of redemption, displaying that salvation rests on His grace and not on human merit. It is not a decree that fixes the eternal destiny of every individual apart from their response.

State the positive doctrine plainly, consistent with the whole of Scripture. The gospel call is real and universal. God 'desires all people to be saved' (1 Timothy 2:4), is 'not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance' (2 Peter 3:9), and invites everyone: 'whoever desires, let him take the water of life without price' (Revelation 22:17). Human beings are genuinely able to respond; God sets life and death before us and calls us to choose life (Deuteronomy 30:19; Joshua 24:15). Unconditional individual election to salvation, and its mirror, that God created some for hell with no possibility of response, contradicts God's revealed love for all and His justice. We reject it.

Hold the two truths together for the class. God is absolutely sovereign over His plan of redemption; He chooses the line and the instruments freely, and no one can dictate to Him. And God genuinely offers salvation to all, holding each person accountable for his own response. These are not in conflict. God sovereignly arranged, through Jacob's line, to bring a Savior for all nations, and that Savior now calls everyone, everywhere, to come. The right response to the doctrine of election is not anxious speculation about whether we are 'chosen,' but glad obedience to the universal call of the gospel, knowing that 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved' (Romans 10:13).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's choice of Jacob as primarily about the covenant line and the nations, not individual eternal destiny (Genesis 25:23; Malachi 1:2-3).
- Paul's point in Romans 9: God's freedom to advance His purpose through the line He chooses, by grace not merit.
- Election as a call to covenant purpose (blessing all nations, bringing the Messiah), not unconditional individual election to salvation.
- The gospel call as real and universal; God desiring all to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9; Revelation 22:17).
- Human beings genuinely able to respond; God holding each accountable (Deuteronomy 30:19; Joshua 24:15).
- Rejecting Calvinistic unconditional election and reprobation as contrary to God's revealed love and justice.
- Holding God's sovereignty over His plan together with the genuine, universal offer of salvation (Romans 10:13).

Discussion Prompts

- What does the choice of Jacob actually concern, according to Genesis and Malachi?
- How is choosing the covenant line different from decreeing individual salvation?
- How do we hold God's sovereignty and the universal gospel call together?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the whole passage. Name one specific way God is calling you to value your spiritual birthright, to persevere in prayer, to guard against favoritism, and to trust His sovereign purposes.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Use this capstone to bring the chapter to a personal point. We have seen persevering prayer, God's sovereign freedom, the tragedy of despising spiritual blessings, and the poison of favoritism. The thread that most searches the heart is Esau's trade: what am I tempted to give away for something I want right now?

Press for the specific. For one student the lesson is to persevere in a long prayer; for another, to stop trading their birthright for a bowl of stew; for another, to root out favoritism; for another, to trust God's surprising purposes.

Close by lifting their eyes to the inheritance God offers in Christ. We who are in Christ have a birthright beyond Esau's, an imperishable inheritance kept in heaven (1 Peter 1:4). To be formed by this passage is to treasure that inheritance above every passing appetite, to persevere in prayer, to love without partiality, and to rest in the sovereign God who has, in Christ, opened His covenant blessing to all who will come.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Treasuring our spiritual birthright above passing appetites.
- Persevering in prayer.
- Rooting out favoritism and partiality.
- Trusting God's sovereign purposes and the inheritance kept for us in Christ (1 Peter 1:4).

Discussion Prompts

- What is God most calling you to value or to guard from this chapter?
- What 'stew' do you need to stop trading your birthright for?
- How does your inheritance in Christ change what you treasure?