

Sibling Rivalry

And the children struggled together within her. Genesis 25:22

Isaac and Rebekah waited twenty long years for God to unlock their womb and give them a child. At age sixty, the prayers of Isaac were answered and he was destined for fatherhood. This blissful dream, however, began to eclipse when Rebekah, carrying two children instead of one, sensed a great conflict. An inner fear gripped her heart as the children struggled together in her womb. These boys were obviously a fulfillment of God's blessed promise, but an ominous cloud began to form in her future. In desperation, she went to inquire of the Lord, *If it be so, why am I thus?*

Our ideology wants children, provided they be normal, healthy, safe, and stable – so long as they will not rebel or embarrass us. But God has not stayed His his adoption of children, though millions of us persist in our inner resistance to His will. He has wept clouds of tears through the ages over the rebellious and stiff-necked generations of children. Yet, still knowing this, He willingly became our Father. When we become parents we expect the inconvenience of that which babies bring. We anticipate the need to spend sleepless nights rocking our infants, and thousands of dollars on their care. But most parents are ill prepared to face the complications that arise from the most irritating feature of child rearing ... sibling rivalry. Every parent with more than one child knows how children can fight among themselves. It seems that there is a natural constitution within children that compels them, at times, to behave like miniature warriors, probing for the weakness of their foe and attacking the

other at their most vulnerable point. The tendency is to argue, hit, scream, grab, taunt, tattle, tease, and fill the air with a relentless stream of uncivil words. Some act in brutish force, while others act with subtle conniving. Wise parents will stay on top of the situation and incessantly extinguish each flare as it arises. These will be rewarded for their efforts. Others will give up in exasperation and long for the day when the child will leave the home. We have little need to look far in the Scriptures to find sordid examples of this wretched competition. Cain and Able began the long train of feuding fraternities, flanked by Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, and Joseph and his brethren. Many Old Testament characters followed suite right into the New Testament where we find the brothers of our Lord in conflict with Him. *For neither did his brethren believe in him.* John 7:5

Next to divorce, there is, perhaps, nothing that fractures a family quite like a conflict between siblings. The battleground may be fought on many different fronts. Many sparks fly upward as siblings rage over their parents' estate while others silently burn, fueled by imaginary hurts. Jephthah *was a mighty man of valour*, yet, his brothers rejected him merely because *he was the son of an harlot.* Judges 11:1-3

Thus we find all the ingredients present in the prophesied rivalry between Jacob and Esau. This strife began in the womb so we are hard pressed to blame their environment. It appears that within months of their conception, these two brothers were at odds with one another. Perhaps they are an exception since they were foreordained to each become a nation ... *and the elder shall serve the younger.* Gen

25:23 But there still remains a host of observations that can be learned from the situation.

We live in a world obsessed and immersed in competition. Everyone is vying for something, and winning is no longer just essential ... it is everything. Beyond having sufficient for ourselves, we strive to be equal or ahead of the others. A teenage boy cares not so much about being tall as he does about being taller than his peers. Our feelings of blessedness are not based upon how much we have, but governed by a proportional measurement to others.

The story is told of a Christian who was reduced to such poverty that he had only one pair of shoes, with the soles worn through and his toes sticking out. Depressed and discouraged, he walked down the street mumbling to himself: "I might as well be barefooted as to wear these miserable, uncomfortable shoes." As he felt himself becoming more and more bitter, he came upon a man sitting on the sidewalk and begging. The poor fellow had no legs. After a moment, the discouraged Christian realized that there was something worse than having old shoes—having no feet upon which to wear shoes. He walked away in the same shoes feeling quite blessed.

So it is that many people stumble through life staring at their feet and the feet of others. To see my brother well shod while my shoes are banal is more than most of us can bear. It is in this condition that we bargain away our souls for a mess of pottage. Whether it is Esau, envious over his brother's pottage, a child jealous over a sibling's toy, or ourselves coveting the blessedness of our brother, it all falls within the same fanatical folly of frivolous fretting.

The Dynamics of Diversity

And the boys grew. Gen 25:27

There are over twenty years wrapped up in these four words. These two decades saw the twins develop into totally different men. Esau was a *cunning hunter, a man of the field* while Jacob was a *plain man, dwelling in tents*. One may well wonder if the two had the same set of parents. They didn't look alike, think alike, of talk alike. They didn't like the same things and they didn't like each other. To complicate the matters, their parents were divided in their loyalties.

Isaac loved Esau, because he did eat of his venison: but Rebekah loved Jacob. Gen 25:28

Some would conclude that the two were just incompatible. This we cannot accept. The boys were created different but that is no barrier to experiencing the pleasantries of brethren dwelling together in unity. Ps 133 God has long created immense diversity that lives in perfect harmony. There are palm trees, pin oaks, pines, and persimmons that all bear the same stamp of the Master Designer. There were prophets that were extremely different in their personality and ministrations. Isaiah spoke often of the coming Messiah while Daniel of political events. Elijah thundered forth driving prophecies against sin while Jeremiah wept over them. Elisha was people-oriented while Jonah was reclusive. What benefit would there have been if all of Christ's disciples were just like John? There are no two of us that look alike, act alike, and respond alike, yet does not the same Spirit serve us all? We conclude that diversity does not need to bring contention.

Regardless of what reasoning carries the banner of our dissension, the foundation of most such rivalry is ...

The Grapple for the Blessing

We want the blessedness that is being experienced by another. To pursue the blessings of God is certainly no character flaw, but we would do well to consider the real root reasons why we are pursuing them. Jacob wanted it because it was the possession of his brother. Isaac knew its benefits and wanted to impart it to his favorite son. Rebecca did likewise. Esau only wanted what benefited his personal agenda.

Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled; lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright. For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears. Heb 12:15-17

Thus did the brothers contend for their own personal happiness. Esau went for the quick thrill while Jacob went for the throat. So do countless numbers of well meaning souls today. Not only must they *keep up with the Jones'*, they must outdo them just a little. We feel much more blessed when we out-perform, out-dress, out-wit, and have more accumulated wealth or prestige than our brother. But these sought-out *blessings* are nothing more than a mess of red pottage, and our grappling over them creates a mess of riled

personage. *Wealth gotten by vanity shall be diminished.* Pr 13:11

So shall every one reap bitter disappointment who pursues personal blessing rather than ...

The Giver of the Blessing

Our spiritual birthright consists of the things that are rightfully ours via our birth. In such a case it is the place and position bestowed upon us by our heavenly Father at our adoption into His family. Our earthly stature change may be minimal, but as we are received by Him we are, in turn, bestowed with a personal endowment that is ours to keep. No man can take away this blessedness, but it can be squandered away by our own carelessness.

Martha lifted up a bitter complaint against her sister for leaving her in an unhappy condition. Though Jesus was decidedly unbiased toward either of the sisters, Martha, in her honest desire to bless and be blessed was surrendering her birthright by leveling a complaint against her sister. We can hear the compassion in Christ's tone as He must correct her erring perception. *Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: but one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her.*

Luke 10:41, 42 Those who are grappling for the blessing shall forfeit their own peace and blessedness as their circumstances surf the waves of life. But Mary sought the Giver. Her blessedness could never be taken away.

The prodigal's older brother was a good boy who stayed home and worked. He understood well his relationship to the servants under him and to his father over him. It was the happy reception of his

sibling that he could not swallow, and thus he was in danger of squandering his own birthright in his inner grappling with his brother. But his father read well the marks of his insecurity. *And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine.*

Luke 15:31 Siblings who live in common rivalry, do so to their own chagrin. Nobody wins and the coveted blessedness eludes them all. Like the two boys beating on each other finally paused to ask, "Is anyone going to stop us before we get hurt?" They only wanted the love and attention of their parents.

When Christ's disciples were striving to be the greatest, He took the moment to explain the folly of the occasion.

The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and they that exercise authority upon them are called benefactors. But ye shall not be so: but he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that doth serve. For whether is greater, he that sitteth at meat, or he that serveth? Is not he that sitteth at meat? But I am among you as he that serveth. Luke 22:24-27

This calls for a paradigm shift in our understanding of the nature of true blessedness. Our birthright is the security within our father's love. Sitting at meat and feeding our personage is gentile in its orient. When we give ourselves over to teasing, envy, or resentment, the blessing shall elude us. It is only when we seek to secure the blessing upon others that we will obtain it ourselves. Those that support, encourage, take an interest, and share in the happiness of their brother obtain a blessing from their heavenly Father and discover that *this my joy therefore is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease.* John 3:30

*What would you sell your birthright for? Just what is it worth to you?
Like Esau, is it up for grabs for the likes of a bowl of stew?
For what will you trade the things that last, the marks of your life in
Christ?
How much does Satan need to ask? How big or how small the price?
What are the things you clutch at? The treasures you can see?
Or those laid up in heaven that one day yours will be?
Esau didn't walk alone, his birthright to despise,
If he were here today, he'd say we, too, are not so wise.
We, famished from our hunting of things this world affords,
Get a whiff of compromise and we forget God's words.
We forget eternity and sell out for today.
We cry, "We're dying anyhow." But what a price we pay!
Cherish your birthright, Christian, those things that make you whole,
Or else you may the whole world gain and trade your very soul.
And when you've gained the world's acclaim and heeded Satan's call,
You'll have but a mess of pottage, and you'll have lost it all. - unknown*

[Presented by Lee Rufener]