
SERMON NOTES

Genesis #23: The Ultimate Author

Genesis 25:23-34

Last week I promised that we would talk a little bit more about how God can be in control, and at the same time allow us to make free choices. This becomes an issue in Genesis chapter 25, because God tells Rebekah, before her twins are born, that he is going to favor the younger child over the older one. Now last week, we learned that this choice is a demonstration of God's grace – he chose Jacob, not based on merit, but purely to show his grace. He did it show us that our relationship with him is based not on what we do for him, but on his overwhelming love for us. That idea stands, and it is supported by many other Biblical principles. Hold on to it. Don't let the following discussion confuse you about it.

God's decision does seem to be rather hard luck on Esau. How can it be that God gives Esau the choice the live his life either in faith or not, and yet at the same, time, before he is born, declare that he will not be the keeper of God's promises? Hasn't he predetermined Esau's fate? Now, it turns out Esau was a man who was not very interested in God. But did God make him that way? Or did he have a free choice to turn out that way?

Many of you know that I have written a couple of fiction novels. The process of writing books has given me a different perspective on some of these issues. When I was writing my first novel, I found something strange and exciting happening. My characters were taking on a life of their own. That's right: people that I made up in my head, figments of my own imagination, were doing and saying things that I did not plan for them to do or say. Needless to say, it was fun, and yet I thought perhaps I was going crazy. I would write a piece of dialogue and then sit back and think, "I didn't know she was going to say *that*." Since then, I've talked to other fiction writers, and read what some authors say about writing fiction, and sure enough, many of them experience the same phenomenon.

In my most recent novel, I had been planning all along that at the very end, the villain would repent of his crimes, break down in tears and be led away to jail, leaving you, the reader, with a sense of hopefulness. But when it came down to the wire, the guy simply wouldn't do it. I mean, I *created* this guy, I had in mind all along to show him *mercy*, but in the end, he forced me to have him killed.

Before you start calling mental hospitals, hear me out completely. Of *course* I could have written the book such a way that this villain repented, like I wanted to originally. But the thing is, if I did that, many readers would feel that I had somehow "rigged" the story. It wouldn't feel *real*, because ultimately repentance was inconsistent with who that character really was. To make the best story, I had to let that person make a choice that was different from my plan, but consistent with the character he had shown throughout the book.

Likewise, in this book is another guy who is, for the most part, a real jerk. But all along I could see that there was some good in him, a little corner that might someday grow and teach him to be a decent man. I didn't expect that. But when it began to come out, I allowed it.

To summarize: I have an overall plot that is going to be played out, no matter what. But within that plot, my characters are free to make some choices. The choices of those characters can't change the conclusion of the story, but they can change how it gets there. Now, I want to add one more thing into the mix. Once my book is complete, I know everything that happens in it. I know now, that my villain is not going to repent at the end. He doesn't know that on page twenty, but I can go back and read page twenty, and I know it. If I wanted to, I could go back, and insert a prophecy that he will be given a chance to make the right choice, but he won't do it. My prophecy would not determine his choice – in fact, it's the other way round. Knowing, before he does, what choices he will make, I can

go back in time (for my characters, not for me) and tell them a bit about it. From the point of view of his life, he's still going to make the choice freely, but from my perspective, the book is already written, and we already know what his choice is.

One final thought. I can write, "George stepped into empty space." I can then leave George hanging there while I go back and write in a piece of the story where someone puts a big trampoline at the bottom of the cliff he's stepped off. From George's perspective, he takes the leap and lands safely immediately afterwards. From my perspective, George is completely safe, suspended in mid-air while I work out a way to save him.

Now, all that is merely talk about imaginary people in a made-up story. But sometimes I think that God has something of that perspective about us. He creates us. God, as the author, is in control too. If he needs to, he has all the time in the world to change what happens between the time you pick up the phone, and the time you start punching in numbers. On the other hand, he does allow us to make our own choices. We can't change the conclusion, or the purpose of the story. But we do have some freedom to decide what part we ourselves will play, and how. To God, the book is already written. He can see our future, and he knows what choices we will make. So if he communicates something that happens in the future, he is not so much determining someone's choice, as telling us what someone will freely decide to do.

In Esau and Jacob, God created some characters, all right. And he knew, before they were born, the kinds of choices they would make. Esau was born first, with Jacob immediately after, still holding on to his brother's heel. Esau got his name because he was hairy and red; Jacob got his by grabbing his brother's heel. In fact, Jacob's name means something like "heel," and the meaning is not too far from our colloquial meaning, as in "That guy was real heel." Almost immediately, we see the conflict in Jacob. Some of the connotations of Jacob's name are *insidious*, *overreaching*, *supplanter*, *deceitful*. As we study the life of Jacob, we will see that these descriptions are not far off the mark at times. And yet, verse 27 describes him as a "quiet man..." The Hebrew term translated "quiet" is as good as the implication of "heel" is bad. "Quiet" includes the sense of being complete and sound; wholesome and having integrity. For many years these two sides of Jacob were to be at war within him. He is in fact, a diamond in the rough.

We get one further insight into both children of Isaac before the narrative moves on. When they are grown (therefore, at least thirteen) Esau comes in from hunting one day, absolutely famished. He sees some stew that Jacob has simmering, and demands it immediately. Jacob, ever the opportunist, living up to his name as supplanter and overreaching, offers to sell the stew for the price of Esau's birthright. What this would mean, is that Esau would be treated as the younger son in terms of his inheritance. Instead of getting twice as much as Jacob, he would get half as much. In addition (though this is not completely clear) Esau would also be giving up his place as leader of the family when Isaac dies. He would be supplanted by Jacob. Astoundingly, Esau agrees. Apparently all he can think about is the here and now, and in the here and now, he is hungry. He does not appear to care about his birthright.

Esau is a man's man, a hairy man. He is not what you would call the strong sensitive type. In fact, Esau didn't really care about many things that are important to God, and he lived simply from moment to moment. Clearly, in verses 29-34, **what is important for Esau is only what is going on inside of him at the time**. He is not interested in the future, and he does not respect the responsibility he has as the eldest. His mind is fixed on his present, visceral circumstances. **He is the ultimate example of a tragic "buy now, pay later," mentality**. And God knew what was in his heart. He saw ahead into Esau's life, and chose Jacob, not because of external qualifications, but because he knew that someday, that rough diamond Jacob would become a precious jewel. I believe he did what he could for Esau, but he was limited by Esau's own choices.