

Praying for the Church
Genesis 25:19-34 (Part 1)
Halifax: 24 January 2016, 10:30 AM

Introduction:

Today, in our Genesis sermon series, we come to a new section that begins in Genesis 25:19.

- Abraham has died, and we have seen his burial and we have seen a quick summation of the lines of his concubines, Hagar and Keturah,
 - but now, with verse 19, the narrative turns to the object of its chief concern,
 - the line through which the covenant birthright is transmitted,
 - the line that goes through Isaac and at last to Jesus Christ, the promised Son.
- Tracing the succession of Jesus Christ is the main concern because He is the sole hope of the world.
 - For there to be a church of the redeemed, a people who are reconciled to God, a godly people, a people who live forever and receive an everlasting inheritance as God has promised,
 - there must be this promised redeemer who comes to crush the serpent's head, to free His people from the dominion of sin, to be the ram provided by God that atones for sin by His blood, to be the Head of the church and the One who gathers the families of the earth to the Lord.
 - Without Him, all is lost, all die in their sins and none return to God.
 - That is why there is so much interest in the patriarchal history of tracing the ancestral line of Christ.
 - All the promises depend upon Him.
- And in this patriarchal history, we see at every turn that the transmission of the covenant birthright is entirely of God...
 - From the very first promise that there will be a redeemed church, it is the LORD Himself who says to Satan, "I will put enmity between your seed (the fallen human race which follows the serpent who is called Satan and the Devil) and her Seed (a sole descendant of the woman who will be bruised in the heel but who will crush the serpent's head).
 - God is the one that put enmity in the church against Satan so that we no longer serve him...He is the one who will, through this Seed of the woman, turn fallen men and women against Satan to be people for God.
- And as the Biblical narrative traces the line through which the Messiah is to come, we constantly see that it is the Lord who upholds this line.
 - After the initial promise, great wickedness spreads in the earth and there is the murder of the redeemed son of Adam and Eve by Cain, the seed of the serpent...
 - And we have the preservation of a thin line of the seed of the woman (the redeemed church) through Seth, culminating in the great flood in which only the redeemed are spared...
 - But even with this restart, there is a drifting into idolatry that is brought to a head at Babel until the Lord breaks them up...

- And then we have the LORD appearing to one of the families that was scattered—to the family of Terah and to his son Abraham...
 - And to him the LORD promises by an eternal covenant that the Son of promise by whom the church is to be redeemed will come through him!
- But it is soon evident that Abraham and Sarah cannot bring forth a son even though all of the promises depend upon their doing so...
 - They are barren and after a time, become too old—
 - And by their own folly they put the whole matter in jeopardy, by deciding to use Hagar as a substitute wife; and by Abraham practically giving his wife to Pharaoh and to Abimelech because of his fears...
 - But the LORD is the One who brings forth Isaac the son of laughter by whom the covenant promise is transmitted.
 - All of this shows that the Redeemer comes not by the power or mechanisations of man, but by the LORD!
- And with Genesis 25:19, where we have now come, the focus of the narrative turns to Isaac and his family...
 - because it is through Isaac that the promised redeemer is to come.
 - Without him, there would be no redeemer.
- And once again with Isaac, we will see that it is God who maintains the promised line despite the folly and weakness of His own covenant people...
 - With Isaac and his household, we are going to see faith, but also folly and sin, just as with Abraham...
 - And once again, we are going to see how God is the one who brings forth the next generation and preserves it in marvellous ways.
 - And today, we are going to look in particular at Isaac and Rebekah, who started out knowing that the coming of the kingdom was in God's hands.
 - We see how they prayed and looked to God, putting themselves in His hands that He might bring about His purposes.
 - But we are also going to see how they lost their focus and brought trouble upon their household when they ceased to pray.

Our text is Genesis 25:19-34.

- I will not attempt to exhaust this passage today,
 - but we will focus in particular on this matter of prayer and then next week we will explore the oracle about Jacob and Esau and its implications.
- So please give me your attention as I read this portion of God's holy word...Genesis 25 beginning with verse 19 to the end of the chapter:

Genesis 25:19-34: This is the genealogy of Isaac, Abraham's son. Abraham begot Isaac. ²⁰ Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah as wife, the daughter of Bethuel the Syrian of Padan Aram, the sister of Laban the Syrian. ²¹ Now Isaac pleaded with the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his plea, and Rebekah his wife conceived. ²² 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. ²³ 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.” ²⁴ So when her days were fulfilled *for her* to give birth, indeed *there were* twins in her womb. ²⁵ And the first came out red. *He was* like a hairy garment all over; so they called his name Esau. ²⁶ Afterward his brother came out, and his hand took hold of Esau’s heel; so his name was called Jacob. Isaac *was* sixty years old when she bore them. ²⁷ So the boys grew. And Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field; but Jacob was a mild

man, dwelling in tents. ²⁸ And Isaac loved Esau because he ate *of his* game, but Rebekah loved Jacob. ²⁹ Now Jacob cooked a stew; and Esau came in from the field, and he *was* weary. ³⁰ And Esau said to Jacob, “Please feed me with that same red *stew*, for I *am* weary.” Therefore his name was called Edom. ³¹ But Jacob said, “Sell me your birthright as of this day.” ³² And Esau said, “Look, I *am* about to die; so what *is* this birthright to me?” ³³ Then Jacob said, “Swear to me as of this day.” So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. ³⁴ And Jacob gave Esau bread and stew of lentils; then he ate and drank, arose, and went his way. Thus Esau despised *his* birthright.

May the Lord bless to us the reading and now the exposition of His word.

As I told you already, today I want to focus on the subject of prayer as it is presented to us in this text.

- It is not the main point, but it is a very important point.
- We are taught by the apostles that we can look at God’s word from different perspectives.
 - First, we can look at the Patriarchs as examples to guide us in our living.
 - That is what we are doing today by looking at Isaac’s example of prayer.
 - Some criticise this as moralism, but we find the Apostles do this often—for example, James exhorts the church to prayer after the example of Elijah, and to patience after the example of Job.
 - Second, we can (and should) look at the Patriarchal history in a redemptive historical manner—
 - This is where we trace the development of the revelation about Jesus Christ and His kingdom—
 - Paul does this, for example, in Romans 9 where he points to Jacob and Esau as revealing to us that fact that not all the covenant people are saved, but only the elect...
 - We will look at this next week.

Today, as we look at this passage and what it teaches us about prayer, my outline is very simple.

I. First, that we ought to pray for the church as Isaac did.

II. Second, that we ought to pray for the church as Rebekah did.

III. Third, that we ought to keep on praying as Isaac and Rebekah did not do.

So let’s begin with the first point...that...

I. You ought to pray for the church as Isaac did.

A. Isaac knew what God had promised about the church...

1. He had the sign of circumcision upon his body, and he knew that it was a seal of the covenant that God had established with his father Abraham...
 - a. He knew that the covenant included the promise that Abraham and his seed would be a people for God...
 - As God said in Geneses 17:7: **I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you.**
 - b. And related to that was the promise of an everlasting inheritance and so a promise of everlasting life
 - And God had promised in Gen 17:8: **I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.**
 - Abraham did not merely believe that his descendants would inherit the land, but that he himself along with them would be at last raised from the dead to inherit it—as an eternal city built by God.
2. And further to this, Isaac knew that God had specified that the promised redeemer was to come through him.
 - Just as God had shown that the Son of Promise was to come through Abraham, now He had identified Isaac as the one through whom He would come...
 - For example, in Genesis 21:12, He had said that **“in Isaac your seed shall be called.”**
 - Isaac also knew, from the unforgettable experience on Mt. Moriah where he learned that God had commanded his father to offer him as a burnt offering, and then stopped him, promising to provide the required sacrifice,
 - that God required an offering for sin that was greater than he was—and perhaps he knew that Christ would be that sacrifice...
 - that He was the One who was represented by the sacrifices of animals that God had appointed.
3. So Isaac knew that everything depended upon the one who was to come from his body—this coming redeemer was the hope of the entire church.
 - By the church, I mean the people who were reconciled to God...
 - Isaac knew that against nature, he himself had been born—not only to his barren mother, but to her and to Abraham when they were too old to conceive a child...
 - And he knew how God had brought forth a suitable wife for him through His amazing providence—a wife that he also dearly loved.
 - This beautiful, energetic woman had left her home to come and seek the promised blessing to Abraham with her husband Isaac—to bring forth the church and the redeemer that God had promised.
 - She had left her home with the promise ringing in her ears (as Gordon Wenham puts it): **May you, our sister, become thousands of ten thousands (24:60).**

- B. With what hope and enthusiasm had they entered into their marriage, but now the years are ticking away and Rebekah is barren!
1. We are told in our text that Isaac was 40 when he married and that he was 60 before he had a child—so there were 20 years of waiting!
 - How difficult this must have been—to have these promises that the seed of the woman would come through them and yet to have no child.
 - Where was the Lord in all this?
 - Is this not the experience with the people of God through the ages waiting for the kingdom in times when the kingdom seems so weak and so frail?
 2. So many times, the promise of Jesus and His kingdom seems to be forgotten by the LORD...
 - How hard it was for the godly people in Egypt who waited for the promise only to see their bondage increased by Pharaoh when Moses came promising deliverance...
 - And then for them to see the unfaithfulness of Israel in the wilderness with idols and with unbelief that sent them back to wilderness for forty years when they had been called to go and take Canaan.
 - How vexing it was for the people in the time of the judges when Israel was threatened with absorption into the pagan nations because of their sin, or with annihilation from the swords of their enemies...
 - And in the time of the kings when the nation was divided and when many of the kings led the people not to God, but to apostasy...
 - And then in the exile when Jerusalem was destroyed and the people were made to serve pagan kings...
 - And even after they were returned, the remnant was so small and the people were so weak...what had happened to the glorious promised kingdom?
 - And then when Messiah came, for the godly see Him despised and rejected and crucified—not by a few hotheads, but the chief priests and the elders of the people! How could such a one establish a kingdom?
 - And then to see the struggles in the early church with Judaizers and Gnostics...
 - And a little later with the Arian heresy...
 - And then after that with such apostasy that indulgences were being sold by the leaders of the church to deliver people from their sins...
 - How could the church survive?
 3. And so in our day—there is the discouragement of the church with all of its heresy and division...
 - with her leaders denying the scriptures and the deity of Jesus Christ...
 - with even the basic moral teachings of the ten commandments ignored...
 - with miracles denied and the need for Christ's atonement denied.
 - with unfaithfulness and apostasy even among the Bible believing part of the church—where even ministers have no self-control...

TRANS> How can the church survive? What is a people to do?

- As with Isaac, it can seem as though the church will perish.

- C. But Isaac does what we ought to do—he pleads with the Lord for the church!
1. In verse 21 it tells us the whole matter: **Now Isaac pleaded with the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his plea, and Rebekah his wife conceived.**
 - a. In the original, as reflected in our translation, the word *pleaded* is used twice—that he *pleaded* and that the Lord granted his *plea*.
 - The word translated *pleaded* is the word that was used when Moses pled with the Lord to remove the plagues in Egypt after Pharaoh repented...
 - He would plead, and the Lord would grant his plea.
 - It is a word that may involve the offering of a sacrifice in connection with it.
 - b. So Isaac did not make the mistake that his father made over the twenty years of waiting...
 - He did not take a substitute wife, but instead he pled with the Lord.
 - c. And the LORD does what He always does when we pray for His church, for the kingdom of the Messiah, for the continuance of the church...
 - He granted to Isaac his request and life came forth where there was no life!
 - The barren woman (the barren church) became a mother.
 2. I tell you my brothers and sisters, we are to pray for the church when we see her threatened with extinction!
 - a. We are to pray in the wilderness when the idolatry and the complaining and the apostasy are all around us.
 - When we see a pitiful and weak church that is being swallowed up by the world...
 - we are to be like Daniel who prayed for the church three times a day throughout the captivity.
 - b. Did Jesus not teach His disciples that they would be hated by all men for His sake, but that they were to pray and that the Father would hear them?
 - John 14:13-14: **“And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do it.”**
 - This was not a promise from Jesus that He would be their genie in the bottle and give them their wishes...
 - This is a promise that when they plead for His kingdom, He will hear them and answer them!
 - It is only right for you to be concerned about His kingdom and to pray for it when it is in trouble.
 - And so do you pray for this? Do you? Or do you only pray for your own private concerns?
 - You can certainly pray for those, but you must not neglect to pray for the church when she is in such trouble.

- c. And I tell you that when you pray for His kingdom—that it would come, that He would be glorified, that it would advance...
 - He always hears and answers that prayer.
 - You may have to wait for many years, but He will answer!
 - And you who are praying earnestly and sincerely will flourish while you wait, even through the most trying times...
 - the way Jesus’ apostles did, the way the reformers did, the way praying Christians do today.
 - When you do, you are on track with what God is doing and He will sustain you though whatever comes your way.

TRANS> So I say to you that you are to pray like Isaac prayed. Now, secondly...

II. You ought to pray for the church as Rebekah did.

A. Rebekah prayed in a similar way after she conceived because she perceived that something was wrong in the church.

1. Remember that the kingdom of God was in her womb...and she knew this, but something was terribly wrong.
 - This was not the “Oh look, the baby is moving,”
 - There were extremely violent convulsions going on inside of her...
 - The word *struggle* that is used in verse 22 is a word that speaks of crushing and oppression.
 - She did not know it, but we know that it was symbolic of the struggle between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent...
 - This was a puzzling division in the kingdom and Rebekah is rightly greatly distressed...
2. And in her distress, she calls upon the name of the LORD!
 - According to verse 22, she said, “**If all is well, why am I like this?**” She went to inquire of the LORD.
 - The language here suggests that she went to get an answer from Him.
 - She was praying for wisdom and for understanding.
3. My friends, when you see division and apostasy and unfaithfulness in the church, don’t waste your frustration and your perplexity...
 - Your frustration and perplexity are an opportunity for you to plead!
 - Don’t let yourself become indifferent about the matter—but pray! pray! pray!
 - Entreat the LORD about it!
 - Ask Him to give you wisdom and understanding!
 - Don’t act like a spiritual orphan who has no heavenly Father to call upon—like a bastard who has no throne of grace to approach!

B. And when you pray for wisdom like this, God will give it to you!

1. He showed Rebekah what she needed to know!
 - Verse 23 says: **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.”**

- We do not know how the LORD revealed this to her—we do not need to know that—only that He did reveal it, and it was what she needed to know.
 - God will show you what you need to know—that is what we need to know.
2. So what did this mean to Rebekah and her family?
- a. It meant that she had twins, of course...
- And it meant that they would be divided into two nations—
 - At this time, they did not know that this meant apostasy for Esau—for Abraham was to be the father of many nations, and all the nations were to be blessed in him...
 - But that the older would serve the younger certainly indicated that the Messiah was to come through the younger...
 - It is important to understand that in this day, the firstborn was the one who ordinarily ran the household after his father—he was given authority and a double portion of the inheritance...
 - That was the right of the firstborn—the birthright.
 - But of course for this family, the inheritance was not merely houses and lands, but as we have already seen, the bringing forth of the Messiah who would save the world!
 - So this oracle showed that the younger twin who is called Jacob, would be given that privilege.
 - But this certainly did not have to mean that his brother would be excluded from the blessing!
 - Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh become two peoples as well, and the older serves the younger with them, but they both were numbered with the people of God.
 - As far as Isaac and Rebekah knew, the younger could indeed bring forth the Messiah, but why could the older son not be blessed by the Messiah too?
 - Of course we know that the oracle speaks of the greater division between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent...
 - That one was apostate and the other was a son of the promise...
 - We will look at that in more detail in a future sermon...
- b. But you see that Isaac and Rebekah initially respond to this oracle appropriately...
- They name Esau Esau because he is hairy, even as a baby, and the name Esau means hairy...
 - But significant of their hope in God, they name his brother *Jacob* because of the fact that he grabbed his brother's heel as if trying to keep him from coming out first....
 - And this name is commemorative of the fact that the oracle says that he will take the place of his brother as the first born.
 - He was to bring forth the line of the promised Messiah.

- c. How thankful the family should have been to know that the promised one was coming through Jacob.
 - How this ought to have humbled Jacob!
 - Who was he to have such a great privilege?
 - And how it ought to have stirred up prayer for the blessing that was to come to the world through Jacob...
 - How it ought to have brought them together as a family, all delighting in the will of God.
3. The LORD will give you the wisdom that you need when you call upon Him in your perplexity.
- a. Perhaps there is division in your home!
 - Perhaps the other members in the family just rub you the wrong way.
 - Just this week, I spoke into at least five volatile relationships in the kingdom of God...
 - relationships between spouses or siblings or parents and children who were striving with each other.
 - Do you have such difficult relationships?
 - b. Well know that God did not make a mistake in putting you into that relationship.
 - It was not a mistake that Jacob and Esau were shut up in the same womb and were to grow up in the same family...
 - There is something for each of you to learn...
 - It is for you to ask God to help you to learn what you need to learn.
 - Don't just pray that your rival will stop being such a pain, but pray that you will learn what you need to learn in that relationship...
 - Pray that you will do God's will in that relationship!
 - Pray that you will honour Him in that relationship.
 - c. Rebekah sought the LORD in her distress and the LORD showed her what she needed to know...
 - And He will do the same with you!
 - God promises to give us wisdom in our trials if we ask Him to.

TRANS> And that brings us to third thing I want to show you from this passage...

III. Third, don't stop praying the way Isaac and Rebekah did.

- A. It is obvious that they stopped truly praying, truly seeking to honour the Lord after the twins were born.
 - 1. We read the account of how the boys grew up and were very different.
 - Verse 27 explains that Esau was a skilful hunter—a rugged outdoorsman, and Jacob was a mild man—the word indicates that he was self-possessed—he dwelt in tents...and was a herdsman like his father.
 - They might have enjoyed and taken interest in these differences, but instead they develop hostility for one another—they annoy each other.

2. And rather than helping the boys to get along, the parents took sides, each with one of the boys, only enflaming the division.
 - Verse 28 has the ominous words: **28 And Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.**
 - a. This shows that the family had stopped praying—
 - They had lost their focus on doing the will of God.
 - It was about food and who knows what else instead of about honouring God and seeking His kingdom and glory.
 - b. What division this brings into a home!
 - A young Christian couple marries—they delight in each other—they pray together—they bring forth children...they seek the LORD...
 - But then in the busyness and the trials of life, they start to slack off in their prayers...
 - They do not pray that they will honour God in their home.
 - They start to irritate each other and to strive and contend.
 - Everyone focuses on their own agenda and not the glory of God.
 - c. Isaac as the head of the home ought to have led them in prayer for each other—
 - in prayer for the Messiah that was to come, and in prayer that they all would be partakers of the blessing...
 - But instead he himself becomes a source of greater division.
 - Was it God that led him to show favouritism to Esau because he brought home the food that he loved?
 - Was it God that directed Rebekah to side off with Jacob because she enjoyed his company around the house?
- B. The very blessing of the promised Messiah which ought to have brought them together becomes a source of division.
1. Without wisdom from God, without prayer for the will of God, we see how the family behaves...
 - a. Jacob begins to look at birthright which for their family meant bringing forth the Messiah,
 - as a commodity to be purchased and contended for.
 - We read the account of how Esau comes into the house from his hunting—his active lifestyle was probably a regular irritation to Jacob...
 - And he comes in all tired and petty from exhaustion because of his hunting excursion and requests some of the red stuff that Jacob was cooking—
 - He calls it red stuff and is named Edom which means red on account of his passion for the red stuff...

- And scheming Jacob, no doubt irritated by his brother's haphazard manner and lack of planning for himself,
 - seizes the opportunity to purchase the birthright which did not look like his father was intending to give him...
 - Again, Isaac should have been talking about this and rejoicing in the oracle of God and leading his home to seek the blessing together...but alas, he had left off real praying...
 - And so Jacob says very bluntly (v. 31): **“Sell me your birthright as of this day.”**
 - It was customary to sell birthrights in these days, but not usually for a bowl of lentils!
- b. But Esau, loving his sports and having little interest in the things of the LORD, following his father's love for food,
- does not see any value in the birthright...
 - What he says in verse 32 can be interpreted in two ways...
 - **v. 32 And Esau said, “Look, I am about to die; so what is this birthright to me?”**
 - Either he is being overly dramatic—he was hardly a starving man—and saying that he would die unless he got that stew...
 - certainly there was food in the house he might have taken, but he wanted that red stuff...
 - Or he is actually saying, “I am going to die anyway, so what good is this birthright about some inheritance in that distant future?”
 - They knew that the land would not be inherited until after the 400 years in Egypt—so Esau is saying, what is that inheritance to me?
 - This certainly does fit, in either case, with the inspired comment at the end of verse 34—that **thus Esau despised his birthright...**
 - This is very significant because moral commentary like this is rare in the Bible...
 - It shows that Esau had no regard for the promised inheritance of the LORD—some future blessing...pie in the sky...
 - He could eat the stew now—but the inheritance was shadowy and remote.
 - If Isaac had been leading his family to seek the blessing of the Lord, had been giving thanks for the promised inheritance,
 - Jacob would never have thought he needed to contend for it,
 - Like David, he would have humbly said, **2 Sam 7:18-25: “Who am I and what is my house that you have brought me this far?...You have also spoken of Your servant's house for a great while to come...And who is like Your people, like Israel, the one nation on the earth whom God**

went to redeem for Himself as a people, to make for Himself a name...For You have made Your people Israel Your very own people forever; and You, LORD, have become their God. Now, O LORD God, the word which You have spoken concerning Your servant and concerning his house, establish it forever and do as You have said.”

- And Esau would have greatly valued the blessing and rejoiced in it as Jonathan did when he said to David,
 - **1 Sam 23:17: “Do not fear, for the hand of Saul my father shall not find you. You shall be king over Israel, and I shall be next to you. Even my father Saul knows that.”**
- c. I was recently greatly saddened by a minister’s son who spoke in the manner of Esau about his inheritance in the Lord.
 - He told me that it meant nothing to him unless it could be used to build cities now. What a travesty!
 - He despised his birthright!
- 2. What is the state of you and your house?
 - Are you seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness?
 - Is your great desire to honour the Lord and to grow in His grace, to see His kingdom come?
 - Or is everyone in your house seeking his own interests and desires and getting on each other’s nerves?
 - Is your family praying for God’s blessing for each other?
 - Are you praying out loud for each other?
 - Are you praying that together you would honour God, or are you just irritated with each other?
 - Get back to real prayers!
 - Your rote prayers are an abomination to the Lord!
 - Your selfish prayers will not be answered!
 - Get back to the real deal—
 - Praying earnestly for His kingdom to come as Isaac did...
 - Praying earnestly for wisdom in the struggles and perplexities as Rebekah did...
 - Why did you ever stop your praying?
 - Why did you give up when God has so much to give to you?
 - Do you want your home to be a shipwreck like Isaac’s was?
 - Or do you want it to be a place of blessing and salvation?
 - Ask and it shall be given to you...
 - Seek and you shall find...

- Knock and the door shall be open to you.
3. Here is what a man said to me just this week who began truly praying with his wife again...
- He spoke of their Bible study and said...“Many interesting questions have come up, with some good practical discussion on the application to our lives and our extended family and so on.
 - “Our prayers have been gradually more open and focused, and led to some very positive breakthroughs in my wife’s peace of mind about work and family, especially in areas of political friction at work.
 - “Our house has become a more peaceful place, the unstated friction that often hung around has greatly moderated, we are more positively encouraging with each other and it’s becoming easier to deal with conflict and put it aside and make unified decisions. And there have been a lot of situations easily leading to anxiety, stress, and recriminations in the past that fit this category.
 - “We both are experiencing more assurance about matters beyond our control...”
 - and then he lists a number of examples...