

¹⁹ *This is the account of Abraham's son Isaac.*

Abraham became the father of Isaac,²⁰ and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah daughter of Bethuel the Aramean from Paddan Aram and sister of Laban the Aramean.

²¹ *Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren. The LORD answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant.²² The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, "Why is this happening to me?" So she went to inquire of the LORD.*

²³ *The LORD said to her,*

*"Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples from within you will be separated;
one people will be stronger than the other,
and the older will serve the younger."*

²⁴ *When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb.²⁵ The first to come out was red, and his whole body was like a hairy garment; so they named him Esau.²⁶ After this, his brother came out, with his hand grasping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when Rebekah gave birth to them.*

²⁷ *The boys grew up, and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was a quiet man, staying among the tents.²⁸ Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob.*

²⁹ *Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished.³⁰ He said to Jacob, "Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I'm famished!" (That is why he was also called Edom.)*

³¹ *Jacob replied, "First sell me your birthright."*

³² *"Look, I am about to die," Esau said. "What good is the birthright to me?"*

³³ *But Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob.*

³⁴ *Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, and then got up and left. So Esau despised his birthright. (Genesis 25:19-34)*

Make the Most of Your Life Under Christ

Are you happy with your life? This is perhaps a funny time to ask that question – what with all the turmoil in the stock market and an election looming and endless speculation over the future of the auto industry. Maybe most of us are just holding our breath waiting to see what's going to happen. But you are where you are in life today. You've taken and refused jobs. You've made personal choices about marriage and relationships. When you step back and look at your life, do you wish you had done things differently? Do you wish that you'd worked harder on friendships or relationships with family members? Do you feel like you got a bad deal in life? That your family or your job or something else kept you from having a better life than the one you've got? So many people have so many hurts and defeats and so much bad behavior in their personal history. Most of us have no trouble listing at least a few regrets. God never promised to spare us those difficulties. But he did promise us to be with us and to strengthen us as we try to live for him here. This morning, we're going to look at two brothers and I hope to share this encouragement with you: **make the most of your life under Christ.**

I.

The book of Genesis tells us that Isaac prayed for his wife, Rebekah, because she was barren. For twenty years they had longed for children, but God didn't give them any. Finally, God gave them twin sons, Esau the elder, and Jacob a few minutes younger. But when they got these children, they were less than perfect parents. In fact, they showed rampant favoritism. Isaac loved Esau but Rebekah loved Jacob. So for their entire lives, these two boys were rivals for their parents' affections. That was complicated by their very different lifestyles. Esau was a outdoorsman. He loved to hunt but didn't seem to have a lot of time for day to day responsibilities. Jacob stayed home and looked after things. We can imagine that these different attitudes led to sibling arguments as they grew up. And that more than once, Isaac and Rebekah themselves quarreled over their sons and the obvious preference each one had for the other. The customs of the Middle East almost certainly made things worse. At this time, the eldest son usually inherited the birthright. When a father died,

the sons divided up his estate. And the son with the birthright got a double share. It's clear from the incident recorded this morning that Jacob resented his brother's advantage.

Moses tells us that Esau came in from a hard day's hunting and he was famished. Jacob was making dinner. It smelled good and Esau wanted it. But Jacob didn't just give it to him. He didn't treat his brother with love and thoughtfulness. They didn't have that kind of relationship. Instead, he said, **“First sell me your birthright.”** He must have been amazed when Esau actually agreed to it. Now, I'm sure that most of us have been in situations when you were very hungry and you wound up spending much more at a restaurant than you intended. But would you have give up half of a very rich inheritance rather than waiting an hour for a servant to fix a meal? What was wrong with Esau? He had a bad attitude. He was selfish and impatient. He was unwilling to stop and think about the consequences of his actions. He certainly did not act as a faithful child of God. God says that by selling his birthright for a meal, Esau despised it.

If you know the rest of the story, you know it only got worse between these two brothers. And all their problems come down to the sinful and selfish attitudes they had about life. When they acted on those attitudes, they made their own lives harder and they hurt people they loved. In the end, God protected them both and even blessed them in spite of their sinful attitudes. But that does not excuse those attitudes. It doesn't matter that life was unfair to them. It's true that their parents did a lousy job of raising them. It's true that Jacob felt cheated by being born a few minutes after his brother and Esau felt that his brother took advantage of him. But you know what? They were still responsible for their sinful attitudes. Instead of repenting and trying to treat each other with love, each one put himself first. Each one was guilty.

Life isn't fair. Sometimes, I joke that I'd be happy if the congregation just paid me the minimum salary that a player in the National Football League makes. You don't have to pay me the millions that a star like Peyton Manning makes. I'd be happy with the NFL minimum. Do you know how much that is? For a rookie, this year it's \$295,000. Now, is what they do more important than what I do? I don't think so. I think that teaching the word of God is much more important than playing football, but life isn't fair. I'm never going to make the NFL minimum as a WELS pastor.

And that's OK. Whatever I'm paid, God wants me – and he wants you – to have a Christian attitude about it. An attitude that trusts in his love instead of constantly reciting our discontent to ourselves and spewing it out to other people. We are Christians living in a world that is not fair. That's true about more than just money. Some of us were blessed with wonderful parents who taught us the faith and who loved us openly and richly and took good care of us. Some of us had harder childhoods. Many of us are the children of divorce or alcoholism. Some of us may wonder sometimes how different our lives would be if we would've have different opportunities or different parents, or if we would've been born in a different place or time.

But in every situation, sin takes its toll. There is no perfect life here. Although some people's lives may be better than ours, we don't get to use all the bad things that have happened to us as excuses for our bad attitudes or behavior. No matter how bad our parents were, no matter how many times we've been cheated or betrayed, no matter how much disappointment has piled up in our lives, God expects us to live as his children. That begins with an attitude of faith.

One of the psalms says, **“This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”** God wants us to consider each day a day of his grace and to rejoice that our God loves us even when life hurts. That doesn't mean we pretend that pain is easy. But we trust in God who loves us even in our hurt. Does God find that attitude of faith in our hearts? Or are we like Jacob and Esau, so caught up in our own hurts, so focused on what we want, that we fail to love God by loving each other? I would be surprised if very many of us could say that they're innocent of that sin. I'm not. At times, I drive my poor wife crazy with my discontent. Do you, like me, need to confess that too often your words and actions reflect a lack of trust in your Lord? Do other people suffer because of your sins?

Don't you hate that feeling of sinful weakness – “I'm messing up again!” – that feeling of disappointing God one more time. My friends, this is exactly the moment to remember that Jesus triumphed over our sinful hearts. Jesus gives us the victory over our own pride and selfishness. He took away our guilt. God no longer finds us guilty in his court because Jesus offered himself in our place. Because he took God's punishment for our sin, God says that our punishment is over. We've paid our debt, God says, because Jesus did.

Every time we condemn ourselves, God says to us, “No, you're free.” He keeps on saying it, in communion and in baptism and in sermons and in confession until we actually understand that he means me!

God keeps saying it until we finally take comfort. Once we trust that promise, then God works to change us. Being set free from guilt and shame gives us the strength to change our lives. Jesus died for me. So that makes today a day to rejoice, even if I have an uphill struggle all day long. When my life is tough, I need to resist that temptation to gripe and complain, even to myself. I need to remember God's love and turn from sin, even as God applies his gospel to me. But the power to turn doesn't come from me. It's there in that message of unyielding, eternal forgiveness. **Make the most of your life under Christ. Cultivate an attitude of faith.**

II.

When Rebekah was pregnant with twins, she experienced an amount of movement that startled her. My mom likes to tell the story of when she was pregnant with twins and didn't know it. She thought the baby was doing jumping jacks or something. Now, I don't know if Rebekah experienced that normal increase in movement that comes from having two babies in a very tight spot, or if this was something more. But it did cause her to ask God what was happening. God told her that two peoples were separating already in her womb. Both of her sons would found a nation. Esau was the ancestor of Edom, Israel's neighbor. And Jacob was the ancestor of Israel.

This is one of several miracle births in the Old Testament. Rebekah could not conceive. Twenty years of waiting had proven that. God waited to give them these children until it was clear that he was intervening in their lives. Then while the boys were still in the womb, God told Rebekah that the older would serve the younger. If things go the normal way, the older one should get the birthright. To the Israelite way of thinking, the older one should also naturally become the greater people. But God showed that he was working.

God chose Jacob to be the father of the nation of Israel. His twelve sons each fathered at least one tribe. This was the chosen people that would one day march up out of Egypt and come to Mt. Sinai and receive the covenant there from God himself. This was the people that would conquer the Promised Land and live under God's protection. This was the people that had the one temple on earth where God actually appeared, and that alone had the Old Testament scriptures.

But the number one reason why God created Israel was to be the ancestors of Christ. God chose Israel to be the cradle for his Son. He chose Israel to provide the context for Jesus' ministry and his life and death and resurrection. He chose Israel to provide the human ancestry of our Savior. So on the day God selected Jacob to found his people, God was working for you. And for me. And for every human being that would ever live. Jesus has come to take away our pride and selfishness and sinfulness. He came through Israel.

God is still working for us. He has created us to be the New Israel. The true people of God consists of all those who trust in Jesus. You see, whatever else was true of Jacob, he was believer. It's harder to say for sure if Esau was, but Jacob's faith shines through all the stories about him, even when we see him at his sinful worst. That shows that Jacob is truly our brother. We, too, are sinners. Every single day, our sin shows itself. But God is working in our hearts through the gospel. He keeps that faith alive. He works to make that faith shine through. Day after day, he calls us his children, his people, his beloved.

We live in a time when it's easy to be afraid. There are so many scary things going on. Will our jobs be here next week, let alone next year? There are so many hurts and sorrows around us. But we are the people of God. No matter how unfair life is for us here, God has chosen us. He will guard us and protect us and bring us home to him in heaven. That promise can never fail. Because it is ours, we can live here as his children. We can see the time and the place where we are as the time and place where God has put us for his reasons. His reasons always come from his love for us. So we can rejoice in his love, even when we weep for sorrow. My friends, whatever is going on in your life and your world, **make the most of your life under Christ. Rejoice in your privileged position.**

Are you happy with your life? Do you have any regrets? We live in a sinful world. There will always be unhappiness here. But this life is temporary. One day, we're going to leave it and live with Jesus. One day, our Lord is going to come back and undo all that sin has done here and we will live in joy forever. That makes today a day of hope, no matter how dark the rest of our life seems to be. God is with you. Jesus is greater than all the hurt that can touch us here. Trust in him. Rejoice in him. Make the most of your time under his grace here. Amen.