

# The Book of Genesis

## The Story

### Ismael and Isaac – Esau and Jacob

Wednesday 30 June 2021

6:30 PM-8:00 PM

#### Opening Prayer

#### Reading Assignment – Genesis Chapters 21 - 30

#### Background

In exploring the stories found in Genesis, we must always keep in mind that these stories and their portrayal of God and the world come from a primitive culture and worldview very different from that of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christian understanding of God, the world, and relationships or even that of later Jewish insights. It is unlikely that we will have the exact interpretations as the writers or original hearers of Genesis did. Our hope is that we can nevertheless learn useful lessons for our Christian life today.

As the story of Genesis continues, we follow the tale of a particular human family, and specifically the tale of certain male members of that family. The family is that of Abraham, the Aramean, who walks with God. The story exposes the hopes, aspirations, loves, envies, and deceits among the members of that family, as well as parental favoritism. It also tells of the mysterious favor God exhibits toward some men in the family, but not others.

The men in this family, as presented in Genesis, do not fit our 21st Century idea of godly people. Their focus is not on serving God and working to build God's kingdom.

Ishmael, the first-born son of Abraham is something of a mystery. Not much is told about him. He seems to have enjoyed the company of his younger brother Isaac,

and loved him, but was sent away into the wilderness with his mother, Hagar, by Abraham because Sarah was envious of her and saw Ismael as a threat to the inheritance of Isaac.

Isaac appears to be a dull but inoffensive man. There is no evidence of particular piety. We see him primarily as a child and then as an old man. The time between these two periods appears to have been spent as the indulged son of a wealthy man, who marries Rebekah and has twin sons, Esau and Jacob. He has little in the way of adventures other than to repeat the lie of his father, Abraham, and say his wife Rebekah is his sister to save himself when he feared for his life.

Esau, their first born, comes into the world as one who does not have the favor of God, we are told. His brother Jacob is destined to overtake him. Esau is Isaac's favorite. Esau does seem not to be very sharp, preferring the pleasures of the moment to planning for the future.

Jacob, by contrast, is quite sharp. And his tendency is to take advantage of others. He seizes upon their weaknesses to benefit himself. He is a deceiver. Yet, he is loved by his mother Rebekah more than Esau, and he is loved by God. Some would say Jacob is mischievous. In actuality he is more than that. He is self-serving.

What can this family story of sons chosen and sons not chosen tell us as modern Christians? What can we learn from the lives of these people? How are we to interpret the preference of God for one brother over the other in two generations?

### **Questions to Consider**

1. Abraham sends his first-born son, Ismael, into the wilderness with a bit of food and water and the urging of his wife and his God. Is this moral?
2. God orders Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, but God hates human sacrifices and the killing of humans. Discuss.
3. Abraham had at least eight sons, but he sent all of them away except Isaac. In your assessment, is this a loving and reasonable way for a father to act?
4. Why is Esau portrayed as a not too smart brute in this story?
5. Jacob is a deceiver but loved by God. How does this make sense?
6. What does the favoritism of Isaac and Rebekah toward one son suggest?
7. Summarize the lessons from the stories of these four brothers for us today?

**Closing Prayer**

