

# Womb Warfare: Wanted, Not Worthy

Grace Fellowship | Nick Dutton | Genesis 25:19-26

Church, you may be seated. Good morning, Grace Fellowship. So this week we are continuing our studies in Genesis and we're going to be moving from a text that apparently at least one commentator says nobody should ever preach to a text that undergirds one of the most important and most controversial doctrines in all of Scripture: the doctrine of election. So naturally we had one of our pastors preach last week and an associate minister this week. So all seriousness, I am humbled by this opportunity and I just want to acknowledge the leadership of our church. Grace Fellowship, I hope you know that you have some of the most loving and mature elders that a church can have. I was also deeply humbled meditating on this text and thinking about how to preach it.

So let me start by reading the text and then I'll open us with a word of prayer. We are in Genesis 25 and we will be reading verses 19 through 26.

*These are the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son. Abraham fathered Isaac and Isaac was 40 years old when he took Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan Aram, the sister of Laban the Aramean, to be his wife. And Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife because she was barren, and the Lord granted his prayer. And Rebekah, his wife, conceived. The children struggled together within her, and she said, "If it is thus, why is this happening to me?" So she went to inquire of the Lord, and the Lord said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided. The one shall be stronger than the other. The older shall serve the younger." When their days to give birth were completed, behold, there were twins in her womb. The first one came out red, all his body like a hairy cloak, so they called his name Esau. Afterward his brother came out with his hand holding Esau's heel, so his name was called Jacob. Isaac was 60 years old when she bore them. This is the Word of the Lord.*

**Prayer:** Heavenly Father, Lord, I pray right now that what is preached would be helpful. I pray that it would be true. I pray, Father, if there's in any way that **Your** people are not following **You**, that think differently than what **Your** Word teaches, I pray that **You** would soften their hearts to hear and to change. Lord, bless this message. Bless **Your** people now through it. And I pray this in the **Name** of Jesus. Amen.

This week we move from the generations of Ishmael to the generations of Isaac. With one we get a list of names and with the other we get a story. One ends with death, the other ends with birth. God is demonstrating that this is the continued story of **His** redeeming work in the fallen world. God has promised that the seed of the woman will crush the head of the serpent. **He** has promised that **He** will bring a great name, a multitude of descendants, and a blessing to all the nations through the seed of Abraham. Now the question is: When will this seed come? And who will this seed be? And our text today

doesn't answer these questions fully, but it does demonstrate how God is working out **His** sovereign plan of redemption.

John Stott once told the story of a Hindu philosopher who visited a women's Christian school and asked if he could lecture the women about Hinduism. They said yes and he returned with two other Hindus. They all sat on mats on the floor and the Hindu teacher gave an interesting talk about God, telling the women that **He** was a transcendent being who was far away and unapproachable and that man was in the depths of abysmal ignorance and degradation. So hopeless was the story that the women were left gasping for breath. When he suddenly stopped, the women cried out, "Go on, go on, you can't stop there!" He replied saying, "Our religion stops there."

Now Hinduism is a diverse religion and there may be some who disagree with that characterization. But Christians, because the Bible is true, I would say this Hindu speaks more truly of his situation than he knows. Outside of Christ, God is unapproachable. Man is in a state of misery and condemnation. Grace Fellowship, Christianity also teaches of a holy and transcendent God. It teaches that mankind because of sin is in a state of ignorance, degradation, and condemnation. But our story doesn't stop there.

The doctrine of election tells of God's eminence. **His** eternal decree that a portion of mankind exists on whom **He** has set **His** love. For these **He** has worked in history to bring about their salvation from sin so that they can live in eminent fellowship with the transcendent God. And that's what our passage is about today. The story of the birth of Jacob and Esau teaches us that God has chosen to save those **He** wanted, not those who are worthy.

God has not left mankind in a hopeless state. The main point of our passage is that God's election of Jacob as the promised seed comes as the result of faithful prayer and is determined only by God's sovereign love and will. As we will see, Jacob is not the obvious choice, but **He** is the one that God chooses. And what I want to get across to you today is that we should live lives that reflect God's election of us in Christ, which is the result of **His** providential work in history and is ultimately rooted in **His** unconditional electing love.

I'm going to walk through the text with three points today. The first is a **Barren Womb**. The second is a **Battle of Brothers**. And the third is a **Bad Choice**.

### **1. A Barren Womb**

Let's read in verses 19 through 21. At the start of our text, we see a very familiar theme for the book of Genesis, and that is the barren womb. Just like his parents, Isaac and his wife Rebekah are unable to conceive children naturally. So Isaac responds with prayer. And why does he do this? Let's think about his life. His own birth was a picture of the power and faithfulness of God. In biblical times, the birth of a child from a barren womb was like a resurrection from the dead. Let's think about Genesis 22 where God's miraculous

provision of a lamb on a mountain was like a resurrection. Going up the mountain Isaac was as good as dead. Coming back down, he had been brought back to life.

So to say that Isaac was familiar with the resurrection power of God is an understatement. He knows that he serves the God of the living, not the dead. He knows that Yahweh is a God who responds faithfully to the prayers of **His** faithful covenant partners. And so even though God has promised that he is **His** chosen seed and that nations will come from him, he doesn't presume on this promise. He intercedes for his wife because he knows that God has the ability and the intention to bless him with the promised seed.

And God hears his prayer. The Hebrew literally states, Moses is emphasizing the direct connection between Isaac's prayer and Rebekah conceiving. It is because Isaac prayed that Rebekah conceived. Does that bother you? Is it hard to conceive in your mind how God can guarantee that something is going to happen, and yet at the same time, it only happens because someone prayed for it? Too often we think about God's interactions with the world in ways that are more rational than biblical. The doctrine of election does not erase the necessity of the means by which God brings about **His** elective purposes.

So brothers and sisters, when it comes to praying to God to move in this world—whether that be for healing, whether that be for your sanctification, whether that be for the salvation of a child or a brother or sister—yes, God has a sovereign plan that **He** has set in stone since before the ages began. And at the same time, the Bible tells us that our prayers really matter. Things happen, and the reason that they happen is because we prayed for them. Does it surprise you that a passage that centers around God's elective purposes begins with the prayers of a faithful man? We must be comfortable with the reality that there are things that can be at tension in our minds that are not at tension in the mind of God. Part of that is realizing **He's** God and we're not.

And this is the difference between fatalism and a biblical view of God's sovereignty. Fatalism says that nothing we do matters because God has determined everything. Biblical sovereignty in the doctrine of election tells us that everything we do matters because God has determined them to be the means by which **He** brings about **His** sovereign plan. To be a fatalist is to act like God's equal, disagreeing with **Him** about whether our actions matter or not. It is not a matter of logical reasoning. It's a matter of humility, accepting what God has said to be true. Isaac wasn't a fatalist. Isaac knows that he's been promised a seed. He knows that God can bring life from the dead and he knows that Yahweh is a faithful God, and so he prays. He sees no contradiction in what he's doing. It is because God is his God and has made him promises that he prays. God's sovereignty supports our prayers instead of eliminating the need for them.

In the same way, we know that God has raised **His Son** from the dead, that from the womb of a virgin came the ultimate promised seed of and the Savior of the world. And **His** coming was preceded by thousands of years of prayers of faithful saints who wanted to see **Him** come. God will fulfill **His** gospel promises, but that didn't erase the impact and the

necessity of the prayers of **His** elect people. God has promised that **He** will save all of **His** elect. **He** promises that we will grow in holiness. **He** promises that Jesus will return one day. And it is because **He** is our good and sovereign Lord that we can confidently pray to **Him** for all of these things and know that they will be accomplished. It should be our joy that we get to be part of God's plan of redemption.

Truly the question that needs to be answered about salvation is not "If God is sovereign over salvation, why do we pray?" The question that needs to be answered is "If God is not sovereign over salvation, why should we pray?" I don't ask people for things I know they can't give me. We pray because we know God can and has promised to save **His** elect. **He** has also promised to bring all things together for our good. And so while **He's** not guaranteed our physical health or the salvation of everyone that we love, we can know at the end of the day, however God responds to these prayers is best and is wisest.

What we also find at the end of our passage is that God did not answer Isaac's prayers right away. We find out it took 20 years for him to see his baby boys. I don't know about you, brothers and sisters, but I feel like if I'm praying for something for a week, God isn't hearing me. Sometimes I just want to take control and tell God, answer me now. The best way to fight this sin is to remember the amazing electing love of God in Christ Jesus. We must remember that in ourselves, we have no right to request anything of God. The only thing we have a right to is **His** judgment. We deserve God's wrath, not **His** ear.

And at the same time, Christians, we know that God listens to us because of Christ. Because God promises to hear us through **His** promised seed. Our intercession is rooted in **His** intercession. You can be confident that God hears you because God hears Christ. And why can we have this confidence in Christ? That's what I really want to spend the rest of my sermon talking about. I want to discuss the basis of the confidence that we can have in Christ and why it's ultimately not rooted in anything in us, but is rooted in entirely all of God's electing grace.

## **2. A Battle of Brothers**

Let's move to our second point: a battle of brothers. Let's read in verse 22. Examining this verse, we find one confused mama. I'm sure she knows that pregnancy can be tough for some women, but she also probably knows that it shouldn't feel like a WWE SmackDown is going inside of you. The word "struggled" here really doesn't capture the Hebrew well. A survey of the literature shows that the verb is a violent verb, often translated "crushed" or "broken." Such as when Abimelech had his head crushed by a millstone thrown from a woman from the tower. So it's not like she's feeling a few kicks here and there. There is a fist fight going on in her womb. If Esau comes out red, I bet Jacob came out black and blue.

And of course, the reason for this struggle is that she has two sons who are at war within her. The theme of brother warfare is one of the most consistent throughout all the book of Genesis and honestly all the Bible. Think of Cain and Abel. Think of the sons of Noah. Think

of Isaac himself, whose brother Ishmael mocked him and died with his face set against all his brothers. And the cause of this infighting is that God has promised in Genesis 3 that all of humanity is in two warring factions: the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. And because both seeds can come from the same womb, it can be hard to tell who the seed of the woman is and who the seed of the serpent is.

You know, maybe you felt this tension in your own life too. Jesus tells us that part of the effects of gospel ministry is that it will divide families. Many families will consist of those chosen by God and those who reject **Him**. And that's honestly one of the hardest parts of daily life as a Christian. And you know this pain if you have an unbelieving family member. Maybe one of the questions you have is this: "Why me and not him or her?"

What I want to caution you against is the default of placing the ultimate reason within that person. Well, you might say, it's because I chose God and they didn't. First off, I want you to consider that in light of the biblical evidence that I'm going to present in this sermon. You know, what the Bible says determines what we should think and feel. What we think and feel does not determine what the Bible says. And second, if you think that God gives each of us the same pervenient grace and ability to respond, and yet some of us choose **Him** and others don't, why is that so? I mean, just thinking logically, the only answer I can come to is that those who choose God are somehow better or more virtuous than those who don't. I mean, if the same amount of grace is given, what could be a more virtuous thing to do than to choose God rather than to not choose God?

I'm not saying that we should ground our belief about election based on logic. But if we're going to make extra-biblical arguments to support our case, we need to understand how the logic really works out. Giving unbiblical answers to tough questions can only give unbiblical, worldly comfort. We should not want that. We should want to be comforted by the Holy Spirit and **He** can only comfort us with biblical truth. So let's take a look at verses 24 through 26 and see what our two options are.

Looking at verse 25, we see Esau. This is the firstborn, the one who had the right to all of his father's wealth and blessing according to the traditions of his time. His name comes from the fact that he's covered in hair. I think it's a universal principle, but it was especially true in biblical times that a hairy man was a blessed man. Think about Samson, whose strength was tied directly to his hair. Think about the prophets and how they would often tie the cutting off or the shaving of one's head with judgment. The fact that he's red also gives him this sort of manly, ruddy look. According to this description, this child is going to be a man's man. He's one that we can look at, and like the prophet Samuel did when looking at David's older brother, we can say, "Surely this is the Lord's anointed, right?"

Now let's look at Jacob, the secondborn. The fact that he comes out second, holding his brother's heel, demonstrates that they were fighting up until the moment they were born. And Jacob loses. As will be predicted, he is the weaker son. In the Bible, a heel-grabber is a trickster, a deceiver. Jacob's name sounds like the Hebrew word for heel, which is also

related to the word meaning to deceive or to betray. And that's why when we get later on in the story, Esau says that Jacob is living up to his namesake when he tricks him out of his birthright and his blessing. This is also the first time that the word "heel" is used since Genesis 3, where it said that the serpent will strike the seed of the woman on the heel. It's as if the Lord is trying to make it obvious that, based on appearances, Jacob is the seed of the serpent.

So we can choose between the man's man and the heel-grabbing, deceiving, second-born loser. That would be an easy pick if we're playing dodgeball. But we're not. We're talking about God's redemptive plan of salvation and the bringing of all the blessings of Abraham to the nations of the world. And here's the truth: what we're going to see from the lives of both men is that apart from God's grace, they're both scoundrels. Complete scoundrels. Both are sinners in desperate need of God's electing grace. And we're in that same boat, aren't we? If election is based on any condition in us, we fail that test every single time. Every single time. We are all prisoners on the death row of eternal punishment, and God would be totally just to send every single one of us to an eternal hell.

Spurgeon says, "How it ought to humble us when we remember that we have no claims upon God. If **He** should leave us to go on in sin and perish, we have no right to complain because we deserve it." One of the greatest gifts the Lord gives us when **He** saves us is the ability to grasp that reality. We begin to see just how holy our God is and how evil our sin is. Until you see yourselves worthy of an eternal judgment, you will be unable to comprehend the justice of God in freely electing those whom **He** chooses. Self-righteousness is like a faulty wooden stool that we set ourselves up on to judge God and how **He** operates in the world. A right view of God comes when we are face-flat on the ground accepting the truth of **His** holiness and our sinfulness. It is only in considering this truth that we can understand verse 23 and the purposes of God and election. God's elective claims upon us only make sense when we consider the fact that we have no claim upon God. We can only accept the truth that God is in the heavens and does whatever **He** pleases when we see ourselves as totally unworthy of any of **His** grace and love.

### **3. A Bad Choice**

So that brings us to our third point: a bad choice. So she went to inquire of the Lord, and the Lord said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided. The one shall be stronger than the other. The older shall serve the younger." You know, the fact that they're both going to be nations shows that the physical blessings of Abraham truly do go to all of his children. And yet, these sons will be divided, meaning only one of them will receive the blessings—all of the blessings—that are promised to Abraham. And God's choice is in direct contrast to how the world chooses things, right? You choose the stronger, older one, right? Not God.

Now God's purposes in election are not determined by what gives **Him** the greatest chance of success. They are determined by **His** ultimate glory and gracious love. Why will the

younger, weaker sons be served by the older, stronger one? Because God has determined it to be so. The Apostle Paul grounds his doctrine of election as explained in Romans 9 in this passage. In explaining why not all of the Jewish people have accepted Jesus as their Messiah, Paul points out that physical descent has never been a guarantee of receiving God's blessings. It has always been God's election that determined who **His** people were. Romans 9:10-13 reads:

*But also when Rebecca had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born and had done nothing, either good or bad, in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works, but because of **Him** who calls. She was told, "The older will serve the younger." As it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."*

Not because of their works. Not because of anything that Jacob or Esau are going to do. Not because of any choices that they're going to make. But because of **Him** who calls will the older serve the younger. And this is the repeated theme throughout Scripture. It was Abel, not Cain; Jacob, not Esau; Judah, not Reuben; David, not his older brothers.

As will be explained in Isaac's blessing of Jacob in chapter 27, the one who is served by the other is the one who receives all of the promises of God. And not to steal from future passages, but the way that God brings about **His** election of Jacob is astounding. It's through lies and deceit. God's providence over **His** elective purposes does not make **Him** the author of evil, but it does show how God has determined all things to work together for good in **His** plan. I mean, think about the way that God saved you. Was it in an unhealthy church? Did it come because of sin bringing you to your knees? Did it come through somewhat questionable preaching? Were you in the depths of immorality? I can say yes to all of those questions. And yet God's amazing providence worked through all of this to bring about **His** call in my life.

So do not think that your past sin can disqualify you from God's electing love. God's call does not work according to our works, to things that we have done, but according to **His** purposes. We bring to God not our gifts, but our brokenness. We are all complete scoundrels by birth. The one thing that people who are saved and people who are lost have in common is they will spend eternity saying, "I do not deserve to be where I am." And only one of them is going to be right.

And so the effect of the gospel is that it opens our eyes to the justice of God's judgment and the grace of **His** salvation. We realize that we are wanted, not worthy. And that changes everything. We need to ponder the fact that God's **Son** was crucified for us. And when we look at the cross, we realize that should be us. When it comes to election, the real question that should stump us is not "God, why do **You** send some people to hell?" It's "God, why did **You** send **Your Son** to go through hell for me?"

Think about what we sang earlier: *And can it be that I should gain an interest in my Savior's blood? Died **He** for me who caused **His** pain? For me who **Him** to death pursued? Amazing love, how can it be that **Thou**, my God, should die for me?* The mystery of election is not that there are people in hell. The mystery is who died on the cross. God elected **His Son**, the ultimate promised seed, to die for the sins of **His** elect, that those whom **He** has chosen despite all their sin might receive the blessings of Abraham through faith. They are not worthy; they are wanted. And that is amazing love, is it not?

We have a bright future not because of our work ethic, our ACT scores, or our 401K. We have a bright future because God has set **His** love on us. And that radically changes how we see God. When we know that God has set **His** love on us freely, not because of anything that we have done, we should never doubt **His** love on us. You didn't earn **His** love; what can you do to take it away? As John Owen says, saints are to see God as full of love for them. Think about that: full of love. How much love does it take to fill God? Do you see God that way? If you're trusting in Christ today, that is how you should see **Him**.

You want to know the fullness of love? The Apostle John tells us in 1 John 4:9, *"In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent **His** only **Son** into the world so that we might live through **Him**."* If you have life in Christ, you can be certain of God's unending, incomprehensible love for you. Just think about how you would finish this quote from John Owen. It starts by saying: "Have no fears about **His** love for you. The greatest sorrow and burden that you can lay on the Father..." Let's stop right there. What do you think the answer is going to be? Is it our sin? Is it because I had an angry outburst this week? Is it my lack of a consistent prayer time? Is that what gives God the greatest sorrow?

The greatest sorrow that we can give... here's what he says: "The greatest unkindness you can do to **Him** is to not believe that **He** loves you." So you have a duty today, if you are in Christ, to believe that God loves you in all **His** fullness. And this duty does not change on days when you are killing sin versus on days when it seems to be killing you. God's love for us is the same on both days. Full of love. You know, God still hates the sin within us, and **He** may discipline us or cause us to feel **His** displeasure. But even that is rooted in **His** ultimate, unending, full-of-love love that seeks for us to be holy and happy like **He** is holy and happy.

And because God loves each of us as **His** elect, we should love one another in the same way too. We ought to be kind and gracious, thinking as highly of our brothers and sisters as we can, assuming the best motives—not the worst—when we see each other doing stuff we disagree with. We ought to forgive and seek forgiveness quickly. We ought to intentionally seek friendship with those who we may not naturally like because God sought friendship with us when we should have nothing but hatred from **Him**. At the same time, today I want to warn you that this love is only for those who are in Christ Jesus. If you have not turned from sin and trusted in Christ, you can only be certain of God's wrath towards you and your sin. So turn to **Him** today. Right now **He** might be working within you repentance and faith. Freely accept the gift of salvation **He** has provided in **His Son**.

John Owen defines faith as the place where our souls go to find rest. Stop seeking to find that rest in the things of this world; seek it in Christ. But someone might object, "How can we evangelize like this if God elects only some to salvation? If God's election is sure and not based on anything in us, should we only evangelize the elect? Does anything we do really matter if God has determined everything?" I'd refer you to this quote from J.I. Packer which states, "In the Bible, Divine sovereignty and human responsibility are not enemies. They are not uneasy neighbors. They are not in an endless state of cold war with each other. They are friends and they work together."

If this is hard for you to grasp, that's okay. Accepting that humans are responsible to declare and to respond to the gospel and that God is sovereign over who is elect is not a matter of logical thinking. It is a matter of faith. It is a matter of humility. And logically, it should make sense to us that there are things about God that don't make sense to us. That's why **He's** God and we're not. As I've told my wife many times, the biblical doctrine of election is really one of the areas of life where you can have your cake and eat it too. We really can believe that everything we do in life matters; that people truly are saved because we shared the gospel with them. And at the same time, there's nothing we can do to mess up God's plan. Nothing we can do can cause God to lose one of **His** elect.

Our job is to be faithful; it is **His** work that brings fruit. The gospel is still free to all who would come, and yet only those whom the Father has chosen will come to Christ. So brothers and sisters, my prayer is that Grace Fellowship would be a church that handles the doctrine of election with grace and love; that we would rightly emphasize the responsibility that each of us has to pray and to evangelize and to encourage one another. And at the same time, I pray that we would humbly recognize the sovereignty of God over all things—the sovereignty that assures us of **His** unchanging, incomprehensible love for us and our inability to mess up any of **His** plans.

You know, Jacob was a scoundrel, unworthy of God's love, but God wanted him, and so he was God's. In the same way, we are all scoundrels, worthy of hell, unworthy of love. But if you are in Christ, you are wanted. And you are God's elect—an object of **His** infinite love. Let us rest in **His** providence and let us take responsibility for our actions. Let us declare the wonders of Christ and let us rest in that wondrous love.

I'm going to close by reading a poem from an old saint, just because I feel like it teaches well the truths of this passage and I think it will transition well to our time of communion.

*Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back, > Guilty of dust and sin. > But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack > From my first entrance in, > Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning, > If I lacked any thing.*

*"A guest," I answered, "worthy to be here:" > Love said, "You shall be he." > "I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear, > I cannot look on **thee**." > Love took my hand, and smiling did reply, > "Who made the eyes but I?"*

*"Truth, Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame > Go where it doth deserve." > "And know you not," says Love, "who bore the blame?" > "My dear, then I will serve." > "You must sit down," says Love, "and taste my meat:" > So I did sit and eat.*

Grace Fellowship, if you are in Christ, your hope is that **He** has come to serve you, that **He** gave **His** body and **His** blood as an example of **His** unending, amazing love for you. So today, sit and taste this meal, trusting in **His** love.

**Prayer:** Heavenly Father, Lord, we're so grateful for **Your** love today—a love that we cannot earn, a love that is totally dependent upon **Your** election of us. Father, I just pray that this message would be helpful. I pray that **Your** people would not for a second doubt **Your** love for them today. And I pray this in the holy **Name** of Jesus. Amen.