

What happened when Rebekah prayed to God about her difficult pregnancy? First, God told her she was carrying twins. I imagine this would have confirmed a strong suspicion that Rebekah probably already had. From the amount of tumbling around and kicking she was experiencing every day she must have wondered how one child could afflict her in so many places at the same time. . . . But then God went on to frame the information about her carrying twins in terms of an oracle – a divine revelation – about the twins. Yes, the twins were indeed two very different people – but they also represented two different nations of people who would not get along. These nations would continue to butt heads with one another – just as the twins already seemed to be doing before birth. And speaking of the twins themselves, God tells Rebekah that the older will serve the younger. Rebekah must have been very surprised to hear that God did not expect the “older” or firstborn twin to be the one that the “younger” or second born twin would serve – since a firstborn son was the traditional “favorite” for receiving more, or having more expected of them. Rebekah might also have been surprised that God shared this oracle directly with her instead of her husband Isaac. Since God’s promise was passed down through Isaac, why wouldn’t God have shared this oracle directly with him? . . . If God wasn’t going to tell Isaac about this, apparently Rebekah felt she didn’t need to either. Nor did she share this information with anyone else. Because nowhere in the scripture passage does it say that she said anything about the oracle to her husband, Isaac; nor her sons, Esau and Jacob, after they were born.

I think Rebekah wanted to keep this information to herself. But I also think she wanted to “help” pave the way for God’s vision of the future to be fulfilled. So she favored Jacob. Maybe most people who knew Rebekah thought she was just trying to “even” things out when it came to giving parental attention to the twins – because it was obvious that Isaac loved Esau – particularly Esau’s hunting skills which put game on the table. Now I don’t want to perpetuate the stereotype that the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach – but that does seem to be the case with Isaac and Esau. And maybe Isaac’s focus on Esau encouraged Rebekah to “up” her influence on Jacob. It seems to me that Rebekah must have made suggestions or comments to Jacob that implied that he was every bit as good as, or better than, Esau to head up the family and inherit a double share of Isaac’s wealth. I think that seed had to have been planted and watered in Jacob long before he decided to withhold food from his own brother when he came in from the field empty handed and just starving. It does not feel like a “spur of the moment” decision when Jacob forced Esau to swear over his birthright as the firstborn in exchange for some stew to eat. The fact that Jacob would withhold such basic hospitality from an immediate family member was absurd! No one would do such a thing. And maybe Esau thought at first that Jacob

was just playing around, trying to drive him crazy by holding back a bowl of stew. Esau probably thought Jacob would hand him the stew and say he was just kidding. But by the time Esau realized that Jacob wasn't kidding it was too late for Esau to take back his oath. This was no longer "boys will be boys" joshing or roughhousing around, with Jacob holding a bowl of stew out of reach until Esau cried "uncle." No, Jacob deliberately took advantage of Esau's brash willingness to say anything to get something to eat; and Esau clearly didn't value his birthright enough to refuse to swear it away for a bowl of stew. The younger twin took advantage of the older; and the older was willing to let it happen. . . . And if you really don't think Rebekah had *anything* to do with this, I would invite you to read chapter 27 of Genesis and get back to me on that. In Genesis 27 Rebekah deliberately helped her son Jacob fool her husband Isaac into thinking he was giving his deathbed blessing to Esau – when in fact he gave it to Jacob instead. Yes, Rebekah did that for her son Jacob. And we'll hear more about that next week. But suffice it to say, Rebekah probably "helped" to stir this stew pot.

Now in contrast to Rebekah's determined efforts to "help" God's oracle be fulfilled, Paul's letter to the Romans presents a different model for how to work with God. Paul talks about being "in Christ" and having the Spirit of God dwelling "in you." Where Rebekah worked at something outside of herself by shaping her son Jacob to fit into the future God had described in his oracle to her; Paul describes how the power and Spirit of God can shape believers from the inside out if our lives are lived "in Christ." Because when we are "in Christ" God's Spirit is able to flow through us. It is no longer about what we can do – what our abilities are, what we are determined to do; but it is instead about what God can do, if we're open to God's leading. Do you understand how that is radically different from what Rebekah was doing? Where Rebekah could "feel" the turmoil of her twins when she was carrying them; I'm not sure she also "felt" the Spirit of God at work through her as she continued to influence her son Jacob. That seems more like a "head strong" kind of thing instead of a "Spirit strong" kind of thing to do. Or to put it another way: after hearing God's oracle Rebekah did what Rebekah could do; but when we're "in Christ" we are able to do what God can do – we're not limited to what we can do. God is able to use us to do what we could not do on our own. Or to use Paul's terms: Rebekah's mind was still set on the things of the flesh – the success of her son Jacob, at the expense of her son Esau, and without the knowledge of her husband Isaac – instead of really being focused on God. It's like she twisted a word from God into something that she believed she could control – and in the process it became more about her human effort and less about fulfilling the vision and purpose of God. It's like Rebekah thought she was the one with the power to make this oracle become reality.

But when we are living "in Christ" we aren't thinking, "Look at what I was able to do!" Instead, we think, "Wow! Look at what God was able to do!" because we KNOW it is

more than what we could have done. When we are living “in Christ” our lives become fuller, more alive, more at peace, because of what the Spirit of God can do and is doing. I don’t know about you, but I believe that our lives can be more deeply satisfying if we choose to live “in Christ” rather than constantly jockeying for position and doing things like ripping off a relative’s birthright for a bowl of stew. I mean – isn’t living a life of peace more appealing than always struggling to have the upper hand, and trying to edge someone else out? To live our lives “in Christ” is an invitation to live our lives well with God and other people, instead of living “at odds” with God and other people. . . . Imagine how less contentious the world as a whole could be if more people chose to live “in Christ” and knew the peace of having God’s Spirit dwelling in them. . . . Perhaps that is an oracle we can “help” God to fulfill.

Amen.