

Genesis 25:1-34

by John Calvin

John Calvin's sermon on Genesis 25:1-34 explores Abraham's later life, his marriages, the significance of Isaac as the sole heir, and the implications of his death and legacy.

Scripture: Genesis 25:1-27, Romans 9:10, Hebrews 12:16

Topics: "Divine Election", "Faith Over Works"

Description

John Calvin preaches on the story of Abraham, Keturah, Isaac, Ishmael, Esau, and Jacob, highlighting the complexities of human nature, divine election, and the consequences of prioritizing earthly desires over spiritual blessings. He delves into the struggles within families, the importance of faith over works, and the sovereignty of God in choosing His elect for salvation, emphasizing the need for humility, perseverance in prayer, and reliance on God's grace.

Transcript

1. Then again Abraham took a wife, and her name was Keturah.
1. Et addidit Abraham, et accepit uxorem, cujus nomen erat Cetura.
2. And she bare him Zimran, and Jokshan, and Medan, and Midian, and Ishbak, and Shuah.
2. Et peperit ei Zimram, et Iocsan, et Medan, et Midian, et Isbah, et Suah
3. And Jokshan begat Sheba, and Dedan. And the sons of Dedan were Asshurim, and Letushim, and Leummim.
3. Et Iocsan genuit Seba, et Dedan. Filii autem Dedan fuerunt Assurim, et Letusim, et Leummin.
4. And the sons of Midian; Ephah, and Ephher, and Hanoah, and Abida, and Eldaah. All these were the children of Keturah.
4. Filii vero Midian, Hephah, et Hephher, et Hanoah, et Abidah, et Eldaah: omnes isti, filii Ceturae.
5. And Abraham gave all that he had unto Isaac.
5. Porro dedit Abraham omnia, quae sua erant, ipsi Ishac.

6. But unto the sons of the concubines, which Abraham had, Abraham gave gifts, and sent them away from Isaac his son, while he yet lived, eastward, unto the east country.

6. Et filiis concubinarum quas habebat Abraham, dedit Abraham dona; et emisit eos ab Ishac filio suo, quum adhuc viveret, ad Orientem, ad terram Orientalem.

7. And these are the days of the years of Abraham's life which he lived, an hundred threescore and fifteen years.

7. Porro isti sunt dies annorum vitae Abraham quos vixit, centum anni et septuaginta anni et quinque anni.

8. Then Abraham gave up the ghost, and died in a good old age, an old man, and full of years; and was gathered to his people.

8. Et obiit, et mortuus est Abraham in senectute bona, senex et satur: et congregatus est ad populos suos.

9. And his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, which is before Mamre;

9. Et sepelierunt eum Ishac et Ismael filii ejus in spelunca duplici, in agro Ephron filii Sohar Hittaei, quae est ante Mamre,

10. The field which Abraham purchased of the sons of Heth: there was Abraham buried, and Sarah his wife.

10. In agro quem emit Abraham a filiis Heth: ibi sepultus est Abraham et Sarah uxor ejus.

11. And it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that God blessed his son Isaac; and Isaac dwelt by the well Lahairoi.

11. Et fuit, postquam mortuus est Abraham, benedixit Deus Ishac filio ejus; et habitavit Ishac apud Puteum viventis videntis me.

12. Now these are the generations of Ishmael, Abraham's son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's handmaid, bare unto Abraham:

12. Istae autem generationes Ismael filii Abraham, quem peperit Hagar Aegyptia ancilla Sarah ipsi Abraham.

13. And these are the names of the sons of Ishmael, by their names, according to their generations: the firstborn of Ishmael, Nebajoth; and Kedar, and Adbeel, and Mibsam,

13. Et haec nomina filiorum Ismael per nomina sua, per generationes suas: primogenitus Ismael, Nebajoth, et Cedar, et Abdeel, et Mibsam,

14. And Mishma, and Dumah, and Massa,

14. Et Mismah, et Dumah, et Masa,

15. Hadar, and Tema, Jetur, Naphish, and Kedemah:

15. Hadar, et Thema, Jetur, Naphis, et Cedmah.

16. These are the sons of Ishmael, and these are their names, by their towns, and by their castles; twelve princes according to their nations.

16. Isti sunt filii Ismael, et ista nomina eorum per villas suas, et per castella sua, duodecim principes per familias suas.

17. And these are the years of the life of Ishmael, an hundred and thirty and seven years: and he gave up the ghost and died; and was gathered unto his people.

17. Et isti sunt anni vitae Ismael, centum anni, et triginta anni, et septem anni: et obiit, et mortuus est, et congregatus est ad populos suos.

18. And they dwelt from Havilah unto Shur, that is before Egypt, as thou goest toward Assyria: and he died in the presence of all his brethren.

18. Et habitaverunt ab Havilah usque ad Sur, quae est ante Aegyptum, dum pergis in Assur: coram omnibus fratribus suis habitavit.

19. And these are the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham begat Isaac:

19. Istae vero sunt generationes Ishac filii Abraham: Abraham genuit Ishac.

20. And Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah to wife, the daughter of Bethuel the Syrian of Padanaram, the sister to Laban the Syrian.

20. Et erat Ishac quadragenarius, quando accepit Ribcam filiam Bethuel Aramaei de Padan Aram, sororem Laban Aramaei, sibi in uxorem.

21. And Isaac intreated the LORD for his wife, because she was barren: and the LORD was intreated of him, and Rebekah his wife conceived.

21. Et oravit Ishac Iehovam respectu uxoris suae, quia sterilis erat: et exoratus est ab ipso Iehova, et concepit Ribca uxor ejus.

22. And the children struggled together within her; and she said, If it be so, why am I thus? And she went to enquire of the LORD.

22. Et collidebant se filii in utero ejus, et dixit, Si ita, ut quid ego?

23. And the LORD said unto her, Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger.

23. Tunc dixit Iehova ad eam, Duae gentes sunt in utero tuo, et duo populi a visceribus tuis separabunt se: et populus populo robustior erit, et major serviet minori.

24. And when her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb.

24. Et impleti sunt dies ejus ut pareret, et ecce gemini erant in utero ejus.

25. And the first came out red, all over like an hairy garment; and they called his name Esau.

25. Egressus est autem prior rufus, totus ipse sicut pallium pilosum: et vocaverunt nomen ejus Esau.

26. And after that came his brother out, and his hand took hold on Esau's heel; and his name was called Jacob: and Isaac was threescore years old when she bare them.

26. Et postea egressus est frater ejus, et manus ejus tenebat calcaneum Esau, et vocarunt nomen lahacob. Ishac autem erat sexagenarius, quando peperit eos.

27. And the boys grew: and Esau was a cunning hunter, a man of the field; and Jacob was a plain man, dwelling in tents.

27. Et creverunt pueri: et fuit Esau vir peritus venationis, vir agricola: sed lahacob erat vir integer, manens in tabernaculis.

28. And Isaac loved Esau, because he did eat of his venison: but Rebekah loved Jacob.

28. Et dilexit Ishac Esau, quia venatio erat in ore ejus, et Ribca diligebat lahacob.

29. And Jacob sod pottage: and Esau came from the field, and he was faint:

29. Coxit autem lahacob coctionem: et venit Esau ex agro, et erat lassus.

30. And Esau said to Jacob, Feed me, I pray thee, with that same red pottage; for I am faint: therefore was his name called Edom.

30. Et dixit Esau ad lahacob, Fac me comedere nunc de rufo, rufo isto: quia lassus sum: idcirco vocarunt nomen ejus Edom.

31. And Jacob said, Sell me this day thy birthright.

31. Tunc dixit lahacob, Vende hoc tempore primogenituram tuam mihi.

32. And Esau said, Behold, I am at the point to die: and what profit shall this birthright do to me?

32. Et dixit Esau, Ecce ego vado ut moriar, et utquid mihi primogenitura?

33. And Jacob said, Swear to me this day; and he sware unto him: and he sold his birthright unto Jacob.

33. Dixit itaque lahacob, Iura mihi hoc tempore. Et juravit ei: et vendidit primogenituram suam ipsi lahacob.

34. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and pottage of lentiles; and he did eat and drink, and rose up, and went his way: thus Esau despised his birthright.

34. Et lahacob dedit Esau panem et coctionem lenticularum, et comedit, atque bibit: et surrexit, et abiit, contempsitque Esau primogenituram.

1. Then again Abraham took a wife ¹⁵ It seems very absurd that Abraham, who is said to have been dead in his own body thirty-eight years before the decease of Sarah, should, after her death, marry another wife. such an act was, certainly, unworthy of his gravity. Besides, when Paul commends his faith, (Ro 4:19,) he not only asserts that the womb of Sarah was dead, when Isaac was about to be born, but also that the body of the father himself was dead. Therefore Abraham acted most foolishly, if, after the loss of

his wife, he, in the decrepitude of old age, contracted another marriage.

Further, it is at variance with the language of Paul, that he, who in his hundredth year was cold and impotent, 16 should, forty years afterwards, have many sons. Many commentators, to avoid this absurdity, suppose Keturah to have been the same person as Hagar. But their conjecture is immediately refuted in the context; where Moses says, Abraham gave gifts to the sons of his concubines. The same point is clearly established from 1Ch 1:32. Others conjecture that, while Sarah was yet living, he took another wife.

This, although worthy of grave censure, is however not altogether incredible. We know it to be not uncommon for men to be rendered bold by excessive license. Thus Abraham having once transgressed the law of marriage, perhaps, after the dispute respecting Hagar, did not desist from the practice of polygamy. It is also probable that his mind had been wounded, by the divorce which Sarah had compelled him to make with Hagar. Such conduct indeed was disgraceful, or, at least, unbecoming in the holy patriarch.

Nevertheless no other, of all the conjectures which have been made, seems to me more probable. If it be admitted, the narrative belongs to another place; but Moses is frequently accustomed to place those things which have precedence in time, in a different order. And though this reason should not be deemed conclusive, yet the fact itself shows an inverted order in the history. 17 Sarah had passed her ninetieth year, when she brought forth her son Isaac; she died in the hundred and twenty-seventh year of her age; and Isaac married when he was forty years old.

Therefore, nearly four years intervened between the death of his mother and his nuptials. If Abraham took a wife after this, what was he thinking of, seeing that he had been during so many years accustomed to a single life? It is therefore lawful to conjecture that Moses, in writing the life of Abraham, when he approached the closing scene, inserted what he had before omitted. The difficulty, however, is not yet solved. For whence proceeded Abraham's renovated vigor, 18 since Paul testifies that his body had long ago been withered by age?

Augustine supposes not only that strength was imparted to him for a short space of time, which might suffice for Isaac's birth; but that by a divine restoration, it flourished again during the remaining term of his life. Which opinion, both because it amplifies the glory of the miracle, and for other reasons, I willingly embrace. 19 And what I have before said, namely, that Isaac was miraculously born, as being a spiritual seed, is not opposed to this view; for it was especially on his account that the failing body of Abraham was restored to vigor.

That others were afterwards born was, so to speak, adventitious. Thus the blessing of God pronounced in the words, "Increase and multiply," which was annexed expressly to marriage, is also extended to unlawful connexions. Certainly, if Abraham married a wife while Sarah was yet alive, (as I think most probable,) his adulterous connection was unworthy of the divine benediction. But although we know not why this addition was made to the just measure of favor granted to Abraham, yet the wonderful providence of God appears in this, that while many nations of considerable importance descended from his other sons, the spiritual covenant, of which the rest also bore the sign in their flesh, remained in the exclusive possession of Isaac.

6. But unto the sons of the concubines. Moses relates, that when Abraham was about to die, he formed the design of removing all cause of strife among his sons after his death, by constituting Isaac his sole heir, and dismissing the rest with suitable gifts. This dismissal was, indeed, apparently harsh and cruel; but it was agreeable to the appointment and decree of God, in order that the entire possession of the land

might remain for the posterity of Isaac. For it was not lawful for Abraham to divide, at his own pleasure, that inheritance which had been granted entire to Isaac. Wherefore, no course was left to him but to provide for the rest of his sons in the manner here described. If any person should now select one of his sons as his heir, to the exclusion of the others, he would do them an injury; and, by applying the torch of injustice, in disinheriting a part of his children, he would light up the flame of pernicious strifes in his family. Wherefore, we must note the special reason by which Abraham was not only induced, but compelled, to deprive his sons of the inheritance, and to remove them to a distance; namely, lest by their intervention, the grant which had been divinely made to Isaac should, of necessity, be disturbed. We have elsewhere said that, among the Hebrews, she who is a partaker of the bed, but not of all the goods, is styled a concubine. The same distinction has been adopted into the customs, and sanctioned by the laws of all nations. So, we shall afterwards see, that Leah and Rachel were principal wives, but that Bilhah and Zilpah were in the second rank; so that their condition remained servile, although they were admitted to the conjugal bed. Since Abraham had made Hagar and Keturah his wives on this condition, it seems that he might lawfully bestow on their sons, only a small portion of his goods; to have transferred, however, from his only heir to them, equal portions of his property, would have been neither just nor right. It is probable that no subsequent strife or contention took place respecting the succession; but by sending the sons of the concubines far away, he provides against the danger of which I have spoken, lest they should occupy a part of the land which God had assigned to the posterity of Isaac alone.

7. And these are the days. Moses now brings us down to the death of Abraham; and the first thing to be noticed concerning his age is the number of years during which he lived as a pilgrim; for he deserves the praise of wonderful and incomparable patience, for having wandered through the space of a hundred years, while God led him about in various directions, contented, both in life and death, with the bare promise of God. Let those be ashamed who find it difficult to bear the disquietude of one, or of a few years, since Abraham, the father of the faithful, was not merely a stranger during a hundred years, but was also often cast forth into exile. Meanwhile, however, Moses expressly shows that the Lord had fulfilled his promise, Thou shalt die in a good old age: for although he fought a hard and severe battle, yet his consolation was neither light nor small; because he knew that, amidst so many sufferings, his life was the object of Divine care. But if this sole looking unto God sustained him through his whole life, amidst the most boisterous waves, amidst many bitter griefs, amidst tormenting cares, and in short an accumulated mass of evils; let us also learn -- that we may not become weary in our course -- to rely on this support, that the Lord has promised us a happy issue of life, and one truly far more glorious than that of our father Abraham.

8. Then Abraham gave up the ghost ²⁰ They are mistaken who suppose that this expression denotes sudden death, as intimating that he had not been worn out by long disease, but expired without pain. Moses rather means to say that the father of the faithful was not exempt from the common lot of men, in order that our minds may not languish when the outward man is perishing; but that, by meditating on that renovation which is laid up as the object of our hope, we may, with tranquil minds, suffer this frail tabernacle to be dissolved. There is therefore no reason why a feeble, emaciated body, failing eyes, tremulous hands, and the lost use of all our members, should so dishearten us, that we should not hasten, after the example of our father, with joy and alacrity to our death. But although Abraham had this in common with the human race, that he grew old and died; yet Moses, shortly afterwards, puts a difference between him and the promiscuous multitude of men as to manner of dying; namely, that he should die in a good old age, and satisfied with life. Unbelievers, indeed, often seem to participate in the same blessing; yea, David complains that they excelled in this kind of privilege; and a similar complaint occurs in the book

of Job, namely, that they fill up their time happily, till in a moment they descend into the grave. 21 But what I said before must be remembered, that the chief part of a good old age consists in a good conscience and in a serene and tranquil mind. Whence it follows, that what God promises to Abraham, can only apply to those who truly cultivate righteousness: for Plato says, with equal truth and wisdom, that a good hope is the nutriment of old age; and therefore old men who have a guilty conscience are miserably tormented, and are inwardly racked as by a perpetual torture. But to this we must add, what Plato knew not, that it is godliness which causes a good old age to attend us even to the grave, because faith is the preserver of a tranquil mind. To the same point belongs what is immediately added, he was full of days, so that he did not desire a prolongation of life. We see how many are in bondage to the desire of life; yea, nearly the whole world languishes between a weariness of the present life and an inexplicable desire for its continuance. That satiety of life, therefore, which shall cause us to be ready to leave it, is a singular favor from God.

And was gathered to his people. I gladly embrace the opinion of those who believe the state of our future life to be pointed out in this form of expression; provided we do not restrict it, as these expositors do, to the faithful only; but understand by it that mankind are associated together in death as well as in life. 22 It may seem absurd to profane men, for David to say, that the reprobate are gathered together like sheep into the grave; but if we examine the expression more closely, this gathering together will have no existence if their souls are annihilated. 23 The mention of Abraham's burial will presently follow. Now he is said to be gathered to his fathers, which would be inconsistent with fact if human life vanished, and men were reduced to annihilation: wherefore the Scripture, in speaking thus, shows that another state of life remains after death, so that a departure out of the world is not the destruction of the whole man.

9. And his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him. Hence it appears, that although Ishmael had long ago been dismissed, he was not utterly alienated from his father, because he performed the office of a son in celebrating the obsequies of his deceased parent. Ishmael, rather than the other sons did this, as being nearer.

12. Now these are the generations of Ishmael. This narration is not superfluous. In the commencement of the chapter, Moses alludes to what was done for the sons of Keturah. Here he speaks designedly more at large, for the purpose of showing that the promise of God, given in the seventeenth chapter (Ge 17:1-22,) was confirmed by its manifest accomplishment. In the first place, it was no common gift of God that Ishmael should have twelve sons who should possess rank and authority over as many tribes; but inasmuch as the event corresponded with the promise, we must chiefly consider the veracity of God, as well as the singular benevolence and honor which he manifested towards his servant Abraham, when, even in those benefits which were merely adventitious, he dealt so kindly and liberally with him; for that may rightly be regarded as adventitious which was superadded to the spiritual covenant: therefore Moses, after he has enumerated the towns in which the posterity of Ishmael was distributed, buries that whole race in oblivion, that substantial perpetuity may remain only in the Church, according to the declaration in Ps 102:28, "the sons of sons shall inhabit." 24 Further, Moses, as with his finger, shows the wonderful counsel of God, because, in assigning a region distinct from the land of Canaan to the sons of Ishmael, he has both provided for them in future, and kept the inheritance vacant for the sons of Isaac.

18. He died in the presence of all his brethren 25 The major part of commentators understand this of his death; as if Moses had said that the life of Ishmael was shorter than that of his brethren, who long survived him: but because the word נָפַל (naphal) is applied to a violent death, and Moses testifies that Ishmael died a natural death, this exposition cannot be approved. The Chaldean Paraphrast supposes the word "lot" to be understood, and elicits this sense, that the lot fell to him, so as to assign him a habitation not far

from his brethren. Although I do not greatly differ in this matter, I yet think that the words are not to be thus distorted. 26 The word ■■■■ (naphal) sometimes signifies to lie down, or to rest, and also to dwell. The simple assertion therefore of Moses is, that a habitation was given to Ishmael opposite his brethren, so that he should indeed be a neighbor to them, and yet should have his distinct boundaries: 27 for I do not doubt that he referred to the oracle contained in the sixteenth chapter (Ge 16:1) where, among other things, the angel said to his mother Hagar, He shall remain, or pitch his tents in the presence of his brethren. Why does he rather speak thus of Ishmael than of the others, except for this reason, that whereas they migrated towards the eastern region, Ishmael, although the head of a nation, separated from the sons of Abraham, yet retained his dwelling in their neighborhood? Meanwhile the intention of God is also to be observed, namely, that Ishmael, though living near his brethren, was yet placed apart in an abode of his own, that he might not become mingled with them, but might dwell in their presence, or opposite to them. Moreover, it is sufficiently obvious that the prediction is not to be restricted personally to Ishmael.

19. These are the generations of Isaac. Because what Moses has said concerning the Ishmaelites was incidental, he now returns to the principal subject of the history, for the purpose of describing the progress of the Church. And in the first place, he repeats that Isaac's wife was taken from Mesopotamia. He expressly calls her the sister of Laban the Syrian, who was hereafter to become the father-in-law of Jacob, and concerning whom he had many things to relate. But it is chiefly worthy of observation that he declares Rebekah to have been barren during the early years of her marriage. And we shall afterwards see that her barrenness continued, not for three or four, but for twenty years, in order that her very despair of offspring might give greater lustre to the sudden granting of the blessing. But nothing seems less accordant with reason, than that the propagation of the Church should be thus small and slow. Abraham, in his extreme old age, received (as it seems) a slender solace for his long privation of offspring, in having all his hope centred in one individual. Isaac also, already advanced in years, and bordering on old age, was not yet a father. Where, then, was the seed which should equal the stars of heaven in number? Who would not suppose that God was dealing deceitfully in leaving those houses empty and solitary, which, according to his own word, ought to be replenished with teeming population? But that which is recorded in the psalm must be accomplished in reference to the Church, that

"he maketh her who had been barren to keep house, and to be a joyful mother of many children." (Ps 113:9.)

For this small and contemptible origin, these slow and feeble advances, render more illustrious that increase, which afterwards follows, beyond all hope and expectation, to teach us that the Church was produced and increased by divine power and grace, and not by merely natural means. It is indeed possible, that God designed to correct or moderate any excess of attachment in Isaac. But this is to be observed as the chief reason for God's conduct, that as the holy seed was given from heaven, it must not be produced according to the common order of nature, to the end, that we learn that the Church did not originate in the industry of man, but flowed from the grace of God alone.

21. And Isaac entreated the Lord for his wife. Some translate the passage, Isaac entreated the Lord in the presence of his wife; and understand this to have been done, that she also might add her prayers, and they might jointly supplicate God. But the version here given is more simple. Moreover, this resort to prayer testifies that Isaac knew that he was deprived of children, because God had not blessed him. He also knew that fruitfulness was a special gift of God. For although the favor of obtaining offspring was widely diffused over the whole human race, when God uttered the words "increase and multiply;" yet to

show that men are not born fortuitously, he distributes this power of production in various degrees. Isaac, therefore, acknowledges, that the blessing, which was not at man's disposal, must be sought for by prayer from God. It now truly appears, that he was endued with no ordinary constancy of faith. Forasmuch as the covenant of God was known to him, he earnestly (if ever any did) desired seed. It, therefore, had not now, for the first time, entered into his mind to pray, seeing that for more than twenty years he had been disappointed of his hope. Hence, although Moses, only in a single word, says that he had obtained offspring by his prayers to God; yet reason dictates that these prayers had continued through many years. The patience of the holy man is herein conspicuous, that while he seems in vain to pour forth his wishes into the air, he still does not remit the ardor of his devotion. And as Isaac teaches us, by his example, to persevere in prayer; so God also shows that he never turns a deaf ear to the wishes of his faithful people, although he may long defer the answer.

22. And the children struggled together. Here a new temptation suddenly arises, namely, that the infants struggle together in their mother's womb. This conflict occasions the mother such grief that she wishes for death. And no wonder; for she thinks that it would be a hundred times better for her to die, than that she have within her the horrible prodigy of twin -- brothers, shut up in her womb, carrying on intestine war. They, therefore, are mistaken, who attribute this complaint to female impatience, since it was not so much extorted by pain or torture, as by abhorrence of the prodigy.

For she doubtless perceived that this conflict did not arise from natural causes, but was a prodigy portending some dreadful and tragic end. She also necessarily felt some fear of the divine anger stealing over her: as it is usual with the faithful not to confine their thoughts to the evil immediately present with them, but to trace it to its cause; and hence they tremble through the apprehension of divine judgment. But though in the beginning she was more grievously disturbed than she ought to have been, and, breaking out into murmurings, preserved neither moderation nor temper; yet she soon afterwards receives a remedy and solace to her grief.

We are thus taught by her example to take care that we do not give excessive indulgence to sorrow in affairs of perplexity, nor inflame our minds by inwardly cherishing secret causes of distress. It is, indeed, difficult to restrain the first emotions of our minds; but before they become ungovernable, we must bridle them, and bring them into subjection. And chiefly we must pray to the Lord for moderation; as Moses here relates that Rebekah went to ask counsel from the Lord; because, indeed, she perceived that nothing would be more effectual in tranquilizing her mind, than to aim at obedience to the will of God, under the conviction that she was directed by him.

For although the response given might be adverse, or, at least, not such as she would desire, she yet hoped for some alleviation from a gracious God, with which she might be satisfied. A question here arises respecting the way in which Rebekah asked counsel of God. It is the commonly received opinion that she inquired of some prophet what was the nature of this prodigy: and Moses seems to intimate that she had gone to some place to hear the oracle. But since that conjecture has no probability, I rather incline to a different interpretation; namely, that she, having sought retirement, prayed more earnestly that she might receive a revelation from heaven.

For, at that time, what prophets, except her husband and her father-in-law, would she have found in the world, still less in that neighborhood? Moreover, I perceive that God then commonly made known his will by oracles. Once more, if we consider the magnitude of the affair, it was more fitting that the secret should be revealed by the mouth of God, than manifested by the testimony of man. In our times a different

method prevails. For God does not, at this day, reveal things future by such miracles; and the teaching of the Law, the Prophets, and the Gospel, which comprises the perfection of wisdom, is abundantly sufficient for the regulation of our course of life.

23. Two nations. In the first place, God answers that the contention between the twin-brothers had reference to something far beyond their own persons; for in this way he shows that there would be discord between their posterities. When he says, there are two nations, the expression is emphatical; for since they were brothers and twins, and therefore of one blood, the mother did not suppose that they would be so far disjoined as to become the heads of distinct nations; yet God declares that dissension should take place between those who were by nature joined together. Secondly, he describes their different conditions, namely, that victory would belong to one of these nations, forasmuch as this was the cause of the contest, that they could not be equal, but one was chosen and the other rejected. For since the reprobate give way reluctantly, it follows of necessity that the children of God have to undergo many troubles and contests on account of their adoption. Thirdly, the Lord affirms that the order of nature being inverted, the younger, who was inferior, should be the victor.

We must now see what this victory implies. They who restrict it to earthly riches and wealth coldly trifle. Undoubtedly by this oracle Isaac and Rebekah were taught that the covenant of salvation would not be common to the two people, but would be reserved only for the posterity of Jacob. In the beginning, the promise was apparently general, as comprehending the whole seed: now, it is restricted to one part of the seed. This is the reason of the conflict, that God divides the seed of Jacob (of which the condition appeared to be one and the same) in such a manner that he adopts one part and rejects the other: that one part obtains the name and privilege of the Church, the rest are reckoned strangers; with one part resides the blessing of which the other is deprived; as it afterwards actually occurred: for we know that the Idumaeans were cut off from the body of the Church; but the covenant of grace was deposited in the family of Jacob.

If we seek the cause of this distinction, it will not be found in nature; for the origin of both nations was the same. It will not be found in merit; because the heads of both nations were yet enclosed in their mother's womb when the contention began. Moreover God, in order to humble the pride of the flesh, determined to take away from men all occasion of confidence and of boasting. He might have brought forth Jacob first from the womb; but he made the other the firstborn, who, at length, was to become the inferior.

Why does he thus, designedly, invert the order appointed by himself, except to teach us that, without regard to dignity, Jacob, who was to be the heir of the promised benediction, was gratuitously elected? The sum of the whole, then, is, that the preference which God gave to Jacob over his brother Esau, by making him the father of the Church, was not granted as a reward for his merits, neither was obtained by his own industry, but proceeded from the mere grace of God himself.

But when an entire people is the subject of discourse, reference is made not to the secret election, which is confirmed to few, but the common adoption, which spreads as widely as the external preaching of the word. Since this subject, thus briefly stated, may be somewhat obscure, the readers may recall to memory what I have said above in expounding the seventeenth chapter (Genesis 17:1) namely, that God embraced, by the grace of his adoption, all the sons of Abraham, because he made a covenant with all; and that it was not in vain that he appointed the promise of salvation to be offered promiscuously to all, and to be attested by the sign of circumcision in their flesh; but that there was a special chosen seed from the whole people, and these should at length be accounted the legitimate sons of Abraham, who by the

secret counsel of God are ordained unto salvation.

Faith, indeed, is that which distinguishes the spiritual from the carnal seed; but the question now under consideration is the principle on which the distinction is made, not the symbol or mark by which it is attested. God, therefore, chose the whole seed of Jacob without exception, as the Scripture in many places testifies; because he has conferred on all alike the same testimonies of his grace, namely, in the word and sacraments. But another and peculiar election has always flourished, which comprehended a certain definite number of men, in order that, in the common destruction, God might save those whom he would.

A question is here suggested for our consideration. Whereas Moses here treats of the former kind of election, 28 Paul turns his words to the latter. 29 For while he attempts to prove, that not all who are Jews by natural descent are heirs of life; and not all who are descended from Jacob according to the flesh are to be accounted true Israelites; but that God chooses whom he will, according to his own good pleasure, he adduces this testimony, the elder shall serve the younger. (Rom. 9:7, 8, 12.)

They who endeavor to extinguish the doctrine of gratuitous election, desire to persuade their readers that the words of Paul also are to be understood only of external vocation; but his whole discourse is manifestly repugnant to their interpretation; and they prove themselves to be not only infatuated, but impudent in their attempt to bring darkness or smoke over this light which shines so clearly. They allege that the dignity of Esau is transferred to his younger brother, lest he should glory in the flesh; inasmuch as a new promise is here given to the latter.

I confess there is some force in what they say; but I contend that they omit the principal point in the case, by explaining the difference here stated, of the external vocation. But unless they intend to make the covenant of God of none effect, they must concede that Esau and Jacob were alike partakers of the external calling; whence it appears, that they to whom a common vocation had been granted, were separated by the secret counsel of God. The nature and object of Paul's argument is well known.

For when the Jews, inflated with the title of the Church, rejected the Gospel, the faith of the simple was shaken, by the consideration that it was improbable that Christ, and the salvation promised through him, could possibly be rejected by an elect people, a holy nation, and the genuine sons of God. Here, therefore, Paul contends that not all who descend from Jacob, according to the flesh, are true Israelites, because God, of his own good pleasure, may choose whom he will, as heirs of eternal salvation.

Who does not see that Paul descends from a general to a particular adoption, in order to teach us, that not all who occupy a place in the Church are to be accounted as true members of the Church? It is certain that he openly excludes from the rank of children those to whom (he elsewhere says) pertaineth the adoption; whence it is assuredly gathered, that in proof of this position, he adduces the testimony of Moses, who declares that God chose certain from among the sons of Abraham to himself, in whom he might render the grace of adoption firm and efficacious.

How, therefore, shall we reconcile Paul with Moses? I answer, although the Lord separates the whole seed of Jacob from the race of Esau, it was done with a view to the Church, which was included in the posterity of Jacob. And, doubtless, the general election of the people had reference to this end, that God might have a Church separated from the rest of the world. What absurdity, then, is there in supposing that Paul applies to special election the words of Moses, by which it is predicted that the Church shall spring from the seed of Jacob?

And an instance in point was exhibited in the condition of the heads themselves of these two nations. For Jacob was not only called by the external voice of the Lord, but, while his brother was passed by, he was chosen an heir of life. That good pleasure of God, which Moses commends in the person of Jacob alone, Paul properly extends further: and lest any one should suppose, that after the two nations had been rendered distinct by this oracle, the election should pertain indiscriminately to all the sons of Jacob, Paul brings, on the opposite side, another oracle, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy; where we see a certain number severed from the promiscuous race of Jacob's sons, in the salvation of whom the special election of God might triumph.

Whence it appears that Paul wisely considered the counsel of God, which was, in truth, that he had transferred the honor of primogeniture from the elder to the younger, in order that he might choose to himself a Church, according to his own will, out of the seed of Jacob; not on account of the merits of men, but as a matter of mere grace. And although God designed that the means by which the Church was to be collected should be common to the whole people, yet the end which Paul had in view is chiefly to be regarded; namely, that there might always be a body of men in the world which should call upon God with a pure faith, and should be kept even to the end.

Let it therefore remain as a settled point of doctrine, that among men some perish, some obtain salvation; but the cause of this depends on the secret will of God. For whence does it arise that they who are born of Abraham are not all possessed of the same privilege? The disparity of condition certainly cannot be ascribed either to the virtue of the one, or to the vice of the other, seeing they were not yet born. Since the common feeling of mankind rejects this doctrine, there have been found, in all ages, acute men, who have fiercely disputed against the election of God.

It is not my present purpose to refute or to weaken their calumnies: let it suffice us to hold fast what we gather from Paul's interpretation; that whereas the whole human race deserves the same destruction, and is bound under the same sentence of condemnation, some are delivered by gratuitous mercy, others are justly left in their own destruction: and that those whom God has chosen are not preferred to others, because God foresaw they would be holy, but in order that they might be holy.

But if the first origin of holiness is the election of God, we seek in vain for that difference in men, which rests solely in the will of God. If any one desires a mystical interpretation of the subject, 30 we may give the following: 31 whereas many hypocrites, who are for a time enclosed in the womb of the Church, pride themselves upon an empty title, and, with insolent boastings, exult over the true sons of God; internal conflicts will hence arise, which will grievously torment the mother herself.

24. And when her days to be delivered were fulfilled. Moses shows that the intestine strife in her womb continued to the time of bringing forth; for it was not by mere accident that Jacob seized his brother by the heel and attempted to get out before him. The Lord testified by this sign that the effect of his election does not immediately appear; but rather that the intervening path was strewed with troubles and conflicts. Therefore Esau's name was allotted to him on account of his asperity; which even from earliest infancy assumed a manly form; but the name Jacob signifies that this giant, vainly striving in his boasted strength, had still been vanquished. 32

27. And the boys grew. Moses now briefly describes the manners of them both. He does not, indeed, commend Jacob on account of those rare and excellent qualities, which are especially worthy of praise and of remembrance, but only says that he was simple. The word ■■ (tam,) although generally taken for

upright and sincere, is here put antithetically. After the sacred writer has stated that Esau was robust, and addicted to hunting, he places on the opposite side the mild disposition of Jacob, who loved the quiet of home so much, that he might seem to be indolent; just as the Greeks call those persons οἰκισίτους oikositous, who, dwelling at home, give no evidence of their industry. In short, the comparison implies that Moses praises Esau on account of his vigor, but speaks of Jacob as being addicted to domestic leisure; and that he describes the disposition of the former as giving promise that he would be a courageous man, while the disposition of the latter had nothing worthy of commendation. Seeing that, by a decree of heaven, the honor of primogeniture would be transferred to Jacob, why did God suffer him to lie down in his tent, and to slumber among ashes; unless it be, that he sometimes intends his election to be concealed for a time, lest men should attribute something to their own preparatory acts?

28. And Isaac loved Esau. That God might more clearly show his own election to be sufficiently firm, to need no assistance elsewhere, and even powerful enough to overcome any obstacle whatever, he permitted Esau to be so preferred to his brother, in the affection and good opinion of his father, that Jacob appeared in the light of a rejected person. Since, therefore, Moses clearly demonstrates, by so many circumstances, that the adoption of Jacob was founded on the sole good pleasure of God, it is an intolerable presumption to suppose it to depend upon the will of man; or to ascribe it, in part, to means, (as they are called,) and to human preparations. 33 But how was it possible for the father, who was not ignorant of the oracle, to be thus predisposed in favor of the firstborn, whom he knew to be divinely rejected? It would rather have been the part of piety and of modesty to subdue his own private affection, that he might yield obedience to God. The firstborn prefers a natural claim to the chief place in the parent's affection; but the father was not at liberty to exalt him above his brother, who had been placed in subjection by the oracle of God. That also is still more shameful and more unworthy of the holy patriarch, which Moses adds; namely, that he had been induced to give this preference to Esau, by the taste of his venison. Was he so enslaved to the indulgence of the palate, that, forgetting the oracle, he despised the grace of God in Jacob, while he preposterously set his affection on him whom God had rejected? Let the Jews now go and glory in the flesh; since Isaac, preferring food to the inheritance destined for his son, would pervert (as far as he had the power) the gratuitous covenant of God! For there is no room here for excuse; since with a blind, or, at least, a most inconsiderate love to his firstborn, he undervalued the younger. It is uncertain whether the mother was chargeable with a fault of the opposite kind. For we commonly find the affections of parents so divided, that if the wife sees any one of the sons preferred by her husband, she inclines, by a contrary spirit of emulation, more towards another. Rebekah loved her son Jacob more than Esau. If, in so doing, she was obeying the oracle, she acted rightly; but it is possible that her love was ill regulated. And on this point the corruption of nature too much betrays itself. There is no bond of mutual concord more sacred than that of marriage: children form still further links of connection; and yet they often prove the occasion of dissension. But since we soon after see Rebekah chiefly in earnest respecting the blessing of God, the conjecture is probable, that she had been induced, by divine authority, to prefer the younger to the firstborn. Meanwhile, the foolish affection of the father only the more fully illustrates the grace of the divine adoption.

29. And Jacob sod pottage. This narration differs little from the sport of children. Jacob is cooking pottage; his brother returns from hunting weary and famishing, and barter his birthright for food. What kind of bargain, I pray, was this? Jacob ought of his own accord to have satisfied the hunger of his brother. When being asked, he refuses to do so: who would not condemn him for his inhumanity? In compelling Esau to surrender his right of primogeniture, he seems to make an illicit and frivolous compact.

God, however, put the disposition of Esau to the proof in a matter of small moment; and still farther, designed to present an instance of Jacob's piety, or, (to speak more properly,) he brought to light what lay hid in both. Many indeed are mistaken in suspending the cause of Jacob's election on the fact, that God foresaw some worthiness in him; and in thinking that Esau was reprobated, because his future impiety had rendered him unworthy of the divine adoption before he was born.

Paul, however, having declared election to be gratuitous, denies that the distinction is to be looked for in the persons of men; and, indeed, first assumes it as an axiom, that since mankind is ruined from its origin, and devoted to destruction, whosoever are saved are in no other way freed from destruction than by the mere grace of God. And, therefore, that some are preferred to others, is not on account of their own merits; but seeing that all are alike unworthy of grace, they are saved whom God, of his own good pleasure, has chosen.

He then ascends still higher, and reasons thus: Since God is the Creator of the world, he is, by his own right, in such a sense, the arbiter of life and death, that he cannot be called to account; but his own will is (so to speak) the cause of causes. And yet Paul does not, by thus reasoning, impute tyranny to God, as the sophists triflingly allege in speaking of his absolute power. But whereas He dwells in inaccessible light, and his judgments are deeper than the lowest abyss, Paul prudently enjoins acquiescence in God's sole purpose; lest, if men seek to be too inquisitive, this immense chaos should absorb all their senses.

It is therefore foolishly inferred by some, from this place, that whereas God chose one of the two brothers, and passed by the other, the merits of both had been foreseen. For it was necessary that God should have decreed that Jacob should differ from Esau, otherwise he would not have been unlike his brother. And we must always remember the doctrine of Paul, that no one excels another by means of his own industry or virtue, but by the grace of God alone. Although, however, both the brothers were by nature equal, yet Moses represents to us, in the person of Esau, as in a mirror, what kind of men all the reprobate are, who, being left to their own disposition, are not governed by the spirit of God.

While, in the person of Jacob, he shows that the grace of adoption is not idle in the elect, because the Lord effectually attests it by his vocation. Whence then does it arise that Esau sets his birthright to sale, but from this cause, that he, being deprived of the Spirit of God, relishes only the things of the earth? And whence does it happen that his brother Jacob, denying himself his own food, patiently endures hunger, except that under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, he raises himself above the world and aspires to a heavenly life?

Hence, let us learn, that they to whom God does not vouchsafe the grace of his Spirit, are carnal and brutal; and are so addicted to this fading life, that they think not of the spiritual kingdom of God; but them whom God has undertaken to govern, are not so far entangled in the snares of the flesh as to prevent them from being intent upon their high vocation. Whence it follows, that all the reprobate remain immersed in the corruptions of the flesh; but that the elect are renewed by the Holy Spirit, that they may be the workmanship of God, created unto good works.

If any one should raise the objection, that part of the blame may be ascribed to God, because he does not correct the stupor and the depraved desires inherent in the reprobate, the solution is ready, that God is exonerated by the testimony of their own conscience, which compels them to condemn themselves. Wherefore, nothing remains but that all flesh should keep silence before God, and that the whole world, confessing itself to be obnoxious to his judgment, should rather be humbled than proudly contend.

30. Feed me, I pray thee, with that same red pottage 34 Although Esau declares in these words that he by no means desires delicacies, but is content with food of any kind, (seeing that he contemptuously designates the pottage from its color only, without regard to its taste,) we may yet lawfully conjecture that the affair was viewed in a serious light by his parents; for his own name had not been given him on account of any ludicrous matter. In desiring and asking food he commits nothing worthy of reprehension; but when he says, Behold I am at the point to die, and what profit shall this birthright do to me? he betrays a profane desire entirely addicted to the earth and to the flesh. It is not, indeed, to be doubted that he spake sincerely, when he declared that he was impelled by a sense of the approach of death. For they are under a misapprehension who understand him to use the words, "Behold I die," as if he meant merely to say, that his life would not be long, because, by hunting daily among wild beasts, his life was in constant danger. Therefore, in order to escape immediate death, he exchanges his birthright for food; notwithstanding, he grievously sins in so doing, because he regards his birthright as of no value, unless it may be made profitable in the present life. For, hence it happens, that he barter a spiritual for an earthly and fading good. On this account the Apostle calls him a "profane person," (Heb 12:16,) as one who settles in the present life, and will not aspire higher. But it would have been his true wisdom rather to undergo a thousand deaths than to renounce his birthright; which, so far from being confined within the narrow limits of one age alone, was capable of transmitting the perpetuity of a heavenly life to his posterity also. 35 Now, let each of us look well to himself; for since the disposition of us all is earthly, if we follow nature as our leader, we shall easily renounce the celestial inheritance. Therefore, we should frequently recall to mind the Apostle's exhortation, "Let us not be profane persons as Esau was."

33. And Jacob said, Swear to me. Jacob did not act cruelly towards his brother, for he took nothing from him, but only desired a confirmation of that right which had been divinely granted to him; and he does this with a pious intention, that he may hereby the more fully establish the certainty of his own election. Meanwhile the infatuation of Esau is to be observed, who, in the name and presence of God, does not hesitate to set his birthright to sale. Although he had before rushed inconsiderately upon the food under the maddening impulse of hunger; now, at least, when an oath is exacted from him, some sense of religion should have stolen over him to correct his brutal cupidity. But he is so addicted to gluttony that he makes God himself a witness of his ingratitude.

34. Then Jacob gave. Although, at first sight, this statement seems to be cold and superfluous, it is nevertheless of great weight. For, in the first place, Moses commends the piety of holy Jacob, who in aspiring to a heavenly life, was able to bridle the appetite for food. Certainly he was not a log of wood; in preparing the food for the satisfying of his hunger, he would the more sharpen his appetite. Wherefore he must of necessity do violence to himself in order to bear his hunger. But he would never have been able in this manner to subdue his flesh, unless a spiritual desire of a better life had flourished within him. On the other side, the remarkable indifference of his brother Esau is emphatically described in few words, he did eat and drink, and rose up and went his way. For what reason are these four things stated? Truly, that we may know what is declared immediately after, that he accounted the incomparable benefit of which he was deprived as nothing. The complaint of the Lacedemonian captive is celebrated by the historians. The army, which had long sustained a siege, surrendered to the enemy for want of water. After they had drunk out of the river, O comrades, (he exclaimed,) for what a little pleasure have we lost an incomparable good! He, miserable man, having quenched his thirst, returned to his senses, and mourned over his lost liberty. But Esau having satisfied his appetite, did not consider that he had sacrificed a blessing far more valuable than a hundred lives, to purchase a repast which would be ended in half an hour. Thus are all profane persons accustomed to act: alienated from the celestial life, they do not perceive that they have lost

anything, till God thunders upon them out of heaven. As long as they enjoy their carnal wishes, they cast the anger of God behind them; and hence it happens that they go stupidly forward to their own destruction. Wherefore let us learn, if, at any time, we, being deceived by the allurements of the world, swerve from the right way, quickly to rouse ourselves from our slumber.

Footnotes

15

"Et addidit Abraham et accepit uxorem." The Geneva version of our own Bible has it: "Nov Abraham had taken him another wife called Keturah;" and adds in the margin, "while Sarah was yet alive," which agrees, as will appear in what follows, with the opinion of Calvin, expressed in this Commentary. -- Ed.

16

"Frigidus, et ad generandum impotens."

17

"Atque ut haec ratio non urgeat, res tamen ipsa ostendit esse in hac historia, "■στερον προτερον." "Et encore que ceste raison ne presse point, toutefois le faict monstre, qu'en ceste histoire il y a des choses mises devant derriere." -- French Tr The old English translator has it: "And though this reason serve not; yet nevertheless the matter itself declareth, that there is in this history a Hysteron proteron, that is, a setting of the cart before the horse." -- Ed

18

"Unde enim novus illi ad muliebrem concubitum vigor."

19

On the question, whether Abraham married Keturah during Sarah's life, or not till after her death, authorities are much divided. Whichever side is taken the difficulties are great, yet perhaps on neither side insuperable. So far as merely human probabilities are concerned, the evidence would turn in favor of Calvin's hypothesis, which is supported by Dr. A. Clarke and Professor Bush; the arguments of the latter writer, which seem to be mainly drawn from Calvin, are very forcibly put. On the other hand, great consideration is due to the authority of such men as Patrick, Le Clerc, Kidder, and Scott, who would preserve the present order of the sacred narrative; and would account for the events related on the ground of a miraculous renewal and continuance of strength, which Calvin himself allows to have taken place. It is in favor of this latter mode of interpretation, that it certainly better accords with the general character of Abraham, and is more consistent with the testimony which the Scriptures bear to his faith, than the other hypothesis; besides which the order of the narrative remains undisturbed. See this question treated at length in Exercitationes Andreae Riveti in Genesin, p 548. Lugd. 1633. -- Ed.

20

"Et obiit Abraham." And Abraham died. The expression "gave up the ghost" is not a literal rendering of the original. -- Ed.

21

See Ps 73:4. "There are no bands in their death; but their strength is firm;" and Job 21:13, "They spend their days in wealth, and in a moment go down to the grave." -- Ed.

22

Rivetius speaks in similar language on this clause. "This is never said concerning beasts when they die; and, therefore, from this form of speech, it is to be observed, that men by death are not reduced to nothing, nor does the whole of man die.... The Scripture, in speaking thus, points out some other state; so that departure out of the world is not the destruction of the whole man." -- Exercitatio cxiii. p. 553.

23

See Ps 49.

24

"Filii filiorum habitabunt." In the English it is, "The children of thy servants shall continue." -- Ed.

25

"Coram omnibus fratribus suis habitavit." He dwelt in the presence of all his brethren.

26

This is the interpretation of Vatablus, favored by Professor Bush, who says, "As Ishmael's death has already been mentioned, and as the term 'fall' is seldom used in the Scriptures in reference to 'dying,' except in cases of sudden and violent death, as when one 'falls' in battle, the probability is, that it here signifies that his territory or possessions 'fell' to him in the presence of his brethren, or immediately contiguous to their borders." -- Bush.

27

Calvin's interpretation, though opposed to the Vulgate and to our own version, is supported by the Septuagint, the Targum Onkelos, the Syriac, and Arabic versions. See Walton's Polyglott. -- Ed.

28

Namely, that which is general or national. -- Ed.

29

Namely, that which is particular or individual. -- Ed.

30

Si quis anagogen desideret.

31

Nous pourrions dire. -- French Tr. The original has no corresponding expression; but one to the same effect is obviously understood. -- Ed.

32

The names of the two brothers was significant of their character. Esau is called Edom, which signifies red, because he was of sanguinary temperament. He is said to have been hairy or shaggy, "■ ■ ■ ■," from which word the mountainous country he inhabited was called Seir. The name Jacob, "■ ■ ■ ■ ■," means to supplant, or trip up the heels. -- Ed

33

C'est une outrecuidance insupportable de la vouloir faire dependre de la volonte de l'homme, ou transporter une partie d'icelle aux moyens et preparatifs humain. -- French Tr.

34

Literally the passage would run, "Feed me, I pray thee, with that red, that read," the word pottage being understood. "the repetition of the epithet, and the omission of the substantive, indicated the extreme haste and eagerness of the asker. His eye was caught by the color of the dish; and being faint with hunger and fatigue, he gave way to the solicitations of appetite, regardless of consequences." -- Bush.

35

It is to be remembered that the birthright included not merely earthly advantages, but those also which were spiritual. Till the tribe of Levi was accepted by God, in lieu of all the first-born of Israel, the eldest son was the priest of the family as well as its natural head. And this was probably the part of the birthright which Esau treated with peculiar contempt, and for which the Apostle Paul styles him a "profane person." -- Ed.

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