

The Last Will Be First

Mt 20:1-16; Gn 25:19-34 (text)

16 May 2021, Reformed Church of Wainuiomata 10:30

(Put together by Pieter van Huyssteen)¹

Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Our call to worship this morning has reminded us that God often chooses what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chooses what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that seem so important to man!²

I mean, did God not do this with the Apostle Paul who served the Lord's Church without a certificate so sought after by man?³

Did God not use Paul in his weaknesses – through hunger, stoning, shipwreck, lashes, a thorn-in-the-flesh & imprisonment? Did God not, through all of these, build His Church? And did not God do the same with our Lord Jesus who was despised, rejected and killed by man, yet raised from the dead by God and given the highest authority at God's right hand?

See what is so often true about our faith? The first will be last, and the last will be first! Is it then a surprise if the world looks at the church and concludes, "Ah, they're a losing team!"?

Is it a surprise when the Christian businessman is mocked and despised for running his business on God's terms and for His glory?

Is it a surprise when the couple who live their marriage on God's terms are laughed at; and when Christian parents are mocked for firmly raising their children in the ways of the Lord?

My brother & sister, even if you, as Christ-follower, are not so popular, God's word says, "*Many who are (now) first will be last, and the last will be first!*" Yes, by *God's grace*, the last – i.e., the unattractive, despised, and embattled one who loves Christ – will be first!

Look is that not also the message of our Old Testament text?

The sermon has three points:

- His Word
- His Word Begins to Be Fulfilled
- His Word Fulfilled

His Word

My brother & sister, v. 20 tells us (that) Isaac was 40 years old when he married Rebekah. But, having children did not come easy for this couple.

Just like *Sarah*, so also *Rebekah* was barren!

¹ With much appreciation for the wonderful work of GREIDANUS, Sidney. 2007. *Preaching Christ from Genesis: foundations for expository sermons*. Grand Rapids, MI : William B Eerdmans. p. 246-262

² 1 Cor 1:27-29, ***God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.***

³ Cf. e.g., 2 Cor 3:1-3, ***Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? ² You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. ³ You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.***

Thus, for 20 long years – no doubt to make them see that things didn't happen in their own strength – Isaac & Rebekah faced an enormous challenge to their faith!
 They prayed & prayed to the LORD to give them children.
 Then, finally, *when Isaac was 60 years old*, Rebekah conceived!
 But even then, things didn't go smoothly, because Rebekah had much more than the usual pregnancy discomforts, for v.22 says, "...***the children struggled together within her.***"
 The Hebrew text literally says, "The children were *crushing* one another within her."⁴
 The NIV says, "The babies *jostled* each other within her."
 Of course, this troubled Rebekah greatly!
 So, Rebekah said, "***If this is so*** (if there's fighting inside me), ***why then am I this way?***"⁵
 (And Rebekah could not go for an ultrasound scan).
 But she asked the LORD for His word on this.
 And here is His word: "***Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger.***"

The older will serve the younger!
 Wow! How revolutionary! How could the older possibly serve the younger?
 Did God's own Law, later on, not clearly stipulate that the first-born should get a double share of the inheritance – even if he is born from the husband's not-so-favourite wife?⁶
 Yet, now God's word to Rebekah is clear: "...***the older will serve the younger.***"⁷
 How is that possible?
 The answer is: only by God's sovereign grace!
 Yes, God, in His sovereignty, has decided to turn-around what is normal, i.e., what people expect!
 Indeed, at times God chooses the insignificant, the small, the little and young⁸ to rule the significant, big, old!
 Yes, at times – by His sovereign will – God causes those who are, by human standards, esteemed *last*, to be *first*!
 Did God not often show such grace to His chosen ones?
 Yes, did He not e.g., choose the younger Abel over Cain, the younger Isaac over Ishmael, the younger Joseph over his brothers, the younger Ephraim over Manasseh, the younger David over his brothers, and the younger Solomon over Adonijah?

My brother & sister, are you God's loved one? Have you received Jesus as your Saviour and Lord? Are you, as a result of that, striving to live on His terms and for His glory?
 Yet, are your battles fierce?
 Do you at times feel small/insignificant – not esteemed?

⁴ וַיִּתְרָצְצוּ Hitpo`el WCl 3 m pl of רָצַץ "crush," in the Hitpo`el = "crushing one another" (cf. Brown, F., Driver, S. R., & Briggs, C. A. (1977). [Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon](#) (p. 954). Oxford: Clarendon Press).

⁵ וַתֹּאמֶר אִם-יֶן לְמֵה זֶה אֶנְכִּי

⁶ Deut 21:15-17 ***If a man has two wives, and he loves one but not the other, and both bear him sons but the firstborn is the son of the wife he does not love, when he wills his property to his sons, he must not give the rights of the firstborn to the son of the wife he loves in preference to his actual firstborn, the son of the wife he does not love. He must acknowledge the son of his unloved wife as the firstborn by giving him a double share of all he has. That son is the first sign of his father's strength. The right of the firstborn belongs to him.***

⁷ וְרַב יַעֲבֹד צָעִיר

⁸ These are all meanings contained in the Hebrew word for "younger" (צָעִיר v.23).

Well, take heart from God's word to Rebekah, for He who has the power to give life where there's barrenness; to make the last be first; is also powerful to uphold *you* – His embattled child – by His powerful hand, and to ultimately vindicate you (acquit, deliver and redeem you)!

The Almighty God says to Rebekah, “The older will serve the younger!”⁹
That was God's word to Rebekah.
Here is the next point...

His Word Begins to Be Fulfilled

Indeed, v.24 tells us that when Rebekah's due date arrived to give birth, behold, there were twins in her womb!

See? What God had known and promised before, man now starts to see: God was right! It *is* twins!

But look, also in other aspects does God's word now proved to be true!

You see the first boy to be born had a red-brownish colour¹⁰ – the same word that would later on be used to describe the ruddy colour of handsome young David.¹¹

Thus, a healthy baby – likeable by most people!

But, this first baby boy also had another characteristic at birth: his whole body, as if covered with fur, had an unusual quantity of hair. So, they called him Esau, i.e., “The Hairy One.”¹²

Then came the second baby boy – with his hand stretched out and holding the heel (in Old Hebrew ‘aqab)¹³ of the first-born. So, they called him Jacob (Ya‘aqov/b), i.e., “to hold the heel” – in other words, “a heel-grabber,”¹⁴ one who “outwits his opponent!” Well, this holding of his brother's heel was a sign of Jacob's future attitude towards his brother!

Thus, right here at the birth of the two boys, the LORD's word already proves to be true – the older will serve the younger!

But now, we fast-forward!

You see, the brothers grew up: Esau, became a man of the field, an adventurer, a hunter – dad's boy whom most people will be proud of!

But Jacob?

⁹ Note: if one looks carefully, one can see that the LORD's word to Rebekah contains a promise – yes, it's like a pre-printed programme – there will be conflict, but the younger one will ultimately (in the end) triumph! Gn 25:23 ***“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.”***

¹⁰ אָדָמוֹנִי “red, ruddy”

¹¹ 1 Sam. 16:12; 17:42

¹² cf. Keil, C. F., & Delitzsch, F. (1996). *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Vol. 1, pp. 171–173). Peabody, MA: Hendrickson.

Also cf. Koehler & Baumgartner (1958:741) for אֶשָׂו related to Arabic ‘a-‘thay “Reich behaart” (having much hair).

¹³ More precisely ‘aqev (אָקֵב)

¹⁴ cf. Greidanus (ibid:258ff)

Well, v.27 says, he was a *peaceful*,¹⁵ quiet¹⁶ man, living in tents – yes, *sitting* in the tent, in contrast with the outdoor-adventurous life led by his brother.

No wonder Jacob was his mother’s favourite boy¹⁷ – yes, a real mummy’s boy,¹⁸ just a *plain* man (as the KJV says); just loving the quiet life at home!

So, if you’d look at the two boys, which one would you have wanted as your friend?

Well, wouldn’t most people say, “Adventurous & life-loving *Esau*; definitely not boring Jacob!”?

But God does not always follow man’s way! And this is quite clear from what He said to Rebekah before the two were born!

Well, our text fast-forwards again many years to the next episode...

The brothers are now older!

Jacob, the homebound boy, had made a *lentil stew*¹⁹ – the colour was red.

In came Esau from the field and was famished!

He pleaded with Jacob, “Please let me swallow²⁰ some of that red stuff (in Hebrew, *’adom*) there!”

So, from that day on, Esau also got the name “Edom” (related to the word *’adom* = red).

But look at Jacob!

You see, is Jacob not showing again that heel-grabber’s character?

Is he not saying again words to outwit his brother?

“***First sell me your birthright...!***” says he!

In fact, because Jacob knew the legality of an oath, he continues, “***First swear to me!***”

So, Esau, too tired to care about spiritual things; yes, too tired to see that he was about to give away a high-ranking position in the line of the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and *Esau*), swore to Jacob and sold him his birthright!

Then Jacob gave Esau the much-craved-for bread & red lentil stew!

So important was what happened there that day, that the last sentence in our text *repeats* the words of the pre-last verse: “***Thus Esau despised his birthright!***” (v.34).

And so, God’s word came true: the older is now (also in a legal sense) subdued to the younger!

Was Esau acting unthoughtfully, sinfully, with little regard for spiritual things?

Yes, indeed! I mean, is that not why, nearly two-thousand years later, the book of Hebrews says (in Heb 12:16), “***See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son***”?²¹

What about Jacob? Were his actions blameless?

No!

¹⁵ דָּפֵן “complete, peaceful, (German “ruhig”), sound, wholesome, plain” (KJV).

¹⁶ So the NIV

¹⁷ cf. Keil & Delitzsch (ibid)

¹⁸ cf. Greidanus (ibid:257)

¹⁹ דִּשְׁוֹן פִּתְוֵי לְבָנִים pottage of lentils (v.34)

²⁰ הִלְעִיטְנִי נָא Hif’il imperative masculine singular with pronominal suffix 1st singular of לָעֵץ “swallow greedily”

²¹ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Heb 12:16). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

You see, it is indeed so that, in God's eyes, *Esau* was not worthy!
But Jacob was not worthy *either*!
You see, the heel-grabber could not wait for God's promises to be fulfilled on God's terms and in God's time!
So, he got his birthright by his own ingenuity!
Yes, Jacob was just as sinful!

Now here comes the question: If Jacob was then just as sinful as Esau, why did God choose Jacob above Esau?

Grace!²²

You see, Romans 9 says, "...*Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac.* ¹¹ *Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand:* ¹² *not by works but by him who calls—she was told, "The older will serve the younger."*

What about you & me who call ourselves Christian?

How is it that we are so privileged?

Is it because of anything good in us that God has chosen us to be Christians?

No! It's by God's grace – so that you and I should not boast!

Well, God's word which He had spoken to Rebekah, came true!

Clearly the older is now serving the younger! And not because of anything good in the younger one, but simply because of God's sovereign & gracious choosing!

Thus, God's word to Rebekah came true – the older did come to serve the younger (which brings us to the last point...)

His Word Fulfilled

My brother & sister, we have seen that Esau got the name Edom (v.30).

Well, God's word to Rebekah was going to be fulfilled quite a few times through history, for even the offspring of Esau & Jacob (yes, of Edom and Israel) were constantly going to clash!

You see, did Edom not become Jacob/Israel's archenemy?

Remember when Israel came out of their 40-year desert wanderings and Moses politely asked Edom, "*Thus says your brother Israel... 'Let us pass through your land. We will not pass through field or vineyard, or drink water from any well; we will go along the King's Highway...'*" *But Edom said to Israel, "You shall not pass through, or we will come out with the sword against you"* (Num 20:14-21).

Then, a few hundred years later, King David "*killed eighteen thousand Edomites... He put garrisons in Edom..., and all the Edomites became David's servants*" (2 Sm 8:13-14). Thus, again, the older came to serve the younger.

²² cf. Rm 9:10-16, *Not only that, but Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac.* ¹¹ *Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand:* ¹² *not by works but by him who calls—she was told, "The older will serve the younger."* ¹³ *Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."*

¹⁴ *What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all!* ¹⁵ *For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."*

¹⁶ *It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy.*

Then, about another five-hundred years later, when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, guess what? It was the Edomites who urged the Babylonians on against Israel by saying, “**Lay it bare, lay it bare! Down to its foundations!**” (cf. Ps 137:7)!²³

Then, when Israel were exiles in Babylon, were they attractive?

No! Not at all! They were a people who had lost their country, their city, their temple!

But, again, still fulfilling His word to Rebekah, **God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.**²⁴

Thus, the Sovereign God, who rules over all peoples of the earth, brought back His despised and belittled ones from Babylon!

See? Quite often when the *sovereign Lord* works, the last shall be first!

Well, here is the beauty: this action of God continued into the New Testament when God chose Jesus – born in a stable, brought up in despised Nazareth, poor and lowly – to become THE seed of the woman (Gen.3:15)!

And so, in Jesus Christ, God’s word to Rebekah is fulfilled! Yes, is it not so, that if ever there was one **despised and rejected by men**²⁵ yet chosen by God – then it was our Lord Jesus!?

And what did this Jesus do?

Well, did not He, too, choose lowly disciples to become His representatives to all nations?

See? Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first!

And Christ explained this once in a parable when He said the Kingdom of Heaven is like those workers hired on different times, yet getting the same pay!²⁶

So, when those who had come first in the day saw that those who came last received the same pay, they grumbled.

But the landowner said to them the most stunning words: “I choose to give to this last the same as to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I’m generous?”

Of course, then Jesus drives home the point of the parable saying, “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

My brother & sister,

What message do you & I take from this?

Well *firstly*, that you & I should never in human short-sightedness write off any person as impossible to be saved by God!

Secondly, may God’s grace make you & me stand in awe of the fact that, just like heel-grabber Jacob, you and I have not at all earned God’s kingdom, but that it’s the King’s free gift!

Now, what’s the *third/last* message you & I get from “the older will serve the younger;” from, “the first will be last and the last will be first”?

Is it not comfort!?

²³ **Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites**

the day of Jerusalem, how they said, “Lay it bare, lay it bare, down to its foundations!”

²⁴ cf. 1 Cor 1:27

²⁵ Cf. Isaiah 53:3

²⁶ Cf. Mt. 19:30-20:16

Yes, is it not the great comfort that, be the Christian faith in our day & age ever so unpopular, ever so embattled, ever so persecuted; and be the Christian's personal struggles ever so daunting, God *will* fulfil His word/promise as He fulfilled it to Rebekah?

Yes, as God did uphold Jacob right through history and finally in Jesus Christ, He will uphold everyone who has by grace through faith received Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord of his/her life!

Is that you!?

AMEN (2,419 words excluding footnotes)