

Genesis 36:1-43
Joseph and his disinherited uncle
Christ Church Liverpool
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What happens when somebody becomes a Christian? That's a question we asked a few weeks ago when we were looking at Matthew 16. We saw there that becoming a Christian is always a miraculous event; something that God does in people's hearts and minds.

That theme, of God's rule or control of sovereignty is quite important in the passage we are looking at today. Indeed it's quite important in the whole story of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Esau and Joseph as told in the book of Genesis, which we're going to be looking at, on and off, from now through till July.

But for this morning I'd like to us to start by looking at that question, "what happens when someone becomes a Christian?" from a slightly different angle. Not, "what thing in the universe changes to move someone from rejecting Jesus to trusting him." Instead, this morning, I'd like us to think about what happens to you as a person when you become a Christian.

What happens to you as a person when you become a Christian?

What is different about the attitude and understanding of a Christian person, compared to their friend who may believe in some other god, or in no god at all? It's almost a psychological question: what differences in someone's whole outlook on life should you see between a Christian and their Buddhist, atheist, Muslim or agnostic colleagues?

It's a really important question to ask. Because some of the main accusations levelled at Christians are all about this. So you get people who say "Andrew, it's all very well for you to call yourself a Christian but, to be honest, you don't seem to be all that different from me." And you also get people who say "Andrew, it's all very well for you to call yourself a Christian but, to be honest, it just seems to make you arrogant – all that stuff about knowing you are one of God's people and telling others that they need to believe what you do."

Either way they are pretty major accusations. So we need to understand in what it is that should be different about a Christian; so that we are able both to understand our own lives and explain them to others!

Now at first sight perhaps the passage I've just read doesn't seem to tell you very much about that subject. How can a massive list of unpronounceable names, some of which seem to be randomly repeated, possibly illuminate for us anything really useful about the Christian life, let alone tell us something as important as how we should expect Christian people to be? In fact can a passage like Genesis 36 ever really be more than a slightly tedious history lesson?

Well I think that it can. But we'll only see how this chapter can help us to understand ourselves better and, even

more importantly, to understand God better, when we realise that that this isn't just a random list of names, as if somebody found Esau's Christmas card list and shoved it in the Bible. Instead this list of names is part of a much bigger story. An epic tale of the history of God's dealings with the very human race and, especially, his dealing with one family whose descendents would change the world.

So what is the back story here? Well it all starts in Genesis 12 where God calls a man called Abraham and promises that, through his family line, he will bring massive blessing to the whole world. In fact, God implies, he will undo the very worst problems in our world; our alienation from God and our inevitable death, through this family's descendents.

But God will only do this through one of Abraham's two sons. The older son, Ishmael, is not part of God's family to bring blessing to the nations. That role falls to Isaac, miraculously born to Abraham in his 100th year.

Isaac too has a pair of sons, twins this time, called Jacob and Esau. And again God says that he will work out his amazing plan of rescue for humanity through one strand of this family; once more through the younger son, Jacob. Here's how the writer of Genesis records the events in chapter 25...

Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren. The LORD answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant. The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, "Why is this happening to me?" So she went to inquire of the LORD. The LORD said to her, "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."

Do you see what we have here? Two brothers, indeed twins. Brought up in the same household, at the same time. Separated not by geography or history or family ties but by the fact that one of them, Jacob, is a believer in the living God and the other, Esau, isn't.

So this is an excellent place to come to in the Bible to see, in the lives of these twins, the ways in which we ought to expect the life of one of God's people to be different from, or similar to, someone who does not believe.

And in the life of Esau we're going to see three things that every Christian, and everybody who is in any way considering the Christian faith, needs to know about what should happen to you when you become a Christian...

1 Be warned: being blessed is not the same as being a Christian.

In lots of ways Esau's life doesn't look that different from Jacob's. Jacob, we know from Genesis 35, had 12 sons. And the writer of Genesis tells us about Esau's children and grandchildren in such a way as to get that number to 12 too: 5 grandsons from his first wife Adah, 4 grandsons from his second wife Basemath and 3 sons from his third wife Oholibamah. In case you're wondering his grandson Amalek doesn't count because he was born to a concubine

not a wife so he wouldn't have been able to share in the inheritance! But you probably weren't wondering that. Anyway, however you count the kids, the main point is clear: Jacob has lots of kids. Esau has lots of kids. They are both blessed.

And children aren't the only thing overflowing in both these households. There is also lots of stuff! In fact, v7 tells us, their possessions were so great that the brothers couldn't live as close to each other as they once had because there were too many sheep and cattle and goats and people for the land to support.

Those two things alone might have been an impressive enough legacy; a large family and loads of money would certainly be near the top of many people's list of life ambitions. But Esau had more than that.

His family wasn't destined for regular working life or even middle class comfort. This was a family born to rule. In fact long before the nation of Israel has a king the descendants of Esau ruled the nation of Edom. The word chiefs appears 13 times in this chapter and the word king 10 times.

Esau had family, he had money and he had power. If you wanted to sum it all up in a single word you would say, I think, that Esau was blessed.

To all appearances he had as much as his little brother Jacob and more. He looked like he had been blessed by God. In fact he had been blessed by God.

But that did not mean Esau was a believer. And there are two things that he does in this chapter which make that clear. The first is in v2: *Esau took his wives from the women of Canaan*. How do you know Esau isn't really a believer? Because he marries unbelieving women. We know from Genesis 26 that these wives were a source of grief to Esau's parents. We know that Isaac was quite clear with his children that he wanted them to marry in the clan of Abraham. But Esau did it anyway. He made his closest and most intimate relationship with people who didn't love the Lord. The second way we know from Genesis 36 that Esau wasn't a believer is in v6: *Esau took his wives and sons and daughters and all the members of his household, as well as his livestock and all his other animals and all the goods he had acquired in Canaan, and moved to a land some distance from his brother Jacob*. How do you know Esau isn't really a believer? Because he moves away from the land God has promised to his people. Esau marries unbelieving women. Esau moves away from the land.

All the very real blessings that God poured out on Esau did not mean that he was one of God's people. For all that he looked as if the Lord was in charge of his life in some of the most important ways possible Esau was in rebellion against God.

The issues are just the same for me and you this morning. It is easy for us to mistake God's blessing in our lives; for example the provision of a job, a home or a lover, for the reality of a relationship with God. But being blessed by God is not the same as being a Christian.

So what might be the telltale signs for us, the things we should take heed of, that might show to us that, despite the obvious blessing of God we are not, in fact, living in a relationship of trust and dependence on him?

Well it might be all sorts of things! The two particular issues that showed up in Esau's life are not at all the *only* two things that might demonstrate that someone whose life looks like God has his hand on it is actually outside God's family.

But the Bible doesn't choose its examples without good reason. And I think that still the two issues that affected Esau are intended by God to act as massive flashing neon warning signs to Bible readers through the ages about possible danger areas in our lives.

Esau marries unbelieving women. As much as we might like to believe otherwise, through the whole of 2,000 years or more of Bible history and another 2,000 years of church history, marrying somebody who doesn't trust God is a pretty certain sign that you don't trust him either. More broadly sexual sin is an important warning that all is not well in your relationship with God.

But surely, you might say, that's just the spin put on things by boring old married pastors like me who want to spoil the fun of the young and single and avoid having to deal with divorce or remarriage?

Well no I don't think that's the case. The reason that marrying a non-Christian, and sexual sin in general, is such a big deal isn't because of the prejudices of the church. It's about the pattern of God.

You see being in a relationship with God is about knowing him as part of his family. It's not, in the end, a merely personal spiritual experience, but a decision to be united to a new kind of community. And if that's not something you are wanting to do in your marriage, that most intimate of all human relationships, it's certain you're not going to put God and his people at the centre of the rest of your life.

Esau moves away from the land. He gathers together all his children and all his massive amounts of stuff, loads the removal vans and heads East, away from the promised land. But hang on a minute doesn't Genesis 34 say that the reason he does that is that there isn't enough room for Esau's herds and Jacob's in the same place? So surely Esau didn't have a choice?

Well actually he did have a choice. There were plenty of places he could have gone that weren't next to Jacob but were still in the land of Canaan that God had promised to his people. From chapter 34v21 we know that the land of Canaan has "plenty of room". Esau doesn't leave Canaan because he's going to starve or be impoverished if he stays there. He leaves because he has decided that he knows the best way to bring blessing on himself and it isn't the way God has said.

And still today the same thing happens. How often do people end up with the very blessings that God has given them being the cause of them moving away from God the giver? Think of all those people who God blesses with a

great talent and a modicum of good fortune so they get promoted at work into responsible, interesting, well-paid job... and who as a consequence stop coming to meet with God's people because they are so busy. Think of all those people who God blesses with children and who keep themselves so totally absorbed with bust family life that they have no time for other Christians or church.

Be warned: being blessed isn't the same as being a Christian.

2 Be humbled: Christian and unbeliever aren't any different

You might think that believing the things I have just said will lead Christians to be totally self-righteous and unbearable arrogant.

Imagine that you and I think, having heard this, "hey, I'm not like Esau. I'm not romantically involved with an unbeliever. I'm not moving away from seeking the centre of my life amongst God and his people."

Won't that lead me to think: "man I am so sorted. There can't be any doubt that I'm on God's team. That I'm one of his people. Not like that plonker I know who married a non-Christian. Loser."

Well not if we understand the story properly. Because as much as there are these important signs that Esau and Jacob are different anybody who knows the story of their lives will also be aware that there are a whole pile of similarities between the two men.

They are both from the same parents.
Both are wealthy.
Both have large families.

And morally there isn't a lot to choose between them either.
They both have children by multiple wives.
Esau and Jacob are both are deceitful and manipulative.

The differences between Jacob and Esau were not the reason that God chose Jacob. Jacob didn't get to be one of God's people because he stayed in the land or married in the godly family. He wasn't given God's favour because he was good. Quite the opposite.

Jacob's life was changed, he became good, because God gave Jacob grace. God extended his mercy to Jacob.

Wherever there is a good thing in your life, a sign that you are following the God of the Bible, that you are trusting Jesus the right response is not pride but thankfulness. The only way you do the right thing, the only way you will marry another Christian, the only way you will keep committed to church, the only way you will love God's word, the only way you will talk about Jesus to others, the only way you will not lie and cheat is as God extends his grace and mercy to you.

And whenever you look around at somebody else, somebody in your office, on your course or in your family who is rebelling against God in a particular way and making in plain that they will not have God's standards for

their lives and will not live his way what should you say? Not "I thank you God that I am not like that person." But rather "There but for the grace of God go I." and "Lord have mercy on me, a sinner."

Because apart from the sovereign grace and mercy of God Jacob and Esau are just the same as each other. Apart from the sovereign grace and mercy of God you and I are just the same as anybody else in the world.

The right response when you see good things is humility.

And, when you see bad things. When you see something destructive in your life. If you are dating someone who is not a Christian, if your career or family is overwhelming your commitment to the Lord and his people what can you do? Well it's simple: throw yourself on God's grace and mercy.

It's wonderful news that apart from God's grace we are all the same; because it means that whoever you are and whatever you've done and however messed up your life seems all you have to do is come to him for rescue because that's the only difference between you and anybody else in the world.

The person who trusts God should not be arrogant, as if we have done something terribly clever that other people haven't worked out. Instead we should be humbled: the grace of God is the only difference between Christian and unbeliever.

3 Be confident: God always keeps his promises.

One of the things I have discovered about being a dad is that it's a role in which you make a lot of promises. Some of those promises are unconditional promises. So, yesterday, when we went out for a walk in the park we met, as you do, quite a lot of dogs. Tom, our 3 year old, has a bit of an issue with dogs. He's not keen. So whenever a dog came along I would walk nice and close to him and tell him not to worry because I am there to look after him. I made him promises.

Lots of the promises you make as a parent are a bit more negative than that though. So in the Evans household it is a more or less ritual part of every morning to tell Tom that if he refuses to dress himself and sits sulking on the floor there will be no chance of playing with his toy cars that day.

The promises you make as a parent range from the trivial (if you eat that piece of broccoli you can have mango for pudding) to the massively significant (I will always love you).

There is all sorts of research, from the academically rigorous to the advice of Supernanny on channel 4, that shows that for children doing what you say you will do really matters. It really matters that if Tom has that big sulk on the floor that I must not let him have his cars that day if that's what I said would happen. Why? Because he needs to know that I keep my promises.

After all if I don't keep my promises on small, everyday things how can my children possibly know that I will keep

my promises to protect them, provide for them and love them? It is their experience of my promise keeping in relatively small matters that will help them to trust my promises in things that are much more important.

And that is exactly what is going on in Genesis 36. Because the people who read this chapter of the Bible, the people it is intended for, are not Esau's descendants but Jacob's descendants. So why would they need to know about Esau and what happened to him? Because they need to know that God keeps his promises.

Esau wasn't in the family line that God would use to bring about his purposes for the whole world. That privilege belonged to Jacob and his descendants, the family of Israel. That meant that the promises that God made about Esau and his descendants were, in the great global scheme of things, not all that important. Esau becoming a great nation wasn't the most important thing on God's agenda. But God still kept his promises to Rebekah that two nations would come from the children in her womb.

God kept the promise because that's just the kind of God he is. And he made sure that the fact he kept it was recorded and written down so that everybody who reads this book could be certain that's the kind of God he is. God is a God who keeps his promises. He kept his promises about Esau even though Esau wasn't a believer.

And that means we can be confident today that God keeps his promises. Because he has a perfect track record, even in areas that aren't absolutely at the centre of his plans and purposes.

What kind of people will we be if we believe in a God who keeps his promises? Well there are many in the world who seem to think it's inevitable that if you think God is with you, that if you think you are his child, it will make you arrogant and proud and lead you to start wars and conquests. There are lots of people who think that the confidence of Christians that God keeps his promises is a bad thing.

But that's because those people don't understand what kind of relationship God has with his people. Because God reveals himself to us as Father. And having a Dad who keeps his promises doesn't make people arrogant.

It makes them secure. It makes them confident. It makes them able to form functional relationships with others. But it doesn't make them arrogant.

This morning if you are a Christian you, with me, need to be reminded by Genesis 36 that God keeps all of his promises. He keeps his promises to Esau about becoming a great nation, even though that isn't the heart of his plan for the world. How much more can you and I be confident this morning that he will keep his promises to us?

Because for every Christian here this morning our promises are rooted in Jesus Christ. And Jesus is the heart and centre of all God's plans for our world. Jesus is the focus of God's promises. He is the one who physically rose from the dead to demonstrate that God is a promise-keeping God. And that means we can be absolutely confident this morning that if we have our trust in him

we will be forgiven for all our sin and rebellion, just like he promises. We can be absolutely confident that he has come to dwell in us by his Holy Spirit, just like he promises. And we can be absolutely confident that he will bring us through all the struggles and trials of life to a glorious day when we will be raised, like Christ, to live forever with Christ, just like he promises.

If we understand that rightly it won't make us arrogant. Because the thing that guarantees our future isn't us. It's not our own greatness or goodness. It's our Dad's. Our heavenly father. Christians only have such a great future because of his grace and mercy to us.

What happens when you become a Christian? Warning, but not despair. Humility, but not self-loathing. Confidence but not arrogance.

Those are some of the things that must characterise the life of the Christian. And they aren't just randomly chosen character traits that I thought would be nice to commend this morning. They aren't even randomly chosen character traits that the Bible writers want us to have. They are things related to the way God works in human history. Warning, humility and confidence are products of believing in the God of the Bible.

Most of us, I am sure, find one of them harder than the others.

Some here this morning will be so convinced of the fact that you're on God's team that you find it hard to see the warning signs that you are living a life like Esau in which you are so taken up with the blessings God has given you that you have no time for the God who gave them to you. Be warned.

Other people here this morning will be very, very please that you aren't like that. You'll be alert to the warning signs and very carefully avoid dating non-Christians or allowing your career to distract from your personal spiritual life or church involvement. But the only difference between Esau and Jacob wasn't their goodness. It was God's grace. Be humbled.

And, of course there will be those here this morning who feel lots of doubt. Who find it hard to comprehend how God can possibly bring about a remade world where all of our present experience of pain and tears and toil and stress is consigned to the dustbin of history. Well he can do that. And he has proved it not just once or twice in the big promises of the Bible but, just like he does here in Genesis 36, in thousands of little demonstrations of faithful promise keeping along the way.

This morning if you are a Christian be warned. Be humbled. Be confident.

And if you aren't a Christian yet then please, please realise this morning that this life. A life of realistic, quiet confidence before the God who made the universe and will return one day to judge us all, is open to anybody who will come and seek his grace and mercy.