

Our Messes

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[0 : 00] It's great. What a wonderful morning. And we do give thanks to God and give him all the praise and the glory for how he is at work in people's lives. Here's what I'd love you to do. I'd love you to come to the book of Genesis. This is the very first book in the Bible. And we are starting a new series this morning in this first book of the Bible, looking at this man called Jacob. This is going to take us through the summer. And here's why this is exciting this morning. It's exciting as we begin this because this story explains Delia's story.

As we get to know this man called Jacob. And this has been my prayer over this last number of weeks as we've been thinking about this new summer series. My prayer is that it would remind us of who the God of the Bible is and how he works, what he does, what he's in the business of. Because what we fundamentally believe as Christians about the God of the Bible is that he loves to speak hope into the most hopeless of situations. Now with that in mind, let me tell you about my friend Trevor, right? He's one of my new best friends. He and his wife Val, they live down in London. Trevor serves as the London director of the FIEC, the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches, working to see churches planted all over our country for the glory of Jesus. Alex and I met them, him and his wife, on a beach in Jersey. And we had lunch with them. And he starts telling us about how he came to know Jesus. And a more messy and complicated family situation you could not imagine. So his mum moves from Aberystwyth in Wales to the bustle and grime of East End London. The year is 1918. Why that's significant is that she goes there to London to try and make a living as a housemaid during the war. And she goes there at the age of 16.

So she leaves the little farming village where she's from. She moves to the East End of London. And long story short, Trevor is the youngest of three. He has two older sisters. And the three of them have three different biological fathers. His dad is now the stepdad of the family. The family, one sister ends up in foster care when she was growing up. The other one is at some point evacuated during the war. And so Trevor grows up in a home that is full of secrets, that is packed with heartache, that's riddled with shame, and is full of mess. And a more complicated family situation you could not imagine. But the one thing that Trevor loves in his life as a little boy is he loves football. And he hears about the church down the roads who are running a summer football camp. And quite frankly, if it's got the word football in it, he's there. And he goes, and he hears about Jesus for the first time. And after a bit of time in the workplace, he becomes a Christian. And God calls him after a little bit of time in the church to go to Bible college. And after a while, he later becomes the pastor of the church when he first heard about Jesus. And so over a burger and a chips, as we're thinking about his story, here's what he says. He says, my life is testimony to the truth that God's grace is bigger and greater than our mess.

[4 : 01] And that's the kind of God that we're dealing with as we come to the pages of the Bible. A God whose grace is greater than our mess. And maybe this is where this is going to hit for many of us today. You might be sitting here right now. And all you can think about is about mistakes that are behind you. And all you're aware of right now is mess around you. And all you can think about and see ahead of you are dead ends. And if truth be told, it feels like you are sinking in the bog.

And that line that you two sang way back in the day is so fixed in your mind. You've got yourself stuck in a moment and you can't get out of it. It's often what shame and guilt feel like, isn't it, in our lives. It feels like you're sitting on a bus and you're heading in the wrong direction. And with every passing stop that goes by, it just gets easier to keep sitting. And it just feels impossible to get up and press the button to stop.

And if that's you here this morning, you need this. Let God, through his word, as we see this man, Jacob, and all the mess that surrounds his life.

I mean, the state of this family, as we travel with it over the weeks, this would be something that today would leave Jerry McHale and Oprah scratching their heads thinking, how on earth do we fix something like this? This is messy. But let this story about how God is at work in this family's life, lead you to see what he has done for you, to save you from your mess, to lift us out of the bog so that we can get off the bus and we can cross the road and we can get on the bus marked to grace, which is heading in the other direction. This is what repentance means in the Bible, to stop going your way, to turn and to start going God's way.

So here's what my thinking has been this week, as we turn to Genesis. Why did Moses, the author here, why did, as he writes this, give us so many details?

[6 : 20] Right? He could have saved himself a lot of time and just given us the biblical family tree, could he not have? Genesis would have been a much shorter book if he had. He wants us to see Jacob and his family, warts and all.

Yeah? And so we view this as the readers, not like we would watch a play. This is much more like looking in a mirror. This is not for us to look back and laugh at their misfortune. No, this is so we can see ourselves in their folly and see that Jesus is our only hope.

So we're going to read this together now in at verse 19 of chapter 25. And as we do this, here's a little challenge for you. Verse 19, chapter 25.

Here's the challenge. See how many mistakes you can spot. Right? See how much mess is in this picture. See if you can count them on your fingers.

It's like a game show, isn't it, as we read it through. See how many mistakes you can spot. Here's the story. This is the account of the family line of Abraham's son Isaac.

[7 : 45] Abraham became the father of Isaac and Isaac was 40 years old when he married Rebecca, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean, from Paddan Aram and sister of Laban the Aramean.

Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife because she was childless. The Lord answered his prayer and his wife Rebecca became pregnant.

Verse 22. 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. When the time came for her to give birth, they were twin boys in her womb.

The first to come out was red and his whole body was like a hairy garment. So they named him Esau. After this, his brother came out with his hand grasping Esau's heel.

[9 : 01] So he was named Jacob. Isaac was 60 years old when Rebecca gave birth to them. The boys grew up and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was content to stay at home among the tents.

Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau. But Rebecca loved Jacob. Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country famished.

He said to Jacob, quick, let me have some of that red stew. I'm famished. That is why he was also called Edom. Jacob replied, first, sell me your birthright.

Look, I'm about to die. Esau said, what good is the birthright to me? But Jacob said, swear to me first. So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob.

Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank and then got up and left. So Esau despised his birthright.

[10 : 15] And this is God's word to us this morning. Now, if we were to channel our inner teacher and mark the mistakes on this, I think you would have one or two blue ticks and you would have a whole lot of red.

Yeah? But here's the big thing I think Moses is saying to this generation as it comes to them and as it comes to us today, even these mistakes, even these wrongdoings will not stop the grace of God. So here's three of them today. We'll rattle through these. But here's three things I want us to know won't stop the grace of God. Here's the first one that won't stop it. Life being full of questions.

So the question facing Isaac and Rebecca is, why can't we have a child? And I get that for many of us here today, that is a pain that either we will know or we know others will know.

That sense of sadness and disappointment, the kind I've heard Christopher Ashe, who's a former pastor down in Oxford, describe it as like grieving without an object.

[11 : 33] And I get that it's hard watching others rejoice in the birth of babies. And we'd love to walk and talk with you in that and pray for you in that as we seek to be a church that walks with one another through the ups and the downs of life.

But the added pain for Isaac and Rebecca is the fact that God had promised Isaac's father, Abraham, that through their family line would come one who was both the serpent crusher of Genesis 3, who was going to defeat evil in the world, and he was going to be the one who would bring blessing to the nations.

And so they're looking at this thinking, where is that child that God has promised us? Has God failed at generation two of that promise? And so this is really painful for them in this moment. Do you not love that the Bible doesn't shy away from that kind of pain and those kind of questions? So glad for that. It's almost God's invitation to say to us, you can come to me with these things. Here's what I think we can learn from Isaac and Rebecca. Where do they go with their pain and their questions? They do not go away from God, but they go to God in prayer.

[12 : 57] Because the salvation story of the Bible is that God does his best work when human beings are all out of options. And Isaac would know that his parents, Abraham and Sarah, they couldn't have a child either.

They went through the exact same thing. Isaac is the miracle child in Genesis. They know that they have a God big enough to deal with their pain.

They know that they have a God with a track record of coming through on his promises. They know that they have a God who loves them enough and invites them to come to him with their questions and not to run away from him in the pain.

You know, I remember hearing a man called Paul Mallard speak a number of years ago down south and he was talking about how he and his wife, Edry, how they process everything when she was diagnosed with a neurological degenerative disease.

And he writes about it in his book called Invest Your Suffering. And I just want to read you this one quote and the whole quote's on the screen.

[14 : 09] I just want you to read the last bit to you. Here's what he writes. And this is a book well worth checking out if that's a question in your mind. He says, But one thing I've never doubted is that in the darkest circumstances, we were only ever in the hands of God.

that has been the ultimate source of comfort and hope. And that's what we see here, isn't it? In these times when we're up against it, in these times where we feel stretched, let's pray and help one another and pray that our faith would be like an elastic band that would bring us back into God and the gospel.

is God draws us to himself. See, Isaac, verse 20, what is he doing? He prayed to the Lord for his wife.

And even after she becomes pregnant, Rebecca, do you see how she does the same? Verse 22, she inquires of the Lord. So even when life is full of questions, this won't stop his grace.

And the other thing, the second thing that won't stop it is when families feel full of tensions. Right? Rebecca here, do you see how she gets the news that she's having twins?

[15 : 33] And not long after that has sunk in, the Lord tells her, verse 20, that these two boys are going to represent two nations who are going to have two different attitudes to God. And Esau comes out all red.

Love that. Jacob comes out clinging to his heel. Now you add those details together and you begin to see that there's something going on here with the birth of these two boys.

Now, two things I want us to notice here in the text. Firstly, notice the description of the boys. Do you see verse 27?

Esau's a hunter. While Jacob was a quiet man living in tents. Now, I take it Moses is showing us that there to explain the verse that's come before.

So we're in no doubt who is the physically stronger, who's the weaker. But I take it as well, he just wants it to show us that these boys couldn't be any more different. And yet, they're both boys.

[16 : 34] I think it's so important for us to see how the Bible views that. Because we live in a culture where today we'd be tempted to ask questions as we look at their character, wouldn't we? So Esau, when we see him, he's a man's man.

He's like Jack Grealish in Bear Grylls, kind of rolled into one. Classic lad. Classic lad behavior. But Jacob? Not so sure.

And this is where we want to be very clear and loving that we want to go baby in bathwater as we seek to lovingly dialogue and live distinctly in our culture right now.

The bathwater is that we want to rightly question the helpfulness of cultural gender stereotypes.

And we want to repent of the times that we've got that wrong as a church.

Right? Not all boys need to love sport and wear blue. Not all girls need to love Barbies and wear pink. But the baby is just because your character, you like or dislike certain things, doesn't make you any less or any more of a man or a woman by God's good design.

[17 : 45] And so in love and desiring to foster the kind of community where we can walk with one another through these things and can create a safe place for us to share honestly our experiences and our struggles, let me just say that our genders are both wonderfully God-designed and assigned to us.

And that is why Moses here, we've got to see, he makes no comment on that. Right? And if that's the defense, if you like, that we have as Christian believers, the Bible also gives us an offense.

To be a man, I'm just picking men because we're dealing with boys here, to be a man according to the Bible is to be like Christ. Christ. And when you start defining it like that, all of a sudden the words to describe our characters should be words like gentle and humble and sacrificial and loving and serving because it's into Christ's image that we're being made.

Okay? Talking about guys, it's the same for our dear sisters as well. Okay? Guys have to get used to being the bride of Christ so you can deal with the fact that you're being made into Christ's image. Okay? That's what it is.

I've got a friend, Class. I went around to see them recently. Class was telling me about how he's going through so many pairs of jeans as a parent. Do you know why?

[19 : 24] Because he spends all his time on his knees. Changing nappies. Wiping away tears. Sweeping up shreddies off the floor.

Tons of holes in his jeans. Just taking that position of just serving his family. Guys, I take it that we should be people in life who've got tons of holes in our jeans. Yeah?

As we seek after the Lord, desire more of his character in our lives. It's into his image that God is making us. See the parents' behavior here too.

How they don't cover themselves in glory. You know, watching Isaac and Rebecca here made me think of that joke that they always make on airplanes at the safety demonstration. Parents, fit your own masks first before turning to fit that of your child.

If you've got more than one child, you have to pick your favorite. And we would be in no doubt here as to who is Isaac and Rebecca's favorite child, would we? We'd be in no doubt as to that.

[20 : 26] Isaac, Moses tells us, Isaac loves, do you see it? Isaac loves Esau. Rebecca loved Jacob. How that must have messed with the minds of these boys as they grew up.

Not to mention the tension that it must have brought on their marriage. I told you this family was a mess. We're only 10 verses in. Again, Moses makes no comment except to hold this up as a mirror and say how unwise, how foolish to pick your favorite.

And that's true. But I think the challenge here, particularly to parents, is not just don't pick your favorite, but that's true, is what is going on in your heart as a parent that these guys even got to that place.

Yeah, what are they projecting onto their kids? Something of their own aspirations? We don't know it. But how do you end up as a parent in this place? That's the question I think that we're meant to ask here.

Yeah, I love that, that the Bible doesn't just deal with the surface things. The Bible, God calls us to examine our hearts for hidden motives. What's going on in our hearts?

[21 : 46] So parents, what do we long for for our kids? Yeah? If we had to make a list of the things that we want to be true for them in the future as they grow up, what is number one on that list?

If you were to ask them this morning, what is it that most excites mum? What is it that brings greatest joy to dad? What would they say? And I think this is where I have been so encouraged by Delia's story.

And I think this is what connects the story of the life of our dear friend Lynn that we heard yesterday and connects what Delia said about her mum. That there was no doubt in our minds what was the most important thing in their lives as they lived it out in front of their kids.

Delia's story is how God answered that prayer of the greatest desire of her mum.

And can I just say, if you want to think about this a bit more, here's a book giveaway this morning. Five of these books written by a guy called Kevin DeYoung. I don't know why they've got different covers, they just do. Same book. It's just called Amaze Them With God.

[22 : 59] And it's his summons as a parent of, I think they've got eight or nine kids, to live out an infectious affection for Jesus in front of your children.

If you want one of these, we've got five of them, just come and take it after the service. It's only 60 or so pages, you'll get through it in an afternoon. But a brilliant summons to parents to live out a love for Jesus in front of our kids.

You see, when families are full of tensions, Moses is saying, still this won't stop God's grace. And thirdly, when people make foolish decisions, this won't stop God's grace.

This rivalry, you see, it develops between these boys. We get this scene. Esau comes in exhausted from the field. He's clearly a felt needs kind of guy.

He's famished. All he can think about is his stomach. And how timely that Jacob's in the kitchen having been cooking up a stew. But Jacob has been cooking up more than that in his mind.

[24 : 01] Do you see that? He's been cooking up a plan. You see, there's folly in Esau doing anything to get a quick feed, even if it means selling his birthright as the firstborn son.

The privileges, the greater share, the responsibility that goes with that. But equally, there's envy a play in Jacob's heart.

And again, the invitation is from our father to say, do you see this in your heart? Do you see envy? Do you see jealousy? Do you struggle when others get good news?

Do you rejoice when others get good news? Do you struggle to empathize when others get bad news? What is going on in our hearts today as a church family?

And you have to say when Jacob makes his play here and says, sell me your birthright, you've got to ask where on earth did that come from? Right? I don't think we're meant to read this and think that Jacob is the opportunist par excellence.

[25 : 05] Just saw a chance and went for it. I think we're meant to understand that this has been brewing in his heart for years. Years. Just waiting for that opportunity to pounce because if he can't beat his brother by bronze, he can beat him with brains.

Red pen all over this. Right? And Esau is all too willing to take the hook, take the bait when Jacob plays it in front of him.

Right? The New Testament is it picks up on this in Hebrews chapter 12. We talk about how Esau despised his birthright. In other words, it meant nothing to him. It's like a used bus ticket just out the window that goes.

It meant nothing to him being the firstborn. Take it once, nothing to do with God. Not really cared for anything other than his felt needs. And here's, I think, the challenge as we look at this guy.

In this moment, his wants trump God's word. God's word. His desire to fulfill his pleasures trumps God's promises.

[26 : 19] And so, you've got two different brothers with two different longings manifesting themselves in two different ways and yet you see how we've got exactly the same heart problem.

And there is mess everywhere in this family and it is only going to get messier. Do you identify with that this morning?

So hard, isn't it, as we think about the, oh man, the mistakes that we have made in the past, all of us, the words that we've said that we can't take back, the attitudes that were going on in our hearts that we thought were okay, now we look back and we shudder.

Oh man, where would we be if it weren't for the grace of God? But maybe that is you precisely today. All you can think about is mistakes behind you.

All you're aware of is mess around you. All you're aware of is dead ends ahead of you. But we need to understand that the hope for messy people is not what's going on on the ground.

[27 : 33] This throws us to think about what's going on above. What is God up to in our mess? If we believe that he is bigger, if his grace is bigger than our mess, then what is he up to?

Our only hope is the God who is in control and who loves us and who is above. You see, here's my friend Trevor again as we begin to wind this up. Trevor's 70 now.

Trevor's writing his story down so that he can pass it on to future generations. And he sent me a copy this week. And he says, looking back on his life and what life has taught him about God, he says this.

He says, I've come to understand life like a tapestry. You look at a tapestry from underneath and all you can see is loose threads.

All you can see is frays. All you can see is knots. You can't see any discernible pattern. You can't understand the logic. But that same tapestry viewed from above, that picture's wonderful.

[28 : 47] And I think this is what's going to, and if all we do with this series over the summer is get bogged down in the character details, and they are important, we're going to miss the whole purpose of this book.

Because the whole point is how God is bringing to pass his promise to bring forth a saviour from the line of his people, despite all the reasons that should have put him off.

This is the story about God's relentless grace getting to people like us who desperately need it, of God's unrelenting mercy, of his unfailing purposes, in blessing the world with Jesus.

Because years later, the Bible is going to introduce us to another firstborn son. From the line of Jacob, born into our mess, a man who wouldn't despise his responsibilities, a man who would step up to the plate, and a man who would do what Esau didn't do, and what you and I in and of ourselves can't do, and that's put, and love the fact that God's word trumps our wants.

And he would come and do what Jacob couldn't do, and what you and I can't do in and of ourselves, and have that pure heart of worship to his God.

[30 : 27] Jesus took responsibility for my mess, and your mess. As he died for us on the cross, he paid the price for our sin.

He's paid for all of it. He has paid for all of it. He has washed us clean, and because he's done that, he offers to redeem us out of our mess and the consequences that our sin deserves.

Standing above all of this, and really this is what the developing story here is all about, is God's delightful determination, and his relentless mercy, and in his loving desire to get us Jesus.

And I love the words of John Newton, and with this we close. John Newton, former slave trader, worked on the ships, turned minister, who penned that words of that first song that we sang called Amazing Grace, and he sits down at the end of his life, and what has life taught him, and he says this, although my memory's fading, I remember two things very clearly, that I am a great sinner, and Christ is a great savior.

And that's what this morning is about, dear friends. It's about who he is today, and his love for us, and his commitment to us, and like we said at the start, who he is, he is the great shepherd, and the great overseer of our souls.

[32 : 08] Let's pray, will we? And so Father, we thank you so much this morning, dear God, for who you are.

Thank you for Jesus that he stepped into our mess. He didn't shout from above, he didn't tell us to work harder, no, he entered our world, and he took responsibility for our failures.

And as he stands, having defeated them on the cross, and as he stands in that place of victory, thank you that we have life in him. And so, Father, at the end of this morning, we would want to just give you all the praise and the glory.

Lord, would your spirit be at work in our lives? Maybe we've never thought about this stuff before.

May you prompt us to think about the things of Jesus. Father, for those who are struggling, may this word come as a great source of comfort.

And Father, for those of us who need challenged, Lord, may this spur us on to live our lives to the praise of his name. And we pray these things in his worthy name.

[33 : 32] Amen. Amen.