

**Series: BETWEEN THE TREES - April 18, 2010**

**PASSING THE BUCK...THE BATON...THE BLESSING  
Genesis 24:1-8**

1. How many of you are familiar with Relay races? In the Olympic Games, the Relay Race is made up of 4 runners, each running 100 meters. If you've never seen one, the runners carry an aluminum tube called a **baton**. The tricky part is passing that baton to the next runner...and the next, and so on until the last runner completes the race. To drop the baton at any time is to disqualify your team and lose the race. **Nobody** wants to drop the baton!

-Can anyone guess **when** the baton usually gets dropped? It's usually when one runner is passing it to the next runner. The timing, the speed—everything has to be just right. Imagine running an Olympic race, your team is in first place—you're runner #4—and as reach for the baton—it slips! And for **your** team, the race is over.

-As a parent of four children, I think about this concept a lot. I mean, we get passed **lots** of batons. My Dad solidly passed the fishing baton. He loved to laugh—and I got that one. He taught me how to carve and work with leather—got that one. But my Dad **passionately** loved Jesus...and others. And I grabbed that one...as did my brother and sister.

-And the question is—will I pass **that** baton—or will I drop it?

2. As you read this story of God's promise to bless the nations through Abraham and his descendents—the blessing He grasps with such stellar faith, you wonder what will happen with this son of promise; Isaac. I mean **surely** he's seen both his Dad's flaws—and his faith, right?

-We have these records because Abraham passed them down orally—so Isaac knew all about his father's encounters with God—and the promises that were given. What they passed on was very strategic. And it's in this record that you see Abraham's role in passing the baton of God's blessing to his children and grand-children. One of the issues Abraham struggled with was endangering Sarah—and minimizing her role in the blessing. When it comes to his counsel on who Isaac should marry—you can see how careful he is. Listen to the record.

**Abraham was now a very old man, and the Lord had blessed him in every way. One day Abraham said to his oldest servant, the man in charge of his household, "Take an oath by putting your hand under my thigh. Swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and earth, that you will not allow my son to marry one of these local Canaanite women. Go instead to my homeland, to my relatives, and find a wife there for my son Isaac."**

**The servant asked, "But what if I can't find a young woman who is willing to travel so far from home? Should I then take Isaac there to live among your relatives in the land you came from?"**

**"No!" Abraham responded. "Be careful never to take my son there. For the Lord, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and my native**

land, solemnly promised to give this land to my descendants. He will send his angel ahead of you, and he will see to it that you find a wife there for my son. If she is unwilling to come back with you, then you are free from this oath of mine. But under no circumstances are you to take my son there.”

(Genesis 24:1-8 NLT)

- a. You want to ask, “So. Abraham. How do you **really** feel about Isaac going back to live with your relatives?” Abraham seems absolutely convinced that for his family to move back to Haran would be a **huge** mistake. For two reasons; 1) they were idol-worshippers; 2) because **God** had led him away from there. Even though he did not yet own the land God had promised, there was a sense that to move back would be to compromise the calling of God to be blessed, to be a distinct nation—and to bless all the nations and peoples of the world.  
**...Under no circumstances are you to take my son there!**

- b. There’s something else that influence Abraham’s thinking, I believe. Years earlier Abraham had watched his nephew, Lot, get sucked right into the culture of Sodom—a place God had to destroy because of its incredible wickedness.

-When given first choice of where to settle when he and Abraham separated, Lot took the plum, the best land, and settled in Sodom. When the Lord told Abraham that the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah’s wickedness had become **so** great—there were going to be destroyed, Abraham **pleaded** with the Lord to spare these cities. He bargained God to the point where if there were even 10 righteous people in them, he wouldn’t destroy them.

-But Lot is different. The two angels that showed up had to literally **drag** Lot and his family away from Sodom. And even then, Lot’s wife stopped, turned longingly toward Sodom—and was destroyed along with the place she had fallen in love with.

-The angels got Lot and his daughters out of Sodom—but couldn’t get Sodom out of **them**. Their story ends with sordid account of Lot’s two daughters getting him drunk, and then getting impregnated by him to carry on the family name. Abraham obviously found out about this—and was determined that **this** was not going to happen to **his** descendents! He **knew** that the woman Isaac married was critical to how God would shape a nation—that would bless **all** peoples.

- c. The story of the servant going to Abraham’s family of origin—and finding Rebekah as a wife for Isaac is like a plot from a romance novel. It’s a clear story of God honoring Abraham’s faith. And Rebekah’s courage is stunning. Without even having **met** Isaac, she was willing to leave her family and start a 600 mile journey the very next day. Any of you who would be willing to do that? Cause, see, I’ve got this cousin in Arkansas... When they met for the first time, there were **sparks**—good ones! God proves He has **no** limitations—even in matters of the heart!

-Isaac’s story mirror’s Abraham’s story in a couple of ways. First, he and Rebekah struggled with infertility, too. In fact, after 20 years of waiting, Isaac

pleaded with God for children. God answered—and gave them twins! Quite literally, double trouble under a single roof. More on that later.

-Isaac picked up another family trait. Lying. There was a famine and Isaac had to move into the territory that Abimelech was king over. At that time, God renewed the promise He had made to Abraham:

**Stay in this land for a while, and I will be with you and will bless you. For to you and your descendants I will give all these lands and will confirm the oath I swore to your father Abraham. I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and will give them all these lands, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed... (Genesis 26:3-4 TNIV)**

-But Isaac, just like his old man, told Rebekah to lie, to tell people that she was his sister. When this king, also named Abimelech, saw Isaac caressing Rebekah—he called him on his lie. Instead of **blessing** the nations, Isaac endangered them because of his fear and lack of faith. It's true, isn't it? Our kids tend to walk in the paths we **thought** we'd covered up.

3. But there was a much bigger problem with Isaac and Rebekah that threatened God's promise. It began to show itself when Rebekah was in her last trimester of pregnancy—and the wrestling of these twins in her womb was abnormally rough. To the point that she asked God what in the world was going on.

**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, there 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; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when Rebekah gave birth to them. (Genesis 25:23-26 TNIV)**

- a. Anyone here who has never heard of or experienced **sibling rivalry**? This, friends, is a case study in it! Some rivalry is normal. But the way Isaac and Rebekah handled it was deadly. They each chose favorites! Esau was a hunter! A man's man—probably a chip off the old man's block—and Isaac loved **him**. Jacob? He was kinda quiet—liked to hang around the tents with Mom—you know, making fudge and butter tarts. And she loved **him**.

-Apparently, Esau came in from hunting one day—and, having gone one forest too far, was famished. Jacob happened to be making stew that day. When Esau **begged** for some, Jacob thought, "Hmmm! This could work for me!" Esau, who had been born minutes before him had the birthright—and the blessing—which were **huge** in that culture. So, Jacob **sold** the stew. The pricetag? **One birthright!** Esau just mumbled something about, "What good is a birthright if you're dead!"

- b. When scene two on these two boys opens, Isaac is blind. Jacob and Esau are about 40—and Isaac senses his time **might** be limited—so he decides to pass on his blessing. What’s **fascinating** is how he does it. He asks **his** boy, Esau, hunting buddy, chip off the old block, to go get some game, make Isaac’s favorite stew. And when he’s slurped down the last of it, he’ll give the blessing. Do you catch the irony here? Esau **sold** his rights for a bowl of stew!

-There’s something else. Isaac **knew** what God had said—that Esau would serve Jacob. Did he just forget? I don’t think so. The problem was—**Jacob wasn’t his favorite!** And Isaac seemed willing to ignore what God had already said should be done—to do what **he** wanted to do.

-Neither Isaac or Esau realized that Rebekah was hiding behind the tent flaps:

**Now Rebekah was listening as Isaac spoke to his son Esau. When Esau left for the open country to hunt game and bring it back, Rebekah said to her son Jacob... (Genesis 27:5-6a TNIV)**

-Notice how the writer describes the relationships: Isaac spoke to **his** son, Esau...Rebekah said to **her** son Jacob. Now something feels really **off** here, doesn’t it? I’ll tell you what it is. In a family, there are **primary** relationships and **secondary** relationships. The **primary** relationship, marriage, is permanent—and it always, **always** comes first. The **secondary** relationships—eg., parent-child relationships—are very important, but they’re intended to change over time.

-Here’s the deal; if a parent puts a relationship with a child before their relationship with their spouse—it creates **all kinds** of problems. In fact, it can blow up a marriage.

-Remember how we talked about **Plan B** stuff last week? That’s what this is. Isaac is telling Esau how to earn his blessing, and Rebekah is coaching Jacob on how to steal the blessing. It’s funny in a sick sort of way. Here’s Jacob, 40 years old, and his Mom is dressing him up in his brother’s clothes—gluing goat fur to his neck and hands. You can just imagine him whining, “Awww, Mom...it’s not even Halloween, yet!” Well, the deal goes down; she cooks the stew, Jacob serves it up, and lies to his Dad about his identity. And Jacob gets his Dad’s blessing.

-The result is tragic. When Esau realizes that his Dad has already given the blessing to Jacob, his wails can be heard all through the camp. “Don’t you have a blessing left for me, Dad?” Cause, you see, **every** child—even when they’re 40--want’s their parent’s blessing. And from that day on, Esau had a plan. When his Dad died, he’d hunt down, shoot and stuff Jacob like a trophy buck!

- c. To spare Jacob’s life—Rebekah sends Jacob into exile—with **her** family. She makes the comment,

**“...When your brother is no longer angry with you and forgets what you did to him, I'll send word for you to come back from there. Why should I lose both of you in one day?” (Genesis 27:45 TNIV)**

-I'm sure she rationalized her actions by passing the buck. “Well, if *Isaac* hadn't been such a doorknob—and blessed the son he was **supposed** to bless...” The question is—**Is God big enough to bless who He wants to bless?** And **that's** our temptation. To manipulate. Control. **Make** things happen. In taking things into her own hands, Rebekah compromised her relationship with both Isaac and Esau—and never saw Jacob, **her** boy, again.

-And when Jacob left, Isaac sent him on with the blessing that had been passed from God to Abraham to him.

4. Up to this point Jacob, **heel-grabber—deceiver**—has been pretty much living out his name. He finds himself all alone—which is where deceiving and grabbing many times takes you. And it's at this point of brokenness that He is open to God. And **that's** where God—who is just as passionate as ever about making all things new and right—meets him. In fact, God comes looking for **him!** As Jacob falls asleep—he has this vision of angels ascending and descending on a staircase between heaven and earth. And God speaks:

**“I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” (Genesis 28:13-15 TNIV)**

-What we see next is a fascinating story about how God the blessing of God works. See, God's blessing is not about Him just giving us plenty and keeping us safe while **we** do what **we** want. God's plan is to **bless all peoples**—and change our hearts and form our character in the process.

- a. After this experience with God, it's like Jacob is traveling with the wind as his back. He's different. It's like he's beginning to realize that the blessing isn't something we deceive and cheat for—or grab from a begrudging Dad. It comes from a God who is **on your side!** When he gets to his Uncle Laban's ranch, the first person he meets is Rachel—his cousin. And it's love at first sight! Jacob agrees to work 7 years for Laban—free—if he can marry Rachel. This guy has it **bad**. The story says, “...His love for her was so strong that he seemed to him but a few days.”

-But Jacob was about to find out that he was working for a **way** bigger cheat and deceiver than himself. After his wedding night, he woke up the next morning and found **Leah!** Rachel's older sister. Now. Either Jacob had too much wine—or it was **really** dark in that tent! Laban had changed the rules! He could have Rachel after a week—but had to work 7 more years!

-Jacob stayed on and worked for Laban another 6 years—but his father-in-law cheated him at every turn. People, in circumstances like that either get **really** angry—or they change. Even though he’s being cheated, he calls on God to take care of him—and he finds that no matter **what** people do, **God** is in charge—and **He** is absolutely faithful!

- b. Jacob is not just confronted with a craftier version of himself, though. Because of his marriage to two sisters—one of whom he didn’t **want** to be married to—Jacob is confronted with favoritism and sibling rivalry—that same stuff that blew him out of his own home. And Jacob has to face the same chaos that went on between Sarah and Hagar and their sons—and the stuff that blew up his home—his Mom favoring him, and his Dad favouring Esau.

-Leah and Rachel competed on everything. Leah wanted to love and attention Jacob gave to Rachel, and Rachel wanted the sons Jacob fathered with Leah. Jacob, for some reason, never stepped up to the plate to solve the problem. In **fact**, he passed the favoritism on to his sons—and it bit him in the end. Problems, when you ignore them, don’t just go away!

- c. God kept His promise—and blessed everything Jacob did despite Laban’s attempts to cheat him. And **this** created jealousy and tension among Laban and his boys. God confirmed to Jacob that it was time to go back to the land he’d been promised. So, without telling Laban—he pulls up stakes and moves! True to character, Laban rounded up a posse and went after him. Before Laban had a chance to do **anything** to Jacob, God spoke to him in a dream and said, “I’m warning you—leave Jacob alone!”

-Laban and Jacob said what they needed to say, made a covenant to not hurt each other--and that was the end of that era in Jacob’s life.

- d. But Jacob had unfinished business in his life. Anyone know what it was? He had to face Esau. The **thought** of that gave Jacob cramps and diarrhea! Esau was one scary guy! He was big, red, hairy and tough—and had guns in his pick-up truck! The account of this meeting is fascinating. It’s one of those stories that you feel in your gut as you’re reading it, thinking, “Man, it sucks to be you!”

-Jacob, the original spin doctor, is going through all his usual tricks—sending waves of gifts to Esau—a total of 550 animals. Why? Well, Jacob is scared to death—he has to face someone he cheated at the deepest level.

-But the night before they meet, Jacob—after sending his family and all he owns across the river ahead of him—is left all alone. And that’s when the Lord shows up in this strange encounter where he wrestles all night with Jacob—who says, “I won’t let you go until you bless me!” At daybreak—the Lord asks him, “What is your name?” **Jacob—heel-grabber, deceiver, one who grabs to get what he wants.** And God says, “Your name will be **Israel**”—one who struggles with God. Jacob built an altar there so he would never forget this encounter that changed his life.

-Now he was ready to meet Esau. When they met, instead of throwing spears or rocks, they threw their arms around each other and sobbed. Jacob—now known as Israel—put it like this:

**...To see your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favorably. (Genesis 33:10 TNIV)**

And now the family circle was complete. God told Jacob to take his family back to the place where they had originally met at the staircase, some 20 years before. Jacob had named this place Bethel, or **House of God**, and it was there that he had his family and household throw away their idols and give themselves completely to this Almighty, All-seeing God. He could be trusted as One who blesses by **changing our names—and changing our lives**. Jacob was a **changed man!**

5. The main thing in all these accounts—is the story of God. The story of how He **relentlessly** advances His mission—making things right, and yet using flawed people—like me and like you—along with our dysfunctional families to do it. In this story, there are some **amazing** insights into the human family—the context where we **all** find ourselves at some point in life.

-Did anyone here grow up in an absolutely **perfect** family? I used to **think** I had the perfect family—but then one day the illusion disappeared! It's quite popular in our culture to **pass the buck**; to blame our parents. For **everything!** Truth is—parents are flawed people—and so are kids! Put a sinner or two under one roof—add a few sinnerlings—and it's a recipe for problems.

-Here's the deal. When we're faced with the family stuff we've inherited (quite honestly)—and the problems we've created with those raw materials, we can do one of a few things. We can ignore it and call it 'normal', we can wallow in it and pass the buck—or we can **see** it, **own** it and, with God's help--**change** it—and pass the baton well. See, if **we** don't, then who **will?**

- a. It's pretty clear in these stories of our spiritual ancestors that they struggled! They struggled with telling the truth; they struggled with favoritism; they struggled with jealousy and deceit. And it's **also** clear that this stuff got passed right down the family tree. I want to focus, in closing, on just two issues that I don't think get talked about a whole lot—and can hinder the passing of the baton.

-Remember the issue that came up with Isaac and Rebekah? With Isaac favoring **his** son, Esau and Rebekah favoring **her** son, Jacob? They made their relationship with their children more important than their relationship with each other.

-That is a direct violation of what God says about marriage. Jesus, in talking about marriage says:

"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh' (Matthew 19:4-5 TNIV)

-There's a word here that describes a child's relationship with his or her parents. Can you see it? **Leave!** There's a different word that's used to describe the relationship between a husband and wife. It's the word **united...**in the KJV, **cleave. Become one flesh.** This relationship is permanent; it is never intended to change. But the relationship between a parent and child is. Ultimately—they **leave!**

- b. Isaac and Rebekah got these two relationships confused, and when they were done—it created **huge** conflict. How do you think Isaac felt about Rebekah after she helped Jacob deceive him? How do you think Esau felt about his mother? Jacob left under a cloud—and Rebekah never saw him again!

-There is a part that parents play—and kids play when it comes to **leaving well.** Look at this story. Isaac and Esau are both 40—and the Mom and Dad are still running the show. Especially Jacob! Man, Rebekah must've had apron strings made of steel! And she's going behind the scenes and commenting on how she can't stand Esau's wives. That is **not** good! It appears from the outside that Jacob and Esau have never done the **leaving** thing—and the parents are not making it easier!

-Let me give you a picture of this—one I've used before. I've always loved float planes—and was able to get a ride in one this past summer. It was a **blast!** You can see the picture here of the plane beside the dock. [pic] Float planes are tied to the dock—because that's where they're loaded and fueled up; that's where people get on board. What if no one untied the plane—and it tried to take off? Can you imagine the plane—engine revving, ropes straining, stuff flying everywhere as it pulled at the ropes?

-**Something's** gotta give! Either the plane will get ripped apart or the ropes will break. To **leave**, you have to **untie the ropes!** See, the relationship that a float plane has with a dock is **temporary.** Planes fly, but docks don't fly.

-The **primary** relationship in life is between a husband and wife—never intended to change. And there are secondary relationships—between parents and children. And they **are** supposed to change. And the change word is **LEAVE!** If parents won't allow it—or help untie the ropes—they will ultimately ruin one of the relationships.

6. There's one more thing. Did you notice the similarities between Isaac and Esau? That they both seem to care more about a good meal—than the blessing? There's some irony in this—in that Esau initially trades his birthright for a bowl of stew—and, when it's time to give the blessing, Isaac is ready to pass it off—in total violation to what God had said at their birth—for...what? **A bowl of stew!**

-We can talk a **really** good talk when it comes to honoring God—but **talk** doesn't cut it when it comes to passing the baton. It's with **how we live every day**—and how our values leak out through all that we do. Good or bad. Think about children for a minute. How do they learn? If you're a parent, did you kids learn to walk, talk and feed themselves through little lessons with flipcharts and digital projectors? **NO!** Kids learn by watching and **mimicking**. And that's why the Bible says this:

**These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:6-9 TNIV)**

-Do you see what this is saying? If our children are going to learn to love and obey and live as God calls us to—they'll have to see it in our lives. If they're going to love God with all their heart, soul strength and mind—and others as themselves—they'll have to see that in the way we talk to...and talk about God and others. In the way we treat other drivers along the road. In what we're like when we get up in the morning—and when we get home at night.

-This is saying that our children learn to adopt a value system by seeing **our** value system in action; what our home is like. What our hands do. Where our feet go. How we make our money and spend our money. It's not about Who we **say** we worship—and what we **say** matters most. No. It's about what we declare to be of ultimate worth in the way we spend our time, our money, our opportunities—in what we **give our lives to!** And if our value system says something different than our mouths? Kids will **always** choose to mimic our value system. That's **just the way it is!**

-And **that's** where God's mission in this world to reach everyone with the Good News of Jesus and make all things right will either happen—or not happen. See, we have a legacy to pass on. And it is **so** easy to get all caught up in the external—education, performance, getting ahead—and **totally** miss what matters most.

-You and I can impress everyone with your knowledge, your prayers—and even your service to the community—I mean, you can even be the next Mother Theresa. But if your children don't see transparency and depth in the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control in the way you treat them—in the way you live every day—**they** won't live it either.

-Now. How many of you are getting this right every day? I'm not. Our only other hope, as parents, is **humility**. It took **humility** for people like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to pass on the story of their failures to the next generation. Our calling is **not** to live perfect lives, but to have the humility of heart to admit when we're wrong; to ask forgiveness when we've goofed up, and to ask God for the power to change when we need to change.