

Does God Play Favorites?

Hey, welcome back to week 2 of Tough Questions. I'm Tim Perry, pastor of Spiritual Discovery here at Christ Community Church. The question I want to ask in this video blog is, "Does God Seem to Play Favorites?" I don't know if you have noticed the pattern that I keep seeing in the Bible, but God wants to work His purposes out through people. And God is selective in His way of doing that. So as you are reading this week, you will find two examples of God favoring one brother over another brother as a person through whom God is going to bless humanity. It's as if God is being selective in His strategy, and it raises questions for us about whether or not that seems to be fair. Well, in today's video blog we want to look at 2 sets of brothers. They have the same dad. In one case, different mom. In one case, they are twin brothers. But, in both cases God makes a choice to favor one brother over the other. Well, I want to understand what's the criterion of His choice. Because sometimes that seems fair. It seems to be in connection with the character of the people involved, but sometimes it seems arbitrary. So what is the basis of God choosing one person and favoring him and giving him promises? And, then what do we do when it seems like we're not in agreement with the rationale that God has for His choice? What happens when we disagree with that choice?

Well, my white board is feeling a little bit sick today, so let's try something a little bit different. To get things started, let's look at Abraham's family tree for a minute. Do you remember that Abraham was promised by God that he would give birth to a child? In fact, the promise was to Abraham and also to his wife, Sarah. When at first Sarah is unable to give birth, she takes things into her own hands and suggests that Hagar, her hand-maiden, who is actually Egyptian in ethnicity, could be the mother of this child that she apparently is unable to bare. And, you remember that this child's name when he is born is Ishmael. Well God says to Abraham, "No, I want the promise to be something that you and Sarah experience. It's not My plan for you to take things in your own hands and to have a child through Hagar." So God stops that plan and continues to insist that Abraham and Sarah are going to have a child. Well that child does come years and years later. His name is Isaac. And Isaac is the child of blessing promised to Abraham and to Sarah. And so Ishmael ordinarily would be the one who is chosen to receive the inheritance when his father would pass on. A double share of the inheritance of Isaac. But no, in this case it's Isaac who's going to inherit everything from Abraham. And God says about Hagar that the child born within you is going to become a nation. He gives a promise similar to the one that God had given Abraham but He says to Hagar, "Be encouraged. I am going to make a great name of these people that are going to come from Ishmael's line." Well, the pattern repeats itself if you keep following the story. Isaac then, later on, he marries a woman, her name is Rebekah. And, similar promises are given to Isaac and Rebekah, that they are going to be parents of a child of promise and that God's purposes are going to continue to flow through their family line. And, sure enough, Rebekah becomes pregnant with twins. And the names of those twins, as you read, are of course Jacob and Esau. Now Jacob was the younger of the two. As you are reading in the story, even Jacob's name means, "One who grabs the heel." As a little bitty guy, he reached out and grabbed a hold of Esau's heel. Esau was actually born first, by maybe minutes or hours. But Jacob is reaching out, trying to slow things down, trying to catch up with his big brother, Esau. Esau is the one who has the birthright. He is the one who should inherit everything. But Jacob actually is

the one that's going to inherit everything. And a prophecy is proclaimed right on the day of their birth that this Jacob is going to be a trickster. He is going to be the one who is going to get his way. That God's purposes are even going to flow through Jacob's line and that Esau, even though he is the older, is going to serve the younger. So here we have this pattern again where what's ordinarily expected, breaks down and God's promises flow in this direction, through His choice of person.

What I want to look at for the rest of our tough question here today is this transition right here: Ishmael and Isaac. What happened between Ishmael and Isaac historically, after they were born, after they grew up, after they had families? And what happens when we question this pattern of God bestowing His grace and His favor in the way that He wants to? So let's look for a minute at a comparison of Isaac and Ishmael. They both had the same father, Abraham. They have a different mother: Sarah - Hagar. Hagar is Egyptian. Sarah is Semitic. She belongs to the same family as Abraham. Do you remember that? And then look at the wives that both of these men have. Rebekah-it's very important that Rebekah comes from the same basic line and tribal family as Abraham. But, over here Hagar- Hagar is with Ishmael when Ishmael is dispersed and sent away. And Hagar chooses, from among the Egyptians, a wife for Ishmael. So over here there is a common denominator of an Egyptian mother and wife, but over here a Semitic mother and wife. And so the family line is preserved over here with Isaac, and it is fragmented a couple of times over here. Well what does that result in in terms of the destinies of these two men? Well, initially, Jacob is born over here to Isaac. He gives birth to two sons and Jacob is the one who then gives birth to 12 more sons. And those 12 sons become the 12 tribes of Israel. Those 12 tribes are then enslaved in Egypt and then freed through who? You got it, Moses. And, Moses becomes a monumental figure in the path through which God is going to continue to bless and work among the Israelites. Moses promises them that they are going to move into a land called the Promised Land. And, Moses also gives them the Law. And, the Land and the Law define these people as the true nation of Israel. What it means to really be an Israelite comes through this experience of enslavement in Egypt but delivery through Moses, given a Land and given a Law, a covenant in relationship with God.

But, what about Ishmael? What's the outcome of Ishmael? Well, turns out that Ishmael has 12 sons as well. And, those 12 sons become actually the heads of nomadic tribes that are desert dwellers. And, they actually become what today we call the Arabic peoples, the Arabic people groups. And a prophecy is told about this line, right here on page 51, January 11th, it says down at the bottom of page 51, "His descendants (this is talking about Ishmael) settled in the area from Havilah to Shur, near the border of Egypt, as you go toward Asshur. And [there] they lived in hostility toward all their brothers." So what is going to happen to this group of people who live in hostility to others around them? And then what is the basis of why it is that God picks Isaac's line and not Ishmael's line? Is it so that Isaac's line can be proud of being Jewish and that they, somehow, have obtained God's favor in a way that the Ishmaelites will not experience? Well, scripture gives us a hint at this through a writing the Moses left in the book of Deuteronomy. And, this gives us a really good hint as to God's basis for why He shows favoritism to people. Why does He want to work His purposes out through a lineage? Here is a verse that you will want to take a look at some time: Deuteronomy chapter 7, starting at verse six, "For you are a

people holy to the LORD [your God]. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be His people, His treasured possession." Get this, "The LORD did not set His affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than [all the] other peoples, for you were the fewest of all people[s]." So why does God choose? Well, "it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath [that] He swore to your forefathers..." God is a promise-giving and a promise-keeping God.

Well, the last thing I want to think about is what about this contrast again between these two people groups, these two families of Isaac and of Ishmael? So God's promises are based on God's purposes. Not on favoritism. Not on anything that anyone who He ever favors deserves in the first place. It's all about God's grace. It's about God reaching down and blessing one so that many can be blessed. It's about God reaching down to the smallest, the fewest in number, in order that everyone else can be blessed. And that way people can't brag about it, can't boast about it, can't claim a kind of nationalistic blessing from God. If you fast forward through the rest of the story, you'll find that Jesus, the Messiah, comes through one of those 12 tribes of Jacob, through the tribe of Judah. And, the kingdom that Jesus announces is a kingdom for men, for women, for Jews, for Gentiles. And the commission that Jesus gives His followers is to take this message, take the kingdom, to everyplace on the earth, to every people group, so that every people group can be blessed by the sons and daughters of Abraham.

Well what about these stubborn Ishmaelites? In tomorrow's post, I want to take a look at a young Ishmaelite who will come along centuries after the Messiah comes and will question this whole strategy of God blessing all the families on the earth through Abraham and his lineage. He'll stubbornly insist that God has blessed all of the families on the earth through Ishmeal's line, not Isaac's. And this young religious reformer is literally going to rewrite the pages of the Bible that you are reading this week as you read about the account of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.