

"Chip Off the Ol' Block"

GENESIS 35:22-29 (NIV) *Jacob had twelve sons: Paddan Aram. ²⁷Jacob came home to his father*
²³The sons of Leah: Reuben the firstborn of Isaac in Mamre, near Kiriath Arba (that is, Jacob, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar and Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had Zebulun. ²⁴The sons of Rachel: Joseph and stayed. ²⁸Isaac lived a hundred and eighty Benjamin. ²⁵The sons of Rachel's maidservant Bilhah: Dan and Naphtali. ²⁶The sons of was gathered to his people, old and full of Leah's maidservant Zilpah: Gad and Asher. years. And his sons Esau and Jacob buried These were the sons of Jacob, born to him in him.

You're going to get to know my extended family pretty well, because I have so many stories about them. For those who have large extended families, as I do, the idea of "family reunions" may trigger some memories; and so may this scripture. Nobody on either side of my family had twelve sons; although there were nine children in my father's family.

I had eight aunts and eight uncles and twenty-two first cousins and thirty-three second cousins, and every one of them gathered at Aunt Avis' and Uncle Miley's farm outside Ranger, Texas, when Granddaddy Robinson died. That's the same farm where I picked cotton two weeks ago.

It's a tender memory for me, comfortable and comforting, like an old rocking chair whose bottom has conformed to the shape of mine: grand-children playing outside in the dirt, not yet grasping the finality of death, Aunt Avis trying to remember all their names; neighbors with furrowed brows dropping by in a steady stream, greeting with silent, somber hugs, and bringing plates of food that occupied every flat surface in the house.

In the scene from the text, add twin sons, now mature grandparents, themselves, looking more alike every year, both bearing a striking resemblance to the one whose life they remember together. [Has that happened to you, yet? You're shaving and you glance up in the mirror and say, "Dad?"]. "A Chip off the ol' block".

Of course, there's sadness in the loss of a parent or grandparent, but there is comfort in being together, a sense of gratitude for the many full years, and joy over shared memories that bring smiles through the tears.

As in most families, there had been problems. The twins were full of fire in their youth, as their father had been, and his father before him: Three generations of "chips off the ol' block". Even though twins, in many ways they were like oil and water. The youngest was the mother's favorite; fair of face and soft to the touch. The father was partial to the older, who was a "man's man": a hunter; hair on his chest. Early on, the twins fought with each other. The younger swindled the elder's birth-right, and then ran a con on his father to defraud his brother of the patriarchal blessing [his mother conspired with him to do that], and he had to get out of town. But eventually the prodigal returned; the black sheep got homesick, and he was welcomed back home, but not before an encounter with the divine changed his identity, and his name, from Jacob to Israel.

"A Chip Off the Ol' Block". As Isaac approached the end of his days, I suspect that metaphor spoke clearly to him; sitting in the rocker on the front porch,

watching his great grandchildren playing in the front yard, drawing the shawl tighter around his chilled shoulders, his mind going back to his own father.

Father Abraham hadn't always been a "paragon" of virtue, himself. In one of Isaac's childhood memories his family was traveling through the land of Gerar. Isaac's mother, Sarah, was very beautiful, a fact that bothered Abraham when they traveled. There were stories about local sheiks killing a man in order to have his wife without being called an adulterer [strange values: willing to murder, in order to avoid adultery!]

So Abraham told Sarah, "If anybody asks, tell them you're my sister, so they won't kill me." And Sarah did that, and Abimelech, Sheik of Gerar, took her into his harem. Turns out the Lord intervened, and Sarah's virtue was spared, as was Abraham's life. But that experience left its mark on Isaac. Word was that this was the second time Abraham had pulled that stunt. And Isaac remembered thinking, "I'd never do that to a woman I loved! I'd die first!" But he did the same thing; in fact, it was in the same place, with the same sheik; and, again, the Lord intervened.

"Chip off the ol' block"—"Like father, like son."

And Isaac's own sons, Jacob and Esau—the twins... Well, "The acorns don't fall far from the tree". Those two were always up to their neck in trouble; especially that Jacob! If nothing else, as we've already indicated, they were at each other's throats! If only Rebekah, their mother, hadn't taken sides, Jacob might never have left home. Oh well; they're together again, and at peace with each other.

(chuckle) Then there's Isaac's grandson, Jacob's son, Judah: "Chip Off The Ol' Block!" "Just like his dad!" Always wheelin' and dealin', neglecting things at home. He had three sons, and when his oldest son, Er, died, leaving a widow, Tamar, with no male heir, it was Judah's obligation, under the custom of the day, to assign one of his remaining sons to father a son by her, so that her husband's name—and therefore her name--would continue. But Judah got busy, and forgot. Tamar went to him, and he said, "Oh, yeah! I gotta' get on that! I been so busy, lately! I'll talk to my boys next trip home!" But he continued to neglect his duty.

So Tamar took it on herself to get the job done. She dressed like a hooker and positioned herself along the road where Judah was traveling, and enticed him into her tent. He didn't recognize her. She insisted on payment "up front"; but he said, "You can have a kid from the flock." She asked for something as security until he brought her the kid. She said, "Give me your signet, your cord and your staff." These all were symbols of authority, and indicate that Judah was a man of wealth and position.

When they completed their business, Judah went on his way and soon forgot the kid, and the ring, and the cord and the staff. About three months later he got word that his daughter-in-law had been sleeping around, and was pregnant; so he gave orders to have her brought to him and burned. But when they brought her to him she was twirling his ring on his cord. "Remember these?" He was "busted"!

Judah said, "She is more righteous than I because I neglected my duty, and she saw to it." And he took her into his home, where she would have a loving family in which to raise her son.

These Patriarchs of Israel—these heroes of faith—were real people: they

sweat, and had body odor and bad breath like anybody else. Two were willing to pass their wives as their sisters in order to save their own skins; another was a cheat, conning his own father and swindling his own brother; and his son neglected his family duties. There's an ambitious mother who conspired with a fraudulent son; another woman who prostituted herself in order to achieve her goals. These were heroes of the faith! "role models". Are these the kinds of role models you want for your kids?

Still, God used them all in powerful ways. God found something within each of them that was worth saving and using. Is there anything in their lives worth claiming for ourselves and for our children?

We are blessed, in that the writer of the New Testament Epistle to the Hebrews already has done the research for us. Listen to part of the eleventh chapter:

¹⁷By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, ¹⁸even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned."

¹⁹Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.

²⁰By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future.

²¹By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff.

It is important that we see these heroes of faith as they really were: real people in real situations with real hang-ups and real problems and real weaknesses, just like you and me. It's important because it invalidates any attempt to use our own problems and hang-ups and weaknesses as excuses for slipshod faith and halfhearted commitment: "What do you expect, I'm just human!" So were they! If God can use them, God use us.

But it's equally important for us to see that, in spite of all their faults—in spite of their humanness—when they did become aware of God's claim upon their lives, they responded with faith and obedience. And that's how God was able to use them: not because of their sterling character! They were characters, all right; but not sterling! And not because of their faultless morality and ethics. God was able to use them because, once in awhile, in the midst of the blinding, dazzling attractions of "life in the fast lane", they caught a glimmer of divine presence; in the midst of the noise and clamor of the marketplace they heard a whisper, and recognized it as God's call; and they dropped everything, and obeyed.

Do I want them as role models for my kids! You bet!