

FOUNDING FATHERS 3: A STUDY IN THE BOOK GENESIS
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After winning independence in the Revolutionary War, our country had to learn to govern itself. Just like today many people had different ideas on how to do it. We had won freedom, but as we all know freedom is a precarious thing. How do you maintain it when it comes to social issues or government programs, when it comes to taxes and cash and debt? A big problem for our newly formed country was just that. We had debt and financial division following the Revolutionary War and people were arguing about the financial stability. People began to worry about the state of our nation that seemed to be primarily a nation of states when it came to financial matters.

Alexander Hamilton was pushing for Congress to nationalize debt and issue bonds so the entire nation could thrive. People like Jefferson and Madison had a problem with this idea because it seemed the southern states were unnecessarily taking on the debt of the northern states. This bill failed in Congress twice and understandably so. This was a stalemate with no end in sight until the Compromise of 1790. On June 20, 1790, Thomas Jefferson set up a meeting between Alexander Hamilton and James Madison in his New York City residence. By the end of the night, the bill was guaranteed to pass. In this compromise, our nation's seat of government moved from New York City to the banks of the Potomac as a gift to the Southerners, and for that gift, they offered their willingness to nationalize the debt.

That is the episode that is hashed out in the song *The Room Where It Happens*. In a dining room in New York City, two major decisions were made concerning our nation's capital and our nation's capital. It's strange how those can be described with the same word. Somehow government and money might be intertwined. At any rate, this song is Aaron Burr as an outsider wondering how these deals get made. These deals that shape a nation and forever change its trajectory. Aaron Burr is lamenting the fact that a Founding Father can make a slippery deal and change everything.

We wish that everything was objectively clear and obviously on the right path, but that is rarely the case. That is why deals have to be done, sometimes slippery deals. Deals that don't make sense to everybody. Deals that have favored parties and not those left behind. Deals that make insiders of some and outsiders of others. It turns out that this is how the world works. What if I told you today that is also how God works. You would think that in order to build a nation and a faith community, rules would be followed. No deals would be necessary. Things would be completely fair and easy to follow. What if I told you God often works the exact opposite of that?

Today we are going to look at one of the slipperiest Founding Fathers. He is a slick, shrewd and more than occasionally deceitful Founding Father named Jacob. Surprisingly, this shrewd deceitful man reveals something about the nature of God.

Genesis 25: 19-28

Abraham has Isaac and now Isaac has twins named Esau and Jacob. The first-born was the hairy redhead named Esau. The second was Jacob. He came out with his hand grasping Esau's heel, so they named him Jacob. Jacob's name means "may God protect," but the Hebrew letters used in it sound very similar to "heel." This is kind of a profound double meaning for Jacob. God protects him, and you also see this man always grabbing for more. This man is okay tripping others up to get ahead by grabbing their heel. This image of their birth might as well be a perfect metaphor for the life of Jacob and also the fraught relationship of Esau and Jacob.

Before we go any further, I want you to understand the law of primogeniture. This is a concept you have heard about before here at SFC. The law of primogeniture is how inheritance is passed down from generation to generation. Primogeniture simply means the first-born. In several parts of the Bible, we see this idea displayed and discussed. Historically, the first-born son would get the bulk portion of the property and a much smaller sliver would go to the rest of the offspring. This was not a biblical idea. It was a common practice in the ancient Near East since it was an agrarian land-based economy.

The primary reason was that most people had large families, and if a father split up the land among his children ten ways and each of those kids had ten kids, the land of the father was now the size of a postage stamp. So the law of primogeniture became common. It was wise. It was fair. It was how people saw the world, and it was great to be first-born.

First-borns were the favored ones just because of who they were. By virtue of nothing, they got it all. Which is not that different from normal life. With our firstborn Halle, we hovered. She was at the center of all that we did every moment of the day. Our photo books were full of memories; her room was full of toys. She got regular tender baths. When Bennett rolled around, the photos were a bit lighter, the toys were used and the baths were occasional. Now with our third daughter, our main success is keeping her alive day to day, and we are considering putting in some kind of trough in the backyard in hopes that they'll jump in it once a month to clean off. I'm kidding, sort of.

In this culture, all of that was in play plus the idea that this kid would get the feast and you would get the scraps. This small select group of the first-borns got it all, and everyone else was on the outside looking in. It was how the world worked. It was how families worked. It was how people saw their relationship with their father. A few favored ones got blessed. Most don't.

You can tell this always bothered Jacob. Imagine being the second-born a few years behind your older brother. He's always taller and stronger and older. He can beat you up and he will get more inheritance. That would bother anyone, but how much more so for a twin. Your brother isn't years older, only minutes older. You are the same size, always fighting and competing for everything. He's favored. He gets more money. It would drive sibling rivalry to a whole new level. Not to mention that it seems like mom and dad are playing favorites, the mom for Jacob and the dad for Esau. We are trying to build a nation of priests that will bless the whole world. These are the Founding Fathers. We already have jealousy, favoritism and competition. Why does God allow this? With that in mind, let's keep reading.

Jacob has just made his first of many deals. He took advantage of the situation to get what he wanted. He saw an opening and took it. The Bible offers very little into the motivations or color commentary on this passage, except that Jacob saw something he wanted and it appears Esau did not think it all the way through.

Most people believe that Alexander Hamilton had no problem moving the nation's capital as long as he got to stay in charge of the nation's capital, namely that the banks stayed in New York City. In all reality, most historians believe this was a lopsided deal and Hamilton got exactly what he wanted for very little in exchange, so it was with Jacob. For a double share of the inheritance, he only had to trade away some soup and bread.

Just like that, the story begins to change. You know how this story ends up. The rest of Genesis will be about Jacob and his sons, not Esau and his sons. The story was supposed to be passed down through first-born sons, but that had already changed.

This sibling rivalry is just getting started. Jacob made a deal, legitimate though it was, even though he was taking advantage of his brother in need, now he goes to the next level.

Genesis 27: 1-17

You know how this story goes. The plan works and Jacob steals Esau's blessing. He is no longer content to make slippery deals to take advantage of his brother. He is now dressing up and stealing his blessing. The blessing in the ancient Near East was a big deal. This was not just, "I love you. You're a good boy." These words carried great weight. They were a pronouncement and a prophecy all in one, and Jacob stole it. After the ruse is found, let's jump ahead.

Genesis 27: 35-41

This didn't go over well. Imagine this from Isaac's perspective. He is the son of Father Abraham. God promised to make a great nation out of him and his offspring. Isaac is one of his offspring, and this is how his two kids are acting. This doesn't feel great. It doesn't feel like the beginning of a great people, a nation of priests who will bless the world. This feels like a mess of sibling rivalry. Taking advantage. Making slippery deals. Masquerading as the other. Then ending with anger and threats of deadly violence. The father is trying to do something profound and serious, and the kids are messing it all up.

I don't know if you saw this video last week, but it's worth seeing again. A BBC news correspondent was reporting from his home office on the serious issues going on in South Korea. And then this happened.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NA6btdb1mOY>

There are so many amazing moments in this clip. The brazen entrance of the older child and then the baby rolling in, then the panic of the mother to get the kids out and trying to stealthily close the door, as if no one saw what was happening. You have to know what is going on in their mind, this was global news on a serious issue and the kids have completely messed it up.

We are only two generations into this promise from God, and it is already going off the rails. We have a conniving younger brother always grabbing at the heels of his older brother, trying to trip him up and take what he has. Now we have an upset older brother unhappy with what his younger brother has received.

This is a slippery back room deal, and now the fate of a nation has changed trajectory. Why would God allow it to unfold like this? Jacob will become Israel and his sons will become the Twelve Tribes of Israel. The way this family has come into being, the way these groups

became the Twelve Tribes is completely wrong. Rules were broken. Laws were bypassed. Expectations were subverted. Why does it happen this way?

This is almost exclusively how the book of Genesis works. The entirety of this book subverts the common sense of the law of primogeniture.

Our first examples are Cain and Abel. Cain was the first-born, yet God favored Abel. Abraham actually had a son with Hagar before he had Isaac with Sarah, and God favors Isaac. Isaac has two sons, Esau first and then Jacob. Jacob ends up snatching the birthright and the blessing. Jacob has multiple sons, the first of which is Reuben, but early on he favored his youngest, Joseph. In fact, Joseph is told in a dream that all of his older brothers will bow down and serve him. In one seemingly strange story, Judah, one of Jacob's sons has twins and when the time of birth comes, one little hand comes out and the handmaid ties a scarlet thread around his hand to label him the primogeniture. Then the hand went back in and the other child, Perez, came out first.

Time and again common sense is circumvented. Status is switched. Fairness is knocked on its ear. In one story alone, this might seem silly or simple especially stories of birthrights being traded for bowls of soup, and babies hands being tied with scarlet threads. When you see it over and over again, there is something profound that is happening. Jump ahead with me to the end of Jacob's life.

Genesis 48:10-16

This is turning out not to be a fluke. Even these two boys who have been thrust into a role they did not deserve, even then, expectations are subverted. Expectation of what should be is shattered by reality. Manasseh is the first-born and yet Jacob crosses his hands. The right hand was the main hand of blessing and favor and the message is clear. This is a twist on the twist.

The message here which might have seemed silly when Abel was favored over Cain or when Jacob snatched the birthright from Esau or when Isaac got to stay and Ishamel had leave or when Joseph won out over his younger brothers or even when Perez came out before Zerah. This isn't a simple or silly message. It is the way of things in God's economy. The first shall be last and the last shall be first. It is the upside down, topsy-turvy way that God sees things. It is the essence of the inverted kingdom.

This theme doesn't end in Genesis. David is the last of his brothers, yet God picks him to be king. Ruth gets picked instead of the younger more beautiful wives. Esther lands the leading lady role. Mephibosheth gets a seat at the table. Hosea chases after Gomer. The Bible is filled with the passed-over, over-looked, undeserving, lowly, broken down, sickly and last-born finding favor. This is how God works, and it flies in the face of a world that supposedly wants fair play and wise distribution. When you move into the New Testament, Jesus doesn't pick the rabbis and Pharisees to be his disciples. He picks fisherman, hotheads and con artists. He picks cowards, rebels and zealots. This is the way our God works.

He sent his own son to further that message, that son liked to tell stories about prodigal sons who were welcomed home nonetheless. He liked to tell stories about workers in vineyards showing up at all hours of the day and all getting paid the same. He said things like the first shall be last and the last shall be first. He said, "If you want to be a leader, you need to take up a towel and a basin. If you love your friends, you should die for them, over and over again." This is not part of the Christian life. It is the entirety of it. It is the inverted kingdom we live in. This is grace. I saved the best for last. Joseph takes note and tries to stop it.

Genesis 48:17-20

Joseph saw it, and it displeased him. He saw the cross-handed blessing of God and it bugged him. The great irony of ironies? Neither of these men should have been there in the first place. If the law of primogeniture was really observed, then Abraham's line should have

passed to Ishmael not Isaac. Isaac's blessing should have gone to Esau not Jacob. Jacob's blessing should have gone to Reuben not Joseph and definitely not Ephraim. Joseph misses that irony. He was happy to be a beneficiary of the inverted kingdom. He was less excited about being a benefactor. Did you catch that? He never complained about the inverted kingdom when he was the beneficiary. He became a little less generous when it was time to pass it on.

Some of you today need to hear that message. The modern version of it would be "grace for me, justice for you." As long as there are older brothers in the Bible, there is also jealousy, envy and stinginess. The Bible is full of stories of awestruck younger brothers who are amazed by God's grace and those same stories usually include incredulous older brothers who are shocked by grace. God's grace is wider than we imagine, his forgiveness deeper than we expect. As we head into the Easter season, some of you in this room have a great appreciation for the grace you have been given. You don't need to be reminded of it, but maybe you are having a hard time extending that grace to someone else in the form of service or in the form of forgiveness to someone inside or outside of the church.

The Compromise of 1790 is sometimes remembered for its two biggest moving pieces, assumption and residency. If the states would allow the assumption of debt, then they would move the residency of the capital. I think that is a nice tidy picture of our God who assumes our debts and calls on us to take on a new residency. When you enter the Kingdom of God, it is built upon the assumption of your debts. You are forgiven much, so you take up residency in this new life and this new gracious kingdom. That should change you.

You could spend your whole life worrying about other people. You can look at their lives and be upset. Why did they get that kind of deal and I got this one. You can look at those who hurt you and wonder why they are being afforded grace. Why did God make a deal with them? Each week, we have been talking about freedom. There is freedom for all who want it today. To forgive and be gracious to others is freeing. To worry about, obsess over and get mad about the lives of others will enslave you. That's what happened to Esau. It happened to Reuben. It happened to David's older brothers. It happened to the Pharisees. It

happened to the older brother of the prodigal son. It happened to Peter when he asked about John. Don't let it happen to you. Freedom is yours in this topsy-turvy Kingdom of God. Don't let it get compromised.