

Part 2: The Firstborn and His Brothers

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My wife and I have recently found a new podcast which is a behind the scenes look at one of our favorite TV shows. One specific episode stood out to us as the hosts introduced us to something called, "The Show Bible."

This "show bible" was this massive book that the writers kept and it included all of the facts regarding each character as it was revealed over the course of the show. For example if one episode showed a character as a vegetarian, it would be recorded in the show bible under her character so that future writers would know that fact and not write any scenes where the character ate meat.

This show has one particular relationship which unfolds over the course of the series and the two characters end up married in the end. So by the end you could open up the show bible and see that this character will end up marrying that character.

It's called the "show bible," because comprehensive fact books like this are often referred to as "the bible" on whatever subject it's on. While this might help us understand the nature of such books, I think this cultural phenomenon hinders us from actually understanding the Bible.

When you think of the Bible, what do you think it is? Is it just some book filled with truth statements and helpful tips to not get lost in the woods? For many of us I think we have that kind of presupposition towards the Bible. Because of that we open it up, look for some neatly packaged truth statement to apply for the day, and it can become frustrating when we can't seem to identify it.

But if I really wanted to introduce you to this show, I wouldn't just hand you the show bible and say read about all the facts that are in here. No, what I would do is sit you down and have you watch the show. Because while the show bible might tell you that so and so were to get married, it is far more compelling to see that truth unfold in the story of the whole show.

It draws us in and invites us to interact with it.

You see the Bible contains truth facts, propositions, and general counsel for sure. But the Bible is not a collection of abstract facts about God. If that's all we view the Bible for, we will only use it like an instruction manual that gets thrown into our garage. For the most part we'd like it to be there if something breaks, but we don't really look forward to seeing it.

But this book is a story, a true story, which when you encounter it, invites you to respond to it. And like a good book or movie, sometimes it's not until you see the full picture that the moments of confusion begin to make sense.

During our Easter series we are looking at this story, from the beginning of the Bible to the end. Central to the Bible's story is the person and work of Jesus Christ. As we begin to make sense of this story, not only does scripture begin to make more sense to us, but our experience in this world begins to make more sense too.

Last week we looked at Jesus as king, on Friday we saw Jesus as Lamb, and today we are going to look at another aspect of Jesus. One which was just read for us moments ago: Jesus as God's son who invites us into God's family.

To hear that Jesus is God's son might not be new to you, but when we understand that truth in context with the story, we see that on an Easter Sunday, this is the news we need to hear.

So what we are going to see today is this story of the whole Bible in four parts. First we are going to see: **The Fight for the Inheritance**, then we are going to see **The Failures of the Firstborn**, then we are going to look at Jesus as **The Faithful Firstborn**, and lastly we are going to apply it to our own lives by seeing **The Fruits of the Firstborn**.

Just as we needed to understand the kingdom before we saw the beauty of the king, we need to understand the allure of the inheritance before we see the joy of sonship through Jesus Christ.

This is our first part of the story of scripture: **The Fight for the Inheritance**.

Our culture actually understands the allure of inheritance quite well. As wonderful as Daddy Warbuck's affection is towards Little Orphan Annie, it's the invitation into ecosystem of Warbuck's wealth which makes Annie's adoption so captivating.

Similarly, what indebts us to stories like "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory," is the transformation that comes when Charlie is rescued out of poverty and isolation by becoming heir to the Wonka Factory. It brought not only riches but purpose and meaning into a life which seemed to lack both.

And the reason why our imaginations are ripe for such stories is because our hearts were made to long for relationships that bless us and complete us. We were made to desire an inheritance.

We see this in the first page of the Bible as God created the world and created Adam and Eve in his own image. Not only did he father us out of nothing, but we see the nature of this Father is to invite us into his own inheritance.

This inheritance included two realities: a spiritual piece and a physical piece. Spiritually, Adam and Eve as image bearers were exclusively invited to enjoy a relationship with God which animals and plants were not. And physically, God gave his image bearers a tangible inheritance to steward: The Garden of Eden.

Just as it would happen today, God gave Adam and Eve this two fold inheritance and tasked them to steward it faithfully. Look at the nature of this eternally generous Father and his inheritance: **Genesis 1:26-31**.

God gave Adam and Eve something far better than a chocolate factory, he gave them possession of his kingdom. They had it all, perfect relationships with God, perfect relationships with each other, and a world where all their needs would be met by the fruitful creation that the Father himself had created for them. As God's children, the Father's inheritance met every need they had.

But the fight for the inheritance was just beginning. The serpent crept into the garden and he convinced them that their Father was holding out on them. He tried to convince them that a relationship with God was not an inheritance, but a hindrance. If they really wanted the good life, they needed to solve the God problem.

Adam and Eve thought they could get rid of the relational inheritance and just keep the physical piece. So they disobeyed God and in that moment they lost everything they ever wanted.

There's great irony in this because God told Adam and Eve that they could have everything in the garden except the fruit from the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. But it was from this one piece of the garden which they were prohibited that Satan convinced them to take for themselves.

And here's the irony of sin. In the moment Adam and Eve took that fruit, there in a real sense was nothing in the whole world which wasn't theirs. They had all the trees that God gave them to eat and now they even had what wasn't given to them.

Yet, in getting everything they wanted by worldly standards, they lost everything. They rejected God as their good father, and in so doing they lost his inheritance. Their bellies kept the fruit, but they lost everything else. They were removed from God's garden inheritance, and were told that if they were to come back, their sin would cost them their life.

And from this moment on we begin to see the fight for the inheritance spread to all places. Adam and Eve had two children. Cain, the firstborn, and Abel the second. Both Cain and Abel went to offer sacrifices to God, but Abel offered a better sacrifice.

Abel pleased God, he got a sort of glimpse of Eden, and Cain couldn't stand that. So he went and killed Abel. Why? Because he wanted the pleasure of God for himself, and if someone else would steal that inheritance from him, he would solve the problem on his own.

But God reached into this mess himself and appeared to a man named Abraham and promised that God himself was going to recreate a people and invite people back into the blessing of God. The promise of the inheritance was renewed.

Abraham was going to be the physical father of this new nation. So Abraham finally has a son, a single son named Isaac. So the blessing continues to the firstborn. But Isaac has two sons, Esau the firstborn, and Jacob the younger brother.

But now we have a problem, in this day the firstborn was the one who got the greater portion of the inheritance, and there were now two sons. Esau was set up to get this wonderful promise of God's restoring inheritance. But Jacob wanted it, so he deceived Isaac and stole the inheritance disguising himself as Esau.

This really is an odd story, but we know the temptation of this don't we. How many of us have seen friends or families get an inheritance or a gift from a parent and instead of rejoicing for them, we selfishly are angry at them. We see this all the time with people who are successful in the business world. As soon as we find out some business mogul got his start from a rich family member, we write off all of his success. Why? Because we feel they didn't earn it.

Why do our hearts respond like this? Well, because like Cain did, like Jacob and Esau did, we know we are hardwired to fight for an inheritance, but we don't fully understand the inheritance.

From a worldly perspective your attempts to find your inheritance actually affect my own attempts. We live in a finite world, so as soon as you get your wealth, your power, your sexual partner, your spouse, you've actually decreased my chances of getting mine. There's limited resources.

When we fail to see the infinite God himself as the inheritance, we will always find conflict between each other. We're always a threat. This is part of the reason why Christians throw around the word "legalist" to those who are seemingly following Jesus better. If we don't understand grace, then other people's growth in holiness always seems like a threat to my own.

But the inheritance which God would provide doesn't require deceit because it's based in an infinite God, there's enough for all his children.

It's through Jacob that God will make this clear. God is going to shortly change Jacob's name to Israel, and the promise of the inheritance to Jacob is going to count for all of Jacob's offspring.

God solved the problem of which child gets the inheritance by making all of God's people the corporate firstborn of God. To belong to Israel is to receive the blessing of God, it's to have your needs met by the goodness of your father.

But this introduces another problem. This is the second saga of the story: **The Failures of the Firstborn.**

Israel can't seem to stay out of trouble. In fact Jacob's sons, sell off their own brother Joseph into slavery in Egypt. Why? Because Joseph has a favor with their father that they didn't. He was a threat. And because of that sin the whole nation follows Joseph into Egypt where they become slaves.

But look what God calls Moses to say to Pharaoh: **Exodus 4:22-23a**. God was going to bring his firstborn out because he had an inheritance to give him which didn't look like slavery. It looked like the Promised Land. A land where God's people would once again get the inheritance, they would be God's people, in God's presence, in God's place.

In Deuteronomy 26, God says that this Promised Land will be your inheritance, your heritage from your heavenly Father. But, there's a caveat. Because they are God's children, they must act like God's children if they want to continue to inherit the land. Look at **Deuteronomy 6:1-5**.

It was by grace that God chose Abraham, by grace God brought them out of Egypt, by grace God was going to bring them into the land, but if God's people failed to respond to grace with obedience, they would run away from the inheritance of God.

So sure enough the people get into the Promised Land, but just like Adam and just like Jacob, they misunderstood the inheritance. They tried once more to keep the physical portion at the expense of the relational and spiritual portion. They got the Land, so they neglected God not realizing that there's no inheritance without both pieces.

This is actually at the heart of all of our sin. Every promise of sin is the promise of Eden without the God of Eden. It says enjoy all the good things that God made, but apart from God. But not only does this fail to satisfy us, it continues to add to our record as rebellious children.

So God removed them from the land. And look at how he described their rebellion: **Jeremiah 3:19-22a**.

Inheritances are attractive because they promise rest, security, and safety. But the problem for Israel is that they couldn't obey well enough to keep the inheritance. They time and time again cashed out their blessing only to run away from the God who was their blessing.

I hope at this point, the story is beginning to make sense in our own hearts. What this world desires is a relationship of blessing with God, but our own sinful hearts keep us from ever getting there. It cost Israel the land, and if left undressed in our own hearts it doesn't just cost us satisfaction, it will cost us our lives.

But God was going to continue to work for blessing where the people of God failed. In the Psalms we see that God is going to do something about Israel's faithlessness: **Psalms 89:19, 26-28**.

God is going to bring out of Israel a faithful firstborn, one who finally brings the blessing of the covenant. What will this look like? Well, we see the nature of this firstborn in **Zechariah 12:10, 13:1**.

At some point, Israel will pierce this firstborn, but out of the one they have pierced, God will open up a fountain to cleanse them. Through this firstborn, the disobedience will be dealt with, and the inheritance secured forever.

This is where we turn to Jesus, the third act of the Bible's story: **The Faithful Firstborn**. In the opening chapters of the gospels we read of Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, born as fully God, fully man, the firstborn of Mary, but also, **Colossians 1:15**. Jesus is the unique firstborn we've all be waiting for.

He was going to be the faithful son who obeyed the father perfectly so that the whole of God's people might be restored.

And there's one particular parable that I always wrestled with until I understood this theme of Jesus as the faithful firstborn. It was actually a pastor named Ed Clowney who helped me see this theme and now I can't unsee it.

Turn with me to the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15. The context for this parable comes in **Luke 15:1-2**. The Pharisees, who were the religious men at the time were frustrated that Jesus is hanging out with sinners.

The sin of Cain was still strong. If this God-man is pleased with those sinners, what does that say about me?

But then Jesus tells them a story: **Luke 15:11-16**.

Don't we see here the story of Israel in a nutshell? We had a son, who looked at his Father as nothing more than a vending machine and says, "Give me what's mine."

By saying that, he's speaking of course of his inheritance. Which generally speaking was only given out by a father when he died. So in a very real sense this son just told his father: "You're better off to me dead. Give me my inheritance now."

And he took it, and ran as far away from the father as he could. I don't think he went far away because he had to seek out opportunity. I think he went far away because he wanted to distance himself from his father.

You could imagine he had a pretty good time with this cash gift. That's the danger of sin isn't it? It brings a glimpse of the garden, but it never lasts. Eventually, the well runs dry. Famine came. And he used up all the physical inheritance.

So he goes and hires himself out to feed pigs and there is this really powerful moment where he's looking at the pigs he's paid to feed and he realizes, "these pigs have better food than me. Here I am, the one who had the inheritance of a wealthy father, and now I'm nothing."

And then it clicked: **Luke 15:17-19**. The son finally understood what we often don't. The inheritance isn't what the father has, the inheritance is the father himself. And so he begins to practice this apology: "Father I have sinned against heaven and before you, I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants."

I think this to be one of the most tragic prayers in all scripture, and it truly is the prayer of a person who understands the weight of his/her own sin, but not the grace of God. This prodigal son realizes that the relationship with the father is what makes the physical estate so wonderful. But he also realizes that his sin, his rejection has burned the bridge to sonship. He certainly can't go back as a son, but if even to be a slave to work in the father's house would be better than a free man apart from the father.

So he rehearses this apology, relying on his own ability to please the father by his work, all the way home. And then when he gets there we see this scene not of works, but of grace. **Luke 15:20-24**.

Before the son can even finish his apology, he is accepted and a feast is thrown, and he is once more made a son, he's clothed out of the wealth of the inheritance once more.

But this was where I wrestled, because what about this son's rebellion? What about my own rebellion? How do I know that God will treat me like this? How do I know that even though I took what is mine and burned it on the altar of sin that there will yet be the promise of grace for me?

But this is not where the parable ends. We are introduced now to the older brother, the firstborn son. Look here: **Luke 15:25-32**.

While all this is happening the firstborn is away in a field doing what the other son should have been doing: working. And he saw some servants running by him. Now remember this older son remained faithful when the younger son had not. He stayed true and planned to earn his share of the father's property the right way, and he now knew that there was no one to share anything with. His brother had taken his share, and what was left was to be his own. There was nothing the father had at this point that did not legally belong to this firstborn son.

So you can imagine his surprise when the robe of his father he had kept his eye on was being carried by a servant, and the ring which was to be his was being loaded up into a box with the party decorations, and the calf that was to be his was being led across the field.

And then he saw where they were taking them. To his no-good-dirty-rotten-rebellious-and-prodigious brother. The older brother became angry and called the father to him saying, "Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed you, I never abandoned you, I never sinned against you and yet you never even gave me a young goat that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, the one who shamed you, rejected you and squandered your wealth on whisky and women, you killed the fattened calf for him."

Now why is Jesus saying this parable to the Pharisees who are upset that Jesus is hanging out with the broken sinners?

Because Jesus wants to show them that he is the true firstborn. Jesus is the greater older brother. The one who was faithful in all his service to God, pure in his devotion, his worship and his person. But he was the elder brother who didn't fear losing his inheritance but instead offered it up for us, his sinning brothers and sisters.

The older brother in this story hoards his wealth and says, "All the father has is mine, stay out." Jesus as the true older brother says (John 16:15), "All the father has is mine, and I give it to you." Jesus came to find us and offered us the inheritance which we needed, but had no right to. And more than that he repaid the debt we earned with his own blood.

He was pierced so that you might be brought back to the inheritance of the Father by the blood of the son. Now look again at Paul's words: **Romans 8:14-17**.

You see the prodigal son doesn't show cheap grace. It shows costly sacrifice to get us back to God. Costly sacrifice by the faithful and true firstborn to get us back to God's grace. And all of this is free if you too would come to the son.

In closing I want to show you the **Fruits of the Firstborn**, as a points of application. Here we sit on Easter, Sunday the day where we celebrate that Jesus the firstborn didn't stay dead, but rose again.

And here we have the first fruit: *A Future Resurrection*. Look with me at **Romans 6:5**. Because Jesus was raised from the dead, so too will those who are heirs with him. We are joined with Christ and all the things that come with it. You see it's only through Jesus that we get both the relational and the physical parts of the inheritance.

It is in Jesus that nothing gets withheld and that God will one day raise us up in new physical bodies in a New Kingdom for eternity. As we sit in our homes due to a dangerous disease we are reminded that the hope of an empty tomb sustains even an empty church.

For those who fear belonging in a time of social-distancing consider this: *A Future Family*. Read with me **Hebrews 12:22-24**.

Because Jesus' blood is better than that of Abel, we are united to a family more numerous than we can imagine. When the relational and the physical inheritance is our only reality, in the New Heavens and the New Earth all believers will be identified simply as, "the assembly of the firstborn."

Our hope is in belonging to this family. What does this look like now? It looks like the church. This is an odd point of application in this day, but to belong to the firstborn is to belong to the people of the firstborn. Now here on earth we are not the resurrected people, we still carry brokenness, but as we gather together, as we participate in the life of a local church, we are participating in the closest thing we can to heaven.

And as we do this, we grow together and we remind each other of the eternal hope we have in the son: *An Eternal Hope, Revelation 21:1-7.*

This is the story of scripture. This is the hope of the firstborn. That he has come to fix what our rebellion has broken. He holds out for us an inheritance that can't be lost by our works because it wasn't earned by ours.