

# Isaac Marries Rebekah, and the Birth of Jacob & Esau (Genesis 23:1-25:26)

## Expository Lessons from the Book of Genesis

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### I. Review of Prior Lesson (Abraham Sacrificing Isaac, Genesis 22)

- a. God tested Abraham; he still tests those who want to follow Him.
- b. True saving faith, illustrated by Abraham, includes believing plus obeying. Abraham's obeying God here is highlighted in **Hebrews 11:17** and **James 2:14-24**.
- c. Abraham was told two apparently contradictory things by God, but believed both. As a result, he reasoned that God could raise the dead. (**Hebrews 11:17-19**)
- d. Several early Christian writers saw the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac in **Genesis 22** as foreshadowing the Passion and death of Jesus. Elements:
  - i. beloved son;
  - ii. carries wood of his own sacrifice to the place of sacrifice;
  - iii. bound hand and foot; laid upon the wood for the sacrifice;
  - iv. sheep/substitution;
  - v. (perhaps) crown of thorns/ram's horns caught in thicket;
  - vi. figurative resurrection; and
  - vii. gospel preached: all nations/Gentiles to be blessed through one of Abraham's descendants.

### II. Death and Burial of Sarah (Read Genesis 23)

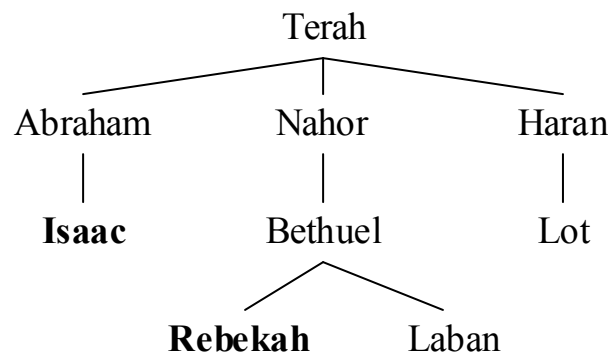
- a. Sarah dies at the age of 127, in land of Canaan.
- b. Abraham purchases family burial plot: a cave that was on the edge of a field of Ephron the Hittite.
  - i. Many Christians wonder if it okay to be cremated when one dies, given this is less expensive than burial. I am not sure. On one hand, the early Christians buried their dead, out of respect for their belief in the resurrection of the physical body. On the other hand, the early Christians believed that no matter how a person died (eaten by lions, burned at the stake, etc.), that God was able to bring the dead body back together in the resurrection.

- ii. Here Abraham, who reasoned that God could raise the dead (**Hebrews 11:19**), lays Sarah's body to rest in a cave.
- c. When asked about the price of the field and cave Ephron responds, "...the land is worth 400 silver drachmas, but what is that between you and me?"
- d. Abraham buries the body of Sarah in the cave.

### III. Abraham's Servant Finds a Wife for Isaac

- a. Read **Genesis 24:1-9**. Basic Storyline:
  - i. Abraham does NOT want a daughter of the Canaanites for his son Isaac.
  - ii. Abraham sends his servant back to Haran, where his family of origin is, to find a bride for Isaac. Haran is in Mesopotamia (the land between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers which is modern day Harran in Turkey near the border with Syria). Haran was maybe 500 miles (800 km) from Canaan, a journey that might take a month or two – a long journey!
    1. Servant thinks it might be good for Isaac to make the trip, to help convince the prospective bride. (**Genesis 24:5**)
    2. However, Abraham does not want Isaac to go to Haran and says, "Do not take my son back there." (**Genesis 24:6**) Why?
    3. God had promised that Abraham's descendants would inherit the land of Canaan. Perhaps Abraham was concerned that Isaac might like it there, or his new bride would not want to leave her family in Haran. In that case, Isaac might not return to Canaan.
    4. Not bringing Isaac certainly made it more difficult for Abraham's servant to recruit a bride! But Abraham is confident, "God will send His Angel before you". (**Genesis 24:7**)
- b. Read **Genesis 24:10-28**
  - i. Abraham's servant travels overland from Canaan to Haran, an approximately 500-mile (800-km) trip.
  - ii. He takes 10 camels. The camels are mentioned 15+ times in this story, and play a very important part!
  - iii. Abraham's servant prays a short prayer; looks for divine assistance.

1. Prays to “God of my lord Abraham”; asks “give me success this day, and show mercy to lord Abraham”. (**Genesis 24:12**)
  - a. Also, (coincidence?) the camels were *kneeling down* while Abraham’s servant was praying by the well.
2. Has a very specific request. If the virgin offers to give water to the camels too, that will be the sign. (**Genesis 24:14**; prayer described more fully in **Genesis 24:42-44**)
  - a. One camel can drink 30-50 gallons of water. That corresponds to six to ten 5-gallon (roughly 20-liter) buckets per camel.
  - b. Therefore, ten camels could drink 2,500-4,000 pounds of water (1,100-1,800 kg). So that was quite a generous offer and sacrifice for Rebekah: to offer to give them water until they finished drinking!
3. After his prayer is clearly answered, the servant bows down, worships God and acknowledges God’s faithfulness to Abraham.
4. Abraham was the uncle of Bethuel, the father of Rebekah. It explains in **Genesis 11:27** that Terah was the father of Abraham, Nahor and Haran (who was the father of Lot).
5. Rebekah’s grandfather (Nahor) and Isaac’s father (Abraham) were brothers.



- c. Decision to send Rebekah to Canaan, to become Isaac’s wife (**Genesis 24:29-57**)
  - i. Bethuel (her father) and Laban (her brother) agree that “the command comes from the Lord” and tell Abraham’s servant, that he may take her back with him, to “let her be your lord’s son’s wife”. (**Genesis 24:50-51**)

- d. Trip to Canaan; marriage of Isaac and Rebekah (Read **Genesis 24:58-67**)
  - i. Rebekah also agrees to go back with Abraham's servant. (**Genesis 24:58**)
  - ii. Rebekah blessed by her family, "may you become the mother of thousands of myriads, and may your seed possess the gates of their enemies". (**Genesis 24:60**)
  - iii. Departs with her maids, riding on the camels.
  - iv. Isaac is out in a field, "meditating".
    - 1. In one of my Bibles (NIV) based on the Masoretic Text (Hebrew) Old Testament, there is a footnote saying that translators of the Hebrew are not certain of the meaning of that word. However, in Greek in the LXX it is a word commonly used for reflecting on the commands of God (used many times in **Psalm 119**, for example).
  - v. Isaac takes Rebekah into the tent/house of his deceased mother Sarah and Rebekah becomes his wife.
    - 1. The Scripture says, "he loved her" and is comforted after his mother's death.
    - 2. This simple, beautiful love story gets off to a great romantic start. But what happens after that? (We will learn things get a bit rocky!)

#### IV. The End of Abraham's Life

- a. **Question:** How many sons did Abraham have (in the Old Testament)? Two?
  - i. **Answer:** At least eight. (Read **Genesis 25:1-4**) He married Keturah after Sarah died, and had six more sons. Yet all his inheritance goes to Isaac; the other sons sent away, to the east.
- b. Read **Genesis 25:7-11**.
  - i. Abraham dies at the age of 175 (38 years after Sarah died).
  - ii. Abraham is buried by Isaac and Ishmael in the family cave where Sarah's body had been laid to rest.
- c. As we pause at the cave in Machpelah where the body of our 'spiritual father' Abraham was laid to rest, let us take one last look back on the legacy he left behind for us. Justin Martyr (c. 100-165 AD) spoke about *the church* as *a nation descending from Abraham*, to a Jewish man named Trypho, writing:

- i. “For this is that nation which God of old promised to Abraham, when He declared that He would make him a father of many nations; not meaning, however, the Arabians, or Egyptians, or Idumeans, since Ishmael became the father of a mighty nation, and so did Esau; and there is now a great number of Ammonites. Noah, moreover, was the father of Abraham, and in fact of all men; and others were the progenitors of others.
- ii. “What larger measure of grace, then, did Christ bestow on Abraham? This, namely, that He called him with His voice by the like calling, telling him to quit the land wherein he dwelt. And He has called all of us by that voice, and we have left already the way of living in which we used to spend our days, passing our time in evil after the fashions of the other inhabitants of the earth; and along with Abraham we shall inherit the holy land, when we shall receive the inheritance for an endless eternity, being children of Abraham through the like faith.
- iii. “For as he believed the voice of God, and it was imputed to him for righteousness, in like manner we, having believed God’s voice spoken by the apostles of Christ, and promulgated to us by the prophets, have renounced even to death all the things of the world. Accordingly, He promises to him a nation of similar faith, God-fearing, righteous, and delighting the Father; but it is not you (*referring to Trypho and the other Jews*) in whom is no faith.” (*Dialogue with Trypho* chapter 119; ANF v. 1, p. 259)
- d. Ishmael’s 12 sons are named; Ishmael dies at age 137. (**Genesis 25:12-18**)

#### V. Challenges for Isaac and Rebekah (Read **Genesis 25:19-26**)

- a. Isaac married at age 40, but Rebekah is barren; *no children for 20 years.*
  - i. After being married for five years, Chuck and Alison did not have any children. One day Chuck started wondering about this, especially since he noticed that most of their married friends were having children. He started researching and learned that if a married couple is childless after *one* year of trying, they are advised to consult a physician because it is likely they have an infertility problem. (Instead, Chuck and Alison prayed that Alison would become pregnant that month; she did, with their daughter Julia.)
  - ii. Isaac and Rebekah were childless for at least 19 years. This is a problem!
  - iii. What happened to that blessing about Rebekah having thousands of myriads of descendants?

- iv. Many examples in the Scriptures of God's people struggling with being unable to conceive (Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Hannah in the Old Testament; Elizabeth the wife of Zacharias in the New Testament).
- b. Isaac prays to God and after close to 20 years of marriage (when he was 60); his wife finally conceives and gives birth to twins!
  - i. Another testimony to the importance of prayer when facing challenges.
  - ii. God often makes us go through long difficult periods of suffering and trials.
  - iii. Recently, Chuck walked past a group of Jewish cemeteries located near his home, outside of Boston. The Jews bury their dead vertically, so there were thousands of tombstones closely packed in the cemeteries. Each represented Jews (just from the Boston area) who were descended from Isaac and Rebekah, a couple that was childless for nearly 20 years!
  - iv. Despite the promise made to Abraham and Isaac regarding many descendants, things were not looking good. Yet millions were destined to be descended from Abraham and Isaac. God works things in his own way, in his own time!

## VI. Rebekah Gives Birth to Twins: Esau and Jacob

- a. Rebekah feels the babies struggling inside her womb, wonders what is going on. Inquires of the Lord, and is told:
  - i. There are two different nations (figuratively) in her womb.
  - ii. The older one will end up serving the younger one.
    - 1. This pattern of two brothers with the younger one getting the greater blessing (which typically would be given to the firstborn) is found in three places in Genesis. It is significant.
      - a. Abraham's sons: Isaac gets greater blessing than Ishmael.
      - b. Isaac's sons: Jacob gets greater blessing than Esau (before birth, and later on as we will see).
      - c. Joseph's sons: Ephraim gets greater blessing from his grandfather Jacob/Israel than his older brother Manasseh (**Genesis 48**).
    - 2. Why do we see this pattern repeated in the Scriptures?

3. Paul noted the significance of Isaac (the second son, born of the free woman) receiving the inheritance over Ishmael (the first son, born of the slave woman) as foreshadowing (in parable form) how the Christians (who came second, and are free from the Law of Moses) would receive the inheritance over the Jews (who came first, and are subject to the Law), in **Galatians 4:21-31**.
4. A number of early Christian writers also commented about this two-son pattern (with the greater blessing going to the second son) as foreshadowing the situation that would later arise between Jews and Christians.
  - a. Barnabas (c. 70-100 AD), in *Epistle of Barnabas* chapter 13; ANF v. 1, p. 145.
  - b. Irenaeus (c. 130-200 AD) in *Against Heresies* book 4, chapter 21; ANF v. 1, pp. 493-494.
  - c. Tertullian (c. 160-230 AD) in *An Answer to the Jews* chapter 1; ANF v. 3, p. 151.
  - d. Cyprian (d. 258 AD) in *The Treatises of Cyprian*, Treatise 12, first book, testimonies 19-21; ANF v. 5, pp. 512-513.
- b. The first-born of the twins was hairy, as if he was wearing a red garment. Hence, he is named *Esau*. (In Hebrew, Esau = hairy.)
  - i. If he were born in an English-speaking land, he might have been named 'Harry'!
- c. The second-born of the twins was born grasping the heel of his brother. He is named *Jacob*. (*Jacob = the supplanter*). This was discussed by the early Christian writer Irenaeus:
  - i. "Thus, in the first place, at his birth, since he laid hold on his brother's heel, he was called Jacob, that is, *the supplanter* – one who holds, but is not held; binding the feet, but not being bound; striving and conquering; grasping in his hand his adversary's heel, that is, victory. For to this end was the Lord born, the type of whose birth he set forth beforehand...." (Irenaeus in *Against Heresies* book 4, chapter 21; ANF v. 1, pp. 493).

## VII. The (False) Teaching of Calvinism Regarding 'Unconditional Election' is Rooted in Romans 9, Tied Back to the Birth of Jacob & Esau in Genesis 25

- a. Reminder: one of the great benefits of having a good foundation in the Old Testament is that it helps us understand the New Testament much better.

- i. New Testament writers assumed that their readers/hearers understood the Old Testament well, so based many of their points on passages from the Old Testament.
  - ii. Also, although Christians are now under a new and different covenant from what the Jews were under, the *nature of God has not changed*.
- b. Calvinism - an introductory overview (or refresher).
- i. Founded by John Calvin, one of the main leaders of the Protestant Reformation.
  - ii. Calvin grew up in France, later moved to Basel, Switzerland.
  - iii. In 1536, a few years after graduating from law school and at the age of 27, Calvin wrote his magnum opus, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. This work was intended as an introduction to Protestantism.
  - iv. Calvin's *Institutes*, and the system of theology that it outlined, have become extremely influential in the Protestant world and in Protestant seminaries. The theology is popularly summarized by the acronym **T.U.L.I.P.**, representing the first letter of each of the five cardinal points of Calvinism, which are:
    - 1. **T**otal Depravity of Man (After the Fall of Adam & Eve, nothing good was left in man.)
    - 2. **U**nconditional Election (God does not base his choice of who will be saved or lost on anything he sees in the individual.)
    - 3. **L**imited Atonement (Jesus did not die for all; he died only for the elect.)
    - 4. **I**rresistible Grace (Those whom God calls to salvation are unable to resist the call.)
    - 5. **P**erseverance of the Saints (You can't lose your salvation no matter what you do or how you live; 'once saved, always saved'.)
- c. Since the five points are inter-related, once you disprove one of the points, the entire system tends to crash like the tower of blocks in a game of *Jenga*.
- i. To some of those listening, this will sound like a monstrous view of God: arbitrarily deciding who will be lost and who will be saved; then eternally punishing and rewarding individuals arbitrarily, with no regard for what they have done.



- ii. If you find Calvinism highly objectionable, you are not alone. All five points are directly contradicted by what Jesus taught, and would have been considered heretical in the early church.
  - iii. However, Calvinism presents an integrated theological system. The points are inter-related and internally consistent. Which is why many intellectual-types are drawn to it, and why it remains popular in Protestant seminaries and pulpits.
- d. Calvin considered **Romans 9:6-29** to be the definitive passage on 'Unconditional Election', the second point of T.U.L.I.P theology.
- i. Read **Romans 9:6-24**
    1. On first glance, reading this passage in isolation, Calvin's conclusion might seem reasonable (God hardens and softens people's hearts, God's election, etc.). But let's read it in context.
    2. An over-arching theme of Paul's letter to the **Romans**: "the just/righteous shall live by faith" (**Romans 1:17**, quoting from **Habakkuk 2:4**). Here, Paul emphasizes living by faith as opposed to living by the Law of Moses.
    3. Related to that, a dominant theme of **Romans chapters 1-11** is salvation of the Jews (who were pursuing righteousness based on following the Law of Moses). There is much discussion on the fate and salvation of *two groups of people*: the Jews and the (predominantly Gentile) Christians. The non-Jews are often referred to as 'the Gentiles', 'the nations' or 'the Greeks'.  
Examples:
      - a. (**Romans 1:16**) the gospel "is the power of God to everyone who believes, the Jew first and also for the Greek".
      - b. (**Romans 2:9-10**) there will be punishment "on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek; but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."
      - c. (**Romans 3:9**) "What then? Are we better than they? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin."
      - d. (**Romans 9:6**) "But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect. For they are not all Israel who are of Israel...."

- e. **(Romans 9:24)** What if God prepared the riches of his glory beforehand for “even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?”
  - f. **(Romans 9:30–31)** “What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness of faith; but Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness.”
  - g. **(Romans 10:1)** “Brethren, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved.”
  - h. **Romans chapter 11** is about how Israel was broken off of the tree by unbelief, while the believing Gentiles were grafted in; however if they do not continue in unbelief, they will be grafted in again.
- ii. Returning to **Romans 9** and **Genesis 25**, now in context:
1. Paul’s concern here, understood in context, is regarding two *groups of people*: the Jews and the Gentile Christians.
    - a. First, Paul uses the story of Abraham to show that it was the children of the promise (the Christians, represented by Isaac), not the children of the flesh (Jews, represented by Ishmael) who would gain the promised inheritance. Similar to the argument Paul made in **Galatians 4**.
    - b. Then Paul uses the story of two nations wrestling in Rebekah’s womb, where the younger was chosen beforehand to become the greater one, as part of God’s sovereign plan which we now see unfolded (salvation coming to the chosen, second offspring, the Christians who are living by faith).
    - c. Irenaeus (c. 130-200, bishop/overseer of the church in Gaul/France) wrote about this.
      - i. “This history of Isaac, too, is not without a symbolical character. For in the **Epistle to the Romans**, the apostle declares: ‘Moreover, when Rebekah had conceived by one, even by our father Isaac’ she received answer from the Word, ‘that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of Him that calls’, it was said to her, ‘Two nations are in your

womb, and two manner of people are in your body; and the one people shall overcome the other, and the elder shall serve the younger.'

- ii. "From which it is evident, that not only [were there] prophecies of the patriarchs, but also that the children brought forth by Rebekah were a prediction of the two nations; and that the one should be indeed the greater, but the other the less; that the one also should be under bondage but the other free; but that both should be of one and the same father. Our God, one and the same, is also their God, who knows hidden things, and who knows all things before they can come to pass." (*Irenaeus Against Heresies*, book 4, chapter 21; ANF v. 1, pp. 492-493)
2. We can understand that now in context, re-reading **Romans 9:6-12**: "But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect. For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, 'In Isaac your seed shall be called.' That is, those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed. For this is the word of promise: 'At this time I will come and Sarah shall have a son.' And not only this, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, even by our father Isaac (for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls), it was said to her, 'The older shall serve the younger.'"
  3. Paul concludes his argument in **Romans 9:30-32**, "What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness of faith; but Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. Why? Because they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumbling stone."
  4. Summary/ Conclusion: this passage is about two groups of people (the Jews and the Gentile Christians), that God has chosen his elect who will be those who pursue him by faith (under the law of Christ, not under the law of the Old Covenant). This passage has nothing to do with the unconditional election of individuals chosen arbitrarily by God to be saved!

- e. What DOES the Bible actually teach about election? The best approach is to start with Jesus, then go to the apostles.
- i. The invitation is universal, open to all. Anyone can become part of the elect, the nation of people chosen beforehand, the “second sons”; also known as the church, the disciples of Jesus.
1. **(John 3:14-16)** “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”
  2. **(Matthew 11:28)** “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”
  3. **(Mark 16:15-16)** “And He said to them, ‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.’”
    - a. If God decided beforehand who and who would not be saved, why would Jesus send his followers to preach to all nations?
  4. **(Romans 10:1)** “Brethren, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved.”
    - a. If God’s intention was that Israel be lost, why would Paul pray for them to be saved?
  5. **(1 Timothy 2:3-4)** Paul tells us to pray for those in authority in the government, that we may be able to lead peaceable and godly lives. “For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”
    - a. Does God want all men to be saved or only some? Clearly all! (Although he certainly knows that the road is narrow and only a few will find it, and that many others will reject the gospel.)
  6. **(Hebrews 11:6)** “But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.”

- a. God is looking for those who diligently seek him. This is not a situation where he is arbitrarily choosing some who will be saved no matter what they do.
- ii. We must persevere if we are to remain among the elect.
  1. **(John 15:5-7)** "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you."
  2. **(Matthew 24:12-13)** "And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. But he who endures to the end shall be saved."
  3. **(Hebrews 3:12-15)** "Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called 'Today,' lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end, while it is said: "Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.'" (Hebrews writer here is quoting from **Psalm 95:7-8**)"
  4. **(Romans 11:19-23)** Here Paul addresses the Gentile Christians (so this directly applies to us): "You will say then, 'Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in.' Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either. Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off. And they also, if they do not continue in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again."
    - a. What Paul taught in **Romans chapter 11** must be consistent with he was teaching in **chapter 9!**
- iii. In summary, what Jesus and Paul taught about election:
  1. God fore-ordained that the Christians (the 'second son', the inheritors of the promise, free from bondage) would inherit salvation. He revealed this through Abraham, Isaac and the

story of the birth of Jacob and Esau (two nations wrestling in the womb).

2. Election is *not* unconditional. It is conditional upon us having faith, and persevering in following Jesus in a loving, obedient relationship to the end.
- f. For many hearing this lesson, what we have just discussed will be consistent with your understanding of what all the Scriptures teach regarding salvation.
  - g. However, if what was covered in this lesson regarding 'election' in **Romans 9** is new to you (especially if you have been exposed to Calvinism or Reformation theology in your spiritual journey), I recommend that you:
    - i. Go back through this lesson and review all of the Scriptures quoted in it; and
    - ii. Re-read all of **Romans chapters 9-11**, in view of the **Genesis 25** example cited by Paul, so that you can better appreciate Paul's main point and supporting illustrations in context.
    - iii. For further study, I commend to you the book *Life in the Son*, a thorough Bible study on the doctrine of election, by Robert Shank.