



THANKSGIVING FAMILY DYNAMICS

SERIES: THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS

As we anticipate the holidays and the accompanying family festivities, different emotions rise up within us. For some, family feasts are times of celebration and joyous reunion, but for others these can be stress-filled occasions. Underneath the thin veil of celebration lurk unhealthy family dynamics that open up old wounds, reestablish age-old pecking orders, and reawaken our deepest longings for expressions of love that have never been fulfilled. Even in the best of homes the prevailing atmosphere can be charged by controlling forces that run as deep as the family history. When the festivities end, we wonder if we will ever be able to shake our childhood identities and be liberated from family competitiveness that strives to attain that ever-elusive family "blessing."

In our text from Genesis today we observe such family dynamics at work. The table is set for a holy meal, where the family "*blessing*" (the word is used seven times) stands as the centerpiece. Everyone is looking to the father to act as head of the home, but his passivity has made him a laughingstock. Far from being the spiritual leader, he uses the holy occasion to feed his own appetites. The tragedy of the situation is that if he succeeds, he will place the family history at risk. There is no prayer before the meal. Everyone arrives with his or her personal agendas. They will stop at nothing to get what they want. At this meal, regrettably, there is neither peace nor family unity. All expressions of love are self-serving. Family conversation is laced with deception, flattery, and blasphemy. Competition has created such a chasm that one half of the family can't even speak to the other. Fokkelman comments: "All the members of the family take part in the actions, but at the same time they must be kept apart in pairs to prevent bloodshed."¹ No speech passes between brothers, and almost none between husband and wife. Rather, almost every conversation takes place between a parent and his or her "favored" son.

Many among us are familiar with such painful family dynamics. The surprise of our text is that these dynamics occur within Israel's chosen family. Only one generation removed from Abraham and the spiritual life within the chosen family has almost completely deteriorated. Our text addresses the question: How will God intervene to further his kingdom, when the chosen family has all but denied his presence?

The story has seven interlocking scenes of dialogue, each of which occurs in pairs of relationships (Isaac-Esau; Rebekah-Jacob; Jacob-Isaac, Isaac-Esau, Rebekah-Jacob, Rebekah-Isaac, Isaac-Jacob). We will look at the first three scenes this week, and the final four in our next study.

Literary Outline (Fokkelman²)

- A Isaac + son of blessing (Esau)
- B Rebekah sends Jacob on the stage
- C Jacob appears before Isaac, receives blessing
- C' Esau appears before Isaac, receives anti-blessing
- B' Rebekah sends Jacob from the stage
- A' Isaac + son of blessing (= Jacob!)

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Genesis 27:1-29
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I. The Pre-game Preparations: Isaac and Esau Dynamics (Gen 27:1-4)

Now it came about, when Isaac was old and his eyes were too dim to see, that he called his older son Esau and said to him, "My son." And he said to him, "Here I am." Isaac said, "Behold now, I am old and I do not know the day of my death. Now then, please take your gear, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field and hunt game for me; and prepare a savory dish for me such as I love, and bring it to me that I may eat, so that my soul may bless you before I die. (Gen 27:1-4, NASB)

Before examining the inner dynamics at work between Isaac and Esau, we need to ask, if Esau has already sold his birthright, how does he now expect to inherit the blessing? Bruce Waltke explains:

The relationship of the blessing to the birthright is unclear. In Esau's mind they are separate, for he expects to receive the blessing even though he admits he lost the birthright (27:36). However, to the inspired writer of Hebrews, and so to God, they are inseparable (Heb 12:17)...Both pertain to the first-born's inheritance rights—the birthright, to property (see 25:31); the blessing, to divine potency, prosperity, and dominion (27:27-29). Together they make the inheritor the primary charier of the family heritage (economic, social, and religious)...Theologically for this family it also means bearing God's promises into the next generation.³

Although Esau has already sold his birthright, in this scene we find that his action has not dampened the love between father and son. Isaac's language is polite and intimate ("my son" is an echo of Isaac's relationship with his father Abraham [22:7]), while Esau expresses his availability and eagerness to serve his father. Isaac makes his request in great detail, dressing up the boy in his imagination to be for him what he could not be in his own strength, a man of "the hunt." This vicarious role of the son is made all the more emphatic by the repeated "for me" (3,4). The solemnity of Isaac's offer is seen in the phrase "my soul will bless you."⁴ "Soul" is a term for one's "*passionate vitality*" (Waltke). Fokkelman explains that its reiteration is significant: "Four times we have that untranslatable word *nefesh* (4, 19, 25, 31), the whole person with all his resources. With complete sincerity of purpose Isaac transmits all the strength, all the vitality he once possessed, all his destiny, all his blessedness tersely and in powerful language (therefore poetry! prose would not do) to his son."⁵ Thus, in the provision of the desired game, Esau will find the blessing he so longs to receive.

But what is painful in the exchange between these two is that Isaac's request is not motivated primarily by love for his son, but by his own appetites. For Isaac, imparting the blessing is secondary to the "*savory*" dish (mentioned six times in this chapter) that he "loves."

In this first scene, Isaac has set his affections on the wrong thing. Further, by blessing what God has cursed, he is willing to engage in the ultimate evil to secure it. While Esau is eager to serve the father by feeding his appetites, ultimately he is longing for the best thing, the blessing. One gives his love to feed his own appetites; the other feeds the father's appetites to acquire love.

Yet the irony is that Isaac's request is framed with the word "death" (2, 4). This serves Isaac's motive to convey a strong sense of urgency to Esau, but it may also be a hint from the narrator concerning where such intentions really take us. From Isaac's dialogue with his favored son we are transported to Rebekah's counter-dialogue with her favored son.

II. The Pre-game Preparations: Rebekah and Jacob Dynamics (Gen 27:5-17)

Rebekah was listening while Isaac spoke to his son Esau. So when Esau went to the field to hunt for game to bring home, Rebekah said to her son Jacob, "Behold, I heard your father speak to your brother Esau, saying, 'Bring me some game and prepare a savory dish for me, that I may eat, and bless you in the presence of the Lord before my death.' Now therefore, my son, listen to me as I command you. Go now to the flock and bring me two choice young goats from there, that I may prepare them as a savory dish for your father, such as he loves. Then you shall bring it to your father, that he may eat, so that he may bless you before his death." (Gen 27:5-10)

Now we discover that Isaac's grand scheme is hidden from the rest of the family. It seems he knows he is acting in direct disobedience to the divine oracle (25:23), and therefore he cannot be open about his plans. But, as fate (or better, "providence") would have it, Rebekah is secretly listening in on their conversation. Her spying reveals a longstanding distrust between this couple. The moment she hears everything she leaps into action. We find her true to her earlier character. She is quick to take the initiative, and she has a huge capacity for hospitality, for two young goats could feed a small army. The scene is strangely reminiscent of Abraham's hospitality to the three strangers (Gen 18), both in its urgency and display of generosity. But what a tragic turn the gift of hospitality has taken! After years of divided loyalties, Rebekah doesn't take the initiative to openly confront her husband; instead she manipulates him through her cooking skills in order to transfer the coveted blessing to her favored son Jacob. Unlike Isaac, she wants the right thing, but unfortunately, she goes about it the wrong way. After years of a dysfunctional marriage, the thought of manipulation and keeping the peace seems a far easier road than the prospect of a family confrontation.

As Rebekah speaks to her son, one can hear the emotional distance separating this family. She refers to Isaac as "your father," and Esau "your brother." This is a common and painfully familiar trait in many families. Rebekah is determined to use this emotional distance to her advantage. Because she was in position to hear "everything," in order for Jacob to relate to his father, he must do so through his mother. Rebekah's monopoly on family information gives her great leverage over her son. If Jacob is to be successful he must "obey" her. Yet she remains in the driver's seat, for all Jacob is required to do is fetch a couple of goats and bring the gourmet meal to his father. She is the cook; he is the waiter. Finally, to heighten Jacob's sense of urgency, she adds the little phrase "*in the presence of the Lord*" to Isaac's blessing. God's name becomes a tool for the agendas of others. In the end, Jacob realizes that if he is to receive the blessing, there is but one window of opportunity; now is the time. To be successful, he must fully align himself with his mother.

But Jacob is a clear thinker. Before making this alliance he thinks through its difficulties.

Jacob answered his mother Rebekah, "Behold, Esau my brother is a hairy man and I am a smooth man. Perhaps my father will feel me, then I will be as a deceiver in his sight, and I will bring upon myself a curse and not a blessing." (Gen 27:11-12)

Jacob knows there is a vast difference between the two sons. Even a blind father "groping" in the dark (a better translation than "feel," see Deut 28:29) can tell by Jacob's smooth skin that he is not Esau. This is the first time in Jacob's story that he comes

close to admitting who he is. The term "smooth" is used twenty times in the O.T. In almost every other occurrence it is used of "smooth" speech that is deceptive, or of "flattery" used to entice others into sin (Ps 5:9; 12:2,3; 55:21; Prov 2:16; 5:3; 7:5; Dan 11:32). Yet it won't be until twenty years later, when Jacob wrestles with the angel at Peniel, that he finally will be able to fully embrace his own name (32:27). Though Jacob admits he is a "smooth" man, he doesn't want to appear as a "mocker" (a better translation than "deceiver") in his father's eyes, and subject himself to a curse (Deut 27:18 invokes a curse on those who physically mislead the blind). As Alter points out, "Jacob expresses no compunction, only fear of getting caught."⁶

But his mother said to him, "Your curse be on me, my son; only obey my voice, and go, get them for me." So he went and got them, and brought them to his mother; and his mother made savory food such as his father loved. (Gen 27:13-14)

So eager is Rebekah for her son to succeed that she volunteers to take his curse if their plans go awry. Doggedly persistent, she continues to press Jacob into action. With an instant display of obedience the son does the bidding of the mother. The young goats are secured, and in no time the meal is prepared—a meal that the father loves. Painfully, this is the only relationship where "love" is mentioned in the chapter. And it is not the love between a father and a son, or between a wife and husband, but the love of a father for his palate.

By the end of the cooking frenzy it appears that Jacob's seed of fear is planted in his mother. To further ensure that this gourmet meal comes off without a hitch, Rebekah prepares more than food.

Then Rebekah took the best garments of Esau her elder son, which were with her in the house, and put them on Jacob her younger son. And she put the skins of the young goats on his hands and on the smooth part of his neck. She also gave the savory food and the bread, which she had made, to her son Jacob. (Gen 27:15-17)

What follows will be an Academy Award-winning performance. Rebekah takes Esau's "best garments" and places them on Jacob. "Best" is a weak translation; the compound adjectives mean "the greatest and most desirable" garments. I imagine these were the hunting garments of Isaac's favored son. If those were not convincing enough, she returns to the kitchen to retrieve the skins of the young goats she slaughtered and sews them around Jacob's hands and the "smooth" part of his neck. This woman is highly innovative. Her generous offerings of two young goats will serve her purposes well beyond the meal. Then she dresses Jacob up in this makeshift Halloween costume.

Let us put ourselves in Jacob's shoes. In the midst of his mother's antics, how would we feel? She is trying to build up his confidence so that he can pull off the deception without flinching, but deep down it must have been extremely humiliating for him. The mother is clearly communicating to the son that if he wants the family blessing, he must dress up like his brother and imitate his brother's "gamy" behavior, for that is what moves the father's love. Jacob must be willing to deny who he is in order to have his father's blessing. Rebekah is not only dishonoring her marriage relationship, she is humiliating her son. God's blessing is given by his sovereign grace, not through denial of one's identity.

Now that the "pre-game" festivities are over the family is ready for the meal. With the preparations complete and the tension mounting, Jacob comes on stage to approach his father.

III. The Meal: Jacob and Isaac Dynamics (Gen 27:18-29)

A. The approach: Deceit and Blasphemy (27:18-20)

Then he came to his father and said, "My father." And he said, "Here I am. Who are you, my son?" Jacob said to his fa-

ther, "I am Esau your firstborn; I have done as you told me. Get up, please, sit and eat of my game, that you (lit. "your soul") may bless me." Isaac said to his son, "How is it that you have it so quickly, my son?" And he said, "Because the LORD your God caused it to happen to me." (Gen 27:18-20)

Jacob has learned his lines well. He approaches his father with the exact counterpoint to Isaac's initial address to Esau. He has learned from his mother both what to say and how to say it. Isaac's initial response appears inviting, but then he reveals his suspicions. The blind father wants more evidence to know which son has approached him. From that point Jacob comes forward with a bold lie, claiming to be Esau, the firstborn, the one deserving of the blessing. Then before Isaac's suspicions can deepen, he presses his bedridden father to eat.

But before he consents, Isaac pointedly asks how it is possible that he could have returned from the hunt and made these preparations so quickly? Jacob responds by committing blasphemy: he attributes his success to the LORD. Has he learned this from his mother? But Isaac, not fully convinced, seeks more confirmation.

B. Groping in the Dark (27:21-27)

Then Isaac said to Jacob, "Please come close, that I may feel you, my son, whether you are really my son Esau or not." So Jacob came close to Isaac his father, and he felt him and said, "The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau." He did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau's hands; so he blessed him. (Gen 27:21-23)

The blind Isaac, relying on his sense of touch, entreats Jacob to come closer. One wonders if Jacob is stung with pain at his words "my son...my son," which communicate that in his father's thinking he has but one son, "my son, Esau." Again, as we saw last week, the evidence that Isaac receives is divided. His ears tell him it is the voice of Jacob, while his touch tells him it is Esau. With the meal sitting before him, the still suspicious Isaac asks his son to remove all doubt by telling him the absolute truth.

And he said, "Are you really my son Esau?" And he said, "I am." So he said, "Bring it to me, and I will eat of my son's game, that I may bless you." And he brought it to him, and he ate; he also brought him wine and he drank. (Gen 27:24-25)

Despite his father's grilling, Jacob remains resolute. With his back against the wall he engages in a second lie that is even bolder than the first. This act of betrayal is enough to give Isaac the freedom to eat, and he does so in good measure. Jacob also provides wine, perhaps hoping to dull his father's senses.

Then his father Isaac said to him, "Please come close and kiss me, my son." So he came close and kissed him; and when he smelled the smell of his garments, he blessed him and said,

"See, the smell of my son
Is like the smell of a field which the LORD has blessed;"
(Gen 27:26-27)

In this final request it is obvious that Isaac still has a residue of doubt, even as he eats. This confirms how much he "loved" his game. Not until after the meal, when he smells the gamy garments of the son, are all his remaining doubts removed. The smell lifts Isaac's senses into such a state of ecstasy that he associates God's blessing with the sensual smells of the field. At this point Isaac reaches the height of disobedience, choosing to bless what God has cursed. But, by the hand of providence, God has overruled, and the younger son of choice receives the blessing. But again we sense that though Jacob's Halloween parade is successful, every word from Isaac lashes his soul with the knowledge that, at least in his father's eyes, he never was a son.

I can identify with Jacob. My own father ruled by silence in our home. He had no capacity to enter into the world of his chil-

dren to impart a blessing. I know that deep down he loved us, but his silence created deep longings in all of us. This summer my sister felt he was near death, so the whole family gathered by his bedside. After the crowd left, I remained alone with him. To my surprise, he awoke and stared at me. As our eyes met, I found that I could not remain fixed on his gaze. Returning home, I tried to come to grips with my inability to look into his eyes.

Into A Father's Eyes

He looked at me,
he stared at me
with those hazel eyes,
eyes never age.
We were so close gazing into each other's eyes.
But I could not refrain from turning away.
Was it fear,
fear of finally feeling the affection of a father,
or fear of seeing him seized by fear
of that dreaded demon, death,
or was it sadness,
accumulated sadness
of not knowing if I was ever a son?
Our family was so polluted by aggressive passion
that placed him high
and lauded him
like a king,
but in reality he was a fearful man
who hid
and could never connect, reside or abide
in someone else's world
or ordinary place.
My father,
I was afraid to look into his eyes
this one last time.

Like Jacob, I feel I was extremely blessed, but not sure if I was ever truly a "son." In the end, Isaac's words are bought into strict conformity with the divine oracle given at Jacob's birth.

C. The Blessing (27:28-29)

"Now may God give you of the dew of heaven,
And of the fatness of the earth,
And an abundance of grain and new wine;
May peoples serve you,
And nations bow down to you;
Be master of your brothers,
And may your mother's sons bow down to you.
Cursed be those who curse you,
And blessed be those who bless you." (Gen 27:28-29)

This is a troubling text. This dinner party for God's new family originally was designed to be the most holy occasion to impart the blessing from one generation to the next, yet no one in the story is operating with God's interests in mind. There is no prayer, no truth telling, and no display of love between family members. Isaac desires the wrong thing, and he does it the wrong way, with the wrong son. Esau thinks he can have the right thing, but he has already thrown away his birthright. Rebekah wants the right thing, but she does it the wrong way, through the right son. Jacob, the manipulative tool of the mother, does her bidding, seeking the right thing the wrong way. So we must ask, where is God to be found when his people forsake spirituality for control?

IV. Just Desserts

A. Everyone is rewarded according to his or her deeds

The first thing we learn in this story is that each character gets his or her just desserts. God designs the history of each one so that they receive the full measure of their deeds. In our last study we looked at Isaac's just desserts; today we will examine Rebekah's and Jacob's. Because Rebekah chooses to deceive her hus-

band rather than openly confronting him, she unwittingly creates an even worse confrontation. This one is not played out between husband and wife, however, but between the sons, and with greater force. Esau becomes so angry with Jacob that he resolves to kill him. So the confrontation that Rebekah hoped to avoid has arrived, and has escalated exponentially. Though she is successful in saving Jacob from the curse of the father, she cannot protect him from the hatred of his brother. When she sends Jacob off to Laban for just "a few days" (27:44), those "few days" turn into twenty years. She will not live long enough to see his return. Thus, in the act of manipulating her favored son, in effect she loses both of her sons. Esau is forever estranged, and Jacob is exiled. Finally, we find the narrator's ultimate censor of her actions in the fact that after this scene, Rebekah is never again heard of in Scripture. Upon her death she is not even given an obituary. But, as Waltke observes, "the narrator memorialized Deborah, her nurse from childhood and closest surrogate (35:8). The silence is deafening."⁷

Jacob also gets what he deserves. In these scenes he comes across as a man who wants the right things in life but will stop at nothing to get them. In aligning himself with his mother against his father he becomes a bold-faced liar and a blasphemous servant to God. As he uses his father's blindness to deceive him, so shall he be deceived under the cover of night before Laban. Upon his leaving Haran it will be Laban who feels (31:34, literally "gropes," the same term as in 27:12) through Jacob's tent, looking for his false gods that had been stolen; and it will be Jacob who pronounces a curse on the party guilty of the deception. Ironically, the curse falls on Rachel, the wife he loves, and she dies a premature death (35:19). She would never meet her new family. And just as Jacob used animal skins as a cover for his "smoothness" (deceit), so his sons will later deceive him with a garment soaked in the blood of a kid. Like his mother, he will spend his waning years lamenting the loss of his favored son. God is not mocked, even within chosen families. We reap what we sow (Gal 6:7-8). Yet this is designed not as punishment, but as discipline to change our character.

B. God overrules to accomplish his end, his way

The second thing we learn from this text is that despite everyone's hidden agendas, God overrules to accomplish his purposes, his way. God ordained that from the birth of these twins "*the older would serve the younger.*" In doing this, God would turn the social order of the day on its head. Neither Jacob nor Rebekah had any cause to manipulate the outcome. God's desire was to give the blessing as his gift. But when everyone in this family forgets his ways and adopts his own ways, God is still capable of overruling all to accomplish his purposes. The blessing ends up with the son of choice.

This story had a huge impact on David; it helped shape his faith. The outstanding trait of Israel's poet-king was that once Samuel had anointed him, he never once made an illicit grasp for the throne. He knew that if God ordained it, then God must give it without any manipulation on his part. May we do the same.

C. Longings for New Family, with no emotional control

My third observation from this text is that living through the pain of a dysfunctional family would cause Israel to long for a new family. This is the marvel of the work of Jesus the Messiah. Christ, Abraham's chosen seed, came to create a new family, one without sibling rivalry, for we are all "favored sons," given "every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies" (Eph 1:3). So each one of us is adopted by faith into a family where we are all equally embraced with the infinite love of the Father. This is a wondrous blessing, without limits or measure. And to help us experience this divine sonship, God has placed within each one of us his Holy Spirit, who cries out within our hearts, "Abba! Father!" (Rom 8:15) So we are not members of a family who must compete for the Father's affection; we are all children already sealed in his love. And that same Spirit equips us with unique spiritual gifts to give his love away to others. We don't have to dress up in one another's clothes and imitate our brothers and sisters; rather, we are uniquely designed to complement one another in service. And finally, in this family we grow not through deception but, "speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects in Him, who is the head, even Christ" (Eph 4:15). What a marvelous family this is! It is only appropriate that we offer thanksgiving to our Father through whom we are blessed beyond measure.

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1. J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1975), 98.

2. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 98.

3. Bruce Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 377.

4. Robert Alter translates soul as "my life-breath may bless you," and further explains that "Nafshi ('my soul') here is an intensive synonym for 'I' and hence something like 'solemnly bless' or 'absolutely bless' is suggested." Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York, W. W. Norton, 1996), 137.

5. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 109.

6. Alter, *Genesis*, 139.

7. Bruce K. Waltke, "Reflections on Retirement From the Life of Isaac," *Crux* 32:4 (December 1996), 6.