



FALLING SHORT OF BLESSING

SERIES: THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS

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Genesis 27:30-28:9

23rd Message

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We come now to the second half of the scene from Genesis 27 that we have entitled "Thanksgiving Family Dynamics." Last week we found that the dynamics operating in God's chosen family had drastically deteriorated just one generation removed from Abraham, the father of the faith. What kind of dynamics were operating in your homes over this Thanksgiving? Did your families enjoy an atmosphere of free expression arising out of thankful hearts and honest relationships, or was the day clouded by control and competition that choked out joy? Was everyone on speaking terms, or did some distance themselves from the inner circles to avoid intimacy? Did you have a sense that God was at work creating new things, or were family members shut down and recast by their old histories? Were genuine prayers offered, or was prayer non-existent? Did you eat dessert with a sense of appreciation or in a state of exile, wondering how God could ever work in such relationships?

The good news of our text this morning is that once God begins a good work he is able to complete it, even against seemingly insurmountable odds, when not even one family member is serving God's interests. In our opening study we observed how Isaac was determined to bless the wrong son, contrary to the oracle of God, and how Rebekah used Jacob to deceive his father into giving the blessing to the right son. Today we will focus on the final three movements in the story and observe the dynamics between Esau and his father Isaac and brother Jacob. Esau's life serves as a severe warning on how to fall short of the blessing.

Literary Outline

Fokkelman¹

- 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!)

I. Esau-Isaac Dynamics: Affection Without Righteousness (Gen 27:30-41)

A. Esau's entrance: Confident expectation (27:30-31)

Now it came about, as soon as Isaac had finished blessing Jacob, and Jacob had hardly gone out from the presence of Isaac his father, that Esau his brother came in from his hunting. Then he also made savory food, and brought it to his father; and he said to his father, "Let my father arise and eat of his son's game, that you may bless me (lit. "my soul")." (Gen 27:30-31, NASB)

Immediately after Isaac finishes blessing Jacob, and his son leaves his presence (the Hebrew doubles the verb "to go out" to make it emphatic), Esau returns from his successful hunt.

The opening sentence reveals "the breakneck speed at which events are unfolding. Rebekah and Jacob have managed to carry out her scheme just in the nick of time."² Behind it all we can sense the providential hand of God orchestrating the exact timetable of events. Once Esau returns he prepares the game into the savory dish his father loves—with no help from his mother. I suspect Rebekah didn't want to be around when the family explosion occurred. Doubtless, Esau didn't want her help. The preparations were to be done in secret, and he was proud of his independence. Imagine his anticipation as he approaches his father. He has provided everything Isaac requested, and in return expects to receive the coveted family blessing. Filled with confidence, he is more direct than the hesitant Jacob. But as soon as the words leave his lips, his confidence is shattered.

B. A volcano of emotion erupts in a father and a son (27:32-34)

Isaac his father said to him, "Who are you?" And he said, "I am your son, your firstborn, Esau." Then Isaac trembled violently, and said, "Who was he then that hunted game and brought it to me, so that I ate of all of it before you came, and blessed him? Yes, and he shall be blessed." When Esau heard the words of his father, he cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry, and said to his father, "Bless me, even me also, O my father!" (Gen 27:32-34)

Isaac can't believe it is actually Esau. So when he asks, "Who are you?" he leaves out the expression "my son," a title he has never addressed to Jacob. But the moment he hears the voice of his favored son Esau, all doubt is removed. When the truth lands, Isaac is shaken to the core: he "trembled violently." "Trembled" is an excellent translation for the Hebrew verb "charag." The word is used of the emotional response to the terror of an earthquake (Exod 19:16), of shattering events that turn one's world inside out. The narrator doubles the verb to strengthen the intensity. Making it even more emphatic, he adds the two modifiers "great" and "exceedingly." Brueggemann says:

Then abruptly, there is the terror-filled turn...His whole beautiful dream for a peaceful and proper closure to his life has been irreversibly shattered...What pathos passes between the son who must have the blessing and the father who cannot give it! The narrative makes ready contact with every parent whose dream for the child is fractured...And so the parent is a mixture of hurt and failure and sorrow.³

But, to remove his culpability before Esau, notice that Isaac "pretends not to know who it is that has deceived him, finding it easier to let Esau name the culprit himself."⁴ Yet we know that after Isaac heard Jacob's voice, he had a residue of doubt, even when he ate his "savory meal." Although Isaac adores Esau, it seems he can't be completely honest with him and admit that his appetites overruled his judgment. Then he hides behind the irrevocable nature of the vow, as if he is just an innocent victim, unable to rescind anything. What's done is done. Today, a legal covenant can be rescinded if one party

misrepresents himself, but words mattered in the ancient world. Waltke says, "The word mediating the divine blessing is as irrevocable as a vow made to God."⁵

Hearing his father's words, Esau loses his composure and screams. The narrator chooses a verb that sounds just like Isaac's name, "yitz'ak," then he doubles the verb to intensify the cry into a "scream." In Esau's scream the Hebrew listener would hear the wrenching cry, "Daddy, Daddy!" Following the cry comes Esau's pathetic, childlike plea, "Bless me, even me also, O my father." An explosion of emotion was released in Isaac's home that day.

C. The ache of irrevocable loss (27:35-38)

And he said, "Your brother came deceitfully and has taken away your blessing." Then he said, "Is he not rightly named Jacob, for he has supplanted me these two times? He took away my birthright, and behold, now he has taken away my blessing." And he said, "Have you not reserved a blessing for me?" (Gen 27:35-36)

Explaining what had occurred, Isaac places all the blame on Jacob, whom he labels "your brother" rather than "my son." Once more he distances himself from any blame, implying that this is really a matter between brothers, not sons and fathers. When Esau hears the word "brother," he vents all his anger on this one he now hates. Jacob, he implies, acted true to his character, one that was clearly recognizable at birth. He is the ultimate heel grabber, and a deceiver now as well.

But though Esau has twice lost the battle, he can't swallow the irrevocable nature of the event. Pleading with his father for that which he cannot have, he asks, "Don't you have a reserve blessing for me?"

But Isaac replied to Esau, "Behold, I have made him your master, and all his relatives I have given to him as servants; and with grain and new wine I have sustained him. Now as for you then, what can I do, my son?" (Gen 27:37)

Again, Isaac resorts to the irrevocable nature of the blessing. What's done is done; there is nothing he can do now. One senses that Isaac feels God's rebuke and will not challenge it. But he is still too weak to confront Esau with his sin; instead, he leaves him to draw the final conclusion for himself. Rebuking the boy he loves would imply an open admission his own guilt. What is left is a sad revelation of the pathetic comfort given to a son who was encouraged to be exactly like his father: "What can I do, my son? I was deceived, and God's words are God's words."

Esau said to his father, "Do you have only one blessing, my father? Bless me, even me also, O my father." So Esau lifted his voice and wept. (Gen 27:38)

This verse compresses a volcano of emotion. Through the painful repetition of names we sense that the world that Esau once imagined is shattered. How great is his pain! For all those years he played the role of the adored son, pleasing the father he so loved. But now he realizes that it was all for naught. Esau's pitiful cries are gripped by excruciating pathos. No one wants to live a life that is not blessed. So he pleads, begs and weeps for that which he cannot have. The Hebrew expresses the powerful turn of his destiny with a play on the verb "to bless" (*barak*). Esau the firstborn (*haberahkah*) who longs for Isaac to bless (*barak*) him, is now reduced to weeping (*yebek*).

Pressed to the wall, Isaac must speak. But instead of bringing comfort, what he says will be the hard and painful truth he has sought to avoid.

D. The anti-blessing (27:39-40)

Then Isaac his father answered and said to him, "Behold, away from the fertility of the earth shall be your dwelling, And away from the dew of heaven from above. (Gen 27:39)

Isaac's first words are ambiguous. They have divided translators for centuries as to whether they are a blessing or a curse. At first glance they appear like an echo of Jacob's blessing, with simply the absence of the verb "to give."

"Now may God give you of (or "from") the dew of heaven, And of the fatness of (or "from") the earth." (27:28)

One could read the text, as Alter and most medieval commentators do, as a blessing of the earth's fertility:

"Look, from the fat of the earth be your dwelling and from the dew of the heavens above."

But most modern commentators translate the preposition "from" with the sense of "away from," because this makes better sense in the context. As Wenham suggests, "Esau is being condemned to a wandering existence like Cain or Ishmael, haunting the dry wilderness to the south and east of Canaan. However, if Esau was clutching at any straw, he may well be presumed to take it in the more optimistic sense, 'Of the richness of the earth and dew of heaven.'"⁶ I would agree with Wenham, because this well fits Isaac's character. One senses he is trying to tell Esau the hard truth in the softest way, since it strikes so deeply against his affection for his son. The ambiguity is designed to allow the son to draw his own conclusions, without creating any pain for the father.

But as to the rest of the blessing, Isaac remains true to God's oracle. He explains what it means, "the older shall serve the younger."

"By your sword you shall live, And your brother you shall serve; But it shall come about when you become restless, That you will break his yoke from your neck." (Gen 27:40)

Esau will learn violence because the earth will reject him. The road of "his descendants will be hunting people instead of game" (Waltke), a tragically unsure path. The only positive prospect for his future is that his servitude will be temporary.⁷ So the blessing that Esau slavishly extracts from his father becomes an anti-blessing.

E. A vow of revenge (27:41)

So Esau bore a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him; and Esau said to himself, "The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob." (Gen 27:41)

By the end of the scene, Esau's hatred has transformed him into a murderer. The verb "bore a grudge" is "rare and suggests a long-term persistent hatred (50:15; Ps 55:3; Job 16:9; 30:21)."⁸ The only thing tempering it is his deep love for his father. So as not to cause grief to Isaac, he will wait until after his father is dead to commit fratricide, and replay the tragic story of Cain and Abel. But as fate (or "providence") would have it, Rebekah again comes into view.

II. Rebekah Counters Esau's Hate (Gen 27:42-45)

A. Rebekah manipulates Jacob (27:42-45)

Now when the words of her elder son Esau were reported to Rebekah, she sent and called her younger son Jacob, and said to him, "Behold your brother Esau is consoling

himself concerning you by planning to kill you. Now therefore, my son, obey my voice, and arise, flee to Haran, to my brother Laban! Stay with him a few days, until your brother's fury subsides, until your brother's anger against you subsides and he forgets what you did to him. Then I will send and get you from there. Why should I be bereaved of you both in one day?" (Gen 27:42-45)

Once more, Rebekah is the one who hears all the family secrets. How she came to know Esau's thoughts is a mystery, but it clearly shows that she is the one who holds all the power in this family. Once she has heard she quickly utilizes all her skills at organization and domination, using Jacob to do her bidding. This will be her final act in the Bible. The narrator's silence becomes the ultimate censor for those who use others to get what they want for themselves. And it serves as a warning for those who are married to keep their relationship primary and their children secondary. When a husband and wife no longer speak the truth to one another, and resort to communicating through their children, the marriage is in deep trouble.

What Rebekah does not perceive is that Esau's anger runs so deep, the "few days" she anticipates for her son's exile will turn out to be twenty years. Although she loves this boy, it is not her love that is the primary motive. Her last line communicates to Jacob that his obedience is not ultimately for his benefit (i.e. saving his own life) but for hers: "Why should I be bereaved of you both in one day?"

Rebekah now turns her sights from Jacob to her husband. She needs proper sanction for her plan, since he is head of the home. Yet how can she be open about what she knows without exposing her manipulative role? She cannot, so once again she falls back on manipulation, using half-truths to avoid a family confrontation.

B. Rebekah manipulates Isaac (27:46)

Rebekah said to Isaac, "I am tired of living because of the daughters of Heth; if Jacob takes a wife from the daughters of Heth, like these, from the daughters of the land, what good will my life be to me?" (Gen 27:46)

Rebekah cannot be honest about her true concern, for Esau's hatred of Jacob would do little to motivate his father, since he was never really fond of Jacob. So she manufactures a concern they both agree on—the distress caused by Esau's wives. Confronting Isaac with maximum emotion, she resorts to hyperbole: "I loathe my life." This ought to get the attention of this passive husband, since most husbands are terrified of confronting negative emotion in their wives. Then she challenges his manhood, implying that, just as he took no responsibility for Esau's marriage, so now he is repeating the same pattern of passivity. Finally, if the first two challenges don't stir Isaac's resolve, her final one will. If Isaac refuses to intervene, she conveys to him that her life will not be worth living. Her statement communicates much of what she values in her marriage.

Isaac offers no rebuttal to Rebekah's forceful voice. Like a dog before its master, he simply does her bidding. At last, after seemingly endless manipulation on Rebekah's part, Isaac speaks directly to Jacob.

III. Isaac and Jacob Dynamic (Gen 28:1-9)

A. Jacob sent away and blessed (28:1-5)

So Isaac called Jacob and blessed him and charged him, and said to him, "You shall not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan. Arise, go to Paddan-aram, to the

house of Bethuel your mother's father; and from there take to yourself a wife from the daughters of Laban your mother's brother. (Gen 28:1-2)

As Isaac commissions Jacob, one wonders how much of his mother's ways he perceived beneath his father's words. The painful reality is that when Isaac finally speaks to his son, it is because the mother has forced these two to occupy the same stage.

Isaac's words are a familiar echo of his father's, with two notable exceptions. The first is that Abraham's seriousness (Abraham's *oath* [24:2-8] is reduced to a *command*) is missing. We can well understand why. It is because Isaac is backed into a corner and forced to do the right thing. It doesn't spring from strong convictions, but out of fear that his marriage was coming apart. Secondly, the affectionate term "my son," (24:3,5) is missing. Its omission at this point in the text is haunting. It's almost as if Isaac is resigned to speak to his son not out of love, but out of necessity. But in the end, Isaac faithfully blesses the right son.

"May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples. May He also give you the blessing of Abraham, to you and to your descendants with you, that you may possess the land of your sojournings, which God gave to Abraham." (Gen 28:3-4)

Isaac's final words are letter perfect, in strict conformity to the blessing. All of Isaac's soul ("soul" = "passionate vitality," Waltke) is passed on to the son, along with the spiritual promises of his father Abraham. The blessing is now complete and sealed with all the fullness of spiritual vitality that will shape history. But, unfortunately, this is like getting a college diploma and accolades from a stranger. The words ring true, but when you bite into them, they have no taste.

Then Isaac sent Jacob away, and he went to Paddan-aram to Laban, son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, the mother of Jacob and Esau. (Gen 28:5)

Finally, Jacob is sent to the land of his mother, Rebekah. While all this is taking place, Esau is watching in secret. The atmosphere in this family seems to be more like a business than a home, for someone is always watching his competitors so as to protect his interests.

B. Esau's imitates the "chosen" brother (28:6-9)

Now Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob and sent him away to Paddan-aram to take to himself a wife from there, and that when he blessed him he charged him, saying, "You shall not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan," and that Jacob had obeyed his father and his mother and had gone to Paddan-aram. So Esau saw that the daughters of Canaan displeased his father Isaac; and Esau went to Ishmael, and married, besides the wives that he had, Mahalath the daughter of Ishmael, Abraham's son, the sister of Nebaioth. (Gen 28:6-9)

Esau's gaze is clearly fixed on his brother. For the first time in his life he is sitting second to him. But he hasn't yet given up the race for first place. Hearing his father's request, and observing Jacob's obedience, he carefully notes how to regain "first place" within this family circle. At last it dawns on him that marrying Canaanite women was unacceptable. He is a very dull student! Now that he has heard the answer from the "professor," he is eager to change. Notice, however, that he is competing solely for his father's love, not his mother's, for there is no mention of Rebekah's pain. So to regain his father's affection he imitates what the "chosen" son does. It seems Esau will do anything for his father's love. But his ac-

tions are merely counterfeit imitation; they lack spiritual discernment. Though he seeks a wife from within the family, he goes to Ishmael, "the rejected son of natural offspring." "Esau is a figure of tragic irony, as Roop says, 'a marginalized family member who deeply wanted to belong.'"⁹

The tragedy is that each son wants what the other has, and the pain caused by what each lacks is greater than the joy of what each possesses. So each son even "dresses up" like his brother to attain what he possesses. I wonder how much this goes on in modern-day families. I have thought often about this as I watched our daughter's sporting events. Do our sons and daughters really excel at sports because they love being involved, or because that is the primary arena where they find the "blessing"? Is the escalation of women's sports in our country due primarily to the love of the game, or is it because daughters have found a way to be recognized by their fathers by "dressing up" and imitating their brothers? This is something for us to consider as our children place themselves under the competition of our nation's grueling sports machines.

IV. How To Fall Short Of the Blessing

These dynamics between Isaac and Esau bring to the surface what we all long for. As Brueggemann explains, "There is pathos in this text, for the sons as well as for the father. It lies in the awareness that nobody wants to live a life that is unblest. Nobody wants a life without the special words and gestures that bind that life to a precious past and a promised future."¹⁰ The writer of Hebrews makes Esau into an icon of how to fall short of the blessing.

Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears. (Heb 12:14-17)

A. Seek peace without holiness

The first thing the writer says is to "pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord." So we are to seek peace—not peace at all costs, but peace shaped in holiness, not deception and manipulation. Peace without holiness will cut us off from all blessing. Remember James' words, "The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable" (Jas 3:17).

B. Sell out for a price

Secondly, the writer says, if you want to lose the blessing, forsake what you cannot see for what is present and real. Let "there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal." At least make sure you get a better price than Esau. Have you determined what your price is? By contrast to those who feel the blessing of the love of God stammering in their heart, they go off in full joy and sell everything to buy the treasure in the field of their heart.¹¹

C. Believe that your choices don't matter

Thirdly, the writer suggests that when Esau sold out, he thought his choices didn't matter: "For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears." God is patient, he is kind, forbearing, and forgiving. But the opportunity to respond to him will not always be there. At some point in your life it will be too late. Your choices will have shaped your character and your character will have finally shaped your destiny.

D. Live to please your parents

Finally, a personal observation. Esau's life is a warning that we cannot have God's blessing if we make pleasing our parents primary. If that is the driving motivation of our life, at the end we will be gripped by Esau's ache, a pain that screams, "Who will set us free from the tyranny of our father's love?"

By contrast, Jesus said, "If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:26). This is also a warning to parents to train their children to serve God alone, even when that goes against our personal interests. At some point we must let them go.

This tragic story is saying that if we are forced to make a choice, it is better to be an orphan at home and blessed by God, like Jacob, than have the approval of our father and be exiled from God's blessing, like Esau. The text leaves us with the haunting question, Which one are you?

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1. J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1975), 98.
2. Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York, W. W. Norton, 1996), 141.
3. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta, John Knox, 1982), 233.
4. Alter, *Genesis*, 141.
5. Bruce Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 380.
6. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (Dallas, Word, 1994), 212.
7. "You shall live by the sword." Wenham explains: "Throughout the OT, Edom appears as a militant nation, often hostile to his brother Israel (Num 20:18; 1 Sam 14:47; 1 Kgs 11:14-16; 2 Kgs 14:7-10; Obad; Ps 60:8-9). From the time of David, Edom was part of the Israelite empire, but later it regained its independence (2 Kgs 8:20-22), and after the fall of Jerusalem took revenge on Judah (cf. Obad; Ps 137:7). It is perhaps these events to which 'when you grow restless, you shall tear off his yoke' refer." Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 212.
8. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 212.
9. Waltke, *Genesis*, 383.
10. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 229.
11. This was André Louf's language for the treasure of prayer. Quoted in *Spiritual Classics*, Richard Foster and Emilie Griffin Eds. (San Francisco, Harper, 2000), 32.