Genesis, Part 26

Last session we saw Isaac deal with hostility from the Philistines he lived among. That hostility seemed from the fact that God prospered him immensely, and he and his large and prosperous entourage posed a threat to the Philistines. Some of that is certainly related to jealousy on their part. The Philistines filled the wells dug by Abraham and drove Isaac away. Eventually, Abimelech, realizing that God must be behind Isaac's blessings and that he was under divine protection, sought a treaty with Isaac to prevent someone as powerful as Isaac had become from attacking him. Not desiring conflict with the Philistines, Isaac agreed to the treaty.

Our story now shifts to an incident involving Isaac in his old age and his two sons Esau and Jacob that had its roots back in Chapter 25 with the birth of the twins. Normally, the elder son was to receive the birthright of primogenitor. But when Rebekah inquired of the Lord concerning the turmoil in her belly when she was pregnant, she was told she would have twins and they were in conflict in her womb and would be even after birth. Furthermore, she was told that the "older shall serve the younger," meaning the younger twin would have the birthrights normally the possession of the elder. The twins emerged from her womb with the younger, Jacob, clutching the heel of the firstborn, Esau.

We saw that Esau became a man of the woods and fields, a hunter, who had no regard for his birthrights as firstborn and traded them to Jacob for a bowl of "red stew". Jacob was not deceptive in the trade, but he did it in an unscrupulous manner. Then after a brief look at Isaac and his dealings with Abimelech in Chapter 26, we come back to the two boys and the trade they made in Chapter 25.

We have here Jacob and Rebekah conniving to get the blessings of the firstborn's birthrights for Jacob that would normally have gone to Esau. Jacob wanted the blessings of his father. He knew that God had promised his mother that the "elder would serve the younger" (Gen 25:23), so the blessings were his already. God expects His servants to carry out their spiritual responsibilities by faith. Unfortunately, when faith is not always present then matters become complicated. This chapter portrays an entire

family attempting to carry out their responsibilities by their physical senses, without faith. Concerning his promised birthright, Jacob did not believe God, nor did his mother, or they would never have hatched this plot. Evidently, Isaac did not believe God either, or he would not have attempted to bypass Jacob and give the blessings to Esau. Isaac knew of God's oracle to Rebekah (Gen 25:23) that the elder would serve the younger; yet he set out to thwart it by blessing Esau! Isaac followed his own feelings and appetite favoring Esau (Gen 25:28) in direct contradiction to the distinct Word of God on the matter. Esau, agreeing to the plan to be blessed by his father, broke the oath he had made with Jacob, as expressed in Genesis 25:23, "…So he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob." While all four parties involved here are at fault, the way Jacob attained the birthright cannot be condoned on any grounds. His conduct was despicable, and God deals with this man in a very definite way. Jacob had to pay for his sin in the same "coin of the realm" in which he sinned.

> **Genesis 27:1** When Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see, he called Esau his older son, and said to him, "My son"; and he answered, "Here I am." 2 He said, "Behold, I am old; I do not know the day of my death. 3 Now then, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field and hunt game for me, 4 and prepare for me delicious food, such as I love, and bring it to me so that I may eat, that my soul may bless you before I die."

This is one of the most gripping stories in Genesis. On first reading, we tend to see Rebekah and Jacob just as rogues who exploited the blindness of Isaac. In fact, the situation is not so black and white. Esau had married two wives, which was a bad step in itself. Moreover, they were Hittites, i.e. Canaanites (see 23:3). Abraham had been most concerned that Isaac should not marry a Canaanite girl (24:3); why had not Isaac insisted on, or even arranged, a suitable match for Esau? Worse still, Isaac seemingly on his deathbed flouted convention and showed total bias towards Esau. (Isaac was about 137 years old at this point, yet he acted as though he would die very soon. Actually, he lived to be 180.) When patriarchs knew their death was near, they were expected to summon all their sons and give them each a blessing (cf. chs. 48–50). Now, lamely pretending he did not

know the day of his death, Isaac summoned only his favorite, the elder son, Esau.

Issac offered to bless Esau. He was anxious to pronounce the patriarchal blessing, a blend of benediction and prediction, upon his beloved son. The festive meal would express the great dignity of the occasion. Important notes are given here about Isaac's weak eyesight and old age. Stress is placed on the love he had for wild game and tasty food. Note how he depended on his senses (feeling, eating, smelling). Note also that feeding the body took priority over doing God's will. His palate governed his heart. But Isaac's point was that he intended to give Esau his blessing ignoring the declarations given by God that Esau would serve Jacob. This was a dilemma for Rebekah that prompted her to act.

> **Gen 27:5** Now Rebekah was listening when Isaac spoke to his son
> Esau. So when Esau went to the field to hunt for game and bring it,
> 6 Rebekah said to her son Jacob, "I heard your father speak to your
> brother Esau, 7 'Bring me game and prepare for me delicious food, that I
> may eat it and bless you before the Lord before I die.' 8 Now therefore,
> my son, obey my voice as I command you.

Rebekah overheard the plan by her husband to bless Esau. Instead of going to God in prayer, as she had years before, she depended on her own plans, a practice that would be characteristic of Jacob in later years. Instead of trusting God, she schemes to see that the promise by God that the elder would serve the younger would come to pass. This is absolute trickery, and there is no way it can be condoned. God is recording it as history, but He condemns it.

> **Gen 27:9** Go to the flock and bring me two good young goats, so that I
> may prepare from them delicious food for your father, such as he loves.
> 10 And you shall bring it to your father to eat, so that he may bless you
> before he dies." 11 But Jacob said to Rebekah his mother, "Behold, my
> brother Esau is a hairy man, and I am a smooth man. 12 Perhaps my
> father will feel me, and I shall seem to be mocking him and bring a curse
> upon myself and not a blessing." 13 His mother said to him, "Let your
> curse be on me, my son; only obey my voice, and go, bring them to me."

> 14 So he went and took them and brought them to his mother, and his mother prepared delicious food, such as his father loved. 15 Then Rebekah took the best garments of Esau her older son, which were with her in the house, and put them on Jacob her younger son. 16 And the skins of the young goats she put on his hands and on the smooth part of his neck. 17 And she put the delicious food and the bread, which she had prepared, into the hand of her son Jacob.

Rebekah had been told that Jacob would receive God's blessing, yet she schemed and plotted to make sure he got it. She planned to prepare a meal of goat meat which resembles the wild game Isaac craved. She seemed confident she could duplicate the taste of meat from wild game with goat's meat. She planned to take advantage of Isaac's weak eyesight and substitute Jacob for Esau to have her favorite son receive the blessings instead. She probably saw no wrong in what she was doing since God had Himself said that Jacob would receive the blessings of the primogenitor.

Jacob had no reservations about the deception itself, but he was desperately afraid of being caught in a lie. Jacob's concern was if Isaac touched him, he would know the difference between Esau's hairy skin and Jacob's smooth skin. Jacob seemed to have no guilt at what he was contemplating—only fear of discovery regarding the plan. But the blessing was perceived by the two as in danger and all must be risked, including even the possibility of a curse on Rebekah (vv. 12–13). So Jacob did as his mother told him. Rebekah even had Jacob put on some of Esau's best clothes!

Jacob brought the goats to her, and she prepared the meat. She dressed Jacob in Esau's clothing and covered his exposed smooth skin with the goat skins. Either Rebekah had lost all confidence in the promise of God, or because of that promise, she thought she was justified in helping things along.

> **Gen 27:18** So he went in to his father and said, "My father." And he said, "Here I am. Who are you, my son?" 19 Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau your firstborn. I have done as you told me; now sit up and eat of

my game, that your soul may bless me.” 20 But Isaac said to his son,
“How is it that you have found it so quickly, my son?” He answered,
“Because the Lord your God granted me success.” 21 Then Isaac said to
Jacob, “Please come near, that I may feel you, my son, to know whether
you are really my son Esau or not.” 22 So Jacob went near to Isaac his
father, who felt him and said, “The voice is Jacob’s voice, but the hands
are the hands of Esau.” 23 And he did not recognize him, because his
hands were hairy like his brother Esau’s hands. So he blessed him.
24 He said, “Are you really my son Esau?” He answered, “I am.” 25 Then
he said, “Bring it near to me, that I may eat of my son’s game and bless
you.” So he brought it near to him, and he ate; and he brought him wine,
and he drank.
26 Then his father Isaac said to him, “Come near and kiss me, my son.”
27 So he came near and kissed him. And Isaac smelled the smell of his
garments and blessed him and said,
“See, the smell of my son
is as the smell of a field that the Lord has blessed!
28 May God give you of the dew of heaven
and of the fatness of the earth
and plenty of grain and wine.
29 Let peoples serve you,
and nations bow down to you.
Be lord over your brothers,
and may your mother’s sons bow down to you.
Cursed be everyone who curses you,
and blessed be everyone who blesses you!”

Jacob told three lies to his aged father. He said,

1. I am Esau
2. I have done as you told me
3. eat some of my venison.

Isaac was amazed that his son could kill and prepare the game so quickly. Jacob explained this, however, as due to the special blessing of Yahweh. This is one of the most blatant abuses of God’s name in Scripture. Jacob was not able to disguise his voice, and Isaac was suspicious. He asked for his son to come near so he could verify by the sense of touch the identity of

this one who came seeking his blessing. The goat skins attached to Jacob's arms were not quite convincing. The voice sounded too much like that of Jacob! So Isaac inquired one last time, "Are you Esau?" Again Jacob lied! (27:21–24).

Isaac ordered the meal to be served before the blessing was granted. After the meal, the patriarch asked his son to kiss him. This would be the final test. If this son smelled of the wild he undoubtedly was Esau. Thanks to his mother's foresight, Jacob passed the test and so his father blessed him (27:25–27).

The blessing is in poetic verse. It begins with an allusion to the wonderful smell of the outdoors. Then Isaac petitioned God to grant Esau the dew of heaven so essential to agricultural success in that arid climate. This dew would ensure that Esau would have the richness of the earth, i.e., grain and new wine (27:27–28).

The blessing takes on political overtones in verse 29.

1. Nations and peoples would bow to him.
2. He would be lord over his brothers.
3. Those who cursed him would be cursed, and those who blessed him would be blessed.

Except for a few brief periods in the parallel history of the two peoples, the Israelites were able to completely dominate the Edomites.

The blessing is couched in the language of petition, but patriarchal blessings were in reality predictions. What was Isaac thinking when he determined to bless Esau?

1. Is Isaac attempting to annul God's original verdict about the relationship of the twins?
2. Had Rebekah never informed him of the word of God concerning the boys?
3. Or was the language of the blessings so ambiguous as to allow Isaac to bestow them on the son he thought was Esau?

Isaac is giving the blessing he had received and is passing it on, a blessing that already belonged to Jacob. Though God had already blessed Jacob, He was not endorsing this deception.

> **Gen 27:30** As soon as Isaac had finished blessing Jacob, when Jacob had scarcely gone out from the presence of Isaac his father, Esau his brother came in from his hunting. 31 He also prepared delicious 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.” 32 His father Isaac said to him, “Who are you?” He answered, “I am your son, your firstborn, Esau.” 33 Then Isaac trembled very violently and said, “Who was it then that hunted game and brought it to me, and I ate it all before you came, and I have blessed him? Yes, and he shall be blessed.” 34 As soon as 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!” 35 But he said, “Your brother came deceitfully, and he has taken away your blessing.” 36 Esau said, “Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has cheated me these two times. He took away my birthright, and behold, now he has taken away my blessing.” Then he said, “Have you not reserved a blessing for me?” 37 Isaac answered and said to Esau, “Behold, I have made him lord over you, and all his brothers I have given to him for servants, and with grain and wine I have sustained him. What then can I do for you, my son?” 38 Esau said to his father, “Have you but one blessing, my father? Bless me, even me also, O my father.” And Esau lifted up his voice and wept.
> 39 Then Isaac his father answered and said to him:
> “Behold, away from the fatness of the earth shall your dwelling be,
> and away from the dew of heaven on high.
> 40 By your sword you shall live,
> and you shall serve your brother;
> but when you grow restless
> you shall break his yoke from your neck.”

Esau returns from the hunt and has prepared a meal of venison for his father only to discover that his younger brother has deceived his father and

been blessed in his place. “Isaac trembled very violently” when he learned he had blessed someone else. Not only has Isaac blessed Jacob, but he has made Jacob lord over Esau (v. 37). Suddenly Esau values his birthright —that would be the one he bargained away back when the drama queen was “so hungry he was about to die”. Now it is important.

Esau pleads for a blessing from his father, but Isaac replies that he pretty much gave it all to Jacob. “Have you but one blessing?” he begs. Hebrews 12:17 indicates that Esau sought the blessing with tears, yet found no place for real repentance for his sins. Remorse, yes, but not sincere repentance. He was sorry for what he had lost, not sorry for what he had done.

Isaac replies with a blessing that is realistic but probably not what Esau hoped for. Isaac tells his son “39 …Behold, away from the fatness of the earth shall your dwelling be, and away from the dew of heaven on high. 40 By your sword you shall live, and you shall serve your brother; but when you grow restless you shall break his yoke from your neck.”

In a sense, Rebekah and Jacob won, though they gained nothing that God would not have given them anyway; and they lost much. Yet God would work through their conniving. Their activities only succeeded in doing what God’s oracle had predicted. God’s program will triumph, often despite human activities.

The story is one of parental favoritism that tore their family completely apart. The story is also an account of spiritual insensitivity. All the natural senses play a conspicuous part—especially the sense of taste in which Isaac prided himself, but which gave him the wrong answer. Reliance on one’s senses for spiritual discernment not only proves fallible but often fouls up life unduly.

Most importantly, however, the story is about deception. Jacob’s only hesitancy was his fear that he would be cursed instead of blessed (27:12). At least he realized such actions would place God’s promise in jeopardy. Jacob later would learn that blessings are given by God, not gained by deceit.

> **Gen 27:41** Now Esau hated 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 approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob.”

Esau is mad and has murder in his heart for his brother. He reasons that his father is close to death. Once the “old man” croaks he will kill his brother.

> **Gen 27:42** But the words of Esau her older son were told to Rebekah. So she sent and called Jacob her younger son and said to him, “Behold, your brother Esau comforts himself about you by planning to kill you. **43** Now therefore, my son, obey my voice. Arise, flee to Laban my brother in Haran **44** and stay with him a while, until your brother’s fury turns away — **45** until your brother’s anger turns away from you, and he forgets what you have done to him. Then I will send and bring you from there. Why should I be bereft of you both in one day?”

Here we have Rebekah again taking things into her own hands. Esau did not keep his intentions to himself. Rebekah learns of Esau’s plot to kill Jacob, probably through a servant who overheard his angry ranting when he thought no one would hear him. She tells Jacob he must leave and urges him to go immediately to her brother Laban in Haran. Rebekah anticipated a short separation from her favorite son. She would send for him the moment she was convinced that he was no longer in danger from his brother. Rebekah worried that if Esau killed Jacob, he would forfeit his own life under the principle of blood revenge. Then she would lose both of her sons in one day (27:45). But little did she know she would never see Jacob again. She would die before he returned.

This passage begins the transition to the Laban stories. Because of his deception, Jacob had to flee from home. But the occasion introduced the subject of his taking a wife from his relatives in the East. Whereas Isaac had remained in the land while Abraham’s servant had gone to find and fetch his wife (chap. 24), Jacob’s journey was necessitated by the imminent danger of being killed by his angry brother (27:41–42). Moreover, God would deal with Jacob severely under the hand of Laban, his uncle.

> **Gen 27:46** Then Rebekah said to Isaac, “I loathe my life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob marries one of the Hittite women like these, one of the women of the land, what good will my life be to me?”

Rebekah did not mention Esau’s plot to Isaac. He probably would not have believed her anyway. She chose to raise another matter of concern, that is where would Jacob get a wife? She knew full well that Isaac loathed the Hittite women Esau had married. If Jacob married a Hittite woman, life would be unbearable. Rebekah wanted Isaac to send Jacob away, for then Esau would not interfere. Again deceiving her husband for the sake of her son, she expressed disgust with her two Hittite daughters-in-law, Judith and Basemath (v. 46; 26:34–35), and urged Isaac to let Jacob get a wife from her own people. In that way, Jacob could flee with Isaac’s blessing (cf. 28:1).

> **Gen 28:1** Then Isaac called Jacob and blessed him and directed him, “You must not take a wife from the Canaanite women. **2** Arise, go to Paddan-aram to the house of Bethuel your mother’s father, and take as your wife from there one of the daughters of Laban your mother’s brother. **3** God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples. **4** May he give the blessing of Abraham to you and to your offspring with you, that you may take possession of the land of your sojournings that God gave to Abraham!” **5** Thus Isaac sent Jacob away. And he went to Paddan-aram, to Laban, the son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, Jacob’s and Esau’s mother.

Isaac summoned Jacob and commanded him not to marry a Canaanite. He was to depart immediately for Paddan Aram and take a wife from among the relatives of his mother. Isaac had another blessing for Jacob, and this one he pronounced “in faith” (Heb 11:20). He said nothing of the deceit used to secure the first blessing doubtless because he was not entirely without fault in that incident.

The Canaanitish people were a mixed breed—they incorporated dozens of groups and clans into their society by treaties and marriages. The family of

Abraham would resist such mixing. The reason for marrying within the clan was a desire to maintain the purity of the line and be loyal to one's family. The surest way to lose tribal distinction was to intermarry with people of mixed elements. Moses' telling the Israelites again and again that their ancestors resisted marriage to the Canaanites certainly sounded a note of warning. To marry Canaanites would destroy the purity of the line, to be sure, but more importantly, it would destroy the purity of the Israelites' faith. Spiritual purity should be maintained in all generations.

Before Jacob departed, Isaac gave him a pure and legitimate blessing. There was no holding back now; Isaac specifically passed on to Jacob the blessing God had given both Abraham and Isaac. Isaac reiterated the blessing from God Almighty (*'ēl šadday*) about prosperity and the land (28:3–4; cf. 15:5, l8–20), and urged his son to go to Paddan Aram. Those inheriting the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant were not to endanger those blessings by intermarriage with Canaanites.

Jacob, who cheated his father, would soon be cheated by his father-in-law Laban who would force him to marry Leah as well as Rachel. This would be a cause of perpetual distress to Jacob for the rest of his days. In their turn, Leah's sons would deceive Jacob with a kid about Joseph's fate, just as Jacob deceived his father with a kid (37:31–35; 27:9, 16).

Later too, Jacob acknowledged his fault. When he returned to Canaan, he gave flocks and herds to Esau and invited him to accept them with the words, "Please accept my blessing that is brought to you" (33:11). With this gesture he was trying to give back the blessing he had cheated Esau out of.

Nevertheless, despite the underhand way in which Jacob obtained the blessing, it was still valid. Isaac's last words predicted the future relationship between Jacob (Israel) and Esau (Edom). The nation of Israel would usually dominate Edom. Israel would enjoy a settled agricultural existence, whereas Edom would be more of a nomadic people in the dry wilderness areas (28–29, 39–40). Furthermore, the promises made first to Abraham and repeated to Isaac, would now be fulfilled through Jacob (28:3–4).

Isaac's long life was filled with unhappiness. His faith, like that of his father, was tested again and again. A barren wife and disappointment with his older son tested the progeny promise. A famine in the land and the conflict over water with the herdsmen of Gerar tested the land and blessing promises.