



## LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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### The Stolen Blessing

Genesis 26:34-27:46

Fr. William Klock

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Genesis 27 brings us to one of the best-known stories in all of the Bible: the “Stolen Blessing”. With it we continue the story of Esau and Jacob. The story shows us more of the character flaws of these two brothers and their parents. From the beginning of the Esau and Jacob story we’ve been left wondering if God’s covenant venture is going to be lost on these two men who don’t share the character and values of Abraham. This is why the storyteller gave us the interlude we read last time: the story of Isaac’s life. There he reinforced the conviction that what God started with Abraham, he continued to do through Isaac. God overcomes obstacles, he overcomes sin, he overcomes people who stand in the way of his covenant promises—he even overcomes the shortcomings of his own people when they get in the way. God is *faithful* even when his people are *faithless*. Being reminded of that, we can now go back to the story of Esau and Jacob; even as the situation degrades and even as the covenant seems to be in greater and greater jeopardy, we can be confident that while his people sin—even while they sometimes work deliberately against him—God is at work.

This act in the drama is introduced by a brief note about Esau in verses 34-35 of Chapter 26.

**When Esau was forty years old, he took Judith the daughter of Beeri the Hittite to be his wife, and Basemath the daughter of Elon the Hittite, and they made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah.**

Why do we need to know this now? First and foremost, as we resume the story, it reminds us that Esau was not fit to inherit either Isaac’s blessing or God’s covenant. In contrast to his

father, who had married the bride Abraham had sent for from amongst his own people, Esau took pagan wives from amongst the Canaanites. Esau is taking a step away from God’s covenant and a step towards assimilation. As we’ve already seen: Esau does not value the things of God. It also points to the passivity of Isaac’s faith. When Isaac was Esau’s age, Abraham had sent for a suitable wife for him so that he wouldn’t marry a Canaanite woman. In contrast, Isaac now sits by passively, grumbling unhappily, as his son marries not one, but two Canaanite women.

With Esau’s worldliness in mind, we now move into Chapter 27 and the scene changes. It’s sometime later—we don’t know how long—and we see Isaac getting on in years. Look at verses 1-4:

**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.” He said, “Behold, I am old; I do not know the day of my death. Now then, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field and hunt game for me, 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.”**

Isaac was a hundred years old at this point, but despite how feeble he’s portrayed as being here, he will live another 80 years. We can’t say for certain what was going through his mind, but the circumstances and his words to Esau, “I do not know the day of my death,” suggest that Isaac was hiding something. Normally, when a man was near death, it was customary to gather the whole family so that all of his sons could receive his blessing. But in this case Isaac calls only Esau to his side. Something’s fishy. Isaac’s hiding something; he wants to pass his blessing onto his favoured son, but he wants to do it without Rebekah or Jacob knowing about it.<sup>1</sup> He knew how his wife favoured Jacob, but more important, he knew what God had spoken before the boys were even born: “The older shall

serve the younger.” That’s the damning thing here: Jacob knows God’s plan but tries to thwart it anyway. Suddenly now, Isaac’s character is starting to look a lot more like Esau’s. In fact, the storyteller even casts him in a similar light. Esau sold his birthright for a pot of stew and now Jacob, determines to thwart God’s plans in exchange for a bowl of Esau’s stew. Both men are dominated by fleshly appetites. Esau too is guilty. This private blessing went against custom; he knew that what his father was doing wasn’t above board, but Esau wanted the blessing so badly he was willing to play Isaac’s game.

But what of the blessing? Could Isaac’s blessing really disrupt God’s plan? Isaac thought it could. In that culture a father passed his hopes and aspirations onto his sons through this sort of blessing and for these people a blessing was thought to have real power, which is why it was considered irrevocable once spoken. But it’s also clear that God is not obligated to empower the blessing. Isaac speaks on his own authority; he doesn’t pretend to speak the blessing on God’s behalf. At the same time, these patriarchal blessings we see in Genesis are often prophetic. They show us that God is providentially at work. In some cases the one giving the blessing is “in tune” with God’s will and we see how his blessing harmonises with God’s plans. But even here, as Isaac tries to use his blessing to change the course of events that God has ordained, attempting rebelliously to bestow on Esau what God had promised to Jacob, Providence instead puts Jacob under Isaac’s hand as the blessing is given. It’s a reminder that God is always sovereignly at work in human events.

As it turns out, Isaac wasn’t quite as secretive as he thought.

**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, Rebekah said to her son Jacob, “I heard your father speak to your brother Esau, ‘Bring me game and prepare for me delicious food, that I may eat it and bless you before the LORD before I die.’ Now therefore, my son, obey my voice as I**

<sup>1</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), p. 206.

**command you. 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. And you shall bring it to your father to eat, so that he may bless you before he dies.”** (Genesis 27:5-10)

Here we get a picture of just how dysfunctional this family really is. Isaac cooked up a scheme to secretly bless Esau, but Rebekah found out about it and comes up with her own scheme to foil him. She tries to rope Jacob into it, but Jacob’s not that stupid. And this is where we come to another damning twist in the story. Jacob doesn’t object because this scheme is dishonest or because it goes against his father’s wishes. He objects because he’s afraid of getting caught. He knows that he and Esau are completely different in appearance, voice, manner, and even in scent. He doesn’t object because Rebekah’s scheme is wrong; he objects because he doesn’t want to end up cursed instead of blessed.

**But Jacob said to Rebekah his mother, “Behold, my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I am a smooth man. Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be mocking him and bring a curse upon myself and not a blessing.” His mother said to him, “Let your curse be on me, my son; only obey my voice, and go, bring them to me.”** (Genesis 27:11-13)

Rebekah is insistent. There’s more to her scheme that she hasn’t revealed yet, but she shamefully urges Jacob to do this, saying that she’ll take any curses upon herself. This really underscores just how much she despised Esau and favoured Jacob. She was willing to let Isaac’s wrath fall on her if the plan failed.

Convinced by his mother, Jacob brings her the goats as she had asked and, knowing her husband well, Rebekah cooks up some stew just the way Isaac likes it. When the meal is ready, she dresses Jacob in Esau’s finest clothes and wraps the skin of the goats around Jacob’s neck and arms to simulate

Esau’s hairiness, then she puts the food in his hands and sends him to Isaac’s tent. The scheme is harebrained. The image of Isaac wrapped in goat skin to fool his father is comical. We think, “Surely Isaac won’t fall for this! Really? Goat skin?” And yet that he falls for it underscores just how devoid of sense Isaac is at this point. The storyteller describes some tense and suspenseful moments as Isaac at first doubts the evidence, but in the end falls for Jacob’s ruse.

**So he went in to his father and said, “My father.” And he said, “Here I am. Who are you, my son?” 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.” 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.” 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.” 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.” And he did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau’s hands. So he blessed him. He said, “Are you really my son Esau?” He answered, “I am.”** (Genesis 27:18-24)

Jacob’s voice gave away his real identity, but Isaac instead relies on his other sense. It underscores a biblical principle and shows us how misguided Isaac was in placing his trust in his nose and his hands. Throughout Scripture, it’s the Word spoken by God and heard by his people that is the source of truth. Experience can teach us a great deal, but our experience must *always* be judged and tested against the truth of God’s Word. Without the Word, experience can easily be misinterpreted. Jacob’s voice gave him away, but Isaac ignored the voice and relied on the experience of his other senses, which led him astray. If he’d only *listened*. And so having been deceived, he pronounces his blessing in verses 26-29:

**Then his father Isaac said to him, “Come near and kiss me, my son.” 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! May God give you of the dew of heaven and of the fatness of the earth and plenty of grain and wine. 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!”**

Isaac’s blessing is straightforward. Inspired by the earthy smell of Jacob’s disguise, Isaac pronounces blessings on him that are associated with the earth—with “the fatness of the earth” and with “plenty of grain and wine”. He seems to have God’s covenant blessings in mind. A hunting nomad like Esau isn’t likely to be planting vineyards and fields of wheat, but Isaac could easily imagine his future descendants settled in the land God had promised. The background of God’s covenant is drawn more sharply as Isaac moves on, declaring not only that the nations would bow down before him, but that his own brothers would do the same. This is the point at which we realize that Isaac was doing his best to counter God’s promise that the “older would serve the younger” by pronouncing an opposing blessing. Then finally, he recalls God’s promises of cursing and blessing on those who curse or bless his chosen.

The irony is that while Isaac thinks he’s doing all this for Esau, it’s actually Jacob who lies under his hands. God is at work, despite the scheming of Isaac and Rebekah to maneuver their favourites into his plan. God does not approve of their scheming, but in his providence he uses their schemes to bring about what he had promised.

Again, despite what Isaac and his sons may have thought, there was nothing magical or inherently controlling in the father's blessing. It was nothing more than a father expressing his desires for his sons. God was not obliged to carry out what Isaac declared over his sons. And yet, God meets his people where they are and makes himself known in the irony of the situation. Isaac thinks he's blessing Esau with the things that he knew God had promised to Jacob, but in fact he's unwittingly speaking them all over Jacob. In his attempt to thwart God, he ends up confirming God!

Jacob now leaves, and as he leaves, Esau shows up from his hunt perfectly on cue:

**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. 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." His father Isaac said to him, "Who are you?" He answered, "I am your son, your firstborn, Esau." 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." 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!" (Genesis 27:30-34)**

Talk about close calls! Esau and Jacob missed each other by *that* much. Esau got back from his hunt just as Jacob left Isaac's tent. Esau looked in, saw that everything was quiet and went to cook his stew. He went happily into the tent expecting the best and we can imagine how things quickly changed when Jacob asked, "Who are you?" The reality of the situation sinks in quickly. Isaac is absolutely furious. The Hebrew says, literally that "he trembled a very great trembling". And it says that Esau "screamed a very great scream". In both cases there's no more powerful way for

Hebrew to convey the intensity of their reactions. Isaac is panicked and angry; Esau is absolutely crushed. And Esau cries out for his father to bless him. But Isaac cannot take back the words he has spoken over Jacob.

**But he said, "Your brother came deceitfully, and he has taken away your blessing." 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?" 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?" 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.**

**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.**

**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." (Genesis 27:35-40)**

Esau had despised his birthright. Now he wants at least his father's blessing, but he's already demonstrated to God that he's not worthy of it. The writer of Hebrews links all these things, the birthright, the blessing, and the covenant, together. Esau can have none of them. Hebrews 12:17 gives us some Spirit-inspired commentary on the situation here in Genesis: "For you know that afterward, when [Esau] desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears."

Instead he's given the leftovers. Isaac had blessed Jacob with the richness of the land, Esau is left an outsider and a scavenger and his brother's servant.

Esau is left with only one small glimmer of hope: one day—at some future time—he will throw off his brother's yoke. And yet that future is more than a thousand years off. Edom, the nation descended from Esau, would be conquered and ruled over by David and his descendants until the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.

Esau's fury only grows stronger as time passes. Remember, this is a man who is ruled by his passions and thinks only of the day.

**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." (Genesis 27:41)**

The only thing that held Esau back from carrying out his murderous rage was his expectation that Isaac was near death. We can imagine him skulking around the camp and muttering threats. Rebekah gets word of them and, again, takes action.

**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. Now therefore, my son, obey my voice. Arise, flee to Laban my brother in Haran and stay with him a while, until your brother's fury turns away—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?" (Genesis 27:42-45)**

It's interesting that when Jacob balked at her scheme she had assured him that she would take the consequences on herself if it failed. In the end, her scheme succeeded, but Rebekah ends up suffering consequences she never expected. Whatever relationship she may have had with Esau is now completely destroyed and she's astute enough to know that Esau may well make good on his threats and rob her of

Jacob. And so she starts scheming again, this time to send Jacob away to her brother back in Padan-Aram. She was no doubt thinking that Esau would cool down in a matter of weeks or maybe months. She has no idea that Jacob will flee and not return for twenty years. This is the last she will see of him. And this is the last we see of her. Not only does Rebekah drop from the story; she has no memorial in Scripture at the time of her death. To drive the point home, Genesis tells us about the death of Rebekah's maid, but nothing of Rebekah's.

The chapter ends with Rebekah setting her new scheme in motion, manipulating Isaac into sending Jacob away to her brother:

**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?"** (Genesis 27:46)

This is the closing bracket on this part of the story, but as we'll see in Chapter 28, Rebekah's scheme to Jacob to Laban will set him off on his own adventures with God.

What does all of this mean for us? The interlude with Isaac in the last chapter of Genesis has given us the assurance that God's covenant is in good hands despite the fact that it now appears to be with Jacob the Swindler, who's about to leave the promised land—which is never a good sign. The covenant will be fine and we know that because we know that it's ultimately in God's hands. And yet Jacob seems to be getting away with his scheming. He's got the birthright. Now he's got his father's blessing. And we might ask: Is God going to let him get away with this?

As I think about that question I'm reminded of an old story about a lazy and dishonest priest. He'd spent his week lazing away and neglecting to prepare for Sunday and then when Sunday morning came he looked out the window on a warm and sunny day. It was a beautiful day and he was

unprepared to do his job, so he called his curate, put on his best show of being sick as a dog, and said that he was going to be in bed all day. His curate wasn't really prepared either. He led the service, but the people went spiritually hungry that week. Meanwhile, the priest grabbed his clubs and headed to the golf course in the next town over. God and Satan watched as the priest played the best game of his life for seventeen holes. Satan looked at God and said, "I see your plan. He's played his best game ever, but you're going to ruin it all for him on the last hole." "No," said God, "Just watch." The priest swung his club and the ball went sailing. Satan watched in disbelief as God raised his hand and seemed to direct the arc of the ball through the air. It was the most difficult fairway on the course, but Satan watched in disbelief as the ball dropped straight into the cup and the priest danced. Satan was flabbergasted. "God, how can you reward this man for his laziness and his dishonesty?" God responded, "You think I've rewarded him? Who's he going to tell?"

Brothers and sisters, we've all seen situations like this, although probably not as comical. We see people every day who seem to be getting away with sin. It's happened to all of us at some point in time too. We sin and we get away with it. We accomplish our objective, we succeed, and no one's the wiser. And yet Jacob teaches us that God is always watching and always at work. He doesn't always deal with sin right away. Sometimes he gives us temporary success so that he can deal with our sin in his perfect timing later. In his sovereignty, God will often bring our sins back to us at the time when he knows the consequences will have the greatest impact or at the time he knows we're ready to humbly repent. Remember that God is always at work to bring about his will. We can trust him even when people around us try to thwart his plans. And when we sin and God seems to have missed it, consider that he may simply be graciously giving you an opportunity to turn from your sin and seek forgiveness. When he gave the

law to Moses, written on those stone tablets, he also declared to him:

**The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty.** (Exodus 34:6-7a)

He will by no means clear the guilty, but over and over he reminds his people that he is merciful, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. If you seem to have got away with your sin, consider Isaiah's exhortation:

**Seek the LORD while he may be found;  
call upon him while he is near;  
let the wicked forsake his way,  
and the unrighteous man his thoughts;  
let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him,  
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.** (Isaiah 55:6-7)

As Jesus said, "There is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:10). This is ultimately why Jesus came; it's why he gave his life on the Cross for our sake; and it's why he rose from the grave: that we might seek forgiveness through him and that our hearts might be turned from sin.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, thank you for the assurance of your patience with us. We know that you are just in punishing sin, and so we thank you for the mercy you offer through Jesus. Give us grace to turn from our sin. Turn our hearts and minds to holy things, we ask. And give us eyes to see you at work in our lives that we might never lose hope even as sin abounds around us. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.