

Navigating Family Conflict

Session 3

October 27, 2024

Isaac and Rebekah: Family Favorites

The Point: Love should be without favoritism within the family.

Session Passages: Genesis 25:24-28; 27:5-13

Genesis 25:24-28

Connection to the Point. Isaac and Rebekah played favorites with their twin sons.

Setting. The Lord renewed with Abram His promise of the land and a multitude of descendants following the patriarch's separation from Lot (Gen. 13:14-17). In Genesis 15 the Lord again reaffirmed His commitment to Abram in a covenant-making procedure. In chapter 17 the Lord changed Abram's name to Abraham and initiated circumcision as the sign of the covenant. After Abraham turned one hundred years old and Sarah ninety, Sarah gave birth to the promised son Isaac. Abraham then sent Ishmael away in obedience to the Lord's command. Chapter 22 records the near sacrifice of Isaac. Chapter 23 reports Sarah's death and burial. After Sarah's death, Abraham sent a trusted servant back to family relatives to find a wife for Isaac. Rebekah willingly returned with the servant and became Isaac's wife (chap. 24). Rebekah gave birth to twins, Jacob and Esau.

Red-looking (v. 25). Isaac and Rebekah named the first twin born Esau. The Edomites descended from Esau. *Edom* derives from a Hebrew word that means "red" or "ruddy." The name also is associated with the red stewpottage or stew Jacob gave to Esau in exchange for Esau's birthright (v. 30).

Esau (v. 25). Moses did not record a precise derivation of the name *Esau*. Instead he associated it with the Hebrew word for "hair" or "hairy." Furthermore the Hebrew word for "hair" implies the place name *Seir*, historically the primary location of Edomite territory (Deut. 2:5). *Seir* also is identified with a mountain range running the length of biblical Edom, leading at times to equating Edom with Seir.

Grasping Took hold on Esau's heel (v. 26). Jacob emerged from Rebekah's womb *grasping* holding on to *Esau's heel*. The Hebrew verb conveys the basic idea of "taking hold of." It sometimes has the violent connotation of "seizing." A noun derived from the verb means "possession" or "property." The sense here is that of firmly gripping. *Heel* is used symbolically elsewhere in the Old Testament to indicate a trusted friend's deception (Ps. 41:9, "has turned" in NIV). Jesus quoted Psalm 41:9 when He predicted His betrayal (John 13:18). The picture of Jacob at birth is that of his firmly latching onto Esau's heel in an attempt to supersede him. Esau recognized the appropriateness of Jacob's name when Esau discovered that Jacob had stolen his blessing (Gen. 27:36).

Jacob (v. 26). The sound of the Hebrew word translated *Jacob* is a play on the Hebrew words for "heel" and "cheated" (see 27:36). The name derives from a verb meaning "to take by the heel" or "to supplant." Jacob lived up to this name in his dealings with Esau and Laban (29–31). However, in his later wrestling and prevailing with God, his name was changed to Israel. The name *Israel* can be interpreted to mean "God prevails" or "God rules" (32:28). Through his encounter with the divine messenger, Jacob learned that we prevail with God by yielding to Him.

Boys grew up (v. 27). The Hebrew for *boys* conveys a wide range of meanings. It can refer to a baby as in Exodus 2:6 where it identifies baby Moses weeping. It also can designate a young adult as in 2 Samuel 18:5 where it describes "the young man" Absalom. The verb translated *grew up* can depict physical growth of humans and other living beings as well as the increase of both tangible and intangible objects. Scripture does not specify how old Jacob and Esau were at the time Esau sold his birthright. The context suggests they had reached young adulthood. In any case they had determined their vocations by this point.

QuietContentPlain (v. 27). This term encompasses an interesting scope of definitions. Among its varied meanings are “complete, perfect, wholesome, ordinary, sound, plain, upright, quiet” and “having integrity.” The same term describes Job in Job 1:1. A form of the word also characterizes Israel’s sacrifices, which were to be “unblemished” (Lev. 1:10). As a schemer and cheater, Jacob at times definitely contradicted this description. A Hebrew professor once defined the term’s meaning as “one whose life revolves around a single center.” Jacob’s life fit this definition. His focus initially revolved around himself. Ultimately, however, his life came to center on the Lord (Heb. 11:21).

Loved (v. 28). Like our English word, the Hebrew verb rendered *loved* ranges in intensity from the Lord’s infinite love for His people to the sensual appetites of a lazy glutton. The term can describe love between human beings, including father and son or husband and wife. It also can designate love for things, good and bad, such as Isaac’s love for delicious food (27:4), a greedy individual’s love for wealth (Eccl. 5:10), a love for God’s commandments (Ps. 119:47), and a love for evil (52:3). The Hebrew term in Genesis 25:28 differs from the word designating the Lord’s covenant love for His people. In the case of Isaac and Rebekah, each showed a strong preference toward one of their sons. Isaac favored Esau, while Rebekah favored Jacob. Partiality for one child over another also characterized Abraham in relationship to Isaac (Gen. 22:2) and Jacob in relationship to Joseph (37:3-4).

Genesis 27:5-10

Connection to the Point. Rebekah sought to pull Jacob into her plan to deceive Isaac.

Setting. Following the statement of parental favoritism in Genesis 25:28, the Scripture records Jacob’s barter with Esau for his birthright. The focus of chapter 26 shifts to Isaac. The Lord reaffirmed His promise of land and numerous offspring to Isaac, who settled in Gerar on the border of Canaanite territory (26:1-6). As his father, Abraham, had previously done, Isaac attempted to pass his wife off as his sister. The Lord preserved Isaac and Rebekah in spite of Isaac’s deception. When conflict arose between Isaac’s herdsmen and the herdsmen of Gerar, Isaac peacefully moved on and dug succeeding wells. Eventually the patriarch went to Beersheba, which later became recognized as the southern extreme of Israel’s land, where the Lord reaffirmed the covenant promises (vv. 7-25). In Genesis 26:26-33 Isaac entered into a covenant with Abimelech, king of Gerar, and verses 34-35 comment on Esau’s wives. The initial verses of chapter 27 introduce Isaac’s plan to bless Esau. He sent Esau to hunt game and prepare a meal for Isaac to consume before he blessed Esau. Although these verses suggest Isaac’s nearness to death, he may have lived many more years (35:28).

ListeningHeard (v. 5). That Rebekah heard the conversation between Isaac and Esau suggests she was preparing to come to Jacob’s aid in acquiring the blessing from his father. Observe that verse 5 identifies Esau as “his [Isaac’s] son,” while verse 6 describes Jacob as “her [Rebekah’s] son.” Parental favoritism with its attending conflict becomes clearly evident. After *listening* she *heard*, Rebekah took action to ensure Jacob received the blessing of the firstborn in the household. With Esau away hunting game, Rebekah felt free to manipulate the situation in her son’s favor. Rebekah’s listening may call to mind Sarah’s earlier listening at the tent doorway to the conversation between the heavenly visitors and Abraham (18:10). The same verb appears in 27:8 in the form of a command. There the term means “obey.” Rebekah emphasized the need for Jacob to follow her instructions by paralleling the expressions: “listen to me carefully obey my voice” and “do what I tell you according to that which I command thee.”

Listen!LookBehold (v. 6). This term literally means “beholdlisten” or “looklisten.” It is an expression that demands attention. Typically it emphasizes the information that follows.

Bless youtheeGive you my blessing (v. 7). Blessing someone in the Old Testament meant endowing that person with power for prosperity, success, longevity, and fruitfulness. A father typically conveyed the patriarchal blessing on his oldest son. Because Esau had emerged from the womb before his twin (25:25-26), he was regarded as the elder son who would receive the blessing. The blessing was closely linked with the birthright that also belonged to the firstborn male child. The privileges associated with the birthright included a double portion of the inheritance. The Hebrew word for blessing (*berakah*) is almost an anagram of the word meaning both birthright and firstborn (*bekorah*). Deuteronomy

21:15-17 forbade a father from playing favorites among his sons by giving the birthright to other than the firstborn son. Genesis 27:27-29 records Isaac's specific words of blessing on Jacob. The blessing included four elements: (1) agricultural prosperity (v. 28), (2) international acclaim and success (v. 29), (3) mastery over the clan (v. 29), and (4) protective provision related to cursing and blessing (v. 29).

In the Lord's presence**In the presence of the Lord****Before the Lord** (v. 7). Rebekah added this phrase when she repeated to Jacob the words Isaac had spoken to Esau (compare v. 4). This expression occurs almost one hundred fifty times in the first five books of the Old Testament and often refers to worship. Rebekah's addition of the expression stressed the religious significance of the matter and added gravity to it. The phrase utilizes the covenant name *Lord* or *Yahweh*. God later revealed the significance of this designation to Moses at the burning bush (Ex. 3:13-15). The title is derived from the Hebrew verb "to be" and denotes God as the Self-existent, covenant God who acts independently of outside influences. The term translated *presencebefore* literally means "face."

Before I die**my death** (v. 7). While Isaac may have perceived himself at death's door because of aging and blindness (vv. 1-4), he may have lived another forty-three years. Isaac did not die until the age of 180 (35:28). The patriarch was 60 when the twins were born (25:26). By comparing the ages of Jacob and Joseph in various references (41:46-47; 45:6; 47:9), some Bible scholars have concluded that possibly Isaac was 137 and Jacob and Esau were 77 when the events recorded in Genesis 27 occurred. Others have speculated Isaac lived another twenty years or more after bestowing the blessing on Jacob.

Choice young goats**Good kids of the goats** (v. 9). Rebekah designed her preparation of *choice young goats**good kids* or choice, young goats to provide a tender delicacy to win Isaac's favor (Judg. 13:15; 15:1). The goat in the biblical era probably possessed backward curving horns and long ears. It might have had long, black hair or be speckled in color. Serving as a prominent source of food, the goat also was used as a sacrifice. People utilized goatskins in making clothing, musical instruments, and water bottles.

Genesis 27:11-13

Connection to the Point. Rebekah was willing to take the blame for the deception.

Hairy man . . . smooth skinman (v. 11). With these phrases Jacob characterized Esau's skin in contrast to his own. In so doing Jacob pointed out the potential for failure if he attempted to pose as Esau. Even though his father's "eyes were so weak that he could not see" (v. 1), Isaac would feel his skin and know Jacob was masquerading as Esau. The Hebrew term translated *hairy* appears in Genesis 27:11 to describe Esau's skin, then in verse 23 to describe Jacob's hands after he had covered them with goat skins (vv. 15-16). The term occurs frequently elsewhere in Scripture to identify a male goat or buck. A related Hebrew noun meaning "hair" refers to the hair of the head or the body of either men or animals. Mention of Esau's hairy skin calls to mind the description of his body at birth (25:25). The birth narrative also informs us of the Lord's announcement to Rebekah prior to the twins' births that the elder would serve the younger, words that foretold the outcome of Jacob's deception (v. 23). The Hebrew term translated *hairy* is also similar to the word for Seir. Mount Seir designates a range that runs the length of Edom, thus at times leading to an equation of Seir and Edom. Esau and his descendants lived in the region.

The expression *smooth skinman*, literally "smooth man," conveys the idea that Jacob lacked the rough, hairy skin that characterized Esau. The term also figuratively describes the words of a flattering, forbidden woman (Prov. 5:3). A related term elsewhere describes the smooth stones David chose from a wadi to use in slaying Goliath (1 Sam. 17:40). The specific Hebrew word for *man* emphasizes man as an individual or as a husband.

Suppose my father touches me**What if my father touches me?****My father peradventure will feel me** (v. 12). Jacob revealed to his mother his wariness of her scheme for him to substitute for Esau while Esau was hunting game. Although Isaac was nearly blind, he could still engage his other senses. Therefore Rebekah and Jacob employed at least five different methods to deceive Isaac. They covered Jacob's smooth skin with goat hair so it would feel like Esau's. Rebekah

prepared a delicious meal that she knew Isaac would love. Jacob donned Esau's garments in order to smell like his twin. Jacob also brought Isaac wine to drink, which may have impaired Isaac's judgment. Finally Jacob repeatedly declared that he was Esau (see vv. 14-25).

Deceiver/Tricking (v. 12). This Hebrew term appears rarely in the Old Testament—occurring only twice. It is found elsewhere in 2 Chronicles 36:16 where the verb describes Judah's inhabitants as ridiculing or mocking God's messengers. Mocking God's messengers was one of the sins that led to Judah's downfall in 587-586 BC. In the context of Genesis 27:12, Jacob feared that Isaac would think Jacob was mocking his father if Jacob pretended to be Esau. Employing other Hebrew words for deception, the book of Proverbs counsels the wise individual not to bear false witness and not to deceive others with one's lips (Prov. 14:5; 24:28). Proverbs 12:20 reveals: "Deceit [a term also meaning "treachery"] is in the hearts of those who plot evil, but those who promote peace have joy; those who imagine evil: but to the counsellors of peace is joy." In calling his readers, including us, to discipleship, Peter counseled them to rid themselves of "all deceit/ guile" (1 Pet. 2:1) even as "no deceit was found/ neither was guile found" in Christ (v. 22).

Bring down a curse (v. 12). The Hebrew word rendered *curse* derives from a verb meaning "to be light" or "to be slight." Curse is often paired with blessing in the Old Testament (see Deut. 11:26,29; 30:1,19; Josh. 8:34). The Lord may transform a curse into a blessing (Deut. 23:5; Neh. 13:2). Jacob admitted the obvious irony if the deceptive plan should fall through. The main emphasis in the Hebrew term rendered *curse* is on the absence or reversal of a blessed or rightful state and a lowering to a lesser state. Rebekah's words differ from the occultic idea of literally putting a curse on someone. Proverbs 26:2 reveals that for a word of blessing or cursing to be effective it must be appropriate and divinely sanctioned. Isaac's blessing of Jacob was not irrevocable because it had already been spoken but rather because it had clearly been ordained by the Lord (see Gen. 25:22-23).

Your curse be on me, my son/ My son, let the curse fall on me/ Upon me be thy curse, my son (v. 13). A curse of an unexpected kind resulted for both Rebekah and Jacob. Because of their scheme, Jacob had to leave home to avoid Esau's wrath. After reaching Paddan-aram, Jacob worked twenty years for his uncle Laban before returning to the promised land of Canaan (31:41). The Scripture gives no indication that Rebekah ever saw her favorite son again.

Obey/ my voice/ Do what I say (v. 13). The expression more literally reads "hearken to my voice" or "listen to me." The verb rendered *obey* basically means "to hear." It can also convey the various meanings of "pay attention," "obey," "answer prayer," "understand," and "examine (in court)." When David called on God to hear his prayer, he desired that God answer him (Ps. 4:1). Jeremiah 11:10-11 contains a play on this Hebrew word meaning "to hear." Because the people of Judah have refused "to hear" (obey) the Lord's words, He would not "hear" (respond) to them when they cried out to Him. In the context of Genesis 27:13, Rebekah's literal instructions to Jacob "listen to me" remind me of my mother's often repeated directive to me. When she said, "Listen to me," I knew that she meant far more than auditory perception of her words. Rather, she clearly intended that I obey her commands.