
Deceitful Gain

Genesis 26:34-28:9¹

There are two kinds of folly often emerging on the opposite ends of one's life:

There is the folly of youth where disobedience, division and defiance lead to life-long consequences.

There is the folly of old age where dullness, decline and self-focused serving erode the goodness and even the greatness of one's life.

The text before us has these and other important themes that intertwine. This is much like life. Your life is not a single note being played. It is a whole symphony of instruments. Isaac, Rebekah, Esau and Jacob are all interacting with one another with heart issues, sinful behaviors, pulsing emotions all the while moving redemptive history forward.

I have chosen to look at a fairly large piece of text this morning that crosses chapter divisions. I am allowing Moses to tell me, through his own structure here, what is hanging together. He gives this text a clear structure. Then, inside that structure, he tells the story like a play. There are definite scenes here with the camera focused on someone and others moving on and off the stage.

So, what about the structure?

Disobedience - Esau's Marriages	26:34-35
Denial - Isaac Intends to Bless Esau	27:1-4
Designs - Rebekah Plots for Jacob	27:5-13
Deceits - Jacob is Blessed	27:14-29
Distress - Esau is Blessed	27:30-40
Danger - Esau Plots against Jacob	27:41-45
Discharge - Isaac Intentionally Blesses Jacob	27:46-28:5
Defiance - Esau's Marriages	28:6-9

So, the lights in the room are dimming. The music shifts to the title theme. The curtain begins to rise. The story unfolds. Will you see yourself on this stage?

¹ All Scriptures in this chapter/sermon are from the New Living Translation (NLT). I have used this instead of the ESV to help with the ease of reading as a story.

Marriage - Opening and Closing Scenes

For the students of the Bible, note how Esau's marriages are the opening and closing scenes. We sometimes refer to this as the "book ends".

Disobedience – Marrying the Hittites (26:34-35)

³⁴ At the age of forty, Esau married two Hittite wives: Judith, the daughter of Beerli, and Basemath, the daughter of Elon. ³⁵ But Esau's wives made life miserable for Isaac and Rebekah.

He is willing, in spite of the example of his grandfather Abraham and the respect for the covenant, to marry women from the land of Canaan. They pleased Esau and suited him. These women were evidently wicked and troublesome. They brought great grief to Rebekah and Isaac.

Defiance – Marrying an Ishmaelite (28:6-9)

⁶ Esau knew that his father, Isaac, had blessed Jacob and sent him to Paddan-aram to find a wife, and that he had warned Jacob, "You must not marry a Canaanite woman."
⁷ He also knew that Jacob had obeyed his parents and gone to Paddan-aram. ⁸ It was now very clear to Esau that his father did not like the local Canaanite women. ⁹ So Esau visited his uncle Ishmael's family and married one of Ishmael's daughters, in addition to the wives he already had. His new wife's name was Mahalath. She was the sister of Nebaioth and the daughter of Ishmael, Abraham's son.

He is also defiant. The text here says that Esau noticed that Isaac disapproved of Canaanite women. He sees that Jacob is sent away (we'll get to this part of story later - everyone here is being manipulated by Rebekah). So, instead of marrying Canaanite women, he marries an Ishmaelite woman. What makes him think this is any better? Here is an act of defiance - rather than seeking a wife among the family who might know God, he seeks a wife among the outcast family who had rejected God.

These serve two important purposes besides marking the text for us.

They illustrate the intentional, rebellious wickedness of Esau. Moses wants all to see that Esau is not a character to be sympathized with for losing his birthright. He is not just some jock who got taken by a sneaky schemer. He is disobedient and defiant.

They illuminate the weak, selfish, disobedience of Isaac. He is going to move into blessing Esau in spite of Esau's character and conduct. He is going to transfer the covenant to a man who is profane, a man who has no respect or reverence for neither the covenant of God nor the God of the covenant.

Scene 1 – Isaac Intends to Bless Esau (v.1-4)

God's people must be alert to the dangers of spiritual drift and decline in old age.

The scene opens with Isaac, old, blind reclining in his easy chair the darkness of his eyes betraying the darkness in his soul.

One day when Isaac was old and turning blind, he called for Esau, his older son, and said, "My son."

"Yes, Father?" Esau replied.

² "I am an old man now," Isaac said, "and I don't know when I may die. ³ Take your bow and a quiver full of arrows, and go out into the open country to hunt some wild game for me. ⁴ Prepare my favorite dish, and bring it here for me to eat. Then I will pronounce the blessing that belongs to you, my firstborn son, before I die."

His Physical Decline

I can do no better than Kent Hughes eloquent description of the sad state Isaac is in.

... now as we continue the story of his life, years have passed, and he [Isaac] is quite old. And in the intervening decades something of Isaac's spiritual edge has dulled. Creature comforts have become center-place for him as represented in his love for food. Early on there had been a hint of this when we read "Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game" (25:28). We get the sense that wild game and savory delights were laid out by his servants to ease his pampered stomach through the night. And as he dreamed, his table was spread again with exotic dishes redolent with garnishes of leeks and onions – moist and succulent.

Aging had also left him visually impaired and dependent upon his family – and demanding. But most notably Isaac, notwithstanding his authentic faith, had come to oppose the revealed will of God regarding Jacob and Esau. He was well aware of the battle that had taken place between the twins in Rebekah's womb. He knew that God had said, "The one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger" (25:23). Rebekah would not let him forget it. And the fact that Jacob had manipulated Esau to sell his birthright to him was a longstanding source of irritation to Isaac, and a subject of contention with his strong-willed wife. He was also painfully aware that Esau had married two Canaanite women – and that they had made life bitter for both him and Rebekah (cf. 26:34). But against the weight of all of this, Isaac was determined that though Esau had lost his birthright, he would now give him the firstborn's blessing. Isaac adored his manly, hairy, red-bearded hunter son. Esau's very smell intoxicated him. And dreams of a hunter's feasts filled his vacant eyes. (Hughes, *Genesis*, p.347-348).

His loss of physical eyesight represents the loss of spiritual discernment.

His Personal Disobedience

This loss of spiritual discernment, connected with an idolatrous love of Esau and being mastered by his appetites, allows him to plan to bless Esau. Esau has already lost the birthright through his own folly. But Isaac sends Esau out to bring home the venison he loves so much. He wants, from the depths of his soul, to bless Esau. He will disobey God because of his love of a son has gone idolatrous. This love for Esau is all entangled with his appetite for certain foods.

Listen to me – I want to say this with kindness and with Biblical firmness. You can and many do love their children too much. It is possible to love your children so much that they are idols. You will sin for love of them. You will want to control them, be their buddy, live your life through them. Danger! Danger! Danger! Idolatry and indulgence will dull your discernment and cause you disobey God.

Scene 2 – Rebekah Plots for Jacob (v.5-17)

God's people must act with integrity and honesty particularly in the context of marriage.

The camera shifts to the adjoining room. There, beautiful Rebekah is listening with manipulative measures dancing in her heart.

Her Wicked Plan (v.5-10)

⁵ But Rebekah overheard what Isaac had said to his son Esau. So when Esau left to hunt for the wild game, ⁶ she said to her son Jacob, “Listen. I overheard your father say to Esau, ⁷ ‘Bring me some wild game and prepare me a delicious meal. Then I will bless you in the LORD’s presence before I die.’ ⁸ Now, my son, listen to me. Do exactly as I tell you. ⁹ Go out to the flocks, and bring me two fine young goats. I’ll use them to prepare your father’s favorite dish. ¹⁰ Then take the food to your father so he can eat it and bless you before he dies.”

Now make no mistake here – Rebekah is not doing this in order to help God out or with an intent to fulfill God’s purpose. She knows what God has said. OK. But she loves Jacob with an idolatry that will begin to scheme a strategy to get what she wants for Jacob. It may be rightfully his both by God’s ordination and by Esau’s trade. But this is not the way to go about it.

So, here is her plan: “Go get a goat and bring it to me. I know Esau’s recipe. Your father is blind – he cannot see who it is who will give him the food. He will bless you.”

His Hesitant Response (v.11-13)

¹¹ “But look,” Jacob replied to Rebekah, “my brother, Esau, is a hairy man, and my skin is smooth. ¹² What if my father touches me? He’ll see that I’m trying to trick him, and then he’ll curse me instead of blessing me.”

¹³ But his mother replied, “Then let the curse fall on me, my son! Just do what I tell you. Go out and get the goats for me!”

But Jacob is no fool. He knows that he is nothing like Esau – in sound, skin or smell. His blind father has come to depend on his other senses which will give Jacob away. He well knows the wrath and curse that will fall if he is caught out. Why would Jacob say that Isaac would think he was being mocked? Surely because Jacob has, possibly even often, mocked him before.

But Rebekah has already anticipated this possibility. Without at this point divulging her full plan – which Jacob probably would have been revolted with – she sends him to do her bidding. Jacob, the schemer, has learned well from his conniving, manipulative mother.

Their Terrible Fraud (v.14-17)

¹⁴ So Jacob went out and got the young goats for his mother. Rebekah took them and prepared a delicious meal, just the way Isaac liked it. ¹⁵ Then she took Esau’s favorite clothes, which were there in the house, and gave them to her younger son, Jacob. ¹⁶ She covered his arms and the smooth part of his neck with the skin of the young goats. ¹⁷ Then she gave Jacob the delicious meal, including freshly baked bread.

Rebekah prepares the terrible fraud. He brings the meat which she cooks. She gets Esau's (presumably smelly) clothes. She has Jacob put on the clothes. She completes the costume by giving him a hairy feel on his exposed arms and neck. She takes the skin and silky hair of kid goats and fastens them on Jacob where Isaac would touch in a hug or kiss on the cheek. She hands him the platter of delicious food and warm bread. The lights fade out as "she pushes her ridiculously costumed favorite through the door" to her husband. (Hughes, p. 349)

Scene 3 – Isaac Blesses his Sons (v.18-40)

Sin and sinners do not frustrate the invincible purposes of God and even further them.

The lights come up once again on Isaac, the grand patriarch, awaiting the arrival of a favored son with tasty venison. I can't read this scene without thinking of those terrible scenes in *The Two Towers* where Worm Tongue has the ear of the slowly failing and faltering king, the remnants of his former greatness hanging from him like useless skin.

Jacob's Deception (v.18-29)

Jacob's sin against his father is described in painful detail.

¹⁸ So Jacob took the food to his father. "My father?" he said.

"Yes, my son," Isaac answered. "Who are you—Esau or Jacob?"

¹⁹ Jacob replied, "It's Esau, your firstborn son. I've done as you told me. Here is the wild game. Now sit up and eat it so you can give me your blessing."

²⁰ Isaac asked, "How did you find it so quickly, my son?"

"The LORD your God put it in my path!" Jacob replied.

²¹ Then Isaac said to Jacob, "Come closer so I can touch you and make sure that you really are Esau." ²² So Jacob went closer to his father, and Isaac touched him. "The voice is Jacob's, but the hands are Esau's," Isaac said. ²³ But he did not recognize Jacob, because Jacob's hands felt hairy just like Esau's. So Isaac prepared to bless Jacob. ²⁴ "But are you really my son Esau?" he asked.

"Yes, I am," Jacob replied.

²⁵ Then Isaac said, "Now, my son, bring me the wild game. Let me eat it, and then I will give you my blessing." So Jacob took the food to his father, and Isaac ate it. He also drank the wine that Jacob served him. ²⁶ Then Isaac said to Jacob, "Please come a little closer and kiss me, my son."

²⁷ So Jacob went over and kissed him. And when Isaac caught the smell of his clothes, he was finally convinced, and he blessed his son. He said, "Ah! The smell of my son is like the smell of the outdoors, which the LORD has blessed!

²⁸ "From the dew of heaven and the richness of the earth, may God always give you abundant harvests of grain and bountiful new wine.

²⁹ May many nations become your servants, and may they bow down to you.

May you be the master over your brothers and may your mother's sons bow down to you.

All who curse you will be cursed, and all who bless you will be blessed."

He lies about who he is. He enlists God as his accomplice when answering as to how he caught something so quickly. He allays the hesitations of his father. He serves him the meal and drink.

How weak and pitiful Isaac is in his venial and idolatrous love. How cringing and hateful is Jacob's deceit and lies. How cunning and crafty Rebekah is with heart beating fast hidden behind the door.

Isaac brings him close to be sure. Ah, the kiss of betrayal, familiar in the garden with a greater Isaac later. He smells the earth and believes the man of the earth is the son he holds. And Isaac is satisfied. He imparts the blessing. It is given here as a four-stanza poem. In these, Isaac blesses Jacob with the birthright and the covenant standing.

In the blessing of heaven's dew, this language lyrically expresses the fullness of all God's favor as seen in the dew and harvest. It is the blessing of wealth and prosperity.

In the blessing of world rule, Isaac sees the covenant being fulfilled in the kingdom throughout all the earth. This is the blessing of power and rule.

In the blessing of familial homage, Jacob is made the head of the household. He is not only established in the line, but is elevated to its headship. This is the blessing of family leadership.

In the blessing and cursing, Isaac invokes the covenant of Abraham. He is here identifying Jacob as the one through whom the covenant will be carried on with all that it entailed. This is the blessing of covenantal union.

The blessing completed; Jacob hurries out with the footfalls of his brother just outside the tent.

Esau's Distress (v.30-40)

Esau enters from his hunt with the food prepared.

³⁰ As soon as Isaac had finished blessing Jacob, and almost before Jacob had left his father, Esau returned from his hunt. ³¹ Esau prepared a delicious meal and brought it to his father. Then he said, "Sit up, my father, and eat my wild game so you can give me your blessing."

³² But Isaac asked him, "Who are you?"

Esau replied, "It's your son, your firstborn son, Esau."

³³ Isaac began to tremble uncontrollably and said, "Then who just served me wild game? I have already eaten it, and I blessed him just before you came. And yes, that blessing must stand!"

³⁴ When Esau heard his father's words, he let out a loud and bitter cry. "Oh my father, what about me? Bless me, too!" he begged.

³⁵ But Isaac said, "Your brother was here, and he tricked me. He has taken away your blessing."

³⁶ Esau exclaimed, "No wonder his name is Jacob, for now he has cheated me twice. First he took my rights as the firstborn, and now he has stolen my blessing. Oh, haven't you saved even one blessing for me?"

³⁷ Isaac said to Esau, "I have made Jacob your master and have declared that all his brothers will be his servants. I have guaranteed him an abundance of grain and wine— what is left for me to give you, my son?"

³⁸ Esau pleaded, "But do you have only one blessing? Oh my father, bless me, too!" Then Esau broke down and wept.

³⁹ Finally, his father, Isaac, said to him, “You will live away from the richness of the earth, and away from the dew of the heaven above. ⁴⁰ You will live by your sword, and you will serve your brother. But when you decide to break free, you will shake his yoke from your neck.”

His heart is swelling as he prepares to receive the first-born blessing from his father. He sings out in greetings, the savory aromas drifting up from his tray.

But Isaac freezes. “Who is this?” And the deceit is uncovered. They know Isaac has been tricked. The blessing he had to give has already and irrevocably been given to Jacob. Esau bitterly invokes Jacob’s name as schemer and deceiver. But is there no blessing left for him? Jacob had stolen both the birthright and the blessing. What is for Esau, this favorite son? What blessing can be given where shoulders heave in grief and tears run?

Isaac invokes a blessing that is a prophecy. Here is the point of Moses’ giving this text. Esau’s descendants, the Edomites, were to live away from the Promised Land, the land of dew and fatness. They would become a restless and warlike people. But they would have rights to neither the covenant birthright nor blessing. This blessing is actually a curse.

Now, before we rise up in sympathetic dismay with Esau’s plight because of Jacob’s horrid deed, remember, he is a man who has despised his birthright and is attempting to get what is not his. If Jacob is a cheat, Esau is a thief. Now, Jacob’s sin is terrible. Rebekah’s planning and conniving is as well. But let’s recognize, as Hebrews does, this event is the end of a long trail of choices and consequences.

Scene 4 – Jacob Flees Esau’s Anger (27:41-28:5)

God uses the consequences of our sin to discipline, correct and change us.

The final scene is taken up with getting Jacob to safety.

Rebekah Warns Him (v.41-45)

⁴¹ From that time on, Esau hated Jacob because their father had given Jacob the blessing. And Esau began to scheme: “I will soon be mourning my father’s death. Then I will kill my brother, Jacob.”

⁴² But Rebekah heard about Esau’s plans. So she sent for Jacob and told him, “Listen, Esau is consoling himself by plotting to kill you. ⁴³ So listen carefully, my son. Get ready and flee to my brother, Laban, in Haran. ⁴⁴ Stay there with him until your brother cools off. ⁴⁵ When he calms down and forgets what you have done to him, I will send for you to come back. Why should I lose both of you in one day?”

Rebekah overhears Esau’s threats and realizes that he may well carry them out. He has the ability and evidently, the capacity. So she warns Jacob and prepares him to flee to Haran and take refuge with Laban, her brother (Jacob’s uncle).

Rebekah Protects Him (v.46)

⁴⁶ Then Rebekah said to Isaac, “I’m sick and tired of these local Hittite women! I would rather die than see Jacob marry one of them.”

In order to accomplish this, she goes to Isaac and pleads with him to send Jacob to Haran to find a wife. Esau’s wives have been a great grief to them. She claims to loathe her life because of these Hittite women. Her agenda is to protect Jacob. But she uses the situation, their own shared frustration over Esau’s wives, to manipulate Isaac into doing what she has already planned and prepared for Jacob to do.

Isaac Sends Him (28:1-5)

So Isaac called for Jacob, blessed him, and said, “You must not marry any of these Canaanite women. ²Instead, go at once to Paddan-aram, to the house of your grandfather Bethuel, and marry one of your uncle Laban’s daughters. ³May God Almighty bless you and give you many children. And may your descendants multiply and become many nations! ⁴May God pass on to you and your descendants the blessings he promised to Abraham. May you own this land where you are now living as a foreigner, for God gave this land to Abraham.”

⁵So Isaac sent Jacob away, and he went to Paddan-aram to stay with his uncle Laban, his mother’s brother, the son of Bethuel the Aramean.

At Rebekah’s prompting, Isaac calls Jacob in and sends him to Haran, to live with Laban. There, he is to find a wife. He must not marry a Canaanite woman. He must not bring upon them all the grief Esau has. Wonder what Jacob is thinking while Isaac tells him this? One thing for certain – the natural bent of his heart towards deceit and scheming was deeply reinforced by his mother so that it became very difficult to change as he grew older.

So, Jacob leaves. Rebekah will summon him back when it is safe. What neither know is that he will spend 20 years away and Rebekah will never see him again. Choices have consequences. God works through our sin to carry out His plan. He also works out the consequences of our sins in order to do His transforming work.

Reflect and Respond

Here are the principles that have emerged from this story:

God’s people must be alert to the dangers of spiritual drift and decline in old age.

God’s people must act with integrity and honesty particularly in the context of marriage.

Sin and sinners do not frustrate the invincible purposes of God and even further them.

God uses the consequences of our sin to discipline, correct and change us.

What a sad and terrible story. No one here is worthy of admiration. No heroes; villains all. But yet the determinative plan of God moves forward. Through the very obstacles, God advances His irreversible and invincible purposes.

What a great warning and a great hope for us. We must pursue the ends God has revealed by the means God is pleased with. But even when we fail, He has gathered all that into His plan. Our God is in heaven; who can stay His Hand? None.