

Lesson 3: Jacob, The Man Who Became Israel (Genesis 24-34)

The Story of Jacob and Esau

The promise to bless the nations through the line of Abraham now rests with Isaac. The great importance of Isaac in the history of salvation is that he marks the continuity of the promise and the blessing God gave to Abraham. As the story moves forward, Isaac, who through a sort of divine dating service, marries Rebekah, who gives birth to twins, Esau and Jacob (the name Jacob means “he supplants”). Esau is the firstborn, and yet even before their birth it is prophesized that there will be great division between the two brothers, and the older will serve the younger.⁶⁴ From the very beginning it is apparent that a rivalry between the two boys will define their relationship. We see Jacob, the younger of the two, born holding onto the foot of the elder, Esau. Jacob, even in his first moments, claims for himself what belongs properly to his brother.

The two brothers, although twins, were different in many ways, which affected how each of their parents related to them. “Esau was a skilful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents. Isaac loved Esau, because he ate of his game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.”⁶⁵ Esau, as the elder brother, is the one in line to receive the family blessing, which would make him head of the household. The story, however, takes an unexpected twist.

One day Esau comes in after a long day hunting, famished with hunger, and Jacob is cooking a pot of red lentils. “And Esau said to Jacob, ‘let me eat some of that red pottage, for I am famished’ ... Jacob said, ‘First sell me your birthright.’ Esau said, ‘I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?’ Jacob said, ‘Swear to me first.’ So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and pottage of lentils, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way.”⁶⁶ Thus the first-born casually gives up his prerogative, considering little for future consequences, and the younger manipulates the situation for his gain when the honorable thing to do would have been to give his brother food without demands. In the same way, we often unthinkingly throw away our supernatural inheritance through mortal sin without considering the eternal consequences of our lack of stewardship. Or, we demand from others more than charity, or even justice demands.

Later on, when Isaac is blind and dying, he calls to Esau. Isaac asks Esau to go hunting and prepare a dinner, and to prepare himself to receive the blessing of the first-born son. Rebekah, preferring Jacob over Esau, discovered her husband’s intentions and assisted Jacob in deceiving Isaac to pass the blessing on to him rather than the rightful heir, Esau. She makes a meal for Isaac, and covers Jacob in animal clothes – for Esau was a very hairy man – and so sends in her second son to pose as the first. Isaac is suspicious at first, since the food is ready so soon and the voice sounds like Jacob’s, and yet ultimately he is deceived and gives the blessing to the younger brother:

⁶⁴ Genesis 25:23

⁶⁵ Genesis 25:27-28

⁶⁶ Genesis 25:30-34

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 every one who curses you, and blessed be every one who blesses you!⁶⁷

The Blessing

From a modern perspective we might say, "What's the big deal? Isaac can just give another blessing to Esau." In ancient times, however, there was a distinction between a blessing and *the blessing*. *The Blessing* was an ordaining of the individual to the royal and priestly office of the family. There could be only one high priest and patriarch of a family and so once this blessing was given it could not be offered to another family member. It is much like the permanent sacraments today. Once someone is ordained, baptized or confirmed the sacrament cannot be taken back; it leaves an indelible mark. This idea of the blessing is central to the entire biblical narrative. From creation, when God blessed the earth, and throughout the rest of Scripture we see the idea of blessing taking a central role in the biblical narrative. God works through the blessing, both in creation and family ties.

Now this blessing (*berakah*) was extremely important. Actually, there were two kinds of blessings. The second kind of blessing was a general blessing for the rest of the children. This latter, while still very important in the relationship of the father and the child (in fact, Esau pleads earnestly with his father, just to get this second blessing), nonetheless did not entitle the recipient to headship over the family. In this story, we can note five elements, which characterize the blessing: first, a meaningful touch. In this case the kiss between father and son. Second, a spoken message is a necessary. Good intentions and actions are not enough; there must also be verbal expression. Third, the blessing includes recognition of the person's high value. The recipient of the blessing is affirmed in part because of his own dignity, but also in relation to the carrier of the family blessing. Fourth, there is a description of a special future for the blessed one. For instance, Isaac tells of Jacob's prosperity, and leadership over his family and even over whole nations. The last characteristic of the blessing is that the giver of the blessing is obliged to an active commitment in aiding the fulfillment of the blessing promise. The one who confers the blessing has a responsibility to support the recipient. It should also be pointed out that these five elements presume that God is the foundational source and guarantor of the blessing: it is ultimately His blessing that is invoked, and His power alone can fulfill the blessing promise.

It is beneficial to keep all of this in mind in our own lives, since it provides a model for our relationships with our family and friends and all those whom God has placed in our lives. Do we touch and speak to others lovingly and affirmatively, in a manner that is in keeping with their dignity? Do we commit ourselves to aid them in their own personal well-being? Further, and more importantly, this ancient blessing rite is a preview of God's fatherly blessing, which comes to us in the sacraments. In each sacrament, God uses something physical and something spoken to impart His grace and help us on our

⁶⁷ Genesis 27:28,29

way to eternal life with Him. No one has a right to the grace, just as Jacob did not have a right to the blessing, but it is given as a free gift from God.

Jacob has resorted to deception to get this blessing reserved for the firstborn. Of course, what he wants, that is the blessing, is something good, but he uses evil means to get what does not belong to him. Certainly Esau was hardly worthy of his birthright, yet that does not justify Jacob's theft and deception. If he had trusted in divine providence, he would have made the most of what he had been given in life, instead of grasping at what was not his. Yet the wound of the fall continues, and all of us have a fallen nature that at times wants what is not meant for us. The fundamental mistrust of the Father leads to a loss of peace and results in turning to unjust means for getting what we want. Such injustice inevitably ends in sorrow. And as we will see, Jacob does suffer for his misdeed. This is a unique characteristic of Scripture. Often times the Bible does not explain how an evil act hurts a person, but shows us. In this way the Bible is more dramatic than a simple textbook. This is why it is important to read the Scriptures with an eye to the detail, so the full meaning of the story might be understood. If all we do is wait for the Scriptures to explicitly explain its meaning, we will miss much of the story. With Jacob we will see that, although the author of Genesis does not tell us directly that Jacob suffered for his sin, we are shown in a variety of ways that Jacob suffers greatly.

Jacob's Exile and Marriages

The first unhappy effect of Jacob's deception is that Esau threatens his life. It is easy to imagine the rage of Esau after discovering what had happened. Rebekah, fearing for her son's safety, convinces Isaac to send Jacob away to find a wife. Here, too, we see the unhappy consequences of sin. How difficult it must have been for Rebekah to send her favorite son away, and yet this is the result of her scheming to steal the birthright from Esau. This is an important lesson on how to deal with anger. Sometimes the best thing to do is to keep our distance from whomever it is we angered until time tones down the indignation.

As Jacob is on the way God speaks to him, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your descendants; and your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and by you and your descendants shall all the families of the earth bless themselves. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land."⁶⁸ In other words, God is beginning the process of reeducating Jacob in trust, persuading him to take faith in His Fatherly care. The Scripture also makes clear that the reason for choosing the people of Israel is to have the blessing of God reach all nations, and to let all people, created as they are in the image and likeness of God, benefit from that choice. This also demonstrates that it is through the breath of God the Father that the covenant is fulfilled. Esau was in line naturally, and yet it is the word of God that makes the covenant promise present in Jacob. Jacob proves himself to be less than honorable, and yet God uses this imperfect person to fulfill his promise. So it is important to remember that in the end it is not us that makes the covenant present, but the grace of God.

⁶⁸ Genesis 28:13-15

Jacob is not yet through with the painful consequences of his wrongdoing. Going to a well in the east, he meets Rachel, the daughter of his uncle Laban. (Watering holes are often the place in the Scriptures where men go to meet women...much like things today.) There is a happy family reunion, and Jacob asks Laban for Rachel's hand in marriage, in return for which he offers to work for seven years. "So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her."⁶⁹ Then, on the day he is to marry Rachel, Laban secretly switches his two daughters, giving Leah (the elder, unattractive sister) in marriage. When Jacob wakes up the next morning he discovers that he has been married to the wrong girl! The irony is thick. Just as he tricked his father into blessing the wrong son, now he himself has been deceived (literally, "jacobed" as the original Hebrew says, which can mean "one who deceives") into marrying the wrong sister. In fact, when he complains of his mistreatment to his uncle, Laban responds, "It is not so done in our country to give the younger before the firstborn"⁷⁰ – a harsh jibe to the fact that in Jacob's case it was the second son who received the blessing before the eldest.

The point is clear: Jacob is reaping what he has sown. Nor is this the last time Jacob will be the victim of lies. As we will see in the next section, his own sons will mislead him in a much more agonizing manner. As it is, Jacob must now work seven more years in exchange for marriage with Rachel, whom he loves much more than Leah. This polygamous relationship leads to much domestic discord in Genesis 29 and 30, yet eventually twelve children are born to Jacob, ten from Leah and two from Rachel. Even though Jacob enters into a polygamous relationship, God still uses him for the blessing. The sacred writer is not trying to base the effectiveness of God's plan on the perfection of the human characters involved but rather on God's personal initiative. Each person in salvation history has his or her limitations and defects, but is called to cooperate with God's will. So it is with us. We are called, in our sin and imperfections, to participate in the divine plan of salvation for all people.

The Reconciliation with Esau and the Struggle with God

In the meantime, his relationship with Laban and his family is becoming aggravated. Laban, not satisfied with having swindled Jacob once, continues to treat him unjustly. Then God speaks to Jacob, "Return to the Land of your fathers and to your kindred, and I will be with you."⁷¹ Here, in Jacob's return to the Promised Land, we see symbolized the attitude of conversion that all Christians are called to: return to the Father's House (grace) after sin.

This command requires a great deal of faith on the part of Jacob. After all, it has been twenty years now since Jacob has seen his brother, and he does not know how his brother will react to his return, since the last time he had been in the area, Esau was plotting to murder him. Jacob must have been haunted by his deception of Esau years earlier. Still, Jacob obeys and sends messengers ahead to Esau with a reconciliatory greeting. The messengers come back informing Jacob that his brother is coming to meet him,

⁶⁹ Genesis 29:20

⁷⁰ Genesis 29:26

⁷¹ Genesis 31:3

accompanied by four hundred men. This ominous reply terrifies Jacob, for he knows that Esau has it in his power to destroy him and his family. He offers a fervent prayer to God, begging for His intercession, and then sends gifts ahead in order to appease his brother.

That night a very strange event occurs. Alone, Jacob wrestles with a man until daybreak. This mysterious man wants to get away, but Jacob tells him, “I will not let you go until you bless me.”⁷² The man tells him, “Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel [which means “he who has striven with God”], for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed,” and he blesses Jacob. Then Jacob declares, “I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.”⁷³ Notice during the story Jacob’s determination that he receive a blessing from God, (since he knows that the blessing he had from Isaac was not gained legitimately) and that God does in fact reward his prayer and effort with the blessing he is seeking.⁷⁴ The tradition of the Church holds that this example of Jacob illustrates the battle we all face in prayer, and that God rewards our perseverance.⁷⁵ A famous saying from Mother Theresa is that “God doesn’t ask for success, just faithfulness.” This is especially true for our prayer life. The most important thing we can do in prayer is to remain faithful to it and submit ourselves in trust to the will of the Father. The Church has also often considered the man who wrestles Jacob an angel. In light of this, we are reminded of the roles angels have in the life of prayer and in the life of the Church, which benefits from “the mysterious and powerful help of angels.”⁷⁶

With the changing of Jacob’s name to Israel there is also a change in his character. If the key moment in the story of Abraham is his obedience to God when He asked him to sacrifice his son, in the case of Jacob it is when he wrestles with God to obtain the blessing. Before the encounter with God, Jacob was fearful of meeting back up with Esau. After the encounter Israel no longer shrinks from the prospect of what awaits him, but he boldly goes forward, even putting himself at the head of the column.

His efforts with his brother are also successful on the following day. As Esau approaches, Jacob leads his family, followed by his concubines and their children, then Leah and her children, with Rachel and her son Joseph taking up the rear in order that they might be the best protected. Fortunately, Jacob’s fears are groundless: Esau gives his brother a warm reception, and tries to return the many gifts sent by Jacob.⁷⁷ But Jacob insists, “No, I pray you, if I have found favor in your sight, then accept my present

⁷² Genesis 32:26

⁷³ Genesis 32:30

⁷⁴ The prophet Hosea will apply this event to the way Israel resists God over the course of its history (Hosea 12:4-6).

⁷⁵ CCC, #2573; Saint Ambrose writes: What does fighting with God mean if not engaging in the combat of virtue and aspiring to the highest, making oneself, above all, an imitator of God? And because his faith and his devotion could not be overpowered, the Lord revealed to him the secret mysteries (*De Jacob et vita beata*, 2, 7, 30).

⁷⁶ CCC, #334

⁷⁷ Jacob shows warm feelings with Esau, but he also acts with great prudence. This is one of his strong virtues: he acts proportionally according to the purpose he pursues. “Prudence is the virtue that disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it...Prudence is right reason in action” (Saint Thomas Aquinas, *S. Th.*, II-II, 47, 2). See also, CCC, #1806.

from my hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God.”⁷⁸ It is important to point out that the word for “present” is “berekah,” which is the same word used for Isaac’s “blessing.” In other words, Jacob is attempting to restore what he stole, in order that there may be reconciliation.⁷⁹ He is successful. Peace is restored in the family. Finally, after years of fear, exploitation, and familial tensions, Jacob/Israel learns to trust in God, and to follow His will in all circumstances.

The Blessing of the Younger Nations

Today Christians still recognize the Jewish people as possessing a certain dignity as the firstborn. It is to them that the family blessing first came. The late John Paul II is famous for his great love for the Jewish people, in part because he knew that it is to them that the blessing first came, and through them the world was given the Messiah.

Although not strictly analogous to the story of Jacob, we see in the Catholic Church the blessing now given to the world through the younger child. While the Jewish people still retain a natural dignity according to their unique order in the salvation history, the blessing is now available to all the children of God through Christ who made the sacrificial blessing of his life available to the Gentiles. The covenant promise is no longer limited to the firstborn, but now is offered to all through the Catholic Church. In this respect, the Catholic Church is similar to the younger child who receives the blessing for the firstborn. The grace of God is not bound by convention. God chooses whomever he wishes, with total freedom. Even in those times when it seems individuals thwart God’s original plan, He accomplishes His divine will regardless. Like with the story of Israel, the younger is chosen through no merits of his own.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Genesis 33:10

⁷⁹ Saint John Chrysostom says this about Jacob’s attitude toward Esau: Nothing is more potent than meekness: just as throwing water on a fiercely blazing fire usually puts it out, so too a word spoken with meekness quenches a rage flaring more fiercely than a furnace...In the same way, it could never happen that anger would suppress anger: I mean, what water does to fire, meekness and gentleness do to anger” (*Homiliae in Genesim*, 58, 5).

⁸⁰ Romans 9:6-13