

GENESIS—WEEK 22

DECEPTION, AND FOR WHAT?



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Cover Picture is Isaac Blesses Jacob (Amsterdam)
by Govert Flinck (1483–1520) On display at Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Esau continues to not give a rip about his family heritage, and it comes back to burn him. Rebekah masterminds a scheme for Isaac to bless Jacob with a blessing meant for Esau. Jacob plays along and gets the blessing—for what that’s worth.

And it’s not worth much. God’s plans were always what ruled the future.

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Thank you.

Genesis 26:34-27:40 — Deception, and for What?

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1 Genesis 26:34–35 (ESV)

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.

Esau continues to distance himself from his family and from God. Surely, he's aware of how Abraham didn't want Isaac to marry one of the locals and how his servant was supernaturally blessed in finding Esau's mom for Isaac. Even though he's his dad's favorite, he bucks family tradition and marries two Hittite women. The Bible emphasizes that this pains his parents. Everything's going off the rails with Esau, and it even looks like that's what he wants. What's going on here?

This is a perfect portrait of how sin spirals out of control. Esau didn't take his birthright seriously and sold it for a bowl of stew. What seemed unimportant to him at the time will prove to be a bitter pill to swallow. He blew off all things having to do with the LORD, and he's not going to wake up for a long time.

This is like kids who get involved in the occult, thinking it's all fun and games. By the time they realize it's not all fun and games, they're in so deep that suicide is a real danger.

We all know what's coming for Esau. Jacob and Rebekah are about to conspire to steal his blessing. It's easy to take the attitude, "Yeah, baby. Paybacks!"

Praise the LORD that He doesn't take that attitude with us.

Learning grace is a never ending, never complete, task for a Christian. People ruin their lives. Our task, as bearers of the gospel, is to help them.

This doesn't mean denying their mistakes—forgiveness is not acquittal—but it can mean loving people who are hard to love. We all cheer when the bad guy in a movie takes it in the shorts. That makes sense for fictional characters, but not for real ones.

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven." — Matthew 5:43–45a

This is a tough lesson to learn—and even tougher to practice. Great challenges require something special, and loving difficult people definitely qualifies. Still, we're all called to not shrink from these challenges. Never, ever, think that anything is beyond where God might take you.

If loving your enemies sounds ridiculous or even impossible, good. That's one of the keys to sanctification. But know this—trying harder is not how this works. Only God can take you to this level. Prayer is the only way.

That's the point. It's impossible. God gets all the glory.

2 Genesis 27:1–13 (ESV)

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.”

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 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.” 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.”

Note that this is all Rebekah’s idea. Even though we normally call this Jacob stealing Esau’s blessing (and Esau will definitely see it that way), it’s actually all Rebekah’s doing. Jacob doesn’t even want to play along. It’s clear that Rebekah is ordering Jacob around when she says, “*Obey my voice,*” twice.

But why? As Jacob points out, this plan has big risks—not to mention that it’s just plain wrong. Sure, Jacob is Rebekah’s favorite, while Esau is Isaac’s, but pulling a stunt like this is pretty close to a marital act of war. If blessings and curses carry real weight, then this plan is nuts; if not, this is all about nothing. It seems sure to cause resentment in the long run. What kind of “blessing” will that be? Why do this?

Could it be that Esau’s Hittite wives have made life so bitter that Rebekah has lost it? Maybe, but then this is all just a demented outburst. If so, the passage should say so—and it doesn’t. Besides, the Bible’s about sin, not mental illness. The simplest explanation is always sin.

Uh oh. Is Rebekah trying to “help” God fulfill His Genesis 25:23 prophesy about her two children? We’ve seen that one before.

Curiously, God will let Rebekah’s plan succeed—in the short run. Just as He let Abraham have a son by Hagar, He will let Jacob deceive Isaac. Rebekah’s plan will blow up in a different way.

This is a great illustration of how we don’t see things the way God sees them. God frequently lets sin “work” for a while—sometimes so well that we think we “got away with it.” Only later do we discover that we weren’t thinking broadly enough.

He’s teaching us! Just as parents let kids make mistakes to teach them, God sometimes lets sin play out.

3 Genesis 27:14–25 (ESV)

So he went and took them and brought them to his mother, and his mother prepared delicious food, such as his father loved. 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. And the skins of the young goats she put on his hands and on the smooth part of his neck. And she put the delicious food and the bread, which she had prepared, into the hand of her son Jacob.

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.” 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.

Jacob has to be scared out of his wits. The exact scenario he was worried about is coming to pass. Don't forget, Rebekah set him up. She hatched the scheme, cooked the food, and made the disguise. She did all the work, plus said that if it goes wrong and Isaac curses Jacob, it's supposed to be all on her.

But now it's Jacob that Isaac is talking to, not Rebekah. He's on his own—lying to his father. Isaac suspects something's up and asks Jacob, “*How is it that you have found it so quickly, my son?*”

Thinking fast, he replies, “*Because the LORD your God granted me success.*” Still, that doesn't end the cross-examination. Isaac makes him come close and continues to check his ID.

By this point, Jacob is probably sweating so much he smells a little gamey.

Eventually, Isaac buys it and the plan works—so to speak. One could even wonder if Isaac really fell for it, or if he just gave up and decided to play along. But Genesis 27:33 makes this clear; Isaac was deceived.

So he blessed him.

Sin can be its own punishment. Jacob got through this, but emerged battered and bruised. Jacob won a blessing at the cost of becoming something no one wants to be—and no one wants to be around. He gained a blessing, but he lost his honor.

Discovering God is the ultimate paradigm shift. To the world, what's important is what you've done. To God, what's important is what you are.

Jesus didn't die on the cross to redeem your past; He died to redeem you.

4 Genesis 27:26–33 (ESV)

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!”

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.”

Isaac’s blessing of Jacob implies real consequences—and it seems to be irrevocable. How?

The Bible doesn’t explain how Isaac’s words have such power, but any power it might have has to come from God. Isaac’s blessing is, at most, an effectual prayer.

But why is it irrevocable? Are some prayers cast in stone? That seems unlikely given that even God’s own pronouncements can be revoked (e.g., see Jonah 3:1-10). So, why is this one irrevocable?

Actually, the Bible doesn’t say that it is. Isaac thinks it’s irrevocable and so won’t revoke it. Scripture doesn’t have any instructions on “blessing law,” so Isaac seems to just be following tradition.

Remember, this is before any mass communication; everything Isaac knows he heard word-of-mouth. To know that a blessing can’t be revoked, even if given under false pretenses, he would have to know of a special rule or at least a similar case.

Neither is mentioned in scripture.

Imagine how mangled everything would be if God didn’t edit our prayers. We’ve all made amusing goofs while on our knees. We mistake names, places, goals, even Scripture.

But it’s all okay, even glorifying. God does wondrous things in response to fumbled prayers. Our prayers aren’t really all that different from the bedtime prayers of a child—and they’re just as beautiful.

Consider the simplest prayers we say, the ones we teach our children, the memorized grace we might say before dinner. Those prayers seem dull, rote, and unimportant, but they have the benefit of not pretending to be wise or clever. They’re just child-like pleas. That’s the right posture to take before an infinite God.

The last thing a prayer should strive to be is “impressive.”

5 Genesis 27:34–40 (ESV)

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!” 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 all 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.”

Most of this blessing just repeats what the LORD told Rebekah long ago. Isaac’s “prophecy” that, “*when you grow restless you shall break his yoke from your neck,*” is never fulfilled. His blessings aren’t so important after all. They’re only as effectual as God chooses to make them.

The Old Testament has a curious way of shooting down the very traditions it reports. Here, Genesis faithfully records Rebekah and Jacob conspiring to steal Esau’s blessing.

But it will go on to show that the whole thing was a waste. Yes, God blesses Jacob, but that’s what He said He would do before Jacob was born. Isaac’s pronouncements aren’t the key.

It’s a mistake to think that since the Bible is inerrant, everyone in it must be inerrant too. Scripture’s recording of an event is not an endorsement. Just because people in the Bible believe something doesn’t mean they’re right. What is infallible is Scripture’s recording of what happened. Isaac is following an ancient tradition, one that Rebekah, Jacob and Esau believe in too.

But the errors in what Isaac says to Esau prove that his blessings are not prophetic.

Isaac’s blessings are like prayers; whatever happens next is up to God. Prayer has great power, but it’s not our power. Unfortunately, our pride can cause us to forget this rule.

Great saints are invariably very humble. That’s not a coincidence. There is a wonderful relationship between humility and prayer. Humility is essential because answered prayers can start us thinking, “Wow, I must have done something right.” That’s pure poison, and God won’t honor that. So, while God can grant any prayer request, humble prayer is proper.

It’s always a good idea to ask God to rid us of our pride. Even then we can end up thinking something like, “Wow, I’m becoming humble.”

But then we should get the joke.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. How should the church train people to love those who are hard to love?
2. Ever had a win, or success, or some other kind of good news, turn out to be a tough lesson in the long run?
3. Are you comfortable with your redemption? Is the weight completely lifted?
4. What's the most mangled prayer you ever prayed? How did God respond?
5. What does true humility look like?