

needed someone to do this in order to resolve the problems now raised for the future of the Covenant. Isaac was not ready to give the Covenant to anyone (we will read more about this tomorrow); Esau would never have it, and Jacob was not mature enough to be worthy of it. A longer term solution was required.

Whatever Rebekah felt about the whole situation, she acted for the safety of her sons, and instructed Jacob to go to the household of her brother Laban in Mesopotamia (a very long way away!) whilst the situation cooled down (27:42f.) Her final comments reveal her thought that if her two sons remained in the same place, they would kill each other, and then everything would be lost. She may also have been aware that if her favoured son Jacob was ever to become a man of God, he needed to be hardened by work of a kind he had not done before (25:27,28). She knew just the man to teach him!

Application

It is very hard for any of us to see the way forward in the midst of difficult times, for personal or family reasons, and it is easy to become caught up in disputes about why did this person say this to that person or someone else, and so forth. The endless discussion of who did what for whatever reason, can be the seed bed either of further strife and conflict, or the route to understanding and forgiveness. The difference between the two is God Himself. In the midst of this situation, I believe that Isaac was holding back from offering the Covenant blessings of God by inheritance to either of his sons; despite the blessings and prophecies he gave to them. Rebekah was looking to the future, trying to make sure that everything did not cycle into disaster. There is much in the story of Genesis 27 that is not worthy of our attention for spiritual growth and formation. However, in the circumstances of strife between Isaac and Esau, their parents might just have done the right thing, in the end.

Whatever happened, God was not going to be deflected from his chosen path. He had promised to keep his Covenant with the family line of Abraham, which was to rest with Jacob, for ever, and everything would work out 'for good'. Whatever was really going on in Isaac's household, the story is a reminder to us that real faith in God is proven when times seem dark and troubled, not when everything is going smoothly.

Discipleship Challenges

Please use the programme of lifestyle challenges which can be found by following the link 'lifestyle challenge'. The downloadable 'worksheet' will help you follow through any challenge which you feel is right for you to take up.

Suggestions about discipleship and Christian lifestyle

Do you recall any troubled times within your family, either when you were a child, or in later life? It is important for us to come to terms with what we recall of such events, even though we tend to bury these things quite deeply inside. I suggest you focus not on the rights and wrongs of what happened, but on its effect on you. Offer your own responses of unhappiness, anger or whatever, to the Lord. Pray and ask the Lord to help you forgive others, repent of wrongdoing, as appropriate for your involvement. You will find great blessing in doing this.

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ; You came into this world with the intention to love all people, and yet You quickly found yourself in contention with those who opposed You. Help us to deal with strife and tension in a godly way, and seek Your help in the midst of all the problems we face. Bring us, we pray, to a place of freedom and liberation from trouble and strife. AMEN

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Why do you think that Isaac did not feel able to give a blessing of any kind to Esau?
2. What did Esau expect to gain from his father, given that he knew that Jacob had 'stolen his birthright'?
3. Discuss the options for what Rebekah may have meant by saying 'why should I loose both of you in one day?'

Prayer

We ask You to bless us, O Lord, when we are troubled by the things that we see happening around us. Save our world, save our church, save our families we pray, and give us the courage to stand against evil wherever we find it; for we do so in Your name, Lord Jesus; AMEN

Further Suggestions for Prayer

Weekly Theme: the Church's task of Mission

Pray today for the work of the Church in deprived areas of the world where there is great poverty or instability. Pray for the Church to have courage to face difficult issues in its mission.

As you pray for this, pray for the political and economic institutions that perpetuate poverty, and call on the Lord for his judgement, and changes for the better,

Meditation

I need to be reminded of Your faithfulness each morning, Lord,

For that is when the pattern of the day is set.

I either focus the day upon myself, my world and my needs,

The tasks of the day and their successful execution,

Or I can decide to turn my gaze away from this and on to You

Who have a bigger sight of everything; more than I can see.

You are able to lead me properly, honestly and thoroughly

Through the ups and downs of all that will happen,

Whereas I just bumble my way unthinkingly through daily work

With what I think is my perspective, but lacks true depth and clarity.

For Lord, I worship You, the One who sees eternity within a gaze,

And sets my moments and my days just perfectly,

Though I can see no further than my hand. But having turned to You,

The world I see, my day, my life, come into focus, gloriously!

Bible Study - Genesis 27:30-45

³⁰ As soon as Isaac had finished blessing Jacob, when Jacob had scarcely left his father's presence, his brother Esau returned from hunting. ³¹ He also prepared a savoury meal and brought it to his father. Then he said, 'My father, please sit up and eat some of my game, so that you may bless me.' ³² His father Isaac said to him, 'Who are you?' He answered, 'I am your firstborn son, Esau.' ³³ Then Isaac shook with fear and horror, 'Then who was it who brought me game which I ate before you came? I blessed him; and yes, he will stay blessed!'

³⁴ When Esau heard what his father said, he cried out and sobbed bitterly, begging his father, 'Bless me, father, me as well!' ³⁵ But he said, 'Your brother came with deceit, and has taken away your blessing.' ³⁶ Esau said, 'Isn't he rightly called Jacob! ('he grabs') Twice he has grabbed what is mine! He took my birthright; and just now, he has taken away my blessing!' Then he said, 'Have you not saved a blessing for me?'

³⁷ Isaac replied and said to Esau, 'Look, I have made him your master, and I have made all his brothers his servants; I have also given him grain and wine for support. What then can I do for you, my son?' ³⁸ Esau said to his father, 'Do you only have one blessing, father? Bless me, father, me as well!' And Esau wept aloud. ³⁹ Then his father Isaac answered him:

'Your home will be far from the earth's riches and heaven's dew. ⁴⁰ You will live by your sword, and you will serve your brother; but when you struggle free, you will break his yoke from your neck.'

⁴¹ Esau bore a deep grudge against Jacob because of the blessing his father had given him, and Esau said to himself, 'When the days of mourning for my father come, then I

will kill my brother Jacob.’⁴² When Rebekah was told what Esau had said; she summoned her younger son Jacob and said to him, ‘Your brother Esau is consoling himself with the idea of killing you.’⁴³ Now then, my son, listen to me; flee immediately to my brother Laban in Haran,⁴⁴ and stay with him for a while, until your brother’s fury subsides.⁴⁵ When he is no longer angry with you and he forgets what you have done to him; then I will send word to bring you back from there. Why should I lose both of you in one day?’

Review

This passage of scripture ends the long story of deceit surrounding the blessing Isaac gave to Jacob instead of Esau, his firstborn. We know what will happen, because the whole story has been building up to this. Esau returns and quickly discovers what has happened. Isaac also discovers the deceit and shakes with fear (27:33). Without question, this is the first time that the Bible has conveyed to us such strength of feeling, for the whole passage is littered with words of anger, tears, appeals and grudges. The blissful scenes of contented nomadic life at the end of chapter 26 have been left far behind, and the ‘chosen people of God’ end this chapter of the Bible rent asunder. Whatever went on in the minds of, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob and Esau, the damage has been done and crucially, the Covenant blessings of God have not yet been passed on.

The question we must ask is this; can God’s chosen people be salvaged from this mess? The answer, of course, is ‘Yes’. Genesis is a long series of catastrophic stories from which God has to rescue his Covenant plan for the future and for salvation. Who would have thought that God’s promises could be passed on by an infertile married couple? But the Lord miraculously gave Sarah a child! Who would have thought that God could have a relationship with people again after their appalling sins before the Flood? But through Noah, He did. Who would have thought that humanity could survive the disaster of the ‘Fall’, and the murder of Abel by Cain? But by the creation of a new line from Adam through Seth, it did. Our passage today is no less significant, but if we know this theme of Genesis, then we can expect that God will find a way to bear the Covenant, even more strongly, to the next generation. The last story in Genesis, about Jacob’s son Joseph, also follows the same path from disaster to triumph. It would become a theme for the whole life of God’s people in Old Testament times.

If you have followed these studies over recent days, you will know that it is not obvious that Isaac intended to do anything more for Esau than give him a fatherly blessing; certainly not the formal inheritance his wealth and the Covenant of God as Abraham had done for Isaac (22:17f.; 25:5f.) We will try to get to the bottom of this in the main Bible study, but we can easily see that Isaac, despite being shocked, did not respond to Esau with warmth or reassurance, eventually giving him what amounted to a curse not a blessing (27:39). There was no reason why a father could not respond favourably to sons that were not firstborn (see 25:5f.). Why did Isaac react like this? Was it because despite his favouritism, he knew that God wanted the Covenant to go to Jacob (27:23,37). We should be careful not to make assumptions about what was happening and read the text carefully.

At the end, the Covenant is not yet passed on and although Isaac may well have been an old man when this happened, he would have to live many more years before the Lord brought Jacob, an immature man of difficult character, to a place of surrender and faith where he was worthy of both the Covenant and the Promised Land.

Going Deeper

What did Isaac really feel about what was going on? He was clearly angry, but unable to show love to Esau and give him comfort! And what was happening to God’s Covenant in the midst of this family mayhem? It is not mentioned, but it was the key to the whole situation.

Strife in the family

The tense moments when Jacob scuttled out of Isaac’s presence and Esau arrived with his freshly killed game are wonderfully portrayed in the Hebrew of verses 30 and 31, and the story is told with a great deal of repetition of words. ‘My father’ or ‘his father’ is repeated in the story far more times than we would normally do in English, six time in verses 30-34 alone, for example, and other details which indicate family relationships are also repeatedly emphasised; ‘his brother Esau’ – v30; ‘... your firstborn son, Esau’ – v32; ‘his father Isaac’ – v39. In this way,

the text of Scripture tells us its primary concern, which is that the family is being destroyed by their ‘in-fighting’ over the Covenant of God.

Throughout the life of the people of Israel in later years, great emphasis was placed on the importance of the family unit as the place where the life of God’s chosen people was to be lived. After the time of the Exile, for example, the supremely important feast of the Passover was celebrated in the family home, as it is to this day amongst Jews. It is possible that some of the stories of Genesis, such as that of Jacob and Esau, which told of the ups and downs of family life were used as examples of what happened when people followed their own ways and the Lord had to rescue them from the consequences of their actions.

Confusion!

Nevertheless, it is possible to dig deeper into this story and reach some conclusions about what was going on, and these conclusions may not be what we might imagine from a quick read of the text. We shall start with Isaac. If it was indeed his intention to give Esau a private paternal blessing for his favoured son, knowing since the Lord’s prophecy at his birth that the Covenant blessing would go to Jacob, then his actions in this text do make sense. When Esau came in and presented himself to Isaac, Isaac would have been shocked that his private arrangement with Esau had been overheard. He would have immediately realised that it was Jacob who had come previously, but he did not speak out against Jacob in anger. Instead, he declared openly that Jacob would indeed be blessed (27:33). The fact was that the whole situation was out of hand; Isaac realised that Jacob (with Rebekah’s help) had tricked him because he thought he would gain the coveted blessing of God, the inheritance of God’s people and the Covenant; but nothing of the sort was in his mind! His trembling was the fear and horror of realising the utter mess that had been created by presumptions and misunderstandings within the family created by its inner tensions.

The confusion in the household about birthrights, blessings and the inheritance of God’s people was clearly evident in Esau’s words of pleading to Isaac. Realising that Jacob had again taken from him what was his, he complained bitterly that Jacob’s name, meaning ‘he grabs’ (see 25:26) had proved to be his character. He knew full well that he had been tricked out of his birthright in the earlier incident with the ‘red stew’ (25:29-34) and this right of the firstborn meant nothing unless it included the primary inheritance from Isaac. His objection to what had just happened was not that he had lost this, but that he had now lost the personal blessing of father.

When Esau complained to Isaac, the reply he received was extraordinary. Isaac repeated that the words of blessing he gave to Jacob, were fixed, and once said, they were irrevocable. Yet why did Isaac not offer other words of blessing for his favoured son in this tragic situation? It is possible that Isaac knew full well that he had one more blessing to give, which was the Lord’s blessing and the Covenant, and his prevarication was a sign of his unease at Esau’s pressing the request for more blessing. In reality, everyone knew the blessing of God and the Covenant was the real issue at stake, and Isaac was not going to say anything to his sons about that in the midst of this family strife! Jacob had tried to get it by trickery, and now Esau was trying to badger his father into doing something he knew would not be right. This is why Isaac spoke words to Esau (27:39,40) that were simply a prophecy of what would come rather than any form of blessing.

The consequences

Whether we are right or wrong about what Isaac felt and believed, the consequences of what happened had a dire impact upon the family. Reading about it in hindsight is easy, because we know that Jacob will one day become a godly man and Esau will find his own life and create a new tribe (Edom – see 25:30), but the strength of feelings generated by the whole incident threatened everything that Isaac and Rebekah had built together with God’s blessing.

Esau became immersed in his own sense of rejection and responded to it with an aggression that was typical of his character. He planned to kill Jacob (27:41). The assumption that his father would soon die was also misplaced, for Isaac would live another 80 years (35:28). Rebekah, the woman commended by scripture for her prompt responses (24:57f.) and strong character (24:64f.) had used these same characteristics, for good or ill, to plot the deception of her husband, and could be said to be responsible for all that had happened. Nevertheless, she attempted to hold the family together and maintain a long term perspective (27:43f.). God