

Genesis: *The Quest to Be Blessed*
Genesis 27:26-40

We are walking through the book of Genesis, and last week we began our work on Genesis 27--a chapter which highlights two sons on a quest to be blessed by their aging father who has lost his eyesight. If you recall, the elderly father, Isaac, determines that the time has come to speak his verbal, fatherly blessing over his firstborn son, Esau, even though God had made it clear when his twin sons were in the womb that "the older shall serve the younger." Nevertheless, Isaac commissions Esau to go hunting for game, come back and prepare the father's favorite meal, so that after eating, Esau might receive his father's blessing that was typically reserved for the firstborn son.

However, when Isaac's wife Rebekah learns of Isaac's plans to bless Esau, she quickly engages their second-born son, Jacob, in a deceptive plot to fool Isaac into blessing Jacob instead of Esau. She prepares a delicious meal of goat stew, covers Jacob in goat skins (to make him appear hairy like his brother) and dresses him in Esau's clothes. She then instructs Jacob to fool the old man into speaking a blessing over him rather than Esau. Now, as we return to the narrative, we will hear Isaac's blessing and walk through the trauma that follows when both Isaac and Esau realize Jacob's deception. Please stand and let us read Genesis 27:26-40:

26 Then his father Isaac said to him, "Come near and kiss me, my son." 27 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!

28 May God give you of the dew of heaven

and of the fatness of the earth

and plenty of grain and wine.

29 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!"

³⁰ 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. ³¹ 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." ³² His father Isaac said to him, "Who are you?" He answered, "I am your son, your firstborn, Esau." ³³ 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." ³⁴ 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!" ³⁵ But he said, "Your brother came deceitfully, and he has taken away your blessing." ³⁶ 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?" ³⁷ 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?" ³⁸ 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.³⁹ Then Isaac his father answered and said to him:

“Behold, away from the fatness of the earth shall your dwelling be,
and away from the dew of heaven on high.

⁴⁰By your sword you shall live,
and you shall serve your brother;
but when you grow restless
you shall break his yoke from your neck.”

My message will fall under three subheadings: 1) The Father’s Blessing; 2) The Wounded Son; and 3) The Anti-Blessing.

I. The Father’s Blessing

As we worked through this story last Sunday, I think we all began to realize how profoundly insightful this story is to the human condition. Every human soul longs to be blessed; and, sadly, if we cannot find the blessing that our hearts long for, we are constantly looking for it.

I read recently of young girl who was born to a mother with mental illness, and her father abandoned them both before she was even born. Because her mother was not capable of raising a child, she was placed into foster care. Though she was in foster care, she would occasionally be reunited with her birth mother for short visits, and it was there as a little girl that she fixated on a picture in the hallway: it was a picture of her mom standing beside the man she assumed to be her father. The little girl would stare at that picture for hours, imagining what it would be like if her father one day stepped back into her life. In fact, in her journal she wrote of a time she was in the hospital for a tonsillectomy, and she kept replaying the dream that he would walk in, kiss her head, tell her that she would be OK and that he was proud of the way she was behaving with so much courage. Sadly, her father never did return; so, she remained obsessed with the image of her father and a dream of a relationship that was not real; nor was the shape of her chin real or the bend of her nose or her feigned air-headed behavior or the beautiful smile that won the souls of millions...nor was her real name Marilyn Monroe. Her real name was Norma Jean Mortenson, though she lived her entire life posing as someone else in a desperate, never-ending quest for the father’s blessing she never received. Though beautiful, sought after, famous, and wealthy, Norma Jean could not find peace in her relationships. She married and divorced three times and finally took her own life at the age of 36 through a massive drug overdose.

Church, the world is full of people like Norma Jean. The desperate quest for a blessing has been going on for a long time, as evidenced by the story of Jacob’s quest for a blessing here in Genesis 27. Though Jacob was loved by his mother, Jacob never felt loved or desired by his father, Isaac. Instead, Isaac loved Jacob’s twin brother, Esau...the firstborn. In the ancient world, there was an assumed bond between the father and the firstborn son because the firstborn would receive a birthright consisting of 2/3 of the estate and all the responsibility of the family when the father aged out of his role. He would also receive the father’s blessing, which was a spoken, prophetic word regarding the firstborn’s gifts, his future, and the father’s prediction of his son’s

success. Every boy other than the firstborn grew up knowing he would never measure up to the oldest son; he would never have the blessing of his father that was reserved for the firstborn. This was a particularly bitter reality for Jacob because he was born just seconds after Esau, and we read that Jacob literally came out of the womb holding onto the heel of Esau, as if there had been a battle in the womb for firstborn status.

We must, then, imagine the bitterness and desperation that accompanied Jacob every day of his life, realizing that he was all but invisible to his father who constantly doted upon and bragged about Esau. Esau was a great shot with the bow; Esau knew how to prepare his father's favorite venison stew; Esau was a manly man, ruddy and hairy, and no doubt he would become a great warrior. Jacob would never be able to live up to Esau; so, he stopped competing. He avoided Esau and stayed home with his mother, Rebekah. Over time, Jacob's bitterness corrupted his very soul. He hated his brother; but mostly he hated himself. We can imagine how Jacob's chronic unhappiness affected his mother, though apparently Isaac never seemed to notice.

Jacob's desperate desire to be seen and blessed by his father finally led to a deceptive plot that we read about last week...a ruse of lies and betrayal that is sealed with a kiss. Let's pick up the story there beginning with vs. 26: ²⁶ Then his father Isaac said to Jacob [thinking he was Esau], "Come near and kiss me, my son." ²⁷ 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!

²⁸ May God give you of the dew of heaven

and of the fatness of the earth

and plenty of grain and wine.

²⁹ 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!"

Because scheming Jacob now wears the clothes of his older brother, Isaac smells the scent of his firstborn son, Esau, and his heart is overwhelmed with love, joy, hope, and blessing. He gushes forth a blessing that is deeply personal and hope-filled. The smell of Esau springs forth images of a field blessed by the LORD. Isaac declares that Esau's future will be as a field that never lacks rain; a field that produces trophy cattle and huge yields of grain, not to mention lush grapevines and exquisite wine. The patriarch then invokes God to place his beloved firstborn in a position of power, that peoples would serve the firstborn, that nations would bow before the firstborn, and every other brother (including Jacob) would serve Esau, the firstborn. Finally, Isaac invokes the same language once spoken by God to Abraham when he declares, "Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you!"

The blessing spoken by Isaac comes from long years of observing his son, Esau. Esau has all the qualities of a mighty man; a man who knows how to handle the bow as well as the plow. He has the leadership qualities to rule, and though God once said “the older shall serve the younger,” Isaac explicitly and passionately declares that the younger son, and any and all sons that belong to the family tree, shall serve the older, firstborn son, Esau. At least that was his intent by blessing the son he thought to be Esau. However, we know as the reader that Isaac has just unknowingly granted authority to Jacob, the younger son, the deceiver. We get the sense that, as soon as the blessing has been spoken, Jacob quietly departs; and a moment later, Esau returns with wild game in hand. We know what’s about to happen, right? All hell is about to break loose when the truth comes out. This moment is incredibly tense and awkward; but does it not strike you as remarkably familiar as well? Why is that?

Well, the scene we just read has been copied and replayed in many literary and theatrical works, and particularly those of William Shakespeare. My daughter is currently in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, and there is a very similar scene where love and blessing is declared, but the intended recipient is not present. Instead, there is one dressed in disguise who receives those words. I did a little research, and at least eleven of Shakespeare’s plays feature a mistaken identity due to someone intentionally presenting themselves dishonestly. The most recent rendition of this scene in Genesis 27 was beautifully displayed in the Broadway musical/made into a movie entitled, *Dear Evan Hansen*. Evan Hansen is an awkward social outcast in his school being raised by a single mom, but through a series of events, he is suddenly lauded and celebrated by grieving parents for being the one and only friend to their deeply troubled student who took his life. Evan knows that he was never a friend to the troubled classmate, but instead of correcting the grieving parents, Evan allows them to believe what they want to believe, and his popularity soars like never before. He is suddenly getting all the affirmation and admiration he had always longed for, but you know throughout the story that his dishonesty is going to come back to bite him, and it does. We’ve seen this kind of plot development so many times in so many stories, right?

So, why do you think that is? Why would so many authors and playwrights reproduce this comedic, yet tragic, moment so many times over in literature? Is it not because it strikes a chord with us all?

Let me ask you a question: What part are you playing, hoping that somehow by playing it, you will receive the blessing that your starving soul longs for? Who is it that you think would finally bless you if you could convince them you are someone other than the person you know yourself to be? And how awkward would it be to have that person bless your charade, when you know very well that their blessing is not for the real you, but for the pretend you? How much pressure do you feel every moment of every day to keep up the ruse, lest people find out that you are not who you present yourself to be, and you are found out to be a fraud? Many, even in this room, have a story to tell about the ridiculous measures you employed or continue to employ to attain a blessing from a girl, a parent, a spouse, a coach, a professor, a boss, a friend group, or

maybe even a pastor. Jacob's desperate measures to attain a blessing is a human story...for many of us, it's our story.

Norma Jean Morteson spent her whole life seeking a blessing under false pretense, and as much as her lovers and her adoring fans literally worshipped the ground she walked on, she knew that the façade was not real. Norma Jean never once believed that she was worthy to be loved because her soul was starved of the blessing she so desperately longed to hear from her father. No matter the infamy of Marilyn Monroe, Norma Jean Morteson lived in utter loneliness.

Jacob knows this same loneliness all too well; and even now, after the blessing was spoken over him in false pretense, Jacob is more alone than ever. He scurries out of the tent, away from the presence of his deceived father, just in time to avoid a direct confrontation with Esau. That leads us to our second subheading...

II. A Wounded Son

Let's pick up the narrative beginning with vs. 30:

³⁰ 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. ³¹ 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." ³² His father Isaac said to him, "Who are you?" He answered, "I am your son, your firstborn, Esau." ³³ 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." ³⁴ 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!" ³⁵ But he said, "Your brother came deceitfully, and he has taken away your blessing."

Throughout his entire life, Esau has known that he was favored by his father, just as he was entitled to a birthright and a blessing. I don't think Esau was ever briefed on God's prophetic word to Mom when he and Jacob were still in the womb. Instead, I imagine Esau has often taken for granted his favored position as the firstborn. We saw how casually he gave up his birthright inheritance for a bowl of soup back in Genesis 25, but now we get the sense that he is eager to be blessed by his father, as are all sons and daughters. Perhaps the blessing meant more to Esau than the birthright ever did, particularly given the fragile condition of his dad.

When Esau arrives back to the camp, he quickly prepares his father's favorite dish and immediately goes to Isaac, anticipating a quick meal and an eternal blessing. However, when Isaac hears his voice, he asks, "Who are you?" Esau is astounded by the question, and replies, "I am your son, your firstborn, Esau."

That information hits Isaac like a ton of lead. The text states, that Isaac trembled violently, which would suggest he is visibly shaken or even having a personal encounter with the holy presence of God. He questions aloud, "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?" And then the truth dawns on Isaac. In his haste to rebel against God's direction and bless the firstborn, the tables have been turned.

He has unknowingly blessed Jacob and declared Jacob to be over his brother Esau, just as God had predicted many years earlier. In utter resignation Isaac states, “Yes, and he shall be blessed.”

Esau’s cry of despair is heartbreaking. For the first time we see that Esau is just as desperate for his father’s blessing as Jacob, which comes as a surprise to the reader. The firstborn immediately understands that Jacob not only conned him into selling his birthright, but he has now also succeeded in robbing him of Isaac’s blessing. Esau turns to his father and begs for a blessing. He asks, “Bless me, even me also, O my father!” I suspect that request will trigger some deep emotions for many in this room, for it is the cry of so many hearts who feel passed over and unseen by their fathers.

Notice how the roles have changed. Esau the firstborn is now as desperate for his father’s blessing as Jacob has been his entire life. Esau wants to believe that his father has the capacity to bless more than one son, but that is apparently not the case, at least when it comes to this particular genre of blessing. Isaac’s words are a promise and a proclamation, a transfer of God’s covenantal promises that were passed onto to him by his father, Abraham. From Isaac’s perspective, those words are as irrevocable as if he had signed a contract in blood. So vs. 35 Isaac sadly replies, “Your brother came deceitfully, and he has taken away your blessing.”

Now, to be fair, according to God’s intent as articulated to Rebekah back in Genesis 25:23, the blessing and the birthright were never Esau’s to begin with. For reasons only known to God, it was Jacob who was to be blessed and given authority over his brothers, not Esau. Had Rebekah and Isaac simply honored God’s Word in the first place, this entire scene could have been avoided, right?

Now, you may be asking yourself, “Why would God choose Jacob over the firstborn?” That is a very good question, but it’s not a unique question, right? Remember that God passed over the firstborn of Adam and Eve, just as God passed over the firstborn of Noah and Terah, the father of Abraham. God chose Isaac instead of the firstborn Ishmael, so it should not come as a surprise that God now again elects Jacob instead of the firstborn, Esau. But why?

Paul essentially answers that question in Ephesians 2:8-9: We have been saved by grace, not by works, so that no man may boast. As we have seen over and over again, God’s election is always unmerited. If God elected the firstborn as the representative of the covenant, everyone in the ancient world would have thought, “Of course, the firstborn is always the most responsible and the one entrusted with great responsibility.” By electing the second-born, there is no inherent merit or positional assumption associated with God’s election. Clearly the second born is chosen because he is without merit—his election is by grace, and grace alone.

That said, God's election of Jacob comes at a cost for the firstborn. Once the firstborn blessing has been spoken over Jacob, that blessing is no longer available for Esau. That leads us to our third and final subheading...

III. The Anti-Blessing

As we return to the narrative, Esau has become desperate. We read beginning in vs. 36: 36 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?" 37 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 is rightfully furious with Jacob, though his memory is a bit fuzzy. He claims that Jacob "cheated" him out of his birthright, but we all know how that story went. Even so, he is correct that Jacob has now cheated him out of his father's blessing, so he asks a profoundly important question: "Have you not reserved a blessing for me?"

The truth is, Isaac has already declared the blessing for Esau, but that blessing landed on an "unworthy other." Everything that would have been declared over the firstborn has now been declared over Jacob, so the firstborn now becomes the "unworthy other." What's done is done, and it is irrevocable. Isaac states, "I have made [Jacob] 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 is beside himself. He has never not been in the pole position of his family. He weeps aloud and asks his father, "Have you but one blessing, my father? Bless me, even me also, O my father."

Esau has never appreciated the serious nature of being the firstborn as evidenced by his willingness to sell his birthright for a bowl of stew. Even now, having missed out on the firstborn blessing, he still doesn't understand the weightiness of what has taken place. The firstborn birthright and blessing has been passed on to the "unworthy other." That action is irrevocable, and now Jacob is the functional firstborn because the inheritance and the blessing are no longer Esau's, they are Jacob's. All that remains for Esau is the anti-blessing reserved for the "unworthy other," a position that he now occupies in place of his brother.

We get the sense that Isaac was trying to avoid what comes next, but because Esau demands to hear a word spoken over him, Isaac speaks the anti-blessing over the firstborn:

Then Isaac his father answered and said to him:

"Behold, away from the fatness of the earth shall your dwelling be,

and away from the dew of heaven on high.

40 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."

Esau's future is now one of exile, struggle, and violence. It is the fate of the "unworthy other," not the destiny of a firstborn—the exchange is complete.

We will pick up the story here next Sunday, but for now, I want to show you how this part of the story so powerfully points to the Gospel...did you see it?

Church, Jesus is the only begotten Son of the Father. In Colossians 1:15 Paul writes, "He is the image of the invisible God, the *firstborn* of all creation."

Now think about that in light of what we just read in Genesis 27. Do you see it? In this story of Isaac, Jacob, and Esau, we see a shadow of the cross.

Jesus is the Firstborn who is worthy of the Father's blessing; all the inheritance is His and His alone. But here's the Gospel: the Firstborn willingly forfeits His birthright and His blessing so that the "unworthy others" might receive those gifts from the Father; and in exchange, He willingly endures the anti-blessing. On the cross, Jesus absorbs the curse that is rightfully ours so that we might inherit the Father's blessing of the Firstborn which is rightfully His.

Church, Jesus loves you! The Father loves you! You have been chosen by God's unmerited grace and election! The birthright and the blessing of the Firstborn has been given to you, and that gift came at a tremendous cost to God's only Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. This is the Gospel, and the shadow of that Gospel is set before us right here in Genesis 27.

Listen: I know that many of us are wounded sons and daughters because we have never heard our father's blessing. We feel alone and unseen in the world, just like Evan Hansen and Norma Jean. But here's the truth: Your Heavenly Father has declared the blessing of the Firstborn over you! Everything that belongs to Christ has been given to you as your inheritance; it is your birthright! You are so loved by Jesus that He willingly bore your loneliness that you might inherit His intimacy with the Father! Church, claim your inheritance! Receive the Firstborn blessing, and know who you are! You are deeply loved, chosen, redeemed, and adopted! You are seen, you are known, and you are HIS! This is the good news of the Gospel, thanks be to God!

Will you pray with me?