

“FLAWED SAINTS”

In our study of Genesis, we have been able to trace the unfolding of God’s plan of redemption in the lives of the various characters in this book. And as we have done this, we have repeatedly seen that the Lord had to overcome a number of obstacles that seemed to threaten the fulfillment of his promises in the lives of his chosen people. We saw this in chapter 26, where God protected Isaac from the consequences of his own sinful actions and from the opposition that he faced from others. It was only the Lord’s determination to bless Isaac that ensured that he would be blessed. In the passage we are studying tonight, a passage in which God’s blessing is about to be passed on to the next generation, the Lord makes sure that the blessing is transmitted to the right person, to Jacob instead of to Esau. And once again, God has to overcome significant obstacles in order to do this. The irony to this is that the obstacles, or at least three out of four of them, are the covenant people themselves: Isaac, Rebekah, and Jacob. This provides yet another example of how the Lord is able to accomplish his will through seriously flawed instruments. It reminds me of a contest that was run by ESPN last year in which tennis champion Andy Roddick beat the contest winner in a tennis match in which Roddick had to use a frying pan instead of a tennis racket. Roddick’s ability to thrash that poor guy was not hindered by the fact that he had to work with such an inadequate tool. In a similar way, this passage shows us that God’s purposes are not thwarted by the fact that he has to accomplish them through such profoundly sinful human beings.

We began our reading tonight in 26:34 because, as most commentators point out, the information contained in the last two verses of chapter 26 serve to introduce what takes place in chapter 27. They set up the account of the passing on of the blessing by calling our attention to Esau's character. Esau's decision to marry Hittite women further demonstrated his antipathy to God's covenant. We recall how Abraham took such great care to ensure that Isaac married someone within the covenant family, but Esau showed no such concern. And neither, apparently, did his father. Why did Isaac allow Esau to do this? Why didn't he show the same concern in providing a wife for Esau that his own father had showed in securing a wife for him? This does not reflect well on either Isaac or Esau. And while the text does not go into the details, it does tell us that Esau's marriages made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah, and this further underscores how foolish Isaac was for continuing to favor Esau over Jacob.

Nevertheless, that is exactly what Isaac did. When he reached his later years, Isaac summoned Esau and made plans to ensure that his blessing went to him instead of Jacob. Now, it is clear that this blessing is central to this passage. All the characters treat it as something of the utmost importance. But we might wonder why it was such a big deal? What was so special about Isaac's blessing that it made everyone want it so badly? The fact that it was so sought after clues us in to the fact that this was much more than a simple wish on the part of Isaac. It was the bestowal of the right to be the primary carrier of the family heritage. And since this was the covenant family, that meant being the new head of the line of promise. This blessing was not just about a father passing on an

inheritance to his son. God used Isaac's blessing as a means by which the covenant promises were passed on to Jacob. In other words, the covenant blessings were mediated through the covenant line. We see this in the actual words of Isaac's blessing, when he says, "Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you!" Those who blessed the covenant people as the people who were blessed by God would come to share in their blessedness.

In order to properly understand the blessing that is given in this passage, we need to go back to the first chapter of Genesis, where the account of God's creation of mankind is concluded with this blessing:

"And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.'" [Gen. 1:28]

God created man to live under his blessing in this world. He created man to fill the earth and rule over it while enjoying the blessing of perfect fellowship with God. But the fall resulted in mankind being cast away from God's presence. After the fall, the only way for people to enjoy the blessing that God pronounced at creation is to receive it as a promise from God. And this is the blessing that is given to Abraham and his offspring. It is God's promise to bring about what the fall made impossible for man. God promises

Abraham and his offspring that he will build them into a community of people who will enjoy his saving presence in a homeland that he will secure for them.

In this passage, the blessing of Isaac was the means through which the Lord mediated this promise. That is why it was so crucial that it be given to the right person. There have been many different eras in the historical unfolding of God's plan of redemption, but one thing has always remained the same: the Lord has always used visible and definable structures to mediate his saving presence. At our particular point in redemptive history, that structure is the visible church and the ministry that the Lord has entrusted to it. As the apostle Paul said, the church is "a pillar and buttress of truth" [1 Tim. 3:15]. God has always made himself present to his people through divinely regulated, visible structures. And for us, that means that he makes himself present to us through the church and its ministry. This is why theologian John Murray once wrote that "We cannot think of Christ properly apart from the church." [cited in Preston Graham, *The Church Question*, 58]

Now I know that one objection to this line of thinking is the fact that the church is so imperfect and flawed. This is certainly true, but the same can be said about Isaac, along with all of the other characters involved in this story. They were all imperfect and flawed, yet the Lord worked through them to ensure that the blessing was passed on to Jacob. Take a look at all of the ways in which we see the sinfulness of the people in this story.

First of all, there is Isaac. Whether or not Isaac knew about Esau selling his birthright to Jacob, he certainly would have known about the words that the Lord had spoken to

Rebekah prior to Jacob and Esau's birth. He knew that the Lord had decreed that the birthright would pass on to Jacob, not Esau. Yet he still persisted in trying to bless Esau, and he was even willing to go about it in an underhanded way. It was customary for a dying father to summon all of his male relatives, not just one of them, to be around him on his deathbed so that he could pronounce his final words to them. But Isaac wasn't even on his deathbed yet, and he made this blessing into a private affair, a matter between him and Esau. This suggests that he knew that it was wrong to give the blessing to Esau, but he went ahead and did it anyway.

We could also note how much Isaac shows himself to be like Esau in this passage. We saw earlier that Esau was willing to sell his birthright for a bowl of soup. And what does Isaac do here? He allows his love for the tasty food that Esau could provide for him to guide his decision about who would receive his blessing. Just like his son, he is a slave to his desires. And the worst part of this is that Isaac was one of God's people. It is not surprising that Esau would be a man who set his mind on the things of the flesh. But Isaac was a believer, and he acted the same way as his unbelieving son. He stands as a prime example of the sad fact that God's people sometimes bear little difference from the people of the world.

One other thing to point out about Isaac is how this passage reflects so poorly on his later years. He displayed a much more robust faith earlier on in his life. Recall the scene at Mount Moriah, when Isaac was a young man. It is highly unlikely that Abraham, being a very old man, would have been able to tie Isaac up if Isaac was not willing to go

along with what he was doing. This indicates that it was not just Abraham who acted in faith on that mountain. Isaac acted in faith as well. But look at Isaac in this passage, a passage in which he is an old man. He seems to have given up running his race too early. He seems to have grown spiritually lax in his later years.

So much for Isaac. Now, what shall we say about Rebekah? She overheard her husband's plan. She knew that Isaac was setting his will against that of the Lord. What should she have done in that situation? Certainly not what she did. Her actions were not those of a woman of faith, but of a woman who was desperately trying to fix things by taking matters into her own hands. Even though Isaac was wrong, that did not make it right for Rebekah to help Jacob deceive him. And even though her plan worked, both she and Jacob paid a heavy price for their actions. Rebekah would never see her beloved son again, and Jacob would have to endure twenty years of working for his scheming uncle Laban.

We see Jacob's sin on display when he brought the meal to his father. Not only does he tell a bald-faced lie, he also commits the sin of blasphemy, answering his father's question about how he found the game so quickly by saying that it was the Lord who gave him success. But even in those words, Jacob spoke better than he knew. For the Lord was giving him success in obtaining the blessing, in spite of his own deceitful attempt to get it.

We can see the sin of Isaac, of Rebekah, and of Jacob. But what about Esau? There is a sense in which Esau seems like the victim in this passage, but it is important to point

out that he was far from innocent. Once he learned about his brother's deception, he was quick to place all of the blame on Jacob. There was no admission of his own sins: the sin of despising his birthright in the first place by selling it for a bowl of soup; and the sin of breaking the oath that he had made when he sold it to Jacob.

There is no human hero in this passage. Each and every character is profoundly sinful. Yet the Lord worked through their sinful actions to bring about what he had already decreed. In the end, the blessing went to Jacob, just as God had said it would. And once it was pronounced, there was no revoking it. The only blessing left for Esau was a sort of "anti-blessing," a pronouncement that served to emphasize that the real blessing had gone to Jacob.

What can we learn from this story of deception and depravity? On the one hand, we need to be careful not to think that the sinful actions of these characters give us permission to be careless when it comes to our own battle against sin. The Lord calls his children to walk as slaves to righteousness, not as slaves to sin. As J. Gresham Machen writes, "although sin is actually found in Christians, it does not belong there; it is never to be acquiesced in for one single moment, but is to be treated as a terrible anomaly that simply ought not to be." [*What Is Faith?*, 207]

On the other hand, there is great comfort for us in this passage. If we are truly honest, we will be able to see ourselves in these actions taken by Isaac and Rebekah and Jacob and Esau. Time and time again, we prove ourselves to be utterly unworthy of God's blessing. If our hope of salvation rested upon anything within us, we would have to

resign ourselves to utter despair. But this passage shows us that that is not the case at all. The basis for God's blessing upon his people is not found in anything within us. Instead, it resides in the purpose of God's will, determined before the foundation of the world, to bring his blessing to all of those whom he has appointed to eternal life in his beloved Son.

Thomas Boston puts it so well when he writes:

“When through deadness and darkness of spirit, whether arising from some conscience-wasting guilt, or otherwise, your faith of the promise is failed, and you cannot fasten your gripe (*sic*) upon it, because you can see no good in you; embrace Christ again, and the promise in him; notwithstanding of your seen and felt sinfulness and utter unworthiness; and by no means stand off from the promise until you be in better case; but say with the Psalmist, ‘Iniquities prevail against me: as for transgressions, thou shalt purge them away,’ (Ps. 65:3). For as the goodness in you was not the ground of the promise; so the evil in you doth not overturn it, and make it of none effect. The foundation of the promise stands sure in Christ, whatever alterations the frame and case of a believer's spirit do undergo. It is established as the moon (Ps. 89:37), which is still the same in itself, notwithstanding of the variety of its appearances to our sight, one while waxing, at another time waning.” [*A View of the Covenant of Grace*, 95]

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The foundation of God's promise is not anything within you. If you look inside yourself to find assurance of God's blessing, you will never find it. But if you look to Jesus Christ in faith, then you can take comfort in knowing that you have been blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.