

Rebekah: A Woman for all seasons
Genesis 27

Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church
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The Prophecy

"Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger."

The movie **The Godfather** is about an Italian – American organized crime family. The ‘godfather’ is the head of the family. He is the one in charge of their criminal activities. He has three sons: Sonny, Frankie, and Michael. Sonny is the eldest and destined to one day inherit the mantle of godfather. But Sonny is flawed: hot headed and impetuous, given to acting first and thinking later. Frankie is too simple to lead the family. He is not a man who could command the necessary respect. Michael wants nothing to do with the family business. Yet he is most like his father: disciplined, insightful and calculating. Michael must become the head of the family. Yet for Michael to become head of the family, Sonny’s place must be overturned. Sonny’s hotheadedness makes him vulnerable and costs him his life. In this way, Michael is drawn reluctantly into the leadership role in the family business.

There is a similar sense of inevitability at work in the unfolding story of Rebekah’s two sons: Esau and Jacob. To understand Rebekah’s actions in Genesis 27, you have to know one important detail about the brothers from Genesis 25:23. They are twins. Though born only moments apart, Esau, as the first born is the eldest. Given the cultural norms of the day, Esau will be the son of privilege, rank, and responsibility. He is destined to be the one to rule the clan.

This is the way things are. Or rather, the way things would be, except for the prophecy given to Rebekah regarding the birth of her twin sons (Genesis 25:23).

“Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples from within you shall be divided;
the one shall be stronger than the other,
the older shall serve the younger.”

If you are a mom or dad, let me ask you: “*What would you do if such a prophecy were given to you regarding two of your children?*” This prophecy declares that the cultural realities of the day will be overturned in the lives of Rebekah’s two sons. The younger son will rule the older. The tables will be turned. The world will be turned upside down. What would you do? How would you intervene in the lives of your children given such knowledge?

Like many families, Rebekah’s was a family with divided parent loyalties, sibling rivalry, deception and disappointments. Jacob and Esau were raised in dysfunctional family: get over it. Lois Ann would tell our children: “We put the ‘fun’ in a dysfunctional.” Rebekah, in spite of the dysfunction of her family, understood that her family was of infinite value. She understood that the souls of her children and husband were worth great personal sacrifice. She took great risk, exhibited great courage, bore deep sacrifice for the sake of her family. Rebekah understood the significance of the prophecy. Her problem was this: “*How can these things occur without one brother killing the other?*” This was Rebekah's principle goal: “*How can God's will be accomplished without the destruction of her family?*”

I know that some might object and ask why Rebekah is doing all these things in the first place. If God prophesied

it, wouldn't it happen with or without her help? Yes. God's will, will not be thwarted. But: God chooses to use means to accomplish his purpose. He uses his people. He works through us in the unfolding of his will. For this reason, it is perfectly appropriate for Rebekah to seek her role in the fulfillment of this prophecy.

But there is a more subtle reason for her involvement in these events. Some criticize Rebekah for her clear favoritism of Jacob over Esau. It is important to remember that to the Middle Eastern mindset it is not at all uncommon to rank ones children. Rebekah loves both her boys. She also understands that one has been chosen by God for his purposes. God's will, will be enacted. But she desires to influence the manner in which it comes to pass. In choosing to conspire on Jacob's behalf she is not slighting Esau, but protecting him. Like Sonny in **The Godfather**, Esau is unfit to rule the clan. Esau too has a fatal flaw. Sonny's flaw was his hotheadedness. Esau's flaw is his failure to understand and value what has been entrusted to him as the eldest. This flaw is seen clearly in Esau's voluntary sale of his birthright to his brother Jacob. His willingness to do so shows that Esau does not possess the leadership ability, the strength and depth of character, the breadth of vision or the necessary discipline to be the bearer of God's covenantal promises as Patriarch. At the same time, his father, Isaac lacks discernment. He is blinded by a father's natural favoritism toward a first born son, especially one given to excellence in "manly" pursuits such as hunting, grilling and sports.

At the same time, we should not make the mistake of thinking that Jacob is obviously the man for the job. Jacob is a momma's boy. He's spent too much time around his mother's skirts. His personal faith is too weak for him to take

anything other than an opportunistic role. He is cunning, but not courageous.

But what's a mother to do? Though neither son seems to be made of the 'right stuff' Rebekah is conspiring for the good of all involved, based upon the prophesy given prior to her sons' birth. Let's look at Rebekah's character traits as she resolves these tensions.

First she is decisive.

First : She is Decisive -- v. 27:6

"Rebekah said to her son Jacob, "Look, I overheard your father."

As Shakespeare put it, there is "*a tide in the affairs of men.*" A Yiddish proverb says, "*When fortune calls, offer him a seat.*" Often what distinguishes mediocrity from greatness is simply a willingness to act when opportunity presents itself.

Back in the days of pagers, a salesman was on his way to an appointment when he got a call on his pager. It was pouring rain. He spotted a public phone (remember those?) and pulled over to answer the page. As he reached for the public phone, it began to ring! "*You wouldn't be standing in the rain if you had a cell phone,*" said the caller. It was a cellular phone salesman who saw opportunity in the pouring rain. When Rebekah overhears Isaac's conversation with Esau she sees the opportunity to secure the fulfilment of the prophesy. The tide is moving. She seizes the moment. She rides the tide. She takes the opportunity God has presented to her.

Being willing to act on the opportunities God gives to us can make all the difference. The crosses of the two

thieves were equidistant from Christ. For one it was the opportunity of salvation. For the other, it was the inattentiveness of the damned. Abraham and Joseph both went down to Egypt. For Abraham it meant a stumble; for Joseph a rise to glory. The parting of the Red Sea represented for the Israelites a wall of protection but for the Egyptians a watery sepulcher. The same word of God when preached by Peter on Pentecost was an opportunity to salvation for 3000; yet when preached by Stephen at his martyrdom, an opportunity to the multitude to harden their hearts for judgment.

Rebekah is decisive. She seizes the opportunity when it presents itself. Next, importantly, she is also faithful.

Second : She is Faithful -- v. 27:4 & 7

Isaac -- "That I may give you my blessing before I die."

Rebekah -- "That I may give you my blessing in the presence of the Lord before I die."

Notice the change in wording as Rebekah repeats her husband Isaac's words to her son Jacob. Isaac's perspective is strictly horizontal, material, and human - "That I may give you my blessing before I die." Rebekah's repetition includes an added spiritual element: "That I may give you my blessing *in the presence of the Lord* before I die." She sees not just the human agency of blessing and promise, but behind that human agency, the hand and purpose of God. Both say the same thing, but from remarkably different perspectives.

In this passage we see Rebekah taking charge of the spiritual management of the family. Isaac too knew of the prophesy regarding his sons, but he appears indifferent to this spiritual reality. Guided by the prophesy, Isaac should have been the one to take the lead in blessing Jacob over

his firstborn Esau. But Isaac does not. He wishes for things to go the way he wishes they would, the way the world intends. And so it falls to his wife, Rebekah, to take the initiative and step out in faith. Some object to Rebekah's use of deception. Some stumble asking '*How can we justify what she does?*' or '*Should she be lifted up as a role model?*' Yet, in the deception, Rebekah is leading Jacob into the fulfillment of God's will. Rebekah is doing all she can to bring salvation to her family. Calvin described Rebekah as having "*holy zeal.*" Rebekah's overriding concern was the protection of her family: to save both her boys and to redeem her husband's lack of spiritual discernment. She was called upon to play her role in the fulfillment of God's will for her family.

You might say: "I could never do the things she did." That is understandable. Rebekah's example to us is challenging. But, can you say that you, like Rebekah, are as consumed with the same zeal for the spiritual vitality of your children and husband? I have a friend who has been dealt a difficult hand in the card game of life. I don't know if she'll be able to point to any outside of her family who are in God's heavenly kingdom because of her witness. But if her husband, and her sons and daughter, and their respective spouses, make it into heaven, then it will be because of my friend's 'holy zeal' on behalf of her family. Like Rebekah, she will have done an amazing work of God.

Rebekah is decisive. She is faithful. Thirdly, she is insightful.

Third: She is Insightful -- v. 27:42

"Your brother Esau is consoling himself with the thought of killing you."

Rebekah can read the hand writing on the wall. She senses the danger, for both her sons. She intervenes further to protect the brothers from themselves. Mothers ought to know their children, understand their ways. She perceives the danger. She takes appropriate action to avert it. And note her motherly sacrifice: to save Jacob, she must now lose him. The son she favors, she sends away. It is not enough that Rebekah is insightful. She also possesses the strength of character to do what she knows she must do: for the larger good of her family. Discernment is only a first step. Accompanying it must be a willingness to act decisively.

Rebekah is decisive, faithful and insightful. Next, we see that she is influential.

Fourth: She is Influential -- v. 28:1

"So Isaac called for Jacob and blessed him."

Leadership is simply Influence. It is the ability to affect other's thoughts and actions. In spite of the deception described in Genesis 27, when the time comes for Jacob to part, he leaves with his father's blessing. He leaves with his father's acknowledgment and blessing. That this is so is a reflection of Rebekah's influence.

One significant mistake many in the West make is to assume that Middle Eastern women have no influence over their men. Yes, the Middle East was and is a male dominated culture. But wives wield great influence, nonetheless. They do so in a different manner than we often think of in the West, wielding their influence not through husbands, but through their sons. We see this clearly illustrated in Rebekah's influence over Isaac. Isaac had failed to do his responsibility as father and head of the clan in providing a proper wife for Esau. It was Isaac's task as

Esau's father, to seek out and find a suitable mate for Esau. Recall the remarkable story in Genesis 24 of Abraham's efforts to find a suitable wife – Rebekah! – for his son, Isaac. Isaac does not make any comparable effort on behalf of either of his sons. Now we see Rebekah influencing Isaac to act rightly on Jacob's behalf. She influences her husband to get him to do the right thing.

I believe the text indicates that Isaac saw his mistake. He calls Jacob, blesses him, and sends him out. It is Isaac's action, but it was Rebekah who planned the thing out. Jacob is sent back to Rebekah's family to find a suitable wife.

Influence is the fourth facet of Rebekah's character. She is a woman of tremendous vision and poise, a woman of influence and purpose. She is decisive. She is a woman of faith and of insight. Lastly, she is a woman of courage.

Fifth: She is Courageous -- v. 27:13

"Let the curse fall on me."

The theme of day two of our Vacation Bible School this past week was "Jesus Gives Us Courage." The Bible text for the day was Peter walking on the water with Jesus. It took courage to step out of the boat onto the water. Sometimes, following Jesus requires us to venture out, to do what we otherwise would be fearful to do.

When Rebekah presents the plan to her son, Jacob is concerned. "*What if we're caught in the deception?*" he asks. "*What if, in being caught, I am cursed instead?*" Jacob had good reason to be concerned. Some time prior to these events Esau had returned home from hunting weak and exhausted. Jacob, a man of the tents, had prepared some

lentil stew that he was in the process of tending. Esau asked for a taste of the stew. Jacob saw an opportunity. He offered to trade the stew in exchange for Esau's birthright as the eldest brother. The birthright was Esau's claim to be the head of the clan upon Isaac's death. It was Esau's right to be the principle son, the one in charge. Esau, for his part, reasoned that since he felt like he was on death's door for lack of nourishment, what good would the birthright do him anyway? So he traded it, for stew. The Bible's judgment is that in doing so he '*despised*' his birthright. This act showed that Esau was not worthy of the birthright. Esau had given up the right to head the family. Now Rebekah is proposing that Jacob obtain the spiritual blessing Isaac intends to give by trickery and deception. What is intended for Esau will in fact be given to Jacob.

The "Blessing" Isaac intends to give is a prophesy of the future for the one being blessed. It was a spiritual promise of a positive future. A "Blessing" such as this was seen as carrying great weight and importance. The specific ingredients named in the "Blessing" included realities such as fertility, spiritual prosperity, well-being, authority, and material wealth. In the spiritual wasteland of the modern secular world we rarely give such things much thought. We do not consider the unseen things, the spiritual dynamics of life. But Blessing (and Cursing!) in the ancient world were serious matters. Just as The Blessing was a source of spiritual power and authority, so cursing would bring spiritual condemnation and judgment. Jacob's fear is legitimate. Blessing and cursing were not mere words, but active spiritual realities. In creation God spoke and the world is made. In the gospels, Jesus speaks and people are healed. Human words do not have the same potency as the divine spoken word, but there is power in human words. Jacob understands this.

It is at this point that Rebekah's courage is revealed. She takes the risk. "*Let the curse fall on me.*" If the plan goes awry and there is a curse, she will be the one to bear its potency. Courage is not the absence of fear, but the ability to carry on with dignity the course you have determined in spite of fear. I believe that courage is often directly tied to a grasp of eternal values. Men and women are cowards when they are too tied to the earth and not sufficiently tied to eternity. If a vision of eternity is not in your heart, you will not have the courage to take risks: whether for yourself, or for your children, or your God. But if you have such vision: no risk is too great.

Conclusion

This same love is replicated when parents endure great sacrifices for the sake of their children. Parents often say, for the sake their children, "*Let the curse fall upon me.*" I read once the story of a debonair and handsome man who, together with his young son was making regular appointments for chemotherapy. A nurse watching the two wondered to herself which one was receiving the treatment? On another day, she noticed that the boy's hair was gone. But then she saw that the father's hair was also gone. She still couldn't tell, until the boy smiled and proudly announced that his dad had shaved his head, "*so our hair can grow back together.*" Where do parents learn the grace to make such sacrifices?

I would argue that we learn it from God. When we say, for the sake of our children, '*Let the curse fall upon me*' we are mimicking the example given to us by God. You see, in his plan and purpose for creation, he determined, before the foundation of the world was laid, that he would be the

first to say, "*Let the curse fall upon me.*" This was his plan. It was his purpose, before the world was made. And then, after the world was made, in the fullness of time God sent his son, Jesus Christ, into our world. Born of a woman he lived among us, taught us God's word, obeyed God's will and became obedient even to the point of a cruel death upon the cross. During those three hours from twelve to three the Lord Jesus Christ, God incarnate, said to the world: *let the curse fall upon me.* He bore the curse that you and I deserved for our sin and disobedience. He carried the punishment that was ours. Our sin was nailed with him upon the cross that we might be redeemed and saved by his sacrifice. As the American gospel hymn puts it:

What wondrous love is this, O my
soul, O my soul,

What wondrous love is this, O my
soul?

What wondrous love is this that
caused the Lord of bliss?

To bear the dreadful curse for my
soul?

Rebekah offered to take the curse for her son Jacob. In the end, it was not necessary for no curse was pronounced. But in her offer she was intervening in the life of her son Jacob in the same manner in which Jesus Christ would one day intervene in the lives of the elect. She was willing to bear the curse for the sake of her son Jacob. Jesus Christ was willing to bear the curse for the sake of those whom God had determined to save.

Turn to Jesus Christ today in believing faith and be saved.

Say 'Amen' Somebody

27 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.” ²He said, “Behold, I am old; I do not know the day of my death. ³Now then, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field and hunt game for me, ⁴and 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.”

⁵Now Rebekah was listening when Isaac spoke to his son Esau. So when Esau went to the field to hunt for game and bring it, ⁶Rebekah said to her son Jacob, “I heard your father speak to your brother Esau, ⁷‘Bring me game and prepare for me delicious food, that I may eat it and bless you before the Lord before I die.’ ⁸Now therefore, my son, obey my voice as I command you. ⁹Go 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. ¹⁰And you shall bring it to your father to eat, so that he may bless you before he dies.” ¹¹But Jacob said to Rebekah his mother, “Behold, my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I am a smooth man. ¹²Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be mocking him and bring a curse upon myself and not a blessing.” ¹³His mother said to him, “Let your curse be on me, my son; only obey my voice, and go, bring them to me.”

¹⁴So he went and took them and brought them to his mother, and his mother prepared delicious food, such as his father loved. ¹⁵Then 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. ¹⁶And the skins of the young goats she put on his hands and on the smooth part of his neck. ¹⁷And she put the delicious food and the bread, which she had prepared, into the hand of her son Jacob.

¹⁸ So he went in to his father and said, “My father.” And he said, “Here I am. Who are you, my son?” ¹⁹ 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.” ²⁰ 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.” ²¹ 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.” ²² 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.” ²³ And he did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau’s hands. So he blessed him. ²⁴ He said, “Are you really my son Esau?” He answered, “I am.” ²⁵ 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.

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.”

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

³⁹Then 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.”

⁴¹Now Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him, and Esau said to himself, “The days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob.” ⁴²But the words of Esau her older son were told to Rebekah. So she sent and called Jacob her younger son and said to him, “Behold, your brother Esau comforts himself about you by planning to kill you. ⁴³Now therefore, my son, obey my voice. Arise, flee to Laban my brother in Haran ⁴⁴and stay with him a while, until your brother’s fury turns away— ⁴⁵until your brother’s

anger turns away from you, and he forgets what you have done to him. Then I will send and bring you from there. Why should I be bereft of you both in one day?"

⁴⁶Then Rebekah said to Isaac, "I loathe my life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob marries one of the Hittite women like these, one of the women of the land, what good will my life be to me?"

28 Then Isaac called Jacob and blessed him and directed him, "You must not take a wife from the Canaanite women. ²Arise, go to Paddan-aram to the house of Bethuel your mother's father, and take as your wife from there one of the daughters of Laban your mother's brother. ³God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples. ⁴May he give the blessing of Abraham to you and to your offspring with you, that you may take possession of the land of your sojournings that God gave to Abraham!" ⁵Thus Isaac sent Jacob away.