

MESSAGES from LIBERTY

“ACCIDENTAL SAINTS”

1. Jacob (Genesis 27-28)

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Today we start a three-week sermon series called “Accidental Saints”. We’re going to look at the lives of three people from the Bible – Jacob, a woman blessed by the prophet Elijah, and the Apostle Paul. But “Accidental Saints” is a deceiving title.

First, we always misunderstand the word “saint” to mean an especially devout, holy person. But that’s not what the word means – because the Bible calls you and me “saints”. A “saint” is someone whom God has called and set apart for His service – as all Christians are.

Second, these three people are not saints “accidentally” – there’s nothing accidental about God calling them to Himself and using them for His work. They’re only “accidental saints” in the sense of “surprising”, “unusual” – which is the way God always seems to work.

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This morning we’re going to look at two chapters’ worth of the story of Jacob. Jacob is one of the Patriarchs – his father was Isaac, and grandfather was Abraham. Later on God would change Jacob’s name to Israel, such that his personal name was the national name for God’s people. Today, I want us to hear the full story as it’s told. So please keep your eyes on the screen and follow along as we hear God’s word from *Genesis 27* and *28*:

One day when Isaac was old and turning blind, he called for Esau, his older son, and said, “My son.”

“Yes, Father?” Esau replied.

“I am an old man now,” Isaac said, “and I don’t know when I may die. Take your bow and a quiver full of arrows, and go out into the open country to hunt some wild game for me. Prepare my favorite dish, and bring it here for me to eat. Then I will pronounce the blessing that belongs to you, my firstborn son, before I die.”

The story begins with a meaningful moment between Isaac and Jacob’s older twin brother, Esau. Isaac senses that his days are numbered, that death is not far off. And instead of waiting for events to overtake him, he calls for Esau, and asks him to go hunting, to prepare him one last special meal, and bring it to him so that Isaac could give Esau this death-bed blessing.

Now, we're not going to understand this story without some background on the ancient concept of blessing. For Old Testament people, to pronounce a blessing on someone is not merely to say some pleasant religious words to them, to communicate a nice thought. No – to pronounce a blessing is to *make something happen*, to convey from one person to another a power which was part of the sender's soul. Just as God created the universe by speaking words, so a person's blessing creates a new reality through his words. And because this is a real power that creates an actual reality, the ability to bless is limited – you can only transfer this power in measurable amounts.

Isaac plans to say the words that will not only *pronounce* a blessing on Esau but will *create* a blessing for him. And this is not just any old blessing of any old father. Because Isaac's blessing will pass on the promise that God made to Isaac's father Abraham – the promise of a great land, the promise of thousands of descendants, the promise that through Abraham's descendants the whole world will be blessed.

But Rebekah overheard what Isaac had said to his son Esau. So when Esau left to hunt for the wild game, she said to her son Jacob, "Listen. I overheard your father say to Esau, 'Bring me some wild game and prepare me a delicious meal. Then I will bless you in the LORD's presence before I die.' Now, my son, listen to me. Do exactly as I tell you. Go out to the flocks, and bring me two fine young goats. I'll use them to prepare your father's favorite dish. Then take the food to your father so he can eat it and bless you before he dies."

Isaac's wife, Rebekah, overhears what Isaac says to Esau, and immediately plans to mess things up. Because this is one dysfunctional family. We hear it in Rebekah's words: Although Isaac and Rebekah are the parents of their twin boys Esau and Jacob, Rebekah overhears what Isaac said "to his son Esau", and so Rebekah talks "to her son Jacob." It's a truly sorry picture – two parents, choosing favorites, setting themselves against each other and setting their sons against each other. This is not what the Bible means by "family values."

"But look," Jacob replied to Rebekah, "my brother, Esau, is a hairy man, and my skin is smooth. What if my father touches me? He'll see that I'm trying to trick him, and then he'll curse me instead of blessing me."

But his mother replied, "Then let the curse fall on me, my son! Just do what I tell you. Go out and get the goats for me!"

Jacob immediately sees a major hole in his mother's scheme – Esau is hairy and Jacob is not. Sure, Isaac is practically blind, but if he touches Jacob, the jig will be up. And just as Isaac has the power to create a reality of blessing with a benediction, so he also has the power to create a reality of evil with a curse. So Jacob says to his mom, "No thanks."

But Rebekah is determined. She says, “Look, I’ll take Isaac’s curse if we are found out.” And so Jacob re-calculates the cost-benefit ratio. Besides, Jacob has never been really satisfied since he snookered Esau out of his birthright several years before. He wants more.

So Jacob went out and got the young goats for his mother. Rebekah took them and prepared a delicious meal, just the way Isaac liked it. Then she took Esau’s favorite clothes, which were there in the house, and gave them to her younger son, Jacob. She covered his arms and the smooth part of his neck with the skin of the young goats. Then she gave Jacob the delicious meal, including freshly baked bread.

So Jacob took the food to his father. “My father?” he said.

“Yes, my son,” Isaac answered. “Who are you — Esau or Jacob?”

Jacob replied, “It’s Esau, your firstborn son. I’ve done as you told me. Here is the wild game. Now sit up and eat it so you can give me your blessing.”

Isaac asked, “How did you find it so quickly, my son?”

“The LORD your God put it in my path!” Jacob replied.

Rebekah and Jacob have sunk to the Three Stooges level of conspiracy. Rebekah dresses Jacob up in this jury-rigged get-up, wearing Esau’s way-too large clothes with this goofy goatskin tied around his hands and neck. You would think they would realize this isn’t going to work! But they charge ahead.

Now Isaac might be blind, but he’s not dumb. Right from the start, Isaac is suspicious. First off, everything happens too quickly. When “Esau” appears with the meal, Isaac can’t believe it – how did he stalk and kill and gut and cook a deer so quickly? But Jacob, dressed like a buffoon, overflowing with greed and deception, looks his father right in his blind eyes and says, “God gave me success.” It is blasphemy.

Then Isaac said to Jacob, “Come closer so I can touch you and make sure that you really are Esau.” So Jacob went closer to his father, and Isaac touched him. “The voice is Jacob’s, but the hands are Esau’s,” Isaac said. But he did not recognize Jacob, because Jacob’s hands felt hairy just like Esau’s. So Isaac prepared to bless Jacob. “But are you really my son Esau?” he asked.

“Yes, I am,” Jacob replied.

There’s still a chance for Jacob to bail and do the right thing. He can’t do an Esau impersonation, and Isaac recognizes Jacob’s voice. But Isaac’s sense of touch deceives him – he falls for the goatskin ruse. And again, Jacob tells his father a bald-faced lie.

Then Isaac said, “Now, my son, bring me the wild game. Let me eat it, and then I will give you my blessing.” So Jacob took the food to his father, and Isaac ate it. He also drank the wine that Jacob served him. Then Isaac said to Jacob, “Please come a little closer and kiss me, my son.”

So Jacob went over and kissed him. And when Isaac caught the smell of his clothes, he was finally convinced, and he blessed his son. He said, "Ah! The smell of my son is like the smell of the outdoors, which the LORD has blessed!

*"From the dew of heaven
and the richness of the earth,
may God always give you abundant harvests of grain
and bountiful new wine.
May many nations become your servants,
and may they bow down to you.
May you be the master over your brothers,
and may your mother's sons bow down to you.
All who curse you will be cursed,
and all who bless you will be blessed."*

Passing the smell test and the taste test, Jacob successfully deceives his father. So Isaac lies back, completely fooled, and lets rip with his blessing, words that create the reality they proclaim, that transfer God's promise to Abraham through Isaac and now – not to Esau the firstborn, but to Jacob.

And as Jacob walks out of his father's tent, there's no indication that he has even a twinge of conscience, one pang of guilt. Because from the day of his birth, Jacob has lived up to the meaning of his name: "deceiver". My bet is that he walked out of there with a smirk on his face.

As soon as Isaac had finished blessing Jacob, and almost before Jacob had left his father, Esau returned from his hunt. Esau prepared a delicious meal and brought it to his father. Then he said, "Sit up, my father, and eat my wild game so you can give me your blessing."

But Isaac asked him, "Who are you?"

Esau replied, "It's your son, your firstborn son, Esau."

Isaac began to tremble uncontrollably and said, "Then who just served me wild game? I have already eaten it, and I blessed him just before you came. And yes, that blessing must stand!"

When Esau heard his father's words, he let out a loud and bitter cry. "Oh my father, what about me? Bless me, too!" he begged.

But Isaac said, "Your brother was here, and he tricked me. He has taken away your blessing."

Esau exclaimed, "No wonder his name is Jacob, for now he has cheated me twice. First he took my rights as the firstborn, and now he has stolen my blessing. Oh, haven't you saved even one blessing for me?"

Isaac said to Esau, "I have made Jacob your master and have declared that all his brothers will be his servants. I have guaranteed him an abundance of grain and wine — what is left for me to give you, my son?"

Esau pleaded, "But do you have only one blessing? Oh my father, bless me, too!" Then Esau broke down and wept.

Finally, his father, Isaac, said to him,

*“You will live away from the richness of the earth,
and away from the dew of the heaven above.
You will live by your sword,
and you will serve your brother.
But when you decide to break free,
you will shake his yoke from your neck.”*

This scene is worthy of a Shakespearean tragedy. Isaac and Esau realize everything at the same instant. Isaac trembles and Esau screams, but there’s no way to fix what Jacob, the slime-ball, has pulled off. Isaac had blessed Jacob with all the power he had, and now his power to bless is gone – there’s nothing left over for Esau. In his desperation, Esau tries to wring some last blessing out of his father, but only receives words in a minor key – barrenness, conflict, submission.

* * *

Let me summarize the next sixteen verses. Understandably, Esau is furious, and he plots to kill Jacob the moment after their father dies. Rebekah knows that Jacob’s life is in peril, so she makes up a cover story – Rebekah asks Isaac to give Jacob permission to return to Rebekah’s homeland, Haran, to stay there with her brother Laban, in order to find himself a wife there. And Isaac agrees. And Jacob is out the back door in a flash, carrying only the clothes on his back, running as fast as he can, constantly looking over his shoulder out of fear that Esau is tracking him down.

* * *

And so we come to chapter 28, verse 10:

Meanwhile, Jacob left Beersheba and traveled toward Haran. At sundown he arrived at a good place to set up camp and stopped there for the night. Jacob found a stone to rest his head against and lay down to sleep.

Jacob runs as hard as he can for as long as he can, staying off the main roads. As night falls, he doesn’t do the normal thing – approach some nomads and ask to spend the night with them, in this culture of ready and extravagant hospitality. Because Jacob doesn’t want to be I.D.’ed. So he hides out in the rocks, not even making a campfire so he won’t be discovered. If Jacob has tricked Isaac into blessing him, it’s not clear what kind of blessing life on the run is.

As he slept, he dreamed of a stairway that reached from the earth up to heaven. And he saw the angels of God going up and down the stairway.

We’re so familiar with the spiritual, “We are climbing Jacob’s ladder” that we miss two important points. First, what Jacob dreamed was not a ladder, but more like a stairway, a stairway that connected heaven and earth. And going up and down the stairway aren’t people but “messengers” – that’s what the word “angel” means. In

other words, in his hide-out off the beaten path, Jacob has stumbled across a window, a door, from heaven to earth, a place where God's messengers come and go doing God's bidding on earth.

At the top of the stairway stood the LORD, and he said, "I am the LORD, the God of your grandfather Abraham, and the God of your father, Isaac.

And it's clear what's coming next. Jacob can run, but he can't hide. It's one thing to be a fugitive from justice, but it's another thing to be a fugitive from God. Jacob thought that he could get away with his slick little trick, but now God has tracked him down, God has Jacob in his sights, and now it's reckoning time for Jacob:

The ground you are lying on belongs to you. I am giving it to you and your descendants. Your descendants will be as numerous as the dust of the earth! They will spread out in all directions—to the west and the east, to the north and the south. And all the families of the earth will be blessed through you and your descendants. What's more, I am with you, and I will protect you wherever you go. One day I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have finished giving you everything I have promised you."

This is exactly what we're *not* expecting to hear! It's hard to read these words without flipping back a few pages to make sure we haven't lost our place. Jacob has lied and schemed and deceived and blasphemed. And God doesn't say word one about any of it. God doesn't accuse Jacob. God doesn't scold Jacob. God doesn't command Jacob to repent or shape up or to do *anything*. God simply rears back and blesses Jacob all over.

God Himself passes on to Jacob His promise to Abraham. And then God goes even further – He also promises that He will be with Jacob, that He will watch over Jacob, that He will bring Jacob back to this land, and that He will never leave Jacob.

And the most stunning thing about all of this is that there is never given the slightest hint of why – why is God so unbelievably kind to Jacob?

Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I wasn't even aware of it!" But he was also afraid and said, "What an awesome place this is! It is none other than the house of God, the very gateway to heaven!"

What makes this place so awesome is not the deal with the stairway and the angels – this isn't some cheesy "X-Files" episode. What makes this place holy is that Jacob has come face to face with grace. When he is hiding from everyone, God finds him. When he is running away from death, he ends up running smack into life. When he has "guilty" written all over him, God accepts him unconditionally. When he deserves nothing more than to be cursed, God blesses him over and over again. God tracks Jacob down with grace.

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It turns out that it was true what was prophesied back in chapter 25, when God told pregnant Rebekah that, of the two infants struggling in her womb, the older one would end up serving the younger. But God isn't boxed in by his own predictions. God is God, which means God is completely free, God is accountable only to Himself, God can do *what* He pleases *when* He pleases *to whom* He pleases *for whatever reasons* He pleases. And the reason the ancient Jews remembered this story and wrote down this story and, to this day, treasure it as sacred is because on that night, Jacob learned something that was and continues to be beyond comprehension – God's choice is to be gracious. And that's good news. AMEN

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