

A SON UNLOVED

WRESTLING WITH GOD: THE JACOB NARRATIVE

By Scott Grant

‘You ain’t got it yet’

Comedian Jerry Lewis confided in a 1996 interview that he never felt he had earned his father’s approval. He and Dean Martin formed the most successful comedy team in show business in the early 1950s. In the late ’50s, he signed what was at the time the most lucrative movie deal in history. Yet he would often hear these crushing words from his father: “You ain’t got it yet, kid.”

“I had already resigned myself to the fact that when he said, ‘You ain’t got it yet, kid,’ that I was never going to get it,” Lewis said. Nevertheless, he approached his father to tell him that Paramount Pictures reported that his films had brought in \$800 million in rentals. His father told him, “You ain’t got it yet, kid.” (1)

Even if we haven’t heard words such as these, many of us have felt that our parents or our superiors or our world have all along been telling us, “You ain’t got it yet, kid.” If this is our experience, we’ll find ourselves in the skin of Jacob in Genesis 27. Jacob’s father doesn’t love him and doesn’t want to bless him. So Jacob takes desperate measures in order to win his father’s blessing.

The story shows Isaac and Rebekah, as parents, in their relationship with the Lord, with each other and with their children, and how those relationships affect their children. In this story, we see there is a negative effect because of the parents’ distance from the Lord and from each other. Each of us is a spouse, a parent or a child, and some of us are all three so all of us can relate to this story.

Messed up father

When Esau was forty years old he married Judith the daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Basemath the daughter of Elon the Hittite; and they brought grief to Isaac and Rebekah.

Now it came about, when Isaac was old and his eyes were too dim to see, that he called his older son Esau and said to him, “My son.” And he said to him, “Here I am.” Isaac said, “Behold now, I am old and I do not know the day of my death. Now then, please take your gear, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field and hunt game for me; and prepare a savory dish for me such as I love, and bring it to me that I may eat, so that my soul may bless you before I die.” (Genesis 26:34-27:4)

Esau marries at age 40, just as his father Isaac did. Esau, however, marries two Hittite women. The Hittites were from the land of Canaan (Genesis 36:2). Abraham warned his servant not to take a wife for Isaac from among the wicked Canaanites, who would not give up their gods for their husbands (Genesis 24:3). The servant found Rebekah from the country and family of Abraham. Isaac also warns Jacob against marrying a Canaanite (Genesis 28:1). Esau, who had earlier despised his birthright, shows that he has no interest in the spiritual dimension of the blessing Isaac wants to give him. The narrator implicates Isaac as well. Unlike Abraham, Isaac made no arrangements for his son’s marriage. When “Abraham was old,” he sought a wife for his son (Genesis 24:1). When “Isaac was old,” he sought to bless the wrong son (Genesis 27:1). The story that follows will further implicate Isaac, who favors faithless Esau despite the oracle of Genesis 25:23.

Isaac’s dim eyes match his dim spiritual sensitivities. The words “my son” and “here I am,” which also appear along with the words “my father” in Genesis 27:18 set this story up as a parody of Genesis 22:1-19, where the same words are used. In the Genesis 22 story, both Abraham and his young son Isaac employ the words “here I am” to convey trusting availability. In the Genesis 22 story, Abraham obeys God, and Isaac obeys Abraham. In this story Isaac takes the role of God but orders not a holy sacrifice but an unholy dish of food. Esau is the obedient son in Isaac’s ill-conceived plan, which blows up in both of their faces.

Genesis 27:1-4 is similar to other death-bed scenes in the Old Testament, with two key exceptions (Genesis 48-49, 50:24-25; Deuteronomy 31-34; Joshua 23-24; 1 Kings 2:1-9). First, Isaac doesn't know that he is about to die, and second, he doesn't call both his sons. Isaac is premature and he is inappropriately selective. Moreover, he disregards the oracle from God that granted supremacy to Jacob (Genesis 25:23).

We know from Genesis 25:28 that Isaac, having a taste for game, preferred Esau, who was a skillful hunter. So he asks Esau to hunt some game and cook him some food in preparation for receiving the blessing. Isaac's taste for game is stronger than his taste for the Lord, which not unlike his son Esau, who sold his birthright for a mouthful of stew. It will be his downfall. Esau, before selling his birthright, exaggerated his condition and said he was so hungry that he was about to die. Now Isaac, wondering if he is about to die, exaggerates his condition in order to bless the wrong son. Again, like son, like father.

A savory dish is the object of Isaac's love. In this story of a fractured family, the word "love" appears only in the context of food. And though it was reported earlier that Isaac loved Esau (Genesis 25:28), he seems in this story to love his food more than either of his sons. Isaac is so taken with Esau's inclinations and abilities that he wants to bless him with his "soul." Even on what he thinks is his deathbed, he is pouring out his soul without respect to the word of God.

The blessing concerns fruitfulness, dominion and protection (Genesis 27:27-29). The birthright, which Esau sold to Jacob, concerns inheritance. In this family, both the birthright and the blessing are connected to the Lord; however, from Isaac and Esau's perspective, they are separate. They think that the blessing is up for grabs. However, because both the birthright and the blessing are connected to the Lord, they cannot be so easily separated. The writer of Hebrews sees a connection between the birthright and the blessing, for he says that after Esau sold the birthright, God, through Isaac, rejected him when he sought the blessing (Hebrews 12:16-17).

Parents, are you blessing your children? If so, how are you blessing them? What qualities are you encouraging? Many parents are more drawn to temporary achievements than eternal treasures. They get more excited about straight A's, touchdowns and prosperity than spiritual growth. In that they bless these to the exclusion of their children's relationship with the Lord, they show their children where they think fulfillment is found. They are more than happy to take responsibility for encouraging these qualities, but they refuse to relate to—and teach—their children in the ways of the Lord. Often, they are more than willing to take them to church and hand them over to Sunday school teachers and youth workers. But they refuse to enter the place where it matters most. Parents, I encourage you to enter the spiritual lives of your children. It's your responsibility to teach them the scriptures, pray with them and point them to Christ. It will be the best investment you ever make in your children.

Parents, is your taste for food or drink or money or career or hobbies or the good life stronger than your taste for the Lord? Are these tastes stronger than your love for your children? Do these tastes cause you to value what your children do but not who they are? Do you know who they are? Do you enter into their lives and ask them how they feel? Do you know their hearts? Jesus said that "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21). And if you keep pouring it out without respect to the word of God, you may find yourself even on your deathbed blessing your children in the wrong way or not blessing them at all. Parents, taste and see that the Lord is good, infinitely more satisfying than your other tastes, and you'll value your children in a new way. Seek to know your children and love them for who they are, not for who you think they are or for what you'd like them to be.

Messed up marriage, wounded son

Rebekah was listening while Isaac spoke to his son Esau. So when Esau went to the field to hunt for game to bring home, Rebekah said to her son Jacob, "Behold, I heard your father speak to your brother Esau, saying, 'Bring me some game and prepare a savory dish for me, that I may eat, and bless you in the presence of the LORD before my death.' Now therefore, my son, listen to me as I command you. Go now to the flock and bring me two choice young goats from there, that I may prepare them as a savory dish for your father, such as he loves. Then you shall bring it to your father, that he may eat, so that he may bless you before his death." Jacob answered his mother Rebekah, "Behold, Esau my brother is a hairy man and I am a smooth man. Perhaps my father will feel me, then I will be as a deceiver in his sight, and I will bring upon myself a curse and not a blessing." But his mother said to him, "Your curse be on me, my son; only obey my voice, and go, get them for me." So he went and got them, and brought

them to his mother; and his mother made savory food such as his father loved. Then Rebekah took the best garments of Esau her elder son, which were with her in the house, and put them on Jacob her younger son. And she put the skins of the young goats on his hands and on the smooth part of his neck. She also gave the savory food and the bread, which she had made, to her son Jacob. (Genesis 27:5-17)

Rebekah overhears the exchange between Isaac and Esau, and she hatches a plan to win the blessing for the son she favors. She recounts for Jacob what she heard Isaac say to Esau. Unlike Isaac, Rebekah sees the blessing as being “in the presence of the Lord.” She appreciates the spiritual dimension of the blessing, while Isaac treats it cavalierly. Rebekah plans for Jacob to imitate Esau and bring a tasty dish to Isaac before Esau returns. This is the kind of dish Isaac loves. But Jacob knows that he is not the kind of son his father loves. The only way to get his father’s blessing is to pretend he’s someone else.

Jacob questions the effectiveness of the plan but not its scruples. He’s afraid Isaac, who can’t see, will recognize him by touch and perceive him as a “deceiver.” Jacob doesn’t seem much concerned about how God perceives him. Jacob, of course, is a deceiver. His tongue is as smooth as his skin. He worries that he will incur a curse. The law, which later came through Moses, said, “Cursed is he who misleads a blind person on the road” (Deuteronomy 27:18). In volunteering to absorb any curse that Jacob incurs, Rebekah is heightening the urgency of her case, although any curse incurred by one person could not be transferred to another.

The plan is carried out with garments and the skins of goats. Jacob himself would later be deceived when his sons dipped the garment of Joseph, his favorite son, in the blood of a goat to make him think that Joseph had been killed (Genesis 37:31-33).

Rebekah persuades her son to humiliate himself—using his brother’s clothes, affixing animal skins to his body, offering his mother’s cooking—in order to win his father’s blessing. He has to completely deny who is and pretend he’s someone else. This is an utterly pathetic picture.

Isaac makes important plans without Rebekah, and then Rebekah makes her own plans to usurp his plans. They’ve squared off against each other without even talking about it, and they’ve turned their children into weapons against each other. Their marriage was seemingly a match made in heaven (Genesis 24). Where did this marriage, which had such a promising beginning, get off track? We know at least this much: The husband drifted away from the Lord, and the two of them failed to communicate. Our marriages often get off track in the same way. The most important thing we can do for our marriage is cultivate our own relationship with the Lord. The second most important thing we can do is to communicate with each other—to share our hearts with one another, to listen to one another, to talk through decisions and differences. If we drift from the Lord and if we fail to communicate, we’ll find ourselves living essentially separate lives, just as Isaac and Rebekah. And our children, like Jacob and Esau, will suffer for it.

In the case of Jacob, he has a father who doesn’t love him and a mother who humiliates him. Like Rebekah, some parents humiliate their children by doting on them, pushing them to the front of the line and forcing them to be someone they’re not. They don’t trust their children and therefore do everything for them even when they are adults. Like Isaac, some parents don’t love their children because they are different from them.

Like Jacob, many children grow up believing that they are not the kind of son or daughter their parents love. They grow up believing that something is wrong with their personality, their interests, or their vocational leanings. Only certain vocational options are open to them because they hold the potential for wealth and status. Many of these sons and daughters grow up believing that something is wrong with their hearts. They think that they haven’t got what it takes and that the best they can do, like Jacob, is fake it. They don’t dress up in the clothes of someone else, but they may as well do that for all their efforts to be somebody else. They spend their lives in a never-ending effort to prove themselves. Many sons and daughters learn from their parents to bow down to the god of “Success.” But that god doesn’t reward its subjects very well. And it never gives you what you really want, which is love.

Deceived father, deceitful son

Then he came to his father and said, “My father.” And he said, “Here I am. Who are you, my son?” Jacob said to his father, “I am Esau your firstborn; I have done as you told me. Get up, please, sit and eat of my game, that you may bless me.” Isaac said to his son, “How is it that you have it so quickly, my

son?” And he said, “Because the LORD your God caused it to happen to me.” Then Isaac said to Jacob, “Please come close, that I may feel you, my son, whether you are really my son Esau or not.” So Jacob came close to Isaac his father, and he felt him and said, “The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau.” He did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau’s hands; so he blessed him. And he said, “Are you really my son Esau?” And he said, “I am.” So he said, “Bring it to me, and I will eat of my son’s game, that I may bless you.” And he brought it to him, and he ate; he also brought him wine and he drank. Then his father Isaac said to him, “Please come close and kiss me, my son.” So he came close and kissed him; and when he smelled the smell of his garments, he blessed him and said,

**“See, the smell of my son
Is like the smell of a field which the LORD has blessed;
Now may God give you of the dew of heaven,
And of the fatness of the earth,
And an abundance of grain and new wine;**

**May peoples serve you,
And nations bow down to you;
Be master of your brothers,
And may your mother’s sons bow down to you.
Cursed be those who curse you,
And blessed be those who bless you.”** (Genesis 27:18-29)

When Abraham was ordered by God to sacrifice Isaac, Isaac approached Abraham with the words, “My father.” Abraham responded, “Here I am, my son.” Isaac wanted to know the whereabouts of the sacrificial lamb. Abraham said, “God will provide for himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son” (Genesis 22). Although the words of greeting are the same in Genesis 27, the beautiful story of a son’s trust for a father and a father’s trust in the Lord is replaced by the tragic story of familial deceit and favoritism. Isaac, the son who trusted a father who trusted the Lord, has now become a father who fails to trust the Lord and is deceived by a son.

Jacob calls himself the “firstborn.” Later, he himself will be deceived and be stuck with a “firstborn” wife that he doesn’t want (Genesis 29:26). Jacob introduces himself as Esau, but Isaac is at first suspicious because “Esau” has returned so quickly from the hunt. Jacob commits blasphemy by ascribing his “success” to the Lord. He identifies the Lord as “your” God but not “my” God because he has not yet embraced the Lord. But then, his father has given him no good reason to embrace the Lord. If the Lord is his father’s God, and if his father doesn’t love him, why should he believe in this God? At this point, Jacob, perhaps in resentment, uses “the Lord” against Isaac by committing blasphemy. Jacob will have to find the Lord on his own, because he’s getting no help from his father.

Isaac initially blesses who he thinks is Esau in verse 23, but this is something of a greeting. The blessing proper comes in verses 28 and 29. Jacob feels and smells like Esau, and he brings food that tastes like Esau’s. But he sounds like himself. Isaac disregards the evidence of the voice he hears and he believes his other senses. He is a sensual man, not a man of faith, and his senses overwhelm him.

Isaac says the smell of his son “is like the smell of a field which the Lord has blessed.” The clothes of Esau, who was a man of the field (Genesis 25:27) retain the smell from Esau’s outings. A field that is blessed by God is one that is fruitful. Isaac in the end bases his blessing, which includes fruitfulness, on the premise that Esau is the blessed of God. In doing so, he disregards what God himself had said about the two sons (Genesis 25:23).

Jacob had already received the blessing of the Promised Land through the birthright that he obtained. In verse 28, Isaac blesses Jacob with fruitfulness in the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 7:13). The dew of heaven provides irrigation. The fatness of the earth is rain. Grain and new wine evoke the image of a banquet, overflowing with joy (Psalm 4:7). In verse 29, Isaac blesses Jacob with dominion over the nations and his family. “Peoples” and “nations” are in parallel construction, as are “brothers” and “your mother’s sons.” “Peoples” and “nations” would be the Gentile peoples and nations. “Brothers” and “your mother’s sons” would be Rebekah’s descendants through Esau, who would also become Gentiles. Finally, the curses and blessings called for equate with God’s protection and are particularly linked to dominion (Numbers 24:9).

This blessing has its beginnings in the beginning. Adam and Eve were blessed by God with land in the Garden of

Eden, fruitfulness and dominion (Genesis 1:26-29). The word “garden” can also mean “enclosure,” implying protection. It next comes to Abraham and Isaac (Genesis 12:1-3, 7; 26:3-4, 24). The far-reaching effects of this are that God would in this way bless the nation of Israel and then the church, which the writer of Hebrews calls the “church of the firstborn” and which Paul calls the “Israel of God” (Hebrews 12:23, Galatians 6:16). The church, composed of Jew and Gentile followers of Jesus, would inherit not just the land of Canaan but the entire earth, with the presence of the Holy Spirit being the down payment of that inheritance (Matthew 5:5, Romans 4:13, Ephesians 1:13-14). It would be spiritually fruitful, and it would have dominion, first in spiritual conflict and then over the whole earth (Mark 4:20, John 15:16, Ephesians 2:6, Revelation 22:5). And God would provide spiritual protection, ensuring its salvation (John 10:28).

The blessing ends up on the son of God’s choosing, but the narrator by no means justifies Rebekah and Jacob’s actions. God uses evil for good, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t consequences for evil. Both Rebekah and Jacob will pay a price.

The Genesis 22 story culminated with a substitution. Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac when the angel of the Lord stopped him. Immediately thereafter, Abraham found a ram to offer in place of Isaac. The Genesis 27 parody of Genesis 22 culminates when Jacob substitutes himself for Esau.

Isaac is like someone who grows up in the church. Many such people, like Isaac, are nurtured in an environment of faith and get off to a great start. But they allow other tastes to take the place of their taste for the Lord. Their senses become more important barometers of truth than the word of God. As parents, they ostensibly believe in the Lord, but their treatment of their children belies such belief. Sometimes, they end up like Isaac—as old men or women who have lost spiritual discernment and are taken in by any scheme. If you live by your tastes and by your senses, to the exclusion of faith, your tastes and senses will get the better of you. You’ll find yourself disregarding the word of God and opening yourself up to all sorts of deception. Isaac’s tastes and senses turned him into a buffoon.

Like Jacob, perhaps some of us were reared in an environment that gave us no good reason to believe in a good and loving God. We’ve had to find the Lord on our own. Or, more likely, the Lord has found us.

A different story

If our story is anything like that of Jacob, we have been wounded. The pain can be excruciating, whether we feel it or whether we’ve deadened it, and can dictate the way we see God, the world and ourselves. If we’ve been wounded, then we are ready to hear another story of a father and his younger son. In this story, the father seeks and finds and celebrates his son.

Both Genesis 27 and the parable of the prodigal son first feature a younger son coming to a father and then an older son who also comes to the father. Each of the four sons in these stories hopes to receive something from his father. Notice how the first half of Genesis 27 relates to the first half of the parable:

And he said, “A man had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.’ So he divided his wealth between them. And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him. But when he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.”’ So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.’ And they began to celebrate. (Luke 15:11-24)

In Genesis 27:1-2, though he is far from death, the father prematurely seeks to bless his older son and wrongly excludes his younger son. But in Luke 15:12 the younger son, even though his father is far from death, prematurely seeks his share of the estate and insults his father by asking for it, which is tantamount to wishing that his father were dead.

In Genesis 27:2, the father thinks he is about to die. In Luke 15:24, the son is dead but comes to life.

In Genesis 27:5-10, the mother encourages the son to deceive his father. In Luke 15:20, the father brings shame to himself in that culture by acting like a mother in running to greet his son, demonstrating extraordinary tenderness and compassion.

In Genesis 27:15, the son wears the “best garments” of his brother to trick his father into blessing him, but in Luke 15:22 the father openly gives his son his “best robe,” which signifies acceptance.

In Genesis 27:18, the father asks his son, “Who are you, my son?” and asks that he come close to make sure, but in Luke 15:20 the father sees his son while he is still along way off and runs to him.

In Genesis 27:18-19, the son, pretending he’s someone else, “came” to his father, but in Luke 15:17, 20 the son, literally, “came to himself” and “came” to his father as himself.

In Genesis 27:18-27, the son breaks relationship with his father by deceiving him into thinking that he is his brother. In Luke 15:12, the son breaks relationship with his father by demanding his share of the estate.

In Genesis 27:19, the son asks his father to get up and eat the meal he has prepared in order that the father might bless him, but in Luke 15:20-24, unasked, the father runs to his son, blesses him and prepares a meal for him.

In Genesis 27:20, the son has to act quickly in order to deceive his father before earning his wrath. In Luke 15:13, the son has to act quickly in gathering everything together before earning the wrath of the community.

In Genesis 27:22, the father feels his son to make sure that he isn’t the son who he doesn’t love, but in Luke 15:20 the father knows the identity of his son and, in love, embraces him.

In Genesis 27:25, the father asks his son to “bring” him a meal, and the father “ate” and drank, but in Luke 15:23 the father tells his servants to “bring” the fattened calf and encourages all to “eat” and celebrate.

And, finally, in Genesis 27:26 the father asks his son to come close and kiss him, blessing him only because he smells like someone else, but in Luke 15:20, the father runs to kiss his son, blessing him with forgiveness while knowing exactly who he is.

Do you see what Jesus is doing? He is rewriting the story. He rewrites the Isaac-Jacob story. He rewrites your story! Jesus intends for us to see in the father a picture of our heavenly Father, who is seen in Jesus himself. It’s an entirely different picture than that of the deeply flawed father of Genesis 27. Is there a wound in your heart that won’t go away because of things that happened long ago? Your heavenly Father knows about it. He was there, holding your hand through it, though you may not have been aware of his presence.

Now he wants to show you another love; His love. He wants to give you another story—one that features a love that runs down the road to welcome you home. When you draw your identity from your parents, who are flawed, or from your world, which is flawed, your sense of yourself will be flawed. If we’re lost in someone else’s assessment of us, we must come home to the Father. We must come home again and again and again, because we get lost in this world again and again and again.

Your heavenly Father doesn’t bless who you aren’t; he blesses who you are. God created the man and the woman and he blessed them and said “be fruitful,” and he deemed his creation very good. There is something you have to offer the world that no one else can offer. It is uniquely and distinctly you. God has given each of us spiritual gifts that we might be spiritually fruitful. But we always want something different or something more. But something different or something more won’t be blessed. It will be blessed in someone else, but not in you. When we try to be

someone we're not in order to be blessed, we leave the place of blessing. We leave ourselves. God blesses us in different ways that we might complement one another. We don't, therefore, need to dress up in someone else's clothes.

In 1995, Jerry Lewis starred in *Damn Yankees* on Broadway. The date of the first show is emblazoned in his memory, and not just because it was the first show. Listen to Lewis: "Well, come Feb. 28, 1995, I come up for the last bow on my first night in *Damn Yankees*, and so help me Christ, I heard my dad say, 'Now, you've got it, kid.'"(2) He was 68 years old, and he finally heard words of approval from his father.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, you don't have to wait 68 years to hear words of approval from your heavenly Father. With artistry and wisdom, he created you. With love and blood, he redeemed you. With strength and tenderness, he indwelt you. What you have to offer is both uniquely yours and pleasing to the Father.

You've got it, kid.

NOTES

(1) Mark de la Vina, "Jerry and the Devil," *San Jose Mercury News*, Sept. 15, 1996. Arts, P. 5.

(2) Ibid.

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Third Message

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