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Genesis 27:1–27, New Living Translation, condensed.

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

“Yes, Father?” Esau replied.

² “I am an old man now,” Isaac said, “and I don’t know when I may die. I will pronounce the blessing that belongs to you, my firstborn son, before I die.”

⁵ But Rebekah overheard what Isaac had said to his son Esau. So ⁶ she said to her son Jacob, “Do exactly as I tell you. Take the food to your father so he can eat it and bless you before he dies.”

¹¹ “But look,” Jacob replied to Rebekah, “my brother, Esau, is a hairy man, and my skin is smooth. ¹² 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.”

Rebekah took Esau’s favorite clothes, which were there in the house, and gave them to her younger son, Jacob. ¹⁶ She covered his arms and the smooth part of his neck with the skin of the young goats. ¹⁷ Then she gave Jacob the delicious meal, including freshly baked bread.

¹⁸ So Jacob took the food to his father. “My father?” he said.

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

¹⁹ Jacob replied, “It’s Esau, your firstborn son. Now sit up and eat it so you can give me your blessing.”

²¹ Then Isaac said to Jacob, “Come closer so I can touch you and make sure that you really are Esau.” ²² So Jacob went closer to his father, and Isaac touched him. “The voice is Jacob’s, but the hands are Esau’s,” Isaac said. ²³ But he did not recognize Jacob, because Jacob’s hands felt hairy just like Esau’s. ²⁴ “But are you really my son Esau?” he asked.

“Yes, I am,” Jacob replied.

²⁵ Then Isaac said, to Jacob, “Please come a little closer and kiss me, my son.”

²⁷ 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!”

Matthew 5:1–12, New Living Translation.

One day as he saw the crowds gathering, Jesus went up on the mountainside and sat down. His disciples gathered around him, ² and he began to teach them.

The Beatitudes

³ *“God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.*

⁴ *God blesses those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

⁵ *God blesses those who are humble, for they will inherit the whole earth.*

⁶ *God blesses those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be satisfied.*

⁷ *God blesses those who are merciful, for they will be shown mercy.*

⁸ *God blesses those whose hearts are pure, for they will see God.*

⁹ *God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God.*

¹⁰ *God blesses those who are persecuted for doing right, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.*

¹¹ *“God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you because you are my followers. ¹² Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven.*

A New Covenant blessing.

I like to sign my emails with “Blessings, Pastor Buzz”. It’s because the word “blessing” has always meant a lot to me. Here are some of the definitions of the word that you’ll find in English dictionaries: “*a ceremonial prayer invoking divine protection*”, “*the act of praying for divine protection*”, and “*something good that you feel very grateful or lucky to have*”. Those are all okay. But these are general,

non-faith-based definitions. Here is a more Christian, theological definition. A blessing is *“a pronouncement that solicits or distributes well-being. When blessings are actualized or realized by divine agency they provide security, peace, and happiness.”* I don’t pretend to have some magical access to God, but when I offer my blessing, it is with the hope that God will indeed intervene and give the person to whom I am offering the blessing security, peace, and happiness.

I’d like to talk about blessings, from a biblical perspective. Blessings are a core concept in the Bible. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, God promises the Israelites their own land, lots of descendants, and God’s blessing. The notion of God blessing people was a very powerful concept to the people of biblical times. The idea of God’s blessing leverages a common practice of the ancient world, wherein a father would bless the son who is to inherit from him. This was how a father could guarantee that a son would prosper and be financially secure. By telling stories that draw a parallel with the blessings that an ancient father would pass on to his eldest son, the authors of the Bible were able to convey in a tangible fashion the power of God’s blessing.

Perhaps the most highly discussed blessing in the Bible is the one offered by Isaac to his son. Isaac and Rebekah had two sons, Jacob and Esau. Esau was an outdoorsman, a hunter, and his father, Isaac, preferred him. But Jacob was a

quiet, thoughtful man, and Rebekah preferred him. In our passage, Rebekah sees Esau as “his” or Isaac’s son, not hers. It’s also true that God tells Rebekah that Esau will end up serving his younger brother Jacob. Importantly, Esau, being older, was supposed to get his father’s blessing, but Rebekah plotted with Jacob to make sure that Jacob got the blessing. From a biblical perspective it’s critical to understand that whoever received the blessing inherits more than just Isaac’s assets: he inherits the guardianship of God’s covenant with the Chosen People. Whichever son of Isaac happens to receive his blessing will be the person who oversees the promise that God has made of providing land, progeny, and God’s continuing blessing to God’s people. Isaac’s blessing is a powerful metaphor in the Book of Genesis: it ensures the continuity of God’s relationship with those who believe in God. This literary device serves to assure us that God will always keep a protective eye on those who live according to the principles of our faith: empathy for all those made in God’s image, living in peace, forgiveness for those who do us harm, and an ongoing commitment to repenting when we have done wrong, along with a determination to always grow spiritually and ethically.

Let’s step back and look at the biblical roots of blessings, from the perspective of Isaac’s failing eyes. Isaac is old; his vision is almost gone. He knows that it is time to pass on the job of being then protector of the covenant

between God and God's people. The oldest son is Esau, but Rebeka wants her favorite – and the person who is apparently God's favorite – to inherit. We don't know much today about the ceremonies that surrounded this sort of blessing, but apparently, it involved the eldest son bringing food to his father just before receiving the blessing. Rebekah tells her son Jacob to bring the dinner to Isaac, to lie to him and claim that he is Esau, and then get blessed. But here is what happens: ¹¹ *“But look,” Jacob replied to Rebekah, “my brother, Esau, is a hairy man, and my skin is smooth. ¹² 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.”* Rebekah took Esau's favorite clothes, which were there in the house, and gave them to her younger son, Jacob. ¹⁶ *She covered his arms and the smooth part of his neck with the skin of the young goats. ¹⁷ Then she gave Jacob the delicious meal, including freshly baked bread.* If I had a brother whose arms were as hairy as goats, I would probably take him to Urgent Care instead of pretending to be him by putting on goat skin. Here is what then happens: *“Yes, my son,” Isaac answered. “Who are you—Esau or Jacob?” ¹⁹ Jacob replied, “It's Esau, your firstborn son. Now sit up and eat it so you can give me your blessing.” ²¹ Then Isaac said to Jacob, “Come closer so I can touch you and make sure that you really are Esau.” ²² So Jacob went closer to his father, and Isaac touched him. “The voice is Jacob's, but the hands are*

Esau's," Isaac said. ²³ But he did not recognize Jacob, because Jacob's hands felt hairy just like Esau's. ²⁴ "But are you really my son Esau?" he asked. "Yes, I am," Jacob replied. So, the goat skin thing works, but Jacob doesn't sound like Esau. In truth, the fact that Jacob is easily tricked probably means that he was suffering from some sort of early dementia. Here is what happens next: ²⁵ Then Isaac said, to Jacob, "Please come a little closer and kiss me, my son." ²⁷ 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! Apparently, the wild animal smell of his son was more important than the fact that he had the voice of the wrong son. Jacob succeeds in getting the blessing. Later, when Esau finds out what happened, he goes to his father and tells him about the trickery. This is what happens as a result: ³³ 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!" ³⁴ 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. ³⁵ But Isaac said, "Your brother was here, and he tricked me. He has taken away your blessing." The best interpretation that biblical scholars can come up with for Isaac not trying to yank the blessing from Jacob and give it to

Esau is that Isaac must have realized that God wanted Jacob to be the new guardian of the covenant between God and the Israelites.

There is a big difference, though, between the Old and the New Covenants. Under the Old Covenant, only the priests could enter the most sacred part of the Temple. In the Old Testament, God used human prophets to interact with the Chosen People. Most significantly, the Old Covenant was between God and an entire people. But the New Covenant is between God and individuals – us. The New Covenant is about the release from sin, a promise of a life eternal, and the opportunity to model our lives after that of Jesus Christ. Isaac's blessing was needed to make sure that there would still be a conduit between God and the Chosen People. But under the New Covenant, blessings are personal.

Near the beginning of Jesus' ministry, he offers the following blessings in the Beatitudes. Notice that they are available to all of us, not just to the first born of an Israelite patriarch: God blesses the poor, those who mourn, humble people, individuals who fight for justice, people who show mercy to others, those with pure hearts, people who work toward peace, and all those who are persecuted for having the courage to make their faith public. In this last case, for those who have true faith in God, Jesus tells us to be happy, knowing that God will protect and guide us, and will ensure us a life eternal.

But just what does it mean to earn that final blessing, the one that says this: ¹¹ *“God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you because you are my followers. ¹² Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven.* How do those who are true believers live? What is the evidence that we deserve this incredible blessing? In Chapter twelve of Paul’s extremely influential letter to the Christians in Rome, he writes this: ² *Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God’s will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.* What this says is that moral, ethical behavior is not something that’s debatable or that evolves over time. We may learn incrementally what God wants from us. It may take all of our lifetimes – and in fact, it certainly does take all that time – to slowly become sanctified, to fully comprehend what it means to live the life that Jesus led. We never fully get there. But what is right and what is wrong – that in itself is not up for debate; it does not change. Our goal is to learn the difference and then live accordingly. We learn it from God, not from people. Our ability to do this is perhaps the most incredible blessing imaginable.

We don’t need a descendent of Abraham – and yes, Isaac was the son of Abraham and Jacob was his grandson – to care for our covenant with God. Ours is

personal, individual. Each of us has a covenant with God. God will guide each of us personally, one-on-one. All you have to do is stop and feel God's blessing. Everything else will flow naturally from there. When Wendy and I are in the foothills or out east of Boulder on a trail, when we're surrounded by pine trees or watching geese fly in a huge arc across the sky, that's when I feel that blessing the most. There's something about the human-built world that keeps us from feeling that personal blessing from God. It's more than the political and social division that the news media instills in us because it's good for their ratings. It's more than the greedy way of living that our commercialized society thrusts upon us. It's more than the pervasive distractions of social media and technology. When we are away from the creations of humans, we see a world that is much closer to the world in which the ancients lived. While there is strong evidence that later people, like King David, are real, we don't know for certain that Abraham, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Esau were true, historical figures. Often biblical stories do more to help us understand our faith than to understand literal history. Be joyful that the story of Isaac's blessing is there to remind us of the incredible value of God's personal blessing for each of us. Please pray very briefly with me.

God, thank you for reaching down and blessing each and every one of us, and thank you for letting us renew that blessing at any time we want. Amen.