

God rules through human sin

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[0 : 00] I love my family, but families are funny things, aren't they? We all long to have a loving one, yet often they're often a source of strife.

And even the most loving of families will often have conflict, will definitely have conflict in them. Perhaps not major feuds that last for years, but arguments and disagreements nonetheless.

And that's just because no one in the family is perfect. We're all human and we're all sinful. Well, tonight we'll see that this is no different to Isaac's family.

Last week, though, we had actually discovered that he was a blessed man. God had blessed him. And yet as we zoom in tonight on chapter 27, on this one faithful day in the life of their family, we see a family feud unfold, one that actually changes the course of history.

It's a suspense-filled drama full of deception and full of emotion. But first, turn to your outlines if you're following with me.

[1 : 10] But first, let's meet our main characters again. Each we now see is actually a flawed character. So first, we meet Esau in chapter 26 and verse 34.

He was Isaac's firstborn, who, when he was 40 years old, went out and married two Hittite women, one by the name of Judith and the other by the name of Basemath.

Or Basemat. Yeah. Sounds weird, but anyway. And the Bible says that they were a source of grief to Isaac and Rebekah. Now, two weeks ago, we saw Esau trade away his birthright for a measly bowl of lentils.

And now we see that actually this was no momentary lapse, but rather a consistent pattern of behavior. You see, unlike his father, when Esau turned 40, he didn't find a wife among his dad's relatives back in the homeland, but took not one, but two Hittite women.

Women who were part of another tribe that was already in the land, who had claims to the land and worshipped foreign gods. And so would compete for Esau's allegiance.

[2 : 27] And yet, as we saw two weeks ago, Esau had disdained God's promises to Abraham. For we read in Genesis chapter 25 and verse 34 that he had despised his birthright.

Today, his actions by marrying the two women confirms that. Next, we meet Isaac, old and blind, and sensing his time is near, he asks Esau to prepare a favorite meal, his favorite meal, a wild game, so that he might then bless him before he dies.

Now, a few things about this actually reflects poorly on Isaac. First, the custom is that when you die, you actually call all your sons together to bless them.

So, for example, we'll see that happen to Jacob at the end of Genesis. Now, you may still end up blessing one son more than the other, probably the elder more than the younger.

But here, for Isaac to only call one of his sons is actually gross favoritism, which actually we've heard about in chapter 25 already. Next, if Isaac knew of the prophecy to Rebekah, the one that says that the older will serve the younger, then again, this reflects even poorly on Isaac, for he was resisting God's will.

[3 : 49] But let's say we give him the benefit of the doubt, which I'm actually willing to, because the Bible is silent on whether he knew about this prophecy or not. Even if we gave him that benefit of doubt, Isaac's behavior here is still very poor, because what have we just read?

We've just read that Esau's wife had given both him and Rebekah grief. And yet, not only does he not chastise Esau, he wants now to bless him instead.

If this kind of rewarding of bad behavior had been a pattern, then you can sort of understand why Esau has turned out the way he has. So Esau, again, is floored in what he's done.

But let's turn now finally to Rebekah and Jacob, whom I will treat as a tag team. Rebekah, in verse 5, she's overheard Isaac's words to Esau. And so she calls Jacob while Esau is out hunting game.

And after relaying what Isaac says, tells Jacob in verse 8 to go and get two choice young goats so that she could prepare a tasty meal just the way Isaac likes it.

[4 : 57] And then Jacob could give it to Isaac to receive the blessing instead. Rebekah here thinks she's giving God a helping hand, especially as she sees Isaac is about to undermine God's prophecy.

Jacob, however, he's concerned. He says, what if dad, being blind, touches his smooth skin instead and finds out who he really is? He'll curse him for trying to trick him.

But Rebekah is insistent and he tells Jacob, don't worry, if that happens, then let the curse fall on me instead. But I think it did get Rebekah thinking.

And so what she does is she then disguises Jacob in Esau's clothes and gets more goat skin so that by covering off the smooth part of his body, Jacob could be passed off as Esau.

Now it's quite interesting to observe this relationship dynamic, isn't it? Because it seems like mom is actually in the driver's seat. She's the one coming up with all the schemes and the ideas.

[5 : 58] She's even going to be cooking the meal for Jacob. And all Jacob has to do is bringing the goats for her, which I think is just probably just outside the house. So not a very big job at all.

And yet Jacob, you have to see, is actually a willing accomplice as well. For he, we've seen, has already desired greatly the blessing.

And notice here that he doesn't actually question the lack of honesty of Rebekah and say, no, we shouldn't be doing this.

Rather, his fears are more centered around the risk of failure. It was actually fears of, you know, related to self-preservation. And so we have mom and son, this deceiving duo, or as I call them, the tag team of trickery.

Which now brings us to the climax of the story in verse 18. I didn't get Johnson to read it, so we'll try and follow it as we go. Now, as Jacob brings Isaac the meal and greets him, he wonders, that is, Isaac wonders who has come.

[7 : 08] And so he asks, who is it? And this is Jacob's reply. I am Esau, your firstborn. I've done as you told me. Please sit up and eat some of my game so that you may give me your blessing.

So immediately we see, in verse 19, two lies. First, that he was Esau, which is wrong. And second, that he had wild game, which was actually just goat. Now, Isaac's suspicions are aroused.

And he said, how do you find that so quickly, my son? You might be going out to get game, to hunt. Well, lie number three follows from Jacob. He says, the Lord your God gave me success.

Then Isaac said to Jacob, come near so I can touch you, my son, to know whether you really are my son Esau or not. And as we read this story, what meant to just get the sense of the suspense that's building.

Because in the back of our mind, we've got God's promise to Rebekah. And so now we're wondering if Jacob will indeed get away with it and be blessed as the younger over the older.

[8 : 15] And so continuing, verse 22, Jacob went close to his father Isaac, who touched him and said, the voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau.

He did not recognize him, for his hands were hairy like those of his brother Esau. So he proceeded to bless him. Isaac is still doubtful, but perhaps, perhaps, he'll get away with it.

Jacob will get away with it and he will be blessed anyway. But just as we think Isaac's about to bless Jacob, comes verse 24.

Are you really my son Esau? He asked. Again, the suspense builds. Will Jacob's cover now be blown? Well, Jacob has to lie once again, but this time, because he senses that dad might recognize his voice, he keeps his answer to a bare minimum.

All he says is, I am. Or actually in Hebrew, it's just one word. And with that, Isaac eats what he thinks is the game. And you know what?

[9 : 21] It's a bit ironic actually, because he actually doesn't realize it's wild game. It's not wild game, but goat. So it's sort of a bit weird, isn't it? Because this was meant to be Esau's special thing that he was going to cook.

And yet, Isaac doesn't really recognize that it's not wild game at all, just goat. Either that, or Rebecca must have been a really good cook, which I think was probably more the truth.

Well, anyway, he takes it, thinks it's game, and then Jacob plies him with more wine, probably to try and dull his senses even more. And then, fingers crossed, we hope this is when the blessing will be given.

But just when we think he's nearly there, one more thing happens. Isaac says, come over here and kiss me. No! It's like, ah, not another one.

We've dealt with Isaac's sight, we've dealt with his hearing, and now we have to deal with his sense of smell. And I can tell you from experience that it's hard actually to disguise your smell.

[10 : 22] I admit that often I'm confused by my daughter's voices, particularly when they call me on the phone, but I can always tell their smells apart. And so you wonder, is this going to be the moment when Jacob is going to be found out?

Is this when the scheme will fall at the last hurdle? Well, no, because thanks to mom, she thought about Esau's clothes. She put that, you know, the best of Esau's clothes on Jacob, and it's that tiny detail that at last proves to be the crucial difference.

And so, when Isaac caught the smell of his clothes, he's finally convinced, he finally blessed him and said, ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field that the Lord has blessed.

May God give you heaven's dew and earth's riches, an abundance of grain and new wine. May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you. Be Lord over your brothers and may the sons of your mother bow down to you.

May those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed. And so finally, finally, the deed is done. But look carefully and I think you see that this blessing is actually also a prayer, isn't it?

[11 : 42] Because Isaac is calling on God to bless his son. So there's the prayer for material blessing, but more importantly, there's the prayer that Jacob will be served by Esau as well as the other nations.

And so even though Isaac doesn't realize this, he's praying actually that God will fulfill his prophecy to Rebekah. Well, after the clothes shave, in verse 30, comes the shocking discovery.

So again, it's like suspense-filled drama because scarcely had Jacob left, the verse says, when Esau returns. Game in hand, not as in tennis, but as in game, ready for blessing.

He cooks his meal and then he brings it to Isaac and says, my father, please sit up and eat some of my game so that you may give me your blessing. And here, Isaac would be going just like *deja vu*, like what?

Is this all happening again? And then notice, they very soon work out exactly what's happened, that they've been had by Jacob and Rebekah. And notice in verse 33, how violently emotional they are.

[12 : 56] Verse 33, Isaac trembled violently. And Esau, when he discovers the blessing in verse 34, it's not going to be reversed, he burst out with a loud and bitter cry.

These are really traumatic emotions for them. And I guess it's perfectly understandable, isn't it? Because the course of history has just been altered. And yet, I think when you look at it, Isaac's reaction is actually quite different to Esau's.

Why? Because Isaac actually comes to terms with what's happened, whereas Esau doesn't. Isaac realizes that now there's no way his favorite son will be blessed.

By hook or by croup, Jacob has been blessed and he says, indeed, he will be blessed. On the other hand, Esau actually refuses to accept it. He's unrepentant. He's actually not acknowledged that he himself has put the blessing at risk by selling his burble right by marrying foreign wives.

He doesn't consider for a moment that God may have seen what he's done and justifiably given his blessing to another. And so, Esau still thinks that he wants to be blessed.

[14 : 08] But actually, if you think about it, even though this blessing has been given to Jacob, Esau could still have been blessed. How? Esau by choosing to serve and bless Jacob, actually.

Because Isaac's blessing has said that whoever blesses Jacob will be blessed and whoever curses him will be cursed. And so, even now, Esau could have actually served Jacob and still have been blessed.

But no, Esau only wanted the blessing directly and not fire Jacob. And so, Esau keeps pressing Isaac for a direct blessing.

Again, he pleads, Bless me too, Father. Have you not left one blessing for me? Well, unfortunately, the answer is no because Isaac had actually dispensed the entire blessing on the one that he thought was his favorite son.

And that's what happens when you show favoritism. You give everything to that son and you've got nothing left for the other. And so, all that's left is really just a prediction. It's not really a blessing that's there in verse 39.

[15 : 17] It's a prediction that Esau will live by the sword, not by the fruit of the land and he will serve his brother until it all gets too hard and then he will throw off his yoke. Well, that's sort of in keeping with Esau's character, isn't it?

Because he refuses to be blessed via Jacob. Well, the remaining verses then give us the aftermath of the feud. Verse 41.

Esau, refusing to repent, nurses a grudge against Jacob and he starts to plot to kill him, especially when dad is dead. Mom, Rebecca, discovers it and again plots to save Jacob.

Sending him away, she hopes for a little while until Esau's anger subsides. And so, at her suggestion, Esau, Isaac sends Jacob to find a wife, not among the Hittites but back in Rebekah's family's homeland.

But before he goes, Isaac blesses him again. And this time, the blessing, we see, is tied explicitly to God's promises to Abraham. It's as though Isaac realizes that yes, it is true, this Jacob, this son now, that God will fulfill his promises.

[16 : 32] So, verse 3 of chapter 28, he says, May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and increase your numbers until you become a community of peoples. May he give you and your descendants the blessing given to Abraham so that you may take possession of the land where you now reside as a foreigner, the land God gave to Abraham.

Now, when Esau finds out and realizes how his Hittite wives have displeased his parents and that's why they've sent Jacob to go and find a wife not among the people of the land, what Esau does is that he goes out and marries a daughter of Ishmael.

I think it's his way of trying to appease his parents but it's really too little to light. This new wife may be a descendant of Abraham but she's actually part of the line that has been rejected by God and what's more, he keeps, he continues to keep his other wives, the wives that are causing grief to Isaac and Rebecca.

It's sort of like when a parent asks his children to clean the room and what they do instead is they buy a box of chocolate for him. It's sort of a token gesture to distract from the real disobedience that has happened.

Now, I hope you've seen with this story, I've flown through it because it's quite a long chapter but I hope you've seen from this story how no one really covers themselves in glory in what they've done.

[18 : 01] Esau, he's left without a blessing but he's angry and unrepentant and he's still a source of grief to mom and dad. Rebecca, well, she loses her favorite son and perhaps never sees him again because as we read, Rebecca and Jacob never speak again to one another.

And Jacob, well, he spends many years in exile, at least 14 years as we will see in the coming weeks and it could have been much longer than that and all this while it would have been a hard life working and trying to gain the favor of Laban.

So much then for getting that blessing from Isaac, isn't it? Well, that's the story but what can we learn from this account? What are the lessons for us today?

Well, I believe there are two key things which are in our third point today. First, we see that God actually remains in control even through human sin.

At every turn of the story, even as each character fails and sins, we see that God's plan remains undeterred. He predestined that the older will serve the younger and here, in this story, we see the first steps of that fulfillment.

[19 : 28] All this happens in spite of Isaac intending otherwise. All this happens in spite of the numerous near misses that occurred where Jacob would have been found out.

Two weeks ago, we saw or explained that there were two truths which needed to be held in tension. If you remember, we needed to hold God's sovereignty and human responsibility together.

Well, tonight, we actually see another two things, two truths. And the first is that although God's good and sovereign will is always done, this, on the other hand, always occurs or often occurs in the midst of human sin.

God's will is done even when humans sin and act contrary to God's will. And so God's rule here is not thwarted by Isaac's failure, nor by Rebecca or Jacob's sin.

I sometimes think of God's sovereignty like it's this huge flexible pipe in which he sort of directs history and bends all things to his good purpose and will. And in it are tiny little ping pong balls, as it were, each representing us and our myriad human decisions.

[20 : 45] And we, as moral agents, we are these ping pong balls colliding with each other, causing chain reactions and all sorts of decisions in history. But no matter what we do and decide, none of our choices or actions actually fall outside the pipe of God's sovereign control.

And in the end, all the balls still keep going down that pipe and end up as God intended, where he wants history to end. And in fact, I think I can even take it further and drop the word even, as I've done it with the title.

Because it's true to say that actually God rules, not even through human sin, but God rules through human sin, not in spite of it. In other words, our failures and our sin aren't like little spot fires that God has to put up or put out in order to keep his plan on track.

Rather, in God's mysterious way, in which we cannot fully understand, our very actions, sinful though they may be, bring about his plans in the very first place.

He himself is not the cause of evil or sin, but somehow, humans in their sin help bring about God's sovereign plan. And so we see that today when Jacob's lies help accomplish God's purposes.

[22 : 03] And we see it, for example, with Jesus and God's salvation. So in a slide here, which I've got on Acts chapter 4 and verse 27, it says this in relation to Jesus' crucifixion.

Indeed, Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. So yes, all the evil was arrayed against God's anointed.

But verse 28, they did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. And so friends, this is true even now.

With all the evil that's in the world at the moment, not only has God not lost control, but actually the achieving for God what he had decided beforehand would happen.

And so, as Christians, we don't need to lose heart, do we? Because even though, for example, we don't like the government that's in power at the moment, and even though they do awful things, they are still achieving what God's purpose is for this world.

[23 : 10] So, for example, it's something that's front of everyone's mind in relation to the postal vote. I don't know what's going to happen afterwards, but even if the marriage laws do change, and I can't predict what will change, although I know that many loud voices pushing for it, even if that's the case, we must still trust that God is in control, and that God's will and purpose will be accomplished, even through something that is contrary to his will.

Because as we look at the rest of history, we see that happening time and time again. So, for example, when Christians were persecuted during the Roman Empire, and yet, even through that persecution, God's kingdom grew.

The same happened with China, for example, for many years, under the communists, there was lots of persecution, and yet the church grew there as well. And the same is happening now, as we hear stories coming out from the Middle East, with ISIS, with Muslims becoming Christian, even though we see evil upon evil being perpetrated by them.

Yes, the evil is horrific, but God's purpose is still being accomplished. And this is true even for us personally, at the individual level, because we too fail and sin, don't we?

But again, God's will is done, even in the midst of our sin and failures. Somehow, God uses them to shape us into the people that he wants us to be.

[24 : 40] And that's sort of encouraging in a strange way, isn't it? Because nothing can frustrate God's good will for us. And yet, on the other hand, we mustn't think then, oh, well, okay, God's going to do what he's going to do, he's going to use our sinfulness, then we don't need to really worry about what we do, right?

We can just keep sinning. After all, God will still accomplish his purpose. Or if I could quote a verse from Romans, Paul says, why not say, let us do evil that good may result?

No, we mustn't think like that, because although God can use evil for his purposes, we ourselves must not take the side of evil or sin, because we will be answerable for our actions.

So, for example, Rebecca and Jacob, they had no excuse for deceiving Isaac, even if they had thought they were giving God a helping hand. That wasn't the right thing to do. And because they did, they actually suffered the consequences for it.

They had a family torn apart because of their actions, and Jacob living in exile and being in fear of his brother's wrath. death. Again, the same thing happened with Jesus' death as well.

[25 : 52] So, Brendan read for us tonight in that New Testament reading, Judas' betrayal of Jesus, well, that was part of God's plan. We read, the Son of Man will go just as is written about him.

But then in the very next sentence, God says, but woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man. Yes, that was part of God's plan, but there was no excuse for Judas.

Judas, he was responsible for what he did. And so for us, we too must choose what's right. We too must seek to do what's according to God's will. Even though when we fail, God's purposes are still fulfilled.

And the thing is that when we do fail, then we mustn't be like Esau. Rather, we ought to repent. We ought to take responsibility for what we did.

And then choose to put our hope in Jesus so that we might be forgiven. We need to serve him and bless him so that we too will be blessed. After all, Jesus is the offspring that God's promised through Abraham, the one through whom all nations will be blessed, as we saw last week, that those who bless him will be blessed, and those who curse him will be cursed.

[27 : 10] Friends, I'm going to finish off with a story about Shane. I think I've got a picture of him on the slides. Shane, as you can tell by the picture, was one of Britain's most dangerous criminals.

It was actually so bad that he committed his first crime by the age of 10. And after that, his lives just spiraled into a wave of violence, armed robberies, drugs, and intimidation. At the age of 20, this is going to scare some of you, he stabbed the man through the head with a knife, and the blade came out through the eyebrows.

And while he was on bail, he actually stabbed another over drugs. And so dangerous was he that when they convicted him, they sent him straight, not into prison, but into solitary confinement.

And they put him on what was called the ghost train, which was the practice of moving criminals, high risk prisoners, from one maximum security unit to another. And I think in total he went to 13 of those.

But on one rare occasion when he was allowed out of his cell, he wandered into a Christianity course. And one of the lads there said that if they joined, they would get free chocolate cake and biscuits, to which he replied, put my name down.

[28 : 24] But at first, he actually railed against the teachings. He thought, there's no chance for me, I'm going to hell. But then he kept hearing that Jesus died for sinners. And so asked, if I've done all these crimes, can I still go to heaven?

And they'll go, only if you repent. So one day he asked the chaplain what to pray to accept God into his life. And then the chaplain said, just pray from your heart.

And so this was his prayer. He said, please God, if you are real, come into my life because I hate who I am. And from that moment, his life changed.

This is a photo of his family now, Sam, his wife, and four children. And now he supports other people like him, wanting them to experience Jesus and eternal life just as he did.

Now I give you this story because, friends, I don't know whether anyone's life can get worse than Shane's. And yet what his life shows is that no matter how bad life may seem, God is still in control.

[29 : 26] He can use even the most sinful human, doing the most sinful things in the lowest point of their lives, to achieve his will and bring them back to Jesus.

And so that's possible for each of us as well. But what we need to do is come to Jesus, to serve him, submit to him, so that through him we will find God's abundant blessing.

Let me pray. Father, again, we see in your story tonight that you are still in control. You're always in control. That your plan for us, for history, for the world, always will come to pass.

And so we praise you for your sovereignty. We praise you for your sovereignty even to the extent that you use human sinfulness and failures to bring about your purpose.

Help us, Father, to continue to choose what is right, to put our faith in Jesus, to trust in him, to serve him, so that through him we will be blessed.

[30 : 38] We pray and ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.