

REMINISCENCE OF A CON MAN

Scripture Reading: Genesis 27:1-20

Reminiscence

You might say mom always liked me best. It was her idea to trick my father into giving the family blessing to me instead of Esau. You understand, of course, that this blessing was not just a blessing. It was about inheriting the promises God gave to our grandfather. God promised Abraham that he would have many descendants who would become a great nation and bring blessing to all the nations of the earth. Isaac was his only son, at least his only son by our grandmother Sarah (that's another story). So in the second generation there was no question about who would inherit God's promise. It was Isaac. But in the next generation Isaac had two children. So now the question was which of us would be the heir to these promises. Which of us would be the ancestor of God's chosen people to bring blessing to all the earth?

My father assumed it was Esau: partly because Esau was the first born, and partly because he liked Esau best. He liked that Esau was a hunter and brought back wild game for him to eat. Me? I just herded goats.

But mother wanted me to dress up like Esau, take dinner to my blind father, and deceive him into giving me the blessing that he intended to give Esau.

"This will never work," I said. "Father's blind, but he's not deaf. What happens when he hears my voice? What happens when he hugs me? I'm not hairy like my descended-from-the-apes brother. Besides, Esau always brings him venison. You think he will be fooled by cooked lamb? He's not going to give me Esau's inheritance; he's going to disown me."

"Just do what I say," mother said. "I know a few things that you don't."

"Like what?" I said.

Mother sat next to me. "I haven't told you this until now. But during my pregnancy you and your twin brother thrashed around so much I thought I was going to die. So I prayed to God, and that's when God spoke to me. God said, 'There are two nations in your womb. One shall be stronger than the other, and the older shall serve the younger.' You are the younger," she said to me. "You are the one chosen to inherit God's promise to Abraham. You are the one chosen to be ancestor of a great nation that will bring God's blessing to the world! That is your destiny, Jacob. I'm just helping it along."

"I won't be a blessing to Esau," I thought, as she fastened the goat's hair to my hands and neck.

Almost immediately my father was suspicious. "Who are you, my son?" he asked. "I'm Esau," I growled, trying to disguise my voice. "I brought you some game that I hunted so you can bless me."

He paused. “How did you find it so quickly?” he asked. “Uh... God helped me,” I stammered. Now I was not only lying; I was committing blasphemy. I expected at any moment to be struck by lightning.

“Come closer,” he said. He touched my hands and put his arm around my neck, just as he did when I was young. “Let me kiss you, my son,” he said. Oh no, this is it. He’s going to feel my face. There was no hair on my face. But he kissed me and said, “Ah, the smell of my son.” Then he blessed me. He said, “May God give you the dew of heaven and the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine. 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.”

At first I felt guilty. What kind of son would deceive his own blind father? But then I felt angry. He was going to give this blessing to my brother! He was going to make my brother the lord over me! The nerve! Esau is not really my elder. We were twins. We should have been treated as equals. It was matter of simple justice. It’s okay to lie if you are just standing up for your rights, isn’t it? That’s what I thought.

Of course, Esau didn’t see it that way. When he found out, he wanted to kill me. So mother sent me away to live with my uncle Laban back east in the town of Haran.

It is ironic. My grandfather left Haran to come to here, because God promised to give him this land and make him a blessing. But now I, his grandson, had to leave this land and go back to Haran, because I was a curse to my own brother. I wondered what God would do now.

Scripture Reading: Genesis 29:15-30

Reminiscence

Well, it has been 20 years since I left my home in Canaan and traveled to Haran. I have gotten married—twice—and have 12 sons and 1 daughter.

The two marriages weren't exactly planned. Upon arriving I met this beautiful girl at a well. It might have been the same well where Abraham's servant met my mother. The girl's name was Rachel. It turned out she was the daughter of Laban, the uncle with whom I had been sent to live. He took me in, and I worked for my room and board by taking care of his flocks.

I must have done a good job, because one day he said to me, "You deserve more than room and board. Name your wages."

"Just this," I said. "Let me work for seven years for the right to marry your daughter Rachel." He was surprised, but seemed pleased. I guess he knew a good deal when I saw it. So the contract was concluded.

Finally after seven years the wedding day came. I was so excited I guess I got a little carried away with the beverages. Anyway, I wasn't seeing too well that night, and when I took my veiled bride to our wedding chamber, well ... I didn't exactly notice who it was, until the next morning. Then I discovered that the woman in bed with me wasn't Rachel. It was her older sister Leah.

I ran over to Laban's house and exploded. "What a stinking trick," I said. "Just because I got a little looped and couldn't see too well, you thought you could dress Leah up in Rachel's wedding clothes and pass her off as her sister. What kind of scum would do such a thing?"

Laban just looked at me. I dropped my eyes. Finally Laban said, "I don't know how it is in your family, but in our family we respect the rights of the first born. The older sister is always given in marriage before the younger. Now if you want to work for me another seven years, I'll consider letting you marry them both."

There was not much else I could do. Having consummated my marriage to Leah, I could no more revoke it than my father could revoke the blessing he had given to me instead of Esau. I guess what goes around comes around.

I worked another seven years and ended up with more than a second wife. I had 13 children, large herds of livestock, and even servants. I had many descendants and blessings beyond measure, just as God had promised to Abraham. But I was still in exile, living far away from the land of Canaan. To inherit the land that God had promised, to receive the blessing Isaac had given me, I would have to go back and face Esau.

I suppose that's another of God's little ironies. For me and my descendants to live in peace and security in the land that we were promised, we first had to be reconciled to the descendants of other nations. I wondered if that is possible.

Scripture Reading: Genesis 32:3-8, 13-18; 33:1-4

Reminiscence

I had been dreading this day for 20 years. I tried to reassure myself. Surely Esau has calmed down and gotten over his anger. I mean, no one can hold a grudge for 20 years, can they?

I was thinking about that when the messengers came back. I had sent some of my servants to tell Esau I was coming. They came back and said, “We have good news and bad news.” “What’s the good news?” I asked. “Esau is coming here to meet you,” they said. Good, I thought. He’s anxious to see me. “What’s the bad news?” “He’s bringing 400 men.”

I sat down and tried to figure out what to do. Maybe I can buy his favor, I thought, the way I bought his birthright when we were young. Yes, I’ve always been able to wheel and deal my way out of trouble. Maybe a little bribery will work.

I arranged all my livestock into groups. I told the herdsman to drive the animals ahead of us in four groups, with a space between each group. When they met Esau they should say, “Here is a present for you from your servant Jacob, and there is more to follow.” I thought that was a nice touch—referring to myself as “your servant Jacob.” I hoped these waves of presents would soften him up before I faced him.

But that night I was unable to sleep. I wrestled with God or an angel of God, I wasn’t sure. I tried to force God to give me a blessing, but he touched my leg and crippled me, and I knew that I could not control God. I could not make God give me a blessing.

I don’t know, maybe it was a dream. But it made me wonder: Can you really buy someone’s forgiveness? If you have really hurt someone, if you have betrayed them or deceived them or broken their heart, can you make up for it with a few flattering words and expensive gifts?

I knew then that it would not work. I had tricked my father into giving me a blessing, but I could not trick Esau, and I could not trick God.

So that night I prayed for the first time in a long time. I said, “Lord, I am not worthy of the least of all your steadfast love and faithfulness.” That was the most truthful thing I had said in years. “But now, Lord, I am afraid. I am afraid that Esau will come and kill us all—servants, mothers, children, all of us. Please deliver us, O Lord.”

I heard no answer, but I suddenly remembered what my mother said 20 years earlier. She said God had chosen me and promised to bless me even before I was born. This blessing was not based on anything I had said or done. It was not based on my sincerity or credibility. It was an unearned, undeserved gift.

The next morning I faced Esau. Immediately I bowed down to him. Another irony, I thought. God said that the elder would serve the younger, but I was the one bowing down. He seemed not the least interested in my presents. Ignoring them, he raced toward me. I braced myself for a blow from his sword or his fist. But instead I felt the embrace of those hairy arms, and the moisture of tears running down his cheek. Soon the tears were running down my cheeks as well.

It's funny, in a way. All the scheming I had done to obtain God's blessing had almost caused me to lose it. But when I quit trying to buy it or manipulate it or wrestle it away from someone, I received it as a gift. Maybe that is what God was trying to show me all along.

- Ken Onstot
November 8, 2009