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My Way Or God's Way?

Genesis 27:1-46

By

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Genesis Lesson 52

My Way Or God's Way? Genesis 27:1-46

Frank Sinatra's well-known song, "I Did It My Way," was shocking for its blatant ungodliness. Of course what Sinatra stated plainly in that song, "I did it my way," is true of every person who does not submit his life to Jesus Christ. Most people just aren't as open as Sinatra in stating the controlling force of their lives.

In Genesis 27, four people sing Sinatra's song. Isaac does things his way by trying to bestow the family blessing on Esau, in opposition to God's revealed will. Esau tries to take back what he had already sold to his brother Jacob. When he is foiled, he plans to kill his brother. Rebekah deceives her aging husband into giving the blessing to her favorite son, Jacob. And Jacob lies to his father and outsmarts his brother. Rebekah and Jacob could argue that they were only trying to bring about the will of God, since God had told Rebekah that her older son would serve the younger. But I'm not persuaded by those who attribute high motives to Rebekah and Jacob. I think that what you have here are four self-centered people seeking their own advantage. They all did it their way, not God's way. In the end they all came up empty and paid a high price for their selfishness.

Every person must have as a theme song in life either "I Did It My Way" or "I Did It God's Way." You would think that the lines would be clearly drawn: Every person outside of Christ would sing, "I Did It My Way"; every Christian would sing, "I Did It God's Way." But I find that many who profess to believe in Christ are really just living for themselves, often using God as the means to self-fulfillment. But the genuine Christian life is a matter of God's confronting our self-centeredness and enthroning Christ as Lord in our hearts. While the process takes a lifetime, I question whether the person who is not involved in the process of dying to self is truly a child of God. Genesis 27 teaches the principle that ...

When we seek our own way, we never get what
we wanted and we pay a high price.

It is presented as a drama with four characters. First (27:1-4), Isaac comes on the stage with his selfish desire, based on his appetite, to give the blessing to Esau, who goes off to comply with Isaac's plan. In scene two (27:5-17), Rebekah, who was eavesdropping, hatches her plot to deceive Isaac and get the blessing for Jacob. In the third scene (27:18-29), Jacob successfully carries out his mother's scheme. In the fourth scene (27:30-40), Isaac and Esau discover they have been deceived. Isaac can only give a lesser blessing to Esau. In the conclusion (27:41-46), we see the consequences: Esau plans to kill Jacob, while Rebekah plots how to divert that crisis. Each of the characters illustrates the theme: Each seeks his or her own way; each is frustrated in not getting what he sought; and each pays a high price.

The drama is marked by some undercurrents which run through the chapter. The first is haste or urgency. Isaac seems to be near death's door when he summons Esau to his bedside. Actually, Isaac, who was 137, lived 43 more years. But you get the feeling that he has one foot in the grave and the other on a banana peel—Esau needs to get on with his mission. While Esau is gone, Rebekah quickly summons Jacob, and there is a flurry of activity as they prepare to deceive the blind old man before Esau returns from his hunt. Jacob barely makes it out the door before Esau comes back. There is haste in Rebekah's urgent words to Jacob, "... arise, flee to Haran ...!" (27:43).

There is often a sense of haste when people are trying to pull off their own schemes, even if it's under the guise of doing God's will. If you're not trusting God to orchestrate circumstances for you, then you work under the false impression that you've got to pull your own strings. So you rush around like a one-armed man putting on a show with 50 dancing marionettes, trying to keep all the strings going at the right time. There are exceptions, but generally when you're trusting God to work things out in His time and way, you aren't running around in eleventh hour haste, trying to rescue the situation.

A second undercurrent which runs through the drama is deception or conspiracy. In the famous words of Sir Walter Scott, "Oh, what a tangled web we weave, When first we practise to deceive." There is an air of secrecy when old Isaac calls Esau to his

bedside. Normally, the blessing would have been given before the entire family (see Genesis 49). It was an oral will which legally determined the disposition of all the father possessed. But Isaac calls Esau without Rebekah or Jacob. He knew that Rebekah would oppose his move; she always had favored Jacob. So Esau is sent out secretly.

But, Rebekah was secretly eavesdropping on Isaac's meeting with Esau. So she secretly calls Jacob and works out her plot to deceive her blind husband. Later, when she thinks that Esau will kill Jacob, Rebekah schemes again by telling Isaac that she is tired of living because of Esau's Hittite wives. If Jacob marries women like these, life will not be worth living (27:46). So without telling Isaac of the real reason, she secures his blessing on Jacob before he sends him away to Haran to find a wife from Rebekah's relatives. Throughout the whole drama is this web of deception, conspiracy, and secrecy.

A third undercurrent is mistrust. You can't carry on secrets and manipulative plots in a family without eroding trust. Isaac didn't trust Rebekah or Jacob or he would have included them in the plan to give away his blessing. Rebekah didn't trust Isaac or she wouldn't have gone to such elaborate lengths to deceive him. Jacob knew that his father wouldn't trust him, as seen in his comment to his mother, "Perhaps my father will feel me, then I shall be as a deceiver [mock] in his sight; ..." (27:12). Neither Jacob nor Esau trusted each other. It was a family riddled with mistrust because it operated on the basis of deception and secrecy instead of honesty and openness.

Each character illustrates the theme: When we seek our own way, we never get what we wanted and we pay a high price.

1. The theme is illustrated with Isaac.

This is not a pretty picture of Isaac. Some try to excuse him by saying that maybe he didn't know or had forgotten about God's prophecy to Rebekah, that the older son would serve the younger. But surely Rebekah would have told and have frequently reminded Isaac of that prophecy, especially when she sensed Isaac's favoritism toward Esau and wanted to assert her own favoritism toward Jacob. Isaac knew.

This is a premeditated plot on Isaac's part to overthrow the revealed purpose of God. Sadly, Isaac's reasons were based totally on the flesh: He had a taste for Esau's game (25:28; 27:3-4). Here, on what Isaac thought was his deathbed, he can only think of indulging himself once more with his favorite meal prepared by his favorite son. He was gratifying his sensual desires in opposition to God's plan. It's a sorry picture.

The picture grows even darker when we read (in 26:34-35) that Esau had taken two Hittite wives. Abraham had been emphatic that his son Isaac should not take a wife from the Canaanites (24:3-9). He knew that those pagan women would pollute God's plan to bless all nations through his descendants. Isaac's charge to Jacob not to take a wife from the Canaanites (28:1) shows that he knew the importance of the heir having a godly wife. Why hadn't he given both sons this charge years before? Yet he set aside that requirement when he made up his mind to give the blessing to Esau.

Isaac wanted his way, not God's way. He liked Esau and his game over Jacob. No matter that Esau was a godless man, that he had despised his birthright, that he had married Canaanite wives. Isaac liked him, so he planned to give everything to Esau, as is clear from the mistaken blessing on Jacob (27:28--29, 37-38).

But did Isaac get what he wanted? Instead of wild game, he got spiced up goat. Instead of blessing Esau, he put him under a curse, because he ordained that whoever cursed Jacob should be cursed, and Esau planned to kill Jacob. His family was riddled with rivalry and his sons were separated from him. He and his wife were at odds and didn't trust each other. Isaac sought his own way, didn't get what he wanted, and paid a high price.

2. The theme is illustrated with Rebekah.

Rebekah wanted God's choice (Jacob), but for selfish reasons. He was her favorite. He was her pawn in her power struggle against her husband. So even though on the surface she could claim, "I just want God's will," the claim was a pious fraud. Rebekah wanted her way. She was willing to deceive her blind husband and to draw her son into deception to gain her goal.

Of course, Rebekah could have rationalized: "What could I do? If I hadn't acted as I did, God's promise wouldn't have been fulfilled. The whole Messianic program was at stake! You can't just sit back and trust God at a time like that. You have to take decisive action. Besides, it worked! God's blessing through Abraham and Isaac came to Jacob, just as God ordained."

The fallacy in that line of thinking is that deception was the *only* alternative. Rebekah could have sought the Lord and then appealed to Isaac based on what he knew to be God's purpose. Having done that, she could have left the matter with God, trusting that if He needed to, God could reverse Isaac's wrong action.

That's the fallacy of situation ethics. It poses a false dilemma, then tells you that you have no choice except to violate God's moral absolutes. There's often time pressure. I can imagine Rebekah thinking, "If I don't act now, God's plan will be thwarted. I don't like lying, but I have no choice." But, almost always, there are other choices. I will grant that, in a fallen world, there are some ethical dilemmas; but they are really rare. Almost always, there is a way not to sin.

Did Rebekah get what she was after? On the surface, yes, Jacob got the blessing. But in the end, no. What she feared (27:45) happened when she lost both her sons. Jacob fled to Haran and Esau moved to Edom. She sought to get the inheritance for Jacob, but he had to leave it behind and flee for his life. She sought to make Jacob the ruler over all that Isaac had; instead, Jacob became the indentured servant of Laban.

And what about the cost? Rebekah calculated that the whole thing would blow over soon (27:44-45): "Stay with him a few days, until your brother's fury subsides, until your brother's anger against you subsides, and he forgets what you did to him. Then I shall send and get you from there." The "few days" turned out to be 20 years, and Rebekah probably never saw her favorite son again. When he returns, Isaac is mentioned, but not Rebekah. In the only other mention of her name in Genesis, Jacob on his deathbed states that they buried Rebekah in the cave of Machpelah (49:31, implying that he was not there). So Rebekah spent her final years bereft of her sons, emotionally estranged from her blind husband. She sought her own way, didn't get what she wanted, and paid a high price.

3. The theme is illustrated with Jacob.

Again, I must disagree with commentators who exonerate Jacob. Some say that he was valuing spiritual things and, after all, he was only obeying his mother. But remember, the man wasn't a teenager—he was probably 77 years old! He should have rebuked his mother for her deceptive scheme. Clearly, Jacob is not a spiritually-minded man. He does not fear God or His moral law; he only fears that the scheme might not work and he might get cursed instead of blessed. He wanted the wealth and advantage which went along with the blessing. Like Rebekah, Jacob was seeking his own way under the guise of seeking God's way.

Note the extremes he was willing to take to get what he wanted. His blind old father asks, "Who are you, my son?" Jacob flatly lies, "I am Esau your firstborn; I have done as you told me" (27:18-19). When Isaac questions how he could have returned so quickly, Jacob crassly gives God the credit (27:20)! But because of Jacob's voice, Isaac still has doubts. So he calls Jacob to him so he can feel his skin. After feeling the deceptive goatskins on Jacob's arms, he asks again, "Are you really my son Esau?" And Jacob baldly lies again, "I am" (27:24). He caps the whole thing off with a kiss! Where is Jacob's conscience?

Jacob's actions seem incredible—until you get honest with yourself. If you know your heart, you can see yourself right there in Jacob's sandals, doing the same thing. Haven't you ever bent the truth when you were under pressure or when you thought it was for a good cause? And once you tell the first lie, it's harder to bail out. So you dig yourself in deeper and deeper.

Did Jacob get what he was after? On the surface, yes, he got the blessing. But it didn't quite do for him what he was expecting. He had to flee from his brother who wanted to kill him. The blessing stipulated that he would be master of his brothers (vs. 29), but before Esau bowed to Jacob, Jacob would bow before Esau and call him lord (33:3, 8). He thought the blessing would put him in a position of influence, but before that it forced him to become the indentured servant of a man who deceived him. Later the sons of this deceiver would deceive their father concerning his beloved son, Joseph, telling him that the animals had killed the boy. For 20 years he mourned for that son, thinking him to be dead before he

found out the truth. So Jacob sought his own way, didn't get what he wanted, and paid high installment payments for years to come.

4. The theme is illustrated with Esau.

While we may sympathize with Esau, there is no doubt that he was seeking his own way. Granted, he was the older brother, so the birthright and blessing should have been his. But he had made a legal agreement with his brother to sell his birthright. It was not true, as Esau laments, that Jacob took away his birthright (27:36). Esau gave it up. Here, he was in cahoots with his father's secretive plan to get the blessing for himself; he just happened to get outsmarted. As a godless man, not concerned about the spiritual promises God had given to Abraham, Esau was clearly seeking his own way, not God's way.

His tears (27:34, 38) may make us feel sorry for him. But remember, Esau wasn't truly repentant, ready to turn from his self-seeking ways to follow God's ways. He was just sorry he didn't get what he was after. He was like the guy who heard at work that his neighbor's house burned down. Since they didn't get along too well, he shrugged and said, "Too bad!" Then he drove home and found out that his own house had burned down, too. If he started wailing, you wouldn't assume that he was sorry for his neighbor or for his own bad attitude. He was just sorry for himself. Esau wasn't truly repentant toward God; he was just sorry his scheme hadn't worked.

Clearly, Esau didn't get the blessing he desired. He ended up estranged from God's promises to Abraham and his descendants. He became the father of the Edomites, who lived to the east of the Dead Sea and were later subjected by several kings of Israel. They finally succeeded in casting off Israel's rule, even as Isaac prophesied (27:40). They sided with Nebuchadnezzar in his overthrow of Jerusalem (587 B.C.) and were overjoyed at its destruction (Ps. 137:7; Lam. 4:21, 22; Obadiah 10-16). Esau, like Isaac, Rebekah, and Jacob, sought his own way, didn't get what he wanted, and paid a high price.

Conclusion

Let me draw four concluding lessons from this drama:

(1) *If we sow to the flesh, we'll reap from the flesh.* The law of sowing and reaping is as true for God's people as it is for unbelievers. If you live for the pleasures of the flesh, you will reap from the flesh corruption (Gal. 6:7-8). If you live for the things of this world, you may get them, but you'll be poor before God.

Some may protest: "But we're under grace, not law!" But remember, Paul warned about sowing and reaping in the very letter where he strongly argues for the grace of God--Galatians. You can't plant spinach and harvest sweet corn. While sin may taste sweet in your mouth, it will be bitter in your stomach and you'll wish you had never tasted it! That's true for believers under grace.

(2) *You can't thwart the ultimate purpose of God, so why not work with Him, not against Him?* It is utter futility to fight God. It may seem as if you're going to be able to get away with your plan. But "He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord scoffs at them" (Ps. 2:4). Man's sin can never thwart God's purpose. It may appear that things are not under God's control and that the forces of evil are going to turn world history to their own ends. It's only an illusion. Even the wrath of man will bring ultimate praise to God (Ps. 76:10). God, not man, determines history. You can either smash yourself to bits trying to fight against God or you can submit to His purpose. As the apostle Paul and millions of others can tell you, life is a lot more pleasant when you don't kick against the goads.

(3) *Godly ends do not justify wrong means.* Was it God's will to give the blessing to Jacob? Yes! Was it right for Rebekah and Jacob to gain the blessing through deception? No! Methods do matter! Wrong methods don't become right just because they work, even when they help accomplish God's purpose. We live in a pragmatic culture, and many Christians have bought into any method that works. Just because a marketing scheme brings people into the church does not make it right. God's work must be done in His way.

(4) *The way to find your life is to lose it for Christ's sake.* Hebrews 11:20 states: "By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau, even regarding things to come." How can that be, when it seems that he was acting in the flesh? The answer is in Genesis 27:33, where a trembling Isaac realizes that he has really blessed Jacob, not Esau, as he intended. He admits, "Yes, and he shall be blessed." At that point

Isaac realized that he and Esau had been fighting against God and they had lost. God pinned him to the mat, Isaac admitted defeat, and submitted to God's sovereign way. So Isaac gives up his theme song, "I Did It My Way." He lost his life, only to find real life in God.

That's the key, by the way, to family harmony—when each member dies to his own selfish way and lives for God's way. What is God's word to wives? "Submit to your husband." Many Christian wives hate that word! It grates on the flesh. But it is God's Word to wives! Before you husbands start gloating, remember God's word to you: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her." The Bible never tells husbands to get their wives to submit. It tells us to seek the highest good of our wives by dying to our own selfish ways. God's word to children is, "Obey your parents" and you will be blessed. To parents (especially fathers) He says, "Don't provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord." (Eph. 5:22-6:4).

Many Christian counselors are telling hurting people, "Assert yourself! Stand up for your rights! Don't be codependent! You've got a right to some happiness in life, so go for it!" But God's Word is clear: If you seek your own way, you won't get what you want and you'll pay a high price in family conflict. If you'll die to your way and seek God's way, He will give you the desires of your heart. You've got to decide which will be your theme song: "I did it my way," or, "I did it God's way?"

Discussion Questions

1. Someone may fear, "If I yield my rights and go God's way, I'll get trampled." How would you counsel them?
2. Does seeking God's way mean always doing what I don't like and not doing what I enjoy? How do I know when I'm doing things God's way?
3. Can a wife be submissive to God and to her husband and yet confront him with his sin? How?
4. Is total honesty always the best policy? What about when honesty would hurt someone's feelings?
5. Are there situations where we must sometimes break one part of God's moral law in order to keep another part? If so, when?

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