



Cooking Up a Plot

Genesis 27:1-17

Trust is such an easy thing to break, but a difficult when not impossible thing to restore. Where trust is most necessary it seems often the most difficult of places to retain it. When it comes to living in family, trust is the groundwork for all relationship, love, and security. Faith in God is about trust and dependence, a relationship that demands trust. When we fail to evidence in trust within our families, how can we hope to build trusting relationships with God and others?

His mother started it, at least at first blush. The story is not seemingly about her, but she is the one who hatched the plot and dreamed the scheme to circumvent her husband's plans. Jacob just followed her instructions and carried out the plans. As tempting as it might be to cast the blame on Rebecca, however, Jacob was well aware of his actions and recognized the nature of the scheme. He was no less guilty than his mother in pulling the wool over his father's eyes.

The brothers already had a history of not getting along. Jacob had taken advantage of Esau's hunger to purchase his birthright privileges for a plate of food. The twins were at odds with each other and vied for the affection of their parents. Esau was favored by his father, Isaac, while Jacob was his mother Rebecca's pet. They lived different lives and different priorities. Their love for one another was not helped along by the conflict stemming from the rest of the family dynamics.

We want to see good role models in the lives of our Biblical heroes, but the narrator paints us no rosy picture of familial bliss here in Genesis 17. Isaac and Rebecca play favorites with their twin sons. Rather than seek the best for both sons, they are at odds with each other, favoring one son over the other. They are not above scheming against one another to fulfill their individual purposes. The same conflict evident among mother and father works itself out among their sons, as well.

By right of birth order, Esau should have inherited the bulk of Isaac's possessions, along with the responsibility to care for his mother, to assume the role of leadership in the clan, and to represent the family before God. The larger inheritance share of the eldest son was a privilege, but it was also a responsibility. Those rights and privileges had been taken by Jacob in a moment of Esau's weakness. What was at play now was the blessing Isaac had to bestow upon his sons.

Blessings and words in the Ancient Near East were understood to have power and life. These were not viewed simply as wishes a father might have for his son. They were viewed as prophetic speech with the power to accomplish the effects spoken. Words were deemed important and powerful. They were viewed as having a life of their own. Once pronounced, they could not be taken back. They had their own life and the power to create life or destroy it. Spoken, they lived in the hearts and minds of those who heard them. They created, even as they were given life by the act of speaking.

We may see some of this concept at play in the first account of creation in Genesis, as well as in its replay in the prologue to the Gospel of John. In the beginning was the word, and it was this spoken word which brought about life and purpose amid a primal chaos devoid of meaning. John says the word brought life into existence, a life that became the light of the world. Such was the backdrop for the ancient understand of a father's blessing and its importance. A blessing spoken, just as a curse, was seen as creating the pronounced reality. A blessing was not "just" words, as we understand them. It was the pronouncement of a reality with a life of its own.

From Isaac's deathbed, he sought the moment to speak a reality of blessing for his eldest son. He sought to give him the only gift left in his possession to share with the son he loved. He prepared for the moment at he sent Esau out into the fields to hunt for game and prepare it for Isaac. In the meantime, Isaac labored over the words he would pronounce and the blessings he wished for his beloved firstborn son's future and posterity. He did not realize the scheme Rebecca was plotting against him. At the same time, he was aware of the possibility of some plot to give the blessing planned for Esau to the younger of the twins.

Jacob entered Isaac's tent in disguise. He altered his voice to sound more like his brother's. Rebecca had instructed him to wear wool on his arms and chest, as well as to put on his brother's clothes and Esau's scent. Isaac eyesight had failed, so visual cues were not important in effecting the charade, but Rebecca had thought through the olfactory issues, as well as tactile ones. The disguise may not have been perfect, but it was sufficient to trick an old man whose eyesight was gone and whose hearing was likewise impaired.

Isaac knew somehow to check the identity of the son who entered claiming to be Esau. It would seem that he well suspected that between Jacob and Rebecca there was likely to be a plot to trick him. He asked his son to identify himself. He asked him to come closer that he might touch him and verify if his were Esau's hairy arms or the smooth skin ones of Jacob. He checked out the son's clothing seeking a telltale smell of one who spent his life hunting in the fields. He couldn't trust his own son to identify himself correctly.

This was a sad state of affairs. The brothers did not trust one another. The parents likewise did not trust each other. The parents did not trust their sons, either. They had missed the mark. This is not simply the story of Jacob's plot, nor that of Rebecca's scheming. It is a picture of an entire family set at odds with one another. Esau's plan, after all, was not simply to bless his sons, but to bless one and not the other. He did not prepare to engage both of them, but only his favored son.

Isaac is seemingly not cut from the same fabric as his father Abraham. Neither, for that matter, are Rebecca, Esau, and Jacob. They are all too human, all too fallible, all too unworthy and all too much in need of grace. They are too concerned with pressing on with their own personal agendas. They take too little thought for the plans and will of God. They take too little thought for dealing in grace, mercy, and generosity. They act as though they must protect their own interests at the expense of all others, beginning with their immediate family. They are seemingly inappropriate as heroes of faith, unworthy of their position as patriarchs in the heritage of a people chosen by God.

While family should be a place of safety and blessing, in their lives it has been transformed into a war zone. What should have been a sphere of comfort and refuge was altered by selfish interests into a setting for intrigue and scheming of plots against those best suited to care for the needs and interests of one another. Trust was eroded by devious plans and backhanded strategies. Light was exchanged for darkness and love for selfish greed. A realm of nurture and affirmation was transformed into a nest of schemes and plots against family members.

We read stories of Jacob and Esau's home life and broken relationships, but little regarding any sense of their relationship with God. Is that not perhaps because it is difficult to relate to God when we neglect to relate to others? Jacob's family was good at cooking up plots against one another, but failed miserably in developing trust in each other and toward God. Perhaps if they had worked harder on love and acceptance, they might have been able to celebrate God's sufficiency for them all. Instead, they cooked up plots to destroy harmony, love, and trust. Rather than confident victors, they became a pitiful band of infighting schemers. Is that not too high a price to pay to advance our selfish interests against those we ought to love?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*