

By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future.

(Hebrews 11:20)

One of the most exciting track and field events is the four by 100 metres relay

- In which four runners sprint lengths of 100 metres each, carrying a baton to pass to the next runner
- The critical part of the race happens in the changeover box that is 20 metres long
- In a team of four, there are three changeover boxes
- The outgoing runner reaches back with a straight arm ready to receive the baton from the incoming runner
- The incoming runner pushes the baton into the outstretched hand until the outgoing runner grips it
- It is easy to drop the baton and lose time, it is also possible to be disqualified for being outside the box
- Mistakes are relatively common, even at national and international level
- But one of the key things is that the outgoing runner does not look backwards
- Having successfully received the baton
- It is the outgoing runner's responsibility to look forwards to the one who will take on the baton next

In his long procession of men and women of faith, the writer to the Hebrews mentions the four patriarchs

- These are the founding fathers of Israel: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph
- The second of these, Isaac, was named by God before he was born – the name means 'he laughs'
- Which recalled the laughter of his mother, Sarah,
- who thought that she and Abraham were too old to have a child (Gen. 18:13-15)
- after Isaac was born, Sarah declared that God had brought her laughter (Gen. 21:6)
- Isaac was the son of the promise, but whereas we know quite a lot about Abraham, Jacob and Joseph
- We know relatively little about Isaac – the circumstances of his marriage are given in detail (Gen. 24)
- Not least that he married, Rebekah, his father's great-niece from the clan at Haran

For 20 years, Isaac and Rebekah remained childless but later Rebekah discovered she was expecting twins

The LORD said to her, “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger.”

(Genesis 25:23)

Although they were twins, the boys, Esau and Jacob, were very different (they were certainly not identical)

- Esau, the elder, was a hunter, a man of the fields and his father’s favourite
- Jacob, the younger, was a quiet man, who stayed among the tents, and was his mother’s favourite
- According to the customs of the time, great privileges were conferred on the firstborn son
- the firstborn son would receive a double-portion of his father’s estate over any brother (cf. Deut. 21:7)
- so, in the case of the two brothers, Esau stood to gain two-thirds of his father’s estate, Jacob one-third
- the two boys became rivals but when Esau returned from a hunting expedition famished
- and asked for a meal, Jacob took the chance to buy Esau’s birthright, which he did for some lentil stew
- though Esau had the rights of the firstborn he did not value these, even over a small bowl of stew
- what Esau did not fight to retain was certainly something that Jacob tried hard to gain
- So, God’s choice of Jacob over Esau, as the one through whom the line of promise would continue, did not run contrary to the wishes of either of the two brothers
- The narrative ends starkly, ‘So Esau despised his birthright’ (Gen. 25:34),
- But the struggle which began before they were born continued – with regard to their father’s blessing
- What the father said before he died would determine the destiny of his descendants
- Such a blessing could not be revoked – this final blessing was more than a prayer for the future
- It was a prophecy whose fulfilment was certain – there are three blessings of Esau and Jacob

I BLESSING AND THE SOVEREIGN GRACE OF GOD (Gen. 27:27-29)

The story of Isaac's blessing of Jacob is one of the great dramas of the Old Testament

- The outline of it is clear enough – the aged Isaac is blind and cannot see his sons
- Instead of conferring an appropriate blessing on both his sons he decides, in order to satisfy his appetite
- To dispatch Esau, the hunter, to catch some tasty game to make a delicious stew before he dies
- Isaac has already said he does not know when he will die and his death does not seem to be imminent
- So it could be that he is just making sure that Esau puts his whole soul into this enterprise
- For while eating, drinking, kissing were an integral part of blessing, Isaac has his heart set on a tasty dish
- The whole plan, to give everything to Esau, seems fundamentally flawed from the start
- Overhearing, Rebekah does not want her favourite son to miss out on such a blessing
- And so, at her initiative, the plan, of Jacob dressing up in Esau's clothes and goatskins, is formed
- And despite what seem to be Isaac's suspicions he blesses Jacob
- In a way that is strongly reminiscent of the promises that God had given to Isaac's father, Abraham

The story of Rebekah inciting Jacob to pretend to be Esau looks as if the blessing depends on deceit

- But in reality it is about God's wisdom and overruling sovereignty
- As the firstborn Esau was in-line to receive this blessing – but it seems God allowed the deceit to work
- Jacob was desperately unkind to his father, pathetically misled by his mother
- Astonishingly jealous of his brother – God's blessing is given not because we deserve it but need it
- What is remarkable in all of this is the content of the blessing – only by faith could Isaac do this
- Interestingly enough, this was not faith that looked backward to the promise made to Abraham
- But faith that looked forward to the fulfilment of these and even greater promises

II BLESSING AND THE MERCY OF GOD (Gen. 27:38-40)

The drama continues as Esau returns home, not least because Jacob has only just come out from Isaac

- The tasty game stew is soon made and Esau is ready to receive his father's blessing
- The uncontrollable trembling of Isaac, the anguished scream of Esau
- And the realisation, 'your brother came deceitfully and took your blessing' (Gen. 27:35)
- All serve to heighten the drama – it is the stuff of which Shakespeare would have been proud

At first, it might seem easy to feel sorry for Esau – but that is not the writer's intention

- Esau's indifference to the law's demands, which Abraham held so dear, suggest otherwise
- While Jacob was far from perfect, was Esau really a right recipient of his father's blessing?
- Esau who had chosen not to marry within the family clan but who had married two Canaanite women?
- Causing his parents' great distress; Esau who for a bowl of lentil stew had despised his birthright?
- Later, the writer to the Hebrews will describe him as 'godless' (Hebrews 12:16)
- And very solemnly the writer points out that even seeking a blessing with tears (Hebrews 12:17)
- Could not undo what had been done – it is a reminder that we can be forgiven, sins forgotten by God
- But, at least for this life, the consequences are, nonetheless, irreversible

Isaac recognised that the blessing he had given to Jacob could not be reversed

- Compared with the extravagant blessing given to Jacob, the blessing given to Esau is restrained
- There is to be no super-abundance of the earth's riches, food or drink (Gen. 27:39)
- To live by the sword means to be caught up in almost constant hostility (Gen. 27:40)
- And yet the blessing, tearing off the yoke, does end with a glimmer of hope (Gen. 27:40) – God's mercy

III BLESSING AND THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD (Gen. 28:1-14)

Having blessed Jacob only under deception, Isaac conferred a second blessing upon his younger son

- This time expressing Isaac's concern that the promises given to Abraham would be fulfilled

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.

(Gen. 28:3-4)

Isaac's accepting that the younger son should now be fully blessed with the promises given to Abraham

- Is, of itself, a mark of his faith that God would fulfil his purposes
- That is he accepted that although his original blessing of Jacob was won by deceit
- Even that could be part of the providential workings of God
- In God's providence things that are difficult to understand happen
- And yet it is still possible to affirm that God is in ultimate control

And so the providential purposes of God unfold, Rebekah's scheming and Jacob's compliance

- Resulted in Jacob obtaining his father's blessing, not once but twice
- But also became the occasion of his journey to his Uncle Laban and his extended family
- There to find a wife from his own people – later, at Peniel, when he seeks God's blessing
- Jacob will need to deal with the reality of his identity, but for now he must flee from his brother

At the conclusion of the story we can have little sympathy for Esau

- Bitterness and a desire for bloodthirsty revenge characterise him (Gen. 27:41)
- But the promises of Abraham and the promises of Isaac are now the promises of Jacob

Despite the intrigue, the conferring of a final blessing shows that Isaac was looking forward

- The first blessing (Jacob) was in accord with the sovereign grace of God
- The second blessing (Esau) was in accord with the mercy of God
- The third blessing (Jacob) was in accord with the providence of God
- Perhaps there is a sense in which we can see God's sovereign grace, mercy and providence
- Inter-twining in our lives: 'With mercy and with judgment, my web of time he wove' (Anne Cousin)

When the patriarchs looked forward, although in one sense they looked forward to the New Jerusalem

- They looked forward to the one whose descent would be traced back through Jacob to Abraham
- For the promises were going to be fulfilled through Jesus
- For the handover in the relay was from generation to generation of faithful men and women
- But the writer to the Hebrews makes it clear that the finishing line is Jesus
- the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy sent before him endured the cross, scorning its shame
- and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:2)
- were these 'Hebrew Christians' in danger of stopping running, of dropping the baton?
- They had to follow the example of the imperfect and yet faithful men and women who went before
- Their perspective had to be not looking back but looking forward
- And that must be our perspective too