

**Genesis 27:41-46, No. 46**  
**“Reciprocity in the Covenant of Grace”**  
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We read last time the fulsome account of Rebekah and Jacob’s deceit, by which they stole the patriarchal blessing from Esau. Now we move on to consider the immediate after-effect of that deceit.

**Text Comment**

- v.41 “The days of mourning for my father” would be the days that followed Isaac’s death. Isaac had said his death was fast approaching and Esau assumed it to be the case. Both men are presented throughout the chapter as clueless. Isaac wouldn’t die for many years to come. In any case, Esau didn’t want to kill Jacob until Isaac was dead. He wasn’t worried about the murder itself; only that it not be perpetrated while his father lived. The phrase “Esau said to himself” means that his mind was made up, not that he kept his thoughts to himself, [Sarna, 194]
- v.42 The family circle was large, including servants and their families as it did. That someone ratted on Esau hardly seems unlikely. He doesn’t appear to be the sort of man who would have generated much personal loyalty! But Rebekah seems to have been the kind of woman who might have had spies everywhere!
- v.44 Rebekah was the most psychologically perceptive member of the family. She knew that Esau would tire of his grudge. He was the sort of man to be distracted from past considerations by present circumstances, and that is, as a matter of fact, what eventually happened. But Rebekah miscalculated the depth of Esau’s immediate outrage. Perhaps she had thought that since he hadn’t made an issue of the birthright, he wouldn’t care that much about the blessing either. But when Esau’s plan was reported to her she became alarmed. [Sarna, 198]
- v.45 However perceptive, Rebekah was no prophetess. As it happens, she never sent for Jacob. Apparently she did not live to see her son return home. [cf. 35:27-29]
- v.46 We know that Esau’s wives were a bitter disappointment to Isaac and Rebekah – we already read that in 26:34-35 – so Rebekah was not making this up. Pagan women in the family would have been an obvious offense and annoyance. But Rebekah had to have a reason for Jacob’s going away. Jacob couldn’t leave without Isaac’s permission but she couldn’t tell Isaac precisely why Jacob had to go away without risking his discovery of her own role in the plot to deceive him and steal Esau’s blessing. So this was the story she told, true enough as it happened, but not the real reason.

Some sermons are easier to preach because the minister knows that the subject of the sermon is one that God’s people will warm to; they will be glad to hear the sermon because it encourages them and leaves them feeling better at the sermon’s end than at its beginning.

*This is not such a sermon.* This is the sort of sermon that often isn't preached, no matter how clearly its subject is present in the biblical text, precisely because the minister knows as well as anyone that it is not a message anyone *wants to hear*. It isn't obviously good news. *It actually is good news, but not obviously so.* But you agree, I'm sure, that my duty is to be faithful to the teaching of the Word of God and not to commit the ministerial sin which Paul describes as satisfying a congregation's "itching ears," by which he meant giving the congregation what it wants and nothing more. [2 Tim. 4:3-4]

What we find here, as we find it in many places in the Word of God, is what may be described as *reciprocity in the kingdom of God*. What is meant by "reciprocity" in this context is the principle of justice, often poetic justice. [Waltke, 35] The moral law of reciprocity is expressed in the Bible in terms of a person reaping what he has sown. There are just deserts even in the world of God's grace. The New Testament rings the changes on this fact as surely as does the Old. Paul says more than once – *and to Christians* – that we will reap what we sow. In 2 Cor. 9:6 for example, he writes:

“...whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.”

And the point is made in many other ways. Think of Paul's warning in 1 Cor. 3 of the man who builds poorly on the foundation and whose work is therefore destroyed; he himself is saved, but only as through fire. A price was paid for his sins.

The point is that even in the world of grace *a principle of proportionate and appropriate reward and punishment* is at work. Now this can be difficult for Christians to accept. If God is gracious to us, if he forgives our sins, if our sins have been punished in the punishment that Christ bore for us on the cross, why then would we still have to suffer their consequences? There is certainly some logical force to that complaint. However, a little thought rather easily disposes of the objection. We know from many texts that because God is our Father and because he loves us, he disciplines us for our good. When a wise parent punishes a child for his or her misbehavior, he or she does so for the child's good and for the family's good. Disobedience and rebellion are destructive, dangerous behaviors and any loving parent will seek to dissuade both the disobedient child and the other children who are observing the disobedient child not to follow the path of defiance. Moral reciprocity in the family is an important part of what shapes the family environment into one that is wholesome, safe, and productive of good things for children.

Well so it is in the family of God. Our Father obviously cares that we grow up to be faithful, wise, discerning, obedient, happy children. And so he orders our lives and the lives of others around us to ensure that we are taught – even if we must be taught the hard way, even if we must be taught, as it were, against our will – to love what is good and hate what is evil. And the fact is, however much we may protest the application of this law of reciprocity to ourselves, we naturally expect it to be applied to others. We do not want misbehaving Christians to get away with their misbehavior. We know how destructive it can be when bad habits are not punished and are allowed to flourish.

We certainly have no difficulty seeing the principle on a larger scale. One of the saddest features of the otherwise often heroic story of Lewis and Clark's voyage of discovery is what it revealed of the captain's views of and treatment of black slaves. Lewis and Clark were in many respects very admirable men with a developed sense of justice and fair play. But in this matter they were no heroes; they disgust us. You may remember that William Clark had a slave, a man named York, who made the journey to the Pacific with the rest of the Corps of Discovery, and, if truth be told, was more valuable a member of the expedition than most. He was, of course, the only man who received no reward for his labors, neither pay nor a grant of land, as were given to the others.

After returning from the Pacific, York asked Clark to free him as his reward for his service on the expedition. Clark refused. York's wife belonged to someone else and lived in Louisville, Kentucky. York asked to be allowed to visit her in Louisville. He even asked Clark to allow him to remain in Louisville, hire himself out, and send his wages back to Clark, all so that he could remain with his wife. In a letter to his brother, who lived near Louisville, Clark said that not only was he unwilling to free York, if he should run off or refuse to perform his duties, he would send him to New Orleans to be sold or hired out to some severe master, until he thought better of his conduct. When York returned to St. Louis from a visit to his wife he was, Clark said, "insolent and sulky" and so "I gave him a severe trouncing...and he has much mended." We can see Stephen Ambrose shaking his head as he wrote:

"York had helped pole Clark's keelboat, paddled his canoe, hunted for his meat, made his fire, had shown he was prepared to sacrifice his life to save Clark's, crossed the continent and returned with his childhood companion, only to be beaten because he was insolent and sulky and denied not only his freedom but his wife and, we may suppose, his children."

Thomas Jefferson, no friend of Christianity, and man who himself sold slaves and separated families, though a champion of freedom for white men was, at least a thoughtful hypocrite. His greatest fear, he confided to his journal, was the dehumanizing effect of slavery on slave-holders and the likely punishment God would visit upon them as a result. He wrote, "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just." [Ambrose, *Undaunted Courage*, 447-449]

And, of course, severe punishment did follow and it fell on a great many Christians. The devastation of the Civil War – by far the greatest human catastrophe through which our country has ever passed – the terrible loss of life, of limb, of treasure, of property, we all nowadays accept, was only the moral law of reciprocity in action *as it ought to have been in action*. The grace of God in the lives of a great many Christians did not protect them from the just punishment of this sin. We accept that. We even approve of that. What is that history but a powerful illustration of the principle: "The Lord will not be mocked; whatsoever a man sows, that shall he also reap"? And what is that history but equally an illustration of God's willingness to punish and punish severely even those he loves for sins he has forgiven? As we read of Israel in the wilderness in Psalm 99:8:

"O Lord our God, you answered them; you were a forgiving God to them, *but an avenger of their wrongdoings.*"

But if this is true on the larger scale, why should we doubt that the same law is applied on a more personal, a more individual level. We have already noticed this in Genesis. Lot was a righteous man. The Bible tells us that. But his decision to make his home in Sodom – a foolish and unfaithful decision – cost him his wife, his sons-in-law, and his considerable property. In fact, we will observe the application of this moral law of reciprocity over and over again in the remainder of Genesis and, indeed, throughout the rest of the Bible,

But it is displayed in a particularly stark form here at the end of chapter 27. We have already considered the sins of all four of the members of the family on display in chapter 27. There is disgusting misbehavior on every hand. Indeed, as we said last time, Esau, the most pagan of the four members of this disaster of a family, appears in the best light. And we have acknowledged that Isaac, pathetic as he may appear in this episode, was a believing man. Our Savior himself assures us that Isaac will be in heaven. In that sense, these people *did not reap what they sowed*. Rebekah's deceit, her playing her nearly blind husband for a fool, Jacob's bald-faced lies, Isaac's rebellion against the will of God, his indulgence of a virulently sinful son for all the wrong reasons, these are the sort of sins that we might naturally suppose would disqualify anyone from membership in the covenant community. But, in fact, they did not. *That* is God's grace; his mercy; his forgiveness.

And, of course, we are Christians precisely because we have come to believe that the whole message of the gospel is that it is possible for men and women, boys and girls, to escape the punishment due them for their sins. "God does not treat us as our sins deserve;" indeed, "he casts our sins behind his back," he "buries them in the deepest sea," he "tramples them under his feet," he "separates them from us as far as the east is from the west," and he "remembers them no more." *That God is merciful to sinners* is obviously and profoundly and powerfully the lesson of Genesis 27.

But the grace and forgiveness of God do not entirely supplant the principle of moral reciprocity in the life of believers. Even for those many sins that are covered by God's mercy there may be a price to pay. We do not wish to take anything away from the grace of God. Indeed, the Bible's argument is that it is a matter of God's grace also that he disciplines and punishes the children that he loves.

But, in any case, we must be true to the plain-speaking of Holy Scripture. And who can deny that it teaches us that even in the world of God's grace, even in that world where mountains of sin are swept away by the forgiveness of God, even in that world where when sin abounds grace much more abounds, even in that world where our sins, though they are red like crimson, become like wool, *even there*, what a person sows he or she shall also reap.

*Take Rebekah here.* She devised the plan by which Isaac was deceived. It was her idea to snatch the blessing from Esau by taking advantage of her husband's blindness. And now, in our reading this morning, she spins another lie to protect Jacob from Esau's fury. She succeeded a second time at fooling her husband and got what she wanted. *But at what price?* She told Jacob in v. 44 to flee to her brother Laban and to remain there for a little while. The text literally reads "a few days." [BDB, 25] She was obviously assuming that Jacob would be absent for only a short time.

In fact, however, he was to remain in Paddan Aram for the next 20 years. The narrator reports her words in v. 45 precisely so that we would feel the irony of them, *she actually did lose both her sons on the same day*. So far as we can tell from the Genesis narrative itself she was never to see Jacob again. When he returned to the Promised Land we read that he was reunited with his father (35:27) but not that he saw his mother again.

Perhaps more ominously, as we pointed out last time, at this point Rebekah disappears from the narrative, never to be heard from again. There is no notice of her death or burial, no memorial raised to her name, no report of anyone grieving for her when she was gone. She was gapped as Isaac had been and even more thoroughly. Rebekah paid a price for what she had done and for a mother who doted on her favorite son it was a steep price indeed!

*Then there is Isaac.* We have already noted that he was denied his place of honor in the Genesis narrative on account of his manner of life as an older man. His life was an embarrassment and was, correspondingly, not judged worthy of report. *In fact, most of what is reported of Isaac's life is to his discredit!* For a believing man surely that is reaping great loss for his failure to sow a godly life as he should have done.

But Isaac paid a greater price than that. He too lost his sons. Alienated from Isaac on account of his wives and, no doubt as well because Isaac had given the blessing he had intended for Esau to Jacob, however unintentionally, Esau eventually moved away from the Promised Land to live in Edom. Isaac was alone with Rebekah once again! Jacob spent the next twenty years far from home and when he finally did return to the Promised Land we read only that Jacob went to see Isaac. Little is said about their reunion and we do not get the impression that their relationship – father and son – was happily restored. In fact, strikingly all the attention falls on Jacob's reunion and reconciliation with his brother Esau. Isaac seems to be largely a non-entity.

So far as we can tell from the narrative, whose silences are now known to be weighty and important, Isaac's later life – about which we read nothing – was lived in insignificance. Isaac died with a moan, unlike his father Abraham who died with his faith at full flood. He had made a set of choices, had lived with many years bowed down under the weight of those choices, allowing other things to matter more to him than the salvation and covenant of God. He paid a price for that!

*But, most of all, we see this law of reciprocity worked out in the life of Jacob, who, after all, is the central character in this section of Genesis.* Don't forget, all this history is being told as the story of Jacob. Jacob took advantage of his brother's hunger and stole Esau's birthright. He agreed to be a participant, indeed the primary participant, in the swindling of the blessing from his father and from Esau. And now he must flee his brother's wrath and spend twenty long years trying to get home. But that is just the beginning.

Jacob, having got ahead in life by deceit and selfish unconcern for others, will discover that everywhere he goes he is himself deceived and falls victim to the selfish interests of others. This is what I meant when I said that the law of reciprocity operating within the covenant of God is often a poetic form of justice. The deceiver finds himself deceived. The selfish man gets used by selfish men. He violated the most sacred of relationships and now finds that all of his

relationships are troubled and vexing. Deceived by his father-in-law Laban, he finds himself married to the wrong woman, a woman he didn't desire and didn't love. Eventually he had alienated everyone in Laban's family and had to leave Paddan Aram in the dark of night. He never did fully accept Leah's children and the bitter tensions between them and Rachel's children – an eerie repetition of the disharmony that existed between Jacob and Esau – would darken the rest of his life. [Wenham, 216] Even more noteworthy, his sons, to his great pain, would lie to him in much the same way he had lied to Isaac, cruelly telling him that Joseph had been killed; his favorite son. He would mourn – as Isaac and Rebekah must have mourned – for years the death of a favorite son who was, in fact, not dead at all. *The deceiver spent the rest of his life being deceived!*

This narrative, in other words, sets before us a striking juxtaposition of principles and perspectives. On the one hand divine grace covered a multitude of vicious sins; on the other, God saw to it that the sins of every one of those ungrateful and disobedient members of his covenant family found them out. We cannot be faithful to the Bible unless we hold both to be true: the annihilation of our guilt in the divine forgiveness that is granted us through Jesus Christ, who bled and died for those very sins of ours *and, at the same time*, the expectation that God will require even his much loved and comprehensively pardoned sons and daughters to face the consequences of their sins. Not all the consequences of their sins, to be sure, and none of the ultimate consequences of their sins – there is much grace and leniency even in the way God requires us to reap what we have sown – but nevertheless face the consequences.

Perhaps you know something of the longstanding argument in Christian theology regarding the nature of Christ's atonement. What exactly was Christ doing on the cross and how did the cross take our sins and our guilt away? We believe, and surely on the basis of overwhelming biblical evidence, that Christ died on the cross to endure the punishment our sins deserved. He died, the just for the unjust, to bring us to God. He was punished in our place so that we would not have to be punished ourselves. Penal substitutionary atonement is the understanding of the atonement that not only has the support of the church's best theologians but is the common assumption of Christian people through the ages, since it seems, so obviously, to be what they read in their Bibles. But not everyone shares that view.

Some have argued for what is called *the moral influence view*: that the purpose of the cross was to set an example of love for us that would inspire us to love God and others in turn. Still others have argued for what is called the *moral government view* of the atonement, viz. that Christ died, not because our sins had to be punished, but because God did not want his forgiveness of our sins to be misunderstood as laxity or moral unconcern, as if he didn't care how we lived our lives. The cross, in this view, is the most potent demonstration of God's displeasure over sin! Our theologians have pointed out that, while penal substitutionary atonement is the principle explanation of the cross in the Bible, those other theories of the atonement do have some truth to them. The cross is, as it has been called, the pulpit from which God preaches love to the world and it is certainly the demonstration of God's abhorrence of sin. Otherwise why should it have been necessary to punish sin so severely? God does care how we live our lives; he does take steps to warn us of the consequences of our sins, but he does so not only at the cross, but by spreading the law of moral reciprocity over the biblical narrative and over the Christian's experience of life.

We would like to believe, of course, that, being forgiven, our sins will have no consequences. But it is not so and everyone knows it is not so. The young Christian man and woman who, though they know promiscuity to be wrong, commit fornication, may repent most sincerely and be forgiven most completely; but the disease or the pregnancy and the resulting parenthood, or, God-forbid, the abortion, with the fear and the shame, are only some of the consequences that must be faced. There are others, such as the very real likelihood that the people they would most want to have married and might have married to their great blessing are forever lost to them. Such a sin can mar an entire life for even the most penitent and the most thoroughly forgiven!

The Christian student who indulges his or her laziness may well wish that no harm may result, but a poor record in school may very well severely curtail opportunities that might otherwise have enriched their lives. The Christian who is foolish with money may well come to repent of his or her irresponsibility, but often the hole that has been dug is so deep that only divine intervention could spare him or her from the shame and the pain of foreclosure or bankruptcy, and, frankly, God is not usually willing to intervene. Christian parents whose failure to nurture the faith of their children must bear the pain, the relentless pain of seeing their children uninterested in spiritual things, no matter how many times they confess their sins to God, no matter how thoroughly they are forgiven, no matter how hard they work to undo the damage they have done. The Christian man who destroyed his liver with alcohol, may feel with the deepest penitence the wrong he did, but that will not cure his cirrhosis in his liver. And the Christian spouse who through indifference or hurtful speech has destroyed the bond with wife or husband may never be able to restore the happiness of married life.

Is there a believer in this room who has not felt the sting of the Lord's lash on account of sins we have committed against him and others? I have been a minister long enough to know how resistant to this teaching believers can be; how resistant I can be. But resisting will not make it any less true. Our heavenly Father will not be mocked; nor will he let his children indulge themselves in sin without forcing them to face up to what they have done.

Sin and temptation being as powerful in our lives as they are, we need all the motivations we can find for living a godly life. The love of God is our supreme motivation, of course, and must be. But here is another: *we will reap what we have sown.*