

Navigating Family Conflict

Session 4

November 3, 2024

Jacob and Esau: Family Rivalry

The Point: Showing humility is critical to restoring a broken relationship.

Session Passages: Genesis 27:35-37,41; 33:1-4,8-11

Genesis 27:35-37,41

Connection to the Point. Esau felt justified in hating his brother because of the lost blessing.

Setting. Rebekah and Jacob carried out their plan to deceive Esau and Isaac (Gen. 27:14-34). After putting on goatskins and Esau's clothing and taking the food his mother had prepared, Jacob approached Isaac to deceitfully obtain the blessing. Though Isaac could not see, he apparently suspected duplicity on Jacob's part. However, Jacob's hands felt like Esau's hairy hands and the younger twin smelled like Esau. Therefore Isaac bestowed on Jacob the patriarchal blessing meant for the elder son. Even though Isaac recognized the voice as Jacob's, he may have doubted his failing sense of hearing. Genesis 27:27-29 records Isaac's blessing on Jacob. It included four elements: (1) agricultural prosperity (v. 28), (2) international acclaim and success (v. 29), (3) mastery over the clan (v. 29), and (4) protective provision related to cursing and blessing (v. 29). Jacob had no sooner left his father's presence after receiving the blessing, than Esau arrived from his hunting expedition. After realizing Jacob had deceived him, Esau cried out for a blessing also.

Came deceitfully with subtility (v. 35). The term translated *deceitfully with subtility* refers to treacherous or deceitful speech (Gen. 34:13; Ps. 10:7). It also applies to falsely weighted scales ("dishonest," Amos 8:5). The Old Testament points out deceitful speech as one of the most detestable sins. The Suffering Servant or Messiah is characterized as an Individual who has no "not spoken deceitfully deceit in his mouth" (Isa. 53:9). Peter quoted Isaiah 53:9 in calling believers to follow in Christ's steps (1 Pet. 2:21-22). Acting deceitfully wrecks relationships, as it did in Jacob's family.

Rightly named Jacob (v. 36). In making this pronouncement, Esau revealed that he accurately perceived the meaning of Jacob's name. The sound of the Hebrew word translated *Jacob* is a play on the Hebrew words for "heel" and "cheated." The name derives from a verb meaning "to take by the heel" or "to supplant." Jacob lived up to this name in his dealings with Esau.

Cheated me twice The second time he has taken advantage of me Supplanted me these two times (v. 36). From Esau's perspective Jacob had cheated him twice. The Hebrew verb provides a wordplay on the name Jacob in the original language. More literally, Esau announced that Jacob had "Jacob-ed" him twice. First, Esau believed Jacob had cheated him out of his birthright. Esau conveniently had forgotten the part he had played in the earlier deal related to the birthright. He had chosen to sell the birthright to Jacob for a bowl of lentil stew (25:32-34). However, Rebekah and Jacob had schemed together to cheat Esau out of the blessing. A father typically conveyed the patriarchal blessing on his oldest son. The blessing was closely linked with the birthright that also belonged to the firstborn male child. The birthright privileges included a double portion of the inheritance.

Any blessing for me? . . . Do you have only Hast thou but one blessing? (vv. 36,38). Esau's questions reflect a pitiable sense of desperation. The Hebrew verb rendered "bless" means "to endow with power for success, prosperity, longevity, and fruitfulness." Isaac's blessing of Jacob was effective and irrevocable because the Lord had ordained it (25:22-23). Isaac could not bestow the blessing of the elder son on Esau because he had already given it to Jacob. Although Isaac's response to Esau's request for a blessing followed the format the patriarch used in blessing Jacob, Isaac's words to Esau were negative rather than positive. For example, in contrast to the dew and richness of Jacob's land, Esau's land would be parched and fruitless. And in contrast to being served, Esau would serve his brother (compare 27:39-40 with 27:27-29). Scripture teaches that as the Lord's people, He wants us to be a blessing to others. The Lord

desired that all peoples be blessed through Abraham (12:1-3). In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructed us to bless even our enemies by loving them (Matt. 5:44).

Master Lord over you Thy lord (v. 37). These words look back to the Lord's words to Rebekah before the twins' births (25:23). There the mastery was presented in terms of two nations struggling in her womb. While Jacob appeared to have the upper hand in stealing his twin's blessing, ironically Jacob submitted to Esau upon their meeting when Jacob returned to Canaan (32:3-5; 33:1-3). The reference to two nations (25:23) reveals that the prophecy and its fulfillment look beyond the two brothers to their descendants. In their national histories, Edom (descended from Esau) repeatedly submitted to Israel (descended from Jacob). See Numbers 24:18; 2 Samuel 8:13-14; and Obadiah 1:18. Jacob's descendants (the nation of Israel) would also experience spiritual dominance in the sense that the Messiah would come from that nation.

Held a grudge Hated (v. 41). This phrase translates a Hebrew verb literally meaning "hated." It refers to a deep-seated anger that can result in violent retaliation. The same term appears in Genesis 50:15 where Joseph's brothers expressed their mistaken fear that Joseph held a grudge against them. The term identifies the tragic results that flow from an unforgiving heart.

Determined Said in his heart Said to himself (v. 41). This phrase literally translates to "said to himself" and expresses Esau's determined intention.

The days of mourning . . . are approaching near at hand (v. 41). This phrase refers to Isaac's death. After Isaac died, Esau would feel free to retaliate against his brother by murdering Jacob. The mourning period for leaders was often thirty days. Isaac's death is recorded in Genesis 35:27-29. He lived 180 years.

Genesis 33:1-4

Connection to the Point. Jacob approached his brother with humility.

Setting. When Rebekah learned of Esau's vow to kill Jacob, she immediately acted. Rebekah influenced Isaac to send Jacob to her relatives in Paddan-aram to seek a wife (Gen. 27:42-28:9). After departing home, Jacob camped at Bethel where he dreamed of a stairway reaching into the sky. There, the Lord promised to be with Jacob and to bring him back to his homeland (28:10-22). Upon arriving in Paddan-aram, Jacob met his uncle Laban's daughter Rachel and agreed to work seven years in order to marry her. Jacob reaped the kind of deceit he had sown when he discovered his uncle had given him the older daughter, Leah, instead. Jacob worked seven more years for Rachel. He fathered twelve sons by Leah, Rachel, and their two slaves. Jacob's flocks multiplied, and he became wealthy (29:1-30:43). Genesis 31 records Jacob's separation from and covenant with Laban. As he approached the land of his father, Jacob learned that Esau was coming to meet him with four hundred men. Because he still feared his twin's wrath, Jacob sent ahead generous gifts with the hope of appeasing his brother. Before he dealt with Esau, however, Jacob first had to deal with God. In that divine encounter Jacob learned that the only way to prevail with God was by yielding to Him (32:1-32).

Divided the children (v. 1). Jacob placed his children with each of their respective mothers. He designed this division as a defensive measure against an anticipated attack by Esau. Jacob then organized the groups of wives and children to reflect his preference for them. He put his slave wives and children at the front, making them more vulnerable than Leah and Rachel, his preferred wives with their children. Leah and her children followed the slave wives. Finally Rachel and Joseph, her only son at this point, brought up the rear. The arrangement reflected Jacob's special love for Rachel (29:30).

Bowed . . . seven times (v. 3). Jacob's act demonstrated a degree of respect unparalleled elsewhere in Scripture. The number seven signifies completeness or perfection. Jacob not only bowed, he bowed to the ground. In the ancient world people might bow to demonstrate hospitality or service (18:2), humble entreaty (23:7-9), or worship (Deut. 4:19).

Jacob's act of bowing excessively emphasizes his willingness to subordinate himself to Esau. It also possibly signifies reverence for God because Jacob acknowledged that seeing Esau's face was like seeing God's face (Gen. 33:10).

Ran (v. 4). This verb in the original language especially conveys the idea of rushing. It describes running for different purposes. For example, Abraham ran to greet visiting strangers and prepare a welcome (18:2,7). Rebekah excitedly ran to let the family know of the arrival of Abraham's servant (24:28). The Midianites ran in terror when confronted with Gideon's army (Judg. 7:21). Messengers ran to deliver news of battle (2 Sam. 18:19-23). Men might also run in an official or ritual capacity as heralds (1 Kings 1:5). Esau's running to meet Jacob describes a surprising response on Esau's part. In fear Jacob had divided his company into groups as a defensive measure against an anticipated attack by Esau and his four hundred men. Surprisingly, however, Esau ran to meet his twin. Bible scholars have pointed out a wordplay between the Hebrew words for *he ran* (used with Esau, *wayyarots*, v. 4) and *he divided* (used of Jacob, *wayyakats*, v. 1). This sound play heightens the contrast between Jacob's fears and Esau's demonstration of forgiveness.

Hugged Embraced . . . kissed (v. 4). These common gestures in the patriarchal world could signify friendship, acceptance, respect, and/or reverence. The Hebrew term rendered *hugged embraced* also means "to embrace clasp" or "to fold." Although it can designate the embrace of lovers (Song of Sg. 2:6), the word typically demonstrates a hug of affection. For example after being reunited with Joseph in Egypt, Jacob (Israel) embraced Joseph's sons (Gen. 48:10). Finally, the verb implicitly denotes self-love. Ecclesiastes notes that "the fool folds his arms [in laziness] and consumes his own flesh fools fold their hands (in laziness) and ruin themselves the fool foldeth his hands together (in laziness), and eateth his own flesh" (Eccl. 4:5). A kiss was (and still is) a common expression of affection in the ancient Near East. It might be placed upon another individual's lips, cheeks, shoulders, hands, or feet. It could also demonstrate respect. After Samuel anointed Saul, the prophet kissed the newly anointed king (1 Sam. 10:1). The significance of a kiss in demonstrating love is noted in Proverbs 24:26: "He who gives an honest answer gives a kiss on the lips An honest answer is like a kiss on the lips Every man shall kiss his lips that giveth a right answer." While kissing might portray genuine affection, it also might be superficial, even done with evil intent (Prov. 27:6). Kisses also were used in idol worship (1 Kings 19:18; Hos. 13:2). Esau's sincere demonstration of affection for Jacob in Genesis 33:4 may call to mind Jacob's deceptive kiss of his father in 27:26-27. The most deceptive kiss, however, was that of Judas in his betraying Jesus (Luke 22:47-48).

Genesis 33:8-11

Connection to the Point. Esau accepted Jacob's gifts but acknowledged such an act was unnecessary.

Setting. After warmly greeting his brother, Esau inquired about the group of women and children that accompanied Jacob. Jacob responded by presenting each group. The two slaves Bilhah and Zilpah with their children approached Esau and bowed down before him. Leah and her children next drew near and respectfully humbled themselves. Finally Joseph and Rachel came and bowed before Esau. The fact that Joseph was the only son identified by name in the group and was mentioned prior to his mother may foreshadow his prominent role in the latter part of Genesis (Gen. 33:5-7).

Whole procession All these flocks and herds All this drove (v. 8). With this phrase Esau requested further explanation for the three groups of animals Jacob had sent ahead in an attempt to appease his twin (32:13-20). Although messengers had offered some explanation in accord with Jacob's instructions to them (vv. 4-5), Esau may have been requesting clarification because the size of the gift appeared exceptionally generous. On the other hand, Esau may have been initiating the customary demonstration of refusal typical of negotiations in that culture.

To find favor grace (v. 8). Jacob explained he had sent gifts ahead to find *favor grace* with Esau. The Hebrew term translated derives from a verb meaning "to be gracious" or "to have compassion." It identifies the action of someone who is superior toward someone of lesser rank or position. Often the Lord is the One who acts graciously or shows compassion on His people. The verb appears in Genesis 33:5 and 11 where Jacob acknowledged that the Lord had been

gracious to Him. The related noun rendered occurs here and in verse 10, where it could also be translated “acceptance.” Jacob realized he could make no genuine claim to receive gracious treatment or acceptance from Esau.

My lord (v. 8). Jacob’s fear of Esau’s response in meeting his brother is reflected not only in his sending of gifts but also in his addressing Esau as *my lord*. The title *lord* differs from the designation *Yahweh* that refers to God and is often written in large and small caps as *Lord*. While the title could refer to God (Ex. 34:23), it typically served as a title of respect in addressing men in ancient Near Eastern culture. Sarah referred to her husband Abraham by this title (Gen. 18:12). The term refers to the king or pharaoh of Egypt in Genesis 40:1., where it is rendered “master.” Hannah addressed Eli the priest using this designation (1 Sam. 1:15). In Isaiah 36:8 the title is translated “master” and designates the king of Assyria. The term could serve as a title of respect for someone of equal rank or status as well as for someone viewed as a superior.

My brother (v. 9). Whereas Jacob addressed Esau as “my lord,” Esau responded with the designation *my brother*. Esau’s peaceable spirit appears in sync with his previous display of warm emotions (v. 4). Esau did not unveil a hostile spirit as Jacob had feared. If anything, Esau’s magnanimous attitude may have made Jacob’s past evil deeds appear even more deceitful. Some Bible scholars believe Esau’s words “keep what you have that thou hast” to his twin imply he completely abandoned any claim to his birthright.

This gift Present (v. 10). This Hebrew word occurs in nonreligious contexts to identify gifts to persons regarded as superior to the giver, particularly presents to kings. Such gifts convey attitudes of submission and homage. The term also identifies religious sacrifices generally. It is used of both Cain’s and Abel’s offering in Genesis 4:4-5. More specifically the Hebrew word refers to a grain offering (Lev. 2:1-16). The new grain offering to the Lord along with leavened bread signified that God’s people were submitting their total lives to Him as their Lord. For Jacob the sign of his acceptance with God was Esau’s acceptance of his gift. Esau had referred to the gift as “this whole procession all these flocks and herds all this drove” (Gen. 33:8)—the three groups of animals Jacob had sent ahead in an attempt to appease his twin (32:13-20). In Genesis 33:11 Jacob identified the gift by a different term translated “present my blessing.” Interestingly, that Hebrew term is the same one rendered “blessing” in Genesis 27:35-36. Was Jacob offering to Esau a blessing in exchange for the one he had stolen years earlier from his twin?

Seen your face . . . seeing God’s face See your face . . . seeing the face of God Seen thy face . . . seen the face of God (v. 10). Jacob addressed these words to Esau after meeting Esau and experiencing his brother’s forgiveness. The reference to the *face* of both Esau and God signals Jacob’s perception of Esau as the counterpart to the “man” with whom he had wrestled at Peniel (32:24-32). Thus Jacob alluded to the blessing of forgiveness that he had received from God at Peniel. The Scripture does not record precisely in what ways seeing Esau’s face was like seeing God’s face. However, in some way an affinity existed between the forgiving face of Esau and the blessing face of God. Jacob’s encounter with God and the renewal of his relationship with his brother are not the same events. But they are clearly related to one another (see 1 John 4:20).

God has been gracious hath dealt graciously (v. 11). One reason Jacob insisted that Esau accept his gift was because God had been gracious to Jacob. The root of the Hebrew verb rendered *has been gracious hath dealt graciously* also means “to have compassion.” It portrays the heartfelt response of someone who has something to give to a person who has a need. It also has been described as depicting an action from someone in a superior position to an individual who can make no real claim to be treated graciously. Many times the Lord is the subject of this verb in the Old Testament.