

Esau . . . and Jacob

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3rd in an eight-week series

July 9, 2017

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Genesis 25:27–34 (CEB)

²⁷ When the young men grew up, Esau became an outdoorsman who knew how to hunt, and Jacob became a quiet man who stayed at home. ²⁸ Isaac loved Esau because he enjoyed eating game, but Rebekah loved Jacob. ²⁹ Once when Jacob was boiling stew, Esau came in from the field hungry ³⁰ and said to Jacob, “I’m starving! Let me devour some of this red stuff.” That’s why his name is Edom.

³¹ Jacob said, “Sell me your birthright today.”

³² Esau said, “Since I’m going to die anyway, what good is my birthright to me?”

³³ Jacob said, “Give me your word today.” And he did. He sold his birthright to Jacob. ³⁴ So Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew. He ate, drank, got up, and left, showing just how little he thought of his birthright.

Genesis 27:1–10, 41 (CEB)

When Isaac had grown old and his eyesight was failing, he summoned his older son Esau and said to him, “My son?”

And Esau said, “I’m here.”

² He said, “I’m old and don’t know when I will die. ³ So now, take your hunting gear, your bow and quiver of arrows, go out to the field, and hunt game for me. ⁴ Make me the delicious food that I love and bring it to me so I can eat. Then I can bless you before I die.”

⁵ Rebekah was listening when Isaac spoke to his son Esau. When Esau went out to the field to hunt game to bring back, ⁶ Rebekah said to her son Jacob, “I just heard your father saying to your brother Esau, ⁷ ‘Bring me some game and make me some delicious food so I can eat, and I will bless you in the LORD’s presence before I die.’”

⁸ Now, my son, listen to me, to what I’m telling you to do. ⁹ Go to the flock and get me two healthy young goats so I can prepare them as the delicious food your father loves.

¹⁰ You can bring it to your father, he will eat, and then he will bless you before he dies.”

⁴¹ Esau was furious at Jacob because his father had blessed him, and Esau said to himself, When the period of mourning for the death of my father is over, I will kill my brother.

Genesis 33:1–7 (CEB)

Jacob looked up and saw Esau approaching with four hundred men. Jacob divided the children among Leah, Rachel, and the two women servants. ² He put the servants and their children first, Leah and her children after them, and Rachel and Joseph last.

³ He himself went in front of them and bowed to the ground seven times as he was approaching his brother. ⁴ But Esau ran to meet him, threw his arms around his neck, kissed him, and they wept. ⁵ Esau looked up and saw the women and children and said, “Who are these with you?”

Jacob said, “The children that God generously gave your servant.” ⁶ The women servants and their children came forward and bowed down. ⁷ Then Leah and her servants also came forward and bowed, and afterward Joseph and Rachel came forward and bowed.

Forgiveness is more powerful than any of us really know.

There are a lot of tragic brother stories in the Bible. Cain murders Abel. Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers. The prodigal son is resented by his brother when he returns home. . . . And then there is Jacob and Esau.

Esau almost always gets second billing, though he is the older twin. After all, Jacob goes on to become the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. Esau becomes the father of a nearly forgotten people, the Edomites. Jacob is the heir of the promise. Esau is not.

But Esau was more than a stooge or a foil. He proved to be a man of depth, characterized by forgiveness. But first, some of the “back story.”

Isaac and Rebekah

As we saw a couple of weeks ago, Abraham and Sarah at long last had a son, in keeping with God’s many promises. His name was Isaac. He had been a bachelor for a long time when he married Rebekah. A servant had gone to the ancestral family home to fetch a wife. The servant brought back Rebekah, who was the granddaughter of Isaac’s uncle; i.e. a cousin. She had left her home and family to come to Isaac, who loved her. Isaac was forty when he married Rebekah.

Isaac was the son of the promise, the one through whom the covenant with the LORD God must pass. But there was a problem, Isaac and Rebekah had trouble conceiving. A lot of trouble. Nineteen years passed and no baby, no child to whom the covenant would pass.

Isaac needed an heir, so he prayed, and he prayed hard. And finally, God granted Isaac’s request. Rebekah conceived. She might have been childless before, but she would soon find out that she was overflowing with blessings.

To Rebekah, the pregnancy mustn’t have felt much like a blessing. It was hard and troubled. She got no peace. Her womb seemed at war with her body. So she too went to God, to find out what was going on inside her.

God revealed to Rebekah that she wasn’t carrying one child but two. Indeed, not just two children but two nations. They would be more than sibling rivals, the twins would be the ancestors of two great but rival nations. Further, God told her that the younger child would have power over the older, for even twins are not born in the same instant.

They named the older twin Esau, for he was covered in red hair. The second-born twin they named Jacob.¹ Esau grew up to be a man’s man, the outdoors type, rough and ready, a skilled hunter; the joy of his father, Isaac. Jacob on the other hand was the quiet, contemplative type, who enjoyed hanging around the tents.

Isaac loved Esau because he seemed to be everything a real man was supposed to be. We’re not told why Rebekah loved Jacob. Perhaps she just liked the stay-at-home type.

Why Jacob and Not Esau?

This question comes up every time I teach these stories. Why Jacob? Why does God make the choice before they are even born? Granted, God knows the men these twins will grow to become, but it becomes quite clear that Jacob has nothing to commend him either. Indeed, merit doesn’t seem to be part of this at all.

Ok . . . so why Jacob and not Esau? Paul comes to this question in his letter to the Romans. He is talking about God’s choice of the Israelites and who actually is an Israelite, that is a child of the covenant. Paul’s point is simple, God chooses whom God chooses. Period. End of story. That’s as far as we can go. God chose Jacob. Paul quotes from Exodus 33:19: “God will have mercy on whom he has mercy and compassion on whom he has compassion” (see Romans 9).

Walter Brueggemann asks us to consider that perhaps this isn’t about God preferring one twin over another, but simply another instance of God upsetting expectations, turning upside down the world’s normal social conventions. Primogeniture (preference to the first-born son) was well established by this time. Perhaps God is simply signaling again that in God’s kingdom, things work differently than they do in the kingdoms of this world. The first will be last and the last first.

In the end, the question is always, “Can God be trusted?” I’ve learned that the answer is a resounding YES.

¹The name “Jacob” doesn’t mean “heel” per se, but it sounds like Hebrew for “heel.” Even on the way out of the womb, Jacob was grasping Esau by the heel.

Perhaps she prefers Jacob because of what God told her about the twins. We are never told that she revealed God's message about the twins to Isaac. But already, just in these few sentences, we see the beginnings of family divisions that will soon come to full flower.

How hungry can he be?

One day, Esau comes rushing in the door. He is famished. He is so starved that he'll do anything to get something to eat. Jacob has been busy in the kitchen preparing what must be a deliciously smelling red stew². Esau demands some of it.

Jacob is revealed to be an opportunist, demanding in turn a trade. A bowl of stew for Esau's birthright, i.e., the rights and privileges that belong to the firstborn son. This would include not only the leadership of the family but a double-share of the inheritance, which in this case is a lot of money, for Isaac is wealthy, having been given all that was Abraham's.

Esau doesn't seem to give it a second thought. What good is the birthright if Esau is dead from starvation, he thinks? Seems rather dramatic doesn't it . . . and stupid . . . and impulsive. Jacob adds some legal protections to the transaction by making his brother swear to the transaction . . . and it is a done deal.

Trade one's birthright for a bowl of stew? How hungry could you be? What kind of brother would pounce on such weakness? Neither twin comes off well in this story. In a way, it only sets the stage for what comes next.

A conspiracy

You might say Esau got what he deserved when he traded his birthright for a bowl of stew. But sometime later, Esau is the victim of a conspiracy engineered by Jacob and their mother, Rebekah. Jacob is her favorite and she wants him to receive the blessing due the eldest son.

So she sets out to trick her own husband and succeeds. Dressing up Jacob so he can fool his nearly blind elderly father, Rebekah steals Isaac's blessing for the second son. Blind and weak the old man thinks he is blessing Esau when it is actually Jacob. Though the trickery is revealed, what's done is done. Nothing is left for Esau. (see Genesis 27 for all of this sordid tale.)

Rebekah is so fearful of Esau's anger that she has Jacob flee northward. It will be twenty years before he returns and, sadly, Rebekah seemingly does not ever see her beloved son again, though Genesis is not clear about this.

Forgiveness

But the most remarkable story of Esau comes at his reunion with Jacob when the long-gone brother returns to Canaan. Understandably, Jacob is terrified of meeting his brother. Jacob knows what he did to Esau and expects his twin to wreak mighty vengeance to set right the wrong. So Jacob carefully arranges the encounter, sending ahead plenty of gifts to try to assuage Esau's justifiable anger. As he approaches Esau, Jacob bows to the ground seven times. He is a very nervous man!

But when the moment comes, Esau runs to meet Jacob, throwing his arms around his neck and kissing him. The brothers break down in tears. It is a touching moment that says much to us still about the power of forgiveness. In those moments, Esau went from being a supporting actor to a main character.

Esau grasps that forgiveness is like breathing. It must be breathed out as we breathe it in. Forgiveness received is forgiveness that must be passed on. When we are forgiven, but refuse to forgive, it is like trying to take in a breath and hold it rather than

²The Hebrew word for "red" is "edom" and this will be the name taken by Esau's descendants. They will be called Edomites and will settle in the land south and east of Canaan.

breathing it out. Eduard Schweizer put it this way: ‘God’s forgiveness is not for decoration but for use.’ A truly grateful heart is also a forgiving heart.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. The theme of rivalry that began with Cain and Abel, continued with Sarah and Hagar, even Isaac and Ishmael, now presses forward with the rival twins, Esau and Jacob. What do we really make of these stories? Could God’s purposes really move forward through such weakness, exploitation, and deceit? Does God really *need* these people to accomplish his rescue plan?
2. You might share some of your own stories about the power of forgiveness. What do these stories have in common? Have you ever been surprised by the outcome created by forgiveness? How so? Why do we find it so difficult to forgive? Why are we so often insistent that forgiveness must be preceded by an apology? Do you think that forgiveness can create a repentant heart? How might this be?
3. And what does this whole business of God choosing one person over another (Choosing Jacob over Esau before birth!) say to us about God? Many people find these stories of choosing one and not another (“election”) morally troublesome. To them, it just doesn’t seem befitting of a good and loving God. Does God really love some people more than others? Is that even what election is about?

Daily Bible Readings

This week: The stories of Esau . . . and Jacob

Monday, Genesis 25:19-26 The birth of Esau and Jacob

Tuesday, Genesis 25:27-33 Esau sells his birthright for a bowl of stew

Wednesday, Genesis 27:1-29 Jacob steals his brother’s blessing

Thursday, Genesis 27:30-46 A secondary blessing for Esau and Jacob flees

Friday, Genesis 32 Jacob prepares to meet Esau

Saturday, Genesis 33:1-17 Esau forgives Jacob

Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Exodus.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying Paul’s letter to the Colossians.

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Scott’s 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Our new series, starting July 9: *The Truth About Angels*

Coming in October 2018: A cruise to Israel with Scott & Patti

For more information go to www.scottengle.org