

Session 4

November 3, 2024

JACOB AND ESAU: FAMILY RIVALRY

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

As I mentioned before, Genesis reads like a soap opera. And the twisted drama of the patriarchal family extended to Jacob and Esau. The favoritism of Isaac toward Esau and Rebekah toward Jacob was displayed even further by the toxic relationship between the two brothers themselves. Fortunately, they were able to patch things up. The drama unfolds in three scenes.

Hatred (27:35-37). The root of their bitterness may have started because of the clear favoritism shown by their parents, but it's just as possible that their personalities were such that the boys simply "didn't get along" (see 25:27). Jacob may have been the more reserved of the two, but he had no problem manipulating his hungry brother out of his birthright (see 25:29-33). The "birthright" mentioned in Scripture was the basis for preferential treatment of the firstborn son. As the eldest, the firstborn son would take ownership of the family in the event of his father's death. In addition, he was virtually guaranteed the lion's share of the inheritance. While it was true that Esau listened to his stomach more than his brain, Jacob clearly took advantage of him. The second act of deception was that conjured up by Rebekah in the first part of chapter 27, where Jacob deceived Isaac and managed to steal his brother's blessing (see last week's study). Esau's bitterness is clearly evident in verse 36. By verse 41, Esau's bitterness had born its fruit, when he "determined in his heart... 'I will kill my brother.'" For reflection: *All of these events were directly tied to God's elective purpose in Gen. 25:23. Who then was responsible? Were the actions of Jacob necessary to fulfill God's plan? What do you think?*

Humility (33:1-4). The intervening chapters record the travels of Jacob and his family out of the land of Canaan. After settling things with his father-in-law Laban (another part of the soap opera), Jacob led his people back to the land of his father Isaac. In doing so, he would pass very near to his brother Esau's territory of Seir (or Edom). About twenty years had passed since their feud over Isaac's blessing, and Jacob had no idea how his brother would react. He started by sending messengers to Esau, pleading for peace and sending him a gift of flocks, and herds, and servants. The messengers returned in fear and trepidation: an army of men—led by Esau—was headed their way! That Esau would make good on his threat to kill him led Jacob to divide the family and space them out (32:8ff). Now, as they approached Esau, Jacob took the lead. Well in front of the others, he made his way bowing and paying homage to his brother (v.3). Any bitterness that Esau may have clung to apparently melted away as the two brothers embraced for the first time in twenty years. For reflection: *How do you think you would have reacted toward Jacob? Do you think Esau was headed out initially to destroy him? Or was he coming with an army to welcome him? Why do you think that?*

Honor (33:8-11). Notice that for all their differences, the brothers shared some things in common. Both wanted what didn't belong to them: Jacob, his brother's birthright and blessing; Esau, his brother's life. And both had obtained a measure of wealth (see 36:7). Here, the selfish pride of both brothers had been transformed to humility. Remember, it didn't have to end this way. Either brother (or both of them) could have avoided the meeting, or clashed in violence, but they chose to move forward in peace. And with mutual humility came mutual honor. Esau,

astounded by the show of wealth that was brought to him, was overwhelmed (v. 8). His question to Jacob was not one of curiosity or arrogance, but of humility, as was Jacob's insistence that Esau accept the gifts he offered. History showed that the descendants of the two brothers never got along, and various battles raged between them, until Edom was ultimately destroyed (see Obad. 1:18). Nevertheless, Jacob and Esau were reunited and their relationship restored. For reflection: *What lessons can we learn about family struggle and family restoration from Jacob and Esau? Does it matter that their descendants never got along? What does that tell us?*