

SESSION 4

JACOB AND ESAU: FAMILY RIVALRY

Leader pages on pp. 144-147

THE POINT:
SHOWING HUMILITY IS
CRITICAL TO RESTORING
A BROKEN RELATIONSHIP.

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

^{27:35} But he replied, "Your brother came deceitfully and took your blessing." ³⁶ So he said, "Isn't he rightly named Jacob? For he has cheated me twice now. He took my birthright, and look, now he has taken my blessing." Then he asked, "Haven't you saved a blessing for me?" ³⁷ But Isaac answered Esau, "Look, I have made him a master over you, have given him all of his relatives as his servants, and have sustained him with grain and new wine. What then can I do for you, my son?" . . . ⁴¹ Esau held a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing his father had given him. And Esau determined in his heart, "The days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob."

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^{33:1} Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming toward him with four hundred men. So he divided the children among Leah, Rachel, and the two slave women. ² He put the slaves and their children first, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph last. ³ He himself went on ahead and bowed to the ground seven times until he approached his brother. ⁴ **But Esau ran to meet him, hugged him, threw his arms around him, and kissed him. Then they wept.**

MEMORY VERSE

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⁸ So Esau said, "What do you mean by this whole procession I met?" "To find favor with you, my lord," he answered. ⁹ "I have enough, my brother," Esau replied. "Keep what you have." ¹⁰ But Jacob said, "No, please! If I have found favor with you, take this gift from me. For indeed, I have seen your face, and it is like seeing God's face, since you have accepted me. ¹¹ Please take my present that was brought to you, because God has been gracious to me and I have everything I need." So Jacob urged him until he accepted.

KEYWORDS

Held a grudge (v. 41)—Translates a Hebrew verb literally meaning "hated." It refers to a deep-seated anger that can result in violent retaliation.

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*. Here the title differs from the term that often refers to God.

My brother (v. 9)—Whereas Jacob addressed Esau as "my lord," Esau responded with the designation my brother. Esau did not unveil a hostile spirit as Jacob had feared.

HOW DO WE DEAL WITH RIVALRY AND STRIFE WITHIN THE FAMILY?

The cartoon character, Charlie Brown, once said, "Friends may come and go, but enemies accumulate." That statement rings true for Jacob. He lived much of his life as a swindling, con man. Nearly all of Jacob's relationships involved conflict. No conflict was more profound than the sibling rivalry between Jacob and Esau.

These brothers hated one another in differing ways. Jacob expressed his pride and rivalry against Esau with mental warfare, needling him for his birthright and scheming with his mother to steal his blessing. Esau responded to his betrayal with boisterous hatred and threats. Esau appeared to show no regard for the prophecy that he would, one day, serve his younger brother. To make matters worse, their parents, Isaac and Rebekah, fed the fire of their rivalry.

As grown men, they met in what could have resulted in the death of rivals. Both brothers, twins, desired to dominate the other. One felt entitled by birth; the other felt entitled because he bartered, swindled, and outwitted the other. Betrayal and treachery nearly collided with death because of the sibling rivalry between Jacob and Esau. Nearly.

Rivalry Destroys Relationships

// Genesis 27:35-37,41

It is likely Esau's hatred toward his younger brother, Jacob, was because of a string of issues where the younger brother prodded and poked to get his older brother's birthright. Before they were born, the Lord said to Rebekah, "Two nations are in your womb . . . and the older will serve the younger" (Gen. 25:23). Once they were older but young enough to still be living at home, Esau sold his birthright to Jacob for red stew. Esau came in from the field and was famished. When Esau asked for some stew, Jacob's quick response was to barter for a trade, his stew for Esau's birthright. Perhaps Jacob was looking for a way to fulfill the Lord's prophecy that he would reign over Esau. That moment gives us a clue that Esau's birthright was at the forefront of Jacob's mind.

So, when Esau gave up his birthright and then lost his blessing because Jacob impersonated him, lied to his father, and stole his blessing, Esau felt justified in hating his brother. But wait a minute. Who stole what, and who pulled the biggest scam over whom? Even more, Isaac knew Esau sold his birthright. Yet, Isaac still made plans with Esau to give him his blessing. Enter Rebekah. She heard all



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this and conspired with Jacob to pull off the deception and gain the blessing for him.

So, all four members of this family were playing one another for what they wanted. Several significant things happened once they completed the transaction and Jacob fully possessed his father's blessing: Isaac trembled but did not change his blessing. Perhaps he realized this was how the Lord wanted it all along. For Rebekah, there is no record she ever saw her son again. Maybe she died during the following years after Jacob fled to Laban's house (Esau made plans to murder Jacob following the eventual death of their father).

There is a danger in rationalizing our behavior to get what we believe is the Lord's will. It is tempting to "help God" get His will accomplished. Rebekah may have felt justified to lie because of the prophecy, "The older will serve the younger." But it is never right to deceive our loved ones for the "greater good."

Before considering the animosity Esau felt toward Jacob for swindling him out of his blessing, let's reflect on how each family member played a specific role in mishandling the event. Each of the four persons in this dysfunctional family shared responsibility for this multi-pronged betrayal.

- Isaac ignored the Lord's Word that "the older will serve the younger."
- Rebekah lied and plotted, deceiving her husband and her firstborn.
- Jacob swindled his brother by purchasing his birthright and later, by impersonating his brother, lied to his father, and cheated to gain what he wanted.
- Esau went along with his father who planned to bless him even though Isaac knew his son had already forfeited the blessing by selling his birthright to Jacob years earlier.

But despite all four with their conniving, their sin, and their separate agendas to get what they wanted, God accomplished His will that the blessing would come through the son born second, Jacob.

Esau was left with a devastating loss. Betrayed by his brother, Esau's anger rose to a fever pitch. He felt justified in what he planned to do next: murder Jacob. He had it coming, Esau believed. But he would wait. Esau would wait until his father died. Then he would strike.

WHY IS SELFISHNESS SO DESTRUCTIVE IN FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS?



DIGGING DEEPER JACOB

The Scriptures show a contrast between Esau and Jacob: "When the boys grew up, Esau became an expert hunter, an outdoorsman, but Jacob was a quiet man who stayed at home" (Gen. 25:27). By that description, one might assume Jacob was docile and non-competitive, but his life would prove otherwise. Jacob's name meant "heel grabber" (Gen. 25:26). Selfish ambition seemed to consume him, just not overtly. He deceived Esau as an adult, deceived his father, and his uncle Laban (Gen. 25:32; 27:1-30; 30:25-43). His history of wrongdoing haunted him so that he sent lots of gifts to appease Esau before reuniting to avoid true confrontation (32:3-5). Turns out that when he finally faced him, he received a blessing, not unlike the blessing he received from wrestling with the Lord just before their meeting: "Jacob then named the place Peniel, "For I have seen God face to face," he said, "yet my life has been spared" (Gen. 32:30).

What are the advantages of confronting the issues instead of deceiving?

Ruminating Prolongs Resistance // Genesis 33:1-4

After years of estrangement, Jacob was about to encounter Esau. Would Esau let bygones be bygones? Would they act as if nothing had ever happened? Or did Esau's rage increase over the decades? Their parents nurtured their difficulties by showing favoritism. And they equally embraced the dysfunction from years ago. These rivals suffered a total breakdown in their relationship. Before they could experience reconciliation, there was some deeply spiritual groundwork that Jacob had to face.

The night before Jacob's rendezvous with Esau, when he was alone, "a man wrestled with him until daybreak" (Gen. 32:24). In Hosea 12:4, the prophet refers to this event as Jacob wrestling an angel. Some scholars believe this angel to be the pre-incarnate Christ. Jacob wrestled with God through the night. Then, the man struck Jacob's hip, and he would thereafter walk with a limp. Jacob could no longer run from his troubles. He had no other choice but to humbly trust in God's divine protection and provision.

When he wrestled with the Lord, Jacob completed the most challenging part of his spiritual trial. He drew close to the Lord, which prepared him to meet his most intimidating adversary: Esau.

Jacob's attitude from his life-changing encounter with God would soon reveal itself through his humility toward Esau. As a precaution against Esau's possible aggression, Jacob divided his children among Leah, Rachel, and the two maidservants. He put his least favorites in the front and his wife, Rachel, and their son, Joseph (his favorites), last for protection. Here again, though Jacob was in a place of surrender to the Lord, his old nature showed favoritism, which ran deep in his family tree.

Jacob bowed seven times before meeting Esau as an act of humility, like bowing before the Lord or a king. His humility put Jacob in the spiritual place where the Lord would bless him. He no longer hid behind any family member. Jacob met his brother in the reality of his vulnerability, the humility of his new trust in the Lord, and his new name: Israel (Gen. 32:27-28).



But Esau, without another thought, ran to meet him, hugged him, and kissed him. Once Jacob realized Esau no longer held animosity toward him, they wept in a sweet reunion. Displaying humility is necessary to build or repair relationships.

WHAT ARE SOME PRACTICAL WAYS WE CAN DISPLAY HUMILITY TO THOSE WE HAVE HURT OR WRONGED?

Readiness Inspires Reconciliation // Genesis 33:8-11

When Esau asked, "What do you mean by this whole procession I met?" Jacob replied honestly, "To find favor with you, my lord." By calling Esau, "lord," Jacob showed humility. But it also kept things a little less personal. We notice Jacob did not call him "my brother" or simply by his name. Esau responded to Jacob about his gifts. Esau said, "I have enough, my brother. Keep what you have." Years earlier, Esau wanted to murder Jacob for taking what he felt belonged to him. Now, Esau sounded content.

Even though Esau lost his birthright, he had become a prominent man. With a band of 400 marauders, he had the power to take whatever he wanted. And when first presented with Jacob's gifts, he refused. This man who once hated his brother for taking his blessing and all the wealth that came with it now could say, "I have enough."

But he also said, "I have enough, my brother." Esau's word was one of affection and kind-heartedness to show his new-found brotherly love.

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Reading what these brothers said should remind us to listen carefully to the words someone says when meeting a rival. We find the possibility for personal peace and reconciliation in Jacob's humility and Esau's expression of warmth, "my brother."

As a result of Esau's affectionate words to his brother, Jacob wanted more than ever to bless Esau with gifts. But it seems this time Jacob offered the gifts not for appeasement but from a heart of brotherly love. When Esau told Jacob, "Keep what you have," he showed us what one says when they have rightly let go of the past.

WHAT ARE YOU WILLING TO GIVE UP TO RESTORE A DAMAGED RELATIONSHIP?

Jacob persisted that Esau should receive his gifts. He exclaimed that seeing Esau's face was like seeing the face of God. Jacob said something similar after wrestling with the angel. That's when Jacob said, "I have seen God face to face . . . yet my life has been spared" (Gen. 32:30). That is, he had lived to tell the tale. With all that, Esau agreed to accept his brother's gift. It takes a level of humility to accept a gift. It appears both brothers had forgiven one another. They both gained a peace only the restored soul can fully appreciate. The only thing that died was their rivalry.

WHERE DO YOU SEE A GREAT NEED FOR HUMILITY AND RECONCILIATION IN OUR WORLD TODAY?

DID YOU KNOW?

Venus and Serena Williams aren't the only siblings to rival in the same individual sport, but they are perhaps the only two who've done it at the highest level in the public eye. Though Venus is the older of the two, Serena holds a career 19-12 record over. In this case, the younger has usurped the older, and is lauded by many as the greatest women's tennis player of all time. Venus has always shown documented support for her little sister, setting an example for the masses, modeling that sibling rivalry, even at the highest levels of esteem, does not have to become personal. The film *King Richard* depicts various tribulations the two endured together on their rise to tennis stardom, and how they relied on one another through them. Proverbs 17:17 says, "A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a difficult time." Perhaps the best way we can love on our siblings when we are at odds with them is to employ empathy.

Biblical Truth: Christ, our high priest, can empathize with us in our weakness.

What role could empathy play with your current "rivals," family or otherwise?

LIVE IT

How can you live a life free of favoritism and rivalry?

A lot of the problems Jacob and Esau faced came from the failings of their parents, Isaac, and Rebekah. They each chose the child they preferred and allowed their biases to influence their actions. Their favoritism created an atmosphere for deceit and revenge. But as adults, the brothers were now responsible for their own behavior.

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- **Take responsibility.** Identify some of the negative learned behaviors from your family and begin humbly to address them. Confess any sin as a result of your behaviors that exists.
- **Forgive.** Choose to forgive those who have offended us or caused us harm or grief. Your forgiveness does not excuse their behavior; it is you letting go of the offense. Choose to forgive.
- **Reconcile.** Take the initiative to reconcile a broken relationship in your life. Doing your due diligence to live peaceably with others (Rom. 12:18) can prevent future conflicts.

DAILY READINGS

1. BETRAYAL PRODUCES DESTRUCTION // GENESIS 27:35-37, 41

Homes should be loving and safe environments for families, but what happens when there is only betrayal and destruction? Isaac lived in such a family where betrayal was the norm: Abram and Isaac traded their wives to save themselves (Gen. 12:11-13; 26:7-9), Jacob took his brother's inheritance, and Rebekah instigated a final coup when she switched her sons. When betrayal is executed, destruction follows. Take time to pray for families experiencing betrayal and destruction.

As believers, we are assured that God will not leave us in our brokenness.

2. FROM GUILT TO APOLOGY // GENESIS 32:11; 33:3

Guilt requires remorse and apology seeks forgiveness. People who have wronged others often experience a sense of guilt and remorse. Once people feel sorry for their actions, an apology is the next step. Hopefully, the injured party will offer forgiveness. Jacob was in this cycle with his brother. As the body of Christ, we wrestled with the guilt of sin and offered an apology through repentance. Since we serve a loving Father, He forgives us for all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

Be thankful for forgiveness and being released from the guilt of sin.

3. BE RECONCILED // GENESIS 33:8-12

Sin breaks relationships and it takes an action to bring reconciliation. Some families are broken because one person will not make a move to resolve a conflict. Oftentimes, this conflict may go on for years. Such is the case with Jacob and Esau. Both brothers were well in years before God told Jacob to go home (Gen. 31:3) where he would face the unresolved issues with his brother. Jacob sent gifts ahead to appease Esau but found that it was not necessary (Gen. 33:8-12). Esau had forgiven Jacob and was happy they were reunited (Gen. 33:4). Sin broke man's relationship

with God and Jesus's sacrifice on the cross and resurrection brought forth reconciliation. God's love is the source of healing, hope and restoration in any situation.

As Christians, let us help others experience being reconciled with God.

4. PEACE DEPENDS ON ME // ROMANS 12:18

Conflict and confusion are present in each new day and peace is elusive. Motown released Marvin Gaye's song entitled "What's Going On" in 1971. This song gives rhyme and rhythm to the perils of the day, and it cries out for peaceful solutions. So where does this peace come from? Romans 12:18 states, "If possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." Therefore, this peace is in our hands. Esau had every right to hold a grudge against his brother Jacob (Gen. 27:41). However, he chose to be the peacemaker and offer forgiveness instead of friction (Gen. 33:4). When conflicts arise, we are the ones who are responsible for resolving or de-escalating the issues.

Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called the sons of God (Matt. 5:9).

5. IT'S YOURS BUT I WANT IT // JAMES 4:2, GENESIS 37:4

"It's yours but I want it" describes the meaning of jealousy and the reason behind many conflicts. Wars have been waged because of the desire to take the land or products another country possesses. "You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and wage war . . ." (Jas. 4:2b). Additionally, people may crave the status or position of someone else. Even family conflicts may find their roots in wanting what rightfully belongs to others. In Genesis 37:4, Joseph's brothers were jealous and hated him. "For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there is disorder and every evil practice" (Jas. 3:16). However, one can overcome jealousy with gratitude.

Reflecting on God's marvelous blessings leaves little room for wanting what others possess.