

SESSION 3

ISAAC AND REBEKAH: FAMILY FAVORITES

Leader pages on pp. 138-141

THE POINT:
LOVE SHOULD BE
WITHOUT FAVORITISM
WITHIN THE FAMILY.

GENESIS 25:24-28; 27:5-13

²⁴ When her time came to give birth, there were indeed twins in her womb. ²⁵ The first one came out red-looking, covered with hair like a fur coat, and they named him Esau. ²⁶ After this, his brother came out grasping Esau's heel with his hand. So he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when they were born. ²⁷ When the boys grew up, Esau became an expert hunter, an outdoorsman, but Jacob was a quiet man who stayed at home. ²⁸ Isaac loved Esau because he had a taste for wild game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

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MEMORY VERSE

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⁵ Now Rebekah was listening to what Isaac said to his son Esau. So while Esau went to the field to hunt some game to bring in, ⁶ Rebekah said to her son Jacob, "Listen! I heard your father talking with your brother Esau. He said, ⁷ 'Bring me game and make a delicious meal for me to eat so that I can bless you in the LORD's presence before I die.' ⁸ **Now, my son, listen to me and do what I tell you.** ⁹ Go to the flock and bring me two choice young goats, and I will make them into a delicious meal for your father—the kind he loves. ¹⁰ Then take it to your father to eat so that he may bless you before he dies."

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¹¹ Jacob answered Rebekah his mother, "Look, my brother Esau is a hairy man, but I am a man with smooth skin. ¹² Suppose my father touches me. Then I will be revealed to him as a deceiver and bring a curse rather than a blessing on myself." ¹³ His mother said to him, "Your curse be on me, my son. Just obey me and go get them for me."

KEYWORDS

Esau (v. 25)—Moses did not record a precise derivation of the name Esau. Instead he associated it with the Hebrew word for "hair" or "hairy."

Bless you (v. 7)—Blessing someone in the Old Testament meant endowing that person with power for prosperity,

success, longevity, and fruitfulness, typically the oldest son.

Your curse . . . son (v. 13)—A curse of an unexpected kind resulted for both Rebekah and Jacob. Because of their scheme, Jacob had to leave home to avoid Esau's wrath.

HOW CAN WE OVERCOME FAVORITISM IN THE FAMILY?

Jerome is a 28-year-old guy who's a die-hard Miami Dolphins fan. He's been that way since he was five, not because Miami is his hometown, but because when he was five, he loved dolphins and when he saw the helmet, he was all in for life. He wouldn't be a Jets fan. He hates the Jets. That's just how our favorites work. Favorites make us human. We make binary choices as we get older. We might start out in neutral, but we never stay that way. Chocolate or Vanilla, Cadillacs or Lincolns, Macs or PCs, boxers, or briefs—favorites define who we are. But in families, favorites can devastate relationships.

Favoritism weaves through the story of Jacob and Esau. The stage is set from the start. Mom and Dad (Isaac and Rebekah) both choose their pick of the litter. Isaac preferred Esau. Rebekah preferred Jacob. They promised, doted, conspired, and deceived to give their favorite son the upper hand.

Your family of origin may have been like the family of Isaac and Rebekah, it may not have instilled positive practices, but families teach us some of our greatest lessons and reveal some of our greatest shortcomings. It is through our families we should learn how to love one another.

Appreciate Differences

// Genesis 25:24-28

When I was 13, the Moore family came across the street to greet us, the new neighbors. Mr. Moore said, "Hello, we are the Moore's. I'm Gary, this is my wife, Harriett, and kids Larry, Terri, and Barry."

My dad responded, "We are the McCoy's. I'm James, my wife, Gina, and kids Jonathan, Joyce, Jasmine, and Bruce."

My Mom wanted to name me Bruce because her favorite uncle's name was Bruce. I said to her, "Mom, I didn't know you had an Uncle Bruce."

"Oh, yes," she said as she smiled into nowhere, "He went to prison."

My siblings and I don't think our parents had a favorite, but with my name starting with a "B" in the land of the "J's," it left me with a big chip on my shoulder to prove I belonged. Like many kids, I felt like I did not fit in, like how a ginger stands out in a crowd full of blondes.

From Genesis 25:25, it sounds like Esau was a ginger. When we observe differences in our children, it's human nature to notice, to talk about



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it, and for the “different child” to feel left out. Those are things to discuss as we learn to accept and admire the differences there may be among siblings.

It’s okay for our children to be different from each other, but it’s not okay for parents to show favoritism. That kind of parental pattern will create a rivalry between husband and wife that will inevitably spill into their children’s lives and put the next generation at risk of lifelong conflict.

WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES WHEN PARENTS SHOW FAVORITISM?

Jacob and Esau were twins, but they were distinct. At birth, we read that Esau was reddish and covered with hair, while Jacob came out of the womb grabbing his brother’s foot. Esau became an expert hunter and an outdoorsman, but Jacob was quiet and stayed at home.

Isaac and Rebekah played favorites with their sons. Genesis 25 highlights their dysfunction: “Now Rebekah was listening to what Isaac said to his son Esau” about his blessing. So, she went to “her son” and told him how to steal the blessing (Gen. 27:5-10). They did not deal with their sons. Instead, we read of his son and her son.

Isaac had more in common with “his son,” Esau. Isaac loved Esau because he had a taste for wild game. There’s no harm in having more in common with one child—that’s natural. But favoritism is a choice to punish by neglecting the other child(ren).

We cannot prove why Rebekah favored Jacob, but experience suggests she may have favored him simply because her husband preferred Esau. We don’t know for sure. But this is for sure, they both had their favorites. And their family tree fell apart because of their favoritism.

WHEN HAS FAVORITISM HAD AN IMPACT ON YOUR LIFE?

Avert Dissension // Genesis 27:5-10

When one’s favorite falls short, the enabling parent is tempted to make excuses for the child. Those excuses grow into lies. Lies grow into betrayal. Betrayal grows into hatred. And hatred gives birth to death.

With Isaac’s old age and diminishing sight, he asked his son Esau to hunt wild game that he could eat. Then Isaac promised he would give Esau his blessing. Rebekah was listening and plotted to trick her husband into giving his blessing to Jacob. With meticulous cunning, she devised an unthinkable scheme for a mother to commit. She betrayed both her husband and her firstborn.



DIGGING DEEPER THE WHOLE FAMILY

The children of God, the “first family,” was firmly established through Jacob, later named Israel, by an act of favoritism (Gen. 27:5-10; 32:28). The “whole family” if you will, was affirmed through Simon, later named Peter, by an act of faith (Matt. 16:16-18). Before Jesus, the Jews, Peter included, assumed that the eternal kingdom was for them alone. It was at the onset of building the Church, through the revelation of the Spirit, that Peter would say, “Now I truly understand that God doesn’t show favoritism, but in every nation the person who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. He sent the message to the Israelites, proclaiming the good news of peace through Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all” (Acts 10:34-36). Paul, also Jewish by heritage, drove home that sentiment by declaring, “There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male, and female, since you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:28-29).

How can you help reduce favoritism in—your family? The body of Christ?



Isaac's blessing was not hers to steal from one son and give it to another. Up until a point, this sin was all on Rebekah. It was her idea to eavesdrop on her husband's remarks to their son. It was her idea for Jacob to hurry and get two choice young goats so she could prepare Isaac one of his favorite meals. It was her idea for Jacob to impersonate Esau and lie to his father about his identity. In her favoritism, she robbed her own family out of misplaced loyalty.

Rebekah was now in the deceit business, and she pulled Jacob into her plan. She stepped into the darkness of self-deception by loving one son over another.

For Esau, receiving his father's blessing was a crucial part of his identity as the firstborn son. To lose this blessing was on par with being cursed in that culture. That's what makes Rebekah's deception so devastating. Romans 12:18 states, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." Rebekah chose dissension over peace in her family. Her actions impacted her sons and future generations.

HOW DOES SINFUL BEHAVIOR AMONG FAMILY MEMBERS IMPACT THE ENTIRE FAMILY?

Avoid Deception // Genesis 27:11-13

Whether it is Rebekah, or you and me, having a favorite child and encouraging them to do something wrong is a failure to love that child.

It enables them to fall deeper into the consequences of sin.

Perhaps Rebekah rationalized or "spiritualized" her decision. Maybe she gave the impression she was "helping God" fulfill His prophecy about the two sons. Before giving birth to her twins, the Lord said to her: "Two nations are in your womb . . . and the older will serve the younger" (Gen. 25:23).

But it is never right to do wrong. And even though Rebekah was willing to assume responsibility, she could not protect Jacob from his consequences.

Jacob was just as guilty. He did not refuse his mother's deceitful scheme. His only concern was how to eliminate the obstacle that might keep him from completing the fraud—he was concerned his arms were not hairy enough!

We don't know where this behavior started, but it undoubtedly included keeping family secrets. "Don't tell your father . . ."

Rebekah was not showing love to her favorite, Jacob, by enabling him to steal the blessing. True love includes disciplining the child and correcting him for his error. Scripture says, "For the Lord disciplines the one he loves and punishes every son he receives" (Heb. 12:6). Rather than enabling Jacob and lying so her son could get ahead, Rebekah should have disciplined him when he erred. Instead of a legacy of integrity, Rebekah left her son Jacob with the consequences of deceit.

Rebekah and Jacob set the table to exploit Isaac's natural weakness in his old age: his sight.

Disguised as Esau, Jacob came to Isaac and asked him to sit up. From this, we understand Isaac probably was just awakened and less sharp. When Isaac asked how he got the game so quickly, Jacob lied and falsely invoked the Lord, "Because the Lord your God made it happen for me" (Gen. 27:20). To better pull off the deception, Jacob wore his brother's clothes so he would smell like Esau when he presented Rebekah's prepared goat meat.

When Esau returned with wild game, as he and Isaac had arranged, they both realized Rebekah and Jacob betrayed them.

Think of Esau: his own mother and twin brother

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ripped him off. Remember the phrase, “That hits a little too close to home”? Every emotion seems heightened at home.

In today’s culture, maybe that is why an experienced police officer will tell you some of their most dangerous encounters are domestic disputes in people’s homes. When things hit too close to home, people may experience flash points of disappointment, betrayal, or anger with heightened sensitivity and a lack of restraint. Things can get dangerous—quickly.

Consider the fallout caused by the parental favoritism of Isaac and Rebekah. A husband and wife couldn’t trust each other for the rest of their days. Twin brothers were now enemies. Isaac and Rebekah essentially lose both sons. Favoritism ripped apart her entire family.

Satan uses lies and deception to encourage us to sin because the devil seeks our maximum harm. God is love and wants us to live in the truth of integrity, because the truth sets us free.

WHAT MAKES LYING AND DECEPTION SO DIFFICULT TO OVERCOME?

DID YOU KNOW?

A Harvard Magazine article suggests that “Before turning 30, nearly one-third of Americans will work at the same firm as a parent. In those jobs, these young adults earn almost 20 percent more than they otherwise would.”¹⁵ Nepotism is the biased, selective hiring of relatives or friends. It is not a new phenomenon and based on a poll of 1,000 adult US citizens, most believe it is common practice.¹⁶ Though this may be true, we know it isn’t ethical. There isn’t a single form of favoritism that shares the heart of the Father—not in the workplace, politics, or education, and certainly not in the Church or family. Proverbs 28:21, saying plainly, “To show partiality is not good. . . .” As believers, we know that common practice is not our North Star. We should lead with integrity in every sphere, free from utilizing bias that leads to dissension.

Biblical Truth: Showing partiality is not the mark of a true believer.

As believers, how do we lead with integrity that is free from bias that leads to dissension?

LIVE IT

Each day we choose how we treat those we love. How can you choose to deal justly?

We all have our favorites, but when it comes to family, playing favorites can have detrimental consequences. At best, showing favoritism is a vain act of alliance, potentially creating an overinflated sense of self-importance and brattiness. At worst, favoritism is a vile tool of self-serving flattery that creates the first problem and darkens the heart of the individual who practices it.

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- **Read.** This week read 1 Corinthians 13. It provides a template for love and respect in families.
- **Reflect.** Journal and reflect on when you have felt wounded in times when others seemed to be more valuable and appreciated than you. How did you overcome those feelings?
- **Rehearse.** Seek to rectify the favoritism in your own life (Jas. 2:1-9). Set aside a time to have a conversation with the family member whom you may have harmed through favoritism.

DAILY READINGS

1. TWINS: SIMILAR YET DIFFERENT // GENESIS 25:24-28

Twins, a double blessing from God, are similar yet different. Identical, fraternal, or conjoined twins share some characteristics but vary in others. These children share the same parents, family heritage, and birthday. Man may view identical twins as the same, but like fraternal and conjoined twins they are fearfully and wonderfully made (Ps. 139:14) possessing different fingerprints, DNA, and personalities. Biblically, Isaac and Rebekah were blessed with fraternal twin boys, Esau—red and hairy, and Jacob—smooth-skinned (Gen. 25:25; 27:11). As the boys grew, Esau (the eldest) became the hunter and Jacob the homebody. Additionally, many of our families are doubly blessed with the birth of twins.

Though twins are similar, we must remember to recognize them as individual gifts from God.

2. SACRIFICES FOR FOOD // GENESIS 27:5-10

Humans need food to live, but what is sacrificed to obtain the desired food? For Adam and Eve, eating from the Tree of Knowledge sacrificed eternal life without sin for death (Gen. 2:17). Esau sold his birthright to his brother for stew, bread, and a beverage (Gen. 25:33-34). Isaac gave the blessings intended for Esau to Jacob who served the delicious meal made from game (Gen. 27:5-10). Like the biblical characters, food has a significant impact on humans today. People are bombarded with advertisements linked to food. Good health is sometimes sacrificed for the extra rolls, cookies, ice cream, cake, etc. Unfortunately, lives are sacrificed when humans have little or nothing to eat.

Are we willing to sacrifice our extras to bless those in need?

3. DECEPTION AND FRAUD // GENESIS 27:11-13

Deception and fraud are considered among the most hurtful events that occur in a person's life. Both are premeditated acts of dishonesty. Dramas like "The Have and the Have Nots" are filled with the deception and fraud of our era. In biblical times, Isaac and Esau

experienced this treachery within their family. While Esau was obeying his father's wishes, his mother and brother were plotting against him. Esau was hurt when he realized what had occurred and vowed to kill his brother once the mourning period for Isaac was over (Gen. 27:34, 41). Whether in the days of old or now, deception and fraud still hurt.

As the body of Christ, our job is to help people see pass the hurt to Jesus the healer.

4. VALUING OTHERS // PHILIPPIANS 2:3

God expects us to value one another (Phil. 2:3b). Matthew 19:19 tells us to "honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as yourself." Moreover, Luke 6:31 reminds us to "do to others as you would have them do to you." Each of these verses reflects the importance of treating others with value. Jacob did just the opposite. He dishonored his father, bartered his stew for his brother's birthright, and impersonated Esau for their father's blessings. If Jacob had truly valued his family, his actions would have reflected love instead of deceit. Jacob is not the only guilty one. Are there times when we value our way rather than what's best for the majority?

In obedience to God's commands, let us faithfully value one another.

5. STAY IN YOUR LANE // GENESIS 27:5-7

Stay in your lane is a phrase that cautions people to take care of their own affairs without interfering with others. Clearly, Rebekah did not understand this expression, since she eavesdropped on her husband's conversation with their eldest son and proceeded to gossip with the younger son about what she overheard (Gen. 27:5-7). She continued her interference by plotting with Jacob to trick Isaac. Like Rebekah, there are people who have issues staying in their own lane. As a result, one might see confusion, animosity, and dissension among family and non-family members. Christians have a lane that is described as a small gate and a narrow road "that leads to life . . ." (Matt. 7:14).

Therefore, always stay in the lane that leads to eternal life.