

CHAPTER 27

Jacob and Esau

In contrast to the story of Cain and Abel there is another biblical story that gives an account of a sibling relationship of hatred, division, violence, resentment and mistrust, which is transformed by reconciliation and the act of giving. The story of Jacob and Esau portrays how two brothers were able to change themselves and reconcile after many years of bitterness and separation.

Jacob and Esau

Abraham's son Isaac married Rebecca, who did not bear children in twenty years. After they prayed, Rebecca conceived twins who struggled within her womb. She received a prophecy from the Lord that: "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger."

Rebecca gave birth to twins, two sons they called Esau and Jacob. Esau was born first, which is why he was considered to be the elder son. When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, while Jacob was a quiet man who stayed among the tents. Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebecca loved Jacob.

Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in hungry from an expedition. He said to Jacob, "Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I'm famished!" Jacob replied, "First sell me your birthright." "Look, I am about to die," Esau said. "What good is the birthright to me?" But Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, and then got up and left. Esau did not value his birthright.

When Isaac was old and blind, he said to Esau, his older son, "I am now old and blind and don't know when I will die. Hunt some wild game for me and prepare me the kind of tasty food I like and bring it to me to eat, so that I may give you my blessing before I die."

Rebecca overheard their conversation. When Esau had left, she told Jacob to get two young goats, so that she could prepare a tasty meal for Isaac. Then Jacob was to pretend he was Esau and take the meal to Isaac so as to receive the blessing himself. Jacob was reluctant to do this, but his mother persuaded him.

Jacob pretending to be Esau went to his father and said, "I am Esau, your firstborn. I have done as you told me. Please eat this meal I have prepared so that you may give me your blessing." After he had eaten, Isaac blessed him and said,

May God give you of heaven's dew and of earth's richness—an abundance of grain and new wine.

May nations serve you
and peoples bow down to you.

Be lord over your brothers,
and may the sons of your mother bow down to you.

After Isaac finished blessing him and Jacob had scarcely left his father's presence, his brother Esau came in from hunting. He too prepared some tasty food and brought it to his father. Then he said to him, "My father, sit up and eat some of my game, so that you may give me your blessing." His father Isaac asked him, "Who are you?" "I am your son," he answered, "your firstborn, Esau." Isaac trembled violently and said, "Who was it, then, that hunted game and brought it to me? I ate it just before you came and I blessed him." When Esau heard his father's words, he burst out with a loud and bitter cry. Isaac said, "Your brother came deceitfully and took your blessing." Esau said, "He has deceived me these two times: He took my birthright, and now he's taken my blessing!"

Esau held a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing his father had given him. He said, "Soon my father will be dead; then I will kill my brother Jacob." When Rebecca heard what Esau had said, she arranged for Jacob to go to stay with her brother Laban and look for a wife. On the way there Jacob had a dream that God would protect him and bring him back to his father's house in peace.

Laban had two daughters; the older was called Leah, and the younger Rachel. Leah was very plain, but Rachel very beautiful. Jacob immediately fell in love with Rachel and told her father, "I'll work for you seven years in return for your younger daughter, Rachel." Laban agreed and Jacob worked seven years to get Rachel. Seven years passed and seemed like a few days to him because of his love for her.

After the seven years were up, Laban held a wedding feast for Jacob. However, the next morning Jacob woke up to find beside him not Rachel, whom he loved, but Leah. Jacob was very upset. However, when he found out that there was a local custom that insisted on the elder being married first, he agreed to work a further seven years for Rachel.

During this time Jacob was deceived many times by his uncle. He still prospered and his family grew and he acquired large flocks, servants, and camels. After twenty-one years had passed, he had another dream in which he was guided to return to his homeland. With Laban's blessing he set out with his family and possessions to return home.

Jacob was rather apprehensive about meeting Esau. He sent messengers ahead of him to meet Esau. The messengers returned and informed Jacob that Esau was coming to meet him with four hundred men. Jacob was afraid. Then Jacob prayed, "O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, O LORD, who said to me, 'Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper,' I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become a large group. Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and

attack me, and the mothers with their children. But you have said, 'I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.'

The next day Jacob made a gift for his brother Esau of two hundred goats, two sheep, thirty camels, fifty cows and bulls, and thirty donkeys. Jacob sent each herd of animals with a servant thinking, "I will pacify him with these gifts I am sending on ahead; later, when I see him, perhaps he will receive me."

The following morning Jacob set off with his family to meet Esau. When he saw his brother, he went on ahead and bowed down to the ground seven times as he approached him. But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept. Then Esau looked up and saw the women and children. "Who are these with you?" he asked. Jacob answered, "They are the children God has graciously given your servant." Then the maidservants and their children approached and bowed down. Leah and her children came and bowed down. Last of all came Joseph and Rachel, and they too bowed down. Esau asked, "What do you mean by all these droves I met?" "To find favor in your eyes, my lord," he said. But Esau said, "I already have plenty, my brother. Keep what you have for yourself." "No, please!" said Jacob. "If I have found favor in your eyes, accept this gift from me. For to see your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favorably. Please accept the present that was brought to you, for God has been gracious to me and I have all I need." And because Jacob insisted, Esau accepted it.

Adapted from Gen. 25-50



Something to think about



Like the story of Cain and Abel, the story of Jacob and Esau can teach us a lot. We should reflect on the motives behind the actions of the two brothers. By doing so, we'll be able to think about our own actions and motives, which may help us to find new ways to solve conflicts. So, let us turn to the story of Jacob and Esau.

- Why did Esau sell his birthright?
- What are the priorities in your life? What is most important to you, and what is secondary?
- Was Jacob justified in taking the blessing? Was there a better way?
- When you pursue a goal, do you think you can use any means?
- Was Esau justified in wanting to kill Jacob?
- Imagine that someone really hurt you. What would you do? Would you do anything out of desire to take revenge? Is such a desire ever justified?
- Why did Jacob continue to work for his uncle when he was treated so badly?
- What would you do if you hurt a friend and then moved to another city, without apologizing?
- Why did Jacob go home, even though he knew Esau might still be seeking revenge?
- If there is a serious conflict between two people, can it be healed by time alone? Does the person who caused the conflict have the right to forgive himself because a long time has passed?
- Why did Jacob's gifts and attitude impress Esau so much?
- Imagine that you have a conflict with a friend or your parents. What would do in order to reconcile? Would it be enough simply to buy an expensive present?
- How can the example of Jacob and Esau be used to solve problems of human relationships today?
- Does this example work only on a personal level, or can it be applied to relationships between groups of people, including nations?

What does the story of Jacob and Esau teach us?

When we read the story of Cain and Abel, we saw that Cain could not overcome his anger and therefore killed his brother. In the story of Jacob and Esau we can see that there was nearly the same outcome. What was the difference?

Dealing with resentment

The reconciliation of Jacob and Esau came about because both had changed. When Jacob took the birthright and blessing by trickery and deception, he did not consider how Esau would feel. Only in Haran, when he himself was tricked and deceived by Laban, could he understand how he must have hurt his brother. If Jacob had behaved in the same way toward Laban and sought his death, then there could have been no possibility of reconciliation with Esau.

Fortunately, even though he was treated unjustly, Jacob did not complain or bear a grudge. Had he done so, his soul would have been poisoned with resentment. Instead he forgave his uncle and worked hard for him, even though Laban often cheated him out of his wages. Jacob's deep love for Rachel must have helped him to endure and overcome. Through the suffering that he experienced his heart and mind were purified and deepened. He became a man of real character.

Isn't it easy, when we experience injustice, to complain and become angry and resentful? However, it is good to stop and think. We can reflect on our life and think about occasions when we have treated someone badly. Are we reaping what we have sowed? Even if we cannot think of a past misdeed on our part, revenge will not solve anything. It will multiply and perpetuate injustice and diminish and corrupt our own character. What is important is how we respond to the way we are treated. Through any experience we can either grow or decline.

Making amends

How should we react when someone is angry with us? Unfortunately it happens all too often. We may upset someone by what we say or do. Or we are on the receiving end of someone already in a bad mood. Unless something is done to make amends, a good relationship can easily get worse and die. For example, if we inadvertently offend someone, we may need only to apologize for the matter to be forgotten. If we break something valuable, an apology may not be enough and we may have to replace the broken item or do something else to show our sincerity. In any case, we have to do whatever is required to restore the original wrong.

To restore his relationship with his brother, Jacob had to change as a person so that he could appreciate why his brother felt so angry with him. Even at the risk of his life, he had to love his brother who wanted to kill him. So he gave Esau a large gift that had taken him many years to earn. He did not give it arrogantly but very humbly and magnanimously. Because it was given in this way, Esau did not even want to receive it. All the past bad feelings and memories were washed away by Jacob's sincere heart.

Esau too had changed. He did not kill Jacob and he did not arrogantly regard Jacob's gift as the compensation he deserved. His heart was open enough to be touched by Jacob's attitude and gift, and he was willing to forgive and be reconciled. Jacob's love was stronger than Esau's hatred.

Do the ends justify the means?

When most people read the story of Jacob and Esau, they think that Jacob is a very unsavory character and does not deserve to be blessed. He deceives his elder brother into selling him the birthright, deceives his father and steals the blessing from Esau. Does this mean that the ends justify the means?

Jacob wanted to have the position of the eldest son and even used dishonest means to achieve it. So let us examine this aspect of the story more closely.

The first question that arises is: Should Jacob have been the one to receive the blessing and inherit the position of eldest son? When Rebecca was pregnant, she received a revelation that the elder son was to serve the younger son. This is why Rebecca helped him to take it. Esau clearly did not value his birthright, since he sold it for a bowl of soup. Clearly food was more important to him than the ancestral lineage. He could have asked someone else, such as his mother, for food. Jacob realized the value of the birthright and the blessing and even risked his life to get it.

Since he had sold Jacob his birthright, Esau should have allowed Jacob to receive the blessing. Esau did not take the implications of transferring the birthright to Jacob seriously. He did not keep his word and did not tell Isaac that the blessing was now



The Toy Gun

When I was a small boy, I used to play with my best friend every afternoon. Our favorite game was setting up our army of toy tin soldiers. I was especially proud of a little machine gun that someone had given me and I even marked it a special way. Then one day the machine gun disappeared. What was worse was that I discovered that my friend had taken it. Because of the little mark I had made, there was no doubt in my mind. I said nothing and my friend said nothing, but our happy little world lay in ruins. I *knew* that he took it, and *he knew* that I knew that he took it, and I knew that he knew that I knew. We could not face each other, we could not play together. Then, in a day or two he came up to me and said: "I am sorry. I took your gun. Forgive me." "Oh, forget about it," I answered. "What do I care!" Suddenly all the world around us was bright and happy again. Everything was so good, it felt like Easter.



rightfully Jacob's. Jacob was in a dilemma. How could he obtain what was rightfully his?

The way Jacob took the birthright and the blessing was not right. He did not have the maturity of character to realize the consequences of his actions. That is why he had to go through a suffering course of twenty-one years. He was reaping what he had sowed, paying the price for his earlier trickery and dishonesty. Although the birthright was his, he should have earned it. So Jacob had plenty of time to reflect on his former recklessness. Eventually he had to reconcile with Esau and win his respect. Jacob thought that through trickery he could take a short cut, but instead found he had taken a twenty-one year detour.

Had Jacob been an exemplary younger brother and won Esau's heart and respect, Esau naturally would have recognized that Jacob was more worthy than he. He would have gladly given Jacob the birthright and commended him to their father.

So Jacob should have been the one to receive the blessing, but the way he went about it was wrong. Only the proper means are justified in attaining an end. Improper means may even make it impossible to reach the desired end.

Individual Exercises



- Think of someone who is angry with you and try to restore that relationship.
- Make a play of the story of Jacob and Esau or develop your own story using the same theme.
- Think whether there are some groups in your class that have poor relations with each other and try to change this.

Teens Who Envy

The action takes place in the school cafeteria at lunch time. Nina and Helen are sitting opposite each other at a long table. At the far end is Dmitri. Finishing his lunch, Dmitri picks up his tray and walks past the girls.

Dmitri: Hi, Nina, Helen. How are you doing?

Nina: Hi, Dmitri. That was a quick lunch.

Dmitri: Growing boys like me work up an appetite.

Nina laughs, but Helen is not amused.

Helen: (Mocking) "Growing boys like me". (In a normal tone) Who does he think he is, anyhow?

Nina: Dmitri?

Helen: Yeah, Dmitri. He's nothing but a spoiled brat.

Nina: (Surprised) I gather you don't like him.

Helen: The boy who has everything? I'm afraid not.

Nina: So he's rich, so what?

Helen: Why are you defending him all of a sudden?

Nina: What's wrong with him? I like him. Maybe you just don't know him.

Helen: What's to know?

Nina: Like I said, he's a good kid.

Helen: He can afford to be. He can afford anything he wants.

Nina: I get it. Just because he has a rich dad, that makes him a jerk.

Helen: That isn't what I said.

Nina: I think you're jealous.

Helen: So what if I am?

Nina: Look, Helen, Dmitri can't help who his parents are.



Helen: What is this? Is he your boyfriend?

Nina: You know better than that.

Helen: You mean, why would a boy from the rich part of town go for a girl like you?

Nina: No, that isn't what I mean. I mean that he's just a friend.

Helen: You call him a friend. He's nothing but an egotistical —

Nina: He is not.

Helen: (Surprised) Why are you sticking up for him so much?

Nina: Why are you attacking him?

Helen: I don't have to listen to this. I thought we were friends. I thought we cared about each other. And you choose that...that stuck-up goon over me.

Helen jumps up, grabs her tray and stalks off. For a moment Nina sits by herself, randomly jabbing a fork into what's left of her lunch. She doesn't see Dmitri coming back.

Dmitri: Mind if I sit down?

Nina: I thought you were gone.

Dmitri: Just cleaning off my tray. (Sitting beside her) I couldn't help but hear what was going on. I mean, I wasn't trying to eavesdrop, but Helen's voice does carry. (Pause) It's kind of dumb, but anyhow, thanks.

Nina: Helen can't help it, I guess. It's just the way she is. But you can't help it either.

Dmitri: I suppose, everyone is envious of someone. Or something.

Nina: Maybe. But most of the time, it's just a passing thought. Except maybe for young kids.

Dmitri: (Smiling) You know who I envy?

Nina: Who?

Dmitri: You, and...well, Helen too.



Nina: For heaven's sake, why?

Dmitri: I've never talked about this to anyone before. But sometimes I wish I could escape. Sure, I like to be able to get pretty much what I want, but...

Nina: But what?

Dmitri: This is really weird. I have this darned...responsibility, I guess. This thing where, somehow, I have to be perfect, you know?

Nina: What do you mean?

Dmitri: There are lots of people like Helen. I mean, in the sense that they're envious.

Nina: Jealous, you mean.

Dmitri: Okay then—jealous. Anyhow, I feel as if they're judging me all the time. There's this gigantic spotlight following me everywhere I go. *(Laughs)* Not really, but because of my background, my family, everything I do is judged, is looked at. I hate it. Once in a while, I just want to be me. I just want to be like everyone else.

Nina: Wow. I never would have thought of that.

Dmitri: Sure, having parents who are well off is pretty darned nice—most of the time. I'm the first to admit it. But at other times... I'd just like to be one of the crowd. You know?

Questions for Discussion



- Are Helen's actions typical?
- Whose behavior is more typical, Helen's or Nina's?
- Do you admire Dmitri? Why or why not? Do you believe him when he says he would like to be one of the crowd?
- Why does Dmitri say that he envies Nina and Helen?
- Is Dmitri exaggerating his feelings of responsibility?
- Do you think that people make a conscious decision to act in a certain way towards others? Why or why not?