

Sibling Rivalry

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"Jacob and Esau Sibling Rivalry"

Prayer of Illumination

Everlasting God,
whose tenacious love holds us:
make our hearts the house of your truth,
and make our minds the realm of your wisdom
so that our fellowship will become your dwelling place,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Background

The *Genesis Family Reality Show* has been renewed for a third season. Here's a recap:

- **First Season:** The chronologically advanced Abraham and Sarah move cross country. Isaac is born to a senior citizen. Abraham hooks up with Hagar and kicks out son Ishmael.
- **Second Season:** We saw how God, a servant, and some camels played matchmaker for Isaac and Rebekah.
- Now the entire **Third Season** has just been dropped on Netflix: "**Jacob and Esau.**"

And you won't be disappointed—the family dysfunction continues, making the Kardashians seem almost like the Cleaver family. There are:

- Infertility challenges. Twins!
- Sibling rivalry. Bickering over inheritance.
- Parental favoritism. Rejection. Deception. Triangulation.

All this is enough to make even the most seasoned marriage and family therapist's head spin.

So why does God have such raw, unfiltered, and flawed characters as Bible heroes?

Is it just for cheap entertainment—like the Jerry Springer Show? *I don't think so.* Genesis helps us see the grace of God in action in the real world. There's not only hope and purpose for these relational train wrecks, there's hope and purpose *for us*. God's grace is bigger than our epic fails. We're also given permission to be honest about our flaws. When we can safely observe our foibles, we're freed to grow. God's holy work of character development can be formed in us. We realize that we don't have to, no...that we *can't* carry the weight of the world on our shoulders.

- Self-improvement isn't a solo project in our lives.
- God is with us. We're not alone.
- God is at work in us, through us, and even despite of us.

So let's hear God's word to us from...

Scripture: Genesis 25:19-34 (NRSVue)

¹⁹ These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham was the father of Isaac, ²⁰ and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. ²¹ Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife because she was barren, and the Lord granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. ²² The children struggled together within her, and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?"^[a] So she went to inquire of the Lord. ²³ And the Lord said to her,

"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."

²⁴ When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. ²⁵ The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle, so they named him Esau. ²⁶ Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel, so he was named Jacob.^[b] Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

²⁷ When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. ²⁸ Isaac loved Esau because he was fond of game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

Esau Sells His Birthright

²⁹ Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. ³⁰ Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!" (Therefore he was called Edom.^[c]) ³¹ Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." ³² Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" ³³ Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob. ³⁴ Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – “Sibling Rivalry”



In psychologist Hal Hershfield’s new book *“Your Future Self: How to Make Tomorrow Better Today,”* he shares a funny and insightful stand-up act that Jerry Seinfeld gave on the Tonight Show in the 1990s.

The topic was **Christmastime appliance sales:**

No payments until **MARCH** of the next year! *Wow, no payments until March?* Seinfeld wondered. It’s as if March will never arrive! Sure, I don’t have the money now, but that guy in March—maybe *he’ll* have the money.

Then he observed that he’s guilty of this kind of thinking all the time, like when he stays out late on a weekday, not worrying about how his “morning self” will do on only five hours of sleep. “So you get up in the morning, with your alarm, and you’re exhausted and groggy...

Oh, I hate that “night guy!”

“Night guy” always shafts “morning guy.” There’s nothing “morning guy” can do. The only thing “morning guy” can do is try to oversleep often enough so that “day guy” loses his job and “night guy” has no money to go out anymore.



Jay Leno chimed in with a solution:

Well, if “morning guy” got up extra early, then “night guy” would be extra tired.

“Yes,” Seinfeld responded...“ *unless* “day guy” decides to take a nap.

We get into trouble when our “future selves” are strangers to our “present selves.” It’s hard to put our brains into the minds of others, but it’s also hard to put our present brains into our future selves. This is exactly what got Esau into such a pickle in our story. He mortgaged his

future long-term well-being for his short-term present hunger. Why save for retirement if you're a stranger to your future self? It's time for your present self to party!!!!

Just as it's hard for us to see far into the distance, so our future selves become blurry in the far distant future. But if we can befriend our future selves, becoming more emotionally connected to them, we'll do things **today** that are more beneficial for ourselves **tomorrow**. In other words, we won't sell our birthright for a bowl of beans.

Isaac looked in the mirror. He had become his father. He was sixty-years old now. His beard grew gray, his belly bigger. And yet he was different from dad. Like his father Abraham and mother Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah were having fertility issues. Their wedding day was two decades ago, yet no child. As the chosen son, Isaac had to continue not only the family tree, but the *national* tree. *No pressure*. But Isaac and Rebekah responded differently than their parents—they prayed. And God answered Isaac's prayers—and then some.

It wasn't an easy pregnancy for Rebekah. Not just morning sickness and bed rest, but her womb felt like a war zone.

"With all this roughhousing and wrestling inside me, I can't keep living this way."

Like Isaac, Rebekah prayed to God about it.

Reminds me of the great hymn:

*Have we trials and temptations?
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged,
Take it to the Lord in prayer.*

Well, God answered Rebekah:

***Two nations are in your womb,
Two peoples butting heads while still in your body,
One people will overpower the other,
And the older will serve the younger. (25:23)***

The older will serve the younger. *What is it with God's preference for younger siblings in the Bible? Have you ever noticed that?*

- Abel, the younger son of Adam and Eve, *his* sacrifice was accepted. The firstborn Cain? God had no regard for his offering.
- Isaac, Abraham's younger son was chosen over the older Ishmael.
- Jacob was preferred over Esau. Granted he was only a few minutes younger, but still younger than Esau.
- Jacob's youngest son Joseph got the amazing technicolor dream coat, not his older brothers.
- Moses who split the Red Sea and received the 10 Commandments...younger than his brother Aaron.
- King David was the youngest of eight brothers. The older ones were the seven spares.

- Then Jesus said, “the last will be first” and “to become the greatest you must become the least.”

The primacy of the least of these are emphasized throughout the Scriptures:

- orphans, widows, and foreigners.

Why do you think that is? It’s no accident. God is free to work however and with whomever he wants. God isn’t handcuffed by human rules of thumb. In fact, working through the child, the youngest, the stranger, the left out, and the looked over, God is showing his power and grace. We *know* it’s God, not us.

Sure enough, Isaac and Rebekah are doubly blessed. They get a “two-for.” Twins. Like his Father, the Patriarch Isaac has to choose the chosen child. But, like Abraham, God had already spelled out who it would be. It just took the guys a little longer to understand than their wives.

[Some things never change.]

The first to come out was this ruddy, red bundle of a baby who looked like he was born wearing a fur coat. So the couple named the firstborn “Hairy” (*that’s what “Esau” means*). “Prince Hairy” would be the forefather of the Edomites, whose land was famous for red-colored rocks.

The second-born was close behind—grasping the heel of his twin brother. So they named him “Jacob” which means “grasp the heel” or “he usurps.” Well, Jacob was not happy winning the silver medal. If the boys were born in China, they would have been named Yin and Yang.

These twins went together like: Day and Night...Black and White...Left and Right. When they grew up, Esau was an outdoorsman. For birthday presents, he always asked for “Bass Pro Shop” gift cards. He was a card-carrying NRA member, avid hunter, and ate like a horse.

Jacob, however, was an indoorsman, a homebody. He hung out in tents but wasn’t really a camper. He was a shepherd. For birthday presents, his two favorite gift cards were either “Barnes & Noble” or “Middle Eastern Wax Center.” Jacob was more of an introvert, bookish, pensive, and liked to cook.

To make things even more complicated, the parents played favorites. Isaac favored **Esau** because he was a “man’s man.” Esau had all the cool tools. A wood shop and a pimped-out Ford F-150 in his garage. And most importantly, he brought home the bacon...I mean venison.

Rebekah, however, favored **Jacob**. He was a mama’s boy. More sensitive. A better conversationalist. Or maybe, it was God’s oracle to her that said the younger will lead the elder. But only one child could be chosen. Not both.

Jacob was a planner. Always thinking about the future. Scheming how he could exchange his silver medal and become Isaac’s number one son. The top dog, not the underdog. A window of opportunity opened. Jacob noticed *Hairy* stumbling in the distance after a long day of hunting—with no trophy elk racks.

Esau: I'm starving, give me some of that red stuff you're cooking.

Jacob: Let's make a trade: my stew for your birthright. *Deal?*

Esau: Bruh, I'm starving to death here. What good is a birthright to me if I've died from hunger? Pass me the bowl.

Jacob: Swear to me.

Esau sighed, felt his stomach growl, then took an oath with his hand on a Hebrew Scroll.

Esau: "I Esau, give my brother Jacob, my birthright."

He signed the documents. Threw down his quill.

"Now give me my stew."

He then devoured the bread.

Wolfed down the red lentil stew.

Chugged his Budweiser. Belched. Broke wind. Left.

Then proceeded to take a two-hour power nap.

The thing Jacob incessantly thought about, Esau didn't even think twice about. Esau despised his birthright. He didn't know himself. Didn't know what he had. Wasn't thinking about the future. All Esau cared about was his belly and the next meal. His present self had no thought for his future self.

Jacob was no angel, but he was certainly willing to take the mantle from Isaac. And of course, he did. Jacob not only tricked his brother Esau out of his birthright. He would dupe his father Isaac, by pulling the goatskin over his father's blind eyes to steal Esau's blessing...*with some serious help from his assertive mother Rebekah.* The matriarchs knew their sons much better than the patriarchs.

We don't have time to unpack this famous story, but I will give it to you for homework: read **Genesis 27** this week. Esau went ballistic when he realized he was hoodwinked yet again by his younger brother. "*I'm gonna kill that son of patriarch.*" Esau harbored a grudge against his brother. Jacob was forced to run for his life.

In **Genesis 32** (*extra credit homework*), we read about the twin brothers having a sort of reconciliation years later. Esau forgave Jacob because he was quick to forget. When they reunited, Esau ran to Jacob, gave him a big bear hug, and they wept together. The blessing Jacob stole, he offered back to Esau, "please accept my blessing."

(It was by the way: 220 goats, 220 sheep, 40 cows, 30 camels, 30 donkeys, and 10 bulls—Jacob was definitely blessed).

But the sibling rivalry of the two brothers continued on after their deaths. The Israelites relationship to the Edomites was rocky. Yet in the midst of the rivalry, rifts, and rejections of these two nations, God still had a special place for both, even though only Jacob was chosen.

There are some tough words to Esau and the Edomites in Scripture. But we can't forget these words in **Deuteronomy 23:7**:

"Do not abhor an Edomite, since he is your brother."

And maybe, as we think about our family of origins this morning and our relationships with other nations, and as we reminisce about our regrets, rifts, and rejections, we can also reflect on the Great Commandment:

Love the Lord God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

And love your neighbor.... and might I add, your brother...your sister...your parent...your fellow human being as yourself.

On this all the Law and Prophets hang.

Amen.

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