

Jacob, Esau and the stolen inheritance: Genesis 25:19-34, Genesis 27

Leader's reflection

This story begins with a summary of Isaac's family history, and the recurring theme of infertility from earlier stories, in that Rebekah cannot have children. Isaac prays to God and she becomes pregnant with twins. In her pregnancy there is a foreshadowing of the conflict between the brothers, the babies struggle in her womb.

When they are born the first is the stronger, with the second emerging holding onto his heel. The names are intriguing: the first born is called Esau, which probably means hairy; and the second is called Jacob, which sounds like the Hebrew word for heel. There is significance in the heel holding and the naming. "Holding on to someone's heel", is a Hebrew saying for tricking someone, and is an indicator of what will happen later in the story.

There is also an interesting connection between Esau and Jacob, and Cain and Abel. One is strong and hunts, while the other is weak and farms. While this story doesn't result in murder because of jealousy, it is only narrowly avoided. In chapter 25, the seeds are sown for the events that will shape these men's lives. Esau returns hungry and weak from hunting and asks for food and Jacob offers food in return for Esau's rights as firstborn. Esau hands over his rights as firstborn, showing contempt for what had been given to him. Because of this, in Hebrews 12, Esau was held up as an example of an ungodly man who put the needs of the flesh above the needs of the spirit.

In chapter 27 an old and blind Isaac seems to sense the end of his time is near. He calls out to Esau to bring him his favourite food, and once he has done this Isaac will give Esau his blessing. Rebekah hears this and plans to send Jacob in to take the blessing in Esau's place. However, before we go down the scheming woman trope too far, Jacob is depicted as an equal partner in the deception. He seems to be the practical thinker in the scheme, and points out how physically different they are. So it is that, wearing a goat skin and carrying a bowl of food, Jacob comes before his

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father to deceive him into giving him Esau's blessing. However, Isaac is no fool. He wonders how Esau has appeared so quickly and, showing how little respect Jacob seems to have for anything, he claims that God helped him to find the animal so quickly.

Probably believing that no one would use God's name in this way, Isaac blesses Jacob, and the blessing is one of abundance and grace. As Jacob leaves, Esau returns with the animal, prepares the food, and goes to see his father. Isaac is confused by this, and asks who he is. When he realises what has happened he trembles, but with what emotion we are not told. Our imaginations have to do the rest but the betrayal done to him reaches out of the page. Isaac and Esau both seem distraught by what has happened. Esau because he has now lost his birthright and blessing to his little brother, Isaac because of the absolute betrayal by those he loves.

Esau cries out for a blessing, but all Isaac seems to have is a curse, or a prediction. He speaks of a life of hardship, toil and pain for Esau, again echoing the story of Cain and Abel.

Rebekah, who knows full well what Esau is capable of, helps Jacob to flee from the anger of Esau to her brother far away to be kept safe.

Aim

Considering how when we only think about ourselves we can hurt the people around us.

Main points to cover

1. Jacob was always jealous of what his brother had.
2. Esau did not care enough about what he had been given.
3. Jacob allowed the leading of his mother and his own greed to shape his actions.

Note: This story should be approached as the first half of the story, with the second half taking place the following session.

Focus On

Jacob's selfishness and Esau's lack of care about what he had been given.



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Activity ideas

Divide the young people into two groups and get one group to look at the story from the perspective of Jacob, and the other from the perspective of Esau. What does the story seem like from each perspective? Get them to present their ideas to the other group. Jacob's wrong stands out fairly clearly, but Esau's lack of care over what he has been given needs to be drawn out a bit more.

What is the point? Mind map some ideas from the group as to why this is an important story and what the point is. Explore with the young people how this story might have looked different if Jacob and Esau had both been less selfish. Using the idea of selfishness, ask the young people what issues they see in the world around them that have been caused by selfishness. Try not to let them give one word answers, but to explain why they think what they do. At the end of this activity, get them to look at Matthew 7:12. Many of them may have come across this before as the Golden Rule. Have them read it and imagine this story if Jacob and Esau had done this. Explain that this is one of the central ideas in Christianity, and would have far reaching consequences if we tried to follow it faithfully.

Where am I selfish? It can be easy to point to other people and say where they are getting it wrong. It can be difficult to do the same for ourselves. Find a piece of reflective Christian music, preferably something like the Taize 'Oh Lord Hear My Prayer'. Get each young person to find a space and just sit and ask God to show them where they are being selfish and need to change. At the end ask if any of the young people would like to share what they are feeling, but make it clear they don't have to. Pray over whatever is shared.

Jacob, Esau and the reunion: Genesis 32, 33

Leader's reflection

Years have passed since the brothers parted ways under very difficult circumstances, and we now get to a point where Jacob can no longer avoid passing through his brother's land. Jacob has changed, he has a large family, many possessions, and has been shaped by his life experiences. Indeed, he has been on the receiving end of another man's scheming, and is clearly not the same man who fled from his brother's anger. However, the memory of what he did to Esau, and the memory of his brother's temper is clearly at the forefront of his mind. He sends messages to Esau in an attempt to avoid conflict and allow the peaceful passage of his family through his land.

The message comes back that Esau is on his way with 400 men. "In great fear and distress," Jacob begins to try to manage the potential destruction he can see happening when his brother arrives. He splits his family, servants and animals he has into two groups, so that if Esau attacks then at least some will escape.

In his desperation, Jacob prays. He throws himself on the mercy of God. In his prayer (v9-12), you can hear the conflict within himself between doing what God has told him and what he wants to do. He is afraid of Esau, but God has said that he should return and that he will find favour, with his descendants becoming so numerous they are like the sand of the sea.

He continues to prepare to calm his brother with gifts. Two hundred female goats, twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, thirty female camels with their young, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten male. The number of animals he possessed which he is willing to hand over to his brother in the hope that it will stop his rage is staggering.

Then we come to a strange moment. Jacob wrestles with God. They wrestle all night and Jacob will not release God. Jacob walks away from this limping, as he has had his

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hip wrenched. He also walks away with a new name, Israel, because “you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.” As with Abraham, the

name change is significant. It shows us that the Jacob returning to Esau is not the same man who fled from him. The man returning has seen the world, has seen life and has seen God, and has been changed because of it.

Then suddenly at the start of chapter 33, Esau is there. Jacob is still scared, he divides his children into two groups, and then goes out ahead of everyone else to meet Esau. This is not the boy who ran in fear for his own life, but a man who is willing to risk himself to save those who he feels responsible for. He seems to be expecting the worst and bows before his brother seven times to show his respect.

But Esau doesn't want his respect. He runs to meet him and embraces him. Esau seems lost in the fact that his brother has returned. He seems surprised by the flocks and herds that Jacob sent out to buy his favour, and chooses to return them to Jacob knowing he has plenty.

In this story the brothers are different. No longer is Esau the man who was so fixated on his hunger that he gave up what he had been born to. No longer is Jacob scheming and jealous. They have both walked with God through their lives and have been changed and mellowed by their experiences. They both seem to understand the importance of each other and of forgiveness, rather than holding to the debts of the past.

Here we see grace and forgiveness in action. Bloodshed, pain, loss, and destruction is avoided, and peace and joy are brought into the world. Love transcends the hurts of the past, and makes a new and better world wherever it goes. Jacob and Esau understood this, and we can see the benefit to the world around them for that.



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Aim

Forgiveness and love change the world.

Main points to cover

1. Jacob is scared of seeing his brother and returning even though God has told him to.
2. Jacob's name is changed to show the change in him.
3. Esau forgives and loves his brother completely, despite the bad blood between them.

Focus On

Jacob's fears for what might happen and the difference between that and what does happen.

Activity ideas

Have the young people remind you of the story from last week. Write down as a group what has happened, adding in anything they might have missed. It is important in this session that the young people remember and understand the context of conflict that took place between the brothers.

Have some ideas of how to resolve conflict in your mind. These don't need to be constructive, in fact it's better to have a mix of things that are helpful and things that are not. These could be things like duel, argument, reparations, etc. Split the young people into groups and get them to choose a way to resolve the conflict between Jacob and Esau and to act out how that would go. Bring them back together to look at what happened and the positive way that the brothers were brought back together.

Explore how forgiveness can be a difficult thing for both people. It can be hard for the person asking for forgiveness to swallow their pride and it can be difficult for the person forgiving to let go. Ask them to write a letter to God thinking about how we are forgiven completely because of Jesus and how we need to forgive other people (if writing is an issue then they could draw their thoughts). Encourage them to think, as they write, of how their lives would look different if they held loosely onto anger and tightly onto love. Before they do this activity, it may be worth making it explicit that you are not just talking about the big things, but the everyday things. Forgiving the people who gossip and spread

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rumours about us is important. Forgiving the person who seems to go out of their way to make us uncomfortable is important. In these smaller acts of forgiveness, we learn what forgiveness looks like, and prepare ourselves for the bigger things that may come later in life.

