

Jacob & Esau: Sibling Rivalry

SCOTT HOEZEE

In history, and before psychologists like Sigmund Freud showed up, maybe no one ever used the phrase “sibling rivalry” to describe what can sometimes go on between brothers and sisters in families; but whether that exact phrase was used, the fact is that history is filled with those kinds of conflicts that are unique to siblings. The Bible’s most famous example was what happened between the twin brothers known as Jacob and Esau; but as we will see today on Groundwork, it looks like in some ways it was God Himself who stirred the pot of this particular sibling rivalry. Why might that be? Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and Dave, we are on program three now of a six- part look at some of the great stories and characters in the book of Genesis; and we are now going to, today, as we move toward Genesis 25, we are in the third generation after Abraham, and we are going to look at some stories about Jacob and Esau, who were the grandchildren of Abraham and Sarah; the children of Isaac and his wife Rebekah, and we can hear the familiar story from Genesis 25.

DAVE BAST

Right; and it goes like this: ²¹Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife because she was childless – sort of an echo there of Abraham and Sarah; and again, interestingly, that is a theme that runs throughout the line of promise – of the covenant. There are all of these people who are supposed to have children who are going to save the world and they are barren – they are infertile.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They need God’s help.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and Rebekah became pregnant. The Lord answered Isaac’s prayer, we read, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant, and it turns out she was pregnant with twins, and the babies started struggling within her so she enquires of the Lord.

²³The Lord said to her, “Two nations are in your womb and two peoples from within you will be separated. One people will be stronger than the other and the older will serve the younger.” ²⁴When the time came for her to give birth there were twin boys in her womb. ²⁵The first to come out was red and his whole body was like a hairy garment, so they named him Esau. ²⁶After this, his brother came out with his hand grasping Esau’s heel, so he was named Jacob.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, there it is; an interesting story; and one of the things that we need to know, background wise, here, Dave, to really make sense of this story, and by the way, some subsequent stories that will come up later in Genesis and elsewhere in scripture is that it was an absolute, ironclad custom in the cultures of the ancient Near East – a custom called primogeniture, which means the firstborn basically gets all the goodies. The firstborn child,

especially the firstborn son, was always the favored one; always got more attention; always got more of the inheritance; the best of everything if you were firstborn, and yet, here God is going to do what He did with Cain and Abel – Abel being the younger child, but more favored than Cain – God tells Rebekah when these kids are having a wrestling match in her, she is saying: What is happening? And God says: Well, there are two in there, but the younger of your children is going to be the key one.

DAVE BAST

Yes; it is so interesting to see how God operates. He is always doing something that is sort of countercultural – or even unnatural to us. Maybe that is not too strong a term. We have our patterns and our expectations, and God just turns them upside down; so, this whole idea that all these people with the promise are childless for periods of time; and the other idea that the younger one is the one chosen by God for the promise to continue through his line; and as you pointed, Abel, not Cain – it happens over and over: Jacob not Esau. Ephraim not Manasseh – the sons of Joseph. For that matter, Judah not Reuben, the firstborn – Jacob's children. David, not any of his seven older brothers. Over and over and over, God flies in the face of convention.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He chooses the unlikely; and we said last time how odd it was that God promised to build a nation, but He started by making Abraham leave the only home in the nation in which he had already been established. God is going to build a people and He chooses a senior citizen couple who were very unlikely to have a baby; but we said last time, that is all because God is reminding us of grace. And so also here; in God's kingdom – in God's sight it is not about deserving; it is not about who the world thinks is the most important or the most beautiful or the most handsome or the favored one. God upends all of those traditions as a way of saying: Hey look, folks; this is all about grace.

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so I am going to choose the younger one. The covenant promises made to Grandpa Abraham are going to be fulfilled, not through the older one, Esau, but through the one who came out second, Jacob.

DAVE BAST

Right; so we start with Isaac and Rebekah, and they have been married for quite a period of time...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Quite a long time, yes.

DAVE BAST

And again, we are condensing and sort of selective reading of Genesis because we do not have enough programs to do the whole thing, but Abraham had sent his servant back to Haran where some of his relatives had stopped along the way. They left Ur together, and when they got to Haran, which was in the north, some of them said this is far enough; but no, Abraham is the man of faith. He is going to press on and go all the way to Canaan to the Promised Land, but he did not want to marry off his precious Isaac, the child of promise, to one of the Canaanites, so he sends back and the servant is led to Rebekah – beautiful Rebekah – who is a kind of cousin to Isaac, and she agrees and comes and they are married and eventually God hears Isaac's prayer and answers it in a double way. You begin to wonder how Rebekah felt about wanting to have children so badly when she has this very difficult pregnancy.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Esau and Jacob – literally Hairy and Heel Grasper, right; because Esau was a very hairy baby. I do not know how that worked, but he looked hairy when he came out; and so they named him Hairy. Then amazingly, just so the conflict that happened in Rebekah's belly keeps going, as Hairy – as Esau gets delivered, they say: Look, the next little guy is grabbing onto him like he is trying to pull him back into the womb, so we are

going to name him: Yaakov – Jacob, which means Heel Grasper; the one who holds onto a heel; and so they come out fighting, and then, if we read just a little bit farther in Genesis 25, we find out they keep on fighting, and we are told that Esau becomes a hunter – a man of the open country – Jacob was more of a home boy, but he was a clever one, and so one day we read:

²⁹Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country famished. ³⁰And he said to Jacob, “Quick, let me have some of that red stew; I am famished.” ³¹And Jacob replied, “First sell me your birthright.” ³²“Look, I am about to die,” Esau said. “What good is a birthright to me?” ³³But Jacob said, “Swear to me first.” So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob, ³⁴and Jacob gave Esau some bread and some of the lentil stew. He ate and drank, got up and left, and Esau despised his birthright. So Esau apparently is a little bit of an easy mark in this sibling rivalry going here, and Jacob manages to get him to give up his birthright – not the full inheritance, but some special privilege Esau had for soup!

DAVE BAST

Well, yes, let's be clear here. I think in this story the birthright is really the covenant promise. We have these two characters, and one of them is kind of a bluff, hardy, “Hey, yeah, I’m a jock. I’m a hunter. I’m a guy of the field. I’m a practical man; I’m hungry – give me some...” And then on the other hand, this sly, grasping heel – Jacob – and he wants the promise, but he gets it in this really rather petty way. I mean, which one are we to choose here? Neither one of them.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, who is the hero?

DAVE BAST

Yes, but maybe that is the point. It is all of grace. Really, we do not deserve what He does for us – what He gives to us. There is a great line I ran across years ago from Mark Twain; Mark Twain said: Salvation must be of grace, not of merit, because if it was of merit, your dog would go to heaven and you would not.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, right. That’s the way it goes. But unfortunately, this story about the lentil stew is not the last little incident of Jacob looking less than savory; so, we will take a look at an even more startling story next.

BREAK:

DAVE BAST

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And Scott, today we are digging into the story of Jacob and Esau, and their parents, Isaac and Rebekah; and we just saw the incident – the first incident – where Esau sells his birthright to Jacob for, in the old version, a mess of pottage – a bowl of lentil stew, and it was red in color, and he picked up a second nickname after that. Everybody started calling him “Red,” after that – *Edom*.

SCOTT HOEZEE

What a way to dig it in, right? So he sold his birthright for red stew, so after that every time Jacob saw him he said: How ya doin’, Red? Just to remind him of how dumb he had been by doing that, and it must have infuriated Esau every time. So Esau probably said: I am not going to get fooled again. That squirrely brother of mine, he is not going to fool me again. So, the next time that there was something in the offering – and this time it was the big family blessing – this time they did not go directly through Esau, they did a different deception, and we read about that in Genesis 27. It is a long story and we really cannot read all of it, but basically the story is, Isaac is old and so he says to Esau, “Go out to the open country; hunt some game; cook

me some food, and when you bring it to me I am going to give the all-important blessing.” Rebekah overhears this – Jacob and Esau’s mother – she does not want Esau to get the blessing, and so she arranges this incredible deception. So, in verse 11 we read:

Jacob said to Rebekah, his mother... She said you are going to go in and get this blessing instead of your brother, and Jacob said, “But my brother Esau is a hairy man while I am smooth skinned. ¹²What if my father touches me? I would appear to be tricking him, and it would bring down a curse on myself rather than a blessing. Well, they are going to trick him; ¹³so his mother says: Let the curse fall on me, just do what I tell you. ¹⁴So, he went and got them and brought all these things to his mother. She prepared tasty food the way his father liked. ¹⁵Then Rebekah took the best clothes of Esau, her older son and put them on her younger son. ¹⁶She covered his hands and the smooth part of his neck with goat skins, and then she handed to her son Jacob the tasty food and bread that she had made. So Jacob brings that in; his father says: That was fast. How did you bring it... Oh, well, God led me right to an animal, shot him dead and I cooked him for you. And then Isaac touches him and says: Yes, you are hairy like Esau; you must be Esau, and so he blesses him. Rebekah and her son swindle Isaac. What a terrible story!

DAVE BAST

Right; and then Esau comes in a day late and a dollar short, and he has missed out on it.

Okay, so let’s just summarize here. We have four people in this story, right? There is Isaac: he is blind; he is kind of in his dotage; he has this covenant blessing to pass on as the patriarch, but all he wants is a good meal first. Paul says later on in writing to the Philippians: Their god is the belly. Well, this great man of faith, all he is thinking about is a fancy dinner. If he were not living 4,000 years ago, and if he were not blind, he would be watching the Food Channel all day. We have Rebekah, his loving wife, who has now not only lost love, but even respect for her husband. They each have their favorite boy. The favorites are jostling one another. Rebekah says: Oh, do not worry about any curses of God. I will take it on me. You just do what I tell you. She is sort of a Lady Macbeth here. Esau cares for nothing except hunting, but he does want the blessing; even though he has forfeited the right to it, and he has despised it, as it says earlier; and then Jacob – what a lovely guy he is, lying to his father, bringing faith into it – Oh, God blessed me, that is why I managed...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Oh, yeah; what a thing! If you are going to tell a lie...

DAVE BAST

And these are the people of God. These are the people of God!

SCOTT HOEZEE

And he uses God in his lie. To my mind, if you are going to tell a lie, that is bad enough, but do not bring God in. So Isaac says: How did you get that so fast? And he says: God blessed me and He led me right... Wow, now he has brought God into the deception; that is not such a good idea if you ask me. And so, it is hard to know what Rebekah was thinking here. Was she remembering that the promise when God had said: Look, the younger is going to be the key one. We are not told that. Was she seeing herself as being a servant of God by making sure Jacob got the blessing, because she remembered; God told her the younger is going to be more important than the older – the older will serve the younger. None of that is told. It just looks like a really devious plot, and Jacob goes along with it. He is pretty good. He has tricked Esau once, why not twice? But of course, this time Esau ends up being furious, and it fractures the family permanently almost.

DAVE BAST

Yes, the next time somebody criticizes the Church for being full of hypocrites or sinners, just point them to this chapter – to this story. It has always been that way. The family of God is a messy – it is a dysfunctional family; let’s put it that way.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; well, most families in the Bible were; what an amazing thing though, because really, Jacob does not come off very well here, and he is not going to come off well in the coming chapters either. Eventually he will go live with his Uncle Laban, and those two will just swindle and scam each other for decades.

DAVE BAST

Right; it gets worse. The only person who really is somewhat appealing in this whole story is Esau, and he is an unbeliever; and in fact, his character gets better and better the further we go into Genesis. It is just a mystery; but here is what really jumps out at me as I look at all of this. It is kind of the sovereign choice of God. God chooses, and it does not depend on how good we are; it does not depend on whether or not we deserve it. He just makes these decisions and carries them out willy-nilly. We may try to advance His plan; we may try to thwart His plan; Isaac is determined. He is going to give the blessing to Esau, and God says no, it is not going to happen. It will not happen; I have determined it. It is going to go to Jacob.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Even though he... As my friend Neil Plantinga likes to say: God is really good at hitting straight shots with crooked sticks. And Jacob is a crooked stick. Jacob is kind of a crook, and he is going to keep showing that. In fact, in the next segment we are going to see that even after a really amazing thing that happened to Jacob, he still ends up coming off kind of crafty; but the most amazing thing is that somehow God's plan of salvation moves forward through imperfect people. For any of us – any of us listening to this program – any of us who go to church every week – for any of us who sense that we are a little imperfect ourselves, to put it mildly – that is maybe some good news.

In an Advent program we did last year, Dave, we looked at the opening genealogy – the family tree of Jesus in Matthew 1 – and we noted how Matthew purposely put some of the shady characters and made references to some of the most terrible events in Israel's history, saying: Jesus came from this. Jesus came from these people. They were not perfect – they sinned – they failed – they had some scandals attached to them, and yet, God is not thwarted. He moves forward.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it is really hard for us, I think, to find the right balance and to take heart from the fact that we do not earn His favor, and we will never be good enough to earn it by reward. See, we compare Jacob to Esau and say, "Oh, I kind of like Esau better," even though he was not the believer; Jacob was the child of promise and he was the one who followed the promises; but that is always wrong. Do not compare bad Christians with more noble non-Christians. What we have to do is compare Jacob here with Jacob as he would become by the end of the story, because that is what God is doing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

God is not finished with him yet.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly; and there is a wonderful line in, I think it is one of the Narnia stories, where Aslan says: I only tell each person their story. I do not tell you his story or her story; I only tell you your story. And that is what we need to do. Stop comparing and just live out the story that God is working in us and accept His grace and then move forward.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And God is not finished Jacob yet, and so the next incident shows part of God's faithfulness to this rather devious guy. We will look at that next.

BREAK:

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to Groundwork, and let's jump right back into our Jacob and Esau story, and Dave, maybe you can bring us to Genesis 28. That is the next big thing that happens.

DAVE BAST

Exactly; we are going to move ahead to Genesis 28; in the interest of time I think I will summarize this, but again, it is a famous story; familiar from Sunday school, right. So Jacob has to leave. He gets out in a hurry because, again, Rebekah, who has been engineering this whole deception hears about Esau's reaction and Esau says: All right; that is enough. I have had it. I am going to kill him. I am going to kill him. And so she packs him off and says: You had better go back and go to my brother Laban's house, back in Mesopotamia – in Haran. And off he goes with just the clothes on his back and a staff in his hand. As he leaves and he is making his way through central Canaan, he stops at a place and lies down for the night, just out in the open.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Stone for a pillow.

DAVE BAST

And he has a dream; and in the dream he sees a stairway going up to heaven. We can just picture the scene. I am told – I have a friend who has lived and worked in Palestine for a number of years and he says that in this area there are these deep ravines, and if you are in the bottom of one of them, it is sort of terraced as it goes up, and you can just imagine Jacob lying down and he sees, as the sun goes down, these steps climbing up out of the ravine, and then the sky grows dark and a million stars come out and it looks like it is going straight up to heaven; and that carries through into the dream that he has.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so he has this dream, and God reveals and shows angels on that ladder – that staircase – and at the top some shining figure that Jacob senses may be God Himself.

So, if you are Jacob, and you just lied, cheated and swindled your dad, your brother – you are not a good person – you are on the lam because your brother wants to kill you and you can hardly blame Esau for wanting to kill him – if you were Jacob and God came to you in a dream, I think I would worry that God would say: You bad person! You liar, you cheat! How dare you! And he is going to get a rebuke, but Jacob gets something rather different.

DAVE BAST

Yes, this is what he actually hears: ¹³“I am the Lord, the God of your father, Abraham, and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. ¹⁴Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. ¹⁵I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised.” Wow! There it is.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is a good dream.

DAVE BAST

It is the promise to Abraham repeated now to Jacob.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Third generation, and despite what he just did – despite who he is, which is kind of a crafty little devil, Jacob was – God is going to fulfill the covenant through him. And so Jacob wakes up and... You know, the ancient people would – sometimes we read the Bible thinking that everybody in the Bible thinks the way we do and

we have a sense that God is everywhere and you can pray to God wherever you are. The Holy Spirit goes with us. But these people did not necessarily have a sense that God was everywhere. They believed that there were certain places on earth that they called thin places where the veil between this world and the next was so thin you could see through it. So, Jacob wakes up saying: God was here, and I did not even know He was here.

DAVE BAST

Yes, here is the other interesting thing. They also believe, many of them... You know, they are learning as they go. God did not give them the full truth right away. They thought the god of anyplace was localized. Abraham starts out in Ur; well, that is where the moon god was worshiped, and so he leaves there. Well, he left the moon god behind. So, Jacob is maybe thinking: The true God is back there where Isaac, my father, has his camp. Now I have gone quite a ways away. Wow – He is here too?! I did not realize that God was in this place.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And he names it Bethel – *Beit El* in Hebrew. The House of God. I was sleeping in God's house. So, we know this story. It is a Sunday school story. It is a great story. It makes for a great flannel graph and artwork for kids to look at with these angels descending and ascending on this ladder – great story; but then we usually stop there and we do not realize that the bottom line of this story once again shows how far Jacob has to go because God promises him all of that great stuff you just read, Dave, and Jacob wakes up and says: Wow, this is God's house. I did not know it. And then, after the dream and he is fully awake – true to form, Jacob says to God: All right; *if* you do what you just said; *if* you bring me back to my father's house someday, then you may be my God. What a guy! He is still bargaining. He is parlaying with almighty God, saying: You want me to worship You? Come through.

DAVE BAST

Yes, he has a ways to go.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Quite a ways.

DAVE BAST

But as we said just a few moments ago, he is getting there, and he will get there. I just think of a personal application of this whole story and the story of Jacob. You know, maybe you feel like you have done something that disqualifies you from being worthy of God or from receiving the promises of God...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Can God work through me?

DAVE BAST

He could not possibly mean me. Not me; if He knew what I was really like. I think He does know what we are really like. I like the phrase you used a few moments ago, Scott. God could hit a straight shot with a crooked stick; and that is what we all are.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is the truth of God's grace that we have been seeing so far in Genesis. Salvation by grace alone would be proclaimed fully in the New Testament, but notes of grace are sounding already in these earliest stories.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation today. I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. Visit groundworkonline.com to tell us what topics or passages you would like to dig into next on Groundwork.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/jacob-esau-sibling-rivalry>

Printed on September 5, 2025

©  **ReFrame** Ministries