

The Story of Jacob and Esau

Genesis 32: 22-32

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The story of Jacob and Esau is perhaps the most interesting story in the entire Old Testament. In fact, if anyone ever tells you the Bible is boring, urge them to read chapters 25 through 32 of Genesis.

To understand today's story of Jacob wrestling with the mysterious man until daybreak on the bank of the river, I need to remind you of what comes before, what happens leading up to this nocturnal wrestling match.

Isaac, son of Abraham, marries Rebekah. Rebekah gives birth to twins. The first boy comes out red and hairy and is named Esau – or *Eh Saw* in Hebrew – which means yes red and hairy.

The next boy grabs the heel of Eh Saw and is named Jacob, or *Ya Kov* in Hebrew. Which means he takes by the heel, or he supplants – he supersedes, or replaces. Before the birth the Lord told Rebekah, “Two nations are in your womb, and the peoples born of you shall be divided. The one shall be stronger than the other and the elder shall serve the younger.” We see trouble ahead.

Quickly we see the perfect storm for a dysfunctional family. Isaac prefers Esau because Esau is a hunter and brings him wild game to eat, which he is so fond of.

Rebekah prefers Jacob because he likes to stay around the tents with her and help her cook.

Esau is the oldest and the oldest has special privileges, receives a greater inheritance. It's not fair, but it's the way of the world.

Jacob is conniving, an opportunist. A poor role model, a cheat, a scoundrel, and yet God uses him and blesses him and does not forsake him. One day Esau comes in from the hunt starving. Jacob has a big pot of lentil soup ready. Esau pleads with Jacob for a bowl of soup. Fee me, I pray thee, that same red pottage. “Only if you give me your birthright, your privileges as the oldest son.”

Esau is so desperately hungry he foolishly relinquishes his oldest son benefits.

Time goes on. Father Isaac is dying. Father Isaac is ready to give Esau his blessing, transferring by a blessing or prayer his status, his power, his wealth to his oldest son.

Isaac asks Esau to go hunt up some wild game for him – perhaps a deer or some rabbits or Quail – barbecue it like he likes it and then Isaac will give Esau his blessing. But Rebekah overhears and persuades Jacob to impersonate Esau. She puts goat skin on his hands and neck and dresses Jacob in Esau's clothes, and she prepares savory meat and leads Jacob into the tent.

Isaac is suspicious. "Come near that I may feel you my son, to know really whether you are my son Esau or not." So, Jacob went up to his father Isaac, who felt him and said, "The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau."

Finally smelling the clothes of Esau Jacob is wearing, he blesses Jacob.

Esau returns from the hunt and finds out what has happened. But it is too late. In one of the saddest most heartbreaking scenes of the Bible, Esau moans, "Have you not reserved a blessing for me? Have you only one blessing father? Bless me, me also, father!" And Esau lifted up his voice and wept. But there was no other blessing. Esau promises to kill his brother. Rebekah arranges for Jacob to escape and go live with her brother Laban's people.

Sadly, I have to skip some good parts I must fast forward. But don't forget. Don't deprive yourself of this marvelous story. Chapters 25-33.

Time has passed. Jacob has prospered. He has two wives Leah and Rachel. He has many cattle, sheep, and goats and servants. He remains a con man, a cheater. A rascal.

And now the story starts sounding like a classic western. Jacob is moving with his possessions across the wilderness. Word comes to him that Esau is approaching. And not alone. With a Calvary. A posse. Or is it a tribe of Indians?

No, this is the Old Testament. Not the *Fistfull of Dollars, Good, The Bad, and the Ugly, High Plains Drifter*. It is not Clint Eastwood. It is Esau, the red hairy, strong maybe angry and vindictive out for revenge brother. And guess what? He has 400 men with him.

Jacob is terrified. He divides his group into sub-groups. He sends them across the river. And there alone on the riverbank he wrestles with a man until daybreak. They wrestle and

wrestle, but it is a standstill. The man cannot prevail. So, he punches Jacob's hip socket and Jacob's hip was put out of joint.

The man is tired. He's had enough. "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob, greedy, sneaky Jacob says, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

Blessings were obviously so very important in those days. Jacob, you've got to be kidding? Another blessing? You already swindled your eldest son privileges and your father's final blessing from Esau. And you have two wives and many servants and thousands of animals. And you think you need another blessing? And the man blesses him. "You shall no longer be called Jacob, *Ya Kov*, the supplanter, the stealer of other men's treasures. You shall now be called Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed." Israel – the one who strives with God.

Jacob wants to know the man's name, but the man wouldn't tell it. Jacob calls the place Penuel Pen ULL – the Face of God. "For I have seen God face to face and yet my life is preserved."

Jacob left limping because of his hip. And verse 32 says, "To this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle."

As you can imagine, there is much speculation as to who Jacob's wrestling partner was. The Bible says a man. But then the man tells Jacob he has wrestled with God and man. But maybe he means in Jacob's life in general he has been wrestling with God and humans. And certainly that is true. Some say it was an angel. But Jacob calls the place – Pen ULL – The face of God.

One of the ways preachers try to make a sermon out of this story – One way anyway is to focus on the limp of Jacob. Jacob wrestles with God but is wounded. But he is also blessed. His name is changed from Jacob to Israel. To be human is to be both strangely wounded and blessed.

Fred Rogers of Mr. Roger's Neighborhood is a great example. As a child he was chubby and called, Fat Freddy. That wound compelled him to create that marvelous TV show for over 30 years helping children deal with their feelings in positive ways. And if you have seen the recent film with Tom Hanks, *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*, you have enjoyed seeing how wounded broken Lloyd Vogel, estranged from his father Jerry, finds healing with the help of Mr. Rogers.

What often makes us special is how we recover from our universally human wounds; our limps, our brokenness. How we heal up. What we learn. I love that message and I believe it, but I don't think it fits with Jacob, *Ya Kov*, the supplanter. It may actually fit better with Esau. So let me finish the story.

Oddly, there is no other mention in the Bible about Jacob's limp. Maybe the next day his hip snapped back into place. We may have thought of it as a lifetime wound, but maybe it wasn't. And there is no evidence that this wrestling match humbled him or changed him for the better in any way.

My favorite part of this 9-chapter story is the ending, chapter 33.

Jacob is terrified, certain his death is near, but Esau runs to his brother and fell on his neck and kissed him.

Esau behaves just like the father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. He has forgiven his brother Jacob. He is just so glad to see him. He still loves him. But Jacob remains cautious. He insists that Esau accept his gifts of servants and animals. Esau doesn't want them. It's not why he came. He has more than plants. He came to see his brother, not to receive. Esau says so happily, "Let us journey on our way, and I will work alongside you."

But Jacob finds a way to get rid of him. "No, we are too tired to keep up your pace. You go ahead and we will meet up the road."

But Jacob turns in another direction and gets away from Esau as soon as possible. Perhaps never to see him again.

As you can see, I am taking sides. I really don't like Jacob. But Esau, he's a man I'd like to spend some time with. He's a man who took a lickin' and kept on tickin'. Tough. Resilient. As well as gracious. Forgiving.

Esau has every right to be hurt, wounded, vindictive, vengeful.

But he shows up cheerful, ready to love his brother and overcome the past, conquering his woundedness.

And Jacob gets rid of him. As if he is thinking, "Well I got lucky this time. Now let's high tail it out of here before he changes his mood."

One imagines Jacob is afraid Esau will eventually bring up Jacob's sins. Or say something like, "Brother, you hurt me very deeply, but over time I have found a way to forgive you. I have healed from these wounds. And all that matters now is that we are together. You are my brother. I love you and want to spend time with you."

I can only imagine how hurt Esau must have been when he realized Jacob was really not glad to see him, not comfortable being around him, only wanted to pay him off and skedaddle. Did not love him as he loved Jacob.

Was this yet another wound for Esau to heal from? This cold-hearted rejection. Or was Esau able to say, "Oh well, I tried. He's still a Jerk! Good riddance." And you know what? Esau did try. Really hard. We can only imagine what reflection and internal spiritual strength it must have taken for Esau to love his brother again.

Perhaps in the end this story, this great Bible story, is a story about missed opportunities. Jacob's grand missed opportunity to confess his sin, to repent, to change his life, to have a grand opportunity, an improbable opportunity to have a relationship with Esau who came to make peace.

We, too, are often given these opportunities, but we lack the courage to admit we were wrong, the courage to look, someone in the eye and say, "I did you wrong. What I did was mean and selfish and cowardly. And I know I hurt you very badly and I am very sorry."

This is the kind of true honest confession the father Jerry gives to his son Lloyd in the Mr. Roger's movie.

But it's hard to be honest and direct like that. It's painful and humiliating. But it's so important. It's one of the finest grandest things we can do as human beings. It takes great strength and courage and character.

May we learn to forgive like Esau and learn to confess and repent as Jacob did not.

Amen.