

Jacob

Gen 27:18-23 CEB ¹⁸ Jacob went to his father and said, "My father." And he said, "I'm here. Who are you, my son?" ¹⁹ Jacob said to his father, "I'm Esau your oldest son. I've made what you asked me to. Sit up and eat some of the game so you can bless me." ²⁰ Isaac said to his son, "How could you find this so quickly, my son?" He said, "The LORD your God led me right to it." ²¹ Isaac said to Jacob, "Come here and let me touch you, my son. Are you my son Esau or not?" ²² So Jacob approached his father Isaac, and Isaac touched him and said, "The voice is Jacob's voice, but the arms are Esau's arms." ²³ Isaac didn't recognize him because his arms were hairy like Esau's arms, so he blessed him.

Gen 29:21-27 CEB ²¹ Jacob said to Laban, "The time has come. Give me my wife so that I may sleep with her." ²² So Laban invited all the people of that place and prepared a banquet. ²³ However, in the evening, he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and he slept with her. ²⁴ Laban had given his servant Zilpah to his daughter Leah as her servant. ²⁵ In the morning, there she was--Leah! Jacob said to Laban, "What have you done to me? Didn't I work for you to have Rachel? Why did you betray me?" ²⁶ Laban said, "Where we live, we don't give the younger woman before the oldest. ²⁷ Complete the celebratory week with this woman. Then I will give you this other woman too for your work, if you work for me seven more years."

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I just love the stories about the early patriarchs of Israel and their families. They're strong, they're flawed, they're good-looking and ugly, brave and timid, cunning and stupid, sometimes they trust God completely, and sometimes they completely forget God. They're a whole lot like almost every family you ever met. And back then, just like today, family relationships were complex and frequently conflicted.

Isaac loved his wife Rebekah. After many years, she became pregnant. It was a difficult pregnancy that ended with giving birth to un-identical twin boys. The first to be born was Esau, who was very hairy, even when he was born. The second son was Jacob. When they grew up, Esau was a great outdoorsman. He loved to hunt and his father was very fond of the wild game that Esau cooked for him. Jacob, on the other hand was a quiet man who stayed at home. Esau was his father's favorite son; Jacob was his mother's favorite.

In many cultures, the oldest son has special rights of inheritance. This is called primogeniture and in those days it meant that the eldest son would receive a double portion of inheritance called the birthright - and a special blessing from his father. Even though they were twins, Esau, as the first to arrive, had the primogeniture rights of birthright and blessing. One day, Esau came home from hunting and he was very hungry. Jacob was boiling a stew that smelled wonderful and exclaiming that he was famished, Esau asked for a bowl of stew. Jacob, seizing the moment, asked Esau to sell his birthright. Esau said, "Since I'm about to die of starvation, what good is my birthright?" And he sold it to Jacob so that he could have a bowl of stew.

You might recall that Abraham had sent a trusted servant back to his homeland to find a wife for his son Isaac because he didn't want his son to marry into the local culture in Canaan. Isaac's son Esau didn't wait for his father to get him a wife from the old country. Esau married two local Hittite women without his parent's consent, and they made life miserable for Esau's parents. We might be tempted to come to some decision about which of the two brothers was more morally fit, Esau or Jacob. But as we will see, Jacob was no saint either.

Esau's other right of primogeniture was to receive a special blessing from his father. We have a lot of difficulty understanding this custom. This blessing wasn't just a matter of wishing your son well and hoping that he would "live long and prosper." This blessing was a decisive event. The

words had real power and they had the capacity to shape future events. And the blessing was irrevocable. Only one son could have the full blessing, because there was only one such blessing to be given.

Isaac was old and his eyesight had really failed. He called Esau and asked him to go hunting and then fix him a meal of the wild game that he loved to eat. And he said, after I eat, I'll give you my blessing, because I don't know how much longer I will live." Esau left to go hunting.

But his mother Rebekah had overheard the conversation, and as I already mentioned, Jacob was her favorite son. Rebekah hatched a plot to get the blessing for Jacob instead of Esau. She had Jacob go grab a couple of young goats from the herd for her to cook in the fashion that Isaac loved. Then they dressed Jacob in Esau's clothes and put the hide of young goats on Jacob's arms and neck so that they would be hairy like his brother Esau's. Then Jacob took the food his mother had cooked and went to see his father. Isaac was dubious about whether this was Esau or Jacob. He sounded like Jacob, but he felt hairy and his clothes smelled like the fields. Isaac asked, "How did you get here so fast with the food?" Jacob took God's name in vain and replied, "The Lord your God led me right to the game." "Are you really my son Esau?" And Jacob lied, saying, "I am." So Isaac blessed him, declaring that he would be the most powerful among his brothers and that they would bow down to him.

Now Jacob had both the birthright and the blessing. He had gone against the clear intent of his father and against every social convention of the time. Esau was locked into a position of being subordinate. Through trickery, cunning, duplicity, lying, and taking advantage of his brother's weakness and his father's old age infirmities, Jacob won all of the rights that belonged to Esau. This is a story that involves betrayal of husband and son, father and brother. Nice guy, this Jacob. Of course, we all know of family feuds today over the settlement of property and inheritance and they often involve coveting and calculating.

Esau was furious, of course. He was so mad that he decided that after Isaac died and the period of mourning was over, he'd kill his twin brother. Now the story takes an ironic turn. When Rebekah learned of Esau's plans, she sent Jacob back to the old country to her brother Laban. Jacob fled to Haran to his uncle's house. The bearer of the blessing became a fugitive. The owner of the birthright arrived with nothing.

When Jacob arrived in Haran, his uncle Laban hugged him and invited him into the house. Jacob told his uncle about everything that had happened. Laban cryptically replied, "Yes, you are my flesh and blood."

Laban had two daughters. The older one was Leah. Her name means "weary" or "wild cow" and she's described as having weak eyes. The younger daughter was named Rachel which means "ewe" (female sheep) and she's described as being beautiful and having a good figure. For some reason, Jacob was attracted to Rachel and since he was penniless, he offered to work seven years for the right to marry her. We're told that he was so smitten with Rachel that the seven years seemed like only a few days.

The time came for the wedding. There was a huge banquet, undoubtedly with a bit of drinking involved. Late in the evening, Laban took a veiled daughter to the marriage tent for the wedding night with Jacob. The next morning, Jacob woke up next to Leah instead of Rachel. Jacob was not happy. He felt betrayed. Laban explained to him, "We have a custom of primogeniture here, too. The oldest daughter is given in marriage before the younger daughter! But tell you what I'll do. Spend the honeymoon week with Leah and I'll give you Rachel in return for your promise to work for me another seven years." And that's what Jacob did.

Jacob met his match in Laban. Laban was devious. He, too, was a trickster who didn't mind taking advantage of a family member for his own selfish purposes! And isn't it ironic that while Jacob had defeated primogeniture at his parent's home, that here it's a female version of primogeniture that tripped up Jacob's plans to get the woman he wanted? Jacob deceived his father

through his inability to see clearly. Jacob was himself deceived in the darkness of night when **he** couldn't see clearly. What goes around - comes around!

What lessons can we learn from these episodes in the life of an ancient dysfunctional family? First of all, it'd be foolish to discount the old scriptures about ancient families as being irrelevant "because times have changed." Times have changed but greed, selfishness, deception, and playing favorites with one's children have not passed from the earth. Families once gathered around the camp fire and today they may gather around an electronic circle of text messaging, but family dynamics and relationships still fit ancient contorted ruts. The patriarchs weren't paragons of perfect piety – and neither are we.

Given that, how might we be like Esau? How are we willing to sell our future to satisfy our immediate hungers? How many ways do we mortgage our future for the sake of immediate satisfaction? Eat the salt and calories now with a mental promise to eat more healthily tomorrow? Buy the new clothes, new car, new furniture, new electronic doodad – take your pick – now with the plan to save money soon? Skimp on supporting Christ's work now with the thought that someday your last will and testament will leave a nice sum to the church? What part of your future are you selling to pay for today's desires?

And how do we, like Jacob, take advantage of others? Modern marketing builds your desire for things until you can't imagine living without. Modern sales takes that hungry desire and turns a huge profit by satisfying your appetite for whatever is involved. Jacob did a classic job of turning a bowl of stew into a double inheritance – a fantastic return on investment. If we took that part of the story by itself - we might conclude that if we cheat, exploit, and steal, God will reward us for it. But in the wider context of the saga of this family, we learn that God has the ability to work through circumstances that are fuzzy at best and at times utterly immoral. Jacob went on to learn that having the birthright and the blessing didn't result in a trouble-free life. In fact, they exposed him to more conflict than would otherwise have been the case. The blessing that he sought so passionately became a burden. We live today in a world where deception is commonplace in business and politics. The story of Jacob indicates the consequences of deception. Deception destroys families, communities, and nations.

Finally, while Jacob suffered the consequences of his actions, God never rejected him. God never tossed Jacob out, never threw him away. We must ask ourselves, if God continued to include Jacob, who can be excluded? Who do we dare to exclude? Amen.

Sisters and Brothers,
Learn the lessons of Esau and Jacob.
Don't sacrifice tomorrow's fulfillment on the altar of today's satisfaction.
Know that conniving and deception will turn and bite you.