

# Sibling Rivalry

Presented By Pastor Scott Walters on 07/12/19  
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Like previous generations, we read scripture for a lot of reasons:

- 1] We seek to know something about God;
- 2] We want to know about ourselves and our lives;
- 3] We want some instruction and guidance.
- 4] We want to know how to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ in our daily lives and how he can work in and through us.

If we come to today's story of Jacob and Esau as a morality tale or as a life-lesson, we will be disappointed. Jacob turns out to be a complex character, who becomes the nation Israel.

From the womb these twin brothers are in conflict, so much so that their worried mother prays to God about it. And she learns that more conflict is coming along with her babies.

God says to her, "two nations are in your womb and two peoples born of you will be divided. The one shall be stronger than the other. The elder shall serve the younger."

There's no judgment of Esau here. He doesn't lose out on the birthright because he has failed, or because he is inadequate. And Jacob doesn't win out because he is more deserving or because of anything good that he has done.

But the lives of these twins will not follow any expected pattern. They turn social norms on their head. In a world where the first-born son was the 'blessed' one, here in this story, the oldest son will have to serve his younger brother.

They'll each become a nation. And the nations: Israel and Edom will be apart. They'll be different people. They'll be at odds. The brothers are born striving, contending, with each other, with Jacob holding on to Esau's heel. He's actually named for that moment. The name 'Jacob' means 'holder of the heel' or supplanter.

The name and that image will capture who Jacob will be for all of his life. He's a striver. He is shrewd. He's never satisfied. He chases after what he wants and what he thinks he deserves.

In the words of Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, "Jacob - this grandson of the Promise, is a rascal!"

This second child, born into a culture where the oldest son was entitled by birth; this second child will not settle for second place. He can't wait to see what comes to him. He was born pulling himself up, by pulling his brother down.

The brothers are different. They have different looks and different personalities.

And here's the thing: the parents take sides. Isaac loved Esau and Rebekah loved Isaac the most.

I bet every one of you who has a sibling has at one time or another thought, "That other kid had it so easy." "He got away with everything." or, "She got whatever she wanted.

Maybe you've said (like Tommy Smothers) "Mom always like you best." (And if you don't know who Tommy Smothers is, check it out!) This takes that feeling to a whole new level.

Rebekah and Jacob will even plot to trick Isaac, to steal his blessing from Esau and give it to Jacob.

But today, the brothers are negotiating between themselves. One day, Esau comes in from the field and he's famished and he finds his brother Jacob cooking stew. But instead of handing his brother a bowl, Jacob demands Esau's birthright. And Esau agrees!!

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He sells all he was all entitled to as the oldest son to his little brother for some stew. An uneven trade to say the least.

This story confounds us as modern readers. Putting aside for a minute the unfairness of the rigid culture that entitled the first-born son to the family inheritance – this story leaves us reeling with questions.

How could Esau care so little about what was his, by birth? How could he value instant gratification over a future that would have all been laid out for him? Was he just impulsive? Short-sighted? Just easily manipulated??

Even knowing as we do how families can be, we still wonder how brothers could treat each other this way. And how could these parents, who said they see their children as a gift from God, take sides and choose favorites?

And we can't help asking, with some disbelief, is God really choosing someone as rascally as Jacob? Someone who manipulates and deceives? Someone who will fight and strive and test God?

YES! The answer is yes! As I said, this story is not a set of instructions on being a moral person and if we look to it for a human hero, we leave empty. This is not a model for family matters.

But this timeless story does show us something about ourselves as human beings. It tells us that since the beginning, family members have fought over power and position and favor.

We all seek favor. We all sometimes want what the other has. This might be any of our families...or any group of friends or colleagues.

This story captures our experience of trying to secure blessing for ourselves.

This story also tells us something about God. It reminds us that God's purposes have always been tangled up with humans and all our self-centeredness and short-sightedness.

It reminds us that God is and always has been at work in us. Jacob eventually becomes 'Israel,' and that name means 'one who strives with God.' Yet even Jacob is blessed.

Not because he deserves God's blessings. Not because he earned it. God's blessing came to Jacob as a free gift. It's shocking, really. Today we are reminded that God's blessing has nothing to do with our idea of entitlement.

Has God blessed someone who's deceptive? ...and manipulative? ...and self-interested? Yes! And I don't just mean Jacob. All of God's promises through all of history have come to flawed and broken people.

God throws human expectations out the window. None of our striving and manipulations gets us Christ's invitation to gather at the Table to be part of the Family in His name.

The Good News for us today is that God is at work in and through even flawed people like US! That's Good News!

But not everyone is in a position right now to receive that Good News. I meet them every once in a while. Like the visitor who didn't come up to receive on Communion Sunday. I don't usually do this, but she seemed troubled, so I told her that we have an 'open table' and that all can receive, if they wish.

She said it wasn't that. It's just that she said she wasn't good enough to receive and that she didn't deserve communion.

My prayer for you this day is that you might know that, in a certain sense, NONE of us are good enough. The point is that God wants us anyway. I ask that you leave our worship today knowing in your heart that God knows everything about you – and still loves you – and still wants you – and still blesses you. Amen.