

## Esau: How to Heal Family Hurts

Genesis 32:3-8, 33:1-17; Genesis 36:6-8

Unsung Heroes and Heroines of the Faith

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According to my dictionary the most appropriate synonym for brother is sibling. And when I looked up sibling I found the word illustrated by the phrase "sibling rivalry." Isn't that interesting? The editors didn't choose "sibling love" or "sibling cooperation" or "sibling understanding," but "sibling rivalry." Because that's what often happens to brothers: they erupt in a battle of wills, they compete fiercely with each other, they give way to sibling rivalry.

Esau and Jacob are a case in point. There was a bitter conflict that started in their mother's womb. "The children struggled within her," according to Genesis 25:22; "and she said, 'If it is to be this way, why do I live?'" All mothers experience movement in the womb, even kicking. But this was all-out war! At their birth Esau was the first to emerge from the womb. "Afterward," says Genesis, "his brother came forth, and his hand had taken hold of Esau's heel." That was taken to be an attempt by the second-born to supplant the first-born, so they named him Jacob, which means "He supplants."

The conflict escalated years later when Jacob persuaded a starving Esau to sell him his birthright in exchange for a bowl of stew. And it reached its climax when their father Isaac was on his deathbed. The ancient law of primogeniture dictated that Esau, the first-born, should receive the family estate. But Jacob, with his mother's connivance, tricked his father into giving him the blessing. And when Esau learned that he had been supplanted once again by his younger brother he plotted to kill Jacob after their father's funeral.

Four thousand years later siblings still fight over the family estate. And if money is not the cause of the conflict, it's abuse, or indifference, or favoritism, or neglect. Why is it that we treat our customers and colleagues better than we treat our siblings, our spouses and our children? Sadly, some of the most polite people in public are unspeakably rude in private. Ever gracious in the office, they breed nothing but conflict in the home.

And conflict ruptures relationships and drives people apart. When Jacob learned about his brother's plot to kill him, he fled the country and stayed away for twenty years. Rather than face up to his brother (and to himself), he ran away, only to find that conflict dogged his footsteps and ruptured all his relationships. His two wives were sisters, and they fought tooth and nail. First one would bear a child and taunt the other. Then the other would bear a child and ridicule the first. Jacob had a running argument with his father-in-law, Laban, over the care and feeding of the family livestock. And when Jacob secretly packed up and left, Laban went after him. They might have come to blows had not the Lord warned Laban not to harm Jacob. Finally they set up a pile of stones to serve as a demilitarized zone, and said to each other, "The Lord watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other." Sounds like a blessing, doesn't it? In fact it was a solemn warning: don't venture beyond this boundary or God will get you! And if God doesn't, I will.

Not all separations are geographic. Bruised by conflict, a member of the family may simply withdraw into silence. They sit at the breakfast table, but won't talk. After dinner, they closet themselves with their hobbies or books or the TV or the computer. The family doesn't spend weekends together or go on vacations together. Eyes are unseeing, ears are unhearing, hearts are uncaring. They live in the same house, but they might as well be on different continents.

But it need not last forever. We can heal our family hurts, and Esau shows us how. You might have expected me to say Jacob, since it was Jacob who made the first move. After twenty years of separation, Jacob packed up and started for home, but without any assurance that he would be received there, let alone welcomed. In fact, he was prepared for combat because word came that Esau was marching to meet

him with four hundred men. Here is Jacob's response to that news: "Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people that were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two companies, thinking, 'If Esau comes to the one company and destroys it, then the company which is left will escape.'" (32:7-8)

But watch Esau in chapter 33, verse 4: "Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him." So it was the injured party who brokered the peace. It was Esau, who had been hoodwinked out of his birthright, who embraced the man who hoodwinked him. It was Esau, who had been robbed of the family estate, who fell on the neck and kissed the man who swindled him, the supplanter, his brother Jacob. Moreover, he did it free of charge. Jacob tried to buy his way back into his brother's good graces with several hundred goats, camels, sheep and cows, but Esau replied, "I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself." After much urging by Jacob, Esau finally accepted the gift, but not as the price for making peace, rather as the sign of reconciliation already achieved.

Esau went further. Jacob was still a long way from home, so Esau offered to have his men travel with Jacob's family to shield them against marauding bandits. That was the real reason Esau brought four hundred men along, not to punish Jacob, but to protect him.

And Esau did one more thing. When it became apparent that the area they lived in could not support both families with all their livestock, he moved "some distance from his brother Jacob." (36:6-8) He might have said, "Look, I was here first; you move!" But instead he gave precedence to one who did not deserve it.

You have to like Esau. He had every right to even the score with Jacob, but he buried his hatchet of hate in the deep reservoir of forgiveness. Esau could have slapped conditions on Jacob's homecoming, but he ripped off the price tags and replaced them with gift wrap. By the way, does Esau remind you of anyone in the New Testament? Esau ran to Jacob, and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him. That scene is virtually identical to the parable of the prodigal son. When the son returned home "his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him." (Luke 15:20) I cannot escape the conclusion that in Jesus' mind, Esau was the model for the gracious, forgiving father in the parable of the prodigal son. And since the father in that parable is a stand-in for our Heavenly Father, Esau is also a mirror image of the God who has brokered the peace between his own sacred holiness and our sinful humanity. "Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God," Isaiah writes, "and your sins have hid his face from you." (59:2) But, writes Paul in his second letter to the Corinthian church, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them." (5:19) The God who was offended by our behavior, the God from whom we had separated ourselves by our willful disobedience, that God took the initiative, that God reached out to the guilty parties, that God paid the price of our reconciliation at the cross.

Families in conflict will never heal until someone like Esau, someone like God, takes the initiative, reaches out to the guilty party, and pays the price of reconciliation. It may not work. The more I read this story the more convinced I am that Jacob never fully accepted his brother's forgiveness, just as the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son may never have fully accepted his father's good will. But the attempt has to be made. Someone has to risk it. For the sake of healing your family hurts, let that person be you.