Jacob and Esau: The Birthright and the Blessing

Bible Stories Anthology — Genesis 25:19-34; 27

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> **Romans 15:4** *For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.*

Why These Stories Were Written — Romans 15:4

Paul had just quoted a thousand-year-old psalm and applied it to Christ (Romans 15:3, quoting Psalm 69:9), and then he explained why he could: *whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning*. **Written aforetime** — the scriptures that already stood before this present age of grace opened at Pentecost: the record God gave through Moses, the prophets and the writings, along with the Gospel accounts of Christ's earthly ministry, which belong to that same time before Pentecost. (When Paul wrote these words, the scriptures he had in hand were the Hebrew scriptures; the Gospels had not yet been written down.) **Written for our learning** — "learning" is the Greek word for *teaching*, the very word rendered "doctrine" in 2 Timothy 3:16. These are not quaint tales; they are doctrine in narrative form. Adam, Ruth and David never knew us, but God did, and He had their lives recorded with us in mind — written *for* us, though not all of it written *to* us, which is why we read Israel's history as our instruction and not as our marching orders. **Through patience and comfort of the scriptures** — "patience" is literally *remaining under*, the staying power we gain from watching men and women stay under a load; "comfort" is a *calling alongside*, the strength God brings when He meets them there, which is why Paul calls Him "the God of patience and consolation" in the very next verse. **That we might have hope** — not a wish, but confident expectation: the return of Jesus Christ and everlasting life with Him. That is why these accounts exist, and it is how they should be read.

A Bowl of Red Stew

A hungry man came in from the field and smelled stew.

He was the firstborn son of a wealthy family, the heir of a promise God had made to his grandfather: a nation, a land, and a blessing for all the families of the earth. His younger twin was at the fire, stirring a pot of red lentils. *Feed me,* said the elder. *First sell me your birthright*, said the younger. And the elder did — for one bowl of stew.

Years later, the younger brother dressed in his brother's clothes, covered his hands and neck in goatskin, and lied to his blind old father to steal the blessing as well. It worked. And it cost him twenty years in exile, a lifetime of being deceived in turn, and a mother he never saw again.

This is one of the most human stories in the Bible. Nobody in it behaves well. A father plays favourites and tries to go around what God had said. A mother schemes. One son despises what is holy; the other grasps for it with lies. And through all of it God's purpose, spoken before the twins were born, stands exactly as He said it would.

The New Testament comes back to these brothers twice. Paul uses them to show that God's purpose rests **"not of works, but of him that calleth"** (Romans 9:11). Hebrews uses Esau as a warning: do not be a **"profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright"** (Hebrews 12:16).

The Setting

When. Isaac married Rebekah at forty (Genesis 25:20) and the twins were born when he was sixty (25:26) — twenty years of waiting. Abraham was still alive; he was 160 when his grandsons were born

and lived fifteen more years. The sale of the birthright happened when the boys were grown. The stolen blessing came much later: by the usual reckoning from the ages Genesis gives for Jacob and Joseph, Jacob was about seventy-seven when he fled, and Isaac about 137. Isaac thought he was dying. He lived to 180 (Genesis 35:28).

Where. In the south of Canaan, around Beersheba and the well Lahai-roi, where Isaac lived as a herdsman and farmer (Genesis 25:11; 26:12).

The administration. The **Patriarchal** administration, from the Fall to the giving of the Law at Sinai. God dealt with men through the heads of families. The father's blessing, spoken at the end of life, was not merely a wish; it passed on the family's inheritance and, in this family, God's own covenant promise.

Two things at stake.

- **The birthright** (Hebrew *bekorah*). The firstborn son's rights: a double share of the father's property (Deuteronomy 21:17 later made this law), the leadership of the family after the father's death, and in this family the headship of the line through which God's promise would pass.
- **The blessing** (Hebrew *berakah*). The father's solemn, final word over his son, which the ancients regarded as binding once spoken. In Isaac's house, it carried the blessing of Abraham itself.

The two Hebrew words sound almost the same — *bekorah*, *berakah* — and Esau would bitterly play on them: **"he took away my birthright; and, behold, now he hath taken away my blessing"** (Genesis 27:36).

The Story, Told Faithfully

Two Nations in the Womb

> **Genesis 25:21** *And Isaac intreated the LORD for his wife, because she was barren: and the LORD was intreated of him, and Rebekah his wife conceived.*
>
> **Genesis 25:22** *And the children struggled together within her; and she said, If it be so, why am I thus? And she went to enquire of the LORD.*
>
> **Genesis 25:23** *And the LORD said unto her, Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger.*

"Isaac intreated the LORD for his wife, because she was barren." Like Sarah before her, Rebekah could not have children. The promised line hung once again on a barren woman, and once again God opened the womb in answer to prayer. Nothing about this family came by natural strength.

"The children struggled together within her." The Hebrew word, *ratsats*, means to crush or dash against one another. It was not ordinary movement. It was so violent that Rebekah asked, *If it be so, why am I thus? — if this is what it means to be pregnant, why am I living?*

"She went to enquire of the LORD." Scripture does not say how. Abraham was still living, and so, by the ages Genesis gives, may have been Shem; some have supposed she went to one of them. That is supposition. What matters is that she asked God, and God answered her.

“Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels.” The two babies were the fathers of two nations: Israel and Edom. The struggle in the womb was the first round of a struggle that would last for centuries.

“And the elder shall serve the younger.” Here is the key to the whole story. God said it before either child was born. In the ancient world the elder always had the rights; God reversed the order before the boys had done anything, good or bad.

The Heel-Grabber

> **Genesis 25:24** *And when her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb.*
>
> **Genesis 25:25** *And the first came out red, all over like an hairy garment; and they called his name Esau.*
>
> **Genesis 25:26** *And after that came his brother out, and his hand took hold on Esau’s heel; and his name was called Jacob: and Isaac was threescore years old when she bare them.*

“The first came out red, all over like an hairy garment; and they called his name Esau.” *Esau* sounds like the Hebrew for “hairy,” and the land his descendants would later hold was called *Seir*, from the same idea. “Red” is *admoni*, which sounds like *Edom*, the name the nation would bear. Moses delights in these sound-plays, the figure called **paronomasia**.

“His hand took hold on Esau’s heel; and his name was called Jacob.” The Hebrew for heel is *aqev*; *Ya’aqov*, Jacob, means “he takes by the heel.” To take someone by the heel is to trip him up from behind, to supplant him. Hosea remembered it: **“He took his brother by the heel in the womb”** (Hosea 12:3). The name described exactly what Jacob would spend his early life doing.

Two Sons, Two Favourites

> **Genesis 25:27** *And the boys grew: and Esau was a cunning hunter, a man of the field; and Jacob was a plain man, dwelling in tents.*
>
> **Genesis 25:28** *And Isaac loved Esau, because he did eat of his venison: but Rebekah loved Jacob.*

“Esau was a cunning hunter, a man of the field.” A skilled, outdoor man, restless and physical, living by the bow.

“Jacob was a plain man, dwelling in tents.” “Plain” is the Hebrew *tam*, the same word translated **“perfect”** of Job (Job 1:1): complete, whole, settled, quiet. Jacob was a man of the household and the flocks. The word does not mean he was morally perfect — the story shows he was not — but that he was steady and home-keeping, the opposite of his wandering brother.

“And Isaac loved Esau, because he did eat of his venison: but Rebekah loved Jacob.” Here is the root of much of the trouble that follows. Each parent had a favourite. Isaac’s reason is given, and it is not flattering: he liked the taste of the game Esau brought home. Rebekah’s reason is not given. Perhaps she remembered what God had said before the boys were born. But favouritism divided the family, and Jacob would later repeat it with his own sons, loving Joseph above the rest — with terrible results.

The Birthright Sold

> **Genesis 25:29** *And Jacob sod pottage: and Esau came from the field, and he was faint:*
> **Genesis 25:30** *And Esau said to Jacob, Feed me, I pray thee, with that same red pottage; for I am faint: therefore was his name called Edom.*
> **Genesis 25:31** *And Jacob said, Sell me this day thy birthright.*
> **Genesis 25:32** *And Esau said, Behold, I am at the point to die: and what profit shall this birthright do to me?*
> **Genesis 25:33** *And Jacob said, Swear to me this day; and he sware unto him: and he sold his birthright unto Jacob.*
> **Genesis 25:34** *Then Jacob gave Esau bread and pottage of lentiles; and he did eat and drink, and rose up, and went his way: thus Esau despised his birthright.*

"Jacob sod pottage." Jacob was boiling a stew — *sod* is the old past tense of *seethe*, to boil. Verse 34 tells us it was **"pottage of lentiles,"** reddish-brown lentils.

"Feed me, I pray thee, with that same red pottage." The Hebrew is blunter: *let me gulp down some of that red stuff, that red stuff*. Esau did not even name the food. He wanted it, and he wanted it now. **"Therefore was his name called Edom"** — *Red*.

"Sell me this day thy birthright." Jacob was ready. He had evidently thought about this before. He did not offer his brother food; he offered a bargain, and he named the price at once.

"Behold, I am at the point to die: and what profit shall this birthright do to me?" Esau was hungry, not dying. This is **hyperbole**, a deliberate exaggeration, and it reveals his heart: nothing in the future mattered compared to the craving of the moment.

"Swear to me this day." Jacob wanted it binding. And Esau swore.

"He did eat and drink, and rose up, and went his way." Five verbs in quick succession — ate, drank, rose, went, and then the verdict. The rapid string of short clauses joined by "and" is the figure called **polysyndeton**; it makes us watch Esau's carelessness step by step. He did not hesitate, did not regret, did not look back.

"Thus Esau despised his birthright." This is the narrator's own verdict, and it is God's. The problem was not only that Jacob was grasping. It was that Esau did not value what God had attached to his birth. Hebrews calls him **"profane"** — Greek *bebēlos*, common, unholy, one who treats what is sacred as ordinary (Hebrews 12:16).

Esau's Wives

> **Genesis 26:34** *And Esau was forty years old when he took to wife Judith the daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Bashemath the daughter of Elon the Hittite:*
> **Genesis 26:35** *Which were a grief of mind unto Isaac and to Rebekah.*

At forty, Esau married two Canaanite women of the Hittites. Abraham had sworn his servant not to let Isaac do this (Genesis 24:3). Esau did it twice, and it grieved both his parents. It was another sign of how little he cared for the promise.

The Old Man's Plan

> **Genesis 27:1** *And it came to pass, that when Isaac was old, and his eyes were dim, so that he could not see, he called Esau his eldest son, and said unto him, My son: and he said unto him, Behold, here am I.*
>
> **Genesis 27:2** *And he said, Behold now, I am old, I know not the day of my death:*
>
> **Genesis 27:3** *Now therefore take, I pray thee, thy weapons, thy quiver and thy bow, and go out to the field, and take me some venison;*
>
> **Genesis 27:4** *And make me savoury meat, such as I love, and bring it to me, that I may eat; that my soul may bless thee before I die.*

"When Isaac was old, and his eyes were dim." Isaac thought his death was near. (By the usual reckoning he had more than forty years still to live.)

"Take me some venison … that my soul may bless thee before I die." Here is the heart of the problem. God had said before the twins were born that **"the elder shall serve the younger."** Esau had sold his birthright and married outside the family of faith. Yet Isaac meant to give Esau the blessing anyway — privately, without Jacob, apparently without Rebekah — and over a meal of the game he loved. Isaac was trying to go around what God had said.

The Mother's Scheme

> **Genesis 27:5** *And Rebekah heard when Isaac spake to Esau his son. And Esau went to the field to hunt for venison, and to bring it.*
>
> **Genesis 27:6** *And Rebekah spake unto Jacob her son, saying, Behold, I heard thy father speak unto Esau thy brother, saying,*
>
> **Genesis 27:7** *Bring me venison, and make me savoury meat, that I may eat, and bless thee before the LORD before my death.*
>
> **Genesis 27:8** *Now therefore, my son, obey my voice according to that which I command thee.*
>
> **Genesis 27:9** *Go now to the flock, and fetch me from thence two good kids of the goats; and I will make them savoury meat for thy father, such as he loveth:*
>
> **Genesis 27:10** *And thou shalt bring it to thy father, that he may eat, and that he may bless thee before his death.*
>
> **Genesis 27:11** *And Jacob said to Rebekah his mother, Behold, Esau my brother is a hairy man, and I am a smooth man:*
>
> **Genesis 27:12** *My father peradventure will feel me, and I shall seem to him as a deceiver; and I shall bring a curse upon me, and not a blessing.*
>
> **Genesis 27:13** *And his mother said unto him, Upon me be thy curse, my son: only obey my voice, and go fetch me them.*

"Rebekah heard." She was listening. And she acted at once.

"Obey my voice according to that which I command thee." Rebekah knew what God had said, and she was right that Jacob should have the blessing. But she did not trust God to bring it about. She planned a deception.

"I shall seem to him as a deceiver; and I shall bring a curse upon me, and not a blessing." Jacob's objection is revealing. He did not say *it is wrong*. He said *I might get caught*.

“Upon me be thy curse, my son.” Rebekah took the risk on herself. As this series understands it, in a sense she paid it: she sent Jacob away “a few days,” and scripture never records that she saw him again. Her death is not even mentioned in the narrative; we learn only much later that she was buried with Isaac (Genesis 49:31).

The Disguise

> **Genesis 27:14** *And he went, and fetched, and brought them to his mother: and his mother made savoury meat, such as his father loved.*
>
> **Genesis 27:15** *And Rebekah took goodly raiment of her eldest son Esau, which were with her in the house, and put them upon Jacob her younger son:*
>
> **Genesis 27:16** *And she put the skins of the kids of the goats upon his hands, and upon the smooth of his neck:*
>
> **Genesis 27:17** *And she gave the savoury meat and the bread, which she had prepared, into the hand of her son Jacob.*

“Goodly raiment of her eldest son Esau.” Esau’s best clothes, with the smell of the fields on them.

“The skins of the kids of the goats upon his hands, and upon the smooth of his neck.” Esau was so hairy that goatskin could pass for his arms. Remember those goats. Years later Jacob’s own sons would deceive *him* with a coat and the blood of a goat (Genesis 37:31).

“I Am Esau Thy Firstborn”

> **Genesis 27:18** *And he came unto his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here am I; who art thou, my son?*
>
> **Genesis 27:19** *And Jacob said unto his father, I am Esau thy firstborn; I have done according as thou badest me: arise, I pray thee, sit and eat of my venison, that thy soul may bless me.*
>
> **Genesis 27:20** *And Isaac said unto his son, How is it that thou hast found it so quickly, my son? And he said, Because the LORD thy God brought it to me.*
>
> **Genesis 27:21** *And Isaac said unto Jacob, Come near, I pray thee, that I may feel thee, my son, whether thou be my very son Esau or not.*
>
> **Genesis 27:22** *And Jacob went near unto Isaac his father; and he felt him, and said, The voice is Jacob’s voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau.*
>
> **Genesis 27:23** *And he discerned him not, because his hands were hairy, as his brother Esau’s hands: so he blessed him.*
>
> **Genesis 27:24** *And he said, Art thou my very son Esau? And he said, I am.*

“Who art thou, my son?” Isaac was suspicious from the first word.

“I am Esau thy firstborn.” A flat lie.

“How is it that thou hast found it so quickly, my son? And he said, Because the LORD thy God brought it to me.” The worst lie of all. Jacob used God’s name to cover his deception. Notice, too, *the LORD thy God* — not *my* God. Jacob did not yet know God as his own. That would come later, at Bethel and at Peniel.

“The voice is Jacob’s voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau.” Isaac’s senses were at war. His ears said one thing; his hands another. He trusted his hands.

“Art thou my very son Esau? And he said, I am.” A third lie, point-blank.

The Blessing

> **Genesis 27:25** *And he said, Bring it near to me, and I will eat of my son’s venison, that my soul may bless thee. And he brought it near to him, and he did eat: and he brought him wine, and he drank.*
>
> **Genesis 27:26** *And his father Isaac said unto him, Come near now, and kiss me, my son.*
>
> **Genesis 27:27** *And he came near, and kissed him: and he smelled the smell of his raiment, and blessed him, and said, See, the smell of my son is as the smell of a field which the LORD hath blessed:*
>
> **Genesis 27:28** *Therefore God give thee of the dew of heaven, and the fatness of the earth, and plenty of corn and wine:*
>
> **Genesis 27:29** *Let people serve thee, and nations bow down to thee: be lord over thy brethren, and let thy mother’s sons bow down to thee: cursed be every one that curseth thee, and blessed be he that blesseth thee.*

“The smell of my son is as the smell of a field which the LORD hath blessed.” Isaac was convinced by the smell of Esau’s clothes. This is a **simile**, a comparison using “as,” and the blessing that follows grows out of it: from the smell of a blessed field to the dew of heaven and the fatness of the earth.

The words of the blessing.

- **“God give thee of the dew of heaven, and the fatness of the earth, and plenty of corn and wine.”** In a dry land, dew was life; prosperity of field and vineyard.
- **“Let people serve thee, and nations bow down to thee.”** Rule over nations.
- **“Be lord over thy brethren, and let thy mother’s sons bow down to thee.”** Headship of the family — exactly what the birthright meant.
- **“Cursed be every one that curseth thee, and blessed be he that blesseth thee.”** Almost the very words God spoke to Abraham (Genesis 12:3). This was the blessing of Abraham.

Isaac Trembled

> **Genesis 27:30** *And it came to pass, as soon as Isaac had made an end of blessing Jacob, and Jacob was yet scarce gone out from the presence of Isaac his father, that Esau his brother came in from his hunting.*
>
> **Genesis 27:31** *And he also had made savoury meat, and brought it unto his father, and said unto his father, Let my father arise, and eat of his son’s venison, that thy soul may bless me.*
>
> **Genesis 27:32** *And Isaac his father said unto him, Who art thou? And he said, I am thy son, thy firstborn Esau.*
>
> **Genesis 27:33** *And Isaac trembled very exceedingly, and said, Who? where is he that hath taken venison, and brought it me, and I have eaten of all before thou camest, and have blessed him? yea, and he shall be blessed.*

“Isaac trembled very exceedingly.” The Hebrew is literally *trembled a great trembling*, *exceedingly*. Why such terror? Not only because he had been deceived. As this series understands it, in that moment Isaac saw what he had been doing. He had tried to give the blessing to the son God had not chosen, and God had overruled him. His next words show that he accepted it: **“yea, and he shall be blessed.”** He did not

take the blessing back. Hebrews says, **"By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come"** (Hebrews 11:20). The faith was in recognizing God's choice and letting it stand.

Esau's Bitter Cry

> **Genesis 27:34** *And when Esau heard the words of his father, he cried with a great and exceeding bitter cry, and said unto his father, Bless me, even me also, O my father.*
>
> **Genesis 27:35** *And he said, Thy brother came with subtilty, and hath taken away thy blessing.*
>
> **Genesis 27:36** *And he said, Is not he rightly named Jacob? for he hath supplanted me these two times: he took away my birthright; and, behold, now he hath taken away my blessing. And he said, Hast thou not reserved a blessing for me?*
>
> **Genesis 27:37** *And Isaac answered and said unto Esau, Behold, I have made him thy lord, and all his brethren have I given to him for servants; and with corn and wine have I sustained him: and what shall I do now unto thee, my son?*
>
> **Genesis 27:38** *And Esau said unto his father, Hast thou but one blessing, my father? bless me, even me also, O my father. And Esau lifted up his voice, and wept.*
>
> **Genesis 27:39** *And Isaac his father answered and said unto him, Behold, thy dwelling shall be the fatness of the earth, and of the dew of heaven from above;*
>
> **Genesis 27:40** *And by thy sword shalt thou live, and shalt serve thy brother; and it shall come to pass when thou shalt have the dominion, that thou shalt break his yoke from off thy neck.*

"He cried with a great and exceeding bitter cry." Scripture does not make light of Esau's grief. It was real.

"Is not he rightly named Jacob? for he hath supplanted me these two times." Esau made the pun: *Jacob — heel-grabber — supplanter!* But notice that he blamed Jacob for the birthright, which he himself had sold.

"Hast thou but one blessing, my father?" The blessing of the covenant was one, and it had been given.

"Thy dwelling shall be the fatness of the earth, and of the dew of heaven from above." The Hebrew preposition *min* can mean either *of* or *away from*, and translators have read Isaac's words both ways: either Esau too would have a fertile land, or his dwelling would be *away from* the fatness of the earth, in the dry hill country of Edom. The rest of the blessing is plain: **"by thy sword shalt thou live, and shalt serve thy brother."** Edom did live by the sword, and did serve Israel: **"all they of Edom became David's servants"** (2 Samuel 8:14).

"When thou shalt have the dominion, … thou shalt break his yoke from off thy neck." That came true as well: **"In his days Edom revolted from under the hand of Judah, and made a king over themselves"** (2 Kings 8:20).

Hatred, and Flight

> **Genesis 27:41** *And Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing wherewith his father blessed him: and Esau said in his heart, The days of mourning for my father are at hand; then will I slay my brother Jacob.*
>
> **Genesis 27:42** *And these words of Esau her elder son were told to Rebekah: and she sent and called Jacob her younger son, and said unto him, Behold, thy brother Esau, as touching thee, doth comfort himself, purposing to kill thee.*

> **Genesis 27:43** *Now therefore, my son, obey my voice; and arise, flee thou to Laban my brother to Haran;*
> **Genesis 27:44** *And tarry with him a few days, until thy brother's fury turn away;*
> **Genesis 27:45** *Until thy brother's anger turn away from thee, and he forget that which thou hast done to him: then I will send, and fetch thee from thence: why should I be deprived also of you both in one day?*
> **Genesis 27:46** *And Rebekah said to Isaac, I am weary of my life because of the daughters of Heth: if Jacob take a wife of the daughters of Heth, such as these which are of the daughters of the land, what good shall my life do me?*

"The days of mourning for my father are at hand; then will I slay my brother Jacob." Esau planned murder, as Cain had. He would wait only for his father to die.

"Flee thou to Laban my brother to Haran; And tarry with him a few days." Rebekah expected a short exile. It lasted twenty years (Genesis 31:41).

"Why should I be deprived also of you both in one day?" If Esau killed Jacob, he would be put to death for it, and she would lose both sons.

"I am weary of my life because of the daughters of Heth." Rebekah gave Isaac a good reason to send Jacob away — to find a wife among their own kin — without mentioning Esau's threat. It was true, as far as it went.

The Blessing Given Knowingly

> **Genesis 28:1** *And Isaac called Jacob, and blessed him, and charged him, and said unto him, Thou shalt not take a wife of the daughters of Canaan.*
> **Genesis 28:2** *Arise, go to Padan-aram, to the house of Bethuel thy mother's father; and take thee a wife from thence of the daughters of Laban thy mother's brother.*
> **Genesis 28:3** *And God Almighty bless thee, and make thee fruitful, and multiply thee, that thou mayest be a multitude of people;*
> **Genesis 28:4** *And give thee the blessing of Abraham, to thee, and to thy seed with thee; that thou mayest inherit the land wherein thou art a stranger, which God gave unto Abraham.*

This time Isaac blessed Jacob with his eyes open. He knew exactly whom he was blessing, and he gave him **"the blessing of Abraham"** by name. Whatever Isaac had intended before, he now willingly passed the covenant to the son God had chosen.

And Esau, seeing that his Canaanite wives displeased his parents, went and married a daughter of Ishmael as well (Genesis 28:9) — trying to please his father, and missing the point once more.

Sowing and Reaping

Jacob got the blessing, but the way he got it followed him for the rest of his life.

- **The deceiver was deceived.** At Haran, Laban put his elder daughter Leah in the marriage tent in place of Rachel, and Jacob did not know until morning. **"Wherefore then hast thou beguiled me?"** he cried — and Laban answered, **"It must not be so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn"** (Genesis 29:25-26). The younger for the firstborn: Jacob heard his own trick thrown back at him.

- **The goat and the garment.** Jacob had deceived his father with a goat and his brother's clothes. His sons deceived him with a goat's blood and his son's coat (Genesis 37:31-33).
- **Favouritism repeated.** Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah, and Joseph more than his brothers — the same wound his parents had given him.

"Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Galatians 6:7). God's purpose for Jacob stood. So did the consequences of his lies.

And God changed him. Twenty years later, at the brook Jabbok, the heel-grabber wrestled until dawn and received a new name: **"Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed"** (Genesis 32:28). And when the brothers met again, Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him, and said, **"I have enough, my brother"** (Genesis 33:9). God had blessed Esau too.

What About "Esau Have I Hated"?

Paul uses this story in Romans 9:

> **Romans 9:10** *And not only this; but when Rebecca also had conceived by one, even by our father Isaac;*
>
> **Romans 9:11** (For the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth;)
>
> **Romans 9:12** *It was said unto her, The elder shall serve the younger.*
>
> **Romans 9:13** *As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated.*

Many readers find this troubling. Did God hate Esau before he was born, and choose him for destruction? Look carefully at what the verses say.

First, what God chose was an order of service, not a destiny of salvation. What was said before the twins were born was **"The elder shall serve the younger."** Genesis 25:23 speaks of *two nations* and *two manner of people*. God chose which of the two lines would carry the promise to the Messiah. Paul's point is that the choice did not depend on anything the boys had done: **"not of works, but of him that calleth."**

Second, "Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated" is quoted from Malachi, written about fourteen hundred years after the twins were born, and it speaks of the two *nations*: God **"laid his mountains and his heritage waste"** (Malachi 1:3), words about Edom's land, not Esau's soul.

Third, "hated" is a Hebrew idiom for *loved less*, *not chosen*. Genesis itself uses it that way: Jacob **"loved also Rachel more than Leah,"** and the next verse says **"the LORD saw that Leah was hated"** (Genesis 29:30-31). Leah was not despised; she was loved less. Jesus used the same idiom: **"If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother … he cannot be my disciple"** (Luke 14:26), which Matthew records as **"He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me"** (Matthew 10:37). An **idiom** is an expression whose meaning comes from the language's own way of speaking, not from the dictionary sense of each word.

God blessed Esau materially (Genesis 27:39; 33:9), and the Law told Israel, **"Thou shalt not abhor an Edomite; for he is thy brother"** (Deuteronomy 23:7). As this series understands it, Romans 9 is about

God's freedom to choose the line of the promise by grace, not about God creating a man in order to hate him.

Where the Story Leads

To the Messiah

The line of the promise. God's choice of Jacob determined the line through which the Messiah would come. Balaam foresaw it: **"there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel"** (Numbers 24:17). The angel told Mary of her Son, **"he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end"** (Luke 1:33).

"Be lord over thy brethren." Isaac's blessing on Jacob — nations bowing, brethren serving — reached far beyond Jacob himself. Jacob never ruled over nations. As this series understands it, the blessing pointed ahead through the line of Judah (Genesis 49:10) to the One who would truly be Lord: Jesus Christ, who died, was raised, and ascended to the right hand of God, where every knee shall bow.

An Israelite without guile. When Jesus first met Nathanael, He said, **"Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!"** (John 1:47) — and moments later spoke of **"the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man"** (John 1:51), the words of Jacob's dream at Bethel. The Greek word for "guile," *dolos*, is the very word the Greek Old Testament uses for Jacob's **"subtilty"** (Genesis 27:35). Jacob, the man of guile, became Israel. Nathanael was an Israel without Jacob's guile.

To the Grace Administration

Not of works, but of him that calleth. Paul uses Jacob and Esau to show that God's purpose rests on His calling, not on human performance. Neither twin earned anything before birth. That is the heart of grace: **"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast"** (Ephesians 2:8-9).

A greater inheritance. Believers today are not heirs of Isaac's flocks, but of God Himself: **"Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ"** (Galatians 4:7). We have **"an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven"** (1 Peter 1:4).

Do not sell it for a bowl of stew. That is the warning of Hebrews 12:

> **Hebrews 12:15** *Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled;*
>
> **Hebrews 12:16** *Lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright.*
>
> **Hebrews 12:17** *For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears.*

"He found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears." "Repentance" is *metanoia*, a change of mind. Esau wanted Isaac to change his mind and give him the blessing, and his father would not. The tears were real, but the time for the choice had passed. As this series understands it, the lesson for believers is not that God refuses anyone who turns to Him, but that there are choices whose consequences cannot be undone. Esau traded what was eternal for what was immediate. Paul

counted **"all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord"** (Philippians 3:8) — the exact opposite of Esau's bargain.

God does not need our schemes. Rebekah and Jacob were right about what God had promised and wrong about how to get it. God's purpose would have stood without a single lie. **"There are many devices in a man's heart; nevertheless the counsel of the LORD, that shall stand"** (Proverbs 19:21).

To the Topic of Family

- **Favouritism divides families** — and is often repeated by the next generation.
- **Parents should honour God's word over their own preferences,** as Isaac finally did.
- **Deception brings its own harvest,** even when the goal is right.
- **Appetite is a poor master.** One meal cost Esau his inheritance.
- **God can change a deceiver.** Jacob became Israel.
- **Brothers can be reconciled.** Esau ran to embrace the brother he had vowed to kill.

The Main Takeaway

Before the twins were born, God said the elder would serve the younger; Esau despised his birthright and sold it for a bowl of stew, Isaac tried to bless him anyway, and Rebekah and Jacob answered with deception — yet God's purpose stood exactly as He had spoken, while every lie reaped its own harvest; God chooses by grace, not by works, and He can take a grasping, deceitful man and make him Israel.

- **God's word stands,** whatever men scheme.
- **Do not despise what God has attached to your life.**
- **Do not grasp by deceit** what God has promised to give.
- **Favouritism wounds.**
- **Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.**
- **God's choosing rests on His calling, not our works.**

For Our Learning — The People

- **Isaac.** Son of Abraham; prayed for his barren wife; loved Esau for his venison; tried to bless him, then accepted God's choice and blessed Jacob knowingly.
- **Rebekah.** Isaac's wife; received God's word before the birth; loved Jacob; planned the deception; sent Jacob away and apparently never saw him again.
- **Esau (Edom).** The elder twin; red and hairy; a hunter; sold his birthright for stew; married Canaanite and Ishmaelite wives; father of the Edomites; later reconciled with Jacob.
- **Jacob (later Israel).** The younger twin; "heel-grabber"; bought the birthright and stole the blessing by deceit; fled to Haran; was renamed Israel.
- **Laban.** Rebekah's brother in Haran, who later deceived Jacob.
- **Judith, Bashemath and Mahalath.** Esau's wives — two Hittites and a daughter of Ishmael.

For Our Learning — Customs and Orientalisms

- **The birthright.** The firstborn's double portion and headship of the family.
- **The father's blessing.** A solemn, final word, regarded as binding once spoken.
- **Game and savoury meat.** A father's favourite dish, prepared by a hunter-son.
- **Lentil stew.** A common reddish food of the East.
- **Oaths.** A sworn transfer of the birthright was binding.
- **Festive garments.** A son's best clothes, kept in the family tent.
- **Days of mourning.** A set period of mourning after a father's death, before family business resumed.
- **Marrying within the kindred.** Parents sought wives for their sons from their own family and faith.

For Our Learning — Figures of Speech

A figure of speech is a deliberate departure from the plain, ordinary way of saying something, used by God to add emphasis and feeling. These are the ones in this story:

- **Paronomasia** — play on similar-sounding words. *Esau* / "hairy"; *Edom* / "red"; *Jacob* / *aqev*, "heel"; *bekorah* / *berakah*, birthright and blessing (25:25-26, 30; 27:36).
- **Hyperbole** — deliberate exaggeration. "I am at the point to die" (25:32).
- **Polysyndeton** — many "ands." "He did eat and drink, and rose up, and went his way" (25:34).
- **Simile** — a comparison using "as." "The smell of my son is as the smell of a field which the LORD hath blessed" (27:27).
- **Idiom** — an expression whose meaning comes from the language's own usage. "Esau have I hated" (Malachi 1:3; Romans 9:13): loved less, not chosen.
- **Erotesis** — questions asked for effect. "Is not he rightly named Jacob?" "Hast thou but one blessing, my father?" (27:36, 38).

What the Bible Actually Says

- **God said "the elder shall serve the younger" before the twins were born** (25:23).
- **Esau sold his birthright for red lentil stew,** and "despised" it (25:34).
- **Isaac tried to bless Esau** in spite of what God had said.
- **Jacob lied three times** and used God's name in one of the lies.
- **Isaac trembled, and let the blessing stand:** "yea, and he shall be blessed."
- **Isaac later blessed Jacob knowingly** with the blessing of Abraham (28:3-4).
- **Rebekah's "few days" became twenty years.**
- **Jacob was deceived in the same ways he had deceived.**
- **"Esau have I hated" is from Malachi,** about the nations, using a Hebrew idiom for "loved less."
- **Esau's "no place of repentance"** was his father's unchangeable decision, not God refusing a sinner.

God’s Will and Intent

- **God’s purpose stands,** spoken before the twins were born.
- **God chooses by grace,** not by works.
- **God wants His people to value what is holy.**
- **God does not need deception** to keep His promises.
- **God lets deception reap its own harvest.**
- **God changes those He has chosen,** as He changed Jacob into Israel.
- **God was preparing the line of the Messiah** through all of it.