

Esau and Jacob

Douglas Cho, PhD, DRS

Scripture for Study [Genesis 25:21-23, NKJV]

Now Isaac pleaded with the Lord for his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord granted his plea, and Rebekah his wife conceived. But the children struggled together within her; and she said, "If all is well, why am I like this?" So, she went to inquire of the Lord. And the Lord said to her: "Two nations are in your womb, two peoples shall be separated from your body; One people shall be stronger than the other, and the older shall serve the younger."

1. Why did God favor Jacob?

A retired pastor once asked me this question, "Why did God choose Jacob who was deceitful and full of trickery in preference over the faithful son Esau?" Apostle Paul provides a rather straightforward answer to this question. Paul posits that God did not provide reasons for His choice of Jacob over Esau because the Almighty God is not obliged to answer to His actions. And here is Paul's explanation.

[Romans 9:10-13] And not only this, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, even by our father Isaac (for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls), it was said to her, "The older shall serve the younger." As it is written, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated."

The gist of Paul's explanation is in this phrase, "that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls." In other words, God Himself is the answer to His decision, which was not based on the works of Esau or Jacob. Paul adds the following argument to bolster God's position.

[Romans 9:20-21] But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, "Why have you made me like this?" Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?

So it was. God chose the younger of the two twins (younger by only a few minutes), who turned out to be a cheater and liar, to become the patriarch of the people of Israel who would bring forth twelve sons, whose descendants would in turn form the twelve tribes of Israel. Jacob would be blessed to become the successor in the covenantal blessing that God had bestowed to their grandfather Abraham, while Esau would be left out of this lineage of divine blessing. Paul compares this decision of God to a choice by a potter who takes a lump of clay and makes a vessel of high value for serving on a royal table and takes another lump and makes a honey pot for nightly bedside use by common people.

We accept this explanation of apostle Paul because God is the Almighty Creator who owes explanations and justifications to no one for His actions and decisions. Nevertheless, I thought surely the Scripture must include the reasons for the divine choice of Jacob over Esau, and I did some investigation and prayerful studies. The thought that came to my mind strongly was that when God makes a preferential choice of one person over another, He might base His decision on His foreknowledge of their future decisions and subsequent impacts of such decisions on His plan and will. The all-knowing God must have foreknown the future lives of these twin brothers, Esau and Jacob, their motives and pursuits in their hearts, and how they would impact the course of His future people and their nation. Thus, God had made His decision that the elder Esau should serve the younger Jacob, that His people would come out of Jacob instead of Esau, and the kingdom of Israel (Jacob) would be established and progress along.

2. Differences between Esau and Jacob

We now examine the lives of Esau and Jacob and attempt to identify the crucial elements that affected the key decisions in each of their lives. What we need to remember here is that the principle that God employs when favoring

one person over another is that He looks into their hearts and sees the motives and pursuits of the person rather than his stature, material possessions, family background or social status. God taught this principle to prophet Samuel when he was assigned to anoint one of the sons of Jesse as the future king of Israel. During this important divine assignment God reminded Samuel how men's selection criteria are vastly different from His own. I believe this principle is still relevant today as in the Old Testament eras.

[1 Samuel 16:7] But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature, because I have refused him. For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

So, let us identify what motives and pursuits were in the hearts of Esau and Jacob. Did either of the two have a true heart before God, honest and humble motives and a heart that sought to have God's help in all situations?

A. Esau's life

Esau wanted very much to please his father, wanted to be blessed as the elder son of his father Isaac and elder grandson of Abraham, whom he revered. Like his grandfather and father, Esau established himself as a successful enterprise owner of animal husbandry and had multiple wives who bore him many children and grandchildren. Esau even had a sizable private army that made him a local power man whom other tribes could not treat lightly.

Nevertheless, we do not find, neither in the Bible nor in the Book of Asher, any record of Esau having a dialogue with God or His angels nor of him praying to God. That meant, although Esau was a loyal child of Isaac and Rebecca, he never became a child of God. Instead of trying to please God and to live according to His precepts, Esau kept on building himself and serving his own ambitions and desires. Very sadly Esau's life was filled with grievances, hatred and complaints. That is why he is described as a fornicator and a profane person in Hebrews.

[Hebrews 12:16] lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright.

Esau sold his birthright so easily because he had a low esteem of God's covenant to Abraham and Isaac, which was to be succeeded by himself had he not sold the birthright to Jacob. It was an act of total lack of faith, a profane act of a non-believer, who had never accepted or understood the gospel that his grandfather and father had received from the angels. Instead of repenting his foolishness Esau sought to kill his brother Jacob, expressed this intent openly so that the evil spirit of hatred and discord destroyed the harmony of the holy family of Isaac and Rebecca. From this point on Esau continued to live contrary to God's will and plan.

At age 40 Esau went out and married two daughters of Hittites without his parents' consent. According to the Book of Asher, these two first wives of Esau brought with them into Isaac's home their idol-worship culture and practiced it brazenly instead of respecting the God-worship tradition of their parents-in-law's family. This caused serious grief to Isaac and Rebecca because their idol-worship brought in spiritual fornication into the home life.

[Genesis 26:34-35] When Esau was forty years old, he took as wives Judith the daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Basemath the daughter of Elon the Hittite. And they were a grief of mind to Isaac and Rebekah.

When Jacob was returning to his father's house after spending 20 years serving his uncle Laban in the land of Haran, Esau went out to meet his brother together with his private army of 400 armed men. Apparently, Esau still harbored age-old grievance and hatred toward his twin brother, whom he had vowed to kill 83 years ago.¹ Had Jacob not shown a spirit of humility together with an abundant array of gifts to his twin brother, he and his family could very likely have suffered evil consequences at the hands of Esau. Esau had an evil heart that could not forgive his own

¹ According to Book of Jasher, the birthright transfer occurred when the boys were 15 years old, and they were both 98 years old at the time of Jacob's return home and Isaac 158.

brother. However, God humbled Jacob at Brook Jabbok and thus kept Jacob and his family from the hand of Esau so that His covenant to Abraham could be carried forward.

[Genesis 32:6-7] Then the messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau, and he also is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him." So, 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.

When God saw how Esau's life would be like, do you think He would still have favored Esau over Jacob and allow Esau be the baton-holder of His covenant to Abraham? If you had been the decision-maker, would you have chosen Esau over Jacob, knowing the motives and desires in Esau's heart and how they would mold his life and surely jeopardize the success of God's plan?

B. Jacob's life

Young Jacob was not a person of admirable character in his normative years. In spite of his shortcomings God chose him and blessed him to become the patriarch from whom the twelve tribes of Israel would come. God changed Jacob's name to Israel after his struggle with an angel of God, as its meaning is 'struggle with God.' And this name has been associated both with the people and the land they possess and dwell. We find some 2400 instances of 'Israel' in the Bible. What caused God to bless Jacob so much?

First, Jacob esteemed the birthright in the Abrahamic family lineage as something highly valuable and to be acquired by all means, even by treachery, whereas Esau did not value it as something that can never be ceded to another, thus he sold it to Jacob for a meal in time of hunger. In this incident we must not criticize Jacob as a thief or trickster. Rather, God must have appreciated Jacob's high esteem of the proper value of the birthright and the effort that he put forth for its acquisition.

Secondly, although Jacob followed his mother's advice of employing trickery to secure his father's blessings as the first-born, God allowed that to occur because Rebecca was faithful in God's revelation that "the elder shall serve the younger," and she thereby helped Jacob to obtain the blessings as a way to fulfill the plan of God.

Thirdly, Jacob went to the land of Padan-aram to the household of his uncle Laban in obedience to his parents' will. Jacob's mother Rebecca was a child of Bethuel, who was a son of Abraham's brother Haran. Unlike their father Tera both Abraham and Haran served God. They were both locked up in prison by the evil king Nimrod for not worshipping idols, which Nimrod was forcing upon the people to worship. Haran died in the burning furnace while Abraham survived thanks to God's special protection. Bethuel's family still worshipped God because of this family history. Isaac and Rebecca must have known the spiritual condition of Rebecca's family back home.

Because of this knowledge they encouraged Jacob to flee from the threatening Esau and to go to Laban's home and find a maiden to marry. Jacob spent twenty years working for his uncle Laban. During this period Jacob acquired four wives and eleven sons and a large flock of herds thanks to the help of God's angels. During this period, however, Jacob became a different person. He learned to trust God and seek His help in all matters. He was in constant communication with God. We also need to spend time wisely so that we experience growth both spiritually and naturally while working diligently in obedience to godly counsel and trust in divine help.

Fourthly, on his way back home to his father's house Jacob was humbled through a night of struggling with an angel, whereupon he became limping physically and humble enough before his twin brother Esau, although he had secured the birthright as the elder. God must have been pleased to see this humility in Jacob before his potential enemy.

3. Our choices

The story of Esau and Jacob is a highly interesting one involving two competing twins and their family. Far beyond this aspect, however, the story teaches us a very important spiritual lesson about what God sees in people when He chooses men and women for achieving His plan and will. What are the motives and pursuits in our hearts as we live this earthly life? What drives us to pursue various goals and endeavors? As we study the story of Esau and Jacob, we should look into our own hearts and see what our motives are and openly lay them bare before God and ask Him to evaluate them and to correct us. Let us see the Esau nature in us that craves only the earthly things and seeks to satisfy the flesh. Let us also see the Jacob in us that agonizes and struggles to overcome the pressures and influences around us so that we become instruments of God for fulfilling His plan and purpose. And let us learn to value our place in God's hand highly and to trust in His mighty hand that helps us overcome in all situations we face. May God be magnified in each of us! May we be wise Christians who secure God's blessings rather than the praise of men! Amen.