

Finding Peace through Forgiveness

The story of Jacob, later renamed Israel, is marked by conflict from beginning to end.¹ In fact, conflict marks previous generations as well. Consider the family tree. Jacob is the son of Isaac and Rebekah, grandson of Abraham and Sarah. Last week we heard about the problems that arose among Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar with the births of Ishmael and Isaac. As the family grows, conflict affects almost every relationship.

- Sibling vs Sibling: Jacob and Esau struggle with each other even before they are born, while they are still in their mother's womb. Sibling rivalry appears again among Jacob's children.
- Parent and child vs Parent and child: From the beginning, each parent is reported to have a favorite child. Rebekah chooses Jacob while Isaac prefers Esau.
- Spouse vs Spouse: Rebekah conspires to deceive Isaac and direct events away from their natural course. Later on, there's tension among Jacob's wives.
- In-law vs In-law: Isaac and Rebekah aren't pleased with Esau's choice of wives. Jacob often tangles with his father-in-law, Laban, who also happens to be his uncle.
- Nation vs Nation: The family conflict reaches beyond the immediate family to touch distant relatives and next-door neighbors. The problems with Isaac and Ishmael and between Jacob and Esau lead to national conflicts between the Israelites, the Ishmaelites, and the Edomites. This reminds us that conflict at one level in a society can expand and affect more and more people.
- Human vs God: Conflict even marks Jacob's relationship with God. On his journey to reconnect with Esau, Jacob wrestles with a mysterious figure. By the end of the encounter, Jacob realizes that his struggle has been with God.

The video we watched summarized the story of Jacob and Esau.² I encourage you to read the end of the story when after many years of animosity and separation, the brothers meet again.³

It may be difficult for us to understand the depth of harm and betrayal Esau experiences when Jacob acquires Esau's birthright in exchange for food and steals the blessing rightfully due to him.

Birthright refers to the right of the oldest son to inherit his father's possessions and authority. In ancient Israel, all the sons received some of their father's property, but the firstborn received a double portion and became the head of the extended family. Through Jacob's cunning and Esau's weakness and poor choices, Jacob gains possessions, status, and power that should have gone to Esau.

While a birthright belonged to the firstborn son, anyone could receive a blessing. However, a greater blessing was often given to the oldest son, usually the one who held the

¹ This sermon draws from the Week Seven Prepare Essay and Sermon Notes written by Joanna Harader, *Current: Seeking Peace Together*, a digital curriculum from MennoMedia, [Current - Menno Media](#), and Eugene Ropp, *Genesis BCBC*, Herald Press, 1987, pp.165-216.

² [Jacob and Esau - Stories of the Bible - YouTube](#) adapted from Genesis 25:19–34; 27; 32:1–12; 33:1–17.

³ Genesis 33:1-17

birthright. These blessings acted as a “last will and testament” and were highly prized as a means of revealing God’s will.

Esau might have expected Isaac’s blessing to restore some of what he lost when he sold his birthright. Instead, through Jacob’s deception with the aid of their mother, Isaac delivers the words meant for Esau to Jacob instead.

*May God grant you gentle showers from heaven and the fertile soils of the earth, and rich harvests of grain and wine. May many peoples come and serve you, and may nations bow down to you. May you be the master of your brothers, and may your mother’s sons all bow down before you. May anyone who curses you be cursed, and may everyone who blesses you be blessed!*⁴

After Jacob’s deception, Esau complains that Jacob has deceived him two times. First, he took away his birthright. Then he took away his blessing. Isaac too is distraught. But once the blessing is given, he can’t change it. Esau begs his father for some type of blessing, and Isaac offers a secondary, inferior blessing.

*You will make your home far from the richness of the earth, far away from the gentle showers of heaven above. You will live by your sword, and you will serve your brother. But when you grow restless to be free, you will break his yoke from your neck.*⁵

I imagine all of us have experienced conflict and hurt within our family and other close relationships. Those we love the most have the ability to hurt us the most. Betrayal by a sibling, lack of approval and respect from a parent, disloyalty from a spouse, and other conflicts with family and friends cut deeply. Many of these are short lived before restoration and healing occur. Others linger for days or weeks or months or years before they’re resolved. Some last a lifetime and beyond.

Seeking peace together is our summer theme. We’ve considered ways to seek peace with God and peace within. We are now thinking about seeking peace with others.

In our story from Genesis, Esau’s anger is so hot that he is ready to kill his brother. Jacob must flee his home and never see his parents again. Later he must flee his new home because he wronged his father-in-law, Laban.

After both brothers gain wives, children, and wealth – cattle, goats, sheep, donkeys, camels, servants, and armies, they prepare to meet. Jacob fears that Esau will try to carry out the murder he plotted all those years ago. He approaches Esau with humility—or at least the display of humility—and offers a lavish gift.

This week’s faith link is “peacemakers forgive.” It seems that Esau does forgive Jacob. Far from being angry, Esau runs to meet Jacob and embraces him. He seems excited to meet his nieces and nephews. He accepts the gifts Jacob offers, which establishes a friendly relationship between the two men. Esau even offers to travel with Jacob, which would have allowed them to reestablish their relationship, but Jacob refuses, telling Esau to go ahead, and that he will catch up with him later. The video we watched ends by saying that the brothers make peace with each other. Such a happy, fairy tale ending!

But recall the ending from Genesis 33. *That day Esau returned on the road to Seir, but Jacob traveled to Succoth. He built a house for himself but made temporary shelters for his animals; therefore, he named the place Succoth.*

Jacob arrived safely at the city of Shechem in the land of Canaan on his trip from Paddan-aram, and he camped in front of the city. He bought the section of the field where he

⁴ Genesis 27:28-29, *The Voice*

⁵ Genesis 27:39-40, *The Voice*

*pitched his tent from the sons of Hamor, Shechem's father, for one hundred qesitahs. Then he set up an altar there and named it El Elohe Israel.*⁶

Jacob doesn't do what he said. He doesn't catch up with Esau later. Instead, he heads in a different direction and establishes a home away from his brother.

I wonder how long Esau waited for him. I wonder if he was sorry to have forgiven him when he realized that Jacob wasn't keeping his word. I wonder if he was relieved that he wouldn't have to live close to Jacob. Sometimes relationships work better if there's not too much togetherness, if there's a bit of distance between the people involved.

While there's much more in scripture about Jacob (later called Israel), we don't know much more about Esau. The two brothers do meet up at least one more time. According to Genesis 35, *at the age of 180 years, Isaac took his last breath and died. He was buried with his ancestors after a long, satisfying life. His sons Esau and Jacob buried him.*⁷

Since the brothers don't seem to form an enduring, positive relationship, we could ask whether Esau's forgiveness of Jacob truly brings peace. It appears that Esau's forgiveness brings Esau peace with God and, presumably, some measure of peace within himself. And it brings at least enough peace between the brothers that they can bury their father together.

We can find peace through forgiveness, but a healthy theology of forgiveness is complex. It's not easily summed up in lists and guidelines. So with a bit of confidence along with some apprehension, I offer you some statements about forgiveness, knowing that there are likely exceptions to many of them.

Why do we forgive?

- We forgive because it makes life more fair. We want revenge. But revenge never evens the score. Pains given and pains received never balance out. Vengeance mires us in our painful pasts. Forgiveness has the power to move us away from past pain.
- We forgive because forgiveness is stronger than hate and violence. Forgiveness requires realism and confrontation. Not facing the hurt is easier than forgiving. Forgiveness requires freedom. Nobody can force us to forgive. Forgiveness requires love, the most powerful force on earth. Love for self allows us to set limits to the abuse we accept and sets us free from bitter memories. Love for others encourages them to take responsibility for their actions and allows us to separate who people are from what they did.
- We forgive because it fits faulty people. All of us are complex, fallible human beings. Those who forgive also need to be forgiven by someone else. We cannot be right with God and unforgiving toward others.
- We forgive because it's good for our health. Bitterness is like a continually running machine that uses our bodies for its energy source. The longer and tighter we hold on to bitterness, the deeper the scar and the more time it takes to heal. Resentment and negative feelings spill over into other relationships. By refusing to forgive, we allow our personal growth and development to hinge on the decisions of others we may dislike. We relinquish control of our lives and that's not healthy.

How do we forgive?

- We forgive with a fundamental feeling of being forgiven. Until we accept God's unconditional love for us, we will have a difficult time forgiving others. If we're overwhelmed by guilt, it will be difficult to forgive.

⁶ Genesis 33:16-20, *The Voice*

⁷ Genesis 35:28-29, *The Voice*

- We forgive with some understanding of ourselves and of others. Understanding a little of what is going on inside of the person who hurt us helps to bring them – and the hurt – down to size. Understanding ourselves better helps too. For some of us we must recognize that our hurt is a big part of who we are. We find our identity in our victimhood and find some sort of comfort in rehashing old hurts. We also can't forgive if we deny that we have been hurt, if we negate our feelings. We need to realize that our habit of trying to smother conflict will never give us a chance to forgive. We need to recognize and name the anger, pain, and betrayal.
- We forgive with anger left over. Anger is a sign that we are alive and well. It drives us to change, to make things better. Bitterness and resentment fade but forgiveness does not change the facts. We may continue to feel anger when we remember what happened.
- We forgive with no set time limit. For some people one definite decision is enough. For most of us the decision to forgive is the start of a journey. The length of the journey may be different for each of us. Inner healing of the spirit can take a long time. But we cannot just forget about the offense and trust time to take care of it. We must make a decision to forgive.
- We forgive with our memories intact. What some of us mean by forgiving is “just forget it.” But forgiving is healing the pain of the past, not forgetting the past ever happened. It's refusing to let our memories control us. We sometimes bury pains too horrible for our memories to manage. Healing cannot occur until the memories return.
- We forgive with boundaries established. Forgiveness is not unconditional. We must enforce ethical conditions. It is possible – and sometimes necessary – to forgive and also to discontinue the relationship.
- We forgive with realistic expectations about reconciliation. Forgiveness can occur even though the person we forgive is out of reach – by distance, by their choice, or even by death. We can forgive in our own memories. For reconciliation to occur, the other person must truly understand what they did to hurt us even if they don't agree in all the details, they must acknowledge the hurt we felt, and they must intend to keep any promises they make. As we saw in the story of Esau and Jacob, forgiving someone doesn't necessarily mean that our relationship with that person will be restored. There are some people we cannot have healthy relationships with because they are not willing to be honest and loving in their dealings with us.

As we seek to find peace through forgiveness, it is good to remember that relationships involve more than one person—we cannot create peace alone. We can live with kindness, integrity, and forgiveness so that we have peace with God and peace within ourselves.

God of friendship and family, where interactions are strained, ease the tension. Where loved ones are distant, bring us closer. Where relationships are broken, grant healing. Give us the grace to offer forgiveness and the wisdom to release harmful relationships. Help us to find peace. Amen.