

## JACOB AND ESAU

*Genesis 25:19-34; 27*

Again we have a story about two brothers, but this time they are twins with the same mother as well as the same father. The teacher should fill in a little of the background by telling how Abraham sent his servant up to Haran, where his brother Nahor had settled, to bring back a wife for Isaac from his own people. Sarah had already died, and after Isaac married Rebekah, Abraham died also.

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### Doctrinal Points

*The Lord is merciful to us, and uses even our selfishness to teach us spiritual lessons.*

*The people in the Bible are not meant to be examples for us to imitate. Only the Lord's life is our example.*

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### Notes for Parents

Rebekah, Isaac's wife, came from Haran. When Abraham and his family took the long journey from their home in Ur of Chaldaea to the land of Canaan, his brother Nahor started the journey with him but stopped part way at Haran, and decided to settle there. Rebekah was Nahor's granddaughter. The Jews were many times commanded not to intermarry with the people among whom they happened to live. In this way their line was kept pure. The deeper reason for the prohibition was, of course, that they might not be drawn away into other religions.

Isaac and Rebekah had no children for twenty years, and then the twins Esau and Jacob were born. They were not identical twins. Esau was red and hairy—his other name *Edom* means “red”—while Jacob was a “smooth” man. And Esau was a “cunning hunter, a man of the field,” while Jacob stayed at home tending

the flocks and herds. Esau was his father's favorite, and Jacob was his mother's.

We have seen in past lessons that the people in the Bible stories were far from perfect. This is clearly illustrated in our two stories for today. Jacob in the first place drove a shrewd bargain with his brother, but Esau's fault was even greater, in being willing to sacrifice his proper future in order to satisfy his immediate physical hunger. Esau, as the firstborn, was entitled to the birthright, the right to be his father's heir. He was also entitled to the better blessing from his father, and here both Jacob and Rebekah obviously did wrong. But when the deceit was successfully carried out, Esau was so angry that he determined to kill his brother. There was not much to choose between Esau and Jacob.

In the Bible we often find stories about pairs of brothers: Cain and Abel, Joseph's two sons Ephraim and Manasseh, and in the New Testament Peter and Andrew and James and John. In our progress through life everything we "bring forth" has a twofold character, including both intention and thought, will and understanding. We know that Abraham represents our innocent little childhood; and Isaac, the development of our reasoning faculty. Esau and Jacob follow. They represent the period when young people are beginning their independent lives in the world, taking jobs or going away to college, standing on their own feet for the first time apart from their parents. Esau, the firstborn, is the natural will at this time, and Jacob is the understanding. Both are faulty. The point of our Bible story is that although the will is primary—we never do anything which is not prompted by a desire of some kind—it is always necessary for us to set our understanding before our will, to think before we act, even when our thoughts are very imperfect, and to control our impulses until we have learned to be really wise and to prefer to do the right things.



### **Primary**

The lesson can be centered on the first story about the selling of the birth-

right. Be sure to explain what a birthright was. The later story can be read at the end, if there is time. Try to teach the children the names Esau and Jacob, but keep in their minds especially the series of names *Abraham*, *Isaac*, and *Jacob*. They should be able to see that both Esau and Jacob did wrong, and that they both suffered as a result.

You remember that when Abraham started out from his home in Ur to go to the land of Canaan, his brother Nahor went with him but did not go all the way. He stopped about halfway, at a place called Haran, and settled there.

After Isaac grew up, Abraham did not want him to marry any of the Canaanite women; so he sent his most trusted servant back to Haran to find a wife for Isaac in his own brother's family. The servant brought back Nahor's granddaughter Rebekah, and Isaac was very happy to marry her.

Isaac and Rebekah had no children for twenty years. But finally they had twins, whom they named Esau and Jacob.

Which was the firstborn?

Were the twins alike?

What did Esau like to do?

What did Esau ask Jacob to give him?

What bargain did Jacob make with him?

Esau was very foolish to sell his birthright just to satisfy his hunger, and Jacob did wrong to take advantage of his brother in this way. And later he did something still worse.

Which of the twins was Isaac's favorite?

Which was Rebekah's favorite?

When Isaac was old, what did he ask Esau to do?

Rebekah helped Jacob to deceive his father by pretending to be Esau.

When Esau came back with his venison, his father was very much upset, but he told him he could not take back the blessing he had given Jacob. He gave Esau a different blessing—really a better one (see Genesis 27:39-40)—but Esau was still so angry that he said he was going to kill Jacob. So Rebekah persuaded Isaac to send Jacob away to Haran, her former home, for a long visit.



### Junior

Have the children trace again on a map the journey of Abram from Ur to Canaan, find Haran, and remind them of Nahor's settling there. This will introduce Rebekah, as Nahor's granddaughter. There are several lessons suggested in the Junior notes which children of this age can easily understand. Stress especially the fact that when we do wrong, we always suffer for it sooner or later, even though at the time we may seem to "get away with it."

Whom did Isaac marry?

Where did she come from?

Isaac and Rebekah lived together for twenty years before they had children. Then they had twin sons.

What were their names?

Which was the firstborn?

Were they identical twins?

*Esau* means "hairy," and *Edom*, the other name by which Esau is called, means "red." You want to remember that Esau was the father of the Edomites, who appear several times in the Bible story, usually as enemies of the Israelites.

Verses 29 to 34 of chapter 25 tell how both Esau and Jacob did wrong. In the King James Version there are some unfamiliar words in the story. *Pottage* is something cooked in a pot, like soup or stew. *Sod* is an old past tense of the verb *seethe* and means "boiled." The *birthright* was the right of the oldest son to become head of the family after his father's death. *Lentiles* are any kind of bean or pea; there are several varieties, one of which is red.

Jacob did wrong in taking advantage of his brother's hunger and weakness to drive a sharp bargain, and Esau did wrong in giving up a valuable privilege to satisfy his appetite. Whenever we do something wrong in order to get something we happen to want very much at the moment, we are "selling our birthright for a mess of pottage"; this is a common expression taken from this story. What do you think our "birthright" really is? Read Matthew 25:31-34. We are different from animals in that we are capable of learning about the Lord and obeying Him, and thus of coming to love Him and be "inheritors" of His kingdom in heaven. We can think about

His will and judge whether the things we want to do are good or bad in His sight. Animals cannot think about God or about right and wrong. They are governed by their instincts and appetites. So whenever we let ourselves be governed by our natural desires, we are putting ourselves on the level of animals and “selling our birthright.”

Which son was the favorite of Isaac?

Which was Rebekah’s favorite?

When Isaac was very old and almost blind and knew it was nearly time for him to die, he wanted to give Esau his blessing—the special blessing which was the right of the firstborn. This was customary among the Jews. The Bible records several instances of it. The father’s final blessing was very precious to the son.

What did Isaac ask Esau to do for him?

Why did Rebekah want Jacob to deceive his father?

How did she help him do it?

Isaac was doubtful. He said, “The voice is Jacob’s voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau.” Still, he gave him the blessing. When Jacob was gone and Esau came in with his venison and Isaac knew that he had been deceived, he said he could not take back the blessing.

Does it seem strange that Jacob should have been permitted to get his blessing by deceit? Jacob did not go unpunished for his wrongdoing. He had to flee from his brother’s anger and spend many long years far from home, and finally he had to bow down before his brother and ask his forgiveness. The Lord used the people in the Bible just as they were, to teach lessons which you will understand when you are a little older. He made even their wrongdoing serve a use. We must study the stories carefully to find the lessons and not think that because someone was blessed by the Lord, everything he did was right. We know that we often do wrong things, and yet think of all the blessings the Lord gives us!

Read carefully the blessing Isaac gave Jacob and the blessing he

gave Esau. We shall see that both these blessings were fulfilled. Esau's plan to kill his brother shows something of his character, just as his willingness to sell his birthright does.

Rebekah's plan to save Jacob was also used by the Lord. It started a whole train of circumstances which we shall study in our later lessons. Everything we do, every decision we make, changes the course of our lives. We should try hard, therefore, to learn to make wise and right decisions.

Where was Haran?

Who lived there?

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### Intermediate

In this lesson the general correspondence of Jacob and Esau is taken up first because it completes the Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob series. The young people should have these patriarchs and their general meaning very clearly in mind before they go on. The reason for Jacob's taking precedence over Esau can be related to the correspondence of Isaac. That is, we need to know truth and to reason from spiritual principles. This is a good opportunity to be sure that the young people understand that the New Church does not teach that all Bible characters are examples to be imitated. The Intermediates are old enough to understand how this can be, and to recognize it without losing any of their reverence for the Word.

Abraham died and was gathered to his people. The childhood state of simple obedience in our lives passes away finally and is replaced by the rule of the rational, which is Isaac. As we grow out of our young childhood, our minds develop and we begin to think for ourselves and finally to act independently. Isaac represents the thinking and Jacob and Esau the acting period. Our independent lives are developing and progressing, but at the same time they are coming down from the high plane of innocence and trust which characterized our infancy to the level of the outside world. Here our life is clearly divided between our desires and our knowledge—Esau and Jacob. The Lord wants both to be good, to be led by Him, but by nature we are selfish and lacking in wisdom. Both Esau and Jacob were faulty. And our desires and our knowl-

edge conflict, just as there was trouble between Esau and Jacob.

Esau, Isaac's firstborn son, pictures the love or desire side and Jacob the truth or thought side of our activity in the world. Desire comes first. If we had no desires, we should neither think nor act. But in order to do what we want we must first learn how. So actually Jacob has to take the first place for a time. *Jacob* means "supplanter." He supplants his older brother.

The character of Jacob in the Bible has puzzled some people; they have assumed that anyone the Lord prospered must have been a thoroughly good person and meant for us to copy. But this is not so. The people in the Bible had good and bad qualities, just as we have, and we are to learn from their stories, even in the letter, what not to do as well as what to do, and about the Lord's tender and merciful dealing with men even when they make serious mistakes. Jacob took a mean advantage of his brother, but Esau also did wrong in despising his birthright—the cherished right of the firstborn to follow his father as head of the family—and giving it away to satisfy his hunger. It may seem to us very unlikely that he would really do this. Yet we do the same sort of thing constantly. We are always giving up something important which we might have at some future time for the sake of some unimportant thing we happen to want right now. Our birthright is the right to know and love the Lord—that is what makes us men instead of animals—to be "sons of God" and to "inherit the kingdom of heaven." Whenever we sacrifice our Christian ideals for the sake of some worldly satisfaction which we want at the moment, we are selling our birthright for a mess of pottage. Jacob could not have cheated Esau if Esau had not yielded to temptation. We sometimes feel, as Esau did, that we shall "die" if we do not get what we want, but the Lord will always give us strength to resist temptation if we really try.

In the second part of our lesson Jacob pretends to be Esau. We often pretend to be the kind of people we wish we were. The Lord knows our real motives. But He does not take away his blessing, since it is better for us to do right from selfish motives

than not to do right at all, and this is one of the ways in which we form good habits and gradually come to love doing what is right. Esau, too, was a mixture of good and bad. He wanted to be blessed and was willing to obey his father and to take a great deal of trouble to procure the blessing. But he was also ready to kill his brother because of his disappointment. When we do not get what we want, don't we sometimes want to hurt somebody? Esau and Jacob in their youth were both thoroughly selfish just as we are in the beginning.

It was a long time before Jacob and Esau were reconciled, and both had to go through years of hard work and discipline first. It takes all our lives in this world to bring our desires and our thinking together in the service of the Lord.

*Basic Correspondences*

Esau = good on the natural plane of life

Jacob = truth on the natural plane of life

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**Senior**

Call the attention of the Seniors to the collateral lines which develop from the characters who are dropped by the way: the Moabites and Ammonites from Lot, the Ishmaelites from Ishmael, and now the Edomites from Esau. These tribes represent thoughts and feelings which we develop at various stages and which remain in our background and come up to trouble us later. We are tracing one thread—the Lord's influence in our lives—but there are other "side lines" branching off here and there from the true line, all of which must eventually be brought into order and under the control of the Lord. This will help to relate the Sunday school lessons to the young people's school and home and recreational activities, and will help to show them the primary importance of religious instruction.

The obvious lesson of the literal story of our first chapter is summed up in the common expression "selling one's birthright for a mess of pottage"; for everyone can see that Esau made a foolish trade, and we know, if we really look at ourselves honestly, that we are all frequently tempted to grasp at some present outward satisfaction at the sacrifice of a future great and more interior good.



But the deeper lessons of the chapter are hidden. We need first to realize that with the birth of Esau and Jacob, we reach the third and final stage in our development from infancy to manhood. We all like to look back upon our early childhood, and we recognize the beauty of its innocent, trusting spirit; but the time comes when our thinking must be made actual in deeds. The rational stage of our development—the Isaac stage—must end, and we must begin to seek an independent place in the external life of the world. Esau and Jacob represent this external, “practical” plane of life. And because it is in the carrying out of our purposes that we must finally be specific, it is here that the separation between will and thought, desire and knowledge, becomes evident.

So now instead of a single son we have twins. Esau pictures the will and Jacob the intellect: twin brothers yet often in conflict. The will is the firstborn because there must be motive before there can be any thought. But because the human will is by birth selfish, the intellect must for a time take first place. The selfishness and shortsightedness of our natural affections and impulses are pictured in Esau’s willingness to give up his whole future to satisfy his present physical hunger.

In our second story Isaac is old and his eyes are dim. When we pass from the thinking stage of our teens to active, independent life, we are likely to become so absorbed in the external affairs of every day that we do not see clearly for a time. We are easily deceived by appearances. Our wills are not yet unselfish. The wild game which Esau brought for his father represents our own ideas of goodness with which we like to be satisfied. Jacob is permitted to substitute two kids of the goats, which represent genuine goodness, though of a natural kind. So our minds help us, although at this stage it is necessary that the truth be made to seem desirable: Jacob puts on Esau’s clothing and puts the skins of the goats on his hands and on the back of his neck to make himself appear like Esau.

This does not mean that Jacob did right. The Lord permitted the deception to teach us that a selfish will must not be allowed

to lead us. We must learn the truth and follow it even though we at first imagine that the truth came out of our own minds, and praise ourselves for thinking of it. This is what is represented by Isaac's words, "The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau."

In the literal story Jacob paid a heavy penalty. He, the more home-loving of the two brothers, had to start off alone and serve many years in a strange land before he was allowed to return and enjoy his inheritance. Haran, to which he went, represents a state of simple obedience. After we have developed our faculties and begun our independent life in the world, we have to go through a long period of doing right just because we know we ought to, before the Lord can develop in us the real love of truth and goodness which enables us to enter into our true spiritual home.

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### Adult

There is plenty of discussion material here, especially in the thought that "natural good"—which is Esau—is never pure or trustworthy, and that our real spiritual progress is dependent upon Jacob, our interest in truth.

Swedenborg says: "There are in every man an internal man, a rational man that is intermediate, and an external, which is properly called the natural man. With the Lord these were represented by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (AC 1893). The Abraham stage with us is our infancy, when the internal man is open to the heavens and is filled by the Lord with "remains"—innocent, trustful, happy states which can later be used in our regeneration. Then we develop into the rational or Isaac stage, and finally are ready to carry out in everyday life the knowledges and affections which we have developed in the previous stages. The rest of our life, if we regenerate, is spent in developing and then in bringing into order this natural or external plane and in gradually bringing it to act as the servant of the inner planes. So, although Abraham and Isaac come first, and in one sense are higher than Jacob, their descendants are called the seed of Jacob or the children of Israel

(Israel being the name later given to Jacob by the Lord), and their history occupies the rest of the Old Testament. Our story today deals with Jacob and his elder twin Esau, and of how Jacob instead of Esau came to be head of the family. We have spoken before of the two divisions of our lives, symbolized by the two rooms in the ark—the will and the understanding. The natural plane of our lives has these two divisions, and they are pictured by Esau and Jacob, Esau good in the natural plane, and Jacob truth in the same plane. They are twins because the will and the understanding, good and truth, go together as equals in us from the beginning.

Esau is actually the elder because all power is from the will, even the power to think, and influx from the Lord or from the hells primarily affects our wills. Throughout most of our life, however, Jacob supplants Esau, because we have to learn what is right before we can do it: our understanding appears to take first place. The Lord permits this change, this inversion of the true order, to meet the changed conditions caused by man's turning to self and perverting his will. That is, because by inheritance our will is selfish, we cannot safely be guided by it but must be taught what is right. Jacob instead of Esau must be head of our house. But we note that Esau eventually is to break off the yoke of his brother. This means that when we are regenerated, when we have practiced doing as truth teaches until the Lord has been able to give us a new will, then we may again be ruled by our will and do as we please freely.

The literal story of Esau and Jacob has proved a stumbling block to those who believe that all those in the letter of the Word whom the Lord favors must be exemplary characters. Here is a man who cheated, lied, and stole, and yet was allowed to keep the fruits of his deception and to become the ancestor of the Lord's chosen people. How can we "get around" this obvious fact? In the New Church we do not have to get around it. The Bible characters, with the exception of our Lord, are not in themselves exemplary. Many of them are evil men, doing evil deeds. But the Lord can make use even of their evil deeds to teach us the ins and outs of

our own souls and the nature of the humanity which He assumed and glorified. He makes use of evil to show how His providence foresees and provides for all our states and tries to lead us back to Him, however far we may have departed. In the inmost sense, which relates to the life of the Lord, the Word is all true and beautiful. In the inner sense, which relates to our own states, we see the Lord's love and truth acting upon our degenerate human nature in the effort to save us. In the letter we see this struggle acted out upon the stage of real life by the Hebrew nation, the nation chosen to portray it. Thus even in the letter, if we keep the whole face of it in mind when studying any given story, we can see good and evil, truth and falsity at work and trace their effects. We must not expect the letter to portray ideal conditions.

The objection to the story of Jacob and Esau is based on the desire to have all evil punished immediately and obviously. This is not the Lord's desire; it is a very earthly one. The Lord desires to show us our evils and to turn us from them, never to punish. Evil punishes itself, often not immediately or obviously, but surely in the end. The results of Jacob's evils can easily be traced in his fear of Esau not only immediately after his deed but even twenty years later when he returned and sought reconciliation with his brother. Furthermore, Esau himself is far from exemplary. He is willing to sell his birthright—his proper future—to satisfy his immediate physical hunger. Here is a lesson which all can see and understand. How often we put present pleasure above future good! How often for the sake of some trivial thing which we want now we do what we know is injuring our character and our prospects, and even what we know will bring us pain and sorrow later! We know that our eternal happiness depends upon our keeping the commandments, yet we continually allow carelessness, laziness, cowardice, and selfishness to lead us to break them. We know that our spiritual progress depends upon our learning about the Lord and doing His will, yet we let ourselves become absorbed in worldly pursuits and pleasures and neglect our regular reading of the Word and the writings and our worship of the Lord. We know

that we are higher than animals just because we have spiritual possibilities which they do not have, yet we choose to live on the level of earthly satisfactions like animals. We think Esau was very foolish, but we do as he did every day.

We have seen that Esau pictures good, and Jacob truth, in the natural plane of our minds. We should all agree that the really important thing is to be good. Esau is the elder twin and the rightful head of the family. Why then does the Lord permit Jacob to supplant Esau? Why do we have to try to keep on learning truth, studying the Word and trying to understand it more and more deeply? If we do what we think is right, is not this all that can be expected of us? Many people today answer this question in the affirmative. Yet have we not often done what we thought was right and found out afterward that it was just the wrong thing? This is our key to the true answer. There is indeed some good in everyone. The Lord has seen to that. But there is also in each of us by our natural inheritance a great deal of evil, and we cannot distinguish between good and evil without truth from the Lord. If we think of ourselves as naturally good and as competent to judge right and wrong without instruction from the Lord, we shall judge and act from evil impulses quite as often as from good ones, and presently we shall believe that whatever we think is true and whatever we want is good, and then we shall be unable to see any fault in ourselves or to improve ourselves in any way. No matter how well we are brought up, we never come to the point in this life when we can safely act from impulse without thought, and our standards are never perfect. Our wills are never wholly pure. We must keep on learning more and more of the Lord's truth and apply it to deeper and deeper states in ourselves. For all our time on earth, Jacob must be the head of our house and Esau must serve him. Not until we get to heaven, where our wills are wholly satisfied to serve the Lord, will Esau be able to take his rightful place.



### From the Writings of Swedenborg

*Divine Providence*, n. 234: “There are no laws of permission by themselves or apart from the laws of the Divine providence, but the two are the same; therefore God is said to permit, which does not mean that He wills, but that on account of the end, which is salvation, He cannot avert. Whatever is done for the sake of the end, which is salvation, is according to the laws of the Divine providence. For the Divine providence . . . is constantly moving in a way diverse from and contrary to man’s will, continually intent upon its end; and in consequence, at every movement of its operation or at every step of its progress, where it observes man to be swerving from that end, it guides, bends, and directs him according to its laws, by leading him away from evil and leading him to good. That this cannot be done without the permission of evil will be seen in what follows. Moreover, nothing can be permitted without a reason, and the reason can be found only in some law of the Divine providence, which law teaches why it is permitted.”

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### Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- P. Whom did Isaac marry? *Rebekah*
- P. Where did she come from? *Haran*
- P. What two sons did Isaac and Rebekah have? *Esau and Jacob*
- P. Which was the firstborn? *Esau*
- P. How were they different? *Esau hairy and red; Jacob smooth*
- P. What did Esau sell to Jacob? *birthright*
- P. What did he get for it? *“mess of pottage”*
- P. Which son was Isaac’s favorite? *Esau*
- P. Which was Rebekah’s favorite? *Jacob*
- J. When Isaac was old, how did Rebekah help Jacob to deceive him?  
*prepared meat, put goat’s hair on Jacob*
- P. What did Isaac give Jacob that Esau should have had?  *blessing of firstborn*
- P. How did Esau feel about it? *wanted to kill Jacob*
- I. What do Esau and Jacob represent? *natural will, natural understanding*
- S. Why did the Lord permit Jacob to supplant Esau? *to show that we must not be led by selfish will*