

November 4

Lesson 10 (NIV)

SIBLINGS' RIVALRY

DEVOTIONAL READING: [Matthew 16:13–20](#)

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: [Genesis 25:19–34](#)

GENESIS 25:19–34

¹⁹This is the account of the family line of Abraham's son Isaac.

Abraham became the father of Isaac, ²⁰and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah daughter of Bethuel the Aramean from Paddan Aram and sister of Laban the Aramean.

²¹Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was childless. The LORD answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant. ²²The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, "Why is this happening to me?" So she went to inquire of the LORD.

²³The LORD said to her,

"Two nations are in your womb,

and two peoples from within you will be separated;

one people will be stronger than the other,

and the older will serve the younger."

²⁴When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb. ²⁵The first to come out was red, and his whole body was like a hairy garment; so they named him Esau. ²⁶After this, his brother came out, with his hand grasping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when Rebekah gave birth to them.

²⁷The boys grew up, and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was content to stay at home among the tents. ²⁸Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

²⁹Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished. ³⁰He said to Jacob, "Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I'm famished!" (That is why he was also called Edom.)

[31](#) Jacob replied, “First sell me your birthright.”

[32](#) “Look, I am about to die,” Esau said. “What good is the birthright to me?”

[33](#) But Jacob said, “Swear to me first.” So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob.

[34](#) Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, and then got up and left.

So Esau despised his birthright.

KEY VERSE

The LORD said to her, “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger.”—[Genesis 25:23](#)

GOD’S WORLD AND GOD’S PEOPLE

Unit 3: God Blesses and Re-creates Regardless

LESSONS [10–13](#)

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize the account of Rebekah’s pregnancy, the birth of her twin boys, and the account of how Jacob obtained the birthright from Esau.
2. Explain what contributed to the sibling rivalry between Jacob and Esau and which influences today create such rivalries.
3. Take the first step to resolve a family rivalry.

LESSON OUTLINE

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[A. Big Picture \(vv. 19, 20\)](#)

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C. [Battle \(vv. 22, 23\)](#)

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C. [Boys' Preferences \(v. 27\)](#)

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C. [Thought to Remember](#)

HOW TO SAY IT

Aram*Air*-um.

Aramean*Air*-uh-**mee**-un.

Bethuel*Beh*-*thew*-el.

Edom*Ee*-dum.

Edomites*Ee*-dum-ites.

Esau*Ee*-saw.

Hagar*Hay-gar*.

Harran*Hair-un*.

Laban*Lay-bun*.

Mesopotamia*Mes-uh-puh-tay-me-uh*.

Nahor*Nay-hor*.

Paddan Aram*Pad-un Air-um*.

Introduction

A. Lucy and Jacob

The classic *Peanuts* comic strip often featured a theme centered around a promise that Charlie Brown's nemesis, Lucy, makes to hold a football on the ground so he can kick it. Charlie is wary; he knows that Lucy will pull the ball away. Lucy pleads for another chance, claiming that she has changed. She gives Charlie her "bonded word" that she will not pull the ball away. So Charlie backs up, runs toward the ball, and (of course) Lucy yanks it away. Charlie is seen flipping into the air with his predictable exclamation of "Aaugh!" Then he lands on his back with a *Wump!*

Lucy's clever, deceptive behavior is similar to that of Jacob, the focus of our next four lessons. In today's Scripture passage we see him taking advantage of his brother Esau's hunger in order to pull away from him something much more significant than a football: the family's birthright. But this was no cartoon; it was a series of events with tragic consequences for Jacob and his family.

B. Lesson Context

Today's lesson begins a new unit of lessons that continues our studies from Genesis this quarter. The unit's theme of "God Blesses and Re-creates Regardless" highlights God's ability to work through the life of one flawed man in particular: Jacob.

Initially, Jacob had very little regard for anyone except himself. He was a man who lived by his wits, by his ability to outwit and outmaneuver anyone who crossed his path. Eventually he learned to acknowledge God, not himself, as the one in control, though the consequences of his deceitful tactics dogged him through much of his life.

“Siblings’ Rivalry,” the title of this lesson, could serve as a subtitle for the book of Genesis as a whole. Before we read of Jacob and Esau’s tension, we read of Cain and Abel and of Ishmael and Isaac (Jacob’s father). Later in Genesis, we see the friction between the two sisters Leah and Rachel. Then there is that of Jacob’s sons. Thus today’s account doesn’t lack for company!

I. Distressed Mother

([GENESIS 25:19–23](#))

A. Big Picture (vv. [19](#), [20](#))

[19](#). This is the account of the family line of Abraham’s son Isaac.

Abraham became the father of Isaac,

The book of Genesis is arranged by the use of the phrase *the account of* (compare [Genesis 2:4](#); [5:1](#); [6:9](#); [10:1](#); [11:10](#), [27](#); [25:12](#); [25:19](#); [36:1](#), [9](#); [37:2](#)). The verses just prior to this one record the account of the family line of Abraham’s son Ishmael. But that account lasts only through verse [18](#). By contrast, the record of *the family line of Abraham’s son Isaac* that begins here continues through [Genesis 35:29](#)—more than 10 chapters! That speaks to the relative significance of these half brothers.

[20](#). and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah daughter of Bethuel the Aramean from Paddan Aram and sister of Laban the Aramean.

[Genesis 24](#) records the arranged marriage of *Isaac* to *Rebekah* (last week’s lesson). *Bethuel* is the son of Abraham’s brother Nahor. Her brother *Laban* eventually becomes father-in-law of Jacob, son of Isaac and Rebekah, through Jacob’s marriages to Leah and Rachel, Laban’s daughters.

The term *Aramean* is a geographical designation rather than an ethnic one. The term *Paddan Aram* means “plain of Aram.” It is a part of Mesopotamia, to which Abraham had sent his servant to find a wife for Isaac ([Genesis 24:10](#)).

B. Barrenness (v. [21](#))

[21](#). Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was childless. The LORD answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant.

Barrenness is a characteristic of three prominent women in the book of Genesis: Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel. This condition, viewed as shameful in biblical times ([Genesis 30:23](#); [Luke 1:25](#)), becomes the backdrop for God to show his power to reverse such circumstances. But God does not grant this request simply to relieve heartache. He is committed to let nothing—not even a seemingly irreversible condition like barrenness—prevent him from keeping his covenant with Abraham ([Genesis 12:2](#)).

Isaac, distraught over his wife’s condition, turns to the Lord in prayer. Thus did his father Abraham express to the Lord his own concern over Sarah ([Genesis 15:2](#), [3](#)). In each case the barren woman is empowered to conceive.

What Do You Think?

How can we ensure that life's difficulties drive us closer to God rather than further from him?

Digging Deeper

Analyze motives and spiritual maturity of Bible characters who made wrong choices in this regard ([Matthew 13:20, 21](#); [26:69–75](#); etc.).

C. Battle (vv. [22](#), [23](#))

[22a](#). The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, “Why is this happening to me?”

An expectant mother can often feel the baby inside kick. Rebekah, however, seems to be experiencing an unusual amount of such activity. She does not yet know that she is carrying twins; she is only questioning why the movement within her is so intense. Perhaps she suspects that there is more than one child responsible for this. In truth, though, the sibling rivalry has begun!

[22b](#). So she went to inquire of the LORD.

Just what this action consists of is difficult to determine. It appears that she goes to a specific place as opposed to simply praying, which is what Isaac has done. Perhaps it is a place that has come to be associated with the presence of the Lord for some reason, much as is the case later with Bethel ([Genesis 28:16–19](#)). What is most important is that Rebekah is going to the right source with her question.

What Do You Think?

What are some reliable ways to discern God's will or purpose in times of confusion?

Digging Deeper

Consider the distinction between what God generally requires of everyone (from Scripture) and what God may want specifically from a particular person in a given context.

[23a](#). The LORD said to her, “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other,

In some clear and unmistakable manner, *the Lord* speaks to Rebekah and answers her inquiry, just as he has answered Isaac's prayer for a child. Rebekah is carrying twins, but they are described as *two nations*. The nations are not specifically named; all that Rebekah is told involves the future of each.

[23b](#). “and the older will serve the younger.”

The prophecy then focuses on the children themselves. The promise here is not the norm in the Old Testament world. Typically, the older sibling is to be given greater prominence within the family. The Law of Moses later stipulates that the firstborn son be given a “double share” of the family's wealth ([Deuteronomy 21:15–17](#)). But in Genesis, the younger sibling is generally more favored. In addition to Jacob, this is true with Abel, Isaac, Rachel, and Joseph.

This illustrates what the Lord will later say through the prophet Isaiah: “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways” ([Isaiah 55:8](#)). One may also see the preference for the younger sibling as illustrating the principle of grace at work: the individual who does not deserve prominence or blessing (the younger) receives it nonetheless.

II. Distinctive Boys

([GENESIS 25:24–28](#))

A. Esau’s Birth (vv. [24](#), [25](#))

[24](#), [25](#). When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb. The first to come out was red, and his whole body was like a hairy garment; so they named him Esau.

A child’s name in the Bible often reflects some detail in the circumstances of the birth itself ([Genesis 38:27–30](#); [1 Samuel 4:19–22](#)) or includes a statement of hope or vindication ([Genesis 30:8](#), [20](#)). In this case the unusually *hairy* appearance of the firstborn son yields the name *Esau*, from the Hebrew for “hairy.”

Also quite striking is the redness of his skin. Both details will play an important role in the sibling rivalry that will characterize these boys: the color *red* (of Jacob’s stew) will figure in Jacob’s act of cunning in obtaining Esau’s birthright, and the hairy appearance will enter into the deception of Isaac in [Genesis 27](#).

B. Jacob’s Birth (v. [26](#))

[26a](#). After this, his brother came out, with his hand grasping Esau’s heel; so he was named Jacob.

The second of Rebekah’s twins is marked not by his appearance but by a rather curious action for a newborn: *his hand* seizes *Esau’s heel*. From this he is given the name *Jacob*, from the Hebrew word for “heel.” At this point, no one can anticipate what kind of “heel-grabbing” this infant will eventually engage in. Nor can anyone anticipate how the characteristics of Esau will play themselves out in his life someday. Whoever names these twins (probably their parents) may be chuckling as they do so. But deceit and heartbreak await this family, not laughter.

Jacob’s heel-grabbing will come to have a much more sinister connotation to it: grabbing the heel as if to pull a rival back and impede his progress so that the heel-grabber can move ahead of him. This is what Jacob will become known for doing—especially and tragically to his own brother and father.

[26b](#). Isaac was sixty years old when Rebekah gave birth to them.

Isaac married when he was 40 ([Genesis 25:20](#), above), and now he is age 60. Thus he has had to wait 20 years for his sons’ births.

WHEN SIBLINGS STRUGGLE

For years, twins Alexandria and Anastasia Duval shared the ups and downs of life, experiencing together business enterprises, bankruptcies, and moves to various places. On May 29, 2016, the sisters were seen in a parked vehicle on a cliff 200 feet above the ocean in Hawaii. Alexandria was in the driver’s

seat. Witnesses saw a fight break out between them, with Anastasia pulling Alexandria’s hair. Then, according to witnesses, the vehicle accelerated and made a sharp left turn over the cliff. Alexandria was injured, and Anastasia was killed in the crash at the bottom of the cliff.

Shortly thereafter, police charged Alexandria with second-degree murder, alleging that she intentionally drove off the road. But a judge said there was not sufficient evidence for the charge. Four months later, however, a grand jury accepted the murder charge, and Alexandria was arrested in New York and held for extradition to Hawaii.

The Bible also includes tragic tales of siblings who struggled against each other. We know about the later struggles of Jacob and Esau, but today’s passage tells us the problem began early—before birth! Many of us wonder how we can work with God to overcome family strife. Let us pray we do better at it than Jacob and Esau did. Perhaps God gave us their story to encourage us to strive not to be like them!

—C. R. B.

C. Boys’ Preferences (v. 27)

27. The boys grew up, and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was content to stay at home among the tents.

The account now moves forward in time, though no specific number of years is given. The text simply reads that *the boys grew up*. Of more importance is how different the boys become, though they are twins: *Esau* becomes an outdoorsman, *a skillful hunter* and *a man of the open country*. *Jacob* is more of a homebody. The Hebrew word rendered *content to stay at home* describes someone who is orderly and methodical, more of a quiet and private person. Jacob is certainly not the rugged, robust individual his brother is.



Visual for Lesson [10](#). Start a discussion by pointing to this visual as you ask, “What’s at the heart of sibling rivalry?”

D. Parents’ Preferences (v. 28)

28. Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

Not only are these boys different, but their differences affect the attitudes of their parents toward them. *Isaac* is drawn toward *Esau*, while *Rebekah* favors *Jacob*. With Isaac a reason is given for his

preference: he likes the kind of food Esau prepares from what he captures when he hunts. The Hebrew word for *wild game* can designate any kind of game obtained by hunting.

No reason is given for why Rebekah becomes especially fond of Jacob, but this is likely because he spends so much time “among the tents” where Rebekah presumably spends most of her days. If there is already any degree of sibling rivalry between Esau and Jacob, the fact that the parents play favorites can only exacerbate the problem.

What Do You Think?

How can parents ensure they do not exhibit favoritism regarding their children?

Digging Deeper

Consider both dos and don'ts.

WHAT MAKES CHILDREN DIFFERENT?

I was born 4 years before my first brother, 8 years before the second, and 12 years before our sister. We differ in many ways, but others see us as very much alike, especially in our sense of humor. At family reunions, our spouses make a game out of simultaneously cringing at our puns and time-worn stories.

Some psychologists call sibling differences a matter of divergence: when one child excels in an area, the others seek to excel in divergent ways. A second way to explain sibling differences comes from the fact that they experience the family environment differently. If their parents divorce, siblings of varying ages will react differently. A third explanation comes from exaggerated comparisons. Though two siblings might both be friendly, the extremely outgoing child will be labeled the family's extrovert while the other is seen as the introvert.

Esau and Jacob differed in appearance from birth, and soon their personality differences became apparent. Their differences were likely exaggerated by the dysfunctional way their parents responded to them. Many of the difficulties the two brothers experienced later in life might have been mitigated if they had received wiser parenting. Rearing children is difficult, but we can make it less stressful if we use godly wisdom in doing so.

—C. R. B.

III. Despised Birthright

(GENESIS 25:29–34)

A. Offer Given (vv. 29–31)

29. Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished.

Apparently Jacob has honed his cooking skills quite well as a result of spending time among the tents. On the occasion mentioned here, Esau comes *in from the open country*. The text does not say whether he has been working or hunting. But apparently it has been some time since his last meal.

30. He said to Jacob, “Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I’m famished!” (That is why he was also called Edom.)

The *red* coloring of the food may come from the lentils ([Genesis 25:34](#)) that are used in making the *stew*. Esau’s craving for this food leads to another name for him: *Edom*, meaning “red.” (Remember that verse [25](#) tells us that Esau came out of the womb “red.”) Esau’s second name, Edom, is eventually used to identify his descendants: Edomites.

What Do You Think?

How can we ensure that our decisions are driven by a sense of right and wrong rather than self-gratification?

Digging Deeper

Distinguish between those who make selfish choices intentionally and those who do so because of ignorance or blind spots.

31. Jacob replied, “First sell me your birthright.”

To this point, the idea of a *birthright* has not been mentioned in the book of Genesis. The Hebrew word behind this translation appears a total of 10 times in the Old Testament in reference to humans, and 5 of them are in the account of Jacob and Esau. The other 5 occur in [Genesis 43:33](#); [Deuteronomy 21:17](#) (discussed earlier); and [1 Chronicles 5:1, 2](#).

Obviously, *Jacob* is well aware of the birthright’s importance. Esau may have returned from a hunting expedition, but Jacob is now the hunter who sees his prey, and his “heel-grabbing” skills go into action. He sees in his brother’s appetite an opportunity to offer a deal and thus take the lead within the family hierarchy.

B. Offer Accepted (vv. [32–34](#))

32. “Look, I am about to die,” Esau said. “What good is the birthright to me?”

Esau exaggerates his condition, claiming to be *about to die*, and thereby reasons that a *birthright* is worthless to a dead man. In his mind, if the birthright cannot keep him from starving to death, then it has no value.

33. But Jacob said, “Swear to me first.” So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob.

Abraham’s servant had sworn *an oath* that he would carry out Abraham’s desire that he find a wife for Isaac from Abraham’s relatives in Harran. The oath was accompanied by a specified gesture ([Genesis 24:1–9](#)). With Esau and Jacob, the two may exchange a verbal agreement accompanied by a gesture (something similar to a handshake). The deal is finalized: *the birthright* has been sold.

What Do You Think?

What can we do to protect ourselves from those who use our weakness to take advantage?

Digging Deeper

Consider how [Psalm 55:20, 21](#); [Proverbs 7:21](#); [Romans 16:17, 18](#); [2 Timothy 3:6](#); [1 John 2:18–27](#); and [3:7–10](#) help identify characteristics and tactics of manipulative personalities.

34. Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, and then got up and left.

So Esau despised his birthright.

The word *lentil* refers to a member of the pea family, whose seeds are often used even today in making soups or stews. But the contents of the stew are not nearly as noteworthy as the contents of its eater’s heart. *Esau* has no qualms whatsoever about what he has just agreed to. He has *despised his birthright*, something that involves far more than mere material possessions or wealth.

This birthright is linked to a spiritual legacy that Esau should have viewed as a sacred trust. Instead he has bargained it away for a bowl of *stew*. He may walk away with a full stomach, but his heart is pitifully empty.

Conclusion

A. The Real Rivalry

While “Siblings’ Rivalry” is the title for today’s study, that is not the only rivalry on display. In fact, it is not really the main rivalry. Both Esau and Jacob fought another battle even more intense than the one that developed between them. This battle was *within* each man.

The Scriptures place special emphasis on Esau’s treatment of the family birthright. Both Old and New Testaments are equally grim in their evaluation of his actions. Our text says that Esau “despised his birthright” ([Genesis 25:34](#)). One can see why the writer of Hebrews uses the word “godless” to describe Esau ([Hebrews 12:16](#)). Esau would likely have professed a belief in God, but his interests and actions are linked solely to what gratifies his desires.

Jacob had his own battle, as demonstrated by his actions in today’s lesson. He could have simply given Esau what he wanted—a bowl of stew. But Jacob, the schemer and “heel-grabber,” saw an opportunity to further his own standing; and he took full advantage of it. Just like Esau, he too was looking out for number one (himself).

Eventually Jacob’s craftiness yielded a bitter harvest of additional deception and heartache. The remainder of Genesis tells us of the conflicts that the practice of deception produced within his wives and his sons. While there was certainly sibling rivalry between Esau and Jacob, each man was his own worst rival. Each gave in to the temptation to make himself and his desires of supreme importance.

Esau and Jacob are not the only competitors in this battle. Paul knew this struggle as well. He describes its intensity in [Romans 7:7–25](#). He desires to do what is good and right before God, but he is constantly at war with “the law of sin at work within me” ([7:23](#)). However, he also knows the key to victory in this battle:

“Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (7:24, 25). That is the key for us as well.

B. Prayer

Father, our world today encourages us to be very Esau-like and Jacob-like in our thoughts, words, and actions: to live for the moment and to make the achievement of our personal desires and wishes more important than anyone else’s. Deliver us from such a self-centered point of view. Keep our minds on higher, holier pursuits. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Live for the Master, not for the moment.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student

Into the Lesson

Distribute handouts (you prepare) with the following statements:

- * My birth order: I am the of children.
- * I agree/disagree [circle one] with this observation: “Comparison is a death knell to sibling harmony” (Elizabeth Fishel).
- * My parents did/did not [circle one] play favorites, and it affected me this way: .

Lead into the Bible study by saying “When parents favor one child over another, the result is usually deep hurt and resentment that negatively affect the relationships between those siblings. Let’s look at the devastation that resulted when Rebekah and Isaac played favorites.”

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “What’s Your Family’s Conflict Style?” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Have students work on it in small groups and discuss their answers.

Into the Word

Say, “Jacob and Esau each seemed to feel entitled to the rights of the firstborn for differing reasons. The fact that their parents played favorites didn’t help.”

Divide the class in half. Designate one as *Team Jacob* and the other as *Team Esau*. Distribute handouts (you create) with these identical instructions: Read [Genesis 25:19–34](#). Then answer these questions: 1–Why would the brother for which your team is named consider himself to be deserving of the birthright? 2–Which parent favored him? 3–What can we tell about his moral character?

Anticipated responses (do not distribute) for *Team Jacob*: 1–God stated that the older would serve the younger; besides, Esau traded it to him fair and square. 2–Rebekah. 3–Jacob was willing to exploit his brother’s vulnerable state. *Team Esau*: 1–Esau deserved the birthright because he was older; a trade undertaken in a moment of vulnerability isn’t valid. 2–Isaac. 3–Esau was impulsive and naïve.

Allow several minutes for group discussion; then ask the two teams to share their answers.

Option. Distribute copies of the “Conflict in Scripture” activity from the reproducible page. Assign Scripture references to small groups to read and discuss as indicated. In the ensuing whole-class discussion, decide which conflict styles were used by the people in today’s text.

Into Life

Move to close the class by saying, “When siblings get along, they can have a profound impact on one another. Over the course of history, these famous siblings have made a significant impact in the world.” Read the following list.

Orville and Wilbur Wright changed the nature of transportation.

Venus and Serena Williams have both won Olympic gold medals.

The Marx Brothers became influential comedic entertainers in the early twentieth century.

The Lennon Sisters entertained audiences for some six decades.

John and Charles Wesley became famous for preaching and hymn writing.

Conclude: “When siblings work together, there’s no telling what they can accomplish.”

On the board, write “When you said or did , it made a significant impact on me; I would like to hear your perspective on what happened.” Ask, “What would happen if you were to say this to a sibling or family member with whom you were in conflict (customizing the sentence to your situation)? How could you see the resulting conversation moving you closer to the resolution of the conflict?”