

FASCINATING STORIES OF FORGOTTEN LIVES

STUDY FOUR

Esau: The Son Who Couldn't Win

Selections from Genesis 25–28

There is nothing wrong with Esau and Jacob being different, but there is something wrong with the parental favoritism which haunts Esau's steps for the balance of his life.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll



To deepen your study, scan to listen.

THE one thing all people hold in common is that we are different. Each of us has our preferences and quirks. Nothing's wrong with preferences—whether they are for a certain restaurant, ice cream flavor, style of music, type of fashion, genre of fiction, or even a way to worship.

Common preferences tend to bring people together. “Birds of a feather flock together” is a true proverb of human behavior. However, because preferences separate us into groups, they can cause us to discount, devalue, or disapprove of people who are different than us—though, like us, are made in God’s image.

Unless we make a conscious effort to engage those unlike us, we may limit our connection with them—even those living under our same roof. Overlapping preferences slide into favoritism, leading to destructive family dynamics.

This *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study examines the turmoil in Isaac’s family between him, his wife Rebekah, and their sons Esau and Jacob. Preference became favoritism, favoritism birthed rivalry, and rivalry descended into deception that tore the family apart. Let’s follow the account of this family in Scripture and learn some lasting lessons from their example.



INSIGHT FOR LIVING

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SEARCHING
THE
SCRIPTURES
BIBLE STUDIES

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PREPARE YOUR HEART

Quiet your spirit and invite the Lord to minister to you through His Word. Read [Psalm 24](#), reflecting on God's desire to cleanse your heart as you enter His presence. Record your prayer here if you wish.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, but twenty years passed before Rebekah gave birth to Esau and Jacob. “Isaac was sixty years old when the twins were born” (Genesis 25:26). What joy Isaac and Rebekah must have felt after two decades of praying and waiting! And yet, even in the womb, the boys struggled against each other, which prompted Rebekah to ask the Lord, “Why is this happening to me?” (25:22). What did the Lord tell her in [Genesis 25:22–23](#)?

The rivalry between these brothers would carry on for generations. According to [25:24–27](#), what happened when the twins were born? How were Esau and Jacob different? What is the significance of their names, based on your Bible’s footnotes?

God created the two boys with different personalities and preferences, and that was good. The problem came when “Isaac loved Esau because he enjoyed eating the wild game Esau brought home, but Rebekah loved Jacob” (25:28). Favoritism fueled Esau and Jacob’s rivalry, and it was just a matter of time before everything blew.

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Observation: Sibling Conflict, a Foolish Trade, and Family Deceit

Although he enjoyed the advantages of being firstborn, Esau made foolish choices that cost him everything. We all must learn how to thrive in less-than-ideal families. Esau's legacy, however, endures as a lesson in mistakes to avoid.

Foolish Trade—Genesis 25:29–34

Use your skills of observation to record the details and descriptions in [Genesis 25:29–34](#).¹ It was just “one day” in the family tent, but it changed the course of biblical history. How did Jacob take advantage of Esau? What was Esau's perspective toward his birthright?

For the satisfaction of his physical needs, Esau's mind-set led him to despise something significant. Spiritual priorities weren't nearly as important as physical comforts. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Troublesome Marriage—Genesis 26:34–35

Perhaps trying to please his parents by walking in his father's footsteps, Esau married when he was forty years old, the same age as Isaac when he married Rebekah. Isaac had received from his father wise counsel for finding a mate, but, apparently, Esau received no guidance from Isaac. What did Esau do in [Genesis 26:34–35](#)? Whom did he marry, and what was the outcome?

Only those whose family has been hurt by an unhappy marriage can understand fully the meaning of Genesis 26:35. Have you experienced it? Your son or your daughter makes an unwise choice and marries someone out of your favor? There's a grief connected with that that isn't healed. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Missed Opportunity—Genesis 27:1–46

Having snubbed his birthright and grieved his parents, Esau still had a chance to redeem himself when Isaac decided it was time to pass God's covenantal blessing to his heir. Would Esau restore his birthright? Would he come out on top? The drama unfolded in four scenes.

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Scene one. Sensing death was near and, perhaps, not realizing that Esau had traded away his birthright, Isaac called for his firstborn. What did Isaac ask Esau to do, according to [Genesis 27:1–4](#)?

Scene two. Isaac's intentions for Esau were in keeping with Jewish custom. Rebekah, however, wanted more for Jacob. Describe Rebekah's two-step coaching deception for Jacob in [27:5–17](#). What did her deceit indicate about the depth of her favoritism?

Scene three. Jacob obeyed his mother and repeatedly lied to his father. In [27:18–29](#), how many times did Isaac question Jacob? Why do you believe Isaac hesitated?

In [27:20](#), Jacob even invoked the name of the Lord in his web of lies. Deception knows no bounds! Isaac then pronounced his blessing upon Jacob.

Scene four. Read [27:30–40](#). Summarize the heartrending scene when Isaac and Esau discovered the deception.

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Epilogue. Deceived out of his expected blessing, Esau plotted revenge. Once Rebekah learned of his plot to kill Jacob, how did her coaching of Jacob in [Genesis 27:41–46](#) mirror her favoritism and earlier actions? According to 27:45–46, whom did Rebekah blame?

In [28:1–5](#), Isaac had no choice but to bless Jacob. How many blessings did Isaac give? Whom did Isaac prohibit Jacob from marrying?

Esau, the son who couldn't win, made one last flailing attempt to save his position. But what foolish choice did Esau make in [28:6–9](#)? Why was marrying a daughter of Ishmael the wrong move?



Interpretation: Esau's Legacy

For interpretation, let's look at what Esau traded for a bowl of stew. Read the article, “[Birthright](#),” in the online *Holman Bible Dictionary* at [studylight.org](#). Why was one's birthright such great value? Contrast Esau's and Jacob's perspective on birthright.

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What lesson do you think God wanted to teach His people regarding Esau's foolish choice?

In a hurried moment of hunger, where Esau says, “I’m famished,” he trades his birthright and blessings for a bowl of soup. It is the problem of instant gratification. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

For more on the identity of the nation formed of Esau's descendants, read the article, “[Esau](#),” in the *Holman Bible Dictionary* at [studylight.org](#). What nation came from Esau, and what do you know about its conflicts with Israel? For insight, read Obadiah's prophecy against this nation in [Obadiah 1:10–14](#) and the hostility this nation caused.



Correlation: New Testament Illumination on Jacob and Esau

The story of Esau, Jacob, and their parents is rich with meaning for New Testament readers. How does [Romans 15:4](#) underscore the value of our Old Testament study?

What does [Hebrews 12:16–17](#) add to your understanding of Esau's legacy?

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Despite Esau's profane values and decisions as well as Jacob's willful deception, how does [Romans 9:10–13](#) shape your perspective of God's sovereignty in human affairs?

What I want you to see is a family in conflict. I want you to see favoritism among parents and the tragic results that follow if such an encounter or such a process is never dealt with. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Application: Lingering Lessons to Ponder

We can sum up Esau's legacy of foolishness with three timely applications.

1. *Instant gratification is a dangerous basis for making a major decision.* If we're not careful, life's tempting options may entice us to quickly settle for less than God's best.
2. *Parental favoritism has a damaging effect on the whole family.* If we're not alert and proactive, unresolved conflicts will continue to surface. Children don't outgrow the feelings of parents who played favorites.
3. *Unconditional acceptance is a longing in the heart of every person, and no one outgrows it.* It begins when we are children. We look to our parents for that acceptance before we turn to anyone else.

Which one of these timeless lessons from our study most impacts you? Why? Where and how might you apply that lesson to your current situation?

Do you empathize with Esau? Why, specifically? Do you feel like you've walked in his shoes?

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Have you practiced deception like Rebekah? Have you practiced lying like Jacob? If so, God knows, and He continues to love you despite your mistakes. Recount and record your experience, confess it to the Lord, and receive His gracious pardon.

Here's one great truth: with our heavenly Father, there is unconditional acceptance. You never have to earn it. It comes because of His grace.

—Pastor Chuck Swindoll



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, thank You for the truth of Your Book, for the value of principles that live on beyond the stories of lives in it. I pray that as a result of what I have uncovered from the life of a man I've never met, from a family I've never seen, that I might see enough here to apply it to my life this very day. Thank You for giving me in the Scriptures true accounts of people who experienced much of what I go through. Take these things and use them in my life and in my family's life, for the good of our future and for the glory of Your name. I pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.

ENDNOTE

1. To learn more about Pastor Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* Bible-study method, go to the web page, "[How Does Pastor Chuck Swindoll Study the Bible?](#)"

For the 2026 broadcasts, this *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study was developed by Marshall F. Davis in collaboration with Aaron Massey, senior vice president of *Searching the Scriptures* Ministries, and Bryce Klabunde, vice president of *Searching the Scriptures* Ministries, based upon the original outlines, charts, and transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll's messages. Copyright © 1990, 2026 by Charles R. Swindoll, Inc. All rights are reserved worldwide. Duplication of copyrighted material for commercial use is strictly prohibited.

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