

## Forgiveness

We have spent the majority of our time in the exploration of the Book of Genesis on some fairly weighty topics such as original sin, the creation of the world, the covenantal relationship with God, the beginning of salvation history and the foreshadowing of the New Testament. This week we will touch on an equally important subject, the idea of forgiveness.

Esau, the character on whom we now dwell, is someone who seems to receive unfair treatment in the Old Testament. As the main story line of the Jews is carried forward in the person (and name) of his younger brother Jacob, Esau is usually relegated to the footnotes. He is known only as the forefather of the Edomites, the residents of Canaan who will later prove to be a problem for the Israelites. Yet, if we spend some time with this seemingly minor character, we will receive a wonderful insight about not only the mechanism of forgiveness (the *how*), but also about the fruits of forgiveness. We will see how forgiveness works from both sides - from the side of the offender and of the offended.

If we may take a second to summarize the offenses against Esau by his brother Jacob, it will help illustrate the importance of Esau's forgiveness of Jacob when later it occurs. Jacob tricked Esau out of his birthright ([Genesis 25:27-34](#)) and also out of the paternal blessing rightfully belonging to his older brother ([Genesis 27:1-40](#)). For his deceptions, Esau swore to kill Jacob ([Genesis 27:41](#)) before Jacob fled to the land of Haran. In the ancient Near East, where a man's honor was tremendously important (indeed the only truly important thing) this offense would rightfully have earned the punishment of death for the offender. Few outside observers, especially those outside of the house of Jacob, would have blamed Esau if he had killed Jacob for this tremendous dishonor.

### **The Church Fathers and Genesis**

See how Jacob, who rejoiced in the generation of his children and in his numerous herds of sheep, came back from Haran and received again Esau into his friendship? In time Israel itself will be converted after the calling of the nations and will admire these riches in Christ.

**St. Cyril of Alexandria, Glaphyra on Genesis, 5.3**

Even though Jacob tried to smooth things out by sending messengers ahead to appeal to his brother Esau (Genesis 32:4-6), there was clearly much trepidation on his part as to how he would be received. Jacob was rightfully fearful of the response he might receive at the hands of the brother he offended. Yet, despite the offense, despite the weightiness of Jacob's trickery, we see something that (for the time period) had to be a shocking turn of events:

*“Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, accompanied by four hundred men. So he divided his children among Leah, Rachel and the two maidservants, putting the maids and the children first, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph last. He himself went on ahead of them, bowing to the ground seven times, until he reached his brother. Esau ran to meet him, embraced him, and flinging himself on his neck, kissed him as he wept.”*

Genesis 33:1-4

Given what we have previously seen concerning enmity between brothers (in particular the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4:1-16), this scene is a remarkable one. It can serve as a model in that it illustrates the numerous steps that must occur before forgiveness and true reconciliation can happen. Let's begin with an examination of this process or movement.

Clearly Jacob offended Esau. Thus, the onus is on Jacob, the one who committed the offense (the sinner), to make the first step. The sinner must be truly sorry for his actions and go to the one he has offended. He or she has to make the first painful steps along the path to reconciliation. However, it is clear in this story the movement is not in one direction and is, I believe, where the true beauty of the story comes to the fore. When Esau saw his brother “*bowing to the ground seven times*,” (when he saw his younger brother was indeed sorry, as that is what this action represents) he ran to forgive him. As Esau was in the right, it would have been completely reasonable for him to stand his ground and let his brother come to him - to make him walk that last mile, so to speak, by himself. Yet he did not. He saw that his brother was indeed sorry and repentant, and therefore went out to meet him on the road. Two insights arise from this action. The first tells us something about how forgiveness works in the Old Testament and God's role in it. The second gives us a glimpse toward how God forgives in the New Testament. First, let's look briefly at what had to happen to both Jacob and Esau (especially Esau) in the intervening years between the offense and the reconciliation.

Remember that the Jacob we see bowing on the road as he walked to his brother Esau is not the Jacob we saw at the beginning of the Jacob-Esau story. After stealing his brother's birthright and blessing, Jacob spent a considerable amount of time with God. First at Bethel in which he had his vision of heaven (Genesis 28:10-15) and second, most importantly, at Jabbok where he wrestled with the divine being. Jacob, as we read in the text, is a man who was transformed. He was so changed that the Lord gave him a new name (Genesis 32:29). He was not the man he once was and the time he spent with the Lord changed him. We see this change in the scene of forgiveness which transpires before his brother Esau.

Gone was the Jacob that was always trying to supplant his brother, gone was the “trickster” that we saw earlier. Instead we see someone who, by the grace of God acting in his life over time, knew how to repent.

In the Gospel of St. Luke we find a similar story of forgiveness, only this time the offense is not between brothers (at least primarily) but between a father and a son. We also see a similar movement between the offender and the offended. In the story Jesus told to those gathered around him in Luke Chapter 15, the prodigal son (like Jacob) makes the first repentant step towards his father and his father (like Esau) ran to him “*while he was still a long way off*” [Luke 15:20](#). Both stories require the first movement to come from the sinner and both stories require the sinner to be met “on the road” by the one who forgives. The sinner does not have to make the entire journey alone. In the first story in the Old Testament we have a model of how forgiveness works between two people. In the second beautiful parable from St. Luke’s Gospel we have a model of the boundless forgiveness of God who will meet us along the road if we take the first step.