

Esau's Error

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He was the hairy one, the elder by one minute of Isaac and Rebekah's twins. Even in the womb they were already wrestling with each other, so much so that scripture tells us the pregnant Rebekah cried out, "If this is how it's going to be, what am I living for?" Most mothers can identify with that – those moments both during and after pregnancy.

He was the firstborn and his father's favorite. Even at birth his body was covered with hair "like a furry garment," which is how he got the name Esau that means "hairy." He was muscular, a skillful bowhunter and outdoorsman, a man of the earth and field. He had a ruddy complexion and got the nickname Edom, which means "Red." Edom was also the name of the southern kingdom – a land of red sandstone and desert like northern New Mexico, where his descendants, the Edomites settled to become perpetual enemies of Israel.

Esau and Jacob were obviously fraternal and not identical twins. Jacob was not furry and preferred to spend his time indoors, or more accurately in-tents – he was quiet and intense. He came out of the womb grasping his brother's heel, and that's what his name means: heel-grabber or leg-puller, and also to "supplant" or "circumvent" – a name that he would fulfill. He was his Mama's boy, and apparently liked to cook. Jacob would later dream of a ladder to heaven, have twelve children by four wives within about seven years, wrestle with an angel, develop a limp, and be given the name "Israel" – the ancestral forebear of Judaism and Christianity.

The story that most people remember about poor old Red, however, is something that happened when the twins were fifteen years old, on the day that their grandfather Abraham died.¹ Esau was just coming home from the field when his nose detected a delicious smell. There was Jacob cooking a pot of red lentil stew. "I'm starving!" he said. "Let me have some of that red stuff."

"Not so fast," Jacob replied. "First, sell me your birthright." As the firstborn, even by a minute, Esau stood to inherit their father's considerable wealth, something that must have irked Jacob to no end.

"I'm dying of hunger right now!" Red stormed. "What good is a birthright to me?"

"Then swear it to me!" Jacob insisted, "and I'll give you some of this stew and bread right away."

So Red swore to give Jacob his birthright, ate his meal, and went on his way. Neither of them, it seems, ever mentioned this little incident to their father, although Jacob apparently did tell his mother. You know the rest of the story.² Isaac is dying, and he calls for Esau to go hunt some wild game and fix him a favorite meal before giving him his blessing and inheritance – an ironic reversal of the secret scene decades earlier. Rebekah overhears and quickly cooks a meal, disguises Jacob, and they conspire to lie and trick blind Isaac into giving Jacob the blessing and inheritance. Never mind that Jacob then had to flee for his life from his stronger brother who swore to kill him, leaving behind his mother and the entire ill-gotten inheritance for fifteen years.

So here we have two classic characters – a gullible man who in a vulnerable moment favors his growling stomach over his best interests, and a conniving cheat who takes advantage of him. I must say that my own sympathies in this story are with Red. He made the mistake to which all of us succumb at times – to choose immediate pleasure or gain over long-term good. "I'm dying of hunger *right now!*" he says melodramatically. We *know* that hunger well – metaphorically if not literally – which demands immediate gratification. It shouts louder than the still small voice of good judgment and common sense. It is the "just do it" choice that can yield a crop of drug abuse, gambling, obesity, and economic collapse. It is the quintessential challenge of human temptation – to do what you know perfectly well is wrong or at least unwise in

the long run – for the immediate pleasure or at least promise of it. Esau’s error is, in a way, the central dynamic of sin. It is, in fact, the original sin – to go for the one forbidden fruit in a garden of plenty.

Esau’s error is also the open door to addiction, the puzzling phenomenon that has held my attention for four decades. Addiction is, by common sense definition, doing something repeatedly for immediate gain, undeterred by the risk or reality of harm to oneself or others. It is *chronic* sinning. I know that sounds harsh and moralistic, and I’ll come back to that point, but in truth addiction is the very essence of idolatry. It is giving to some *thing* the priority, trust and allegiance that belong only to God. The bulletin cover today is an ad that so nicely illustrates this. Here we have a modern Adam and Eve in the primordial garden, the covenant rainbow overhead, but it’s Grand Marnier rather than God that occupies the central place of honor in the sky. And the message: Paradise found. It is substituting temporary satisfaction for the real thing.

Currently the technical term for addiction is *dependence* – and listen to its psychiatric symptoms. Any three of these seven are sufficient to make a diagnosis:

- Spending a great deal of one’s time, energy and resources to get access, do it, and recover
- Continuing to do it in spite of adverse consequences
- A need for continuing and gradually increasing amounts in order to feel the desired effect
- Taking or doing more than one intended
- Discomfort when refraining that is relieved by resuming
- Gradually giving up or reducing other priorities, activities and relationships
- Unsuccessful attempts to cut down or quit

We may think first of alcohol and other drugs, but the phenomenon of dependence applies just as well, and perhaps more commonly, to the quest for money, material possessions, power, fame, sex and love. We can easily be captured and undone by the very thing to which we give our ultimate allegiance. Where our treasure is, there our heart is also, and it happens gradually over time. It is the stuff of Greek and Shakespearian tragedy. Esau’s error is the tragic flaw of modern culture, to misplace our energy and trust in ephemeral money, appearance, weapons, popularity and status – the very traps against which Jesus, and the Buddha, Mohammed and Gandhi all warned us.

So how is it that we human beings progress from Esau’s error – from one dumb indiscretion, to a pattern of enslavement, whether we call it addiction or sin? It happens the same way you get to Carnegie Hall – practice, practice, practice – one small step at a time, persisting despite obstacles. No one sets out intending to become addicted, or to be enslaved by sin. It happens gradually, one choice at a time – one seemingly irrelevant compromise, one little adaptation, one “just this once” at a time, until finally lies seem like truth, and we choose the teachers or preachers or friends who will tell us what we want to hear.³

The end product looks as baffling as it is fascinating. A high fall from grace is front page news and entertainment: the televangelist caught with a prostitute, the investment broker with a collapsed Ponzi scheme, the judge arrested for DWI, the public official using the power of office for personal gain, the rich and attractive young idol back in jail once again. “What on earth were they thinking?” we ask, and wait to see what is done to these mega-sinners. It’s hard to turn our eyes away, perhaps because we sense that there but for the grace of God are we.

In 1986 the General Assembly adopted a report that was our denomination’s first thorough study of alcohol policy since prohibition.⁴ One of its conclusions was that addiction clearly constitutes sin. Yet the report also cautioned that “the individual suffering from alcohol problems, whether addicted or not, should never be regarded as somehow a greater sinner than the rest of us. All have sinned and fallen short of God’s intentions for life.” Isn’t the repetition of an act despite harmful consequences “a condition of almost all sin”?⁵ We are, all of us, susceptible to Esau’s error.

But there is another side to this story. Jacob – Israel, the ancestor of our faith – also sinned. Sometimes his offense is overlooked in the telling, perhaps even with a wink of approval for seeing and taking clever advantage of an opportunity. If there was a sinner here by Judeo-Christian standards, it was not Esau, but Jacob. Esau was foolish, succumbing to temporary hunger, but he hurt no one except himself. Jacob, in contrast, willingly sacrificed their brotherhood for personal gain. Later he would exploit his father’s blindness to continue the scam. He violated Shalom, God’s intended state of peaceful and loving community.

From the perspective of American individualism, the ten commandments seem like an odd and arbitrary set of restrictions on personal freedom, but from the perspective of community they make sense. The first three or four involve our relationship to God, but the rest have to do with breaking community, sacrificing Shalom for personal gain. Don’t spend all your time working. Honor your father and mother. Don’t kill, steal, commit adultery, or falsely accuse neighbors, and don’t envy what they have. Jesus summed it up: the essence of the Law is to love God with all our being, and love and honor others as much as ourselves. Jacob’s error was to exploit and profit from others’ vulnerability. Jacob’s error lies at the heart of gambling, which is inherently the hope of profiting from the loss of others. It is the essence of greed and exploitation.

How, then, do we get free from sin, from the errors of Jacob and Esau? How do we come to have God’s law and love written on our hearts?⁶ Here we encounter one of the great paradoxes of our Christian faith. We are not the source of our own salvation, and yet we are responsible to act. The chosen Hebrew people were delivered from slavery by a mighty covenantal act of God in the exodus, but they were also expected as a condition of that covenant to obey God’s precepts. A guilty woman was saved from execution by stoning through the intervention of Jesus, who then told her, “Go and sin no more.”⁷ With grace comes a duty. This is precisely the tension of recovery from addiction. The 12-step spiritual path of recovery in Alcoholics Anonymous begins with accepting that we cannot save ourselves, but that God, when invited, can and will do so.⁸ In this sense, AA is not really a “self-help” program, but rather a “God-help” program. Left to our own will and devices, we’re toast.

And yet AA members do not just sit back and wait for God to perform the magic trick. They are responsible to *work* the steps of the program, to act, to believe and decide and search and ask. They are not the source of their salvation, and yet they are responsible for it. They get sober and stay sober one day at a time, while also seeking to bring their lives into closer communion with God’s will. Freedom from addiction and sin is not a one-shot-and-done-with-it affair. It is a matter of faithful lifetime persistence one step at a time, one day at a time, one prayer at a time.⁹ The 12 steps end with a duty to carry the message to others and practice the principles in all one’s affairs.

So are we delivered from sin by works or by grace? Yes, we are. Thanks be to God.

¹ Genesis 25:29-34

² Genesis 27

³ 2 Timothy 4:3-4

⁴ *Alcohol use and abuse: The social and health effects. Reports and recommendations by The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).*

Adopted by the 198th General Assembly (1986).

⁵ *Alcohol use and abuse*, pp. 34-35.

⁶ Jeremiah 31:33-34

⁷ John 8:11

⁸ *Alcoholics Anonymous: The story of how many thousands of men and women have recovered from alcoholism* (3rd edition, 1976).

New York: A.A. World Services.

⁹ Luke 18:1-8