If Esau Chose Differently

A Devotional Meditation on Vayishlach (And He Sent)

Genesis 32:3-36:43; Obadiah 1; Matthew 14:15-18:11; Acts 10:15

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November 28, 2026



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Jacob had two reasons to leave home. One was to find a wife so he could carry on the covenant legacy of Abraham's family. The other, and more urgent, reason was to escape the murderous anger of his brother Esau. It didn't matter to Esau that God had chosen Jacob to be the heir. All he knew was that Jacob had deceived and manipulated him and his father to steal his birthright, and because of that he swore to kill Jacob.

That reality weighed heavily on Jacob during the twenty years he sojourned in the house of his father-in-law Laban. When God called him to return home, the fear of meeting Esau drove him to wrestle with God. That encounter left him with a permanent disability, but also with a new name and a hope that God would provide a way.

Jacob planned to appease his brother with a generous gift of livestock, but just in case he divided his family into three groups in hope that some at least would escape if the meeting did not go well. His plan worked. Although the brothers were not reconciled, Esau set aside his anger and agreed to a truce.

But what if Esau had chosen differently? What would have happened if he had acted on his vow of vengeance? The outcome would have been as brutal as when Jacob's sons, Simeon and Levi, sacked the town of Shechem. Esau's 400 men would have slaughtered all the males in Jacob's family and either killed or taken captive the women and girls. The servants, herdsmen, and other members of the household would have suffered the same as the family. Esau would have made no distinction between the native born and the stranger. Anyone associated with Jacob—or Israel, as God had renamed him—would have suffered along with the family.

It's a strange thing that our enemies see us as more united than we see ourselves. Esau and his men saw the family of Israel as a single target of their wrath. They would not have cared that Jacob's wives disagreed with each other, or that his sons fought one another. Neither would they have cared that the male and female servants and the hired hands were not blood relatives, nor perhaps even from the same ethnic stock. All they would have seen was the enemy God had wrongly chosen and blessed instead of them and their master.

Esau's men also didn't see the religious divisions among Israel's people. They had their idols, as we learn when Jacob told them to hide their foreign gods on the way to meet the God of Israel at Bethel. He didn't say to cease worshiping those false gods, but

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only to put them out of sight. The Bible doesn't say that the household retrieved their idols from the hiding place after meeting with the Almighty, but we can assume that they did. God saw that, but he spoke to Jacob anyway, saying:

> "Your name is Jacob; no longer shall your name be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name." So he called his name Israel. And God said to him, "I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body. The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you."
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> Genesis 35:10-12 ESV

God noticed the idolatry, impurities, and divisions in Israel's household, but that did not stop him from moving forward with his divine plan of redemption for them and for all the nations of the earth. He would bring judgment, purification, and a final reckoning in time, but first he had to gather the redeemed and get them moving in the right direction.

That same priority moved Messiah Yeshua. That's what he told the Canaanite woman in Lebanon when she begged him to drive the demons out of her daughter. Yeshua refused at first, telling her, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (Matthew 15:24) She persisted, though, with a faith that moved him to do as she had asked. Apparently that faith was enough to transfer her from the category of Gentile outsider to faithful companion of the House of Israel.

The same kind of transition happened to 4,000 men and their families a few days later. They had gathered to hear Yeshua teach on a mountain in the Gentile region of the Decapolis east of the Sea of Galilee. Earlier, Yeshua had fed 5,000 mostly Jewish men and their families on the other side of the Galilee. No one questioned their status as Israelites, but the crowd in the Decapolis was different. There were some Jews among them, but most were foreigners. The crowd probably included government officials, thieves and unsavory people, and perhaps even Roman soldiers. All of them, however, wanted to hear from this man who had ministered healing and deliverance to their neighbors. They received not only Yeshua's teaching, but also bread and fish to strengthen them before they went on their way.

Here we see another strange thing: God sees us as a unified and united people, just as our enemies do. The difference is that he understands our imperfections and divisions, and he loves us anyway. That doesn't mean he's content to let us remain as we are. He will slay what is wrong in us just as surely as our enemies rob us of life when given the chance, but unlike our enemies he will give us new life and make us right in the end. What we should remember is that those whom God has called holy are still holy even if they don't believe exactly as we do. That's because God looks beyond our doctrines and bloodlines to see what's in our hearts.

This meditation was inspired in part by *The Echoes Bible*, vol. I, *Genesis & Matthew*. *The Echoes Bible* is available at https://www.echoesbible.com/.