

*Foundations: Fleeing the Scene of the Crime*  
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*Psalm 57; Luke 6:27-36; Genesis 27:30-28:9*

Our final Scripture reading today is Genesis 27:30-28:9. May God bless the reading of His holy, infallible, trustworthy Word. "After Isaac finished blessing him and Jacob had scarcely left his father's presence, his brother Esau came in from hunting. He too prepared some tasty food and brought it to his father. Then he said to him, "My father, sit up and eat some of my game, so that you may give me your blessing." His father Isaac asked him, "Who are you?" "I am your son," he answered, "your firstborn, Esau." Isaac trembled violently and said, "Who was it, then, that hunted game and brought it to me? I ate it just before you came and I blessed him-- and indeed he will be blessed!" When Esau heard his father's words, he burst out with a loud and bitter cry and said to his father, "Bless me – me too, my father!" But he said, "Your brother came deceitfully and took your blessing." Esau said, "Isn't he rightly named Jacob? He has deceived me these two times: He took my birthright, and now he's taken my blessing!" Then he asked, "Haven't you reserved any blessing for me?" Isaac answered Esau, "I have made him lord over you and have made all his relatives his servants, and I have sustained him with grain and new wine. So what can I possibly do for you, my son?" Esau said to his father, "Do you have only one blessing, my father? Bless me too, my father!" Then Esau wept aloud. His father Isaac answered him, "Your dwelling will be away from the earth's richness, away from the dew of heaven above. You will live by the sword and you will serve your brother. But when you grow restless, you will throw his yoke from off your neck." Esau held a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing his father had given him. He said to himself, "The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob." When Rebekah was told what her older son Esau had said, she sent for her younger son Jacob and said to him, "Your brother Esau is consoling himself with the thought of killing you. Now then, my son, do what I say: Flee at once to my brother Laban in Haran. Stay with him for a while until your brother's fury subsides. When your brother is no longer angry with you and forgets what you did to him, I'll send word for you to come back from there. Why should I lose both of you in one day?" Then Rebekah said to Isaac, "I'm disgusted with living because of these Hittite women. If Jacob takes a wife from among the women of this land, from Hittite women like these, my life will not be worth living." So Isaac called for Jacob and blessed him and commanded him: "Do not marry a Canaanite woman. Go at once to Paddan Aram, to the house of your mother's father Bethuel. Take a wife for yourself there, from among the daughters of Laban, your mother's brother. May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and increase your numbers until you become a community of peoples. May he give you and your descendants the blessing given to Abraham, so that you may take possession of the land where you now live as an alien, the land God gave to Abraham." Then Isaac sent Jacob on his way, and he went to Paddan Aram, to Laban son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, who was the mother of Jacob and Esau. Now Esau learned that Isaac had blessed Jacob and had sent him to Paddan Aram to take a wife from there, and that when he blessed him he commanded him, "Do not marry a Canaanite woman," and that Jacob had obeyed his father and mother and had gone to Paddan Aram. Esau then realized how displeasing the Canaanite women were to his father Isaac; so he went to Ishmael and married Mahalath, the sister of Nebaioth and daughter of Ishmael son of Abraham, in addition to the wives he already had."

“Vengeance is mine; I will repay.” These are the words of God from Deuteronomy 32:35. You’d hardly believe it, though, if you read the comments on any crime story reported on Facebook. That will take down your faith in humanity quick! People who have nothing to do with the case, people who just stumbled across the story on their news feed, spewing hatred on people they don’t even know. They come across as judge, jury, and executioner. We are quick to pronounce judgment, not just on those who have wronged us, but those who have offended our moral sensibilities. We don’t want reconciliation; we want revenge.

It’s woven into the fabric of our society. It’s built into sentencing laws that aren’t so much about rehabilitation so much as they are retribution and punishment, and the way that even a minor criminal record follows you around forever, keeping you out of the loop for many good jobs. But it’s also ingrained in our entertainment. Most of our superheroes that are crazy popular today, from Batman and Daredevil to Spiderman and Green Arrow, are vigilantes. The most famous group of superheroes are even named The Avengers! Even when they bring evildoers into the police station to be locked up, there are bringing vengeance from outside the system. They decide what is right and wrong by their own moral code and dish out their own brand of justice. That doesn’t even get into the revenge thrillers that are a regular part of our fiction books and action films. We love seeing justice done on someone else.

Revenge and vengeance is the motivator for virtually everything that happens in today’s passage, and the results are heartbreaking and wounding to all involved. Today’s passage shows us in vivid detail why we need God’s law to set justice in its proper place, and why we need Jesus’ difficult teaching about radical forgiveness. It may be painful in the short term, but it saves us so much grief in the long term.

For those who weren’t with us last week, we saw Rebekah scheming to have Jacob receiving his father Isaac’s blessing. While Esau as firstborn would typically have received it, Rebekah knew from before their birth that God had declared Jacob would receive it instead. We saw how everyone was at fault in some way – playing favorites, working in secret, and showing off a really unhealthy family dynamic. Through trickery, Jacob does in fact receive the blessing meant for Esau.

Where we pick up this week, Esau has just returned from the hunt, ready with *his* meal for his father to receive his blessing. Isaac knows something is desperately wrong the moment Esau walks in – he’s been deceived. He may be trembling because he’s upset that his favored son can’t receive his blessing, and he may be trembling because his own subterfuge to hide the blessing from the rest of the family was found out. After Esau’s lament, Isaac does bless Esau, using much of the same wording he spoke over Jacob – but with one change of a word, it’s mostly negative. He will live away from the blessings bestowed upon Jacob, and he will serve his brother.

Yet in another stunning twist, Isaac adds fighting words to his blessing. Yes, Esau may be subservient, but he will live by the sword. One day he will throw off Jacob’s commanding authority. Talk about setting your son up to take revenge! It’s almost as if Isaac is goading Esau to one day take action. Not quite the action that Esau decides upon, but still, Isaac’s blessing on Esau stirs up all the more Esau’s rage at being tricked out of his blessing.

Esau is mad, and he's not hiding it. It might seem like that because in our translation, it says that Esau only thought about murdering his brother once his father was dead. In Hebrew, the literal translation is, "in his heart." That's almost worse, isn't it? It means that the core of him is dead set on revenge. And because it's in his heart and not just a thought, the plan gets told to others – maybe to his best friend, maybe to a servant he speaks to on a regular basis, we don't know. All we know is that Esau mouthed off about the plan in front of someone loyal to Rebekah, who knew her son enough to believe it, and she gets the news to Jacob.

Her plan is for Jacob to go to her own people, to her brother Laban, far enough away that Esau isn't going to know or want to pursue if he finds out. Meanwhile, she'll try to calm Esau down, and when Esau's rage is finally under control, she'll send for him. The way it's worded in Hebrew suggests a short time, maybe months. In reality, the next time the family members will meet again will be in twenty years.

But Rebekah isn't through with her own plan of vengeance. She has a terrible relationship with Esau's Canaanite wives, whom he never should have married – they are the very people group that God condemned for their utter depravity. It's bad enough that she has to deal with them – she's not going to have that for Jacob. So she speaks to Isaac and gets him to order Jacob to take a wife from among Rebekah's people when he goes. This is another twist in the knife, if you will, for Rebekah and Esau. Jacob goes his way, and Esau, recognizing just what a mess he's gotten into with his family for bringing this wickedness into the camp, marries one of Ishmael's daughters, hoping to bring some peace.

I'm not sure how bringing another wife into the mix is going to help things, but it's clear this is the way Esau thinks. He has no regard for anyone but himself and his own situation, and he thinks the best way to make amends is to do something that another person might approve of. But Esau is never repentant. He is never mourning his own actions. He's always aggrieved by his brother and mother, never taking responsibility for his part in all of this. Because of his uncontrolled anger, his family is now divided. His anger creates deep divisions that are never fully healed. It does not mean that Esau wasn't wronged – he truly was. But he had set himself up for it by despising his birthright, by his careless and thoughtless actions, and by going along with Isaac's plan to give him the blessing in secret to get around the prophecy Rebekah had received so long ago.

As we think about what Scripture says to us and how this passage speaks, let's think about this: *revenge is never a Christian trait, only appropriate justice*. While there is genuine injustice in the passage, it seems, Esau is way out of line. He never does actually get revenge, and yet just his schemes for revenge are so despicable that Jacob flees hundreds of miles away just to put some distance between them. Rebekah loses her favorite son, perhaps for all of her life; Isaac lives forty more years despite whatever illness brought him to death's door, and he lives with the regret that he helped cause this fiasco. Just dreaming of one day getting revenge was enough to destroy this family relationship.

Now the extremes of this story may make us think we're all good. I'm guessing none of us has been in a place where we were seriously considering taking out someone who'd done us wrong, though I imagine in our darkest imaginations we might have conceived of it when we had been grievously wronged. It is easy for us to say, "I would never do anything remotely like that." Maybe not. Maybe we really are good people.

Or maybe we sometimes do look for revenge in subtle ways. That classmate who deliberately didn't include me when she passed out invitations to her birthday party? Maybe I'll badmouth her and say untrue things to get people to dislike her. The co-worker who always wastes my time with annoying stories? Maybe I forget to submit his application for a raise. My spouse didn't pick up the groceries I asked for? Maybe I "forget" to do the dishes that night.

Revenge often comes in small packages that we think we can get away with. We look for ways to "get even" or "settle the score." The bigger the wrong, the more we look for it. Sometimes, when the issue is really big, we do take it to court. For some things, that's right and good – we need justice to be done and payment to be made when the wrong is genuinely significant, when someone has been genuinely hurt in some major way. God gave His people the law so that there would be justice done.

But justice is not something we dole out, and we certainly don't take revenge. Jesus' words make this even more clear. He says to love your enemies, to bless those who curse you, to do good to those who hate you, to pray for those who mistreat you. The classmate who slighted us? We pray for her and look for ways to show her kindness. The co-worker that can't stop gabbing? Perhaps they have a desperate need to be heard that we can fill. Our spouses, who we should love anyway? Maybe when the special treat you asked for isn't in the grocery cart, make dinner and do the dishes – perhaps the forgetfulness is because something is heavy on their heart.

This can be desperately hard. And yet it is our calling. And it leads to our second thought: *forgiveness through Christ is the only way to truly overcome a vengeful spirit*. I am often reminded of the story of Corrie Ten Boom, a faithful Christian who helped organize an underground movement to get Jews to safety during World War II. She herself was eventually caught and sent to a concentration camp for nearly a year before the war ended. Her sister and father died in the concentration camp. A few years later, she was doing many speaking engagements about her experiences and sharing the gospel of forgiveness. At one, she was approached by a man she recognized – one of the guards at her camp. He was deeply sorry for what he had done, and he was now a Christian, and so he reached out his hand in friendship and asked Corrie for her forgiveness.

Corrie was stunned. She had preached forgiveness, but now one of her tormentors was right before her, asking for it. She wrote this: "I stood there with coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion – I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. "Jesus, help me!" I prayed silently. "I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling." And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me.

“And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. “I forgive you, brother!” I cried. “With all my heart!””

I know this hits home for some of you. One of our extended family of CrossWay members has told her story of living through the camps herself. Some of you have been hurt in ways none of us has any idea about. Friends and family and husbands and wives turned enemies. Stories of abuse and disgrace that have been hidden. Many of us have parts of our lives we try to keep hidden because they are too painful. And it’s in those places we hold perhaps not a desire for revenge, not to get even, but we hold onto deep unforgiveness. We would as soon see them sent to the pit of hell than to forgive them the awful things they did against us.

And yet there are the words of the Lord’s Prayer – “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” And Jesus made the point of saying that if we did not forgive others, the Father in Heaven would not forgive our sins. Back for a moment to the story of Corrie Ten Boom. In 1947, she started a home in Holland for survivors of the Holocaust, victims of Nazi brutality who needed a place to heal. In her words, “Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able also to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars. Those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and as horrible as that.”

Our self-examination today, then, is asking ourselves this: *Whom must I bless and pray for, and whom must I forgive?* What we won’t see in our study of Genesis is the full-blown story of Esau’s people, who become the Edomites. There is a point where Esau sets aside his vengeful plan on Jacob and there is a sort of reconciliation on a basic level. But the forgiveness never truly came. The grudge continues long past Jacob and Esau. Edomites stand against Israel for the better part of 2,000 years, joining coalitions of forces against their brothers time and again. The Herods, the wicked rulers of Israel during Jesus’ day who bought their way into the throne? Edomites. Just as the descendants of Ishmael would battle Israel, so too would the descendants of Esau.

If we don’t want this to happen in the future generations of our households, now is the time to forgive. Now is the time to pray for those who have done you wrong. Now is the time to start living out what it is to be a disciple of Jesus. Because forgiveness sets you free; someone else’s sin no longer has a hold on you. Praying for those who have mistreated you leaves justice in the hands of the LORD, the perfect judge. And setting aside the wrongs that have been done to you is very much like Jesus taking up His cross and forgiving those who crucified Him.

Friends, I cannot say that this will be easy. This is why you have a church family around you – to support you in your discipleship journey, to hear you when you have to share your anger and your grief. But do it. Cling to your forgiveness in Christ and forgive others, and He will draw you close to Himself, healing the wounds of the past so there is no need for revenge.

