

## **Winners and Losers**

**Genesis 36:1-43**

Pastor Bryan Clark

Years ago when I was in high school, I had a friend named Jay Ashcraft. As a matter of fact, his brother Glenn is one of our missionaries to Spain. Jay was a long-distance runner and a pretty good one. There was something distinct about Jay: he always ran with black dress socks. So you could always pick Jay out on the track—he was pretty much the only one with that attire. His senior year he qualified for the State meet. Jay knew that he had no chance of winning or even placing, so he came up with a plan. His plan was that when the guns went off he would run as fast as he could run, and for maybe a lap or two laps he would be out in the lead. That would be his moment of glory. So that is what he did. When the gun went off he took off like he was running the 400 meter. He finished the first lap and he was way out ahead and everybody thought this was incredible. Part way through the second lap he started to fade. At that point we should have all just walked away, because halfway through the race looked pretty good. But by the end of the race the runners finished, and Jay was nowhere to be found. He was somewhere way back there.

The writers of Scripture love to use the metaphor of a race to describe the Christian life. They say that it isn't a sprint; it is a long-distance race. It is a marathon. Sometimes the problem with a long-distance race is that halfway through the race you can't always tell who is winning and who is losing.

What if we were to change the terminology a little bit? Instead of talking about winning and losing, let's talk about success. If a race is a metaphor for life, how do we define who is successful and who is not? As a matter of fact, if I were to ask you to quickly in your mind list three people you consider to be successful, and boom, boom, boom, you just list them off, what was the basis by which you determined those people? Was it their job? Was it the amount of money they make? Was it the kind of house they live in? Was it the kind of car they drive? Are these the things that determine success?

What if it is possible that, halfway through the race, those people who seem to be winning are actually losing, and those people who perhaps seem to be losing are actually winning? At this time of year, as a new year begins, people are thinking about the year gone by and the year to come. What are we going to live for, and do we need to rearrange our priorities? This is a good time to think about what is really going to matter in the end. What is going to determine those who win the race?

Once again, I think Jacob can help us with this as we look at Genesis 36. If you have been reading ahead, Genesis 36 is one of those chapters where, if you were reading through the Old Testament, you would just skip. You would speed read through it, or you would skip it and say, "Well, that was interesting" and then go on. It's a list of names that you can't pronounce, and you find yourself wondering, *What is the point?*

One of the things we have to process is that the Bible uses an economy of language—meaning there is never a word wasted. We would have liked more details and more description of many of the events of Jacob's life. Yet, the biblical writers are pretty much right to the point. Many of these scenes are described in one or two verses. Then why would God turn around and spend an entire chapter with all of these names that we don't understand and we can't

pronounce? We read them and wonder, *What is the point?* But there is a point, and that is what we need to understand.

It is also important to realize the way we study the Bible here. In a sense we break it down into units of thought and for 35 minutes once a week we study it. This is not necessarily the way the Bible is written. It was not necessarily written to be studied in chunks that are separated by seven days. Sometimes when we do that, we lose sight of the flow and how it all fits together.

When you get to a chapter like chapter 36, which does not seem to have a lot of application to us, one of the things you have to do is back away from it and ask: How would the original hearers have heard this? Originally this book was written to be read orally and not a piece at a time, but the whole book in its entirety. People would have sat and listened to the story from beginning to end. Chapter 36 happens in the flow of what has preceded it and what will follow it. Sometimes the meaning has to be understood in that context. It is also important to remember that the original Bible did not have the chapter divisions and the verse divisions, which sometimes cause us to bracket these texts in our minds, instead of seeing the flow that the writer intended.

Having said that, the only way to really make sense is to go back and remember where we have been with Jacob, and then try to understand how this chapter fits. What is the point the writer is trying to make? Let's go back and review a little bit of what we know about Esau specifically. Jacob and Esau were twins. Esau was born first; therefore, technically he was the oldest, which traditionally meant he would have been the son of promise or the holder of the birthright. The birthright was not just about who got all of the stuff. It was about who had the responsibility to be the patriarch and to lead the family. God was clear that Jacob would actually be the son of promise. He would be the one who would be blessed—not Esau.

We do not know a lot about Esau. Our descriptions about him tell us that he was rough and rather crude. He was also very selfish. As a matter of fact, the New Testament describes him as godless. One of the descriptions of Esau was that he despised his birthright, which means basically he could not have cared less about his family and all the responsibility. He just didn't care. All he cared about was himself and his immediate needs.

Jacob comes along and deceives his father for his blessing, and Esau finds out about it. Esau is very angry, which is understandable—he should have been. What Jacob did was wrong. He vows to kill Jacob, so Jacob flees to the land of Laban. For the next twenty years we track the story of Jacob, the son who is blessed. He lives a very difficult life. He experiences the consequences of his choices and things are not easy for him. Finally after twenty years he comes back, and we are told that Esau is coming to meet him. Esau has 400 men. All we know is that Esau is probably still angry and he probably still wants to kill Jacob. He has 400 men, and it looks like this is going to be a disaster. But when Esau gets there, we find out that God has done a work in Esau's heart, at least as it relates to his brother Jacob, and he embraces him. He loves him.

We also learn that Esau has prospered. He has 400 men with him. He tells Jacob that he has all he needs. He has all the wealth he could possibly use. At that point we are starting to draw a comparison that Jacob has gone through a very difficult struggle and Esau seems like he has been flourishing. Yet Jacob is supposed to be the one who is blessed. The next time we see Esau is when Esau and Jacob meet at Isaac's death. Then we enter into chapter 36.

**Now these are the records of the generations of Esau (that is, Edom).**

(v. 1, \*NASB)

Throughout this text there is going to be a continual reminder that Esau is the father of the Edomites. This will be stated multiple times, and it is very important we don't miss that.

Verses 2 through 5 are just a listing of Esau's wives. If you compare that with chapter 26, you will find the names are different. The reason is because in the ancient Near East, it was not unusual that a woman would have multiple names. As a matter of fact, it was very common that she would be named one thing before she was married and something else after she was married. It is not really an unusual thing that the wives would be referred to by different names.

**Then Esau took his wives and his sons and his daughters and all his household, and his livestock and all his cattle and all his goods which he had acquired in the land of Canaan, and went to another land away from his brother Jacob. For their property had become too great for them to live together, and the land where they sojourned could not sustain them because of their livestock. So Esau lived in the hill country of Seir; Esau is Edom. These then are the records of the generations of Esau the father of the Edomites in the hill country of Seir.**

(vs. 6-9)

From that point on, it is a listing of Esau's descendants. This sounds very familiar. It sounds like Genesis 13 when Abraham and Lot could not live together because both of them had prospered so much, and they had to divide up. This is the same situation—where Jacob has prospered, but so has Esau. Esau and his family move to a different land.

One of the things we have to wrestle with is this whole list of descendants. In the ancient Near East the blessing of God was often viewed according to their descendants. In other words, lots of descendants—especially lots of sons—was evidence of God's blessing. In a sense, this is Esau's portfolio. This is his evidence of God's blessing. What you see here is very, very impressive. He lists the line of kings and the line of chiefs. The first readers, the Hebrew people, would have understood that this was an extremely impressive line of descendants. Even modern commentators and Jewish historians would all agree that this is extremely impressive.

Now compare that with Jacob's descendants in chapter 35; it is three verses. We can read through that in less than a minute; he had twelve sons. But then you get to Esau, and his list is huge. We find ourselves asking the question: Which one of these guys is blessed? It seems like Jacob has had nothing but struggles, and his list of descendants is very short. That is compared to this list of Esau's descendants, which is huge and very impressive. It seems like life is just working out for Esau. I think the writer wants us to look at that and say, "Wait a minute here. Which one of these guys is blessed?"

A lot of that is determined by what we mean by the blessing of God. What does that really mean that Jacob was blessed? This is halfway through the race, and it seems like Esau is winning. If we were to put this into modern terminology, we don't look at success based on descendants. What would we look at and what would be our portfolio halfway through the race that would determine God's blessing or success?

According to the value system of the world in which we live, a lot of it is determined by material stuff. People appear successful if they have a certain house or a certain car, or if they can buy all this stuff. They buy things to say, “I am successful.” There is a certain level of status with all of that.

That is understandable in a world apart from God. But what is troubling is when that value system makes its way into the church. If you were to go home this afternoon and dial up the TV preachers, an overwhelming majority of them would be telling you that God’s value system is such that the gospel is about wealth, health and prosperity, and if you really pursue God, He is going to make you rich. They would say He is going to make you prosperous because that is God’s value system. Prosperity would mean you are successful and that means His blessing is upon you.

This past week in the *Omaha World-Herald* there was an article about the modern-day televangelists. They went back and talked about the days of Jim Bakker and PTL and Jimmy Swaggart. They talked about how that whole industry came crashing down. But what has happened is that the industry has rebuilt on that rubble, and it is bigger than ever. The amount of money these people are pulling in is just amazing. The article talked about Joyce Meyer, Benny Hinn, and Paul and Janet Crouch. It talked about Kenneth Copeland and Robert Tilton. It is estimated that Joyce Meyer, in the year to come, will bring in \$95 million. The article goes on to talk about how she spends that money. She lives an incredibly affluent, ridiculously opulent lifestyle. A lot of that ministry money is consumed on herself, as it is with most of those, because the message is such that God’s favor and God’s blessing means material prosperity. Therefore, in order to communicate to their followers that God is pleased with them, they live with that abundance and affluence.

Is that really true? Has God bought into the value system of the world—that what God means by His blessing is that which is material and short-sighted and doomed to rust and decay? Is that what God is interested in? You watch those television shows and see the auditoriums packed with thousands of people. It would be easy to say, “Wow, they have all that money and they have all those people. Surely God must be blessing them.” Halfway through the race, it seems like they are winning... if that is God’s value system.

Patti and I happen to be avid junkers. We just have this thing for junk. Not modern junk—we like old junk. Our idea of a romantic date is to go to the junkyards and dig through stuff. We like to fix it or make something out of it or just look at it. I know what you are thinking. You are thinking, *They are not normal!* But junkyards are great places to gain perspective. You look around at this stuff and realize that at one time these things were treasures. At one time people worked long, hard hours to buy this thing, that today is in the junkyard. We have to remember that all of our stuff is going to end up in a junkyard, in a junk pile. Is that really what it is all about? Is that really what defines success? Once a year all of us need to go to a salvage yard and just look around. We need to remind ourselves that our vehicles are going to end up in the same place.

That does not mean that we shouldn’t buy a new vehicle. It does not mean that we should not buy new stuff. I like to buy. But it does mean that we need to gain some perspective that says this stuff is not about God’s blessing. It isn’t about defining success. It is not really the stuff that even matters much to God.

We talk about the fact that we need to live for that which is eternal, but that is so vague. That is so big that sometimes it is hard to understand what that means. What if we were to shrink it

down into terms that maybe we could grasp a little better and apply what I call the “hundred-year test.” That is a more manageable framework. We can ask ourselves, *What is it I am involved in, what is it that I am passionate about, what is it that I am giving my life to that a hundred years from now will still matter?* A hundred years from now our material stuff will be in a junkyard. It will be in a pile. If that is the definition of success, it is rather pathetic. But a hundred years from now, what will really matter? When you think about it that way, you are starting to get some grasp of God’s value system. God is not really into things that will end up in a junkyard in twenty years. He is into things that last. That is the hundred-year test.

Let’s think about Jacob and Esau again now. It appears halfway through the story that Jacob has really struggled. Jacob has not had an easy life. It seems like Esau is on cruise control. Which one of them is blessed? Well, we are only halfway through the race.

Maybe the best way to understand this is to look at a passage in the New Testament—Hebrews 12. The writer of Hebrews says it much better than I can. At the beginning of Hebrews 12, the writer talks about a race. He says that to run the race well we have to lay aside all the weights, all the entanglements, and everything that holds us back, in order to run the best race possible so that we can win. To do that, God has got to be involved in our lives and helping us lay aside those entanglements. Look at the passage, beginning with Hebrews 12:5:

**My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reproved by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives. It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.** (Hebrews 12: 5b-11)

If we were to apply this passage to Jacob, we would say there is a reason why Jacob has struggled throughout his life as the son of promise. It is because God is working on him. God is training him and God is breaking him. God is humbling him, and God wants Jacob to understand what it means to be a man of faith. God is really not paying a lot of attention to Esau. Esau is not his son; Esau is not his child. Esau is just living. But God has great plans for Jacob, and He is working him over.

Sometimes you may look around you and it seems like the godless around you have everything going right for them. They seem to have life by the tail, and you feel like you are just constantly struggling. You feel like you have this difficulty and that difficulty. You may be right. You may be right, because they are not God’s children and you are. Right now God’s attention is not on them; it is on *you*. He is shaping you and He is molding you. He is humbling you and breaking you, in order to cause you to run the very best race you can. It says in Hebrews 12 that you run this race with endurance and you lay aside all these entanglements. It is like an athletic team. If a coach is yelling at you, it is probably because

he thinks you have the ability to contribute to the team. The worst thing is when the coach ignores you; it is probably because he thinks you have nothing to offer.

God is paying attention to you and He is working you over so that you ultimately run the very best race possible. That is God's blessing. God's blessing is His commitment to you to mold and shape you and make you into the image of Christ. It is not a bunch of material stuff.

Paul loved the metaphor of a race. In Philippians he talks about being willing to count everything as rubbish, trash, junk—in order to know Christ. Why? “Looking forward to that upward call in Christ Jesus.” That language was Greek language. It was taken right out of the Greek games that described a runner who has finished a race, who would be called up to the judges' stand to receive his reward. Paul is thinking about a race and thinking, *I am willing to count everything as trash in order to run the best race I can, because I want to be called up to the victor's stand and know that I was a winner in Christ.* Paul says to the Corinthians that he is running in such a way that he might win.

Let's take this back to Genesis 36. Let's call this halfway through the race. It appears that maybe Esau is winning. It appears that maybe Esau is blessed and Jacob has struggled. But when you read through chapter 36, you keep getting this constant reminder that Esau is Edom. Esau is the father of the Edomites. The first readers would have clearly understood what that meant. First, they will be the enemy. And secondly, the Edomites do not win the race.

Let's apply the hundred-year test. In this case, it is the several hundred-year test. How did Jacob do? What was Jacob involved in? What did God do with Jacob that would last? Hundreds of years later God would speak to Moses and say, “Moses, I am calling you to lead My people out of bondage in Egypt into the land of promise.” And Moses said, “God, I can't do that. Why are you calling me? These people won't listen to me. Who should I tell them called me?” And God said, “You tell them it is the God of Abraham. It is the God of Isaac. It is the God of Jacob.” Can you imagine God referring to Himself that way—if you were Jacob? Hundreds of years later, did it matter? Yes. God called Himself the God of Jacob. That is amazing.

What about the Edomites? If you go to a little book towards the end of the Old Testament, written by a prophet by the name of Obadiah, you find out. Obadiah was a prophet that talked about God's judgment to the Edomites. In that short little book, God says the Edomites are through. They are done. He says, “I am wiping them out. I am wiping them out because of their pride, because of their arrogance, and because of how they treated Jacob. They are done.” He says Jacob will flourish, while the Edomites are done. That is what He is referring to in Genesis 36 when He keeps reminding us, “It may look like Esau is doing great, but he is the father of the Edomites. They don't win.”

If you turn on the nightly news, you are not going to find any reports about the Edomites—because they are gone. They don't exist as a nation. They haven't existed since before the time of Christ. But every night in the news, you hear about the people of Jacob, who to this day continue to be a people. It may have looked like Esau was winning halfway through the race, but who won that race? It was the one who was blessed, whom God was working on and pouring into, sculpting and developing. Jacob makes it into the Faith Hall of Fame in Hebrews 11.

Perhaps the greatest contest between the line of Esau and the line of Jacob was seen 2000 years ago, when one with all of the wealth and power of this world stood in judgment over a

poor carpenter who was about to be crucified. Jesus was of the line of Jacob. He was the promised seed. Herod was an Edomite. And there is the contest between Esau and Jacob. Herod had everything this world had to offer. He had the wealth and the power. It appeared for a moment that perhaps he was the victor. But of course, we know the end of the story. Herod is destroyed, and Jesus is exalted and seated at the right hand of the Father forever. That is the end of the race.

Going into this next year, we all need to stop and think, *What is it that I am giving my life to? What is it to me that really matters? What is it that I am passionate about?* Put the hundred-year test to it. What is it that I am going to be involved in during the next year, that a hundred years from now will still matter? Am I dedicated to working hard so I can just buy a bunch of junk that, twenty years from now ends up in the junk heap? What is the point of that? What a waste! Halfway through the race it may seem like you are winning. People may be very impressed. But at the end of the race, you have lost. Put the hundred-year test to it and ask yourself, *What is really going to last? What is going to matter?*

Here is the rub with that. Because God's value system is so much different than the value system of this world, if you choose to live for the things that God values it is likely that your peers, your friends, your work associates, will not view you as successful today. You have to be willing to live with that. If you are not going to play their game, they probably are not going to be impressed. They probably are not going to look at you as being really successful. You have to keep in mind that the race is only half over. Are you committing yourself to that which, at the end of the race, will matter—so that you ultimately end up a winner?

You say, "How do you know that? How do you know that in the end that is what will matter?" *By faith.* I can't prove it to you. I can only tell you that is what God says. That is what He promises, and I choose to believe it by faith. If I believe that is what will matter in the end, then that is what I live for today.

\*Scripture quotations are from the NASB (New American Standard) translation.

Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512  
Copyright 2004 – Bryan Clark. All rights reserved.



January 3/4, 2004

**Study Questions**  
*Fear or Faith (Part 1): A Study in the Life of Isaac & Jacob*  
**Winners and Losers**  
**Genesis 36:1-43**

**Opening Discussion**

1. How would success be defined by most people in our culture?
2. How would you define success?
3. Imagine you could see 100 years into the future and you could see the long-term effect of your choices and accomplishments. How might this cause you to rethink how you define success?

**Bible Study**

1. Read Genesis 36:1-8. Skim over 9-43. Compare with Genesis 13.  
What did the future hold for Lot? Was he successful or not?
2. Compare what you know of Jacob and Esau. Which one appears to be blessed and why?  
How do we measure “blessing?”
3. Read the book of Obadiah. This is the Word of God concerning Edom. How does Edom compare with Jacob in the end according to Obadiah?
4. Read Psalm 1. How does Psalm 1 describe the story of Jacob and Esau?
5. Compare Matthew 7:13,14 with the story of Jacob and Esau. Why do the majority choose the wide gate?
6. Read Hebrews 12:7-11. What can we expect as God’s children?  
How does this help us in defining success in this life?

**Application**

1. What will define success in this life for you?  
How is your definition of success different from those around you in the culture?

2. Will most people around you view you as successful according to their definition of success? Why or why not?
3. How will your definition of success affect generations to follow?  
  
How will your success be evident 100 years from now?
4. Identify 3 specific things that will be necessary this coming year for you to move down the pathway of success as you have defined it.