

## CHAPTER 9

# PAST TENSE

## Genesis 33

**F**red Snodgrass led an extraordinary life. During his more than eight decades, he played nine years of professional baseball. He succeeded as a rancher and a banker. He served as mayor of Oxnard, California. He was an exemplary family man and a model citizen.

Yet when he passed away in 1974, the obituary headline did not highlight his achievements. The *New York Times* heralded his most famous failure: “Fred Snodgrass, 86, Dead Ball Player Muffed 1912 Fly.”<sup>1</sup>

It’s true. Snodgrass dropped the fly ball in the last game of the 1912 World Series. Had he caught the tenth-inning pop-up, the New York Giants would have won the title. But Snodgrass took his eye off the ball. It fell to the ground. His error led to two runs, a lost game, and a mistake that would follow him to the grave.

We’ve done the same. Not in the outfield of a baseball game but in . . . Would you care to fill in the blank?

- a marriage
- a business
- your youth
- your parenting



We didn't let the ball fall, but we let our spouse down, our guard down, our debt spiral out of control. We live, not with the stigma of a lost game, but with a divided family, a broken heart, or an angry brother.

That was the case with Jacob.

He and Esau were twins, you'll recall, separated in age by the length of time it took for Jacob to exit the womb. Jacob resented the second-place finish, and when he saw an opportunity to reverse the situation, he took it. He caught Esau with a hungry belly and in a flippant mood and convinced him to swap his birthright for a bowl of stew. Jacob achieved what he wanted but burned bridges to get it.

When we last left Esau, the storm raged in him like lava in Krakatoa. He muttered about Jacob.

"Not for nothing was he named Jacob, the Heel. Twice now he's tricked me: first he took my birth-

right and now he's taken my blessing . . ." Esau seethed in anger against Jacob because of the blessing his father had given him; he brooded, "The time for mourning my father's death is close. And then I'll kill my brother Jacob." (Gen. 27:36, 41 THE MESSAGE)

Jacob got wind of Esau's anger and hightailed it to the high country to hide out while Esau cooled down. Now it was time to face him.

God told him, "Return to the land of your father and grandfather and to your relatives there, and I will be with you" (Gen. 31:3 NLT). In order to return to the land, Jacob had to return to the region where Esau lived. No more hiding. No more running. Jacob might have been happy to sidestep the encounter, but not God. Meeting Esau was a spiritual necessity.

To move forward into his future, Jacob had to come face-to-face with his past.



He's not the only Bible hero to have a sordid story in his or her biography. Moses had blood on his hands from murdering an Egyptian (Ex. 2:12). Abraham lied about his wife, passing her off as a sister in order to save his neck (Gen. 12:12–13). Elijah, the prophet, had enough faith to call down fire one day and enough fear to drive him into hiding the next (1 Kings 18–19). Esther took a courageous stand but not before she didn't. She hid her Jewish identity from the king (Est. 2:20).

Got some stains on your past? Peter can relate. On the night Christ needed him most, the disciple cursed the very name of Jesus (Matt. 26:69–75). Paul had skeletons in his closet. The apostle whose words we cherish, study, and memorize? He himself confessed, "I persecuted the people who followed the Way of Jesus, and some of them were even killed. I arrested men and women and put them in jail" (Acts 22:4 NCV). Paul actively tried to "destroy the church" (Acts 8:3 NIV).

The Greek word for "destroy" denotes a brutal and sadistic cruelty.<sup>2</sup> His aggression was no mere lapse in judgment or youthful indiscretion.

Moses had blood on his hands.  
Abraham was a bald-faced liar.  
Elijah was a coward.  
Jacob was a liar and a cheat.  
Esther kept her faith a secret.  
Peter was a betrayer.  
Paul was a murderer.

Yet God used them all. They chose to trust God with their futures and because they did, their pasts no longer had a hold on them.

God's not put off by our ugly chapter(s). With his help we can soon say what Paul came to say: "But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press



on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:13–14 ESV).

Paul put his past in the past and set his eyes on the future. Want to do likewise? Take some notes on Jacob’s story.

On the big day of the Esau encounter, the exhausted, God-struck patriarch limped back to his camp. “Esau was coming, and with him were four hundred men” (Gen. 33:1). He could see Esau in the distance, across the field. The big, brawny brother walked a dozen steps ahead of his militia. His beard still red. His arms still thick. A bow and a quiver slung across his back. It was Jacob, the dachshund, vs. Esau, the Doberman.

The next few actions leave us wondering if the old Jacob or the new Israel was in charge.

He sent his family out first. He divided his children among their mothers. He placed them in a sequence: first, Bilhah and Zilpah, the handmaidens. Next Leah, the wife he didn’t want. Fi-

nally, Rachel, the wife he loved, and their son, Joseph. The meaning was lost on no one. That was a Jacob decision.

But then, signs of the new Israel. “He crossed over before them and bowed himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother” (Gen. 33:3).

Jacob, in his folly, might have run to hide.

Israel, with the limp, had no choice but to trust.

He prostrated himself like a vassal before a royal in an ancient court. A few steps then nose and forehead on the ground. A few more steps then face on the ground. Five more times he lowered himself to the earth. Obsequious to the extreme.

And then all of a sudden “Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept” (Gen. 33:4).

When Esau rejected his birthright, the narrator described the moment with five percussive verbs: “ate . . . drank . . . got up . . . left . . . despised” (25:34



NIV). Now, in the moment of reconciliation, he rapidly fires five verbs of opposite sentiment: “*ran . . . embraced . . . fell . . . kissed . . . wept.*”

Esau squeezed him so close Israel nearly lost his breath. Esau released him long enough to look at his face. The eyes of the twins met for the first time in twenty years.

Both sets filled with tears, and they wept.

They wept for relief.

They wept with forgiveness.

They wept at the possibility of a new start, a fresh beginning.

Esau wept because his brother was home.

Israel wept because he'd come face-to-face with his past only to find that his past held no power over his life.

God had gone ahead of him. God had kept the promise he had made in Bethel: “I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land” (Gen. 28:15).

The journey came at God's behest and with God's provision. He sent angels to welcome Jacob into the land. He blessed Jacob with a new name. He stripped Jacob of human power, leaving him to rely on God. God softened the heart of Esau. This is not a story of Jacob's courage. It is a story of “the Almighty's single-minded dedication to love humanity and to implement his plan through flawed persons.”<sup>3</sup>

God led Jacob into his future by helping him face his past.

Don't we need him to do the same for us?

We can relate to the words of Paul. “No matter which way I turn I can't make myself do right. I want to but I can't. When I want to do good, I don't; and when I try not to do wrong, I do it anyway . . . . Oh, what a terrible predicament I'm in! Who will free me from my slavery to this deadly lower nature?” (Rom. 7:18–19, 24 TLB).



Paul's past was quicksand. The more he struggled, the deeper he sank. Just when we think he is about to go under, he announced: "Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord! . . . Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (7:25; 8:1 NIV).

Paul discovered a guilt-free zone. Through Jesus, every chain and shackle fell to the ground. Paul moved past his past. No small matter for a murderer, church divider, and self-proclaimed hypocrite. Yet he trusted God with his future and moved on.

Do likewise.

"If we confess our sins, he will forgive our sins, because we can trust God to do what is right. He will cleanse us from all the wrongs we have done" (1 John 1:9 NCV). Note who is active in this passage: "he will forgive our sins . . . we can trust God to do what is right . . . he will cleanse us."

The remedy for our sin is not our work but God's work. Tell Christ what you did. Be specific. Hold nothing back. No sin is too ancient, evil, or insignificant. You were not made to carry this weight. Only Jesus can take it away. Ask him to do so. Take your guilt in your hand as if it were a stone, and hand it to him.

"Jesus, will you please take this from me?"

You know how he will respond. "Come to Me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28 NASB).

Paul Hegstrom accepted this invitation. His past was a shameful one. Within a week of his wedding, he began beating his wife. Bouts of rage led to violence on an almost weekly basis. When children came, he beat them. After sixteen years of marriage, his wife gave up and got out.

The divorce was not enough of a wake-up call. His unmanaged anger ruined relationship after relationship. One woman threatened to file at-



tempted murder charges. That was enough to get Hegstrom's attention. He set out to find the root of his anger. He sought counseling. Most important, he met with God.

Little by little Hegstrom began rebuilding the relationships he'd destroyed. The process was long. Winning people's trust took time. Eventually his ex-wife fell in love with him again, and they were remarried.

Just as Jacob became Israel, the old Paul Hegstrom became a new man. His life took on a new direction. He began a ministry that helps men who are caught in the cycle of anger and abuse.<sup>4</sup>

In case I've been unclear, let me state the message of the Esau event: you can't move past your past without God's help. Apart from him, you will

justify it, deny it, avoid it, or suppress it. But with God's help you can move forward.

It's time to do so. Let God speak over you the greatest of blessings: "Anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!" (2 Cor. 5:17 NLT).

You are no longer Jacob. You are Israel, and God fights for you.

You no longer swagger in false strength; you limp in God's power.

You need fear Esau no more. God has gone ahead of you. He has prepared the way and paved the path.

Your Esau, your past, is now your brother. Embrace him. And weep for joy.