

Esau's Venison

How Isaac's hunger for goodness was satisfied.

by the Rev. Jeremy F. Simons, Bryn Athyn Church, August 23, 2026

“And Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.” Genesis 25:28

The story of Jacob and Esau does not hinge on Isaac's love of venison, but understanding that love is a key to seeing what the story is about.

On our summer vacation travels, especially if we have gone to national parks, mountains or lakes, it is likely that we have seen various animals that we don't normally see. Some of these might be animals like moose, bison, elk and antelope, which are beautiful, graceful and exciting to see. The same is also true of white-tailed deer, even though they are now so common that they are often seen as garden pests. At the same time, although we may also have seen sheep, goats and various types of cattle on our journeys they do not hold nearly the same kind of interest.

The differences between these two types of animals – the common domesticated herd animals and wild animals similar to deer – may help us to understand the Jacob and Esau story. Why did Isaac want venison? Why did he prefer Esau? Why was it so important for Jacob to carry on the story and not Esau? Why did the lies and deceit in the story go unpunished? Why was it important that Isaac be prevented from eating the venison that he longed for? There are spiritual reasons for all of these things that describe parallels in our own regeneration.

Deer are mentioned frequently in the Word, and they are unique in being the only wild mammal that the children of Israel were allowed to hunt for food. The rule was that mammals that “*divide the hoof, having cloven hooves and chew the cud—that you may eat*” (Leviticus 11). This excluded animals like

camels, horses, donkeys, pigs, rabbits and other small animals. This basically meant that only domesticated mammals could be eaten, and only

some of those, as well as various birds and fish. The only exceptions were deer in their different types.

But although deer could serve for food, they could not serve for sacrifices. The reason that they could not serve for sacrifices is the same reason that Isaac would not be allowed to be served venison before blessing his son.

So what is wrong with venison?

Deer are never criticized in the Old or New Testaments, or in the Heavenly Doctrine, or compared with anything negative at all. The references are positive and the issue is not very clearly explained.



The Word says good things about deer.

In Genesis 49, in blessing his sons, Israel says, “*Naphtali is a deer let loose; He uses beautiful words.*” Our lesson from the Arcana makes this comment:

“‘A deer let loose’ means the freedom that natural affection possesses. A deer is a woodland creature that loves more than all others to be free. The natural too is like this, for it loves to engage in what delights its affections and therefore to feel free; for freedom is the hallmark of affection.” Arcana Coelestia 6413

Similarly, in *True Christianity* we read:

“When it comes to the spiritual or theological teachings of the church, the nations that have freedom are like majestic deer with great racks of antlers, running wherever they wish through fields, woods, and forests.” True Christianity 815

Isaiah says:

“Behold, your God will come...⁶ Then the lame shall leap like a deer” Isaiah 35

Apocalypse Explained comments:

“This is said of the coming of the Lord; the ‘lame’ signifies those who are in good but not genuine good, because they are in ignorance of truth through which good comes; ‘to leap as a deer’ signifies to have joy from the perception of truth.”

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Psalms 42 says:

“As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God.”

In what way can we be said to “thirst” for

God? The answer is that we thirst for answers, for the truth, for knowledge and enlightenment so that we know what to do. The image of a deer panting for water is like our natural desire to find answers that are tangible and sensible.

Psalms 18 says:

“God is my strength and power, and He makes my way perfect.

³⁴ He makes my feet like the feet of deer, and sets me on my high places.” II Samuel 22; Psalm 18

The Arcana comments:

‘Placing feet like those of a deer’ stands for the natural when its affections are in freedom, ‘feet’ being the natural. This meaning of ‘placing feet like those of deer’ may be seen from the fact there is nothing spiritual about making a person’s feet like those of deer, nimble and fit to run with. Yet the idea does have a spiritual implication, as is evident from the references that immediately follow to being set by Jehovah on high places and caused to walk on them, meaning spiritual affection on a level above natural affection.” Arcana Coelestia 6413

Deer are sure-footed, and some kinds of deer have an amazing ability to walk on high cliffs in rocky terrain without falling. The meaning here is that if we have feet like a deer we will be able to negotiate

the seemingly difficult terrain to the higher path that the Lord calls us to.

Why was Isaac prevented from having venison?

So what is the issue with deer that prevents them from being used in sacrifices? What is it that prevented Isaac from having the venison that he loved before blessing his son?

The answer is that it is the issue that confronts all of us as we try to live a good life in this world. The issue is that people usually want to become spiritually better by doing what comes naturally, and they resist the seemingly

unnatural and artificial rules that stifle their more authentic interests and redirect their behaviors. Being like a deer is all about being free to do as we wish. A deer represents what is natural, not spiritual.

It is interesting that many passages about deer emphasize the idea of freedom – even asserting that “a deer is a woodland creature that loves more than all others to be free (Arcana Coelestia 6413). The modern phenomenon of deer wandering around suburban communities throughout the United States illustrates this. Deer don’t respond well to domestication or confinement, but they are perfectly happy to drift around our neighborhoods in close proximity to people – especially now that they are no longer hunted the way that they used to be. But imagine cows or sheep in the same situation. They would be lost and in danger and would undoubtedly cause even more trouble than the deer do. But while cows and sheep do not have the beauty and grace, or intelligence, of deer, they have an essential quality that deer lack.

Isaac’s plan

Isaac sent Esau off to hunt game and bring him venison. He said: “Take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field and hunt game for me.” Esau’s weapons stand for the doctrines that he already happened to know, and his



mission in the spiritual sense was to bring Isaac a good life – or create for him a good life – based on natural truths consistent with natural loves. Isaac stands for the Lord’s Divine Rational and at this point in the story He is wishing to move into a new state, a state of goodness in the natural. His eyes are failing, meaning that although He wished for goodness on the natural level, He could not see clearly what that new state was like (*Arcana Coelestia* 3493). He hungered for it, so Isaac sent Esau off to hunt for it. The premise here is that if we have good intentions we can discover ways of behaving that seem good to us, and that everything will be good.

The one who sees the flaw in this plan is Rebekah. She stands for “*the Lord’s Divine rational as to Divine truth conjoined with the Divine good therein, thus the very affection of truth*” (*Arcana Coelestia* 3507). Since she stands for this affection for truth, she immediately sees that hunting for ideas and behaviors that feel right is not the answer.

Rebekah’s plan

Rebekah’s plan is to bring Jacob into the picture and fool Isaac into thinking he is Esau and believing that the savory food made from kid goats from the flock is venison. That is, her plan is to dress up Divine truth in the natural so that it appears to be natural good, and get Isaac to accept that the external innocence of spiritual truth meant by the kid goats is the natural truth meant by venison.

Her plan is actually brilliant. This is the plan that the Lord uses with each of us to bring light to our natural perceptions and to move us away from following our own natural inclinations and towards following Him. That is, the Lord enlightens us by means of interesting and pleasing narratives, by repeated sayings that convince us that the happiness of others is as important as our own happiness, by the suggestion that living according to the precepts of spiritual laws will bring us happiness, and in many other ways in which a spiritual life

masquerades as a pleasing natural life. So we eat savory food made from kid goats thinking it is venison and bless Jacob thinking he is Esau.

But what about the deception in the story?

Naturally Jacob is concerned about the deception involved and worries that the plan will backfire. What if our self-centered desires catch on to the fact that the stories and explanations we enjoy hearing from the Word are likely to threaten their control of our lives? Esau naturally responded angrily when he discovered the deception. But even

though we may worry that living a good life according to what the Word teaches may ruin our fun and lead to a boring and burdensome life, the truth is just the opposite.

The truth is that there was never any deception at all. Rebekah’s plan to promote Jacob and deprive Isaac of his venison was giving him what he wanted all along. He just didn’t know it. The same is true for us. The idea that willingly following the Lord and not ourselves is freedom is not a lie, even though it may seem that way to our



unregenerate selves.

The thing that the animals of the flock and herd have that deer lack is the willingness to be led that is the hallmark of innocence and spirituality. As such they are able to represent what comes from the Lord and what makes up heaven. This is why they and not deer could be used for sacrifices, and why Esau’s hunt for deer to satisfy his father was to no avail. Deer are natural, but the solution is spiritual.

Which is not really to criticize deer in any way. They are beautiful and beloved animals. They have their place, but they are not the answer that will satisfy our hunger for goodness.

“For who is God, except the LORD?

And who is a rock, except our God?

³³ *God is my strength and power,*

And He makes my way perfect.

³⁴ *He makes my feet like the feet of deer,*

And sets me on my high places.” II Samuel 22; Psalm

Readings from the Word

Genesis 27

Now it came to pass, when Isaac was old and his eyes were so dim that he could not see, that he called Esau his older son and said to him, “My son.”

And he answered him, “Here I am.”

² Then he said, “Behold now, I am old. I do not know the day of my death. ³ Now therefore, please take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field and hunt game for me. ⁴ And make me savory food, such as I love, and bring *it* to me that I may eat, that my soul may bless you before I die.”

⁵ Now Rebekah was listening when Isaac spoke to Esau his son. And Esau went to the field to hunt game and to bring *it*. ⁶ So Rebekah spoke to Jacob her son, saying, “Indeed I heard your father speak to Esau your brother, saying, ⁷ ‘Bring me game and make savory food for me, that I may eat it and bless you in the presence of the LORD before my death.’ ⁸ Now therefore, my son, obey my voice according to what I command you. ⁹ Go now to the flock and bring me from there two choice kids of the goats, and I will make savory food from them for your father, such as he loves. ¹⁰ Then you shall take *it* to your father, that he may eat *it*, and that he may bless you before his death.”

¹¹ And Jacob said to Rebekah his mother, “Look, Esau my brother *is* a hairy man, and I *am* a smooth-skinned man. ¹² Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be a deceiver to him; and I shall bring a curse on myself and not a blessing.”

¹³ But his mother said to him, “*Let your curse be on me, my son; only obey my voice, and go, get them for me.*” ¹⁴ And he went and got *them* and brought *them* to his mother, and his mother made savory food, such as his father loved.

Arcana Coelestia 3313

And Isaac loved Esau because of the venison he had in his mouth’ means that Divine Goodness in the Lord’s Divine Rational mind loved the goodness that grows out of truth... Esau represents goodness in the Lord’s Divine Natural... and game (or venison) symbolizes the good of life resulting from natural truth... ‘*In his mouth*’ means that he responded to it with earthly desire. In the Word whatever lies deeply within and proceeds from goodness is said to be in the heart, while whatever lies on the surface and proceeds from truth is said to be in the mouth. Goodness that comes from truth, here represented by Esau and symbolized by game (or venison) is relatively shallow; it is an object of earthly desire and grows out of truth. So it is said to have been in Isaac’s mouth.



Arcana Coelestia 6413

Naphtali is a deer let loose' (Genesis 49:21) means the freedom that natural affection possesses. This is clear from the meaning of 'a deer' as natural affection, and from the meaning of 'let loose' as freedom, for when a deer that has been captured is let loose it has freedom. Freedom from a state of temptations is compared to 'a deer let loose' because a deer is a woodland creature that loves more than all others to be free. The natural too is like this, for it loves to engage in what delights its affections and therefore to feel free; for freedom is the hallmark of affection. The reason 'a deer' means natural affection is that it is one of the beasts that serve to mean the affections, among those which can be used as food and are useful creatures, such as lambs, sheep, she-goats, kids, he-goats, as well as bulls, young bulls, and also cows. Yet these beasts also serve to mean spiritual affections because burnt offerings and sacrifices were made of them, whereas 'deer', because they were not put to that use, served to mean natural affections.