

**Rotation.org Writing Team**

**JACOB AND ESAU**

**BIBLE BACKGROUND**

**PASSAGE**

**Story:** Genesis 25:19-34; 27:1-33:20

**Key/Memory Verse:** Genesis 28:16b

**Part One**

Genesis 25:19-34

Genesis 27:1-35

Genesis 27:41-43

**Part Two**

Genesis 29:15-30

Genesis 31:1-3

Genesis 32:3-7a, 22-30

Genesis 33:1-4

**PURPOSE**

Lesson Overview

On the surface, the scriptural readings tell the story of the conflict (and its resolution) between Jacob and Esau, twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah. At first glance, it appears to be a story of what we might now call one of the Bible's more dysfunctional families. Beyond this, however, it is a story about God, God's nature, and the awesome power that chooses even the lowliest of us to bless and use in the advancement of the Kingdom.

## Lesson Objectives

Find the stories of Jacob in Genesis, in the Old Testament.

Identify the following characters and place them correctly in the story: Isaac, Rebekah, Esau, Jacob, Laban, Rachel, Leah.

Discover God's plan at work in the lives of these characters, despite their imperfections.

Understand that a loving, forgiving God is at work in their lives.

Realize that we need patience, persistence, and courage to wait for God's timing.

Discover that the stories are timeless and continue to speak to us today.

## BIBLE BACKGROUND NOTES

Upon reading what the theological literature refers to as “the Jacob narrative,” one is immediately struck with the length of it. Upon studying it in more depth, one comes to appreciate the complexity of not only the storytelling, but the theological truths embedded within. This writing will attempt to do service to both. In order to do so, the preponderance of credit must be given to Walter Brueggemann’s commentary as the framework for the presentation.

### Theological Premises

Depending on where we are in our faith walk and relationship with God, the Jacob stories seek to either introduce us to, inform, or remind us of the following:

**“The God of Jacob is every bit as scandalous as Jacob.”** What is meant here is that God does things that catch us up short, because they seem improbable, if not downright “wrong” by the standards of the natural order of things. This God of Jacob is the same God who later made “the first to be last,” upending the traditional human power structure, inverting it on its ear. As Brueggemann writes, “To be faithful to such a God brings conflict because this God himself evokes and enters into conflict with the way the world is organized.”

**God chooses to appear and become known, even to a fugitive like Jacob; that experience is life transforming.** God means to come into our lives, no matter our circumstances, to transform the reality of our existence. The decision to encounter us is made not because we are “good enough,” but merely because God wishes it to be so. The world is a place where one can encounter God.

**Our relationship with God has a direct impact on our relationship with others.** Not only does God's call on Jacob's life place him in conflict with those around him, it is Jacob's evolving relationship with God that brings about reconciliation with his brother, Esau.

**God's plans may have no visible or necessary connection to the conventional order of life, but he is always steadfast and faithful.** Before he was born, Jacob had already been chosen by God. This greatly impacted the events in his life, and his relationships. The conflict he experienced caused him great strife and hardship. Through all of this, he was never alone and it was always for ultimate good. God's promises to Jacob at Bethel are echoed much later through Jesus when he promises "Lo, I am with you always ..." (Matthew 28:20), his petition for our protection (John 17:11b, 15), and reconciliation (John 17:25).

### **Literary/Historical Considerations**

Brueggemann suggests that the progression of the Jacob narrative is arranged in a series of concentric circles. In the outer circles, we find the materials dealing with Jacob and Esau. The two encounters with God come within the next circle, with the material dealing with Jacob and Laban, falling in between these encounters. The center of the narrative is the birth of Jacob's children. There is then a series of designations by/encounters with God and Jacob which cause conflict, ultimately leading to new life and reconciliation. If we understand Brueggemann's intent, he is talking about concentric and overlapping circles, or themes, within the story.

The Jacob stories follow, and to some degree parallel, the Abraham stories; however they differ in two main ways. The Abraham stories focus on the promise, and how it can be passed from one generation to another. The Jacob stories shift attention to matters of blessing, and struggles within a single generation. Brueggemann writes: "The Abraham narrative is preoccupied with the issue of promise. It revolves around two questions: (1) Will God keep his promise of an heir? (2) Will Abraham and Sarah trust in and rely only on the promise? ... the Jacob narrative ... is dominated by the motif of blessing." This then has the effect of shifting the focus from the "religious" to more earthly concerns.

In order to truly appreciate this, one must more deeply explore the meaning of blessing in this culture. In our culture, we typically equate blessing with approval. Parents might give their blessing/approval to the efforts of their children -- usually meaning their choice of career or spouse. Blessing can be given equally. It is seen as a rather old fashioned and "quaint" practice, that holds little real weight.

Brueggemann reminds us that this was not the case in Jacob's world. Here, for this family, blessing mattered more than anything in the tangible world. Here, "blessing combines all of the primitive power of a spoken word (which has a life of its own) with the high theological claim derived from it." Here, "symbolic actions have genuine and abiding power ... not empty gestures signifying nothing." Here, the execution of symbols through ritual cause something to happen. Here, words, symbols, and gestures are the source of power. Here, blessing ties the past to the present and provides hope for a future. It cannot be retracted. It cannot be reissued. This is not just about the distribution of property. God will go with the blessed. The other must fend for himself. And in this world, it is expected that Isaac's blessing will go to his oldest son. This is the custom. This is what is expected to happen in all "good families." It is into this world that Esau and Jacob are conceived and born. It is from forces beyond this world that complications first arise.

### **Narrative Progression, Character Development and Symbolism**

Jacob's story begins before his conception. His father is middle aged and his mother is "barren," much like Abraham and Sarah. In this case, though, the issue of barrenness is quickly dispatched through Isaac's intercession to God. Rebekah becomes pregnant.

To say this was not an easy pregnancy would be the epitome of understatement. Rebekah is beyond miserable. She becomes so desperate she "inquire(s) of the LORD" (25: 22) -- ie, she sought an oracle to help her understand her situation. She is told what is to be the destiny of her children: two nations will be born from her, with the older serving the younger (v. 23). This divine revelation may help us to understand Rebekah's later behavior to some degree ... perhaps she felt justified or even driven to initiate the deceptive way Jacob obtains his father's blessing.

The two boys born are obviously not identical twins. Esau, the first born, was larger, hairier, and "red." Jacob was birthed grabbing at Esau's heel. Esau grew to be a boisterous man, a skilled hunter, preferring life in the fields, while Jacob was quiet, preferring life in the tents.

A few words about these names ... Again, in Jacob's time, words carried meaning and weight. There is some debate about the sum total of meanings in Esau's name. Some attribute his name to his condition at birth (hairy), while others downplay this angle. Jacob is related to the Hebrew word for "heel," and came to mean "deceiver" or "supplanter." Both men grow into alternative names before the narrative is done. Esau's is determined by the bargain made between the two brothers relayed in vv. 29-34.

This portion of the narrative shows us a famished Esau coming in from the fields to find Jacob over a pot of stew. Esau is portrayed as abrupt, even crass. He demands "some of that red stuff" from his brother. The scripture then tells us that Esau becomes known as Edom. In Hebrew, this word is related to the words "red" and "pottage" or stew. The implication here is that since Esau was more concerned with the momentary pleasure of instant gratification, with no regard for the future (he "despised his birthright"), this is what he became. His descendants, the Edomites, were then likewise destined for "red stuff" and not more.

The bargain, the trade between Esau's birthright and Jacob's stew, is the second bit of evidence that Jacob is meant to "have it over" his brother. Brueggemann fleshes out this notion with some discussion of the difference between deferred and immediate material blessing, and those that can be achieved vs. gifted. He states that what is implied in these passages is that while Jacob may well be a conniving scoundrel, he also evidences belief in a future and the sureness of God's promise, things to which Esau is totally indifferent. Lest we be tempted to take pity on Esau for being just a big, dumb oaf who didn't have any better sense, Williams reminds us that "According to the rabbis, Jacob was not the only tricky brother. Esau is described by them as a trapper as well as a hunter. He would trap people with leading questions ... so that any answer would ensnare the answerer."

With this and family divisions firmly in place (Esau is Isaac's favorite, Jacob is Rebekah's), we enter the bestowing of Isaac's blessing. Legally, Jacob can claim to be Isaac's heir. However, he still needs Isaac's blessing. Rebekah, convinced of Jacob's right to it (the oracle had decreed it, her older son's behavior -- in addition to "despising his birthright," Esau married Hittite women, who were apparently the bane of Isaac and Rebekah's existence and further evidence of his obvious disregard for the promise -- confirmed it), devises a plan to insure that he gets it. So sure of the correctness of her assessment, she is even willing to call curses upon herself to clinch Jacob's participation in the deception.

Brueggemann is quick to remind us "This is not a spiritual treatise on morality. It is, rather, a memory of how faith moves in the rawness of experience." He cautions us to refrain from getting too caught up in the obvious moral dilemma here. Instead, we are encouraged to continue to look for the hand of God at work.

Williams also more than hints at the possibility that Isaac was not a total fool. The interplay between Jacob (disguised as Esau) and Isaac suggests that not only did the patriarch have questions about with whom he was really dealing, his blessing implies he really knew! Williams points out that Isaac's blessing was one more fitting for a farmer than a hunter. This interpretation, along with the mirror image blessing Isaac later gives Esau, leaves this door open, and gives Isaac the freedom to be true in blessing the nature of each son.

Again, Brueggemann reminds us: "The way of God will not be explained. The narrative invites the listening community to marvel rather than explain. The reality of blessing is not simply the result of human ingenuity. Nor is it a matter of good luck. ... It is ironic that the bearer of the blessing becomes a fugitive ... That is the perilous, hopeful way of God."

Our memory verse comes from this "fugitive" section of the narrative. Jacob has been sent away by his parents, to escape the wrath of his brother. Isaac again blesses him, this time charging him to marry within the family. Jacob is to go to his uncle, Laban, and take one of his daughters as a wife. On his way, God comes to Jacob in a dream, and makes three promises: (1) "I am with you"; (2) "I will keep you"; (3) "I will bring you home." The unexpected nature of the encounter, and the power of the promises cause Jacob to exclaim "Surely the LORD is in this place and I was not aware of it." (28:16b, NIV). The encounter transforms Jacob. He makes a covenant with God. He promises to worship God, and to tithe. He leaves the place with hope for the future.

The inner narrative portion dealing with Jacob and Laban, Jacob's marriages and the birth of his children, all reflect and expand upon the themes already present in the earlier narrative. We again witness the conflict brought on by attempts to upend the conventional order of things, when Jacob seeks to marry the younger Rachel over Leah. Jacob meets his match in Laban, and has to learn how to work for what he wants. The natural order is again challenged when the beautiful and loved Rachel is barren. Unloved Leah is allowed the privilege of bearing Jacob's first children. Brueggemann points out that God is left out of this part of the narrative, for the most part. It is not until Rachel conceives and bears Joseph that God's name reenters the story. This also signals the time for the family to leave and return to Jacob's homeland.

It is on this return trip that Jacob's famous wrestling match at the Jabbok occurs. Jacob has sent messengers ahead to try to impress Esau with his accomplishments and wealth. It seems this attempt has failed when they return with the news that Esau is coming to meet Jacob and his family! Jacob is convinced he will be killed. He prays to God, reminding God of the promises made at Bethel. Then he sends Esau some extraordinary gifts, literally a fortune in livestock. He has now done all he can.

It is night. Jacob is alone. Suddenly, "a Man" comes out of the darkness and wrestles with Jacob all night! Apparently this one can only function at night. As the morning comes, he tries to get away by crippling Jacob. Jacob continues to hang on, refusing to let go "until you bless me." The Man's blessing is to change Jacob's name to Israel. Jacob believed he had been wrestling with God. Brueggemann reminds us that such activity comes with a price -- "Israel must ponder how it is blessings are given and at what cost."

Jacob's meeting with Esau does not occur as Jacob feared. The two meet and embrace. They are reconciled, but remain the same. Esau still wants to be brash and run the show (presumes to tell Jacob when it is time to leave and where they will go together); Jacob continues to be deceptive (leaves Esau with the impression he will catch up with him, but settles in another area).

Brueggemann ends: "Love of God and love of brother belong together. It remains to ask about seeing and loving. What does it mean to be children and heirs of that man -- crippled and blessed, bowed down and forgiven? ... all the answers must pass through the prism of the Crucified One. He is the one who knows fully about limping and blessing, about bowing down and forgiving."

## **REFERENCES**

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