

OT Narratives Bible Study Series

Genesis 25-35 - Jacob

For Discussion:

-Have you ever had to "learn something the hard way"? Have there been times of hardship in your life that have helped shape you into the person you are today? Looking back, how do you see God working in your life through those times? Did you feel the same way as you were going through the hardships?

Read Genesis 25:19-34 and 27:1 - 28:22

-What kind of man was Jacob?

- "Jacob" means "he grasps the heel", i.e. he cheats, or he deceives
- a quiet man (25:27), but shrewd, opportunistic, calculating, and self-seeking - seen in his dealings with Esau (25:29-34)
- unscrupulous; willing to lie to get his way; worried more about getting caught than with doing deceiving his father (27:11-12), and even invoked God's name in his deception (27:20)
- but unlike Esau, he saw the value of the birthright, though perhaps with wrong motivations

-What was the significance of Esau's "birthright", and why does Scripture condemn him for selling it? (cf. Hebrews 12:16-17)

- birthright = a place of special honor; came with promise of future blessing
 - often came with double portion of the inheritance (e.g. Deut. 21:15-17)
- more importantly, in this case, the birthright came with potential to receive God's blessing / promises made to Abraham
 - Isaac affirms Jacob as the heir of these promises when he sends him away (28:3-4)
 - God also affirms Jacob as heir of the promises in Jacob's vision of the ladder into heaven (28:13-15)
- he was a man who lived for the here & now; didn't care about the future, and about "things unseen"
 - traded a promise of significant future blessing for immediate gratification/pleasure – and a ridiculously small amount at that (i.e. a single meal)
- point of application: don't give up things of eternal value for fleeting gratification/sin here & now

Read Genesis 29:1 - 31:21; 32:1 - 33:20; and 35:9-15

-What do you think God was up to in the life of Jacob (and his family) in the years he was with his uncle Laban?

- shaping Jacob by allowing him to reap what he sowed (cf. Gal. 6:7)
 - Jacob had deceived Isaac to get the blessing --> now deceived by Laban and lived a life of hardship for 20 years (31:38-41)
 - Laban's deception of Jacob wrt Leah & Rachel resulted in broken marriages and difficult home life (29:31-30:24)
 - ongoing deception as Laban tried to cheat Jacob by changing his wages (31:7,41)
- at the same time, He was still watching over Jacob and blessing him --> limits on what Laban could do to him - as Jacob acknowledges (31:42)
 - gave Jacob many children (in contrast to Abraham & Isaac) --> establishing the nation of Israel --> 12 sons who would form the 12 tribes of Israel
 - prospered him with great possessions (30:43) despite Laban's attempts to cheat him
 - guided Jacob - instructed him to return home when the time had come

-In what ways has Jacob changed as he returns home after his time with Laban? In what ways hasn't he changed?

- left with nothing, returns as the head of a large household, and as a wealthy man
- but acknowledges God as the one who has been watching over him to guard and bless him (31:4-10), and seems to show greater reliance on Him (e.g. 32:9-12)
- see perhaps some glimpses of his 'old ways' (i.e. deception)
 - e.g. trying to outsmart Laban through selective breeding (30:37-42); leaving without telling Laban (31:20); deceiving Esau by saying he would join them later, but going in a different direction (33:12-17)
 - Jacob was still a 'work in progress' --> we will continue to see growth in his life going forward

-What was going on in the episode when Jacob wrestled 'a man' through the night (32:22-32; cf. Hosea 12:3-5)? In what sense did Jacob (now renamed Israel) strive with God and prevail (32:28)?

- God appearing as a man to wrestle Jacob (v.30 – Jacob says he saw the face of God)
 - wrestling match appears to have been external, physical outworking of Jacob's inward struggles
 - Jacob wanted to be alone, but God sought him out (v.24)
 - Jacob was between a rock and a hard place --> could not go back to Laban, but seemingly could not go forward because Esau was coming with 400 men, perhaps to attack & destroy him
 - up to this point, he had gotten ahead by scheming, plotting, deceiving; but now, all that seemed like it couldn't get him anywhere
 - God allowed Jacob to struggle/wrestle to the end of his strength, before completely breaking him, so that he could do nothing more than to cling to God and beg for his favor (cf. Hos. 12:2-4) - acknowledging God as the source of salvation and blessing
 - Jacob prevailed, not by defeating God/the angel (who crippled him), but in clinging tenaciously to God, to seek His blessing
 - reminiscent of the Christian life - the kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor in spirit (Matt. 5:3); God's power made known in our weakness (2 Cor. 12:7-10)

-What do we learn about God through his dealings with Jacob and Esau? (time permitting, you might also consider Romans 9:6-13)

- He is sovereign over salvation - He chooses whom He will (Rom. 9:6-13)
 - His choice/election not based on what we've done - He chose before either Jacob or Esau had been born or done anything good or bad
 - His choice also not based on what He sees we'll do in the future - Jacob was a deceiver/supplanter before God appeared to him
- the kindness and the severity of God in His dealings with people
- God is merciful; did not discard Jacob because of his faults, but worked to shape his character
- God is faithful to those whom He has chosen can called - both to bless, and to discipline them
 - allows his people to go through difficult times to shape and sanctify them --> His discipline
 - but in all this, He watches over them to guard them - Laban could only go so far, and no further
- He works all things for good, for those who love Him
 - e.g. even Jacob's difficult family life, he used to establish the nation of Israel, and to fulfill His promise to bless Abraham (and to bless the world through his offspring)
 - blessing those who blessed him, cursing those who dishonor him --> seen in Laban's downfall, as one who tried to cheat Jacob
- His common grace - enabled Esau to prosper materially, despite not receiving the blessing given to Jacob
 - this may also have been His provision for reconciliation with Jacob --> as Esau was a 'here-and-now' person, perhaps his material prosperity was enough to make him forget what Jacob had done to him
- His immanence - He is not far off, but near & personal

-What encouragements - and warnings - can we take away from the account of Jacob & Esau in these chapters?

- do not be ungodly like Esau - living only for the here and now, without thought to God's promises or to the eternal (cf. Heb. 12:16-17)
- God is faithful
 - doesn't give up on His people, in spite of our sins and failings
 - even as He disciplines us (sometimes by allowing us to reap what we sow), He is watching over us and working for our good
 - an encouragement to trust Him and cling to Him
 - in His discipline, He intends to bring about a harvest of righteousness in our lives (Heb. 12:5-11)
- encouragement for those from broken family backgrounds --> God used Jacob's broken family to be the source of blessing for many others

For further reflection

In the life of Jacob, we see the interplay between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Although he had already been chosen by God from the womb (25:21-23), Jacob sought to advance his own interests through deceit and cunning. In so doing, he reaped the consequences of his actions, being forced to flee to his uncle Laban, where he was himself deceived into marrying Leah, resulting in 7 extra years of hard labor and a home life filled with bitterness and strife. Through it all, however, God was faithful to His covenant with Abraham and Isaac, appearing to Jacob at Bethel and to promising to watch over him and to bring him back to the land that he and his descendants would inherit (28:13-15). In His sovereignty, God allowed Jacob to reap what he had sown, using Laban's schemes to discipline and shape him. At the same time, however, God used these same difficult circumstances to bring about fulfillment of His promise to make Jacob's descendants "like the dust of the earth" (28:14), and to give birth to the nation of Israel. He also placed limits on how far Laban could go, enabling Jacob ultimately to prosper in spite of Laban's efforts to the contrary (31:11-12). For his part, Jacob continued to struggle "with God and with men" (32:28), until God completely broke him, so that he could do nothing more but cling to God and, weeping, beg for His favor (Hosea 12:4). In his brokenness, Jacob clung tenaciously to God as his only hope and prevailed, receiving God's blessing and a new identity.

God's dealings with Jacob serve both as a warning and an encouragement to us today. When we face God's discipline in our lives, we should not grow impatient nor lose heart, but rather cling to Him, submitting ourselves to Him and to His shaping work in our lives, because we know that He disciplines those He loves, and that His discipline ultimately yields a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it (Heb. 12:5-11).

Additional Resources

CGYG/LIFE website: www.cgygfellowship.com (Resources section)

- Genesis Bible study series: http://www.cgygfellowship.com/BBS_Genesis.shtml
- OT Daily Devotional series

CGC website: OT Survey and Genesis adult Christian education materials: <http://www.cgctorenglish.chinesegospelchurch.ca> (Resources section)