

The God of Jacob

GRACE IN THE MESS



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Introduction

But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. (1 Corinthians 1:27-29)

The story of Jacob is a perplexing narrative in its down-to-earth presentation of its chief protagonist. Jacob is not a man we would naturally look up to as a leader and spiritual hero. A liar, a coward and a trickster who gets away with being blessed by God anyway despite his moral failures - it grates against our understanding of the world. Don't we reap what we sow?

Esau was strong, well-regarded but impulsive. Even then to us, the loss of his blessing and birthright as the eldest child might leave a bad taste in our mouths. Wasn't it harsh for him to miss out the way he does? Then again, why is the older child supposed to get so much and the younger so little? Who came up with that rule?

Grace is the underlying theme hidden in the layers of this anti-hero tale. God turns human power structures and traditions on their head in order to prepare humanity for the good news of Jesus. Can we come to see ourselves in Jacob and Esau, as conflicted, multi-dimensional characters who must struggle with the reality of our true reflections and wrestle with a personal God of grace, who we must turn to with faith rather than works? Wrapped in the narrative tensions of family betrayal and reconciliation is the bigger unfolding story of salvation.

Ultimately, the story of Jacob is not really about him at all. God would fulfil His promises and plans in spite of Jacob's lousiness. That's precisely the point we find again and again in Scripture: God redeems amidst and through human frailty and

failure. The weaving and winding of the divine salvation plan appears in a web of human “self-interest and self-seeking”¹, which culminates in the cross. Humanity needs redemption, and that can only come through the intervention of God into our messed-up situation.

It would have been easy to have story after story of cookie-cutter faith-heroes like in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, with characters that we can look up to and admire for their perfect responses to every situation. Of course, if that’s what the Bible was, it wouldn’t be real and it wouldn’t offer us the hope it does. Instead, we have a real story, with real people, a real God and a real message to us today.

¹ Walter Brueggeman, *Interpretation: Genesis - A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, p. 204

Study 1 | Genesis 25:19-34

God of the trickster

Context

The Genesis story carries a recurring theme of controversy between an older and a younger brother. In the preceding story of Isaac and Ishmael, the younger son is chosen against the older son born of a concubine. However, the unique dynamic in the story of Jacob and Esau is that of two legitimate children born moments apart from each other competing for the right of heir.

Against all conventional wisdom and societal structure, a prophecy is given that the older brother will serve the younger. Jacob will clutch at the heel of Esau and pull him to the side. So begins a great drama of family, love, betrayal, providence, and ultimately for us, a glimpse of the hope that will arrive from Jacob's progeny - the Christ, whose truth will 'turn the world upside down' (Acts 17:6-7).

Observation

1. From Isaac and Rebekah's perspective, what is the significance of having children? How does this relate to God's promises to this family (Genesis 17:3-8)?
2. Isaac and Rebekah each has a favourite son (verse 28). What are your thoughts and feelings when parents play favourites?

Meaning

The prophecy of two nations and two children being in the womb throws in an unexpected twist with “the older serving the younger”. In Deuteronomy 21:15-17² (written at a later period), the law reflects a cultural norm of preference, blessing and the largest portion of the inheritance going to the firstborn. This is also the norm during this earlier period with Jacob and Esau³.

3. What is the message when God chooses to create the nation of Israel through Jacob’s lineage rather than Esau’s? How does this relate to us (1 Corinthians 1:27-29)?
4. The prophecy (verse 23) indicates that Jacob will come out as the stronger of the two parties, despite being younger and physically weaker. Is it unfair that the younger receives a greater inheritance than the older?

Application

Esau treats his birthright flippantly. He also assumes that he will still receive his rightful inheritance. For the narrator, this interaction around the stew is significant and leads to the nickname “Edom” for Esau’s descendants, which refers to the red stew.

² The word for ‘unloved’ (Deuteronomy 21:15-17) literally means “hated” (Malachi 1:2-3; Romans 9:11-12; Genesis 29:31)

³ This is why Laban wants Jacob to marry Leah before Rachel (Genesis 29:26)

5. Discuss the behaviour of Isaac, Rebekah, Esau and Jacob. What can we learn from the dynamics of this family?

6. Power structures often still put some groups at a disadvantage today. How can we as Christians respond appropriately to unjust power structures in our current times?

Study 2 | Genesis 27:1-45

God of blessing

Context

The tension between Jacob and Esau begins in their mother's womb. Jacob, the younger twin, emerges holding to the heel of the older twin Esau. The name Esau means "red" and "hairy", while the name Jacob means "heel" and "deceiver" (Genesis 25:25-26).

Jacob (who dwells in tents) is favoured by his mother Rebekah as the organised, administrative and quiet one, while Esau is favoured by his father Isaac as a skillful hunter (Genesis 25:27-28). The tension between the two brothers is growing, especially after Esau sells his birthright to Jacob.

Observation

1. Jacob lies directly to his father (verses 18-24). What does this show about Jacob's character?

The birthright is the right of the eldest male to inherit twice the inheritance of the other males. If there were two sons, the older would get two-thirds and the younger one-third. If there were 12 sons, the eldest would get 2/13 while the others 1/13. The blessing is connected to the birthright as it traditionally goes to the eldest son.

2. What is the significance of the blessing (27:27-29; 12:1-3)?

3. How does Esau react to what he has lost (verses 34-38, 41)? Is that a proportionate or impulsive reaction?

Meaning

4. How have these characters failed to live God's way? What are the consequences of these failures?
5. Although God is not mentioned much in this passage, what are the hints that He is directing events towards His purposes in spite of human sin (25:23)?

Application

"You can fool all the people some of the time, and some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time." (Abraham Lincoln)

6. Only God knows our true character all the time. Why does God appear to sometimes allow us to have success in our sin? Share an experience.
7. What can we expect from God when we constantly fail to live up to the magnitude of His blessings?

God who remembers

*"The Bible's original love triangle: Jacob, Leah and Rachel..."
(Jean-Pierre Isbouts, National Geographic, 15 February 2019)*

Context

Being fulfilled is a state of being content usually associated with finding meaning in life. Depending on our circumstances or life stage, this may mean establishing a rewarding career or winning over the heart of someone we love. Yet, if we google 'a life less fulfilled', the result 'why having kids won't fulfil you'⁴ appears near the top.

Does a meaningful life require children? In ancient Jewish culture, having children was considered a blessing, while childlessness carried a sense of reproach or disgrace (Psalm 127:3-5 and 1 Samuel 1:15-18). Rachel feels this anguish when she says, "Give me children or I shall die!" in Genesis 30. Even today, many couples struggle with this very personal and often painful topic.

Within the bigger picture, God is fulfilling His plans in establishing a nation for His people through Jacob. This remains true even after Jacob has been tricked into marrying Leah before his first love Rachel, which provides the backdrop for this passage.

⁴ <https://time.com/3640988/jennifer-aniston-woman-kids-fulfill-you/>

Observation

1. Leah has borne four sons, while Rachel has yet to bear any (Genesis 29). What thoughts, feelings and pressure can influence Rachel's actions (verses 1-3)?
2. The names of Jacob's children carry meaning and significance (verses 4-13).

Sons born through Bilhah (Rachel's handmaid)	Dan	"God has vindicated me"
	Naphtali	"My struggle"
Sons born through Zilpah (Leah's handmaid)	Gad	"Good fortune"
	Asher	"Happy"

Looking at what those names mean, how do Rachel and Leah interpret their situation? What are their motives? What value do they place on these children and ultimately their relationship with God?

Meaning

God shows concern for Leah, who is 'hated' because she is not Jacob's first love. God also recognises her disadvantage and provides for her by 'opening her womb' (Genesis 29: 30-31 and Deuteronomy 21:15-17). However, despite having children of her own, Leah remains insecure and jealous of Rachel (verse 15).

3. What does it say about God to show this care and concern for Leah? Does Leah's trade and subsequent efforts change anything in her relationships?

Using a handmaid for surrogacy has happened before in Genesis (i.e. the birth of Ishmael through Sarah's handmaid Hagar). This time, however, the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah are accepted to make up four out of the 12 tribes of Israel.

4. What distinguishes these surrogacies apart? How is God's grace shown despite their lack of patience (Genesis 16:4, 17:19-21)?

5. Many years later God remembers Rachel and enables her to conceive (verses 22-25). Why is her son Joseph so significant to this family's story and the story of Israel (Genesis 45:4-15, 50:15-21)?

Application

Rachel uses her handmaid Bilhah to fulfil her desire to bear her children (verse 3) while Leah uses her handmaid Zilpah to maintain her lead (verse 9).

6. What does fulfilment mean to you? What lengths would you go to attain it?
 - a. How do we guard ourselves from being consumed by disappointment or turning our unfulfilled dream into an idol (Philippians 4:6-8 and Romans 5:1-5)?

 - b. How do we ensure that our motives are authentic and glorifying God (Titus 3:3-8)?

7. Although Rachel takes matters into her own hands, she also continues to plead with God (verse 22). Her prayer is answered in God's timing. What if things never happen according to our hopes and prayers (1 Corinthians 1:26-28, Hebrews 12:1-3 and 1 Peter 2:6)?

Prayer

Lord, help us to understand the struggle with disappointment, remind us that You are there in the midst of despair. Help us to walk with others who suffer, so that together we may remain and abide in You. May we bring joy and fulfilment loving one another as You have called.

Study 4 | Genesis 31

God of the deceived

Context

Jacob has been living for 20 years with his relatives. He is an outsider to their customs (29:26) and treated as such among them (31:1). Just as God has called Abraham from the land of his fathers, God now places the same call on Jacob - Abraham's grandson.

God blesses Abraham and Jacob, even though they are both imperfect recipients of God's promises. Abraham's many years of waiting for God's promise (to be fulfilled in Isaac) are mirrored in Jacob's many years of serving his father-in-law Laban.

Many parallels of Jacob's prior life with his family play out in Laban's household, but with the roles reversed. Jacob the deceiver has met another deceiver in Laban. Laban has cheated and stolen from Jacob. Now Jacob is fleeing once again.

1. Through Joshua, God characterises Abraham's relatives as having served other gods (Joshua 24:2). We can also see this in Laban's act of divination (Genesis 30:27) and his household idols. So why does Rachel decide to steal her father's household idols?

Observation

2. How has Jacob's relationship with God progressed during his 20-year stay (verses 9 and 42)?

3. God tells Jacob to return home (verse 3). Jacob proceeds to discuss this with his wives and flee. How do his actions reflect on his leadership abilities?

Meaning

4. What are the purposes of the monument Jacob and Laban set up (verses 43-53)?
5. God is the one to judge between Jacob and Laban - blessing Jacob against all odds and warning Laban not to harm Jacob. They trust God to look over each other (verse 49). Does God get involved in all conflicts?

Application

6. Jacob discusses the decision to leave Laban with his wives before getting ready to leave. What can we learn from this example? How can we implement this in our decisions as a leader?
7. Although Jacob decides to flee Laban (instead of facing him), he eventually responds honestly about his feelings (verse 31) before stating his complaints. How do you normally approach a conflict? How does God want us to do it effectively (Matthew 18:15-17 and Ephesians 4:25-32)?

Study 5 | Genesis 32:22-32

God who wrestles

Context

The coming days are uncertain for Jacob. The impending meeting with Esau and his 400 fighting men causes Jacob fear and stress (verse 7). Jacob prepares his family in the event of an attack by Esau and cries out in prayer to God - asking God to come through on His promises (verses 11-12).

Although Jacob has not seen Esau for 20 years, the images are still fresh in his mind - how he tricked Esau into trading his birthright for a bowl of stew and how he also stole the blessing meant for Esau.

1. Share a time over the past year when you felt overwhelmed.

This passage is a turning point for Jacob. He finally recognises that he has been a recipient of God's grace over and over again, and comes to understand his real need.

Observations

2. From the strange wrestling match between Jacob and the mysterious man, what can you observe about that man? What is he like?

3. What does this encounter reveal about Jacob's faith?

Meaning

The mysterious man can easily dislocate Jacob's joint. He is much more than just a human being. Yet, he allows Jacob to wrestle with him for so long. He is willing to come down and meet Jacob at his level. This man then blesses Jacob and changes Jacob's name - giving him a completely new identity as someone who 'strives with God'.

4. What is the connection between the blessing Jacob receives and his name change (32:27-28 and 17:4-6)?
5. Seeing God's face normally means death (Exodus 33:20). How is Jacob able to see God and remains alive (verse 30)? What are the implications for us (John 1:14 and 18)?

Study 6 | Genesis 33:1-18

God of reconciliation

Context

Jacob is in fear as he sees Esau coming to meet him with 400 men. We can probably relate to the dread of facing up to someone we have wronged and knowing that we deserve a punishment. Share your experience and how that turned out.

Observation

1. Chapter 33 begins with Jacob fearing for his life and ends with Jacob having reconciled with Esau. His actions reflect a changed but flawed man. He shows genuine humility, but also deceit and favouritism.

Verses	What does Jacob do?	What characteristic does this demonstrate?
1-2		
3-4		
10-11		
12-17		
18-20*		

* refer to Genesis 31:13 and 35:1

Meaning

2. Esau initially rejects Jacob's gifts (verse 9). Jacob then persuades Esau to accept the gifts (verse 11). What does it mean to have 'enough'? How has God dealt graciously with Jacob?
3. Jacob likens seeing Esau's face to seeing the face of God (verse 10). How does Esau's forgiveness relate to God's forgiveness (Ephesians 1:7)?

Application

4. Jacob and Esau's interaction (verses 4-11) reveals the healing in their relationship, which is no longer divided by their desire to dominate each other and seek personal advantage. Share about a relationship in your life (if any) where you are seeking reconciliation.

God of new beginnings

Context

Just prior to this passage, Jacob's daughter Dinah is tragically defiled and Jacob's sons brutally take revenge. His family is once more in tatters - his daughter is humiliated, and his family is weakened and divided.

1. In light of what has just happened to Jacob's family, what is surprising about God's word to him and Jacob's reaction (verses 1-4)?

Observation

2. How does God demonstrate His faithfulness to His promises to Jacob (35:5-8, 28:12-19, 34:30)?
3. How does Jacob's name change foreshadow what is in store for his family in the future (verses 10-12)?

Meaning

4. The key for this passage is verse 9. From verses 10-12 and previous weeks' passages, how would you summarise and describe God's blessing in Jacob's life? Compare and contrast this with our spiritual blessings in Christ (Ephesians 1:3-14).

Application

5. There are four burials in chapter 35, which signify the end to a past era and the expectation of a new beginning. There is also the burying of foreign gods and rings (verse 4) as a symbolic burial of a past defilement. Share one struggle with sin that you would like to put an end to with God's help.
6. How would you summarise the story of Jacob to someone who has never read it before?