

## *Lessons from the Life of Jacob*

Opening Hymn: #63 — “He Will Make It Plain”

The book of Genesis is longer than any book of the Bible except Psalms. And it says more about the patriarch Jacob than anyone else—a lot more than about his father Isaac or grandfather Abraham. Jacob’s experiences occupy the last half of the book. He’s born in chapter 25; he’s buried in chapter 50.

The apostle Paul in 1 Cor. 10:11 says that the experiences of fleshly Israel are meant to instruct us. When we look at this patriarch’s life, we see there are many lessons associated with the one whose name was “Israel,” whose sons became the heads of the twelve tribes of the nation of Israel. Here are some of them.

### **Lesson #1 — God Keeps His Own Counsel**

Romans 9:10-13 When Rebecca had conceived [twins] ... (for the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth;) it was said unto her, The elder shall serve the younger. As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I **hated**.

Rebecca was experiencing great pains in her womb from what seemed to be fighting between the two boys she was carrying. She could not understand why and so inquired of the Lord. This is what she was told:

Genesis 25:23 Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger.

Nothing is said about God “hating” the elder. In fact Esau becomes the father of twelve sons who are the founders of nations, and he becomes a wealthy man. This is the same “hate” as in Luke 14:26, “If any man come to me, and **hate** [*same Greek word*] not his father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters...” Jesus did not ask us to hate our parents; that would be contrary to the Law which said we should “honour father and mother.” We are to love them less compared to the love we have for him.

Being “loved” by God was not that big a blessing for Jacob. He suffered a lot, often because of his own poor choices. God does not insulate us from the consequences of our actions. He certainly did not do so in the case of Jacob. And as far as Isaac was concerned, he loved Esau:

Genesis 25:28 **Isaac loved Esau**, because he did eat of his venison: but Rebekah loved Jacob.

A key lesson is that God can select whom he pleases even before birth. In the case of Jacob God selected the one he wanted for his purposes yet without predetermining Jacob’s final destiny. Another example is Paul who said he personally had been selected by God “from my mother’s womb” (Gal. 1:15). Why did God select you, and not your brother or sister? This is not a question any can answer because God follows his own counsel, not man’s.

The name Jacob (Strong's #3290) means "heel-catcher (i.e., supplanter)." "Supplant" means "to usurp the place of, especially through intrigue or underhanded tactics." Jacob got this name because he took hold of Esau's heel as he came out of the womb. He definitely lived up to his name.

There are some who think the position of the sun, moon, and stars at the moment of birth determines a person's characteristics. My mother sometimes reminded me I was born under the sign of Cancer the Crab and that of course was why I behaved as I did. I wonder how she would explain why Jacob was so vastly different from Esau when both were born simultaneously?

## **Lesson #2 — Do Wrong and There Are Consequences**

Gen. 25:29-34 (NIV) Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished. He said to Jacob, "Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I'm famished!" ... Jacob replied, "First sell me your birthright." "Look, I am about to die," Esau said, "What good is the birthright to me?" But Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, and then got up and left. So Esau despised his birthright.

We don't know exactly when this happened; presumably the boys were in their late teens. Esau makes it sound like he either eats Jacob's stew or he dies. What nonsense! There is no other food in the house? And what about Jacob? He has plenty of stew cooking over a fire and his brother is starving. He won't give him any unless he "pays" for it? What kind of behavior is that? In any event, Jacob considered the birthright valuable, Esau did not. He later regretted this teenage impulsiveness, but it was too late:

Heb. 12:16,17 (NIV) See that no one is ... like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. He could bring about no change of mind, though he sought the blessing with tears.

It was more than 50 years later when Isaac decides it's time to give his sons their paternal blessing, he first asks Esau to go hunt some wild game with bow and arrow, then cook it in the style he loves. At this point Esau has been married for 37 years to two Hittite wives. Rebekah overhears the conversation and is sure Isaac will give his best blessing to Esau not Jacob. So she takes matters into her own hands. She conspires to deceive Isaac by having Jacob impersonate Esau. The details are in Genesis 27. She knows God has said "the elder shall serve the younger" and she wants to do everything she can to guarantee it. Isaac relies on taste, touch, and smell—Rebekah makes sure Jacob is wearing Esau's clothes—and ignores the sound of a voice he thinks is Jacob's. At age 137 he is blind. Although this deception is engineered by Rebekah, Jacob's only worries about whether he'll get caught or not (27:11,12). The ruse is successful and Jacob steals the blessing Isaac intended for Esau.

When Esau discovers what happened, he bursts out crying, pleading for a blessing from Isaac. He is so mad at Jacob he vows to kill him as soon as his father dies. What no one in the family knew was that Isaac would live 43 more years. Rebekah is so worried Esau and Jacob might actually kill each

other, she convinces Jacob to flee, saying that Esau's Canaanite wives disgust her, and she wants Jacob to marry someone in her family. It's about time. Jacob is 77 years old and still living at home! What Rebekah does not know is that Jacob will be gone for 20 years. It is entirely possible she never saw him again. There is no excuse for what she and Jacob did. When God says "the elder shall serve the younger," he meant it. He didn't need her help. Thinking the "ends justify the means" has been a trap since the beginning of time. Let us not fall into it. The Lord is in control. He will **not** bless our misguided efforts to lie, cheat, and steal to get what we believe is rightly ours. Rebekah paid a high price for her actions. So did Jacob.

### **Lesson #3 — We Reap What We Sow**

Jacob goes to where his mother was born and raised. At a well he meets Rachel and immediately falls in love with her. He is a strong man for he rolls away a stone from the well's mouth and single-handedly waters the flock. It turns out Rachel is his cousin; her father Laban is Rebekah's brother.

Unlike the last visitor from Caanan who came laden with gold and gifts—and left with Rebekah—Jacob is penniless. He has nothing to give Laban for Rachel except his own servitude. A deal is reached: he will serve Laban seven years to win Rachel. Seven years sounds like a long time but not when you're in love: "Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to her" (Genesis 29:20).

Although it does not say so explicitly it appears Laban got Jacob drunk because when he goes into the tent on his wedding night, he is essentially blind. He can rely on smell and touch, but if he heard any voice at all, it was Leah's, not Rachel's. Like his father Isaac when Jacob pretended to be Esau, Jacob ignores the voice and consummates the marriage. In the morning Laban's deception is revealed: Jacob is in bed with Leah, not the greatly beloved Rachel. Laban knows that if he is to retain Jacob, he had better deliver Rachel, and he does so a week later in return for another seven years service contract. The deception practiced by Jacob is returned to him by Laban. We reap what we sow.

Jacob loves Rachel and "hates" Leah, but this is hate in the "love less" sense. If he hated Leah he would not sleep with her, yet she bears him four sons one right after the other. Rachel is jealous and asks Jacob to give her sons using the body of Bilhah her maid servant. This is like Sarah offering her maid servant Hagar to Abraham.

Genesis 30:1 When Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children [Hebrew: sons, plural], or else I die.

This sounds vaguely like Esau who with similar impulsiveness says he needs Jacob's lentil stew or he will die. He gets the stew, and Rachel gets sons, but both pay much more than they imagine. In Rachel's case, she dies when her second son is born.

Rachel's maid servant produces two sons. Then Leah makes the same suggestion about her maid servant and soon she produces two sons. Everything seems to happen in twos with Jacob. Now he has eight sons. Jacob evidently did stop sleeping with Leah because it appears she has to "buy" a night with him (Gen. 30:16); another son results, and soon another. Finally Rachel bears Joseph and a few

years later Jacob decides to go home (Gen. 30:25). He is now in his mid-90s and has eleven sons and one named daughter.

Now it is time for Laban to reap the fruits of deception. Jacob strikes a deal that during a given period of time the colored animals that are born are to be his. God blesses Jacob and the colored cattle multiply greatly. God tells Jacob to get out and he makes plans to do so. Jacob tells his wives that Laban constantly changes whatever deal he makes (“changed my wages ten times” are his words in Gen. 31:7). So with his entire family and his flocks, he makes a break for it while Laban is away shearing sheep, a three-day journey in the opposite direction. It takes seven days before Laban can catch up with the group. He accuses someone of stealing his personal household gods. Laban searches and finds nothing, but it is only because Rachel, pleading her period, asks to not be forced to dismount from her camel. Rachel is sitting on her father’s gods. Laban wanted to take back the flocks and people by force but God warned him not to do Jacob harm. Laban’s treachery has been paid in full. He lost the best shepherd he ever had, his two daughters, his grandchildren, and his gods.

#### **Lesson #4 — Do Your Best, Then Pray**

Jacob remains terrified of Esau all his life. As he is on his way back home, word comes that Esau is approaching with 400 men. Jacob suspects the worst: the men are an army meant to obliterate him (see 32:6). He divides his family into two groups with the thought that if one is smitten, the other can escape. He then picks out 550 animals which will be a gift for Esau.

The family and flocks are sent ahead and Jacob is left alone. He prays claiming the promise God made to him when he said he would bless him and he asks specifically to be saved from the hand of his brother Esau. That night he wrestles with someone he later realizes is a spirit being (end of Gen. 32). Neither prevail over the other. Just as night was ending Jacob insisted that the man bless him. The blessing was a name change: his new name would be Israel. The wrestler touched Jacob’s thigh and put it permanently out of joint. Day broke and with it fresh hope, but the man whose name was now Israel was forced to walk with a limp for the rest of his life.

Jacob the “supplanter” had contended for the birthright, for Isaac’s blessing, with Laban ... with everyone. And he succeeded. Now he contends with God—or at least God’s representative—and fails. The name Israel means “God commands.” The new name reminds him of his need to depend upon God, and the limp makes sure he never forgets it.

Some have questioned whether this being was really a good angel because the experience is at night and the angel disappears at sunrise. But are we to believe Satan’s “angel” would change Jacob’s name to Israel? This angel was sent to reassure Jacob in his internal, mental “wrestlings” that God was still with him:

Hosea 12:4 Yea, [Jacob] had power over the angel, and prevailed: he wept, and made supplication unto him: he found him in Bethel, and there he spake with us.

When Abram’s name is changed to Abraham, the change is permanent. The old name is gone forever. But such is not the case with the Jacob-to-Israel name change. The old name Jacob keeps reappearing.

For example, near the end of his life the patriarch moves to Egypt with his family because of the famine in Canaan. God speaks to him:

Genesis 46:2 And God spake unto **Israel** in the visions of the night, and said, **Jacob, Jacob.** And he said, Here am I.

One opinion as to why the name Jacob doesn't disappear is that the name Jacob is used in the account whenever he has doubts and fears, and the name Israel when he has faith and confidence in God's will for him.

As it turns out Esau has come in peace. The people with him show he is now a prosperous man. The twins are now 98 years old. Jacob presents the large number of animals as a gift. Esau tries to refuse claiming he has enough of everything, but Jacob insists. Throughout the entire conversation Jacob employs the language of a servant speaking to his master. If we thought Esau lost tangible wealth when he sold his birthright, surely he more than made up for it with the huge gift he received from Jacob that day. In a way Jacob bought the birthright with considerably more than a dish of lentil stew. As far as we know he received nothing from the estate of Isaac who was still alive. In fact Isaac died 22 years after this meeting.

### **Lesson #5 — Be Careful For What You Pray For**

There are far more experiences in these Genesis chapters than we have time to discuss. You know that Rachel, Jacob's beloved wife, died when Benjamin was born. A year or two later Joseph was sold as a slave. At the time he was 17 or 18 years old; his oldest half-brother doing the selling was no more than 23 or 24. Deception again occurs when the brothers produce Joseph's blood-drenched coat and say he must have been killed by wild beats (37:34). And of course we know Joseph became second only to the Pharaoh in Egypt and saved the lives of his family by giving them food during a famine.

Jacob arrives in Egypt as an old man and is presented to the Pharaoh. In Genesis 47:9 Pharaoh asks Jacob how old he is. He says he is 130 years old, and then he adds:

Genesis 47:9 ... few and evil have the days of the years of my life been, and [I] have not attained unto the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their pilgrimage.

In fact Jacob has achieved everything he ever wanted: he has the birthright, he got his father's chief blessing, he married the woman he loved, he has lots of sons, and he is wealthy. But one great lesson from a study of Jacob's life is that although he got everything he wanted, none of it happened in the way he wanted. We see him in front of Pharaoh reflecting on a life of far more pain than contentment. Everything has been a struggle. He has wrestled in his lifetime with more than an angel on the night when his name was changed. His story has a happy ending ... yet there is no real feeling of happiness at the end.

Perhaps the lesson for us is that we should be careful about what we ask for. We are not wise enough to ask intelligently for anything other than spiritual gifts. The Manna for February 22 says it best. The text is Hebrews 13:4, "Be content with such things as ye have." The comment:

Some have gained wealth and lost the truth and its service; some have gained health, only to find that with it they gained other trials no less severe: some have had their dear ones restored to them from the very jaws of death, only to wish afterward that God had not answered their prayers--or, more correctly, to wish that they had accepted the Lord's wisdom and providences trustfully, contentedly, uncomplainingly. ... Spiritual Israel's ... petitions should be for spiritual gifts--including patient endurance and heart contentment.

Jacob lives another seventeen years in Egypt and then dies. With great ceremony he is transported from Egypt to the cave of Macpelah where Abaraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob's wife Leah were buried.

Just before Jacob dies he gives a special blessing to each of his sons. Joseph somehow anticipates he will do something special for his sons because he takes Ephraim and Manasseh with him (48:1). Jacob blesses these two sons and states that they are to be treated as though they were really his sons, not his grandsons. They become tribal heads in their own right along with the other sons. Thus when Canaan is divided up at a later time, Joseph is not considered a tribe but Ephraim and Manasseh are.

There is an obscure reference to this blessing in Hebrews:

Hebrews 11:21 By faith Jacob, when he was a dying, blessed both the sons of Joseph; and worshipped, leaning upon the top of his staff.

At the end of Genesis 47 Jacob asks Joseph to swear that he will not bury him in Egypt. By faith he was sure his progeny would return to Canaan in fulfillment of God's promise to him. The Septuagint of Gen. 47:31 reads like this text: "And Israel bowed down on the head of his staff." That staff was about all he had when he passed over Jordan fleeing from the wrath of his brother after stealing Isaac's blessing; now near death he still has it and so much more. (He blesses Joseph's sons in the next chapter.)

The *Companion Bible* has a totally different explanation of this text: "By faith, Jacob, on his death bed, blessed the two sons of Joseph, basing that decision on the height of his (i.e., Joseph's staff)." Noting, when his sons gathered for their final blessings, that Joseph had the staff of the grand vizier of all Egypt, Jacob concluded that if God had so blessed this son, then he should act in harmony with that blessing by making him the firstborn of his children.

Let us learn from the experiences of Jacob so we can be more pleasing to God. God promised Jacob when he was most afraid that he would never leave him. And God has promised us exactly the same thing:

Hebrews 13:5,6 Be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, I will not fear what man shall do unto me.

Closing Hymn: #114 — I Love Thy Will

*Companion Bible Chronology*

B.C.	Jacob's Age	
1836	0	Jacob and Esau are born. Isaac is 60.
1821	15	Abraham dies at age 175. Isaac is 75. (Heb. 11:9—Abraham dwells with Isaac and Jacob.)
?	?	Jacob "buys" the birthright from Esau with a dish of lentil stew.
1796	40	Esau marries two Hittite wives.
1759	77	Jacob steals Esau's blessing from Isaac, flees to Padon-Aram. (Esau suffers no real loss.)
1758	78	Jacob's servitude to Laban commences.
1752	84	Jacob marries Leah and Rachel.
1745	91	Joseph is born.
1742	94	Jacob bargains with Laban for cattle.
1739	97	Jacob flees from Padon-Aram.
1738	98	Jacob meets Esau. Gives him 550 animals.
1736	100	Settles in Shechem.
1732	104	Dinah is raped.
1731	105	Jacob settles in Bethel.
1728	108	Rachel dies when Benjamin is born.
1727	109	Joseph is sold at age 18. (His half-brothers are no older than 24.)
1726	110	Jacob joins Isaac at Hebron after a 33 year separation. Isaac will live ten more years.
1716	120	Isaac dies at age 180.
1706	130	Jacob moves to Egypt with his family. Benjamin is 22 and has ten sons (46:21).
1689	147	Jacob dies. Joseph is 56, Benjamin is 39.
1635		Joseph dies at age 110.