

Reading the stories of Genesis literally as descriptions of God and God's actions makes a mockery of the God Jesus reveals and embodies in the gospels. But if we read them more metaphorically, then some important insights emerge. When is faith tested in our lives and how do we come through to the other side with our faith not only renewed but stronger? Abraham has to find the kind of faith to believe his only son will be ok even though his fear can take over and overwhelm him. The theme of "God will provide" is a powerful one. God will provide a way through. Hang in there, trust the process and don't make choices and don't commit actions out of fear. Hold on to your principles, keep grounded and have faith that living and behaving with integrity will pay off in the end.

With Jacob, we'll dive into how God could possibly bless someone who is so deceptive and untrustworthy. Jacob has to learn a few life lessons. Will he learn them? Or will it also be a situation where God keeps working with flawed humans. If God can work with Jacob, God can work with anybody. And God is always holding out hope that people can change, even the worst of them. God is not going into this with everything certain in advance. God, too, has to have faith in what's possible with flawed and unpredictable humans.

GENESIS 26-30

1) ISAAC PROSPERS: CHAPTER 26

The pattern of developments in the story of Abraham are repeated in the story of Isaac. Isaac, too, is on his way to Egypt, and even though he doesn't end up getting there, he settles in the environs of Gerar where Abimelech is King. Just like his Father Abraham did with Sarah, first in Egypt and later in Gerar (20), Isaac introduces Rebekah as his sister rather than his wife because of fear that he will be killed for her, since she is so beautiful. Once again, Abimelech discovers that Rebekah is Isaac's wife and rebukes him for not having been honest about that. Just like he did with his father Abraham, Abimelech makes a covenant with Isaac, which provides security for Isaac, his family and his property, as he is a foreigner.

Isaac prospers, and this is a sign that God is blessing him. Isaac also has a personal encounter with God, and he develops a personal relationship with God just like his father Abraham had done, trusting God's promise that: 1) The land he is now living in as a foreigner will become his homeland (the promised land), 2) He will be the ancestor of a great nation, and 3) all the nations of the earth will receive their blessing through him and the people that will be produced through him.

2) ISAAC, JACOB, ESAU, REBEKAH - FAMILY CONFLICT 1 : CHAPTERS 27-28

Esau had forfeited the firstborn's share in his father's property (25:29-34), and this was largely his own fault. In this chapter, though, he is deceived out of his father's

testamentary blessing, and this is the result of pure scheming on the part of his brother Jacob and his mother Rebekah. In ancient culture, a dying man's blessing on specific children had sacred authority. Jacob receives what rightfully belongs to Esau, and Esau is bitter and anguished as a result. Because of the first loss, Esau had already begun to make his own living and settle into life in the area by marrying local women. Jacob and the rest of the family, on the other hand, live in the area but have not assimilated into the surrounding culture. This situation is a source of tension, and the family, beginning with Isaac, have to make all kinds of covenants to secure and protect their property and livelihoods. Envy and jealousy by other people become a major problem, and trust is something hard to come by even within the family.

The shocking thing in this story is not only Jacob's deception of his vulnerable father, but his mother Rebekah's instigation of it, overtly promoting the interests of one of her children over the other. For God to work through such circumstances is astonishing. Jacob is certainly not portrayed as a worthy recipient of God's graciousness, and our sympathies go out more naturally to Esau than to his mother or his brother.

Of course, neither Jacob nor Rebekah anticipate the trouble their deception will cause as Esau is looking for blood. Rebekah convinces Jacob to go into hiding for a while, and the reasoning she offers Isaac is that Jacob must go to her brother (their family back in Haran) in order to secure a wife from their own people. Neither Rebekah nor Jacob realize how long he will be away, and Rebekah will not see him for years. This is but the first of several sad consequences of their actions.

Esau, on his part, marries Ishmael's daughter, and as Abraham loved Ishmael, so he hopes that Isaac's love for Ishmael's children will bring him favour as well. This also explains how Esau, too, becomes an ancestor in the line of Ishmael. Moreover, it follows the pattern of the matriarch preferring one of the children over the other (Sarah preferred Isaac over Ishmael, and Rebekah prefers Jacob over Esau).

Jacob's dream at Bethel is fascinating on a number of counts. Jacob is alone, on the run, with a very uncertain future ahead of him. The dream becomes a source of deep assurance that all will be well because God will bless him. Jacob also receives the word from God, that he is the one through whom the promise of descendants, the promised land and blessing to the nations will be fulfilled. Through the dream and its aftermath Jacob also experiences a personal relationship with God, just as Isaac and Abraham did before him. Regardless of God's incredible grace toward him, Jacob continues to bargain and scheme with God as is his character to do with people. If God keeps him safe and blesses him, he will return trust and worship to God, as well as 1/10th of all his prosperity (which at this point, isn't much). God's action, however, is not dependent or contingent on such offers, schemes, or bargains. Jacob will learn life's lessons the hard way. We shall see Jacob's scheming and its consequences further manifested in later chapters.

3) JACOB, RACHEL, LEAH & LABAN - FAMILY CONFLICT 2: CHAPTERS 29-30

Jacob meets Rachel and loves her. Jacob is welcomed by Laban as a kinsman. Laban gives Jacob a job and Rachel will be his reward. Jacob is tricked by Laban for Leah instead. After a week he marries Rachel also, but the deal he is forced to accept is another 7 years of service.

The tension and conflict between Rachel and Leah is due to the unevenness of Jacob's love for one over the other. Between Leah, Rachel, and their maids, 11 sons and 1 daughter are born. The 4 oldest (from Leah) will have a certain dominance, those born of the slaves will be less so, and the youngest (Joseph) will be the favourite because of his mother. Later, Rachel will also give birth to Benjamin, the 12th.

How do the 12 tribes of Israel come to be? 10 sons become 10 tribes:

Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, and Zebulun.

Joseph's children: Ephraim and Manasseh will together form one large tribe adding 1 more, and Benjamin will be a smaller tribe making it 12.

A final contest takes place between Laban and Jacob, with Jacob coming out on top. Jacob wins because he is the smarter schemer. Where will all this scheming lead?

LARGER QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

- 1) Why do we scheme (if and when we do)? Are we afraid that if we are honest and straightforward, we will not get the result we want? Are we afraid the truth will hurt us or the person we are dealing with? Do we want to secure an advantage for ourselves we do not believe is possible with a more truthful and transparent way forward?
- 2) At what point does dishonesty and deception become a pattern we fall into or a hole out of which it is more difficult to come out of the farther along we have gone into it?
- 3) How is the cycle of deception, scheming and dishonesty broken? (You'll have to wait till later chapters in Genesis to find out what happens between Jacob and Esau).
- 4) Does God give up on us if we keep falling into a hole of our own making?