Bible Studies - Part 1

Studies 1-6

KIAMA ANGLICAN CHURCHES

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Genesis 25:19 - 35:29
Struggling With Jacob

Bible Studies accompanying the Sermon Series on the Life of Jacob

		The Study and Preaching Plan		
	Page	**Study**	***Study and/or Preaching Passage*** **Genesis**	**Sunday**
← Studies Part 1 →	2	1 (Intro)	-	-
	8	2	25:19-34	28 April
	14	3	26:1-33	-
	19	4	26:34 - 28:9	5 May
	-	-	*Mother's Day*	*12 May*
	27	5	28:10-22	19 May
	34	6	29:1-30	26 May
		-	*One Off Sermon*	*2 June*
← Studies Part 2 →		7	29:31 - 30:24	9 June
		8	30:25 - 31:18	16 June
		9	31:17 - 32:2	23 June
		10	32:1 - 33:20	30 June
		11	34:1-31	-
		12	35:1-15	7 July
			35:16-29	14 July

The preaching passages do not line up exactly with the study passages in Part 2.

Gordon Wenham's *Word Biblical Commentary* on Genesis 16-50 was a major source for these studies.

Study 1 - Genesis 25:19 - 35:29
The Life of Jacob - Introduction and Overview

The purpose of this first study is to develop some familiarity with the story that we will look in these studies.

Your group may wish to just use Section 1 as a short study for what is possibly your first get together after a couple of weeks off. Section 2 is probably best done as 'homework.'

The story of Jacob in Genesis 25-35 is a great story, worthy of a mini-series. It's the story of a very 'interesting' family. It's the story of plotting, scheming, deceiving, and struggling. Throw in strange dreams, bigamy, revenge, and reconciliation and you've got all the ingredients for an epic tale.

But more than that, Jacob is a key character in the Old Testament's story of God's unfolding plan of salvation. God had promised Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him. Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob's 12 sons became the fathers of the 12 tribes of Israel. That makes Jacob worth spending some time on, both in Sunday Services and in Bible Study Groups with parallel studies.

And even more than that, the story of Jacob is part of God's word to us, part of the Scripture which is able to make us wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. It's part of the Scripture which is God-breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that we may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:15-17)

Getting Started

What do you already know about Jacob?

Where does he fit in the Old Testament story?

What kind of person was he?

1. Introducing Jacob

The story of Jacob comes in the second half of Genesis. We will be concentrating on Genesis 25:19-35:29 which is the eighth of ten 'accounts' that make up the book of Genesis.

How is this account introduced in 25:19?

How about the other accounts? See 2:4, 5:1, 6:9, 10:1, 11:10, 11:27, 25:12, 36:1 and 37:2.

Although 25:19 introduces the 'account of Isaac', Jacob is the main character in this section, just as Joseph will be the main character in the 'account of Jacob' (37:2). Does this occur in the other accounts?

Who are the four main characters of Genesis 12-50? (see 17:5, 17:19, 25:24-26, 30:22-25.)

Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac was the father of Jacob and Jacob was the father of Joseph. Joseph is the main character from Genesis 36-50. Altogether Jacob had 12 sons who became the fathers of the 12 tribes of Israel.

God is sometimes referred to as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (eg Exodus 3:6-16, Acts 3:13) and at other times, more briefly as the God of Jacob (Psalm 20:1, Isaiah 2:3).

What does the name 'Jacob' mean? (25:26, 27:36. See the footnotes.)

What was Jacob's name changed to and what does it mean? (32:24-28. See the footnote.)

Can you think of others in the Bible who had their name changed?

What was the significance of the name changes?

2. The Whole Account

Read the whole 'account' from 25:19 - 35:29.

Identify the main sections of the story and come up with a short heading for each section which reminds you of the contents of that part of the story. You may like to use the sermon and study divisions on page 1 or come up with your own sections.

Although this could be done in great detail, the main point here is to become familiar with the flow of the whole story.

Your Outline

Are you able to identify any form or structure to the story? Can you see any patterns that will help you keep the whole story together? Indicate them on your outline above.

What are the turning points in the life of Jacob? Indicate them on your outline.

Jot down any thoughts or questions about each section.

What about the other characters in the story? Who are they? How do they fit in? What observations can you make about them?

Isaac	Rachel
Rebekah	Leah
Esau	Bilhah
Laban	Zilpah

Try drawing a family tree. You may want to extend beyond the limits of this story.

Conclusion

How would you describe Jacob in the early part of the story?

How would you describe Jacob at the end of the story?

Even in a quick overview, what stands out in the story of Jacob…

- about Jacob?

- about God?

- about yourself?

Prayer

Pray that as you work your way through the life of Jacob, as you ‘struggle with Jacob,’ that you will learn more about yourself, more about God, and grow in your walk with Him.

Study 2 - Genesis 25:19-34
First Encounters of Jacob and Esau

Getting Started

Who is your favourite fictional villain?

This first section of the Jacob story acts as a trailer to the whole story. After a brief introduction, we are given three episodes which both determine and illustrate what will follow.

Read Genesis 25:19-34.

Give a title for each of the three episodes.

Genesis	Title
25:19-20	Introduction / Isaac's Relatives
25:21-26	1.
25:27-28	2.
25:29-34	3.

Introduction / Isaac's Relatives

Which important character and place are introduced in 25:19-20? See 28:2

See Deuteronomy 26:5 for an echo of Israel's ethnic origins recorded here.

Pregnancy & Birth

What characteristic of Rebekah is mentioned in 25:21?

Who does this link her with in the Jacob story? (29:31)

What about earlier in Genesis? (11:30)

What does God act in response to? (25:21)

In 25:22 we read that the babies 'jostled' in the womb. When Rebekah consults the LORD, a prophetic message is given. What was it?

What will this mean in the life of Jacob and Esau?

What will it mean for the future generations? See Numbers 20:14-21 and 2 Kings 8:20-21 for just a couple of examples. (Esau was also known as Edom.)

What does the symbolism of the birth and the naming of the boys tell us about the pattern for the rest of the story?

The Twins Contrasted

How are the twins contrasted in 25:27-28?

In what way will the parental favouritism of verse 28 become important later in the story?

Of Stews and Birthrights

If the contrast of 25:27-28 show a growing division between the brothers deepening as predicted, 25:29-34 show how the younger starts to make a slave of the older and how he deserves his name as the prophecy of 25:23 begins to be fulfilled.

What do you know about the rights of the firstborn in the ancient near east?

Describe Esau's character.

Describe Jacob's character.

Are there any ways in which you are like Jacob and/or Esau?

Explicit moral comment is rare in Old Testament narratives so the final phrase of 25:34 is important. Jacob has been portrayed as heartlessly exploitive, but the narrator finds it

unnecessary to comment on that here. The results of his action will become clear as the story unfolds. Here the most decisive aspect is mentioned: In his response to the choice offered to him by Jacob, Esau despises his birthright, himself and the LORD, and so must change places with Jacob.

Parallels with the Abraham Story

Optional additional exercise.

This opening looks not only looks forward and introduces the Jacob story, it also looks back. Note the parallels with the opening of the Abraham story.

11:27	&	25:19
11:29	&	25:20
11:30	&	25:21
11:31	&	25:22
12:1-3	&	25:23
12:4	&	25:24-26
12:5-9	&	25:27-34
12:10-20	&	26:1-11

The promise to Abraham in 12:1-3 is quite well known and is important not only to the story of Abraham, but also for Genesis as a whole, the first five books of the Bible (the Pentateuch), and indeed the whole Bible. The prophetic word in 25:23 is similarly programmatic for the Jacob story and has ramifications right through the Old Testament.

New Testament Reflections

The reverberations of the age-old conflict are not forgotten in the New Testament. The writer of Hebrews was probably writing to Jewish Christians who were being tempted to avoid persecution by reverting to Judaism.

How does the writer use the Jacob & Esau story in Hebrews 12:15-17?

How does Paul use Jacob and Esau in Romans 9–11 ? See Romans 9:10-16 in particular. What does this tell us about God?

God's Sovereignty and Grace

Was Jacob 'better' than Esau?

Did the prophecy of 25:12 determine what Esau and Jacob would be like or did it reflect God's knowledge of what they would be like?

Why does God choose some and not others? See Titus 3:3-7

Conclusion

What parts of God's character are seen in what we have read? How does that encourage you?

For personal reflection: In thinking about the questions on page 10, are there areas of your life that need the transforming power of the Holy Spirit? Pray about those things.

'The fact that God was able to use men like Jacob to forward his purposes may shock is, but it should surely encourage us too, for at times we fall as badly as he did. If God could use him, may he now graciously use us.' *Wenham*

Prayer

Reframe the quote from Wenham into a prayer.

Study 3 - Genesis 26:1-33
Issac and the Philistines

Getting Started

Are you like your parents in any way – positively or negatively?

After introducing Jacob in chapter 25, there is a pause in his story as we look at Isaac's encounters with the Philistines. Since Jacob does not feature in this section it has not been included in the Sunday preaching plan. It does, however, form an important part of the overall story. In the stories of the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) in Genesis, Isaac spends most of his life in the shadow of his father or his sons. It is only in this chapter that Isaac appears as a person in his own right.

Read Genesis 26:1-33.

Give a title for each of the seven episodes in this section.

Genesis	Title
26:1-6	
26:7-11	
26:12-17	
26:18-22	
26:23-25	
26:26-31	
26:32-33	

Where are the first four episodes set?

Where do the final three occur?

Note the parallels between events in the two locations.

26: 1-6 & 26:23-25 _____

26: 7-17 & 26:26-31 _____

26:18-22 & 26:32-33 _____

An Interruption?

This chapter seems to interrupt the Jacob story. What is it doing here?

Without chapter 26, chapters 25 & 27 would join smoothly. In a parallel manner chapter 34 interrupts chapters 33 and 35. Looking at your overall outline from study 1, you may note a certain symmetry in the story of Jacob with chapters 26 and 34 providing interludes near the beginning and end of the story respectively. This would suggest the inclusion of both is not the work of a haphazard editor.

Can you see a common theme in chapters 26 and 34?

This chapter also links the Jacob story with Abraham. How many explicit references are there to Abraham in chapter 26?

There are also parallels between this chapter and the Abraham story. Quickly look through 12:10 - 14:24 and note the parallels.

When these parallels are taken together with the parallels between 11:27 - 12:9 and 25:19-34 that we saw in study 2, it would seem chapter 26 fits well as a conscious comparison of Isaac with his father Abraham. (More parallels occur in chapters 20 and 21.)

Recipient of Divine Blessing

The promises first made to Abraham are reiterated and enhanced in 26:3-5. Does Isaac deserve God's blessing? (26:7-11)

Despite his lapse what happens? (26:12-13)

How does Isaac come across in 26:14-21?

Despite his lapse and despite being kicked around by the Philistines what does 26:22 show us?

After this, things improve for Isaac. What does God do and what is Isaac's response? (26:23-25)

How is Isaac now treated by the Philistines? (26:26-32)

How does the way Isaac is portrayed as receiving God's blessing differ from what we are about to see (in chapter 27) of the way that Jacob, aided by Rebekah, will seek to secure blessing?

Conclusion

Isaac is portrayed as a man of mixed character. How would you describe him?

What do you learn about yourself? Do you see any of yourself in Isaac?

What have you learnt about God from this study?

Read Titus 3:3-7. (We read it last study, but read it again)

‘This account of Isaac’s dealings with the Philistines portrays Isaac as ‘walking in his father’s footsteps.’ He receives similar promises, faces similar tests, fails similarly, but eventually triumphs in similar fashion. In certain respects, he is given more in the promises and achieves more. He is promised ‘all these lands,’ and by the end of the chapter he is settled securely in Beersheba and has a treaty with the Philistines in which they acknowledge his superiority.’ *Wenham*

God is working his purposes out, moving to the time that ‘through Isaac’s offspring all nations on earth will be blessed.’ (26:4, See 2 Corinthians 1:20). God’s promises will be fulfilled despite the frailty of his chosen people.

Prayer

Give thanks to God that we, through Isaac’s descendent Jesus, are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. (1 Peter 2:9)

Study 4 - Genesis 26:34 - 28:9
Jacob Cheats Esau out of His Blessing

Getting Started

How much help does God need from us to bring about his purposes?

In a well-known story like that of Jacob, some parts of the story are particularly memorable. The drama of Jacob cheating Esau out of his blessing makes this part of the story rather gripping. Will Isaac dislodge Jacob's disguise as he blindly gropes around? Will Esau get back from the hunt before Isaac has blessed Jacob? Will Rebekah and Jacob get away with their daring plot? It's a story that satisfies our love for the theatrical, but on a surface reading at least, it can outrage our sense of moral and theological propriety. How could God's intention to bless Jacob be forwarded by such underhand tactics?

Read Genesis 26:34 - 28:9

Give a title for each of the episodes in this part of the story.

Genesis	Title
26:34-35	
27:1-5	
27:6-17	
27:18-29	
27:30-40	
27:41 - 28:5	
28:6-9	

There are five main scenes, which are preceded and followed by reports of _____

After the interlude of Isaac and the Philistines in chapter 26, we re-enter the world of the twins whose birth and early conflicts we saw in 25:19-24. Just as we noted in study 3 that chapter 26 corresponded to chapter 34, here we observe that this section corresponds to reconciliation of Jacob and Esau in chapters 32 and 33.

Esau Marries Two Hittites (26:34-35)

Where do the Hittites fit into the picture? (See your family tree from Study 1, and 10:15).

Why is Esau's marriage to Hittite women somewhat unexpected? See 24:1-4 and also Deuteronomy 7:1-5 and Judges 3:5-7 for later comments.

Was Isaac negligent in not finding a wife for Esau from among his people, or was Esau rejecting family tradition?

Whether Isaac's indifference or Esau's rebelliousness (or both), what is the cost of the marriages as described in 26:35?

What do you make of all this bigamy in the OT?

With God having made one wife for Adam, the actions of the first bigamist (see Gen 4:19, 23-24) should lead us to think that bigamy is at best, doubtful. As we move on in the story of Jacob we see that his family is constantly at loggerheads because he had two wives.

Isaac and Esau (27:1-5)

It is unusual, to say the least, that only one of the two sons is summoned as both were entitled to some blessing by their father. Why does Isaac only call for Esau?

What is Isaac prepared to overlook in order to bless Esau ? (26:34-35 & 25:23)

What do these verses (27:1-5) tell us about Isaac? How is he like Esau? (27:4, 25:30)

In the light of God's promise in 25:23 and the partisanship of 25:28, Isaacs intentions must be called into question.

Rebekah and Jacob (27:6-17)

Why does Rebekah take such decisive action? In the light of God's promise in 25:23, was she right in ensuring that it came to pass?

How, and for what purpose, does Rebekah modify Isaac's word to Esau when she reports them to Jacob?

Jacob expresses concern with his mother's suggestion. What is the basis for his concern? Does he agree with her aims?

Does Rebekah's response (27:13) answer Jacob's concerns? Why does Rebekah answer in this way?

Isaac and Jacob (27:18-29)

Whatever Jacob's earlier hesitations, he now throws himself into it. The tension mounts as Isaac is not as easily persuaded as perhaps Rebekah had thought. How does Jacob nearly give himself away?

Finally Jacob is blessed. The blessing was intended for the firstborn Esau, but is pronounced over Jacob. How does this blessing echo the Lord's words in 25:23 ?

Are there any parallels with the promise to Abraham in 12:1-3 ? What do the differences tell us?

Esau and Isaac (27:30-40)

Had Esau been just a few minutes earlier (27:30) he may have unmasked his brother. Having prepared the food he enters cheerfully, but is quickly deflated by Isaac's question:

‘Who are you?’ His shocked reply, ‘I am your son, your firstborn, Esau’ (27:32) paves the way for Isaac’s panic.

In this dramatic scene, the emotions of Esau and Isaac are described with some fullness, but even more dramatic is the fact that however irregular was Isaac’s blessing, it was irrevocable (27:33) and Esau and Isaac can do nothing to change it. Jacob, with his mother’s help, has lived up to his name as the grasping deceiver yet again (27:35-36, see 25:26).

Esau still seeks a blessing. Had this been a proper deathbed farewell, all the sons would have been invited to receive a blessing, but Isaac summoned only Esau to confer a blessing only on him. Esau went along with the plan and is now left with nothing.

Isaac reaffirms his blessing to Jacob (27:37). How does he interpret what this means for Esau?

What do you make of the blessing given to Esau? (27:39)

How does Edom (the nation descended from Esau) appear in the rest of the OT as fulfilling the blessings to Jacob and Esau? See Numbers 28:14-21, 1 Samuel 14:47, 2 Samuel 8:11-14, 1 Kings 11:14-16, 2 Kings 3:9, 2 Kings 8:20-22, 2 Kings 14:7-10, Obadiah, Psalm 60:8-9, Psalm 137:7.

From the time of King David, Edom was part of the Israelite empire, but later gained independence and after the fall of Jerusalem, Edom took revenge on Judah.

Rebekah Thwarts Esau's Revenge (27:41 - 28:5)

Although 27:35 is the closest that the narrator comes to condemning the behaviour of Rebekah and Jacob, we see here and in the unfolding story that they do pay dearly for their actions.

Why does Rebekah want Jacob to flee?

What does she mean by 'Why should I lose both of you in one day?' (27:45)

Jacob is to flee for 'a while' (27:43-44). How long does 'a while' last? (See 31:38, 41)

How does Rebekah ensure that Jacob does go away? Note the skilful way in which she achieves what she wants.

How do Isaac's words to Jacob (28:1-2) compare to Abraham's when he sought a wife for Isaac? (21:1-4)

Compare the blessing that Isaac gives to Jacob on his departure (28:3-4) with the promises made to Abraham

(12:2-3, 7; 13:15-17; 15:7, 18-21; 17:1-8, 16; 22:17-18; 24:7) and with those made to Isaac (26:3-4, 24).

This is the first time that Jacob has been designated heir of the Abrahamic promises. See also the promises in 28:13-15 and 35:11-12; and 48:3-4 where the promise is recalled.

Esau Marries an Ishmaelite (28:6-9)

Where does Ishmael fit into the picture? (See your family tree from Study 1, and 16:3-4,11-12,15; 25:12-18)

This reference to Esau marrying an Ishmaelite suggests a close association between the two groups. Note the similarity between the groups in 16:12 and 27:39-40.

Conclusion

What do you learn (re-learn?) about God from this part of Jacob's story.

What does that mean for your life?

Fundamental to this story is the conviction of the efficacy of the deathbed blessings of the patriarchs; what he says before he dies determines the destiny of his descendants. (See also Genesis 48-49.) That is why Rebekah is so desperate to make sure that Jacob gets the blessing and not Esau. That is

why Isaac declares that the blessing cannot be revoked. That is why Esau pleads for some blessing. In Genesis, the deathbed blessing is more than prayer for the future, it is a prophecy whose fulfilment is certain. Here Isaac declares the future relationship between Esau (Edom) and Jacob (Israel), prophecies which find multiple fulfilments throughout the OT. He also reiterates the promises made to Abraham and himself (28:2-4) indicating that God's chosen line will pass through Jacob, not Esau.

This step forward in God's plan of salvation history is set in the context of unprincipled behaviour by every member of the family as they each self-centredly look out for their own interests. (See Philippians 2:4-5.) While this story points out the fallibility of God's chosen, whose virtues often turn into vices, it also reasserts the grace of God. It is his mercy that is the ultimate ground of salvation.

Might as well read Titus 3:3-7 again.

Prayer

Give thanks that God is sovereign and will bring about his purposes. Give thanks that he uses even us in our frailty and sin.

Study 5 - Genesis 28:10-22
Jacob Meets God at Bethel

Getting Started

Is there a time in your life when God was particularly near to you, but you were unaware?

Despite a warm send-off (28:1-5), Jacob must have been frightened leaving home. The quiet home-loving boy had been forced to flee for his life because of the hatred of his brother. And now on his first night away from home he lies down under the stars, perhaps wondering if there was anything his father's pious hopes for his future. (28:3-4).

Read Genesis 28:10-22

Divide this passage into two or three scenes, giving a title for each.

Passage Title

Although this is a self-contained unit, it is part of the bigger story and contains many links to what precedes and follows it.

Verses	Passages to Compare	Links
28:10	26:23 and 29:4	
28:11-15	15:12-21 and 32:24-32	
28:13-14	12:3; 13:14-16; 32:9-12; 35:11-12	
28:15	31:3, 5, 42; 32:12; and 35:3	

In Study 1 you were asked to come up with an outline of the Jacob story from 25:19 to 35:29 and look for any structure and patterns. In study 3 we noted the similarities of chapters 26 and 34 and in Study 4 a passing reference was made to a correspondence between chapters 27 and 32-33. With this symmetry in the story of Jacob, to what does 28:10-22 correspond? You may wish to revisit your outline, seeing if you can use this mirror image structure to enhance it.

Jacob's Dream (28:10-15)

The place to which Jacob is to go referred to by two names: _____ (28:10; 27:43) and _____ (28:2,5; 25:20). The same general district is meant by both names.

Have a look at 11:31-12:5. In the light of what is about to unfold in 28:12-15, why might 12:10 refer to Haran rather than Paddan-Aram?

How comfortable is a stone pillow? When was the last time you tried one?

Whilst Jacob may have put a small stone "under his head" (perhaps with some padding!) to raise it, it is also possible he put some of the stones "round his head" to protect it, rather than lie on. (The same phrase "round his head" appears in 1 Sam 26:11-12 and 1 Kings 19:6.)

What are the three main features of Jacob's dream?

1.

2.

3.

Whether the stairway is a stairway, a ladder or a ramp (see NIV footnote on 28:12) matters not. What is the important thing about it?

What have the angels got to do with anything?

In the OT angels are sometimes conceived as patrolling the earth and looking after different areas. If this is the case then it may be that the ascending angels are responsible for the land from which Jacob has come and those descending are responsible for the land he is going to. In this way, the vision would anticipate the assurance of 28:15. In a similar way, the vision of Abraham anticipates the prophecy that follows it in 15:11-16. At the very least the ascending and descending angels emphasis the idea that the stairway links heaven and earth.

How does God identify himself? (28:13) What is the significance of this?

The promise in 28:13-14 has obvious similarities with the promises made to Abraham, and most closely parallels the promise of 13:15-16. What other link between these passages is there? (See 13:3)

What is the difference between the situations of Abraham and Jacob when they receive these promises?

What three things does God promise in 28:15?

The promise of 28:15 makes explicit what was implied in 28:13-14, and must have been of some comfort to the fleeing Jacob.

Jacob's Reaction (28:16-17)

What is Jacob's initial reaction to the dream? (28:16-17)

Compare Jacob's reaction with that of others in the Bible who encounter God. (eg Ex 3:6, 20:18; Judges 13:22; Isaiah 6:1-5)

Jacob's Vow (28:18-22)

The next morning Jacob starts to worship according to the customs of the age. He sets up a stone as a sacred pillar using the oil he had taken for his journey to consecrate it,

and he makes a vow. What does God have to say about setting up stones? (Deut 16:21-22; 1 Kings 14:22-23)

How do we explain this discrepancy between the patriarchal practice and the law given through Moses?

What does Bethel mean? (See the footnote)

How does Jacob's vow compare with the promise of 28:15?

Is Jacob's vow that "the Lord will be my God" (28:21) contingent on his safe return?

In light of the promise made to him, is his prayer for safe return necessary? Does it show a lack of faith?

Throughout the Bible, the basis of prayer is the promises of God. Here Jacob's prayer is best understood to reflect faith, rather than unbelief.

Compare the responses of Jacob with those of Abraham in 14:17-24.

New Testament

Read John 1:43-51.

What does Jesus mean by this?

What does it mean for the way we encounter God?

How does the writer to the Hebrews (Heb 13:5) suggest we respond to a promise similar to that given to Jacob in 28:15?

Jacob's move from knowing about the Lord as the God of his father (27:20), to knowing the Lord as his God (28:22), is a significant step in the story. You may like to encourage each other in the group by sharing how you came to know God personally.

Conclusion

Jacob was the first person in Bible history to hear the assurance 'I am with you,' a promise later repeated to many of the nation's leaders and by Jesus himself to the disciples (Matthew 28:20, see also Matthew 1:23). Jacob was also assured, 'I will bring you back to this land.' Little did he suspect that it would he twenty years before he came back.

Jacob's experience at Bethel reaffirmed the promises yet again and brought their fulfillment one step closer. His experience is a model for us, reminding us of our need to personally encounter God, and that in our moments of deepest crisis God is still with us, and will eventually bring his promises to fulfillment.

Over 250 years ago, Phillip Doddridge wrote this hymn…

O God of Bethel, by whose hand
thy people still are fed,
who through this weary pilgrimage
hast all our fathers led:

Our vows, our prayers, we now present
before Thy Throne of grace;
God of our fathers, be the God
Of their succeeding race.

Through each perplexing path of life
our wandering footsteps guide;
give us each day our daily bread,
and raiment fit provide.

O spread thy covering wings around,
till all our wanderings cease,
And at our Father's loved abode
our souls arrive in peace.

Prayer

You may like to turn that hymn into a prayer.

Study 6 - Genesis 29:1-30
Jacob Arrives at Laban's Home and Marries his Daughters

Getting Started

For those who are married, share how you met you husband or wife.

This chapter begins on a cheerful note with Jacob's successful arrival at his uncle's home. Everything seems to be going smoothly for him, as the promise God made to him at Bethel (28:15) appears to be being fulfilled. By the end of this part of the story, however, the deceiver has been deceived and things are anything but rosy.

Read Genesis 29:1-30

This passage falls into two distinct sections - the arrival of Jacob in Haran, and his marriage to Laban's two daughters. Divide each major section into several subsections, giving a title for each.

Passage	Title
29:1-14	Jacob Arrives at Laban's Home
29:15-30	Jacob Marries Laban's Daughters

Some scholars make much of possible different sources for each part of the Jacob story, however each part of the narrative is a well organised and coherent narrative. Far from being a collection of independent traditions, the overall story is tightly bound and linked with common themes, and allusions to what precedes and follows - both within the Jacob story and beyond it.

For example, in the current chapter, note the mention of the family relationships (29:5, 10-14), particularly Rebekah as Laban's sister, which echo 22:23; 24:29 and 27:43. Some of the other links will be noted during the study.

Jacob Arrives at Laban's Home (29:1-14)

Jacob and the Shepherds (29:1-9)

After his encounter with the Lord at Bethel (28:10-22), Jacob continues on his journey to the land of the eastern peoples, and comes to a well. The unfolding scene is somewhat reminiscent of the search for a wife by for Isaac by Abraham's servant in chapter 24. What are the similarities and differences between these two accounts? What do the distinguishing features tell you about the characters involved?

What impression do you get of Jacob in his conversation with the shepherds? (29:4-8)

Why does the narrator describe the situation at the well so fully in 29:2-3? The shepherd's give the same information to Jacob in response to his (almost impertinent) question (29:7-8). What then are we to make of Jacob's action in 29:10?

Jacob Meets Rachael (29:10-12)

Jacob kisses Rachel and weeps for joy. What was the reason for his joy? Was it love at first sight, or simply relief at finding a relative in this foreign land?

Although the embrace anticipates their later marriage, and Isaac had directed him to find a wife from Laban's family, this part of the story repeatedly insists that Jacob waters the sheep, not because of Rachel, but because they belonged to Laban. At this stage it seems his main motive is to ingratiate himself to his uncle although he undoubtedly noticed Rachel's beauty (29:17).

Jacob stays with Laban (29:13-14)

Laban hurried out and greeted Jacob with great joy. He has, of course, been through all this before. What events of the previous occasion may have prompted Laban's hurry this time? (24:53)

How much of "all these things" (29:13) Jacob actually told him we are left to guess, but no doubt Laban soon realised that Jacob was more of a run-away than a rich emissary with camels and financial assets to offer.

With what tone of voice does Laban say "You are my own flesh and blood" ? (29:14)

Although it could be taken as a warm greeting, as Jacob comes on the run, without assets, it could be taken as grudging admission - "OK, I'm convinced, you are my nephew, you may as well stay." If this is the case, Laban's

double-dealing that will occur later in the story is already being hinted at.

This section ends with Jacob staying with Laban in accordance with the first part of his father's instructions in 28:2. The Lord has been with him, protecting and guiding, but there are some obstacles to overcome before the promise of descendants and the return to land are fulfilled.

Jacob Marries Laban's Daughters (29:15-30)

The Betrothal (29:15-19)

After a month Laban introduces the subject of working and wages. It sounds friendly enough, but in what context do these terms occur in the following narrative? See 29:18, 20, 25, 27, 30; 30:26, 29, 32,33; 31:6-7, 41

Keeping in mind that Laban is aware of Jacob's reason for coming (28:2; 29:13), why do you think he brings up the wages issue?

What do the names Leah and Rachel mean? (The notes in the NIV Study Bible for 29:16 will give you the answer.)

Leah's eyes are described as "weak" (29:17) or "delicate" (NIV footnote). A more literal interpretation is "soft", but what makes her eyes "soft" is unclear. Most commentators think it means that she had no "sparkle" in her eyes - a quality that was prized in the ancient near east. Whatever the case, the description of Rachel seems to indicate she

outshone her sister in various ways, and it is Rachel, we are told, who Jacob loved.

In the ancient near east, it was customary to mark a betrothal by the paying of a bride-price. The payment is made from the groom's family to the bride's family. As Jacob could not ask his family to pay he offers seven years' service instead. Was this a fair price?

Although much later, Deuteronomy 22:29 gives what appears to be the maximum bride-price of 50 shekels, though we know that bride-prices were typically much lower. We also know that in old Babylonian times a casual labourer could earn up to a shekel a month, which means Jacob's bride-price was generous indeed.

Seven years of service (29:20)

How did the seven years of service seem to Jacob? Why? (See 29:20)

Note the link back to Jacob's leaving home. Although the NIV translates Rebekah's words back in 27:44 as "a while", it is the same phrase as is translated "a few days" in 29:20.

See Exodus 21:2-6 and Deuteronomy 15:12-18 for later laws on the time of service for slaves.

The Weddings (29:21-30a)

Jacob seems keen to consummate the marriage arranged seven years earlier. Does the abruptness of Jacob's request, and the absence of a reply by Laban tell us anything?

Although Laban's thoughts are not recorded for us, he apparently does the right thing and invites his neighbours to celebrate a marriage. What do you know about the celebration of weddings at this time?

The wedding celebration and feasting lasted a week (29:27). On the first day there were various processions, the reading of the marriage contract, and a large meal. (29:22) Throughout this day the bride was veiled. It was at the end of the first day that the marriage was consummated. (29:23) It was also customary for the father of the bride to give her a 'dowry', in this case the maid-servants mentioned in 29:24 and 29:29? Why is attention drawn to them? (See 30:3, 9)

When morning came, there was Leah! (29:25) How could Leah have been substituted for Rachel?

The deceiver has now been deceived (see 29:25 and 27:35-36). Note the irony of Laban's comments in 29:26. "It's not our custom to put the younger before the older." It wasn't supposed to be done in Isaac's family either, yet that is what Jacob had done. There is some sort of poetic justice in Laban's deception of Jacob, but are his actions justified? Is Jacob right to be incensed?

Jacob cannot opt out. He is trapped. The marriage to Rachel goes ahead a week later, but only to be followed by another seven years work.

Although outwardly decorum is restored, (29:28-29) what source of underlying unhappiness does the narrator point to? (29:30)

Another seven years of service (29:30b)

How did these seven years compare with the first seven? (See, for example, 29:32; 30:7)

The Big Picture

How do these events fit in with the promises made to Jacob?

How much does human sinfulness interfere with God's purposes?

How much does God overrule to bring about his purposes?

Is God still with Jacob as he promised?

Does what has happened to Jacob have any relationship with Proverbs 3:12 and Hebrews 12:5-6?

Through it all, what do you learn about God?

What do you learn about yourself?

Through these events, God's purposes were advanced. Jacob had been promised a multitude of descendants (28:14), and as we will see in the next study it will be through the unloved Leah and her maid-servant that eight of the twelve tribes will trace their descent. Despite the sinfulness of Jacob and Laban, God will bring his divine plan to fulfilment. In the experiences of Jacob in Haran, we see again the sovereignty and grace of God.

Prayer

Give thanks to God for his sovereignty and grace.


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