

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## Lessons from the life of Jacob: Jacob in Canaan

*"When Israel was a child I loved him...but the more I called Israel the further they went from me...How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?" (Hosea 11:1 and 8)* How moving are these words, coming from the breaking heart of a loving God, as He looks at the people He had chosen and knows them to be utterly unfaithful to Him. And yet this great tale of unrewarded love has its beginnings in the arid lands of the Negev, and in the birth of the man who was born Jacob, but whose name was later changed to Israel.

The lives of three men dominate the book of Genesis.

- Abraham, called to leave home to journey with God to an unknown land, is a great example to us of faith.
- Isaac, married to a beautiful bride that his father had provided for him, is a picture for us of Christ's love for His Church; and
- Jacob. Jacob was to become the father of the nation of Israel, the people that would so fill the heart of God, and then break it.

All three would receive individual promises from God, and all three, in their different ways would learn of the enormous goodness of God at first hand. It is the last of these three patriarchs that we shall study over the next few weeks. As we look at the life of Jacob, we shall undoubtedly learn important lessons about our responsibilities and ourselves. But perhaps more importantly, we shall see the infinite goodness of a God who loves to give. He gives even to the most undeserving of individuals. For perhaps, more than anywhere else in the Bible, the story of Jacob is a story of pure grace.

Let us start our journey then by reading Genesis 25:21-26: *Now Isaac pleaded with the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his plea, and Rebekah his wife conceived. But the children struggled together within her; and she said, "If all is well, why am I this way?" So she went to inquire of the LORD. And the LORD said to her: "Two nations are in your womb, two peoples shall be separated from your body; one people shall be stronger than the other, and the older shall serve the younger." So when her days were fulfilled for her to give birth, indeed there were twins in her womb. And the first came out red. He was like a hairy garment all over; so they called his name Esau. Afterward his brother came out, and his hand took hold of Esau's heel; so his name was called Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them."*

There can be no greater blessing in life, and no greater start to life, than being the object of prayer. So it was that Jacob was conceived. Even during those months of pregnancy we get hints of the life of struggle that was to come. So Rebekah enquires of the Lord as to these unusual gestational happenings. Is this the sort of relationship that we enjoy with the Lord? For sure, the major crises in life may lead us, eventually, into the presence of the Lord. But in Rebekah, we have an example of how daily life should be. In any and all events in life I should constantly involve the Lord. Not because I deserve His presence – as we shall soon learn from the life of Jacob – but because His daily delight is with people like us! Before I get on my bike to ride to work do I ask him to go with me? Before I cook the next meal or go shopping do I ask Him to help me make right choices? Sadly, I know too little of His involvement in the little things of life.

God answers Rebekah's query with the startling news that she is carrying twins. As if that were not shock enough, she is then told that, contrary to custom and practice, the younger will be stronger than, and be served by, the elder. Jacob joins a select group of individuals that we read about in the Bible, who were the subjects of specific prophecy before they were born. His own father (Genesis 17:19) had similarly been prophesied about. Samson (Judges 13) and John the Baptist (Luke 1) were others. Supremely, of course, the child Jesus falls into this group. It is never the wrong time of year to remind ourselves of the words of the angel to Joseph, in Matthew 1:21: "you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins", or to Mary, in Luke 1:32: "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David."

And yet in another way we are all like Jacob. From the moment of our conception, God knows each one of us and the purpose for which He would have us brought into the world. None of us go unnoticed or unwanted by God. So in the book of Jeremiah chapter 1:5 we read, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born, I set you

apart." Similarly David could worship his God as he considered his beginnings, in Psalm 139:13-15, "You knit me together in my mother's womb...my frame was not hidden from You, when I was made in the secret place." What was true of Jeremiah and David was also clearly true of Jacob. And what was true for these three servants of God is also true for us today. Here we are living in twenty-first century Britain and we are still immensely valuable to God! Each one of us matters to the One who gave us our beginning. How much society has lost by losing sight of the fact that we mean so much to God.

So it was that Jacob was born, second in time to his brother, but first in destiny. Jacob's name means "he grasps the heel", referring to the manner of his birth. Figuratively speaking, this came to signify a deceiver. How appropriate his name was to prove. Two incidents in his early life bear out the sad reality of Jacob's name. Firstly, Jacob obtains the family birthright from its rightful owner, Esau, and then again at his brother's expense, he steals the family blessing. Let us then look at the first of these two events.

*"So the boys grew. And Esau was a skilful hunter, a man of the field; but Jacob was a mild man, dwelling in tents. And Isaac love Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob. Now Jacob cooked a stew; and Esau came in from the field, and he was weary. And Esau said to Jacob, "Please feed me with that same red stew, for I am weary." Therefore his name was called Edom. But Jacob said, "Sell me your birthright as of this day." And Esau said, "Look, I am about to die; so what profit shall this birthright be to me?" Then Jacob said, "Swear to me as of this day." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. And Jacob gave Esau bread and stew of lentils; then he ate and drank, arose, and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright" (Genesis 25:27 to 34).*

All was not well in the family home. We read that Isaac loved Esau, undoubtedly seeing in him the answer to his prayers. Rebekah, however, loved Jacob, having the knowledge of his eventual superiority. Divisions, whether in the family, or in the Christian family, the Church, are always a source of regret and weakness. Probably both parents felt that they were right in their favouritism, but how much pain and grief it was to cause for future generations. If Isaac and Rebekah could have known the results of their disunity, would they still have followed the course they did? How very much we need to have eyes that can see the results of our actions. There is a right way, an obedient way, a God honouring way to live our lives, as individuals and collectively. We should never be afraid to admit that we were wrong and to change. If we cannot undo the mistakes of the past, at least let us not be responsible for perpetuating them into the future. The lack of family unity obviously left a lasting impression on the boys as they grew up.

So it was that one day, as Esau comes in from the fields after a long day that he asks Jacob for some of his stew. What could be more natural? But in this family it proves to be an opportunity for advancement. Jacob responds to his brother by demanding that Esau exchange his birthright for the stew. In Jacob's day, the birthright, the privileges of which went to the eldest son, represented at least two things. On the one hand it involved being the family priest. He would lead the family into the presence of God because the Aaronic priesthood had not yet been given. On the other hand, the promise of God to Adam and Eve, that the One who would defeat Satan would come via that family tree, came with the birthright. You can trace this line for yourself in Genesis 11. The promise of being a part of the direct line of descent of the Christ came with the birthright. These ought to have been things that were highly valued. Sadly, Esau did not hold the promise of future glory in much regard in comparison with present benefit. Are we a modern day Esau? Does the prospect of pleasing our Lord and Saviour pale into insignificance compared with career advancement or self-pleasing pursuits? How many Christians today know anything of the giving of time and self to the point of personal cost? It is so much easier to go with the crowd and settle for an easy, spectator Christianity, rather than put into practice the hard truths that Scripture spells out. I remember all too clearly listening to one Christian friend, who had recently changed churches, and was praising his decision, saying, "It's so much easier...there is no pressure to get involved, or to take responsibility. While I don't agree with everything they do and say, it's something I can live with." Oh yes, the spirit of Esau is still very much alive today. Have we truly lost sight of the immense glory it will be to one day hear those words, "Well done! Good and faithful servant." That should be praise enough to keep us through the hardest of circumstances now.

In Jacob's favour, it must be said that he rightly valued the birthright. The blessing of God was something that moved him. Most likely, he was already aware of the prophecy that had been given to his mother concerning his future. Surely this was his chance, and he took it. God had promised a future blessing for Jacob. God would fulfil it, and that should have been enough for Jacob. Extortion was never a part of the divine plan. How sad that neither brother rightly valued this birthright. Esau valued it not at all. Jacob valued it as worth a pot of stew. And yet God still honoured it!

As Christians, we all have a similar spiritual birthright. 1 Peter 2:9, speaks of us as a "chosen people, a royal priesthood." Each and every believer in Christ has the privilege, and responsibility, to come into the very presence of God. We should take this opportunity to come personally into His presence to worship, praise, thank and to intercede for others. It is not acceptable to leave others to do this for us. 2 Timothy 4:8 speaks about the reward for those who have "longed for His appearing." Jesus is coming again for all those who have accepted Him as Saviour. Are we prepared to sacrifice ourselves now, in however small a manner, in view of the glory of that future day?

Many years elapsed before we come to the second part of Jacob's history. Isaac was now an old man, and so calls for Esau, and requests that he go and hunt game, and then prepare some tasty food so that Isaac can eat it and then pass on the family blessing.

*"Now Rebekah was listening when Isaac spoke to Esau his son. And Esau went to the field to hunt game and to bring it. So Rebekah spoke to Jacob her son, saying, 'Indeed I heard your father speak to Esau your brother, saying, 'Bring me game and make savoury food for me, that I may eat it and bless you in the presence of the LORD before my death.' Now therefore, my son, obey my voice according to what I command you. Go now to the flock and bring me two choice kids of the goats, and I will make savoury food from them for your father, such as he loves. Then you shall take it to your father, that he may eat it, and that he may bless you before his death. And Jacob said to his mother, 'Look, Esau my brother is a hairy man, and I am a smooth skinned man. Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be a deceiver to him; and I shall bring a curse on myself and not a blessing.'" (Genesis 27:5-12).*

So Rebekah hatches her deceitful plan to secure the blessing for her favoured Jacob. Jacob follows his mother's advice, and so involves himself in the elaborate hoax. By now, Jacob was a grown man. He could not claim that he was only doing as his mother had told him. No, he was morally responsible now for tricking his own father. He does what he is told. Then, when all is ready, he goes in and acts out his deception. He compounds his guilt by lying brazenly to his father, and involving God in his lies. It is telling that at this stage of Jacob's spiritual experience he answers "the LORD **your** God gave me success." It is not "the LORD **my** God." There is no substitute for a personal relationship with God. Job's confession, towards the end of his dealings with God, is telling. "My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you" (Job 42:5). Jacob had yet to reach this point with God. Systematically Jacob acts out his deception, quietening each suspicion of his frail father, until at last he wins him over. Isaac now is ready to take his son, believing him to be Esau, and bestow his blessing upon him.

*"Therefore may God give you of the dew of heaven, of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine. Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be master over your brethren, and let your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be those who bless you!"*

What a blessing! Not only would Jacob prosper materially, but he would also stand tall amongst his contemporaries. This more or less covers the whole of human ambition today. In one way or another, man longs to prosper in what he has, and to be recognised and held in high regard by others. Having received the blessing of his father, and in the sure knowledge that what Isaac had said would come to be, he leaves, no doubt to share the good news with his mother.

In a scene worthy of the greatest revolving doors farce, no sooner has Jacob left than Esau arrives. But it is too late. Too late in time, yes, but too late too, to realise the value of God's blessing. A future eternity will not be the time to resolve to serve a crucified Saviour. It will be too late. As Paul could urge the Corinthians: *"Now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation."* (2 Corinthians 6:2).

Now is the time to be saved. Now is the time to serve. Only the leftovers remain for Esau, who bitterly resents the actions of his deceitful brother. As his heart turns to murder, Rebekah sends for her loved one, Jacob, and warns him of his brother's intentions. Jacob is forced to flee from home and go to live with his mother's family in Haran. When things had all calmed down, perhaps Rebekah thought she could effect a reunion. Little did she realise as they made their painful parting, that it would be their last. Jacob would not return home again whilst his mother was alive. He would never see her again. What pain is caused by hasty human actions! Jacob gained nothing that he would not otherwise have been given by God, but lost so much: his integrity, his family and his peace of mind. If we learn nothing else from the history of Jacob, then let us learn to act in God's time. In daily dependence upon Him, let us be neither too quick to act, nor too slow to serve, as He seeks our very best.

But before we close our first steps along the path of Jacob's life, we are forced to ask ourselves the question, "Why did God promise to bless Jacob so much?" From what we have seen so far, there was little to commend in this deceitful man. Why should he, rather than another, so merit God's blessing? In his favour, we have to note that his heart was in the right place. He desired those good things that Esau did not. He saw value in the presence and blessing of God. The means he employed to achieve his goal were at fault, but his desire, and that which he desired, were not. How often we desire to do what is right and yet make such a mess of things. And yet God still perseveres and is able to use us, almost despite ourselves. In the Lord Jesus we have a truly gracious master. Paul, in Romans 7:15 put into words this same difficulty, *"For what I will to do, that I do not practise; but what I hate, that I do."*

However to see Jacob's heart being in the right place as the reason for his blessing is surely to miss the point. God chose Jacob because God is supreme, and God loves to give. He is a truly gracious God, lavishing His favour upon those who do not deserve His goodness. Were the blessing of God only given to those who deserve it, then what a poor place the world would be. No, God gives because that is a part of His nature. So we read in 2 Corinthians 8:9,

*“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.”* We are enriched because He took the place of having utterly nothing.

Paul in Romans 9:10-16, refers to Jacob's blessing, and the reasons for it. He quotes the startling scripture from the prophecy of Malachi 1:1-3. God's love for Jacob was so strong, and He lavished so much good upon him that the love that God had for Esau seemed comparatively like hate. A similar use of love and hate is found in Luke 14:26. The Lord told us that we should love Him so much, that the love we have for our parents, in comparison, seems like hatred. The blessing that Jacob received was due to the vast love of God, not some quality that he possessed.

We can apply this to ourselves today. Who would argue that we have not received a far greater blessing than ever Jacob did? Does our eternal salvation or our home in heaven depend upon us? Does being a part of God's family, having the Holy Spirit living in us or being co-heirs with Christ rely in any measure on ourselves? Does our being completely forgiven and made right for His presence first require our merit? No, not at all! All we have as Christians, all the many good things that are ours now, and those things that will be ours in a coming day, are ours because of who Jesus is and because of what He accomplished for us in His life, death, resurrection and subsequent ministry. We, as believers, are truly rich, rich beyond knowing. Yet we are so not because of anything we are or have done. Take time to consider what He has done for us, and then make time to worship Him.

*“Now to Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to him be glory in the Church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.”*

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