

Jacob - Mighty is the God of Israel



The Bible Study

What you will need:

- Bible, pen and note pad for each participant
- A stone to add to the altar. Painted black and white to represent truth over lies. (No shades of grey)

"After Jacob came from Paddan Aram, he arrived safely at the city of Shechem in Canaan and camped within sight of the city. For a hundred pieces of silver, he bought from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem, the plot of ground where he pitched his tent. There he set up an altar and called it El Elohe Israel." Genesis 33:18-20 (NIV)

Wrestling with God

Genesis 25-37, 42-50

The account of the life and spiritual development of Jacob takes up a large portion of Genesis. From his conception to the time of his death, Jacob is a conundrum. His life seems to be one constant struggle. When God answered Isaac's prayer and Rebekah became pregnant it was soon apparent that she was going to give birth to twins. The babies were struggling in her womb and Rebekah prayed to ask God why there was such a struggle. She may have been greatly surprised by the answer.

"The LORD said to her, 'Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger.'" Genesis 25:23 (NIV)

- How does this Word from God to Rebekah support the promise God made to Abraham about many nations and a multitude of descendants?

Even as Rebekah gave birth the struggle between the two brothers was obvious.

"When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb. The first to come out was red, and his whole body was like a hairy garment; so they named him Esau. After this, his brother came out, with his hand grasping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob." Genesis 25:24-26a (NIV)

Esau sounds like the word for hairy. Jacob means "he grasps the heel" and he deceives. Jacob also means supplanter. To supplant means to displace, replace, succeed or unseat. Jacob was struggling in the womb of Rebekah to be the first born, yet the Word from the Lord said that he would be the second born who would rule over the older one.

The normal pattern for inheritance was male driven and birth order was very important in the culture of that day and that land. The first born son of the first wife was normally the one who would inherit the blessing and lion share of all that belonged to the father. If the first wife did not give birth to a son, the inheritance would go to other sons born to the head of the house. If no sons were born to the head of the house, a nephew would inherit. If there was no nephew, then it would be the oldest male member of the servants born to the household who would inherit and keep it in "trust" as a steward in case a grandson was born to a daughter or niece of the head of the household. (That is assuming there were any children born to the head of the household.)

One of the reasons it was important for a woman to give her husband a son or a child was that they needed to provide an heir. It was important for the husband to have an heir, it was also important for the wife as it would be the heir who would take care of her if she lived longer than her husband. Children were a "type" of social security.

- Who takes care of elderly parents in your culture?

Esau and Jacob were not identical twins. They were fraternal twins. Fraternal twins occur when the mother has two eggs that are fertilized at the same time. They can be boy/boy, girl/girl or boy/girl. Identical twins occur when the egg splits into two embryos after it has been fertilized. They have to be of the same sex. Esau and Jacob did not look alike nor did they have the same kind of interests. Esau was a hunter and a man of the fields. Isaac favored him. Rebekah favored Jacob, her "stay at home" son. It is possible that Jacob was more of a scholar and an introvert while Esau was more athletic and the extrovert of the two.

Birth order is known to play a role in our development even today. The eldest is expected to set the example for the younger child or children. The younger children often feel like they live in the shadow of the older children. Middle children are often peacemakers. Rebekah and Isaac only have two sons and they made a great parenting mistake of choosing favourites and showing favouritism. It is natural for a parent to love all their children differently, but it is disastrous for them to show it by giving or withholding affection or approval. Think back to the first set of brothers, Cain and Abel. Brothers will naturally compete with each other, but when the competition gets out of control, there is going to be trouble. Jacob was a schemer. Esau was a man of action. Jacob was gentle and Esau seems to be a bit of a brute. The brothers were set up by circumstance, parents and even seemingly by God's design to be contenders.

- Is it wise for parents and elders to make known to their children a design or destiny for their lives?
- Do we have a choice in our life calling?

Did Rebekah keep secret the message God gave her regarding the twins or was it a topic of discussion from the time the boys were born and Jacob was holding the heel of his brother? (Look up Luke 2:19, 51)

Read Romans 9:12-14

Esau grew up to be a skilful hunter and a real outdoor type. The Bible tells us that Jacob liked to stay at home and this may mean that he was the student of the two brothers. One day Esau returned from hunting and wanted to eat. He tells Jacob to give him some stew. Jacob agreed if Esau would trade his birthright for it. Esau seems to have been more concerned with his hunger than his birthright so he agreed. Once he was full of the red bean stew, he went on with his business and cared little about the deal he just made to trade his birthright. In life we are often faced with an urgent need or desire and tempted to trade our birthright to have that need met. Many solid people trade the good and eternal blessings of God for a meal, a brief sexual affair, a bag of gold or even short lived success. Like Esau we do not even consider the consequences until payment comes due. Look at Genesis 27 and see how Jacob steals Esau's blessing and Esau's reaction. Genesis 27:34-39 to see Esau's reaction when he learns the consequences of his trading his birthright for a bowl of bean stew. Tears of bitterness and shouts of anger would not restore what Esau lost to Jacob. Rebekah now learns that her part in the deception would mean that she could lose both sons if she did not act quickly to send Jacob away.

This bit of family drama launched Jacob out of the comfortable nest and into an adventure. One of the first altar stones attributed to Jacob is the one found in Genesis 28:10-22. Jacob found a stone to use as a pillow when he stopped at Bethel to camp for the night. That night he dreamed of a stairway from earth to heaven. God stood at the top of the stairway and made a covenant with Jacob. The next morning Jacob set up the stone as a memorial pillar, an altar to remind him of the meeting with God. He anointed the rock and made a vow to God.

When Jacob arrived at Paddan-Aram, he asked some shepherds about his uncle Laban. They pointed out Rachel as Laban's daughter. Jacob helped her water the sheep and told her that he was Rebekah's son. Rachel went to tell Laban. Laban greeted Jacob and invited him to stay with them. Jacob fell in love with Rachel and agrees to work seven years for her. The Bible tells us that he was so in love that the seven years seemed as though they were a few days. The morning after the wedding feast, Jacob discovers he is married to Leah and not Rachel. His uncle tricked him. Laban agrees to give him Rachel as well if Jacob will work seven more years.

Jacob is kept busy fathering children and taking care of the flocks for Laban. Genesis 30 and 31 contain the account of the thirteen children born to Jacob, Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, and Zilpah. We also learn that Jacob is a clever businessman yet still a bit deceitful in his deals with others. He almost met his match in his uncle Laban, but Jacob knew "when to get out while the getting out was good." He packed up his wives, his children, his livestock, his possessions and headed for home. What he did not know was Rachel stole the household idols and packed them in her bags. Laban pursued them and accused them of the theft. Jacob unknowingly cursed Rachel to die. More family drama ensued before a treaty was made with Laban.

Genesis 31:45 states that Jacob set up a stone monument and instructed his men to gather stones and pile them in a heap. The family shared a meal together by the pile of stones to signify the treaty. The stone monument was called "Witness Pile" to remind them of their treaty. They called upon God to witness their treaty. It is interesting to note that many Christians will use the phrase "may the Lord watch between me and you while we are absent one from another" as a blessing when those words were really a prayer to God to make sure each kept their part of the treaty.

Jacob and his family were on their way home. Now Jacob had to think about what waited at home. Would Esau still be angry after all these years? Was there danger in returning home? Jacob, clever as ever, sent messengers with gifts to Esau.

The night before Jacob met Esau, Jacob wrestled with a man for a blessing. He said he wrestled with God but his life was spared. Have you ever spent a restless night "wrestling" with a problem or a decision you had to make? Have you wrestled with God over some thing He asked you to surrender? If so, you might have some insight to understand what happened that night between Jacob and God. As a result of that wrestling match, Jacob received a new name, the name Israel. Israel means "one who struggles with God." This is a good description of Jacob.

Esau and Jacob make peace. Esau invited Jacob to return home and Jacob tells him that they will head that way, but at a pace the women, children and livestock could go. We do not know if that really was Jacob's intention but we do know he got side tracked in Succoth. He bought land outside of Shechem and built an altar.

Genesis 35:2 indicates that perhaps Jacob was finally willing to submit to God. He instructed his household to destroy their idols, wash and put on clean clothing. They were going to make a new start. In Bethel they would build an altar to God and name it El-bethel, or the God at Bethel. (Bethel means house of God. Beth means house and El means God.) In Genesis 35 we learn of the deaths of Rebekah's nurse, Deborah, Rachel and Isaac. All three had great significance to Jacob.

Jacob's story began to fade into the story of his sons and especially his son Joseph. God uses Joseph to transition the family of Jacob to Egypt and set the scene for the story of the Exodus. Jacob's last impact on his family is listed in Genesis 49 as he prophetically blessed and cursed them. Jacob "adopted" the two sons of Joseph. Once again the younger one was chosen over the older brother.

Jacob's story is one of constant wrestling. He wrestled with his twin in the womb. Jacob wrestled away Esau's birthright with a tempting bowl of bean stew. He wrestled away Esau's blessing from Isaac. He thumbed his nose at local custom by watering Laban's sheep instead of waiting until all the other flocks had arrived. He was tricked into marrying Leah and agreed to marrying both Leah and Rachel. His wives wrestled for his attention and to be able to give birth to children even through their maids. Jacob's sons wrestled for his favour because he chose to dote on Rachel's two sons. Jacob's sons fought for the reputation of their sister. Jacob wrestled with God for a blessing when all he had to do was to trust and obey. Jacob was renamed Israel, which means "one who wrestles with God" and that name rightly described him. Rebekah received a prophecy about Jacob and Esau, but she did not just trust that God had a plan and allow God to work out the details – she felt she had to "help" God. Rebekah also wrestled with God. Do you wrestle with God? If you do, learn from the mistakes and right choices of Jacob and Rebekah. It is better to work with God through trusting and obeying Him. Be at peace with God.