

GOD WITH US
Part 1: The Great Blessing
Genesis – Deuteronomy

Message 4 – The Promise continues through
Isaac and Jacob
Genesis 25:12-36:43

Introduction

The middle chapters of Genesis trace God's promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3) as it moves through the chosen line of Isaac and then Jacob. God will fulfill His covenant to build a nation from Abraham's seed, through which He will bless the whole world. Yet, the descendants of Abraham do not maintain the same level of faith and obedience that Abraham had. There is serious deterioration in the spiritual devotion of the subsequent generations. Nevertheless, God is faithful even when His people are not. He will keep His promise, even if it means working through fallible human beings and twisted circumstances.

The sons of Ishmael and Isaac: 25:12-28

In the story of Abraham, two sons figured prominently: Ishmael and Isaac. The narrative picks up at Abraham's death as both sons participate in burying their father (25:9-11). Then, the 12 sons of Ishmael are listed (25:12-18) and Ishmael's death is recorded. Just 7 verses are given to Ishmael and his 12 tribes. On the other hand, the narrative follows very closely the life of Isaac, beginning with the story of the birth of his two sons, **Esau and Jacob**. Clearly, the promise is moving forward through Isaac, not Ishmael.

Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his barren wife, Rebekah. The Lord answered his prayers and twins were born to the couple. In the birth process, the stage was set for the ongoing conflict between Jacob and Esau. They were wrestling with each other while still in the womb. As they were born, Jacob came out second, "with his hand grasping Esau's heel." Thus, his name was "Jacob" which means "holder of the heel," or "supplanter." As the narrative progresses, Jacob will continually try to supplant (overcome) his brother, Esau. This was, just as God said:

The Lord said to her, "Two nations are in your womb; and two peoples will be separated from your body; and one people shall be stronger than the other; and the older shall serve the younger" (25:23).

As the boys grew up, there developed a division in the family, for Isaac favored Esau, a man of the outdoors, while Rebekah favored Jacob, a quiet man who preferred to stay near home. This division would create chaos and heartache in Isaac and Rebekah's home; yet, it would be used to further the divine plan through Jacob.

The primary relationship in a home should always be the relationship between husband and wife. As the story unfolds, we will see a lack of "oneness" between Isaac and Rebekah. When spiritual and emotional intimacy is lacking, it is common for a husband and wife to become enmeshed with their children in order to satisfy their needs for relational connectedness. When this happens, both the parents and the children suffer in the long run.

Esau sells his birthright to Jacob: 25:29-34

The story of Esau selling his birthright to Jacob for a single meal is rather shocking in the Jewish context. The birthright, belonging to the firstborn son, involved a double share of the father's inheritance. It was also assumed that the father would give the firstborn a special blessing, as well as the privilege of leadership over the entire household. Thus, the birthright was an extremely valued possession in ancient Israel. The last line of this story is important: *"Thus, Esau despised his birthright."* He valued it less than a single bowl of soup! Jacob, on the other hand, would go to great lengths to obtain the birthright. He saw the value in having the father's inheritance, including the divine blessing being passed down from Abraham, to Isaac and to Isaac's "firstborn." Perhaps Rebekah had told Jacob about God's promise to bless him over Esau. In any case, he wanted the birthright, and he got it! The N.T. book of Hebrews points to Esau as an example of one who willfully devalued and rejected the blessings of God over his life:

"See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears" (Hebrews 12:15-17).

The protection and prosperity of Isaac: 26:1-35

This section of the Isaac narrative reads like a miniature of the Abraham story. The promise of God to make a great nation through Isaac is twice repeated here. In the meantime, Isaac lies to Abimelech, king of Gerar, about his wife being his "sister" in order

to protect his own life, repeating exactly the sin of Abraham. Both father and son had the same propensity toward *fear* and both tried to handle their fear with self-protective strategies. Nevertheless, God blessed Isaac as he dwelt in Philistine territory.

“Now Isaac sowed in that land and reaped in the same year a hundredfold. And the Lord blessed him, and the man became rich, and continued to grow richer until he became very wealthy; for he had possessions of flocks and herds and a great household, so that the Philistines envied him” (26:12-14).

Clearly, the favor of God rests upon this son of Abraham. God’s promise is secure. He desires to be *with Isaac*.

The Lord appeared to him the same night and said, “I am the God of your father Abraham; do not fear, for I am with you. I will bless you, and multiply your descendants, for the sake of My servant Abraham.” So he built an altar there and called upon the name of the Lord” (26:24,25).

Jacob steals Esau’s blessing: 27:1-46

The narrative of Jacob stealing Esau’s blessing is absolutely fabulous for its detail and intrigue. This reads like a script from a modern soap opera. Rebekah had such cunning as she schemed with her favored son, Jacob, how to snatch the fatherly blessing away from Esau. Reading closely, we learn that the primary mover in this deception was, in fact, Rebekah. She did everything she could to help her son steal the blessing. Mother and son had in their favor the fact that Isaac’s eyesight was gone, so their plot was to fool the blind old man into thinking he was blessing Esau (his favorite) when, in fact, he was uttering the irrevocable words of blessing over Jacob instead!

Once the fatherly blessing had been pronounced over Jacob, Esau returned, horrified to learn that his brother had stolen his blessing. Isaac was more than horrified. ***Then Isaac trembled violently . . . (27:33).*** He was angry beyond words that he had been deceived. Esau was devastated at his loss:

When Esau heard the words of his father, he cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry, and said to his father, “Bless me, even me also, O my father!” And he said, “Your brother came deceitfully and has taken away your blessing.” Then he said, “Is he not rightly named Jacob, for he has supplanted me these two times? He took away my birthright, and behold, now he has taken away my blessing” (27:34-36).

Esau pleaded with his father to give him a blessing as well; but the primary blessing had been bestowed and could not be revoked. Isaac pronounced over Esau words that sound more like a curse than a blessing. The story ends with Esau bent on murdering his brother Jacob. Rebekah, sensing his murderous intentions, schemes for Jacob's protection by asking Isaac to send Jacob away to find a wife in the far off land of their ancestors. Her reason? She doesn't want Jacob to marry a woman from the land of Canaan, as Esau had, bringing them grief (see 26:35). Rebekah learned well the art of deception. We will soon find out where she learned such skills.

The curse against Eve was that her relational world would be filled with pain. She would have great pain in bearing and raising children, and she would struggle to control and manipulate her husband (Genesis 3:16). In Rebekah we see all of this playing out. Her unborn children wrestle in her womb. Once born, she can only love the son she favors. As they grow, she cannot trust her husband, or her God, with their future. She must take matters into her own hands in order to make life work in ways that please her. Rebekah typifies the woman who never learns to rest her relational fears in the hands of a God who loves her more than she can ever know.

Isaac sends Jacob away to find a wife: 28:1-22

- The sendoff: 28:1-9

Recall that when it was time for Abraham to find a wife for his son, Isaac, he strongly warned his servant *to never take Isaac back to their homeland (Genesis 24:5-9)*. Now, a generation later, Isaac is doing this very thing: sending his own son Jacob, heir of the sacred promises, back to the homeland to find a wife. Abraham's faith-based determination has given way to Isaac's expediency-based compromise. There is deterioration of the faith in the 2nd generation. Both Isaac and Rebekah knew that they were sending their "chosen son" into a setting filled with ungodliness, idol worship and deception. Nevertheless, they sent Jacob away to keep him from being killed by Esau, who stayed home and caused increasing grief to Isaac and Rebekah.

- The Lord appears in Jacob's dream at Bethel: 28:10-22.

As Jacob was traveling, he stopped at Bethel to sleep. God appeared to him in a dream and reaffirmed the Abrahamic promises to him, as the new generation God would be with.

"I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your

descendants. Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you” (28:13-15).

Not only will God fulfill the promises made to Abraham; He will keep Jacob (*safe*) wherever he goes, and bring him back to the land of promise (v.15). Jacob responded to this dream in an interesting way. He set up an altar and made a *conditional* vow that God would be “his God” IF these promises came true:

Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me and will keep me on this journey that I take, and will give me food to eat and garments to wear, and I return to my father’s house in safety, then the Lord will be my God. This stone, which I have set up as a pillar, will be God’s house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You” (28:20-22).

Jacob’s faith in God is very undeveloped at this point. He needs proof of God’s faithfulness before he will accept God as *his own God*. It will be 20 long years (31:8) before Jacob will return to this very place (Bethel) and truly accept God as *his own God*.

While it is true that Isaac showed a lack of faith in sending Jacob back to the “old country,” it is also true that every new generation needs to develop their own faith, rather than trying to ride on the faith of their forefathers. Jacob must develop his own intimate walk with God and learn to personally trust God for the fulfillment of the promises. It has rightly been said: “God has no grandchildren . . . only children.” Thus, Jacob’s journey away from the land of promise will, in the end, thrust him into difficulties that will force the development of his own faith in God. Much like the prodigal son in the far off land, Jacob will “come to his senses” and see that God is his only hope for a life of joy and purpose.

Jacob deceived in Laban’s house: 29:1-30

Jacob had learned the art of deception from his mother, Rebekah. Now, he falls prey to the master deceiver, his uncle Laban, brother of Rebekah. When Jacob arrived at Laban’s house, he quickly fell in love with Rachel, the younger daughter of Laban. He agreed to work a full 7 years for the right to marry Rachel. But on the wedding night, Laban made a feast and managed to slip Leah, his older daughter, into Jacob’s tent in place of Rachel. In the morning, Jacob woke up to find the wrong wife lying next to him!

Jacob got a taste of his own medicine. Recall how he had deceived his father, Isaac, in order to steal the blessing.

“What is this you have done to me? Was it not for Rachel that I served with you? Why then have you deceived me?” But Laban said, “It is not the practice in our place to marry off the younger before the firstborn. Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also for the service which you shall serve with me for another seven years” (29:25-27).

Jacob ended up working an additional 7 years to get Rachel as a wife. The deceiver has fallen victim to an even greater deceiver. *God is not mocked. A man reaps what he sows (Galatians 6:7).*

The battle of the wives: 29:31-30:24

A serious rivalry developed between Leah and Rachel over their relationship with Jacob and their longing for his attention and love. This rivalry was played out through their competitive childbearing and, more directly, through the *naming* of their children. Both Leah and Rachel had maids, who also served as surrogate mothers to bear children for them. Aside from the obvious fact that the narrative is setting us up to understand the origins of the 12 tribes of Israel, there is a very tragic human story unfolding here. Jacob’s polygamous marriages, fostered by Laban’s deceit, bring about a spirit of rivalry, scheming and heartbreak among his wives. Leah strives to find real love in a world where she is not valued. Rachel becomes jealous of her sister and angry with her husband because of her barrenness. She must have children, otherwise her life has no meaning.

Now when Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she became jealous of her sister; and she said to Jacob, “Give me children, or else I die.” Then Jacob’s anger burned against Rachel, and he said, “Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?” (30:1,2).

Below you see the “scorecard” of the battle between “team Leah” and “team Rachel.” Though these sons will later become the 12 tribes of the nation Israel, only 11 sons are listed below, as the 12th, Benjamin, will be born at the end of Rachel’s life (35:16-19).

Team Leah goes up 4-0.

Reuben: The Lord has “**looked upon**” my affliction.

Simeon: The Lord has “**heard**” that I am unloved.

Levi: Now my husband will become “**attached**” to me.

Judah: Now I will “**praise the Lord.**”

Team Rachel rallies back to 4-2 through Bilhah.

Dan: God has “**judged**” in favor of me.

Naphtali: I have “**wrestled**” with my sister and won.

Team Leah extends lead 6-2 through Zilpah.

Gad: Oh how “fortunate” I am to have another son.

Asher: Oh how “**happy**” I am! Women will call me “**happy.**”

Team Leah runs up the score 8-2.

Issachar: God has given me my “**wages.**”

Zebulun: Now my husband will “**honor**” me.

Team Rachel scores one to end at 8-3.

Joseph: Perhaps the Lord will “**add**” more children to me?

God’s plan always moves forward even in the midst of human sin and failure. Yet, our enjoyment of the blessings associated with God’s plan is hindered by our sin and our relational failures. Jacob is a man living under the promise of God’s blessing; yet, his life is filled with pain and emotional turmoil, because he has stepped outside of God’s intended path for his life. The faithfulness of God will ensure that the promises are fulfilled. But the waywardness of Jacob and his wives will ensure that the path to fulfillment is filled with heartache, pain and disappointment. An old hymn puts it this way: “Trust and obey, for there’s no other way, to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.” “It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in man” (Psalm 118:8).

God prospers Jacob while he dwells with Laban 30:25-43

After 14 tiring years living under his uncle’s control, Jacob desired to depart and return to the land of Canaan; but Laban invited him into a business deal that would benefit both of them. Laban knew that his herds were being greatly blessed because of God’s favor on Jacob, so he was seeking ways to leverage Jacob’s ongoing success for his own ongoing benefit. Why let go of a star player? As “wages” for his continued labor, Jacob was allowed to remove from the flocks certain animals that would become his own herd. In return, Jacob would continue to manage all of the herds belonging to both of them.

“Let me pass through your entire flock today, removing from there every speckled and spotted sheep and every black one among the lambs and the spotted and speckled among the goats; and such shall be my wages” (30:32).

Jacob then adopted a breeding technique of placing striped rods at the watering holes. This practice (widely accepted back then) was

based on the thinking that sheep would reproduce *according to the visual stimulation given to them* (more striped, speckled and spotted lambs because of the striped rods). The validity of this practice has no basis in science, and only goes to show the extent to which Jacob was still relying on human strategies to secure the divine blessing. It was God who caused Jacob's herds to increase, not Jacob's clever striped rods. The final verse of this chapter makes the point clear:

“So the man became exceedingly prosperous, and had large flocks and female and male servants and camels and donkeys” (30:43).

God is fulfilling His pledge to be with Jacob, even in the far off land of deception, shrewdness and manipulation.

“It is the blessing of the Lord that makes rich . . . (Proverbs 10:22). How often do we take credit for things that are actually bestowed to us from God? Moses will later warn the Exodus generation to never think that they earned the blessings. “You may say in your heart, ‘My power and the strength of my hand made me this wealth’” (Deut. 8:17). It is the folly of human pride to mistake divine gifts as human achievements. (See all of Deut. 8:11-20.) King David modeled the right spirit with wealth: “Both riches and honor come from You, and You rule over all, and in Your hand is power and might; and it lies in Your hand to make great and to strengthen everyone . . . But who am I and who are my people that we should be able to offer as generously as this? For all things come from You, and from Your hand we have given You” (1Chronicles 29:12-14).

Jacob secretly departs for Canaan: 31:1-55

How fitting that the story of Jacob and Laban should end on a note of deception. Jacob took his wives, children, servants and flocks and departed secretly for Canaan, without informing Laban.

“And Jacob deceived Laban the Aramean by not telling him that he was fleeing. So he fled with all that he had; and he arose and crossed the Euphrates River, and set his face toward the hill country of Gilead” (31:20,21).

Don't miss the little detail that Rachel stole her father's household idols on the way out of town. Devotion to Yahweh, the God of Abraham, is compromised even in the hearts of the lead couple.

“When Laban had gone to shear his flock, then Rachel stole the household idols that were her father's” (31:19).

Is the favor and protection of Yahweh not enough for the descendants of Abraham? Must they take along pagan idols to secure their future? The faith of Abraham and Sarah has seriously deteriorated in the 3rd generation of Jacob and Rachel.

Laban pursued Jacob all the way into the hill country of Gilead, the northern portion of the land of Canaan. On the way, God came to him in a dream and warned him not “*to speak good or bad to Jacob.*” There is no small irony in Laban’s question to Jacob: “*Why have you deceived me . . .*” (31:26,27). The great deceiver has been outdone! He was also angry that Jacob had stolen his household idols, a fact that Jacob denied (because he did not know that his *wife* Rachel had done so). The ultimate irony of this whole story comes when Laban goes searching for the idols, only to be deceived by his own daughter, who is sitting on top of them as she lies about being in her menstrual cycle. What a daddy’s daughter!

“Now Rachel had taken the household idols and put them in the camel’s saddle, and she sat on them. And Laban felt through all the tent but did not find them. She said to her father, “Let not my lord be angry that I cannot rise before you, for the manner of women is upon me.” So he searched but did not find the household idols” (31:34,35).

Jacob argued heatedly with Laban over the fact that he had served him for **20 years** and been taken advantage of all along the way. They finally reached an agreement to separate from one another, formalizing their intention with a covenant ceremony (31:43-55). Laban departs for his homeland, and Jacob his.

*When Rebekah sent Jacob away to find a wife, she “thought” that he would be back in a short while: “Now therefore, my son, obey my voice, and arise, flee to Haran, to my brother Laban! Stay with him **a few days**, until your brother’s fury subsides, until your brother’s anger against you subsides and he forgets what you did to him. Then I will send and get you from there. Why should I be bereaved of you both in one day?” (27:43-45). When we take matters into our own hands, and think we can control what the outcome will be (apart from seeking God’s will) we set ourselves up for great disappointment. The Bible leaves no record of the death of Rebekah; but it appears that she never did see her favorite son again. Rebekah tried to make life work in her own strength. She seems not to have relied upon God for His plans, provisions and protection.*

Jacob prepares to meet Esau; wrestles with God: 32:1-32

As Jacob prepared to reengage with his estranged brother, Esau, he

feared greatly Esau's anger. Twenty years have passed; but he assumed Esau was still bent on killing him in revenge for taking away his birthright and blessing. He began to strategize how to meet Esau and still have an escape plan, in case of conflict. Not only did he divide up his family into groups so that some might escape if others were attacked, he also sent ahead (in waves) a massive goodwill offering in the form of livestock and other goods. He was hoping to soften the heart of his brother.

He also prayed and asked for God's favor, based on His promises.

Jacob said, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord, who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your relatives, and I will prosper you,' I am unworthy of all the lovingkindness and of all the faithfulness which You have shown to Your servant; for with my staff only I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two companies. Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, that he will come and attack me and the mothers with the children. For You said, 'I will surely prosper you and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which is too great to be numbered'" (32:9-12).

That night, Jacob had the most significant encounter with God in his entire life. He literally wrestled with God (32:24-32).

Then Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he touched the socket of his thigh; so the socket of Jacob's thigh was dislocated while he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the dawn is breaking." But he said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." He said, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him and said, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And he blessed him there. So Jacob named the place Peniel, for he said, "I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved" (32:24-30).

Jacob's life has been one long struggle to obtain the blessing of God. He has struggled with God and man from birth until this day. His new name, "Israel," means: **"He who strives with God."** "This is the picture of a man who was brought to God kicking and screaming. As a result, Jacob was transformed from being a

schemer to a triumphant receiver of God's blessing.” (Moody Bible Commentary, p.94). For the people of Israel who were preparing to enter the Promised Land (and for us today), the message is quite clear: Victory comes as we rest in humble dependence upon God; not as we strive to obtain the victory in our own strength.

Roughly 1,000 years after Jacob, Isaiah the prophet will sound the message of dependence upon God to the nation Israel, as they try to hammer out a strategy to escape from their overpowering oppressors: “For thus the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, has said, ‘In repentance and rest you will be saved, in quietness and trust is your strength.’ But you were not willing, and you said, ‘No, for we will flee on horses.’ Therefore you shall flee! ‘And we will ride on swift horses.’ Therefore those who pursue you shall be swift” (Isaiah 30:15,16). The unyielding lie of the devil to humanity, from the tree in the Garden forward, is that we can handle life apart from God. Thus, there really are only two types of people in the world: Those who say to God, “THY will be done,” and those to whom God says, “thy will be done.”

Jacob meets Esau: 33:1-20

After all of his worrying and strategizing, Jacob's feared encounter with Esau turned out to be a non-event. Esau seemed to be “over it” and was friendly toward his brother. He even questioned why all of the droves of “stuff” had been sent ahead as a gift. The brothers separated peacefully and Jacob moved on to settle in the city of Shechem, at the very center of the land of Canaan.

The rape of Dinah and revenge of Jacob's sons: 34:1-31

Upon arriving in Shechem, the young prince of the land (named Shechem) saw Dinah, the daughter of Jacob and wanted her for himself. He first violated her sexually and then asked for her hand in marriage. The sons of Jacob, Dinah's brothers, were incensed at Shechem. While they “played along” as if they would give their sister to Shechem as a wife, they were actually planning a mass murder of the entire village. (The pattern of deception continues unabated.) They tricked men of Shechem into a peace plan by asking them to take on the rite of circumcision in order to become “their brothers.” There is a sad irony here in that the *method of the deception was the use of the sacred sign of the covenant relationship with God – circumcision*. On the third day, when all the men of Shechem were in pain, Simeon and Levi came upon the town and killed every male. Then, they looted the city.

“Jacob’s sons came upon the slain and looted the city, because they had defiled their sister. They took their flocks and their herds and their donkeys, and that which was in the city and that which was in the field; and they captured and looted all their wealth and all their little ones and their wives, even all that was in the houses” (34:27-29).

The point of the narrative seems to be to show how the descendants of Abraham, instead of becoming “a great blessing” to the nations, had become a terror to the inhabitants of the land. Jacob makes this point to his sons:

Then Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, “You have brought trouble on me by making me odious among the inhabitants of the land, among the Canaanites and the Perizzites; and my men being few in number, they will gather together against me and attack me and I will be destroyed, I and my household” (34:30).

A little side note from the next chapter reinforces this idea:

“As they journeyed, there was a great terror upon the cities which were around them, and they did not pursue the sons of Jacob” (35:5).

Jacob returns to Bethel: 35:1-15

Bethel is the most significant location in the life of Jacob, for this was the place that God appeared to him when he fled from Esau at the beginning of the narrative. This was also the place where he made his conditional vow to God, saying in essence: *If You bring me back here safely, You will be my God (see 28:20-22)*. Now, God calls Jacob to return to this spot. This is God’s call for Jacob to fully affirm his own faith.

Then God said to Jacob, “Arise, go up to Bethel and live there, and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau.” So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, “Put away the foreign gods which are among you, and purify yourselves and change your garments; and let us arise and go up to Bethel, and I will make an altar there to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone.” So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods which they had and the rings which were in their ears, and Jacob hid them under the oak which was near Shechem (35:1-4).

It is sad to learn that, even at this point in his journey, Jacob had to admonish his household to “*put away the foreign gods among*

you.” Jacob then buried these idols under an oak tree. We would have hoped that the practice of idolatry would have been put away from the life of the great heir to the Abrahamic promises; but this is not the case. Even Jacob’s wife, Rachel, was carrying idols from her father’s house. Nevertheless, the promises conveyed by God to Abraham and Isaac are now repeated to Jacob:

“I am God Almighty; be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come forth from you. The land which I gave to Abraham and Isaac, I will give it to you, and I will give the land to your descendants after you.”

God reaffirms that Jacob’s name has been changed to “Israel” (he who strives with God). In turn, Jacob names that place “Bethel,” meaning “house of God.”

Birth of Benjamin; death of Rachel: 35:16-21

As Jacob was journeying with his clan toward Bethlehem, his wife Rachel gave birth to her 2nd son, bringing the total number of the sons of Jacob to 12 (the 12 tribes of Israel). Rachel died giving birth to the son she named “Ben-oni,” meaning “son of my sorrow.” In time, Jacob renamed this special son “Ben-jamin” meaning “son of my right hand.” As the story will unfold, these two sons of Rachel became Jacob’s favorites undoubtedly because they were sons of his favorite wife.

The twelve sons of Jacob and the death of Isaac: 35:23-29

If the reader has lost track of all the sons of Jacob, they are relisted here for the sake of clarity. After all, these 12 sons are those who form the 12 tribes of Israel, the carriers of the promises made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is somewhat surprising to find the death of Isaac noted here, for he has been so far in the background of the narrative that the reader could easily have assumed he died long ago. The death of Rebekah, Isaac’s wife, is not found in Scripture. We are left to assume she has already passed away. The point is that, from a narrative standpoint, it is very clear that the story of Jacob and his 12 sons is much more important than the much shorter story of Jacob’s father, Isaac.

There is one very odd verse at the end of the Jacob narrative, concerning the immoral actions of the firstborn son, Reuben.

“It came about while Israel was dwelling in that land, that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father’s concubine, and Israel heard of it” (35:22).

This shows once again the degradation of faith, now in the 4th generation from Abraham. Concerning Reuben's audacious act of sinning against his father, I quote here the excellent comments from Matthew Henry's Commentary:

"A piece of abominable wickedness it was that he was guilty of that very sin which the apostle says (1Corinthians 5:1) is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife. It is said to have been when Israel dwelt in that land; as if he were then absent from his family, which might be the unhappy occasion of these disorders. Though perhaps Bilhah was the greater criminal, and it is probable was abandoned by Jacob for it, yet Reuben's crime was so provoking that, for it, he lost his birthright and blessing (Genesis 49:4). The first-born is not always the best, nor the most promising. This was Reuben's sin, but it was Jacob's affliction; and what a sore affliction it was is intimated in a short phrase: "and Israel heard it." No more is said – that is enough; he heard it with the utmost grief and shame, horror and displeasure. Reuben thought to conceal it, that his father should never hear of it; but those that promise themselves secrecy in sin are generally disappointed; a bird of the air carries the voice."

The descendants of Esau: 36:1-43

The entire 36th chapter of Genesis is given to the descendants of Esau, who populated the territory of Edom, south of the land that Jacob's descendants occupied (Israel). The Edomites figured significantly in Israel's long history as a nation. The O.T. prophetic book of Obadiah is specifically addressed to the Edomites. The "sons of Seir are also enumerated in ch.36. These were not descendants of Esau, but they were dwelling in the land of Edom and may have intermarried with Esau's descendants.

The story of Jacob has presented to us TWO sons through whom the divine blessing might legitimately be carried forward: Judah (son of Leah; her first 3 sons having forfeited the divine right through shameful acts of disobedience) and Joseph (firstborn of Rachel). While Joseph will surely become the major character in the upcoming narrative, it is rather surprising to find that it is the son of Leah who becomes the one through whom the ultimate blessing of God comes to the world. It was through the line of Judah that the Christ was born! Oh how unpredictable are the ways of God. The greatest blessing of all came to the world through the woman who thought that she was unloved . . .