

LESSON 5

PLACID ISAAC AND INTRIGUING JACOB

Genesis 25:19–36:43

Aim

To examine how the sovereign God was faithful to keep His promises of the Covenant in spite of the failures of Abraham's descendants.

The Role of Isaac

Genesis 25:19–26:35

His importance

Isaac usually appeared as a background figure in situations involving Abraham, Rebekah, or Jacob. He lived a quiet and reserved life and never dominated the scene. His quietness and lack of self-assertion should not be used to judge him negatively. Evidently, he possessed depth of meditation and devotion to God. Perhaps he would have been judged as a great figure if he had not stood in the shadows of Abraham and Jacob. After Genesis, Amos is the only Old Testament writer who mentioned Isaac. Even Isaac's relation to God is mentioned only in connexion with Abraham (25:11; 26:3). The Lord promised to bless Isaac because of Abraham's obedience (26:5). Again in 26:24, God promised to bless Isaac for the sake of His servant Abraham. The selection of a companion for life was not even the decision of Isaac. Isaac is presented primarily as the link between an illustrious father and a famous, if not notorious, son.

His faithfulness to God

According to Genesis 24:63, Isaac was in the field for meditation when his new bride arrived. The Hebrew word for meditation ("sinking down") could have meant that he was grieving for his departed mother since the verb form indicates "depression, mourning, or grieving." However, the form of the verb used indicates that he was probably worshipping God. Evidence of his prayer life is seen also in Genesis 25:21 as he prayed to the Lord on behalf of his barren wife. Involved in Isaac's prayer for a son was the perpetuation of the Covenant. The influence of Isaac's religious life is demonstrated in 31:42 when Jacob reflected in a foreign country upon his home and remembered his father's religion as the "fear of Yahweh." Isaac lived in reverence and awe of God. Jacob remembered his home as a place where God was the ruler and his father stood in awe before God.

His family relations

Perhaps the overly protective attitude of his parents lessened the opportunity for development of Isaac's own initiative. The Sarah-Isaac-Hagar episode of chapter 21 reveals the degree to which Sarah looked after him, and Abraham's taking the initiative in securing a wife for Isaac indicates Abraham's protective concern. Even Eliezer, the servant of Abraham, had a more positive part in selecting a wife for Isaac than Isaac himself.

As a father, Isaac failed to assert his authority. He came nearer being the servant of the intriguing Jacob and Rebekah

Isaac's outstanding character trait was
his _____ to God.
(devotion)

Read the following verses: Genesis 24:63; 25:21;

31:42. List three evidences of Isaac's faithfulness to God.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

(Compare your answer with the text.)

than the master of the situation. Esau married a Canaanite, an action which Abraham would never have permitted. The episode of the blessing reveals a weakness on the part of Isaac. Usually the blessing was given by the father as death approached. Isaac lived eighty years after attempting to bestow the blessing on his favourite son Esau. The sons were born when Isaac was sixty years of age; at the age of 100, he bestowed the blessing; his death came at 180 years of age (35:28).

His leadership

As a tribal leader, Isaac showed weaknesses also. The people of the land encroached upon Isaac's rights and stopped the wells by filling them with earth (26:15, 18). Isaac was forced from one well to another until he was pushed to the limit at Beersheba (26:27). Abimelech, a king of Gerar, requested a covenant between Isaac and himself because he saw that the Lord was with Isaac.

The Birth and Birthright of Esau and Jacob

Genesis 25:19-34

Rebekah's barrenness is noted in 25:21. This recurring element in the Old and New Testament birth stories (Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Hannah, and Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist) was regarded as proof of divine purpose of a child who was destined to fulfil a special role in the history of Israel. The line of descent in the special history of salvation depended entirely upon the grace of God. Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph were all children of miraculous birth.

When Rebekah inquired of the Lord concerning the struggle of the two children within her, she received the answer that their struggling prefigured future rivalries between their two nations. The younger would prevail over the older. Esau was first; he was red and hairy. Red was a play on the name "Edom" (25:30) and hairy on the word "Seir," the home of Esau's descendants (33:16). Esau represented the kind of natural manhood which loved the out-of-doors, and he was the favourite son of his father Isaac. In character, he was generous, impulsive and quick to forget offences, but he lacked sensitivity in spiritual matters.

Jacob was born holding the heel of Esau as if attempting to replace him as the first-born. Early in life, Jacob displayed a double character. He was the favourite of his mother. Despite his bad qualities, apparently Jacob was a man who was at least searching for God.

Concerning the birthright, Isaac and Rebekah had little to do with the original conflict between their sons. Esau came home from hunting, exhausted and hungry. Jacob took advantage of his condition and offered him food with the condition that Esau would sell his birthright. Esau followed his impulses without careful calculation. He was willing to sell his covenant privilege and responsibility for temporal relief. Jacob's bargaining for the birthright may indicate that he felt unjustly treated by his father. The older son was thought to possess a natural vigour of body and character and was to occupy a position of honour as head of the family (27:29; 49:8). He was to receive a double share of the inheritance, and through him the Covenant would be transmitted to the descendants. Was Esau's readiness to part with the birthright an indication of his lack of interest in the Covenant?

The Escapades of Jacob

Genesis 27:1-35:29

Jacob's deception for the blessing (27:1-40)

Apparently Isaac thought he was dying and wished to bestow

True or False.

Rebekah was told by Jehovah that the struggle between the two children within her signified future rivalry between the two nations they would represent. _____

(True)

Place the name Esau or Jacob to head the lists of characteristics of each.

_____	_____
hunter	deceitful
generous	herdsman
impulsive	chosen of Yahweh
favourite of his father	favourite of his mother

(Compare your answer with the text.)

Apparently Jacob was searching for _____ (God)

The oldest son in a family was to receive the birthright which consisted of a _____ of the inheritance. _____ (double share)

a blessing on his older son before death. He requested Esau to prepare him a favourite dish to strengthen him so that the power of his life might go forth in the blessing. The belief of that day was that the last words of a dying man had special power and prophetic significance. Once spoken, the words of the blessing were irrevocable and legally binding. The Nuzu tablets reflect that these oral blessings were upheld in court.

The meal connected with the bestowing of the blessing may have symbolized communion with God; thus Yahweh was present to witness the covenant transmission. The blessing included the fruitfulness of the Promised Land and domination over surrounding nations and relatives.

Rebekah overheard Isaac's promise to bless Esau and schemed with Jacob to trick Isaac into bestowing the blessing upon Jacob. When Jacob was almost discovered in the ruse by the sound of his voice, he blasphemously answered, "The Lord your God granted me success" (v. 20—RSV).

The return of Esau created a pitiful scene. Apparently Esau realized what he had forfeited in the birthright; he had been defrauded of the blessing. Esau "cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry" (v. 34—RSV), but the blessing could not be retracted. He could only beg for a second, though inferior, blessing. Isaac's oracle to Esau was a combination of curses and blessings (vv. 39f.). Esau and his descendants (Edomites) would be servants of Israel and would be doomed to subjection under Israel, but there would be times when the Edomites would break the yoke of his brother's descendants. Esau determined to kill Jacob after Isaac's death. Rebekah learned of Esau's plot and advised Jacob to leave home until Esau's anger subsided.

The purpose of the story is not to condone deception or hatred but to show that God's redemptive purpose for the salvation of the world is advanced in spite of the sinfulness of man.

Jacob's flight (27:41—28:22)

Jacob went to Paddan-aram on the pretence of taking a wife from the daughters of Laban. The more urgent reason was to escape the wrath of Esau. At the end of a day on the journey to Haran, Jacob spent the night at the place now known as Bethel. Using a stone for a pillow, he slept and dreamed of a ladder resting upon the earth and reaching into heaven. The angels of God were ascending and descending on it. Jacob may not have taken the worship of his father Isaac seriously while at home, but during the dream he suddenly realized that Yahweh was not a tribal God limited to his father's tents—He was also a God of the lonely and weary traveller. Yahweh was present and accessible to protect him and to provide for his urgent needs. The promises of God to Abraham were renewed to Jacob, and the determination of God to fulfil the promises was expressed.

Although Yahweh did not directly condemn Jacob's sin, when Jacob awoke he was filled with fear. Perhaps for the first time he recognized the seriousness of his sin and the heavy responsibility of the Covenant. The experience apparently did not bring about a complete change in his life, but he would never forget it. Realizing that God's promise involved the land of Palestine instead of Mesopotamia, Jacob vowed that the Lord would be his God if he returned safely to his home.

Some interpreters take a negative view of Jacob's demands of God before he would respond in faithfulness to God. Elliott believes that Jacob was really saying that if God could work with a deceitful being, then he would do certain things.¹

The blessing which Isaac would bestow on his son included the fruitfulness of the _____ and domination over surrounding _____ and _____.

(Promised Land, nations, relatives)

Which son deceitfully received the blessing from Isaac? _____.

(Jacob)

Place the names Isaac, Jacob, and Esau in the blanks.

_____ planned to kill _____ after the death of their father, _____.

(Esau, Jacob, Isaac)

In order to escape Esau's wrath, Jacob fled to _____.

(Haran)

On Jacob's journey, God's promises to Abraham were renewed to Jacob at _____.

(Bethel)

¹ *The Message of Genesis* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1961), p. 166.

Jacob's contest with Laban (29:1-30:43)

Jacob met his match in Laban who was very cordial to his relative at first and received him as part of the family. The relationship degenerated, and Laban attempted to make a servant of Jacob. He took advantage of Jacob's love for his younger daughter Rachel. Jacob offered to work seven years without wages for Rachel. On the wedding night, deception was possible because of the darkness and the customary veil which the bride wore. The deceiver experienced the bitterness of being deceived. Laban's justification for his action was based on the custom that the elder daughter should be given in marriage before the younger. At the end of the seven-day bridal week, Laban promised Jacob the second daughter also if Jacob would serve another seven years.

Jacob showed favouritism of Rachel over Leah (29:30), but he may have come to have more lasting appreciation for Leah since he chose to honour her with burial in the family sepulchre at Machpelah. The jealousies of multiple wives no doubt brought many problems to the life of Jacob. The emphasis of the story was not on the conflict, however, but on the birth of the sons who became the leaders of tribes which constituted the nation of Israel (29:31-30:24). It is interesting to note that all of the children, except Benjamin, were born outside of Canaan. Since Judah was born to Leah, both David and Jesus were descendants of Leah.

After Leah had been blessed with several sons, Rachel became jealous of her because she had no child. She expressed her frustration to Jacob, who replied, "Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?" (30:2-NASB). God is the source of life, and He alone is able to give children (30:22). The social custom of a childless wife's providing her handmaid for her husband "that she may bear on my knees, that through her I too may have children" enabled the childless wife to have adopted children (30:3-NASB).

After serving Laban for fourteen years, Jacob desired to return to his own country and people. Laban recognized that Jacob's God had blessed him during his sojourn; therefore, he offered Jacob wages to continue working. Jacob stated that he wanted no gift, but in order to support his family he agreed with Laban to take the speckled, spotted, and black lambs and the spotted and speckled goats. Since in the Orient most sheep were white and the goats were black or brown, Laban rejoiced in thinking he had received the better part of the bargain. Dividing the sheep according to markings and colours would enable each owner to know his own. Laban assigned Jacob to tend his large flock of white sheep and left the small flock of speckled animals in the hands of his sons.

Jacob had plans of his own. He prepared rods which were striped and spotted; he placed them where the animals could see them during the time of mating. It was believed in that day that the striped rods before their eyes would cause the ewes to produce offsprings similarly striped or speckled. Jacob placed the striped rods in the troughs only when the strongest of the flock were breeding. The white sheep and brown or black goats began bearing speckled offsprings, and Jacob's possessions increased exceedingly.

Jacob's departure from Laban (31:1-55)

Because Jacob's wealth increased, Laban's sons became jealous. The Lord instructed Jacob to return to the land of his fathers. Jacob explained the situation to his wives, emphasizing the fact that Laban had cheated him, but God had not permitted Laban to hurt him (31:7). God had made the flocks to bear spotted and striped offsprings. Jacob's wives were sympathetic since they felt their father had treated them like foreigners (31:5),

The two daughters of Laban who became Jacob's wives, for whom Jacob served fourteen years, were _____ and _____.

(Leah, Rachel)

On what custom did Laban base his right to give Leah to Jacob first instead of Rachel?

(Compare your answer with the text.)

Circle the correct words in both parentheses. Jacob's wealth (increased, decreased) and Laban's sons (felt sorry for Jacob, became jealous of Jacob).

(increased, became jealous of Jacob)

apparently assigning them to inferior social positions. The wedding dowry from the young man was usually returned by the father to the daughter, but apparently Laban had kept it for himself, in addition to paying Jacob no wages for fourteen years of labour.

While Laban was away from home, Jacob gathered his household and livestock and began the trek back to Canaan. Rachel stole the household gods, which apparently were thought to secure family life, and their possession gave legal title to the family's property. Laban pursued Jacob and his family to the hill country of Gilead on the eastern side of the Jordan. He was warned in a dream not to say anything to Jacob (to do any harm to the fugitive). Laban rebuked Jacob for slipping away with his daughters as though they were captives of war and for disrupting the family ties. After Jacob and Laban expressed their points of view, they reached a covenant agreement (31:36-54). Included in the covenant agreement was the erection of two sacred monuments: one a sacred stone and the other a heap of stones. Two names were given to the place: (1) Gilead which means "the heap of witness"; and, (2) Mizpah which means "a place of watching." The rights of Laban's daughters were to be protected, and Laban and Jacob agreed to respect the boundary line set up between them and marked by the heap of stones. To protect the daughters of Laban, Jacob was to follow the law of the land, which stated that if an adopted son took another wife besides the daughter of his adopted father he would forfeit the land and buildings which he had inherited. The presence of God was invoked to watch over the two parties of the covenant. If one party violated his part of the agreement, God would punish the offender.

Jacob's meeting with Esau (32:1-33:20)

After Jacob departed from his father-in-law, he realized that a genuine test lay ahead of him—the meeting with Esau. As he contemplated this matter, the angels of God met him (32:1). The root of the word "met" meant "to oppose" or "to inflict pain." Jacob was experiencing inner spiritual pain as he met the two angels because he had been relying on himself instead of on God. The angels reminded him of the presence of God; thus he named the place *Mahanaim* (the presence of God's hosts or two armies). Jacob seemed to have forgotten immediately the significance of the encounter with the angels when he approached Esau.

Jacob had left an angry brother who had vowed to kill him. In his attempt at reconciliation, he sent messengers to Esau. They told of Jacob's great wealth and his desire to be received peaceably. The messengers returned with the report that Esau was approaching with 400 men. Jacob's response was to pray for God's blessings. His spontaneous prayer expressed a heart full of fear and anxiety and included four elements: invocation (32:9), thanksgiving (32:10), petition (32:11), and reliance upon divine faithfulness (32:12). He reminded the Lord of His promise to bring him back safely to his own country and kindred, he acknowledged his unworthiness in the light of the Lord's goodness to him, and he begged for deliverance from the hand of Esau. After the prayer, he selected a sizable number of animals to present to Esau. He divided his remaining possessions and family and sent them across the brook Jabbok.

The experience at Peniel (face of God) is difficult to interpret. Jacob was left alone after his family and possessions had been sent across the brook. Perhaps he was thinking of the events which the next day would bring forth when he would meet Esau. His real struggle was with God, however, since he must make things right with God before he could face Esau. The identity of

Jacob was led by _____ to leave Laban's household.

(God)

The household gods which Rachel took with her were significant for these reasons:

1. _____
2. _____

(Compare your answer with the text.)

Circle the correct word.

Jacob was (fearful, unafraid) of meeting Esau after twenty years.

(Circle fearful)

the nocturnal wrestler is not given. Genesis 32:25 implies that the visitor was a supernatural being. He is identified as God in 32:30. Hosea called him an angel who was overcome by Jacob's tears and supplication (Hosea 12:3-4). The writer of Genesis presented the encounter as a description of Yahweh's dealing directly and personally with Jacob to change his life and to give him a new name. The old Jacob was defeated as the hollow of his thigh was touched and he was left helpless. With the stubborn will of the self-reliant Jacob broken, he recognized his need to cling to Yahweh. With his physical body broken, his strength was gone and his only hope was to trust in God's word of promise. The supplanter received the new name Israel (he who strives with God). *Israel* would meet Esau victoriously, but *Jacob* would have failed.

As Jacob prepared to meet Esau, he divided the children among Leah, Rachel, and the two maids. He put the maids and their children in front, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph last. As Jacob led the group to meet Esau, he bowed respectfully seven times. Esau responded by running to meet Jacob, embracing him, and kissing him. Jacob urged Esau to accept the gifts, and he did after Jacob urged him several times. Esau returned to his home, and no more is recorded about him except the fact that he and Jacob buried Isaac (35:29) and the listing of his genealogy in chapter 36. Jacob journeyed to Succoth and then to Shechem where he built an altar on some land he purchased.

The spiritual relapse of Jacob (34:1-31)

Jacob's daughter Dinah was desecrated by Shechem, a heathen Hivite prince (v. 2). Shechem requested his father Hamor to arrange for his marriage to Dinah. Hamor approached Jacob concerning the benefits of intermarriage. Shechem was willing to pay whatever dowry was requested by Jacob. Jacob consulted with his sons. The sons answered with deceit because their sister Dinah had been defiled. They stated that Dinah's marriage to the uncircumcised would be a disgrace; therefore, they demanded that every male Hivite be circumcised. Shechem and Hamor agreed to the demand. The sons of Jacob took advantage of the occasion and slew the men of Shechem. Simeon and Levi led in the slaughter. They were rebuked by Jacob, but the two sons were given the last word (v. 31) by the author of Genesis.

Jacob's return to Bethel (35:1-29)

Bethel, the place where Jacob had the vision of the ladder, continued to have significance for him. When he prepared to return to Bethel, he instructed his household to put away the foreign gods which were among them and prepare by purifying themselves. Apparently Jacob had fallen again into distress and desired to return to the place where God had answered his need during a previous crisis. God's promised blessing of a fruitful heritage and a promised land were renewed, and Jacob's name was changed to Israel.

After departing from Bethel for Ephrath, Rachel died during child-birth. She had named her offspring Ben-Oni (son of my sorrow), but Jacob renamed him Benjamin (son of the right hand).

With a notice of the incest of Reuben and the death of Isaac at the age of 180, the focus of attention on the patriarch Jacob comes to an end. Chapter 36 is concerned with the genealogy of Esau.

In Genesis 32:30 Jacob declared that he had experienced a _____ to _____ encounter with _____.

(face, face, God)

Jacob's name was changed to _____.

(Israel)

Use the following verses to name the sons of Jacob and identify the mother of each.

	Son	Mother
Genesis 29:32	_____	_____
29:33	_____	_____
29:34	_____	_____
29:35	_____	_____
30:6	_____	_____
30:8	_____	_____
30:11	_____	_____
30:13	_____	_____
30:18	_____	_____
30:18	_____	_____
30:24	_____	_____
35:18	_____	_____

God requested Jacob to return to Bethel for the purpose of renewing His _____.

(covenant)

Home Study Exercise

Basic activity (Levels 1, 2, and 3). After reading Genesis 25:15–36:43 and the study manual, answer the following questions.

1. What was the strongest characteristic of Isaac? _____

2. Why was Abraham so concerned about the selection of a wife for Isaac?

3. What quality in Jacob justified God's choice of him instead of Esau?

4. What was a birthright? _____

5. What was a blessing? _____

6. What did Jacob discover about his father's God at Bethel? _____

7. How did Laban justify his deception of Jacob by giving him Leah instead of Rachel in marriage? _____

8. Give two reasons Jacob, Leah, and Rachel departed from the household of Laban. _____

9. Why did Rachel steal her father's household gods? _____

10. What was the meaning of Jacob's nocturnal wrestling experience? _____

11. Why did Jacob return to Bethel? _____

12. Name the twelve sons of Jacob and identify the mother of each.

Supplementary activity (Levels 2 and 3). Read pages 54–71 in *A Nation in the Making* and do the following.

1. Give a brief character sketch of Jacob's life.
2. Discuss the spiritual meaning of Jacob's vision of the ladder.

Advanced activity (Level 3). Read pages 78–100 in *The Book of Genesis* by Fritsch and answer the following questions.

1. On what occasion did God reaffirm the Covenant with Isaac?
 2. Why did Jacob flee from Laban, and what was the significance of Rachel's taking the household gods?
 3. Discuss the right and wrong actions of Jacob in the light of his divine election.
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Seminar Discussion

1. Evaluate the strong and weak characteristics of Isaac and explain why God chose him as a link in His redemptive plan.
2. Why did God select Jacob instead of Esau?
3. What were the spiritual lessons in the incidents of Jacob's ladder and the wrestling at Peniel?
4. List some customs which were acceptable in the day of the Book of Genesis and are not acceptable today in the light of the moral standards of later Christian revelation.
5. How did the favouritism of Isaac and Rebekah affect their sons?
6. Was Jacob justified in gaining such a large part of Laban's flocks? Explain.
7. What did Jacob's success reveal about his God?