

IMPARTING FAITH TO JACOB

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I. Introduction

A. Two weeks ago, we looked at Isaac as an example of a son who remained faithful to God. Last week Terry looked at Esau. Tonight we are focusing on Jacob, so there obviously will be some overlap with Terry's lesson from last week. Next week we'll look at Joseph.

B. As I understand the assignment, we're trying to see if we can learn anything about how the parents in the cases of faithful sons successfully transmitted their faith. The final Wednesday of the quarter Terry is going to give a wrap-up lesson where he will summarize all points, answer all questions, and bring everything together into a perfect whole.

II. Jacob's Faith

A. Jacob, of course, was the second born of the twins of Isaac and Rebekah; Esau being the older twin. These twins were born in answer to prayer when Isaac was sixty years old, after he and Rebekah had been married without children for twenty years (Gen. 25:20-21, 26).

B. We are told (Gen. 25:22-23) that these twins struggled within Rebekah, so much so that she inquired of the Lord why it was happening to her, and the Lord told her that the twins' struggle was a harbinger of their struggle throughout their lives and the conflict that would characterize their descendants in the future. In other words, her difficult pregnancy was a kind of acted out prophecy of future conflict.

C. The Lord also told Rebekah that "the older shall serve the younger" (Gen. 25:23), implying that the special privileges normally granted to the firstborn were in this case to belong to Jacob, the younger twin. This divine purpose is reflected in Jacob's behavior at birth in grasping Esau's heel. Indeed, the name Jacob means "he grasps the heel," an act that symbolizes an effort to catch up with and supplant Esau. Esau says in Gen. 27:36 (NASU), "Is he not rightly named Jacob, for he has supplanted me these two times?"

D. Though God intended for Jacob to have the special privileges of the firstborn, it is interesting how Jacob actually secured those privileges. He exploited his brother's situation and weakness to obtain the birthright, the disproportionate inheritance, and then later, with the encouragement of his mother, deceived his father to obtain the blessing of the covenant promise.

1. Regarding the birthright you are, of course, familiar with the story in Gen. 25:29-34. Terry talked about it last week.

a. Esau comes in from a day in the open country, presumably a day of hunting, and he is very hungry. He says something like, "Let me gobble down that red stuff, I'm starving."

b. Jacob replies, "First sell me your birthright." Esau's "birthright" was his entitlement to a disproportionate share of their father Isaac's estate by virtue of being the firstborn. So Jacob is angling to beat his brother out of his inheritance. He knows his brother is an impulsive man who acts on his desires, and he seeks to exploit that to his own advantage.

c. Esau is so consumed by his hunger that he agrees to assign his birthright to Jacob, which decision he rationalizes with the claim that he is starving to death and the birthright will be of no value to him dead. Jacob knows, however, that when the edge is gone off Esau's hunger that he'll seek to renege on the deal, so he insists that he seal the deal with an oath.

d. Jacob's exploitation of his brother's situation and weakness is certainly not a noble or a good thing, but notice who is singled out in the text for explicit disapproval. Not Jacob, but Esau! The verdict on the episode in Gen. 25:34 is: "So Esau despised his birthright." In other words, Esau treated his birthright as something worth no more than a bowl of stew. He chose to give it away in exchange for something worth so little, which was a shameful insult to his father. Jacob took advantage of his brother to gain the birthright, but he at least valued it enough to want it.

e. In Heb. 12:15-17 the writer warns his fellow Christians not to be godless (or profane or irreligious) like Esau, "who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son." The text states: ¹⁵Take care that no one falls short of the grace of God, that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble and by it many become defiled, ¹⁶that no one is sexually immoral or godless like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. ¹⁷For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he did not find a place for repentance, though he sought it with tears.

2. Esau's rejection of his birthright was finalized in Genesis 27, where Jacob deceived Isaac into bestowing "the blessing" upon him rather than upon Esau.

a. "The blessing" refers to the covenant blessings bestowed by God, which by birthright normally would be passed to the eldest son. To have "the blessing" is to be in the covenant lineage, to be the child of promise. Though Jacob used deception to secure "the blessing," this was still God's rejection of Esau (v. 17 – "he was rejected") for Esau's earlier rejection of his birthright. And all of this was in keeping with the Lord's prophecy to Rebekah that the older would serve the younger.

b. The Hebrew writer stresses the finality of the consequences brought on by Esau's rejection of his birthright. Though he cried aloud in Genesis 27 to be given a blessing by Isaac, his rejection was fixed forever by Isaac's pronouncement.

No amount of tears could alter the situation. George Guthrie remarks in his commentary on Hebrews (p. 405), "The author of Hebrews wishes to drive home the point that only tears and rejection await those who sell out the inheritance that God promises to his children."

c. As I noted two weeks ago, it is true that Isaac favored Esau over Jacob because he liked to eat the game Esau killed (Gen. 25:28), but it is not certain that Isaac was intentionally bucking God's will in intending to give the covenant blessing to Esau. Assuming Rebekah had told him many years ago that the Lord had said to her that the older would serve the younger, he may have misunderstood its implication, had doubts about Rebekah's experience or understanding of the message, or simply forgotten it. In any event, Isaac's intention is frustrated by Jacob's deceit in pretending to be Esau (Genesis 27).

E. Esau resolved to kill Jacob but chose to wait until after their father died to do so. Rebekah learned of Esau's intentions and told Jacob to go stay with her brother Laban in Haran. She sold this to Isaac by telling him she could not stand the thought of Jacob marrying one of the local Hittite women. So Isaac sent Jacob to Laban, a journey of just over four hundred miles.

F. It may surprise you to know that Jacob probably was around seventy-seven years old when he left for Haran. You can deduce that from several bits of data.

1. Jacob was around ninety-one years old when Joseph was born.

a. Jacob was 130 when he joined Joseph in Egypt during the drought (Gen. 47:9).

b. Jacob joined Joseph in Egypt about nine years after Joseph began overseeing the seven years of abundance (the seven years of abundance plus the two years of the seven years of famine that had passed – Gen. 45:11). So when Joseph began overseeing the seven years of abundance Jacob was 121.

c. Joseph was thirty years old when he began overseeing the seven years of abundance (Gen. 41:46), so Jacob was 91 when Joseph was born.

2. Jacob had been in Haran about 14 years when Joseph was born (Gen. 29:20, Gen. 29:30; 30:25-26, 30:31, 31:41), which means Jacob was seventy-seven when he went to Haran.

3. Some contend that Jacob was in Haran forty years instead of twenty and thus was fifty-seven years old when he left for Haran, but Gen. 31:38-41 seems quite clear that Jacob's total time in Haran was twenty years. As for the alleged difficulty of Jacob fathering eleven sons and one daughter in seven years, see Charles L. Zimmerman, "The Chronology and Birth of Jacob's Children," *Grace Journal* 13.1 (Winter 1972) 3-12.

G. On his way to Haran, Jacob came to Luz, which he renamed Bethel (meaning House of God), where he had a dream of a ladder or staircase reaching to heaven with the angels of God ascending and descending (Gen. 28:20-22). The Lord appeared to him in the dream and told him that the covenant blessings would be fulfilled through him and that he would continue to be with him and would bring him back to the land he was leaving. The next day Jacob anointed a stone to commemorate the event and committed himself to God.

1. The Lord Jesus refers to this event in Jn. 1:51 when he tells Nathanael, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

2. Jesus is saying that Nathanael and others will see through their association with him that he is the bridge between heaven and earth, the ultimate vehicle of God's revelation. It will be shown to them (they will "see" that he has this function and significance) throughout the Gospel of John that Jesus is *the* revealer of heavenly things. Here is how Leon Morris states it in his commentary on John:

In this passage the place of the ladder is taken by 'the Son of Man.' Jesus himself is the link between heaven and earth (3:13). He is the means by which the realities of heaven are brought down to earth, and Nathanael will see this for himself. The expression then is a figurative way of saying that Jesus will reveal heavenly things, a thought that is developed throughout this Gospel. Philip's view of Jesus (v. 45) is true but inadequate. Jesus is indeed the fulfiller of prophecy, but he is also the Son of man, the revealer of God, the means of establishing communication between earth and heaven.

G. You no doubt recall the events in Haran.

1. Jacob wanted to marry Laban's younger daughter, Rachel, and agreed to work for Laban for seven years in exchange for her hand. (This payment to the bride's family served as a sort of "trust fund" for the bride in the event her husband died or divorced her.) During the wedding ceremony that was held after Jacob's seven years of labor, Laban secretly substituted his older daughter, Leah, as the bride. When Jacob cried foul, Laban excused his deceit by appealing to their cultural practice of the older daughter marrying first.

2. Laban said that Jacob could marry Rachel after the seven days of the wedding festivities accompanying his marriage to Leah were over, if he agreed to work for Laban for seven more years. That is what Jacob chose to do.

3. During this second seven-year period, Jacob had six sons by Leah, two by Leah's female servant, Zilpah, two by Rachel's female servant, Bilhah, and one by Rachel. He also had a daughter by Leah named Dinah.

4. The birth of Rachel's son, Joseph, corresponded with Jacob's completion of his labor commitment to Laban, and Jacob asked Laban to send him on his way back to his homeland with his family. Apparently the culturally acceptable thing was to seek Laban's approval for the return. Instead of approving that return, Laban persuaded Jacob to remain longer because he said he had learned by divination that the Lord had blessed him because of Jacob (Gen. 30:27).

5. Jacob offered to care for Laban's flock in exchange for getting to keep the speckled and spotted sheep and goats and any black lambs. Laban snapped up the offer knowing that such animals were rare. He then proceeded to remove secretly from the herd all goats and lambs that would qualify, which he put under the charge of his sons a long distance away.

6. Jacob strikes back by attempting to manipulate the number and kind of animals with the odd coloring he wanted by having the strong animals look at certain things when they were mating. Jacob apparently thought that doing so could affect whether the offspring were born with the odd colors. And lo and behold, these animals did indeed have the oddly colored offspring that marked them as Jacob's.

a. It is important to recognize that the inspired writer does not affirm that the visual aids were the cause of the oddly colored offspring. Rather, as Jacob came to understand and declare in Gen. 31:4-12, it was God who brought about the desired results. Some translations of Gen. 30:38-39 obscure that fact by adding words not in the Hebrew text that assert a cause and effect connection. As Derek Kidner notes regarding Gen. 30:38-39 (Tyndale Old Testament series), "RSV inserts the words *since* and *so*, but the Hebrew is content to state the bare sequence, as in AV, RV, not pronouncing on cause and effect. Verse 39 is *post hoc* [after this], not explicitly *propter hoc* [because of this]."

b. I think Kenneth Mathews (New American Commentary) is on track when he states: "The Lord tolerated Jacob's imaginative devices and transcended them. God was pleased to bless despite whatever erroneous notions Jacob may have had about animal husbandry."

7. At the end of this six-year period, Jacob had amassed great wealth, and God told him to return to his homeland. He headed out without informing Laban, who tracked him down and confronted him in the hill country of Gilead, north of the Dead Sea and east of the Jordan River. Laban accused him of having stolen his household gods, which Rachel had taken without Jacob's knowledge, and chastised him for depriving him of having a proper farewell celebration. Jacob defended his stealthy departure in terms of Laban's untrustworthiness and denied any theft of his household gods, which Laban never found. They parted company agreeing not to intrude on the other's domain.

H. As Jacob continued on his journey, he was met by angels, which caused him to name the place Mahanaim, meaning "two camps," Jacob's and God's. Jacob sent messengers ahead to contact Esau in advance, and they returned with alarming news that

Esau and four hundred men were coming to meet him. Jacob divided his camp as a precaution, and then that night had the mysterious encounter in which he wrestled with an angel (see Hos. 12:4).

1. It seems that Jacob is engaged with God in a kind of acted-out parable about God's dealing not only with Jacob but with the nation to be named after him. This happens as Jacob is about to reenter the promise land, which marks another phase in God's program. The idea is that God will allow an Israel that struggles to prevail over the adversity that he brings or permits Israel to face.

2. Gordon Wenham writes:

The whole incident is shrouded in mystery. Not only did it take place at night, but what was God doing attacking Jacob and yet being unable or unwilling to defeat him? Here the paradox of the human condition is vividly summed up. On the one hand, God allows, even puts his people into, difficult or impossible situations, but it is the same God who delivers us from them. We pray, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil". This experience of Jacob at the Jabbok summed up his career. It was God who had brought him to this crisis situation, confronting Esau, but it was the same God who would bring him through victoriously. His successful struggle at the Jabbok was a pledge that his confrontation with Esau would also have a happy outcome. He was a new man as his new name 'Israel' indicated, the victor over God and man.

I. Esau received Jacob kindly, and then Jacob continued to Shechem where he purchased property and built an altar to God. His daughter Dinah was raped there by Shechem, the son of a city leader (Hamor), and when the city leader asked permission for his son to marry Dinah Jacob's sons said all the men of the city first had to be circumcised. While the Shechemite men were incapacitated, Simeon and Levi slaughtered them, and the other brothers plundered the city.

J. God then commanded Jacob to go to Bethel. Before doing so, Jacob purified his camp by taking all the "foreign gods" and burying them under a tree. God protected them on their journey by putting fear of them in the people of the cities. At Bethel, God appeared to Jacob and renewed the covenant with him. It was here that he changed his name to Israel, meaning the one blessed by God.

K. As Jacob and his party traveled from Shechem to Ephrath (Bethlehem), Rachel died outside of Ephrath giving birth to Jacob's twelfth son, Benjamin. They moved on to Hebron where Jacob's father Isaac was still living. It was during his time in Hebron that ten of Jacob's sons sold Joseph into slavery and reported to Jacob that he had been killed.

L. Twenty years after the loss of Joseph, Jacob sent his remaining sons (except Benjamin) to Egypt to buy grain. This leads to Jacob's learning that Joseph was alive and in an important position in Egypt and his traveling to Egypt at the age of 130. He died

there at the age of 147 (Gen. 47:28). His body was embalmed and then taken to Canaan for interment in the cave of Machpelah at Hebron. His twelve sons, of course, are the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel (Joseph's two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, standing in place of Joseph and Levi).

M. Hebrews 11:21 states: "By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph and worshiped, [leaning] on the top of his staff." This is the only express commendation of Jacob's faith of which I am aware.

1. In blessing Joseph's sons from his death bed (Gen. 48:8-22), Jacob expressed his faith in God. Like Abraham and Isaac, he trusted God's control of the future and in that faith blessed Ephraim and Manasseh regarding their future. He could speak of their future because of his confidence in the God of the future.

2. The statement that he worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff refers to an earlier incident in Gen. 47:29-31. (The Hebrew word in v. 31 means either "bed" or "staff" depending on how it is vowel pointed. The LXX translators took it as "staff.") In that incident, Jacob bows in worship after Joseph swore to carry his body out of Egypt. Jacob's request looks forward to God's deliverance from Egypt (as does Joseph's request in Heb. 11:22).

III. The Influence of Isaac and Rebekah

A. It is not easy to point to anything specific that Isaac and Rebekah did that imparted faith successfully to Jacob. Indeed, God's appearing to him in the dream at Bethel seemed to be a turning point in his devotion, but that was direct intervention by God when he was around seventy-seven years old. God's continuing protection and blessing of his life, both in Haran and after, no doubt reinforced his reality in Jacob's life.

B. Certainly Jacob saw in Genesis 26 how Isaac settled in Gerar in Philistia in obedience to God's command and how he was abundantly blessed there. He presumably would have been aware that God had spoken directly to Isaac.

C. Jacob would have seen Isaac build an altar to the Lord at Beersheba after the Lord appeared there to him, and Jacob probably would have been aware that the foreign ruler Abimelech and the commander of his army had declared to Isaac, in light of his great blessings, "We see plainly that the LORD has been with you" and "You are now the blessed of the LORD" (Gen 26:28-29).

D. And even though he deceived Isaac into bestowing the blessing on him, Jacob saw in Isaac's bestowing of the blessing Isaac's faith that God is in control of the future. Hebrews 11:20 says that Isaac by faith, *also regarding things to come* – that is, just like Abraham's faith regarding things to come – blessed Jacob and Esau regarding their future.