

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

The story of Abraham's family picks up in Genesis 24 when his son Isaac marries a woman named Rebekah, who conceives twin sons that are rivals from the start as they "struggled together" in her womb (Gn 25:22). Even their birth was a moment of contention: When the first-born, Esau, was delivered, the second-born grabbed hold of Esau's heel (Gn 25: 26)—hence the younger brother was named "Jacob," which means "supplanter" or "cheater," or even more literally, "*he clutches the heel.*" Jacob's heel-grabbing move at birth foreshadows his future strife with Esau: Never content with second place, the heel-grabber at birth will grow up and grab at Esau's privileges as the first-born son.

First, Jacob grabs at Esau's birthright. When Esau returns from hunting one day, he is famished and pleads with Jacob for some food. Seeing an opportunity to best his older brother, Jacob says he will share some pottage with him in exchange for his birthright. The birthright represents his prerogatives and status as the first-born son, including the right to a double portion of the inheritance that his father would award each son. In a moment of rash desperation, Esau agrees and exchanges half his inheritance for a pottage of lentils (Gn 25:29-34).

Stolen Blessing

But getting the birthright was not enough for Jacob. He still wants more and grabs at the *blessing* Esau was supposed to receive from his father as well.

What is the difference between the birthright and the blessing? The *birthright* refers to the concrete, material inheritance a firstborn son would receive from the father—the lion's share of the father's estate. The *blessing* is a spiritual inheritance: The father invokes God's grace upon the first-born so that he can carry out his responsibility to lead his family as patriarch after his father dies. This was an almost king-like function, as his clan would be placed under his care and protection (see Gn 27:29, 37). The firstborn also assumed a priestly role, leading the family in worship and mediating their relationship with God (see Gn 8:20-21, 12:6-8, 15:9-21, 26:23-25).

In Esau's case, he was to receive the most important blessing mentioned in the Book of Genesis, for his father Isaac was the guardian of the covenant blessing that came to him from Abraham—a blessing that had its roots in God's blessing of Adam and Eve and was linked with God's promise to give Abraham's descendants a great land (Gn 28:3-4) and to bless the entire human family through them (Gn 23:14). Thus, as Isaac neared his death and prepared to bestow his blessing upon his first-born son, it would have been the greatest moment in Esau's life:

When Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see, he called Esau his older son, and said to him, "My son"; and he answered, "Here I am." He said, "Behold, I am old; I do not know the day of my death. Now then, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field

and hunt game for me, and prepare for me savoury food, such as I love, and bring it to me that I may eat; that I may bless you before I die.” (Gn 27:1-4)

It is at this pivotal point in Esau’s life that his younger brother Jacob steps in and steals his blessing—the heel-grabbing supplanter living up to his name once again. Jacob quickly puts on Esau’s best garments, covering himself with animal skins to make him appear more hairy like his older brother, and brings his father food that Rebekah prepared for him. Jacob thus deceives his father into thinking he is Esau coming for the blessing. The nearly blind Isaac is fooled and gives Jacob the covenantal blessing, elevating him as lord over all of Abraham’s family and the spiritual descendants of Abraham’s only beloved son.

“Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother’s sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you!” (Gn 27:29)

When Esau returns, he is understandably devastated. By rights, he should have become the patriarchal father of the blessed line of Abraham and Isaac—but all this has been usurped by his younger brother. Isaac already gave the blessing to Jacob, and there is nothing he can do to take it back. As Isaac explains,

“Behold, I have made him your lord, and all his brothers I have given to him for servants, and with grain and wine I have sustained him. What then can I do for you my son?” (Gn 27:37)

With an enraged Esau now plotting to kill his brother, Rebekah sends Jacob away to her brother Laban in Haran. For Rebekah, this solves two

problems in one move: First, she can protect her beloved Jacob from Esau, and second, she can protect Jacob from the pagan immorality in the land. She has already lamented that Esau married two pagan Hittite women, making life bitter for her and Isaac (Gn 26:34-35). She does not want the same to happen to Jacob, so she sends him away, hoping he will find a godly wife among their own Hebrew kinsmen in Haran (Gn 27:42-28:1).

The Younger before the Older

Jacob’s sins, however, eventually catch up with him. When Jacob arrives in Haran, he meets Laban’s two daughters, Leah and Rachel. Leah, the first-born, is described as having weak eyes, and her name can be translated “cow.” In contrast, Laban’s younger daughter Rachel is described as “beautiful and lovely,” and her name literally means “ewe lamb” (Gn 29:17).

Jacob immediately falls in love with Rachel, but according to custom, the younger sister should not marry before the older one. Nevertheless, Jacob reaches for something that is not supposed to be his: He wants Rachel as his wife, even though her older sister Leah is not yet married. So much did Jacob desire Rachel that he agreed to serve uncle Laban for seven years in return for Rachel’s hand in marriage. “So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her” (Gn 29:20).

But when the day of the wedding arrives, Laban makes a cunning switch. At the end of the marriage feast that evening, instead of bringing Rachel to Jacob, Laban brings him the elder daughter, Leah. In the dark of night, Jacob consummates his marriage with a woman whom he presumes to be Rachel.

Jacob makes the startling discovery the next day: “And in the morning, behold, it was Leah” (Gn 29:25). That’s one big “behold”! In the clearer light of day, Jacob realizes that the daughter he had been given in marriage was not his beloved Rachel but her older, unattractive sister, Leah. The deceiver finds himself deceived; the trickster has been tricked. Jacob has finally gotten a taste of his own medicine.

Outraged, Jacob goes to his father-in-law and objects, “What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?” (Gn 29:25) Ironically, Jacob the archdeceiver now complains of having been duped himself. In accusing Laban of trickery, Jacob is unwittingly condemning himself.

But Laban’s response must have cut Jacob to the heart: “It is not so done in our country to give the younger before the first-born” (Gn 29:25-6).

Jacob has no response to this. Laban’s words probably remind Jacob of his own sin in putting himself before the firstborn Esau back in Canaan. He tried to supplant a first-born again here in Haran, but Laban says such a horrendous thing “is not so done *in our country*.” The stinging implication is that it should not have been done in Jacob’s home-land, either.

Many Wives?

After marrying Leah, Jacob ends up working an additional seven years in exchange for Rachel as his second wife. This is not good news. As we saw in the case of Abraham, a lack of faithfulness to one wife creates tension in the family. In Jacob’s case, this rivalry will affect not only his wives but also the sons they bear him.

First, the Lord recognizes that Leah was unloved and blesses her with the ability to conceive children (Gn 29:31). Rachel, who had been incapable of conceiving children of her own, becomes infuriated. She envies her sister Leah so much that she preferred her husband take yet *another* woman rather than concede supremacy to her rival. She offers her maidservant Bilhah to Jacob as a concubine, in the misguided hope that Bilhah somehow will bear children on Rachel’s behalf. But when Bilhah conceives, Rachel doesn’t defeat her rival; she merely creates a new one. Now there are *two* women who have borne children for her husband.

Not willing to be outdone by Rachel, Leah makes a similar move, offering her maidservant Zilpah as a concubine as well. Zilpah also conceives, only adding to the rivalry. Conflict begins to overwhelm the family.

Finally, God remembers the barren Rachel, and she gives birth to two sons, Joseph and Benjamin. All in all, Jacob fathers twelve sons through four different women. Though these twelve sons will become known as the twelve patriarchs of the nation of Israel, the Bible also shows that Jacob’s sons experience intense rivalry, and tension will arise in the history of their descendants. As we will see in the next chapter, the Bible reveals the long-term heartache that will come as a result of Jacob’s departure from God’s intention for marriage to be a permanent and exclusive union between one man and one woman.

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Genesis 25:19-34, 27:1-46, 29:15-30

1. Launching Question: In today's chapter, we are going to read more about Abraham's family—his sons Jacob and Esau, including their sibling rivalry. As we get started, what do you think about when you consider your relationship with your siblings? Or what comes to mind when you think of how siblings interact?

Please read aloud: The story of Abraham's family picks up in Genesis 24 when his son Isaac marries a woman named Rebekah, who conceives twin sons that are rivals from the start.

Read Genesis 25:19-34

2. Jacob's name literally means "supplanter," "cheater," or "he clutches the heel." In what ways does Jacob live up to his name in this passage?

Answer: Jacob's heel-grabbing move at birth foreshadows his future strife with Esau: Never content with second place, the heel-grabber at birth grabs at Esau's privileges as the first-born son, stealing his birthright.

Please read aloud: The birthright represents Esau's prerogatives and status as the first-born son, including the right to a double portion of the inheritance that his father would award each son. In a moment of

rash desperation, Esau agrees and exchanges half his inheritance for a pottage of lentils (Gn 25:29-34).

3. What does this episode tell us about the character of Jacob and Esau?

Answer: Allow the group to discuss. Jacob is sneaky. Esau seems to care little for truly important things and gets caught up in more immediate, material concerns.

Please read aloud: But getting the birthright was not enough for Jacob. He still wants more and grabs at the *blessing* Esau was supposed to receive from his father as well.

Read Genesis 27:1-29

4. We've just seen Jacob steal Esau's birthright; now he plans to steal his blessing. Does anyone know the difference between the birthright and the blessing?

Answer: The birthright refers to the concrete, material inheritance a firstborn son would receive from the father—the lion's share of the father's estate. The blessing is a spiritual inheritance: The father invokes God's grace upon the first-born so that he can carry out his responsibility to lead his family as patriarch after his father dies. This was an almost king-like function, as his clan would be placed under his care and protection (see Gen 27:29, 37). The firstborn also assumed a priestly role, leading the family in worship and mediating their relationship with God (see Gn 8:20-21, 12:6-8, 15:9-21, 26:23-25).

5. Thinking back to our previous chapters of this Bible study, what blessings have we already encountered in our walk through the Bible? What is so important about receiving this particular

blessing? How is the blessing connected to previous stories?

Answer: In Esau's case, he was to receive the most important blessing mentioned in the Book of Genesis, for his father Isaac was the guardian of the covenant blessing that came to him from Abraham—a blessing that had its roots in God's blessing of Adam and Eve and was linked with God's promise to give Abraham's descendants a great land (Gn 28:3-4) and to bless the entire human family through them (Gn 23:14).

Please read aloud: It is at this pivotal point in Esau's life that his younger brother Jacob steps in and steals his blessing—the heel-grabbing supplanter living up to his name once again. Jacob quickly puts on Esau's best garments, covering himself with animal skins to make him appear more hairy like his older brother, and brings his father food that Rebekah prepared for him. Jacob thus deceives his father into thinking he is Esau coming for the blessing. The nearly blind Isaac is fooled and gives Jacob the covenantal blessing, elevating him as lord over all of Abraham's family and the spiritual descendants of Abraham's only beloved son:

"Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you!" (Gn 27:29)

When Esau returns, he is understandably devastated. Let's read about his response:

Read Genesis 27:30-46

6. How does Esau respond to Jacob's theft of his birthright?

Answer: Esau is enraged and is now plotting to kill his brother.

7. How does Rebekah respond to Esau's threats to Jacob? What two problems does this help her solve?

Answer: Rebekah sends Jacob away to her brother Laban in Haran. For Rebekah, this solves two problems in one move: First, she can protect her beloved Jacob from Esau, and second, she can protect Jacob from the pagan immorality in the land. She has already lamented that Esau married two pagan Hittite women, making life bitter for her and Isaac (Gn 26:34-35). She does not want the same to happen to Jacob, so she sends him away, hoping he will find a godly wife among their own Hebrew kinsmen in Haran (Gn 27:42-28:1).

Please read aloud: At first, it might appear that Jacob gets away with his deceptive tricks, but let's read about how Jacob's sins eventually catch up with him in this new land with his uncle Laban.

Genesis 29:15-30

8. What happens in this story? Could someone provide a brief summary?

Answer: Jacob immediately falls in love with Rachel, but according to custom, the younger sister should not marry before the older one. Nevertheless, Jacob reaches for something that is not supposed to be his: He wants Rachel as his wife, even though her older sister Leah is not yet married. So much did Jacob desire Rachel that he agreed to serve uncle Laban for seven years in return for Rachel's hand in marriage (Gn 29:20). But when the day of the wedding arrives, Laban makes a cunning switch. At the end of the marriage feast that evening, instead of bringing Rachel to Jacob, Laban brings him the elder daughter, Leah. In the dark of night, Jacob consummates his marriage with a woman whom he presumes to be Rachel. Jacob makes the startling discovery the next day: "And in the morning, behold, it was Leah" (Gn 29:25). That's one big "behold"! In the clearer light of day, Jacob

realizes that the daughter he had been given in marriage was not his beloved Rachel but her older, unattractive sister, Leah.

9. Outraged at the trick, Jacob goes to his father-in-law and objects, "What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?" (Gn 29:25) But Laban's response must have cut Jacob to the heart: "It is not so done in our country to give the younger before the first-born" (Gn 29:25-6). Why would Laban's words have had such a deep effect of Jacob? How does this story connect to the previous stories of Jacob and Esau?

Answer: Laban's words probably remind Jacob of his own sin in putting himself before the firstborn Esau back in Canaan. He tried to supplant a first-born again here in Haran, but Laban says such a horrendous thing "is not so done in our country." The stinging implication is that it should not have been done in Jacob's homeland, either. The deceiver is now deceived; Jacob's tricks are finally catching up to him.

Please read aloud: After marrying Leah, Jacob ends up working an additional seven years in exchange for Rachel as his second wife. This is not good news. As we saw in the case of Abraham, a lack of faithfulness to one wife creates tension in the family. In Jacob's case, this rivalry will affect not only his wives but also the sons they bear him.

If we continue reading the story, eventually, all in all, Jacob fathers twelve sons through four different women. The Bible shows that Jacob's sons experience intense rivalry, and tension will arise in the history of their descendants. As we will see in the next chapter, the Bible reveals the long-term heartache that will come as a result of

Jacob's departure from God's intention for marriage to be a permanent and exclusive union between one man and one woman.

10. Jacob's family experiences the negative effects of not abiding by God's plan for marriage. How have you witnessed something similar in your life? How does a neglect of God's plan for marriage impact people today?

Answer: Allow the group to discuss.

11. But the story doesn't end there, these twelve sons will become known as the twelve patriarchs of the nation of Israel, and in the next chapter, we will see how God brings good out of evil. How have you seen God work in your life or the lives of others despite difficult family situations? And how can God work in our families, despite their brokenness?

Answer: Allow the group to discuss.