

**A Daily Devotional  
on Genesis  
– Part II –**  
By Ken Miller



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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

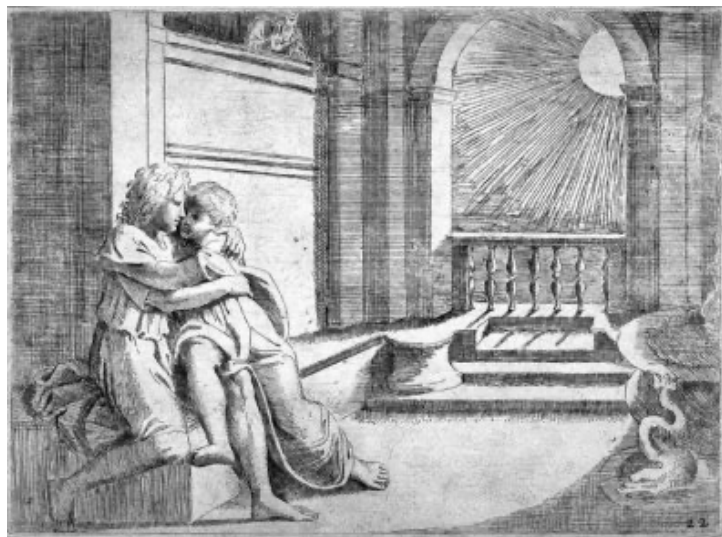
<b>Genesis 26:6-16: Like Father, Like Son .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Genesis 26:17-25: A Growing Conflict.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Genesis 27:1-13: Driven by the Wrong Desires.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Genesis 27:14-25: Liar, Liar, Pants on Fire .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Genesis 27:26-40: The Marvelous and Mysterious Ways of God .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Genesis 27:41-28:5: God's Will Always Wins Out .....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Genesis 28:6-22: It Never Pays to Bargain With God .....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>Genesis 29:1-14: In Need of an Attitude Adjustment .....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Genesis 29:15-30: The Tables Are Turned .....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Genesis 29:31-30:2: The Improbable but Providential Will of God .....</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Genesis 30:3-24: The Sport of Competitive Conception .....</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Genesis 30:25-43: The God of the Speckled, Spotted, and Flawed.....</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>Genesis 31:1-16: By His Stripes .....</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>Genesis 31:17-32: Leaving the Past Behind .....</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>Genesis 31:33-42: A Fight to the Finish.....</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>Genesis 31:43-55: With Friends Like This.....</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>Genesis 32:1-21: Mixing Prayer and Payola .....</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>Genesis 32:22-32: And in This Corner .....</b>	<b>79</b>
<b>Genesis 33:1-20: The God of Israel .....</b>	<b>83</b>
<b>Genesis 34:1-12: Lust, Love, and Lousy Leadership .....</b>	<b>87</b>
<b>Genesis 34:13-31: Revenge, Greed, and Deceit, Oh My! .....</b>	<b>91</b>
<b>Genesis 35:1-15: What's in a Name .....</b>	<b>95</b>
<b>Genesis 35:16-29: Two Deaths, A Birth, and a New Beginning .....</b>	<b>99</b>
<b>Genesis 36:1-19: Blessed but Not Chosen .....</b>	<b>103</b>
<b>Genesis 36:20-43: The Weight of Waiting.....</b>	<b>107</b>
<b>Genesis 37:1-11: A Preview of Coming Attractions.....</b>	<b>111</b>
<b>Genesis 37:12-36: From Sonship to Slavery .....</b>	<b>117</b>
<b>Genesis 38:1-19: Meanwhile Back in Canaan .....</b>	<b>121</b>
<b>Genesis 38:20-30: The Unlikely Purpose of Perez.....</b>	<b>125</b>
<b>Genesis 39:1-18: The Lord Was with Him .....</b>	<b>129</b>
<b>Genesis 39:19-23: The Lord Made It Succeed .....</b>	<b>133</b>
<b>Genesis 40:1-15: Dreams, Nightmares, and Visions.....</b>	<b>137</b>
<b>Genesis 40:16-41:8: When Dreams Come True .....</b>	<b>141</b>
<b>Genesis 41:9-36: What God is About to Do .....</b>	<b>145</b>
<b>Genesis 41:37-57: God's Man with the Plan .....</b>	<b>149</b>
<b>Genesis 42:1-17: An Awkward Family Reunion.....</b>	<b>153</b>

<b>Genesis 42:18-38: I Fear God .....</b>	<b>159</b>
<b>Genesis 43:1-18: Like Grandfather, Like Son.....</b>	<b>163</b>
<b>Genesis 43:19-34: Son, Servant, Savior .....</b>	<b>167</b>
<b>Genesis 44:1-17: The Test of a Lifetime .....</b>	<b>171</b>
<b>Genesis 44:18-34: Greater Love Has No Man .....</b>	<b>175</b>
<b>Genesis 45:1-15: God-Sent.....</b>	<b>179</b>
<b>Genesis 45:16-28: All According to Plan.....</b>	<b>183</b>
<b>Genesis 46:28-47:6: Little Is Much When God Is In It .....</b>	<b>187</b>
<b>Genesis 47:7-19: The Land of “Evil” and Blessing .....</b>	<b>195</b>
<b>Genesis 47:20-31: A Famine and Fruitfulness .....</b>	<b>199</b>
<b>Genesis 48:1-22: The Sovereign Switch .....</b>	<b>203</b>
<b>Genesis 49:1-12: Future Blessings.....</b>	<b>207</b>
<b>Genesis 49:13-33: Count Your Blessings .....</b>	<b>213</b>
<b>Genesis 50:1-13: The Beginning, Not the End.....</b>	<b>217</b>
<b>Genesis 50:14-26: Unwavering Faith in an Unfailing God.....</b>	<b>221</b>

## Like Father, Like Son

<sup>6</sup> So Isaac settled in Gerar. <sup>7</sup> When the men of the place asked him about his wife, he said, “She is my sister,” for he feared to say, “My wife,” thinking, “lest the men of the place should kill me because of Rebekah,” because she was attractive in appearance. <sup>8</sup> When he had been there a long time, Abimelech king of the Philistines looked out of a window and saw Isaac laughing with Rebekah his wife. <sup>9</sup> So Abimelech called Isaac and said, “Behold, she is your wife. How then could you say, ‘She is my sister’?” Isaac said to him, “Because I thought, ‘Lest I die because of her.’” <sup>10</sup> Abimelech said, “What is this you have done to us? One of the people might easily have lain with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us.” <sup>11</sup> So Abimelech warned all the people, saying, “Whoever touches this man or his wife shall surely be put to death.”

<sup>12</sup> And Isaac sowed in that land and reaped in the same year a hundredfold. The Lord blessed him, <sup>13</sup> and the man became rich, and gained more and more until he became very wealthy. <sup>14</sup> He had possessions of flocks and herds and many servants, so that the Philistines envied him. <sup>15</sup> (Now the Philistines had stopped and filled with earth all the wells that his father’s servants had dug in the days of Abraham his father.) <sup>16</sup> And Abimelech said to Isaac, “Go away from us, for you are much mightier than we.” – Genesis 26:6-16 ESV



Isaac and his family are facing a severe famine in the land of Canaan. And this is not the first time that God has allowed the land of promise to withhold its bounty. Nearly two centuries earlier, another famine had come upon the land of Canaan. Isaac’s father, Abraham, had been only 75 years old at the time and was a new arrival to the land, having been called by God out of Haran in Mesopotamia. Yet, while God had promised to give Abraham the land of Canaan as his inheritance, a severe famine forced Abraham to seek refuge in Egypt.

*Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land.* – Genesis 12:10 ESV

Hundreds of years later, when Isaac found himself facing similar circumstances, God warned him to avoid Egypt like the plague.

*“Do not go down to Egypt; dwell in the land of which I shall tell you. Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and will bless you, for to you and to your offspring I will give all*

*these lands, and I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father.” – Genesis 26:2-3 ESV*

Abraham was dead and gone, but as this passage will reveal, his influence still lingered over his family. And God knew that Isaac would be prone to follow in the footsteps of his father. There is little doubt that Abraham had told his son about his fateful trip to Egypt and all that occurred there. His decision to seek food and shelter in Egypt had not been his primary mistake. It was the unwise decision he made once he had crossed the border.

*When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, “I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘This is his wife.’ Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared for your sake.” – Genesis 12:11-13 ESV*

Finding himself a stranger in Egypt, Abraham had feared for his own life, and so he convinced his wife to hide their marital status. He hoped that by having Sarah claim to be his sister, which technically she was, the Egyptians would not kill him so they could have his beautiful wife. But his plan had backfired. The Pharaoh himself had decided to add Sarah as a concubine in his harem, leaving Abraham very much alive, but also very much alone. But God had intervened, sparing Sarah from humiliation at the hands of Pharaoh, and returning her to Abraham’s side.

So, Isaac’s warning from God that he avoid Egypt at all costs makes more sense with that story in mind. But there is another story from Abraham’s past that factors into this account. While Isaac had been forbidden by God to seek shelter in Egypt, Moses makes it clear that “Isaac went to Gerar to Abimelech king of the Philistines” (Genesis 26:1 ESV). This should sound eerily familiar.

Years earlier, Abraham had also journeyed to the land of Gerar. And, as he had done in Egypt, he begged Sarah to introduce herself as his sister. He had learned little from his close call with Pharaoh and was still having a difficult time believing that God could protect him from his enemies. So, upon their arrival in Gerar, Sarah had once again faithfully followed her husband’s counsel, and the next thing she knew, she was in the harem of King Abimelech. And as before, God intervened and protected Sarah.

*God came to Abimelech in a dream by night and said to him, “Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man’s wife.” – Genesis 20:3 ESV*

Sarah was returned to Abraham, along with many sheep, oxen, and male and female servants. The relieved Abimelech showered Abraham with gifts, including 1,000 pieces of silver. The unbelieving and distrustful Abraham had walked away a wealthy man, just as he had done in Egypt. And perhaps it was this silver lining on the dark cloud of Abraham’s behavior that

attracted Isaac and prompted him to mirror his father's behavior. Because that is exactly what he did.

*So Isaac settled in Gerar. When the men of the place asked him about his wife, he said, "She is my sister," for he feared to say, "My wife," thinking, "lest the men of the place should kill me because of Rebekah," because she was attractive in appearance. – Genesis 26:6-7 ESV*

His little ploy seems to have worked because a great deal of time passed, and no one attempted to add Rebekah to their harem. And because no one suspected them to be husband and wife, there had been no threats on Isaac's life. But in time, their little charade was exposed.

*When he had been there a long time, Abimelech king of the Philistines looked out of a window and saw Isaac laughing with Rebekah his wife. – Genesis 26:8 ESV*

There is far more here than meets the eye. Isaac and Rebekah were doing far more than sharing an innocent laugh together. The NET Bible Study Notes explains:

The Hebrew word מְצַחֵק (*mtsakheq*), from the root צַחַק (*tsakhaq*, "laugh"), forms a sound play with the name "Isaac" right before it. Here it depicts an action, probably caressing or fondling, that indicated immediately that Rebekah was Isaac's wife, not his sister. Isaac's deception made a mockery of God's covenantal promise. Ignoring God's promise to protect and bless him, Isaac lied to protect himself and acted in bad faith to the men of Gerar.

As he had done some 70-90 years earlier, Abimelech proved to be more righteous than Abraham or Isaac. He had done more to protect the wives of these two men than they had. And when he discovered the lie that Isaac and Rebekah had been living and considered the consequences it could have brought upon his people, Abimelech confronted Isaac and warned his people to avoid Rebekah or face death.

*"What is this you have done to us? One of the people might easily have lain with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us." So Abimelech warned all the people, saying, "Whoever touches this man or his wife shall surely be put to death." – Genesis 26:10-11 ESV*

One of the difficult things to understand about these stories is how God repeatedly blessed Abraham and Isaac even during their unfaithful actions. Moses reveals that Isaac's lies and deception were seemingly rewarded by God.

*And Isaac sowed in that land and reaped in the same year a hundredfold. The Lord blessed him, and the man became rich, and gained more and more until he became very wealthy. He had possessions of flocks and herds and many servants, so that the Philistines envied him. – Genesis 26:12-14 ESV*

But these blessings were not a result of Isaac's actions. They were the fulfillment of God's covenant promise to Abraham. God was blessing Isaac despite his behavior, not because of it. God had told Abraham, "I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing" (Genesis 12:2 ESV). God had made a self-binding agreement with Abraham, declaring His intentions to establish an everlasting covenant between Himself and Abraham's descendants.

*"I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you." – Genesis 17:6-7 ESV*

And Isaac was destined to play a role in God's fulfillment of His covenant promise. After Abraham had shown his willingness to obey God and sacrifice Isaac, his only son, God had reiterated His promise.

*"...because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice." – Genesis 26:16-18 ESV*

Now, years later, the adult Isaac stood back and watched as God poured out His covenant blessings, despite all that he had done to deserve God's judgment and wrath. And while he was blessed by God, he also found himself despised by the occupants of the land. As they watched him prosper at their expense, they decided to treat him as persona non grata and cast him from their land. Even they could see that Isaac was under some kind of divine protection. He was living under a charm and they were jealous of his supernatural and inexplicable success.

But as God continued to bless Isaac, He was also preparing him for what was to come. There would be yet another famine in the land, and the days ahead would be full of conflict and constant relocation, as Isaac and his family continued the same nomadic lifestyle that Abraham had endured. God was blessing Isaac so that he might one day be a blessing. God was separating Isaac so that, one day, his descendants might become the set-apart people of God. And through Isaac would come another Son who would mirror the nature of His Father. He would become the offspring of Abraham who would bring the blessing of God to the nations.



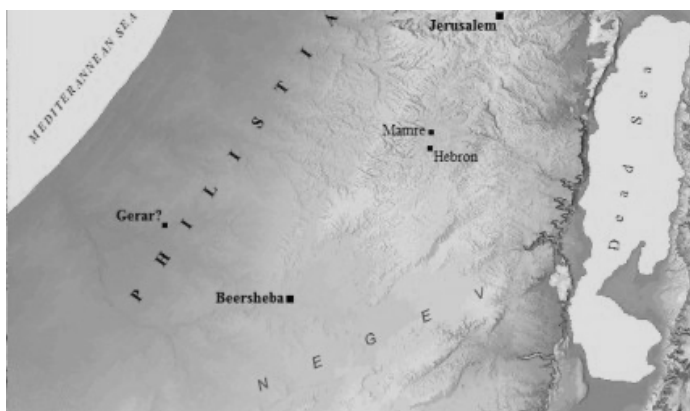
## A Growing Conflict

<sup>17</sup> So Isaac departed from there and encamped in the Valley of Gerar and settled there. <sup>18</sup> And Isaac dug again the wells of water that had been dug in the days of Abraham his father, which the Philistines had stopped after the death of Abraham. And he gave them the names that his father had given them. <sup>19</sup> But when Isaac's servants dug in the valley and found there a well of spring water, <sup>20</sup> the herdsmen of Gerar quarreled with Isaac's herdsmen, saying, "The water is ours." So he called the name of the well Esek, because they contended with him. <sup>21</sup> Then they dug another well, and they quarreled over that also, so he called its name Sitnah. <sup>22</sup> And he moved from there and dug another well, and they did not quarrel over it. So he called its name Rehoboth, saying, "For now the Lord has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land."

<sup>23</sup> From there he went up to Beersheba. <sup>24</sup> And the Lord appeared to him the same night and said, "I am the God of Abraham your father. Fear not, for I am with you and will bless you and multiply your offspring for my servant Abraham's sake." <sup>25</sup> So he built an altar there and called upon the name of the Lord and pitched his tent there. And there Isaac's servants dug a well.

<sup>26</sup> When Abimelech went to him from Gerar with Ahuzzath his adviser and Phicol the commander of his army, <sup>27</sup> Isaac said to them, "Why have you come to me, seeing that you hate me and have sent me away from you?" <sup>28</sup> They said, "We see plainly that the Lord has been with you. So we said, let there be a sworn pact between us, between you and us, and let us make a covenant with you, <sup>29</sup> that you will do us no harm, just as we have not touched you and have done to you nothing but good and have sent you away in peace. You are now the blessed of the Lord." <sup>30</sup> So he made them a feast, and they ate and drank. <sup>31</sup> In the morning they rose early and exchanged oaths. And Isaac sent them on their way, and they departed from him in peace. <sup>32</sup> That same day Isaac's servants came and told him about the well that they had dug and said to him, "We have found water." <sup>33</sup> He called it Shibah; therefore the name of the city is Beersheba to this day.

<sup>34</sup> When Esau was forty years old, he took Judith the daughter of Beeri the Hittite to be his wife, and Basemath the daughter of Elon the Hittite, <sup>35</sup> and they made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah. – Genesis 26:17-35 ESV



The blessings of God were clearly evident in Isaac's life. He had become a wealthy man while living among the people of Philistia. But they soon grew jealous and suspicious of this stranger's expanding presence in their land, so they demanded that he leave. But Isaac didn't go far. He ended up settling in the Valley of Gerar, where he began the process of digging wells for his growing flocks and herds.

Unfortunately for Isaac, the wells his father had dug many years earlier had been decommissioned by the Philistines. In an effort to rid themselves of Abraham and his future descendants, they had filled in all the wells he had dug. This forced Isaac to dig new wells, a laborious and time-consuming task.

But each time Isaac's servants dug a productive well, they found themselves in a contentious standoff with the local citizens, who claimed it as their own. It seems that everywhere Isaac turned, he was faced with opposition. The Philistines were going out of their way to make his stay in their land as uncomfortable as possible. And because the entire land of Canaan was experiencing a famine, Isaac was having a difficult time caring for all the flocks, herds, and servants with which God had blessed him. He even ended up giving two of the wells the highly descriptive names of "Contention" and "Enmity." Things were not going well.

They say the third time is the charm, and that proved true for Isaac. A third well dug by his servants proved to be uncontested, prompting Isaac to give it the name, Rehoboth, which means, "to make room." It seems that Isaac was expressing his gratitude to God for having made room for them among the Philistines. Despite all the opposition they had faced, God had provided them with a much-needed source of fresh water. And Isaac vocalized his gratefulness for God's blessing.

*"For now the Lord has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land."* – Genesis 26:22 ESV

The water provided by the well was another sign of God's blessings upon Isaac. Not only would he be able to sustain the life of his flocks, but he would have water necessary to plant and harvest crops – in the middle of a famine.

But after an undisclosed length of time, Isaac moved his growing clan to Beersheba. This small town was located at the southernmost tip of Canaan, on the very edge of Negev Desert. It was in Beersheba that Abraham had made a covenant with King Abimelech. It was there, decades earlier, that the servants of Abimelech had unlawfully seized a well dug by Abraham. In exchange for seven ewe lambs, Abimelech acknowledged the well as belonging to Abraham and his descendants. The name Beersheba means "well of seven" or "well of the oath." It was while living in Beersheba that Isaac received a vision and message from the Lord.

*"I am the God of Abraham your father. Fear not, for I am with you and will bless you and multiply your offspring for my servant Abraham's sake."* – Genesis 26:24 ESV

God reiterated His covenant commitment to Isaac, ensuring him that the promises made to Abraham would be fulfilled through him. Abraham was dead but God's promises were very much alive and well. He would do what He had promised to do. Like his father before him, Isaac built an altar to Yahweh and "called there on the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God" (Genesis 21:33 ESV).

Having demonstrated his devotion and gratitude to God, Isaac commissioned the digging of yet another well, probably an indication of his vast wealth and the growing size of his flocks and herds. One well would not suffice. And when Abimelech received word that Isaac had settled in Beersheba just as Abraham had done, he determined to pay the young man a visit. This entire scene is reminiscent of a similar trip made years earlier by Abimelech and Phicol, his army commander.

*At that time Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his army said to Abraham, "God is with you in all that you do. Now therefore swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my descendants or with my posterity, but as I have dealt kindly with you, so you will deal with me and with the land where you have sojourned." And Abraham said, "I will swear." – Genesis 21:22-24 ESV*

History has a way of repeating itself and chapter 26 of Genesis is proof. Here we have the king of Gerar and his army commander making another unscheduled visit to Beersheba to strike another agreement with the son of Abraham.

*"We see plainly that the Lord has been with you. So we said, let there be a sworn pact between us, between you and us, and let us make a covenant with you, that you will do us no harm, just as we have not touched you and have done to you nothing but good and have sent you away in peace. You are now the blessed of the Lord." – Genesis 26:28-29 ESV*

Abimelech renewed his covenant with Abraham, but this time, with his son. He saw the handwriting on the wall and seemed to understand that Abraham's God was going to continue to pour out His blessing upon Abraham's offspring. The names may have changed, but the outcome seemed as certain as ever. Even this pagan potentate understood that Abraham's offspring were the heirs of God's gracious provision and protection. So, he made a peace treaty with Isaac and celebrated their agreement with a feast.

Then Isaac was informed that yet another well had been dug in Beersheba, which he promptly named, Shibah, which means "oath." There is more to this name than a recognition of an oath sworn between two men. This entire pericope is meant to stress the covenant-keeping nature of God Almighty. He had made an oath to Abraham, and He was going to stand by it, even though Abraham was long gone. Isaac would be the next in line to receive the blessings of God. And soon, his son, Jacob would follow in his footsteps.

But Moses ends this section with a brief update on Esau's marital status. Esau was technically the firstborn son, but he had sold his birthright to Jacob for the price of a bowl of stew. And in these closing verses of chapter 26, Moses reveals that Esau ended up taking two foreign wives from among the Hittites. These were the descendants of Heth, who had been one of the sons of Canaan., who was the grandson of Noah. Ham, the son of Noah had dishonored him so, as a result, Noah had placed a curse upon Ham's descendants (Genesis 9:25).

Esau, who had treated his birthright with contempt, ended up marrying two different women from among the descendants of Heth. And Moses flatly states, “and they made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah” (Genesis 26:35 ESV). Noah had declared that the offspring of Canaan would end up being the servants of their own relatives. And it seems that this curse came to fruition in the life of Esau. By marrying women from among the sons of Heth, Esau sealed their fate and assured an ongoing conflict between the sons of Jacob and Esau.

*But Esau’s wives made life miserable for Isaac and Rebekah. – Genesis 26:35 NLT*

How? They ended up bearing Esau children who would become the enemies of Jacob’s descendants. And the stage is set for a growing conflict between Jacob and Esau. But God is at work, behind the scenes, orchestrating everything according to His sovereign plan.

## Driven by the Wrong Desires

<sup>1</sup> 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.” <sup>2</sup> He said, “Behold, I am old; I do not know the day of my death. <sup>3</sup> Now then, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field and hunt game for me, <sup>4</sup> and prepare for me delicious food, such as I love, and bring it to me so that I may eat, that my soul may bless you before I die.”

<sup>5</sup> Now Rebekah was listening when Isaac spoke to his son Esau. So when Esau went to the field to hunt for game and bring it, <sup>6</sup> Rebekah said to her son Jacob, “I heard your father speak to your brother Esau, <sup>7</sup> ‘Bring me game and prepare for me delicious food, that I may eat it and bless you before the Lord before I die.’ <sup>8</sup> Now therefore, my son, obey my voice as I command you. <sup>9</sup> Go to the flock and bring me two good young goats, so that I may prepare from them delicious food for your father, such as he loves. <sup>10</sup> And you shall bring it to your father to eat, so that he may bless you before he dies.” <sup>11</sup> But Jacob said to Rebekah his mother, “Behold, my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I am a smooth man. <sup>12</sup> Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be mocking him and bring a curse upon myself and not a blessing.” <sup>13</sup> His mother said to him, “Let your curse be on me, my son; only obey my voice, and go, bring them to me.” – Genesis 27:1-13 ESV



Chapter 26 ended with a brief snapshot of Esau’s life. When he reached the age of 40, this eldest son of Isaac married two different women from the among the sons of Heth. And Moses comments that Esau’s wives “made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah” (Genesis 26:35 ESV). This seems to be a reference to the disappointment his parents felt that he had failed to take for himself a wife from among the clan of Abraham. It is important to recall that

Rebekah had been a granddaughter of Abraham’s brother. It had been highly important to Abraham that his son, Isaac, have a wife from among his own people. And when Abraham had sent his servant to Haran to seek a suitable bride for Isaac, he had made him swear an oath.

*“I may make you swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and God of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell, but will go to my country and to my kindred, and take a wife for my son Isaac.” – Genesis 24:3-4 ESV*

So, Esau's decision to marry not one, but two, Hittite women, left Isaac and Rebekah bitter and frustrated by their son's rebellious behavior. By marrying Canaanite women, Esau ensured that any children they bore him would be, in a sense, impure. He had married outside his clan and, in doing so, had brought dishonor to the family name.

But, as Moses revealed earlier, Isaac had a special love for Esau.

*Isaac loved Esau because he enjoyed eating the wild game Esau brought home... –*  
Genesis 25:28 ESV

This entire chapter is going to place a special emphasis on physical appetites and desires. Each of the characters seem to be consumed by what the apostle John called "the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life" (1 John 2:16 ESV). They each display an unhealthy obsession with self and allow their own personal agendas to cloud their decision making.

While Isaac and Rebekah had been grieved by Esau's choice of wives, Isaac still appreciated his son's culinary skills. In the waning days of his life, Isaac showed little concern about the spiritual heritage he would leave his eldest son, but instead, he used Esau to satisfy his own selfish desires.

*"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 delicious food, such as I love, and bring it to me so that I may eat, that my soul may bless you before I die." –* Genesis 27:2-4 ESV

Basically, Isaac manipulates his son to get what he wants. He couches his request in the guise of a blessing and offers Esau something that was already his by right. But Isaac has attached a condition. If you bring me food, I will bless you. And this offer appealed to Esau because, years earlier, he had mistakenly sold his birthright to Jacob, in exchange for a bowl of stew. The birthright and the blessing were two different things. The birthright was usually given to the firstborn son and guaranteed him the largest portion of the family's estate upon his father's death. But Esau had flippantly traded that right away. Yet, despite his reckless decision, Esau was still the firstborn and, as such, was guaranteed a special blessing from his father. So, Isaac's request provided Esau with a chance to make up his losses. By selling his birthright, Esau had given up his right to be the chief of the tribe and head of the family, but he still held out hope that his father would reward him with a double portion as the eldest son of the family.

Like his father, Esau was driven by his own brand of lust and desire. So, he quickly took up Isaac's offer and headed out in search of wild game.

But there had been someone eavesdropping on the conversation between Isaac and Esau. Rebekah overheard what her husband had said and immediately went into protective-parent

mode. According to Moses, Rebekah loved Jacob (Genesis 25:28), and she would do anything to protect her favorite child. So, when she heard that Isaac planned to give Esau the blessing, she saw her chance to guarantee Jacob's future for life.

There is no way to tell if Isaac or Rebekah knew about Esau's sale of his birthright. It would appear that they were still operating under the impression that Esau still retained the birthright and had every right to expect the blessing of the firstborn. Rebekah's motivation is purely selfish. She desires that her favorite son be the one who inherits all the Isaac leaves behind. And she is willing to use deception to make it happen. But keep in mind, that Rebekah has already been promised by God that Jacob will be the more powerful and successful of the two sons. When she was still carrying the two boys in her womb, God had given her a prophetic pronouncement regarding their future.

*"Two nations are in your womb,  
and two peoples from within you shall be divided;  
the one shall be stronger than the other,  
the older shall serve the younger."* – Genesis 25:23 ESV

But Rebekah decided to take matters into her own hands. She was going to do whatever it took to ensure the outcome that God had promised. While Esau was gone, she called Jacob and informed him of her plan.

*"Now therefore, my son, obey my voice as I command you. Go to the flock and bring me two good young goats, so that I may prepare from them delicious food for your father, such as he loves. And you shall bring it to your father to eat, so that he may bless you before he dies."* – Genesis 27:8-10 ESV

Unwilling to allow God to accomplish His will on His own terms and according to His own timing, Rebekah chose to implement her own cleverly concocted plan. She decided to help out the Almighty. And everything about her plan is deceptive and potentially destructive. She shows no concern for Esau and displays no respect for the wishes of her own husband. In her desire to get what she wanted, she was willing to disobey God, deceive her husband, and defraud her own son.

Interestingly enough, Jacob doesn't reject his mother's plan, but simply exposes the holes he sees in it. He displays a fear of getting exposed but not a fear of deceiving his father and cheating his brother out of the blessing. He knew his father was half-blind, but he also knew that his father was no fool. He and his brother looked nothing alike, and Isaac was sure to see through their little charade. But Rebekah had a plan. She had already thought through all the variables and had come up with a fool proof strategy for pulling the wool over Isaac's already cloudy eyes.

She even assured her reluctant son that, if they were caught, she would personally endure any curse that Isaac leveled against him. She would take the heat. If nothing else, Rebekah was committed. She was completely sold out to her son's success and would do anything to see that he got all she believed he deserved.

At this moment, Rebekah's desires had completely taken precedence over God's will. Nothing she was doing was necessary. And yet, God allowed it to happen. According to His sovereign will and in line with His providential plan, He permitted each of these individuals to operate according to their own selfish agendas, without ever sacrificing a single element of His own divine will.

*Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand.* – Proverbs 19:21 ESV

*The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps.* – Proverbs 16:9 ESV

Isaac lusted for food. Esau coveted a blessing. Rebekah yearned to get her own way. And Jacob craved significance.

All four of them could have saved themselves a lot of hurt and heartache if they could have heard the words of the apostle John.

*Do not love this world nor the things it offers you, for when you love the world, you do not have the love of the Father in you. For the world offers only a craving for physical pleasure, a craving for everything we see, and pride in our achievements and possessions. These are not from the Father, but are from this world. And this world is fading away, along with everything that people crave. But anyone who does what pleases God will live forever.* – 1 John 2:15-17 NLT



## Liar, Liar, Pants on Fire

<sup>14</sup> So he went and took them and brought them to his mother, and his mother prepared delicious food, such as his father loved. <sup>15</sup> Then Rebekah took the best garments of Esau her older son, which were with her in the house, and put them on Jacob her younger son. <sup>16</sup> And the skins of the young goats she put on his hands and on the smooth part of his neck. <sup>17</sup> And she put the delicious food and the bread, which she had prepared, into the hand of her son Jacob.

<sup>18</sup> So he went in to his father and said, "My father." And he said, "Here I am. Who are you, my son?" <sup>19</sup> Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau your firstborn. I have done as you told me; now sit up and eat of my game, that your soul may bless me." <sup>20</sup> But Isaac said to his son, "How is it that you have found it so quickly, my son?" He answered, "Because the Lord your God granted me success." <sup>21</sup> Then Isaac said to Jacob, "Please come near, that I may feel you, my son, to know whether you are really my son Esau or not." <sup>22</sup> So Jacob went near to Isaac his father, who felt him and said, "The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau." <sup>23</sup> And he did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau's hands. So he blessed him. <sup>24</sup> He said, "Are you really my son Esau?" He answered, "I am." <sup>25</sup> Then he said, "Bring it near to me, that I may eat of my son's game and bless you." So he brought it near to him, and he ate; and he brought him wine, and he drank. — Genesis 27:14-25 ESV



This story is meant to be disturbing. Yet, how easy it is to read it while completely glossing over the blatant displays of human depravity it contains. No one in the narrative comes out looking like a hero. In fact, Isaac, Rebekah, Esau, and Jacob each stand as guilty and well-deserving of divine condemnation for their actions. And what should make this story so disconcerting

and difficult to comprehend is the knowledge that none of their behavior was justified or necessary. Moses has made it clear that God had always planned for Esau to serve Jacob. Even while the two boys were still in Rebekah's womb, God had informed her "the older shall serve the younger" (Genesis 25:23 ESV).

The Almighty had a plan for these twin brothers. He had their futures completely orchestrated long before they took their first breaths. And while He provided Rebekah with no explanation as to how the older would end up serving the younger, it was not up for debate or worthy of doubt. God had a well-established track record of doing what He had promised to do.

And yet, these verses describe a scene in which the human actors seem to be operating according to worldly standards and in keeping with their own personal agendas. Isaac is using

his capacity as the head of the household to satisfy his love of good food by requiring his son, Esau, to prepare him a meal in exchange for his blessing. In a sense, Isaac was requiring his son to *earn* the blessing that was rightfully his by birth.

Rebekah, in a blatant display of “helicopter parenting,” can’t help but interject herself into the scene to protect the interests of her favorite child. She was determined that Jacob should have it all and was willing to do anything to guarantee her preferred outcome. Blinded by jealousy and pride, Rebekah concocted an elaborate plan to deceive Isaac and defraud Esau. And her enthusiasm for the task must have been contagious because, after a brief display of reluctance, Jacob ending up jumping in with eager abandon.

According to his mother’s instructions, Jacob slaughtered the two goats, which she promptly prepared according to her husband’s favorite recipe. Rebekah had learned the truth to the old adage: The way to a man’s heart is through his stomach.

But Rebekah knew that she would have to employ further subterfuge if her plan was to be a success. And this is where the depth of her cunning and conniving comes into full view.

*...she took Esau’s favorite clothes, which were there in the house, and gave them to her younger son, Jacob. She covered his arms and the smooth part of his neck with the skin of the young goats. Then she gave Jacob the delicious meal, including freshly baked bread. – Genesis 27:15-17 ESV*

This woman was leaving nothing up to chance. Despite her husband’s old age and poor eyesight, she was going out of her way to ensure that her scheme went off without a hitch. And, sadly, she used her influence as a parent to convince her son to not only comply, but to carry out the dastardly plan. And he did so with enthusiastic abandon.

Disguised in his brother’s clothes and with his bare arms and neck covered in goat skin, Jacob approached his father. Carrying the food prepared by his mother, Jacob displayed his sold-out commitment to the plan and his full intention to deceive his own father. He was a willing participant in the deception and was essential to its success.

Jacob wasn’t just wearing a disguise; he was living a lie. He purposefully and deceitfully portrayed himself as his brother so that he might steal that which did not belong to him. From this point forward, Jacob found himself caught in a lie that would continue to escalate and intensify, plunging him deeper into a black hole of deception and condemnation. When asked by Isaac to identify himself, Jacob replied, “It’s Esau, your firstborn son. I’ve done as you told me. Here is the wild game. Now sit up and eat it so you can give me your blessing” (Genesis 27:19 ESV).

And when Isaac expressed surprise at how quickly Esau had returned from the hunt with a meal already prepared, Jacob was forced to think on his feet. But look closely at how he explains himself.

*“Because the Lord your God granted me success.” – Genesis 27:20 ESV*

Not only was Jacob lying, but he was dragging God into his web of deceit. Essentially, Jacob was guilty of using God’s name in vain. The name of God was synonymous with His character. His name was representative of His holiness and greatness. Jacob was using God’s name in a flippant and disrespectful manner and attempting to leverage its significance to Isaac in order to accomplish his unethical and immoral plan. Whether Jacob realized it or not, he was walking on thin ice. He was using the name of God to perpetrate fraud.

And the story of Jacob’s deception provides evidence to the old adage: “One lie leads to another.” Once Jacob went down this path, there was no turning back. His father expressed confusion when he heard what sounded like Jacob’s voice coming out of a body that appeared to belong to Esau. “Are you really my son Esau?” he asked. And with no hesitation, Jacob replied, “I am.”

Convinced by Jacob’s lies, Isaac quickly refocused the conversation to his more pressing need: His own appetite. He was ready to eat and would not give up the blessing until he had filled up his stomach.

*So Jacob took the food to his father, and Isaac ate it. He also drank the wine that Jacob served him. – Genesis 27:25 NLT*

Isaac feasted while Jacob watched and waited. Moses doesn’t disclose how long it took for Isaac to satisfy his hunger, but Jacob must have died a thousand deaths as he watched the tent door, fully expecting his brother to return at any moment. And it seems likely that Rebekah was nearby, anxiously wondering why it was taking so long.

As stated earlier, the story is meant to be disturbing, but it’s also conveys a rather comical air. It’s difficult not to picture Jacob draped in goat hair, sweating profusely, and nervously watching as his half-blind father slowly consumes a meal.

The saddest character in the whole story is Esau, who was busily hunting for game so that he might prepare the meal that would earn him his long-awaited blessing. And all the while, his own mother and brother were conspiring behind his back to deprive him of what was rightfully his. And when Esau eventually returned, meal in hand, he would experience one of the greatest disappointments of his life – at the hands of his own family members.



## The Marvelous and Mysterious Ways of God

<sup>26</sup> Then his father Isaac said to him, "Come near and kiss me, my son." <sup>27</sup> So he came near and kissed him. And Isaac smelled the smell of his garments and blessed him and said,

*"See, the smell of my son  
is as the smell of a field that the Lord has blessed!"*

<sup>28</sup> May God give you of the dew of heaven  
and of the fatness of the earth  
and plenty of grain and wine.

<sup>29</sup> 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!"

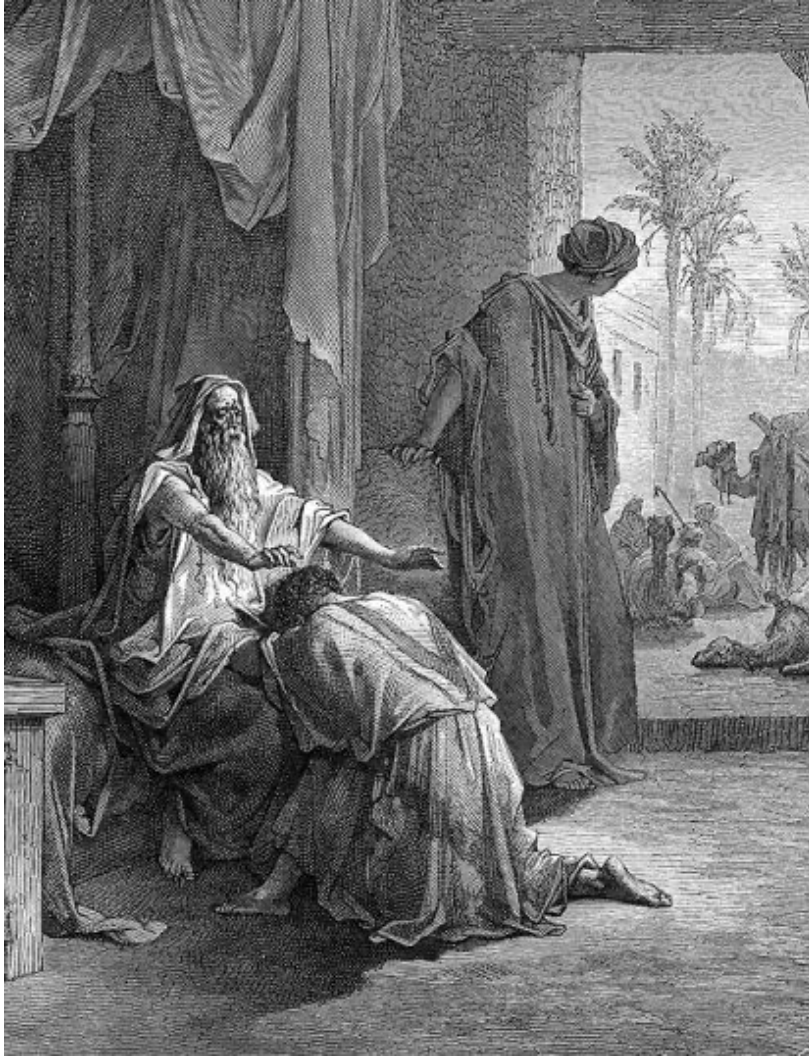
<sup>30</sup> As soon as Isaac had finished blessing Jacob, when Jacob had scarcely gone out from the presence of Isaac his father, Esau his brother came in from his hunting. <sup>31</sup> He also prepared delicious food and brought it to his father. And he said to his father, "Let my father arise and eat of his son's game, that you may bless me." <sup>32</sup> His father Isaac said to him, "Who are you?" He answered, "I am your son, your firstborn, Esau." <sup>33</sup> Then Isaac trembled very violently and said, "Who was it then that hunted game and brought it to me, and I ate it all before you came, and I have blessed him? Yes, and he shall be blessed." <sup>34</sup> As soon as 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!" <sup>35</sup> But he said, "Your brother came deceitfully, and he has taken away your blessing." <sup>36</sup> Esau said, "Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has cheated me these two times. He took away my birthright, and behold, now he has taken away my blessing." Then he said, "Have you not reserved a blessing for me?" <sup>37</sup> Isaac answered and said to Esau, "Behold, I have made him lord over you, 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?" <sup>38</sup> Esau said to his father, "Have you but one blessing, my father? Bless me, even me also, O my father." And Esau lifted up his voice and wept.

<sup>39</sup> Then Isaac his father answered and said to him:

*"Behold, away from the fatness of the earth shall your dwelling be,  
and away from the dew of heaven on high.*

<sup>40</sup> *By your sword you shall live,  
and you shall serve your brother;*

*but when you grow restless  
you shall break his yoke from your neck."* – Genesis 27:26-40 ESV



Rebekah's clandestine plan had worked to perfection. Her elderly and half-blind husband had been so thoroughly fooled by Jacob's slipshod disguise that he truly thought he was about to bestow a blessing on his eldest son, Esau.

Having satiated his appetite with the food that Jacob had prepared, the old man called his son to his side and kissed him. And because Jacob had followed his mother's advice and was wearing Esau's clothes, Isaac's dulled senses were fooled yet again. Esau was an outdoorsman and a hunter, so his clothing carried a unique scent. Isaac described it as "the smell of a field that the Lord has blessed" (Genesis 27:27 ESV). Along with an affectionate fatherly kiss, Isaac bestowed a blessing upon his son. But little did he realize that his blessing was being

stolen right from under his clouded eyes.

But completely oblivious to the fraudulent nature of the moment, Isaac placed his hands on his son and passed on the blessing of the firstborn.

*"From the dew of heaven  
and the richness of the earth,  
may God always give you abundant harvests of grain  
and bountiful new wine.  
May many nations become your servants,  
and may they bow down to you.  
May you be the master over your brothers,  
and may your mother's sons bow down to you.  
All who curse you will be cursed,  
and all who bless you will be blessed."* – Genesis 27:28-29 NLT

This blessing would have been of great value to Isaac because it had been passed down to him by his own father. There had been a time in Isaac's life when Abraham had declared these very same words to him, and now he was passing them on to his eldest son – or so he thought.

The words contained in the blessing are a reiteration of the promise that God had made to Abraham. In fact, on the day that Abraham obeyed the word of the Lord and prepared to offer up the life of Isaac as an offering, God had intervened and repeated His covenant promise.

*“Because you have obeyed me and have not withheld even your son, your only son, I swear by my own name that I will certainly bless you. I will multiply your descendants beyond number, like the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will conquer the cities of their enemies. And through your descendants all the nations of the earth will be blessed—all because you have obeyed me.” – Genesis 22:16-18 NLT*

That is the core message behind Isaac's blessing of Esau. It contains the promises of land, fruitfulness, and power. Isaac is declaring his belief that, even after his own death, God will continue to fulfill every aspect of His covenant promise. But while Isaac's heart was in the right place, his hands were on the wrong son. He was inadvertently bestowing the blessing on Jacob instead of Esau. But despite Isaac's confusion, God's will was actually being fulfilled. This convoluted mess was turning out just as God had planned.

God had declared his intentions regarding these two brothers long before they were born. While Rebekah was still carrying them in her womb, He had revealed their preordained destinies.

*“Two nations are in your womb,  
and two peoples from within you shall be divided;  
the one shall be stronger than the other,  
the older shall serve the younger.” – Genesis 25:23 ESV*

God had already predetermined that Jacob would be the greater of the two. And while Esau had been the first to exit the birth canal providing him with a legal claim to the birthright and the blessing of the firstborn, God had other plans.

This passage provides a powerful reminder that God's ways are beyond our limited capacity to understand. He declares of Himself, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways” and then He adds, “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9 ESV). God is not required to explain Himself. And Moses provides no explanation for God's actions in this story. We are not told why God allowed Rebekah to do what she did. There is no rationale given for why God permitted the deceptive and manipulative Jacob to steal his brother's blessing.

Each of the characters in the story comes off as fatally flawed and seemingly out of step with the will of God. And yet, God's will was being done *in spite of* them but, more importantly, *through* them. Each of them had been driven by their own selfish agenda, but their wills were completely subject to the sovereign will of God.

Isaac's misplaced blessing would prove to have long-term implications, but the outcome would be in keeping with God's predetermined plan. Jacob, the younger, would be blessed so that he might be a blessing. He would inherit the right to rule over his brothers. And his descendants would enjoy the divine protection of God Almighty. Those who cursed them would be cursed. Those who blessed them would be blessed.

It's difficult to reconcile this news when one considers the ungodly actions of Rebekah and Jacob. They employed deceit, manipulation, and fraud to accomplish their objective. But God was working behind the scenes to ensure their less-than-righteous actions produced good rather than evil. It is the same message that will be conveyed later on in the story of Genesis, when Joseph, a son of Jacob, confronts his own brothers who, out of jealousy and spite, had sold him into slavery. Through the sovereign will of God, Joseph ended up in Egypt and rose from slavery to the second-highest position in the land. And when his brothers came seeking food because of a severe famine in Canaan, Joseph confronted them about their ill-treatment of him.

*"But don't be upset, and don't be angry with yourselves for selling me to this place. It was God who sent me here ahead of you to preserve your lives. This famine that has ravaged the land for two years will last five more years, and there will be neither plowing nor harvesting. God has sent me ahead of you to keep you and your families alive and to preserve many survivors. So it was God who sent me here, not you! And he is the one who made me an adviser to Pharaoh—the manager of his entire palace and the governor of all Egypt."* – Genesis 45:5-8 NLT

Joseph could see the hand of God in all that had happened in his life. His brothers had been guilty of selling him into slavery, but Joseph recognized that it had all been a part of God's sovereign plan. And it is important to remember that Joseph was a son of Jacob, the man who stole the blessing from his own brother. And, even at the end of his life, Joseph was able to reiterate to his brothers his belief in God's sovereign plan.

*"Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today."* – Genesis 50:19-20 ESV

But the story of Jacob and Esau is still difficult to read and even more difficult to justify. It all seems so unfair and indefensible, especially when Moses relates the impact it had on the unsuspecting and seemingly innocent Esau. He ultimately comes home to find that his blessing has been stolen and he is beside himself with frustration and anger. This is the second time his



brother has taken advantage of him, and he declares his well-justified resentment at this most recent injustice.

*"...he has cheated me these two times. He took away my birthright, and behold, now he has taken away my blessing."* – Genesis 27:36 ESV

Esau demands to receive a blessing, but Isaac sadly informs him that Jacob has received it all.

*"I have made Jacob your master and have declared that all his brothers will be his servants. I have guaranteed him an abundance of grain and wine—what is left for me to give you, my son?"* – Genesis 27:37 NLT

There is nothing left to give. Esau's brother now owns his birthright and his blessing. And when Isaac hears Esau's anguished pleas to be blessed, all he can do is restate the negative impact that the blessing of Jacob will have on Esau's life. It is less a blessing than it is a curse.

*"You will live away from the richness of the earth,  
and away from the dew of the heaven above.  
You will live by your sword,  
and you will serve your brother.  
But when you decide to break free,  
you will shake his yoke from your neck."* – Genesis 27:39-40 NLT

While this story is intended to leave the reader with a sense of dissonance, it should also remind them of the unfathomable nature of God's ways. There are things going on behind the scenes that we cannot see or comprehend. The dysfunctionality of this family is appalling, but even their worse actions are no match for God's best-laid plans. The fulfillment of His will is not dependent upon their faithfulness. Jacob did not deserve the blessing, yet it was his. Rebekah's unrighteous behavior is in no way justified by the outcome it seems to have produced. And she will live to regret the division her behavior has created within her own household. Her sins will have consequences. And, as the story unfolds, it will become painfully clear that Jacob's sins will have serious consequences as well.



## God's Will Always Wins Out

<sup>41</sup> Now Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him, and Esau said to himself, "The days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob." <sup>42</sup> But the words of Esau her older son were told to Rebekah. So she sent and called Jacob her younger son and said to him, "Behold, your brother Esau comforts himself about you by planning to kill you. <sup>43</sup> Now therefore, my son, obey my voice. Arise, flee to Laban my brother in Haran <sup>44</sup> and stay with him a while, until your brother's fury turns away— <sup>45</sup> until your brother's anger turns away from you, and he forgets what you have done to him. Then I will send and bring you from there. Why should I be bereft of you both in one day?"

<sup>46</sup> Then Rebekah said to Isaac, "I loathe my life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob marries one of the Hittite women like these, one of the women of the land, what good will my life be to me?"

<sup>1</sup> Then Isaac called Jacob and blessed him and directed him, "You must not take a wife from the Canaanite women. <sup>2</sup> Arise, go to Paddan-aram to the house of Bethuel your mother's father, and take as your wife from there one of the daughters of Laban your mother's brother. <sup>3</sup> God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples. <sup>4</sup> May he give the blessing of Abraham to you and to your offspring with you, that you may take possession of the land of your sojournings that God gave to Abraham!" <sup>5</sup> Thus Isaac sent Jacob away. And he went to Paddan-aram, to Laban, the son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, Jacob's and Esau's mother.— Genesis 27:41-28:5 ESV



Rebekah got exactly what she wished for, and much more than she could have ever imagined. She had helped her favorite son swindle the blessing from his older brother. Now Jacob had it all – the birthright and the blessing – making him the legal heir to his father's inheritance and the next in line to rule over their clan. He was destined to be a wealthy and powerful man. On top of that, with his mother's help, he had managed to become the sole beneficiary of the covenant that God had made with his grandfather, Abraham. But what Rebekah failed to consider was the reaction of Esau. It is as if she thought he would take all this lying down. But she was in for an unpleasant surprise.

Esau was furious, and rightfully so. In a sense, he had been cursed, and he was partly to blame. Years earlier, he had willingly sold his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of stew. He had allowed his immediate physical appetites to make an impulsive decision that would have long-term ramifications. Now, his future had taken another hit because his own brother and mother had stolen the blessing that had been rightfully his as the firstborn son. He had nothing to look forward to except the prospect of living in his brother's shadow for the rest of his life.

What nobody in this story seems to recognize is the hand of God working behind the scenes to accomplish His divine will. They seemed to believe that they were operating as fully autonomous free agents without any responsibility to answer to God for their actions. At no point does anyone seek God's input or approval for their decisions. Driven by their emotions and depending upon their own wisdom, each decision they make only seems to make matter worse. And yet, Moses would have his readers understand that this soap-opera-like story is actually an illustration of how God's sovereignty and man's autonomy interact in daily life. Rebekah, Isaac, Jacob, and Esau are each making independent decisions, but the ultimate outcome is in the hands of Almighty God. According to Scripture, the will of God cannot be thwarted by the plans of men.

*Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand.* – Proverbs 19:21 ESV

*The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps.* – Proverbs 16:9 ESV

*A man's steps are from the LORD, so how can anyone understand his own way?* – Proverbs 20:24 BSB

Angered over his most recent loss, Esau made plans to murder his brother. Frightened over the news that Jacob's life was in danger, Rebekah made plans to protect him. Distraught over the prospect of Jacob marrying a Hittite woman, Isaac made plans to send him to Haran. Everyone was making plans for the future, but no one realized that it was God who was establishing their steps. This was all according to His divine will.

But these people were not operating like mindless automatons, helplessly and unwilling fulfilling God's relentless will. No, they were each doing exactly what they wanted to do. God was not forcing or coercing them against their wills. But He was sovereignly and providentially orchestrating the outcome of their decisions. What they meant for evil, God would use for good. Esau's evil intentions to kill his brother would be used by God to send Jacob away from the smothering influence of his mother. Rebekah's manipulative attempt to promote the prospects of her favorite son would actually result in his blessing by God.

Yet, while God was turning their evil into good, He would still hold them accountable for their actions. They would each suffer the consequences for the decisions they made without God's

input or blessing. In a sense, God was going to redeem their unrighteous behavior in order to produce a fully righteous outcome.

Rebekah seems to have been caught off guard by Esau's over-the-top reaction to his loss. So, when she caught wind that he planned to kill Jacob, she was forced to come up with yet another plan to protect her favorite son. She immediately called Jacob and shared with him her latest and greatest idea.

*"Look, your brother Esau is planning to get revenge by killing you. Now then, my son, do what I say. Run away immediately to my brother Laban in Haran. Live with him for a little while until your brother's rage subsides. Stay there until your brother's anger against you subsides and he forgets what you did to him. Then I'll send someone to bring you back from there. Why should I lose both of you in one day?"* – Genesis 27:42-45 NET

She realized her relationship with Esau was dead in the water. There was no way she was going to mitigate the damage she had done. So, the best thing she could do was keep Esau from murdering Jacob. It's obvious that she took Esau's threat seriously because she was willing to send Jacob away. And she was able to convince the somewhat oblivious Isaac to agree to her plan by portraying it as a quest to find Jacob a bride. Neither she nor Isaac had been thrilled by Esau's decision to marry two Hittite women (Genesis 26:34). In fact, Moses states that these marriages "caused Isaac and Rebekah great anxiety" (Genesis 26:35 NET).

So, Rebekah convinced Isaac to send Jacob back to her hometown of Haran so that he might search for a bride from among her brother's family. This plan pleased Isaac because that had been how his father had found Rebekah for him. So, Isaac agreed to send Jacob back to Haran so that he might find a wife. But neither Isaac nor Rebekah had any idea just how long this separation was going to last. She seemed to believe that, with Jacob out of the way, Esau's anger would quickly subside. So, she assured Jacob that his exile in Haran would only be "for a little while" (Genesis 27:44 NET).

Once again, Esau is going to find himself as the odd-man-out. He would wake up one day to find that his plans for killing his brother had been thwarted by his conniving mother, and his father, Isaac, had been complicit in the whole affair.

In rather short order, Jacob found himself on his way to Mesopotamia with instructions to find a wife among his grandfather's relatives.

*"You must not marry any of these Canaanite women. Instead, go at once to Paddan-aram, to the house of your grandfather Bethuel, and marry one of your uncle Laban's daughters."* – Genesis 28:1-2 NLT

Isaac views this trip in a totally positive light, believing that his son will return with a bride who will help Jacob fulfill the conditions contained in the divine covenant. He even reiterates the terms of the covenant, putting them in the form of a blessing.

*“May God Almighty bless you and give you many children. And may your descendants multiply and become many nations! May God pass on to you and your descendants the blessings he promised to Abraham. May you own this land where you are now living as a foreigner, for God gave this land to Abraham.” – Genesis 28:3-4 NLT*

Rebekah must have smiled as she heard these words. It was all she had ever wanted for Jacob. But Esau must have fumed as he stood back and watched his younger brother ride away with his birthright, his blessing, and his father’s best wishes for a prosperous future.

Isaac, Rebekah, and Esau stood and watched as Jacob and his caravan rode off into the distance. And little did they know that 20 years would pass before they saw him again. There are those who believe that Rebekah never saw Jacob again. The timing of her death is not mentioned in Scripture, but neither is her reunion with Jacob. It seems that her plan to promote her younger son over his brother had worked, but it came at a great cost. The boy she loved so dearly would be taken from her and she would never live to meet his wife or see the birth of her grandchildren. Her days would be marked by pain and regret, as she was forced to consider the cost of her actions. It’s likely that her relationship with Esau was beyond repair. In her misguided effort to protect the one thing she loved more than anything else in the world, she had actually ended up losing it. But God was working behind the scenes and He had great plans for Jacob. The days ahead would be difficult. The next two decades would be filled with pain and sorrow. And Jacob, the deceiver, would find himself getting an unexpected and unpleasant dose of his own medicine – all for his own good and God’s glory.

## It Never Pays to Bargain with God

<sup>6</sup> Now Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob and sent him away to Paddan-aram to take a wife from there, and that as he blessed him he directed him, “You must not take a wife from the Canaanite women,” <sup>7</sup> and that Jacob had obeyed his father and his mother and gone to Paddan-aram. <sup>8</sup> So when Esau saw that the Canaanite women did not please Isaac his father, <sup>9</sup> Esau went to Ishmael and took as his wife, besides the wives he had, Mahalath the daughter of Ishmael, Abraham’s son, the sister of Nebaioth.

<sup>10</sup> Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. <sup>11</sup> And he came to a certain place and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. <sup>12</sup> And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! <sup>13</sup> And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, “I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. <sup>14</sup> Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. <sup>15</sup> 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.” <sup>16</sup> Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.” <sup>17</sup> And he was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

<sup>18</sup> So early in the morning Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. <sup>19</sup> He called the name of that place Bethel, but the name of the city was Luz at the first. <sup>20</sup> Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, <sup>21</sup> so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, <sup>22</sup> and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you.” – Genesis 28:6-22 ESV



After Jacob had left to seek a wife from among his mother’s family in Mesopotamia, his brother Esau decided to try and win back his parent’s favor by marrying a woman from among his own clan. Esau already had two Hittite wives, but he knew that these marriages had been a huge disappointment to his mother and father. So, when he had heard Isaac warn Jacob not to take a wife from among the Canaanites, Esau determined to make amends with his parents by marrying one of his cousins. Her name was Mahalath and she was the daughter

of Ishmael, the elder son of Abraham. While Esau had been angered by his parent’s complicity

in Jacob's stealing of his blessing, he also desired their favor. Having lost his birthright and his blessing, he was desperate to win them over. But he failed to consider the fact that God had divinely ordained the separation of Ishmael's clan from that of Isaac's. The Ishmaelites were not destined to share in the covenant promise made to Abraham. So, Esau's marriage to Mahalath would do little to improve his relationship with his parents or to enhance his future prospects. Yet, during his brother's 20-year absence, Esau would build a life for himself in Canaan, raising a family and attempting to maintain a civil relationship with his mother and father.



Meanwhile, Jacob continued his long and arduous journey to Haran. But some 58 miles into his trip, he was forced to stop for the night, and it would prove to be anything but a restful evening. As he drifted off to sleep, he had a vivid and somewhat disturbing dream. He envisioned a giant flight of steps reaching from heaven to earth, and on that massive stairway, there was a host of angels ascending and descending. But Jacob's eye was drawn to the top of the stairway, where he caught a glimpse of Yahweh, the Lord. And, considering all that Jacob had just done to deceive his father and defraud his brother, this vision of the Almighty must have struck fear into his heart. Was God going to repay him for having stolen his brother's blessing? Was this going to be some kind of well-deserved payback for his treachery and deceit? But before Jacob could formulate any words to speak to God, he was presented with an unexpected announcement.

*"I am the Lord, the God of your grandfather Abraham, and the God of your father, Isaac. The ground you are lying on belongs to you. I am giving it to you and your descendants. Your descendants will be as numerous as the dust of the earth! They will spread out in all directions—to the west and the east, to the north and the south. And all the families of the earth will be blessed through you and your descendants." – Genesis 28:13-14 NLT*

The symbolism contained in this dream is powerful and significant. As Jacob lay in the darkness, separated from his family and facing an uncertain future, a host of angelic beings were moving back and forth between heaven and earth. These messengers of God represent His divine oversight and influence over all that happens on earth. Their movement between the two realms was meant to symbolize His sovereign control over the affairs of this world. They were His celestial agents, carrying out His wishes and accomplishing His divine will among men.

While Jacob and his mother had been busily conspiring to deceive Isaac and defraud Esau, God's will had been carried out. There was a constant movement taking place between heaven



and earth, as God's messengers carried out His orders and implemented His sovereign plans among men. But Jacob and Rebekah had been oblivious to this invisible activity taking place in the unseen realms. They had mistakenly thought that they were in control of their futures and fate. But now, Jacob was receiving a divine wake-up call, informing him that all his trickery and deceit had been unnecessary. There had been no need for Jacob to barter for the birthright or to steal the blessing of the firstborn. God had always intended for the covenant promise to be his. It had not been his cleverly conceived plan to fool Isaac that had earned him the right to his father's inheritance. It had been the sovereign will of God.

From among all the men who lived on the earth, God had chosen Abraham. And He had given this undeserving Chaldean a promise to bless him beyond his wildest dream.

*"I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you,  
and I will make your name great,  
so that you will exemplify divine blessing.  
I will bless those who bless you,  
but the one who treats you lightly I must curse,  
so that all the families of the earth may receive blessing through you."* – Genesis 12:2-3  
NLT

And then, God had chosen Abraham's son, Isaac, to be the conduit through whom this blessing would flow. God had sovereignly passed by Ishmael, the firstborn. And now, God was announcing that it had always been His plan to choose Jacob over Esau. The covenant promise would flow to him and through him. God was going to use this flawed vessel as the conduit through which He would accomplish His redemptive plan for mankind. And, not only that, God informed Jacob that he would enjoy divine protection all during his extended journey.

*"What's more, I am with you, and I will protect you wherever you go. One day I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have finished giving you everything I have promised you."* – Genesis 28:15 NLT

What Jacob didn't know was that his trip was going to take much longer than he anticipated. Two decades would pass before he was able to return to Beersheba and, during that time, Jacob would experience both the blessings and the discipline of God. He would eventually find the wife for which he was searching. But, more importantly, he would discover the power and sovereignty of God. The next 20 years of his life would be filled with joy and sorrow, success and failure, hope and heartache. But his roller-coaster existence would also be marked by the constant assurance that God was with him, operating behind the scenes and orchestrating every aspect of his life. God had promised Jacob that he would remain with him to the end.

The impact this dream had on Jacob can be seen in his response when he awoke.

*"Surely the Lord is in this place, and I wasn't even aware of it!"* – Genesis 28:16 NLT

Jacob could have spoken those words back in Beersheba as well because God had always been with him. He just hadn't realized it. This divine encounter left Jacob shaken and sobered.

*"What an awesome place this is! It is none other than the house of God, the very gateway to heaven!" – Genesis 28:17 NLT*

Out of reverence for God, Jacob took the stone upon which his head had rested while he dreamed, and he turned it into a sacred pillar. He named the place Bethel which means "house of God." What's fascinating is that this is the very same spot where, years earlier, Jacob's grandfather Abraham had erected an altar to God.

*Then he moved from there to the hill country east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the Lord and worshiped the Lord. – Genesis 12:8 NLT*

Like his grandfather before him, Jacob worshiped Yahweh. But, in keeping with his bargaining nature, Jacob attempted to strike a deal with God.

*"If God will indeed be with me and protect me on this journey, and if he will provide me with food and clothing, and if I return safely to my father's home, then the Lord will certainly be my God. And this memorial pillar I have set up will become a place for worshiping God, and I will present to God a tenth of everything he gives me." – Genesis 28:20-22 NLT*

Rather than rejoice in the fact that God had just promised to bless and not punish him, Jacob arrogantly attempted to bargain with the Almighty. He placed conditions on his continued worship of God. Even though God had promised to fulfill every aspect of the promise He had made, Jacob wanted guarantees. This undeserving grandson of Abraham tried to arm wrestle Yahweh by threatening to hold his worship if his conditions were not met. Suffice it to say, Jacob had a lot to learn about God.

## In Need of an Attitude Adjustment

<sup>1</sup> Then Jacob went on his journey and came to the land of the people of the east. <sup>2</sup> As he looked, he saw a well in the field, and behold, three flocks of sheep lying beside it, for out of that well the flocks were watered. The stone on the well's mouth was large, <sup>3</sup> and when all the flocks were gathered there, the shepherds would roll the stone from the mouth of the well and water the sheep, and put the stone back in its place over the mouth of the well.

<sup>4</sup> Jacob said to them, "My brothers, where do you come from?" They said, "We are from Haran."

<sup>5</sup> He said to them, "Do you know Laban the son of Nahor?" They said, "We know him." <sup>6</sup> He said to them, "Is it well with him?" They said, "It is well; and see, Rachel his daughter is coming with the sheep!" <sup>7</sup> He said, "Behold, it is still high day; it is not time for the livestock to be gathered together. Water the sheep and go, pasture them." <sup>8</sup> But they said, "We cannot until all the flocks are gathered together and the stone is rolled from the mouth of the well; then we water the sheep."

<sup>9</sup> While he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep, for she was a shepherdess. <sup>10</sup> Now as soon as Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of Laban his mother's brother, and the sheep of Laban his mother's brother, Jacob came near and rolled the stone from the well's mouth and watered the flock of Laban his mother's brother. <sup>11</sup> Then Jacob kissed Rachel and wept aloud. <sup>12</sup> And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's kinsman, and that he was Rebekah's son, and she ran and told her father.

<sup>13</sup> As soon as Laban heard the news about Jacob, his sister's son, he ran to meet him and embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his house. Jacob told Laban all these things, <sup>14</sup> and Laban said to him, "Surely you are my bone and my flesh!" And he stayed with him a month. – Genesis 29:1-14 ESV

In his quest to find a bride, Jacob had traveled nearly 450 miles from Beersheba to Haran, his mother's hometown in Mesopotamia. Upon his arrival, Jacob made his way to the local "watering hole" or a well, which would have been a natural gathering spot for the citizens of that region. In a sense, Jacob was following the example of Abraham's servant who, years earlier, had made the same journey in search of Isaac's wife. It had been at a well that the servant had discovered Rebekah, who would later become Abraham's wife and Jacob's mother (Genesis 24). And it seems likely that Jacob had heard this story many times over his lifetime.



So, in an attempt to locate his mother's kin, Jacob began his search at a local well. And he would not be disappointed.

But before proceeding to the rest of the story, it is important to compare the Genesis 24 and Genesis 29 stories. In both cases, there is a man in search of a woman who might serve as a bride for one of Abraham's descendants. In the case of Abraham, he had commanded his servant, "go to my country and to my kindred, and take a wife for my son Isaac" (Genesis 24:4 ESV). Abraham was sending his servant to Haran to seek a suitable wife from among the household of his brother, Nahor. It was important to Abraham that his future daughter-in-law be a member of his own clan and so he warned his servant, "you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites" (Genesis 24:3 ESV). Notice that Isaac gave his son similar warnings and instructions.

*"You must not take a wife from the Canaanite women. Arise, go to Paddan-aram to the house of Bethuel your mother's father, and take as your wife from there one of the daughters of Laban your mother's brother."* – Genesis 28:1-2 ESV

Both men carefully followed the instructions they had been given and made the difficult journey to Haran. And while both began their search at a well, only Abraham's servant invoked the aid of Yahweh.

*"O Lord, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today and show steadfast love to my master Abraham."* – Genesis 24:12 ESV

Recognizing the importance of his task, this faithful servant of Abraham sought divine assistance from his master's God. Yet, the first words out of Jacob's mouth were to shepherds, not Yahweh. It might be argued that Jacob had prayed his prayer all the way back in Bethel.

*"If God will indeed be with me and protect me on this journey, and if he will provide me with food and clothing, and if I return safely to my father's home, then the Lord will certainly be my God."* – Genesis 28:20-21 NLT

It could be that Jacob was operating under the assumption that he already had God's assurance of success. After all, Jacob had received a hard-and-fast commitment from the Almighty.

*“I am with you, and I will protect you wherever you go. One day I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have finished giving you everything I have promised you.” – Genesis 28:15 NLT*

And as the story unfolds, it becomes clear that God *was* guiding and directing Jacob’s steps. Yet, one can’t help but notice the glaring absence of any vertical communication on Jacob’s part. And this will become a pattern in Jacob’s life. This self-willed and sometimes conniving individual will show a marked propensity for self-reliance. In fact, it will be more than 14 years before any communication takes place between Jacob and the God of his grandfather Abraham, and it will be Yahweh who instigates the conversation.

*“Return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred, and I will be with you.” – Genesis 31:3 ESV*

But as Jacob stood at the well, he seemed to harbor no thoughts of God and expressed no need of His assistance. Instead, he struck up a conversation with some local shepherds, asking if they were familiar with Laban, his mother’s brother. Much to Jacob’s surprise, the shepherds not only confessed their knowledge of Laban but also announced that his daughter Rachel was on her way to the well with a flock of sheep.

Once again, a quick comparison to the Genesis 24 account is necessary. When Abraham’s servant met Rebekah for the first time, he eagerly waited to see if she was the one for whom he had prayed.

*“Silently the man watched her with interest to determine if the Lord had made his journey successful or not.” – Genesis 24:21 NLT*

And when he discovered her to be the answer to his prayer, the servant “bowed his head and worshiped the Lord” (Genesis 24:26 NLT). He gave all the credit to God.

*“Praised be the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has not abandoned his faithful love for my master! The Lord has led me to the house of my master’s relatives!” – Genesis 24:27 NLT*

Yet, Jacob, the grandson of Abraham, seemed to be oblivious to God’s presence and provision. The fact seems to have escaped him that his long journey had ended at a well where there just *happened* to be men who knew his wife’s brother. And he shows no recognition of God’s involvement even at the serendipitous appearance of Laban’s young, unmarried daughter. No prayers of thanksgiving are expressed. No praise to God flows from his lips.

In fact, the entire narrative seems to focus on Jacob’s self-reliant and fiercely independent nature, a recurring theme in his young life. Jacob had repeatedly proven his penchant for

obsessive-compulsive behavior. When he saw something he wanted, he showed a powerful and unrelenting determination to do whatever it took to get it. And this occasion was no different.

As soon as Jacob learned that Rachel was Laban's daughter, he determined to get rid of the other shepherds. He hurriedly ordered them to water their sheep and be on their way but the men insisted that were forbidden from doing so.

*"We can't water the animals until all the flocks have arrived," they replied. "Then the shepherds move the stone from the mouth of the well, and we water all the sheep and goats." – Genesis 29:8 NLT*

Jacob was a guest in their land and unfamiliar with their local customs and laws. Yet, he had no qualms ordering these men around. And when had refused to remove the stone covering the mouth of the well, he had arrogantly taken matters into his own hands.

*Jacob went over to the well and moved the stone from its mouth and watered his uncle's flock. – Genesis 29:10 NLT*

Having discovered that Rachel was his cousin, Jacob displays a self-righteous determination to seal the deal. He wants this woman to be his wife and is prepared to do whatever it takes to make it happen, even if it means disobeying local customs and violating social protocols. Overcome with joy at discovering Rachel was his cousin, Jacob kissed her. There is nothing in the text that suggests this act had sexual connotations, but it would have broken with established social etiquette. The shepherds who stood by watching this scene unfold would have had no idea who Jacob was. He was a stranger in their land. So, when they saw him kiss the young virgin daughter of one of their neighbors, they were likely appalled. This would have been unexpected and unacceptable behavior. But Jacob seems to have lived his life according to his own set of moral standards. He was a non-conformist and a rule-breaker.

As far as Jacob was concerned, he had met his future bride. But little did he know that he was also about to meet the man who would give him a run for his money when it came to deception and manipulation. In Laban, Jacob would meet his match. He would soon discover that his future father-in-law was more than a worthy challenger when it came to treachery and trickery. Jacob, the consummate deceiver, would soon find himself in the uncomfortable role of the deceived. The master manipulator would become the disgruntled and helpless victim.

Jacob was about to discover the truth behind the well-worn adage, "your sin will find you out" (Numbers 32:23). Yes, he was the descendant of Abraham and the heir to God's covenant promises. But the sins he had committed against his brother would have consequences. He had received the blessing of God but that does not mean he had received absolution for his crimes. The next 20 years of his life would be marked by a strange mixture of blessing and curses, joy and sorrow. Slowly, but surely, God would lovingly whittle away the unhealthy aspects of Jacob's life. This self-willed and self-reliant man would find himself in God's remedial school for

slow learners. And, in time, Jacob would learn the timeless truth concerning God's loving and life-altering use of discipline.

*And have you forgotten the exhortation addressed to you as sons?*

*"My son, do not scorn the Lord's discipline  
or give up when he corrects you.*

*"For the Lord disciplines the one he loves and chastises every son he accepts."*

*Endure your suffering as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is there that a father does not discipline? But if you do not experience discipline, something all sons have shared in, then you are illegitimate and are not sons. – Hebrews 12:5-8 NLT*





## The Tables Are Turned

<sup>15</sup> Then Laban said to Jacob, “Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?” <sup>16</sup> Now Laban had two daughters. The name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. <sup>17</sup> Leah’s eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance. <sup>18</sup> Jacob loved Rachel. And he said, “I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.” <sup>19</sup> Laban said, “It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me.” <sup>20</sup> So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.

<sup>21</sup> Then Jacob said to Laban, “Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed.” <sup>22</sup> So Laban gathered together all the people of the place and made a feast. <sup>23</sup> But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and he went in to her. <sup>24</sup> (Laban gave his female servant Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her servant.) <sup>25</sup> And in the morning, behold, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, “What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?” <sup>26</sup> Laban said, “It is not so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn. <sup>27</sup> Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years.” <sup>28</sup> Jacob did so, and completed her week. Then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to be his wife. <sup>29</sup> (Laban gave his female servant Bilhah to his daughter Rachel to be her servant.) <sup>30</sup> So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah, and served Laban for another seven years. – Genesis 29:15-30 ESV



Jacob had found his bride-to-be, and as he shared the purpose of his quest with Laban, he must have divulged his intention to marry Rachel. But Laban appears to have been reluctant to hand over his daughter to this newcomer, despite the fact that Jacob was his own nephew. So, to buy time, he convinced Jacob to stay with him, a delay that soon extended to a solid month. During that time, Jacob must have made himself useful, and it seems likely that he offered to help with the flocks because Rachel was a shepherdess. What better way to get to win the affections of his future wife than by serving alongside her as she performed her daily duties.

At the end of the month, Laban decided to offer Jacob some form of compensation for his services. In other words, he attempted to make Jacob a permanent employee. And when he asked Jacob

what his salary should be, the young man asked for the right to marry his youngest daughter, Rachel. Jacob was so infatuated with her that he agreed to a seven-year labor contract in order

to earn the right to marry her. It seems odd, given the fact that Jacob had come in search of a bride, that he had brought no gifts or money to offer as a bride price.

When Abraham's servant had gone in search of a bride for Isaac, he had carried gifts for the bride and her family. When he met Rebekah, he had given her "a gold ring weighing a half shekel, and two bracelets for her arms weighing ten gold shekels" (Genesis 24:22 ESV). And when the servant eventually met Rebekah's family, he had presented additional gifts.

*And the servant brought out jewelry of silver and of gold, and garments, and gave them to Rebekah. He also gave to her brother and to her mother costly ornaments. – Genesis 24:53 ESV*

And it's interesting to note that the brother referred to in this passage was Laban. He too had been received expensive gifts from Abraham's servant and these items had been intended to serve as a bride price for Rebekah.

But when Jacob showed up in Haran and shared his desire to marry one of Laban's daughters, no gifts were given or exchanged. A month later, there had still been no bride price offered by Jacob. So, to win the right to marry Laban's daughter, he offered to spend seven years as Laban's indentured servant.

All of this begs the question: Had Isaac failed to give Jacob any gifts to present? Or had Jacob squandered them along the way? Perhaps Jacob had decided to keep the treasures for himself to fund what he knew would be an extended stay in Mesopotamia. After all, his mother had told him to not return until she sent word that it was safe to do so.

*"Get ready and flee to my brother, Laban, in Haran. Stay there with him until your brother cools off. When he calms down and forgets what you have done to him, I will send for you to come back." – Genesis 27:43-45 NLT*

Whatever the case, Jacob was committed to a lengthy stay in Haran. And it seems that Laban was once again hoping for some kind of profitable exchange between himself and the grandson of Abraham. His overly enthusiastic welcome of Jacob would suggest that Laban was expecting another big payday. As head of the house, he stood to gain a substantial bride price for allowing Jacob to wed Rebekah. And, since no gifts had forthcoming, Laban decided to accept Jacob's terms. But this is where the story gets interesting.

Moses points out that the deceit-prone Jacob actually kept his word.

*Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her. – Genesis 29:20 ESV*

His love for Rachel overpowered any desire he may have had to cut corners or skirt the rules. But his decision to do things the right way would end up costing him.

When his seven-year commitment had been fulfilled, Jacob demanded that Laban keep his end of the bargain.

*“I have fulfilled my agreement,” Jacob said to Laban. “Now give me my wife so I can sleep with her.” – Genesis 29:21 NLT*

You can almost sense Jacob’s impatience as he rather crassly demands the right to consummate his marriage to Rachel. This almost leaves the impression that Jacob and Rachel had been betrothed the entire seven years, and everyone would have known that Laban had agreed to the arrangement. So, this makes what Laban does next especially evil.

Having agreed to the betrothal and marriage, Laban decided to take advantage of Jacob’s unbridled enthusiasm to accomplish another pressing matter. It seems that Leah, Rachel’s older sister, remained unmarried. The text states that “Leah’s eyes were weak” (Genesis 29:17 ESV). The Hebrew word is רַךְ (*raḵ*) and it can be translated as “tender,” “delicate,” or “weak.” Given the fact that Leah’s eyes are being compared to Rachel’s outward beauty (Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance), it would appear that Leah suffered from some kind of eye condition. Perhaps she was partially blind or had some other ocular ailment.

But as a father, Laban would have felt a special responsibility to find a suitable husband for his firstborn daughter. The day would come when he could no longer care for her, so it was essential that he provide her with a man to provide for and protect her after he was gone. This led Laban to do the unthinkable.

After throwing a feast for the newlyweds and, most likely, after ensuring that Jacob was highly inebriated, Laban snuck Leah into the bridal tent in place of Rachel. This time, the firstborn pretended to be the youngest. In the same way that Rebekah helped Jacob to deceive Isaac, Laban assisted Leah in her deception of Jacob. Overcome by the effects of the alcohol and due to the darkness of the tent, Jacob never realized that he had slept with the wrong woman – until the sun came up.

*...in the morning, behold, it was Leah! – Genesis 29:25 ESV*

What a shock that must have been. And it’s amazing to consider that Leah went along with it all. She willingly participated in the deception, not seeming to consider how her actions would impact her own sister. And the righteous indignation of Jacob, while justified, is still somewhat comical.

*“What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? **Why then have you deceived me?**” – Genesis 29:25 ESV*

How hypocritical these words sound coming from the mouth of Jacob. The deceiver has just been deceived and he can't believe it. How dare someone take advantage of him? But Jacob had it coming.

In response to Jacob's anger, Laban provided a rather lame explanation having to do with local social customs. It was not proper to marry off the younger daughter ahead of her older sister. But this excuse doesn't explain why Laban failed to disclose this rather important detail before he had made the agreement with Jacob. He had withheld it on purpose, having already decided to use Jacob's love for Rachel as the pretext for marrying off his less-attractive daughter. In a sense, Laban killed two birds with one stone. And then he had the audacity to suggest that Jacob's seven years of service would be counted as payment for his marriage to Leah. Another seven-year contract would be required if Jacob wanted Rachel as well.

One can only imagine the look on Jacob's face as he heard these words come out of Laban's mouth. He must have been beside himself with rage and frustration. But he was not in a position to declare his rights or negotiate a better deal. If he wanted Rachel, he was going to have to swallow his pride and agree to Laban's less-than-generous terms. And that's exactly what he did. After a week of honoring his conjugal responsibilities to Leah, Jacob was allowed to marry Rachel as well. But he would spend the next seven years of his life paying off his debt. Suddenly, his one-month stay in Haran had turned into 14 years of forced labor. The man who had cheated his own brother out of his birthright and blessing had been taken to the cleaners by his future father-in-law.

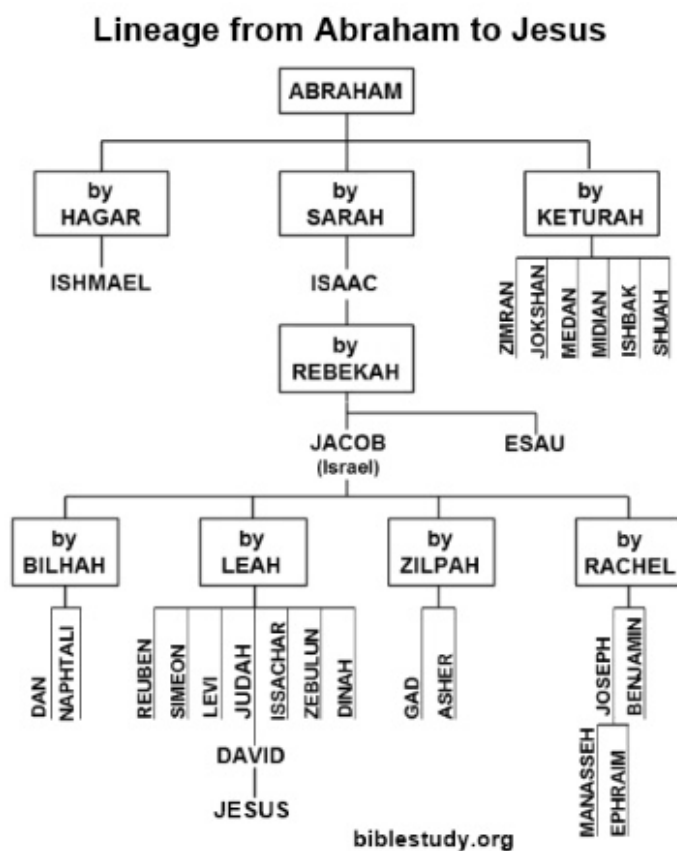
But as has become evident all throughout this story, God was operating behind the scene on this occasion as well. Despite the despicable actions of Laban, God had a purpose behind Jacob's unplanned marriage to Leah. Due to her physical infirmity, she was the unwanted daughter whom no man desired for a wife. But it would be through Leah that the family tree of Jesus would come. This weak-eyed, undesirable woman would become the one through whom God's plan for the Messiah of Israel would be fulfilled. Jacob loved Rachel. But God had a special love for Leah that would produce the greatest expression of divine affection the world has ever seen.

*"For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life." – John 3:16 NLT*

## The Improbable but Providential Will of God

<sup>31</sup> When the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren. <sup>32</sup> And Leah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Reuben, for she said, "Because the Lord has looked upon my affliction; for now my husband will love me." <sup>33</sup> She conceived again and bore a son, and said, "Because the Lord has heard that I am hated, he has given me this son also." And she called his name Simeon. <sup>34</sup> Again she conceived and bore a son, and said, "Now this time my husband will be attached to me, because I have borne him three sons." Therefore his name was called Levi. <sup>35</sup> And she conceived again and bore a son, and said, "This time I will praise the Lord." Therefore she called his name Judah. Then she ceased bearing.

<sup>1</sup> When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister. She said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I shall die!" <sup>2</sup> Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel, and he said, "Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?" – Genesis 29:31-30:2 ESV



Verses 31 flatly states that Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah. Having allowed Laban to trick him into marrying Rachel's older sister, Jacob found himself struggling to display any signs of affection for his unexpected and unwanted wife. In the same way that his mother had shown favoritism for him over his brother, Esau, Jacob poured out all his attention and affection on Rachel. She was the only one he had ever wanted. Leah was nothing more than a burden and a constant reminder of Laban's treachery. Her very presence must have rubbed Jacob the wrong way. But while Leah was avoided like the plague by her new husband, God chose to see her affliction and show her affection.

*...the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren. –*  
Genesis 29:31 ESV

Once again, we see the sovereign God of the universe inserting Himself into human affairs and orchestrating the fulfillment of His divine will. None of this is a knee-jerk reaction on God's part. He had not been caught off guard or surprised by the actions of Laban. When Jacob had woken up the morning after his wedding night and found himself lying next to Leah, he had been shocked. But not God.

Laban must have been proud over how he had pulled a fast one on the unsuspecting Jacob. He had tricked the younger man into marrying his older and less-attractive daughter. And having successfully secured her future, Laban had been more than willing to let Jacob have Rachel as well. After all, his little trick had netted him 14 years of free labor from the gullible and easily manipulated Jacob.

It seems clear from the context, that Jacob intended to raise a family through Rachel. But there was a problem. She was barren. Like her mother-in-law, Rebekah, and her grandmother-in-law, Sarah, Rachel was unable to bear children. Jacob was operating under the impression that Rachel was to be the vehicle through which all the promises concerning offspring would come. Jacob remembered the words of his father, Isaac, spoken as he was preparing to go in search of a wife.

*"God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples." – Genesis 28:3 ESV*

He also recalled the vision he had in Bethel and the words that God had spoken to him.

*"The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed." – Genesis 28:13-14 ESV*

But despite all the promises, Jacob was facing a bleak future because he had a barren wife. How were any of these promises to come true if Rachel couldn't bear children? Yet, what Jacob failed to realize was that he had two wives for a very good reason. It had been the will of God. And while Jacob despised Leah, God had great plans for her.

*Leah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Reuben, for she said, "Because the Lord has looked upon my affliction; for now my husband will love me." – Genesis 29:32 ESV*

The woman whom Jacob never wanted was the one to give Jacob that which he most desired: A son. And she was far from done. In seemingly rapid succession, Leah produced four sons for Jacob: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah. And the fact that she kept getting pregnant would clearly suggest that Jacob had changed his attitude toward her. All during this time, Rachel

remained incapable of bearing Jacob any children, so he turned his attention to the more obviously fruitful older sister. With each new pregnancy and birth, Leah revealed her great desire that Jacob would truly love her.

At the birth of Reuben, she stated, “The Lord has noticed my misery, and now my husband will love me” (Genesis 29:32 NLT). But despite providing Jacob with a son, she still felt rejected by him, because at the birth of Simeon she declared, “The Lord heard that I was unloved and has given me another son” (Genesis 29:33 NLT). Yet, even with the birth of Levi, Leah was still waiting for some sign that Jacob loved her.

*“Surely **this time** my husband will feel affection for me, since I have given him three sons!” – Genesis 29:34 NLT*

It seems that Jacob’s interest in Leah was purely utilitarian in nature. She was effective in producing sons and heirs, but this apparently failed to elicit any signs of affection from Jacob. He gladly welcomed each new son into the world, but still treated Leah as a second-class citizen.

But something happened with the birth of her fourth son. When Judah came into the world, she declared, “Now I will praise the Lord!” (Genesis 29:35 NLT). Judah’s name means “praised,” and reflects Leah’s gratitude to God for His gracious provision of four healthy sons. She recognized that each of her pregnancies had been the handiwork of God and an expression of His love for her. While Jacob remained aloof and reticent to display love and affection for her, Leah knew that her fruitfulness had been a gracious gift from God. And, as the text makes clear, with Judah’s birth, Leah “ceased bearing” (Genesis 29:35 ESV).

Leah wasn’t done having children, but there is a pronounced and obvious break between the delivery of Judah and that of her next son. If you take the time to study the family tree of Jesus found in the opening chapter of the book of Matthew, you will find the name of Judah.

*Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and **Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers**, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram, and Ram the father of Amminadab, and Amminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David the king. – Matthew 1:2-6 ESV*

Judah is the only one of the 12 sons of Jacob to be mentioned in the genealogy because it was through his line that Jesus came. This fourth son of Jacob, born to the unwanted older daughter of Laban, would be the conduit through whom the promised Messiah would come into the world. It was not through Rachel, the favorite wife of Jacob. In fact, while Leah had been busy bearing sons for Jacob, Rachel had remained completely incapable of even conceiving an heir for her husband. And this situation left her angry and resentful of her older sister.

*When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister. She said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I shall die!" – Genesis 30:1 ESV*

This response reveals a great deal about Rachel. She comes across as a petulant and spoiled woman who was used to getting her way. And the ludicrous demand she makes of Jacob further reflects her naturally controlling nature. She didn't like her circumstances and she was expecting Jacob to do something about it. She even seems to be threatening to kill herself if she doesn't get her way. But Jacob is angered by the unjustified blame she has heaped on him. It wasn't his fault she could not bear children. In his mind, it was the hand of God. And yet, what is noticeably missing in all of this is any sign that either Jacob or Rachel took this matter to the Lord. There are no prayers lifted up. No cries for assistance are uttered. Neither Jacob nor his wife bothers to take the situation to the throne of God. He seems content to rely upon the child-bearing capabilities of Leah. And Rachel seems resigned to passing blame and demanding her way. And as the story unfolds, Rachel will take a page out of Sarah's playbook and come up with a solution to her own problem. Rather than call on God, she will choose to play God and right what she believes to be an injustice.



## The Sport of Competitive Conception

<sup>3</sup> Then she said, "Here is my servant Bilhah; go in to her, so that she may give birth on my behalf, that even I may have children through her." <sup>4</sup> So she gave him her servant Bilhah as a wife, and Jacob went in to her. <sup>5</sup> And Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son. <sup>6</sup> Then Rachel said, "God has judged me, and has also heard my voice and given me a son." Therefore she called his name Dan. <sup>7</sup> Rachel's servant Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. <sup>8</sup> Then Rachel said, "With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister and have prevailed." So she called his name Naphtali.

<sup>9</sup> When Leah saw that she had ceased bearing children, she took her servant Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife. <sup>10</sup> Then Leah's servant Zilpah bore Jacob a son. <sup>11</sup> And Leah said, "Good fortune has come!" so she called his name Gad. <sup>12</sup> Leah's servant Zilpah bore Jacob a second son. <sup>13</sup> And Leah said, "Happy am I! For women have called me happy." So she called his name Asher.

<sup>14</sup> In the days of wheat harvest Reuben went and found mandrakes in the field and brought them to his mother Leah. Then Rachel said to Leah, "Please give me some of your son's mandrakes." <sup>15</sup> But she said to her, "Is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband? Would you take away my son's mandrakes also?" Rachel said, "Then he may lie with you tonight in exchange for your son's mandrakes." <sup>16</sup> When Jacob came from the field in the evening, Leah went out to meet him and said, "You must come in to me, for I have hired you with my son's mandrakes." So he lay with her that night. <sup>17</sup> And God listened to Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son. <sup>18</sup> Leah said, "God has given me my wages because I gave my servant to my husband." So she called his name Issachar.

<sup>19</sup> And Leah conceived again, and she bore Jacob a sixth son. <sup>20</sup> Then Leah said, "God has endowed me with a good endowment; now my husband will honor me, because I have borne him six sons." So she called his name Zebulun. <sup>21</sup> Afterward she bore a daughter and called her name Dinah.

<sup>22</sup> Then God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her and opened her womb. <sup>23</sup> She conceived and bore a son and said, "God has taken away my reproach." <sup>24</sup> And she called his name Joseph, saying, "May the Lord add to me another son!" – Genesis 30:3-24 ESV



This story reads like a 1970s television soap opera. The interpersonal intrigues are difficult to keep up with and the sheer number of births is mind-boggling. Moses provides no timeline for this narrative, but suffice it to say, Jacob was a busy man. In the span of 19 verses, Moses describes Jacob as fathering seven sons by four different women. And it's impossible to read this story and not see the similarities found in the lives of Jacob's parents and grandparents. But it is if Jacob, Rachel, and Leah have taken the art of

conception to a whole new level. It has become a competitive sport, with the women in Jacob's life batting him like a helpless shuttlecock in a game of badminton.

In fact, it got so bad that Jacob functioned more like a prostitute than as the patriarch of his own family. When his wives ordered him to sleep with their maidservants, he seemed to passively comply. At one point, his wife Leah actually sold some mandrakes to Rachel and used sexual access to Jacob as her bartering chip. Having paid for his services, she simply informed Jacob of the arrangement.

*"You must come and sleep with me tonight!" she said. "I have paid for you with some mandrakes that my son found." So that night he slept with Leah. – Genesis 30:16 NLT*

It's difficult to keep up, but at this point in the story, Jacob has fathered 11 sons. Leah has given him Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun. Her handmaid Zilpah has added Gad and Asher. Rachel's handmaid provided Dan and Naphtali. And, after God opened her womb, Rachel delivered Joseph.

Due to her barrenness, Rachel had been unable to bear Jacob any children – until God had intervened. As her husband's favorite wife, she found herself shamed by her infertility and her frustrating inability to give Jacob the one thing he desired most: A son. So, in an effort to compete with her sister's prolific child-bearing capabilities, she had come up with the idea to have children through a surrogate.

*"Take my maid, Bilhah, and sleep with her. She will bear children for me, and through her I can have a family, too." – Genesis 30:3 NLT*

In a fit of jealousy and driven by purely selfish motives, Rachel ordered Jacob to father a son through her servant. And just as Abraham had followed the same advice from his wife, Sarah, Jacob complied. Not once, but twice. And this little act of competitive conception encouraged Leah to take up the sport. She too offered her servant to Jacob and, once again, he willingly took her up on the offer. The result? Two more sons.

It would be easy to read this story and be left with the impression that things have gotten completely out of control. There is no referee in this game of one-upmanship. Each of these women seems to make up the rules as the game unfolds. And Jacob comes across like a triple-A prospect who suddenly gets called up to the big leagues. This little country boy from Beersheba was going up against the pros.

But, Moses wants his readers to know that this is not some no-rules, make-it-up-as-you-go-along free-for-all. God is fully in control and operating behind the scenes to accomplish His divine will. Yes, it's messy and incorporates all the subterfuge and self-promotion that Rachel and Leah bring to the table, but it is far from out of control. As Moses lists the various names of the boys born to Jacob, his Jewish readers would have recognized the names of their individual tribes. These boys would grow to become men and father 11 of the 12 tribes of Israel. And on two separate occasions, Moses deliberately pauses the narrative at the mention of the names of Judah and Joseph. When Leah had given birth to her fourth son, she had named him Judah, then Moses wrote, "Then she ceased bearing" (Genesis 29:35 ESV). It seems that God had turned off the tap. He sovereignly sealed her womb, not permanently, but for a period of time.

As stated in yesterday's blog, Judah was to become the tribe through whom the Messiah of Israel would be born. Judah was going to play a major role in the national affairs of Israel and the future fate of the world. And the same thing is true of Joseph.

Rachel, the favored wife of Jacob, could not bear children. That is until God sovereignly ordained it. And when He miraculously opened her womb, Rachel gave birth to a boy named Joseph. Little did Rachel know that this long-awaited son would play a vital role in the future salvation and preservation of the people of Israel. Moses' readers would have been highly familiar with the story of Joseph. He would grow to become the favorite son of Jacob, a designation that would make him the envy of his 10 older brothers. Jacob would lavish the favored son of his favorite wife with affection and gifts, a move that would make Joseph the target of his brothers' ire.

*Jacob loved Joseph more than any of his other children because Joseph had been born to him in his old age. So one day Jacob had a special gift made for Joseph—a beautiful robe. But his brothers hated Joseph because their father loved him more than the rest of them. They couldn't say a kind word to him. — Genesis 37:3-4 NLT*

Yet, like Judah, Joseph was destined to play a special role in his family's future. While Rachel and Leah were busy conniving and competing, God had more serious and world-changing plans in mind. He was using the selfish and shortsighted machinations of these two women to fulfill the covenant promise He had made to Abraham, Isaac, and now, Jacob. As usual, the characters in the story remain oblivious to the unseen actions of God. They believed themselves to be in control and driving the narrative. Oh, they give God lip service.

*“God has vindicated me! He has heard my request and given me a son.”* – Genesis 30:6 NLT

*“God has rewarded me for giving my servant to my husband as a wife.”* – Genesis 30:18 NLT

*“God has given me a good reward.”* – Genesis 30:20 NLT

*“God has removed my disgrace...”* – Genesis 30:23 NLT

But they were operating according to their own agendas and in keeping with their own selfish desires. Yet, God was righteously redeeming their flawed actions to bring about the plan He had developed long before any of them ever existed.

With the birth of Joseph, a new chapter in the story will begin. For nearly two decades, Jacob had been living in Haran with his father-in-law Laban. He had been waiting on word from his mother, Rachel, informing him that Esau had forgiven him, and it was safe to return home. But that message had never come. Likely, Rachel had died while Jacob had been away. He now had two wives, two concubines, and 11 sons. God had blessed him, and he realized it was time to return to Canaan. According to God, it was there that his inheritance would be found. When Jacob had stopped in Bethel on his way to Haran, God had appeared to him in a dream and said:

*“I am the Lord, the God of your grandfather Abraham, and the God of your father, Isaac. The ground you are lying on belongs to you. I am giving it to you and your descendants. Your descendants will be as numerous as the dust of the earth! They will spread out in all directions—to the west and the east, to the north and the south. And all the families of the earth will be blessed through you and your descendants. What’s more, I am with you, and I will protect you wherever you go. One day I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have finished giving you everything I have promised you.”* – Genesis 28:13-15 NLT

Now, it was time to go back to the land because Jacob knew that Canaan was where the promises of God would be fully fulfilled.

## The God of the Speckled, Spotted, and Flawed

<sup>25</sup> As soon as Rachel had borne Joseph, Jacob said to Laban, "Send me away, that I may go to my own home and country. <sup>26</sup> Give me my wives and my children for whom I have served you, that I may go, for you know the service that I have given you." <sup>27</sup> But Laban said to him, "If I have found favor in your sight, I have learned by divination that the Lord has blessed me because of you. <sup>28</sup> Name your wages, and I will give it." <sup>29</sup> Jacob said to him, "You yourself know how I have served you, and how your livestock has fared with me. <sup>30</sup> For you had little before I came, and it has increased abundantly, and the Lord has blessed you wherever I turned. But now when shall I provide for my own household also?" <sup>31</sup> He said, "What shall I give you?" Jacob said, "You shall not give me anything. If you will do this for me, I will again pasture your flock and keep it: <sup>32</sup> let me pass through all your flock today, removing from it every speckled and spotted sheep and every black lamb, and the spotted and speckled among the goats, and they shall be my wages. <sup>33</sup> So my honesty will answer for me later, when you come to look into my wages with you. Every one that is not speckled and spotted among the goats and black among the lambs, if found with me, shall be counted stolen." <sup>34</sup> Laban said, "Good! Let it be as you have said." <sup>35</sup> But that day Laban removed the male goats that were striped and spotted, and all the female goats that were speckled and spotted, every one that had white on it, and every lamb that was black, and put them in the charge of his sons. <sup>36</sup> And he set a distance of three days' journey between himself and Jacob, and Jacob pastured the rest of Laban's flock.

<sup>37</sup> Then Jacob took fresh sticks of poplar and almond and plane trees, and peeled white streaks in them, exposing the white of the sticks. <sup>38</sup> He set the sticks that he had peeled in front of the flocks in the troughs, that is, the watering places, where the flocks came to drink. And since they bred when they came to drink, <sup>39</sup> the flocks bred in front of the sticks and so the flocks brought forth striped, speckled, and spotted. <sup>40</sup> And Jacob separated the lambs and set the faces of the flocks toward the striped and all the black in the flock of Laban. He put his own droves apart and did not put them with Laban's flock. <sup>41</sup> Whenever the stronger of the flock were breeding, Jacob would lay the sticks in the troughs before the eyes of the flock, that they might breed among the sticks, <sup>42</sup> but for the feebler of the flock he would not lay them there. So the feebler would be Laban's, and the stronger Jacob's. <sup>43</sup> Thus the man increased greatly and had large flocks, female servants and male servants, and camels and donkeys. — Genesis 30:25-43 ESV



Years earlier, when Jacob had left Beersheba in search of a wife, God had made promised to remain with him. In a vision, God had declared to him, “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.” And the story that Moses records clearly reveals how God had been keeping that promise. Jacob had left home as an unmarried man and now he had two wives, an equal number of concubines, and 11 sons. But even Jacob knew that it was time for him to come out from under his father-in-law’s control

and return home. He had spent the last 14 years earning the right to marry Rachel and now, after a long delay, she had delivered him a son.

But leaving his father-in-law’s employment would prove to be more difficult than he thought. Laban was resistant to letting go of his two daughters, 11 grandsons, and hard-working son-in-law. He even admitted to Jacob, “I have become wealthy, for the Lord has blessed me because of you” (Genesis 30:27 NLT). It’s difficult to decipher whether Laban was sincere or simply trying to persuade Jacob that his stay in Haran had been a “God thing.” There is no indication that Laban was a religious man or that he worshiped Yahweh. But he knew that Jacob, like his grandfather, Abraham, was committed to God. So, he tried to persuade Jacob that God had ordained his time in Haran. This was true, but it is not clear that Laban had received that message directly from God.

God’s involvement in the entire affair is without question. He had promised to remain with Jacob and bring him back safely to Canaan. In the meantime, God had been protecting Jacob, turning Laban’s deception into a blessing. While Laban had deceived Jacob into marrying Leah, it had resulted in eight of his 11 sons, including Joseph, who would later play an instrumental role in the preservation of Jacob’s family. God had been at work, providing for Jacob’s needs and protecting his life.

The day came when Jacob knew it was time to go. There is no indication that he received a message from God, but it seems that he had finally grown tired of living under another man’s roof and control. So, he approached Laban and said, “Please release me so I can go home to my own country. Let me take my wives and children, for I have earned them by serving you, and let me be on my way. You certainly know how hard I have worked for you” (Genesis 30:25-26 NLT).

It seems that Laban believed Jacob was upset about the way he had been treated and was looking for compensation for all his labor. For more than 14 years, he had been little more than a slave to Laban and helped make him a wealthy man. And Laban was not ready to give up this valuable resource, so he told Jacob to name his price. What would it take to get him to stay? And Jacob acknowledged that he felt slighted by Laban.

*“You know how hard I’ve worked for you, and how your flocks and herds have grown under my care. You had little indeed before I came, but your wealth has increased enormously. The Lord has blessed you through everything I’ve done. But now, what about me? When can I start providing for my own family?” – Genesis 30:29-30 NLT*

But Jacob wasn’t interested in staying. He was ready to leaven Haran and Laban behind. Yet, he decided to take Laban up on his offer and proposed a suitable form of compensation.

*“Don’t give me anything. Just do this one thing, and I’ll continue to tend and watch over your flocks. Let me inspect your flocks today and remove all the sheep and goats that are speckled or spotted, along with all the black sheep. Give these to me as my wages.” – Genesis 30:31-32 NLT*

Jacob asked to be paid in sheep. He proposed that he be allowed to take all the non-white sheep from among Laban’s flocks. The spotted and dark-colored sheep would have been in the minority, leaving Laban with a greater number of pure white sheep which were of greater value. In a sense, Jacob was asking to receive the dregs of Laban’s flocks.

The always wily Laban agreed to Jacob’s offer, but immediately took measures to protect his assets. Before Jacob could have a chance to make his selection, Laban ordered his sons to remove all the spotted and speckled sheep from among his flocks and take them 3-days journey away. He cheated Jacob again. And it seems obvious that Jacob would have seen through this charade. But rather than complain, he took decided to give Laban a taste of his own medicine. What happens next is difficult to explain. Jacob’s actions seem to be based more on superstition and folklore than anything else.

He came up with a rather strange plan that involved the use of “fresh sticks of poplar and almond and plane trees” (Genesis 30:37 ESV). He then peeled off strips of the bark, revealing the lighter-colored interior. “Then he placed these peeled branches in the watering troughs where the flocks came to drink, for that was where they mated” (Genesis 30:38 NLT). What happens next is inexplicable. It seems that when the sheep mated “in front of the white-streaked branches, they gave birth to young that were streaked, speckled, and spotted” (Genesis 30:39 NLT).

There is no scientific explanation for what occurred. It’s likely that Jacob was utilizing what was nothing more than an old wives’ tale. But for some unknown reason, it worked. As the sheep mated, they produced spotted and speckled lambs. When mating season came around again, Jacob reintroduced these spotted sheep into the flock and the result was more of the same. Over time, he used Laban’s non-spotted sheep to produce a flock that was predominantly spotted, speckled and black. And, as if to add insult to injury, Jacob removed all the weak and feeble sheep when it came time to mate, ensuring that all the lambs that were born were healthy and disease-free. And Moses states that Jacob’s rather strange process produced outstanding results.

*As a result, Jacob became very wealthy, with large flocks of sheep and goats, female and male servants, and many camels and donkeys. – Genesis 30:43 NLT*

This entire process and the results it produced would have required multiple seasons. So, it extended Jacob's stay but helped transform him into a wealthy and influential man. He was able to parley his sheep-mating venture into a lucrative business that allowed him to buy servants, camels, and donkeys. He would be returning to Canaan as a very rich man.

But, as always, this story is meant to highlight the sovereign power of God. The only explanation for Jacob's success is Yahweh. Throwing black and white tree branches into the watering troughs at mating time had nothing to do with anything. Jacob may have been convinced that his efforts had produced the outcome he enjoyed, but it was all the handiwork of God. Jacob could attempt to take credit for his own success, but Moses would have his readers understand that God was the actual hero of the story. What had taken place was a miracle. It was no different than when Moses used a staff to part the water of the Red Sea. God used something common and ordinary to do the uncommon and extraordinary. And in a way, the imagery of the speckled and spotted sheep is a fitting metaphor for the people of Israel. God was going to set apart the small, insignificant, and flawed family of Jacob in order to produce a mighty nation. He would take what others considered to be the rejects and transform them into "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6 ESV). But that is a story for another day.