

A LONG WAY TO GO

SERIES: WRESTLING WITH GOD: THE JACOB NARRATIVE

By Scott Grant

The story of Jacob is a bewildering tale. It will infuriate that part within us that desperately wants good things to happen only to good people. We want it to be this way in the hope that we can guarantee certain results in our lives by doing the right things. The way Jacob goes about securing God's blessings repulses us. Yet God blesses him, and gives him the name that will forever be associated with the people of God: Israel.

On the other, hand, the story will delight that part within us that hungers for God's grace and knows we have a long way to go. Jacob, at least to some degree, comes to value the right things: God and his blessings. God does something in this man and with this man.

In Genesis 25-35, God is looking for a covenant partner. He picks Jacob, meets with him and forms him through family conflicts with his brother and uncle. Near the end of the narrative, his conflict with God himself surfaces. God overcomes the many obstacles that appear in this narrative, not the least of which being his shaky partner, to perpetuate the blessings he promised to Abraham.

The story of Jacob, like so many in the scriptures, is one of exile and return. The story of the nation of Israel would also be one of exile and return. Jacob, though valuing the land of promise, is forced to leave it for fear of his brother. He lives in exile as a slave of his uncle. He returns 20 years later as a different man. At two crucial junctures in his journey God meets him in powerful ways, first as he leaves the land and then as he returns to the land. The literary structure supports the journey depicted in the narrative. It also highlights the creation of the tribes of Israel by placing the birth of Jacob's sons at the center point:

- A Births / Jacob and nation chosen (25:19-24)
 - B Digression: Isaac (and Rebekah) vs. the Philistines (26:1-33)
 - C Jacob steals Esau's blessing (26:34-28:9)
 - D Encounter with angels at Bethel (28:10-22)
 - E Arrival at Haran / Conflict with Laban (29:1-30)
 - X Rachel vs. Leah: Birth of sons (29:31-30:24)
 - E' Defeat of Laban / Departure from Haran (30:25-31:55)
 - D' Encounter with angels at Mahanaim and Peniel (32:1-32)
 - C' Jacob reconciles with Esau (33:1-17)
 - B' Digression: Dinah (and Jacob) vs. Hivites (33:18-34:31)
 - A' Births and deaths / Establishment of chosen nation (35:1-29)

Our purpose in studying the Jacob narrative will be to identify with Jacob and meet with God in his story. We may find that we are conflicted just like Jacob, desiring God at some level but resistant to his ways. We may also find, even in our conflicted state, that God wants to bless us, meet with us and form us through the conflicts that surface in our lives.

Setting the stage

As the riots raged around him, spurred by the verdict that acquitted Los Angeles police officers of crimes against him, Rodney King cried out, "Can't we all just get along?" Many of us want to say yes--that is, until we perceive that someone has mistreated us. Then, suddenly, we may find ourselves wanting to fight back. In such cases, we think that conflict is quite appropriate.

Even if we manage to keep our emotions in check, there's no guarantee that our mistreatment of another won't lead him or her into conflict with us. Sometimes, believing and speaking the truth leads to conflict. Paul says, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men" (Romans 12:18). In many cases, it isn't possible. Conflict, it seems, is inevitable.

Although we may bemoan this until Jesus returns, we should also recognize that conflict serves a purpose. It tests us.

The way we think about God, others and ourselves emerges from the hidden corners of our psyches. The pain of conflict challenges us to renew our minds according to the truth.

The two opening stories in the Jacob narrative set the stage for conflict in his life. Perhaps the stage of our lives is set for conflict as well. How will we deal with it? Conflict will show Jacob, as it probably shows us, that God has a lot of work to do in us, and that we have a long way to go.

Destined for conflict

Now these are the records of the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham became the father of Isaac; and Isaac was 40 years old when he took Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, the sister of Laban the Aramean, to be his wife. Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD answered him and Rebekah his wife conceived. But the children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is so, why then am I this way?" So she went to inquire of the LORD. The LORD said to her,

**"Two nations are in your womb;
And two peoples will be separated from your body;
And one people shall be stronger than the other;
And the older shall serve the younger."**

When her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb. Now the first came forth red, all over like a hairy garment; and they named him Esau. Afterward his brother came forth with his hand holding on to Esau's heel, so his name was called Jacob; and Isaac was sixty years old when she gave birth to them. (Genesis 25:19-26)

The word translated "generations" (*toledot*) marks the beginning of a major section in the book of Genesis. Altogether, there are 10 of these major sections, each beginning with this word. The three largest sections--the generations of Terah (11:27-25:11), the generations of Isaac (25:19-35:29) and the generations of Jacob (Genesis 37:2-50:26)--focus on the family of Abraham and its relation to the promises of God. The name at the head of each section is the father of the man who will be featured in that section. Thus, the generations of Isaac feature the story of his son, Jacob.

It's interesting to note that the story of Isaac is basically skipped. The narrative focuses on Terah's son, Abraham; Isaac's son, Jacob; and Jacob's son, Joseph. There is no section headed by "the generations of Abraham," which would feature Isaac. Isaac appears in the Jacob narrative in a less than favorable light (25:28, 26:34-27:46). Isaac was reared in an environment of faith and started well. But he finished poorly.

The otherwise unnecessary references to Paddan-aram and Laban foreshadow their appearance in Genesis 29-31 as the place and person, respectively, of Jacob's testing.

Rebekah's barrenness poses an obstacle to God's promise of descendants to Abraham and the extension of God's blessing to the world through those descendants (Genesis 12:1-3, 17:4, 22:17). Isaac, who was born to parents beyond the age of childbearing, believes two things: God has promised descendants to him, the child of promise, and God can provide. Isaac, at 40 years of age, does well: He prays. In fact, he does even better than his father Abraham, who in a similar predicament went into his wife's maid (Genesis 16:1-4) and later laughed when God promised a son to him through Sarah (Genesis 18:17). As with Sarah and with future generations of women who carried the promise of blessing, God overcomes barrenness to ensure continuity. In this manner, he makes it known that the fulfillment of his promises is dependent on him, not men and women. The human part is faith.

All seems exceedingly well when the Lord answers Isaac's prayer, and Rebekah conceives. Isaac gets what he prays for. But the next sentence begins with "but." On the one hand, he gets more than what he prays for: He gets not a child but "children." On the other hand, these children struggle with each other inside Rebekah's womb. The addition of these children will challenge Isaac to respond with new faith, but he will fail to do so. The prenatal wrestling match sets the stage for a series of conflicts in the Jacob narrative, culminating in Jacob's wrestling match with a mysterious stranger (Genesis 32:24-30).

As for Rebekah, the struggle within her is so great that it causes her to ask, literally, “If it is so, why this, I?” The question has within it not only the meaning, “Why is this happening to me?” but also, “Why am I?” She doesn’t understand why this pregnancy is so painful, and she even questions whether there’s any reason to continue living. The answer to Isaac’s prayer, which no doubt Rebekah would have rejoiced in as well, now causes her immense anguish. It could be said to Rebekah, as it was said to another woman who was blessed with a miraculous pregnancy, that “a sword will pierce even your own soul” (Luke 2:35).

Her pain causes her to seek an answer from the Lord, who gives her an explanation in the form of a four-line poem of two couplets. The second line in each couplet amplifies the first line. Her pregnancy is so problematic because her womb has become the battlefield in a cataclysmic conflict. Two nations are in her womb. They literally “crush” each other in their struggle for supremacy. The struggle goes back to Genesis 3:15, where two lines destined for conflict would proceed from Eve: the children of Eve and the children of the serpent. The conflict is seen in Genesis 4:8, where Cain kills his brother Abel. Now these two children are facing off inside their mother’s womb, and two nations would proceed from them, those who worship God and those who oppose him.

These two peoples, together in their mother’s womb, would be separated from her body, which indicates that their conflict would separate them from each other. First, Jacob will flee from Esau; then the peoples that would proceed from them, the nations of Israel and Edom, would live apart from each other and in tension. This is not what a woman would want for her children--or her descendants. The last two lines in the poem predict that the younger son, Jacob, and the nation proceeding from him, would occupy a place of superiority over the older son, Esau, and the nation proceeding from him. Israel would rule over Edom (Genesis 27:29). Tradition granted supremacy to the firstborn. God, for neither the first or last time, overturns the conventions of the day. He blesses the one without the privileges. Jacob, though, would take his turn “serving” Laban (Genesis 29:20, 30), and God sent the nation of Israel into captivity in Babylon because of its idolatry. Much of this poem must have been lost on Rebekah, for the narrator indicates that Rebekah was surprised at the birth of twins.

The first child is born red and hairy. The color, true to the history of Esau and the nation of Edom, indicates a bloody passion (Genesis 27:41). Herod, who ordered the slaughter of the children of Bethlehem, was a descendant of Esau (Matthew 2:16-18). The hair indicates an animal nature. The name Edom, is a play on the word “red” (*’adom*). Edom’s territory, Seir, is a play on the word “hairy” (*se’ir*). The narrator will use his description of Esau as being like a “hairy garment” in a later episode (Genesis 27:11, 15). The second child is born grasping onto the heel of his brother, and the name given to him indicates his posture. The name Jacob is a play on the word “heel” (*’aqeb*). Esau breaks from the gate first, but Jacob isn’t far behind, and in the years to come he will catapult himself to the lead position. The poetic oracle from God indicated that Jacob would occupy the lead position, but Jacob’s position at birth is a sign that he will not be trusting God to fulfill his promises. Even at birth, Jacob doesn’t appear to be prepared to be the man who will carry the blessings of God to the next generation. From here on, the Jacob narrative is largely about the work God does in the heart of his chosen one.

Isaac’s age at the time of the birth of the twins seems like an unnecessary detail until it’s matched up with verses 20 and 21. Isaac was 40 years old when he married Rebekah, and it was discovered shortly thereafter that she was barren. So Isaac prayed. The Hebrew tense used for the word “prayed” in verse 21 conveys incompleteness, which probably indicates that Isaac continued to pray. We find out that when the twins were born, he was 60 years old. Here’s the math: Isaac prayed for 20 years before God answered his prayer. At this point in his life, Isaac is a man of faith.

From Isaac we learn this: Don’t stop praying. The spiritual landscape of our world may at times seem as barren as Rebekah’s womb. Such barrenness may seem like a reason to pull back from prayer. In actuality, it’s a reason to go deeper in prayer and find a more profound faith. Like Isaac, we may be surprised at the way God answers our prayer. Sometimes, we may even be doubly blessed, as Isaac was. Often, God’s answers to our prayers will challenge us to respond with new faith. You desperately want something; you get it; and you get more than you bargained for. The relative absence of Isaac in the rest of Genesis serves as warning to those of us who have been exposed to faith in Christ that we must embrace him and continue trusting him into our latter years.

The conflict within Rebekah’s womb is representative of the struggle in the inner life of every woman and man. Our minds are the battlefield of a cataclysmic conflict between good and evil. “The flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you

please” (Galatians 5:17). The sting of battle becomes so acute at times that we ask, “Why is this happening to me?” and even, “Why am I?” We become weary of the fight. We want to give up and let evil have its way. Yet if we do so, the evil one will lay waste to our inner life. So we must “put on the full armor of God” and “stand firm against the schemes of the devil” (Ephesians 6:11). We are warriors, and we must fight the good fight and never give up.

From Jacob we learn that God’s blessings flow to us from his grace and are not tied to human privilege. If God has chosen to bless you with his presence, he probably did so by overturning some human convention, if not in your lifetime than in the life of a parent, grandparent or other ancestor who began passing on the blessing in your family.

We also learn from Jacob that to be chosen by God does not mean that we are born without sinful tendencies. When David committed adultery, he recognized that this propensity was with him from the beginning: “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me” (Psalm 51:5). Before Jacob is out of the womb, he is already demonstrating a particular sinful predilection that will manifest itself well into his adult years. So we are all born with the propensity to sin and quite possibly with the propensity to sin in particular ways. For example, from a biblical perspective, it is quite possible that people with homosexual tendencies were born with them. It is also quite possible that those born with sinful heterosexual tendencies were born with them. We are all descendants of Adam. We are all born needing redemption. There is no promise in the scriptures that we will ever be rid of these tendencies until the day for which we “groan” arrives, when the Lord redeems our bodies (Romans 8:23).

Allan E. Mallinger, M.D., who writes from neither a biblical nor a spiritual perspective in his book *Too Perfect*, nonetheless offers that scores of parents have told him about children who seemed picky and perfectionistic almost from birth. One woman told him: “I remember making Christmas cookies with Max when he was barely two years old. When a little piece of dough remained wedged in a corner of the cookie cutter, he insisted I throw the offending cookie away. I told him that the cookie was just fine, but he burst into tears and wailed that it wasn’t perfect, so he wouldn’t eat. It was crazy! Later, in nursery school, he refused to fingerprint with the other children; he thought it was too messy.” (1)

Sinful tendencies, like the enemies of Israel that the Lord left in the Promised Land, teach us war (Judges 3:1-2). So, for those of us burdened with them, the message is this: Fight well. And groan for the day of the Lord.

A greater love

When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the field, but Jacob was a peaceful man, living in tents. Now Isaac loved Esau, because he had a taste for game, but Rebekah loved Jacob. When Jacob had cooked stew, Esau came in from the field and he was famished; and Esau said to Jacob, “Please let me have a swallow of that red stuff there, for I am famished.” Therefore his name was called Edom. But Jacob said, “First sell me your birthright.” Esau said, “Behold, I am about to die; so of what use then is the birthright to me?” And Jacob said, “First swear to me”; so he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew; and he ate and drank, and rose and went on his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright. (Genesis 25:27-34)

Esau may have been a skillful hunter and a man of the field, but in this story, Esau is the prey, and he is “outskilled” by his brother, who goes hunting for the birthright. Jacob is described with the word translated “quiet” (*tam*). It appears in opposition to the description of Esau as a “skillful hunter” and may mean something along the lines of “complete.” It may indicate that Jacob was skilled in his own right, but in a different sort of way. The story, of course, bears out the skills of Jacob. Jacob, unlike his brother, was a homebody, literally “dwelling” in tents like his grandfather Abraham (Genesis 12:8). It appears that Jacob values the blessing of God: the land promised to Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 12:7). It also appears that he was a herdsman (Genesis 4:20) and that he was in keeping with God’s model for his people and his leaders (Genesis 4:2, Exodus 3:1, 1 Samuel 16:11, Psalm 23, Ezekiel 34, John 10:1-18, 1 Peter 5:3-4). In learning to care for animals, one learns to care for people.

Isaac favored Esau based on his son’s taste for game. His preference has nothing to do with spiritual reasons and bumps up against the oracle of God, which granted supremacy to Jacob. The basis of Isaac’s preference will prove to be his downfall and the means by which he is deceived into giving his blessing to Jacob (Genesis 27). Rebekah, perhaps in deference to the divine oracle, favored Jacob. The war between the twins in Rebekah’s womb spills over into the favoritism of their mother and father, who have each taken sides and now find themselves in opposition to

each other. This is--and will be--a family in crisis, fractured by competition and favoritism.

What must this have been like for Jacob, who grew up without his father's love? For Esau, who grew up without his mother's love?

Jacob and Esau are alike in this way: They both cooked stew. From Genesis 27:1-4, we learn that Esau's culinary expertise kindled the affections of his father. No such affections are reported in connection with Jacob's efforts. Apparently, Jacob lacked the necessary expertise, because Rebekah, not Jacob, cooked the meal that deceived Isaac (Genesis 27:9). Jacob, even in being like his brother Esau, could not win his father's love. But perhaps he could win his brother's birthright. If he can't win his father's love, he'll take it out on the one his father favors.

Jacob was cooking up more than stew when his brother returned from the field. Esau was a skillful hunter and a man of the field, but game must have eluded him this time, for when he returned from the field, he was famished.

Esau, in keeping with his brutish nature, literally grunts, "Please, let me gulp down some of the red stuff, the red stuff." His second name, Edom, is a play on the word "red" (*'edom*), and relates to his appearance at birth. Jacob defeats his "red" brother with "red" stew--beating him at his own game, so to speak. According to the customs of hospitality, Jacob should have offered the stew to Esau in the way that Abraham and Lot offered meals to strangers (Genesis 18:1-18, 19:1-18). Jacob's actions are all the more reprehensible in that Esau is his brother. Instead of granting hospitality, Jacob grants us our first look into his conniving nature. He may have grown up, but he is still nipping at the heels of his brother.

Unlike his brother, Jacob carefully measures his words and offers Esau the stew in exchange for his birthright, the rights of the firstborn. In this family, the birthright is linked with the Abrahamic covenant and the promise of the land, which constitutes a spiritual inheritance (Hebrews 11:8-10, 12:16-17). Jacob values what is good, but he employs underhanded tactics. To complicate his folly, he negotiates for what God plans to give him. Later, Jacob the negotiator will be outwitted at the bargaining table by Laban (Genesis 29:15-30). Jacob will need to learn to trust in God, not his bargaining ability.

The question before Esau is whether he will forfeit a spiritual future by responding to the need of the moment. He opens himself up to the need of the moment by concluding that the future would be closed off to him anyway. He reasons that without food, he will die. Of course, he's not so on the verge of death that he can't negotiate with Jacob. He overstates his plight in order to justify getting what he wants.

A phrase in Esau's description of his plight is almost identical to the words Rebekah used to describe her predicament in verse 22. Rebekah asked, "If it is so, why this, I?" Esau also seems to be asking, "Why is this happening to me?" and, "Why am I?" He also seems to be concluding, "If this is happening to me, if life is this hard, I may as well live for the moment." Esau's plight, however, pales in comparison to that of Rebekah.

Jacob coaxes an oath out of Esau, which makes the transaction irrevocable. For such a high price, we'd at least expect Esau to get the meal of a lifetime. Esau's description of the stew as "red" leaves us to believe that meat was in the offing. Instead, he gets bread and meatless stew. Esau has a taste for game, but he's left to suck on lentils. The narrator depicts Esau in much the same way as an animal. Without reflecting, he eats, drinks, rises and goes on his way. Similar wording is used to describe the Israelites in the wilderness when they worshiped the golden calf (Exodus 32:6). Esau gets his meal, but it will leave a bitter taste in his mouth.

Such behavior depicted in verses 29 through 34 demonstrates that Esau "despised" his birthright. To him, it was worth only one meatless meal to be wolfed down without so much as a thought concerning what he's forfeited. When his birthright passes from him, no injustice is done, for he loses that which he doesn't want. The story demonstrates that he places little value on the blessings of God and that he is unfit to carry those blessings to the next generation. The writer of Hebrews calls Esau an "immoral" and "godless" man who "sold his own birthright for a single meal" (Hebrews 12:16).

Jacob now has the birthright he wanted, but the means he employs to get it demonstrate that he's not ready for it. Isaac prayed and waited for the fulfillment of God's promise, but not Jacob. He has a long way to go. And, perhaps, we have a long way to go as well.

From Isaac and Rebekah, we learn that parental favoritism can tear families apart. It teaches children to compete for their parents' affections and sends them out into the world as confused young men and women. When we salivate when we see our children enjoying our particular tastes but hardly react at all to their relationship with the Lord, we should be concerned, not only for our children but for ourselves. Our tastes may be our downfall--and theirs.

To grow up with a father or mother who doesn't love you leaves wounds that will continue hemorrhaging well into adulthood. Jacob's and Esau's wounds will bleed all over the pages of Genesis 27. I've spoken with many people who have told me something like this: "My father didn't tell me that he loved me, but he showed me his love through his actions." These words reflect not only an attempt to understand their fathers but also an attempt to cover up the pain. But it still hurts. Showing your children that you love them but not telling them simply won't do. Neither will telling them you love them without showing them. Either way, your children will still be confused. You must tell them that you love them, and you must show them that you love them. And if you have never told a child that you love him in his adolescent or adult years, you need to do it today. You don't know what your life will be like tomorrow--or if there will be a tomorrow.

From Esau, we learn that no matter how skilled we may be, our skills will fail us sooner or later. Finally and most certainly, they will fail to keep us from facing death. Therefore, we should not trust in what our skills can get us; we should trust in the Lord to give us himself.

How many futures have been forfeited for the sake of something like a single meal--the perceived need of the moment? How many men and women have falsely concluded that they were going to die--either literally or figuratively--unless their cravings were satisfied on the spot? How many men and women have found themselves saying what the scriptures say for those who either perceive or value no future with God: "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (Isaiah 22:13, 1 Corinthians 15:32)? If we follow in the ways of Esau, we overstate our plight, we live for the moment, and all we get in the end is a few lentils to suck on.

From Jacob, we begin to learn what it's like to grow up without the love of a parent. Many of us know what this is like. All of us know what it's like to be reared by parents whose love for us is imperfect. Therefore, some of us try to prepare the "stew" that we think our parents or our world will accept, but it never seems to satisfy them. And if we perceive that someone else satisfies them, then that person often becomes the object of our wrath. We become resentful of those who have the skills that win the approval that we crave. What people can do for us becomes vital. What we can do for them fades into the background. Then, perhaps, like Jacob we become a bargainer and a manipulator. We begin negotiating for what God plans to give us. If this is our approach, then we set ourselves up to be outnegotiated. He who lives by the bargain dies by the bargain. He who lives by deception dies by deception. He who maneuvers himself into position will be maneuvered out of position.

The success of our parents' love should show us an even greater love: the love of our heavenly Father. The failure of our parents' love should drive us to the love of our heavenly Father, whose love cannot be earned and whose love never fails. In the home of our heavenly Father, we understand that all his children are chosen (Ephesians 1:4). No matter how much you try, you cannot be more chosen than you already are. When you understand this, you begin to think about and treat the "Esau" of your world differently.

Brennan Manning writes: "Behind men's grumpiest poses and most puzzling defense mechanisms, behind their arrogance and airs, behind their silence, sneers and curses, Jesus saw little children who hadn't been loved enough and who ceased growing because someone had ceased believing in them."² Jesus saw little Jacobs. When earthly love fails us, Jesus embraces us with the arms of heaven.

A promise before the beginning

Jacob seems destined for conflict even before birth. His father doesn't love him. As a young man, he schemes against his brother. It doesn't appear to be a promising beginning, but God promised something before the beginning. The apostle Paul says that God gave the oracle to Rebekah before the twins were born and before they had "done anything good or bad" so that "God's purpose according to his choice would stand, not because of works but because of him who calls" (Romans 9:11). "So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs but on God who has mercy" (Romans 9:16). God's choice of this deeply flawed man will shape him in the

scenes to come. This offers hope to those of us who have been chosen by God to know him but are well acquainted with our own flaws.

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NOTES:

- (1) Mallinger, M.D., Allan E, and DeWyze, Jeannette, *Too Perfect*, © 1992 Ballantine Books, New York, NY, P. 8.
- (2) Manning, Brennan, *The Signature of Jesus*, © 1992 Multnomah Press, Portland, OR, P. 74.

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