

# The Pentateuch

LESSON  
NINE

## THE PATRIARCH JACOB



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# The Pentateuch

## Lesson Nine

### The Patriarch Jacob

#### INTRODUCTION

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Have you ever known people who are so deceitful they seem to be beyond hope? Their deception and dishonesty might benefit them — at least in the short run — often making them even worse. But happily, when God wants to use such people in special ways, they aren't beyond his reach. God will bring hardships into their lives to humble them and to shape them into the kinds of people who are ready to serve him. And more often than not, those that God reaches in these ways end up becoming models of humility and faith for others.

This lesson is devoted to a portion of *the Pentateuch* that focuses on one of the most deceitful men in the Bible, “The Patriarch Jacob.” But, as we'll see, this portion of Genesis from 25:19–37:1, not only reveals how Jacob was deceitful, but also how God humbled and shaped him into one of the most admired patriarchs of Israel.

In other lessons, we've seen that the book of Genesis can be divided into three major sections. The first section is the primeval history in 1:1–11:9. Here Moses explained how Israel's call to the Promised Land was rooted in what happened in the earliest stages of world history. The second section covers the earlier patriarchal history in 11:10–37:1. In this section, Moses clarified how the journey to the Promised Land was to be viewed against the backdrop of the lives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The third section is the later patriarchal history in 37:2–50:26. In these verses, Moses told the story of Joseph and his brothers to address issues that had emerged among the tribes of Israel as they moved toward the Promised Land.

The record of the patriarch Jacob is a part of the second division; the earlier patriarchal history that deals with Israel's three well-known patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The events of Isaac's life are woven into both the record of Abraham in 11:10–25:18, and also into the record of Jacob in 25:19–37:1. So, in this lesson, we'll focus on the second half of this division: the life of Jacob.

Our lesson on the patriarch Jacob will divide into two main parts. First, we'll examine the structure and content of this portion of Genesis. Then we'll look at the major themes Moses emphasized for his original audience, and how these themes apply to modern Christians. Let's begin by looking at the structure and content of Jacob's story.

#### STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

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Most students of the Bible are familiar with the events of Jacob's life. But at this point in our lesson, we want to see how Moses organized the record of these events in the book of Genesis. Keep in mind that, when we read the Scriptures, we must ask both what they say and *how* they say it. In other words, how do the content and structure of every

passage work together? Understanding this relationship helps us discern biblical authors' purposes for their original audiences. And it helps us know how we should apply their texts in our modern world.

There are many ways to outline a portion of Scripture as long and complex as Genesis 25:19–37:1. But, for our purposes, we'll identify seven major divisions of the account of Jacob's life.

- The first division is what we may call the beginning of struggle in Genesis 25:19-34. It raises the dramatic problem of the struggle between Jacob and Esau, and subsequently the nations that descended from them. This struggle rises and falls in intensity throughout the account of Jacob's life. The end of this first division is marked by a shift away from Jacob and Esau to their father, Isaac, as the protagonist.
- The second division turns to peaceful encounters between Isaac and Philistines in 26:1-33. This division ends with a shift back to Esau and Jacob as the main characters.
- The third division deals with Jacob and Esau's hostile separation in 26:34–28:22. This division ends with Jacob's move toward Laban and his relatives outside the Promised Land.
- The fourth division describes Jacob's time with Laban in 29:1–31:55. This division ends as Jacob returns to the Promised Land.
- The fifth division reports Jacob and Esau's peaceful separation after Jacob had returned to the Promised Land in 32:1–33:17. This division then shifts away from Esau to Jacob's dealings with Canaanite opponents.
- The sixth division focuses on encounters between Jacob and Canaanites in 33:18–35:15. At the end of this division, attention moves to Jacob's lineage.
- Finally, the seventh division of Jacob's life tells about the end of struggle for the brothers in 35:16–37:1.

A number of commentators have noted that this basic outline of the life of Jacob forms a large-scale chiasm:

**A literary structure in which sections before and after a centerpiece parallel or balance each other.**

**Any time you talk about the outline of a section or a part of the Old Testament you have to keep in mind, that with rare exception, biblical writers did not write their stories, or their poems and the like, with an outline in mind. As if, "Now I'm on part one. Now I'm on part two. Now I'm on part three." Instead, what we're talking about is interpreters looking at texts that were written and finding patterns that are identifiable, which means then that every outline is using certain criteria to analyze the structure and the logical connections. And depending on what criteria you use, you're going to come up with different outlines. Well, one of the criteria that you can use is that of**

**balance, or echo, or reflection, or parallels between earlier sections and later sections ... but when you find even more detailed parallels — say, between the first section and the last section as in the case of Jacob — then you come to the point where, if you have enough of these parallels, you could actually call it an "intentional chiasm," where the writer is thinking in terms of, "I've done this. I've done this. I've done this in the first part; now I'm going to do these things that have rough correlations back to the earlier part" ... and because of those correlations that come out in that kind of a structure, you have the opportunity then to compare and contrast the correlating sections. And that's what's valuable when it comes to the story of Jacob. The early parts of Jacob's life correlate to later parts of Jacob's life. And when you see those correlations — which involve both contrasts and comparisons — when you see both of those together and they pop up between these various sections, then you have the opportunity to see what Moses as the author is emphasizing in both of those sections. Comparisons and contrasts, that's the key for understanding the significance of a chiasm.**

**— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.**

As we've just noted, the first division in the story of Jacob recounts the beginning of struggle for brothers Jacob and Esau. This section is balanced by the seventh and final division where we read about the end of their struggle. Both divisions deal with the struggle between not only the brothers, but also the nations that descended from them.

The second division focuses on Isaac and his interactions with Philistines. It corresponds to the sixth division where we see Jacob and his interactions with Canaanites. These divisions balance each other because they both describe encounters that took place between the patriarchs and other groups in the Promised Land. The third division records Jacob and Esau's hostile separation. It balances with the fifth division regarding Jacob and Esau's peaceful separation. Clearly, both divisions focus on the dynamics surrounding the times when the brothers parted ways. And finally, the fourth division looks at Jacob's time with Laban. This division stands alone as the center, or hinge, of the chiastic structure. As such, it forms a turning point in the drama of Jacob's story.

Keeping this overarching symmetrical design in mind, we'll examine the content of Moses' account by comparing and contrasting each paired division. For the sake of convenience, we'll start with the two outermost divisions and work our way toward the central division. Let's look first at the beginning of the brothers' struggle in Genesis 25:19-34.

### **BEGINNING OF STRUGGLE (GENESIS 25:19-34)**

This section consists of three simple episodes that show how the struggle between the brothers began. The first episode takes place before the twins' birth, in 25:19-23. It reports that the twins fought in their mother's womb. Listen to Genesis 25:23, where God explained this prenatal struggle to Rebekah:

**Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger (Genesis 25:23).**

As we see, God said that the struggle between Jacob and Esau was much more than a personal struggle between two brothers. It anticipated a struggle between "two nations" or "two peoples." So, what two nations did God have in mind? We find the answer in the second and third episodes of this section.

The second episode tells us about the brothers' struggle at birth in 25:24-26. This short passage gives us the first identification of the two nations referred to earlier. Genesis 25:25 describes the firstborn child, Esau, as "red" at birth. The Hebrew term translated "red" is אָדָם (*admoni*). This terminology represents a subtle play on words because it derives from the same family of Hebrew terms as the word אֶדוֹם or *Edom*. This indicated that Esau was the ancestor of the nation of Edom. We learn of the second nation in Genesis 25:26, where the second son is called Jacob. Jacob, of course, was the well-known father of the nation of Israel.

The third episode reports on the rivalry between Jacob and Esau as young adults in 25:27-34. In these verses, Jacob enticed Esau to exchange his birthright for "red stew," or אֶדָם (*adōm*) in Hebrew. This Hebrew word echoes the earlier "red" color of Esau himself at his birth. And Genesis 25:30 explicitly notes that this is why Esau was also called "Edom."

As we've just seen, from the outset Moses provided his audience with a crucial orientation toward his account. His audience was about to learn of what happened between Jacob and his brother Esau. But this struggle was much more than a struggle merely between two brothers. These two brothers were the heads of two nations, Israel and Edom, and as such, their personal struggle foreshadowed the struggle between their descendants in these two nations.

**When we think about the diplomatic relations, the political intersection, interface between Israel and Edom ... it's a relationship that is not a happy one... Even when they're in the womb of Rebekah, right? They're fighting and then one is trying to supplant the other. Of course, Esau comes out first; so he is the firstborn. But Jacob is right behind him and he wants to supplant him, which is his name. Jacob is "the supplanter," right? "The one who supplants." And so, that's the backdrop. And then, very young — two very different temperaments — Jacob likes to hang out in the tent and eat and stay at home and Esau is the hunter, right? But Jacob wants what Esau**

has, which is the inheritance of the firstborn. So he cooks him a meal. He comes home from the field very hungry and he makes this stupid deal with his brother. And Jacob says to Esau, “You know what? I’m just gonna make you a nice meal and you can give me your inheritance.” The guy is so hungry, he says, “Sure, I’ll do it.” And then he realizes what’s happened and then he wants the blessing from his father. And now, in cahoot with his own mom, Jacob pretends to be Esau. And Esau is the, you know, the “He-Man” — hairy, everything, right? And so, he puts some skins on his arms and goes in and pretends to be Esau and asks for the blessing from the patriarch of the family. And Isaac says, “Okay, you can have the blessing.” And so, all the way, Esau is being stolen out of his inheritance. And so, of course it creates bad blood. And then Jacob has to leave because he’s going to get murdered by his brother. So, that is not a good relationship between the two brothers... And then this gets amplified when they become nation-states; they hate each other. And they have the history to prove it.

— Dr. Tom Petter

This focus on Jacob, Esau and their descendants in the first division helps us understand the seventh or last division, the end of struggle for the brothers in 35:16–37:1.

### **END OF STRUGGLE (GENESIS 35:16–37:1)**

In this division, Moses focused once again on Jacob and Esau and the two nations they represented. He did this in three parts. First, he recorded Jacob’s lineage in Genesis 35:16-26. This section elaborates on how Jacob’s descendants formed the nation of Israel. It includes short notes about Benjamin and Reuben and ends with a list of the patriarchs of Israel’s twelve tribes.

Second, Moses described the behavior of Jacob and Esau at Isaac’s death in Genesis 35:27-29. This short passage reports that both Esau and Jacob buried Isaac. The poignancy of this report becomes clear when we recall that in Genesis 27:41 Esau threatened to kill Jacob as soon as their father died. In this light, the description of Isaac’s death points out that the struggle between the brothers was over.

Third, Moses gave a detailed account of Esau’s lineage in Genesis 36:1-43. This account combines two genealogies that report various segments of Esau’s line. The section ends with the kings who ruled in the region of Seir. Then Moses added an afterword in 37:1 explaining that Jacob continued to live in the land of Canaan. By ending Esau’s lineage in this way, Moses made it clear that, although the struggle between Jacob and Esau had ended, the brothers had separated. The descendants of Jacob lived in Canaan and the descendants of Esau lived in Edom.



With the content of the first and last divisions of Jacob's life in mind, let's move one step closer to the center of Moses' account, to the second and sixth divisions that deal with the patriarchs' encounters in the Promised Land.

### **ISAAC AND PHILISTINES (GENESIS 26:1-33)**

These divisions contrast peaceful encounters between Isaac and Philistines, in Genesis 26:1-33, with hostile encounters between Jacob and Canaanites in Genesis 33:18–35:15. We'll start with the second division that describes Isaac and his encounters with Philistines.

Now, many critical interpreters have argued that this chapter of Genesis is out of place. We can all see that it focuses on Isaac instead of Jacob. And it may very well be true that these events took place before the births of Jacob and Esau. But as we'll see, this division is vital to Moses' focus on Jacob's life.

This material divides into two closely related episodes. The first episode describes Isaac's initial peace with the Philistines in 26:1-11. In these verses, Isaac deceived the Philistine king, Abimelech, into thinking that Rebekah was his sister. Upon discovering Isaac's deceit, Abimelech returned Rebekah to Isaac. He then gave Isaac permission to stay in the region and ordered his people not to harm them in any way.

The second episode reports Isaac's enduring peace with the Philistines in 26:12-33. In this section, God blessed Isaac but his many flocks and herds caused the Philistines to envy him. So, Isaac avoided violence by moving from well to well. The episode closes as Abimelech acknowledged God's blessing on Isaac and the two made a treaty of peace between them at Beersheba.

This narrative of Isaac's peace with Philistines highlights the fact that Isaac, and in turn his son Jacob, were Abraham's successors. When we compare the content of this division with the life of Abraham, we find a number of parallels to Abraham's life. Abraham dealt with a Philistine king, also named Abimelech, in Genesis 20:1-18. Abraham dug wells and lived among the Philistines in Genesis 21:30 and 34. Abraham also entered into a treaty with the Philistines at Beersheba in Genesis 21:22-34. Moses designed these comparisons with Abraham to remove all doubt that God approved Isaac's peaceful relationship with the Philistines.

Now let's turn from Isaac's interactions with Philistines to the sixth division of Jacob's life that focuses on encounters between Jacob and Canaanites in 33:18–35:15.

### **JACOB AND CANAANITES (GENESIS 33:18–35:15)**

Jacob's conflict with Canaanites also consists of two closely connected episodes. The first episode concerns Jacob's conflict at Shechem in 33:18–34:31. While Jacob was among the Canaanites, Shechem son of Hamor violated Jacob's daughter, Dinah. In response to this attack on their sister, Jacob's sons tricked the Shechemites into believing all would be forgiven if they would be circumcised. But once the Shechemites were disabled by their circumcisions, Jacob's sons Simeon and Levi attacked and killed them

all. Afterwards, Jacob expressed fear that the Canaanites would seek revenge and destroy his family. Even though Jacob's sons insisted that they had done the right thing, Jacob's final words about Simeon and Levi in Genesis 49:5-7 indicate otherwise.

In the second episode, Jacob received a dramatic assurance from God at Bethel in Genesis 35:1-15. In 35:2-4, Jacob consecrated himself and his entire family to God in preparation for building an altar at Bethel. As a result, the terror of God fell on the Canaanites and they didn't pursue Jacob. Then, after Jacob built the altar at Bethel, God spoke to him and assured him that he was his father's successor. We see this particularly in 35:10-12 where God's words parallel his earlier words to Isaac in 26:3-4. The episode closes with Jacob giving thanks for this blessing.

And much like in the second division, we see several parallels between Abraham and Jacob in these chapters. In Genesis 33:20, Jacob set up an altar to the Lord in Shechem much like Abraham had done before him in Genesis 12:7. Moreover, in 35:6-7, Jacob moved from Shechem to Bethel and built an altar there much like Abraham had done in Genesis 12:8. As in the second division, these positive connections to Abraham's life showed that God approved of Jacob's conflict with the Canaanites.

Now let's turn to the third and fifth divisions that deal with Jacob and Esau's times of separation. These narratives focus on two distinct times when the brothers parted ways. The third division describes Jacob and Esau's hostile separation in 26:34–28:22. And the fifth division describes Jacob and Esau's peaceful separation in Genesis 32:1–33:17. Let's look at Jacob and Esau's hostile separation.

### **HOSTILE SEPARATION (GENESIS 26:34–28:22)**

This section focuses on four accounts that alternate between Esau and Jacob to display the moral complexities of these events. First, 26:34 gives a brief report that Esau discredited himself by taking Hittite wives against his parents' wishes. Second, in 27:1–28:5, we read a lengthy narrative of how Jacob's deception secured Isaac's blessing. In this well-known story, Jacob secured the blessing that was meant for Esau by deceiving his father Isaac. Upon learning what had happened, Esau became so enraged that Rebekah feared for Jacob's life. She convinced Isaac to send Jacob to Paddan Aram where Jacob might find a wife from among their relatives. Third, to keep the audience from feeling too much sympathy for Esau, Moses reported in 28:6-9 that Esau took Ishmaelite wives in defiance of his parents. The fourth and last segment affirms God's choice of Jacob as Isaac's heir by reporting Jacob's blessing through a dream at Bethel in 28:10-22.

### **PEACEFUL SEPARATION (GENESIS 32:1–33:17)**

In contrast to the third division's narrative of Jacob and Esau's hostile separation, the fifth division of Jacob's life reports the brothers' peaceful separation in 32:1–33:17. This division involves two closely connected episodes. First, we see Jacob's preparation for Esau in 32:1-32. Years after their hostile separation, Jacob prepared to meet Esau by

sending messengers and gifts ahead of him. According to Hosea 12:4, the night before meeting Esau, Jacob was humbled as he wrestled with an angel and received God's blessing.

**We see that the promise had already been made to Rebekah that Jacob would be the one who would receive the blessing but the way that Jacob went about getting the blessing ... he deceived his father and he, when he was asked his name, he said, "My name is Esau, your firstborn." He lied... But God blesses him; God multiplies, gives him all the children so that the promise to Abraham is beginning to be fulfilled — "As the stars are, so shall your seed be" — and yet, when he's coming back to the Promised Land, he has to face up to his past. And this time, the night before he's to meet Esau, he's wrestling with an angel and he's asked, "What is your name?" And this time he tells the truth. He says, "My name is Jacob." And he's given a new name, Israel.**

— Dr. Craig S. Keener

The second episode in 33:1-17 reports Jacob's reconciliation with Esau. In this section, the brothers meet and then part on peaceful terms. The contrasts between this division and its parallel are obvious. Jacob was no longer deceitful but sincere and humble. Esau no longer sought revenge but granted forgiveness. In the end, the earlier hostility between the twins took a turn toward resolution and they went their separate ways in peace. This division ends as Esau disappears from the storyline. Then, in chapter 34, Canaanites and a new geographical setting appear. All of this brings us to the fourth, pivotal division of Jacob's time with Laban in Genesis 29:1–31:55.

### **TIME WITH LABAN (GENESIS 29:1–31:55)**

Jacob's time with Laban divides into five main segments. It begins in 29:1-14 with Jacob's arrival in Paddan Aram. We then learn in 29:14-30 of Laban's deception of Jacob as he gave Jacob his daughters in marriage. Following Jacob's marriages, in 29:31–30:24 we read of the births of Jacob's children, the tribal patriarchs of Israel. Then, to balance Laban's earlier deception, in 30:25-43 Moses reported Jacob's deception of Laban as he sought wages for his years of work. Finally, in 31:1-55, we find Jacob's departure from Paddan Aram, including a covenant of peace made with Laban. These pivotal chapters deal with a variety of deceptions and conflicts. But, as we'll see in a moment, they brought about a radical transformation in Jacob.

**When we look at the Jacob narrative in Genesis 25–37, we see a remarkable series of transformations that took place in Jacob's life. As he begins, as the deceiver, then he has that amazing gracious revelation from God in which God does not refer to the deception that**

**Jacob has practiced but instead renews all the promises of Abraham to him. And Jacob becomes the dealer as he makes a deal with God that, if God will keep those promises, he will give him a little cut. But what a deal it was because God kept his promises when Jacob met a man who was crookeder than Jacob was in the person of Laban. And as Jacob senses God's blessing in his life, it's very clear that he becomes more and more willing to trust God — at least in minimal ways — so that when God says to head home, he's willing to do it. And finally then, the deceiver, the dealer is defeated when he hears the word that his brother is coming with all those armed men. And then the defeated is delivered when God comes and Jacob says, "It's *your* blessing I have to have — not my father's, not Esau's. It's yours!" And ultimately then, in this way, he's brought to the place where he is willing and able to trust God and no longer needs to be the manipulator who makes everything work for himself.**

— Dr. John Oswalt

Up to this point in our lesson on the patriarch Jacob, we've explored the structure and content of Jacob's life in the book of Genesis. Now we should turn to our second main topic: the major themes that appear in these chapters.

## MAJOR THEMES

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Unfortunately, followers of Christ often act as if Jacob's story was written primarily for individual believers to apply directly to their personal lives. Of course, this part of Genesis has much to say about how individuals should live. But we always have to remember that Genesis was not written with the expectation that the average individual believer would be able to read it. Only the leaders of ancient Israel had direct access to the Scriptures. So, the life of Jacob was primarily written to address matters related to the nation of Israel as a whole. God had set Israel on a mission to build his kingdom in the Promised Land. And from there they were to spread his kingdom to the ends of the earth. And this kingdom-building mission helps us identify the major themes of Jacob's life for ancient Israel and for you and me living in Christ's kingdom today.

In our lessons on the life of Abraham, we saw that Moses emphasized four main themes: God's grace to Abraham, Abraham's loyalty to God, God's blessings to Abraham and God's blessings through Abraham to others. These same themes appear again in the life of Jacob. For this reason, we'll consider how the story of Jacob's life emphasizes these four major themes. First, we'll discuss God's grace to Israel; second, the requirement of Israel's loyalty to God; third, God's blessings to Israel; and fourth, the most important feature of these chapters, God's blessings *through* Israel to others. Let's begin with some of the ways Jacob's story focuses on God's grace to Israel.

## GOD'S GRACE TO ISRAEL

We'll explore God's grace to Israel in two ways. On the one hand, we'll see how this theme was a focus of Moses' original meaning, how he wanted to impact his ancient Israelite audience. On the other hand, we'll note some of the ways the theme of divine grace should affect our modern application of this part of Genesis. Let's look first at Moses' original meaning.

### Original Meaning

In general terms, to teach the people of Israel about God's grace in their own lives, Moses stressed divine grace in Jacob's life in three ways.

**Past Grace.** First, Moses noted how God had shown Jacob past grace even before he was born. The opening episode of Jacob's story draws attention to this theme. Listen again to Genesis 25:23 where God said to Rebekah:

**Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger (Genesis 25:23).**

In Romans 9:11-12, the apostle Paul made the comment that Jacob received God's mercy even before he had done anything right or wrong. In much the same way, God's favor to the tribes of Israel that were following Moses toward the Promised Land also rested on God's mercies in the past. In Deuteronomy 7:7-8, Moses put it this way:

**The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples ... But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery (Deuteronomy 7:7-8).**

**Ongoing Grace.** In the second place, Moses also highlighted the need for God's ongoing grace in Jacob's life. This taught the Israelites how much they needed God's ongoing grace in their own lives. This focus first appears in the account of Jacob's birth in Genesis 25:24-26. Listen to Genesis 25:26:

**After this, his brother came out, with his hand grasping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob (Genesis 25:26).**

Jacob received his name because he was "grasping Esau's heel" as they were born. The name Jacob, יַעֲקֹב (*yacob*) in Hebrew, is from the same root as the word translated here "heel," אָקֵב (*akeeb*) in Hebrew. In effect, Jacob's name meant, "he grabs the heel." But, in this case, his name had connotations of subversion and deception

because Jacob tried to gain the position of firstborn as early as the day of his birth. We might even say that the name Jacob meant something like “the trickster.” This explains Esau’s reaction in Genesis 27:36 after Jacob had tricked Isaac into giving him Esau’s blessing:

**Esau said, “Isn’t he rightly named Jacob? He has deceived me these two times: He took my birthright, and now he’s taken my blessing!” (Genesis 27:36).**

Jacob’s name aptly matched his actions and made it clear that he needed God’s ongoing grace every day of his life. Moses often drew attention to displays of God’s ongoing grace that were particularly relevant for his original audience.

By way of illustration, in Genesis 26:26-33, God showed mercy to Jacob’s father, Isaac, by giving him safety among Philistines. When Moses wrote these chapters, his Israelite audience also needed God’s grace to secure their own protection from the Philistines. In addition to this, in 34:1-31, God graciously gave Jacob victory over Canaanites. By this example, Moses’ original audience learned how they needed God’s ongoing grace to give them victory over Canaanites in their own day.

***Future Grace.*** In the third place, the story of Jacob also focuses on God’s future grace. Once again, we see this theme first in the opening episodes of Moses’ account. As you’ll recall, in Genesis 25:23, before Jacob’s birth, God promised:

**One people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger (Genesis 25:23).**

This promise indicated that the Israelites would be so well established in the Promised Land that they would extend their rule — and thus *God’s* rule — over the land of Esau’s descendants as well. And this promise of future grace was particularly relevant for Moses’ original audience as they dealt with Edomites in their own day.

And God made a number of other promises of future grace in the story of Jacob’s life. For example, in Jacob’s dream at Bethel in Genesis 28:10-22, God assured Jacob of many future mercies. And later, God reaffirmed similar promises of grace in Jacob’s worship at Bethel in 35:11-12. These promises of future grace to Jacob showed Moses’ audience the bright future that God offered them as they moved toward the conquest and settlement of Canaan.

**To understand how the stories of Jacob emphasize that Israel has a right to the Promised Land, we have to remember at least two different things. One is that these stories are primarily about the contrast between Jacob and Esau — groups that would have been competing, as it were, as the rightful heirs of Abraham’s promises. And the stories of Jacob and Esau, the contrast between them shows very plainly that Esau went south toward the Edomites and that God gave him that land — that that’s where God established him — and that Jacob, rather, is the rightful heir of the promise given to**



**Abraham for the Promised Land. But you can also find it in the story of Laban when Jacob leaves. These are northern neighbors, relatives of his, but he doesn't stay there but for a period of time. But more important than just these contrasts, between Jacob/Esau, Jacob and Laban, is the fact that as Jacob is leaving the Promised Land, having deceived his father, deceived his brother; he's leaving the Promised Land. In chapter 28, he has that well-known dream at Bethel where he finds God and the angels appearing to him and then Jacob says, "Will you please just assure me that I am going to come back to this land?" And God does assure him that he will do just that. And then in chapter 35, you have a recollection of that event where God says, "Go to Bethel; build an altar. Build an altar at the place that I told you I would bring you back to." And Bethel, as we know, is in the Promised Land. And those two passages in the life of Jacob positively emphasize the idea that this is the land that God had given to Jacob despite all of his failings, despite that he deceived his brother, deceived his father, even did things up in the land of Laban that were questionable. Despite all of that, God chose Jacob as the one who would inherit the land that had been promised to his forefather Abraham.**

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Now that we've looked at God's grace to Israel with the original meaning in mind, let's touch on some of the ways God's grace should affect the modern application of Jacob's story.

### **Modern Application**

Of course, there are countless ways to apply the theme of God's grace to our lives as followers of Christ. But for the sake of convenience, we'll think in terms of the inauguration of Christ's kingdom, the continuation of his kingdom throughout church history, and the consummation of the kingdom at his return in glory. These three stages of Christ's kingdom represent some of the main ways the New Testament teaches Christ's followers to find God's past, ongoing and future grace in their lives.

In the first place, as followers of Christ, when we see displays of past grace in Jacob's life, we should recall how God revealed his past grace to us especially in the inauguration of his kingdom in Christ. The first advent of Christ stands at the end of a long history of grace that ran throughout all of the Old Testament. And as passages like Romans 5:20 indicate, God showed more grace and mercy in the first advent of Christ than ever before. As Paul put it:

**Where sin increased, grace increased all the more (Romans 5:20).**

In the second place, God's ongoing grace in Jacob's life reminds us to seek and depend on God's ongoing mercies during the continuation of Christ's kingdom. As passages like Hebrews 4:16 tell us, Christ's followers can "approach [God's] throne of grace with confidence." And we'll "find ongoing grace to help us in our time of need."

And third, when we see God's assurances of future grace to Jacob, we should remember God's future grace for us that will appear at the consummation of Christ's kingdom. Much like Moses' original audience learned about God's future grace in the Promised Land, followers of Christ long to see God's promises fulfilled in the new creation. Passages like Ephesians 2:7 remind us that, at Christ's return, we'll experience "the incomparable riches of [God's] grace."

### ISRAEL'S LOYALTY TO GOD

Now that we've touched on the major theme of God's grace to Israel, we should turn to the second major theme: the requirement of Israel's loyalty to God. Both the Old and New Testaments make it clear that eternal salvation is granted entirely by the grace of God. No one has ever been able to gain salvation by works. But the Scriptures also make it clear that when people receive the saving grace of God, God's Spirit begins to transform them, and they seek to obey God's commands out of heartfelt gratitude for his many mercies. This is the fruit of God's Spirit within us. As we look at the theme of loyalty to God in Jacob's life, we must always keep these basic theological outlooks in mind.

To see what we mean, we'll look at Israel's loyalty to God as a facet of Moses' original meaning and then move toward the modern application of this theme. Let's consider first Moses' original meaning.

#### Original Meaning

In general terms, Moses stressed Jacob's loyalty to God to call his original audience to be loyal to God in their own day. One of the most obvious ways Moses did this was to point out how God transformed Jacob into his loyal servant. In the early divisions of Jacob's story, the patriarch is largely portrayed in a negative light. Jacob's birth depicts him as grasping his brother's heel, and thus trying to grasp the position of the firstborn. In his young adulthood, we learn that Jacob took advantage of Esau's hunger to secure Esau's birthright for himself. He also deceived his aged father to get the blessing reserved for Esau. The only exception to this early negative characterization is Jacob's vow at Bethel where he swore that if God would protect him, the Lord would be his God.

Now, following this vow, Jacob went to live with Laban. Apparently, the seed of loyalty to God sown in Jacob's heart at Bethel must have continued to grow. Despite being mistreated by his father-in-law, when Jacob returned from his time with Laban, he became a new man.



Moses made this transformation evident in at least four ways. First, Moses reported that Jacob showed contrition toward Esau. In 32:4-5, Jacob instructed his servant to address Esau on his behalf as “my master.” And when Jacob himself finally met Esau in Genesis 33:8, he directly addressed him as “my lord.”

Second, Jacob showed contrition toward God. For instance, in Genesis 32:10 Jacob confessed to God:

**I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant (Genesis 32:10).**

Third, Jacob received a new name from God. In Genesis 32:22-32, Jacob wrestled with an angel at the ford of the Jabbok River. In verse 27, Jacob essentially confessed to the angel that he’d been a “trickster” by admitting that his name was Jacob. But the angel responded to Jacob’s confession in Genesis 32:28 by saying:

**Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome (Genesis 32:28).**

Like so many other names in the Bible, the name *יִשְׂרָאֵל* (*Israel*) was, at some point in its history, a praise to God meaning, “God struggles” or “fights.” It derives from the Hebrew verb *סָרַח* (*sarah*), which is translated in verse 28 as “you have struggled.” The angel explained that this name applied to Jacob in a special way because he had “struggled with God and with men and [had] overcome.” Jacob’s struggle with God refers to his wrestling for a blessing in this very scene. And, in all likelihood, Jacob’s struggle with men refers to his struggles with Esau and Laban. In terms of Jacob’s life, his new name indicated that he was a new man. Rather than remaining a trickster, Jacob had become “Israel,” one who had struggled and had overcome.

**You read in the book of Genesis the interesting story of Jacob’s name being changed by God himself to Israel. Jacob had wrestled an angel and he realized that that angel represented God; it was the Angel of God. And he realized that God had a special plan for him. God had paid attention to him, had visited him, had a purpose for him that was very, very significant. And so, he got his name changed... In ancient Israel, we know that people did not name babies until they were born. They didn’t name them in advance. They didn’t say, if it’s a boy we’ll give him this name, and if it’s a girl we’ll give her that name. Instead, what they did was to wait for some kind of signal, some kind of sign, some kind of indication. Now, this had happened to Jacob when he was born because he was grabbing on — when he came out of the womb — to his brother Esau’s heel. So, he got a name, “*Yakov*” in Hebrew, that means “heeler” or “holder of the heel,” or “heel-type person.” And he carried that through his life... But he was really in a new life when God met him. When God got ahold of Jacob and gave him that sense of his real purpose, that he would be the father of a nation, in an even more direct way than his own father Isaac or his**

**own grandfather Abraham were — a very direct way... And so that change from Jacob to Israel is really a beautiful thing and we appreciate God's role in it, in calling the immediate father of the nation of Israel to serve him and to produce the children that he would use to form his first people on the earth.**

— Dr. Douglas Stuart

It would be difficult to overestimate the significance of Jacob's new name for Moses' original audience. "Israel" was the national name of the twelve tribes Moses led from Egypt to the Promised Land. When they heard of the patriarch's new name as God's loyal servant, they were reminded that, being Israel, they were called to struggle and overcome just as Jacob had.

A fourth, positive depiction of Jacob, after his time with Laban, was his sincere worship when he returned to Bethel. Just as he promised loyalty to God at Bethel in Genesis 28:20-21, Jacob built an altar and worshipped the Lord in all sincerity at Bethel in Genesis 35:3.

Moses' account of Jacob's transformation had two chief implications for his original audience. He presented Jacob's *disloyalty* because his audience needed to face the many ways they had been disloyal to God. But he also presented Jacob's transformation into a loyal servant of God to encourage his audience to imitate Jacob's *loyalty* in their own day. And as much as Moses' original audience needed to rely on God's grace, they also needed to commit themselves to loyal service to God as they faced the challenges of life in the Promised Land.

Now that we've observed the theme of Israel's loyalty to God with regard to Moses' original meaning, we should look at this theme as a facet of our modern application of Jacob's life. For our purposes, we'll turn once again to how this dimension of Jacob's life also applies to us in terms of the inauguration, continuation, and consummation of Christ's kingdom.

## Modern Application

In the first place, anytime the record of Jacob's life leads us to consider our responsibility to be loyal to God, we should keep in mind how Christ himself fulfilled all righteousness in the inauguration of his kingdom. Hebrews 4:15 tells us that Christ was tempted just like we are, but he never sinned. In fact, Christ was so loyal to God's commands that he willingly died on the cross under God's judgment in the place of all who believe in him. And his perfect righteousness is now imputed to us by faith. Christ's own personal loyalty to God in the inauguration of his kingdom keeps us from reducing the application of Jacob's life to moralism — "Do this; don't do that." Every moral implication of Jacob's life should be viewed first in terms of Christ's own fulfillment of all righteousness on our behalf.

In the second place, when we see the theme of loyalty in the story of Jacob, we find guidance for our own loyal service to Christ today. During the continuation of

Christ's kingdom, Jacob's life still calls on us to consider our own loyalty to God. We're reminded of passages like Hebrews 12:1-2 that encourage us to imitate the faithfulness of those who have gone before us, including Jacob.

And in the third place, every facet of Jacob's story that touches on the requirement of human loyalty should turn our hearts toward loyalty to Christ at the consummation of God's kingdom. The theme of loyalty reminds us that we who follow Christ will one day be transformed into God's perfected, faithful servants. As passages like 1 John 3:2 teach, when Christ returns, "we will be like him."

**We can apply the Jacob stories to our own lives today by seeing that Jacob was promised God's blessing. It was God's word that had promised that he had set his love on Jacob and yet, Jacob spent much of his life trying to gain, by hook or crook, what God had already promised him. So, we're often like Jacob. We strive to gain in life — through any means necessary sometimes — what God has already promised us, in fact, has already given us in Christ. No verse in the New Testament speaks to that perhaps as well as Romans 8:32: "If God did not spare his own Son, how much more will he not give us all things in him?" Through Christ we can especially hear the words of Psalm 46: "Cease striving and know that I am God (NASB)," and — if I may add — know that he is a good God, kindly disposed toward his covenant children.**

— Rev. Michael J. Glodo

Having looked at the major themes of God's grace to Israel and Israel's loyalty to God, we should turn to a third major theme in this part of Genesis: God's blessings to Israel.

## **GOD'S BLESSINGS TO ISRAEL**

We'll examine God's blessings to Israel in the same way that we explored Moses' other themes. We'll think first in terms of Moses' original meaning, and then we'll consider our modern application of this theme. Let's begin with Moses' original meaning.

### **Original Meaning**

In general terms, God's covenant relationship with his people always involves blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. There's no doubt that Jacob experienced negative consequences from his disobedience. For instance, after deceiving his brother and father, Jacob had to flee for his life. He also experienced hard times from his father-in-law, Laban.

But Moses clearly placed much more emphasis on the *blessings* that God gave to Jacob to remind his original audience that God had given them many blessings as well. God's blessings in Jacob's life fall roughly into two groups: blessings despite Jacob's disobedience and blessings in response to Jacob's obedience.

On the one hand, Jacob received blessings despite his disloyalty. For instance, in Genesis 27:27-29, Jacob received God's blessing through Isaac even though he acquired it by deceiving Isaac. Jacob also received God's blessings at Bethel in 28:13-15 despite the fact that he was fleeing for his life from Esau.

On the other hand, in the later divisions of Jacob's story, God's blessings came in response to Jacob's loyalty. For instance, in Genesis 29:1-31:55, God granted Jacob blessings of family and wealth through Laban. After Jacob humbled himself, God granted him blessings through Esau in Genesis 32:1-33:17. In a similar way, in Genesis 33:18-34:31, Jacob received God's blessings at Shechem after his sons engaged in conflict with the Canaanites. God also gave Jacob blessings at Bethel in 35:9-13 when the patriarch devoted himself to the worship of God.

Moses knew that the Israelites who followed him toward the Promised Land were going to face many challenges in the exodus and conquest. So, in these and many other passages, Moses focused on God's blessings to Jacob to inspire gratitude in his original audience and to motivate them to pursue God's blessings even further. Once we see the original meaning in the theme of God's blessings to Israel, it isn't difficult to grasp the significance of these matters for modern application.

## Modern Application

In line with our earlier discussions, we'll speak once again in terms of the inauguration, continuation and consummation of Christ's kingdom. We should first turn our hearts toward Christ himself during the inauguration of the kingdom. In contrast with Jacob, Jesus didn't receive any blessings in spite of disloyalty; he had no sin. But because he was faithful to the Father, Jesus received great blessings during his lifetime on earth and even greater blessings when he ascended into heaven. What is most remarkable about Jesus' own blessings is that, as passages like Ephesians 1:3 teach, through our union with Christ, *we* share in the blessings Jesus obtained.

In addition to this, the New Testament teaches that Christ pours out blessings on his people throughout the continuation of his kingdom. Just as he did with Jacob, God blesses us, sometimes despite our disloyalty and at other times in response to our loyalty. Now, life is full of self-denial and suffering for Christ's followers. But passages like 2 Corinthians 1:21-22 and Ephesians 1:13-14 make it clear that God has promised to seal each of us with the wondrous blessing of his Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit lives in and among us as the guarantee of our even greater inheritance in the world to come.

So, whenever we see God's blessings to Jacob in the book of Genesis, we're reminded of the immeasurable blessings we'll receive at the consummation of Christ's kingdom. As passages like Matthew 25:34 teach so clearly, when Christ returns, God will welcome us into "the kingdom prepared for us since the creation of the world."

Having looked at the major themes of God's grace to Israel, Israel's loyalty to God, and God's blessings to Israel, let's turn to the fourth, and clearly the most prominent theme in Moses' record of Jacob's life: God's blessings *through* Israel to others.

## **GOD'S BLESSINGS THROUGH ISRAEL**

As before, we'll explore the theme of God's blessings *through* Israel in terms of Moses' original meaning and then turn to the theme's modern application. Let's look first at Moses' original meaning.

### **Original meaning**

To understand the significance of this theme for the original audience, we need to recall God's special commission to Abraham as the father of the nation of Israel. The story of Abraham in Genesis explains that God commissioned the people of Israel to take the lead in fulfilling humanity's original commission. They were to multiply and fill the earth with faithful images of God. And one way they were to do this was by spreading God's blessings to other peoples throughout the earth. As we read in Genesis 12:2-3, God said to Abraham:

**You will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you (Genesis 12:2-3).**

Notice here that God called for Abraham to spread the blessings of God's kingdom to "all peoples on earth." But notice that even though God's blessings would spread throughout the entire earth, not every person would be blessed. God said: "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse." In other words, some would reject Israel's efforts, and others would accept them. And God promised to bless and curse other peoples accordingly.

Interestingly enough, the same twofold process of blessing and cursing that God revealed to Abraham was repeated to Jacob in Genesis 27:29 when Isaac blessed Jacob, saying:

**May those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed (Genesis 27:29).**

Moses devoted most of his record of Jacob's life to pointing out how the patriarch interacted with various people in his day. These were the ancestors of people groups that interacted with the Israelites in Moses' day. So, in this way, Moses taught Israel how to treat this or that group. Should they go to war? Or should they establish peace? For instance, the stories of Jacob deal with two people groups within the borders of the Promised Land.

On the one hand, the sixth division reports encounters between Jacob and Canaanites in 33:18–35:15. In Genesis 15:16, God made it clear that he would not bring Israel out of Egypt until “the sin of the Amorites” — another term for Canaanites — had “reached its full measure.” With few exceptions, like Rahab, the Canaanites had so defiled the Promised Land by the days of Moses that God commanded Israel to destroy them. So, it’s not surprising that Moses reported Jacob’s defeat of the Shechemites and God’s protection of Jacob from other Canaanites.

On the other hand, the second division of Jacob’s life tells of encounters between Isaac and Philistines in 26:1-33. Unlike Jacob’s conflict with Canaanites, this division focuses on Isaac’s *peace* with Philistines. We know from Joshua 13:1-5 that Philistines lived in the lands God had promised to Israel. But their name indicates that the Philistines were a seafaring people who came from Caphtor. For this reason, they didn’t immediately come under God’s judgment against Canaanites. This policy was supported by the examples of Abraham in Genesis 21:22-34 and Isaac in 26:26-33. Both of these patriarchs made treaties of peace with the Philistines. As a result, the Israelites in Moses’ day were to emulate Abraham and Isaac by seeking to live alongside Philistines in peace. It was only after the Philistines broke this peace in later generations that Israel waged war against them.

Beyond these examples, Jacob’s story also deals with people who lived outside of the Promised Land. For example, the central division of Jacob’s time with Laban in 29:1–31:55 focuses on the Israelites’ distant relatives who lived in Paddan Aram, just north of the Promised Land. The record of Jacob’s time there warns against the deceit that characterized Laban and his family. But Genesis 31:51-55 indicates that Jacob and Laban swore to honor the geographical boundary between them and to live at peace with each other. This made it clear that the Israelites following Moses were to live at peace with their relatives on the northern border. It was only later that Israel was to spread the kingdom of God to this place as well.

In addition to dealing with peoples who lived in the Promised Land and on the northern border, the majority of Jacob’s life story focuses on his interactions with his brother Esau. As we’ve noted, the beginning of struggle for the brothers and nations in Genesis 25:19-34 stressed the fact that Jacob and Esau’s interactions foreshadowed Israel’s interactions with the Edomites who lived in Seir, the southernmost border of the Promised Land.

Edom was particularly important for the original audience of Genesis because they’d faced Edomite hostility as they moved along the southern border of the Promised Land. God had directed the Israelites to make war with other peoples in this region, but in Deuteronomy 2:4-6 and Numbers 20:14-21, we learn that Moses specifically directed Israel to live humbly and at peace with their relatives, the Edomites.

The story of Jacob reminded the Israelites that Jacob had gained God’s blessing through deceit. It also pointed out that Jacob humbled himself toward Esau. And more than this, the stories about Jacob focused on the peaceful, geographical separation of Jacob and Esau and their descendants. These dimensions of Moses’ account spoke directly to the ways the Israelites following him were to treat the Edomites. It wasn’t until much later, when the Edomites troubled Israel that Israel went to war with them.

Now that we’ve touched on the original meaning of God’s blessings through Israel to others, we should turn to the modern application of this theme.

## Modern Application

This theme has many implications for our lives, but for the sake of convenience we'll focus once again on the three phases of Christ's kingdom. First, in the inauguration of his kingdom, Jesus, Israel's King, came offering God's blessings to all people on earth. Passages like John 12:47-48 tell us that, in his first advent, Jesus came to defeat Satan and his demonic forces. But he also came with terms of peace to every nation on earth. Jesus and his apostles and prophets met resistance, but they patiently offered reconciliation with God through the proclamation of the gospel. They also warned of God's judgment on the last day against those who rejected the gospel.

Second, during the continuation of Christ's kingdom, God's blessings continue to spread to the nations through the ministry of the church. Following the example of Christ and his apostles and prophets, we move against evil spirits who continue to deceive the nations. As passages like 2 Corinthians 5:20 put it, we are "Christ's ambassadors." We offer terms of peace and reconciliation with God to the entire world, even as we warn of God's judgment on the last day.

Third, we should apply Jacob's interactions with others with a view to the consummation of Christ's kingdom. In Old Testament times, Israel's offer of peace to others was often withdrawn when God determined that it was time to bring judgment. In a similar way, when Christ returns in glory, the offer of peace to the nations will be withdrawn completely from all who have resisted Christ and his kingdom. As passages like Revelation 5:9-10 tell us, at that time, the wicked will fall under God's judgment, but countless people from every corner of the earth who have trusted Christ will enter the worldwide kingdom of God.

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## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson, we've explored Moses' presentation of the patriarch Jacob's life in the book of Genesis. We've seen how Moses masterfully integrated the structure and content of his record so that the life of Jacob would touch the lives of the Israelites that followed him toward the Promised Land. We've also noted how Moses' major themes of God's grace to Israel, Israel's loyalty to God, God's blessings to Israel and God's blessings through Israel, not only provided practical guidance for the nation of Israel in Moses' day, but continue to guide followers of Christ as we seek to serve God in our own day.

The story of Jacob is a wonderful story of hope for all who trust in Christ. It first helped Moses' original audience as they dealt with their own failures and successes. And it guided their interactions with other peoples as they moved toward the Promised Land. It also does something similar for you and me today. In the life of Jacob, we are reassured that no one is beyond the reach of God's mercy. And as those who are joined to Christ, despite our many failures, we can learn from Jacob how we are to extend the blessings of God's kingdom throughout the world until Christ returns in glory.