

Book of Genesis – Part XII - Genesis 27-28

“The Covenant Recalled: God’s Faithfulness and Human Deceit”

These next two chapters record one of the most pivotal events in Old Testament history. Jacob, encouraged by his mother, deceives his father and cheats his brother out of his inheritance. Yet, in spite of this, God’s covenant is reaffirmed for Jacob. God’s promises both contradict and overpower human failings. Jacob in this passage receives the special promise, “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go . . . (Gen 28:15).”

- I. Jacob’s Great Deception – 27:1-46
 - a. At first glance this is a story of outright deceit and lying on the part of both Rebekah and Jacob. Without excusing their actions, there are however some previous happenings which form an important background to these events.
 - b. Earlier we read how Esau had traded away his birthright for some lentil stew. It was certainly not appropriate for Jacob to ask for the birthright but, at the same time, no one forced Esau to give it up. In a sense then Jacob, in claiming the blessing that was Esau’s birthright, is only seeking to gain something that had already been given to him. Even this, though, hardly justifies the lying and deceit that he and his mother carry out.
 - c. Another important point comes from the end of the previous chapter. We read in 26:34 that Esau had married two Hittite women. The first problem here is that God had established marriage as between one man and one woman (Gen. 2:21-24). The fact that polygamy was widely practiced in the ancient world hardly justifies it. Invariably problems arose with the practice as in the case of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar (Gen. 16:1-6). The first recorded account we have of a man with two wives is Lamach. He boasts to his wives that he killed a young man for striking him (Gen. 4:19-24). Whatever else lies behind this story, Lamach doesn’t exactly seem to be a role model. Later both David and Solomon suffered as a result of their multiple wives (II Sam. 6:20-23; I Kings 11:1-8).
 - d. The second problem arises from the fact that Esau has married two women outside the covenant. Abraham had taken great pains to see that Isaac married a woman of his “kindred,” that is, from within his family (24:1-4). Apparently Isaac had not taken the same initiative with his own sons. There is a serious fallout from Esau’s actions. His Hittite wives “made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah” (26:35). The Hittite (or Canaanite) women also represent the worship of false gods (Num. 25:1-3; I Kings 11:1-2). Again, without justifying the action, this may explain some of Rebekah’s negative feelings for Esau.
 - e. The story in chapter 27 moves rapidly. Isaac has asked Esau, his hunter son, to prepare some “savory food” for him, after which he will give him his blessing. It is important to understand that in this context “blessing” was

believed to be a great deal more than good wishes. Blessing was thought to bestow power as well as a legal right to the major part of the family inheritance.

- f. Rebekah overhears what Isaac says and devises her own plan. She has Jacob disguise himself as his brother. Initially Isaac is suspicious. Isaac asks him point blank, "Are you really my son, Esau?" (v. 24). Jacob lies, "I am." And so Jacob receives the blessing intended for his brother (vv. 27-29).
 - g. The story grows more suspenseful. As soon as Jacob's deception has achieved its goal, Esau himself returns. The reality of the deception becomes apparent to both Esau and Isaac. However the blessing once given cannot be rescinded. Isaac trembles violently (v. 33) once understanding what has happened. Esau reflects on the meaning of Jacob's name, "he supplants," or more literally, "he takes the heel." Isaac, unable to give the same blessing, instead gives a prophecy (vv. 39-30). Esau will be the father of the nation, Edom, which will be in conflict with Israel and will betray Israel centuries later when Israel goes into captivity into Babylon. God's judgment of Edom will be harsh (Isa. 34).
 - h. Understandably, Esau is furious. He hates Jacob and intends to kill him. Rebekah warns Jacob and sends him away to his uncle Laban. She promises to send for him once his brother's "fury turns away" (vv. 41-45). The account ends with a second mention of the great difficulty Esau's Hittite wives have caused (v. 46). This appears to be the critical backdrop to the whole story.
- II. Jacob's Dream and God's Promise – 28:1-22
- a. Isaac calls Jacob to himself and, in spite of the deception, reaffirms his blessing on him. Isaac also sends him to his uncle but for a different reason than Esau's anger. He states that Jacob should not marry one of the Canaanite woman (Esau had married *two*). He is to marry a woman from within his own family circle. Isaac now invokes God's blessing on Jacob (vv. 3-4). Two implications seem to emerge at this point.
 - 1. Esau's marriage to the Canaanite women has caused great pain for his parents. This action has placed him outside of God's promise. The loss of his birthright is perhaps justified. However the deception of Jacob and Rebekah is not condoned. Yet behind this stands the mystery of God's election: "Jacob I have loved and Esau I have hated" (Mal. 1:2-3; Rom. 9:10-12). In the face of this mystery Paul maintains that God is not unjust but has the freedom to have mercy on whom he will have mercy (Rom. 9:14).
 - 2. Jacob needs to leave his home if he is to encounter God's promise for him. Jacob will become the namesake for Israel (Gen. 32:28). Yet like Abraham before him he must undertake an uncertain and at times difficult journey to find God's plan for his life.
 - b. Esau observes this and realizes how disruptive his Canaanite wives have been for the whole family. He then marries one of Ishmael's daughters. However he still retains his Hittite wives (28:6-9). This is a pattern we see throughout Israel's history. Israel practices spiritual adultery time and

again (since many of the false gods they serve were fertility goddess the sexual imagery is both literal and figurative). This is a running theme throughout the history of Israel (Num. 25:1-5; Jer. 3:9; Ezek. 23:37; Hosea 2:2). In a deluded way Israel often tried to worship the true God at the same time that they were sacrificing to idols (Isa. 42:5-8; Jer. 7:1-10).

- c. One of the most familiar stories of the Old Testament follows. This is the account of Jacob's dream of a ladder to heaven while he is on his journey. In the context of this dream he receives a great promise from God (28:15). God assures Jacob that he will be with him "wherever you go." This promise is reaffirmed again and again (Ex. 3:12; Joshua 1:5; Judges 6:16; Matt. 1:23). There is clearly no question of human merit or achievement here. Jacob and Rebekah tried to gain God's promise by their own efforts as Abraham and Sarah had done before them. The results are always tragic (cf. Gen. 16:1-6).
- d. Jacob awakes and realizes he has been in the presence of God. He sets up a pillar for God. Then, showing he still has a lot to learn, he proposes his own "promise" to God. Unlike God's unconditional promise Jacob's is full of conditions. He wants God to provide him with
 1. bread to eat
 2. clothes to wear
 3. a safe return to his father's house (28:20-22).

For this, Jacob promises God a tenth of whatever he has (the origin of the tithe). Big deal. Jacob's prayer however is disturbingly similar to ones we often pray. We are willing to serve God on the condition that God prospers us and gives what we want. As we will see in the succeeding chapters, Jacob has a lot to learn. And so do we.

Questions for Us –

1. What lessons can we learn from Esau's marrying wives outside of the community of faith? What are some of the ways we can be swayed into worshipping false gods?
2. What challenge and comfort can we take from God's plan of election, "Esau I have hated (or regarded less) but Jacob I have loved? (Mal. 1:2-3)?"
3. Do we, like Jacob, want to place our own conditions on God's promises? What hope can we gain from God's assurance that he will be with us and keep us wherever we go?

Next Study – Oct. 7:

Genesis Chapters 29-30 – "Jacob Meets His Match"