

THE PATRIARCHS

The Making of Israel as a Nation



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Inheriting Faith - Wife for Isaac

I was indecisive of whether to include this story in the Abraham chapter or in this chapter on the rest of the Patriarch. The story came across equally strongly as ① Abraham's faithfulness in ensuring the continuance of the covenant, but also ② God's providence for Isaac so that he can continue in the covenant.

What do you normally think about when you hear this infamous story of how Isaac got a wife? There would be many who would end up understanding this as a model for us to get a life's mate – that we should similarly look for divine signs and hope that our wife gets directed to us miraculously. I think that is a rather mistaken application of this passage; although I do agree that this passage does tell us a lot about how to look for a life partner. And we shall get to that, I promise.

But before we get to the topic every young people would be anxious to talk about, I want to get your attention to the overarching topic of this chapter. There is one particular word that is not only repeated in this chapter, but which idea surrounds the whole of the chapter; and it is the Hebrew word *Hesed*. The word *hesed* occurs 11 times in the Book of Genesis; 4 of which can be found in chapter 24 (**24:12, 14, 27, 49**). In all four mentions, the word is translated as "kindness" in the NIV Bible. But the meaning of the word is way more profound than that.

Hesed is rather difficult to describe, especially because there is no English word equivalence for it. It is often translated as lovingkindness, kindness, loyalty, mercy. The idea is that of "loyal love," an eager and persistent love that is bound in covenantal relationship. Vine's dictionary suggests that there are three meanings within the word *hesed* that always interacts – strength, steadfastness and love. Any understanding of *hesed* that fails to suggest all three inevitably loses some of its richness. Love by itself easily becomes sentimentalized or universalized apart from the covenant. Yet, strength or steadfastness suggests only the fulfillment of a legal (or similar) obligation. *Hesed* refers primarily to mutual and reciprocal rights and obligations between parties of a relationship (especially Jehovah and Israel). But *hesed* is not only a matter of obligation but is also of generosity. It is not only a matter of loyalty, but also of mercy. *Hesed* implies personal involvement and commitment in a relationship beyond the rule of law¹. The idea is that of a loyal love. However, when applied to God's covenantal love to stiff-necked Israel, the loyalty or persistence must additionally be understood as being administered through mercy and forgiveness. Gen 24 is filled with the idea of *hesed*, above and beyond the mention of its word.

Now *hesed* fills Gen 24 in the following manner:

- **God's *hesed* to Abraham.** We have discussed in our previous lessons how God was the author and perfecter of Abraham's faith – how He was the one who called Abraham, was patient and faithful in teaching and disciplining Abraham despite his weaknesses, and ultimately used/ orchestrated all of the events in Abraham's life to work out for good and to bring about a mature faith. Right in the beginning of chapter 24, we see a description of fulfillment: "*Abraham was now very old, and the Lord had blessed him in every way*" (**Gen 24:1**). God had shown his *hesed* to Abraham.

In this context also, as the servant adequately acknowledged, the fact that he was able to identify the chosen wife at all was an act of God's *hesed* to Abraham his master (**24:12, 14, 27, 49**). In fact, these were the explicit mentions of *hesed* in this chapter. God was faithful in providing a wife for the son of Abraham so that His covenant could be fulfilled through the descendants of Abraham.

- **Abraham's *hesed* to God.** We also see in this chapter Abraham's *hesed* to God. Having believed God in every stage of his life despite circumstances to the contrary, Abraham's *hesed*, of course, was made possible by God's initiating call. But he was nonetheless commended for abiding in it; by being faithful to the covenantal relationship God had granted. Abraham reciprocated God's love and call and showed *hesed* to God as a response to God's *hesed*. In chapter 24, we see a final act of Abraham's *hesed* in this act of ensuring



a godly wife for his son. Abraham was now very old; and his act of asking for the servant's oath through the servant putting his hand under Abraham's thigh showed that Abraham knew his time of death was drawing near. This manner of oath-taking is done when the one requesting the oath was close to death (and therefore might not be able to live to see the fulfillment of the oath). See, for example, **Gen 47:29** where a similar method is used by Jacob when he requested Joseph to show him *hesed* by not burying him in Egypt. Abraham had understood the call of God; that God called him out in order to consecrate him. And if Isaac was going to remain in that covenant, he would need a wife, a helper who did not come from the wicked Canaan or Egypt; but rather one who was a descendant of the chosen line of Shem. And this would be Abraham's final act of *hesed* before his God.

- **The Servant's *hesed* to Abraham (and vice versa).** This trusted "senior servant" is most probably Eliezer of Damascus that Abraham mentioned in **15:2-3**. Their relationship is representational of the *hesed* between a master and his servant where the master doesn't treat his servant with oppression and the servant submits to the master with willingness and sincerity. Abraham's *hesed* to the servant, if he indeed was Eliezer, was evident in Abraham's complete trust in him and the fact that Abraham put him as heir if he had not had a son. But in chapter 24, we see a very touching display of the servant's *hesed* to Abraham, shown in his eagerness and determination to fulfill Abraham's dying wish. He could have just done the task dutifully, for Abraham had provided a way for him to get out of the oath anyway (**24:8**); but he proved most eager in fulfilling the task that his prayer exuded the passion in his heart (**24:12**). He had shown loyalty beyond the requirement of the law, and thus displayed *hesed* to his beloved master.
- **Rebekah's *hesed*.** Did the servant just think of some random event and requested it to God as a sign, or was there some sort of significance to his request? I believe there was. The Book of Genesis (and in fact, the whole Bible) chooses one particular act of charity to represent the outward portrayal of *hesed*; and it was the act of hospitality to wandering strangers. See how this theme is pervasive in all of Scripture: ① in **Gen 18:2-8** Abraham showed *hesed* by offering hospitality to the three visitors. ② in **Gen 19:1-3**, Lot showed *hesed* by offering hospitality to the two angels he thought were wandering pilgrims ③ in **Ruth 2:8-9**, Boaz showed *hesed* to Ruth by allowing her to harvest at his field above and beyond what the law required Boaz to do. ④ In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the Samaritan showed *hesed* to the victim by providing for him (**Luk 10:25-37**) despite the fact that the Jews regarded Samaritans as enemies.

In this view, the servant's criteria in looking for his master's future daughter-in-law was a test of *hesed*. The desired suitor would be one who would offer the wayward stranger an offer of water, and go beyond what is required by offering the drink for his camels too (**24:14**). And Rebekah would fulfill this criteria; and thus Isaac would have a wife who exhibited *hesed*. Remember how I said I will get back to the criteria of getting a good wife? Well, here you go. The single criteria which I think the servant looked for was that of *hesed*; and we would do well to do likewise.

Isaac, Like His Father Abraham

The story of Isaac is told very briefly in the Bible. However, brevity does not imply lack of significance, for after all, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are the patriarchs of the Jewish faith.

The story of Isaac, rather, is very intentionally told as a mirror of his father Abraham's. It was as if that Isaac was retracing his father's footsteps – which in fact acts as a testament of Isaac's faith. Isaac's faith resembles that of his father, which is in fact representative of what we should be. We Christians, after all, are also children of Abraham, and are supposed to imitate his faith (**Gal 3:7**).

This is how Isaac's life is compared to his father's:



Events	Isaac	Abraham
Barren Wife	25:21	11:30
Famine	26:1	12:10
Lied about his wife	26:7-10	12:11-13; 20:2
Made treaty with Abimelek at Beersheba	26:26-33	21:22-34
Dug well and called on the name of the Lord at Beersheba "The Well of Seven/ The Well of Oath"	26:15; 18-22; 25	21:30-33
Showed material faithfulness by avoiding quarrels	26:19-22	13:8-9

Notice how the (individual) story of Isaac started off. First off, it is uncanny how all of the patriarchs of the blessed nation of Israel who are to give rise to descendants as numerous as the star and the sand actually all had barren wives! Abraham's wife was barren (**11:30**); Isaac's was barren (and although the narrative was very short, the period was 20 years! – **25:21**); and Jacob's were also barren (we will discuss this later – **29:31**).

After finishing with the description of the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Ishmael, at the very first narrative of Isaac, we are given this very familiar tone: *"Now there was a famine in the land- besides the previous famine in Abraham's time- and Isaac went to Abimelek king of the Philistines in Gerar"* (**26:1**). God called Isaac to reestablish the covenant He had made with Isaac's father (**26:2-5**), and Isaac obeyed the call despite the unfavorable circumstance for him. Though separated by one whole generation, the famine was compared to that of Abraham's time. And ironically enough, Isaac had to repeat an unmistakable episode in Abraham's life when Abraham lied about his wife to Abimelek (amalgamated with him doing that to Pharaoh during his own episode of famine). And after both incident of Abraham and Isaac lying about their wives to Abimelek, he would also proceed by making treaties with them at Beersheba. Isaac also reopened the wells that had been dug in the time of his father Abraham (**26:18**); and also took after his father's faithfulness in material possession (especially in not wanting to quarrel with Lot) when he refused to quarrel over what rightly could have been his (**26:19-22**).

This sounds to me like a reenactment of Abraham's life made more compact. Isaac was just like his father; and he had faith just as Abraham did. The reason for this similarity, I think, is explained by Paul in the New Testament. Moses intended to show that Isaac is the promised son through which the Messiah would come: *"it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned"* (**Gen 21:12; Rom 9:7**). Paul would later continue by arguing for Jacob's election (**Rom 9:10-13**). So, it is not the physical descendants of Abraham that would inherit the promise, but only those who share in his faith (**Rom 9:6-7**). This would later give the allowance for the inclusion of the Gentiles through the same promise, for all who share the faith of Abraham are in fact his descendants (**Gal 3:7**).

Jacob – His Election

We shall now move on to the story of Esau and Jacob; or more specifically, Jacob, because he was the chosen one by God.

When I consider the story of Jacob, three words come very prominently to my mind: ① Deception ② Competition ③ Struggle. Jacob deceived his father once, and the rest of his life was marked by him being deceived repeatedly by Laban. Jacob competed with his brother Esau, and his wives later competed with each other to win Jacob's favor. Jacob struggled for a blessing that wasn't his birthright, and he spent the rest of his life struggling for redemption. This will be the executive summary of his story.



The story of Jacob gives rise to one very prominent issue: That of the election of Jacob. Paul gave an explanation of this election in a manner that most would deem to be very disturbing. Here's what he said:

Before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad – in order that God's purpose in election might stand; not by works but by Him who calls – she was told, "the older will serve the younger." Just as it is written: "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I hated."

What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy.

Rom 9:11-16

So, Paul's explanation for the election of Jacob was simple: "In order that God's purpose in election might stand" (Rom 9:11). In other words, it would seem that God elects whom He decides to elect, and He does not consider the good works of that person one least bit. So one might even be tempted to say that God elects randomly, and it might be the case that He elects the evildoer without any apparent reasons; and that its reasons are literally *none of our business*.

After all, I would think that the Scripture intentionally describes the electability of Esau; and also conversely the un-electability of Jacob. See the table below and consider how deliberately this message was portrayed:

	Esau	Jacob
Identity	<i>Natural right</i> – Firstborn	Younger twin
Appearance	<i>Natural attractiveness</i> – Manly, adventurous	Content, stay-at-home, quiet
Morality	<i>Natural morality</i> – Forgiving, receiving reconciliation without demanding substitution; and dispensing forgiveness where it was due	Deceitful, someone who appears to justify the means to an end.

I don't know if the writer can be obvious enough in what he's trying to say. Of the two brothers, Esau had the obvious electability. Not only did he have the natural birthright to the blessing; he seemed to be more qualified for it as well. He was described as being manly, and adventurous; whereas Jacob was the stay-at-home mommy's boy. And perhaps most convincingly, Esau's response when Jacob asked for forgiveness was ultimately that of forgiveness – which really was quite virtuous. On the other hand, Jacob was one who resorted to deception to get what he wanted. It's like the writer was doing public relations for Esau, intending for the readers to root for Esau.

So what shock and horror it must have been to see Jacob finally getting his blessing. And how confusedly the readers must react when they see not only that God did not reprimand Jacob for the deception, but that He actually reaffirmed the blessing that Isaac had given (28:13-15). And when we compare the story to Paul's explanation in Romans 9, we see indeed that Jacob's election was nothing but God's sovereignty.

If the story of Jacob had stopped right there and then; we would have no choice but to say that God's election was not only sovereign; it was also random. That sovereignty meant doing as one like, without needing an actual reasoning. But concluding this initial paradox to divine election is also important; for the message was indeed vivid. God elects sovereignly; and the whole point of His sometimes unfathomable action is because of this sovereignty. We must not be tempted to think that we can fully comprehend God's choices so much so that we can predict Him. For to do so would be humanizing God to our level; and we would in fact cease to see Him divine. God's thoughts and ways will always remain infinitely higher than the wisest of man, as proclaimed in Isa 55:8-9.



However, we must also seek answer as far as it is revealed through the Scriptures. Hiding behind the reason of sovereignty whilst avoiding the responsibility of understanding is equally wrong. When we do so, our knowledge would cease to be as productive as it is profound. And so, it is with such warrant that we proceed with our story.

Although at first sight the Bible seems to root for Esau, I would argue that this is an intentional misleading of the readers' attention that the writer employed to dramatize the real message. For our rooting for Esau was one that is founded in our natural (and fleshly) perception of him. Physically and naturally, Esau was an impressive man. However, this applies only when we judge the book by its cover. See, as human beings we are only able to judge by the outward appearances; and we try to deduce the innermost motivations of the heart by looking at the observable phenomenon. However, God is able to see so much more than we can; and in fact everything. And so the Bible does give a hint as to God's criteria for election at least once when He chose David: "*The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart*" (1 Sam 16:7).

So there. God's sovereign election does not in any way mean it is random. Rather, it means that His judgment and choice relies upon criteria that are qualitatively different (and more superior) than what man is able to look at. To be more clear:

Loving	Wise	Holy	Just	Sovereign	
✓	✓	✓	✓	X	Not the Christian God
✓	✓	✓	X	✓	Not the Christian God
✓	✓	X	✓	✓	Not the Christian God
✓	X	✓	✓	✓	Not the Christian God
X	✓	✓	✓	✓	Not the Christian God
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	The Christian God

It is important for us to realize that the attributes of God are not to be looked at separately. God must be all loving, all wise, all holy, all just and all sovereign (just to mention five of the attributes); in all that He does. Take away but one of these attributes, you will not get the description of the Christian God. And this applies to the act of electing. God elects sovereignly; but He also elects most lovingly, most wisely, in the most holy manner and most justly.

And so in the rest of the story to follow, we will witness how each of these attributes play a role in God's election of Jacob.

	Esau	Jacob
Parental Love	<i>Natural Reason</i> – Loved by Isaac because they both “had a love for the wild game” (25:28)	<i>Spiritual Reason</i> – Reason not given in (25:28) but most probably because Rebekah had inquired of the Lord in (25:22-23)
Appreciation of Birthright	<i>Natural Appreciation</i> , most probably because of the double-portion aspect of firstborn sons (Deut 21:17). Esau said of this birthright “what good is it to me if I’m dead” (25:32) and thus “despised his birthright” (25:34). NT – Godless (Heb 12:16)	<i>Spiritual Appreciation</i> – Thought of the birthright as something he needed to attain by any means; even through deception. Held on to it even after possibly losing all the material aspect to the inheritance. Wrestled with God to ensure His blessing.
Marriage	<i>Natural Priorities</i> - Married 2 Hittite (Canaanite) women, caused his parents great grief (26:34; 27:46), and later an Ishmaelite just to please Isaac.	<i>Spiritual Priorities</i> – Followed his father's footsteps by marrying one of his own race; a Shemite.



I hope the above table is clear enough in comparing between the two brothers' values. This is a hint as to what went on behind the scenes; and a hint as to what God looked at when He rejected Esau and chose Jacob; though again I must emphasize that this is but a hint.

- Even their parents favored them for different reasons. Isaac loved Esau more because of the similarity of their hobby – love of the wild game (**25:28**). This was a natural reason. However, Rebekah probably favored Jacob because she had inquired of the Lord in **25:22-23** when the babies jostled with each other in her womb and it was revealed to her that God had chosen the younger. Rebekah kept in mind what the Lord had told her; and thus giving her a more spiritual reason to favor Jacob.
- The appreciation of their birthright was an episode that gets brought into the New Testament; and the writer of Hebrews went so far as to say that the way Esau valued his birthright showed that he was in fact “godless” (**Heb 12:16**). Now, this sounds rather harsh. But Esau *did* see his birthright only in its physical benefits, coveting it probably because the firstborn son would get a double portion (as later legalized in **Deut 21:17**). And because Esau saw the birthright only in its physical benefits, it should come as no surprise that he saw it worthless if he was dead (**25:32**). Esau’s appreciation was merely physical, and therefore, despite his begging and crying over it like he wanted it so much, the writer concluded that he “despised the birthright” (**25:34**). Jacob, on the other hand, underhandedly fought for the birthright. Although this action in itself is a sin (and as we shall see, Jacob shall pay for this mistake for his whole life), nonetheless Jacob showed that he appreciated it so much that he fought for it. Even after visibly losing all his material possessions as he ran away as a fugitive, we see Jacob still hanging on to the promise and finally even wrestling with God to ensure that he attains it. We shall see in the rest of the article what all of this means. But clearly, Jacob appreciated the birthright not merely for its physical benefits but more importantly for its spiritual intent.
- Their marriages are also an important aspect to consider, because it is through a godly marriage that godly offspring are to descend (see **Mal 2:15**). And so, Esau’s marrying (not one but two) Canaanite women who were known for their idolatrous practices meant that Esau placed his fleshly desires above God’s intent. In fact, the women’s behaviors were so unbecoming that they were becoming a great grief to Isaac and Rebekah (**26:34; 27:46**). And when Esau noticed that even Isaac was displeased with this, he only saw the natural reason for Isaac’s disapproval and married an Ishmaelite to please his father. Jacob is thus contrasted as one who would follow in his father’s footsteps and look for a wife not among the Canaanites but among his own people who came under the elect lineage of Shem.

In the background story, therefore, God’s supreme wisdom was demonstrated. God looked at the heart of Jacob – long before he did anything good or bad – and elected him in His supreme wisdom. The unfolding of the story went to prove that God, who knows all things, will not make a mistake that human makes when they judge according to what is seen.

Jacob’s Journey of Faith

By providence the sinful Jacob attained the blessing from God. But what next? Again, if the story ended there, we would be tempted to think that God was unjust and that He compromised on Jacob’s sin. But here’s the Bible’s message: “Those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son.. and those He predestined, He also called; those He called He also justified; those He justified He also glorified” (**Rom 8:29-20**). By grace, God loved Jacob (and us) “while we were yet sinners” (**Rom 5:8**). None of us possess the merit to deserve His love; yet He loved us and called us. But those He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of Christ – it means that we are to live our subsequent lives in conformity to the life of Christ. And God who initiated the faith in us, would work in us to bring it into completion (see **Phil 1:6**), so that we will one day be like Christ (**1 Jn**



3:2). And so, the story was just beginning; and we shall see that the God who called Jacob in his sins will not leave him in his trespasses.

For that reason of process, Abraham's red carpet to responding to God's promise was famine. For that same reason, Isaac's first personal confirmation of the promise was received in a famine just like the one Abraham experienced. And now, moments after Jacob had attained the blessing from his father, we might be already expecting disaster to strike. And it did, though in a different manner. And I see it as no coincidence that none of the patriarchs entered into their covenantal lives in luxury or comfort; but rather in suffering and trials. And I think the purpose of God was that they firstly understood that His promise was not first and foremost physical, but rather spiritual. And that, unlike the practice of other religions, God was not to be utilized for their benefits. On the contrary, they were to be the ones who will glorify God.

Immediately after attaining Isaac's blessing, Jacob had to become a fugitive; running away from the wrath of his own brother. The blessing that he had attained did not serve to provide him with any material sufficiency. To the contrary, it had caused him to lose everything he had ever owned; and forced him to a life of pilgrimage carrying with him only a staff (see **32:10**. Even if this were figurative, it did mean that Jacob had no wealth when he departed). The stay-at-home, non-adventurous son was now forced out of the comfort and safety of his own home and left to fend for himself. Even if God was working it for good, Jacob had to pay for the cunning deception. And perhaps ironically enough, Jacob would pay for his deceitful attitude for his whole life; as we shall learn throughout this lesson.

Jacob must have experienced the greatest shock of his life. The life of blessing was nothing that he imagined. Not only was he stripped of the safety of his own home, his own brother now sought to kill him. God understood this to be a critical juncture; and He intervened. On the way from Beersheba to Haran, Jacob was given a divine dream. In this dream Jacob saw a stairway which top "*reaches to the heaven*" (**28:12**). Angels were ascending and descending on it, and on its very top, Jacob saw the LORD (**28:13**). Now, that it reaches to the heaven is identified by *the Reformation Study Bible* as being of similar description to that of the Tower of Babel (**11:4**). I don't think the similarity is merely coincidental. As we discussed, the Tower of Babel represented man's own ambitious effort at salvation; apart from the grace of God. It represented a rebellion against the authority of God. This, then, is the antithesis of what the Tower of Babel represented. This stairway that reaches to the heaven is one (and the only one) which led to the dwelling place of God Himself. And it was not built by man; but rather revealed and provided by God to a sinful man in desperate need for redemption. Jacob had done nothing to merit the favor of God – on the contrary, he had just done the very thing that should have merited his own demise. And yet, God chose this very manner to pronounce grace. Not through human merit so they could boast, but through their helplessness and hopelessness.

And Isaac's response to this was most interesting:

"If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's house, then the Lord will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all you give me I will give You a tenth" (28:20-22)

It is funny to us that Jacob used an "if then" statement. If God would do this, then I would consider Him as God. If God would provide for me then I would give Him a tenth. What was that about? Why would God even need Jacob's loyalty? And wasn't the tenth that Jacob promised something from God anyway? How is it a big deal if we promise a tenth of what does not belong to us?

But a deeper look into the vow I think tells us of its significance:



- ***Jacob's Reliance upon God.*** Upon hearing God's promise, Jacob herein acknowledges that anything that he gains from this point onwards would be nothing but the providence of God. If he had food to eat, and clothes to wear, those would be given to him by God. Every sufficiency from this point on, would be his *daily bread*. And as it was with Abraham, so Jacob's tithe spoke of this complete and utter reliance upon God. The tenth that he gave would be testament that ALL he had belonged to God. Do keep in mind that this was pre-Mosaic, so even this oath was not one required by the law, but something that came from the depth of Jacob's heart.
- ***Jacob's "Repentance".*** Up to this point, Jacob was on the run from Esau. He was in a state of helplessness and hopelessness, and was unsure of his future (or even if he had any future at all). God's word and promise changed everything. He now had a mission he knew he had to accomplish. He went, in order to return. And just as he committed to acknowledge God in every material sufficiency; Jacob herein also committed to acknowledge God for his safe return. The whole mood of the story changed. Jacob was no longer a fugitive; but a man on a journey. He was no longer hopeless; he was now a man on a mission. And we shall see the significance of this vow next; especially because this vow required that Jacob no longer take matters into his own hands (by lying, that is), but to be completely reliant upon God even when he knew he was on the receiving end of the deception.
- ***Of God's Accompaniment.*** Jacob understood the significance of what he was doing. If he were to succeed in this mission he embarked on, God would have to literally be with Him each step of the way. And if the promise to Abraham was to be fulfilled, it would mean that God would need to dwell with His people and be their God. So, Jacob here gave the first mention of the Temple of God. There was yet any building, any physical temple. Yet, the essence of a temple was God's dwelling with His people. And this was what Jacob acknowledged.

Jacob's Life of Faith – The Liar who can't Lie

Jacob was deceitful. And for that, his whole life would be one filled with deceits; right to its very end. Laban was more than a match for Jacob – he was equally deceitful, if not more than Jacob was. He served Jacob with his own medicine when he “conned” Jacob from the one he so passionately desired – Rachel. Comparing the descriptions of Leah and Rachel, it might be possible that Laban was actually worried that he would not be able to get Leah a husband. After all, she had weak eyes, whilst Rachel was lovely in form and beautiful (**29:17**). Leah had nothing in her that would cause a man to desire her; and so Laban resorted to trickery to get her a husband.

Nonetheless, because Jacob had no wealth with him, working for seven years was the only dowry he could offer to Laban. And so when Jacob unknowingly consummated his marriage with Leah, he was legally unable to insist for Rachel without giving another dowry for her.

Now, this deception would not be the first and last that Laban would do to Jacob. So, to keep the context, I will skip the part about the children of Jacob and get on with this topic.

A 1997 blockbuster comedy entitled *Liar Liar*, which starred Jim Carrey gave a very comedic storyline of a lawyer by the name of Fletcher Reede who was an adept manipulator of truth. One day, however, through the wish of his son, he was suddenly incapable of saying what was false.

The tale of Jacob reminded me of this scene; minus the comedy and minus Fletcher's absolute unwillingness to tell the truth. Jacob plunged into the situation consciously when he made a vow to live the rest of his life as a testament to God's providence for his life (**28:20-22**). From then on, Jacob could no longer take matters into his own hands by reciprocating Laban's deceptive ways. If he had done that, he might have been able to retaliate; and he might have been able to survive, even succeed on his own. But that would have said nothing about God's providence and workings in his life.



A lot of people (and I mean, a lot!) give their objections to this story because it seems to lend legitimacy to Jacob's manipulative ways. Some extremists even make things worse by saying that we should just leave things be; and that God chose deceptive Jacob by His sovereignty, and we need not and must not understand the reason for His election; lest by doing so we belittle His sovereignty. Now, at this juncture I must remind you that I am a five-point Calvinist (although we may need to define the terms more carefully for a more accurate description); and I have also explained how I absolutely affirm Rom 9's description of the sovereignty of God in election. However, I think the mistake of many hyper-calvinists (again, I concur with the need to avoid stereotyping, but I also need to use the broad sense of the word for the sake of definition) was to separate God's absolute sovereignty with His other attributes, like His wisdom, love, justice, holiness, etc. And I think to leave election as just some random choice of God that we are not supposed to understand would take away the wealth of knowledge that is offered in stories like that of Jacob's. Although we must acknowledge that we may never fully understand the wisdom of His election (at least not in this lifetime), we must nonetheless strive for a deeper understanding. I shall argue that understanding election this way would cause us to become more mature whilst avoiding arrogance. It causes us to attain knowledge whilst retaining humility.

It is in this attitude that I invite you to consider the life of Jacob. God chose Jacob in His sovereignty; and He called Jacob just as he was; in his sinful nature. But if God had not called man while still in his sinful nature, none may stand before Him without being consumed (see **Ps 130:3-4**); and salvation would not have been possible. However, upon establishing a covenantal relationship with Jacob, we witness here a life that is transformed by grace! God calls us just as we are; but He will not allow us to stay as we are. God draws us whilst we are yet sinners; but He draws us to participate in the divine nature.

On with the story.

Laban was an adept businessman; but an inconsiderate father. His deception did get Leah a husband; but I do not know if he had considered what a nightmare her life would be, living with a husband who did not love her. And I think it was not even merely an honest mistake. The story actually indicated that Laban was a man who was after profit, and did not mind even the most dishonest gain.

And there are two instances in which this motivation was very evident: ① **His mistreatment of Jacob**. Despite acknowledging the fact that it was actually Jacob who brought him his fortunes (**30:27-30**), Laban actually exploited Jacob very unfairly. He demanded Jacob pay for the losses, but did not properly reward him for the profits (**31:38-39**); he changed Jacob's wages ten times detrimentally; and switched the terms of employment whenever it became beneficial to Jacob (**31:8**) Jacob's putting up with this mistreatment until such point where God directed him away from Laban showed how his profession was done in his faith, for in fear of God he submitted himself to his master, who is not good and not considerate, but harsh (see **1 Pet 2:18**). ② **His misuse of the dowry**. Freeman (1998) noted that dowries were given for dual purposes. It is given to compensate the parents for the cost of raising the bride and for the loss of her services; but it is also given to secure the bride's financial future should the husband dies or deserts herⁱⁱ. Both Leah and Rachel blamed their father for using up the dowries Jacob had paid (**31:15**), which at least partially was meant to be kept for their security. Leah and Rachel also took this act as their father's treating them as business transactions only; and after that treating them as foreigners who forewent their inheritance (**31:14-15a**). Laban was clearly after profits; even in the events of his daughters' wedding.

And so we have quite an unfair match. Jacob's faith in God had bridled his cunning; whereas Laban's sole desire for profit had but poured oil to the fire of his greed. Jacob was absolutely right in his diagnosis, "*if the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had not been with me, you would surely have sent me away empty handed*" (**31:42**); and Laban did not deny the charge. But Jacob here was keeping his oath. He was attributing his success solely to God; and he was trying his best to serve Laban in God's terms. Not in the cunning ways he surely had the capacity to do. There's a saying: it takes one to know one. And Jacob was able to see through Laban's



strategy, because he himself possessed the same quality of shrewdness; one he had decided to lock away in the cage.

The more fairy-tale way of concluding this portion would be to say that the conclusion of the battle of wits still went to Jacob, because God was with him. But to conclude it so simply would belittle the suffering and injustice that Jacob experienced for twenty whole years (**31:38**)! In that twenty years, the providence of God came to Jacob through the injustice, through the hardships. It was not always crystal clear that God was on the steering wheel, directing all the profits Jacob's way. The heat did consume Jacob in the daytime, and the cold at night, and Jacob was deprived of slumber and sleep (**31:40**). Now notice the similarity of this language to **Ps 121**, and consider the significance of its similarity. In **Ps 121**, the Lord's helping His people would mean that the sun will not harm us by day, nor the moon by night; because the Lord who watches over us will neither sleep nor slumber. But this was the exact opposite of what Jacob experienced! Did this mean that Jacob was denying God's aid? No, in fact, it was the exact opposite! Jacob's whole argument was that, despite the difficult experience, God had been helping him. In fact, if God had not been his helper, he would have been left with absolutely nothing (**31:42**). And so this is how we must understand God's protection for the believers. Although in the macro sense of the word, God's protection would indeed mean that we are protected from harm (ie. In this context Jacob was ultimately spared from mortality due to the heat or the cold), we also need to see that in the micro sense of the word, the people of God would still suffer (ie. In this context the heat and the cold still caused Jacob to suffer). The ultimate guarantee that we have in Christ is that absolutely nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God (**Rom 8:35-39**). However, in the course of our everyday lives, there may be times when we feel abandoned and helpless. And those are the trials that God has put in our way, so that we can learn to trust in Him despite what would seem to be obviously unfavorable circumstances.

Israel's Redemption

So, we witness Jacob's repentance in this confession: *"If I have found favor in your (Esau's) eyes, accept this gift from me. For to see your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favorably"* (**Gen 33:10**). Was Jacob exaggerating here? Was he merely saying something to please his brother and to further merit his forgiveness? I believe not. We already see how terrified Jacob was to meet Esau in **32:1-21**.

Jacob was absolutely terrified to meet his brother again. He was afraid that the anger that Esau bore towards him would only deepen through the 20 years he was away; and that his desire for vengeance would be only greater. Yet one thing would be of interest if this were true: Why return then? Why risk everything he had owned for what was most probably his certain death? After all, he was more than surviving on his own – he was thriving!

Well, we need only look into the passage to see the reason. In **31:2-3**, we are told that a new milestone had begun in Jacob's life. Laban had finally realized that his ploy to exploit Jacob backfired. Not only was he no longer gaining profit from his employment of Jacob, but that now this employment had somehow caused his fortunes to bleed away to Jacob. And Jacob was absolutely blameless in the event; resorting to no trickery (I'll explain this part) and even committing to absolute honesty (**30:33**).

Okay, some of you may wonder the part where I said that Jacob did not resort to trickery; especially because Jacob's strategy as described in (**30:37-43**) seems like a manipulation on his part. My own interpretation is that this was no deliberate strategy of Jacob's, but perhaps something instructed by God which Jacob might have done in ignorance (Jacob's explanation in **31:8-9; 10-12** might have hinted this). But even if Jacob knew what he was doing, and somehow his actions had affected the outcome of the breed, this would have been an appropriate and legal strategy, considering what Laban himself had done in **30:35-36**, which undoubtedly sought to deprive Jacob of his much-deserved wages. Personally, I tend to say that Jacob did not know what he was doing, for his trickery seemed rather gibberish to me (it took me a while to merely understand what he did). It wasn't some sort of scientific



method to alter a livestock's breed. And even if some modern readers attempt to explain this in terms of an (unproven) discovery in epigenetics, I think it would be extremely unlikely that Jacob could have known that way back then. Rather, I think Jacob was honest in explaining that it was God who miraculously shifted the odds to his favor, so that whatever Laban agreed to be Jacob's wages would turn out to Jacob's favor, despite Laban's best attempt to do otherwise.

Nonetheless, in this same episode, God was making it clear to Jacob that it would be His last intervention to Jacob's favor; and it was now time for him to go back to his hometown (**31:13**). Now, if you have been paying attention to the story so far, ever since his dream in chapter 28, Jacob had been living his life in accordance to his vow. He would from then on rely on God and glorify God for his daily providence and survival. But the climax to his vow was indeed meant for this very moment. Jacob's vow would climax in his safe return to his hometown (**28:21**). And God was saying that it was now time to fulfill *that* part of the promise.

But facing Esau had been the very thing Jacob was dreading to face. Having been on the receiving end of deception for the last 20 years only made it worse for Jacob – he now understood so well the hurt this sin would cause to its victim. The unfairness, the injustice he had been complaining about to God for the past 20 years was the very wrong he had committed against his brother Esau. And so Jacob expected Esau to still harbor hatred for what he had done. He expected the same ghost that had haunted him for 20 years to have haunted his brother as well.

On the other hand, Jacob had also unmistakably seen God's hand in the past 20 years. He had ran away a fugitive, with no possession and no hope. Yet God's faithfulness had meant that he was able to be as he was. He had proven in the past 20 years that it was indeed God's providence; for he stripped himself off his old ways of deception. He undertook an honest life in the most unfavorable moment of his life. He wouldn't have survived. He couldn't. Yet he did. And his well-being was then a testament to God's faithfulness.

The undeniable facts of his sin and of God's providence were now presented to Jacob all at once. In his journey ahead to see his brother, he expected to face wrath. But in the journey before, he had seen God's faithfulness. There's no easier way to narrate this than to describe it thus: Jacob wrestled with himself unendingly. This was his prayer of struggle before God:

"O god of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, Lord, You who said to me, 'Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper,' I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two camps. Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children. But you have said, 'I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.'" (**32:9-12**)

Jacob was petrified! When he deceived Esau, he was by himself, and if he was to face vengeance, the worst that he would face was his own deserved death. But now that God had blessed him with so many children, his choice would not only impact him but his whole family. He could not afford to wager; he had to be sure.

And so what would happen next should be seen as no coincidence. God would come down to Jacob in a theophany to help Jacob deal with the struggle of his own soul. The struggle Jacob had with God was a mirror to the struggle of his own heart. God was matching him, struggle for struggle, worry for worry until daybreak. God even condescended in such a way that He feigned defeat; though not without leaving hints of His actual prowess. With just a mere touch, the Man crippled Jacob (**32:25, 31**), leaving no doubt that He could have easily defeated Jacob had He intended to. Before ascertaining His identity, Jacob already knew of His divine origin, and Jacob insisted blessing from Him (**32:26**). Jacob had sought a reaffirmation to God's blessing; but what he got was much more humbling. God didn't need to reveal Himself by name, as Jacob already suspected His divinity (**32:29**). In **32:30** Jacob acknowledged that his very survival from such divine encounter was in itself grace. For he had seen God face to face



and lived. And this comfort would aid him in confronting Esau and his own sin. God changed Jacob's name to Israel for the first time here, and it was a testament of his struggle with men and God.

That day, Jacob would meet Esau in his new-found faith. Before the encounter with God, Jacob almost reverted to his old self; setting up manipulative strategies so that he could be received (**32:13-21**). Jacob's gifts went ahead of him in effort to pacify Esau's anger (and probably to make it easier to turn tails and run if all things fail). However, after the struggle with God, Jacob repented and himself went on ahead to meet Esau (**33:3**). After all, this was the climax of the fulfillment of his vow to God – his safe return to his hometown. If he had resorted to trickeries and manipulations, then all would be meaningless.

And so, when Esau received him favorably, Jacob literally found redemption in the undeserved forgiveness of his sin. Seeing Esau's face was indeed like seeing the face of God – his survival was solely by grace. And when all of the story of his return was done, Jacob set up two altars calling it El Elohe Israel ("El is the God of Israel") and El Bethel ("The God of the House of God"). Jacob, or Israel, had vowed that his safe return would be a testament of his God. And finally, God reaffirmed His promise to Jacob and also His covenant with Abraham and Isaac in **35:11-12**; and Jacob or Israel becomes the Patriarch of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Jacob's Final Act

The story would from here on shift to Joseph; and we shall learn about him next week. However, let's skip to **Gen 48**, for there is one final very important act of faith that Jacob did at the end of his life.

In fact, this act of faith is the one chosen by the writer of Hebrews to be the tribute to Jacob. **Heb 11:21** chooses this very moment: "*By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshipped as he leaned on the top of his staff.*" Now, this is a very unlikely tribute. Surely there were many other greater testaments to his faith than simply the act of blessing Joseph's sons?

However, if we have learned anything in the story of Jacob, it is not to judge an event by their outward appearance. The writer of Hebrews wrote in the wisdom that God gave him; so I believe he chose wisely. And, in what I think is a fitting conclusion to the Patriarch's life, we see recurring pattern in how Jacob blessed Ephraim and Manasseh:

- **That God would chose, not man.** It had been, after all, Isaac and not Ishmael. Jacob and not Esau. Joseph and not Reuben. And so, even this time, Jacob rightly discerned that God would give greater blessing to Ephraim and nor Manasseh the firstborn. It was God's sovereign choice, and Jacob discerned it wisely.
- **Jacob's Discernment.** Much earlier on, we see a similar episode of a very old Isaac whose eyes were very weak (**27:1**), who blessed Jacob although he had intended to bless Esau. This time, Jacob, similarly very old and near death; and whose eyes were similarly failing (**48:10**) blessed two of Joseph's sons he had earlier taken as his own. However, the problem with Jacob was not with his weak eyes; Jacob was very aware of God's will. When protested by Joseph, Jacob replied, "*I know, my son, I know*" (**48:19**). But Jacob knowingly blessed the younger with the greater blessing. I believe this was not done in some perverted desire to bless the younger over the elder. Jacob saw something in Ephraim that we are not informed about; but definitely something God-given, for apparently He would indeed bless Ephraim more than He would Manasseh. But my view about this event is that Jacob had in all of his life struggled about his election over Esau; and that struggle had somehow made him more sensitive to how God would elect. And so somehow, when blessing Ephraim over Manasseh, he was using this discernment.

One final thing to note was the writer of Hebrew's observation that after blessing Ephraim and Manasseh Jacob worshipped as he leaned on the top of his staff. Now, I could not find any mention of a staff in Jacob's life safe in



one mention: of how he left his father's house with nothing but a staff (**32:10**). It could be, then, that Jacob kept the staff as a reminder of God's supreme providence in his life.

Jacob's final act of blessing Joseph's sons, then, showed how much he understood God's own work in his own life; how his election was very much a testament of God's sovereignty, His love, His justice and His wisdom. And this being his final act before his death showed how Jacob dedicated his whole life, and the process of God's election, as a doxological blessing: One that comes from God, through God and for God alone.

Side Note: Leah and Rebekah

After discussing the life of Jacob, I just want to make a brief mention for a chapter we skipped in our discussion. So we revert backwards to **29:31-30:24**. Jacob had married Leah, and then Rebekah. However, both of them knew that Rebekah was the favored wife. And so we get another competition.

And we come to the irony I have mentioned about. Jacob, as one of the patriarchs of the nation of Israel, had barren wives (as did Abraham and Isaac). Some may protest and say that this is not the case, since Leah apparently was not barren. However, a detailed look at the verses would say otherwise: "*when the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, He enabled her to conceive, but Rachel remained childless" (**29:31**). In other words, Leah was also initially barren, and it was only because God opened her womb that she was able to conceive. God sort of leveled the playing field so that Leah, who was less loved, would be the first to give Jacob children.*

And I believe that it actually worked momentarily; that every time Leah gave birth to a child, Jacob's attention would shift to her momentarily, which was why Leah and Rachel then made it into some kind of competition.

There are two things, though, which I would like to bring your attention to, which I think is the main message of this narrative:

- **Naming of the Children.** One of the most curious thing about the naming of each of the children was that Leah and Rachel would always be the ones who would give name to the children. Jacob would not be involved in the assigning of any name of his own children. Not only was this uncommon; it also carried a significance. The Hebrew practice of giving names was to denote authority, as well as the hope of the parent toward the child. That Jacob's wives were the ones giving names, therefore, meant that the children were of exceptional significance to each of them. It showed their competitive spirits for Jacob's attention and love. It also showed the state of their spirituality – sometimes they named the child in with very selfish reasons of beating the competition; at other times, they sincerely attributed their fertility to the blessing of God.
- **Beginning of the Twelve Tribes.** The message which is of the utmost importance was how God used this situation of competition to give Jacob twelve children; who will be the patriarchs of the twelve tribes of Israel. Again, God is working for good despite all the mistakes his people would make.

Nevertheless, the message here is clear. God gave to Jacob twelve children as a blessing, so that the blessing which had only been passed down through single families would be now inherited by tribes; and later one whole nation.

Conclusion

What do we make of these stories? Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; collectively the patriarchs of Israel were called by God in the most inopportune of time. But they were called, and consecrated to become a people and a nation through whom God will fulfill His plan for salvation. Each were tested with their own famines and difficulties; and each proved faithful to the calling. God would make sure that in every step of the way, these patriarchs realize that it was indeed God working through them. God would grant each of them the irony that the patriarchs of the blessed



nation would all have barren wives; who conceived only as God divinely allowed. And each of them were called not to rely on their own abilities and prowess but rather to make their lives testaments to God's providence. And, as Paul explains in **Galatians 3**, the righteousness that they received by faith would be a model for all believers. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob lived in obedience *prior* to the giving of Mosaic laws. Their tithes, their altars, Jacob's temple, are all pre-Mosaic. And so, as explained in **Gal 3:18-20**, the law was added only pedagogically – until Christ the promised Seed would come. And therefore, each of us are to live righteously before God not through the bondage of the law, but through the freedom of grace.

But over and above all, these stories of faith should inspire in us lives similarly committed before God. For *“those who have faith are children of Abraham”* (**Gal 3:7**); we therefore inherit through faith the promise given to Abraham. We are thus called to attain righteousness through our faith in God; and in so doing, become a blessing to the nations.

Soli Deo Gloria!

ⁱ Vine, W.E. (1996) *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, Nelson.

ⁱⁱ Freeman J.M. (1998) *The New Manners and Customs of the Bible*, Bridge-Logos Publishers, pp. 40, 56.

