

The Pentateuch

Lesson 9

The Patriarch Jacob

Forum



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Lesson Nine: The Patriarch Jacob

Forum

With

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Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.
Dr. Brian D. Russell
Dr. Douglas Stuart

Question 1:

What is the broad literary structure of Jacob's story in Genesis 25:19–37:1?

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

When it comes to the story of Jacob, this is certainly the case that we can see very plainly, just obviously, that Jacob's story divides into three main parts. The middle section of chapters 29–31 is where Jacob's with Laban. That's the centerpiece of this story of Jacob's life because on the front side of that you have the events between Jacob and Esau, and on the backside of that you have events concerning Jacob and Esau... So obviously then, the story of Jacob divides into these three main parts, and the first part correlates with the last part and the middle section on Jacob and Laban in chapters 29–31 is something of a hinge or a transition piece between that first and that last part. Now, you could call that a chiasm if you want to, and to say that the centerpiece is the crossing of the two others, and that sort of thing, 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... 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.

Dr. Erika Moore

Now, we read about the Jacob story in Genesis 25 all the way to chapter 35, and it's interesting that this cycle, if you will, is sandwiched by two accounts of the non-elect line, so that we have the account of Ishmael's sons in 25:12-18, and the account of Esau's descendants in chapter 36. And in between we get the Jacob cycle. And the broad structure seems to be one of conflict, a conflict that goes back and forth between Jacob having conflict with both people and with God. And at the center of that structure are chapters 29, or the end of 29, and 30. And what do these focus on? Well, right at the center of this structure is an account of Jacob's children, and that's

at 29:31-35. Then it goes on into chapter 30, and then in 30:25 and following, an account of Jacob's flocks increasing. So, you have this Jacob cycle buttressed by the account of the non-elect line, and then when we get to Jacob and Esau themselves, we see the conflict. There's conflict between Jacob and Esau in the womb; there's conflict between the mother and father; there's conflict between the nephew and the uncle. And right in the middle is, once again, God's gracious covenant faithfulness, his *chesed*, if you will, where he blesses Jacob with both progeny and with productivity. So, what we see here is in the context of conflict, and part of that conflict we see that getting resolved where Jacob wrestles with a man? God? The text says both. And I think there's a built-in ambiguity there because that's within his whole life, wrestling with both individuals and with God, and we see that becoming resolved in that wrestling match and then in the reconciliation with his brother Esau. But in the middle of the cycle is God's determination to bless this less-than-stellar character in the covenant community.

Question 2:

What were the causes of the conflict between Jacob and Esau?

Dr. Stephen J. Bramer

When I take a look at the book of Genesis and I'm thinking about the conflict between Jacob and Esau... the conflict originates with the fact that God is going to choose, not the person who in their culture would probably be normally chosen, the oldest, but choose the youngest. And so, therefore, that's going to prove to be part of the reason for the conflict, especially Esau not getting what everyone else, perhaps, in his society is getting as the firstborn. And at the end of Genesis 25, Jacob takes advantage of his brother in his famished condition and deceives him. Well, not quite deceives him, but certainly takes advantage of him and, feeling that he's able to get Esau to sell him his birthright, he trades that, of course, for a bowl of stew... In chapter 27 of Genesis, we see another occurrence where the conflict is augmented. Jacob, along with help from his mother Rebekah, deceives Father Isaac and therefore is able to get rid of any blessing that might be coming to Esau. Apparently, Isaac is going to give some sort of final blessing and perhaps it would delete, or perhaps at least adjust any selling of the birthright, and Esau is hoping for that. And when he finds out that his brother Jacob has deceived him, he wants to kill him.

Dr. John Oswalt

One of the great things about the Bible is its ability to represent human experience with such an air of reality. In my mind, this is one of the marks of inspiration. As you look at other literatures, you don't find that air of realism. So, for instance, in the case of Jacob and Esau, the picture there of Jacob's need as the second son to somehow put himself into a position of priority, how many hundreds of thousands of times has that taken place in the human experience? But it's not presented in just sort of a stereotypical way; it's presented very, very realistically. So, you have Jacob needing two things if he's to fulfill that dream about his priority that his mother got. He's got

to have the birthright, which is basically the position of the firstborn getting a double portion of the inheritance and having the authority as family leader, so he's got to maneuver his brother into that. But he's also got to have the fatherly blessing. There's a sense in which the birthright is the legal authority in the family, and the blessing is the spiritual authority, and he's got to have both of those so that his need to deceive rather than to trust God to work this out in his way is ultimately the base problem there.

Dr. David. T. Lamb

The book of Genesis is full of fratricidal conflicts from Cain and Abel in Genesis 4 all the way to the end of the book with Joseph and his older brothers. In the middle, we see this conflict, yet another fratricidal conflict between Jacob and his older brother Esau. I would say the conflict begins in the womb of their mother Rebekah. There's a battle going on in her belly, and she's like, "Why is this happening?" God speaks to her and tells her, "There are two nations in your womb." I mean, ultimately, we'd say God is the source of this conflict, on some level, orchestrating this in Rebekah. When they're grown up, Esau comes back — Esau's the hunter — he comes back, he's hungry, he didn't catch anything in his quest, and his younger brother Jacob is cooking, and he's got food. And Jacob basically tricks his older brother into giving him over the birthright. So, God's sort of behind the first one, Jacob's behind the second one. The third element of the conflict comes later when Rebekah, the mother, now comes up with an idea to trick her husband Isaac and basically... get the blessing — from the older brother Esau. But Rebekah comes up with a scheme to trick him. So, it's a combination of factors, really, beginning with God, Jacob, and then finally Rebekah, all scheming and then to deceive older brother Esau. And when Esau finds out what's happened, he wants to kill his brother. And a theme of the book, we see it in perhaps the most dramatic way in this conflict between Jacob and Esau.

Question 3:

What lessons might Israel have learned about their relationship with Edom from the stories of Jacob and Esau?

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

The original audience of Genesis, the first generation of Israelites, would have had a lot of lessons they could have learned about the story of Jacob and his relationship with Esau because the descendants of Esau were the Edomites. They would have in that story an example of how they were to relate to some people, not as they related to Canaanites as idolaters and enemies, but rather, near relatives, and they were to treat them as neighbors. And, in fact, the way that Jacob strives to grasp God's blessings when they've been promised to him, Jacob's striving actually produces strife with Edom who is his brother. And so, Israel would have known that instead of striving and trying to obtain by human ingenuity God's covenant blessings, at the expense of their relations with their neighbors, that they should trust God to grant his covenant promises in his time so that they could live peacefully with tribes like the Edomites.

And this is really a reflection of what was promised, or was foretold, in the closing chapters of the flood story where Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth. Shem would be the covenant line. Ham would be the one from whom the Canaanites would descend, and they would be cursed. But Japheth would be blessed by living in the tents of Shem. So, the Israelites had a taxonomy coming from the Noah story that said there were three kinds of people in the world: there were the covenant people to whom God would give the covenant promises; there were those who would share in the blessings of the covenant because of their relation to and drawing near to the covenant people; and then there would be the cursed enemies of God, the idolaters. And so, Israel wasn't to treat everyone in the world like a Canaanite, and the story of Jacob and Esau would be a great example of that.

Dr. Tom Petter

The stories of Jacob and Esau in Genesis are... this is a great illustration for me, to me about tribal relationships. And it goes back to... We could take the story of Moab, too, and the Bene Ammon, the sons of Ammon, because it's part of Genesis. It's the start of the nations that will be neighbors to Israel during the monarchy. So, Edom is a nation that's across the river, across Jordan, in the southern region of the area, and then Moab is to the north, and then Ammon is to the north of Moab. So, you've got these three nations that are neighbors to Israel during the monarchy. But they're not friendly neighbors at all. And so, for the people in Israel during the time of their history, to know where Edom comes from is very significant, because it's a constant thorn in the flesh of Israel, especially Judah. I mean, the kingdom of Judah and Edom are at each other's throats regularly. And so, the Genesis stories composed and written by Moses provide a tremendous backdrop to an Israelite history with Edom that's not a friendly one at all. In fact, they build a fortress in Arad, in the south of Judah, just to protect themselves from these pesky Edomites. And then, but at the end, Yahweh has the final words with the Edomites, and it comes through that little prophet who packs a major punch, Obadiah, because then Edom gets the judgment from Yahweh, because Yahweh has not forgotten that Edom is connected to Israel. And how is that? Because Jacob and Esau are brothers. And they are at each other's throat from the beginning, and that just kind of perpetuates itself throughout the history. And finally at the end, Yahweh says, via the prophet Obadiah, "Enough is enough. Edom, you have been neglecting your brother, you have gloated when your brother Israel, Judah, has been under my judgment and you've not helped them, you've not come to their help and, therefore, I'm going to judge you too." So it's a, I mean, the Jacob and Esau narrative is just a microcosm of a conflict between brothers that's going to explode later on in Israelite history. And so, a compelling story and the details of the fight between Jacob and Esau are great to look at considering where this is all going.

Question 4: **Why did God change Jacob's name to Israel?**

Dr. David T. Lamb

In Genesis 32 Jacob is worried. His brother Esau is coming with 400 men. He prays. God answers his prayer in an unexpected way. As he's going to bed he gets attacked. It's near a river; it's in the middle of the night. I like to think of it as mud wrestling. And all night long he wrestles with a creature that the text calls both a man and God. It's kind of unclear exactly what's going on. At the end of this mud wrestling event, Jacob gets renamed Israel — literally maybe, “God striver.” I like to say, “God wrestler.” Jacob strove with humans and with God, and somehow he prevails. Now, interestingly, Jacob's twelve sons become the twelve tribes of Israel, but they're not called Jacob, the nation is not called Jacob. They're called “Israel” after the God wrestler. And I think, as we look at the story of Israel, we see that this in some ways characterizes the nation. They are constantly struggling, striving in conflict, in some ways with God... The thing about wrestling, there is no sport that's closer, that's more intimate, that's more physical than wrestling. You're totally connected. I think that's a beautiful image for the relationship between God and his people. And as Christians today, we are the new Israel. We are a nation; we are a people who continue to strive and struggle and wrestle with God in this situation in this kind of intimate way. And I think God likes it.

Dr. Douglas Gropp

There are actually two points in the Jacob narratives where Jacob's name is changed by God to Israel. One is in Genesis 32 when he wrestles with this mysterious man, and the other one is when he comes back to Bethel, as he promised to do to pay his vows to the Lord, it's changed to Israel there in Genesis 35... There's no explanation of the name change there, but it resonates very much with the name change from Abram to Abraham in Genesis 17 and from Sarai to Sarah, also in Genesis 17. And I think we should probably make a distinction between modern scientific etymologies based on Semitic cognates and so on from the more folk kind of etymologies and sound plays that we find embedded in the actual biblical narratives. In terms of a scientific etymology, the name Abram and Abraham are really the same name, meaning the exalted father and probably the father referred to as a divine father who is father to the bearer of the name. Similarly, Sarai and Sarah both mean the same thing — two forms of the same name that essentially means either princess or noble lady, or even possibly queen. And the original name Jacob that we know from Ethiopic cognates probably originally meant that “God will protect the bearer of the name.” And the name Israel probably originally meant that “God fights for Israel,” will fight for Israel. But in the narratives, there is a play on the name Jacob so that it's related to the word for heel, and it means something like “to grasp the heel,” the one who will grasp the heel and so cheat somebody or trick somebody out of something, get the better of somebody, and that's how it's used in those narratives. And that depicts Jacob's character in those early narratives. And then, the way “Israel” is used in that narrative, in Genesis 32, is it's explained by this mysterious man he wrestles with: “You have striven with God and with men and have prevailed.” In that same narrative, there's another name, Peniel which means “face of El,” or “face of God,” and Jacob explains the name as he names the place Peniel, “for I have seen God face to face and somehow I got away with my life.” Those two names express from

different angles, I think, the same significance to that narrative... The name Israel, "*Yisrael*," expresses the meaning of the incident from the point of view of divine condescension, that you have wrestled, you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed. How could Jacob prevail over God? It can only be on the analogy of something like a child wrestling with his father and the father allowing him graciously to win. Then the name Peniel expresses the significance of the incident from Jacob's perspective, because, as Jacob explains the name, "For I have seen God face to face and have gotten away with my life." Jacob knows that he's underserving and that he's wondering at the divine favor that he's received. The interesting thing for me is that this unexpected favor from God in this close encounter actually comes home to Jacob at a later point when Jacob, who fears greatly meeting Esau again after Jacob has wronged Esau, when he actually comes face to face with Esau in chapter 33, he says, "I have seen your face like seeing the face of God, and you have accepted me; you have favorably accepted me," he says. So, he receives the forgiveness from Esau as if he were receiving the forgiveness from God.

Dr. Stephen J. Bramer

The incident in Genesis where God changes Jacob's name is actually found in two places: in Genesis 32 and again in Genesis 35. In Genesis 32, Jacob, whose name means "heel-catcher," the one who is grabbing on for what his brother has, is changed to Israel, meaning "he struggles," or "he strives with God." And it comes from that incident where a man wrestled with Jacob during the night, and I believe it's the Lord God because he ends up blessing Jacob. And so, he changes his name saying, "No longer will you identify with the one who is grasping after; you will now be identified with the one who realized that he needs my blessing in order to have all of these promises fulfilled." And when he comes back into the land, when he returns to the place of Bethel where earlier God had given him the promise as he had the angels coming up and down the ladder before Jacob left the land, again God reiterates that his name is Israel. He is a changed person. He has come back to the land, and God is prepared to bless him as he continues to stay close to the Lord and not seek that blessing on his own.

Question 5:

How would the Jacob stories reinforce God's promise that Israel would one day inhabit the Promised Land?

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

The Jacob stories would serve to reinforce the idea for the first generation that it was God's will to bring them to the land, the Promised Land. We see this in the Jacob story, for instance, as he is leaving the Land of Promise out of fear of Esau, that at Bethel God promises him, "I will be with you." And even during his time away from the Land of Promise, we see evidence that God was with Jacob in how he blessed him and prospered him and brought him to the house of Laban where he found Rachel and

Leah, his wives. And so, all that happened to Jacob during his time outside of the land was seen to be under God's sovereign control. And then even as Jacob came back to the Promised Land and he faced his angry brother Esau, he wrestles with God till the break of day with that unnamed angel of the Lord at the brook of Jabbok by Peniel, we can see that God is finalizing his lesson with Jacob: "Don't contend with me, don't strive with me because I have promised to bless you." And so, Israel... would have seen God had been with them in Egypt, and God would bring them back... They would know not to strive with God as they did in the wilderness but, rather, to trust him to bless them and bring them to the Land of Promise. So, there are both positive and negative lessons they could have taken from the life of Jacob.

Dr. Douglas Stuart

Beginning with Abraham, God promised a people would come, and that people would be a blessing to the earth, would have important roles to play. But one of the things also would be that he'd give them a land. That's key to who the Israelites were. They were a people who, when they finally left Egypt and got that land, understood that they didn't deserve it. God had paved the way for them to get a place on the planet that they hadn't earned, that they didn't have any right to, but that he gave them by his own promise and his certain plan to make it happen. Now, Jacob, also called Israel, is key in that, partly because he is the one who builds up the small but growing people of Israel in his own family, so that by the time they get to go down to Egypt, helped by one of his sons, Joseph, who invites them down, once Joseph has revealed himself as a high official in Egypt to his brothers, there are seventy of them that go. It's a big crowd; it's a big family! So, you've got Jacob and you've got his twelve sons, and you've got their own families, in some cases with fairly grown children, and it's a big crowd from which an even greater nation, by far, can grow in Egypt and come back into the Promised Land. So, first, there's just the simple fact of Jacob as the progenitor, the dad, the father, the ancestor of all of these people, the producer of the family. But secondly, Jacob has to have the faith to believe the promises. If you look in the book of Genesis, the promise of land is given to Abraham, but it's given also to his son, Isaac, and it's given *also* to his son Jacob. Jacob has the faith. He's not a perfect person; he's not sin-free. He does some mean things. He often is a poor parent, and we see that. He makes mistakes, gets himself in trouble sometimes, but he's got the faith to trust that God's promises are true. And when the time comes to preserve that family, he takes them down to Egypt and they're there for hundreds of years, but they come back and they're still called the children of Israel.

Dr. Stephen J. Bramer

In the stories about Jacob, we have numerous times God reiterating the Abrahamic covenant to him and promising him that the land would belong to him and to his descendants. But one of the neat times is when Jacob is in Bethel about to leave the land, and yet God assures him that he will return to the land, and the land would be his. I can't help but think that the children of Israel, when they're in exile, when they're no longer in possession of the land, would look back at that and say to themselves, "The land is not just ours because we have continual occupation in it, it is ours because it is based upon a promise of God." And so I think the children of Israel,

down through the years, even when they were being disciplined by God, when they were running for their lives, as Jacob was running from his brother Esau, would remember God has made a promise and that someday the land will be our possession.

Question 6:

What did God's words to Jacob in Genesis 28:14 teach Israel about its role as a blessing to the nations?

Dr. Erika Moore

We read in the Jacob cycle this interesting promise from the Lord, and I'm reading here from Genesis 28:14:

Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring (Genesis 28:14).

Well, where have we heard that before? Well, we heard that in Genesis 12 when the Lord calls Abram and says, "I'm going to make your family a great nation, and out of you all the nations of the world will be blessed." And we see the Jacob cycle, we see that Jacob is to be a blessing to the people that he comes in contact with, and yet there's a very sobering story in chapter 34. It's the story of Dinah and Shechemites... Back in 28 he said that he would come back to Bethel. But he stops 20 miles short because we're told in chapter 33:16 that he stops in Shechem, which is about 20 miles short, and he sets up camp there. And one day one of his daughters, Dinah, goes out to the town, and one of the prince's sons sees Dinah and violates her. And then the story is told how Jacob's sons dupe the Shechemites into getting circumcised, and then they destroy them. What's going on here? Well, it's similar to what... It's a parallel situation to Genesis 12. As soon as the Lord tells Abraham, "You're to be a blessing to all the nations," he goes to Egypt because of a famine, and what does he do? He pawns Sarah off as his half-sister. And then, instead of blessing, cursing comes to Egypt because Abraham is not trusting in the Lord. So, too, here Jacob is not trusting the Lord. He doesn't go all the way to Bethel as he had promised back in 28, and the result is that the nations, in this case the Shechemites, are cursed because of his disobedience. So, we see that the purpose of the Lord calling Abram and then Jacob and his sons was so that all the nations of the world could be blessed. But when they sin, we see that it has the opposite effect and they actually end up cursing the nations, which just shows us that this all points to we need a true Israel, we need Jesus, who can be the one through whom all the nations of the world are blessed.

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Among other things, God promised Abraham in Genesis 12:3 that Israel, his descendants, would become a blessing to every family, every nation on the earth.

And, of course, this is what Christians believe comes through Jesus as the gospel goes to every nation in the world. But that theme of God blessing all the nations through Abraham also reappears in Genesis 28:14 in the life of Jacob. Jacob at Bethel receives this blessing: that he will have many descendants, they will live in the Promised Land, but then they will spread to the east, to the west, to the north and the south, and because they spread out, they will then become a blessing to all the nations of the world. And then the story of Jacob also emphasizes this as Jacob interacts with Esau — the father of the Edomites, who are the people of the south — and of Laban, when he interacts with Laban, and these are the people of the north. And so, as you deal with those two boundaries or those two borders of the Promised Land, Edom and Laban up north, then what you have is interactions of Jacob with people around him, other people other than his own descendants. And we see in both of those stories that Jacob interacts both positively and negatively with those people. It's important to realize that in Genesis 12:3 when God says that Abraham will become a blessing to all the nations, which is then repeated in chapter 28:14 for Jacob, that God also says this to Abraham: "Those who bless you I will bless, and those who curse you" — or disdain you — "I will curse." And so, this interaction with other peoples that will lead eventually to the blessings of all the nations isn't just positive, it's also negative. And so, blessings and curses work together in God's economy, or God's providence, eventually will lead to Jacob becoming a blessing to all the nations. This is the theme that comes out for the people of Israel in the days of Moses. They were going to the Promised Land. But why were they going to the Promised Land? What was the endpoint? What was the goal? What was the destiny? Was it that God would just bless them, that God would give them good things, that God would save them from their sins and give them eternal life? No. It was that they, as the instruments of God, would become the conduit of blessings to all the families of the earth, something that we see repeated over and over in the book of Genesis but also we see later on in the Bible as well, say in Psalm 72, where it is said that the blessing will be given to all peoples in fulfillment of Abraham's promise by means of the house of David. Psalm 72 in many respects for the Old Testament is the climax of this, the hope that then is centered in the house of David as the one to whom, through whom all the nations of the earth will be blessed.

Question 7:

What are some major themes that can be found within the Jacob stories?

Dr. Douglas Gropp

I think the overall theme of the narratives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the patriarchs, is the promise to the patriarchs, which I would regard as threefold: having to do with many descendants, the promise of the land of Canaan, and a relationship to the nations, either for blessing or for curse. And we can abbreviate those as seed, land and nations. But within each of the segments of the patriarchal narratives, Abraham,

Isaac and Jacob, I think we can speak of subthemes as well. And in the Jacob narratives in particular, I would pinpoint two themes, two subthemes. One has to do with struggle, and Jacob struggles. He struggles with Esau, he struggles with his relative Laban in Haran, and then his wives struggle among themselves, particularly Rachael and Leah, but the central struggle he has is with God that we see in his wrestling match in Genesis 32. So that's one set of subthemes. The other is his relationship to the land. Jacob begins in the land, and he is exiled from the land in part because of his hostile relationship that develops with Esau and he has to come back into the land. And there's a question there of whether God will fulfill his promise to him, as a child of the promise, of possessing the land in all of that. And the two themes come together in... Genesis 32:23-33, the passage where he wrestles with this mysterious man. That man seems to be barring his way back into the Promised Land in some sense, perhaps guarding the holiness of the holy land, the holiness of God's presence in the land.

Dr. Robert B. Chisholm, Jr.

Well, as I prepare to teach the Jacob stories, I recognize there are two, maybe three major themes. One would be the sovereignty of God. God is in control of things, he has a plan for Jacob, and he is bringing it to fruition. Related to that is the providential protection and provision of God. All along the way, Jacob is doing really stupid, selfish things... but the Lord counters that by bringing Jacob through those difficult times and teaches him a lesson. And then that leads us to the third major theme, which is the importance of trusting God rather than our own wits and schemes and deceptiveness. We need to trust that God is working in our lives, and we don't need to do dishonest things to try to get ahead.

Dr. Brian D. Russell

Jacob confronts us with some interesting problems, because at some level Jacob doesn't act in ways that we might expect, to being one of the heroes of the Bible. He starts off kind of cheating his brother; he cheats his father-in-law; he gets himself into all kinds of trouble. And one of the things when we're trying to preach or teach from it, we have to deal with that. So one of the key goals is to sort of release ourselves from trying to make Jacob look good in places where he really doesn't. Now, he changes in the story, but early on we don't have to make the guy look good; let's let the Scriptures do with what they want, because God is trying to do something bigger in the Jacob story. One of the key themes that we don't want to miss is promise. That extends through to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Genesis 12 to 50 are less about how great Israel's ancestors were and a lot more about how God is completely faithful to his promises. He calls broken people to be his agents of blessing. Some of these characters do a little better than others. Joseph is exemplary, for example. But Jacob, he makes... he challenges that whole notion, because Jacob tries to use human power and human means to advance, ultimately, Jacob's purposes. But in God's mission, it's God advancing God's purposes. So we want to remember that God's promises frame this. God has called Israel to be his people, his agents of blessing to the nations, and Jacob receives that and he's going to carry that promise. We know that from even before he was born... And so, Jacob is going to supplant his older

brother as God's choice. So one of the... And that's an interesting theme. We have... The theme of the firstborn is a thread that goes through Genesis, and we see it in Jacob's account. And sometimes you can read that and think this is really unfair, but God's trying to make a point in this. And this is a key thing for preachers. God's trying to demonstrate that God's salvation doesn't come through typical human channels. And so, Jacob, as the second born, just like Isaac as the second born, demonstrates that typical human culture in the ancient world — and we still see this today in some contexts — the firstborn son was the means by which a family would secure its fortune, and it would essentially give all the wealth to that firstborn son to make sure that one member of the family carried on that family tradition. But if God is going to demonstrate that he's the Savior, we really wouldn't expect God to use typical human means, so God uses the second born to remind us that we're saved not by power or by our own ingenuity or by human culture, but by God's grace.

Dr. Stephen J. Bramer

When I think of the Jacob stories, there are some wonderful little ethical, moral lessons it can teach. But I would want to emphasize some themes that are broad that go throughout the story. And it seems to me that one theme is the reliability, the trustworthiness of the promises of God. It's repeated over and over again, and although at the very end of Jacob's story he is down in Egypt, God's promise of bringing him back to the land and promising to his descendants the land is a theme that is important. God's word comes true. I think another theme I would emphasize would be the fact that God keeps his promise and works with people even when they are disobedient. Jacob is a heel-catcher, he's a deceiver, he's one who early on in his life was always trying to do it himself by manipulating people, and yet God works with him. The disobedience of Jacob doesn't undo the fact that God can still carry out his will and his promises. And I think, thirdly, I would emphasize that God can change people. Too often I hear, "Well, that person's been like that for so many years," and yet, Jacob, after being out of the land for 20 years and being deceived by others, God comes into his life and is able to change his life. And so, not only now can God's will be done, but Jacob can enjoy the blessing of cooperating with God and allowing God's promises to come true.

Question 8:

How do the Jacob stories illustrate God's grace?

Dr. Erika Moore

The Jacob stories illustrate over and over again for us God's gracious dealings with his people. First of all, Jacob; he's one of the chosen. So, we see that God has kept his promise to Abram. And we see that God is not bound by conventions of the day. So, he takes Jacob over Esau, he chooses the younger over the older. And it's not because Jacob is such a stellar example of grace and faithfulness. It's because God chose him. And so, we see God's grace. In fact, I think that when you read the text in the Jacob

cycle, we see Esau is just represented as this gruff man who has no interest in covenantal things. But we look at Jacob and we see that he too has reprehensible features; he's a deceiver. And we see the irony in that later. He himself will be deceived by his uncle Laban. But we see God's grace working through this reprehensible man named Jacob, and we see a transformation taking place in chapter 32, when he returns from Laban, and he doesn't return empty-handed. Right? He leaves empty-handed. He's on the run, his brother Esau wants to kill him, and yet he returns with a wife, with several wives, with children, with numerous flocks, and again, it's not because of his faithfulness. I mean, his peculiar, ill-conceived ideas about animal husbandry, his roughness, we see that God, in spite of these things, works through these things, and God in his grace continues to bless Jacob so that we see God's graciousness is not dependent on the faithfulness of Jacob. It's dependent on God's own love and his own commitment to Abraham that he will bless his family, they will become a nation, and out of that nation, all the nations of the world will be blessed.

Dr. Robert B. Chisholm, Jr.

As we read through Genesis 25–37, we discover that God, through a series of events, transformed Jacob's life. I have a sermon on Jacob's life, which I entitle "Transformation of a Trickster from Self-Sufficient Schemer to Dependent Worshiper." And God has to get Jacob's attention. God wants to do some great things through him, and he gives him a promise. And it's amazing, in Genesis 28 Jacob stiff-arms God. He holds God out and he says, "Well, I'm not so sure I want to cut a deal with you yet. If you bring me back safely, then you will become my God." So, that's the kind of person Jacob is. He really relies on his own wits and skills, and God has to teach him a lesson. He uses Laban to do that because there is somebody out there who's better at scheming and deceiving than Jacob is. And Jacob eventually realizes this and comes to the point where he realizes that his future is dependent on God's blessing and God's providence, not his own schemes. And so, that whole series of events is designed to bring Jacob to that point.

Dr. Carol Kaminski

The story of Jacob is just one of those rich stories in the book of Genesis. And sometimes we can go to the book of Genesis, and we look at the patriarchs like Abraham or Isaac, Jacob, and we can go to them and look to them for... to be examples of moral behavior. We can kind of look quickly and then say, "Okay, something else is going on here. What else is going on?" So, what do we know about Jacob? You know, you see early on with the story with Jacob that God has placed a blessing upon him, a call upon him, but you see him struggling with his brother. And of course, the most pitiful scene is when his dad's old in age and he dresses up like his brother and his dad says to him, "Is that you Esau?" and he says, "It is I." And he says, "Come closer. Is it you?" And it's just a pitiful scene. And I remember the first time that I translated that passage in Hebrew, and all my sympathies were with Esau. I just thought, oh, this is just awful, and his dad's old. And so, you know, his dad blesses Jacob, and then Esau comes in and is furious and says, "Don't you have a blessing for me?" And of course, this leads to the rivalry between the two of them.

But immediately after the story of Jacob, he flees, and what happens next? God comes to him in a dream and he blesses him. And I remember the first time I read that, and I thought, you've got to be kidding me. Why is it that God is blessing Jacob? And of course, Paul picks this up to say that Jacob wasn't chosen because he was a good man. And so the patriarchs are under divine grace, and we see this with Jacob in that God is not choosing him based on him being good, based on him being righteous, but it is based on his sovereign hand upon him and his grace and his mercy that comes to him. And so, what actually happens in the story of Jacob... And Jacob knows the grace and mercy of God, because in the story when he, a number of years later after he's had lots of children and wives, and then he goes to meet Esau, and Esau comes at a distance, and he's absolutely afraid for his life. And he goes to meet Esau, and he gives him all these gifts, and he's trying to kind of buy Esau's favor; that's what he says, "If I've found favor," and he gives him all these gifts. Now, when Esau comes to him, he just weeps and embraces him. And Jacob says, "I have seen you as one who's seen the face of God for you have accepted me favorably." And so, I think one thing we want to take home from Jacob is that when God calls people, he's not calling good people or righteous people — and this is the founder of Israel! He's calling people like you and me, and he gives them his grace and his mercy. And what we also see with Jacob is on this journey there is one particular key moment in the journey where he's carried these idols with him, and he goes back home and he buries his idols. And the Scripture then talks about, he doesn't then call upon the God of Abraham and Isaac, but he calls upon "my God." And so, I think he comes to know the God of the Old Testament, and it is beginning in his sin and in his messiness, and yet God also changes his name to Israel, that, rather than being deception, there's a new identity that he starts to have because the God of Israel comes to him. He doesn't come to him when he's a good person but comes to him amidst the mess of it all, and he's going to make a change in his life.

Question 9:

What are some practical ways we can apply the Jacob stories to our own lives today?

Rev. Dr. Cyprian K. Guchienda

Some of the practical ways we can apply Jacob's stories in our lives today are like ... Jacob wrestling with God. You know, there's no way any one of us can wrestle with God when we sit and think about it, because we know God is powerful; God is Creator; God is able. We are not all that. So, but we know that Jacob wrestled with God, and he earned a limp. And we find ourselves wrestling with God, asking questions. When bad things happen in our lives, asking, "Where is God in this?" we wrestle with him. Or asking, "Why is God not coming through for this difficult challenge?" And this is a Christian; this is a believer. And we can see others who do not believe in God doing well. We look at those things and wrestle with God, and that teaches us that, as human beings, we are created; we have some inadequacy in us. And that inadequacy can only be found in God. It cannot be found in anything else.

Dr. Robert B. Chisholm, Jr.

Well, there are many ways that we can apply the Jacob story to our own lives. I'll mention a couple, the two major ways, I think. One is that we need to trust God. When God promises us something, he will bring that to fulfillment through his providence, his intervention, and we really need to really trust God, that God is in control of our lives and leading us toward the goal that he has for us as individuals, as a church, as his people. We also need to learn from Jacob's experience that we don't accomplish things through our own wits and schemes and deceiving and cheating and self-reliance. Jacob felt as if success were dependent on his ability to, kind of, forge his way and trick other people, if necessary, and we should not be doing that as the people of God.

Dr. John Oswalt

When we think about the biblical story of Jacob, it illustrates so very well the terms and the character of all of our lives. The fundamental issue there is trust. Will we trust that God has our best interests at heart? Will we trust that he knows our needs better than we will? Or will we insist on somehow trying to meet our needs ourselves? That was Jacob's problem, and it was really not until coming to that place where he knew himself to be helpless, where he knew that unless he had the blessing of God, nothing that he had was worth anything. It was only when he came to that place that he was really able to move forward and be the kind of man that God wanted him to be. I think that's true for all of us. Every one of us has to come to that place where we surrender our needs into God's hands, where we do believe that he is for us, and knowing that, can receive from him all he wants to give us.

Dr. David T. Lamb

One of the big themes throughout Scripture is waiting. God makes Abraham wait for a son. God makes Jacob wait for a wife. And God also makes Jacob wait to get reconciled. We see the theme of waiting show up in a big way in the book of Genesis. And I think waiting is always difficult. And Jacob, as he was waiting, did not always respond faithfully. But I think it's great that his story is in Scripture, and God is still able to work through this flawed patriarch during his time of waiting. So, one of the things, when I talk to my students about this, is a lot of them are waiting for a child, maybe they're waiting to get married like Jacob, or they're waiting for something else, for a home or for a job or whatever. Waiting is a big theme. The question that God has for us is, can we trust God while we are waiting? Jacob didn't always trust him. He had that vision of this ladder connecting the heaven to the earth, with the angels coming up and down, kind of a symbol that God was somehow with him and aware of what's going on for him. So, he could hold onto that. But it's hard to wait, and I think the story of Jacob shows us how God's still looking out for his people and may sometimes make them wait for a long time, but he can still be trusted. And we can wait for him and know that he will be faithful to give us what he has promised.

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