

GENESIS—WEEK 23

JACOB'S JOURNEY OF FAITH



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is Jacob's Dream by Ferdinand Bol (1616–1680)
On display at Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister in Dresden*

Esau's anger over having his blessing stolen scares Rebekah, and so she launches another scheme. This time she has Jacob flee under the pretense of finding a non-Canaanite wife. This turns into a life-changing road trip. Jacob encounters the LORD and gets a clue.

He's still a piece of work, but it's a solid start.

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Thank you.

Genesis 27:41-28:22—Jacob's Journey of Faith
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1 Genesis 27:41–45 (NKJV)

So Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father blessed him, and Esau said in his heart, “The days of mourning for my father are at hand; then I will kill my brother Jacob.”

And the words of Esau her older son were told to Rebekah. So she sent and called Jacob her younger son, and said to him, “Surely your brother Esau comforts himself concerning you by intending to kill you. Now therefore, my son, obey my voice: arise, flee to my brother Laban in Haran. And stay with him a few days, until your brother’s fury turns away, until your brother’s anger turns away from you, and he forgets what you have done to him; then I will send and bring you from there. Why should I be bereaved also of you both in one day?”

Good job Rebekah. Your plan worked flawlessly. How’s that working out for you, eh?

So, we’re back to her saying to Jacob, “*Obey my voice.*” This time it’s all about damage control. Her “success” now threatens to ruin everything. For the zillionth time, do not try to help the LORD keep His promises! He’s God, for heaven’s sake (pun intended). He doesn’t need your help.

This lesson keeps repeating because it needs to be repeated. All this history is needed to teach people who are just as stupid as Rebekah. That’s you and me, bub.

Just think for a moment about the magnitude of this stupidity. Rebekah believes absolutely in the power of Isaac’s blessing—but the LORD’s prophesy spoken directly to her? Not so much.

The Bible spends thousands of pages detailing the nature of sin. This is where Christian doctrine kicks all other psychological theories to the curb. You can’t explain these nutty behaviors with a psychological model based on selfishness, or evolution, or whatever theory is popular this month. Only sin explains it.

For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. ... O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! — Romans 7:15, 24–25a (NKJV)

One of the great errors we make is thinking that we’ve arrived. Specifically, many Christians are under the impression that their conversion has cured them of this terrible condition called sin. The church tries to correct this error by teaching, “Justification is not sanctification.”

That’s true, but “memorizing correct doctrine is not learning correct doctrine” either. We “know” that our sinful nature is still present, but we don’t really see it in the mirror. We pay lip service to our struggle with sin but aren’t truly depressed by it. In our heart of hearts, we’re too comfortable with our progress.

This is the great challenge in walking with Christ—to know the total forgiveness of the gospel, yet still be driven nuts by our battle with sin. We need to suffer the anguish Paul describes in Romans 7.

It’s supposed to hurt.

2 Genesis 27:46-28:5 (ESV)

Then Rebekah said to Isaac, “I loathe my life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob marries one of the Hittite women like these, one of the women of the land, what good will my life be to me?”

Then Isaac called Jacob and blessed him and directed him, “You must not take a wife from the Canaanite women. Arise, go to Paddan-aram to the house of Bethuel your mother's father, and take as your wife from there one of the daughters of Laban your mother's brother. God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples. May he give the blessing of Abraham to you and to your offspring with you, that you may take possession of the land of your sojournings that God gave to Abraham!” Thus Isaac sent Jacob away. And he went to Paddan-aram, to Laban, the son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, Jacob's and Esau's mother.

Okay, this is strange. Jacob had tricked Isaac into giving him Esau's blessing. *Then Isaac trembled very violently and said [to Esau], “Who was it then that hunted game and brought it to me, and I ate it all before you came, and I have blessed him?”* — Genesis 27:33a (ESV)

Now it looks like all is forgotten, and Isaac's happy. He even asks God to give the blessing of Abraham to Jacob. How is that possible? What changed?

This looks like it has something to do with the LORD's prophesy to Rebekah in Genesis 25:23.

And the LORD said to her, “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger.” (ESV)

When Isaac tried to give his blessing to Esau, he either didn't know about the prophesy, or wasn't thinking about it, or was resisting it. Now he's mindful of God's will for his sons and is good with it.

There's no indication that Rebekah kept the prophesy secret (or had any reason to). However, that was years ago, and she might have told it to Isaac in a way that didn't stick. It meant a lot to Rebekah—she was distraught over the battle going on inside her—but Isaac may have been busy and just said something akin to, “Yes, dear.”

But now it seems to be on his mind. Maybe she reminded him of the prophesy and that calmed him down. Or maybe, as he was shaking in disbelief over how he'd been deceived, he recalled it and connected the dots on his own. No matter how the change happened, Isaac had been on the wrong side of God's will.

He was, to use the New Testament expression, “kicking against the goads.”

Have you ever done that—noticed that things were going against you in ways so extraordinary that they felt supernatural? That can be a great blessing in disguise.

Any time you're amazed at your “bad luck,” open your eyes. Consider that God might be trying to get your attention.

3 Genesis 28:6–9 (ESV)

Now Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob and sent him away to Paddan-aram to take a wife from there, and that as he blessed him he directed him, “You must not take a wife from the Canaanite women,” and that Jacob had obeyed his father and his mother and gone to Paddan-aram. So when Esau saw that the Canaanite women did not please Isaac his father, Esau went to Ishmael and took as his wife, besides the wives he had, Mahalath the daughter of Ishmael, Abraham's son, the sister of Nebaioth.

Esau should be seething mad. Yet instead of pursuing Jacob to kill him like he said he would, he has an attitude adjustment and starts trying to please his parents. What happened?

The text tells us that he saw Isaac tell Jacob, “*You must not take a wife from the Canaanite women.*” That must have been a giant wake-up call.

Esau saw that the Canaanite women did not please Isaac his father. He now realizes how his Canaanite wives *made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah.* We don't know if they made life bitter for him too, but when he hears his father make darn sure that doesn't happen again with Jacob, he takes it to heart.

Also, Esau may have just learned of the LORD's prophesy about him and Jacob. Seems like everything in this household gets overheard, and his parents may have just had some loud conversations about that prophesy. By now, they should have told him anyway.

In any case, Esau has a real change of attitude and it's to his credit.

This will help us make sense out of some events to come.

Do not miss how extraordinary this is. Esau had just been cheated. He had every right to be furious. Yet, he saw his own errors and worked on them—instead of working on getting even.

Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? ... You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye. — Matthew 7:3, 5 (ESV)

There's an advanced principle here—the times when you're hottest about someone else's faults are actually the best times to work on your own. You're attuned to *why* the issue is worth working on, even if your focus is on someone else. With your blood already up, all you need is some humble self-awareness.

But notice that Jesus also made a second point—removing the plank from your own eye helps you *see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.* So, even if you haven't let go of the objective of fixing someone else's fault, you still need to fix yours first. That'll make you a better fixer of others.

It seems like almost every lesson in the Bible eventually gets around to teaching humility.

There's a reason for that.

4 Genesis 28:10–17 (ESV)

Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. And he came to a certain place and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, “I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it.” And he was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

Now it’s Jacob’s turn to have an attitude adjustment. Remember, Jacob is running away from his brother, who threatened to kill him. Before he gets far, God gives him a big wake-up call.

Up to this point, Jacob has pretty much been a total loser. Besides all the lying and stealing, he couldn’t care less about God. He made this clear when he explained to his dad how he (disguised as Esau) got the wild game so fast.

But Isaac said to his son, “How is it that you have found it so quickly, my son?” He answered, “Because the LORD your God granted me success.” — Genesis 27:20 (ESV)

“Your God”?? No doubt, Isaac taught his children about their heritage and all the wonderful things the LORD has done. Jacob’s explanation was disrespectful of all this—and he did it reflexively, without thinking, while he was concentrating on faking being Esau.

So, God fills Jacob in on where he is, who He is, and what’s going to happen next. But the important thing is that Jacob has the classic “discovering God” shock—a retroactive loss of privacy. He realizes that he’s not alone and that he’s never been alone.

And he was afraid.

The doctrines of God’s omniscience and omnipresence are just peachy, as long as we don’t talk about the impact they have on our privacy. That sort of talk sounds like legalism, and we know that legalism wrong.

But it’s not legalism. In fact, it’s one of the keys to the gospel of grace. If God’s forgiveness is based on His not knowing the whole truth, then it’s not really grace.

Accepting God’s love is hard. We can think, “If He knew all the things I’ve done, there’s no way ...”

God is not ignorant, and He makes interesting choices. Praise Him for that.

5 Genesis 28:18–22 (NKJV)

Then Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put at his head, set it up as a pillar, and poured oil on top of it. And he called the name of that place Bethel; but the name of that city had been Luz previously. Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on, so that I come back to my father’s house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God. And this stone which I have set as a pillar shall be God’s house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You.”

If the Guinness Book of World’s Records had an entry for “worst confession of faith,” this would be a sure finalist. Jacob says, “*the LORD shall be my God,*” **if** five things all go the way he wants them to. Wow, what a piece of work he is.

And the worst part of it may be what he does with the rock. A pillar is a pagan worship practice; he should have built an altar.

And describing a pillar as God’s house is just silly. Jacob is trying—the oil he pours on the pillar is valuable—but he has no concept of God as the Lord of everything (especially of Jacob).

Jacob needs some lessons in theology—and he’s about to get them.

This will be a magnificent example of God’s tough-love educational program for people who don’t deserve His love.

Jacob is suffering wake-up-calls almost as dramatic as those suffered by Job—and there’s an interesting lesson in that. Jacob is one of the least admirable people in the Bible, while Job is all the way at the other end of the scale. Yet they both suffer top trials.

The most tried people in scripture tend to be great saints—Noah, Joseph, Jonah, Peter, Paul, etc. Except for Paul, they led admirable lives, and the part of Paul’s life that wasn’t admirable was the part where he didn’t suffer trials.

God’s educational system seems to always be some kind of tough love. He relentlessly pursues character development, and He doesn’t slack off on those characters that are already pretty well developed. In fact, the more developed characters tend to get the greater trials.

That makes sense. Suppose you were a coach training two athletes; one was average and the other had a shot at the Olympics. Which one would you push harder?

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, — James 1:2 (NKJV)

Trials are indicative of great things. No one likes trials, but when you are tried, take comfort in the fact that God has chosen you for some advanced training.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What’s the most extreme case of damage control you’ve personally been involved in?
2. Do you usually look for a supernatural explanation when things are frustrating or don’t make sense?
3. Have you ever discovered that your anger at someone was wrong—that it was all your fault?
4. Do you feel forgiven?
5. What was your favorite trial you’ve experienced?