

Lesson 6: Genesis 23-35 Isaac and Jacob

Introduction

Our simple outline of Genesis divides the book into two parts. Chapters 1-11 focus on all humanity and the four events of Creation, Fall, Flood and Nations. Chapters 12-50 focus on one family and the four people Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. I gave two lessons to Abraham, the father of our faith, to whom God made the promise. Now I am going to speed it up a bit by covering the stories of Isaac and Jacob with one shot. I will use the narrative of Isaac to set up our covenant context. And then I will focus on the narrative of Jacob, the story of a son of believing parents who struggles to come to terms with his faith heritage.

We start with Isaac.

Isaac's Story

According to the genealogy or generations structure of Genesis, the narrative of Isaac does not stand out on its own. Isaac's story is a bridge overlapping Abraham's story and Jacob's story. Remember that Moses gave us 10 genealogies in Genesis. My Bible uses the word generations. We started with the generations of heaven and earth in 2:4. Then we had the generations of Adam and then the generations of Noah, the generations of Shem, Ham and Japheth, then just the generations of Shem all the way down to Terah. Some of these generations statements are lists of descendants with just a little bit of narrative commentary. Others, like the generations of Terah, introduce a story. And that story is not usually about the one named, but about one of the sons of the one named. The generations of Terah, for example, introduces not the story of Terah but the story of his son Abraham.

Following that pattern, we might expect to encounter somewhere the phrase, "These are the records of the generations of Abraham," which would then lead into the story of Isaac. That is not going to happen. We find the narrative of Isaac included at the end of Abraham's story and then at the beginning of Jacob's story. And that is Genesis 24-26.

Isaac and Doublets

One thing we learn from Isaac's story is that in the Ancient Near East, the best place to find a wife is at a well. Apparently, it happens a lot. We are going to see it repeated. Narrative repetitions like this are sometimes called doublets. Abraham lies about Sarah not once but twice. Then Isaac is going to lie about Rebekah. Some scholars argue that these doublets exist because the details of some original story have been confused or mixed up or intentionally changed. The story then gets attached to two different people or events at two different points on somebody's timeline. That's how they explain doublets in the narrative, one story that has been repeated.

And that does seem to make a lot of sense. Because what man would ever commit the same exact sin twice in his life? And what son would ever repeat the sin of his father? That's my problem with the scholarly skepticism about doublets. It is in fact quite believable that a man would mess up in the same way twice and that a son would make the same mistakes as his father, even after he says, "I am never going to be like my father." And then he goes and acts just like his father. Nobody is surprised by that in real life. And this kind of repetition in real life is exactly the kind of story you would want to include in a person's biography if you are writing the biography. It is both interesting and telling. With Abraham it is telling that a man secure in his belief in the promise of God and a man who is growing in his faith would also be a man who continues to struggle and sins in the exact same way as he did when he was a new believer. That tells us something about the struggle of sin in the life of faith. These two realities exist in tension, children of God mature in their faith and children of God continue to struggle with sin. The sin of Isaac lying about Rebekah is also telling. We see that sin is not only passed on through birth but is also socialized into children. Our sinful habits, inclinations, and responses can be picked up and carried on by our sons and daughters. That's just reality.

Not all doublets are bad examples. The repetition of finding a woman at a well is a positive repetition. Robert Alter describes the bride at the well as a motif similar to a western gunfight scene (*The Art of Biblical Narrative*). It is a known literary idea that has some expected elements, like high noon and twitchy fingers, a good guy and a bad guy. You just mention the gunfight scene and an expected picture comes to mind. The literary artist uses the scene to bring up something expected. So, we can immediately imagine a well and a man at the well and a woman coming to get water at the well. And then that literary artist takes that and uses it to highlight something that is different. Even though there is similarity between all these meetings at the well. There is always also differences. Here we have a servant meeting the bride at the well. In the next story, Jacob the groom will meet his bride at the well. The difference is between a servant and a son. There is also a difference in how the story plays out, the first leads to a happy ending, the second leads to struggle and strive.

Alter does not seem to care too much about whether the stories are historical. His focus is on the way the stories are used in literature. I am quite comfortable with the stories being both true and also good literature. The art of theological biography, takes interesting events in the lives of people and then, while remaining faithful to historical events, communicates the story in a way that reveals truth about God, about people, and about the world we live in. The historical nature of the stories grounds the revealed truth in real life. That is crucial in biblical narrative. This is not theoretical truth or merely psychological truth, this is truth played out in the real life events of real people.

Isaac and Covenant Renewal

There is another very important repetition in Isaac's story that we should take note of. In Genesis 26:24 we read,

The LORD appeared to him the same night and said,
"I am the God of your father Abraham;
Do not fear, for I am with you.
I will bless you, and multiply your descendants,
For the sake of My servant Abraham."

The Lord made covenant with Abraham and his descendants. Here he reaffirms that covenant directly to Isaac. When I introduce the kingdom motif, which includes a king who defines relationship with his people through covenant, I said that the covenant is communicated through a mediator. When that happens in the Bible, we call that person a covenant mediator prophet. I said that there are six covenant mediator prophets in the Bible, Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David and Jesus. Isaac is not on the list. And yet, here we have God communicating, promising covenant with Isaac. What is a good way to understand this?

My Old Testament professor Jeffrey Niehaus argued that we should understand this as covenant renewal.¹ There was a parallel practice in the Ancient Near East. A suzerain or king of kings made covenant with a vassal or lesser king. If the vassal died, then the suzerain might choose to renew the covenant with the vassal's son. This new covenant may include additional stipulations but was essentially the same legal agreement extended from father to son. Let me read to you an example

¹ My terminology of "renewal" here misses a more precise distinction Dr. Niehaus included in his *Biblical Theology*. He considers the covenant with Isaac and Jacob to be a "reconfirmation" of the Abrahamic covenant. Dr. Niehaus sees covenant "renewal" as a covenant process which includes elements of the covenant form and a ratification of covenant. He recognizes only two covenant renewals in the Bible: the renewal of the Adamic covenant with Noah and the renewal of the Sinai covenant with the second generation on the plains of Moab (Exodus and Deuteronomy). "Reconfirmation" or "recommitment" occurs when the vassal affirms their acceptance to an existing covenant as, for example, following generations affirmed their commitment to the Mosaic covenant without an "updating" of that covenant such as we see in Deuteronomy. Jeffrey J. Niehaus. *Biblical Theology, Volume 2, The Special Grace Covenants, Old Testament*. (Wooster, Ohio: Weaver Book Company, 2017) 109-110. (Also Volume 1, 212.)

from the prologue of a 2nd millennium treaty between the Hittite suzerain Mursillis and his vassal Duppi-Tessub of Amurru.

“When my father became god and I seated myself on the throne of my father, [your grandfather] Aziras behaved toward me just as he had behaved toward my father. [...] When your father died, in accordance with your father's word I did not drop you. Since your father had mentioned to me your name with great praise, I sought after you. To be sure, you were sick and ailing, but although you were ailing, I, the Sun, put you in the place of your father and took your brothers (and) sisters and the Amurru land in oath for you. When I, the Sun, sought after you in accordance with your father's word and put you in your father's place, I took you in oath for the king of the Hatti land, the Hatti land, and for my sons and grandsons. So honor the oath (of loyalty) to the king and the king's king And I, the king, will be loyal toward you, Duppi- Tessub. When you take a wife, and when you beget an heir, he shall be king in the Amurru land likewise. And just as I shall be loyal toward you, even so shall I be loyal toward your son. But you, Duppi-Tessub, remain loyal toward the king of the Hatti land, the Hatti land, my sons (and) my grandsons forever! The tribute which was imposed upon your grandfather and your father— they presented 300 shekels of good, refined first-class gold weighed with standard weights—you shall present them likewise. Do not turn your eyes to anyone else! Your fathers presented tribute to Egypt; you [shall not do that!] (Pritchard, *ANET* 203-205).”

Several phrases catch my attention here, like how high an opinion Mursillis had of himself, “When my father became a god” and “I the Sun”; and the low opinion he had of Duppi-Tessub, “To be sure, you were sick and ailing,”; and his concern about the gold tribute being just right, “300 shekels of good, refined, first-class gold weighed with standard weights.” He really wanted to make sure he did not get cheated on his tribute.

For now, our concern is about the language of covenant renewal. Mursillis said that he had made covenant with Duppi-Tessub's father and upon the death of his father, Mursillis now offers renewal of that covenant to Duppi-Tessub and also to his sons after him. Covenant renewal, like this, provides a helpful parallel for us as we consider the operation of biblical covenants. God made a covenant with Abraham. Now he is simply renewing that covenant with Isaac. And after Isaac, he will renew that covenant with Jacob. We do not have three different covenants with three different covenant mediators. We have one covenant made through Abraham, being renewed with his son and later his grandson. There are three expressions of covenant, but together they make up one legal package.

This concept will help us later on with the more complicated covenants made on Mt. Sinai and in the book of Deuteronomy. The Sinai covenant was cut with the first generation of Israel to come out of Egypt. Deuteronomy is a second law in the sense that it is a restatement of the first covenant made with the second generation to come out of Egypt. The first is for the fathers and mothers, the second is for the sons and daughters. There are additions to the second covenant, but the two covenants together create one legal package. Much later there will be significant difference between the Mosaic Covenant and the New Covenant. Each has their own covenant mediator because they are not one legal package. The New Covenant is not a renewal. It is a new covenant.

So, back to Isaac. After God makes the promise of covenant renewal with Isaac, the next verse implies Isaac's personal commitment to the covenant. This is 26:25.

²⁵ So he built an altar there and called upon the name of the LORD, and pitched his tent there; and there Isaac's servants dug a well.

Isaac did not just pick up bad habits from his father. Just like Abraham built altars and worshipped God, so we see Isaac doing the same here.

There is more to the story of Isaac, more that I would like to talk about. But I am going to leave that to you to look into. Since we are doing a survey of the whole Pentateuch, we need to move on to his son Jacob.

Jacob's Story

Grasping after birthright and blessing

The story of Jacob begins in Genesis 25:19 with another genealogy statement, "Now these are the records of the generations of Isaac." So, it is not going to be about Isaac. It is going to be about his son Jacob. The tale starts with Jacob's birth which foreshadows his life. He comes out of the womb grasping on to the heel of his brother. In spite of the promise of God that accompanied his arrival, Jacob is going to wrestle his way through life to grasp hold of that blessing himself for himself. Jacob's struggle is compounded by the weaknesses of his believing parents. Genesis 25:28, right after the birth story, tells us, "Now Isaac loved Esau, because he had a taste for game; but Rebekah loved Jacob." Isaac loves the hunter, and Rebekah loves the cook. And that kind of favoritism among the parents never really helps out the children.

The parents do deserve their right share of blame. But the sons bear the responsibility of their own actions. So, the next story in Genesis 25 gives some insight into their character. Jacob takes advantage of Esau's rash nature by withholding food from him until he gives up his birthright. Jacob does not accept Esau's first word for it but requires him to swear an oath. Esau agrees, and he swears, giving over his birthright. We are given a direct, negative statement about Esau that he "despised his birthright." And we should understand, in light of God's covenant with Abraham and Isaac, that Esau is not only despising the material gain of his birthright but also his spiritual heritage. He is giving up being the first born of the covenant. And though he likely does not understand what he is really giving up, he does not respect his parents enough to prize the spiritual inheritance they have to offer.

Jacob does not come out of the story all nice and shiny. He comes off as manipulative. The promise was made for him to receive the blessing. God does not need him to help out. But this is his nature. He is grasping after it.

Next, we get the covenant renewal with Isaac in Genesis 26. Remember I said that Isaac is used as a bridge from Abraham's story to Jacob's. Biblical authors often link or overlap two stories. We saw this back in Genesis 1 and 2 with the stories from the creation where the second story goes backwards first to give us more detail about the creation of man and woman. So, we had everything created in chapter 1, but then chapter 2 starts back without Adam and has him created and then without Eve, and then she is created. The way it works here is like this. We have the narrative of Abraham then part of Isaac's story then the death of Abraham concluding his story. Then we have a genealogy statement showing us we are transitioning to a new narrative chapter. This one starts with the birth of Jacob, gives us the rest of Isaac's story and then continues with the narrative of Jacob. So, it is this pattern is Abraham, Isaac, Abraham, Jacob Isaac, Jacob.

So, we have started the narrative of Jacob and are now getting the renewal of covenant with Isaac, which I have already described. And the result of this overlapping is that we get the renewal of covenant with Isaac sandwiched between the story of Jacob grasping Esau's birthright and the story of Jacob grasping Esau's blessing. In the first story Jacob is sneaky. In the second story he is outright deceptive. And we have to admit that both of his parents share some culpability.

Isaac allows his love for his first-born Esau to overshadow his commitment to the word of the Lord that came at the twin's birth. He is determined to give Esau the blessing due a first-born son. It is important to Isaac. And we see that. He wants to set it up right. So, he tells Esau to go get a fresh kill. And then bring it back and make that kind of stew I like. We are going to have a feast. And then I am going to bless you. He says in 27:4, "and prepare a savory dish for me such as I love, and bring it to me that I may eat, so that my soul may bless you before I die." This is serious to Isaac both in the set-up required and also in his words. He says, "so my soul may bless you." The blessing is to come from a deep, spiritual place in Isaac, from his soul.

We know the story well from here. Similar to how Sarah urges Abraham to help God out by getting Hagar pregnant, Rebekah urges Jacob to help God out by stealing the blessing God had already

promised. Jacob's character comes off looking worse than Abraham as he dresses up like his brother to trick his old, blind father. That is not cool, but it works. And Isaac pronounces this blessing over him, Genesis 27:29,

May peoples serve you,
And nations bow down to you;
Be master of your brothers,
And may your mother's sons bow down to you.
Cursed be those who curse you,
And blessed be those who bless you.

We hear in this blessing both the language God used at Jacob's birth and also the language of the covenant promise. Remember that Isaac thinks this is Esau he is blessing. He thinks he is passing on the covenant promise to his first born. When Isaac and Esau realize what has happened, Esau asks for blessing, but Isaac says in 27:37, "Behold, I have made him your master, and all his relatives I have given to him as servants...Now as for you then, what can I do my son?" It seems that Isaac believes himself bound by the legal nature of the blessing proclaimed on Jacob. I wonder also if he experienced conviction from God because he knew the blessing was supposed to go to Jacob in the first place. So, he decides to stick to it.

Esau, not a man to be sensitive to the will of God, harbors a murderous grudge against Jacob. He is just going to wait for Isaac to die, and then he is going to kill Jacob. Knowing this, Rebekah comes up with a plan to send Jacob far away, telling Isaac that she wants him to go find a wife from among her relatives who live up north in Mesopotamia. The sending away happens in Genesis 28. And this is an important chapter both for Isaac, so let's focus in on the text.

The Struggle of Believing Parents

First, let me pause and say that this family really provides us with an interesting example of how faith works in sinful human beings. We have just seen the conflict in Isaac as he chooses to bless Esau with words that express confidence in the Abrahamic promise and yet go contrary to God's express choice of Jacob. Isaac seems to have repented of his insistence on Esau and is now recognizing the promise going forward through Jacob. And he says at the beginning of chapter 28 in verses 3-4,

³ "May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples. ⁴ "May He also give you the blessing of Abraham, to you and to your descendants with you, that you may possess the land of your sojournings, which God gave to Abraham."

In spite of his favoritism of Esau, Isaac now links the promise of both land and descendants to his son Jacob. So, we have this picture of a believing father who still struggles to trust God's plan when it comes to his sons.

We have also seen the struggle of the mother Rebekah. Her desire for Jacob to be blessed is not solely faith in the promise. She prefers Jacob. She wants to protect him, to mother him. Her desire for him to marry a believing wife sounds spiritual, but it is also motivated by her dislike of Esau's wives and her fear for Jacob. We see that this believing mother also has her own challenges in trusting God with her children.

The brother Esau has not shown any interest in God or the promise. He wants material things. He wants blessing but does not show he wants God. He marries Canaanite women without concern for how this might affect his own worldview or the faith of his future children.

Jacob himself has shown no commitment to God. He wants what God has promised, the birthright and blessing. But he does not trust God to provide these things for him. He feels like he must grasp it himself. We have not heard him say or seen him do anything that affirms faith in God. His will is not submitted to Yahweh as Lord of his life. The promise is not a touchstone for him to view life by as he presents himself in service of his great King. And while his parents have faith that is imperfect, Jacob

knows the right words without personally submitting to and trusting God on his own. His faith is not real.

This is a messy family. Not unlike maybe your own family or unlike the families that fill our churches. This family affirms the reality that God has no grandchildren. Being born into a believing family does not guarantee faith in the sons and daughters. They must come to that on their own. And the behavior of the believing parents does not always point children in the right direction.

Isaac communicates words of faith to Jacob as he sets out. But it will be many, many years before Jacob yields to that faith himself. I see Jacob as the son who never quite lets go of the faith but never quite yields either. I don't know if you have a son like that or know a son like that. He is the son who struggles, willing to go to church, never voicing rejection of God, willing to be prayed for, yet regularly getting into this life problem or that life problem, driven by his desires, driven by unwise decisions, sometimes staying on a good path for a while and then straying off again. He never quite gets dependence on God or true relationship with God. For some reason he just can't be consistent with God. That is how I see Jacob.

God Initiates and Jacob Promises

Having set off to find a wife in Haran, Jacob stops, lies down to sleep, and dreams of a ladder from heaven to earth on which angels ascend and descend. It is as though a way of direct communication has been opened up to heaven. And in the dream God, himself, renews covenant with Jacob, saying in 28:13-14,

“I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants. Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed.”

Notice how this promise includes the purpose statement given to Abraham. Not only will Jacob be greatly blessed, but, “in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed.” Jacob's acknowledgment of God comes out in verse 16 as he says, “Surely Yahweh is in this place.” And in verse 19, we are told that he called that place Bethel which means house of God. But we also get something very human from Jacob. Listen to this and ask yourself, what does that sound like? Does that sound like faith? This is 20-22.

²⁰ Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me and will keep me on this journey that I take, and will give me food to eat and garments to wear, ²¹ and I return to my father's house in safety, then the LORD will be my God. ²² “This stone, which I have set up as a pillar, will be God's house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You.”

Does that sound like faith? It sounds like a deal to me, a business arrangement. It is faith in the sense of acknowledging God's presence. But it does not sound like trust in the word of God. Jacob is running from Esau afraid. He does not know how things are going to work out. This is that kind of faith that comes out when we are in trouble. “God, if you help me out, I promise that I will not miss a Sunday of church. And I will put money in the plate every time. Just help me keep this job or get out of this mess or succeed in this endeavor. Bless me, and I will be your guy.”

I made a lot about not judging Abraham too quickly when he questioned God in Genesis 15. So, let's hold off on diagnosing Jacob's spiritual state until we see how the story goes.

Jacob Meets His Match in Laban

Jacob continues on, and he arrives in Haran, and he meets Rachel at a well and discovers his match in manipulation, not Rachel, but her father Laban. Laban tricks Jacob into serving him for 14 years. And during this time God keeps his promise to Jacob. Jacob has 12 sons and prospers materially, even as Laban continues to try to make profit off of Jacob. It is not clear how righteous Jacob is in the growth of his flocks, but he does give credit to God for the blessing. He even has another dream from God reminding him of his oath. This is in Genesis 31:13, “I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a

pillar, where you made a vow to me; now arise, leave this land, and return to the land of your birth." In response, Jacob gathers his wives and children and flocks and sneaks out. Laban gives chase, but in the end, they separate with no conflict.

The Wrestling Match; A Life Theme

Free of Laban, Jacob now begins to fear how Esau will receive him. He sends ahead hundreds of goats, sheep, cows and donkeys as a gift. He is coming from the north. He is on the east side of the Jordan river about halfway between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. The town of Shechem is to the west across the Jordan river. And in front of him on the east side of the Jordan is the river Jabbok. Jacob sends all his livestock and servants and even family across the Jabbok.

Left alone we have one of the strangest meetings between man and God in the Bible, and oddly, perhaps one of the most normal meetings between man and God. Genesis 32:24 tells us, "Then Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak." Why did God appear as a man and why wrestle with Jacob? I think God was treating Jacob as Jacob was treating God. Jacob has not shown himself prepared to submit to the lordship of God. He does not give himself into relationship with God. He makes deals with God, treating him as he would treat another man, albeit a very powerful man. Jacob wrestles with God to get blessing from God while maintaining control of his own life. Consider verses 25-29,

²⁵ When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he touched the socket of his thigh; so the socket of Jacob's thigh was dislocated while he wrestled with him. ²⁶ Then he said, "Let me go, for the dawn is breaking." But he said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." ²⁷ So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸ He said, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed." ²⁹ Then Jacob asked him and said, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And he blessed him there.

God does not desire to overwhelm Jacob and force him into slavery. God desires for Jacob to yield his will and enter into relationship. Dislocating his thigh, God employs suffering to motivate Jacob to yield in faith. True to form Jacob refuses. He will have the blessing from God, but he will have it on his own terms by striving with God. God gives him a new name to match that attitude, Israel, the one who strives with God. And God does bless Jacob there. But I am conflicted at how to take this. I think God invites us to wrestle with him. To wrestle with our doubts and bitterness and sense of unfairness. This is not the faith that God desires for us. It is not a willful yielding to God as the righteous and true king over our lives. But at least it is engagement. Jacob has not turned from God or denied God or even assumed everything is okay between he and God. By wrestling Jacob at least honestly acknowledged the reality of God in his life even if he was not ready yet himself to yield in that relationship. He could not bring himself to simply trust and obey, or to listen and love as Moses puts it in Deuteronomy. I see this wrestling with God as symbolic of Jacob's struggle through life to embrace the faith of his parents and grandparents. He wants the blessing they have, but he does not want to walk with God like they do.

Blessed in Life Jacob Forgets His Promise

After that night of wrestling with God, Jacob sets out to meet Esau. And everything turns out fine. They hug. They weep. They agree to be friends. And Esau returns to Seir which is south of the Dead Sea, far enough not to be in conflict with Jacob settling in Canaan. Jacob then crosses the Jordan river and buys a piece of land next to the city Shechem. This puts Jacob in the middle of the promise land which seems like a good thing. But it's not. What is the one promise Jacob had made to God? If you protect me and bless me then, "this stone, which I have set up as a pillar, will be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give a tenth to you (Genesis 28:22)." Where was that stone? To what place had Jacob promised to return and build a temple to the Lord? Well, not Shechem. Bethel, he promised to return to Bethel.

This is what so often happens to those faith promises made when we humans are under duress. “Whatever you want from me God! Just save me from this mess, I have created, and I will do anything you want me to do!” God went along with it even though he knew what the result would be. Safe from Esau, Jacob re-evaluates the plan and rationalizes out that the piece of land by Shechem is just too good a deal to pass up. Certainly, God would not begrudge him that.

As a result, Jacob’s family suffers terribly. A prince of Shechem rapes Jacob’s daughter Dina. And in revenge Jacob’s second and third sons, Simeon and Levi, deceive the men of Shechem. The prince says he wants to marry Dina now. And Simeon and Levi, say, “Okay, as long as you are circumcised.” But after the ceremony of circumcision, when the men are decapitated, Simeon and Levi murder them. It is an awful abuse of the covenant ritual, something like requiring someone to be baptized and then drowning them while they are under the water. Dina’s tragedy is now magnified with Jacob’s whole family being despised by people in the land.

Struggling in Life Jacob Remembers His Promise

“Then God said to Jacob, ‘Arise, go up to Bethel, and live there; and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau (Genesis 35:1).’” God is telling Jacob, “Go and do what you originally promised to do.”

Jacob’s story is coming to an end. Other things will happen in his old age but that belongs more to Joseph and his sons than to Jacob. This is the end of Jacob’s story. Before moving to Bethel, he says this in Genesis 35:2-3,

² So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, “Put away the foreign gods which are among you, and purify yourselves and change your garments; ³ and let us arise and go up to Bethel, and I will make an altar there to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone (Genesis 35:2–3).”

I think Jacob is done wrestling with God. He is done doing things his way. He is done making bargains. God says, “Arise and go.” So, Jacob arises and goes. First, he ordered the members of his household to clean out the gods among them. That’s not such a strange order as it might seem. Every family moves through life collecting idols. Jacob does not blame God now for what happened at Shechem. I think he is owning that for himself. He is now able to say of God, “[he] answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone.” Like Isaac and like Abraham before him, Jacob is finally now ready to build an altar and worship his God.

Once Jacob arrives in Bethel, God appears and speaks to him again. This is Genesis 35:9-15,

¹⁰ God said to him, “Your name is Jacob; You shall no longer be called Jacob, But Israel shall be your name.” Thus He called him Israel. ¹¹ God also said to him, “I am God Almighty; Be fruitful and multiply; A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, And kings shall come forth from you. ¹² “The land which I gave to Abraham and Isaac, I will give it to you, And I will give the land to your descendants after you.” ¹³ Then God went up from him in the place where He had spoken with him. ¹⁴ Jacob set up a pillar in the place where He had spoken with him, a pillar of stone, and he poured out a drink offering on it; he also poured oil on it. ¹⁵ So Jacob named the place where God had spoken with him, Bethel.

This is the story of Jacob. It is a story we can relate to. In part it is true of us. In part it is true of people we love. It is the story of a long struggle with God. Jacob works to grab hold of what he wants in life. He is not content to wait for the Lord. He does not trust God. He does not want to walk in close relationship with God. He is fine operating like a junior business partner with God blessing him and him paying back God a tithe. That is enough of a relationship for Jacob. And yet, he cannot shake the knowledge of God instilled by his family. His very wrestling with God proves his belief in God. He wants blessing. He does not want to yield, until finally, after going his own way continues to bring tragedy and finally tragedy on his children, he breaks. And now he is ready to put away the idols, to submit himself, and finally go where God leads.

Even more than the story of Abraham, the story of Jacob raises the question, how can the promise of God be kept if it depends on the faithfulness of his people? It is the faithfulness of God that stands out in this story. He allows Jacob the freedom to enter into the struggle of life. And he never gives up on Jacob. Through it all, God is with him. God's faithfulness is the anchor to the promise, not man's.

And will the promise continue to hold? With every generation we must hand of the baton on. But what if they are not worthy of the promise? What if they do not want the promise? What happens then? We will continue with that question into the next story, the next generation, where the problem only intensifies.

Reflection Questions

1. As you look over Isaac's story consider especially the covenant renewal of chapter 26. What stands out to you? What do you notice as interesting or important or strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Consider also the prophecy made about Jacob in Genesis 25:23. Try to relate to Isaac. Why do you think it was so hard for him to see the covenant being renewed through Jacob instead of Esau? What personal factors and what cultural factors might have worked together to fix in Isaac's mind the continual favoring of Esau?
3. As you look over Jacob's story from Genesis 27 – 35 what moments especially stand out to you? What two or three passages seem to be especially significant or especially interesting to you?
4. Consider closely the story about Jacob wrestling with God in Genesis 32:24-32? What stands out to you in this passage?
5. How do these two things represent Jacob's life: Jacob grasping Esau's heel at birth and Jacob's wrestling with God?
6. Consider the promise of God and the promise of Jacob in 28:13-22. And then consider the promise of God renewed in 35:9-15. Do you believe the Jacob of Genesis 35 is different from the Jacob of Genesis 28? How so?