

# Genesis Bible Study 15

## The Power to Forgive – Two Generations after Abraham

taken from

***Salvation for the Social Order: For Those Who Haven't Read the Bible  
and for Those Who Think Religion is Merely a Private Matter***

by Philip E. Friesen

**Reading:** Genesis 25:19-34; Genesis 26:34-28:4

**Principal Question:** What value is a sacred trust?

### **Notes**

Individualistic westerners like to study the individual patriarchs, focusing upon Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. This study is about a family and the interactions between its members.

I have two objectives. The first is personal faith, and Abraham is the perfect example. Paul calls him the "father of all who believe" in Romans 4:11. The second is what I like to call "our faith" rather than simply "my faith." It is the new humanity revealed in the patriarchal family as God calls a people to himself. The torn fabric of Jacob's family<sup>1</sup> is mended by the genuine forgiveness that Joseph was able to give at the end of the story. There are important aspects of Jacob's personal faith which this study does not address, but which you may want to add if there is time. It is my hope that this study will take you beyond merely individual personal faith, and lay a foundation for understanding the new humanity to which we are called, which is to be the Body of Christ in the world.

My principle source besides the Bible is the JPS Torah Commentary. Other sources will be noted separately.

This story is about having a relationship with God, but God is hard to understand. You may have more questions than answers when you finish this lesson. Be ready to talk about your reactions, but remember, the story has just begun. Your feelings may change as you continue reading.

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps symbolized by the torn and blood spattered coat of many colors.

### **Genesis 25-28 Condensed in Simple English**

Isaac was 40 years old when he married Rebekah, his cousin's daughter. They had no children; so Isaac prayed for her, and she became pregnant with twins. The children moved so violently in her womb that she asked God why this was happening, and God answered her, "Two nations in your womb, two people, going their own ways from birth! One shall be stronger than the other; the older shall be servant to the younger."

When her time had come, there were indeed twins in her womb. They named the first Esau<sup>2</sup>, and the second Jacob. The boys grew up, and Esau became a hunter, preferring to live out on the plains, but Jacob led a settled life near home.

One day Jacob prepared soup, and Esau came in exhausted. "I'm tired and hungry enough to die," said Esau. "Give me some soup!"

"Not until you sell me your birthright," Jacob answered. "Swear an oath that you will sell me your birthright."

Esau responded, "I'm ready to die! So what! You can have it." So he swore the oath and sold Jacob his birthright.

When Esau reached 40 years of age, he married two local Hittite women. These two daughters-in-law were a source of grief for Isaac and Rebekah.

Now when Isaac was old and blind, he said to Esau. "I am an old man, and don't know when I will die. Get your weapons and hunt some wild game for me. Prepare the meat I like to eat, and I will bless you before I die.

Rebekah heard what Isaac said. After Esau left to go hunting, she called Jacob, and said, "Isaac is preparing to bless Esau. Now do exactly as I say. Go kill two young goats, and I will make the food your father likes. Then take it to him, and he will bless you instead." Jacob said, "Esau is hairy and I am smooth. If he touches me, I will get a curse instead of a blessing." Rebekah said, "Let the curse be on me. Just do as I say."

So Jacob did what his mother said. Then Rebekah dressed Jacob in Esau's clothes and covered his hands and neck with goatskin, before he went to visit Isaac.

Jacob went to his father and said, "Father, I am Esau. I have brought the game for you to eat. Please sit up, eat, and then bless me." Isaac said, "How did you find the game so quickly?"

"The Lord your God gave me success," Jacob replied.

"Come, let me touch you to know whether you are really Esau," demanded Isaac. Jacob went close, and his father touched him. "It is Jacob's voice, but Esau's hands," Isaac said. "Are you really Esau?"

"I am," Jacob answered. Jacob brought the food to Isaac, and Isaac ate.

After eating and drinking wine, Isaac kissed Jacob and said. "My son smells like a field God has blessed. May God give you heavens dew and earth's richness. May nations serve you and peoples bow to you. Rule your brothers. May those who curse you be cursed, and those who bless you be blessed."

Jacob had scarcely left his father when Esau arrived. He said, "Father, sit up and eat some of my game, so that you may bless me."

Isaac asked, "Who are you?"

"I am Esau, your firstborn," replied Esau.

Isaac trembled violently and asked, "Who was it that just brought me game, and I ate, and blessed him? Indeed, he will be blessed!" Upon hearing this, Esau cried loudly and bitterly and said, "Father, please bless me too." But Isaac answered, "Your brother came with deceit and took your blessing."

"His name is rightly Jacob<sup>3</sup>, for he deceived me two times. He took my birthright, and now my blessing. Don't you also have a blessing for me?" complained Esau.

Isaac replied, "I made him Lord over you and all his relatives. I gave him grain and new wine. What more have I to give?"

"Please, you must have one blessing for me!" said Esau, weeping.

Isaac answered, "You will live away from the earth's richness and from heaven's dew. You will live by the sword and serve your brother. But when you grow restless, you will throw his yoke off your neck."

Esau said to himself, "Father will die soon. After he dies, I will kill Jacob." Rebekah heard what Esau was saying; so she told Jacob, "Run to my brother, Laban, in Haran until your brother gets over this. I'll send a message when it is safe for you to return home. "

Then she told Isaac, "I am disgusted living with these Hittite wives of Esau. If Jacob marries one of them, my life will be worthless."

So Isaac sent Jacob to Uncle Laban and commanded him not to marry a local woman, but to find a wife from Laban's family. "May God give you the blessing of Abraham," he said.

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<sup>2</sup> Which means "red", as he was full of red hair.

<sup>3</sup> Jacob means "*he grasps the heel*" or figuratively "*he deceives*". When Jacob, the second twin was born, his hand was grasping his older brother's heel. That is why he was named Jacob.

## **Definitions**

- **Birthright**: the birthright was the special privilege and responsibility of the oldest son in a family. It gave the oldest son a double inheritance and made him head of the clan when his father died. The father could transfer this right to a different son, and it was possible to bargain with the birthright as Jacob and Esau did. In Isaac's family the birthright included a Divine promise made to Abraham (Genesis 12), which placed certain moral obligations upon the son. It implied a close relationship with God.
- **Blessing**: the blessing and the birthright went together, but the blessing referred specifically to the material benefits of the birthright. This was the part of the birthright, which Esau did not want to lose.

## **Discussion**

1. Read the story. What questions do you have about it?
2. Which brother wanted the birthright?
3. Describe Jacob's character and personality?
4. Describe Esau's character and personality?
5. Do you think Isaac is a wise and good father? Why?
6. Is this family like any other families you know? If so, describe the similarities?
7. Do you think either of the brothers was worthy of receiving the birthright? Why?
8. What is the relationship between Rebekah and her foreign daughters-in-law?
9. What specific values do you hold which may clash with someone from outside your group?
10. What do you think about culturally mixed marriages?
11. How does Rebekah make use of the in-law troubles to get what she wants from Isaac? Have you observed this kind of behavior among your relatives sometimes?
12. Remember the curse that Rebekah called upon herself in Genesis 27:13? Watch for its effects later in the story. If you are not watchful, you may not notice.
13. If you have time, review the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4 again. What similarities do you find between the stories? What is God's role in each case?
14. Compare these two brothers with Isaac and Ishmael whom you studied earlier? What are the significant differences?
15. Abraham left a tradition of faith in God, but he also left a record of lies, deceit and betrayal. The conflict between faith and dishonesty plays out in his grandson's life. The outcome of Jacob's personal battle with evil will determine the destiny of his family. Based upon what you know about this family now, how do you evaluate their prospects for success as a family? Can Abraham's family survive?

## **Cultural and Historical Notes**

Jacob means, "*he grasps the heel*". Figuratively it means "*he deceives*".

In history, the people, Edomites, who traditionally descended from Esau were hunters, like their ancestor, living southeast of the Dead Sea; whereas, the Hebrews lived a more settled life raising domestic animals. Jacob's prediction about these people came true. Edom was a vassal state of Israel in the 10th century BC, but became independent in the 9th century.

### **Content Questions for English Comprehension**

16. Which brother was older, and which was younger?
17. Describe the older brother's physical appearance.
18. Describe the younger brother's physical appearance.
19. What activities did each brother enjoy?
20. What is Isaac's physical problem?
21. Compare Esau and Jacob's physical appearance.
22. How did Jacob deceive his father?
23. What role did the mother, Rebekah play in the deception?

### **Prayer**

Give opportunity for each person to pray for one relative.