

SUNDAY MORNING BIBLE STUDY
Week 10: Genesis 31-33 – Jacob and Esau Reconcile

SYNOPSIS OF GENESIS 29-30

CHAPTER 29 – HERE COME THE WIVES AND CHILDREN

Jacob heads to the land of Abraham and meets Laban's youngest daughter Rachel by a well. Tricked by Laban, he works seven years to marry Leah and then seven more years to marry the object of his desire, Rachel. Knowing that Leah is unloved, God makes her fertile and she has four children (Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah); while Rachel is barren.

CHAPTER 30 – HOW TO GET TO TWELVE

Rachel gives Jacob her maid so that she could have children on her side and Bilhah has two (Dan and Naphtali). Leah does the same with her servant Zilpah who has two children (Gad and Asher). Leah then sleeps with Jacob after trading a night with him for some mandrakes and she gives birth to Issachar. Then she has another boy and a girl (Zebulun and Dinah). Still, Rachel has none of her own. Finally, God remembers Rachel and she has a son of her own (Joseph), but she wants one more and so gives Joseph his name which means (to add or increase) saying "May the Lord give me another son." It's not until chapter 35 that Rachel finally has that other son. She dies in childbirth and just before she dies, she names him Ben-oni "Son of my sorrow," but Jacob calls him Benjamin (meaning "Son of my right hand").

What we have seen in this birth of the nation is that it is born to a dysfunctional family; full of trickery, competition and jealousy. Jacob has favorites and it's not always the eldest son.

CHAPTER 31 – JACOB FLEES WITH FAMILY AND FLOCKS

Laban and his sons have begun to resent Jacob. Jacob gets the word from the Lord that he should head back to the land of his father, Isaac. So, Jacob flees with his family and flocks without telling Laban. But unbeknownst to Jacob, Rachel has stolen her father's household gods. Wait! What? Family idols? What happened to being faithful to the God of Abraham and Isaac? Why are they still dabbling in other gods? Remember, Genesis is part one, the introduction to the Pentateuch. Things and themes introduced here foreshadow what will take place later. The point is that while the later Israelites had a hard time being faithful to God, God was always faithful to them; and God always seems to press on with God's plans, looking past the inadequacies of God's people.

Anyhow, the loss of the gods is important enough to Laban that he chases them for hundreds of miles. But God warns Laban not to harm Jacob. And when Laban catches up and confronts Jacob, Jacob explains why he left but insists that he didn't take the idols. But Rachel was sitting on them. Anyhow, both men agree to an uneasy truce, building a pile of stones to serve as a visible reminder.

CHAPTER 32 – WRESTLE MANIA

As Jacob and his family continue on their way, they are greeted by angels. But then they learn that Esau is nearby and so they send messengers to Esau promising him great riches. The messengers return with some terrifying news: Esau is coming with four hundred men. Is he coming for battle or for a reunion? It doesn't look good. So, Jacob does what he does best, he decides to send his brother some advance gifts to pacify him.

But then something weird happens. That night, as his gifts are on their way to Esau and he is waiting alone by the Jabbok River, Jacob has an all-night wrestling match with a mysterious man, who, apparently, is unable to overpower him, yet has the ability to knock his hip out of joint with one touch. It's a bizarre, random story, but Jacob seems to know what is going on. And Jacob tells the man that he will not let him go unless he blesses him. The man agrees and blesses Jacob and changes his name from Jacob, "the deceiver" to "Israel," which means "one who struggles with God." Thus, we are introduced to the very name of God's people. They are the people of Israel; a people who wrestle or struggle with God. And like Jacob, they refuse to ultimately let go of God before they receive a blessing. They will cling to God for as long as it takes because in the end, God will bless them. Jacob names the place Peniel, which means "face of God." And as a result of the match, Jacob will never walk the same again, but now has a "gangsta" limp. Of course, the author uses this detail as an etiology for why the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip. What is strange and stunning about this story is that God wrestles with Jacob but can't prevail!

CHAPTER 33 – THE BROTHERS MEET AND RECONCILE

Having wrestled with God and been blessed in the process, Jacob finally has the courage to meet his brother Esau. He bows before Esau seven times, a sign of total submission known to us from other ancient cultures. Esau embraces his brother and kisses him. Then Jacob introduces his family to Esau and presents his flocks to Esau. Jacob begs Esau to accept the “gift” of livestock. The Hebrew word for “gift” here is the same word used earlier for the “blessing” stolen by Jacob at the beginning of the story. And so, in a way, Jacob offers back to his brother the blessing that is properly his. That is, out of the blessing he received from God, he now returns that blessing to his brother. And notice how Esau reacts. He’s not greedy. He only accepts because Israel is insistent. And we see that God has blessed Israel and through him others are being blessed.

With nothing to fear from his brother, Jacob then goes on to settle near the city of Shechem, which is in Canaan. Abraham had also passed through there. Jacob buys a parcel of land, digs a well (a way of laying claim to the land) and builds an altar that he names El Elohe Yisrael (which means something like “God, the God of Israel”). Notice that he is still going by the name of Jacob. He will have his name changed once again in Genesis 35:9-10.

GENESIS 34 – THE RAPE OF DINAH

Dinah, the only daughter of Jacob, is raped by Shechem, the prince and son of Hamor (whose name is the Hebrew word for a female donkey), a member of the ruling Canaanite family. But then, in a move not typical of rapists, Shechem seeks to have her become his wife. Jacob responds with prudence and care and begins negotiations with Shechem’s family. But Jacob’s sons resist and after Shechem says that he will do whatever they deceitfully say that they can only give their sister if Shechem and all the men of their town are circumcised. And so, they do as had been requested of them, they and all the men of the city.

But then, on the third day, when they were still in pain, two of the brothers, Simeon and Levi, take the initiative and follow through on their deceit, breaking faith with their new blood brothers. They murder Shechem and his father, and every male in town; they take all the women and children and pillage the city. The irony is that they use the covenant promise of circumcision, which meant life to them, as a vehicle for deception, violence and death. Jacob is not happy and then becomes fearful of the surrounding peoples. But the brothers insist that their sister shouldn’t be treated like a whore. Later in Genesis, Jacob will sharply condemn the violent actions of Simeon and Levi (see Genesis 49:5-7)

In the concluding exchange (34:30-31) Jacob stands in opposition to what the brothers have done. In turn, their question is narrow and self-serving, raising a new issue, namely, harlotry (34:31); once again, their shame seems to be the focus of their attention rather than Dinah. Later, Jacob will sharply condemn the violent actions and anger of Simeon and Levi (Gen 49:5-7).

CHAPTER 35 – RETURN TO BETHEL AND THE BIRTH OF BENJAMIN

God then tells Jacob to go to Bethel and to settle there. Jacob tells all his family to put away their foreign gods (idols) and purify themselves, so that they can build an altar there. They give their idols to Jacob and he buries them under the oak at Shechem. God protects them on their journey and none of the other warlords follow them.

Once again God appears and blesses Jacob and changes his name once and for all to Israel. God says that he is El Shaddai, God almighty. He tells him to be fruitful and multiply, saying that a nation and a company of nations will come from him, a continuation of the promise made to Abraham and to Isaac. Jacob set up a pillar of stone and poured out a drink offering on it and poured oil on it and called that place Bethel (which means “house of God”).

As they journey from that place, Rachel then has a hard time in childbirth. As she is dying, she names him Ben-oni (which means “son of my sorrow”), but Jacob calls him Benjamin (which means “Son of the right hand”). Rachel dies and is buried on the way to Ephrath (that is Bethlehem). Jacob sets up another pillar there.

Then we have some strange reporting. Apparently, Reuben (Jacob’s firstborn son) slept with his father’s concubine Bilhah and Israel learned of it. But we hear nothing more about it. We are then given the names of the twelve sons of Jacob and told that Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre (Hebron) before Isaac died at age 180 and both Isaac and Esau buried him there. Chapter 36 is going to be all about the sons of Esau and their descendants.