

Summary for Session 5: The Patriarchs Part 2

Prep work: Genesis 25-50

DVD: Jeff opens this session with Jacob and Esau, Isaac's sons. They are twins, but Esau is born first and the birthright and blessing of the family by rights should go to him. The Scripture authors note that "Isaac preferred Esau...but Rebekah preferred Jacob" (Genesis 25:28). Later, Esau is referred to as "a profane man" who treated the holy as common (Hebrews 12:16). The prime example of this is when Esau sells his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of Jacob's stew. Jeff pauses to explain what the birthright and blessing are. The birthright was a measure to ensure the tribe's continuance—the eldest son received a double portion of his father's inheritance, but was responsible for taking leadership of the family after the father's death and looking out for the good of the tribe. Jeff suggests that one might not want a man who would sell his fortune and responsibility away for a bowl of broth to receive the birthright, anyway. The blessing is a continuation of the blessing given by God to Adam and passed along from generation to generation. It is for prosperity, vitality, and fertility and essentially denotes the family line God will fulfill His promises through.

Through trickery instigated by Rebekah, Jacob manages to get the blessing which an aged Isaac meant to confer on Esau. Esau is furious at this deception and Jacob runs away to Haran, where Rebekah's relatives live. Jeff remarks that when God's Chosen people leave the Promised Land, it doesn't turn out well—it's exile (a recurring theme in the Old Testament). Jacob is gone for 20 years during which much will happen. At this point Jeff wonders aloud whether Jacob has to pay any consequences for his deceitful actions, or whether the blessing was actually conferred to him, since it was under false pretenses. The answer to both questions is yes. The American sense of justice is such that many will want the story to clearly state how Jacob had severe retribution in his life for such a heist, but the Hebrew tradition is subtler and prefers to show through the resulting events how Jacob will "reap what he has sown."

As Jacob travels to Haran, he has a dream one night of a staircase (a more accurate translation than "ladder") with angels ascending and descending between heaven and earth. This will later be echoed in the steps of the Temple leading up to the Divine Presence in the Ark of the Covenant and Holy of Holies. All this speaks of the blessing God has conferred on Jacob. Jacob is welcomed into Laban's family at Haran and immediately falls in love with Laban's younger daughter, Rachel. He makes an agreement with Laban to work seven years in return for her hand in marriage. The wedding does take place after seven years, but Jacob awakes the next morning to find he has wed and consummated the marriage with Leah, Rachel's older sister, instead! Jeff notes that this trick is very similar to Jacob's own trick of securing the blessing from Isaac. Laban's explanation to this act is that in Haran, the custom is for "the eldest to go first"—a direct jab at Jacob outmaneuvering Esau. Jacob, whose name means "trickster," has had the tables turned on him! Like Isaac, he was blinded (this time by the dark of night) and because of a costume, does not know the truth. Jacob works another seven years for Rachel's hand in marriage, and both wives and their maids give him a total of twelve sons. These sons will later give rise to the twelve tribes of Israel as a nation, although Jacob's favorite is Joseph, the first son of Rachel. Jacob decides to take his large family and herds and go back to the land of Isaac. On his way, he will encounter Esau, and while Jacob worries the meeting will be a confrontation, Esau is overjoyed at meeting his brother again. The night before Jacob encounters Esau, he wrestles with a stranger through the night who eventually reveals himself to be an angel of the Lord. Jacob demands a blessing (he already has the blessing, has he always

wondered if it was valid?) before he will agree to stop wrestling, and the angel grants him that and changes his name to Israel (Genesis 32:29).

As he enters the land of Canaan, Jacob pitches his tents outside of the city of Shechem, where another misfortune of deceit will befall him. His only daughter, Dinah, is raped by a man of Shechem (also named Shechem). Shechem swears he loves her and tries to arrange a marriage agreement for her. The family of Jacob decides they will agree to the marriage if the men of the city will submit to circumcision, but then Dinah's full brothers (all of Leah) Simeon and Levi go and slaughter all the men while they are still in pain from the procedure, in revenge for Dinah's defilement. Jacob tells them they have brought shame upon him for this act of going back on the family's word to the city (Genesis 34:30).

The story shifts to Joseph, the 11th son of Jacob, at this point. Joseph is Jacob's favorite, and he favors his son with a fine tunic, or coat. Joseph also is gifted with dreams, and tells his family about two which seem to show that he will have leadership over his brothers. His brothers are jealous, and when Jacob sends Joseph to check on his brothers out in the fields, they use the opportunity to sell him into slavery to Ishmaelite traders. They return to their father with Joseph's coat, dipped in animal's blood, and have him believe Joseph has been killed by a wild animal (Jacob deceived by clothes again). Joseph is, in fact, sold to Potiphar, the chief steward of the Egyptian pharaoh. While there, he wins favor with Potiphar and is given responsibility over Potiphar's affairs, and God blesses his work. Potiphar's wife becomes enamored with Joseph, and tries to entice him. When he refuses her advances, she accuses him of trying to rape her, and is thrown in prison. Jeff remarks here on the differences between Joseph and Judah, another son of Jacob who will later become an important figure. Jeff submits that this part of Genesis should be read as a two-fold story of both Joseph and Judah, and how they grow in faithfulness. Judah, the fourth son of Jacob, is the one who proposed the brothers should sell Joseph into slavery. Judah also later slept with his daughter-in-law Tamar, thinking she was a prostitute and then begetting children by her—a disgrace (but one God will turn to good, as is seen in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus). He has thus far compromised his morals and is the sub-par of the two. Joseph, in contrast, has remained faithful to God and trusts in Him, even while being sold into slavery and hauled to a strange land, even when tempted to sin by Potiphar's wife, even when thrown in prison for a crime he did not commit. He is righteous and commendable, declaring he will not sin against his master or God. Whether Judah will change to become more faithful like Joseph will be seen at the end of the story.

While Joseph is in prison, he ends up interpreting the dreams of both Pharaoh's cup-bearer (butler) and baker. Joseph tells the butler that his dream means he will be restored to Pharaoh's service, and to please remember him still in prison. Joseph tells the baker that Pharaoh will have him killed. Both interpretations are proved correct, but the butler forgets about Joseph once he returns to Pharaoh's side. Jeff pauses to comment that when in our own lives, it seems we have no control over our situation and the people who could help have forgotten us, we need to trust in God like Joseph. Joseph waited for two years for his chance out of prison, and it came in the form of another dream. Pharaoh had a troubling dream and needed an interpretation. The butler finally remembered Joseph, who was called to offer an interpretation. When Joseph tells Pharaoh that there will be seven years of abundant harvests followed by seven years of famine, Pharaoh believes him and makes him the equivalent of prime minister, to be especially in charge of storing the excess to survive the coming famine. The term for this position, *al ha-bayit*, literally means “over the household” and is the foundation for the idea

behind the role of the papacy in the Church (this will be detailed in later sessions). Joseph performs his job well and Egypt has food when no one else does.

When Joseph's brothers come to Egypt to ask for food, they do not recognize Joseph, even though he immediately knows them. He decides to test their attitudes toward their father and youngest brother (his full-brother, Benjamin) to see if they have changed. Joseph first accuses them of espionage, then declares that he will hold one of them ransom until they bring back their youngest brother as proof that they are telling the truth. He holds Simeon and lets the rest go, after giving them grain and secretly filling their bags with money. The money is also a test, because when Jacob finds that they've returned with a lot of money but one less brother, he will be suspicious of them—have they sold off Simeon? Jacob will not be persuaded to part with Benjamin. Finally, they are desperate again for food and Judah offers to take personal responsibility for Benjamin's welfare (a sign of his spiritual maturity) (Genesis 43:9). Jacob agrees to let him go with them to Egypt. When they meet with Joseph there, he lets them all go with grain and more money, but has his silver cup hidden in Benjamin's sack in a final test. When Joseph sends men after them to find it, they drag the brothers back and Joseph declares he will keep Benjamin as his slave. Judah again steps forward and offers himself in place of Benjamin. Seeing his devotion, Joseph breaks down and reveals all to them, telling his brothers that he holds no grudge against them. He sees the events of his life as God's will “for the sake of saving lives” (Genesis 44:5). It is this spiritual maturity that we should also strive for, Jeff notes. Joseph sees that his suffering has helped his family, and we should remember that our own struggles may be for the sake of those in our life; we should see God's hand in our lives and not look to blame others.

Joseph sends his brothers to get Jacob and return with all their possessions to live in Egypt with him, but admonishes them not to quarrel with each other on the way, since he knows they will be liable to blaming each other for the turn of events. Jacob moves to Egypt and the whole family lives in prosperity and abundance in there. Before he dies, Jacob must pass the blessing on, but to whom? Reuben, the eldest, had shamed his father by sleeping with Jacob's concubine, Bilhah, in attempt to gain power. Simeon and Levi, the next eldest, proved themselves unworthy by the slaughter at Shechem. The next in line is Judah, and as he has changed to one worthy of the blessing, Jacob bestows it upon him. “You, Judah, shall your brothers praise...the scepter shall never depart from Judah” (Genesis 49:8,10). This is in reference to the establishment of the royal kingdom of David, of Judah's line. Later, this will also be fulfilled by the Messiah, Jesus, also of Judah's line. Genesis ends with Joseph's assurances that God will one day lead His People back to the Promised Land—but what a long and winding road back it will be!