

Jacob *the* Supplanter



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Gen. 25:21–34, Gen. 28:10–22, Gen. 11:1–9, Gen. 29:1–30, Gen. 30:25–32.*

Memory Text: “And Esau said, ‘Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has supplanted me these two times. He took away my birthright, and now look, he has taken away my blessing!’ And he said, ‘Have you not reserved a blessing for me?’ ” (*Genesis 27:36, NKJV*).

We now pick up on the continued family history of Isaac, the miracle child and early ancestor of the promised Seed. The story doesn’t start out particularly well, however. The flawed character of his son Jacob will be manifested in the rivalry between the two brothers over the birthright (*Gen. 25:27–34*) and consequently over the right to obtain the blessing of Isaac (*Genesis 27*).

Because Jacob deceives his father and steals the blessing from his older brother, he will have to flee for his life. In exile, God confronts him at Bethel (*Gen. 28:10–22*). From then on Jacob, the deceiver, will experience some deception himself. Instead of Rachel, whom Jacob loves (*Genesis 29*), Leah, the older daughter, will be given to Jacob, and he will have to work 14 years to earn his wives.

Yet, Jacob also will experience God’s blessing, for in exile he will have 11 of his sons, and God will increase his wealth.

Thus, whatever else we can see in this story, we can see how God will fulfill His covenant promises, one way or another, regardless of how often His people fail.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 28.

Jacob and Esau

Read Genesis 25:21–34. Compare the two personalities of Jacob and Esau. What qualities of Jacob predisposed him to be worthy of Isaac’s blessing?

Already, from their mother’s womb we understand that Jacob and Esau are different and will struggle against each other. While Esau is described as a tough hunter running in the field, Jacob is seen as a “mild” person sitting in the tent and meditating. The Hebrew word *tam*, translated “mild” (*NKJV*), is the same verb applied to Job and to Noah, translated “blameless” for Job (*Job 1:8, NKJV*) and “perfect” for Noah (*Gen. 6:9, NKJV*).

This difference of character becomes more manifest later in their lives (*Gen. 27:1–28:5*). Esau comes home tired and hungry, and finds Jacob cooking lentils. For Esau, the immediate visible and physical enjoyment of food “ ‘this day’ ” (*Gen. 25:31*) is more important than the future blessing associated with his birthright (*compare with Heb. 12:16, 17*).

“The promises made to Abraham and confirmed to his son were held by Isaac and Rebekah as the great object of their desires and hopes. With these promises Esau and Jacob were familiar. They were taught to regard the birthright as a matter of great importance, for it included not only an inheritance of worldly wealth but spiritual pre-eminence. He who received it was to be the priest of his family, and in the line of his posterity the Redeemer of the world would come.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 177.

For Jacob, in contrast to his brother, the future spiritual significance of blessing is what matters. Yet, later, under the instigation of his mother (*see Genesis 27*), Jacob openly and purposely deceives his father, even using the name of “ ‘the LORD your God’ ” (*Gen. 27:20, NKJV*) in perpetrating that deception. He commits this terrible deception, even though it was for something that he knew was good.

The results were tragic, adding whole new layers of dysfunction to an already dysfunctional family.

Jacob wanted something good, something of value, and that was admirable (especially compared to his brother’s attitude). Yet, he used deception and lies to get it. How can we avoid falling into a similar trap of doing bad so that “good” may come?

Jacob's Ladder

As soon as Esau learns that Jacob has received his father's blessing, he understands that he has been deceived and supplanted by his brother (*Gen. 27:36*), and he wants to kill him (*Gen. 27:42*). Rebekah is worried and wants to prevent this crime that would be fatal for both sons (*Gen. 27:45*). So, with the support of Isaac (*Gen. 28:5*), she urges Jacob to flee to her family (*Gen. 27:43*). On his way to exile, Jacob encounters God in a dream at a place that he will call Bethel, "the house of God," and there will make a vow.

Compare Genesis 28:10–22 with Genesis 11:1–9. How is Bethel different from Babel? What lesson can we learn about our relationship with God from Jacob's experience at Bethel versus what happened at Babel?

In this dream, Jacob sees an extraordinary ladder that is connected with God. The same Hebrew verb, *natsav*, is used to refer to the ladder that is "set up" (*Gen. 28:12, NKJV*) and the LORD who "stood" (*Gen. 28:13, NKJV*), as if the ladder and the LORD are the same thing.

The ladder is linked to the attempt at Babel to reach heaven. Like the Tower of Babel, the ladder is to reach the "door of heaven." But while the Tower of Babel represents the human effort to go up and reach God, the ladder of Bethel emphasizes that access to God can be achieved only through God's coming to us, and not through human effort.

As for the "stone" on which Jacob has put his head and had his dream, it becomes the symbol of *beth-El*, "the house of God" (*Gen. 28:17; compare with Gen. 28:22*), which points to the temple, the sanctuary, the center of God's saving activity for humanity.

Yet, Jacob does not limit to the spiritual and the mystical his expression of worship and sense of awe concerning what had happened to him. That is, he wanted to respond in concrete, outward terms. Thus, Jacob decides to "give a tenth" to God, not in order to obtain God's blessing but as a grateful response to God's gift, which already has been given to him. Here again we see the idea of tithe long before the rise of the nation of Israel.

Read again Genesis 28:22. The "tithe" is taken from "all that You give me" (*Gen. 28:22, NKJV*). What important point should we take from what Jacob says here about tithe and what it is?

The Deceiver Deceived

Read Genesis 29:1–30. How and why does God allow for Laban’s deception? What lessons did Jacob learn?

The first thing that Jacob sees when he arrives at the place of destination is a stone, perhaps a hint referring back to the stone of Bethel, which signified God’s presence (*Gen. 28:18, 19*). It is this stone that will, after all, give Jacob the opportunity to interact with Rachel. When Jacob hears from the standing shepherds that Rachel is coming with her sheep to water her flock, he urges the shepherds to roll away the stone. They refuse, which gives Jacob the opportunity to do it alone, and to introduce himself to Rachel (*Gen. 29:11*).

Rachel responds by running to her family. This first contact between Jacob and Rachel was productive: “Jacob loved Rachel” (*Gen. 29:18*), so much that the seven years he worked for Laban in exchange for Rachel were like “a few days” (*Gen. 29:20*).

However, after these seven years, Jacob is deceived. On the night of the wedding, it is Leah, the elder sister, and not Rachel, whom Jacob discovers in his bed. Taking advantage of the confusion of the feast and of Jacob’s intense emotion and vulnerability, Laban had managed this trick. Interestingly, Jacob uses the same root word for “deceive” (*Gen. 29:25, NKJV*) that Isaac had used to characterize Jacob’s behavior toward his father and his brother (*Gen. 27:35*).

Note that the same thinking also is implied in the *lex talionis* (law of retaliation), “eye for eye, tooth for tooth” (*Exod. 21:24; compare with Gen. 9:6*), which forces the culprit to identify with his or her victim in that the culprit faces what the victim did. In a similar way, then, what Jacob had done to someone else had now been done to him.

Jacob understands now what it means to be the victim of deception. Ironically, God teaches Jacob about his own deception through Laban’s deception. Although Jacob as “deceiver” (*Gen. 27:12*) knows well what deception means, he is surprised when he is the victim of deception. Thus, he asks the question, “‘Why . . . have you deceived me?’” (*Gen. 29:25, NKJV*), which shows that he knows deception is wrong.

Though Jacob was the deceiver, he himself was the deceived. How can we learn to trust God when we don’t see “justice” being done, when we see people who do evil get away with it, or when we see the innocent suffer?

The Blessing of the Family

For Jacob, the last seven years of exile are a burden, and yet, these also are the most fruitful years. In them, Jacob will father 11 of the 12 children who will become the ancestors of God's people.

This section constitutes the center of Jacob's story (*Gen. 25:19–35:26*), and it begins and ends with the key phrase God "opened her womb," referring to Leah (*Gen. 29:31*) and to Rachel (*Gen. 30:22*). Each time, this statement is followed by births; the evidence is that these births are the result of God's miraculous action.

Read Genesis 29:31–30:22. How are we, today, to understand the meaning of what takes place here?

God opened Leah's womb, and she had a son Reuben, whose name contains the verb *ra'ah*, which means to "see." Because God "saw" that she was unloved by Jacob (*Gen. 29:31*), this child was compensation for her in her pain and suffering.

In addition, she gives the name of Simeon, which contains the verb *shama'*, "heard," to her second son, because God had "heard" (*shama'*) the depth and the humiliation of her pain and, thus, had pity on her just as He had heard Hagar's affliction (*Gen. 29:33*).

Leah's son "Simeon" also will resonate with the name of Hagar's son "Ishmael," which means "God will hear" (*see Gen. 16:11*). When Leah gives birth to her last son, she calls him Judah, which means "praise." Leah does not refer to her pain or even her blessing anymore. She just focuses on God and praises Him for His grace.

Strangely, it is only when Leah cannot give birth again that God "remembers" Rachel and opens Rachel's womb (*Gen. 30:22*). Rachel, the loved wife, had to wait seven years after her marriage, and 14 years after her betrothal with Jacob, to have her first son (*Gen. 29:18, 27; compare with Gen. 30:25*). She gave him the name of "Joseph" to signify that God had "taken away [*asaf*] my reproach" and "shall add [*yasaf*] to me another son" (*Gen. 30:23, 24, NKJV*). However wrong some of these situations were, God was still able to use them, even if He didn't condone them, in order to create a nation from the seed of Abraham.

In what ways does this story reveal that God's purposes will be fulfilled in heaven and on earth, despite human foibles and errors?

Jacob Leaves

In this story, Jacob—who deceived his father and his brother to acquire the family birthright, and who stole the blessing that Isaac designed to give to his elder son—nevertheless remained passive toward Laban and served him faithfully. Jacob knows well that he has been deceived by his father-in-law, and yet, he let it go. It is difficult to understand Jacob’s passivity considering his temperament. Jacob could have revolted, or at least resisted Laban or bargained with him. But he didn’t. He just did what Laban asked, no matter how unfair it all was.

Nevertheless, at the birth of Rachel’s first son, Joseph, Jacob finally reached the fourteenth year of his “service” to Laban (*Gen. 30:26*), and now considers leaving Laban in order to return to the Promised Land. But Jacob is concerned about providing for his “ ‘own house’ ” (*Gen. 30:30*).

Read Genesis 30:25–32. What is happening here, and what kind of reasoning does Jacob use? What is Laban’s response?

It had been a very long detour for Jacob, who had long been gone from home. It probably had not been his original intention to stay away from his country for so long, but events kept him away for years. It’s now time to return home, and what a family he will return with too!

Meanwhile, Jacob’s unnatural compliance suggests that Jacob has perhaps changed; he has understood the lesson of faith. That is, Jacob waits for God’s signal to go. It is only when God speaks to him that Jacob decides to move.

God reveals Himself to Jacob as “ ‘the God of Bethel’ ” and commands Jacob to leave Laban’s house and return to “ ‘your family’ ” (*Gen. 31:13, NKJV*) with the same words that God used to call Abram to leave “ ‘from your family’ ” (*Gen. 12:1, NKJV*).

What helped him see that it was time to go, too, was the attitude of Laban’s sons and Laban himself (*see Gen. 31:1, 2*). “Jacob would have left his crafty kinsman long before but for the fear of encountering Esau. Now he felt that he was in danger from the sons of Laban, who, looking upon his wealth as their own, might endeavor to secure it by violence.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 193.

Hence, he took his family and possessions and left, thus beginning another phase in the great saga of God’s covenant people.

Further Thought: God chose Jacob, not because he deserved it, but because of His grace. And yet, Jacob worked hard to try to deserve grace, which itself is a contradiction. If he deserved it, then it wouldn't be grace; it would be works (*see Rom. 4:1–5*), which is contrary to the gospel. Only later did Jacob start to understand the significance of God's grace and what it meant to trust God, to live by faith, and to be completely dependent on the Lord. Jacob's experience contains an important lesson for the ambitious person: do not strive to promote yourself at the expense of others.

“Jacob thought to gain a right to the birthright through deception, but he found himself disappointed. He thought he had lost everything, his connection with God, his home, and all, and there he was a disappointed fugitive. But what did God do? He looked upon him in his hopeless condition, He saw his disappointment, and He saw there was material there that would render back glory to God. No sooner does He see his condition than He presents the mystic ladder, which represents Jesus Christ. Here is man, who had lost all connection with God, and the God of heaven looks upon him and consents that Christ shall bridge the gulf which sin has made. We might have looked and said, I long for heaven but how can I reach it? I see no way. That is what Jacob thought, and so God shows him the vision of the ladder, and that ladder connects earth with heaven, with Jesus Christ. A man can climb it, for the base rests upon the earth and the top-most round reaches into heaven.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, p. 1095.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Look at the characters of these people (Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, Esau, Laban, Rachel, Leah) in some of these accounts of sacred history. Look at all the lies and deception involved. What does this teach us about human nature in general and God's grace?
- 2 As you read the story of Jacob, what evidence can you find that over time his character was maturing and growing?