

Genesis 27:41–45 (NIV)

⁴¹ Esau held a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing his father had given him. He said to himself, “The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob.”

⁴² When Rebekah was told what her older son Esau had said, she sent for her younger son Jacob and said to him, “Your brother Esau is planning to avenge himself by killing you. ⁴³ Now then, my son, do what I say: Flee at once to my brother Laban in Haran. ⁴⁴ Stay with him for a while until your brother’s fury subsides. ⁴⁵ When your brother is no longer angry with you and forgets what you did to him, I’ll send word for you to come back from there. Why should I lose both of you in one day?”

Genesis 28:12–15 (NIV)

¹² He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³ There above it stood the LORD, and he said: “I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying.

¹⁴ Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. ¹⁵ I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

Genesis 30:22 (NIV)

²² Then God remembered Rachel; he listened to her and enabled her to conceive.

Genesis 32:28 (NIV)

²⁸ Then the man said, “Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.”

Genesis 45:4–8 (NIV)

⁴ Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come close to me.” When they had done so, he said, “I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! ⁵ And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. ⁶ For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping. ⁷ But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.

⁸ “So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt.

Genesis 50:18–21 (NIV)

¹⁸ His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. “We are your slaves,” they said.

¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, “Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? ²⁰ You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. ²¹ So then, don’t be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.” And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.

The true story

The family grows as Jacob has twelve sons and some daughters beside, by two wives and two servants. The sons will grow to be the patriarchs of the twelve tribes that constitute the people called Israel. One son, Joseph, is the

first-born of the woman Jacob truly loved, Rachel. Joseph is sold into slavery in Egypt but God can find good purpose even in this. When the promised land of Canaan succumbs to drought and famine, the family of the promise survive because of God's hand in Joseph's work with the Pharaoh. They will end up enslaved, but God will come to their rescue again . . . and again. But that story begins next week.

This week, we turn to the story of Jacob and his family, for his sons become the patriarchs of the twelve tribes of Israel. The words "Jew," "Jewish," and "Judea," are rooted in the name of the fourth son, Judah, whose tribe became the largest and most powerful of them. Sadly, this family would have to leave the Promised Land for refuge in Egypt, where they would end up enslaved and in desperate need of rescue from bondage.

From one generation to the next

As we saw last week, Abraham and Sarah had a son named Isaac, who married a kinswoman named Rebekah. Isaac and Rebekah waited a long time for a child. Isaac needed an heir, so he had prayed and prayed hard. And finally, God granted Isaac's request. Rebekah conceived. She might have been childless before, but she would soon find out that she was overflowing with blessings.

To Rebekah, the pregnancy mustn't have felt much like a blessing. It was hard and troubled. She got no peace. Her womb seemed at war with her body. So she too went to God, to find out what was going on inside her.

God revealed to Rebekah that she wasn't carrying one child but two. Indeed, not just two children but two nations. They would be more than sibling rivals, the twins would be the ancestors of two great but rival peoples. Further, God told her that the younger child (Jacob) would have power over the older (Esau), for even twins are not born in the same instant.

They named the older twin Esau, for he was covered in red hair. The second-born twin they named Jacob.¹ Esau grew up to be a man's man, the outdoors type, rough and ready, a skilled hunter; the joy of his father, Isaac. Jacob on the other hand was the quiet, contemplative type, who enjoyed hanging around the tents.

Isaac loved Esau because he seemed to be everything a real man was supposed to be, a skilled hunter and the rest. We're not told why Rebekah loved Jacob. Perhaps she liked the stay-at-home type. Perhaps it is because of what God told her about the twins. We are never told that she revealed to Isaac God's message about the twins.

But already, just in these few sentences, we see the beginnings of family divisions that will soon come to full flower.

How hungry can he be?

One day, Esau comes rushing in the door. He is famished. He is so starved that he'll do anything to get something to eat. Jacob has been busy in the kitchen preparing what must be a deliciously smelling red stew.² Esau demands some of it.

Jacob is revealed to be an opportunist, as he tests his brother's desire, demanding in turn a trade. A bowl of stew for Esau's birthright, i.e., the rights and privileges that belong to the firstborn son. This would include not only the leadership of the family but a double-share of the inheritance, which in this case is a lot of money, for Isaac is wealthy, having been given all that was Abraham's.

¹The name "Jacob" doesn't mean "heel" per se, but it sounds like Hebrew for "heel." Even on the way out of the womb, Jacob was grasping Esau by the heel.

²The Hebrew word for "red" is "edom" and this will be the name taken by Esau's descendants. They will be called Edomites and will settle in the land south and east of Canaan.

Esau doesn't seem to give it a second thought. What good is the birthright if Esau is dead from starvation? Seems rather over-dramatic doesn't it . . . and stupid . . . and impulsive. Jacob adds some legal protections to the transaction by making his brother swear to the transaction . . . and it is a done deal.

Trade one's birthright for a bowl of stew? How hungry could you be? What kind of brother would pounce on such weakness? Neither twin comes off well in this story. In a way, it only sets the stage for what comes next. For some time later, Jacob conspires with his mother, Rebekah, to steal the promise of the covenant that Isaac intends to pass on to Esau.

You can imagine what that conspiracy leads. Rebekah is so fearful of what Esau might do in his fury that she sends Jacob running northward to the ancestral home. Along the way, Jacob has a vision of a ladder connecting heaven and earth. He also wrestles with someone (God?) on a riverbank and is given the name "Israel," which means "struggles with God."

These stories remind us that God is able to use us all to accomplish his purposes. We may not understand or even recognize God at work in our lives, but still God moves us toward the kingdom which he promised long ago to Abraham.

Why Jacob and Not Esau?

This question comes up each time I teach this passage. Why Jacob? Why does God make the choice before they are even born? (Genesis 25:23) Granted, God knows the men these twins will grow to become, but it becomes quite clear that Jacob has nothing to commend him either. Indeed, merit doesn't seem to be part of this at all.

Ok . . . so why Jacob and not Esau? Paul comes to this question in his letter to the Romans. He is talking about God's choice of the Israelites and who actually is an Israelite, that is a child of the covenant. Paul's point is simple, God chooses whom God chooses. Period. End of story. That's as far as we can go. God chose Jacob. Paul quotes from Exodus 33:19: "God will mercy on whom he has mercy and compassion on whom he has compassion" (see Romans 9).

Walter Brueggemann asks us to consider that perhaps this isn't about God preferring one twin over another, but simply another instance of God upsetting expectations, turning upside the world's normal social conventions. Primogeniture (preference to the first-born son) was well established by this time. Perhaps God is simply signaling again that in God's kingdom, things work differently than they do in the kingdoms of this world. The first will be last and the last first.

In the end, the question is always, "Can God be trusted?" I've learned that the answer is a resounding YES.

Jacob marries -- twice!

So Jacob flees back to the extended family and quickly meets a young woman named Rachel. He meets her. He kisses her. He loves her. Such is the stuff of many a Hollywood hit. . . .ok, so the kiss is one of those family kisses. Still, it soon becomes clear that Rachel is the girl who claims Jacob's heart. After all, we're told she is stunningly beautiful! All very Hollywood.

But there is a problem. Jacob is a bit short on cash and he knows that uncle Laban is not about to marry off a prize daughter for nothing. So Jacob offers to work for Laban for seven years to earn Rachel as a wife and Laban agrees. We're told that though Jacob labored for seven long years, it seemed to him like only a few days. That's love!!

When the big day came, Laban pulls a fast one on Jacob. On the wedding night, Laban slips Leah, Rachel's older sister, into the wedding tent in Rachel's place and Jacob never

notices the switch. All I can figure is that there must have been a lot of veils and a very dark tent!

In any event, in the morning Jacob confronts Laban about the switch. What's been done cannot be undone. A marriage has been consummated and Leah is his wife now, not the beloved Rachel. But Laban still dangles Rachel out in front of Jacob, telling him that for another seven years of labor Jacob can marry her too. And he does. Jacob works another seven years, making it fourteen years total that he has sacrificed in order to be with Rachel.

Yes, Jacob is finally going to be married to Rachel, but Laban has made complete ruin of it all. Poor Leah was forced into a marriage she didn't want, knowing that Jacob's heart belonged to her sister. Rachel endured seven years of watching Leah as Jacob's wife alone. And Jacob gave fourteen years to the deceiving Laban.

Further, out of all this there must come children, for Jacob is the bearer of the covenant and there must be heirs to the promise if Abraham's family is ever to be as numerous as the stars (Genesis 15:5).

Sadly, it is the need for children that gives rise to yet another rivalry. This time it will be sister against sister, as Leah is able to have children but Rachel remains childless. The biblical writer tells us that God saw that Leah was unloved and opened her womb.

Leah gives birth to four sons. In her frustration, Rachel sends into Jacob's bed her maid, a legal surrogate, to bear a child who will be Rachel's. When Leah proves unable to have more children herself, she also sends in a legal surrogate. It is a bona fide baby-making competition. If you've wondered how Jacob could end up with so many sons – here is your answer! It is Jacob's many sons who will be the patriarchs of Israel's twelve tribes.

In the end, Rachel herself is finally able to have a baby, a boy, whom she names Joseph. Knowing how much Jacob loved Rachel, we can understand why Joseph becomes his father's favorite and the envy of his brothers, who resent even a multi-color coat made for Joseph by his father.

Take a moment and reflect on Jacob and Rachel. What a love they must have shared. Fourteen years they waited to be married. Though tricked and swindled, they pressed on, determined to be together. Through all the twists and turns, they never lost their love.

This story reminds us that the best synonym for love is sacrifice. Jacob's love for Rachel goes far beyond mere feelings. He gives up many years of his life for her, for them. In this, Jacob's love foreshadows the love of Christ, who didn't just give up fourteen years of life for you and me, he gave up life itself. I think that if Paul ran into Jacob one day and said, "You want to know what love is, look to the cross," Jacob would know just what Paul was talking about.

Deception piled on deception

The stories of Jacob and his family are of one deception piled on another. As Jacob's sons grow up, they become envious of Joseph and a beautiful cloak that Jacob gave his favorite. Tragically, the brothers conspire to kill Joseph and toss him into a dry cistern. They will simply lie and say that animals got him. One of them, Reuben, talks them all into not killing Joseph but simply leaving him in the hole . . . as if that is really better!

Then Judah has either a pang of conscience or sniffs the scent of opportunity. Some Ishmaelite traders have wandered by and Judah urges the brothers to spare Joseph and sell him into slavery. See, Joseph can live *and* the brothers can reap a windfall. A clever head and a cold heart.

Of course, the brothers must come up with a cover story. So Jacob the deceiver is deceived yet again. The brothers tell their father that Joseph has been killed and they

even produce the boy's beautiful coat, now covered in goat's blood. Jacob would never be the same and would cling even more tightly to young Benjamin, the last remaining child of his beloved Rachel. Meanwhile, Joseph makes his way to slavery in Egypt.

Joseph

Joseph ends up in Egypt, a servant to the captain of Pharaoh's guard, Potiphar. Joseph has to reject the sexual advances of Potiphar's wife, who accuses Joseph of trying to rape her and has him tossed into prison. Joseph's gift for interpreting dreams gets him out of prison and, remarkably, he rises to become chief administrator of Pharaoh's empire.

Joseph's dreams reveal to him that there will soon be a lengthy famine in Egypt. Armed with this foresight, Joseph saves Egypt from starvation. When the famine threatens Canaan, Jacob's sons make their way to Egypt to buy food. There, they stand before Pharaoh's right-hand man . . . Joseph! The brothers don't recognize him, but Joseph sure recognizes them. He accuses them of being spies and says he will sell them grain, but they must bring the missing brother (for they have traveled without Benjamin³) to show that they have told the truth. Joseph hangs on to Simeon to ensure their return. But, of course, the question is whether they will return? Or will they abandon Simeon as they "abandoned" Joseph?

Though it will become clear that Joseph wants to heal the breach with his brothers, it is understandable that he would set things up so that he can observe his brothers and see what comes of it all. The brothers claim to be "honest" but are they? Have they learned anything since their sale of the young Joseph? Also, by his questions, Joseph is able to learn about the family circumstances.

There are many twists and turns in the story, and Joseph has a lot of trouble keeping control of his emotions through it all. It is a well-told tale and I hope you'll grab a copy of Peterson's *The Message* and read the whole thing (Genesis 37-50). It might even be a little hard for you to remember that you are reading the Bible!

At last, the truth

The brothers do return to Egypt to buy more grain and, in the end, too overcome with emotion to go on with the deception, Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers. Can you imagine the shock of the brothers when the "prime minister" reveals himself?! Their shock quickly gives way to fear. The brothers have every reason to expect that Joseph will exact revenge for their evil deed, that their family's cycle of treachery and hostility will roll on.

But the brothers do not know what we, the readers, know. God has been with Joseph in all things and Joseph knows it. Upon the births of his own sons, Manasseh and Ephraim,⁴ Joseph said "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house⁵ . . . For God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortune" (41:51-52).

And now, with everything out in the open, Jacob's whole family will move down to Egypt, where they will live under the protection of Pharaoh and Joseph.⁶

³Benjamin is the youngest of the brothers and is Joseph's only full brother, having been born to Rachel, Jacob's lifelong love. She died during Benjamin's birth.

⁴Joseph takes a Egyptian wife. Before his death, Jacob adopts the two sons as his own and Joseph's tribal allotment goes to his sons. Thus, in the lists of tribes, Ephraim and Manasseh are included. The books of the prophets can often be confusing because they frequently use the name of one the tribes to stand in for all Israel. Thus, the prophets will address Dan or Judah or Ephraim, for example, when they are bringing God's word to the people of God.

⁵Joseph means that he has forgotten the cycles of deceit and envy in which he was raised.

⁶But another shock lies ahead, for the family's descendants become enslaved by later Pharaohs (see Exodus 1).

God's grace and God's work

Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers is God's amazing grace at work in their lives and relationships. It is God who is able to break the cycle of deceit in their family. It is God alone who can enable us to set aside our pride, to overlook the wrongs committed against us. It is God who empowers us to embrace and to forgive, time and again if need be, those in our family we love and those we must learn to love.

And through all these stories of Jacob and his sons, through all the deceit and treachery, God was moving events and people forward toward the covenant that God had made with Abraham, Jacob's grandfather.

So often, our own confidence in God is tested by the difficulties that plague our lives and our world. We wonder where God is in it all. Yet, stories such as Joseph remind us that God is God, able to work all things toward God's and our own good. This doesn't make our evil acts less evil, nor our tragedies less tragic. It just means that God can do what God promises to do.

But there is a problem . . . Jacob's family is in Egypt and there they will stay, eventually becoming enslaved, desperate for rescue.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *Paul's Letters to the Next Generation: 1 & Timothy and Titus.*

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *John's Gospel*

Meeting on-line at 12:00 noon Tuesday on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

Scott's Sunday Class

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

This week: We just began the nine-month journey through the Bible, *God-Is*. Each week, we will follow the sermon at 9:30 and dig a little deeper into the Scriptures for that week.

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.