

## CLOUD OF WITNESSES | 06:: Jacob

**PRAYER:** Fair warning! This is a super long post, so you might want to pack a lunch! Seriously, though, don't feel bad if you have to pause halfway through and pick back up another day or pause twice before you finish. The most important thing is that you don't rush through the questions and actually answer them so you can follow the story line and learn the life lessons.

Before you begin, sit with Jesus for a minute or two and invite Him to teach you through the Biblical truths discussed in this post and the many scriptures you will read today.



Today is for anyone who feels like they don't *deserve* to be included in the Kingdom of God. And if you do, let me just say that none of us deserve grace, but God is so good and loves us so much He has offered it freely, despite all our flaws.

In the last two posts, we looked at the lives of Abraham + Sarah. At the end of the last post, we celebrated the birth of Isaac, the son God promised that Abraham + Sarah would have. Today, we look at the life of one of Isaac's sons, Jacob.

READ GENESIS 25:19-34. MAKE A LIST IN YOUR JOURNAL OF EVERYTHING THIS PASSAGE SAYS ABOUT JACOB AND HIS BROTHER ESAU.

Jacob and Esau were twins. And even in the womb, Jacob was a firecracker. I mean... poor Rebekah felt the boys' fighting inside of her and asked the Lord what on earth was going on. Then, when the twins were born, Jacob comes out in a literal power grab, clinching Esau's heel, as if he's saying, "Hey! It's not finished until *I'm* finished!" Who comes out like that?!

As we learned in the last post, in ancient times a person's name told specific facts about them. Jacob's name comes from a Hebrew word that means "to follow" or "to be behind" but also means "to supplant" (which means to illegally take the place of, especially in an underhanded way.") Before we even leave the first chapter in Jacob's story, we see all of this in action. Jacob may have had a "quiet temperament," but he was sneaky and scheming.



In this first scene, Jacob is cooking a stew and Esau is literally starving. When Esau asked to have some stew, Jacob saw an opportunity to steal Esau's birthright. In ancient Hebrew culture, the first-born son (in this case, Esau, since he came out of the womb first) had a prominent place in his family. Not only did it include a larger portion of the estate, after the father passed away, the first-born son would become the head of the family. Most importantly, the birthright in this particular Hebrew family was deeply tied to the covenant promises that God had made to Abraham. Abraham passed those along to Isaac and Isaac would pass those along to his oldest son. It was like a spiritual baton or the passing of the torch for the Olympics. So, Jacob taking Esau's birthright was a big deal.

## READ GENESIS 27:1-41. WRITE A SUMMARY OF EVENTS IN YOUR JOURNAL.

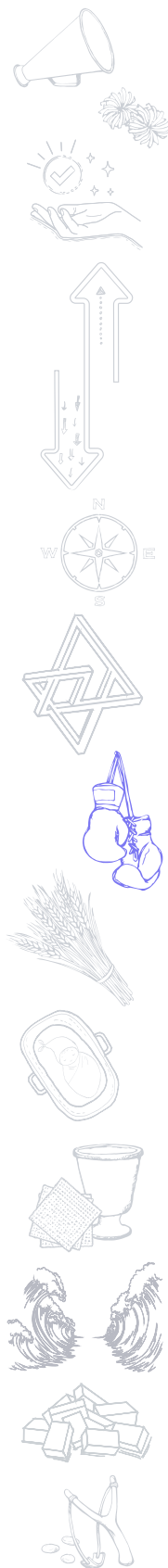
As we read in Genesis 25, Rebekah was a mom who played favorites. And honestly... Isaac played favorites too, but with Esau. When Rebekah suggested Jacob pretend to be Esau, Jacob didn't stop his mom and tell her it was a bad idea, or wrong. Instead, he was worried about his own self, that he might receive a curse from his father rather than a blessing.

Isaac may have prayed prayers over Jacob that he truly meant for Esau, but God had other plans. While there's no excuse for Jacob's actions, all along it was God's plan not only that Jacob would "rule over" Esau (as He foretold in Genesis 25:23), but also that Jacob would become someone so important in Biblical history. I love what the commentary in my Bible says about this, "Jacob was ever the schemer, seeking by any means to gain advantage over others. But it was by God's appointment and care, not Jacob's wits, that he came into the blessing."<sup>1</sup>

## READ GALATIANS 3:14, 3:26-29 AND THEN FLIP TO GENESIS 12:3 AND GENESIS 18:18. BASED ON WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED ABOUT SOME OF THESE VERSES, HOW DO YOU THINK GOD'S PROMISES TO ABRAHAM FLOW DOWN TO US?

In Galatians, Paul is writing to the local church focusing on God's promise to Abraham that all nations would be blessed by his "seed." As we discussed a few posts ago, Jesus comes from Abraham's family line. We'll dive into this a bit more in a future post, but what is significant about that is, God made a promise to Abraham that Jesus would be one of his descendants and through Jesus *all nations* can truly be blessed because everyone has the opportunity to know God – not just the people of Israel.

Looking back at Jacob's story, we see at the end of Genesis 27 that Esau was so upset over losing



his blessing that he grew to hate Jacob and plotted to kill him once Isaac passed away.

Fast forward a bit, Rebekah warns Jacob to run for his life and Isaac gives Jacob some advice on where to go. But, before he goes, Isaac has a blessing specifically *for Jacob*. Let's dive into this in a bit more detail.

## READ GENESIS 28:1-5. LIST THE BLESSINGS THAT ISAAC PRAYS OVER JACOB.

These blessings sound familiar, don't they? That's because Isaac was passing the rest of the baton to Jacob. With that, Isaac and Rebekah saw Jacob off and he headed to see his uncle Laban.

## READ GENESIS 28:10-22. WRITE A SUMMARY OF EVENTS IN YOUR JOURNAL. WHAT PROMISES OF GOD DO YOU RECOGNIZE? WHAT ARE THE NEW ONES?

It is here, at Bethel, that Jacob meets God personally. Up until now, God was "a family thing" for Jacob. Like, he knew about God, he may have believed God existed, but he didn't *belong* to God or start serving him with his life or truly worship Him until now. In all the verses we've read so far, Jacob never even mentions God. Maybe you can relate? It's like... God is acknowledged in your house, maybe you pray at dinner, maybe you go to church... but God is just your family's thing. But if someone were to ask you personally, you don't know God or have a relationship with Him. That's where Jacob was at.

But then, God revealed Himself to Jacob in a dream. And He *personally* reinforced the blessings that Jacob's father had passed on to him. Like God was letting Jacob know that, yes, He is involved in all this. He was going to hold up His end of the deal – that Isaac's words weren't just hopeful whispers into the night air. Jacob would have known all of the promises that His grandfather, Abraham, had received from God because the family would have marveled over them and talked about them all the time – I mean, it's a pretty big deal that out of all the people on earth God chose *your family* to be HIS people! But isn't it a sweet touch that God thought to personally reach out to Jacob and confirm He was with him?

## REREAD GENESIS 28:16-22. WHAT IS JACOB'S REACTION TO GOD?

After this dream, Jacob is in awe, and he worships God. He was excited! He arrived at Luz (Bethel) with nothing. No possessions, just the clothes on his back. His family situation was a tangled mess,



his brother was out to kill him, I mean, Jacob was in the lowest of lows. But God met him and changed everything. What I think is especially cute is that Jacob sets up a memorial so he would forever remember where he met God. Then Jacob vows that if God would truly protect, provide, and help Jacob return to this land, he would give back to God a portion of what He had given.

That is what it is like to meet God. 2 Corinthians 5:15 says, “And He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for Him who died for them and was raised again” (NIV). Meaning, when we accept Christ and the Holy Spirit comes to live in our hearts, we no longer live for ourselves, but for Jesus. If you’ve met God, it changes you and you genuinely want to give your time, resources, and life to Him as a “thank you.”

We’re going to really fast forward, here, and skip over the love triangle that is Jacob’s love life, but don’t worry! I have plans to come back to that one in the future because it’s good. For now, let’s keep it moving and look at what happens 20 years down the road.

## READ GENESIS 32:1-21. HOW IS JACOB’S FAITH AT PLAY IN THIS SITUATION? WHAT DOES HE SAY TO GOD?

There are lots of things to see in this text. Jacob is leaving his home of 20 years because in Chapter 31 (which, we’ve skipped over, but you can find it in 31:13) God told him to leave. So, he packs up and by the next chapter, he’s leaving out of obedience to God. Starting to sound familiar, isn’t it? But, headed back “home,” Jacob is filled with anxiety over seeing his brother again.

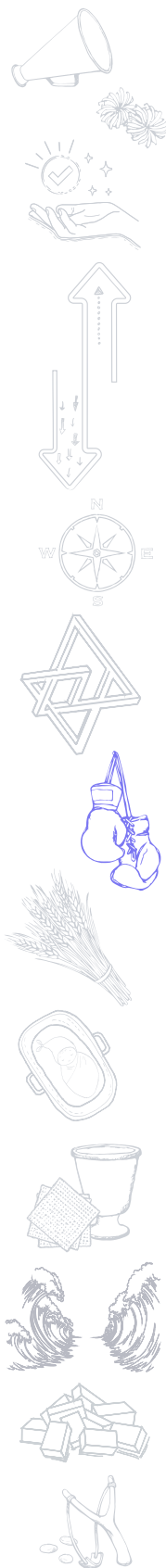
They say, “time heals all wounds,” but who can forget that their brother wanted to kill them – even if 20 years has passed? And their father did prophesy over Esau that he would “live by the sword,” which was probably just as ominous as it sounds. So... Jacob wasn’t *thrilled*, to say the least to head home.

But ever the one to hedge his bets, he devised a plan: he would send messengers ahead proclaiming to Esau that his “servant Jacob” was headed home – basically expressing humility toward his brother. *If I do this, Jacob thought to himself, then surely Esau will be more lenient with me.* And he was sincere. This time, he wasn’t scheming, he was just trying to protect himself and his family.

When the messengers come back to Jacob and shared that Esau was coming to meet him with 400 men, Jacob assumed the absolute worst. 400 men is a little much for a welcome home party! And it is about the right size for an army. *Fan-tastic!*

Fear and anxiety filled Jacob’s chest and he started to pray, reminding God of everything He’d said in the past. “Dear God,” Jacob prayed, “remember you told me the other day to ‘go home’ and 20 years ago you promised you would make me prosper?”

Have you ever done that before? Looked at a situation that seemed like it was going to end so



badly and remind your parents or maybe remind God that they promised it was going to work out? That's where Jacob was.

Then he continues: "I know I don't deserve all of the kindness and faithfulness you've given me..." Jacob is remembering his past and probably thinking about his current sins, too, whatever they were. We all have them. But I don't want to miss the fact that Jacob's interaction with God at Bethel changed him. It changed his priorities, it changed his attitude, it helped him not be a slimy schemer. It brought humility into his life. And when faced with a terrifying situation, he went to God about it and brought his concerns to Him. He was doing his best to face his circumstance head on and lean on God for strength. He also did what so many of our other cheerleaders in the faith did: he clung to the promises of God and believed them to be true.

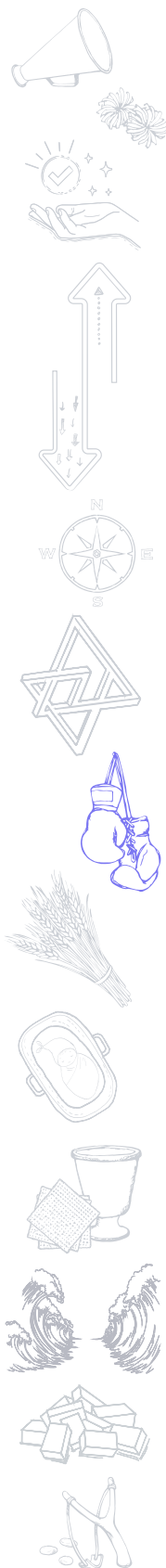
After he prayed, though, he still wasn't sure because he added a second level to his plan – you know... just in case. He leveled up by creating "gift packages" to send ahead in two different directions, so that whichever group met Esau first could offer their goods to him. The commentary in my Cultural Backgrounds Bible says, "This gift is generous. It is larger than many towns would have been able to pay in tribute to conquering kings even at later dates."<sup>2</sup> This shows you just how much God had truly blessed Jacob already! They continue to write, "If Esau or his men had plunder on their mind, it saves them the trouble and makes the trip worth their time and effort. Assyrian sources contain numerous lists of plunder collected in their conquests."<sup>2</sup> Because, let's not forget – Esau lived by the sword! So, any wealth he accumulated was probably by his own fighting in contrast with Jacob who became prosperous out of abundant blessings from God.

Jacob divided everyone into the two camps and slipped away on his own for the night, probably praying and worrying and unable to sleep.

## READ GENESIS 32:22-31. WHAT SIGNIFICANT THINGS HAPPENED THAT NIGHT?

This story is so famous. Jacob: the man who wrestled God! Don't let it be lost on you that Jacob schemed his way into every blessing and everything that he wanted. And the old Jacob didn't care who he stepped on to get it.

HERE'S A QUESTION FOR YOU TO PONDER IN YOUR JOURNAL: IF JACOB HADN'T SCHEMED AND FOUGHT HIS WAY INTO EVERYTHING HE HAD EVER GOTTEN, DO YOU THINK HE STILL WOULD HAVE HAD IT ALL? IF SO, HOW?



Jacob's mindset was to take care of his own self, so he spent his whole life fighting for everything God planned to give him anyway. How ironic is that?! Remember when God blessed Jacob from birth by saying he would be over his brother Esau? The blessing was always meant for Jacob even though everyone assumed it would be for the firstborn son.

Key phrase in that last paragraph... "God blessed". *GOD* blessed. Not Jacob won... Not Jacob figured out... Not Jacob conned his way into... The blessing, the birthright, the prosperity was Jacob's all along. So, if he hadn't done all the things he had done, God would have used another method to give Jacob everything He had planned. A friend of mine used to say this all the time and it has given me comfort so many times: "What is for me will not miss me." It's true! If it came from God's mouth, IT IS SO! Believe it.

Well, in all Jacob's planning and plotting, God doesn't abandon Jacob in frustration. No! We read in Genesis 28 that God had already *promised* Jacob that He would protect him and be with him and would not leave until He had done what He promised – which included giving Jacob the land to which he was returning. But Jacob could not stop his bad habit of fending for himself. So, God decided that the only way to get through to Jacob was to get down on Jacob's level and literally fight it out.

Remember when God repeated to Abraham over and over and over again that Abraham would have offspring and he *just didn't get it*? God eventually got through to Abraham and Sarah with words, but with Jacob God knew he needed to use a different tactic. That's our God! He's personal and He knows exactly how to get through to each of us with our different personalities and quirks.

Let's look at this night of wrestling in a bit more detail, shall we?

In verse 24, we see that a random man comes from the middle of nowhere and starts wrestling Jacob. Suddenly, the man reaches out and dislocates Jacob's hip, revealing that this is no ordinary man. As the sun rises, the man asks Jacob to let him go – *that's hilarious! You started it!* – and Jacob, realizing that this was probably God, says, "Not until you bless me!" It is in that moment that everything finally clicks for Jacob. Provision comes from God. Blessings come from God. When God promises something, He gives it, you don't have to control the situation to make it go the way God said it would go. That's *His* job. Jacob finally realized that God's blessings were a gift he couldn't earn, not matter how hard he tried.

Let that be word to someone today! You cannot *earn* or *work* your way into God's heart or into receiving blessings from Him – including salvation. Being a "good person" doesn't cut it and there is no special number of good things you can do to pay God back for your sins. In fact, that's the wrong way to look at it all together. As we say around Passion, sin doesn't make you bad, it makes you dead. So, the better way to say all that would be, there is no special number of good things you can do to bring your soul to life. We'll definitely discuss this in greater detail in the future, but just wanted to throw in that little tidbit.

Looking back at Jacob's story, God asks Jacob's name and after Jacob shares it, God changes his





name to Israel. No longer would he be known for being a con artist. Now when people heard his name, they would know "he wrestles with God."

The thing is, God asks us to wrestle with Him too. Isaiah 1:18 starts off with God saying, "Come now! Let us reason together." That word "reason" could also be translated as "to engage in a debate."

Maybe you wrestle with God because you have doubts. Maybe you wrestle with God because He's asked you to give up something you hold close. Maybe you wrestle with God because you're praying hard for something that seems to have an impossible outcome. Whatever your specific situation, if God invites you to fight it out, go ahead. Have a debate. Bring your doubts to Him. He's not afraid of tough questions. In fact, He will fill you with truth and reveal Himself to you. If you're refusing to hand something over, take your struggle to God. Tell Him how you feel. Ask Him to help you release what He has commanded and to trust Him with how the situation will play out.

If you're facing an impossible situation, pray about it over and over. The Bible invites us to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). It's ok if you repeat yourself. You're not bugging God. In fact, He is honored by your faith to believe in the impossible. And the more you pray and grow, the more you will start to desire what He wants, and we already know God gets what He wants.

What's important here is that Jacob went away that night on his own in a heap of anxiety and stress and God met him. The wrestling drew Jacob out of his head and forced him to focus on God. That's the point of our wrestling too.

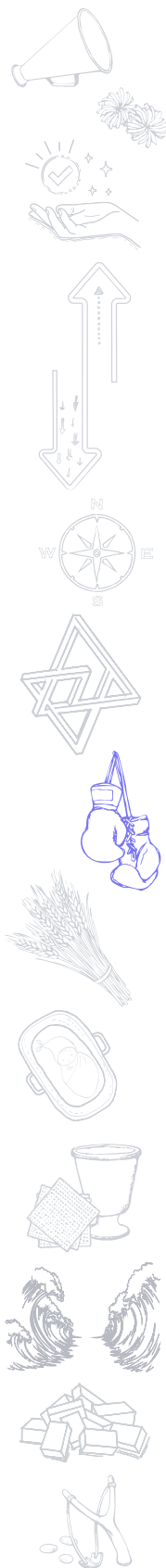
After God changes Jacob's name and blesses him, Jacob thinks to himself, "I saw God face to face and yet my life was spared." My Bible commentary says that Jacob must have realized that if his life was spared when he met God, then surely God would answer his prayer for his life to be spared when he met Esau. <sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Jacob leaves that spot and heads toward his brother with a limp.

If you know anything about God by now, you know that He lives for stacking up the impossible so His glory can shine the brightest in the end. God had compromised Jacob's body by giving him this hip injury. This left Jacob vulnerable to Esau, forcing Jacob to lean on and trust in God and not himself for a victory.

The Lord sometimes allows debilitating irritants into *our lives* too. In the New Testament, Paul called this his "thorn."

## READ 2 CORINTHIANS 12:7-10.

### WHAT DOES PAUL SHARE ABOUT THE PURPOSE OF HIS "THORN"?



Paul says the thorn “keeps him from becoming conceited.” Have you ever struggled with something? Maybe you get really good grades, but you struggle with one particular subject. Or maybe you’re on a sports team and you’re good at it, but there’s one skill you can’t master. Or maybe life is great right now for you, but there’s this one thing that like “Man! Life would be perfect if it wasn’t for this one thing...” Or maybe you feel like you keep meeting failure over and over again. These are the types of thorns I think of when I read this passage, but I’m sure it could be anything.

## WHAT DID PAUL DO ABOUT THE THORN? WHAT WAS GOD’S RESPONSE?

Our inadequacies cause us to lean on the Lord. That is why God told him “My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.” Basically, God is saying that when we lean on Him in our weakness, He is gracious and merciful to give us His own power – the power that can do anything, the power that only knows victory – and because of that, God has the perfect opportunity to display it. That is why Paul concludes that in our weakness we are made strong. Because we are no longer relying on our strength, but on God’s. Then, when we face victory, we can no longer take the credit because we know God was the one who won for us – and He gets the glory instead. That is what He wants. He is a glory magnet, and He deserves it.

So... what happens next?

Well, Jacob and Esau meet and much to Jacob’s surprise, Esau ran to him and gave him a hug and a kiss and both the men wept. No, seriously! You can read it in Genesis 33! And God knew it all along. After he reunites with his brother, he continues his journey to Bethel and here is where we leave him for the day.

## READ GENESIS 35:1-14.

God tells Jacob to go to Bethel and he does. When Jacob arrives at Bethel, he asks everyone to throw out their false idols and together they all worship God at the alter Jacob had made to God so many years ago. Afterward, God changes Jacob’s name to Israel one more time (...just to really seal the deal, I’m sure. That first night was a bit crazy enough for anyone to leave with their head spinning. It’s almost like God was like “Hey Bud, this was a really important thing I did back there and now that everything has quieted down, I just want to do it again so you can focus on it and really receive it.). He then tells Israel that a “community of nations” would spring up from him (and it does! The 12 tribes of Israel!) and my personal favorite that “kings would come from [his] body.” Ha! What a cute thing to say! Turns out, Israel’s son Joseph ended up being 2nd in command of Egypt, but King David is down the line and Jesus is way down the line, so several kings came from Jacob’s body!





Just as God promised, before God “leaves” (v. 13, Genesis 28:15) Jacob, He gives him the land that He promised He would – the same land that He had given to Abraham and Isaac. See? I told you the blessing was like a baton.

As we close, let’s look at Hebrews 11, because after all, it is the inspiration for this entire series.

## READ HEBREWS 11:20-21.

The story the Hebrews writer chooses to tell for these two men is unlike any other in the passage. As we can see, there were so many other stories of faith that Jacob lived – and if we had studied the life of Isaac, we would have found that to be true of him as well. I guess what the author was trying to say was that these two pillars of our faith had such belief in God that they took the baton and passed it on, knowing they wouldn’t see the end result.

Just a few verses before this it says, “All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth” (Hebrews 11:13). Then, a few paragraphs later, he explains, “these were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect” (Hebrews 11:39-40). You see, this promise God made was waaaaay bigger than just one person’s life. It only started to come to fruition when Jesus came to earth several hundred years later. But they kept on believing and kept on passing that baton.



### DIG A LITTLE DEEPER:

- \* Is Jesus just a “family thing” for you? Or do you have a personal relationship with Him? Write about this in your journal. How do you see Jesus?



\* Have you ever experienced God in such a powerful way that it literally changed how you acted, how you thought, or what you believed? Write about that time in your journal.

\* Take some time to think about the idea of wrestling with God. Is there anything you need to bring to Him? Write about this in your journal. Bring it all to Him. Write about how you feel, write about how you want to feel, write about the outcome you desire. Write about any doubts you have. Write a prayer to Him... start wrestling right now on those pages!

\* Is there something that God has promised to provide that you continue to try and control (or earn), as if the outcome depends on you? Write about this in your journal and then consider writing a prayer expressing your desire (if you have one) to let go and ask God for His help. If you can't think of any promises, go back to the list we made in the first post from this series, "Faith in Action," and look at the scriptures that describe God's promises to all Christians.



- \* Do you have something in your life that you would consider a “thorn”? Write about it in your journal and think about how God might be using that “thorn” in your life. Maybe write a prayer asking God to please reveal to you how He could use this thorn to help you.

- \* What about Jacob’s story stood out to you the most? What touched your heart? Was there anything that you think will impact your life?



## Reference Notes

<sup>1</sup> Zondervan, NIV Study Bible, 2002

<sup>2</sup> Zondervan, NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible, 2016