

Journey INTO THE Bible

Leader's Guide

Genesis, Part Two: Lesson Three

Genesis 27—35

Suggestion: When you are ready to begin the Bible study, it is appropriate to open with a prayer. You may use the one below or one of your own. It may be practical to connect your prayer with some aspect of the lesson, for example, God's choice of less than desirable people to achieve his ends, God's involvement with Jacob during his flight from Esau, or the significance of a vow in the life of Jacob.

Opening Prayer

Gracious and loving God, when things look bleakest, you bestow the gift of divine presence on the most vulnerable. You did this for Jacob as he fled from his brother Esau. You promised to be with him, to keep him wherever he went, and to bring him back to his home country. We ask you to journey with us as we make our way through life. Sustain us when we falter and encourage us when we doubt. In turn, we promise to represent you to all those whose journeys are difficult and burdensome. May we lighten their burdens and smooth their paths. We ask this through Christ our Lord, who has promised to be with us to the end of the ages (Matthew 28:20).

Suggestion: Welcome newcomers and returning participants and make necessary announcements. Afterwards, read aloud "Setting the Stage."

Setting the Stage

Genesis 27:1-45 is undoubtedly the most glaring and daring act of deception on the part of the "heel-gripper." While we cannot condone his (and Rebekah's) actions, we can admire the stealth and cunning involved in the whole enterprise. At the same time, we are compelled to lament with Isaac and Esau—the blessing has gone to the "heel-gripper." We must bear in mind the paramount role of blessing. It is a life-changing power transmitted from Isaac to Jacob. It shapes Jacob's and Israel's destiny. Once released, this power cannot be recalled, much to the cha-

grin of Esau. In the end this blessing will be the engine that will drive the fortunes not only of Jacob, but also of Israel. Paradoxically, the theft will mean that all the families of the earth will be blessed.

Jacob's Bethel experience is a liminal one—he has crossed a new threshold. From being a hunted fugitive, he now emerges as the third-generation bearer of the divine promises. This new status is contingent upon God's appearance at Bethel. Although once a revered Canaanite sanctuary, it now becomes nothing less than the house of God and the gate of heaven (28:17). In addition to receiving the divine promises of numerous progeny, possession of the land, and the source of blessing for all, Jacob acquires special assurances. Hence God will be with him, keep him wherever he goes, and bring him back to his homeland (28:15). Moved by this unique encounter, Jacob consecrates the place by erecting a standing stone and anointing it with oil. Finally Jacob makes a vow to God that, if certain conditions are met, the Lord will be his God, the standing stone will be God's house (Bethel), and this God will receive a tenth (tithe) of all his possessions. To be sure, the experience has changed Jacob, but the conditional vow reveals that he is still hedging his bets.

Text (Genesis 27:1-45)

Suggestion: Given the length of the passage, you may select just a portion (27:26-29, 33-40) and assign the parts to three readers: (1) narrator; (2) Isaac (27:27b-29, 33, 35, 37, 39-40); and (3) Esau (27:34b-36, 38).

Think and Talk Questions

1. Does this biblical notion of blessing strike you as being different from our modern understanding?
2. Does the author's refusal to pass judgment on Jacob's deception seem somewhat disconcerting?
3. Does the author convey in a convincing way the anguish of Isaac and Esau?

Additional Questions

1. Do you think that vows have too much of a bargaining quality about them? Do you think that they restrict God's freedom to act? The following are examples: Hannah's vow (1 Samuel 1:11), Absalom's vow (2 Samuel 5:7-8), and the vows of the sailors on board with Jonah (Jonah 1:16).
2. Are there certain enduring qualities of sacred places? The Israelites continued to worship at Bethel, although it was originally Canaanite shrine. You may wish to contrast Jacob's action of consecration of Bethel in Genesis 28:18-19 with King Josiah's destruction of Bethel in 2 Kings 23:15-16. Are there Christian sanctuaries or shrines that were once non-Christian?

Break

Text (Genesis 28:10-22)

Suggestion: It may be useful for three people to read the text: (1) narrator; (2) the Lord/God (28:13-15); and (3) Jacob (28:16-17, 20-22).

Think and Talk Questions

1. Do you think that God's appearance at Bethel is really necessary for Jacob on his flight from Jacob?
2. Do you think that Jacob's action of setting up the stone as a sacred pillar (28:18) is noteworthy given biblical prohibitions against such practices?
3. Do you think that the meaning of Jacob's name ("May [God] protect") is sufficiently fulfilled in Genesis 28:15?

Additional Questions

1. Do you think that God's choice of Jacob as the bearer of the promise is scandalous? Perhaps the leader could point to other characters in the Bible who lack the proper credentials but who nonetheless are the very ones God chooses. The following passages from the Gospel of Luke may be of some help: 14:12-14 (inviting the outcasts who cannot repay you); 15:1-2 (Jesus' association with sinners even to the point of eating with them); 19:7 (Jesus having a meal in the house of a sinner [Zacchaeus]). All these people in the judgment of Jesus' critics

are unacceptable. Is there any absolute norm that determines who will be the bearers of the promise and who constitute the proper company to associate with Jesus?

2. Do you think that divine appearances still occur and that they are also life-transforming? Are all divine appearances the same? Certainly the appearance to Jacob is unique. We also know that God appeared to the saints and drastically changed their lives. However, what about daily encounters with others, whether at work, play, worship, etc.? May we think of these occasions as ones in which God chooses to operate through humans?

Wrapping Up

When there are about twenty minutes left, bring the discussion to a close. Participants may want to briefly share something they have learned.

Closing Prayer

Psalm 121 may make a fitting closing prayer since its prominent motif is that of keeping. The noun "keeper" and the verb "to keep" appear six times. The psalmist introduces possible dangers (the slipping of one's foot, the Lord's slumbering, exposure to the Near Eastern sun, and the dangers associated with the moon). Such dangers notwithstanding, the Lord is Israel's keeper. The New Revised Standard Version reads as follows:

"I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore."

Suggestion: Remind everyone about the next meeting time and place. Encourage everyone to read through Lesson Four before the next Bible study session.