

# Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God

Psalm 146:5

Our Summer Sermon Series this year, as in previous years, offer us an opportunity to hear again one of the great stories of the Old Testament. This year, we are reading highlights from the story of Jacob.

For some of us, this might be the first time we have thought about the story since Sunday School. For others, these stories might be wholly unknown. For others again, they will form part of the fabric out of which our faith life has been woven. No matter, we can unite joyfully around these stories, which God has placed in the Scriptures, and which are endlessly rich and rewarding to all who give them time.

Jacob is one of the three patriarchs of Israel. He is the son of Isaac, and the grandson of Abraham. Jacob himself goes on to father twelve sons, who in turn become the progenitors of the twelve tribes of Israel. We shall take up the story in Chapter 25 of the Book of Genesis and then read through the highlights of the story through to Chapter 33. A précis of the story is offered below to help us keep track of the story as we move through it week to week.



Isaac's wife, Rebecca, falls pregnant with twins. She feels her two children struggling with each other within her womb, and is distressed by this, taking her concern to God in prayer. She feels God saying to her that the two children will struggle throughout their lives. When Rebecca gives birth, she has two sons – Esau and Jacob.

As they grow up, Esau, the older boy, spends his time hunting and thinks little about the future. Jacob, the younger boy, is much quieter, and perhaps thinks too much. One day, when they are young men, Esau comes in from hunting famished, and acquiesces to Jacob's demand that he give Jacob his 'birthright' (that is, the spiritual leadership of the family) in return for a plate of broth.

Years later, when Isaac is old and all but blind, he wishes to bestow on Esau his 'blessing' – that is, the material inheritance which the oldest son customarily received. However, Jacob (at his mother's urging) dresses up as Esau and tricks his father into giving him Esau's inheritance. When Esau learns of this, he plans to kill his brother, but before this can happen Jacob flees to live with his mother's brother, Laban.

During his journey to his uncle's home, Jacob has a dream in which he sees angels climbing up and down a ladder reaching from heaven to earth. Jacob sees God at the top of the ladder, and God tells him that he will inherit the covenant that God had made with his grandfather Abraham. When he awakens up, Jacob calls the place Bethel – that is, 'God's house'.

When Jacob arrives at the home of his uncle Laban, he falls in love with Rachel, his uncle's younger daughter. Laban, however, demands a high price for Rachel's hand – seven years of labour, shepherding Laban's flocks. Jacob is not in a strong bargaining position and agrees. However, when the time comes for the marriage, Laban hides his older daughter, Leah, under a heavy bridal-veil, and so deceives Jacob into marrying her.

We see here a neat symmetry with Jacob's own earlier actions – one sibling gaining what belongs to another sibling by means of deceitful dressing up. The deceiver has become the deceived. When Jacob confronts Laban, his uncle tries to avoid moral responsibility for his act of deception. 'I had no choice,' Laban says. 'This is just the way we do things around here.' The local culture, Laban claims, would not permit the younger sister to marry before the older sister.

Jacob is therefore forced to work a further seven years for Rachel. Alongside each daughter, Laban gives Jacob a concubine. In total the four women bear

Jacob twelve sons and a daughter; but Jacob's favourites were Rachel's children, Joseph and Benjamin.

With his growing family to provide for, Jacob now seeks permission to leave his uncle's service and go back home. Laban does not wish to see him leave, and so instead offers to pay Jacob a wage if he stays on in his service. Jacob, however, declines wages and instead offers to stay if Laban will make him an equity partner in his livestock farming business.

Laban accept this offer, and Jacob becomes his business partner. However, Laban unilaterally changes the terms of the deal between them ten times in the next six years, each time to Jacob's disadvantage. Each time he does this, God intervenes to ensure that Jacob flourishes. After six years, Laban and his sons become angry and fearful – no matter what they do, they end up with the poorer part of the business' assets. Jacob senses further trouble ahead, and decides to flee stealthily from his uncle, taking his family and his property with him. In his prayers, Jacob feels God telling him to return home; Leah and Rachel agree too.

They leave; and when Laban discovers that they have gone, he and his 'heavies' pursue Jacob. When he catches up with Jacob, Laban offers Jacob a list complaints and accusations; he even masquerades as a doting father in order to cast Jacob in a bad light. Jacob responds in anger, setting the record straight in terms of their true business relations. Perhaps Laban feels shame at the exposure of his real behaviour. In any case, Laban now proposes a 'peace deal' between them, presenting the deal as an act of magnanimity. They part on good terms.

Jacob now sends a message ahead to his brother Esau, telling Esau that he has made his fortune. Jacob realizes how badly he treated his brother when they were young, claiming the inheritance which ought to have been Esau's. Now he seeks to reassure Esau that he has all he needs and that he does not wish to claim their father's property.

The messenger brings back the less-than-reassuring news that Esau is now on his way to meet Jacob with a company of four hundred men. Jacob prays to be delivered from his brother's 'clutches'. He is so worried that he decides to 'soften up' Esau by sending ahead three sets of generous gifts. He also divides his family and his belongings into two camp, so that if Esau attacks some might escape.

Jacob wrestles all throughout that night with a stranger who refuses to give his name. Jacob survives the encounter, and for this reason, the stranger renames him Israel – which means ‘to struggle with God’.

At daybreak, the two brothers meet. Jacob greets his brother in fear, unconvinced that reconciliation is possible. But Esau embraces him, weeping. Jacob is astonished by Esau’s willingness to forget the past. The brothers make peace.

**Image on page 1** – Francesco Hayez, 1844: Incontro tra Esaù e Giacobbe [Esau and Jacob reconcile]. The work of art depicted in this image and the reproduction thereof are in the public domain worldwide. The reproduction is part of a collection of reproductions compiled by The Yorck Project. The compilation copyright is held by Zenodot Verlagsgesellschaft mbH and licensed under the GNU Free Documentation Licence.