

Service in the life of Jacob

BIBLE BASICS

Clutching the Heel

Jacob, the son of Isaac and Rebekah, was born into a patriarchal family filled with spiritual symbolism. His twin brother, Esau, emerged from the womb first, granting him the status of the firstborn. However, Jacob's name, meaning "supplanter," hinted at the intricate dynamics that would unfold throughout his life.

In allegorical terms, Isaac represents Christ, while Rebekah symbolizes the church. Their union results in the birth of two contrasting children — one representing good and the other evil. This allegory reflects the reality of the church, where both righteous and sinful individuals engage in an ongoing struggle. The hope lies in the transformation of all towards goodness.

Jacob's birth was not merely a physical event but a foreshadowing of his life's trajectory. As he emerged from the womb, clutching Esau's heel, it hinted at his future actions and the complex relationship between the twins. This symbolic act mirrored the spiritual journey of believers, who often grapple with their own inner struggles and dualities.

Despite being the second-born, Jacob was chosen by God to carry forth the covenant promises made to Abraham. This choice underscores the sovereignty of God and the unexpected ways in which He works His purposes. "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways," says the Lord." (Isaiah 55:8 NKJV) Jacob's life became filled with events of trials, triumphs, and spiritual growth. He experienced deception, betrayal, and reconciliation, ultimately maturing into a man of faith and humility. His story serves as a reminder that God can transform even the most flawed individuals, using their weaknesses to accomplish His divine purposes.

In Times of Conflict, Turn to God

When conflict arises within the church, it reverberates throughout the entire congregation, causing turmoil and unease. In the biblical narrative, we find the account of Rebekah and how she sought to understand the conflict raging within her womb. "But the children struggled together within her; and she said, 'If all is well, why am I like this?' So she went to inquire of the Lord" (Genesis 25:22).

To understand what was happening inside her, Rebekah "went to inquire of the Lord." Rebekah's proactive response to the conflict within her is a testament to her deep faith and unwavering trust in divine guidance. She recognized that the turmoil she experienced was not merely physical but spiritual, and thus she sought answers from the Lord. The fathers of the church offer two distinct interpretations of Rebekah's actions.

According to one interpretation, Rebekah's "went" symbolizes her dedication to fervent prayer. She withdrew into the depths of her spiritual life, seeking understanding and clarity from God. By immersing herself in prayer, Rebekah sought to align her heart and mind with the divine will, trusting that God would reveal the truth to her. Origen further explains that Rebekah's journey represents a transformative process of spiritual growth and development. He suggests that she "passed over from one life to another, from one deed to another, from good things to better. She proceeded from profitable things to more profitable. She hastened from holy things to holier."

In this interpretation, Rebekah's "went" is a metaphor for her spiritual journey, as she moved from a state of confusion and uncertainty to a deeper understanding of God's plan in prayer. Origen emphasizes the progressive nature of spiritual growth, highlighting that Rebekah's journey was not merely about gaining knowledge but about the transformation of her heart and soul in prayer.

Alternatively, according to the next interpretation, Rebekah sought guidance from the elders and prophets, as was customary in the Old Testament. According to St. Ephrem the Syrian, Rebekah approached Melchizedek, a mysterious figure often associated with wisdom and priestly authority. St. Ephrem explains, "She went to inquire of the Lord, and it was told to her, 'two nations are in your womb,' that is, the Edomite and Hebrew nations. To whom did she go to inquire? It was to Melchizedek that she went to inquire, as we mentioned above in the genealogy of Melchizedek."

Rebekah's actions serve as a reminder that in times of conflict and uncertainty, we too should seek the wisdom of our spiritual leaders and dedicate time to prayer, fasting, and spiritual practices. By turning to the Lord and aligning ourselves with His will, we can find clarity amidst the chaos and experience the transformative power of His love and guidance.

The Different Pursuits of the Mind

In the realm of Genesis, two brothers, Jacob and Esau, emerged with distinct personalities and talents. While Esau, a skilled hunter, thrived in the wilderness, Jacob, a mild-mannered individual, preferred the comfort of tents: "So the boys grew. And Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field; but Jacob was a mild man, dwelling in tents." (Genesis 25:27) Jacob and Esau were the same in everything, but with different talents. One is a doer the other a thinker, meaning one is not better than the other, and both were needed. The difference lies, however, in what they valued.

One fateful day, as Esau returned from a tiring day of hunting, hunger gnawed at his core. Spotting Jacob cooking a delectable stew, the aroma tantalizing his weary senses, Esau implored, "Please feed me with that same red stew, for I am exhausted." Sensing an opportunity, Jacob proposed a trade: "Sell me your birthright in exchange for a bowl of stew."

Esau, consumed by immediate gratification and lacking self-control, readily agreed. "Look, I am about to die; so what is this birthright to me?" he exclaimed. Little did he know the profound spiritual significance of his birthright—a blessing that held the promise of God's favor and inheritance. In haste, Esau relinquished his birthright to Jacob for a mere bowl of stew. (Genesis 25:29-34)

This impulsive act underscores the importance of self-control in our Christian walk. St. Augustine speaks on this plight saying, "no one becomes spiritual without first having been 'of the flesh' or

materialistic. But if they persist in “the mind of the flesh,” they will always be Esau. If, however, they become spiritual, they will then be the younger son. But then the junior will be the senior; the other takes precedence in time, this one in virtue.” When St. Augustine wisely observes, “no one becomes spiritual without first having been ‘of the flesh’ or materialistic”, he depicts Esau's lack of self-control rendered his hard labor in the field futile, for a Christian's character is defined, in part, by their ability to resist immediate temptations and desires.

In contrast, Jacob, though initially obtaining the birthright through questionable means, recognized its spiritual value. He understood that earthly possessions and immediate gratification should not outweigh eternal blessings. This distinction highlights the significance of engaging in spiritual practices in our own lives. Without them, our service to God becomes void, as we misunderstand its true purpose.

St. Augustine further elaborates on this dichotomy, stating, “If they persist in ‘the mind of the flesh,’ they will always be Esau. If, however, they become spiritual, they will then be the younger son. But then the junior will be the senior; the other takes precedence in time, this one in virtue.”

In essence, Esau represents those who prioritize worldly desires over spiritual pursuits, while Jacob symbolizes those who, despite their shortcomings, ultimately recognize the importance of God's blessings. Their story serves as a cautionary tale, reminding us that true fulfillment and spiritual growth can only be found when we prioritize our relationship with God above all else.

Bias and Favoritism

In Genesis 25:28, Isaac and Rebekah's favoritism towards their sons, Jacob and Esau, is evident. “And Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.” (Genesis 25:28) St. Ambrose offers a critical commentary on the potential consequences of such partiality in parenting. He emphasizes the importance of treating all children with equal devotion, regardless of personal preferences or perceived differences:

“we ought not to leave his parents without an excuse for having preferred their younger son to the elder. At the same time we must take care so that no one, in turning to their example, would make an unfair judgment between his sons or suppose that he should love the one and esteem the other less. From this line of conduct fraternal hatreds are aroused, and the crime of fratricide is contrived to gain a worthless sum of money. Let children be nurtured with a like measure of devotion. Granted that one's love may fasten more upon some trait in a child who is more agreeable or similar to oneself, the exercise of justice ought to be the same in regard to all. The more that is given to the child that is loved and who seeks his brothers' love, the more is taken away from the one who is burdened with jealousy at the unfair preference. Esau threatened that he would kill his brother. Neither the fact of brotherhood nor respect for their parents kept him from his fratricidal madness. He grieved that the blessing had been snatched away from him, whereas he should have proved himself worthy of it by forbearance rather than by crime.”

St. Ambrose acknowledges that parents may naturally feel closer to a particular child due to shared traits or compatibility. However, he cautions against allowing this natural inclination to influence one's actions or behavior toward the children. He warns that favoritism can lead to feelings of jealousy, resentment, and hatred among siblings, which can escalate into tragic outcomes like fratricide, as seen in the case of Esau and Jacob.

The story of Esau's murderous threat against his brother illustrates the destructive power of favoritism. Despite their shared familial bond and the love of their parents, Esau's jealousy and anger at being deprived of the blessing drove him to contemplate killing his brother. St. Ambrose emphasizes that not even the sacred bond of brotherhood or respect for parental authority could deter Esau from his fratricidal rage.

St. Ambrose's criticism serves as a reminder of the importance of treating all children fairly and equitably, regardless of their differences. He encourages parents to nurture their children with equal devotion and to exercise justice in all their interactions. By doing so, they can help foster a harmonious and loving family environment, preventing the destructive consequences of favoritism and promoting unity and peace among siblings.

The same can be said of servants towards children they serve. Naturally, they may feel a natural inclination towards some as opposed to others. However, it is crucial for these servants to recognize and manage these inclinations to ensure that all children receive equitable care, attention, and support. Favoritism, even if unintentional, can have negative effects on the children involved. Those who are perceived as favorites may develop a sense of entitlement or superiority, while those who feel neglected or overlooked may experience feelings of lack of belonging in the church, inadequacy, resentment, or low self-esteem. Servants are called to actively work to overcome any biases or preferences they may have in order to treat all children with fairness, respect, and compassion, regardless of their personalities, abilities, or backgrounds.

Blessing of the Service Takes Work

Though the story of Rebekah and Jacob's deception may be overshadowed, St. John Chrysostom offers a profound symbolic understanding beyond mere condemnation of their actions. In receiving divine blessings, efforts were still enacted by Jacob in preparing the food and covering himself with Esau's clothes. He had to kill the goats, use the skin to cover himself, put on Esau's clothes, present the food. According to St. John Chrysostom, this represented an important contribution in order to receive the divine blessings: "...whereas we contribute our utmost, we enjoy in generous measure as well cooperation from God...It is neither the case that everything is due to help from on high (rather we, too, must contribute something), nor on the other hand does he require everything of us, knowing as he does the extra-ordinary degree of our limitations. On the contrary, out of fidelity to his characteristic love and wishing to find some occasion for demonstrating his own generosity, he awaits the contribution of what we have to offer."

St. John emphasizes that while God's help is essential, it is not exclusive. He expects us to make an effort, to put in the work, and to cooperate with His grace. This cooperation is not a matter of earning

God's favor but rather an act of faith and obedience. It is through our limited efforts that God's generosity and love are fully manifested.

While the deception itself was not justified, the story serves as an illustration of how even our small efforts can be rewarded with abundant blessings from above. The act of putting on different clothes symbolizes the transformation from the old man to the new one. The goat's skin, used to mimic Esau's hairy skin, in the Old Testament sacrificial system, often represented sin and its consequences. By covering himself with the goat's skin, Jacob, foreshadows the ultimate sacrifice of Christ, who bore the sins of humanity on the cross. Thus, his work shed the old nature and embraced the new identity in Christ. Covering oneself with the cloak of Christ, represented by the goat's skin, signifies the protection and righteousness that come from trusting in Him.

Jacob's elaborate scheme, while successful in securing the earthly blessing, ultimately led to years of strife and exile. This serves as a reminder that true and lasting blessings are not obtained through manipulation or deceit but through alignment with God's will and purposes. Yet, as previously mentioned, even our seemingly insignificant efforts, when aligned with God's purposes, can lead to abundant blessings. While Jacob's actions were flawed, his desire for the blessing reveals a yearning for spiritual inheritance. This yearning, when directed towards God, is always met with an outpouring of His grace and favor. The blessings received by Jacob were not just material but mainly spiritual. They included the promise of a numerous offspring, the inheritance of the land, and the assurance of God's presence and protection.

Find Comfort in the Rock

In Genesis 28:11-12, we witness a profound moment in Jacob's life as he journeys to exile. As dusk settled in, he sought a place of rest, finding solace on a simple stone that served as his pillow for the night. "And he took one of the stones of that place and put it at his head, and he lay down in that place to sleep. Then he dreamed, and behold, a ladder was set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it." (Genesis 28:11-12)

St. John Chrysostom highlights Jacob's grateful spirit, emphasizing that his unassuming nature and willingness to make do with what was available made him worthy of a remarkable vision. Our Lord, recognizing a humble disposition, displays his care and favor. His approach teaches us to approach God in hardship and find solace in Him through thanksgiving even in the most minute of gifts. That even a rock, was turned into a blessing by a humble outlook.

St. John Chrysostom, in his teachings, draws our attention to the profound humility and gratitude exemplified by Jacob. He underscores the significance of Jacob's simple and unpretentious nature. When Jacob, using a mere stone for a pillow, slept on the bare ground, it was not seen as a sign of deprivation, but rather as a testament to his grounded spirit. This lack of attachment to material comforts and his acceptance of his circumstances, according to Chrysostom, was precisely what made Jacob worthy of receiving a divine vision.

"See the young fellow's hardy spirit: He used the stone as a pillow and slept on the ground. Consequently, since he was imbued with common sense and a hardy attitude and was free of all human pretense, he was found worthy of that

remarkable vision. Our Lord is like that, you see: When he sees a dutiful soul that makes no account of present realities, he demonstrates his own great care for him.”

Chrysostom's interpretation reveals a deeper spiritual truth: God's favor often rests upon those who approach life with a sense of humility and contentment. It is not the pursuit of worldly possessions or the clamor for recognition that attracts divine grace, but rather a quiet and unassuming heart that is open to recognizing God's presence even in the simplest of things. Chrysostom's words echo a timeless lesson: Our Lord is drawn to those who, like Jacob, possess a "dutiful soul" and do not become overly preoccupied with the "present realities." When we are able to detach ourselves from the anxieties and demands of the material world, we create space within ourselves for a deeper connection with the divine. In this state of openness, even the most ordinary experiences can become imbued with blessings. The stone serves as a powerful reminder that blessings can be found in unexpected places. The very rock that Jacob used as a pillow became a symbol of divine encounter. Psalm 137 similarly expresses a similar thought: “Happy the one who takes and dashes Your little ones against the rock!” (Ps 137:9) “That is to say, shall dash all corrupt and filthy thoughts against Christ” (St. Ambrose)

St. Jerome further expounds on Jacob's asceticism, drawing attention to his challenging circumstances. Fleeing from the wrath of his brother Esau, Jacob found support and comfort in a stone. This stone, symbolic of Christ, becomes a source of strength for those facing persecution. However, for the unbelieving Jew, it poses a stumbling block, leading to potential downfall: “consider our ascetic [Jacob]: he was running away from a very cruel man; he was fleeing his brother, and he found help in stone. That stone is Christ. That stone is the support of all those who suffer persecution, but to the unbelieving Jew, it is “a stone of stumbling, and a rock of scandal.”

When we accept trials and tribulations we learn to find comfort and rest in the rock of Christ. When we choose to rely solely on God, He turns even the hardest, (rock), situations into experiences of comfort and rest. The rock will then humble those seeking salvation but grind to powder those who choose to do evil. In the same way, Jacob sees heaven when: he runs away from evil, (escaping his brother Esau), discards the comforts and cares of this world, (sleeping on a rock), and obeys God, (following the instruction of his parents)

The narrative underscores the significance of accepting trials and tribulations as opportunities for growth. When we choose to rely solely on God, even the most challenging situations, such as the rock, can transform into experiences of comfort and rest. The stone acts as a metaphor, humbling those seeking salvation while grinding to dust those who embrace evil. In Jacob's case, his journey unfolds as he runs away from evil while escaping his brother, discards the allure of worldly comforts while sleeping on a rock, and obey God in following the instructions of his parents. These acts of obedience and self-sacrifice set pace to allow him to perceive the ladder reaching up to heaven.

Turn the Rock into an Altar

When we face challenges and difficulties in life, it is all too easy to become discouraged and overwhelmed. However, the story of Jacob in Genesis 28:18-22 offers a powerful reminder that even in the midst of trials, we can find hope and transformation. Jacob after he had experienced his fair share

of trials and tribulations in fleeing from his home, and using a stone as a pillow to rest for the night, realized that this stone was more than just a rock. It was a symbol of his encounter with God. In a dream, Jacob had seen a ladder reaching from earth to heaven, with angels ascending and descending. And God had spoken to him, promising to be with him and to bless him. Jacob awoke from his dream feeling a sense of awe and reverence. He realized that the stone he had used as a pillow was a sacred object, a place where he had encountered the presence of God.

So, Jacob took the stone and set it up as a pillar. He poured oil on top of it and called the place Bethel, which means "house of God." He then made a vow to God, promising to worship him and to give him a tenth of everything he received.

“then Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put at his head, set it up as a pillar, and poured oil on top of it. And he called the name of that place Bethel; but the name of that city had been Luz previously. Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on, so that I come back to my father’s house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God. And this stone which I have set as a pillar shall be God’s house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You.” (Genesis 28:18-22)

As we face our own trials and tribulations, we can learn from Jacob's example. We can learn to turn our rocks into altars, places where we encounter God and where we make vows of faithfulness to him. And we can learn to trust that God is always with us, even in the midst of our darkest moments. When we sacrifice ourselves to God through long suffering and prayer, we will have something to show for, as our Lord always looks out for our best interests. He will never leave us or forsake us, and he will always work for our good. So, let us not be discouraged by our trials, but let us instead see them as opportunities to grow closer to God and to experience his transforming power.

Love Reduces Work and Time

Now Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, “I will serve you seven years for Rachel, your younger daughter.” And Laban said, “It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to another man. Stay with me.” So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed only a few days to him because of the love he had for her.” (Genesis 29:18-20)

Jacob's love for Rachel serves as a profound allegory of the relationship between Christ and His church. Rachel, in this context, symbolizes the church, representing the collective body of believers united in faith. The number seven, often associated with perfection and completeness, holds significant meaning in this story.

When we serve Christ and His people with genuine love, our service becomes a testament to the perfection of our devotion. As Jacob served Laban for seven years to obtain Rachel's hand in marriage, his love for her made the arduous labor seem like a short time. Similarly, when we serve Christ and the church out of love, the challenges and sacrifices we encounter become less burdensome, for our hearts are set on a higher purpose.

The allegory of Jacob and Rachel teaches us that true love transcends hardship. When someone is captivated by love's desire, they willingly endure difficulties and dangers, their sole focus being the attainment of their beloved. In the same vein, our love for Christ and His church should motivate us to persevere through trials, knowing that the reward of our service is eternal life and communion with God.

Furthermore, Jacob's love for Rachel highlights the importance of commitment and faithfulness. He remained steadfast in his service to Laban, even when faced with unexpected challenges and disappointments. "You see, when someone is smitten with love's desire, far from seeing any problem, he easily puts up with everything, albeit fraught with danger and much difficulty besides, having in view one thing only—obtaining the object of his desire." (St. John Chrysostom) Our love for Christ and His church should mirror this steadfastness, leading us to persevere in our faith despite life's uncertainties. The allegory of Jacob and Rachel serves as a reminder that our service to Christ and His church is not merely an obligation but an act of love. When we serve with genuine love, our hearts are filled with joy and purpose, and the challenges we encounter along the way become opportunities for growth and sanctification.

Wrestling with God

In the depths of the night, under a veil of stars, Jacob, found himself locked in an intense struggle. Unbeknownst to him, he was grappling with the divine, a Man of unparalleled strength and wisdom. Hours passed, and as dawn approached, the Man realized that He could not overpower Jacob through sheer force. With a deft touch, He struck the socket of Jacob's hip, dislocating it and causing him excruciating pain.

"Let Me go," the Man urged, "for the day breaks."

But Jacob, filled with an unwavering determination, refused to yield. "I will not let You go unless You bless me!" he exclaimed.

Recognizing Jacob's unwavering resolve, the Man inquired, "What is your name?"

"Jacob," he replied.

The Man then uttered words that would forever change Jacob's destiny. "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel," He declared. "For you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed."

A surge of awe and wonder washed over Jacob as he realized the profound significance of this encounter. He yearned to know more about the enigmatic Man with whom he had grappled, so he asked, "Tell me Your name, I pray."

"Why is it that you ask about My name?" the Man replied.

And with a touch of His hand, the Man blessed Jacob. Overwhelmed with emotion, Jacob named the place Peniel, meaning "the face of God," for he had indeed seen God face to face and emerged from the encounter with his life preserved. Jacob limped away from Peniel, forever transformed by his

experience. From that day forward, the children of Israel refrained from eating the muscle that had shrunk on Jacob's hip, a poignant reminder of the divine encounter that had shaped their patriarch's destiny.

Jacob's wrestling match serves as a powerful allegory, encouraging us to tenaciously seek blessings and understanding from God. It teaches us that through prayer, trials, toil of service, and the pursuit of wisdom, we can draw nearer to the divine and receive His transformative touch. Like Jacob, we may not always comprehend the mysteries we encounter, but we can trust that God's grace is sufficient to sustain us on our journey.

Toil for the Sake of Obtaining Virtues

St. Ambrose delves deeper into the spiritual significance of Jacob's wrestling match. He emphasizes that Jacob, having purified his heart and embraced a peaceful disposition, first relinquished his worldly possessions and then engaged in a solitary struggle with God. This act of forsaking worldly attachments, Ambrose argues, brings one closer to the divine image and likeness.

The wrestling with God symbolizes a profound spiritual struggle for virtue. It is a contest against a superior force, with the aim of becoming a more faithful imitator of God. Jacob's unwavering faith and devotion during this struggle led to a divine revelation. God touched the hollow of Jacob's thigh, signifying a profound spiritual connection.

“therefore Jacob, who had purified his heart of all pretenses and was manifesting a peaceable disposition, first cast off all that was his, then remained behind alone and wrestled with God . For whoever forsakes worldly things comes nearer to the image and likeness of God. What is it to wrestle with God other than to enter upon the struggle for virtue, to contend with one who is stronger and to become a better imitator of God than the others are? Because Jacob’s faith and devotion were unconquerable, the Lord revealed his hidden mysteries to him by touching the side of his thigh .For it was by descent from him that the Lord Jesus was to be born of a virgin, and Jesus would be neither unlike nor unequal to God. The numbness in the side of Jacob’s thigh foreshadowed the cross of Christ, who would bring salvation to all people by spreading the forgiveness of sins throughout the whole world and would give resurrection to the departed by the numbness and torpidity of his own body. On this account the sun rightly rose on holy Jacob, for the saving cross of the Lord shone brightly on his lineage. And at the same time the Sun of justice rises on the person who recognizes God, because he is himself the everlasting Light.” - St. Ambrose

This connection of touching, Ambrose suggests, foreshadows the lineage of Jesus Christ, who would be born of a virgin descendant of Jacob. The numbness in Jacob's thigh, caused by the touch, is seen as a prefiguration of the crucifixion of Christ. Through his sacrifice on the cross, Christ would bring salvation to all humanity by offering forgiveness for sins and the promise of resurrection. The sun then rising on Jacob, he argues, symbolizes the radiant light of the Lord's saving cross shining upon his lineage. Moreover, the Sun of Justice, which represents God's everlasting light, rises upon those who acknowledge and recognize God.

In essence, St. Ambrose interprets Jacob's wrestling match as a profound spiritual journey of purification, struggle, and divine revelation. It foreshadows the coming of Christ and the salvation he would bring to the world. The symbolism of the sun emphasizes the divine light that shines upon those who seek and recognize God.



Review Questions

1. What should one do in times of conflict? (A: Turn deeper to God and attempt to find comfort in the rock of Christ.)
2. True or false? Jacob wrestled with our Lord. (A: True)
3. True or false? Favoritism in parenting alienates one child and causes their jealousy to grow. (A: True)
4. True or false? Esau's toiling was still accounted for even though he did not have any self control with Jacob. (A: False)
5. True or false? Esau threatened to kill Jacob for taking his birthright. (A: True)