

Jacob A Bad Rap

Whenever you hear a message involving Jacob, you usually hear about how he was such a deceiver, manipulator, and cheating scoundrel. It is often cloaked in some misled intent of showing that God saves and blesses even the sinner. But this is the overwhelming message of the bible – God saves sinners. However, it is not contrary to that message to recognize good characters, knowing all the while that they also are sinners in need of grace. Daniel and Joseph are perfect examples. They were men of good, even sterling, character, yet we don't get misled and think that they had no sin. Jacob, though one of the most honorable men of the bible and the man after whom God names his own people – Israel – seems to be singled out for abuse. It is a slander of a good and honorable man whom we as Christians should emulate. It is time to reform our understanding of Jacob's character.



First, it is a given that Jacob was not chosen by God for being a good man. In fact, he is used as an example in the New Testament of a person chosen by grace alone. "It was said to her [Rebecca], 'The older shall serve the younger.'" Romans 9:12. Why would Esau serve Jacob? "(For the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls)." God chose Jacob to be the chosen son before he was even born, before he could even earn it. (Any argument that Jacob was chosen only because God foreknew that Esau would despise his birthright contradicts the grace message of Paul, denies salvation by grace by saying one earns it after the fact, and is potentially subject to the condemnation of Galatians 1.) Let's not confuse the message God saves the worst of sinners with the message of Jacob's life and ignore the fact that it is an example of how to follow Christ. Yes, you read that right. I said it is an example of how to follow Christ.

Second, Jacob's life is one to emulate. Why did he buy the birthright? And he did buy it; he did not cheat Esau. How did he know that Esau would be willing to sell it? They had been brothers for decades, and he knew Esau's character. He knew what Esau valued. He also knew that his father favored Esau; therefore, how could Jacob think that he would ever collect on the bargain? Esau was no pushover; later he would scheme to kill Jacob. Isaac,

who irrationally favored Esau in spite of his demonstrated character flaws, was a patriarch, responsible for a significant estate of much property and hundreds of servants, inherited from Abraham and built up since then. So, Isaac was no pushover either. Jacob had no human way of collecting on the bargain; in order to make the deal with Esau, he must have acted in faith that God would ensure that Esau would never collect the birthright for himself.

Let's look at this economically. What did Esau get? He got something he could see and touch. Commentators fault him for choosing to please his base appetite, a bowl of soup over the birthright. But let's give him some credit - he did get something. What did Jacob get? Nothing . . . yet. Jacob saw the invisible; he saw what was more valuable. And he must have known there is a divine bill collector who will see the deal and enforce the deal by holding Esau to his word. Jacob was a man of faith, seeing the invisible and valuing it more than the temporal. And that which is invisible is eternal. II Corinthians 4:18. What do Christians choose when they give up everything in this life, perhaps even their own lives, to obtain Christ and his inheritance? The invisible, the eternal.

Jacob lived that way - by faith - for the rest of his life. After the deception of his father, instigated by his mother by the way, he was sent to live with Rebecca's family, where he worked for Laban. Jacob worked for Laban for fourteen years, yet was paid barely enough to survive, even though he was married to two of Laban's daughters. Talk about a deceptive unsavory character! That was Laban. If anyone was a deceptive schemer, it was Laban. Often Jacob's dealings with Laban are discussed as if Jacob were reaping what he had sowed. Laban was out to scam Jacob out of everything. At the end of fourteen years, Jacob negotiated what he thought was reasonable compensation for his work, while also being a generous deal for Laban. Laban got to keep the best of the flock. Apparently, at that time, the speckled and spotted were considered less valuable than the pure colored flocks of goats and sheep. So Jacob was generous enough to work out a deal with Laban such that Jacob received the lesser-valued animals. Laban agreed then behind Jacob's back, had his sons take all the speckled and spotted animals and hide them far from where Jacob kept Laban's flocks. Because that left nothing but unspotted animals in the herd from which Jacob could choose, Laban made it practically impossible for Jacob to make a living of any substance.

But Jacob saw with the eyes of faith, and placing poplar branches in front of the watering troughs, envisioned the flocks as speckled and spotted. What was amazing was not that some unspotted animals gave birth to spotted animals, but that God ensured that so many spotted and speckled animals were born. Only God could have changed the population of animals to favor Jacob, and he clearly did so to pay Jacob back for the manner in which Laban had cheated him. Jacob himself explains the injustice of his situation when Laban comes after him to do who knows what because God had blessed Jacob.

These twenty years I have been with you; your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried their young, and I have not eaten the rams of your flock. That which was torn by beasts I did not bring to you; I bore the loss of it. You required it from my hand, whether stolen by day or stolen by night. There I was! In the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night, and my sleep departed from my eyes. Thus I have been in your house twenty years; I served you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flock, and you have changed my wages ten times. Unless the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had been with me, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. God has seen my affliction and the labor of my hands, and rebuked you last night.

Gen. 31:38-42.

Third, in only one event in his life did Jacob ever deceive anyone – his father, when his mother ordered him to pretend to be his brother, Esau, in order to receive his father’s blessing. But let’s look at that situation in its entirety. All of Jacob’s life, his father Isaac had disobeyed God and ignored his wife. His wife, Rebecca, had heard from God Himself that Jacob was to receive the birthright. Yet, Isaac ignored the word of God, preferring his own interests in Esau the hunter and in the human law that required that the inheritance and birthright go to the firstborn. For over 40 years, instead of listening to God’s word and analyzing the character of his sons based on what they placed as priorities, Isaac followed legalism and his own desire. Rebecca knew this, and even Isaac admitted this when he proclaimed about Jacob after the

deception: “And he will be blessed.” How could Jacob be truly blessed by taking something by fraud? Could not Isaac have said the opposite? Something like: “Jacob, you stole the blessing by deception; therefore, it is invalid. It shall go to Esau.”

How could Jacob be truly blessed by taking something by fraud? Could not Isaac have said the opposite? Something like: “Jacob, you stole the blessing by deception; therefore, it is invalid. It shall go to Esau.” But Isaac didn’t say that. Instead, he admitted Jacob would be blessed in spite of the deception. So how could Isaac believe such was the case if he believed that God WANTED to give the blessing to Esau, the firstborn? Isaac had to know that Esau was the wrong one, even if he faced that fact only after the event. He knew God had blessed Jacob, and he knew that God does not honor fraud. Isaac had tried to defraud God, and he knew he had been shown up, not by Rebecca, but by God.

Fourth, Esau was the deceiver, not Jacob. How? Esau made a deal with Jacob in the negotiation for the stew. In the law, it's known as the "peppercorn" principle. A legitimate contract can only occur if both parties exchange what is called consideration, which can be money, property, just about anything of value. And the saying goes that even something as low-valued as a peppercorn will satisfy the requirement. Often people will sell a house to a relative for a dollar because they really don't want anything from the deal. But that dollar satisfies the consideration requirement. Although Esau's birthright was extremely highly valued compared to the stew that Jacob had made, the stew was still something of value and satisfied the consideration requirement for a contract. That's the whole point of the bible pointing out that Esau "despised" the birthright; he sold it for so little. But he really did sell it.

Therefore, Esau and Jacob had a deal. We don't know if anyone witnessed the agreement. Probably not because Esau thought he could get away with selling the birthright but keeping the blessing. Nevertheless, we know people in the family knew about it because of Esau's complaint to his father later:

"And he said, Is not he rightly named Jacob? for he hath supplanted me these two times: he took away my birthright; and, behold, now he hath taken

away my blessing. And he said, Hast thou not reserved a blessing for me?" Genesis 27:36.

But the blessing was legally associated with the birthright. Once Esau sold the birthright, then he no longer had a right to the blessing from his father, Isaac. But Esau apparently thought he could get away with the deception, thinking that no one would hold him to his earlier agreement to sell the birthright. But God did enforce it; Jacob came in before him and took it by pretending to be Esau. In other words, Esau thought he could make an agreement but not be held to it, thus defrauding his brother, Jacob. But today in so many messages and sermons, Jacob is made out to be the deceiver, not Esau.

Jacob originally thought that his mother's plan was a bad idea. Before the event, Jacob even disputed with his mother, protesting that he might get a curse instead of a blessing, but his mother overruled his objection by saying, "May the curse be upon me." She could say that because she knew God's will; she knew the true recipient of the blessing. She knew the source of blessing was God Himself. Jacob's deception of his father, Isaac, was more a correction than a deception. Think of the story of the Prince and the Pauper. A prince finds a look-alike to take his place while he explores the world without his royal trappings, but the pauper almost gets coronated as king. The true prince returns in time to be coronated, and the false prince is not kicked out but he doesn't become king either.

Esau was the fraud; he was not the true heir of the birthright or Abraham's inheritance. Jacob's mother sought to correct that, and obviously Isaac had not listened to her all these 40 years. In Malachi 1, God compares Israel to Esau and asks how Israel can ask if God loves them. Then God goes about explaining how Israel has treated Him like Esau did. Yet God still loves them; that is how elect Israel was. It disproves the idea that somehow God simply foreknew that Jacob would be more honorable than Esau. How could that be if God later treats Israel, Jacob's descendants, as the elect, when the nation of Israel was despising God as Esau had? The nation of Israel's offerings were of not the best of the flock. In fact, they were of the worst. That was something Esau would have done – despise God by giving the worst of his

flock as a sacrifice, or at least, by not valuing God (the birthright) as highly as He should have been honored.

Jacob's name means to "grasp the heel," which has been interpreted as schemer and manipulator. But that is not what Jacob was. Jacob grasped the heel in the same sense that Peter did. What did Peter do when he met Jesus and realized who He was? He fell down on his face at his feet and said, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" He was at the place, on the ground, where he could only grasp Jesus' heel. Where can you grasp Christ when He's on the cross, only His heel. Where was the prostitute when she honored Christ? At His feet. Therefore, that is where we should be – at His feet, fit only to grasp His feet, His heel, and hold on, believing that His righteousness can be ours and that is our only hope.

Jacob is most like the Disciple, Peter, whose name was changed from Simon. When was Jacob's name changed? When he would not let go of the man with whom Jacob wrestled all night. The bible does not tell us what part of the man Jacob held. It could only have been the heel, right? A man can get his hands around the heel of a stronger opponent who is trying to leave. Yet, at that event, when Jacob most fits his name as grasper of the heel, this man changes Jacob's name to Prince, which is what Israel means. Therefore, Jacob's name was not based on manipulation and deceit but on not letting go of the God who took hold of Him when Jacob was in the womb - when Jacob would not let go of his twin brother's heel. Jacob wanted the most valuable thing, the Lord Himself, and he would not let go. He was a persevering saint, and God honored him with an even better name, as he lived up to his original name.

How else is he like Peter? Peter wanted the best. He left the fishing nets, perhaps a fairly prosperous business, to follow Jesus Christ, the person and thing most valuable. Peter expected something from it: "Lord, we have left all to follow you. What will there be for us?" Jesus did not rebuke him. Far from it, He told Him there would be great riches for him and the other disciples – houses, family, persecution, and eternal life. Jesus loved that Peter would leave all to seek after what was most valuable, even though Peter did not fully understand all that he was seeking (much of which was invisible). Had Jesus come to Jacob and told him to follow Him, Jacob would have left all just like Peter did. Why? Because Jacob knew what was most valuable, unlike Esau who sold what was most valuable for what was temporarily satisfying.

What disciple is Esau most like? Who thought 40 shekels of silver was more valuable than the most valuable thing/person in the universe? Who thought, "What's He done for me more than this silver can do? This silver may be temporary, but it meets my needs now. Unlike this so-called savior, this Son of God. What good can He do me now?" That is Esau's thinking: "What good is this birthright to me? This food I can eat now and meet my needs now." Study the history of Jacob and see if the bible ever says that Jacob received a shred of his father's physical inheritance. Jacob received only the birthright, something invisible. He received that inheritance which was eternal because that which is invisible is that which is eternal. I Peter 3:17.

Study the history of Jacob and see if he received a shred of physical or monetary inheritance from his father, Isaac. Jacob received his wealth not from his father but from working for Laban, who tried to deceive and cheat Jacob, yet Jacob never retaliated against, never stole from Laban. Jacob relied on God to justify him, to retaliate against Laban, to restore to Jacob what Laban had stolen from him. And God honored Jacob by restoring what Laban had cheated him out of. Why is it that we give Laban's reputation of lying and stealing and cheating to the honorable Jacob? What would Esau have done if Laban had cheated him? He would have killed Laban and his sons and taken what he thought was his. Esau would not have waited on God, would not have depended upon God.

Even more amazingly, Jacob is like Christ, in that he did not take vengeance but endured suffering believing God would vindicate him in the end. I Peter 4:19. Jesus even uses "Jacob's Ladder" (Genesis 28:12) to describe Himself in John 1:51. Jacob saw the ladder (really a staircase) going up to heaven after having been cast from his family, forced to leave because of Esau's threats to kill him. He has so little in possessions that a rock is his pillow. Like Christ, he had nowhere to lay his head. Then Jacob received a vision of Christ.