Lesson Six

Jacob: Deception and Blessing

Focal Text
Genesis 25:21-34; 27:22-36b; 32:22-32; 35:9-12

Background
Genesis 25:19-34; 27:1–33:20; 35:1-29

Main Idea
As hard as it may be to understand or accept, God can choose to bless imperfect people so that they can accomplish God’s mission.

Question to Explore
What would be required for you to believe you are a person whom God wishes to bless and use to accomplish God’s purposes?

Quick Read
God uses and blesses us by grace through faith.

Commentary
Do you remember the story of Prometheus, the god who gave fire to mortals? For his transgression he was chained and tortured by Might, Violence, and Hephaestus, servants of Zeus. So the ancient Greek playwright Aeschylus makes Hephaestus say to Prometheus, “This is thy wage for loving humankind. . . . With groanings deep and lamentable cries, Thy voice; for Zeus is hard to be entreated.”1
There have been times when I’ve wondered if Hephaestus was right. Times when God felt distant from me, days when my prayers seemed to ricochet from the ceiling unanswered, when it seemed clear to me that I must do more to merit the attention and help of the Almighty. That I must be more religious, keep more rules, do more to impress God. You have probably been there as well. But we were wrong.

This week we will meet one of the most unlikely candidates in Scripture to be called, blessed, and used by God. If our perfect Father could use such an imperfect instrument in the biblical era, we can know that he still uses imperfect vessels today. God can hit straight licks with crooked sticks, as the saying goes.

The next time you wonder whether God can use your life and service, remember the story we’ll explore this week. Offer such divine favor to those you will teach this Sunday, and rejoice to know that you serve a God of grace.

**God calls us by grace (25:21-34)**

Isaac’s remarkable story began with his miraculous birth, but it didn’t end there. Abraham sent his most trusted servant to find his son a wife among his own people; the events by which he found Rebekah and brought her to Isaac were clearly providential (Genesis 24).

*Conceived by grace*

But the couple experienced a tragic setback: “Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren” (Gen. 25:21a). “Prayed” could be translated *entreated*, and comes from a Hebrew word originally meaning *to burn incense*. Why was Isaac so burdened?

For a woman to be unable to bear children in the ancient Near East was devastating beyond our imagining. The chief function of wives in their culture was the production of children, especially boys (see Psalm 127:3). In an agrarian culture, which depended on children for financial production and family continuity, it seemed that Rebekah had failed in her most significant responsibility. (Jacob’s wife would be barren as well; Gen. 29:31).

It had been twenty years since the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah (25: 20, 26). Some might even have thought her barrenness indicated divine judgment, but her husband interceded on her behalf, certain that God could still help and bless them. And “the LORD answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant” (25:21b). God apparently removed the physical hindrances to her pregnancy, giving her a child despite all expectations.

She then followed Isaac’s example: “The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, ‘Why is this happening to me?’ So she went to inquire of the LORD” (25:22).
“Jostled” translates a Hebrew word that means *to struggle violently*. Rebekah became so alarmed that she sought divine help and counsel. The text does not specify how she made this inquiry, whether personally, through a recognized spiritual leader, or at a place of worship.

God answered her inquiry with poetic prophecy, whether through a human agent or by direct revelation to Rebekah:

> Two nations are in your womb,  
> and two peoples from within you will be separated;  
> one people will be stronger than the other,  
> and the older will serve the younger (25:23).

In this one event Rebekah would go from the shame of barrenness to the joy of multiple sons. What was more, these sons would be the forebears of “nations” and “peoples.” This was remarkable news, another fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham that he would make him a “great nation” so that “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (12:2, 3).

Then came the shock: “the older will serve the younger.” Ancient culture always favored the firstborn son as the superior child. In time the Jewish law would give him two-thirds of the estate (Deuteronomy 21:17); he was often given his father’s name, as when John the Baptizer was born and “they were going to name him after his father Zechariah” (Luke 1:59). But now, for reasons not yet disclosed, God told this excited mother that her older son would serve his younger brother.

God kept his word: “When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb. The first to come out was red, and his whole body was like a hairy garment; so they named him Esau (Gen. 25:24-25). “Esau” means hairy, a description that would soon be important to the unfolding narrative. “His whole body was like a hairy garment” could be translated, *His entire body was covered with hair as with a cloak*. In the ancient world, hair was an indication of masculinity and strength, so that the prophet Elisha was taunted for his baldness (2 Kings 2:23).

Then “his brother came out, with his hand grasping Esau’s heel; so he was named Jacob” (Gen. 25:26a). “Jacob” means *he grasps the heel*; it can also mean *deceiver*, a definition this son would soon deserve. Indicating the historical nature of this narrative, the writer informs us that “Isaac was sixty years old when Rebekah gave birth to them” (25:26b).

**Earning his name**

The sons would soon earn their names: “The boys grew up, and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was a quiet man, staying among the tents” (25:27). A “skillful hunter” was invaluable to a tribe living off the land. By contrast, a
“quiet man, staying among the tents” had no financial or social value to his culture. He did not find and bring food for the family, and neither was it his place to prepare it with the women.

Adding to the growing family tragedy, “Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob” (25:28). Such division of parental affection would soon lead to conflict and misery.

The first of many moral failures to come then unfolded: “Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished” (25:29). “Cooking” translates a word that means boiling; “stew” was vegetable soup made of lentels, brownish-red in color. Esau had been hard at work hunting for the tribe; Jacob had been at home cooking for himself.

Esau then said to Jacob, “Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I’m famished!” (25:30a). The writer adds, “(That is why he was also called Edom)” (25:30b); “Edom” means red, an appropriate name given the color of the stew and of Esau’s hair (25:25).

The son named grasper or deceiver saw his opportunity: “Jacob replied, ‘First sell me your birthright’” (25:31). The “birthright” was the oldest son’s right to two-thirds of the estate (Deut. 21:17); it also gave him authority over his younger siblings (see Gen. 27:27-29).

Esau’s reply showed that his character was no more mature or godly than his brother’s: “Look, I am about to die. What good is the birthright to me?” (25:32). But Jacob didn’t trust his older brother: “But Jacob said, ‘Swear to me first.’ So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob” (25:33).

Finally Jacob kept his end of the deal: “Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, and then got up and left” (25:34a). The writer notes with prescient disapproval, “So Esau despised his birthright” (25:34b). The writer of Hebrews agreed with his critical assessment: “See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son” (Hebrews 12:16).

What a tragic beginning to one of the most significant stories in Scripture. Who reading this far in Genesis could imagine Jacob would become the patriarch of the twelve tribes of Israel, and that the people of God would take their name from his across the rest of human history?

As God called Jacob by a grace his character did not repay, so God has called us by that same grace and mercy. I did not deserve to hear the gospel and respond to the Spirit’s conviction in my life; you did not deserve the eternal life you have received from your
Father. I do not deserve the privilege of a life in vocational ministry; you do not deserve the honor of teaching sacred Scripture this week. Others are far better qualified than me to do the things I am called to do; you may know others more qualified to teach and serve than you. But God’s grace is greater than all our sins. He chooses availability over ability; he does not call the equipped, but equips the called.

Dwight Moody never had more than a fifth-grade education, and struggled with grammar and diction his entire life. A critic once lambasted him for his failings with language. Mr. Moody replied, “I know that others can speak better than I can. It’s just that when I speak, God seems to use me.”

When last did you thank God for the grace by which he called you to himself and his purpose for your life?

**God blesses us by grace (27:22-36)**

Genesis 26 tells the story of Isaac and Rebekah’s travels among the Philistines during a time of famine. Isaac was fearful that the Philistines would kill him so as to steal his beautiful wife, and so he imitated his father’s earlier deception by claiming she was his sister (26:7; see 20:2). We are left to wonder whether Jacob’s personality was not formed at least in part by his father’s example.

Meanwhile, as another window into Esau’s character, we read that “when Esau was forty years old, he married Judith daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and also Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite. They were a source of grief to Isaac and Rebekah” (26:34-35), for they were Canaanites, not part of the family’s tribe.

Now the time of Isaac’s death was approaching, and he wanted to confer the customary blessing of the father on his children. He sent Esau to hunt game for a last meal together; Rebekah overheard their conversation and sent Jacob in to imitate his brother. Given Isaac’s failing eyesight and the hairy garments with which Jacob’s mother clothed him, their ruse worked: “Jacob went close to his father Isaac, who touched him and said, ‘The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau.’ He did not recognize him, for his hands were hairy like those of his brother Esau; so he blessed him” (27:22-23). Isaac was still unsure: “‘Are you really my son Esau?’ he asked” (27:24a). Now Jacob clearly lied, “‘I am,’ he replied” (27:24b).

Isaac was deceived and said, “My son, bring me some of your game to eat, so that I may give you my blessing” (27:25a). Per his prior arrangement with his mother, “Jacob brought it to him and he ate; and he brought some wine and he drank” (27:25b).

Now the son’s deception becomes even more poignant and troubling: “Then his father Isaac said to him, ‘Come here, my son, and kiss me’” (27:26). We think of Judas’
betrayal of Jesus with a kiss (Matthew 26:49). Jacob was shameless: “So he went to him and kissed him. When Isaac caught the smell of his clothes, he blessed him and said,

Ah, the smell of my son  
is like the smell of a field  
that the LORD has blessed” (Gen. 27:27).

Now comes the father’s covenant blessing on his son: “May God give you of heaven’s dew and of earth’s richness—an abundance of grain and new wine” (27:28). In a dry climate, “dew” was as vital as rain to the success of the crops (see Deut. 33:13). The “earth’s richness” was likewise essential to “an abundance of grain and new wine,” wealth and prosperity in their agrarian culture.

On the basis of such personal prosperity, Isaac expanded his blessing: “May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you” (Gen. 27:29a). Again we see God’s blessing on Abraham being fulfilled by his descendants (12:3). This blessing would begin with his own family: “Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you” (27:29b). In defense of his future, “May those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed” (27:29c).

Of course, such deception was soon discovered: “After Isaac finished blessing him and Jacob had scarcely left his father’s presence, his brother Esau came in from hunting. He too prepared some tasty food and brought it to his father. Then he said to him, ‘My father, sit up and eat some of my game, so that you may give me your blessing’” (27:30-31).

His blind father asked him, “Who are you?” He replied, “I am your son, your firstborn, Esau” (27:32). Clearly Esau still wanted the highest blessing his father could convey, even though he had forfeited his rights as firstborn to his brother.

His father’s reaction was understandable: “Isaac trembled violently and said, ‘Who was it, then, that hunted game and brought it to me? I ate it just before you came and I blessed him—and indeed he will be blessed!’” (27:33). The Hebrew people believed in the power and permanency of words—once spoken, they could not be retracted. It has been noted that you cannot unring a bell.

Now Esau’s earlier transaction came to full reality: “When Esau heard his father’s words, he burst out with a loud and bitter cry and said to his father, ‘Bless me—me too, my father!’” (27:34). With his firstborn rights gone and now his covenant blessing from his father, he would be bereft of position and status in their society.

Note that Isaac did not wonder who had perpetrated this deception: “But he said, ‘Your brother came deceitfully and took your blessing’” (27:35). Esau’s reaction was bitter: “Isn’t he rightly named Jacob? He has deceived me these two times: He took my
birthright, and now he’s taken my blessing!” (27:36). The writer of Hebrews used this result to warn us about the outcome of sin in our lives: “Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. He could bring about no change of mind, though he sought the blessing with tears” (Heb. 12:17).

We find much to criticize in Jacob’s behavior—his blatant deception of his failing father, his complicity with his scheming mother, and his willingness to steal what belonged to his brother. Nonetheless, Isaac chose to bless him and his brother: “By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future” (Heb. 11:20). And God chose to bless this man named Deceiver. In this sense, we are all Jacob.

None of us could earn the right to salvation: “It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). None deserves to be heard by God, to have our sins forgiven or our need supplied: “my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19). It was not fair that Jacob stole Esau’s blessing, but if God were fair none of us could be blessed at all.

What is the last gift you received from your Father? When last did God forgive your sin, answer your prayers, or meet your needs? Don’t fall into the trap of thinking you earned what God could only give, or that you are better than others for having been so blessed.

The only proper response to divine favor is for us to worship God with gratitude and serve our neighbor with grace. Who will experience God’s grace in yours today?

God uses us by grace (32:22-32; 35:9-12)

Esau immediately began plotting his revenge: “Esau held a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing his father had given him. He said to himself, ‘The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob!’” (Gen. 27:41). Rebekah heard his vow and warned Jacob to flee to her brother Laban in Haran (27:42). Isaac sent him off with instructions to marry one of Laban’s daughters rather than a Canaanite (28:1-5). In spiteful response, Esau married two Canaanites “in addition to the wives he already had” (28: 6-9).

Wrestling with God

Along the way, for the first time recorded in Scripture, Jacob met God personally (28:10-22). He gained entrance to Laban’s family, married his daughters Rachel and Leah, and had eleven sons by them and their maids (Gen. 29—30). By the time he left his uncle, he was a man of great wealth and status (Gen. 31).

But he had never made peace with his brother. He sent messengers and gifts to Esau, hoping for reconciliation with him (32:21). Then came an event that would change the
narrative of his life and nation: “That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions” (32:22-23).

Solitude is a typical way to meet God, as with Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:1-3) and Jesus in Capernaum: “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed” (Mark 1:35). It was the same with Jacob: “So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak” (Gen. 32:24). Who was this “man”?

He manifested human traits: “the man saw that he could not overpower him” (32:25a); he said to Jacob, “Let me go” (32:26a); he asked Jacob’s name as though he did not know it (32:27); and the text calls him a “man” (32:25-27). At the same time, this individual had the power to disable Jacob with a touch (32:25b) and could change Jacob’s name to “Israel” (32:28a). He indicated that Jacob had “struggled with God and with men” (32:28b), perhaps indicating the mysterious person’s divine status. And Jacob would say, “I saw God face to face” (32:30a).

Hosea gives us our best solution to this mystery: speaking of Jacob, he said, “In the womb he grasped his brother’s heel; as a man he struggled with God. He struggled with the angel and overcame him; he wept and begged for his favor” (Hosea 12:3-4). As at other times in Scripture, most notably when Abraham entertained his three guests (Gen. 18), God manifested himself as a man and an angel.

Now to the narrative: after they wrestled until daybreak, “When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man” (32:25). This area is related to the nervus ischiadicus, the main nerve in the area of the hip.

Then he said to Jacob, “Let me go, for it is daybreak” (32:26a) and Jacob had work to do. But Jacob was not finished with this remarkable encounter: “‘I will not let you go unless you bless me’” (32:26b). In response, “The man asked him, ‘What is your name?’ ‘Jacob,’ he answered” (32:27), either to inform the man or to confess his name and reputation to God.

Now comes the pivotal moment: “Then the man said, ‘Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome’” (32:28). “Israel” indeed means one who struggles with God, and would be the name of the chosen people to the present day.

Then Jacob asked, “Please tell me your name” (32:29a), the same question Moses had asked of God in his own divine encounter (Exod. 3:13). Perhaps Jacob had his own questions as to this individual’s identity and nature, or more likely he wanted the kind of personal relationship that learning a name conveyed.
The individual refused: “But he replied, ‘Why do you ask my name?’ Then he blessed him there” (32:29b). As a result, “Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, ‘It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared’” (32:30). “Peniel” means face of God.

In a fitting conclusion to this remarkable episode, “The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip. Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip, because the socket of Jacob’s hip was touched near the tendon” (32:31-32).

Blessed by God
Jacob and Esau were reconciled (Gen. 33); then Jacob’s sons followed their father’s example in deceiving the men of Shechem after their sister was violated (Gen. 34). God sent Jacob and his family back to Bethel; in preparation, he led them to dispose of all the idols they had accumulated along the way (35:1-8).

Along the way, “After Jacob returned from Paddan Aram, God appeared to him again and blessed him” (35:9). Paddan Aram is located in northwest Mesopotamia. Keeping the promise made to Jacob by the individual with whom he had wrestled all night, “God said to him, ‘Your name is Jacob, but you will no longer be called Jacob; your name will be Israel.’ So he named him Israel” (35:10).

Furthermore, “God said to him, ‘I am God Almighty; be fruitful and increase in number. A nation and a community of nations will come from you, and kings will come from your body’” (35:11). From Jacob’s sons would come the entire nation of Israel.

Most significantly, “The land I gave to Abraham and Isaac I also give to you, and I will give this land to your descendants after you” (35:12). God first promised this land to Jacob’s grandfather: “On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, ‘To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates—the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites’” (15:18-21).

The Lord later renewed this promise with Abraham: “The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God” (17:8). And he promised it to Jacob thirty years earlier at Bethel: “I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying” (28:13).

God chose to use Jacob despite his consistent pattern of deception and moral weakness. In the same way, God chooses to use fallen and failed humans today. Lee Atwater was the most notorious political figure of the 1980s. As chairman of the Republican National Committee, he did and would do anything in his power to elect his candidates to office.
He was feared by his side and hated by his opponents. But when he came to faith in Christ, everything changed. Shortly after his conversion he discovered he had terminal brain cancer. He spent his last months apologizing to his opponents, mending relationships with his friends, and witnessing to his faith. God’s grace transformed his life.

Manuel Noriega was “public enemy number one” during the time leading up to the U.S. invasion of Panama in December of 1989. Jailed on drug and money laundering charges, he was visited in his Miami prison cell by evangelists Clift Brannon and Rudy Hernandez. On January 16, 1990, at 11:00 in the morning, he made Christ his Lord. He has since written to former political and criminal associates, inviting them to receive Jesus as well. God’s grace transformed his life.

In the early 1970s, Charles W. Colson was known as the White House “hatchet man.” This aide to President Nixon was “incapable of humanitarian thought,” according to the media of the day. When he came to Christ in 1973, the Boston Globe reported, “If Mr. Colson can repent of his sins, there just has to be hope for everybody.” He later founded Prison Fellowship Ministries, the world’s largest outreach to prisoners, ex-prisoners, crime victims, and their families. God’s grace transformed his life.

How has God used your life and gifts by his grace?

**Conclusion**

We serve God, not so God will love us but because he already does. He called you, blessed you, and uses you by his grace. How can you not give it to another of God’s children this week?
See [www.baptistwaypress.org](http://www.baptistwaypress.org) for additional study materials on

**The Book of Genesis:**

**People Relating to God**

and on more than thirty-eight other Bible studies by BaptistWay Press®,

or call 1-866-249-1799

(M-Th 8:30 a.m.-6:00 p.m.; Fri 8:30 a.m.-5:00 p.m. central time).

A recent book by Dr. Denison, *The Bible—You Can Believe It: Biblical Authority in the Twenty-First Century*, is also available from BAPTISTWAY PRESS®. The cost is only $4.95 each plus shipping and any applicable taxes. A *Teaching Guide* is available for only $1.95 plus shipping and any applicable taxes.

♦

To receive Dr. Denison’s free daily e-mail, “GodIssues: Today’s news in spiritual perspective,” see [www.InformedFaith.com](http://www.InformedFaith.com). The brief essay discusses current events and issues in light of God’s word and provides practical applications to life.

♦

---