

## **God Transforms His Chosen Family** *Genesis 12 – 50*

### **Three Types of Pain** *Genesis 25 – 35*

#### **Introduction: Interpreting Your Pain**

Years ago, an acquaintance of mine died. He graduated in 1997. He died of a very rare neurological disease when he was only 32 years old, leaving behind his wife in her 20's. They had been married less than 1 year. Now, how do you interpret that? Who is to blame? Is the world wrong in a physical sense because of the disease? Or did he do something wrong? Or did God do something wrong? How you interpret that makes a huge difference.

When you get a bad grade in a class, how do you interpret that? Do you say, 'The world is wrong, and I need to overcome that'? Do you say, 'I was wrong, and I need to overcome myself'? Or do you say, 'God is wrong for dealing me that grade, and I don't know if I need to overcome Him somehow'?

When you break up with someone, how do you interpret that? Do you say, 'The other person is wrong for doing that to me'? Do you say, 'I was wrong for doing that'? Or do you say, 'God was wrong' somehow?

Pain presses the issue to us of how we interpret it. And the most practical, personal issue always comes down to this: Can I trust God? If God actually does cause us pain somehow, then how do we think about that? How can we trust Him?

#### **Context: God Transforming His Chosen Family**

We are in the book of Genesis, in the story of Jacob. I bring this story before us because I believe it's a great example of three different types of pain that we can experience in life. First, there is the pain of living in a broken world in general. Second, there is the pain of your own choices. Third, there is the pain of God wounding your sin in order to heal you. It is important to differentiate these things so you know how to handle life.

In Genesis, we see the beginnings of how the biblical God trained His people to know Him, discern Him, and become His partners in the world. He was, in fact, preparing them in a very preliminary way for Jesus and Jesus' mission to the whole world. The story of God's chosen people starts with Abraham, who just cared about having a son, as the Bible picks it up in Genesis 11. But within four generations, we wind up with Joseph, who is in the place to care about all Egypt and the known world at the time during a famine. So this is in the context of God transforming His people to be more like Himself in small but tangible ways, in the context of the ancient world which was terribly insecure, brutal, and treacherous. We're going to follow the story of Jacob. The story goes through Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and now Jacob along with his brother Esau.

For those of you who appreciate literature, I'm going to tell the story in a certain way. I'm going to follow the structure of the story in Genesis 25 – 35. The Jacob story is in the form of a chiasm. That is, the first point matches the last point, the second point matches the second to last point, and so on. The center of the story is the main point. So how do you know what the main point or the author's intention is? Look at the center of the story. Here is the high level overview of the Jacob story.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> By Mako Nagasawa using insights from J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, Paul Borgman, *Genesis: The Story We Haven't Heard*, and Gary A. Rendsburg, *The Redaction of Genesis* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1986), p.53 – 54.

- A. God makes promise; struggle in childbirth; Jacob and Esau born; Jacob buys birthright (25:19 – 34)
- B. Rebekah endangered in a foreign palace, Isaac lies about her, pact with foreigners (26:1 – 34)
- C. Jacob fears Esau and flees the Promised Land (27:1 – 28:9)
  - D. At night, God speaks to Jacob in a dream (ladder with angels), Jacob names Bethel, makes deal with God (28:10 – 22)
  - E. Jacob meets Rachel and Laban (29:1 – 14)
    - F. Jacob must acknowledge the rights of the firstborn (Leah) and is vulnerable to Laban, Laban deceives Rachel (29:15 – 30)
    - G. Jacob experiences conflict between his two wives (29:31 – 30:13)
      - H. Rachel relinquishes rights to Jacob; Leah bears children (30:14 – 21)
      - H'. God 'remembers' Rachel; Rachel bears Joseph (30:22 – 24)
    - G'. Jacob experiences conflict with Laban but accepts a handicap with his flocks, relinquishes his rights (30:25 – 36)
  - F'. God prospers Jacob and protects him from Laban; Rachel deceives Laban (30:37 – 31:35)
  - E'. Laban departs from Jacob (31:43 – 55)
  - D'. At night, God wrestles Jacob, Jacob named Israel, asks God for blessing (32:1 – 32)
- C'. Jacob returns to the Promised Land and is restored to Esau (33:1 – 20)
- B'. Dinah endangered in foreign palace, Jacob's sons lie, pact with foreigners (34:1 – 31)
- A'. God fulfills promise; Jacob named Israel again at Bethel; struggle in childbirth, Rachel dies; Reuben forfeits birthright; Isaac dies, Jacob and Esau bury him (35:1 – 29)

### **The First Pain: The Pain of Living in a Broken World (points A – D)**

Here's the family backdrop. Let me tell the story as it unfolds. Jacob was a twin. He was always competing in some way with his twin brother Esau. Dad (Isaac) was passive. Mom (Rebekah) was controlling. Dad favored the physically stronger boy, Esau. Mom favored the one who knew how to navigate relationships, Jacob, even if it was by deception, which is what his name means: *deceiver, supplanter*. For many of us, the pain of living in a broken world is something we know through our family. Or, maybe through our lack of family. These are things that are outside of our control because it involves someone else's sin. Dad was alcoholic. Mom was verbally abusive. Someone was physically abusive. A sibling got into big problems. All of that affects you.

The important thing to remember here is that God did not cause the world to be messed up. He didn't. He is not the author of evil or human sin. In the Christian account, humanity is responsible for the world being what it is. Both in terms of human evil because we corrupted our own nature, and also natural disaster because we aborted a mission to turn the wild creation into a garden with supernatural power. We as human beings lost both our goodness and our power. But God is restoring you and me and the world. Sometimes, however, we became afraid. And that is why we start to run away from pain. Sometime we run away externally. Sometimes we run away internally. If we run away externally, we leave, or we find someone else to love us. If we run away internally, we pretend things don't hurt us, or we try to control the situation. Jacob runs away by leaving home.

In C, Jacob fears Esau and flees the Promised Land (27:1 – 28:9). In D, at night, God speaks to Jacob in a dream (ladder with angels), Jacob names Bethel, makes deal with God (28:10 – 22). When we grow up knowing that we can manipulate people, we became someone like Jacob. We might be shaped by our family. We might be shaped by some other experience. And we wind up thinking, consciously or subconsciously, that God can be manipulated, too. The way Jacob thinks about God's blessing is that it is for him at the expense of Esau. What they will both learn is that God's blessing is far larger than that. So what does God do to correct that? He lays a foundation for trust. God makes the same promise to Jacob that He did with Abraham: to establish him and his descendants in the land. This is a critical moment in Jacob's life. But what does he do? He makes a bargain with God. 'If God will be with me and will keep me on this journey that I take, and will give me food to eat and garments to wear, and I return to my father's house in safety, then the LORD will be my God.' (Gen.28:20 – 21) Jacob could have said, 'You are my God, therefore I will return to my father's house in safety.' But true to form and to his nature, Jacob makes a deal.

### **The Second Pain: The Pain of Your Own Choices**

Here the real action begins. This is where we see the pain of Jacob's own choices. In E, Jacob meets Rachel and Laban (29:1 – 14). In F, Jacob must acknowledge the rights of the firstborn (Leah) and is vulnerable to Laban, Laban deceives Rachel (29:15 – 30). In G, Jacob experiences conflict between his two wives (29:31 – 30:13). In this case, what's going on is that Jacob has met his match: his uncle Laban. Jacob is a deceiver. But Laban has out-deceived Jacob. We know that Jacob's mother Rebekah was a bit of a deceiver herself. But her brother Laban, Jacob's uncle, is really a deceiver. Jacob has been drawn into family games much bigger than himself. Each of us will get to a place when your brokenness is shown. Jacob's brokenness is shown. He's tried to play a high stakes game of deception with his family. But his uncle Laban has had decades more to practice. Laban is good at it; Jacob is an amateur, and he has lost. Jacob has risen to the highest level of his incompetence. Have you? Has someone you know? Have you reached the highest level of your dysfunction yet?

In the business world, there's something called the Peter Principle. The Peter Principle says that you will always reach the highest level of your incompetence. You keep getting promoted until you really blow it. I think that's true in other ways. You will become good at doing certain things. And then you'll get to a place in life so that when you make a mistake, it will really show. For example, if your identity is wrapped up in doing really well in school, you'll be drawn to others who are really competitive. And you'll get your butt kicked. Because there's always someone smarter than you. And just to do well, you'll have to work yourself to the bone. And after days and weeks and months of slogging away at being a pre-med, or pre-law, or pre-whatever, and finally giving up, when your parents are furious, how do you interpret that? Is the world to blame? Is it you? Or is it God? I believe it is an intersection point between the world and yourself. I don't think it's God. Why? Because I don't think God is the One who puts you into competitions where you don't take rest, you don't participate in Jesus' mission to others, you feel lots of anxiety, and you become a striver. And yet how easy it is to think that God placed this burden of academic success on you, which you have to live up to. But God does not do that. You did that.

This type of pain is self-inflicted. If you suppress your own pain and become a people pleaser, what you've done is to run away from pain internally. You become someone who needs to be needed, who tries not to feel hurt, who always focuses on others. You feel like you have to make everyone happy, and now you've become a victim of your own success. Too many people make demands on you. Or some people feel they don't really know you. And they're right. Because the real you is damaged by fear; you need Jesus to heal you. Perhaps because of what happened earlier in your life, what you've done is understandable...*until now*. But *now* is the time that God is calling you out of those patterns. Because now, there are too many people in your life. You cannot go on like this.

If you just want to surround yourself with loyal friends, if you just want 'community,' then something will happen that will shatter your community. Why? Because it was self-centered to begin with. And when you foster that kind of self-centeredness – instead of Jesus-centeredness – among a group of people, all it takes is for someone to feel neglected, or a breakup to happen, or a bad housing situation to happen, or someone to feel like, 'This doesn't feel like my community anymore.' Then the whole thing unravels. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and theologian who wrote a book called *Life Together* in 1938 from an underground seminary in Nazi Germany. He watched human community take shape in Nazi Germany. And he wrote these chilling words: 'Human love has little regard for truth. It makes the truth relative, since nothing, not even the truth, must come between it and the beloved person. Human love desires the other person, his company, his answering love, but it does not serve him. On the contrary, it continues to desire even when it seems to be serving. There are two marks, both of which are one and the same thing, that manifest the difference between spiritual and human love: Human love cannot tolerate the dissolution of a fellowship that has become false for the sake of genuine fellowship, and human love cannot love an enemy, that is, one who seriously and stubbornly resists it. Both spring from the same source: human love is by its very nature desire – desire for human community. So long as it can satisfy this desire in some way, it will not give it up, even for the sake of truth, even for the sake of genuine love for others. But where it can no longer expect its desire to be fulfilled, there it stops short – namely, in the face of an enemy. There it turns into hatred, contempt, and calumny. Right here is the point where spiritual love begins. This is why human love becomes personal hatred when it encounters genuine spiritual love, which does not desire but serves. Human love makes itself an end in itself. It creates of itself an end, an idol which it worships, to which it must subject everything. It nurses and cultivates an ideal, it loves itself, and nothing else in the world. Spiritual love, however, comes from Jesus Christ, it serves him alone; it knows that it has no immediate access to other persons.' When we set our hearts on something other than Jesus, we wind up being drawn into dynamics that we hardly understand.

But the moment when we come to an end of ourselves is exactly when we might be able to best hear God's voice. This is what happens right under Jacob's nose. In H, Rachel relinquishes her rights to Jacob; Leah bears Zebulun and Dinah (30:14 – 21). In H', God 'remembers' Rachel; Rachel bears Joseph (30:22 – 24). Mandrakes in Hebrew are known as the love plant. It was thought to help with getting pregnant, which could be what Rachel and Leah believed. Rachel is Jacob's favored wife, and seems to have an informal kind of power. So she says that Leah can sleep with Jacob that night, and, it seems, in the future because Leah bears not just one more son (Issachar), but another son (Zebulun) and a daughter (Dinah). What is implied here is that Rachel gives up the competition with her sister. She lets go of her rights, if they were really rights in the first place! She really lets go of her power. She was Jacob's favored wife, and she turned him away from Leah. She blocked Leah from being loved, and even from sexual intimacy with Jacob at times. But now, Rachel realizes that her sister is in terrible pain, and she's only making it worse for her, so she stops using her power. She lets Leah be loved. Rachel lets go of her resentment, even though Leah has children and Rachel doesn't; Rachel doesn't hold it against Leah, nor does she hold it against God. She turns to God instead, humbly. And God remembers Rachel. He helps her bear a son, Joseph.

This is the core of the story, the turning point. Following Rachel and Leah's story is worth doing on its own, and I wish we had time for it. But for now, I'm going to follow Jacob's story. Jacob watches this happen, of course. This has an impact on him. First, it reminds him of the conflict he has with Esau, his brother. Now he's in the position of seeing a conflict happen, so he knows what he must look like to his family and to God. It's like seeing a junior version of yourself, warts and all. Second, it reminds him of the promise God made to him. So Rachel schools Jacob here. She shows him what it means to trust God. It means that you give up your power and bitterness.

### **The Third Pain: God Wounds Our Sin to Heal Us**

From this point, Jacob gives up his rights, power, and bitterness. He trusts God. And this leads to the third pain, the pain God inflicts on Jacob. In G', Jacob experiences conflict with Laban but accepts a handicap with his flocks, relinquishes his rights (30:25 – 36): Jacob says to Uncle Laban, 'I need to make a way for myself. Let me and my family go.' Shrewdly, Jacob doesn't ask to be compensated. He knows that any gift from Laban will come with strings attached. Instead, Jacob proposes that he take the least favorable animals from among the flock. 'Normally the hire of a shepherd is 20 percent of the flock, and rarely, if ever, would the speckled population be such a large percentage.' (Waltke) And, 'In a flock of sheep and goats, the sheep are mostly all white, the goats all black or dark brown. Multicolored sheep and goats are much rarer. Jacob suggests that all the multicolored animals be his wage and that the pure white sheep and the dark goats be Laban's.' (Wenham) To the greedy Laban it seems as though Jacob wants practically nothing. How could Laban refuse such an offer? But in case Jacob has any tricks up his sleeve, Laban steals the initiative away from him and removes Jacob's 'inferior' animals himself. To ensure that Jacob cannot acquire any of these multicolored animals, he separates them from Jacob by three days distance, placing them under the protective care of his own sons. Little does Laban know that his mistrust will work to Jacob's advantage. Jacob takes an intriguing gamble in animal breeding and God makes it succeed.

In F', God prospers Jacob and protects him from Laban; Rachel deceives Laban (30:37 – 31:35). In E', Laban departs from Jacob (31:43 – 55). Then in D', At night, God wrestles Jacob, Jacob named Israel, asks God for blessing (32:1 – 32): Jacob finally asks God for the blessing, instead of trying to steal it from Esau, or steal it from God. This confrontation is what makes Jacob walk with a limp. God touched his hip, dislocated it, and from that point on, Jacob cannot run away. Jacob has to be a man who confronts his deepest fears and his deepest enemies. God wounds Jacob in order to heal him. That is what it means to bear the blessing of God – it means that you bear the blessing to share it with others. For eventually, God blesses one human being, Jesus, in order to bless all human beings. Therefore we share in this blessing in order to share it with others. That is what God is transforming His chosen people back in Genesis to understand. Up until the point of Jesus, the family of Israel was blessed in order to share that blessing with others. Ultimately we are blessed in Jesus to share that blessing with others. Once we see the God who blesses, we can simply ask Him and receive what He has for us. We do not have to steal from others, or compete with others, or be recognized above others. But it means God must wound our sin to heal us.

Illus: In C.S. Lewis' book *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Eustace Scrubb is a spoiled rich kid who gets sucked into Narnia with his cousins. He hates it there because he's lived such a pampered life. And he hates people there because he doesn't get his way. Then, Eustace picks up an armband out of his greed, and the band turns him into a dragon. He tries to communicate with the others but can't at first. They finally realize the dragon is Eustace. But all throughout, Eustace is realizing how much he really needs friendship. He tries to be helpful. He starts to like

people, genuinely like them. And then, a deeper transformation happens to him, and here is how Eustace tells his story.

'Well, anyway, I looked up and saw the very last thing I expected: a huge lion coming slowly towards me. And one queer thing was that there was no moon last night, but there was moonlight where the lion was. So it came nearer and nearer. I was terribly afraid of it. You may think that, being a dragon, I could have knocked any lion out easily enough. But it wasn't that kind of fear. I wasn't afraid of it eating me, I was just afraid of *it*--if you can understand. Well, it came closer up to me and looked straight into my eyes. And I shut my eyes tight. But that wasn't any good because it told me to follow it.'

'You mean it spoke?'

'I don't know. Now that you mention it, I don't think it did. But it told me all the same. And I knew I'd have to do what it told me, so I got up and followed it. And it led me a long way into the mountains. And there was always this moonlight over and round the lion wherever we went. So at last we came to the top of a mountain I'd never seen before and on top of this mountain there was a garden--trees and fruit and everything. In the middle of it there was a well.

'I knew it was a well because you could see the water bubbling up from the bottom of it: but it was a lot bigger than most wells--like a very big, round bath with marble steps going down into it. The water was as clear as anything and I thought if I could get in there and bathe it would ease the pain in my leg. But the lion told me I must undress first. Mind you, I don't know if he said any words out loud or not.

'I was just going to say that I couldn't undress because I hadn't had any clothes on when I suddenly thought that dragons are snaky sort of things and snakes can cast their skins. Oh, of course, thought I, that's what the lion means. So I started scratching myself and my scales began coming off all over the place. And then I scratched a little deeper and, instead of just scales coming off here and there, my whole skin started peeling off beautifully, like it does after an illness, or as if I was a banana. In a minute or two I just stepped out of it. I could see it lying there beside me, looking rather nasty. It was a most lovely feeling. So I started to go down into the well for my bath.

'But just as I was going to put my foot into the water I looked down and saw that it was all hard and rough and wrinkled and scaly just as it had been before. Oh, that's all right, said I, it only means I had another smaller suit on underneath the first one, and I'll have to get out of it too. So I scratched and tore again and this under skin peeled off beautifully and out I stepped and left it lying beside the other one and went down to the well for my bath.

'Well, exactly the same thing happened again. And I thought to myself, oh dear, how ever many skins have I got to take off? For I was long to bathe my leg. So I scratched away for the third time and got off a third skin, just like the two others, and stepped out of it. But as soon as I looked at myself in the water I knew it had been no good.

'Then the lion said--but I don't know if it spoke--You will have to let me undress you. I was afraid of his claws, I can tell you, but I was pretty nearly desperate now. So I just lay flat down on my back to let him do it.

'The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off. You know--if you've ever picked the scab of a sore place. It hurts like billy-oh but it is such fun to see it coming away.'

'I know exactly what you mean,' said Edmund.

'Well, he peeled the beastly stuff right off--just as I thought I'd done it myself the other three times, only they hadn't hurt--and there it was lying on the grass: only ever so much thicker, and darker, and more knobbly looking than the others had been. And there was I as smooth and soft as a peeled switch and smaller than I had been. Then he caught hold of me--I didn't like that much for I was very tender underneath now that I'd no skin on--and threw me into the water. I smarted like anything but only for a moment. After that it became perfectly delicious and as soon as I started swimming and splashing I found that all the pain had gone from my arm. And then I saw why. I'd turned into a boy again. You'd think me simply phoney if I told you how I felt about my own arms. I know they've no muscle and are pretty mouldy compared with Caspian's but I was so glad to see them.

'After a bit the lion took me out and dressed me--'

'Dressed you. With his paws?'

'Well, I don't exactly remember that bit. But he did somehow or other: in new clothes--the same I've got on now, as a matter of fact. And then suddenly I was back here. Which is what makes me think it must have been a dream.'

'No. It wasn't a dream,' said Edmund.

'Why not?'

'Well, there are the clothes, for one thing. And you have been--well, un-dragoned, for another.'

‘What do you think it was, then?’ asked Eustace.

‘I think you’ve seen Aslan,’ said Edmund.

‘Aslan!’ said Eustace. ‘I’ve heard that name mentioned several times since we joined the *Dawn Treader*. And I felt--I don’t know what--I hated it. But I was hating everything then. And by the way, I’d like to apologize. I’m afraid I’ve been pretty beastly.’

You see, when Jesus wounds our sin to heal us, it is not malicious, nor is it arbitrary. He is incredibly precise, and we does it with our permission. Jesus wounds us in the very place we hurt the most. Why does he do that? Because we build up layers of protection so we don’t get hurt again. We become manipulators, strivers, shoppers, even self-mutilators to protect ourselves from the pain we fear the most. But when Jesus comes, he asks us to allow him to rip all that away. He loves us, and he wants to live in us by his Spirit and love others through us. And the biggest barrier to that love is our fear. So Jesus will expose your fear again, in the most tender place. Your ability to run away – Jesus will cripple it. And it will feel like it goes straight to your heart. But that is what allows him to heal you. Jesus wounds *your sin* to heal *you*.

Illus: There is a young man I know who grew up with an abusive family. His response was to work really hard and play really hard. Between intense sports and getting drunk, he didn’t have time to feel the pain. That was his way of running away. That became a habit. At one point, he said to me that he doesn’t keep his romantic interest in any particular woman. He gets bored quickly. I said, ‘It’s because you think that strength means running away from your problems. And you become attracted to girls who demonstrate that same quality. Some of them have charming personalities at first but no depth. No wonder you get bored – they’re superficial. And running away from your problems is not strength. That’s *weakness*. From a Christian point of view, that’s driven by fear and self-inflicted pain and the need for distraction. If only you would let Jesus open your eyes to the fact that you are actually weak for running away. Jesus wants to wound your sin in order to heal you. Then you’ll develop character and true strength with Jesus. And then, you’ll come to recognize that in other people and treasure it.’ I still pray for this person to submit to the touch of Jesus. It will hurt like nothing else, I know. But removing cancer from your body often hurts.

Then in section C’, Jacob returns to the Promised Land and is restored to Esau (33:1 – 20). It’s not everything but it’s a concrete step of reconciliation. His family issues are sort of resolved in B’ – A’. In B’, Dinah is endangered in foreign palace, Jacob’s sons lie, make a pact with foreigners and then brutally trick them and kill them (34:1 – 31). That will need to be resolved later. In A’, God fulfills His promise, God names Jacob ‘Israel’ again at Bethel, there is a struggle in childbirth, Rachel dies, Reuben sins and forfeits his birthright, Isaac dies, and then Jacob and Esau bury him (35:1 – 29). So there is a note of reconciliation and peace. The story is not over, but that is where we will leave it now.

### **Conclusion**

Who is God? And who are we? God wounds our sin to heal us. He has even come personally in the human being Jesus of Nazareth to wound human nature fatally. Jesus took on human nature, the same kind that you and I have, and he wounded its sin. In fact, he didn’t just wound its sin, he killed it. That is the meaning of his life, which was sinless, and his death, when he killed the corruption in his own human nature which he had taken on. But then Jesus rose again as a new God-soaked, God-drenched humanity, to give his new humanity to all humanity. So our healing flows from his. Our transformation flows from his. And our healing is bound up with the healing of others. The Spirit’s work is to help us desire the healing of others, even when it means giving up our rights, bitterness, and power and letting Him lead us into deeper levels of His love for others. But this is as much for our healing as for anyone else’s. Because God is intent on conforming us back to His own image.

We are both recipients of this healing and bearers of it. We interpret it to others. We help people interpret the situations they find themselves in, and help people see that when Jesus wounds their selfishness, he does so in order to expand their hearts and minds. And although it may feel crippling at first, it is ultimately healing and life-giving. For that is who he is: the life-giver.