

*subversive*

**GOOD**

**they meant it for evil...  
but God meant it for good**



# DECEPTION

## THE KEY TO GENESIS?

**Grant Thorp discovers a thread that might just unravel the mysteries of the book of Genesis...**

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IT'S THE FOURTH cold grey rainy day in a row. My bored, not quite two year old, reaches for his trusty chair and climbs up to adjust the settings on the video. I give the stern parental "Get down!" He stares back knowingly. Wide blue eyes. Half smile. Almost audibly he thinks, "He doesn't really mean it... did he really say..." In the end it takes a firm parental hand to clear away this misconception. I don't want him to be deceived.

This familiar standoff is as old as parenthood. In fact, it goes back to the original place, when the propagator of evil put a similar argument to some thoughtful but gullible children of God.

Deception is a key idea to unravelling the rich complexities of Genesis. It is an idea that appears frequently, beginning with the garden and continuing through every major character to the story of Joseph. It exposes the guts of sin and the character of God.

One of the problems I have when I read any of the large OT books is how to get a handle on it. I suspect I'm not alone. The sheer amount of material scares me off, often before I've begun. But if I can find an entryway into it, I can cope. Is 'deception' such an entryway into Genesis? The question is almost shocking. "Genesis is about creation." "It's about beginnings." At least that's what I was told when I asked some friends what it was about. But is that what it's about? Have we been so sidetracked by the creation/evolution debate that we have failed to see other major themes that provide a way into the whole book and not just a part of it?

Genesis begins by picturing an idyllic scene-the garden of Eden. Cool winding streams, shady trees, succulent fruit are the order of the day. There are no diseases, no taxes, no commands. Except one. "The fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden you must not eat, for on the day you eat of it you will die." Into this idyllic setting slides the serpent, with his familiar argument: "Did God really say "You must not eat from any tree in the garden?"; "You will not surely die." Subtly and deceptively he paints himself as an angel of light, and God as the deceiving villain. He bites them and the venom spreads.

From this point on Genesis reads like a Who's Who of the world's great deceivers. Virtually every character is in on the act, vying with the others to see who is best. Adam and Eve begin in grand style by trying to deceive God himself. Abraham, the man whom God calls to bring blessing to the world, turns out to be a deceiver. In order to save his own neck he passes his wife off as his sister. His son Isaac does the same with his wife. The family trait continues in Isaac's son Jacob. With the help of his mother he pulled the goatskin over his father's eyes and obtained the blessing which was rightfully his brothers. For his trouble, Jacob is in turn deceived by his father-in-law. Laban marries his short sighted daughter off to Jacob and makes him work another seven years for Rachel. He is then done over again by his children who deceive him into thinking his favourite son, Joseph, is dead. Joseph completes the circle by deceiving his brothers about his identity. It's hard to imagine a more distinguished group of liars. You wouldn't buy a used car from any of them.

Deception features in practically every major character and incident in the book. We must conclude that it's an important theme. But what theological mileage can be gained from that conclusion? It seems evident that creation is a theological rocket with lot's of sparkle, but isn't deception by comparison a lame duck?

It depends if you consider the nature of sin, God's control and grace to be lame duck ideas or not? All of these ideas are tied to the theme of deception.

Every day we are surrounded by sin, but what is it like? Essentially sin is deception. Genesis clarifies that for us in the seduction of Eve and the portrayal of the other characters in the book. Our own experiences bear it out. All sin involves some level of compromise with the truth, from obvious lies to the subtle deception of pride, seeing ourselves as better or more important than we are. We are enticed by something that appears to be what in reality it is not.

What about God's control? Through their deceit the characters in Genesis try to carve out a future apart from the promises of God. Abraham, to save his own neck, passes off Sarah as his sister. In doing so he endangers God's promises. Despite that threat, God proves himself to be powerful to bring truth and fulfilment out of the deceptive situation. God is truth and through the truth God shows himself to be in control. God's truth is more powerful than man's lies. Not only does deception allow us to see the nature of sin and of God's control, it also sheds light on the grace of God.

Repeatedly Genesis illustrates that you don't have to be good for God to back you. All of Abraham's descendants are shift, but God still chooses them, works with them and redeems them out of their deception. He even chose Jacob over his brother Esau, despite the fact that Jacob's name meant "he grasps the heel" or figuratively "he deceives." God eventually renamed him "Israel" meaning "he struggles with God." The true Israelite, the true child of God, has of course been redeemed from deception. Like Nathaniel whom Jesus described as "a true Israelite in whom there is no guile," the true follower of Christ will be a person who does not practise deceit.

Deception is a key idea in Genesis. As a theme it provides a skeleton for the book. It shows us the core of sin which is untruth, and the character of God which is grace and truth. God shows himself to be the God who consistently keeps his promises, rescuing his people from the destructiveness of their own deceptions by the power of his truth.

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**Thought provoking? Let's investigate further...**

# Genesis 25-50 - Study 1

## The Quest for Blessing – The Story So far

When we left Genesis 25 late last year, we'd been following the story of Abraham, who God had promised was going to be the one whose family line would bring blessing to the world.

- ✍ Abraham was going to be the father of a great nation
- ✍ Abraham's descendants would be given a land of their own
- ✍ Abraham's descendants would bring blessing to all the nations of the world.

Having that sort of promise as your "family heritage" must have been quite a bonus. Or was it? On the one hand, it was a promise that was going to be good for **all** the nations of the world. On the other hand, it was a promise that focused on **just one thread** of Abraham's family line. Like the right to the British throne, it was a birthright that would typically pass down through the oldest son. But also like the right to the British throne, reality can get a little messy.

In Genesis 25-50, we'll be following the "line of promise" – the family line which carries God's blessing. Branch by branch, we'll see some lines of the family tree lopped off. We'll see God's blessing restated; we'll see God's promises relentlessly moving forward, sometimes against all the odds. We'll see some who are hungry for God's blessing, and others who are simply not interested. We'll see those who try to bless themselves – and learn some tough lessons about the nature of grace.

It's a long story... and you'll only really benefit if you actually read it and chew it over. If nothing else, why not try to read a little bit each day, so that you cover these 25 chapters over 5 weeks. Read it to your family at dinner time, read it on the train, or read it before bed-time... it's a gripping tale of God's determination to bring blessing, even when no blessing is deserved!

## A tale of **two stews**

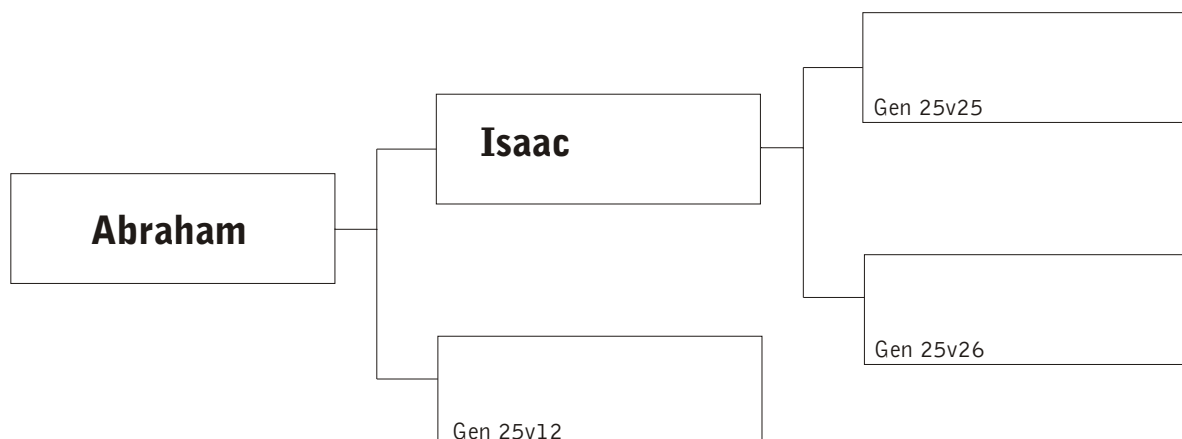
### Genesis 25:19-28-9

#### Getting in a Stew - Part 1

We met Isaac in the earlier chapters of Genesis. He's the long promised son born to Abraham and Sarah in their old age. His half-brother Ishmael is described in the previous few verses – his descendants live to the south, near the border of Egypt, and "they lived in hostility towards all their brothers." (We'll hear from the troublesome Ishmaelites from time to time as the story unfolds.) Now, the spotlight moves on to Isaac, and more especially to Isaac's sons, Jacob and Esau.

**Read Genesis 25:19-34.**

**Reading Plan suggestion: If you can't prepare the studies in advance, at least try to follow the reading plan, by pre-reading the sections marked with the R icon and a grey bar in the margin.**



Fill in the blanks in the family tree

a) What's unusual about Rebekah's pregnancy?

b) Imagine this... How would you feel if the ultrasound results came back with a report like verse 23? What sort of "family dynamic" is it going to create?

What reversal of the usual order is on view here?

Check out the classy names that Isaac and Rebekah give their twins. Literally, they're called "Hairy" and "Grasper." Jacob, "the grasping one", is born holding on to the heel of the first-born, Esau, "the hairy one." Both of these qualities play a part in the next part of this twisted tale.

c) What contrasts are highlighted between the twins in verses 27-28?

### Grasping for greatness

God has already warned that the usual order of things would be reversed... and grasping Jacob is looking for every opportunity to make it happen.

d) What does the "stew story" in v 30-34 tell us about...

1) Jacob

2) Esau

e) Neither of these guys stands out as being particularly impressive. Jacob is living up to his name as a "grasper." But what bigger failing does Esau have, according to v32 and v34?

f) Hebrews 12v16-17 reflects on this event. What similar danger do Christians face?

What sort of temptation would it take to make **you** sell your birthright?

Analyse the stages of Esau's decision. What part does the desire for immediate gratification play?



1/2 kilo of lentils; 1 cup crushed tomatoes;  
1 onion, finely chopped; 1 bay leaf; 2  
cloves of chopped garlic; salt and pepper;  
1/2 cup celery, chopped; 1/2 cup olive oil;  
1/2 cup carrots, sliced; vinegar (optional)

Pick through the lentils and make sure all  
stones, bad lentils and anything else that  
is not edible is removed. Wash them well.  
Put the lentils into a large pot with all the  
other ingredients. Cover with water and  
allow to boil until tender (1 - 2 hours). You  
will have to keep adding water as  
necessary.

Some like a sprinkle of vinegar when  
eating this.

# R

## **Sister Act 3 (Just like his dad...)**

The spotlight switches back a generation, to Isaac and Rebekah again. As in his father Abraham's time, there's a famine. Like his dad, Isaac heads for the territory ruled by Abimelech. Like his dad, Isaac fears that his good looking wife will be stolen from him... and would rather "give her away" by pretending she's his sister. This is the **THIRD TIME** this game has been played. **Read Genesis 26**, and look for:

- \* evidence of God's promises restated
- \* evidence of Isaac's fear, leading to sinful behaviour
- \* evidence of God keeping his promise to bless

g) What irony can you see in the contrast between Isaac (v9) and the "gentile" Abimelech (v28)?

h) From hints in v24, what is Isaac's biggest problem?

What connection do you see between fear, and lack of faith?

# R

## **Getting in a Stew Part 2**

There's more to the "birthright" and "blessing" scenario than we might expect. Isaac has already successfully bartered for the rights of the firstborn son, but there's more to be gained. The words of blessing of a dying dad were seen to have power to shape the future. And Jacob – aided by his doting mum – is always grasping for more. So what happens when Isaac thinks he's on his deathbed, and calls for his number one son?

### **Read the nasty little tale of corrupt plotting in Genesis 27:1-40.**

i) Where did Esau get the idea that blessing was something that could be traded for a good feed? Obviously from his dad! What deal does Isaac offer in v4?

j) What is Rebekah's plan, and why? (cf 25:28)

k) See, hear, taste, touch, smell... the five senses all play their part in Jacob's deception of his dad. How?

l) What blessing does Isaac give to Jacob? Is it the same, or different to, the blessing God gave Abraham and his descendants? (Is this it, or do we have to watch for another?)

m) When you read verse 36, whose side are you on?

It's fascinating that as we read this account of the Israelites' great ancestor Jacob, he's presented in such an unsympathetic light. He's a deceiver – a con-man of the worst kind. And we can easily sympathise more for his brother Esau, who is left without blessing, with only the prospect of living by the sword until the day when he can stand it no more and casts off the yoke.

**n) Read 27:41-28:9.** In human terms, what is the impact of Jacob's deception...

- on Esau
- on Isaac
- on Rebekah
- on Jacob himself



The reality is - in spite of the neat excuse of going away to look for a suitable wife - Jacob is now a man on the run. Rebekah says "Flee at once"... and that's exactly what he does. In fact, from this point on, he's always a man on the run. Until, as we'll see, God steps in and stops him in his tracks.

In fact, grasping for blessing, which is his habit, is a disastrous way to go. Maybe trying to organise your own blessing like this is always doomed. So far, he's destroyed his relationship with his brother and his dad, he's separated from his doting mum; the family that was meant to be the "family of blessing" is a fractured family instead.

### **Trying to Get Your Own Blessing**

o) Have you ever been tempted to take short cuts to happiness or prosperity or status or relational satisfaction like Jacob?

Has it ever gone badly wrong for you? What's the danger here?

### **Trying to Get Your Own Blessing...from God**

p) What happens when you try to arrange your own blessing from GOD? Read Ephesians 2:8-13.

What does this say about how to be blessed by God?

Why do people find this hard to accept? Have you seen examples of people trying to be saved "by works"?

How is it - from Ephesians 2:11-13 - that we Gentiles are included in the family of blessing?

The great news is, even though we - by birth - didn't have a part in God's covenant promises to the descendants of Abraham, we've been included. And it's not by our own efforts. We don't need to impress God, we don't need to do deals - though we were "foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world," Paul says we have now been brought near to God, by the blood of Christ. That's grace!

For further study: In Romans 9, Paul wrestles with the question of how some branches of Israel are cut off, and Gentiles are included. It's all a matter of God's "electing mercy", and our response of faith. He says, it all started with Jacob and Esau... "It does not depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy." You might like to read the chapter and reflect on it.