



10

SESSION TEN

God's Dysfunctional Covenant Family

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, we will see that despite the dysfunction of Isaac's family, the deception of Jacob, and the despondency of Esau, God is committed to His plan to redeem a people from all the nations on the planet through the offspring of this family—Jesus of Nazareth. Because God specializes in showing mercy to unworthy people, we should look for ways God can make visible His grace through our own struggles with ongoing flaws and dysfunction.

SCRIPTURE

Genesis 27:1-40; 28:10-22

THE POINT

God is sovereign over all of life and will work out His plan of redemption despite and sometimes through our dysfunction.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

I grew up attending a church with beautiful stained glass windows in the sanctuary. These windows depicted scenes from well-known Bible stories. However, whenever I stood close to the window, I could not see the story; instead, I saw jagged glass, bright colors, and indistinct details. Up close it looked like an abstract collage; only when I stood back and took in the entire window could I see the beauty, the intricate planning, and the masterful design.

God's plan often works this way. Up close in the gritty details of daily life, things look jagged and messed up. There doesn't seem to be cohesion; the particulars don't make much sense. But whenever we look back at our lives, taking in the whole picture, we can often see how God has been working all along the way.

A family member's illness, a rejection letter, trouble at school, not getting a spot on the roster, or a sudden move across the country—at the time, these may seem like unwanted deviations from our plans (or God's plans). As we look back, though, we can see how God has worked through these moments to put us where He wanted us when He wanted us there, and we see how His plan was better than what we could have mapped out for ourselves.

- **When was a time you thought your life was ruined as a result of something that happened or some bad news? Looking back, how have you seen God work through that difficult situation?**

Option 2

Display an deflated balloon, explaining that conflict is a lot like a balloon. Invite students to call out some common sources of family conflict. With each idea students offer, blow into the balloon, pausing periodically to discuss how some conflicts get started. Blow some more, then pause, talking about the types of things that cause conflict to escalate. Continue this process, then pop the balloon when it reaches its capacity.

Acknowledge that as the balloon got more and more inflated, everyone was cringing, just waiting for it to pop. Point out that conflict has a definite impact on the people around us and it can cause problems if we don't deal with it.

- **How has conflict affected the relationships in your family?**
- **When have you been shown grace by a parent or someone you respected, even though you know you didn't deserve it? How was their response similar to the grace God shows us?**

Today we will see how conflict between Isaac's sons, Jacob and Esau, brought pain to their family. However, the good news is that God does not reserve His love and grace for perfect families. We will see this truth on display in Isaac's family: God can and does use dysfunctional families to carry out His plans.

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

God is sovereign over all of life and will work out His plan of redemption despite and sometimes through our dysfunction.

CHARACTERS

- **The Triune God:** Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **Esau and Jacob:** twin sons born to Isaac and Rebekah

PLOT

God's plan may not seem the least bumpy or even the most efficient at times, but through it all He is always committed to His promises. We saw this truth on display in the previous session, in which God reaffirmed His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob even when they proved less than faithful in their actions.

As we continue along the biblical journey, we will see that despite the dysfunction of Isaac's family, the deception of Jacob, and the despondency of Esau, God is committed to His plan to redeem a people from all the nations on the planet through the offspring of this family—Jesus of Nazareth. And this story will show us, among many things, that because God specializes in showing mercy to unworthy people, we should look for ways God can make visible His grace through our own struggle with ongoing flaws and dysfunction.

GOD'S PLAN GOES FORWARD THROUGH A DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY

Some Christians long for “the good old days” when family values were celebrated. We complain about the shows on TV and wish there were more sitcoms focused on the perfect nuclear family. Or perhaps we worry about the messages these shows convey. The truth is there hasn't been an era of “good old days” since the garden of Eden. Families have always been sinful and dysfunctional. Because of our innate sinfulness, families have always shifted blame, reversed roles, and much more.

No family is perfect. Every family has its challenges. The good news is that God doesn't reserve His love and grace for perfect families. We will see this on display in Isaac's family: God can and does use dysfunctional families to carry out His plans.

Let's review. When Isaac and Rebekah's children—Esau and Jacob—were in their mother's womb, the Lord told Rebekah that the older would serve the younger. In ancient cultures, the younger son would serve the older son, and the older son would receive the family inheritance. But as this story unfolds, we see the older son, Esau, selling his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of stew. Like Adam and Eve in the garden, Esau was defined by food, by his appetite.

Not only did Esau sell his birthright, but he also took Hittite wives. He intermarried with a pagan people who didn't follow the one true God, and his actions made things miserable for his parents (Gen. 26:34-35). But God had declared that His promise to Eve (her offspring would crush the serpent's head, Gen. 3) and to Abraham (his offspring would bring salvation to all the peoples of the earth, Gen. 12) would be carried forward through Jacob, not Esau.

We see in Genesis 27 a final showdown between these brothers. Even though Isaac and his family were sinful, dysfunctional, and manipulative, God graciously keeps His promises.

When Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see, he called Esau his older son and said to him, “My son”; and he answered, “Here I am.” He said, “Behold, I am old; I do not know the day of my death. Now then, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field and hunt game for me, and prepare for me delicious food, such as I love, and bring it to me so that I may eat, that my soul may bless you before I die.” Now Rebekah was listening when Isaac spoke to his son Esau. So when Esau went to the field to hunt for game and bring it, Rebekah said to her son Jacob, “I heard your father speak to your brother Esau, ‘Bring me game and prepare for me delicious food, that I may eat it and bless you before the LORD before I die.’ Now therefore, my son, obey my voice as I command you. Go to the flock and bring me two good young goats, so that I may prepare from them delicious food for your father, such as he loves. And you shall bring it to your father to eat, so that he may bless you before he dies.” But Jacob said to Rebekah his mother, “Behold, my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I am a smooth man. Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be mocking him and bring a curse upon

TIMELINE

JACOB AND ESAU

Family dysfunction erupts between parents and sons for the birthright blessing.

JACOB WRESTLES WITH GOD

Jacob, the deceiver, is forever changed after being broken through his encounter with God.

JOSEPH'S HARDSHIPS

The sufferings of Joseph and the mercies of God.

myself and not a blessing.” His mother said to him, “Let your curse be on me, my son; only obey my voice, and go, bring them to me.” So he went and took them and brought them to his mother, and his mother prepared delicious food, such as his father loved. Then Rebekah took the best garments of Esau her older son, which were with her in the house, and put them on Jacob her younger son. And the skins of the young goats she put on his hands and on the smooth part of his neck. And she put the delicious food and the bread, which she had prepared, into the hand of her son Jacob. (Gen. 27:1-17)

As Isaac anticipated his death, he sent for Esau in order to bless him. God had made promises to Abraham and Isaac concerning land, offspring, and blessing, so Isaac intended to pass that on to his oldest son. Earlier in the narrative, the Scriptures told us that Isaac loved to eat what Esau brought back from the hunt (Gen. 25:28). So Isaac instructed Esau to hunt some game and prepare a meal in order that Isaac might bless Esau before the Lord.

One can see the dysfunction of this family in that the parents played favorites. Isaac loved Esau’s “manliness” and appreciated his ability to bring back food from the hunt. Rebekah preferred Jacob, so when she overheard Isaac’s conversation with Esau, she hatched a plot to help Jacob receive the blessing instead of Esau.

The plot was to deceive Isaac into thinking that Jacob was Esau. Jacob was to bring goats from their flock so that Rebekah could make a meal that Isaac loved. Jacob protested that even though his father could not see well, if Isaac touched Jacob, then Isaac would realize that he was not Esau. Jacob was concerned that he would be cursed by his father rather than blessed. But Rebekah had everything figured out. She clothed Jacob in Esau’s clothes, she put the goats’ skin on Jacob to make him hairy, and she prepared a meal her husband would like.

Genesis paints an unflattering picture of Abraham and his offspring. We see them lie, cheat, and manipulate. Abraham and Isaac both passed their wives off as their sisters in order to take the heat off themselves (Gen. 12:11-13; 26:7). Isaac played favorites with his son Esau; so did his wife, Rebekah, with Jacob. Rebekah and Jacob were willing to deceive in order to get what they wanted.

In spite of all of this scheming, God continued to be gracious. He kept His promises. His plan to redeem the world will not be thwarted by human cunning and sin.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

God’s Plan and Human Action

God’s sovereignty over all of life encompasses the free actions of human beings. Proverbs 19:21 says, “Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand.” In ways we are unable to fully comprehend, the Lord’s plan goes forward in a way that extends to the choices of human beings as moral agents. Even freely chosen sinful actions are factored into God’s overarching plan, as is the case with the crucifixion of Jesus—an event both purposed by God through foreknowledge and yet also carried out by the wicked decisions of human beings (Acts 2:23). Knowing that God is working all things for the good of those who love Him (Rom. 8:28), we trust in His promise to fulfill His plan, even when we do not understand our present circumstances.

GOD'S PLAN GOES FORWARD THROUGH A DECEITFUL SON

So he went in to his father and said, "My father." And he said, "Here I am. Who are you, my son?" Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau your firstborn. I have done as you told me; now sit up and eat of my game, that your soul may bless me." But Isaac said to his son, "How is it that you have found it so quickly, my son?" He answered, "Because the LORD your God granted me success." Then Isaac said to Jacob, "Please come near, that I may feel you, my son, to know whether you are really my son Esau or not." So Jacob went near to Isaac his father, who felt him and said, "The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau." And he did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau's hands. So he blessed him. He said, "Are you really my son Esau?" He answered, "I am." Then he said, "Bring it near to me, that I may eat of my son's game and bless you." So he brought it near to him, and he ate; and he brought him wine, and he drank. Then his father Isaac said to him, "Come near and kiss me, my son." So he came near and kissed him. And Isaac smelled the smell of his garments and blessed him and said, "See, the smell of my son is as the smell of a field that the LORD has blessed! May God give you of the dew of heaven and of the fatness of the earth and plenty of grain and wine. Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you!" (Gen. 27:18-29)

Jacob deceived Isaac into thinking he was Esau. Isaac questioned how Esau could have gotten back so quickly, but Jacob replied that the Lord had blessed his endeavor. Isaac, not convinced, asked him to come closer so he could tell if he were really Esau. He was confused because this son sounded like Jacob but felt like Esau. Ultimately, on account of the smell of his clothes, Isaac blessed him.

Jacob schemed and lied to get what he wanted. In fact, he had numerous opportunities to come clean with his father and tell the truth. But he was so blinded with greed for the blessing that he continued to deceive.

- **When have you been guilty of altering the truth, even just a little, to get something you wanted? How did that work out?** (p. 67, PSG)

We are often no different than Jacob. In situations where we find ourselves lying, it is usually because of something we want. We want others to have a certain opinion of us, so we bend the truth.

Notice that the words of blessing Isaac uttered over Jacob were basically a restating of the promises to Abraham. God had promised Abraham land, offspring, and blessing. Isaac spoke here of land and blessing. He asked that God

TIMELINE

THE SALVATION OF MANY

God brings good out of the evil done to Joseph.

Beginning Winter 2015-16

MOSES SPEAKS TO GOD

God reveals Himself to Moses and promises redemption.

GOD'S GLORY IS REVEALED

God displays His glory among all the peoples.

would cause Jacob's brothers and the nations to serve him. God's blessing would be given to those nations that blessed Jacob.

Jacob would eventually become the representative head of the nation of Israel, and Israel was called to be a light to the nations. God's redeeming plan would go through Jacob to all the nations of the earth. The saving line would come through the deceitful younger son, Jacob, not Esau.

CHRIST CONNECTION

In Genesis 28:10-22 we are reminded of God's faithfulness to keep His promises, even to those who are undeserving. After betraying his brother, Jacob fled for his safety. He found a place to stay the night, choosing a stone as his pillow.

As he slept, Jacob dreamed about a stairway on the ground with its top in the heavens. Angels were going up and down. It is here that Yahweh reminded Jacob that He is the God of Abraham and Isaac and He would be Jacob's God, too. God would give the land to Jacob and his offspring. He would give Jacob offspring as numerous as the dust of the earth. God promised that all the peoples of the world would be blessed by Jacob's offspring. Then God promised, "I am with you." Jacob took the stone he used for a pillow and set it up as a marker and named the place Bethel, or "House of God." Like in Eden, God promised to live among His people. Jacob then vowed to serve Yahweh as His God.

The stairway Jacob saw reminds us of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:4). The people of Babel had attempted to come before God on their own terms. But this story shows us that if man is to reconnect with God, then it will require God coming down to us. Christianity is different from other religions because we believe God's presence is secured not through our climbing up toward Him but through His gracious descent toward us.

Jacob's stairway gives us a glimpse into the reversal of Babel. The people of Babel were trying to reach God by lifting up a tower, and it caused them to be separated all over the planet. But when the offspring of Jacob, God incarnate—Jesus of Nazareth—will come down from heaven, He will be lifted up to draw all people to Himself. He will bless all the peoples of the earth and reunite them in Himself. John 1:51 tells us that Jesus is the true stairway to heaven. He is the One who reconnects earth and heaven.

YOUR STORY 10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **What are some common dysfunctions in families? How can God's grace in the gospel overcome these?** *Answers will vary with the first question. The second question is designed to help students understand that the gospel, the person and work of Jesus, is able to speak directly into those issues and help the Christian overcome.*
- **In what kinds of situations do we find it easiest to lie? What do those situations tell us about what our hearts are craving?** *Answers will vary to the first question. The second question is intended to point out that we don't lie for no reason—we lie in order to gain something. And the thing that we are looking to gain is reflective of what our hearts are craving at the moment.*
- **How can we change the desires of the heart?** *Allow students time to think through this one, discussing their ideas along the way. Some may say that change comes through discipline or determination, but if they are honest, they will also say that this type of change isn't really change at all, only a temporary modification of behavior. However, the Christian worldview argues that lasting change or transformation comes through Christ alone.*
- **What hope does it give you to know that God works even through our deceit and sinfulness to accomplish His plan?** *The purpose of this question is to simply emphasize that no matter how bad we know our hearts to be or how awful we have made things, God is still at work accomplishing His good work and will.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES

HEAD



This story of Jacob and Esau contains family favoritism, deceit, and manipulation. Once again we see the human heart and the depths of its sinfulness on full display. Yet, at the same time, we also see God's plan of rescue continuing to be carried out, displaying His grace and goodness despite man's sinfulness.

- **How does the truth that God's plan is always working out help you face the surprises, disappointments, and hardships of your daily life?** *Answers to this question will vary. Give students an example from your own life to help get the conversation started.*
- **What are some things we can determine about God's character based on this story?** *Answers to this question will vary, but may include traits like grace, mercy, sovereignty, goodness, omniscience (all-knowing), etc.*

HEART



In this story we learn that Jacob experiences the presence of God, and as a result, is forever changed by that experience. We see this same formula repeated through the Bible—people encounter God and are transformed as a result (see Isaiah 7; Acts 9).

- **In what ways are we changed by experiencing the presence of God?** *Answers to this question will vary. Ask for answers based on real-life experience, as well as what they think should take place.*
- **Is it possible to experience God's presence and not be changed? Why or why not?** *This question may get different responses, so allow students to explain their rationale. The differences in response may likely be based on one's understanding of the word "experience," which may be taken to mean a "worship experience" or an actual literal encounter as with Saul on the Damascus road. Entertain these different understandings, but try to land somewhere in the middle as a thought experiment for this question.*

HANDS



The story of Jacob and Esau not only teaches us a lot about God and ourselves, but also the importance of developing healthy relationships around us so that God's message of redemption may spread throughout our communities.

- **How does the story of God's continual grace through messed-up people free you to be part of His plan?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **What are some ways you, as a group or as an individual, can engage in God's mission to bless all peoples of the earth?** *Answers to this question will vary.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, item #10 can be used during group time. Item #10 contains a map that will help students to visually grasp the landscape and journeys of many of the characters they are learning about.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- Leader Training Videos
- One Conversations
- Midweek studies
- Circular Timeline Poster
- App (for both leader and student)



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at

GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for ***free online training*** on how to lead a group visit

MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject