

done this, and have not withheld your only son, I give you my promise. Your descendants shall be in number as the stars in the sky or as the numbers of grains of sand on the seashore. In blessing you and yours, I shall bless all the peoples of the world.”

Isaac's Twin Sons

[Genesis 25:19-34; 27:41-45]

Isaac grew to manhood, married, and had twin sons. The first to come from his mother's womb was Esau, and the second they named Jacob. Esau grew to be a skilled hunter, while Jacob became a shepherd and one who worked about the tent with his mother. Esau was his father's favorite, partly because the old man enjoyed the venison Esau's hunting brought to the family table. But Mother Rebekah loved Jacob more.

Esau, being the older of the two boys, was entitled to the family possessions on his father's death. That is to say, the birthright belonged to Esau by law. If Esau had been a man who found favor with God, he would have become the ancestor of God's "chosen people." But Esau did not please God. He had married two women, natives of the land of Canaan, who worshiped idols, and they had led him into wrong-doing.

One day as Jacob was preparing a dish of lentil soup, Esau came in from his hunt, feeling faint and hungry. "Please, Jacob," he said, "give me some of that lentil soup you are preparing, for I am faint."

Jacob saw his chance to win an advantage over his brother. "I will trade the soup for your birthright," he said sharply.

Esau hesitated. The birthright meant everything to him. "But," he thought to himself, "I am really at the point of death. What good will the birthright do me if I die?"

"Promise me first that the birthright shall be mine," repeated Jacob coldly, and waited. Finally Esau promised.

from Sophia Lyon Fahs, *The Old Story of Salvation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955).

Jacob then gave him some bread and a bowl of lentil soup, and Esau ate and drank with relish. Then he rose and went on his way. Later, however, when he realized the seriousness of what he had done, he hated Jacob violently for having taken advantage of his weariness and hunger. "When my father is dead, I will kill Jacob for this." One day in his mother's presence he openly threatened to kill Jacob.

Rebekah, seeing the hate in Esau's eyes, became frightened. She secretly called Jacob to her and said, "Now, Jacob, obey me. Flee to your Uncle Laban's home in Haran, and stay there until your brother's anger turns away from you and he can forget the wrong you have done him."

As quickly as possible, Jacob got away without Esau's knowing where he had gone. To reach his Uncle Laban's home meant several weeks of lonely foot travel.

Jacob's Dream of a Ladder to Heaven

[Genesis 20:10-22]

At the close of the first day of his journey, as darkness was coming on, Jacob climbed part of the way up a rocky mountain to spend the night out under the stars. He found a ledge covered with many large stones; using one of the smaller ones as a pillow, he lay down to sleep.

While sleeping, he dreamed he saw a tall ladder standing up before him, so high that the top seemed to reach all the way to heaven. He dreamed he saw angels walking down the ladder and then up, and at the top he saw God himself standing. And he heard a voice. "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, thy father. The land on which you are now lying I will give to you and to your children and your children's children forever. They shall spread their homes to the north and to the south, and in you and in your descendants all the families of the earth shall be blessed. I am

with you, and I will take care of you wherever you go. I will not leave you until I have done all these things that I promise you.”

Then Jacob woke from his dream. He was awed and afraid. “Surely God is in this place and I did not know it.” He lifted the stone he had used for a pillow and set it up on end. Taking oil from a bottle hanging from his belt he poured it over the stone and made a promise to God. “O God, if you will be with me and protect me wherever I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothes to wear, and will bring me back to my father’s house in peace, then you shall be my God and I will give you a tenth of all I ever gain.”

From that time to this day, this place has been called Bethel, meaning the house of God.

Jacob pressed forward on his way to Haran, where he lived for forty long years. He married first Laban’s older daughter, and later the younger. When finally he decided to return home, he brought with him a big family and many servants and large flocks of sheep and herds of cattle, for God had prospered him in all he had done. By that time his father Isaac and his mother Rebekah were both dead, and his brother Esau was ready to forget the old wrong. Later Jacob became the honored father of twelve sons.

Joseph Is Sold as a Slave

[Genesis 37:1-36]

Now Jacob loved his son Joseph more than any of his other children. Joseph’s brothers noticed many small signs of favoritism. When Jacob had a bright coat of many colors made especially for Joseph, the brothers were so angry they could not speak peaceably to him. In his pride, Joseph began dreaming of being the greatest in the family, and he even told his brothers the dreams.

“We were all out in the field binding sheaves, and lo my sheaf stood up straight, while your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to it.”

from Sophia Lyon Fahs, *The Old Story of Salvation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955).

“And so you are going to reign over us?” said the brothers in scorn, and they hated him all the more.

Joseph even told a second dream in which the sun, moon, and stars were all bowing down before him. Even his father rebuked him then.

The crisis came when the ten older sons were away from home tending their flocks far off in the hills near Shechem. Jacob had become anxious about them because of their long absence. He called Joseph to him. “Go now and see whether or not your brothers and their sheep are well, and bring back word to me about them.”

Joseph set off alone in search of his brothers. As soon as they saw him coming toward them, they began to plot how they might kill him, or at least get rid of him.

Young Joseph was helpless against his ten strong older brothers. They seized him, pulled off his many-colored coat, and threw him into an empty well nearby. Then they sat down to eat their midday meal. Soon they spied a caravan of Midianite merchants approaching, riding on the backs of camels.

“Come, let us sell Joseph to these merchants!” said Judah. “Then we will not have to kill him ourselves—for after all, he is our brother.”

It was quickly agreed. Joseph was lifted out of the well and offered to the merchants for twenty pieces of silver. The boy, with his hands tied, was dragged along after the caravan and was soon out of sight.

On reaching home, the brothers told their father that Joseph had been killed by some wild beast as he was traveling alone in search of them. Jacob in his anguish tore his clothes and wrapped himself in sackcloth, and sat mourning hours and days on end, weeping for his much-loved son. One by one the brothers tried to comfort their father, but he refused their comfort. “I will go down into my grave mourning for my son.”