



LifeLight

"In Him was life, and that life was the light of men." John 1:4

Genesis, Part 2

—
GENESIS 25:12–50:26

LEADERS GUIDE

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Introduction

Welcome to LifeLight

A special pleasure is in store for you. You will be instrumental in leading your brothers and sisters in Christ closer to Him who is our life and light (John 1:4). You will have the pleasure of seeing fellow Christians discover new insights and rediscover old ones as they open the Scriptures and dig deep into them, perhaps deeper than they have ever dug before. More than that, you will have the pleasure of sharing in this wonderful study.

LifeLight—An In-depth Study

LifeLight is a series of in-depth Bible studies. The goal of LifeLight is that through a regular program of in-depth personal and group study of Scripture, more and more Christian adults may grow in their personal faith in Jesus Christ, enjoy fellowship with the members of His body, and reach out in love to others in witness and service.

In-depth means that this Bible study includes the following four components: individual daily home study; discussion in a small group; a lecture presentation on the Scripture portion under study; and an enhancement of the week's material (through reading the enrichment magazine).

LifeLight Participants

LifeLight participants are adults who desire a deeper study of the Scriptures than is available in the typical Sunday morning adult Bible class. (Mid-to-older teens might also be LifeLight participants.) While LifeLight does not assume an existing knowledge of the Bible or special experience or skills in Bible study, it does assume a level of commitment that will bring participants to each of the nine weekly assemblies having read the assigned readings and attempted to answer the study questions. Daily reading and study will require from 15 to 30 minutes for the five days preceding the

LifeLight assembly. The day following the assembly will be spent reviewing the previous week's study by going over the completed study leaflet and the enrichment magazine.

LifeLight Leadership

While the in-depth process used by LifeLight begins with individual study and cannot achieve its aims without this individual effort, it cannot be completed by individual study alone. Therefore, trained leaders are necessary. You fill one or perhaps more of the important roles described below.

The Director

This person oversees the LifeLight program in a local center (which may be a congregation or a center operated by several neighboring congregations). The director

- serves as the parish LifeLight overall coordinator and leader;
- coordinates the scheduling of the LifeLight program;
- orders materials;
- convenes LifeLight leadership team meetings;
- develops publicity materials;
- recruits participants;
- maintains records and budgeting;
- assigns, with the leadership team, participants to small discussion groups;
- makes arrangements for facilities;
- communicates outreach opportunities to small-group leaders and to congregational boards;
- follows up on participants who leave the program.

The Assistant Director (*optional*)

This person may assist the director. Duties listed for the director may be assigned to the assistant director as mutually agreeable.

The Lecture Leader

This person prepares and delivers the lecture at the weekly assembly. (**Lesson material for the lecture leader begins on p. 9.**) The lecture leader

- prepares and presents the Bible study lecture to the large group;
- prepares worship activities (devotional thought, hymn, prayer), using resources in the study leaflet and leaders guide and possibly other, outside sources;
- helps the small-group discussion leaders to grow in understanding the content of the lessons;
- encourages prayer at weekly leadership team and discussion leaders meetings.

The Small-Group Coordinator (*optional; the director may fill this role*)

This person supervises and coordinates the work of the small-group discussion leaders. The small-group coordinator

- recruits with the leadership team the small-group discussion leaders;
- trains or arranges for training of the discussion leaders;
- assists the director and discussion leaders in follow-up and outreach;
- encourages the discussion leaders to contact absent group members;
- participates in the weekly leadership team and discussion leaders equipping meetings;
- provides ongoing training and support as needed.

The Small-Group Discussion Leaders

These people guide and facilitate discussion of LifeLight participants in the small groups. (**Lesson material for the small-group leaders begins on p. 59.**) There should be one discussion leader for every group of no more than 12 participants. The small-group discussion leaders are, perhaps, those individuals who are most important to the success of the program. They should, therefore, be chosen with special care and be equipped with skills needed to guide discussion and to foster a caring fellowship within the group. These discussion leaders

- prepare each week for the small-group discussion by using the study leaflet and small-group leaders guide section for that session (**see p. 59**);
- read the enrichment magazine as a study supplement;
- guide and facilitate discussion in their small group;
- encourage and assist the discussion group in prayer;
- foster fellowship and mutual care within the discussion group;
- attend weekly discussion leaders training meetings.

Leadership Training

LifeLight leaders will meet weekly to review the previous week's work and plan the coming week. At this session, leaders can address concerns and prepare for the coming session. LifeLight is a 1½-hour program with no possibility for it to be taught in the one hour typically available on Sunday mornings. Some congregations, however, may want to use the Sunday morning Bible study hour for LifeLight preparation and leadership training. In such a meeting, the lecture leader and/or small-group coordinator may lead the discussion leaders through the coming week's lesson, reserving 5 or 10 minutes for problem solving or other group concerns.

While it requires intense effort, LifeLight has proven to bring great benefit to LifeLight participants. The effort put into this program, both by leaders and by participants, will be rewarding and profitable.

The LifeLight Weekly Schedule

Here is how LifeLight will work week by week:

1. Before session 1, each participant will receive the study leaflet for session 1 and the enrichment magazine for the course. The study leaflet contains worship resources (for use both in individual daily study and at the opening of the following week's assembly) and readings and study questions for five days. Challenge questions will lead those participants who have the time and desire a greater challenge into even deeper levels of study.

2. After the five days of individual study at home, participants will gather for a weekly assembly of all LifeLight participants. The assembly will begin with a brief period of worship (5 minutes). Participants will then join their assigned small discussion groups (of 12 or fewer, who will remain the same throughout the course), where they will go over the week's study questions together (55 minutes). Assembling together once again, participants will listen to a lecture presentation on the readings they have studied in the previous week and discussed in their small groups (20 minutes). After the lecture presentation, the director or another leader will distribute the study leaflet for the following week. Closing announcements and other necessary business may take another five minutes before dismissal.

In some places some small groups will not join the weekly assembly because of scheduling or other reasons. Such groups may meet at another time and place (perhaps in the home of one of the small group's members). They will follow the same schedule, but they may use a cassette tape to listen to the week's lecture presentation. The discussion leader will obtain the tape and leaflets from the director. A cassette tape version of the lecture is available for purchase from CPH (see your catalog). Or a congregation may record the lecture given by the lecture leader at the weekly assembly and duplicate it for use by other groups meeting later in the week.

3. On the day following the assembly, participants will review the preceding week's work by rereading the study leaflet they completed (and that they perhaps supplemented or corrected during the discussion in their small group) and by reading appropriate articles in the enrichment magazine.

Then the LifeLight weekly study process will begin all over again!

Recommended Resources for Genesis

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Concordia Self-Study Bible, New International Version. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986. Interpretive notes on each page form a running commentary on the text. The book includes cross-references, a 35,000-word concordance, full-color maps, charts, and time lines.

Delitzsch, Franz. *A New Commentary on Genesis.* 2 vols. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1899. A careful handling of theological issues in Genesis, making purposeful use of both Hebrew and Aramaic. A valuable resource.

Leupold, Herbert C. *Exposition of Genesis.* 2 vols. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1942. This commentary is a careful exposition by a conservative scholar.

Luther, Martin. *Lectures on Genesis.* *Luther's Works.* 8 vols. Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958-70. Rather lengthy comments but patient, discerning reading of these volumes is rewarding.

Roehrs, Walter R., and Martin H. Franzmann. *Concordia Self-Study Commentary.* St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979. This one-volume commentary on the Bible contains 950 pages.

Every Voice a Song Pipe Organ Accompaniment for 180 Hymns and Liturgy. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House Item #99-1565. Use this music CD for worship hymn accompaniment.

The Line of Jacob Is Established

Genesis 25:12–28:22

Preparing for the Session

Central Focus

The influence a godly father can have on his son is awesome. One would assume from Isaac's previous history that his spiritual influence would have been great, but Esau's careless attitude and Jacob's deceitful character demonstrate that Isaac's will was weaker than his eyes. Thus, it would take the heavenly Father a great deal of time to mold Jacob into the spiritually influential patriarch he would become in his later years.

Objectives

That the participant, as a child of God and with the Holy Spirit's help, will be led to

1. observe the influence (for good or bad) that parents have on their children;
2. praise God for continuing the line of promise in ways beyond our expectations;
3. thank God for His continuing protection over our lives, even when we do not deserve it.

Note for small-group leaders: Lesson notes and other materials you will need begin on page 59.

For the Lecture Leader

This course continues the story of how God began His covenant line in Abraham and fulfilled His promises through Abraham's descendants. (Videotapes of the Genesis Project's New Media Bible may assist the LifeLight leadership team in bringing this continuity to life so that it may be taught to others.) This first session covers nearly four chapters, so it is important that the small-group leaders pace their discussion time. A brief

summary of the basic highlights of the LifeLight course on the first half of Genesis may be helpful in establishing continuity for the small groups. If you have a number of participants who did not take part in the first LifeLight Genesis course, you may wish to use some of the introductory materials from the leaders guide of the previous course.

Chronicling the failings of great patriarchs such as Isaac and Jacob may not seem likely to impress some newer LifeLight participants to Scripture. But you may discover that exposing their shortcomings makes it easier for all of God's people to relate God's grace and mercy to their own lives, which also evidence failings and shortcomings.

Note: This course, unlike some of the other LifeLight courses, features a short devotional talk as part of the opening worship and a correspondingly shorter series of lecture presentations. Thus, you will want to schedule accordingly, beginning and ending the small-group discussion period five minutes later than usual.

Session Plan

Worship

Begin the session with the hymn and prayer printed in the study leaflet. Follow with the devotion. Hymn accompaniments are available in denominational hymnals, such as *Lutheran Worship* (refer to hymnal index).

Devotion

There is a story about Mr. Smith, a man who loved the neighborhood children and whose forgiving attitude toward even the worst of boys was amazing. One day Mr. Smith poured a new cement driveway, but after dark some mischievous boys found the fresh cement and "mistook" it for the front of Mann's Chinese Theater, leaving their shoe prints for posterity. When Mr. Smith discovered the damage the next morning, he blew his stack so loudly that the whole neighborhood

could hear. Surprised by the outburst of such a gentle, fatherly figure, one of the neighbors approached him. Gazing at Mr. Smith standing on his new driveway, the neighbor said, "I thought you loved all children." Mr. Smith thought for a while and then replied, "I guess I love them in the *abstract*, but not in the *concrete*."

Experienced parents agree that raising children is not a job for the fainthearted, even though the dividends of good Christian parenting are eternal. Perhaps that is why Scripture mentions the words *child* and *children* nearly 2,000 times, reminding us that offspring truly are a heritage from the Lord.

Sadly, parents can emotionally scar that heritage by playing favorites. Comedian Tommy Smothers had a routine in which he insisted that Mom liked his brother, Dick, much better. "That's simply not true," claimed Dick. "Oh, yeah," responded Tommy, "then why was it when we asked to have a pet, Mom gave you the puppy and I got the chicken?"

Siblings very often feel that way about how their parents treat them. In today's LifeLight study Esau and Jacob, the treacherous twins, may have rightly felt that way about their parents, Isaac and Rebekah, who seemed oblivious to how their deceptive schemes would result in "splitting heirs."

What a blessing that our heavenly Father loves each of us with an impartial and caring love that numbers each hair of our head, as well as each heir of His promise. Christian parents, who know their heavenly Father, will never play one child against another. Instead, they will bring their children up in an atmosphere where love, peace, and harmony are not merely taught but lived out through their own parental example. God made us a family. We are privileged to share His love and forgiveness with each other.

Lecture Presentation

Introduction

Security. It is a prized commodity. We save; we invest; we buy insurance. We order our lives so that our future might be "secure." Yet, we're painfully aware that risks remain. A dramatic drop in the stock market can produce instant panic! How much security do you have? How can your future be more secure?

To answer these questions it is helpful to look at biblical characters. Sometimes they appear to be without hope. But then, suddenly and inexplicably, they enjoy security in full measure. Isaac and Jacob are perfect for this purpose. They lived when security was hard to find. There were no banks. There were no poverty programs. A famine ... a drought ... a raid—these could crush a family at any moment. Slavery could replace security. The prospect of an untimely death could replace prosperity. Isaac and Jacob were nomads. To feed and water their flocks and herds required movement, and movement exposed them to real dangers.

Yet, the patriarchs took pleasure especially in one area of their lives—their children. Our culture frequently views children as a burden or an obstacle to security. But the patriarchs viewed children as central and necessary for a full and secure life—not simply as security, but as great blessings!

1 The Line of Ishmael

For this reason Genesis details the many descendants of Abraham by Ishmael (Genesis 25:12–18). Far from merely rehearsing facts, Ishmael's genealogy alerts us to God's gracious hand in Abraham's history.

First, we see that God keeps His Word. God fulfilled His promise to Hagar (Genesis 16:10: "I will so increase your descendants that they will be too numerous to count"). God's plan of salvation includes many nations like the Ishmaelites.

Second, this genealogy shows that God's promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:1–3) was remarkably realized as his name is made great through his many descendants.

Finally, the short summary of Ishmael's children (Genesis 25:12–18), followed by the detailed description of Isaac's family, focuses our attention on the messianic line. We have already seen this pattern of prefacing the messianic line with nonmessianic lineages in chapters 4 and 10.

"This is the account of Abraham's son Ishmael... This is the account of Abraham's son Isaac." Note that Genesis completes the career of Abraham with an account of his children, not with his bank account!

2 The Line of Isaac

Verses 20–22—This emphasis on children is also central in the description of Isaac's adult life. His marriage at the age of 40 is followed immediately by the crisis that remaining childless had created: "Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren" (25:21). Isaac illustrates the familiar expression Like father, like son. The parallel begins in Rebekah's barrenness; it will continue in later events.

The atmosphere was clearly one of crisis. God responded by graciously answering Isaac's prayer. Rebekah became pregnant with twins.

Isaac and Rebekah are not simply wooden pieces that God moves across the checkerboard of history. Their hopes and anxieties are transparent. Their faith is intertwined with impatience. Like us, they both create and are caught by many problems. For example, Rebekah's pregnancy was not easy. She could feel the twins struggling within her. The conflict was so severe that Rebekah feared for her life. (Literally, the text in verse 22 reads, "Why do I live?") The Lord answered with a short summary of the future. The two sons would father two nations. Contrary to custom (25:5), the older would serve the younger (25:23).

Just as God had promised the birth and blessing of Isaac (Genesis 17:15–16), so the Lord of history foretold the lives of Esau and Jacob. By graphically describing their births, the text alerts us that even the first moments of life signaled what would come later. Esau's "hairy" or "red" appearance suggested a man of the outdoors. Jacob's grasp of Esau's heel provided a name that means

both "heel" and "deception." The suitability of these names will become obvious later. Even more evident will be God's hand in the history of Isaac's family.

Yet, the scene is not set in heaven. These are human beings whose behavior we recognize. The tensions in the family are described as frankly as the strife that had separated Sarah and Hagar (chapter 16). Isaac, due to his fondness for wild meat, favored Esau. Rebekah, on the other hand, preferred Jacob (25:28). We can easily imagine how these preferences displayed themselves in little ways day after day. Over a period of time the hurts hardened into hostility.

A key instance of such conflict is provided in verses 29–34. Verse 29—Esau returned from a hunt, famished. Verse 31—Jacob exploited Esau's hunger by requiring his birthright in exchange for some food—the very opposite of a brotherly attitude! Verse 33—An oath sealed the exchange. Oaths in antiquity were the equal of today's notarized, legal documents. This transaction, so far-reaching in its results, grew from dark motives. Jacob refused to share a simple meal without requiring Esau's forfeiture of his birthright. Esau, on the other hand, put his appetite ahead of his birthright.

Genesis, unlike the great epics of Egypt, tells the whole truth, even about its chief characters. We don't meet divine and perfect figures, such as the pharaohs portrayed by Egyptian scribes. Rather, we find ourselves in the center of a family fight. There is more here than moralism. The point is the very real presence of God in such sad situations. Then, and now, the promise and presence of God—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—is with sinful men and women. God does not remove Himself from people with wrong motives.

This presence of God in the Old Testament anticipates the real presence of Christ among fallen humanity in the incarnation. The gracious patience of God with such people finds its precise parallel in His mercy upon us. Christ's coming removes any question that God's presence in the Old Testament was casual or conditional. Then, and now, His presence points to His purpose: the salvation of sinful people.

3 The Lifeline Is Threatened

"A few inches more ... a few seconds more. It would all have been over!" Most of us have had a near miss. Perhaps it was on an interstate as a truck sped by. Perhaps it was at home as an alarm alerted us to danger. Whenever, in a sobering moment we sensed that our life was on the very brink of extinction. In less than a second our lives can be lost to the accidental and the unexpected. **You may wish to refer, instead, to a near miss in your own experience.**

Chapter 26 describes a slower but no less significant threat to Isaac's security. Verse 1—All he has is threatened by a famine. Water for his herds and food for his family: these were daily needs a nomad couldn't stockpile. Isaac went to reside with the Philistines. They inhabited the southwestern coast of Palestine and were known for their sailing skills. Probably these events occurred before the birth of Jacob and Esau. The famine description, including the loss of Esau's birthright, highlights God's investment in this history. What God had done so much to guarantee, Esau gives away for lentil stew (verse 34). The famine brought Isaac's household into contact with Abimelech, king of the Philistines. *Abimelech*, like *Pharaoh*, is a title, meaning "father is king." (An earlier king in Abraham's time—20:2—also bore this title.)

Verse 2—As the Lord had appeared to Abram (12:7), so He now appeared to Isaac with a specific warning not to go down to Egypt. The real point of this appearance is to restate the promise to Abram (vv. 3–4): "Stay in this land for a while, and I will be with you and will bless you. For to you and your descendants I will give all these lands and will confirm the oath I swore to your father Abraham. I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and will give them all these lands, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed."

Here is security no famine can threaten. Isaac and his family are safe. How? God's presence and promise guarantee the future. This security is offered to all in that child who would come from Abraham and Isaac's line—Jesus (Genesis 12:2–3; 13:16; 15:5). Verse 4—The

remarkable truth is that through the offspring of a famine-fleeing Isaac "all nations on earth will be blessed."

The Gospel promise, like its fulfillment in Christ, is framed in people and places that none of us would expect. Our taste is for trumpets and fanfare. Our natural preferences are for established power and wealth rather than a fleeing desert prince. But the promise came then, and comes now, in God's own manner. Isaac's seemingly weak and tenuous existence bears a blessing for all. Christ crucified is the Savior of all!

The drama becomes even more engaging when that existence is threatened by more than a famine. From within Isaac, as from within Abram, came a more subtle and insidious danger: a lack of trust. The promise was sure. The future was secure. But Isaac worried about the present. He tried, like Abram, to safeguard his life with a lie. Verses 7–11 tell how Rebekah is represented as his sister for safety's sake.

Verse 10—The serious threat to Isaac's seed was perceived even by Abimelech: "What is this you have done to us? One of the men might well have slept with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us." As with us, the temptation to trust in our own plans rather than God's presence placed Isaac at risk. But God doesn't give up! He remains. Verse 11—In Isaac's case God protected Rebekah through the edict of the Philistine prince.

God does more than protect! He provides blessings! Verses 12–14 rehearse how lavishly and liberally Isaac was blessed. So great does Isaac's estate become that it brought about a crisis. The Philistines were envious of his prosperity. They sought to stop such growth by filling up the wells used by Isaac's flocks.

The pivotal place of water in antiquity again becomes obvious. Verses 16–17—Abimelech requested Isaac's departure, and the patriarch complied. The strife in Israel today, as well as battles over water rights in our own Southwest, is not new. Our situation and our dispositions are not superior to the ancients! Verse 22—Even as God provided room for Isaac's family to live in peace, His presence is the only security for 20th-century wanderers.

Chapter 26 closes with two episodes. Verses 23–25—First, God again appeared to reassure Isaac. This repetition of the promise reminded and refreshed Isaac. Verse 25—His natural response, like Abram’s, was worship. Second, Abimelech approached with a request that a pact be made between them. Verse 28—His reason for approaching Isaac should not be missed: “We saw clearly that the LORD was with you.” The Lord’s presence is so transparent that even a Philistine prince can see it! The processes by which Isaac and Abimelech frame a treaty (oaths and public statements) are widely attested from this period.

Lest we see Isaac’s world suddenly problem free, verse 35 concludes the chapter with an observation that Esau’s Hittite wives grieved Isaac and Rebekah. It is likely that these women were continuing to practice their pagan religions. Esau, who so lightly regarded his birthright, was evidently equally lax in domestic matters.

4 The Pivotal Place of Blessing

If evidence is needed for God’s presence, chapter 27 shows how completely God commits Himself to human beings. The context for Isaac’s blessing displays the cunning and deception that our modern society also knows so well. Think how today’s families can contest the last will and testament of a loved one. God’s good gift of family can be changed from an oasis of love to a desert of strife. The great detail provided us points to the pivotal place of blessing in the world of the patriarchs. God’s guidance attended the blessing of Isaac, like the later blessing of Jacob (Genesis 49). The blessing determined the future! Both parties in the dispute desperately wanted the blessing.

Both sides decided to take matters into their own hands. Verse 23—Isaac wanted Esau to receive the blessing despite the Lord’s earlier oracle. Verses 15–17—Rebekah wanted Jacob to have the blessing, even at the price of deception. Neither was prepared to await the Lord’s good pleasure in guiding events.

The result is now familiar to us. Instead of improving matters, the deterioration of family ties accelerated. The blessing was conferred upon Jacob. So severe was Esau’s disappointment that he planned to kill Jacob. From

twin brothers to the prospect of a Cain-like murder of Jacob, the rupture of the relationship is complete. Jacob had to flee all the way to his uncle Laban in Haran!

Several events show God’s continued control and guidance. Verses 37–40—First, Isaac recognized the binding blessing he had bestowed on Jacob. Whether he did so because ancient custom forbade changing a blessing or because he sensed that God’s will, not his own, had been done, the result was the same: Jacob was blessed! This change in disposition is confirmed by the manner in which Isaac recalled Jacob and repeated the blessing in Genesis 28:3–4. Isaac and Rebekah also admonished Jacob to take a wife from his kindred people. Verse 9—Aware that his parents were not pleased with his wives, Esau responded by taking an Israelite wife. He clearly hoped to reverse the situation. But, like an arrow once released, the blessing of Jacob cannot be retrieved!

5 Jacob’s Remarkable Dream

Verse 10—The text next shifts our attention to Jacob’s journey. Verses 13–15—We are transported in the desert night to Jacob’s camp. The fact that his pillow was a stone reflects the ancient practice of sleeping on hard surfaces. Even the pharaohs used hard, sometimes metal, headrests for sleeping. The reason the text directs us to Jacob’s camp, however, is the remarkable dream he has there. Here, far from the centers of power and in the dark of the night, God again rehearsed His great covenant promise. The dream, with its stairway to heaven, recalls the great stairways of ancient temples. The ascending and descending angels alerted Jacob that he was in the very presence of God.

Marking the place with a pillar and naming it Bethel (house of God) set it aside as a sacred site. But the real significance of this scene is the promise in verse 15: “I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go.” Unlike pagan gods, who claimed jurisdiction only over a restricted area, the Lord assured Jacob of His abiding presence.

Alone in the desert night. Alienated from a brother. Exposed to the dangers of ancient travel. Jacob was still safe and secure. His safety was in God’s presence. His future was in God’s promise.

Now this is security that can be enjoyed. It will not evaporate with ill health or dissolve with a sick economy. It is sure; God guarantees it. The security we all seek is freely available in the presence of God. Jacob would see that truth in his many descendants. We have seen that truth in Jacob's greatest descendant, Jesus Christ: the one seed in which all the nations of the earth can have security and salvation.

Concluding Activities

Speak a prayer, asking God's blessing on participants in this LifeLight course and that God's Holy Spirit might enable all to grow in knowledge of and faith in God's plan for them. Then make any necessary announcements and distribute study leaflet 2.

Notes

Jacob's Marriage: The Line Flourishes

Genesis 29:1–31:21

Preparing for the Session

Central Focus

This lesson focuses on a family—a greedy, cunning, and deceptive family out of which God can still bring blessings and a Messiah.

Objectives

That the participant, as a child of God and with the Holy Spirit's help, will be led to

1. learn patience in the face of injustice;
2. praise God for always keeping His promises;
3. grow in integrity, especially when dealing with members of his or her own family;
4. rejoice in the blessings received by others.

Note for small-group leaders: Lesson notes and other materials you will need begin on page 62.

For the Lecture Leader

This lesson may seem like the script to a new soap opera entitled, "Greed, Deceit, and Other Family Matters." Nevertheless, God is still in control despite the attempts at one-upmanship we see in these chapters; His will still is accomplished. This lesson will provide many opportunities to address family relationships and how we are to treat one another as members of God's family. It also speaks to employer-employee relationships and the problem of injustice in this world. Although the main characters do not always set a shining example for us, we can learn from their mistakes. Furthermore, God uses the events in these chapters to mellow Jacob and begin reshaping him. We can ask God to do the same in our lives.

Session Plan

Worship

Begin the session with the hymn and prayer printed in the study leaflet. Follow with the devotion. Hymn accompaniments are available in denominational hymnals, such as *Lutheran Worship* (refer to hymnal index).

Devotion

There's a supposedly true story about a stingy man who kept his family in hand-me-downs but gave himself most anything he wanted. He also managed to salt away a sizable portion of his wages, which the family never saw. His saintly wife, in particular, endured this lifestyle throughout their marriage. Neighbors said that if anyone could find a way to beat the IRS and take it with him, this man could.

Stuffed inside the man's mattress was a considerable part of his life savings—\$30,000 in small bills. As the miser lay dying, he made his wife swear she would put his savings into his coffin and bury it with him. Cruel and uncaring as this last wish sounded, his wife kept her word. The very day of her husband's death, she deposited the money into her bank account, wrote out a personal check for \$30,000, and dutifully placed it into his casket!

Avarice has a way of turning back on ourselves, while generosity returns in overflowing measure. In this week's LifeLight study, Jacob, the deceiver, learns some lessons about the wages of sin from another greedy man. For that matter, so does Laban. Through the midst of the bargaining and labor contracts, Jacob experienced God's gracious hand of blessing. Wise as a serpent and almost as innocent as a dove, he dealt patiently with Laban, a worldly man who brought new meaning to the term *minimum wage*.

In the end, Jacob looked at his blessings and realized that he did not get what he deserved; he got more than he deserved—not of evil, but material blessings beyond

measure and the spiritual blessings of God's continued presence in his life throughout adversity and injustice.

As God's people, we can expect to be used and abused by the fortune hunters of this world. Maybe that's not so bad. It makes us realize that our true fortunes are with God. God has balanced the scales of justice with His own Son, who was willing to pay the wages that none of us were willing to accept. Even beyond that, each day He blesses us with—to use Luther's words—"all that I need to support this body and life." Not to recognize that is to deceive ourselves. For all his faults, even Jacob, the deceiver, was not guilty of that.

Lecture Presentation

Introduction

The soap opera (or daytime drama). Have you ever watched one? Have you watched one recently? Do you watch one regularly? Market analysts say that millions do. Why do they appeal to so many people? If you are a fan, or even an infrequent viewer, what draws you to a soap opera?

One explanation, experts agree, is our endless interest in the human situation. Fame and fortune; fidelity and infidelity. Conceit and deceit; pride and power. From triumph to tragedy, we are simply fascinated by the variety of human emotions. The range of human feeling seems infinite.

1 A Meeting at the Well

Genesis 29–31 is far from a soap opera. There is nothing contrived about this plot! The characters are real, not artificial. Here all the emotions of human beings emerge in sharp focus. These feelings are intertwined with complex motives. The turns and twists of these three chapters are many. Betrayals, deceptions, jealousy, anxiety: they are all here. So are romantic love, a full life, and God's gracious blessing. If we read carefully and look closely, it won't take long to recognize these impulses and emotions in our own makeup. These men and women are children of Adam and Eve even as we are. They are not fairy-tale figures.

Chapter 29 begins with a scene that could be drawn from Lawrence of Arabia. Shepherds keep their flocks as they mill about at an oasis in the desert. Suddenly a stranger appears and asks questions. Jacob is clearly concerned about his situation. He is unfamiliar with the shepherds. Verse 5—He asks if they have heard of Laban. The setting is obviously charged with anxiety. If Jacob is thought to be a spy, he could be killed quickly. If he is seen as vulnerable, he could be made a slave.

Life and death issues were often decided near ancient wells. Access to water was essential to nomadic life. All would note the appearance of a stranger. In fact, to this day, certain wells still provide their precious commodity to nomadic peoples. Several thousand years has not altered this aspect of their life: all depends on adequate water for family and flocks!

Verses 5–6—Jacob seeks to locate Laban. Rachel's arrival conforms with the ancient practice of a daughter serving as a shepherdess. Verses 9–11—Rachel's spontaneous assistance, as well as the emotional greeting, might characterize any family reunion. Verses 12–14—Rachel runs to tell Laban. Laban runs to welcome Jacob. This immediate and total hospitality was considered central to nomadic life. It is still the case in much of the Near East today. A guest is given the best, and a relative is always welcomed heartily. To do otherwise would be a great affront to Semitic sensitivities.

2 For Love's Sake ...

Verse 15—After a month, Laban raises the question of wages for Jacob's labor. This question provides an opportunity for Jacob. Verse 18—He proposes that he work seven years for Rachel's hand in marriage. His poverty requires him to earn the "bride-price" (Exodus 22:17). This payment to the father of the bride was to compensate for the loss of a daughter. It was viewed as an essential part of the marriage rite.

Verse 20—If we doubt the depth of affection in Jacob's heart, all we need to do is reflect on this sentence: "So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her." Few men today would labor for seven years and feel they were "only a few days" for love's sake!

But, just as we find the height of human affection, we also encounter the depths of duplicity. Verse 23—Laban, at the last moment, substitutes Leah for Rachel! Various theories account for how such a switch could go unnoticed. Women were heavily veiled at weddings; perhaps a veil was in place. Several days of festivity with wine and song were also routine. Perhaps Jacob's senses were impaired. Verses 25–27—Whatever the reason, Jacob awoke with Leah. When Jacob protests, Laban appeals, somewhat lamely, to the custom of marrying the elder daughter first. While this custom was known in antiquity, it was hardly justification for such deception. Laban proposes that Rachel be given in marriage immediately after the bridal week. He also expects seven more years of labor. Laban's standing and wealth are clear in his presentation of Zilpah to be Leah's maid and Bilhah to be Rachel's maid.

As with Abraham's multiple mates (Sarah and Hagar), tension soon arises. Leah, not unexpectedly, is neglected. Verse 31—But the Lord "saw that Leah was not loved." The Lord's gracious presence blesses Leah with four sons in quick succession. Verses 32–35—Each son bears a significant name: *Reuben* means "see, a son" and sounds similar to the Hebrew for "he has seen my misery." *Simeon* means "[God] has heard." *Levi* means "attached." And *Judah* means "praise." **You may list on a chalkboard, transparency, or newsprint sheet Jacob's children as the names come up, together with the meaning of each name.**

These sons and their descendants figure prominently in Old Testament history. Levi founded the priestly line, which led to Aaron. Judah founded the royal line, which led to Jesus, the Messiah. Leah, the one not loved by her husband, is blessed beyond measure by her Maker. She is the ancestor of God's own Son! God uses the unwanted and insignificant to build His kingdom in the Old Testament as well as the New. Leah's place as mother of the Messiah is similar to Mary's, the handmaiden of the Lord.

Verse 1—Rachel's reaction reminds us that children were viewed as great gifts in the world of the patriarchs. She cries to Jacob, "Give me children, or I'll die!" Jacob becomes angry and shouts—verse 2, "Am I in the place of God, who has kept you from having children?" Pain.

Anger. Jealousy. All the contours of human feeling are well defined.

Rachel, like Sarah, seeks help in the ancient practice of providing a maid—Bilhah. Verses 6–8—When Dan is born, and later Naphtali, Rachel rejoices. They are counted as her children!

This jealous race between Leah and Rachel for more children leads to a remarkable episode. The mandrake plant was thought to induce pregnancy when eaten. When Reuben returns from the field, Rachel requests several of the mandrakes. Rachel offers Leah a night with Jacob in exchange for the mandrakes! The similarity with some soap operas becomes almost too close at this point!

Verses 18–21—God again heeds Leah's pleas for children. She bears Issachar ("reward"); Zebulun ("honor"); and a daughter, Dinah. Verses 22–24—This chronicle of birth concludes when Joseph is born to Rachel. Throughout the first section of this chapter, the longing for children carries the action forward.

3 Who Shall Have the Most?

From verse 25 forward, the longing for wealth, or the "love of money," motivates the actions. In this case the contest is not between Leah and Rachel, but between Laban and Jacob. Not children, but the number of sheep and goats is the measure of the full life!

Verse 26—The contest begins with Jacob's request to "Give me my wives and children, for whom I have served you, and I will be on my way." Laban's response is revealing. First, he pleads with Jacob to stay, not for affection's sake, nor for family reasons, but because Jacob has been good for Laban's business. Laban senses that Jacob's presence has brought blessings! Second, verse 27—we learn that he has resorted to divination for an answer. Laban discouraged Jacob's departure because of what he learned through magical means. This was Laban's guide. Later God would command that divination not occur in Israel (Leviticus 19:26; Deuteronomy 18:10–11). Laban, not unlike us, acknowledged the Lord's activity, but he stumbled by seeking a more secure word through divination. This apparent contra-

diction does not surprise us. Our old flesh and our faith daily struggle against one another.

What follows is a fascinating story of negotiation and struggle for possessions. Verses 31–34—Jacob opens the exchange with the overstatement: “Don’t give me anything!” (v. 31). He quickly qualifies this suggestion with a request for “every speckled or spotted sheep, every dark-colored lamb and every spotted or speckled goat” (v. 32). Laban quickly agrees to what appear very good terms. Speckled or spotted sheep would have been of lesser value and of fewer numbers in ancient herds.

Verses 35–36—Laban loses no time in carrying out the provisions of the agreement. Verses 37–42—Jacob, through his own means of deception, promotes the growth of his flock in numbers and in quality. Jacob, like Abram (Genesis 12:1–3) and Isaac (Genesis 26:24), is blessed by Yahweh.

4 Big Business

The contrast between Jacob’s increased wealth and Laban’s lesser possessions leads to conflict! Chapter 31:2 states simply and eloquently how jealousy can change the human heart: “And Jacob noticed that Laban’s attitude toward him was not what it had been.” Verse 3—At this point, the Lord directly intervenes and instructs Jacob, “Go back to the land of your fathers.”

Verses 15–19—The response of Rachel and Leah indicates that they too feel slighted. Laban had not treated them very well. The human contours in which God’s will is realized become even clearer as Rachel steals Laban’s household gods and Jacob secretly flees. Verses 22–55 describe Laban’s pursuit of Jacob, their meeting, and the resulting conversations. Verses 27–28—Again we are exposed to the complexities of human emotion and motivation! Laban pleads that Jacob’s secret flight has robbed him of the festivity and affection of a proper farewell. Verses 31–32—Laban also inquires about the whereabouts of his household gods. Jacob responds that he feared Laban would not let his daughters go, and he invites Laban to search for the gods. Verses 35–36—Rachel’s cunning kept her secret. Since he did not know what Rachel had done, the search kindled Jacob’s anger.

Human emotions lace chapters 29–31. Some are noble and honorable; others are quite the opposite. How marvelous that these emotions and actions—even the all-too-apparent deception, greed, and jealousy—do not obstruct God’s gracious promise!

Perhaps soap operas are popular because they frequently show the way things are among the children of Adam and Eve. God’s presence with such people, in Jacob’s world and in ours, is a radiant witness to His mercy and grace. The fact that one of Jacob’s descendants would be God Himself in human flesh is beyond our comprehension. Yet Scripture declares it is so! What comfort to know that God continues His gracious presence in Word and Sacrament despite the soap operas of our own sin!

Concluding Activities

Invite participants to speak a silent prayer, thanking God for the people who are most important in their own lives—spouse, children, parents, siblings, friends—and asking for God’s help in maintaining these relationships in love and peace.

Then make any necessary announcements and distribute study leaflet 3.

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Notes