

Genesis | Deep in the weeds with Jacob

Fellowship@10, 19 July 2026 + Alison Sampson

Reflecting on Genesis 28:10-22 & Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

What wonderful promises! God will give Jacob land to plant roots and descendants to spread across the earth like dandelions. God will ensure the earth will be blessed by him and his countless offspring. And God will bless him, protect him and stay with him until these promises are fulfilled. I should be all starry-eyed, but quite frankly this story annoys the hell out of me. Because Jacob is a complete schmuck. Whatever is God thinking, to grant such glorious gifts to a grifter like Jacob?

‘Woah, what??!!’ you’re probably thinking. ‘What’s wrong with Jacob? He’s the great-great-granddaddy of our faith!’ So just in case you didn’t spend your last holiday reading the sprawling intergenerational blockbuster we call Genesis, I’ll do a quick recap. First, Jacob is not, I’m sorry to say, a manly man. Unlike his twin brother Esau, who loves nothing better than huntin’, shootin’ and fishin’ with the boys, Jacob is a homebody. He’s a weedy type who stays at home and hangs round the kitchen and makes soup with his mum. He’s hardly the kind of guy whom other men warm to. In fact, he’s a jerk.

He’s the kind of guy who, when he is born, comes out gripping his twin brother’s genitals. He’s the kind of guy who, when his brother comes home famished, exploits his brother’s hunger, coercing him to sign over his birthright in exchange for a bowl of soup. He’s the kind of guy who, when his elderly father is blind, weak and well into his dotage, exploits his father’s disability, tricking him into granting Jacob the blessings meant for Esau. And he’s the kind of guy who, purely as a result of his own conniving, is now on the run from his justifiably enraged and murderous brother.

We meet him here, a stranger in a strange land, on the way to his uncle’s house where he’ll finally be outfoxed. If Jacob had any sort of conscience, he’d be tossing and turning, racked by guilt, worried about the family he left behind, anxious about where he’s going. But no; this jerk sleeps like a baby. Yet in the total schemozzle he’s made of his life, and in the total absence of any repentance or even a whisker of effort on Jacob’s part, God shows up

while he is sleeping and showers him with unconditional gifts. How enraging!

Then, as if to prove what a jerk he is, Jacob responds to God's unconditional gifts conditionally: If and only if God does these things and more, then he'll deign to call God his own. Sheesh. Any sensible God would have struck this guy down, weeded him out, or burned him up with holy fire. And any sensible God would have chosen someone far more worthy to shower with blessings and to form into a blessing for the world. But this God didn't. Instead, this God chose the totally noxious weed we call Jacob.

This God also chose one of Jacob's descendants, Jesus, to tell a story about weeds and seeds and maybe dandelions. 'The kingdom of heaven is like someone who sowed good seed in a field,' he said. 'But an enemy came in the night and sowed weeds alongside the good seed. And it all sprouted.' The workers asked if they should weed the field, but the owner said, 'No.' Because as any novice gardener quickly discovers, those who weed risk pulling out the good along with the bad. More, I suggest that, as a more sophisticated gardener knows, weeds provide shelter from wind and sun; they bring up subsoil nutrients; they attract pollinators and provide cover for predators; they can lead to a better harvest. So, says the owner, leave the weeds to grow until the harvest, and only then will they be removed.

Two comments. First, who does the weeding in the end? It's not the workers, who are notoriously bad at identifying between weeds and seedlings and at weeding without harming the good. Leave it to the workers, and they'd yank old Jacob out. Instead, the weeders are the harvesters are God's angels. What we learn is that trying to distinguish the weeds and remove them is not our business; we're terrible at it. Instead, it's God's responsibility and God's alone.

Second, the weeds might not even be people. The story goes on to say that the angels will weed out everything that causes sin and, most translations say, 'all who do evil.' 'Great!' we think. 'At last all the mongrels, sinners and schmucks will be destroyed.' But a literal translation of the Greek reads: 'everything which causes sin and which brings about evil' (literally, lawlessness). So it's not entirely clear that it's people who will be weeded out. Maybe it's the forces which lead us into evil. Greed, for example, and rivalry. Hatred and judgement. Racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia. Violence, envy, apathy, and our cold and stony hearts. These are the sorts of

things which trigger terrible evil; perhaps it's these which will be weeded out. And perhaps they'll be weeded out from every one of us. And perhaps like good therapy it will hurt like hell and there will be much weeping and gnashing of teeth: but we'll emerge refined and purified and shining like the sun (vv 42-43).

Now, for those of us convinced of our own righteousness and with no interest in growth, such a reading is unacceptable. For those of us who, like me, would love to see the bad guys punished not transformed, such a reading is deeply unpalatable. But for those of us who, also like me, are acutely aware of our own fears and failings, who know just how greatly we have made a mess of our lives, and who perhaps have even wondered if we are worthy to be called children of God, such a reading offers a word of grace. It describes a lovingly patient God who does not cast anyone aside but who leaves room aplenty for growth, then gathers us all up and purifies us, finding a sweet kernel of goodness within.

For children of Abraham, Isaac and that schmuck Jacob, children of dappled light and shadow that we are, perhaps this is the reading we need. And perhaps with this reading we can lean into the promise given to Jacob's descendants, that God will remain with us generously sowing, carefully tending, patiently waiting, until that great and glorious day when all peoples of the earth will be blessed.

One final comment. Did you notice that, for all his trickery and striving, Jacob received God's blessing not when he was grabbing for it, but in the vulnerability of sleep? In the same way, when we give up grabbing and striving, when we stop trying to prove anything, when we let down our defences, then anything is possible. In some harsh and lonely liminal space, we too might dream of angels. We, too, might rise, awestruck and wondering, into the Shekinah, the very Presence of God. Ω