

# 7 Character Study

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People everywhere, young and old, enjoy stories. Stories entertain us, but they also can teach us. Jesus knew the value of stories. He used them to illustrate deep spiritual truths.

We can be thankful that God chose to record many of the Bible's lessons in story form. The characters of these stories are real people who lived long ago on this earth. They faced the same kinds of problems that we face today. People like Moses, David, and Peter made mistakes and learned by their mistakes. Now we can read about what happened and profit by their experiences. We can read of their victories and be strengthened by their faith.

## ***The Plan***

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- A. The Purpose of Character Studies
- B. Approach to a Character Study
- C. The Story of Jacob

## ***The Goals***

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- 1. Explain how character studies are important.
- 2. Demonstrate how to study the life of a Bible character.
- 3. Indicate lessons learned from Jacob's life.

## **A. THE PURPOSE OF CHARACTER STUDIES**

### **Goal 1.** Explain how character studies are important.

The Bible mentions over 2,900 different persons in its pages. While many of these are only named, others are described in some detail. These descriptions offer us subject matter for individual studies. In character study, we look at a person's life history. We see who he was, what he did, and what he was like.

This method of study is very effective in teaching children. They listen closely to the stories of baby Moses in a basket, of young David facing the giant Goliath, of Ruth gathering fallen grain, and of baby Jesus in the manger. Children identify easily with their Bible friends. They learn important lessons about God's will for their lives.

Adults, too, identify with Bible characters, especially those who struggled with weaknesses and doubts as people everywhere do. Although some Bible characters appear to be almost perfect, they were not perfect. James 5:17 makes this clear: "Elijah was a man just like us." Our prayers will be just as effective as his were if we ask in faith.

David was called a man after God's own heart. Yet, on occasion he was guilty of lying, adultery, and murder. This does

not mean that God was pleased with his sin. David was a man after God's own heart because he repented of his sins. He found God's forgiveness and learned from his mistakes to submit to God.

We learn from David's life not to make the mistakes he did. His failure is like a flare on a dark night, warning us to pray that we do not fall into temptation. Thus, the Scripture emphasizes the purpose of studying the lives of Bible characters: "These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us" (1 Corinthians 10:11).

Our parents can give us good advice, for they have known the problems of life. They know certain truths about the weather, the farm, animals, work, business, and people. Usually, we find it easier to learn from them than to learn rules from books.

The Bible is not written as a set of rules. Instead, most of it records the experiences of real people, of how God worked in their lives. We study these personal experiences to gain knowledge and help in Christian living. In our study of Jacob, see how many times you learn a new truth or receive practical help.

## ***Application***

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- 1** Circle the letter in front of each TRUE reason why biographical studies are important.
- a)** We can relate better to people with Bible names.
  - b)** All people can learn from each other's mistakes.
  - c)** We can be proud we never made the same mistakes as those of Bible characters.
  - d)** Life stories appeal to both children and adults, and we can learn from them.



## B. APPROACH TO A CHARACTER STUDY

**Goal 2.** Demonstrate how to study the life of a Bible character.

After you choose the person you want to study, list all the Scriptural references you can find that relate to him or her. This is the same process as for a topical study. Some studies will be short, others very long. For example, Queen Esther is described only in the book of Esther. Moses stands out as a central character in four books and is mentioned in 26 other books.

Do not neglect reading the scattered references to a character. A brief reference may help you to better understand that person. We do not want to confuse references relating to two or more persons having the same name. To illustrate, there are six women named Mary in the New Testament, four men named John, and three named James.

Second, read the references. Write notes about the person's life, work, and personal traits. Note everyone's life story is given in detail. But find out as much as you can about his or her background. What does his name mean? What is her ancestry? Where did he spend his early years? What influences were important in her youth? For example, Timothy grew up with the godly influence of his grandmother, Lois, and mother, Eunice. Note the person's friends and associates. How did they influence him? In a study of David, it is helpful to study his friend Jonathan.

Note the places where the Bible character has lived and traveled. For instance, Moses' life is in three divisions. He spent forty years among royalty in Egypt, forty years as a shepherd in Midian, and forty years leading the Israelites toward the promised land. Likewise, some of Paul's letters become more meaningful when we realize he wrote them while in prison.

How do Bible characters differ personally from each other? Paul, Peter, and John were strong leaders in the early church. God used all of them with their particular traits and talents to present his truths. Paul is known as the apostle of faith, Peter

as the apostle of hope, and John as the apostle of love. We see their strengths and their weaknesses. How did some of their failures affect their futures? How did God deal with the person you have chosen to study?

Note the great events in the person's life. How did he react in times of trouble and in times of happiness? What changes took place in him? What contributions did she make in the time she lived and to our lives today. Sum up the main lessons you learn from the story of this person's life.

## ***Application***

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**2** Circle the letter in front of each correct completion for the following statement: As part of a complete study of a Bible character, you need to pay attention to

- a)** scattered references to the person.
- b)** the last part of the person's life.
- c)** the person's growth in character.
- d)** details concerning people with similar names.

## **Make A List Of Important Facts**

Character's name

Meaning of name

Place of birth or home

Names of relatives and friends

Place in history

Special traits

Weaknesses

Strengths

Important events

Important acts

Lessons learned



## C. THE STORY OF JACOB

**Goal 3.** Indicate lessons learned from Jacob's life.

The study of Jacob's life is particularly helpful as a character study. He was a man with character flaws. He tried to get the best of others if he could. And those faults are recorded in the Bible. Each of us can see something of ourselves in him, yet God's grace and power transformed him from a deceiver into a prince having a special relationship with the Lord. (See Romans 9:10–13.) The Scripture applies Jacob's experience to all of us: "So then, everything depends, not on what man wants or does, but only on God's mercy" (Romans 9:16). Certainly there is hope for us, too, as we allow God to transform us.

The first step in a study of Jacob is to find the references to him. His life story is in Genesis 25–50. There are many other brief references to him, including Matthew 1:2; 8:11; Luke 1:32–33; John 4:5–6; Acts 7:8–16, 32; Romans 9:11–13; Hebrews 11:9, 13, 21.

### Jacob and Esau

Second, read the passages and take notes. Jacob was born after his twin brother Esau, holding on to Esau's heel. The meaning of Jacob is often translated *deceiver* (Genesis 25:26). Jacob's father and mother were Isaac and Rebecca, and his grandfather Abraham was known as the father of the Hebrew nation. Abraham was a direct descendant of Noah through the line of Shem (Genesis 11:10–26).

Jacob lived with his parents and his brother Esau. He was a quiet man and his mother's favorite (Genesis 25:27–28), but he was deceitful (25:31–34). He stole his brother's birthright as the elder son; then he stole Esau's blessing as well (27:33–36).

### Jacob and Laban

After this, Jacob had to flee from his home to escape Esau's anger. He went to Haran to live with Laban, his uncle (Genesis 27:42–43). During this time Laban cheated him. Jacob wanted to marry Rachel, but Laban gave him Leah first (29:23). As a

result Jacob had to work fourteen long years to get Rachel and then six more years to build up his own flocks (31:41). To make matters worse, Laban changed Jacob's wages ten times (31:7).

Jacob's life story unfolds in several places. In Beersheba he was a deceiver (Genesis 28:10). In Haran he served Laban and was both the deceiver and the deceived (30:25–43). In Hebron he became a saint after his meeting with God at Peniel (37:1). And at the end of his years he became a respected man of wisdom in Egypt (Genesis 46:3–4).

By nature Jacob was a deceiver. But even though he did wrong, he set his heart on that which God had promised (Genesis 25:23). He believed in the value of both the birthright, which Esau did not care about (25:33–34), and the blessing. He appreciated spiritual values. After his dream about God's promises to him, he set up a memorial at Bethel where people would worship God. He vowed to pay back to God a tenth of everything God gave him (28:18–22).

## Jacob's Memorial at Bethel

Nevertheless, Jacob suffered for his wrong doing. His daughter Dinah was disgraced. His sons became deceivers and murderers (34). Rachel, his beloved wife, died in childbirth (35:16–20). He lost Joseph, his first son by Rachel (37:34–35). He felt the disgrace of Judah, his fourth son (38), and he was separated from Benjamin, his youngest son (43).

Looking back on Jacob's life we see the crisis came at Peniel, where he wrestled with God. It had been twenty years since Jacob had made his vow to God at Bethel. When Jacob's struggle with God ended in a face-to-face battle, God changed Jacob's name to Israel, which means Prince with God. He gave Jacob a new blessing (32:24–30). Jacob submitted the rest of his life to God, even in the midst of problems and tragedies (47:9). God allowed Jacob to see into the future and grant blessings to Joseph's sons (48:13–20) and his own sons (49).

### Application

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**3** Jacob’s life teaches us many lessons. Answer the following questions, using Jacob’s life for your illustrations. Afterwards compare your answers with the ones we have given. The first answer is done for you as a guide.

**a)** Is it true that what we sow we will also reap?

*Yes, Jacob deceived others, and later Laban deceived him.*

**b)** Does prosperity always mean that God approves of what we are doing?

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**c)** Can God make our enemies be at peace with us?

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**d)** Do we have to pay for our wrong doing?

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**e)** Can God change our nature?

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## ***Check Your Answers***

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- 1** **b)** and **d)** are true.
- 3** **b)** No. Jacob prospered even when he was disobedient.  
**c)** Yes. Esau forgave Jacob and the brothers became friends again.  
**d)** Yes. Jacob and even Jacob's sons suffered because of his bad actions.  
**e)** Yes. He changed Jacob and gave him a new name that means Prince with God.
- 2** **a)** scattered references to the person.  
**b)** the last part of the person's life.  
**c)** the person's growth in character.

