

# Thorn in My Heart

## Bible Study Guide

*“Human life begins with sorrow,  
and the roses of its joy are surrounded with thorns.”*

Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (1706)

This overview of the biblical text that served as the story framework for the historical novel, ***Thorn in My Heart***, is designed for small-group use or for personal reflection. In the Genesis account Jacob's journey takes center stage; Leah's story, though briefly presented in Scripture, offers a meaningful lesson for all who long to be seen, to be heard, to be loved.

### **Read Genesis 25:19-26 A Tale of Two Brothers**

1. Isaac was forty when he married Rebekah and sixty when his sons were born. What marital challenge did Isaac and Rebekah face during those twenty years, and what did Isaac do about it? Compare Isaac's solution with how Abraham handled a similar situation in Genesis 16:1-2.
2. According to verse 22, how did Rebekah handle her worries about her pregnancy? What do you learn in the following verses about dealing with your own needs and concerns: Deuteronomy 4:29-30; Psalm 55:22; Philippians 4:6-7?
3. The unique personalities of the twins were apparent from birth. Genesis 25:25-26 describes how the boys looked and behaved. What might those attributes indicate about their distinctive temperaments? And what hint do we find that God's promise to Rebekah was already unfolding?

### **Read Genesis 25:27-34 A Bartered Birthright**

4. Some commentators place this scene in the twins' teen years. What differences do you find in their behavior styles now? What did Esau want (verse 30), and what did Jacob want (verse 31)? Why, do you think, Jacob would have expected Esau to accept such an unequal trade?
5. In Hebrews 6:13-17 it is clear that God had sworn to Abraham that his descendants would be heirs of God's promise. Then Jacob required Esau to "swear" to give away that heirship by giving up his birthright. Since such an oath was binding, why would Esau even have considered it? The last line of Genesis 25:34 aptly summarizes Esau's opinion of his birthright. What might that tell us about Esau's relationship with God? And how is Esau described in Hebrews 12:16?

### **Read Genesis 27:1-29 A Father Deceived**

6. Esau was off hunting for venison, while his mother and brother remained in the tent, hunting for a solution to their problem. In verse 5, Rebekah was "listening" as Isaac spoke to Esau. Why do you think she did so? Was she being deceptive or merely cautious? What do the following passages teach about deceiving others...and deceiving ourselves: Proverbs 24:28; 2 Corinthians 4:2; 1 Corinthians 3:18?
7. Compare Isaac's words to Esau (verse 4) with Rebekah's retelling of those words to Jacob (verse 7). What significant difference do you find in Rebekah's version? Rebekah's actions beg the question, "On whose behalf was she doing this: the Lord's, her son's, or her own?" See if you can make a case for all three.

### **Read Genesis 27:30-46; 28:1-5 A Brother Bested**

8. In verse 35, whom did Isaac blame for the misplaced blessing? What does that suggest about Isaac's ability to "see" the situation clearly? Whom did Esau blame (verse 36)? What is one way in which each member of this family was responsible for the wrong son's being blessed?
9. What did God say in Genesis 25:23 about the relationship of the brothers? Do you think this was how God intended that truth to be lived out? How would you explain God's willingness to work with such an untidy mess? How might Psalm 130:1-8 help answer this question?

### **Read Genesis 28:10-22 *A Dream Come True***

10. When God spoke to Jacob, his message was not “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not,” nor did God point out Jacob’s crafty deception. What *did* God say to Jacob in Genesis 28:13-14? How do those promises compare to Isaac’s last words to his son in Genesis 28:3-4?

11. Perhaps the greatest promise God made to Jacob is found in Genesis 28:15. Just as God spoke those words to Jacob four thousand years ago, God speaks those same words to those who love him today. How do the following verses demonstrate that God is truly with us: Psalm 23:4; Psalm 42:8; Psalm 118:6-7? What comfort do those promises offer you in your present circumstances?

### **Read Genesis 29:1-15 *A Journey East***

12. In verse 9, a newcomer appears on the scene. What facts do we learn about her in that single verse? We have no record of what Jacob said to the new arrival...only what he did, as recorded in Genesis 29:10. How could you explain his remarkable feat?

13. Genesis 29:11 describes a rather emotional display on Jacob’s part. Perhaps Jacob was overcome with God’s faithfulness despite Jacob’s own lies and deceit. Note what the following verses teach us about the faithfulness of God: Deuteronomy 7:9; Psalm 57:10; Psalm 86:15. How has God recently demonstrated his steadfast love to you, even when you felt unworthy?

### **Read Genesis 29:16-24 *A Tale of Two Sisters***

14. The name *Leah*, which is sometimes translated as “dull,” “weary,” or “tired,” is also rendered “cow,” while *Rachel* means “ewe.” How are Leah and Rachel contrasted? What relevance do those differences have to the biblical story?

15. In verse 18 Jacob stated how long he was willing to work and his expected compensation. What details did Jacob include? How would you interpret Laban’s response to Jacob’s offer in verse 19? And what did Laban *not* say that you might have expected?

16. Given what we know of Laban’s nature, can you answer the most compelling question: Why might Laban have given Leah to Jacob rather than the woman Jacob loved (and for whom he labored), Rachel? Was Laban’s deception of Jacob *more* or *less* despicable than Jacob’s deception of his father, Isaac? Choose your answer, then explain your reasoning.

### **Read Genesis 29:25-30 *A Deceiver Deceived***

17. Dreams were shattered and hearts were broken that fateful morning. Where did Jacob turn first for an explanation? Whom did he *not* blame? Many commentators believe that Leviticus 18:18 refers to the volatile situation experienced by this family. One husband, two wives, two maidservants—that was hardly God’s plan. What *is* God’s plan for marriage, as described in Genesis 2:24 and Matthew 19:4-8?

18. Earlier at Bethel, Jacob clearly said, “the Lord will be my God” (Genesis 28:21). What evidence do you see of a “godly Jacob” in Genesis 29? Do you find any mention of the Lord in these first thirty verses? What conclusion might you draw about Jacob and his relationship with God at this point in the story?

19. Do you feel Jacob got what he deserved? Consider what the following verses teach us about God’s justice: Psalm 94:2; Jeremiah 17:10. If we truly got what we deserved for our sins, we would all be in trouble. What encouragement does Psalm 103:8-12 provide for those who fear the Lord? And what does Romans 3:22-24 teach us about God’s grace?

### **Read Genesis 29:31-35 *A Heart for God***

20. Our biblical story shifts to the unloved wife, Leah. Caught up in her sorrowful predicament, we often miss the important opening words, “When the Lord saw...” How do the following verses encourage you that God sees inside your heart, even during those times when you (like Leah) fear no one is paying any attention to you at all: Job 34:21; Psalm 33:13-15; 2 Chronicles 16:9a?

21. The Lord not only saw that Leah was unloved/hated, he heard her cry for help. According to verse 31, what did God do for Leah...and not do for Rachel? With the birth of each son, what did Leah say concerning God, and what outcome was she seeking? How might 1 Corinthians 1:27-29 fit Leah’s difficult situation? What assurance does Psalm 34:17-18 give you about your own difficult situations?

22. How does God use such times in our lives to test and refine our faith? See James 1:2-4 and 1 Peter 1:6-7. Indeed, by the time Leah gave birth to her fourth child, her entire outlook was transformed. Describe the spiritual

and emotional changes demonstrated in Leah's life and what her journey from tragedy to triumph has taught you.

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