

The Patriarchs | The Gospel According to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob

The Blessing Part Two (Our Struggle With Self-Sufficiency)

Genesis 32:9-12, 22-32

11-18-12

Jacob said, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD, who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your relatives, and I will prosper you,'¹⁰ I am unworthy of all the lovingkindness and of all the faithfulness which You have shown to Your servant; for with my staff only I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two companies.¹¹ "Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, that he will come and attack me and the mothers with the children.¹² "For You said, 'I will surely prosper you and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which is too great to be numbered.'"

Now he arose that same night and took his two wives and his two maids and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok.²³ He took them and sent them across the stream. And he sent across whatever he had.²⁴ Then Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.²⁵ When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he touched the socket of his thigh; so the socket of Jacob's thigh was dislocated while he wrestled with him.²⁶ Then he said, "Let me go, for the dawn is breaking." But he said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."²⁷ So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob."²⁸ He said, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed."²⁹ Then Jacob asked him and said, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And he blessed him there.³⁰ So Jacob named the place Peniel, for he said, "I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved."³¹ Now the sun rose upon him just as he crossed over Peniel, and he was limping on his thigh.³² Therefore, to this day the sons of Israel do not eat the sinew of the hip which is on the socket of the thigh, because he touched the socket of Jacob's thigh in the sinew of the hip.

We're looking at the **life of JACOB** in **Genesis**. He's the **third generation of the Patriarchs**, Abraham, Isaac and **Jacob, the first family of the Israelites and therefore the forerunners of the Christian Church**.

Today, we see **the name**, Jacob meaning "heel-grabber" or "usurper", is changed to the name "Israel", "one who strives with God". And throughout the Old Testament, the Israelites (**named after this Patriarch**) the Israelites will often be referred to as **either** Israel **OR** Jacob. And some scholars suggest that when the Israelites are being good, they're referred to as Israel and when they're degenerate and corrupt, **that's** when the prophets and OT writers call the Israelites by the name Jacob.

The life of Jacob (now called Israel) is a kind of microcosm for the nation of Israel. The nation will often display the qualities of this ancestor – sometimes a bunch of deceptive backstabbers and sometimes really clinging to God for His blessing.

Today, Jacob has a kind of spiritual breakthrough almost a conversion or a new phase in his walk with God...God is moving Jacob back to the Land of Promise but before he re-enters he has to lose a great impediment to spiritual progress...an inner condition that blocks grace and peace and joy from flowing INTO our lives and through our lives (to others) and that deadly flaw is self-reliance or self-sufficiency...way more serious than we think it is! And that's our concern today.

Let's look at **#1 – Pilgrim's Progress**; **#2 – The Crisis of Faith** and **#3 – Our OWN Wrestling With Self-Reliance**

He's the second twin, born holding his brother's heel and they struggle from the womb. He manipulates and seizes opportunity...like a snake...to take the place that was promised to him. And he uses his brother's, Esau's, moment of weakness to pounce – he gets Esau to trade the title of “firstborn” for a bowl of lentil stew.

Then he tricks his blind father...he grabs the advantages that should come with that title. “Is that YOU my firstborn son”, says the blind Isaac, “is your name Esau?” And Jacob, the manipulator answers, “It is Esau!”...and Isaac gives Jacob the blessing and then Esau...vows to kill his heel-grabber brother.

So, Jacob runs for his life back up to Syria and before he leaves the promised land, he has a dream...that stairway from heaven, connecting this world and that...and God, instead of punishing the deceiver, actually blesses him, “I will be with you...will prosper and multiply you and will return you to this land!”

Jacob meets God! He is coming to know the God of his fathers.

Then he arrives at his relatives...Laban, his uncle hears the story of how he wrestled the blessing from the hands of Esau by trickery...and Laban says, “Ah! You are truly one of US...a chip off the old block!”

And then begins a 20 year relationship between two men who are almost genetically predisposed to deception. Laban promises his daughter Rachel to be married to Jacob if only Jacob will work for Laban for seven years. Then on the wedding night, in the dark and when Jacob's a bit intoxicated – Laban sneaks the older Leah into the tent – and in the morning: “behold, it was Leah!”

Then he marries Rachel but he must first promise another seven years labor.

Then Jacob asks for some “profit sharing”, asks for some of the sheep that he has tended these many years and Laban says, “from now on all the spotted sheep born will be yours! DEAL?”... Jacob says, “Deal!”

But, it turns out, Laban takes all the spotted breeding stock OUT of the flock so no spotted sheep are ever born...The deceiver has been out-deceived again! Uncle Laban is winning the deception match!

But finally, Jacob starts to get the hang of things and he begins to get the upper hand. He complained to his father-in-law Laban, “you have changed the deal at least ten times!” (31.7) and soon God really begins to bless Jacob. Every time Laban changes the deal, God changes the outcome. And before long, Jacob is ridiculously wealthy.

Then God calls Jacob to return to the land of Canaan, the land of promise. So Jacob secretly makes plans and then escapes with all his family and 11 sons and his herds and flocks and camels and his 15 passenger Ford van and he sneaks away without Laban knowing and gets a big head start ...but Laban catches up ...and says... “Why didn’t you say goodbye and let me kiss all the grandkids? Why’d you trick me?”

And Jacob says, “Well I was afraid that YOU would trick me...I just beat you to the punch!” And then they have it out and Jacob sees that despite this 20 year long family deception-fest...Jacob begins to see that God has been protecting him...and he tells Laban as much...and they come to an agreement.

Laban says, “Well, go back home but take care of my girls and my grandkids...or your God will get you!” (see even bad ol’ Laban had a tender spot!)...and then they part.

Jacob, won. He prevailed against slippery, sly Laban and he left there a very, VERY wealthy man. And now he’s going back home...and another threat awaits him: Esau!

The brother he deceived is waiting to kill him. So as he approaches the land he meets angels (like when he left the land...the stairway!) and he decides to play it safe. He sends a delegation to plead with Esau, “Please don’t kill me!” **(He uses all this flowery language!)**

He waits for the delegation to see if Esau is cool with his coming back...and it turns out...Esau is NOT cool!

Esau says, “Great, I’ll come to meet my dear old brother (the heel-grabber) and I’ll bring 400 warriors with me! Arrrrggghhhh!”

And **now** Jacob is really scared and he divides his family...he’s scrambling! Half here and half a long way off so at least some of his children will escape the massacre that’s coming...

Then he prays...that's the first part of our reading. It's the longest prayer in Genesis! And in that prayer, you really see the progress the pilgrim has made. He is not the same man we first met. Twenty years in a very weird, tense, deceptive family relationship has changed this heel-grabber!

His prayer shows a man who is learning the meaning of grace:

"O LORD, who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your relatives, and I will prosper you,' I am unworthy of all the lovingkindness and of all the faithfulness which You have shown to, me, Your servant..."

He **seems** to realize that he cannot get by just "workin' the angles" and manipulating and snatching and grabbing and being **self**-reliant. It was God's grace and promise that kept him and changed him. He gets it!

...And...**then** after praying this amazing, long, grace-soaked prayer...he manipulates **JUST** a little more. He gets it but doesn't totally get it...he's an **unbelieving** believer!

He puts together this massive tribute package – hundreds of goats and sheep and camels and bulls and donkeys – like what one king would give another king. Arranges them to be sent to Esau in three waves (it's all in the presentation!)... And then he goes off by himself in this dark canyon...and he waits to exhale: will Esau be appeased?...will he accept my gifts?...will my wealth be enough to save me and my family? **He has to stop and reflect**. He's alone. It's a crisis of faith!

AND THEN HE GETS ATTACKED!

It's a man...but what man? He comes and fights Jacob and the struggle goes on all night. Jacob the heel grabber is wrestling...as is his nature! And it's a draw and then the man just touches Jacob's hip and it's dislocated. But Jacob holds on.

Jacob seems to sense... "Who **IS** this man who can just touch me and take my hip out-of-joint? He must be some sort of special person...supernatural!"

"Let me go!" says the man.

"No", says Jacob, "not until you bless me...I'm waiting to exhale. I may lose my family and everything! I need help! I can't do this!"

Then the man asks that humiliating question "What's your name?" It's like "**The Boy Named Sue**", ashamed to say his own name. It means "deceiver...heel-grabber, Jacob"... And the man, the wrestler says, "From now on you will be Israel...not deceiver, but one who strives with God and prevails".

The power to dislocate a hip with just a touch...and now the power to name a thing...to change a person's very identity...Who is this wrestler?

"Please", says, Jacob, "tell me **YOUR** name?"

"Why is it that you ask my name?", says the wrestler. As if to say, "I have authority over you and not YOU over Me!"

And then the man blesses Jacob (maybe gives him a sense of assurance that it will go well with Esau...but **WILL** it? ...we'll have to wait for next week to see!)

Then he names the place, "Penni-el", "the face of God"... "I have seen the face of God and lived."

Then he goes away limping... "and the children of Israel don't eat the hip joint", says Moses, "to commemorate this moment in Jacob's (i.e. Israel's) life!"

This crisis of faith mirrors the one when Jacob was leaving the Land. He is not the same man. He has been under God's hammer and he is getting a very vivid reminder now...a warning...an experience that changes him even more.

"Jacob, I have been keeping My promises to you and you have prevailed in your struggle with Laban not by your ingenuity or your conniving but by My grace and faithfulness."

"You see it – I hear it in your prayer – but you are only starting to see how true it is...how dependent you really are on ME...the God of the Promise!"

You must see it more fully...I will not give the Land to an ingenious people, a powerful, cunning, superior people...I will not give it to self-sufficient people but to dependent people...to people who hold on to me and don't let go. This land is not for a proud people but for a repentant people. Not for Jacob but for Israel.

Now, for us Jacob is a big help in at least two ways that can really assist us in our own battle with this very deadly enemy of the spiritual life i.e. self-sufficiency: Jacob as a pointer and Jacob as a pattern.

When I say pointer, Jacob is a kind of a champion, like David was with Goliath. David represents the armies of Israel when he goes out alone to battle the Philistine champion, Goliath. So, Jacob leaves all the family on one side of the river and crosses into Esau's land – he is representing them as he battles this opponent. He carries the welfare of his family and children and all their descendants – Jacob is Israel! That is, he has all Israel IN HIM and he stands in their place as the representative of all God's people, the embodiment. He is given that name that will be given to the whole nation.

And in TIME...in the fullness of time...Israel would be embodied again. Another Champion would be sent into the arena to represent all of God's people. Jacob is pointing to THAT Champion.

Jesus Christ would be – not in any way Jacob the deceiver – but the perfect Israel. Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of everything that Jacob and his sons and their nation was to be. Jesus Christ is the perfect Israel. And everything WE are to be!

He comes as the Champion of everyone who depends NOT on self but on Him. He lives for us and He dies for us. He wrestles for us – wrestles with temptation, alone in the wilderness (tempted for US!)...wrestles with all the things that get us down, sickness and the chaotic forces of nature (HE calms the winds and the waves) and spiritual darkness and powers (HE **prevails** over demonic spirits). **And finally He goes to wrestle with the will of God, alone...in darkness...** in the garden and emerges like Jacob at sunrise to be given over to His betrayer....And He wrestles with the justice of God when He is consumed by the punishment I deserved as He writhes and wrestles and dies on the Cross.

And raising Him from the dead, God has given Him the Name above every name. When we come out with our hands up and come to Him – the Book of Revelation says **WE** receive a new name,

I will write on him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God, and My new name. Revelation 3.12

And Jacob also serves as a PATTERN (a pointer and a pattern): if you are called by God and have heard His voice in the Gospel, God is striving with you (as He wrestled with Jacob).

It took a long time for Jacob to come to this place...twenty years under Laban (all that stress and striving) and now facing these 400 warriors and the extinction of his family – the revenge of Esau awaits! And only then does he have the tenacious will to hold on and to strive.

He has had to hit a very low bottom...to wrestle all his life and wrestle all night...a crisis like this is a long time in the making...it's a precious thing that God gives and it hurts so bad...it feels like a death.

And in a way ...Jacob **DID** die that night in the Jabbok Canyon...the old Jacob died and Israel was born. Believers in Jesus Christ undergo this kind of painful renovation all their lives.

And God brings us – not only through one spiritual crisis but perhaps through many. And sometimes they leave a mark, a limp. He is battling our self-sufficiency and bringing us to cling, to remain, to abide in Christ.

He will not give His promises to accomplishment and ingenuity and craftiness but to repentance and faith.