

Winning By Losing
#10 in a Series on The Story: From Creation to Christ
Genesis 25-36
Faith Community Church – March 9, 2008

Introduction

1. If we had time today to read through the entire story of Jacob, my guess is we would see him as the kind of person we should watch out for. He would not be a person we would trust. But Jacob's story is about God's sovereign grace and mercy, and about his ability to change people – people like Jacob and people like you and me.
2. The Bible is incredibly honest when it comes to telling us about the lives of its characters, and as a result it is easy – perhaps too easy – for us to point out their flaws. And Jacob had had them. But we should be reminded that while we may have different flaws, we are really no different, and no less undeserving of God's mercy.
3. Jacob was born as a twin son to Isaac and Rebekah. He is born second, holding on to the heel of his brother Esau, leading to his being named Jacob, which means “he takes by the heel” but also “he cheats”¹ or “he deceives.” As we'll see, Jacob lives up to his name.

Jacob's Life

As we look at the story of Jacob contained in these chapters, we see that Jacob's life is characterized or dominated by several things.

1. First, in keeping with his name, Jacob is a deceiver and an opportunist.
 - a. While God had revealed to their mother that the blessing of the firstborn would fall to Jacob and not Esau, Jacob's first recorded actions are to take advantage of his brother and buy his birthright for a bowl of soup.
 - i. The birthright was something special. It resulted in a position of honor in the family, a double share of the father's inheritance, and being recognized as the leader in the family. Apparently, in cases where there were only two sons, the one with the birthright inherited everything.²
 - ii. So Esau was selling his future for a bowl of soup, and for that he can be blamed, but Jacob doesn't miss an opportunity to better himself in the process.
 - b. The next scene in the story shows Isaac as old and nearing death. He wants to enjoy one last meal provided by Esau, who was a great hunter, and then would give the blessing of the birthright to his son. But Rebekah hears about

¹ ESV footnote

² Waltke, 363

this and disguises Jacob so that he tricks his father into giving him the blessing instead of his brother. When Esau finds out he is distraught, but also angry and plots to kill Jacob. Because of that Jacob leaves for the family of Laban, his uncle, many days away.

- c. Jacob's Uncle Laban is every bit the deceiver and opportunist. And the twenty years Jacob spends working for his uncle turned father-in-law is a story that has all the makings of a soap opera as both men do what they can to try to get the upper hand over each other.
 - d. I can't help but think that Jacob and Laban would fit well into our culture, either as the cutthroat chairmen of major corporations or as seedy used-car salesmen on a back street in Philadelphia. None of us would want to work for them and none of us would want to do business with them.
 - e. But what about us? Is there a part of us that buys into the "get ahead at all costs" thinking that is here? Do we envy people who have this kind of power? We shouldn't because there is a stiff price to pay.
2. Second, Jacob pays the price by having to live in fear and insecurity.
 - a. After Esau loses the blessing, his intent is to kill Jacob. Fear motivates his leaving his home.
 - b. As Jacob prospers at Laban's expense, Laban's attitude toward him changes, and God tells Jacob to go back home. But fearing Laban results in Jacob's packing his belongings (four wives, 11 sons and a daughter, innumerable flocks and herds and a many servants) and running for Canaan while Laban is away.
 - c. But heading home means having to deal with Esau, and Jacob's fear literally brings him to his knees in prayer, which is an usual place for Jacob because of an other dominant theme in his life:
3. Third, Jacob keeps God at a distance.
 - a. In Genesis 28:10-22 we read the familiar story of Jacob's ladder. While on the run from Esau to Laban, Jacob stops to sleep one night and has a dream in which he sees the vision recorded in those verses. [Read the passage]
 - b. God is saying, "I am your God, Jacob, as I am the God of your father and grandfather." To which Jacob responds with a vow that he will worship this God of his fathers if this God will work things out for him.
 - c. Whenever we see Jacob referring to God in these chapters, it is never with the expression "my God," but "your God," or "The God of my fathers." This may reflect an acknowledgment of the covenant promise, but it nevertheless speaks of a relationship with God that is impersonal and distant. Abraham and Isaac built altars and worshipped God, called on the name of the Lord, but Jacob never does – until he faces his biggest crisis, and we read about that in Genesis 32.

Jacob Wrestles With God

1. Genesis 32:1-21 sets the stage for us. Let's read it. We see Jacob's great fear and his prayer of desperation.
2. The rest of the chapter tells us that when Jacob was alone at night, that he had an encounter with God. Let's read Genesis 32:22-32.
3. What is happening here?
 - a. Don't make the mistake of thinking that Jacob is winning this wrestling match. The ease with which God affects his hip socket makes that clear.
 - b. This physical struggle is about a spiritual struggle, and Jacob is losing. But finally recognizing his inferiority and his need of being blessed, Jacob "prevails." He wins by losing.
4. From this point on there is a change in Jacob.
 - a. His name is changed to Israel, but that is not all that changes.
 - b. There is a change in Jacob's heart. In the morning Jacob finally meets Esau, and Jacob no doubt unexpectedly finds a great display of forgiveness and is restored to his brother.
 - c. He returns to Canaan and comes to the city of Shechem where he will live. Genesis 33:18-20 tells the rest of the story. Jacob builds an altar and calls it "El-Eleho-Israel" which means "God – the God of Israel."³

Connecting This Story to Our Lives

There are several possible points of contact between this story and our lives, but I want to focus on one lesson that seems to override the entire story: God want our hearts. What does that mean?

1. Well, it means in part that God does not want us to be like Jacob, who lives his life keeping God at arms length and trying to do things our own way.
 - a. God wants our allegiance, and for us to acknowledge our need for him.
 - b. Is God your God? My God? Not just our deity, but our God?
2. It also means that God wants our relationship with him to be personal.
 - a. Is your relationship with God personal? I'm not talking about a certain kind of mysticism, I'm asking if your relationship with God is personal or if it is second-hand.
 - b. I've said at different times that church is not a spectator event. Let me say that faith is not a spectator event. A relationship with God is forged both alone and in the company of other Christians when our minds and hearts are deliberately engaged to learn about him and pray to him.

³ ESV footnote, and Waltke, 461.

- c. One of the things that parents should want for their kids is that they develop their own relationship with God. I think a lot of teenagers and young adults end up not sticking with the faith that they once professed because it seems so second-hand. And that is a natural thing if you are not cultivating your own relationship with God. YOU need to read Scripture. YOU need to pray. YOU need to be engaged in worship and learning. That way it becomes personal. And of course, that's not just true for teen agers and younger people. It's true for all of us. God wants our hearts.

Conclusion

One day Jesus spoke to a crowd and said, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." Matthew 11:29

Jacob needed that, and so do we. If you've never trusted in Christ as your Savior, he will take away the burden of your sin and make you a new person. And if you have trusted in Christ but you're living in a second-hand or distant relationship, tell him that you want that to change and ask him to show you how.