

Old Testament Survey - Part 9

by Dick Woodward

The sermon explores Jacob's life as a profound illustration of grace and the identity crisis faced by individuals in their spiritual journey.

Duration: 27:29

Scripture: Genesis 25:21-26, Genesis 28:10-22, Genesis 31:43-55, Genesis 32:24-28, Romans 9:10-13

Topics: "Gods Grace", "Faith Journey"

Description

The sermon delves into the life of Jacob, highlighting his journey of faith, identity crisis, and encounters with God. It emphasizes the theme of grace as God's unmerited favor and blessing upon Jacob, despite his flaws and manipulative nature. Through various experiences, Jacob learns to wait on the Lord, confront his identity crisis, and ultimately receive God's blessings through brokenness and surrender.

Transcript

As we consider the life of Abraham, we realize that God has said a great deal to us in the Scripture through what we might call the character sketch. God has a lot of truth he wants to teach us, like truth about faith and truth about other things, and he will communicate that truth to us by telling us the story of a man. Another character in the book of Genesis through whom God says a great deal to us is the character Jacob.

Abraham's life told us about faith. Jacob's life seems to tell us about what we might call the identity crisis. I would like to read a few verses from Genesis 25 and 32, which will tell us something about the life of this man, Jacob.

First of all, in Genesis 25-21 we read these words, "...and Isaac entreated the Lord for his wife, because she was barren, and the Lord was entreated of him. And Rebekah his wife conceived, and the children struggled together within her, and she said, If it were so, why am I thus? And she went to inquire of the Lord. And the Lord said unto her, Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels, and the one people shall be stronger than the other people, and the elder shall serve the younger.

And when her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb. And the first came out red, all over, like a hairy garment, and they called his name Esau. And after that came his brother out, and his hand took hold on Esau's heel, and his name was called Jacob." That's the way the story of Jacob

begins.

Years later, many years later, we have this account in Genesis 32 of this man's life. It says, "...Jacob said, O God of my father Abraham, O God of my father Isaac, the Lord said to me, Return unto thy country, and unto thy kindred, and I will deal well with thee. I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth which thou hast shown unto thy servant.

For with my staff I have passed over this Jordan, and now I have become two bands." And then we have this description of what we might call the subjective spiritual experience of Jacob. Here, all the great men of God in the Scripture have an experience, a spiritual experience, and this is Jacob's experience. In verse 24 of Genesis 32, it says, "...And Jacob was left alone, and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day.

And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh, and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint as he wrestled with him. And he said, Let me go, for the day breaketh. And he said, I will not let thee go, except thou bless me.

And he said unto him, What is thy name? And he said, Jacob. And he said, Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel, for as a prince hast thou power or striven with God and with men, and hast prevailed. And Jacob asked him, and said, Tell me, I pray thee, thy name.

And he said, Wherefore is it that thou dost ask my name? And he blessed them there." That is the beginning and the ending, perhaps, of the story of Jacob. The story of Jacob and the meaning of the story of Jacob seems to focus upon his name. Abraham's story and what we learned about faith from Abraham seemed to focus around his alters, but with Jacob the focus seems to be upon his name.

Jacob is a twin when he is born, and as he comes out of Rebekah's womb, he is grabbing the heel of his twin brother Esau. And for this reason, perhaps, he is named Grabber, or Supplanter, or perhaps Rascal. That's the meaning of the word Jacob.

That's why he is named Jacob. In the story we read at the end of his life, his name is changed. God changes his name to Israel.

Abraham fathered these unique people, the people of God, the chosen people of Israel, but it was Jacob who gave them their name. Out there today in the Middle East, they are called Israel, and they are fighters. They got that name, and perhaps a lot more, from this man Jacob.

As we look at the name of Jacob and look at his story, and we ask the question, God, what truth are you trying to tell us through the story of Jacob from chapter 25-32 of Genesis? You're telling us in some detail about this man's life. What is it that you're trying to tell us through the story of this man? I believe in one word. What God is trying to tell us through the story of Jacob is about grace.

Abraham's life was an illustration of faith. Jacob's life is an illustration of grace. You see, the grace of God is the charisma of God, really.

It's the word charis, and when it's active in your life, it's charisma. It comes in the form of the blessing and favor of God, and also it comes in the form of the power of God, the dynamic of God. When God pours out his grace upon people, grace is called by the theologians, unmerited favor.

Because one of the most important things about the meaning of the word grace is, you don't deserve it, you did not attain it, you did not achieve it or accomplish it, God just poured it out upon you. It would seem that Jacob's life is an illustration of that. The Apostle Paul in the New Testament book of Romans, in Romans 9, gives us a New Testament commentary on the story of Jacob.

He comments upon those verses that we read in Genesis 25, and he teaches election and uses this as an example. He says, Here you have two children in their mother's womb, neither one has done anything good or bad, neither one has achieved anything, attained anything, accomplished anything, deserved anything, and God says that one is going to serve the other. God knows the beginning from the end, God never has any surprises, and God says, according to Paul in Romans 9, Jacob I love and Esau I hate, therefore Esau is going to serve Jacob.

That presents a great problem to many people, because it raises the issue of election. But if you follow Paul's argument through in Romans 9, he isn't really teaching election as much as he is teaching grace. He says it was of election that it might be by grace.

What's really being illustrated by the life of Jacob is simply this. God had already decided he was going to bless Jacob. You see, there were two things worth having in Jacob's family, a birthright and a blessing, and Jacob grabbed them both, or so he thought.

He had to deceive his father and deceive his brother, and he thought that through his cunning and through his deceit, he managed to grab the blessing and the birthright. But I think what we're being told in the story of Jacob is, Jacob didn't have to do that grabbing. He didn't have to do that scheming and conniving.

It was the plan of God all along that he should have those things, and it was determined by grace, the grace of God, and not by achievement. I believe what Jacob describes is what we saw in the third chapter of Genesis, what we called there the identity crisis. There is someone that all of us are supposed to be.

There is something that all of us are supposed to be, and there is some place that all of us are supposed to be. One of the basic causes of unhappiness is there's someone we're supposed to be, and that's not who we are. We're trying to please other people, perhaps, or for all kinds of reasons, we're not the person God meant for us to be.

We're perhaps conforming, or we're being dominated, or we're imitating, but we're not really who we're supposed to be. There's some thing we're supposed to be. God has given us a gift pattern, and that determines what we should do with our life, and we can't say that we're doing that.

That will make us very unhappy if we're not really doing what we've been equipped to do. Then we're supposed to be this person and do this thing somewhere, and if we're not where we're supposed to be, that will make us unhappy. The world calls that the identity crisis.

The Bible calls that the good and acceptable and perfect will of God. I think Jacob's life is an illustration of that. Call it the identity crisis or call it the perfect will of God, but I believe Jacob's story is an illustration of that.

We might put it this way. A child psychologist once told me that in a family where there are three children, if the children are born close together, the first child is going to be a manipulator, because that first child will manipulate the second child. According to some child psychologists, that child's whole personality and lifestyle will develop out of the fact that they were born first and they were therefore a manipulator.

They will become an executive type, and they'll end up being the person who's telling everybody else what to do because of where they came in their family. That second child in a family like this, in order to get away from this manipulator, they become a maneuverer. They're just constantly trying to get away from this older child, and so they become a maneuverer.

They say that their whole lifestyle is formed out of this. They end up becoming a lawyer, a negotiator, a diplomat. They're always the kind of people that can maneuver things.

A third child, if there are three in the family and they come close together, a third child gets caught in a crossfire between a manipulator and a maneuverer, and they become so frustrated they just become a fighter, and they just bull their way through situations, and these become great military men like General George Patton, or perhaps they play in the defensive line for the Pittsburgh Steelers or something. They become people who just like to bull their way through situations. Now they say, following this line of thinking, that after the third child it's anybody's guess.

Now I came from a family of 13, and I was about four guesses down from a fighter, and so this means a lot to me. What they're really suggesting is that if you come after the third child, you're a little bit of everything. You've got some manipulator, you've got some maneuverer, and you've got some fighter.

Now I think the story of Jacob tells us that perhaps a twin is a little bit of everything, because Jacob certainly was a little bit of everything. Jacob was a manipulator, Jacob was a maneuverer, and finally his name has changed because God says, Jacob, you're a fighter, and God commends him for that. And he says, you've fought your way through on three levels, Jacob.

You've looked up and you have striven with God. You have fought your way through to me, and you've looked in and you've fought your way through to the things that you have to work out when you look in. And Jacob, you've looked around and you've fought your way through on this level of horizontal relationships.

You're a fighter, Jacob, I commend you for that, and this is why I'm going to change your name. Now because I came up in a large family, you know, coming up in a large family makes you a survivor, and it makes you a manipulator, and a maneuverer, and a fighter, and a little bit of everything. I really identify with this character, Jacob.

His own brother will say, is he not well named? He really is a grabber, and Jacob really is. In the story of Jacob, after he deceives his father and he gets this birthright and blessing, he thinks because of deceit and because of scheming. His brother is very angry with him and in fact is going to kill him, and so his mother comes to her son Jacob and says, Jacob, you've got to leave.

I have a brother over there in the wilderness, your uncle Laban, you're going to have to go stay with him, because Esau certainly is going to kill you. So Jacob has to leave home. This begins a 20-year period in the life of Jacob, and this is where I believe God really begins to get through to this man, and this is where this man's life shows us the identity crisis.

The first night away from home was a difficult night for Jacob. When Jacob left home, it wasn't like it is today. He didn't stay at the Holiday Inn, or he didn't just have somebody drive him to the airport and then he took off for a distant place.

Jacob went out into a wilderness. He didn't know if his uncle Laban was still going to be alive or not. He didn't know if he'd ever make it to Uncle Laban's, because there were wild animals, there were bandits, there were all kinds of dangers.

That night he couldn't sleep. He had a rock for a pillow, and so he was uncomfortable. But while he was struggling there to sleep, and struggling with his fears and his insecurities, he had an experience with God.

I believe this was his first experience with God, really. He had a vision. We all know about Jacob's ladder.

He saw a ladder with angels ascending and descending on that ladder. He had a covenant with God as a result of this experience. He was awed by the experience, and he said, Surely God was in this place, and I didn't know it.

He met God that first night away from home. But his big concern was, he was leaving home, he didn't know if he'd ever go back or get to go back, and so he made a covenant with God. God said to him essentially the same thing he said to Abraham.

He confirmed the Abrahamic covenant with Jacob. He said, I was with your father Abraham, and I'm going to be with you. I am the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, and I'm going to be with you.

He affirms this promise to him. Jacob says to God, If you really are with me, if this is really true, if you really will bring me back one day to my father's home, and you'll take care of me and provide for me, I'll cut you in for ten percent of the action. He said, I'll give you ten percent of everything I ever made.

You just see this man's grabber nature coming through all the time. But God meets him there that night. They say there are three looks at life that we all have to take.

There are three directions of life that we simply have to get together. First of all, we have to look up, and we have to fight our way through to God, like Jacob did. We have to get the up look straight.

Then when we look up, God wants us to look in, because there are certain things in us. We all have a Jacob nature in us, and God wants us to look in and deal with that Jacob nature. He wants us to sort some of that out.

There are certain things about ourselves he has to show us, and so he makes us look in. That's the second look. Then the person who's looked up and the person who's looked in is ready to look around.

The person who looks around and is effective in that third direction of life is the person who has had a good up look and a good in look. Now Jacob is beginning to enter into a 20-year period where God is going to make him look up and God is going to make him look in and God is going to make him look around. This is perhaps the first up look, the experience of the latter.

They say when you're in transition, and Jacob is in transition here, that there are three problems that God has. You're in transition because you were here, there's some place we're all supposed to be, as we've said, and God wants you over here. In order to get you from here to here, God has three problems.

First of all, he has to get you out of this so he can bring you into this. So he has to get you out in order to bring you in. Then when you're in between, God has to keep you going so he can pull you through.

Then when he gets you over here, he has to make you right so he can settle you in. Those are God's three problems. This is what God is doing in Jacob's life, and this is a time when he gets through to a lot of us when we're in transition.

He's getting us out of the old so he can bring us into the new. He's trying to keep us going so he can pull us through and get us over here where he can make us right and settle us in. That's a time when God gets through to a lot of people, and he seemed to get through to Jacob at that time.

But God has some experiences for Jacob during this 20-year period, and a lot of them center around his uncle Laban. Jacob was a rascal, we've said. He was well-named, and that's what his name meant.

But his uncle Laban was a bigger rascal. God's best cure for a rascal is a bigger rascal. We all have a rascal nature, we all have a manipulating, maneuvering, fighting nature that's a Jacob nature.

And in order for God to get us to see that, one of the best ways for him to get us to see that is to put us with someone who is a bigger rascal than we are, and that's what happens to Jacob. I think there's a lot of humor in the Scripture when he goes to Uncle Laban. He tells Uncle Laban about how he deceived his father and his brother, and he got the blessing and the birthright.

It says that Laban smiled and said, "'Surely you are a bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.' And while he's saying that, Laban is thinking to himself, "'But I'm a bigger rascal than you are, son.'" And that was true. These two rascals worked together for 20 years, and at the end of their 20-year relationship they built a little altar, it's called Mizpah in Hebrew, and they made a covenant. They said, "'The Lord watch between me and thee while we are absent, the one from the other.'" I'm amazed at the number of people who put that in lockets, and they think that that's a very endearing expression of fellowship.

I've heard youth groups end their meetings on Sunday nights by saying, "'The Lord watch between me and thee while we are absent, the one from the other.'" It wasn't really meant that way when those two men built that altar. They had been fighting each other and conniving and scheming and manipulating and maneuvering each other for 20 years. Now God helped Jacob.

God was on Jacob's side. If it hadn't been for that, he would have been had by Uncle Laban. But God intervened for Jacob.

With God on his side, Jacob was even with Uncle Laban. But after trying to manipulate and maneuver and scheme and do all of these things for 20 years, they finally decided they'd met their match, and they called it a draw, and they decided that they would never interfere with one another again. So they drew a line and said, "'Promise me you'll never cross this line into my life again, and I promise you I'll never cross this line into your life again, and the Lord watches between me and thee while we are absent one from another.

The Lord watches while we can't watch each other.'" In the story of Laban and Jacob, again you see an illustration of grace. God was blessing Jacob. That's the whole point of the story.

It wasn't because Jacob was a bigger rascal than Uncle Laban, it was because God was blessing Jacob. When Jacob first discussed wages with Uncle Laban, the wages were supposed to be Uncle Laban's daughter, Rachel. It says that she was lovely of face and form, in one of the translations.

When Jacob saw her, he absolutely flipped. It says he went over to a well when he first saw Rachel. It took several men to take the stone off the top of this well, and Jacob lifted that stone off by himself.

He was so impressed with Rachel and wanted her to be impressed with him. He just absolutely fell in love with Rachel. So when Uncle Laban suggested they talk about his wages, Jacob said, "...I'll work seven years for Rachel." So he worked seven years.

He worked hard, and the time went so quickly because of the great love he had for her. But the night of the wedding, apparently Uncle Laban got him drunk, because it says that in the morning, behold, it was Leah. Rachel had a sister named Leah, and it says she was tender-eyed, whatever that means.

And in the morning, after the honeymoon night, after the wedding night, Jacob found himself looking into the tender little eyes of Leah, and not Rachel. You see, he had been deceived. He was a deceiver, and now he had been deceived.

You know, the one thing that a cheater hates most is to be cheated, and the one thing that a manipulator hates most is to be manipulated. The one thing a maneuverer hates most is to be maneuvered. The one thing that a rascal hates most is a bigger rascal, and that's what God put Jacob with when he put him with Uncle Laban.

Finally, he does get to marry Rachel, and after talking about wages again, on one occasion they came to this agreement. All the animals in the flocks and herds that reproduced striped or speckled would be Jacob's, and all those that were not striped or speckled would be Uncle Laban's. They were the more favored ones, and so that looked as if it favored Uncle Laban.

But after they made this proposition, Jacob went to a place where the animals were mating, and he took the fence around where they were mating, and he stripped off the bark and made it striped and made it spotted. He had never had a course in animal husbandry. He actually believed that if they mated in front of these striped and speckled fences, that they would produce striped and speckled offspring.

They did produce striped and speckled offspring. Once they made that deal, the flocks just reproduced striped and speckled. Here again you have the great illustration of grace.

Jacob thought that was because of what he did there where the animals were mating. But that wasn't the reason why those flocks produced speckled and striped. We know that now because we know something about animal husbandry.

It was because God was blessing him. God was blessing him. That's why the flocks reproduced striped and speckled.

But you see, this is the illustration you have again and again in the life of Jacob. Jacob thinks it's his cunning, it's his cleverness, it's his scheming, but it isn't. It's the blessing of God upon his life.

He finally gets that message. At the end of his story, when he meets his brother Esau, he says, looking at his large flocks and herds, the Lord has dealt graciously with me. He finally learns that that's why he has what he has.

There's another message that we get in the life of Jacob, and this is the one we read at the beginning of our session. His spiritual experience. When Jacob has fled from Uncle Laban and he hears that his brother Esau is coming after him with 400 men, he's frightened again, and he seems to have his second deep experience of God when he's frightened.

He crosses over to a place called Jebuk, where there's a brook, and this word Jebuk means running, and there he has an experience. He wrestles all night with an angel. This wrestling match is a fascinating wrestling match.

When it begins, the aggressor in this wrestling match is the angel that he's wrestling with, or God. But in the middle of the wrestling match, the initiative changes, and now you find Jacob being the aggressor, and you find Jacob saying that he will not let God go until God blesses him. You find God saying, Now let me go, and Jacob saying, I won't let you go until you bless me.

In the middle of that wrestling match, God broke Jacob. It says he touched the hollow of his thigh and put his hip out of joint, and he broke him. What does all that mean? There's an expression in the scripture, it's the expression, Wait on the Lord.

What does it mean to wait on the Lord? Frankly, to wait on the Lord is the antithesis, it's the absolute opposite of maneuvering, manipulating, scheming, conniving. There are these people who are movers, shakers and doers. They are the make-it-happen people.

Wait on the Lord is just the opposite of that concept of being a mover, a shaker and a doer, or a manipulator and a schemer. God can't apparently get through to Jacob and convince him that it's because of grace that you're blessed. Jacob is a mover, a shaker and a doer.

He is a schemer, he is a rascal, he's a grabber, and he thinks that's what's making it happen. So God takes him to this place called Jebuk. It's interesting, the word Jebuk means running.

Apparently Jacob is a man who is always running, he's just running, running, running. In order to get this man to the place where God can really bless him, it seems that he has to take him to this place called running and cripple him so he can never run again. As long as a man can run, he may never wait on the Lord.

But if God succeeds in crippling that man, and he's crippled, what else can he do but wait on the Lord? So it seems that the story of Jacob at the brook called Jebuk is simply summed up this way. God wanted to bless this man. He had been trying to bless him for 20 years, but the only way he could bless him was to break him.

God wanted to crown this man with blessing, but the only way he could crown him was to cripple him. I wonder, have you ever been to a Jebuk yourself? Has God taken you to your own personal Jebuk? Has God ever taken you to the place where he's had to break you so that he might bless you? I wonder if you can interpret any of your experiences, any of the crises in your life in the context of Jacob's experience. Is it possible that this crisis or that crisis in your life could be interpreted this way? I call it the cripple-crown blessing.

God wants to crown you with blessing, but the only way he can crown you is to cripple you. He wants to bless you, but the only way he can bless you is to break you. In that story there in Genesis 32, you see God is commending Jacob for having taken the three looks at life.

He says to him, Jacob, you are a grabber. At the heart of the wrestling match, God brings forth a confession from Jacob. He says, what is your name? And Jacob says, Jacob, I'm a grabber, I'm a rascal.

When God gets that confession from him, God says, but I'm going to change your name, Jacob. I'm going to change your name to Fighter, because like a prince you have fought your way through to me, you have fought your way through to yourself, and you have fought your way through on this horizontal level of human relationships. These are the three directions of life that we have to take.

These are the three directions of life that we just have to take seriously and really get together if we're going to be who and what and where God wants us to be. We simply must look up, we simply must look in, and then we must look around and be related correctly to God, to ourselves and people in order to be who, what and where we're supposed to be. Jesus told us how that should work when he said, Love God, love your neighbor as yourself.

Love when you look up, love when you look in, and love when you look around. I believe that's what the story of Jacob is trying to tell us, the identity crisis. Jacob spent 20 years having this identity crisis.

The word self in the dictionary is defined this way, the uniqueness, the individuality of any given person that makes him distinct from every other person. Jacob found himself, he found God, and he found people there at the brook called Jabruch. I wonder, can you say as you look at the story of Jacob that some of the greatest blessings in your life have come into your life by way of the cripple crown blessing? Let God break you so that he might bless you.

That's the message of the story.

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