

4th in the series on *Heroes of Faith*)

Genesis 32: 22-32 and I Peter 2: 9-10

Today we examine how God blessed Jacob, the son of Isaac and heir of the Abraham promise. The very foundation of our understanding of God starts with these Old Testament characters as their understanding of the world starts with a belief in the One God- Yahweh.

Jacob

Jacob's story is a vivid depiction of human deceit. The second born twin of Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob comes out of the womb grabbing his brother's Esau's heel. Thus he is named Jacob, which literally means "heel grabber." But the name means so much more. Jacob or Ya 'gov in the Hebrew has the sense of "one who takes what is not his." The longer development of the name - *Ya' aqobh* – further develops our understanding of Jacob as "one who overreaches." Jacob spends most of his life focused on the all the wrong things. But in spite of Jacob's continuing refusal to accept God's plan for his life, we see the hand of God trying to redeem Jacob and return him to his rightful place as a child of the promise.

Jacob's story

The story of Jacob is a story of God's redemption. Jacob and his brother Esau are total opposites. Jacob has a fair complexion, has an aptitude for learning and has a gift for handling the farm animals. He is a shepherd and likes to stay close to home. He is the favorite of his mother Rebekah. Jacob's brother Esau, whose name literally means "hairy," has a rugged, harsh, red complexion with heavy hair over his body. Esau loves to roam, hunt and has no interest in learning or studying. He is the favorite of his father Isaac. The two brothers are in constant competition and conflict.

As teens this conflict comes to a head. First, Jacob tricks his brother out of his birthright inheritance (the oldest in a family receives an extra share of the inherited family estate). Second, Jacob with the help of his mother dupes Isaac into giving him the blessing of the father reserved for the first-born. In both cases, Jacob longs for what is not his. He "overreaches" and misses the true blessing that God has planned for him.

Esau is enraged over Jacob's deceit, and swears revenge on his brother. Rebekah is afraid for her favorite son's life and works a deal with her brother, Laban. Jacob flees from his brother Esau to go live with his uncle Laban in another country.

Jacob's story (continued)

On the way, Jacob has a dream, a vision of heaven. In the dream, he sees a ladder with angels coming and going from heaven to earth. God speaks to Jacob and passes the promise of Abraham to Jacob. Jacob receives the blessing, but nothing changes. He lives with his uncle Laban for 20 years. He marries two of Laban's daughters, who will bear him 12 sons. But, these 20 years are full of deceit, deception, confusion, pretending, avoiding, and "overreaching." Finally, Uncle Laban seeks to take revenge on Jacob and he must flee in the middle of the night.

Genesis 32: 22-32

But God has not given up on Jacob. With Laban and a large posse of men in pursuit, Jacob gets word that Esau is coming to meet him with 400 men. Esau has heard that Jacob has left the land of Laban and his protection and it seems that it is time for a showdown. Jacob is desperate. He sends presents to his estranged brother and sends the women and children ahead of him it seems to plead his case.

Night comes, and Jacob now alone, is left to consider the mess he has made of his life. Laban is on the way to take revenge. Esau stands in the way of escape. In the deep of the night a strange man attacks Jacob. This is no dream and Jacob realizes that this is no mortal – the Lord God. They struggle till dawn. In the struggle, Jacob grabs the manifestation of God and will not let go. Jacob is wounded, a wound he will carry for the rest of his life as a reminder of this night. "Bless me," says Jacob. Finally, the question: "What is your name?" (Remember the name and the identity are the same) Tired, worn, exhausted, the reply comes: "Jacob, overreacher." No sooner did Jacob surrender to this request and make himself vulnerable in the honesty of confession that God responded positively. "Your name shall no more be called "Jacob," but "Israel," meaning, "Blessed to be a blessing."

The name attests a new standing, a new beginning. No longer is this the fearful self-doubter who schemes trickery to survive; he is now the capable one whose knowledge of his strength will allow him to live in peace. As the dawn breaks, Jacob, now named Israel takes his family to meet Esau and seek forgiveness. Esau responds with grace and gratitude and later in Genesis, we see Esau and Israel together again to bury their father Isaac.

1 Peter 2: 9-10

We also struggle with life and with God. We hide behind the mask of our making and pretend we are something we are not. We live in a world of "overreaching." But God never gives up on us. We seek the gifts and blessings of this world, while God is offering the blessings of eternity. We ask for pleasure; God offers joy. We ask for help; God offers wholeness. We ask for power and security; God offers love. God created Abraham, Isaac and Jacob for a purpose and fulfills that purpose – transforming them to the person they could never be on their own.

God chooses us and offers us transformation. As we experience the pain of life, God now offers us a new existence in God's love, peace and joy. "...of Him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

Please note: The following daily readings allows you to study other passages that speak to the place of scripture in our lives. The Study Guide readings allow you to dig deeper. This week's we continue reading from the book of James.

This book is often misunderstood as emphasizing works over faith. Martin Luther in the 16th century referred to James as the "epistle of straw". Luther believed that the focus of "salvation by faith" is lost in James as he teaches his reader about the importance of works as a person of faith in Christ.

James' message is for the person who has lost touch with the high call of Christ in their behavior. It is far more than an "epistle of straw". As the apostle Paul says, "By your fruit you shall be known." Likewise, James knows that our life with Christ begins in faith, and then leads to a new way to live.

Monday – Read *James 4:1-10*. In this part of James' letter he speaks harshly to the reader. His language is judgmental and difficult to read. Yet, James intent is not to invite the reader into a state of guilt. James wants us to understand the joy and exaltation that comes in drawing close to God. Conflict comes through our distance from God. Begin your day drawing close to God through prayer and meditation. Listen quietly to God's urging. Allow God to use you in someone's life today.

Tuesday – Read *James 4:11-12*. In this short verse James reinforces an earlier warning concerning our language. Here, he strongly admonishes "speaking evil of another." Measure yourself today. For every negative word to speak about someone, speak at least five positive words about someone else.

Wednesday – Read *James 4:13-17*. Life is short. James encourages the reader to live each day for the Lord. This passage does not condemn planning for the future. Instead, it condemns planning without including God in our plans. Before you begin your day, look at your calendar. Have you included Christ in all your planning for the next three months?

Thursday – Read *Isaiah 2:4* and the daily devotional from *Transforming Lives, Transforming Africa*. Again we hear the words from Isaiah concerning peace and harmony. Where is God leading you to bring peace and harmony?

Friday – Read *Acts 20:35* and the daily devotional from *Transforming Lives, Transforming Africa*. In our materialistic society, we glorify possessions. In the Kingdom of God, the glory goes to those who have given themselves away. Earlier this week we looked at our calendars to see whether we had included God in our plans for the future. Today, look at your check book or credit card bill. Ask yourself the question, how does this record of my spending reflect my values?

Have a great week!

See you next Sunday, March 2, for **Heroes: Joseph – Providence**