

## “Fixing the Family”

Reading: Genesis 25:19-34; 32:22-33:4

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Jacob is one of my personal favorite characters in the Bible. Yes, he is a scoundrel through and through, but I look at it this way: if everyone in the Bible was perfect, then the story would be much shorter, and it would certainly be much, much more boring. I would not suggest anyone use Jacob as an example of morality, but he lived an interesting life. Maybe he would tell us, if he were able, that it's more interesting to read it than to live it, though; a good chunk of his time was spent running for his life or grieving over his loss.

But it's a great story, one for the ages. It's such an old story that even the most rural among us can't really imagine what life was like back then, but we can connect to it because at its root, it's a family story. The Bible as a whole, really, is a family story, since it's concerned with the family of God. It's just that as time passes, the family tree gets so big that entire nations are included in its branches. It's most obviously a family story here in the book of Genesis, where we watch as God begins the slow, laborious process of redeeming the creation that has been so damaged, and He does so by crafting a relationship with one small family. It's a family affair, though the intent is that this one family will eventually bless others.

And like a lot of family affairs, it's really messy. This week's chapter of *The Story* focuses on Abraham, his son Isaac, and Isaac's sons Jacob and Esau. It is, very literally, all about the family business: with Abraham, the concern is Abraham begetting a son to begin building this family claimed by God, and then much of the story focuses on which son receives the inheritance and God's blessing for the future. The story brings us to these twin brothers who are Abraham's grandsons, Jacob and Esau. It's really a sad tale. If you have a brother or sister, I hope you have a good enough relationship with them that Jacob and Esau's story makes you ache a little bit. These men were not only brothers, they were twins; things should have developed so much differently.

I can't help but compare it with the story of two other brothers that we discussed last week, the story of Cain and Abel. In that story, Cain is jealous of his brother Abel and his favor in God's eyes, and God warns him that “sin is crouching at his door,” and he needs to master it before it masters him. But Cain doesn't listen, and the result is the tragic, senseless murder of his brother. But there's nothing quite so senseless in the story of Jacob and Esau. There's plenty of tragedy and anger, but it's all very calculated. My guess is that at worst, Cain's crime was a crime of passion: he was a murderer, and maybe even with premeditation, but he wasn't a psychopath. Jacob, on the other hand, plans and schemes and deceives his entire life. He's a conman who spent years bilking his own family out of their wealth.

He starts while he's still in the womb, we learn, by jostling for position. The first thing we hear about him after his birth, he's now a young man, and he takes advantage of Esau's weakness after a hunting trip to get him to make a rash decision to give up his birthright. Later, when it comes time for their father to formalize the inheritance blessing on Esau as the older brother, Jacob schemes to take advantage of his father's blindness so that Isaac will bless him instead of Esau. He impersonates his own brother so that he can lie to his blind father. And it works, at least until his brother comes back,

at which point Jacob heads for the hills to save his own miserable skin. He's a bad man, pure and simple.

His cover story is that he's going to go live with his uncle and find a wife in that country, but the real reason is because Esau is only waiting for their father to die before he gets his revenge. Deceit piles on deceit, though, and Jacob's uncle tricks him into many years of indentured service for him. Jacob uses his own trickery to gain wealth while in his uncle's service, though, and once again, he finds himself running from his victims.

And it's here that things get really interesting. Jacob, now a man with a large family and great wealth in his livestock, is heading back to his homeland, back toward his brother Esau. He hasn't seen his brother for many years, so he has to assume that Esau is still angry, and who could blame him? He gets word that Esau is coming for him with four hundred men. So the schemes begin to take shape in Jacob's mind, and he begins sending increasingly-extravagant gifts of livestock with messengers to Esau. He divides up his family and their encampments into smaller groups, to minimize his losses if there's a fight. They're at the banks of the river Jabbok, which was the natural boundary of his homeland. Jacob gets all of his people and animals safely over the river until he's the only one left when night falls.

It's a story unlike any other in the Bible. A man appears and wrestles with Jacob all night long. It's dark, silent, dreamlike, but it becomes clear as morning approaches that this is some sort of supernatural opponent he's facing. For Cain, sin was crouching at his door. For Jacob, apparently God is crouching at the boundary of his home. Jacob desperately asks for a blessing, the thing he's been chasing his whole life, and he asks for the identity of this mysterious opponent. But instead of hearing his opponent's name, Jacob hears a new name for himself: Israel, which it is suggested means "he struggles with God." This, really, is the summary of his life, and the lives of so many others who have followed him. Everything else is just decoration; what it really comes down to is this man, alone, struggling against God and anyone else who comes, grasping for that blessing.

Here at the banks of the Jabbok River we see a man stripped of everything except God's plan for him. He's got nothing going for him except God. Yes, he has a huge family, and yes, he's been a success in business, but he's a man who has so far built his life on deceiving whoever he needs to to get what he wants. All of the things that he's managed to get away with don't really matter in the end, because in spite of them he's just a man, alone, wrestling desperately against God. Everything he has, he gained through trickery. His résumé would be a list of his best lies. He wants one genuine blessing from God. And in fact this is the only thing he has going for him, and deep down, he knows it. His blessing, his inheritance, comes to him only because God has a plan for this man and his family and the world. God has a plan for reconciliation and redemption, and so this villain of a man has a place in God's blessing. That's all he has.

The sun rises, and Jacob sees his brother approaching. Years ago, Jacob, pretending to be Esau, had kissed his father to accept the stolen blessing. And now, he finds his wronged brother kissing him in forgiveness. Esau has every reason to cling to his vengeance, but God's plan is in action, and so he chooses reconciliation.

Jacob is a different man after this, from what little we see of him. The story begins to shift to focus on his children's generation, and unfortunately, we see them following in their father's footsteps. But Jacob seems to be different. Something has changed this deceiver so that he no longer has a stomach for the life of a conman.

There are a couple of things that happen, and they are illustrations to us of so much of God's family story. The family story is very messy, and Jacob was far from the last scoundrel in the family tree. And so the story is full of characters who, like Jacob, have nothing going for them except God's plan for them. And when they are transformed, it's usually because they do something like what Jacob did.

First of all, Jacob obeyed the command to *go*. Very simple command, sometimes very difficult to listen to. In fact, it's not an exaggeration to say that God's entire plan for redeeming the world began with the command to go. Abraham is the patriarch of God's newly-reconciled family, and his story begins in Genesis 12:1 with the command to "leave your country, your people, and your father's household and go to the land I will show you." Abraham's willingness to obey that one command begins the whole story of redemption. It's interesting to note that just a couple of verses before that, in 11:31, Abraham's father Terah actually began to go: he gathered his family and set out from the city of Ur to go to Canaan, where God would eventually lead Abraham, but Terah got sidetracked and stopped halfway there, in a place called Haran. He actually started the journey to the Promised Land a generation earlier, but his son Abraham was the one who was faithful. Would Terah have received the blessing of God if he had gone all the way? We don't know; he didn't go.

Jacob received the command to go home and face his brother Esau, and he obeyed. That's a change from what he had been doing most of his life, which was fleeing. Going and fleeing are not the same thing. He would cheat someone, the consequences would catch up to him, and he would run for it. But then God's plan got him, and God told him to go in Genesis 31:3, and God said that He would be with Jacob. It's in that difficult act of putting one foot out in front of the other, starting to move in obedience to God, shifting your momentum in a different direction, that the transformation begins to happen.

So first, Jacob went. And second, Jacob the scoundrel became Israel the patriarch of God's family because he made things right, or at least he did what he could. He humbled himself to the point of recognizing and admitting his faults, and he offered what he could to show his brother that he was truly sorry. He didn't know how Esau would react; that was up to Esau. But Jacob did what he could. And that's part of the transformation: living a different life and becoming a different person. He walked in the direction God wanted him to go and lived the kind of life that contributed to reconciliation in the family.

Our stories today are still family stories. They may literally be stories of our families and the troubles they're in, or maybe your story is all about where you are in relationship to God's family. Each one of us, no matter how good or successful we may be in life, we have nothing going for us except God's plan for us. You may not be the scoundrel that Jacob was, but still, God's love for you and intent for you to be a full member of His family is so much greater than anything else you have or do. And that plan of reconciliation — whether it's with your blood family members, or your friends, or

your enemies, or with God — that plan of reconciliation, of fixing the family, can only happen if we go and make things right.



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