

Struggling with God and Men: Genesis 29-32
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We are nearing the end of our study through the book of Genesis. This morning we're going to look some more at the life of Jacob, and then for the next three weeks we'll look at the life of Jacob's son Joseph. And that will bring us to the end of the book. As we continue to look at the life of Jacob today, we're going to see how his life was characterized by struggling with others, struggling against others. Jacob was a shrewd man. He was a manipulative man. He was cunning and deceitful. In fact, his name means, "He cheats." Jacob spent much of his life striving to gain things for himself, and he was very successful. We could say that he was a self-made man. He saw something that he wanted, and he figured out a way to get it. His life was a life of struggle. It was a life of struggling to get what he wanted by his own efforts. But then one night that changed. God changed Jacob. He changed him from a self-reliant man into a man who recognized his own weakness and need.

I want to begin this sermon by asking you whether you are striving to be a self-made man or woman, a self-sufficient man or woman, or have you been changed into a person who recognizes your own weakness and need? This is the critical question for all of us to examine this morning as we examine our own lives. Are you struggling for gain and struggling against those around you in order to get what you want by your own efforts, and in the hopes that you will ultimately somehow make yourself happy? Or have you realized that you are weak and poor and unable to find for yourself any lasting pleasure? You must cling to Jesus Christ, and to Him alone, to receive eternal blessings and pleasures forevermore.

It's so common to look around and see people who are striving, struggling, fighting to get ahead in this world, and on the surface it may appear that they *are* getting ahead. But on the inside it's like they're spinning their wheels. The accomplishments, the possessions, the prestige and wealth and comfort do not satisfy. The only real satisfaction comes when a person sees God for who He really is, and sees himself for the weak and powerless person that he is, and is radically changed by that. This is what we're going to see in Jacob's life, and this is what I hope has happened, or soon will happen, in your life.

First, we'll look at the ongoing family struggles in Jacob's life (under the heading Struggling for Gain), and then we'll look at the spiritual struggle that Jacob had with God (Struggling with God).

Struggling for Gain

Jacob's life began with struggle. He and his brother weren't even out of the womb yet, and they were struggling. In chapter 25:22 it says, "The children struggled together within [their mother, Rebekah]." And then a few verses later it says that Jacob, who was born second, "came out with his hand holding Esau's heel, so his name was called Jacob" (25:26). The name Jacob means "He takes by the heel," or "He cheats." From the very beginning of his life, Jacob was a struggler. He was a cheater. Someone who was always reaching and grasping for more.

When the brothers grew up, Jacob shrewdly manipulated a situation to get his brother's birthright from him. He exchanged it for a bowl of red stew. And then when

his father Isaac was old and blind, Jacob stole the blessing that was intended for Esau. We looked at that story last week.

Now Jacob is fleeing for his life, because his brother wants to kill him. And he arrives in Haran, in the region of Paddan-Aram. And here Jacob finally meets his match, because Laban is a schemer, too. He is a cheater just like Jacob. There is intense irony in the events of chapter 29 as Jacob, we could say, gets his due. What goes around comes around. Your sin will always find you out. This is what happened to Jacob. He fell in love with a young woman named Rachel, and daughter of Laban. And Jacob agreed to work for Laban for 7 years in order to marry Rachel. At the end of the 7 years, Jacob says, "Give me my wife," (29:21) and Laban makes a big feast, but then it says in 29:23, "in the evening [Laban] took his daughter *Leah* and brought her to Jacob, and he went in to her." Verse 25, "And in the morning, behold, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, 'What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?'" And you just wonder if at that moment Jacob thought back to the detestable way in which he had deceived his own father and brother. His father Isaac had said to Esau, "Your brother came deceitfully, and he has taken away your blessing" (27:35). And Esau had said, "Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has cheated me these two times. He took away my birthright, and behold, now he has taken away my blessing" (27:36).

Jacob was a cheater and a deceiver. And now the deceiver is himself deceived. He wakes up in the morning with Leah by his side, rather than Rachel. A further irony is found here in the fact that Laban deceived Jacob because he wanted to uphold the tradition of giving the firstborn daughter before the younger daughter. Very similar to the rights of the firstborn that Jacob had overturned by taking the birthright and stealing the blessing.

Well, Jacob has been duped, but there's nothing he can really do about it. He completes the marriage week with Leah, and then Laban lets him marry Rachel in exchange for another 7 years of work.

But the struggles are far from over. In fact, they are only increasing. Because now Jacob has two wives, and each wife is struggling to win Jacob's affections. Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah, but Leah thought she could win Jacob's love by bearing him children. And at the end of chapter 29 it's recorded that Leah bore Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah. And then later she also had Issachar and Zebulun. Six sons, and then also a daughter, Dinah. But still Jacob's affections always inclined toward Rachel, even though Rachel was barren at first.

We see the struggle between the sisters in 30:1, where it says that Rachel envied her sister. And Rachel said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I shall die!" Jacob was angry and responded, "Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?" And then they committed the same sin that Abraham and Sarah had committed before them. Rachel said in verse 3, "Here is my servant Bilhah; go in to her, so that she may give birth on my behalf, that even I may have children through her." Bilhah gave birth to Dan and Naphtali. Then Leah gave her servant Zilpah to Jacob, and she bore Gad and Asher. Later Rachel finally did conceive, and she had Joseph. And then at the end of her life she died as she gave birth to Benjamin.

These were the intense struggles within Jacob's household. Two sisters who were given to him as wives. They each had a servant, whom they gave to him as wives. So he

had four wives, 12 sons, and a daughter. And as we'll see in the life of Joseph, there were struggles among the brothers as well as the mothers.

The second half of chapter 30 turns our attention back to the struggle between Jacob and Laban. It has to do with Jacob's compensation for his continued work. He has served Laban 14 years for the two wives, and now he continues to work for him. And Laban agrees to give Jacob a portion of his flock. This is in 30:32. Jacob asks, "let me pass through all you flock today, removing from it every speckled and spotted sheep and every black lamb, and the spotted and speckled among the goats, and they shall be my wages." And in verse 34 Laban says, "Good! Let it be as you have said." But then the next verse says, "But that day Laban removed the male goats that were striped and spotted, and all the female goats that were speckled and spotted, every one that had white on it, and every lamb that was black, and put them in charge of his sons." So immediately Laban cheated and deceived. He tried to make sure that Jacob would not gain anything from him.

Jacob, though, continued to live up to his name, and he tried all kinds of odd things to produce striped, speckled and spotted lambs. And somehow, only by God's grace, Jacob was successful, so that by the end of chapter 30 it says, "Thus the man increased greatly and had large flocks, female servants and male servants, and camels and donkeys." Of course, this created even more tension between Jacob and Laban, because Jacob's gain was Laban's loss. In 31:1 "Jacob heard that the sons of Laban were saying, 'Jacob has taken all that was our father's, and from what was our father's he has gained all this wealth.'" At this point the Lord commanded Jacob and promised Jacob, "Return to the land of your fathers and to you kindred, and I will be with you."

So Jacob left, without even telling Laban. Verse 20 says, "And Jacob tricked Laban the Aramean, by not telling him that he intended to flee." Three days later Laban heard what had happened, and he caught up with Jacob and said, in verse 26, "What have you done, that you have tricked me and driven away my daughters like captives of the sword? Why did you flee secretly and trick me, and did not tell me . . ." Again, it was only by God's grace that Jacob was not harmed, for God protected him. Jacob and Laban parted by making a covenant, not because the bitterness had evaporated between them, but they made a covenant that they would not harm one another. And the next day Laban returned home.

Before we move on to chapter 32, I want to emphasize again a point I made last week, that God is bigger than the sin and deception we see in these accounts. Jacob is a liar, a cheater, a despicable sinner. And yet God had chosen to bless this man and use him as a pivotal piece in bringing about the promises made originally to Abraham, and then to Isaac, and now to Jacob. Consider two things. First of all, the promise that Abraham's descendants would be like the stars of the sky is finally looking like it could happen. The family is for the first time experiencing significant growth. Jacob had 12 sons and a daughter. So in spite of the fact that there was sin and envy and struggling within Jacob's household, God was accomplishing his purposes. At the end of Genesis, in chapter 46, we read that there were 70 people in Jacob's family. What God began with Abraham and Sarah has turned into a family of 70!

The other thing to consider is that Jesus Christ is a descendant of Leah's son Judah. Humanly speaking, the only reason Judah was born was because Laban deceitfully gave Leah instead of Rachel. And Leah was the unloved wife in a

polygamous marriage. Both of these things are contrary to God's will. There should be no unloved wives, and there should be no polygamous marriages. But God intended to bless these patriarchs and to bless all the nations of the earth through their descendants. And that, indeed, is what He is doing. God's plans are so much bigger than the sin and deception we see here.

We've seen how Jacob struggled for gain. He struggled to gain his brother's birthright and blessing, to gain a wife, to gain possessions. There was also much struggling within his household, between his wives and children.

Struggling with God

Now let's look at chapter 32 and see how Jacob struggled with God. In Jacob's life if it was not one thing, it was another. At this point he is relieved that the struggle with his father-in-law is behind him now, but as he ventures toward home, who does he have to meet but his brother Esau who wants to murder him. At least that's what Jacob has to assume.

At the beginning of chapter 32 Jacob meets these angels whom he had met back in chapter 28 when he had the dream about the ladder stretching from earth to heaven with the angels going up and down it. He met those angels on his way out of the Promised Land, when he was fleeing from Esau. And now he meets them again on his way back into the Promised Land, as he wonders whether Esau's anger has subsided over the past 20 years.

In verse 6 Jacob receives the worst possible news. The messengers tell him, "We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and there are four hundred men with him." That's an army! And what could that possibly mean but that Esau intended to utterly destroy Jacob and everything he had. So Jacob divided his family and all of his belongings into two camps, hoping that at least one of the camps might survive.

And then Jacob prays. This is a prayer we can learn from, because I think Jacob's heart is beginning to change. He is coming to the end of himself and realizing his dependence on God. He is starting to let go of his self-reliance, and he shows a humble, but bold, petition to God. Let's look at Jacob's prayer.

Read vv. 9-12

Notice three ways in which Jacob's prayer is a model for us to follow. First, in verse 10 Jacob admits that he is not worthy of God's blessings. We need to come to God humbly, knowing that we don't deserve any blessing from Him. Every good thing we have is a gracious gift. Second, in verse 11 Jacob honestly admits his fear. When we talk to God in prayer, we should honestly express our emotions. He knows them anyway, so there's no use in pretending to be courageous when we're feeling scared. And third, in verse 12 he bases his request on God's promise. This is something we ought to do when we pray. We should pray according to the things God has promised to do.

Then Jacob sent a massive amount of gifts to his brother, hoping to appease his anger. And his last effort to save his family was to send them across the Jabok river. Verse 24 says, "And Jacob was left alone." Think for a moment about how Jacob felt at this point. He was scared of what his brother was going to do. He was completely alone. He had prayed to God and was trying to trust in God's promises. And in the darkness of the night, as Jacob wrestled with doubts and fears in his mind, all of a sudden a man began wrestling him. And the wrestling match lasted all night, until the breaking of day.

Read vv. 25-30.

What we see here is power in weakness. This is where Jacob truly came to the end of himself and came to rely on God alone. He did not prevail here because he was stronger. He prevailed because he recognized his weakness and his desperate need for God's blessing. So he held on. He would not let go. He refused to let go until the man blessed him. And then this man, God in the flesh, asked him what his name was. And Jacob had to reveal his identity. He is Jacob, the deceiver, the cheater. And God changed Jacob's name to Israel, meaning, "He strives with God." And Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered."

This is a very mysterious but profound encounter, and I think it is very instructive for us today. Because our only hope in life is to cling to Jesus Christ. That's what Jacob did. I believe this was a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus Christ. He did not reveal His name, but He is God in the flesh. Notice three things that happened to Jacob, and happen to us, when we cling to Jesus Christ.

First, we are afflicted. Jacob's hip was dislocated simply by his opponent touching his hip socket. As we cling to Jesus Christ, He will do whatever He needs to do to show us our own weakness and frailty, to make us rely totally on Him.

Second, we are changed. Jacob, the deceiver, was changed into Israel, the one who strives with God for His blessing. And Christ will change us, too.

Third, we see God for who He is. It was an amazing privilege that Jacob saw God face to face and did not die. And it's a marvelous blessing that we can see God for who He is in the person of Jesus Christ.

In closing, then, and to bring this back to the question I asked at the beginning, I want you to see your desperate need for God. If you are struggling for gain, struggling for power or wealth or comfort or popularity or worldly pleasure, you will never find what you are looking for and you will never be satisfied. You are wasting your life. But if your struggling is a struggle to cling to Jesus Christ, then you will be afflicted, yes. But you will be changed, and you will experience the immense joy of seeing God for who He is.

If you are an unbeliever, you must realize your need for God. You must humbly admit that you are nothing without Him. Many people think they have to be "good enough" to be accepted by God. But ironically, what the Bible teaches is that the only ones who are accepted by God are those who realize they cannot be good enough. As the hymn says, "All the fitness He requireth is to feel your need of Him" (Joseph Hart, "Come, Ye Sinners"). All you need to do to be accepted by God is to feel you need of Him.

The application for believers is that the Christian life is a continual process of seeing our own weaknesses and clinging to God. Our tendency is still to rely on ourselves. To be the self-made man or woman. To be self-reliant, self-sufficient. But we are weak. We are frail. We are crippled. And our only hope is to cling to God and say, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."