

SINNERS & SAINTS

Jacob

Genesis 25-35

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We continue our journey through the Old Testament this morning by exploring the life of Abraham and Sarah's grandson, Jacob, the son of Isaac and Rebekah. Jacob is best known as the father of the 12 sons who became the leaders of Israel's 12 tribes. As we look at Jacob's life, we'll see that, in many ways, he embodied the spirit of our age. Pastor Andy Stanley of Northpoint Community Church in Atlanta preached a series on Jacob's life titled "Jacob Isaacson." The surname Isaacson comes from the Hebrew practice of creating a last name by adding "son" to the name of the child's father. Jacob lived nearly 4,000 years ago, but in using the title "Jacob Isaacson," Andy Stanley highlighted Jacob's relevance for our own age.

So who was this man, Jacob, who we're introduced to in Genesis chapter 25?

¹⁹This is the account of the family line of Abraham's son Isaac. Abraham became the father of Isaac, ²⁰and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah daughter of Bethuel the Aramean from Paddan Aram and sister of Laban the Aramean.²¹ Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was childless. The LORD answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant. ²²The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, "Why is this happening to me?" So she went to inquire of the LORD.

²³The LORD said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger." – Genesis 25:19-23

Before we read more of Jacob's story, I want us to pay attention to the last six words of that passage: "the older will serve the younger." That prophetic word at Jacob's birth was proven true throughout his life. Isaac's wife, Rebekah, was barren and unable to conceive children, but Isaac prayed for her, and God answered his prayer by blessing her with twins. Rebekah's pregnancy was difficult, and when she asked God about it, He told her there were

two nations jostling within her, and the younger son would rule over the older one. The Hebrew culture of that day gave the firstborn son many advantages over his younger siblings. The firstborn son's birthright included at least twice as much inheritance as any of his brothers, and he was given the blessing of the father prior to the father's death. These benefits were given to the oldest son, because he was the one given the responsibility to carry on the family line. Being the firstborn son was a big deal, because of all the privileges that came with it. Now let's read verses 24-34 of Genesis chapter 25 to see how Jacob's dominance over his brother began to play out:

²⁴ When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb.
²⁵ The first to come out was red, and his whole body was like a hairy garment; so they named him Esau. ²⁶ After this, his brother came out, with his hand grasping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when Rebekah gave birth to them.

Verse 26 tells us, "His brother came out, with his hand grasping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob." Is anyone here this morning named Jacob? If that's your name, please don't be ashamed of it. Jacob is a good, solid name. The name literally means, "he grasps the heel." We have a saying that I don't hear used much anymore, which expresses the same concept: "Are you pulling my leg?" That odd statement means, "Are you tricking or deceiving me?" Isaac and Rebekah's youngest son was given the name Jacob, because he came out of the womb holding onto his brother's heel. I'll pick up reading at verse 27, and we'll see how deception was a tool Jacob used throughout his life.

²⁷ The boys grew up, and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was content to stay at home among the tents. ²⁸ Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

²⁹ Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished. ³⁰ He said to Jacob, "Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I'm famished!" (That is why he was also called Edom.)

³¹ Jacob replied, "First sell me your birthright."

³² “Look, I am about to die,” Esau said. “What good is the birthright to me?”

³³ But Jacob said, “Swear to me first.” So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob.

³⁴ Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, and then got up and left.

So Esau despised his birthright. – Genesis 25:24-34

As the oldest son, Esau was destined to receive many benefits, but early on in their relationship, Jacob began to scheme about how he could receive the blessing (usually given to the oldest child) for himself. And Jacob’s trickery wasn’t limited to his brother. The incident I just read about Jacob stealing his brother’s birthright is just one example among many of the chicanery we see throughout Jacob’s life. That’s why I say Jacob embodied the spirit of our age. Jacob was a “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” kind of guy. He should have had a bumper sticker on his donkey’s rump with the Nike slogan, “Just do it!” Jacob’s life motto could have been a saying you may be familiar with from the sports world, “If you ain’t cheatin’, you ain’t tryin’.”

Before we look more closely at Jacob’s pattern of taking things into his own hands to ensure he got what he thought he deserved, I want us to reflect on our series title, “Sinners & Saints.” The backdrop for this series is that the people God used in the Bible to accomplish his purposes weren’t super saints. They were people with warts, just like you and me. I hope we all can grab hold of the truth that if God used people like that in the Bible, there’s hope for us, too. God can and will use us despite our shortcomings, flaws, and sins. Many of the Bible characters we’re looking at this summer were undeniably saints who had some warts, but Jacob is presented to us as a sinner on whom God bestowed his grace and used for his purposes in spite of his flaws. Jacob’s life reinforces the Tyler Staton quote I’ve highlighted each week in this series. To paraphrase, the Bible doesn’t call people saints because they were good; it calls people saints who experienced the goodness of God.

To give you an idea why Jacob has the reputation of a scoundrel, I’ll share some other examples of this man’s scheming and conniving. You can read about Jacob in detail in Genesis

chapters 25–35—and I encourage you to do so, especially if you’re not very familiar with his story—but I’ll give a quick overview.

Sometime after Jacob and Esau turned 40 years of age, their father’s health began to decline, and Isaac called Esau to him. He asked Esau to hunt some wild game and prepare it for him. After eating the meal Esau prepared for him, Isaac would then pray his father blessing over his eldest son. Isaac’s wife, Rebekah, who we’re told earlier favored Jacob over Esau, overheard her husband, and she called Jacob to her and conceived a plan in which Jacob would convince his aging father that he was Esau and would receive the fatherly blessing reserved for the firstborn. It was an elaborate scheme in which Jacob dressed in his brother’s clothes and put animal fur all over his arms and neck because his brother was a hairy man. When Jacob went to his father posing as Esau, Isaac had his doubts and questioned whether it was actually Esau, but Jacob assured him he was Esau. Because his father was blind, the scheme worked.

When Esau brought his father the game he had shot and prepared a short time later and learned that his brother had already received his dad’s blessing, he was incensed and ready to kill Jacob. For his safety, Jacob fled far away to his Uncle Laban’s estate.

One of the things that becomes evident as we read Abraham, Isaac, Rebekah and Jacob’s stories is that deceit was a family trait. Abraham, Isaac, Rebekah and Jacob were all prone to use deception to get what they wanted. And this penchant for deception was alive and well in Jacob’s Uncle Laban too. Through trickery, Laban gave his oldest daughter, Leah, to Jacob as his wife when Jacob thought he was marrying her younger sister, Rachel. Then when Jacob discovered that he married Leah instead of Rachel, good ol’ Uncle Laban arranged for him to work an additional seven years—a total of 14 years—for his daughter, Rachel.

I understand this gets kind of complicated—that’s why you really need to read the story for yourself—but toward the end of Jacob’s 14 years of service to his uncle, Laban and Jacob agreed on a deal in which all of the spotted and speckled livestock in Laban’s massive flock would go to Jacob, which brings us to another incident of trickery. When it was determined Jacob would get all of the spotted and speckled livestock, Jacob resorted to witchcraft to try and increase his flocks. He peeled the bark of branches from a variety of trees and placed in front of the watering troughs. For some reason, it was believed that if the livestock mated in front of the

streaked branches, they would bear streaked or spotted offspring... and it apparently worked. Jacob's flocks and herds multiplied rapidly.

Eventually Jacob and his wives, children, servants and flocks left Laban, and as he was traveling, he received word that his brother Esau was approaching. Jacob hadn't seen Esau for at least 14 years, since he had tricked him out of their father's blessing, and at that time, Esau was intending to kill Jacob for his deceit. So, it's not surprising that Jacob feared for his life. He came up with a plan that was designed to appease his brother's wrath and protect his own life. He divided his flocks and herds into groups under the supervision of a servant. He told the leader of each division to meet Esau, and when Esau asked who they were to say, "These belong to Jacob, and he's giving them to you as a gift." In this way, Jacob tried to pacify Esau by giving him many gifts in the hope that he would preserve his life.

After Esau met Jacob, hugged him and told him that he had forgiven him and had enough of his own wealth so he didn't need Jacob's gifts, Jacob lied to his brother once again. Esau wanted them to meet up and spend more time together. Jacob told him he couldn't do that because many of his children were young and many of his livestock were nursing. He said he'd travel more slowly and then would meet up with his brother at Seir. Instead, Jacob went in a different direction. He still wasn't convinced Esau wasn't going to harm him, so he deceived his brother once again.

Despite God's prophecy that Jacob would be blessed and that he would rule over his brother, Jacob spent his life working to ensure he would be successful and come out on top. At various points along the way, God revealed to him that it was God's blessing that made Jacob successful, not his own working and scheming. Each time God revealed that, Jacob acknowledged it was true, but then he'd quickly go back to working hard to make sure he succeeded.

I've given significant background surrounding Jacob's life and his determination to be successful by whatever means he thought necessary. I want us to look now at the signature moment in Jacob's life: his wrestling match with God. This encounter with God took place the night before Jacob would meet up with his brother, Esau. Jacob was all alone, because he'd sent

his wives, children, servants, and flocks and herds ahead of him in groups to meet Esau while he stayed behind, protected by a stream. I'll read the account from Genesis 32:22–32.

²² That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³ After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. ²⁴ So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. ²⁵ When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. ²⁶ Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."

But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

²⁷ The man asked him, "What is your name?"

"Jacob," he answered.

²⁸ Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."

²⁹ Jacob said, "Please tell me your name."

But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.

³⁰ So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

³¹ The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip. ³² Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip, because the socket of Jacob's hip was touched near the tendon. – Genesis 32:22-32

As Jacob slept—no doubt restlessly, because he was filled with fear and uncertainty over the impending reunion with his brother, Esau—he encountered a divine being. The text calls him a man and doesn't indicate whether it was an angel or some other divine being or God—some even speculate that this was Jesus Himself. Whoever it was, Jacob understood that the being was divine and represented God. Jacob wrestled with this man until daybreak, demanding a blessing and the assurance that he would be protected from Esau. The man told Jacob to let him go, but Jacob refused until he received a blessing.

Before He would give Jacob a blessing, the man asked, “What is your name?” And Jacob gave him his name. This seemingly simple question was packed with meaning. Before God would bestow a blessing on Jacob, He wanted him to honestly acknowledge who he was. In answering “Jacob,” Jacob acknowledged he was a schemer and a deceiver, one who did whatever it took to try and ensure his own success. This was a formative moment for Jacob, and after he honestly acknowledged who he was, he was positioned to receive God’s blessing. In response to Jacob sharing his identity, God said, “Your name will no longer be Jacob but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.” Finally, in the middle of great distress and fear when there was no one left to manipulate or deceive, Jacob wrestled with God, and God blessed him. Jacob, or Israel, as he is now known, went on to become the patriarch of Israel—the father of the 12 sons who led the 12 tribes of Israel.

Having heard a summary of Jacob’s life story, hopefully you understand my opening comment that Jacob embodied the spirit of our age. I don’t think we have to work too hard to draw parallels to our lives.

At its core, the question Jacob’s life compels us to ask is this: **What is my name and how does my identity lead me to rely on myself rather than on God?** Jacob’s natural bent was to work hard, scheme and deceive, and to manipulate people and circumstances to try and ensure his own success. That tendency led him to rely on himself rather than turning to God and relying on Him. **What do I rely on to do what I can to be successful?** Money, hard work, being a good person who does all the things good people are supposed to do, brains, strength, good looks, being a detail person who leaves no stone unturned or no loose ends, are a few of the things people use in their attempt to remove or at least minimize the uncertainties of life. As you consider your life, do you rely on any of those or other things in place of God as you seek to find meaning and purpose in life and strive to be successful? Although God favored Jacob and promised him he would be blessed, Jacob spent much of his life striving for success. Are you able to place your trust in God, believing He loves you and is looking out for you? Are you secure and at peace knowing your identity rests in being God’s son or daughter, and not in what you accomplish or achieve?

I'm going to read a prayer that, if you identify with it, I encourage you to pray in your heart with me as I read it aloud:

Heavenly Father, my name is _____. Just as Jacob admitted his penchant for trying to make his own way, rather than wrestling in prayer with you, I acknowledge before you my tendency to rely on myself rather than on you. Too often I lean on _____, rather than turning to you as my source of strength, wisdom, direction and security. I confess that to you today and ask, Jesus, that you would truly be the Lord of my life. May I, like Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel, submit myself to you and trust you to work out your purposes in my life, rather than acting like I'm the one who controls my destiny. I claim the words of Proverbs 3:5–6 for my life: "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight."
Amen!