

Jacob: The Conquest of a Wheeler-Dealer

From the sermon series: No Stained Glass Saints

Text: Genesis 32: 24, 28

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him... Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel... Genesis 32: 24, 28

The biblical story is not about what extraordinary people can do to effect the purposes of God, but rather, what God can do through very ordinary people in the establishing of His Kingdom. And in the Church, I am sure, the sin of preachers and Sunday School teachers is to get the focus all wrong, to lift up biblical characters and to make of them heroes and heroines, to put them in stained glass, to remove them far from ordinary folk like us, to make them exemplary models to strive after and to emulate, thereby robbing us of the common humanity that we share with the people that God has used through the centuries in the unveiling of the biblical drama.

The Bible is not about saints in stained glass. It's about ordinary people, just like you and me, people with clay feet exposed, people who could be described as mixed bags, people with strengths and weaknesses, with good points and bad points, people who perform nobly on occasion and fail miserably the next moment - unsteady people. The story is not about faithful people who were able to effect the purposes of God, but a faithful God Who is able to use unsteady people for the realization of His Kingdom purposes.

So, for a few weeks we're going to look at some of these biblical characters who have been put in stained glass and removed far from us, not really to shatter their image, but simply to be honest with the biblical narratives before preachers cleaned them up. Biblical characters have been set before us for so long as those exemplary persons whom we ought to emulate, and we in our own experience have felt so far removed from the faith of Abraham, the devotion of Peter and Paul, the loving commitment of a David, that we've written ourselves off as ordinary people as though there was a day when spiritual giants walked the earth,

but now is the time for ordinary peasants to make their way as best they can, as though there was a day when God did spectacular things, when He was really here, using great spirits, noble people for the effecting of His purpose. And now it's just business as usual with ordinary folk like you and me to whom God really wouldn't give a second look, or be able to do some great thing.

This series of messages is not intended to debunk the saints, but to cause us to see that the biblical story is not really about extraordinary individuals far removed from us through whom God works, but rather about ordinary people through whom an extraordinary God can effect great things, because the Bible is not our story, but *His story*. And the Bible is a story, not about the great achievements of a few saints, but the marvelous grace of a God Who will never give up, in spite of the material with which He has to work. The likes of Abraham and Jacob and David and Peter and Paul and Mary and, well, John and Scott and Susan and Nancy, and all the rest here this morning – the likes of us – that's what the Bible story is made of, and I want us to get that focus right. For when we get that focus wrong, we make it a human drama. Then we sense our own lack and our own falling short, and we have pressure, that sense of oughtness, a legalism and moralism that distort the biblical drama.

The wrong focus breeds pride, because if I am successful, I can congratulate myself for having been so faithful, so steady, so committed, so devoted, having such great faith. And if I fail, I despair of God's mercy, because then I write myself off thinking, if only I had more faith, if only I could pray with greater devotion, if only I could serve with deeper commitment, if only I were a better person, then maybe God would heed my prayer, then maybe He would heal my ill, then maybe He would rein in my child, if only I were better, if only I were like so and so. On the one hand, there's pride: "Look what I have accomplished. Look how God has blessed me." On the other hand there is despair: "Who am I? What good am I? Obviously, God wouldn't do anything with the likes of me. Obviously, my prayers go nowhere. Obviously, I might as well give up on myself, hope to get in by the skin of my teeth, because I'm just an ordinary peasant, full of ambiguity, light and darkness, good and evil."

Both the pride and the despair are out of place, because the point is not what we can accomplish in the Kingdom of God for the purposes of God. The biblical story is about what God does through us, around us, in spite of us – all to His glory and according to His purposes of Grace, which He established before the foundations of the world. The Bible is God's Story, and we and Abraham and Jacob and David and Peter and Paul and Mary and Rahab and Ruth are just all the minor characters caught up in this great drama that is God's story. So, let's look at one of these biblical characters who can teach us a lesson or two, to encourage us in our own pilgrimage of faith - Jacob.

Jacob is the story of God's conquest of a wheeler-dealer. I might have entitled it, "The Con Artist of the Covenant." Jacob is about as unsavory as the mess of

pottage he cooked up was savory. Jacob is the kind of guy you hope never moves next door. He's the kind of guy you hope never comes home dating your daughter. He's the kind of guy who puts you on your guard, turns you off and raises suspicions that he can never be trusted. Jacob is one of the Patriarchs! We pray to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel, who gave his name to that Old Testament people. Jacob – what a person on whom to found a nation that was supposed to be the special instrument in the hand of God for the effecting of His purposes. Think about it for a moment. Think about how ridiculous it is - Jacob. Who would have chosen Jacob? Who would have trusted Jacob with anything? Who would even have wanted to be identified with one like Jacob? If I were God, I could have made a better choice than that. Give me somebody who is trustworthy, somebody who is stable, someone who has unquestioned integrity and tested authenticity. If I'm going to identify my cause with somebody, I want that person to be of sterling character - like Peter! Or John. Certainly not Jacob. I don't really want him on my team. For one thing, he'll be after my job! And for another thing, he'll probably be draining off your capital gains. No, Lord, You could do a lot better than Jacob.

What are You doing with Jacob, when there's Esau! Now, who wouldn't like Esau? They are twins, and already in the beginning there is the clue that this is not an ordinary story. Rebecca had a very difficult pregnancy. That's how rotten Jacob is. He began kicking before he was born. They called him Jacob, which meant "heel," which is maybe because, so the story goes, he reached out and got Esau's heel, as Esau was being born ahead of him. But it's also possible in that translation that he was named heel because he was a kicker and a screamer. And the word has to do with heel; maybe we associate heel with deceiver, supplanter, because this guy was a con-artist, a conniver, a manipulator, a liar and a cheat.

Rebecca said, "I don't know if I'm going to make nine months or not. I'm going to die!" And there was an announcement, a prophecy.

Two nations in your womb, two peoples, going their own ways from birth! One shall be stronger than the other; the older shall be servant to the younger.

Where did it come from? Who heard it? There was something strange about those two children already in the womb, and what is the biblical story pointing to? Isn't it pointing to the fact that when it comes to the purposes of God, things are not left to chance or to accident, but that in and through the things that happen in the natural course of events there is already a word spoken by God that reflects an eternal purpose of God that God is about something in this world and history.

I don't know why Jacob was chosen. Frankly, I'd rather have Esau in my tent. But just as in the case of Isaac, the child of promise who came to Abraham and to Sarah who was barren, by the promise of God so here it is repeated. Rebecca was barren. Why? Because, just in case the point was missed in the previous generation, God will establish it again in the third generation that there is to be

an heir, the chosen one who will carry on this purpose of God spoken to Abraham. It will not be through fleshly desire or Isaac and Rebecca, but because God said, "I will open the womb. I will give a child of promise." That is pretty heavy, but that is what this story is telling us.

Let's follow Jacob through for a moment. Next scene, Momma's boy close to the tent, is cooking up a bowl of soup. Esau comes in from the field, hungry. The firstborn, the rightful heir to the rights of the firstborn, says, "Give me a bowl of soup." Jacob says, "You like the soup? Smells good, eh? You want a bowl of soul, Esau? Give me your birthright." Birthright. Spiritual blessing. Intangible goods. Something for the future. Esau says, "Man, if I don't get that bowl of soup, I won't have a future. Give me a bowl of soup and you can have the birthright."

Well, not too commendatory, Esau, but I can identify with that. How many of us haven't preferred a present, tangible gift rather than a future spiritual blessing?

And then, having moved into position at that point, having taken advantage of a brother in his vulnerability, we get that most dastardly of all scenes where he tricks his old, blind father and robs Esau of the blessing. Now, if this is a good, moralistic sermon – I mean a good, moralistic story like most sermons and most Sunday School lessons – then we would say, "Jacob did this and now Esau's angry and Rebecca's worried for Jacob's life, and so she is going to send him away and now he's going to get his. Be sure your sins will find you out. The way of the transgressor is hard." Right?

Wrong! Jacob goes off into the wilderness, fleeing for his life. He lies down in the wilderness alone, guilty, afraid, and has a nightmare. Right?

Wrong! He falls asleep like a baby and sees a ladder with angels going up and down and Almighty God saying, "You're my boy. I love you, and I'm going to be with you and I'm going to protect you and I'm going to bring you home."

Just exactly what we said, isn't it? Be sure your sins will find you out. The way of the transgressor is hard. This liar, cheat and deceiver goes off in the wilderness with a whole burden of guilt, enough to spread over the whole world, and what happens? He gets a marvelous revelation of a gracious God.

Well, the Bible story could make it easier for us, couldn't it? I could say at this point, "Go thou and do likewise," but that wouldn't exactly be the point, would it? But, listen to this point. It's not a story about human behavior and human conduct. The Bible's not a story about, "Be good and you will be blessed, and be bad and you will suffer." The story of the Bible is not about the little moralisms and legalisms that either make us proud of our righteousness or scared of our unrighteousness. The story is about God Who does something in the world through us, around us, in spite of us, according to His own purpose and His own good pleasure and His own sovereign Grace.

Jacob is no stained glass saint. He's a miserable and abominable cheat and deceiver, the last person on earth who ought to see a revelation like that, which doesn't point to the fickleness of God, but to the grace of God Who says, "I chose you and I've got ahold of you and I'm going to stick with you and I'll protect you and I will effect everything I have said that I will effect through you because I am God."

I like that kind of God, really. He blows my mind. He shatters all of our little pedestrian categories. He's a God Who is about something in this world that is greater than any one of us and transcends all of our strengths and all of our weaknesses, Who uses us in spite of ourselves, in our highs and in our lows, Who never gives us reason to be proud. "Let him that boasteth, boast in the Lord," said Paul. After he had said that God had called the things that are despised, the things that are not, in order to effect His purposes, he concluded, "Let him that boasts, boast of the Lord." No room for human pride, and no room for human despair, for there is no one, no one so wicked and raunchy, no one so mean-spirited but what he can be the instrument of the Eternal God for the effecting of His purposes for the glory of His name.

Now, that reduces us to where we ought to be reduced - to a position of humility before the Sovereign God Who was doing something in this world. Blessed be His name, and He'll do it with the likes of us - you and me, mixed bags that we are, filled with ambiguity, bubbling with enthusiasm, motivated by high ideals, falling flat on our faces, fickle and feeble, dedicated one moment, dry as a bone the next, unsteady, unfaithful, flawed and fallible. Blessed be His name, Who takes clay like this and does His thing!

Well, Jacob went to Laban, got into real conflict there with his father-in-law. He met his match. They really drained all their mutual energy trying to outfox one another. And Laban was pretty good at it, but God was with Jacob, and when they finally parted, Jacob took Laban's daughters, his grandchildren, and his flocks and fled, Laban coming after him. God said to Laban, "Don't you touch him." And when they finally did part, after Laban had caught up with him, they parted with what I once thought was a nice benediction.

Did any of you ever go to Junior Christian Endeavor? That was a youth organization a hundred years ago when I was young. We closed the meetings every week with a Mizpah Benediction. "The Lord watch between me and thee, while we are absent one from another." I thought that was so marvelous. Isn't that marvelous? We could all say it, couldn't we? Every Sunday. "The Lord watch between me and thee, while we are absent, one from another." I always had a warm, cozy feeling about that benediction, but you know what it really meant? That was what Laban proposed to Jacob. He said, "The Lord watch between me and thee while we are absent one from the other because you've ripped me off time and time again, and I don't want you to come near me again!" That's Jacob.

Finally, he comes to the great crisis in his life. He struggles all night alone the day before he's going to meet Esau and something good happened there. If you go home and read that story, you will find a real prayer of a man who was afraid and vulnerable. I think God was eventually getting through to Jacob. I think he was finally at a point where he knew that he couldn't always connive his way through all of his life, and he offered a beautiful prayer and made all the preparations he could, and then, before he met Esau, he was encountered by a man who wrestled with him all the night. It's a very mysterious story. We must assume that it was a wrestling with God, not that God is a man or that God is a physical being, but however that story is to be conceived, it is obviously the point at which Jacob came to terms with the Sovereign God Who wrestled with him and allowed him to hold on to Him all night long, but when push came to shove, with a touch, crippled him. And old Jacob went off into the rising sun that morning limping, and I think that God finally conquered that wheeler-dealer. Although, even after he meets Esau and Esau beautifully forgives him, embraces him, kisses him, invites him to come along, I'm still not sure Jacob was playing it straight. He said, "Ah, no, Esau, look, I've got a lot of animals that can only move along slowly, and I've got these little children and you go ahead, Esau. Thanks a lot, but go ahead." (*"Get out of here, Esau. Leave me alone!"*) So, I'm not sure, even at the end...

But you see, wouldn't it be nice if I could say, "Ah, now finally God had His way with Jacob and here's Jacob, the saint. Put him back into stained glass." And then I've got to say to you, "It's not that nice."

God conquered him. God did His thing with him. Jacob trusted Him. Jacob loved Him. And Jacob never did amount to much to his dying day. He's no hero, friends, just a person God used.

I wonder why God sometimes - seems like all the time - chooses the weak and despised things of this world, the things that are not, to confound the things that are. Maybe it is so that finally we will learn the lesson that all is of Grace, all is of God, all is gift. And all we can do is, in the ambiguity of our own muddy way, cast ourselves on His mercy and wait on the Lord.

Let us pray.

Father, we might ordinarily, in ordinary days and in ordinary church services, and in ordinary messages, conclude by saying, "What a man was Jacob! Help us to be like him." But today we've seen another face of Jacob who saw Your face, and so we can only say, "Lord, we *are* like him. We're schemers and connivers and manipulators and we're cheats. We fudge the truth; we hedge the facts. We take things into our own hands, we try to manage and control, and we try to put the best face on everything that we do and the persons that we are, and underneath, we're Jacob all the way." And so, we don't pray, "Make us like him." We acknowledge that we are. We pray, "Reveal Yourself to us as You did to him. Say to us, 'I will be with you. I will protect you. I will bring you home.'" And then,

Father, from lisping lips and divided lives, we will praise you with all we have.
Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.