



3 JULY AD 2011
Genesis 28:10 -22

If you haven't heard I've decided to do something this summer that I've always wanted to try, preaching on some of the great stories in the Old Testament. Of course there is more than enough material, if I wanted to, I could almost preach on Jacob-Israel for the whole summer. Today Jacob's dream at Beth-el will be our starting point.

Our Jacob is not yet one of Israel's three great patriarchs. He is a relatively young man, and he is running for his life. Jacob is "the supplanter;" my *LUTHERAN STUDY BIBLE* says his name can be taken to mean "he cheats." He is running because his twin brother has threatened to kill him. In their youth Jacob made his famished brother swear over his *birthright* for a pot of lentil stew. We don't quite appreciate the significance of a birthright. However; to the first born *it* is right to rule the family, birthright means power. Esau did wrong; it is said "he despised his birthright," virtually giving it away for a meal.

Recapping the situation

Lately the boys' father, Isaac, hasn't been feeling well. His days are numbered and he senses it is time to bless his sons—especially the eldest Esau. But first he needs a good meal, and he requires Esau—skilled hunter—to make a stew of wild game. Mama favors the younger twin and she conspires with Jacob and sends him disguised in Esau's clothing to his father, with a good meal. The ruse worked, by the time Esau gets back with the prepared stew, Jacob is out the back door taking with him words of blessing from Isaac. The words of blessing, like the Word of God itself, cannot be taken back. Jacob will rule over Esau.

To lessen tensions at home, and to keep the boys apart, mom convinces Isaac that Jacob needs to return to the old country. He's going to be patriarch someday and he must have a proper wife—not like those wretched Hittite women Esau married. When we meet Jacob today, he is off on his adventure. He stops for the night and dreams a dream of heaven, of angels and God. The Almighty promises him greatness, in keeping with the birthright and the blessing, both of which are his. These are nothing less than the promises God gave Abraham; promises of land, a great family, and that the families of the whole earth will be blessed through them.

Jacob is overwhelmed. He wakes up wondering, was it all true? Or, was it merely a foolish dream? Jacob vows that night, if God will bring him home in safety and well fed, then the LORD will be his God, and Jacob will honor him with the tithe of all his possessions. So far our story.

The name speaks volumes, does it not? Jacob, “the Supplanter,” the one who cheats. The midwives say he was born grasping his older brother’s heel, as if trying to prevent his brother from being the first one out! Their mother, Rebekah, had a very difficult pregnancy (25:22 ff), she knew that these boys were going to be a handful.

You kind of feel sorry for Esau, twice he was outwitted by his brother. Jacob was shrewd, a mama’s boy. Esau was the outdoorsman, the hunter, a dumb jock who really didn’t have a clue. So, if you’re God, which do you pick to be the founding father of a nation? And not just a nation, but *the Nation*—the most favored people of God, the elect. But don’t weep, as it turns out, God will bless Esau too; the Edomites count Esau as their patriarch.

***Good news at the bottom
of the barrel***

So what do we take from this? St. Paul tells us, “*God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise... God chose what is low and despised in the world...*” to work his will. (1 Cor 1:27) The good news is that contrary to what so many people think, God does not call or work through “goodie-two-shoes” kind of people. The record shows that (with some consistency) God chooses his saints from the bottom of the barrel and, *by the miracle of divine grace*, remakes these people into heroes. (1 Cor 15:7-11; 2 Cor 5:17; and 1 Tim 1:12-15)

- God doesn’t give up on Adam and Eve
- Cain too is treated relatively well, considering he murdered his brother.
- Abraham, we know his flaws
- Moses and David’s are legendary

In each case God empathizes with their situation; he takes their human flaws into account and weaves them into his plan of salvation for the world. Even a harlot of Jericho, a non-Jew is saved and woven into Israel’s fabric; she shows up in Jesus’ genealogy! (Matthew 1:5)

One might reasonably conclude that, if God was nation-building, he needed a certain kind of man to get the work done. Jacob is colorful and memorable, and while he may not have been our pick, Jacob was God’s man. Today *the Cheater’s* future is uncertain, but by God’s grace he will be changed, born anew. One day Jacob will become a hero, a patriarch and he will give his name to the people of God.

For you

You and I need to see that there is no one beyond the reach of God’s grace. There is no one whom God considers “not worth the effort.” Paul is correct, “*Christ died for all...*” even the most vile sinner can have a conversion, a change of heart. God can work through

you.

One of my favorite scriptures reminds me, *“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things...”* (Heb 1:1-2) In many ways God speaks to us, that means that he speaks to us through a rascal like Jacob, the Cheater. Do you think that our Lord Jesus, the Son of God, can be heir to a title like that? The Cheater!

I think so. In taking on human flesh and blood, Jesus allowed the devil to wreck havoc on his life. As an infant his parents had to flee with their son in arms into Egypt. His time in the wilderness shows us that Jesus could be tempted like you and me, yet he did not yield. In appearance he seemed like anyone else. But looks are deceiving. Isaiah said of him, *“he had no form or majesty that we should have noticed him...”* (Isaiah 53:2)

An innocent was killed on that cross. Roman government acting through Pilate publicly declared him innocent, not worthy of dying. Yet they put him to death, a unique substitute, a Lamb of great price, One who will rise again and stand forever as the great Ransom, the Redeemer. In a very real sense Jesus cheated the Devil, bested him, and won for his Father a new people of God, a holy nation, a royal priesthood, a people to declare the wonderful things God does, calling them out of darkness into light. (1 Pe 2:9)

Listen! God is calling you, calling you to faith and new life. Could he call someone better, more interesting, better looking, wealthier... maybe. Is he scraping the bottom of the barrel in your case? I can't judge that. But even if he is, expect him to do wonderful things. To Jesus be the glory always!

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