

February 15-19, 2021 Edition

The "BIG Story" Of The Bible #37

Finding Jesus In The Old Testament

Jacob & The Power Of A Blessing

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well yuo knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday Reflection: This week we are continuing to look at the story of God's plan to make good on His promise that He made to the serpent way back in Genesis chapter 3. He told the serpent that He would send a descendant of the woman's and even though the serpent would hurt Him when it struck His heel He would crush the head of the serpent in the process.

With Abraham God chose a man to birth a nation through whom He would make good on His promise. I guess if we were going to summarize the life of Abraham we'd say that everything in his story revolved around the concept of promise. This week we will study the life of Abraham's grandson- Jacob. I guess if I was going to summarize Jacob's life I'd say his story is all about the power of blessing. But what exactly is "blessing" in God's eyes? When we use the word today it's usually about getting something good (money, job, relationships, etc.). If you spend much time on Facebook you've seen Christians say how "blessed" they are when telling about something good that happened to them. And while good things are part of what blessing is in the Bible, it's not the whole story.

No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him. 1 Corinthians 2:9 (NLT)

Blessing is when God promises to give you His favor, His protection and His provision. But as God does with every other concept on the planet- He defines what favor, protection and provision looks like and it doesn't always feel good to the bless-ee. In fact, sometimes it can be downright painful living the blessed life. Don't believe me? Just look at the lives of the people we're learning about as we walk through the story of the Old Testament. None of these people had pain free lives. In fact there was tragedy and pain associated with just about every single one of them who were living the "blessed" life. What's up with that?

Well, first of all there's the problem of living in a world that has been infected by sin. Because of that there is pain, sickness, brokenness, people hurting each other and people hurting themselves. Consequently there is a lot of pain that comes into our lives that God can't completely shield us from. But there's also the things that God allows into our lives that will bring about the kind of pressure that gives us the opportunity to grow stronger. Hawk Nelson has a song called Diamonds where the main idea is that coal becomes diamonds not through an easy process but through intense pressure. The chorus says over and over that "He's making diamonds out of dust- He's making diamonds out of us."

But does God bring this pressure into our lives or just allow it to happen. Ahhh, the age old question and the answer is probably yes and no. Another question about God that the answer is always going to stay just out of reach. Sometimes the Bible seems to make it clear that He allows pain (and indeed can't really shield us from it completely even if He wanted to) and sometimes it seems like He brings this pressure into our lives Himself in the form of "discipline".

The story of Jacob is a troubling one for me in some respects and we'll get to that on Friday but one thing is sure- Jacob goes through some pretty painful, pressure filled situations in his life. Many of which he brings on himself with foolish decisions. And God doesn't shield him from the consequences of those actions. Why not? Maybe because it is through the pain and pressure of those consequences (along with the ordinary pain and trouble that living in this broken world sends to our doors in wave after wave) that the coal is transformed into a diamond. What do you think of the pain that comes into your life? What do you think of God when you're going

through that pain and pressure. Have you ever thought about what that pain and pressure just might be doing to you without you even recognizing it?

Tuesday Reflection: What is in a name? Is there power in names or are they just ways of identifying oneself and getting each other's attention? In 21st century America names don't really mean much. Every so often something will pop up on Facebook that offers to tell you the meaning of your name. I remember one a couple of years ago that claimed to be able to tell me the meaning of mine and my friends names but as tons of my friends shared the meaning of their names it soon became painfully obvious the site only had 3 different possibilities that you could be given. Most of my friends were either a "beautiful queen" or a "courageous warrior. I decided to have a little fun and took a screenshot of the picture that the site shared to Facebook walls with the breakdown of each name and edit the picture with my own name and my own definition. I searched for the perfect font to make it look real and then made the meaning of my name say, "Ed-ward = Sketchy-character.

I don't know why that made me so happy, but it did. People had already noticed the site only had a few possibilities for names and "Sketchy-character" was not one of them so my name meaning had a lot of people wondering what had happened. Edward doesn't really mean Sketchy-character. It really means prosperous protector but I didn't know that until just now when I googled it. I never really gave much thought to my name other than the fact that the shortened version of it (Ed) was so easy to write in school. But what about Jacob? What about his name? In the ancient world there were idioms that were very well known. You may not know what an idiom is but you use them all the time. "Get off my back" is an idiom. When you say it to someone nobody assumes that there is actually another human being on your back- you're using an idiom that just about every American would understand because it's a part of our social consciousness. Same thing with "you're pulling my leg". Nobody thinks there's another human actually tugging on your leg- we all know when we hear it that there's someone joking around.

In the ancient world jacob-ing was an idiom. It meant "you're grabbing my heel". When Rebekah gave birth to Esau and Jacob they decided to name the younger son "Jacob" because when the older boy (Esau who was covered in red hair) was born the younger boy was holding onto his heel as he came out of his mom's body.

And when the time came to give birth, Rebekah discovered that she did indeed have twins! The first one was very red at birth and covered with thick hair like a fur coat. So they named him Esau. Then the other twin was born with his hand grasping Esau's heel. So they named him Jacob. Genesis 25:24-26 (NLT)

Let's call him, "Jacob"! Did that name become a self fulfilling prophecy for the boy or did he never give the meaning of jacob much thought? We don't know but we know this- that boy would spend much of the first half of his life living up to that name.

What did the idiom, "you're grabbing my heel" mean in the ancient world. Well, it was sort of like "you're pulling my leg" but with a more sinister twist. It basically meant, "you're trying to cheat me." Over and over Jacob would be defined by this identity as he grew into a man. It became his identity. His brother Esau would even say about him:

"No wonder his name is Jacob, for now he has cheated me twice. First he took my rights as the firstborn, and now he has stolen my blessing. Genesis 27:36 (NLT)

We will spend the rest of the week watching as Jacob lives up to the meaning of his name and how God- through the concept of "blessing"- tries to move him past that meaning to a whole new way of looking at himself. But for today why not spend some time thinking about the identity you are living up to in your own life. The reason I chose "Sketchy-character" as the joke name for that Facebook spoof was twofold- first because it was funny but secondly because it's sort of the default setting I lived in for much of my early life. It is still, to this very day, the first thought I usually have when deciding what action to take. Have you ever seen the Seinfeld where George decides his natural inclinations are always wrong and so he proposes to always do the opposite of the first idea that pops into his head? I have learned to live my life that way.

Every time I get an idea of what I should do in any situation I (on my better days) push the pause button and ask myself if that's really a smart idea. What I've seen over the last 30 years is that my initial ideas are very often the opposite of what I should do. My initial ideas would very often lead me to living up to the name, "Sketchy-character". So I end up doing the opposite. Right now it's going fairly well but I often wonder what will happen if I have the privilege to get to the age where my impulse control slips. I've watched as several of my relatives getting up there in years started losing their impulse control. It was funny often with them but I have a feeling I might get kicked out of the old folks home if that happens to me ;o)

So how about you? What name are you living out in your life? People will try to saddle you with all kinds of negative identities- loser, liar, good-for-nothing, worthless, dishonest, addict, etc. God on the other hand sees a completely different identity in you- redeemed, powerful, beautiful, dearly-loved-child-of-the-King.

Here's the message of the story of Jacob- you can decide whether to live up to the meaning of the identity you've been saddled with by the world or choose to move into the identity you were created with. And it's never too late to choose God's identity for you. Jacob was middle aged before he really started trying to walk in God's identity for him. So was I. All that to say this- it's not too late but the sooner you get started the farther you will go, the brighter your life will shine, the less damage you'll do to yourself and others and more peace you will experience in this life.

So let me ask you- what's your identity?

Wednesday Reflection: This week we are going to look at three watershed events in the life of Jacob (the heel grabber) and see how they impacted his life and the lives of those who were close to him. And that's the problem, isn't it? My actions don't just impact me- they impact so many others lives as well.

We already know that Rebekah gave birth to twin boys and they were named Esau (which means "hairy") and Jacob (which meant "cheater"). Why did they give them such strange names? Maybe they thought they were being cute? Maybe they didn't give it much thought? I don't know but I do know that there was something they knew about the boys before they were even born. Rebekah felt so much tussling going on in her womb that she went to inquire of God what was going on and she was told:

The sons in your womb will become two nations. From the very beginning, the two nations will be rivals. One nation will be stronger than the other; and your older son will serve your younger son. Genesis 25:23 (NLT)

So before they were even born she knew that God would once again throw social convention and custom on its head by choosing the younger son rather than the older one for the blessing to flow through. Maybe it's possible that's the reason why she chose to name the younger son, Jacob- because she knew he would supplant his older brother as the more powerful and the leader of the family?

We'll never know for sure but this much we can be sure of- God had a plan for Jacob. He told Rebekah of His plan and I'm guessing she told Isaac and both of her sons as they grew up. It had to be a big part of the family legend. How did it make Esau feel? Probably not great. Maybe that's why he sold his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of stew.

There are so many questions surrounding this story but one thing shines through again and again- God has a plan for Jacob. And guess what? He has a plan for you too. How will His plan unfold in your life? Probably much the same way it unfolded in Jacob's life- through the concept of "blessing". But if you've read the entire story of Jacob's life then you know that the process of "blessing" isn't always easy and sometimes it hurts- a lot. Jacob goes through a ton of tough times, many of them consequences of his own choices and poor decisions about how to grab the blessing that God had promised to give him. It led to broken relationships, times of intense want and need, a broken family and a broken life. There are two really important take aways from Jacob's story- first God can and will use even our mistakes to bring us to the blessed life He intends for us to live and secondly that revealing and shaping the life He intends to bless is going to include pain even if we made all the right decisions (and how likely is that in our own lives???).

The apostle Peter uses the analogy of a gold-smith taking a lump of ore that contains gold along with many other impurities and refining it to the point where it can be molded and shaped into something beautiful:

There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you must endure many trials for a little while. These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold- though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. 1 Peter 1:6-7 (NLT)

So let's talk about the process that a gold-smith put a lump of useless gold ore through in order to bring out its beauty and its capacity for being molded into the a thing of great beauty and value. In the ancient world a gold-smith would put the lump of ore into a crucible and then heat it over an intense fire. As the impurities were burned away it looked a bit like a fireworks show with sparks flying as the impurities were burned off. They didn't have modern methods for determining the purity of gold like we do today so the way a gold-smith would determine if the lump of ore was of the proper purity was to put the crucible out of the fire and look down into the pool of molten metal. If the gold-smith could see his reflection on the melted gold then it was pure enough and ready to be shaped and molded. If not then the gold went right back into the fire until it was pure enough.

Peter says God refines your faith in much the same way a gold-smith refines gold. The troubles we go through are like the fire and they burn away the impurities (if we respond to them correctly) to refine our faith. The troubles are intended or used to make us more like Jesus. I wonder if God does the same thing a gold-smith does to see if we're ready to be molded and shaped into something useful and beautiful- pull us out of the refining fire and look for His reflection in us. If He doesn't see it then He knows we require more refining. He will allow this process to continue until the impurities are burned away and He (and everyone else around us) can see the beauty that was hidden.

Now I'm not saying that if you cooperate fully with God's refining process that you won't have any more tough times. Jesus said in John 16:33 that in this world you WILL have troubles. Even Jesus, Who lived a perfect life in complete harmony with God's plan for Him had plenty of trouble and pain in His life. You and I will never fully escape the pain this world can bring to us. But I do believe we can decrease how much trouble we endure by doing our best to cooperate with God's refining process. Because God does have a plan for you- He just can't make it happen the way you are right now. I'll leave you with the tag line from a book by Max Lucado that changed my life when I read it 20 years ago:

God loves you just the way you are right now. But He loves you too much to let you stay the way you are right now. He wants you to be Just Like Jesus.

So welcome to the refining fire.

Thursday Reflection: While it is true that God has a plan for you and me it is also true that we can really mess that plan up and gum up the works but trying to seize the blessing God wants us to have our own way rather than waiting on God's timing. That sentence is an understatement when it comes to Jacob's family. When Jacob & Esau were born it soon became obvious that each parent had their favorite:

Isaac loved Esau because he enjoyed eating the wild game Esau brought home, but Rebekah loved Jacob. Genesis 25:28 (NLT)

There is a world of pain in that one sentence. How messed up can we get (pretty messed up as it turns out- even the child of the promise turned out to be a pretty poor father). The family knew what God's plan was but because of sibling and spousal rivalries that plan ended up causing much more pain than it needed to. And when they were older and Esau came back from the bush starving to death he gladly traded his birthright (his position as first born with all the rights and privileges it granted him) for a bowl of stew.

Then when Isaac was close to death he called his oldest son Esau to him and told him to go hunt and bring him some of that wild game that Isaac loved so much and that then Isaac would give him the blessing. This always confused me. Didn't Isaac know that God intended for the blessing to flow through the younger son? Was Isaac disregarding the wishes of his God? I used to think so but I'm not so sure anymore. I do know that Isaac's wife thought that was what he intended to do (so much for marital harmony, huh?) and so she hatched a scheme with Jacob to fool poor

old blind Isaac into giving Jacob the blessing he intended (as far as Rebekah believed) to give to Esau in direct opposition to God's wishes.

And fool him they did. It is one of the most suspenseful stories you'll ever read. At every turn I am sure Isaac is going to uncover the plot but he doesn't and finally he blesses Jacob with the blessing he intended to give to Esau. Then when Esau returns and Isaac figures out what has happened he tells his older son that there's no blessing left for him. As I said earlier- I used to think this meant Isaac intended to give Esau the blessing meant for Jacob but the more I study this passage the more I don't think so anymore. Because the blessing Jacob steals from Esau isn't the blessing (as far as I can tell) that God intended for Jacob. That blessing is given to Jacob later after all the dust has settled (have you ever wondered what Isaac thought of Jacob and his wife Rebekah pulling this stunt on him? I sure have and I'm bummed the Bible doesn't let us listen on that conversation. Maybe Isaac tells them both that they've robbed Esau of his blessing and that he never intended to not bless Jacob. Isaac just meant to give them both a blessing but Jacob was always going to receive the blessing God intended Jacob to receive). The blessing Isaac gives to Jacob in Genesis chapter 28 is the blessing that God gave Abraham that was to continue God's plan to fulfill His promise to the serpent in Genesis chapter 3:

May he give the blessing of Abraham to you and to your offspring with you, that you may take possession of the land of your sojournings that God gave to Abraham!" Genesis 28:4 (NLT)

Do you see what's going on? I'm thinking Isaac intended all along that this blessing of God's promise to Abraham was going to Jacob and not Esau. When he is tricked into giving Jacob the blessing he intended to give Esau there is no mention of the blessing of Abraham and the inheritance of the land that God promised to Abraham's descendants like there is in the blessing he gives Jacob when he knows it's actually Jacob He's blessing. I don't know... maybe I'm way off but it sure seems that way to me. That's why when Esau pleads for his father to bless him too Isaac tells him he can't. Why can't he? Because the only blessing that's left is actually the one that God intends for Jacob and Isaac can't go against the wishes of his God and give that blessing to Esau.

What a sad story. Not only does Jacob not get what he's after when he tricks his father but he finds out later he would have gotten exactly what he was after if he'd been patient and waited on God's timing and now he's turned his family into a war zone. His brother vows to kill Jacob as soon as his father is dead and so Rebekah sends Jacob to run away and live with her brother far in the north. Jacob leaves with nothing and nobody. In fact, the only person who cares about him and accepts him for who he is he will never see again (his mom would die while he was in exile in the north).

Is it an understatement to say we can really mess God's plans up when we refuse to wait on His timing and process? So what's the lesson for me? What can I learn from this story? Maybe to wait on God's timing and process? It is obvious but if you're like me you wonder how you'll

know when what you think you should do is God's plan and timing and when it's mine (or someone else's plan like Rebekah's idea to fool Isaac).

Here's what I do now- I actually say out loud whatever it is that I'm thinking God wants me to do. I say it out loud and then ask myself if I can see God saying those words to me or anyone else. Think about what would have happened if Jacob had done that:

Jacob (this is Jacob pretending to be listening to God), I want you to dress up like your brother and have your mom help you make some meat that will taste like wild game so you can fool your poor-old-blind father into thinking you are actually Esau so that he will be deceived into giving you the blessing he so desperately wants to give to his oldest son. Don't worry about your mom and dad's relationship. Don't worry about the whole, honor-your-father business. This is too important to worry about integrity and family dynamics. Go grab your father's heel (which if you've been reading prior lessons you know means to cheat someone which is what the name "Jacob" means).

Can you imagine God saying those words? Me neither. I wish I had done this with many of my great ideas over the years that I figured must be part of God's plan because it just makes so much sense to me in the moment. How about you? Ever done something that looking back you realize if you had tried saying your plan out loud imagining God speaking you would have saved yourself a whole lot of grief? Maybe this is a new habit we all need to implement in our lives. It would probably save us (and the people we love) from a whole lot of grief.

Friday Reflection: So today we will finish up looking at the life of Jacob by looking at the pivotal moment in his life- a strange wrestling match with a man/angel/God? If you've never read the story take a minute and read Genesis 32:

This left Jacob all alone in the camp, and a man came and wrestled with him until the dawn began to break. When the man saw that he would not win the match, he touched Jacob's hip and wrenched it out of its socket. Then the man said, "Let me go, for the dawn is breaking!" But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." "What is your name?" the man asked. He replied, "Jacob." "Your name will no longer be Jacob," the man told him. "From now on you will be called Israel, because you have fought with God and with men and have won." "Please tell me your name," Jacob said. "Why do you want to know my name?" the man replied. Then he blessed Jacob there. Jacob named the place Peniel (which means "face of God"), for he said, "I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been spared." The sun was rising as Jacob left Peniel, and he was limping because of the injury to his hip. Genesis 32:24-31 (NLT)

Strange, right? Who did Jacob wrestle with? If it really was God then why couldn't He overpower Jacob and "win" the match. So many questions but so much meaning- especially in the life of this cheater who has done everything wrong while pursuing the blessing that God promised to give him before he was even born. So what's going on here?

Jacob is just now beginning to try doing things God's way. God has told him to leave his uncle's place in the north and go back home to the land that God has promised to give Jacob and his

descendants. So Jacob goes. And Jacob is now praying- before this (as far as we know from the Bible) Jacob never pursues God himself. Every encounter up until now has been about God pursuing Jacob but in Genesis 32:9 you will read one of the most beautiful prayers you'll ever see. Even when Jacob hears that Esau (his brother who has vowed to kill Jacob) is heading toward him with 400 fighting men he refuses to turn back and run. Why? Because he's trying to do what God has asked him to do for the first time. What do you think happens when people finally turn their lives over to God? What do you imagine God does at that point? I always figured that when I finally decided to start doing things God's way life would get easy and I'd never be miserable again. Boy was I wrong. I remember the week after I had stopped abusing drugs and alcohol and quit smoking- my life exploded. I had never struggled with the issues I suddenly was struggling with. I can remember looking up to heaven and asking God, "what is going on? Aren't I doing what You want me to do now? Why is this happening?"

Ever been there? Sometimes the process of God leading us into the blessed life can be painful one. It sure was for Jacob. He is following where God leads. He is showing a courage and an integrity he never showed before and on the night before he would finally meet up with his brother (whom he cheated) and settle things once and for all God comes and wrestles with Jacob. On the night before the day that Jacob considered to be the pivotal day of his life when all he wants is a good night's sleep so he can be ready to deal with whatever the most important day of his life would deliver God keeps him up all night long. Why? What's going on?

I think this is God's way of saying to Jacob, "you think tomorrow with Esau is the most important day of your life? You're wrong- it's tonight. And it's not about your relationship with your brother- it's about your relationship with Me." And so they wrestle. At first it seems obvious that Jacob doesn't realize who he's wrestling. God has limited Himself the same way I used to limit myself when Jonathan was tiny and wanted to box with me. I'd put my right hand behind my back and use my left hand with a giant boxing glove on it and when he was still little I could let him hit me as hard as he could and it wouldn't do much to me. God's doing something similar with Jacob but on a much higher level.

So when did Jacob start to get an inkling of who he was wrestling? Probably when the wrestler "touched" Jacob's hip and dislocated it. The word used in Hebrew literally means he "brushed" Jacob's hip. How could that dislocate a hip? One one guy Jacob probably could think of that could make that happen. What do you think was going through his mind? "THIS IS GOD?!?!?!? Why am I not losing worse than I am? Heck... why am I not dead?!?!?!?"

So what does Jacob do? He holds on even tighter despite the pain and despite the danger. And when the wrestler asks Jacob to let Him go because daylight is coming... what's up with that? It's almost like the wrestler is a vampire and if Jacob doesn't let him go he'll start sparkling uncontrollably (or burst into flames depending on your favorite vampire universe ;o) But lately I've wondered if maybe the wrestler (God) is hinting at something He would tell Moses years later in Exodus chapter 33 when Moses asks to see God's face:

"You may not look directly at my face, for no one may see me and live."

Is God telling Jacob that if the sun comes up and Jacob is able to see His face it will end not only the wrestling match but Jacob's life as well? Maybe. And yet Jacob still won't let go. He has finally gotten to the point where he understands the meaning of life. God isn't something to be

used as the means to an end- God is the end in and of Himself. All his life Jacob has told God, "if You do (fill in the blank), then You will be my God." And don't look down on Jacob too much- you and I do the same thing. We wrestle with God by making Him the means to our desired end because we think we know what will lead to the blessed life for us. We break up with someone that we think we can't live without and so we go to God and use Him to get us what will make us happy (a relationship). We find ourselves in financial tough times and so we go to God and use Him as a means to getting what will make us happy (wealth or security). I could go on and on. What we need to learn is what Jacob realized that night wrestling with God- what I really need is God. What I really need is to trust Him with the timing and process of me being blessed because no relationship and no amount of money will actually bless me as long as I make it the center of my life.

And when Jacob realizes that the wrestling match is over and it's as though God takes his hand and raises it over his head and declares him the winner. This exhausted guy that can't even stand up anymore because of his hip. He's the winner. Which begs the question- why didn't God "win". But I think He did. Sure, He could have disintegrated Jacob with just a thought but that wouldn't have gotten Him what He so desperately wanted- a transformed Jacob. What got God what He wanted was limiting himself and meeting Jacob not just in Jacob's weakness but in God's weakness. In fact, that's when you see the greatest examples of God's power in the Bible- when He limits Himself and takes on weakness.

Think about it- on the cross Jesus appeared to have lost the day. He looked to be weak beyond anything we could imagine and yet in his apparent weakness and apparent defeat He unleashed the greatest expression of spiritual power that the universe has ever seen and He won the day (and eternity as well). Jacob told God in his weakness, I will not let You go until You bless me. Jesus on the cross said, "I will not let go until you bless them."

Jacob was the unworthy who received the blessing through sheer grace. Jesus was the worthy One Who took our curse so that we could get the blessing. It's crazy when you think about it. And He wants to do something equally crazy in your life. He wants to meet you in your weakness so that He can bless you with the reward earned for you by His Son. Until we recognize that we will never truly have a blessed life.