

Jacob: Limping into the Future

DAVE BAST

Jacob was an operator. He was slick, tricky, unscrupulous. You could trust him about as far as you could throw him; but God, for some reason we cannot quite make out was determined to make something out of Jacob, and He did it in what we might call the school of hard knocks. Well, today on Groundwork we take a look at Jacob's life as one of God's chosen sinners.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and Scott, today we are continuing this story of Jacob. It is part of a series on the Patriarchs, Abraham through Joseph; and I do not know if you picked up on that phrase at the end of the intro, but God's chosen sinners. We usually think of God's chosen saints, but Jacob is a great illustration of the fact that God makes saints out of sinners.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is right, and just to recap a little bit, He can hit straight shots with crooked sticks, and Jacob is a crooked stick because he – and his mother, it turns out, his mother Rebekah – is, as you said, an operator, and we have already seen that this is a man who has lived his life by his wits, by his cunning, by his being the smartest guy in the room; and when you are the smartest guy in the room – and well, let's say your twin brother Esau is a little dimwitted – you can scam him. So, get his birthright. Esau comes in one day; he is hungry. He says: I would give anything for that soup. And Jacob says: Really? How about your birthright? Some of your inheritance? Sure. And then a few years later, he scams his father with his mother's help. Isaac is almost blind. He is ready to give the family blessing to the older child, who is Esau; and so they have that familiar story, the elaborate plot to deceive blind old Isaac. They gussy up Jacob like hairy Esau and they make him smell like sheep and they fool him; and Isaac gives the blessing to the wrong kid – to the younger.

DAVE BAST

Right; and Esau is far from being grunted at this development. Esau is breathing threats and murder. You have this classic sibling rivalry. You have the older brother, who is athletic and he is strong, and he is probably better looking, and he is the father's favorite; and Jacob, the wily one – he is living by his wits – and he pulls this off, the coup of his lifetime; and Esau says: I am going to kill him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It blows the family up.

DAVE BAST

Right. So Rebekah... And here is some kind of justice – maybe rough justice – you reap what you sow – she has wanted to have Jacob be the one with the blessing, and she ends up losing him; probably for the rest of her life. She sends him packing off back to Mesopotamia, to her family – Laban, her brother, who still lives there, and they are all part of a clan and in the Middle East, of course, clan means everything. So, Jacob is pretty sure he will be taken in and accepted in some way. So off he goes and he has this dream at Bethel – we

looked at that in the last program - and finally he fetches up at Laban's house.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right. This is God's covenant people. These are the people through whom the covenant is going forward; and it is just all like a soap opera. It is all very tawdry. So now he is Haran; he is back home with his Uncle Laban, and we can hear a little bit of that story. We are in Genesis 29. We read that after Jacob had stayed with Laban for a whole month, his Uncle Laban said to him:

¹⁵"Just because you are a relative of mine, should you work for me for nothing? Tell me what your wages should be." ¹⁶Now Laban had two daughters. The name of the older was Leah, the name of the younger was Rachel. ¹⁷Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel had a lovely figure and was beautiful. ¹⁸Jacob was in love with Rachel, and he said, "I will work for you seven years in return for your younger daughter, Rachel." ¹⁹And Laban said, "It is better that I give her to you than to some other man. Stay here with me." So, the story goes on. Jacob works seven years for Uncle Laban and finally the day comes where he gets to marry Rachel, but Uncle Laban is going to pull a fast one.

DAVE BAST

Yes. This is great. We get further on in the story and it is the wedding night and there is a big feast, we read: ²²Laban brought together all the people of the place and gave a feast, ²³but when evening came, he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and Jacob made love to her. ²⁴Laban gave his servant Zilpah to his daughter as her attendant. ²⁵When morning came, there was Leah. I love that line. How in the world did Jacob not know?

SCOTT HOEZEE

I don't know, but I have a feeling the first thing that he did was scream: Laban! What is going on here? And Laban says: Didn't I mention that? You always marry the older daughter first; but, seven more years and you can have Rachel. What we have here is apparently – in Rebekah's family – Jacob's mother – apparently deception runs in this family. These are tricky people, and here is Jacob the trickster, the heel grasper; the one who scammed his brother, scammed his father; now he is being out-scammed by his master scamster, Uncle Laban; but it is almost ridiculous how this is going. Does anybody tell the truth in this family?

DAVE BAST

It is a soap opera. There was a great 19th Century Scottish preacher named Alexander Whyte, who preached through the story of Jacob, and his title for this episode was: The Syrian Biter Bit – or Rebekah's poor lost sheep shorn to the bone by the steel shears of Shylock, her brother. They do not talk like that anymore. They do not make sermon titles like that anymore; no. But he gets at the very nub of the matter. Jacob, the trickster is now himself being cheated. He is getting a taste of his own medicine. My question is: Where is God in all this? This is a Bible story, and really, it just reads like any kind of tawdry tale of human deception and corruption.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Almost more of... It sometimes reminds me of those mafia movies or stories about mobster families where Dad was a killer and a liar, and the son grows up to be a killer and a liar, and it just ricochets from generation to generation. And it is an odd thing - maybe it is an oddly comforting thing – to see that the Bible does not try to clean things up for us. The Bible does not say to us – and here we are right in Genesis – the very first book of the Bible – the Bible does not say: You, your family, your situation, your relations, your relatives all have to be perfect or God cannot be among you. Genesis seems to be saying somehow the Covenant of God – and we know from earlier in the book that Jacob really is the chosen one and God reaffirmed that in that dream of the ladder to heaven at Bethel that Jacob had. So, we know he is chosen, but what a mess. And yet, God is not undone. And we might be able to take some strange comfort from that, in case we happen to sense that maybe our own lives or our own family or our own relations are not always perfect either.

DAVE BAST

You know, I think one of the hardest things for us to shake – especially those of us – maybe we have been born and raised in the Christian faith or we have been part of church all of our lives, and we are basically outwardly pretty respectable people – many of us are. A good thing people cannot see what we are like on the inside; but we just cannot help but feel like there is some deserving that comes into this. If you are good enough, of course God would be pleased with you. Of course God would choose you because you are a pretty decent Joe. You are a pretty decent Jane.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And if you are not good enough, well then, God should not be active in your life; and yet, here are people who by most standards – I do not think you would want to be next door neighbors to these people, they are so devious, much less be related to them – and yet, God is moving forward and there is something more. God is not finished with Jacob yet. There is something God is yet going to do once and for all in many ways to transform old, crafty Jacob. We will see that coming right up.

BREAK:

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to Groundwork, where today we are digging into the story of Jacob, and we followed Jacob, actually in the last program as well as this, through his career of ups and downs, tricks and scams and cheating, and he himself now has been cheated by his father-in-law, Laban. Turn about is fair play, I guess you could say. Or you could say that maybe God is giving him a taste of his own medicine so he knows what it feels like; and there is a little more trickery that goes on between the two of them because Jacob ends up working for Laban for 20 years, and he has earned his wives, now he is going to earn the wealth that in that culture consisted of flocks and herds. We do not have time to read this because it is chapters and chapters of Genesis, but he does this thing with the breeding of the animals that gets him the best of the flocks.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, somehow or another, you get the feeling that Jacob woke up every morning, and the first thing he thought was: How can I scam and fleece my father-in-law today? You just have a feeling Laban woke up every morning and thought: How can I scam Jacob, or at least keep an eye on that crafty son-in-law of mine? And it went on and on for years; but the day comes finally when Jacob decides to leave. So he takes his two wives, and he has kids now...

DAVE BAST

Well, and you know, there is a little push to it, too, because Laban's sons were not all that pleased when they saw that Jacob was getting the best of the deal.

SCOTT HOEZEE

There was not much left of the farm when Jacob left town. The caravan got a little bigger. So, he hightails it out of there and decides it is time to go home.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But that is a problem, too.

DAVE BAST

Right; and meanwhile, his wife Rachel – his favorite wife – by this time now he has 11 sons, and a daughter – at least one – and finally the favorite, Rachel, has borne his youngest son to this point, Joseph; but Rachel

steals her father's gods; that is another weird little element of this story. There are these idols – and I thought these people were supposed to be worshipping God, but leave that to one side. Anyway, they finally have this moment when they realize they have to part, and Laban very piously says, so we think, “May the Lord watch between me and thee while we are absent one from the other.” And honestly, I can remember as a boy it was sometimes used as the benediction, especially in the evening service.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I never heard of that one.

DAVE BAST

No, it sounds like: God be with you till me again.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, but it is not quite that. It is more like: God keep an eye on you when I can't because I know you are not a good person. So, it is not really a benediction; it is not really a malediction, but it is not God bless and keep you, but sort of like: Yeah, get out of here and I hope God keeps an eye on you because you are not trustworthy. So, they do not part on good terms, but it is pillar to post, because now he wants to go home, but the last time Jacob was home, Esau was ready to murder him. And it has been a while – a couple of decades – Esau might have cooled off, or he might not have, and so Jacob is going back home with his wives and kids. They could all be wiped out in case Esau has been bearing a grudge. Maybe Esau has been sharpening a sword for 20 years and he is just ready to run his little brother through for all that treachery of two decades ago. So, what is he going to do?

DAVE BAST

Well, Jacob sends out a couple of scouts to try to find Esau and arrange a meeting, because he figures, no doubt, the first thing he better do is gauge Esau's intent toward him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know things are bad in your family when a reunion with your brother is described in military terms.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Scout it out. Let's get some spies. I remember a preacher once pictured Jacob in this story almost being like General Eisenhower before D Day. He has maps on the walls and pins in the maps and he is very – as he always does, he is using his cunning and his wits to get the best of Esau again. And it does sound like a military encounter.

DAVE BAST

Well, back come these messengers with a rather ominous sounding report. They say Esau is coming to meet you, and oh, by the way, he has four hundred men with him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Sounds like an army.

DAVE BAST

It sure does. And then we pick up the story in Genesis 32; we want to read this part because it is one of the most interesting, really, and mysterious maybe – sort of God-infused incidents in the whole book of Genesis – in the whole Old Testament really.

²²That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants (who were also mothers of some of his sons, as you may recall), and his 11 sons, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all of his possessions. ²⁴So Jacob was left alone, and a Man wrestled with him

until daybreak. ²⁵When 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. ²⁶Then the Man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak," but Jacob replied, "I will not let You go unless You bless me." ²⁷The Man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. ²⁸Then the Man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel because you have struggled with God and with human beings and have overcome." ²⁹Jacob said, "Please tell me Your name," but He replied, "Why do you ask Me My name?" Then He blessed him there. ³⁰So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared." ³¹The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip.

Wow! So, what is going on there, Scott? Is it a man or is it God? Is it an angel? Who is he wrestling with?

SCOTT HOEZEE

It looks like God. Even if somebody renames you "One who wrestled with God," the person saying that is essentially saying: You know, we have been kicking and gouging in the mud and the blood all night. I am God. So you are the one who wrestled with God. You are Israel – *Yishra'el* – the one who wrestles with God. And so, when last Jacob had an encounter with God, God was way up on the top of a ladder and he named the place Bethel – Beit El – the House of God. This time he names the place Peniel – the Face of God – because he realized that when he was nose to nose with that guy all night – it looks like it was God, and that is quite an amazing thing. Among other things, he realizes that the wrestling match was fixed. He thought he could maybe beat this guy with his strength, as he has thought his whole life long, but once the morning comes and the guy just touches him and knocks his hip out, it is like: Oh, man. I could not have won this ever. This person was God.

DAVE BAST

Yes, wow. Deep mystery here, certainly. A man who the story seems to force us to conclude is in some sense an embodiment of God – a kind of pre-incarnation, incarnate God who refuses to tell Jacob His name. He asks Jacob for Jacob's name and Jacob tells him: Yes, I am the heel; I am the cheat.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The heel grasper, yes.

DAVE BAST

And then He gives him this new name, Israel, which will become the name of the People of God still today. We are part of the Israel of God. It is our name, and then Jacob wants to reciprocate. Well, who are you? What is your name? And the Man says – He deflects him and he says in a sense, "You cannot know My name," because God has many names in the Bible, but on the deepest level, theologians tell us, His name is unknown. It is unpronounceable. Because He cannot be known ultimately in His fullness, we can only know as much as He makes Himself known to us; as He reveals to us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And insofar as...

DAVE BAST

And that encounter, by the way, often wounds us...

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is right.

DAVE BAST

And leaves us limping.

Scott Hoezee:

That is right; and insofar as this was, in some sense, God; this encounter with the Living God is surely the strangest in the whole Bible. This is not just the three visitors coming to Abraham under the oaks of Mamre;

this is not just... This is a wrestling match. What a thing. What a way to meet God; jumped from the dead of night; it was probably dark until the dawn; but why would God do this? Maybe it is because when you are someone like Jacob and you have lived your whole life by your own strength and brawn and craft and cunning and skill, maybe the best way for God to get through to him that grace is the true way to get blessing – what comes to you comes free by a gift of grace – maybe the best way to do it was through a wrestling match, where Jacob would have to try to use all those skills, and only after who knows how many hours of wrestling did he realize: oh, the best things in life will never come through my power – only through grace; which is why the preacher, Frederick Buechner, called this the magnificent defeat. Jacob was defeated, but magnificently so because he learned about grace.

DAVE BAST

He actually won by being defeated, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

We have been knocking Jacob pretty good here in this program and in the last one, too; and with good reason. There is a lot about Jacob's character that is unsavory, unattractive, repelling – rebarbative – there is a new word I learned recently. It is a great word; it means off putting; but let's give him credit for this; he knew how to hang onto God. I love that line, and it is in some ways at the heart of this: I will not let You go unless You bless me.

SCOTT HOEZEE

By the end he knew he could not beat Him, but he would not let Him go until he got blessed. He could not beat Him, he knew that. The hip thing convinced him, but yet, do not leave yet. Do not leave yet.

DAVE BAST

Boy, what a lesson for us – what a lesson for faith. No matter what happens; no matter how much you are hurt, how much you are struggling with God, do not let Him go; and the blessing will come.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And He will not let go of you until He blesses you.

DAVE BAST

Well, there is a little bit more to this story because Jacob has to go off and meet Esau yet, and we are going to look at that in our last segment.

BREAK:

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee, and I am here along with Dave Bast, as we are wrapping up the story of Jacob. Jacob just had this incredible encounter with God in no less than a wrestling match, but the story is not quite over yet. So, Jacob is limping away from the river now. His hip has been wrenched out of joint so he is limping. He has learned something about grace in that encounter. The best things in life will never be scammed the way he has been living his whole life. They come by grace, and that is an incredible lesson, but guess what? Esau is still out there and coming at him with four hundred men.

DAVE BAST

Old ways die hard, we could say, from Jacob's example because he has one last trick up his sleeve, or at least it is a kind of tactical approach to this potentially dangerous military situation.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, he decides that just in case Esau is still hopping mad after 20 years and ready to kill him, he is going to try to bombard him with kindness. So he sends ahead one gift and then another gift. So he is sort of sending ahead bribes, until finally the two brothers, after all these years, these twins – they are twin brothers – finally they come face to face, and Jacob is in full ingratiating mode. I can picture him; we are even told he bows down to the ground and keeps saying to Esau: Oh, my lord, my lord. Oh, my lord Esau.

DAVE BAST

Yes, you are the big guy. I may have stolen the birthright and the inheritance, which makes me the head of the clan, really, and the one in line of the covenant promises; but oh, you are such a great lord.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So he is buttering him up, just saying things that are over the top to try to... just in case he is still angry; but guess what? Verse 4 of Genesis 33:

But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him. He threw his arms around his neck and kissed him, and they wept. And so, Esau is not mad after all, and the encounter – he did not need all that stuff. Once again, all of his tricks and cunning and buttering him up turned out sort of like at the River Jabbok, he did not need all that – Esau had forgiven him. Maybe Esau changed over the years, too; obviously he did.

DAVE BAST

Well, we know that God has been working in Jacob's life and in Jacob's heart, and has humbled him in various ways, and is working to change him – to bring out of that rather negative character a true saint; someone who belongs to God. I just wonder if He has been working in Esau's life, too, because for all the fact that Esau is this symbol of somebody who rejected his birthright and spurned the promises of God, he is a mighty gracious figure in this encounter. In fact, there is a remarkable line here in Genesis 33, right?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, in 33:10, and you have to remember, Jacob has just come from the river, just wrestled with God, and he named the place Peniel. In Hebrew that means: God face – God's face. And then in Genesis 33:10, Jacob says to Esau – so now he knows – Esau has forgiven him, and he says: For to see your face is to see the face of God, now that you have accepted me favorably. In the Hebrew there, the language is identical. He says: Esau, you are Peniel, too. You are the face of God again. I just saw God by the river, Peniel, and now I am with you and you are Peniel because what did he see in common on God's face and Esau's face? Grace – forgiveness.

DAVE BAST

So, Esau becomes the face of God to Jacob...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Of all people, right? Some people might remember that old TV show, Bonanza, with the Cartwright boys, and one of the brothers was named Hoss, and Hoss was kind of a big, heavysset guy; he had a gapped tooth grin...

DAVE BAST

Dan Blocker was the actor.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Dan Blocker, and he was a bit of a bumpkin. When I think of Esau I think of Hoss – a bit of a bumpkin – gap-toothed – and we are told that Esau had red hair and a red beard and I think he had never met a comb, and he was just an unkempt kind of ruddy guy, and Jacob looks at that face and sees that gap-toothed grin as Esau tells him he forgave him; and he says: Well, for heaven's sake, it is God again. Because it is grace. And so, the story of the trickster, Jacob, is ending on an incredible note of grace. Who'd a thunk it? Who could

see that coming?

DAVE BAST

Yes; I wonder – we have been thinking about ways of applying this to ourselves, and surely one aspect of it is if you feel like, as we mentioned, your family is maybe not ideal; no model to hold up, and maybe you are not much of a model either – well, God can still be working in you and with you. You have to hang onto Him; but how gracious can we be to one another? Even where there has been maybe a bad past or a poisoned relationship, we really see God at work when we see Him in the face of one another and are reconciled. This beautiful picture – they wept and they embraced. These brothers who have hated each other for 20 years; who had all this history and all the things they could have brought up and thrown at each other, and instead God is there – grace is there – and they embrace.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is an ending full of hope. Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. So visit groundworkonline.com and tell us what topics or passages you would like to dig into next on Groundwork.

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