

Genesis Week 5

The Family of Israel

Good morning, Connection Family! We have spent the last couple weeks journeying through the book of Genesis. And today we are in week 5. We have learned so much and gained so many new perspectives on these foundational stories that we've heard time and time again.

As we continue today, we'll be looking at Jacob's story and all the chaos and disfunction it contains. I invite you to remember once more today these 2 important truths- **this story is our story.** And **it's all connected.** Both of those things we're going to see once again today in Jacob's story.

When we dive into his story, we discover some deep and fundamental truths about our human condition and our sinful nature that can be traced all the way back to the garden. The things that you and I struggle with today are not new! They are struggles that humanity has been dealing with (rather unsuccessfully) since the fall.

But as we look at Jacob's story, his family, and the promise that our faithful father has woven throughout his story, we can remember that no matter where we find ourselves today in our own story and no matter what we are currently struggling with, God is with us. And He longs to bless us and draw us close to Him, if we allow Him to.

Let's pray.

We're going to start with our key scripture that we're focusing on today and work backward to fully understand what is going on with Jacob. Open your bibles with me (or check out the screen) Genesis 32: 24-30-

"So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. 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. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. 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." Jacob said, "Please tell me your name." But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

What is going on here? Why is Jacob in this predicament and how did he get here, fighting with a "man" all night long, to come out on the other side being blessed by God?

Why is this even happening? To fully understand how Jacob got here, we've got to go back a few chapters and zoom out to get the full view and then we'll circle back around. Stick with me because it's a lot but it's so crucial to understand and apply it all to our lives today.

Last week, we looked at Abraham and Sarah's story of promise and God's faithfulness to them and to their children and their children's children, to the whole new nation of people that God was working to set apart.

As many of you know, Jacob is a part of that family lineage. His father is Isaac is the long-awaited and promised child to his grandparents Abraham and Sarah. And just as Abraham and Sarah longed and waited for a child, Isaac and his wife Rebekah questioned God about the timing of their offspring as well.

"Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah as wife...Now Isaac pleaded with the Lord for his wife, because she was barren..." (Genesis 25:20-21)

In the following verses, God grants them their plea and Rebekah does become pregnant- and from the beginning, she senses that something is not quite right.

"But the children struggled together within her; and she said, 'If all is well, why am I like this?' So she went to inquire of the Lord. And the Lord said to her: 'Two nations are in your womb, Two peoples shall be separated from your body; One people shall be stronger than the other, And the older shall serve the younger.' " So when her days were fulfilled for her to give birth, indeed there were twins in her womb." (Genesis 25:22-24).

We instantly find out that not only are these twins at odds with one another before they are even born, but much is on the horizon for them with this divine prophecy about their birth order.

It's no surprise that once Jacob and his older twin brother Esau enter the picture, the turmoil and animosity that started in utero continues.

Jacob and Esau could not have been more different from each other, from the way they looked, to their temperaments and skills. The Bible is careful to include that the parents certainly did not do anything to help their children get along, and in fact if anything, their explicit favoritism- Isaac's love for Esau and Rebekah's love for Jacob-just made things all the worse.

Genesis 25:26 highlights one key part about their birth story that we often skip over and maybe miss the significance. In reading their birth story, we learn that when Jacob was born, he came out grasping his brother Esau's heel. It's one small mention that carries a lot of weight. This small yet important piece of the story actually foreshadows Jacob's upcoming struggles and his tendency to constantly grab for something that is just out of reach and in his own strength.

The brother's grow and continue to be at odds-with Esau, the first born taking on the role of hunter and provider and Jacob, the 2nd born, taking on more the role of the homebody.

Finally, the inciting incident occurs which creates the ultimate divide between the brothers. And it's over Esau's natural born given birth right as the older twin.

Today, that may not make a whole lot of sense to us or even seem important. But back during the time of a patriarchal society, your birthright as a first born was your everything. It was crucial socially, legally, and spiritually and it carried immense weight.

Esau's birthright meant that he would receive a double share of his father's physical and material estate, would assume the role as leader and head of household upon his father Isaac's death, and spiritually, he would be the one to carry out the divine covenant promise- including the lineage of the promised blessing, land, and the future line of the Messiah.

Jacob knew the significance of having this birthright and he wanted it for himself. And so he grasps again for something that is not his.

We read that Jacob manipulates and exploits his brother's hunger to force Esau to give him his birthright. Esau comes home from a hunting trip, famished, weary, and close to death but Jacob refuses to give him the stew that he has been cooking unless Esau sells him his birthright. Chapter 25 ends with Esau giving his birthright to Jacob, and catch what is says-

"...So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. And Jacob gave Esau bread and stew of lentils; then he ate and drank, arose, and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright." (Genesis 25:33-34)

Esau eats and drinks and then leaves without regard for what he just traded. He essentially treated his special rights and blessings as the firstborn son as worthless, compared to a simple bowl of soup. In fact, the author of Hebrews harshly comments on Esau's choice when saying-

"See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son." Hebrews 12:16

Ouch. Esau obviously has some of his own things going on here.

And just when you think the story can't get any worse, it does.

The deal is sealed when with Rebekah's suggestion in Genesis 27, Jacob and his mother trick Isaac into giving Jacob the first-born blessing, intended for Esau. Once again, Jacob is grasping for something that doesn't belong to him.

They proceed to make Isaac a meal, dress him in Esau's clothes and even put goat skins on Jacob's hands and neck to disguise him as his older brother.

Then, when Jacob enters his father's chambers, and deceives him.

"Isaac said to Jacob, "Please come near, that I may feel you, my son, whether you are really my son Esau or not." So Jacob went near to Isaac his father, and he felt him and said, "The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau." And he did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau's hands; so he blessed him. Then he said, "Are you really my son Esau?" He said, "I am." (Genesis 27:21-24)

You can imagine Esau's surprise and dismay when he later tries to go in and receive his blessing and he learns that now not only has Jacob taken his birthright, but also his blessing.

"So Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father blessed him, and Esau said in his heart, 'The days of mourning for my father are at hand; then I will kill my brother Jacob.'" (Genesis 27:41)

So here we are, after 2 generations of knowing the promise that God has for their family, of experiencing God's love and faithfulness through many struggles and challenges, that it seems the sibling rivalry which reared its ugly head with Cain and Abel is back, and just as strong as ever.

Although the promise is still present, life is anything but perfect for God's people. Yet God's divine guarantee of this promise and blessing on this family never waivers.

Jacob runs away, gets deceived himself in his pursuit of marriage and works for 7 years to be able to take the wife he really wants (seriously, read Genesis 29!) and grows his family. His 2nd and favorite wife, Rachel is barren and so the cycles of favoritism and taking matters into their own hands continue. Genesis 30 is full of baby momma drama and women fighting over giving Jacob a son until Rachel FINALLY has a son, baby number 12 for Jacob and names him Joseph. (that's next week!)

So after 20 years of being away from his family, Jacob and his wives and livestock travel back to reunite with his brother. Along his way, the story we are focusing on today takes place.

Whew- what a back story! But like I said, SO KEY to understanding what this all means and what we can learn from it.

Jacob has gone his whole life grasping for what he thinks he should have. And now this fight with a mysterious man is him grasping yet again for a blessing.

It's pretty easy to see from the context clues here that this was no ordinary "man" that Jacob finds himself up against. This stranger not only has otherworldly strength, but also the authority to bless Jacob and to change his name. After this encounter, Jacob says it for himself-

"...I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

Additionally, the prophet Hosea looks back on this event with Jacob and says-

"He struggled with the angel and overcame him; he wept and begged for his favor. He found him at Bethel and talked with him there..." Hosea 12:4

In this struggle, Jacob is adamant to have this blessing. When Jacob requests this blessing, what is the man's question? Vs. 27-

"So He said to him, 'What is your name?' He said, 'Jacob.'"

We now know that when Jacob had been asked that question before, he lied to his father and pretended to be someone else. Finally, Jacob is honest here and it results in a complete identity change. Vs.28-29-

“And He said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed. Then Jacob asked, saying, “Tell me Your name, I pray.” And He said, “Why is it that you ask about My name?” And He blessed him there.”

The name Jacob is given, **Israel, literally means “one who struggles or wrestles with God.”** Because He fought and prevailed, his name is changed to signify perseverance and a direct relationship with God.

To now be known as one who has prevailed with God is a MAJOR shift from what his original name means. Jacob means “heel-grabber” or “to follow, to be behind”. It can also mean “to supplant, circumvent, overreach”. This shift is life changing.

From this point forward, the descendants that come from Jacob are known as the Children of Israel or the Israelites. The name change and blessing signify a major spiritual transformation and shift in identity for Jacob.

It’s clear that Jacob’s story is an example of what can happen when we try to take things into our own hands that we should be trusting God to provide. Jacob spent a lot of his early life grasping- for a birthright, for a blessing, for something that he wanted.

And that grasping desire is not new for humanity. We have been grasping for something that is not ours ever since we grasped for the forbidden fruit back in the garden.

How often do we find ourselves grasping for something that’s not ours? That’s just out of reach? That we think we should have or deserve?

How often do we do the same thing as Jacob- try to orchestrate our own success rather than wait on what God has already promised?

Remember what God told his mother Rebekah when he was still in the womb?

***“...one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger.”
(Genesis 25:23)***

God had already declared in the womb, what would happen. From day one, Jacob was set to inherit the blessing. Yet, he still chose to rely on his own resources and trickery and ended up taking the long and painful way to get to the same place he was always supposed to get to. He obtained it through human deception instead of through God’s grace and love as God had intended.

When we force our own timeline through human striving, we are disrupting the peace that God intends for our path. Often times, we can find ourselves grasping for what God wants to give us freely.

Corrie ten Boom is attributed as being the one who said –

“Hold everything in your hands lightly, otherwise it hurts when God pries your fingers open.”

Jacob’s life reflects the temptation that we’re all prone to- to want to hold on so tightly to what we want that we believe it’s our responsibility to make it happen.

When Jacob spends the night wrestling with God, he comes away with a new name, but also a limp, a physical reminder of the truth that the man who spent his whole life grasping at his own future had come face to face with his own weakness and needed to depend on God.

It’s not bad to want the blessing. But we’ve got to trust the Blessor.

We grasp and want for so many things-relationships, promotions, opportunities, and we get stuck in our own heads that if we don’t make it happen it never will.

But what if God is really asking us to open our hands?

What if that relationship isn’t ours to force? What if that promotion isn’t ours to achieve? What if that opportunity isn’t happening at the right time for what God has planned for us? What if it all is really not ours to control?

What would change in your life if you opened your hands and allowed God to move in His way, and His timing in your life?

Like Corrie said, it might be painful. And it might be hard. It might hurt when we surrender and open our hands and let go.

But we must remember that it’s not because God wants to hurt us. It’s because we’ve put our trust and security in something other than Him, and we’re the ones afraid to surrender that.

As I was working on my message this week, I came across this powerful prayer from the Dutch Catholic priest and author Henri Nouwen. He wrote and published this in one of his collections entitled- *You Are the Beloved: Daily Meditations for Spiritual Living*.

“Dear God, I am so afraid to open my clenched fists! Who will I be when I have nothing left to hold on to? Who will I be when I stand before you with empty hands? Please help me to gradually open my hands and to discover that I am not what I own, but what you want to give me. And what you want to give me is love—unconditional, everlasting love.”

Wow.

If you’re ready, I invite you to do this exercise with me today as we close in prayer.

(Put hands in front, face down and open, symbolically let go and give to God. Then turn palms over and face upward to symbolically be open to receive what God has to give you. We can’t receive anything from God with a closed hand, so we want to release and be emptied of ourselves so that we can be full of you, Father.)

Benediction: Eph. 3:16-19-be so full of God that it spills out on other people