

Jacob - A life transformed!
Kingham & Churchill 1/11/2009
Readings: Genesis 28:1-15; Genesis 29:14b-30

Introduction

Harry Redknapp is one shrewd football manager!

He's turned Spurs round without replacing the whole team!

And talking of 'Dragon's Den', the word 'shrewd' also comes to mind in the looks on the Dragons' faces as they consider whether to invest in the ideas presented to them.

People tend to admire shrewdness.

We aspire to be shrewd investors, shrewd consumers getting all the Tesco's bargains, people who are never taken advantage of.

But why?

Probably because we see the shrewd tend to get ahead in life; they never let success slip through their grasp.

Many of us aspire to that.

So ask yourself, what do you aspire to in life?

And are you shrewd enough to get what you're grasping for?

Because we're in a series each Sunday on the great lives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob & Joseph.

And what we're finding is that true greatness is determined not by how great you appear, to yourself or others, but how great God shows himself to be through your life.

What matters, we'll see today, isn't what you grasp for in life, but what God generously gives you.

The word the Bible uses time and again to describe that generosity is God's 'grace'.

And it's only through his grace that you can aspire to that true greatness.

The backdrop

Turn with me to Genesis 28 on page.....

Remember that Jacob's name means deceiver.

v10 'Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran. When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep.'

Jacob is fleeing his brother Esau.

It started when he shrewdly tricked Esau out of his inheritance and then shrewdly tricked him out of the firstborn blessing that Isaac had intended for Esau.

So Esau wants him dead!

But we already know from what he has said to Abraham and Isaac that God has a different plan for Jacob that doesn't involve an early grace.

God's plan is found at v13 as Jacob has a dream in which the Lord says something which Jacob pretty much ignores.

And this is what the Lord says to him: v13 'I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.'

Keep that backdrop in mind as we look at Jacob's life.

God has a plan, which now centres on Jacob, and God won't let either him or his family get in the way of Him blessing countless people in the centuries to come.

Jacob's efforts to get a wife

So, Jacob is now up north and has found his uncle Laban.

He stays for a month and Laban offers to pay Jacob and asks he wants as wages.

Let's pick it up at chapter 29 v 16.

'Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel was lovely in form, and beautiful. Jacob was in love with Rachel and said, "I'll work for you seven years in return for your younger daughter Rachel." Laban said, "It's better that I give her to you than to some other man. Stay here with me." So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her.'

That might not seem a shrewd deal to you, but think about it.

Jacob's inheritance is back home, but so is Esau.

Big, well-armed and very angry Esau!

So Jacob isn't in a hurry to get back!

He had left in a hurry with just the clothes he stood up in.

He couldn't give the customary wedding gift to the bride's father, so he offers to work free for seven years.

That was so generous that Laban couldn't refuse. Shrewd!

However, Jacob has met his match in Uncle Laban!

V23 and it's the wedding day: 'But when evening came, [Laban] took his daughter Leah and gave her to Jacob, and Jacob lay with her... When morning came, there was Leah! So Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? I served you for Rachel, didn't I? Why have you deceived me?" Laban replied, "It is not our custom here to give the younger daughter in marriage before the older one. Finish this daughter's bridal week; then we will give you the younger one also... in return for another seven years of work." And Jacob did so. He finished the week with Leah, and then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to be his wife.'

And did you notice that Laban deceived Jacob in much the same way that Jacob had deceived Isaac; it's poetic justice!

He used good food and wine, the inability to see who was there with him, and firstborn rights.

And Jacob stole the blessing that said his brother would serve him but ended up serving Laban for 14 years.

Remember that verse last week from Proverbs 16v9?

‘In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps.’

Jacob’s plan to marry Rachel has failed: he’s ended up with two wives, something the Bible nowhere commends and for good reason, only one of whom he loves.

And so begins a life bickering and jealousy.

Just imagine, gentlemen, coming home every night to that!

But remember the dream – God in His grace has a better plan in mind which will not fail.

God's plan involves disciplining Jacob so that he grows into the man God wants him to be.

And God's plan involves disciplining you and me so that we grow into the men and women God wants us to be.

Hebrews chapter 12 says that God disciplines Christians because we’re his children, and says in v11:

‘No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.’

God is disciplining his son Jacob with a punishment that exactly fits his crime.

He holds up a mirror for Jacob to look into and he sees himself in his Uncle Laban.

If you're a Christian, are you experiencing God’s discipline?

Has some past sin come home to roost?

Is God pointing out something he wants you to deal with?

Is God trying to get you to grow in godliness and wisdom and has to use some kind of suffering to get you to listen?

If so, don't fight it!

It means he love you as his child!

And it doesn't mean he hasn't forgiven you.

If you have repented of your sins and placed your trust in Jesus’ death in your place, then you have been forgiven.

But because God loves you so much, he wants you to view your sin as He does.

He wants you to love obedience, just like Jesus did.

To find your happiness in your relationship with him and to become more and more like Jesus.

God loves you so very much that he will use discipline in your life to that end.

One of the ways He does this is like he did with Jacob.

He puts us in relationships that serve as mirrors for us.

So next time you are irritated with someone or judgemental about them, stop and consider if what you see and dislike in them God also sees and dislikes in you.

If so, tell God that you repent of it and ask his forgiveness!

Wives’ efforts to gain Jacob’s love - Genesis 29:31-35

So how does this happy threesome work out?

Look with me at chapter 29v31.

‘When the LORD saw that Leah was not loved, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren. Leah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Reuben, for she said, “It is because the LORD has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now.”’

And so begins a childbearing contest for Jacob’s love.

‘Surely my husband will love me now.’

What terrible, heart-rending words!

To be a wife was to be, by God's definition, someone who is loved, cherished, nurtured and cared for.

She is meant to be a picture of Christ's love for the Church!

An unloved wife ought to be a contradiction in terms.

Husbands, are you loving your wife as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her?

Because that was what you promised to do, and you weren't tricked into it like Jacob.

How should Leah have responded?

And if you find yourself in her situation, how should you?

She should have put her hope in God as 1 Peter 3v5 says, not first and foremost in her husband.

Instead, she grasped for Jacob’s love, which never came.

Wives, we’re only human, so depend on us, your husbands for what only God can provide for you.

Depend on him first and us second.

But what about Rachel?

She was barren, but she had Jacob, who dotes on her.

However, when Leah starts having children, it all turns sour as Rachel becomes jealous.

All of a sudden, Jacob’s love isn’t enough.

Because God isn't no 1 in here life.

So she gives her servant to Jacob to have children through her, just like Sara gave her servant to Abraham.

That's like pouring petrol on the fire of jealousy!

What Rachel is grasping for is made clear in the names of the children her servant has for her.

One she calls Dan, meaning he has vindicated me.

The other Naphtali, meaning her struggle with her sister.

She may have looked beautiful, but inside she's eaten up with jealousy and bitterness.

But despite all that, in His grace, God gives Rachel a child.

It had to be grace because there's no way Rachel deserved such a blessing!

But did she see it like that?

She named him Joseph, which means may he add.

When God graciously gave the child she longed for, she called him I want another one!

Isn't this the perfect picture of jealousy?

We aren't discontented because we don't have enough.

We're discontented because we don't have what she has!

That's not how it should be with those who have been shown so much grace and mercy by God!

On the contrary, Paul in Romans 12:15 says 'Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.'

It's easy to sympathise with someone worse off than you.

But can you feel joyful with someone who is better off?

There is the test!

Is your contentment in what you have?

Or is it in God and what He can do through you?

Rachel had the love of Jacob but also wanted what Leah had, so in the end knew no satisfaction at all.

Rachel's grasping, like Leah's grasping, failed to satisfy.

But look what's happening

But look what's happening!

Abraham was a lying deceiver, and Sara wasn't much better.

Their son Isaac was a lying deceiver, and so was his wife Rebekah.

Their son Jacob was a lying, grasping deceiver and his wives weren't angels either.

But look what's happening!

Despite everything that they all did to try to have it their own way, God's plan is working.

We're beginning to see God's promise being fulfilled, that their descendants would one day be more numerous than the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore.

By the end of chapter 30, God is forming the nation of Israel.

God had plans for enormous blessing for enormous numbers of people.

The blessings of forgiveness, a restored good relationship with him as Heavenly Father, and the absolute assurance of eternal life with him in that relationship.

All of that and so much more is only possible for you and me because Jesus died on the cross and rose again!

And that was only possible, because God blessed these men and women with the children he wanted them to have so that, down the line, his son would be born as one of their descendants.

God didn't rely on Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to bring such blessings to you and me here today.

Any more than he relies on you and me today to bring such blessings to us.

He doesn't bless us with the offer of forgiveness and eternal life because we deserve it.

Because of all the good works that we do that somehow outweigh the bad we do and the good we can't be bothered to do.

We deserve God's grace no more than any of these characters we've been thinking about.

No, it has always been, and will always be, and can only ever be, of his grace alone.

Jacob learns to grasp onto God's grace alone - chapter 32

Jacob finally returns home with his family and his livestock.

Even that is an amazing story of God's grace, but the final thing I want you to note is in chapter 32v9.

Listen to what Jacob prays the first time we see him pray in the story, and see the transformation that God's grace has brought about in him.

'O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, O LORD, who said to me, 'Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper', I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I've become two groups. Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I'm afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children. But you said, 'I'll surely make you prosper and make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which can't be counted.'

There is nothing there about what Jacob deserves.

Nothing about what Jacob has achieved.

Only repeated acknowledgements of God's grace and of Jacob's complete dependence on God's faithfulness.

It is up to God now to keep his word to bless all nations through his descendants, and Jacob knows that.

Yesterday was the day in 1517 when Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to a door and started the Reformation.

Because he had discovered what Jacob discovered.

Luther had been taught all his life that the way to be accepted by God was to trust in Jesus and do good deeds.

What he slowly discovered as he read the book of Romans, was that the blessings of the Gospel are free.

Forgiveness is simply the result of God's grace, freely given.

On the cross, my sin was paid for by Jesus.

My righteousness, my good standing with God, is a gift.

There is nothing left for me to do except to accept this gift.

That's why the word gospel means Good News!

He called it 'The sweet exchange' and he put it this way.

'You, Lord Jesus, are my righteousness and I am your sin, you have taken on yourself what you were not and have given to me what I am not.'

Jacob's story ends in Egypt and once again he is faced with the question, will God be true to His word?

But this time the man who was a grasper and a deceiver is a man who believes and trusts in the grace of God.

So asks that his bones be buried back in the land God had promised to him and his father and grandfather.

That is how sure he now is that God keeps his promises.

What are you trusting in?

Let go of your own efforts and grasp onto God's gracious offer of eternal life as it is held out to you in the gospel.

Then you will find, weird as it may seem, that God is gripping you, grasping hold of you, with His grace.

And God's grace never fails.

Prayer (do business)