

## **“JACOB: A LIFE BORN IN STRUGGLE”** **(Genesis 25:19-26)**

Today we begin a new series on the life of Jacob. One of my goals in preaching is to preach the whole counsel of God’s Word, and to go back and forth between the Old and New Testament. The Bible communicates God’s will in a rich variety of ways – through history, through stories, through poetry, through doctrine and instruction, and through prophecy – and to expose ourselves to the fullness of God’s revelation, I like to pick books that are different than the ones we just studied.

A couple of years ago I started preaching on the book of Genesis, and rather than tackle the whole book at one time, we studied the first eleven chapters, and went to something else. We came back to Genesis and covered the life of Abraham – then we went back to the New Testament and studied Ephesians. Now we’re back in Genesis, starting at chapter 25, and Lord willing – no promises – we will make it all the way to chapter 50.

One of the hard parts in preparing a sermon is deciding how many verses to cover each week. Some pastors go really, really deep into just a few verses and some bite off bigger chunks. I try to be somewhere in the middle. I don’t want to be in Genesis for the next three years and miss out on the rest of God’s Word, yet I want to take the time understand and apply each passage as much as possible.

The last 25 chapters of Genesis highlight the life of two men: Jacob and Joseph, and we begin by looking at the fascinating life of Jacob. One of the most well-known stories in Jacob’s life is when he wrestled with an angel and God renamed him *Israel* – which means “struggle.” The word “struggle” is the key word that summarizes Jacob’s life. His life was born in struggle and the rest of his life was largely defined by struggle.

The first time I taught through the life of Jacob I wasn’t real excited about it because there’s not a lot to like about Jacob. Unlike his son Joseph, who had excellent character qualities, Jacob – according to one commentator – was a rascal. His flaws are laid out on the pages of scripture for all to see. Joseph really preaches well, but what about a guy like Jacob? I’ve since come to really appreciate the life of Jacob because he’s so relatable. He struggled, and I struggle. He’s flawed, and I’m flawed. He was a work in progress, and I’m a work in progress. Yet despite his imperfections, God chose Him to be a vital part of His plan to save the world. Jacob’s story is the story of a man who struggled to become the man God wanted him to be, and over the course of his life he became that man. Jacob’s story, in many ways, is our story.

To understand Jacob, we have to understand the family he was born into. 160 years before Jacob was born, God called his grandfather Abraham in Genesis 12 to be the father of a people God would use to rescue and redeem the world. The first eleven chapters of Genesis set up the basic storyline of the Bible – God created human beings in His image to rule the world on His behalf, but humans choose sin and rebellion, and the world spins out of control, all leading up the rebellion and scattering of the people at the Tower of Babel. The big question is: What is God going to do to rescue and redeem His world?

Out of the scattering of people at Babel, Genesis 11 traces a genealogy of one family that leads to a man named Abraham. Through Abraham God enacts a plan to save the world. God calls Abraham to leave his home and go to the land of Canaan, and promises to make from him a great nation with many descendants. He promises to bless him and give him the land of Canaan as his inheritance.

The ultimate purpose for God blessing Abraham is so that all the peoples of the earth would be blessed through him. The whole rest of the Old Testament focuses on Abraham's family, which eventually would become known as Israel – the name given to Jacob. All of the promises made to Abraham and Israel are ultimately fulfilled in Jesus, who rescues us from sin and redeems what has been lost through man's rebellion.

The promises made to Abraham are directly linked to the promise given to Eve in Genesis 3:15 after the fall. God told Eve that her offspring would crush the head of the serpent, reverse the curse of sin, and bring us back into a relationship with God. Eve was not told who the promised offspring would be, but the expectation all through the Old Testament is that someone would come and restore all that has been lost, and that person would come through Abraham.

In order for God's plan of redemption to be enacted, Abraham needed a son – he needed offspring to carry on the promise that would eventually be fulfilled in Jesus. The dominant theme in Abraham's story is that while God promised him a son, his wife Sarah was barren. Year after year they waited for a child, yet none came. At one point Sarah suggested that Abraham have a child with her servant Hagar, which resulted in the birth of Ishmael. Abraham wanted Ishmael to be the son of promise, but God made it clear that Abraham's heir would come through Sarah. Finally, in Genesis 21, after 25 years of waiting, Abraham and Sarah have a baby boy they name Isaac.

In chapter 25 the baton is passed from Abraham to Isaac. Abraham did not live to see God's promises fulfilled, but entrusted Isaac to be the steward of the family blessing. We pick up the story in Genesis 25:5-6... “Abraham left everything he owned to Isaac. But while he was still living, he gave gifts to the sons of his concubines and sent them away from his son Isaac to the land of the east.” After Sarah died, Abraham married Keturah and through her had several children listed in verses 1-4. Abraham blessed each of these children with gifts, but he sent them away, symbolizing that Isaac was the heir of the promise.

He also did this in chapter 21 when he sent Ishmael away. The descendants of Ishmael are listed in verses 12-18. Ishmael became the father of the Arab people, while Isaac was the father of the Jewish people, and the conflict between these people groups – that carries on to this day – can be traced back to what happens here. Verse 18 says that the descendants of Ishmael lived in hostility to the tribes related to them, and this hostility will be seen for centuries to come as his descendants prove to be a thorn in the flesh for the people of Israel.

In verses 7-8 we read... “Abraham lived a hundred and seventy-five years. Then Abraham breathed his last and died at a good old age, an old man and full of years; and he was gathered to his people.” Abraham fulfilled God's purpose in his generation, and now it was time for the next generation to step up. Charles Wesley said, “God buries His workman, but carries on His work.” Each of us is given a short assignment on earth, and we are to faithfully serve God in our generation. Once we pass on, God uses the next generation to serve His purposes, and as a church we are responsible to faithfully pass the baton to the next generation.

In verses 19-20 we read... “This is the account of the family line of Abraham's son Isaac. Abraham became the father of Isaac, and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah daughter of Bethuel the Aramean from Paddan Aram and sister of Laban the Aramean.”

This takes us back to the events of Genesis 24 where God providentially provides a wife for Isaac. Abraham wanted Isaac to marry someone from his side of the family – not a local Canaanite girl – but someone who would honor God and share his values. So Abraham sent his servant east where – through a series of divine circumstances – God led him to Rebekah, the daughter of Abraham’s nephew Bethuel. Jacob would later go east himself to work for Rebekah’s brother Laban and marry two of his daughters.

Just as Abraham waited 25 years to have Isaac, Isaac waited 40 years to find a wife. A common theme with all the patriarchs in Genesis is that they waited. Nothing came easy and nothing came fast. And the theme of waiting continues in verse 21a... “Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife, because she was childless.” First, Sarah was barren, and now the same thing happens to Rebekah.

Barrenness becomes another theme in Genesis – Abraham’s wife was barren, now Isaac’s wife is, and later on Jacob’s wife Rachel would be barren. We read this and ask “Why?” In Genesis one God commanded Adam to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, and Isaac and Sarah want to do just this. What’s more, God promised each of these women a child, and yet each waited several years before they had a child. What is God teaching through these stories of barrenness? For one thing, they remind us that having children is a work of God. You can go into marriage planning how many kids you’ll have and how you will space them out, and you quickly find out that you’re not in control of that. Isaiah 66:9 says that God opens and closes wombs. To be born or to be born again (physical and spiritual life) is not something you can create – life can only be received as a gift.

We also see that when Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel finally do have children, it will be a miraculous work of God – it will not be the result of anything they did, or a source of pride in their efforts – it will be completely a work of God – which is a picture of the gospel. We all are born spiritual barren, dead in our trespasses and sins, and the only way we can be born again and receive the life of God is by God’s grace.

As a man of faith, Isaac prays to the Lord on behalf of Sarah. I can imagine he prayed something like this, “Lord, ever since I was little, I’ve heard my father talk about your promises – promises about our family being a great nation with many descendants. I waited 40 years for a wife, and you graciously gave me one. Rebekah and I have done everything right – we waited to marry someone of like faith – we have dedicated our lives to serve you – and we’re ready to get on with a family – and we’re not getting any younger. Please, Lord, hear our prayer and grant us a child.”

Verse 21b says... “The Lord answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant.” Altogether, Isaac and Rebekah waited twenty years to have a child. Warren Wiersbe said, “God is never in a hurry.” Have you found that to be true? I can’t think of anything God has done in my life I would classify as quick. Waiting molds and shapes us – it strips us of our pride and self-dependence, and develops within us a character that we would never have without waiting. Paul Tripp says, “Waiting is not just about what you get at the end of the wait, but about who you become as you wait.” We learn things through waiting that we would otherwise never learn. Instead of growing weary in waiting, embrace it as a necessary part of God fulfilling His plan in your life.

Rebekah becomes pregnant, but then another problem arises. Verse 22... “The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, ‘Why is this happening to me?’ So she went to inquire of the Lord.” We find out that Rebekah is carrying not one, but two, babies. God gave her a double blessing. But her blessing turns to trauma. Inside her womb, the two babies begin to jostle. Jostle is a strong word. Rebekah is deeply troubled, and can’t fathom what is going on inside her.

Some translations say they “struggled” within her. How interesting that the name that would later be given to Jacob characterizes his life from the very beginning. Jacob’s entire life is immersed in struggle and conflict.

- He struggles here with Esau in the womb.
- Next week we’ll see that he struggles with Esau over the family birthright.
- Later he struggles with his father-in-law Laban over several things.
- He struggles throughout life with his wives and children.
- He struggles with himself and the character flaws that dog him.
- In chapter 32 he struggles with God – and this event will prove to be a turning point in his life.
- Later in life, Jacob will struggle with extreme grief, thinking that his beloved son Joseph had been killed.

Jacob’s life, in many ways, was a sad life. It was a life of struggle and heartache. Some of his struggles were the result of his own poor choices, and some were the result of living in a sinful, broken world. Through the years Sharla and I have noticed that no one is immune from struggles. We may think that some people have it easy, but behind the scenes everyone has hardships and heartaches – they just come in different packages.

Jesus made it clear that following Him does not eliminate problems – in many ways, becoming a Christian makes life harder. Jesus said, “In this world you will have tribulation” (John 16:33). Job said, “Man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upwards” (Job 5:7). Struggle in a fallen world is normal and expected, and this is what the life of Jacob teaches us. His life also teaches us another important principle – struggling doesn’t mean that God has removed His hand of blessing and favor on our lives. God used Jacob in spite of himself, and through struggle He shaped and molded him into the man he wanted him to be. Knowing that struggle and blessing coexist at the same time gives us perspective in the midst of the struggle.

What happened inside Rebekah’s womb shakes her. So much depended on this pregnancy – all their hopes and dreams rested on having these babies. She can’t fathom what is going on, and probably wonders if she is going to die. She asks the question every Christian eventually asks: “Why? Why is this happening to me? Did I do something wrong? Isaac and I waited twenty years to get pregnant, and now this? Why, Lord?” Rebekah joins a long list of people in the Bible who asked God “Why?”

- Moses asked, “Why have you brought trouble upon your servant? What have I done to displease you?” (Numbers 11:11).
- David asked, “Why, Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” (Psalm 10:1).
- Habakkuk asked, “Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?” (Habakkuk 1:3).
- Job asked, “Why have you made me your target? Why did I not perish at birth?” (Job 7:20; 3:11).
- Even Jesus on the cross asked, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46).

Rebekah does what we all should do when we don’t understand the ways of God. Verse 22 says she “inquired” of the Lord. Rather than be mad at God and boycott God, she seeks to understand what God is up to.

Instead of asking God “why,” perhaps a better question to ask is “What? What do you want to do in this struggle? What good are you trying to accomplish in this? What bigger plan is there in all this? What growth and maturity can come out of this?” God invites our honest inquiry. He’s not bothered by us asking hard questions – He can handle it. He wants us to seek Him and understand His ways.

His answer in verse 23 launches us into the whole story of Jacob... “The Lord said to her, ‘Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger.’”

“The reason you feel so much turmoil is because you have two nations in your womb. These two babies going at each other inside you is a foretaste of a conflict that will extend far into the future.” God reveals four things about these babies. One, they will form two nations. Two, they will be separated – meaning that they will have continual conflict. Three, one nation will be stronger than the other. And four, the older will serve the younger.

The story continues in verses 24-26... “When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb. The first to come out was red, and his whole body was like a hairy garment; so they named him Esau. After this, his brother came out, with his hand grasping Esau’s heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when Rebekah gave birth to them.”

In the ancient world it was common to name your children around the circumstances of their birth, much like the American Indians named their children by an event or animal they saw at the time of their birth. Isaac and Rebekah named their firstborn Esau, which means “red.” Red had something to do with his appearance, and was the same word use of King David, who was described as “ruddy.” Ruddy means to have a healthy complexion, and was symbolic of strength and power. That was Esau. It also says that Esau’s whole body was like a hairy garment, symbolizing that he would be rugged and aggressive – a man’s man. Esau is often pictured as some wild, unattractive beast – but it’s probably more accurate to picture him as handsome, athletic, and charismatic. He possessed all the qualities that make a person attractive in the world’s eyes.

The second-born son they named Jacob, which means “heel-grabber” or “supplanter.” It’s not a real flattering name, but he’s named this because he’s grabbing Esau’s heel as they were coming out of the birth canal. He may have been second-born, but he’s saying, “I’m right behind you, big brother, and I have no intentions of you calling the shots.” Later in the story we learn that Jacob would be the heir to the promises given to Abraham and Isaac – and would go on to have twelve sons that are known as the twelve sons or tribes of Israel – and from the nation of Israel would come Jesus, the Messiah.

And in Jacob we’re introduced to another theme in Genesis, and that is how often God overturns the natural order of blessing the firstborn son and intervenes to have the second-born son blessed...

- It happened early in Genesis when Abel’s sacrifice was accepted over Cain’s.
- Then Seth was chosen to carry on the godly line of Adam instead of his older brother Cain.
- It happened again when Isaac was chosen to be the son of promise over his older brother Ishmael.
- It happens later in Genesis when the first three sons of Jacob are passed over in favor of Judah.
- And it happens when Joseph’s younger son Ephraim is given precedence over his older son Manasseh.

What makes this significant is that it overturns the natural order of the world. The ancient world operated according to the law of primogeniture. Primogeniture was the right granted to the firstborn male child of receiving his father's inheritance, as well as the mantle of authority in the family. This means that this honor would naturally go to Esau, who was born a few seconds ahead of Jacob. How many of you are firstborn? There's a certain bit of pride that comes from being the oldest sibling. I am the youngest in my family, and the oldest was my brother who preceded me by seven years. There was no doubt who the boss was – and he made sure my sister and I knew it.

What is God saying in all these switches between second-born and firstborn in Genesis? He's saying, first of all, that He sovereignly chooses whom He will, and over and over in the Bible He chooses the least-likely person – the exact opposite of the kind of person the world would choose. The Apostle Paul could very well have been writing about Jacob in 1 Corinthians 1:26-27... “Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.”

God choose all these second-born sons in order to shame the wise and the strong of the world, and to show that His blessing on their lives was completely the result of grace and not anything they did. All of which is a picture of the gospel.

So what can we learn – what can we take away by way of application – from this story today?

- The first would be accepting that life is a struggle, and we shouldn't let hardships and heartaches take us by surprise. We can take heart in the fact that struggle and blessing can coexist at the same time.
- We shouldn't be afraid to ask God why, as long as we are seeking a deeper understanding of what He's trying to do. These difficult times of waiting and wondering can be some of the richest times of growth.
- By God overturning the law of primogeniture, it pictures that our salvation is not based on human effort – or anything in which we can take pride – it is based on God's grace – we simply receive His grace by faith.