

From Rascal to Revered
The Big Story: Promises
Jacob, Genesis 28 and 32
Small Group Guide

Opening Icebreaker

- Who is the most famous person you've ever encountered and what happened, if anything?

Optional Background Reading:

Today we're talking about transformation. But not the kind that the internet has enabled to happen overnight. The kind we're talking about *can* happen in an instant, but usually it plays out over time, through encounters with God.¹

Take turns READING Genesis 28:10-22.²

1. In the background reading, we learn that Jacob's life of deceit has caught up with him and now he is destitute – he's on the run from his brother, Esau, who wants to kill him. What do you think is the relationship between deceit and destitution? Always happens, often, sometimes, not as often as you'd like for some people, politicians, etc.? ☺
2. In v12, God gives Jacob the Schemer a vision of heaven that no human has ever seen before. Why did you think God did that and why at this time in Jacob's life?
3. In vv13-15 God reiterates his Promise to Abraham. What are all the components of this promise? Describe.
4. Pastor Josh states that Jacob's life shows incredible transformation and that **there are four ingredients to this transformation.** The first ingredient is, "You must come to God humbly." In other words, you must recognize that God gives his grace to undeserving people, and approaching him in awe of that grace.
 - a. Why would this recognition be vital to experiencing transformation?
 - b. How does this observation sit with you? Is it hard to swallow?
 - c. How would you describe Jacob's response to the vision (vv. 16-22)? Is there any room for growth in this response?
 - d. How does it compare with Abraham's response (last week's sermon) of "Here I am, Lord" and willingness to sacrifice his only son?
5. Josh's said that the second ingredient to transformation is, **You must encounter God personally.**
 - a. What might Jacob have known *about* God before this encounter?

¹ The background for this story is extensive, so see Attachment 1 if interested.

² During the week, we encourage you to read all of Genesis 28-36.

- b. What does his life show about his relationship with God leading up to this vision?
- c. How does this encounter make his approach to God more personal?
- d. What would you say about your relationship with God currently? Is he more distant, or have you encountered him for yourself?

More Background: (If you have time, consider reading Genesis 29-31 for the details). Jacob continues his journey to his Uncle Laban's house, where he moves in, and gets married to not one, but two women, which creates all kinds of headaches. Over the next 20 years, he becomes quite wealthy. It doesn't come easily, because his Uncle Laban plays Jacob's own game against him, and Jacob has to be especially cunning to not get outsmarted. But over the 20 years, you can see some slow character growth happening in Jacob, and then God speaks to him and says, "It's time to take your family and go back home to the Promised Land" [Canaan, which is modern-day Israel]. There's just one problem. Remember what it is? Esau. And on the night before he knows he will meet Esau, he prays:

Gen 32:9 "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,' 10 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 have become two groups. 11 Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children. 12 But you have said, 'I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.'"

- 6. What aspects of Jacob's prayer show us that some transformation has happened in him? In what respects does this prayer provide us with a model?

After this, Jacob sends his family ahead and he gets alone again. **READ GENESIS 32:22-32.**

- 7. From this passage, Josh said that the third ingredient to transformation is, **You must discover that everything you've sought through God is actually found in God.**³
 - a. As we discussed last week, what "idols" are in your life in which you are trying to find fulfillment (work, spouse, kids, relationship, success, wealth, or even hobby)? What's the difference between seeking God for these things, vs. seeking God for himself?
 - b. How might we turn these over to God and seek God himself? Be practical.
- 8. This passage also shows Josh's fourth ingredient: **You must encounter God in weakness.**

³ Commentators have *wrestled* extensively with this passage and we realize for the sake of time, we are giving you two summary points (or two ingredients of transformation).

- a. We must encounter God in our weakness. As one writer said it, “God has to wrestle us into a transformed life rather than comfort us into a transformed life.” Respond.
 - b. Have you ever wrestled with God? What resulted; did it deepen your faith?
 - c. What does Nathanael’s encounter with Jesus show us about Jacob’s experience in relation to “The Big Story?” See John 1:43-51.
 - d. Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-31. What light do Paul’s words here shed on the idea that we must encounter God in his weakness?
 - e. If Jesus transformed the whole known world through being weak in his death on the cross, how can we “cling to” this reality for our transformation? In other words, what does this knowledge do to bring about transformation in us?
9. Prayer: Among our usual prayer requests, let’s pray that we would humbly seek God for the radical transformation that is only found in a grace-filled relationship with him.

Attachment 1 – Back Story to Jacob

The last two weeks we looked at God's promises to **Abraham**. God promised to give this man and his barren, elderly wife a son named Isaac, through whom he would have numerous descendants. God promised to turn them into a great nation, and through one particular descendant, to bless and restore people of every nation. God had also promised to give Abraham's descendants their very own special land.

Isaac grows up and marries Rebekah. God makes Isaac very prosperous. His wife Rebekah is childless, so Isaac prays, and Rebekah conceives **twins**. While she's pregnant, she feels not only the normal kicking in the womb, but the feeling that the two babies are wrestling inside of her. She inquires of the LORD, who tells her that the two babies are fathers of two nations, and contrary to the cultural norm, "The older will serve the younger" (25:23). In those days, remember, the firstborn received the bulk of the family inheritance and was looked to as the most prominent member of the family. When she gave birth, the second baby to come out of her womb was grasping the heel of the first, so they named him **Jacob**, which means, "He grasps the heel," an idiom for, "He deceives." And that name would be an apt description for the man.

The older son is named **Esau**. For twins, they are as different as can be. Esau is the All-American jock. He's a big, hairy, masculine, muscular man who is a great hunter. And his dad, Isaac, loves him for it. Jacob is more the urbane, sophisticated boy who likes to stay home with his mom. So in terms of having a financial future, and having the approval of his father, Jacob was at a disadvantage. But he was smart, and conniving, and he found a way to sneak around and get what he wanted.

One day Esau came home famished from a long time in the wilderness, and Jacob convinced Esau to sell his **birthright**—his status as the firstborn—for some stew. Near the end of Isaac's life, their father, Isaac is going blind and realizes he's about to die, and it's time to pass on his **deathbed blessing**—which carried huge weight—to Esau. But because he was blind, Jacob was able to trick him into thinking he was Esau, and stealing the deathbed blessing from Isaac that was intended for Esau.

This was the last straw. The writer tells us in **Gen. 27**, "**41** Esau held a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing his father had given him. He said to himself, 'The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will **kill** my brother Jacob.'" Jacob takes off just in the nick of time to save his skin, and he sets out to find a wife in the region where Abraham and Isaac had come from, knowing that Esau could be hot on his heels. That's where we pick up the story, in Ch. 28:10-22.

And, usually we don't do this, but in order to get to the heart of the passage, we are also providing these details at the beginning of our passage:

Gen 28:10 Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran. **11** 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.

With Hebrew narrative, it's typical to give very few details, and the ones that are given are very significant. From the details here, we can figure out something about what kind of state Jacob is in. "**A certain place.**" Why isn't the place named? Because it's the middle of nowhere. Nothing important has happened there. Jacob, the son of the family of promise, has made such a mess of his life that he can't even get a place to stay, and he has to lay down in the middle of nowhere.

The writer tells us that the **sun had set**, which is partly there to indicate the time of day, but as is often the case in the Bible, the physical darkness is symbolic of much more. The sun has set for Jacob. He is living in utter darkness. He's cut off from his family. He's alienated practically everyone he knows. He's running for his life. He's leaving the Promised Land, wondering if he'll ever get back there.

And the detail about the **stone** is interesting. He may have been using it as a pillow, which, if that's the case, is indicative of the fact that he had absolutely nothing to his name at this point, not even a knapsack or a coat to put under his head. But some scholars think it's more likely that he put stones around his head as a means of protection. He didn't know if Esau or some bandits would come in the night and he would wake up to a crushing blow. He's alone, he's scared, and he's totally defenseless. He's made his bed, and now he has to lie in it.

Summary: Jacob has made a total mess of his life and now is a poor wanderer, e.g., homeless!