

**Wrestling with God – The Story of Jacob
Blessings, Birthrights, and a Bowl of Stew
January 2, 2011 Ben Bainbridge**

Today we are beginning a new series called Wrestling with God by looking into the story of Jacob found in the last half of Genesis. As a kid I enjoyed Saturdays in the living room with my dad watching professional wrestling. You know the type...where a 300 lbs man in brightly colored spandex is trying to rip the head off of another 300 lbs man in equally dazzling spandex. There is Sumo wrestling, Greco Roman wrestling, thumb wrestling, mud wrestling, and then there's my all time favorite after the holidays type of wrestling called, "the Early-Sunday morning-try-to-get-those-pants-to-fit-because obviously the washer shrunk them over the holidays"-wrestling.

We wrestle internally as well... with decisions in life...with right and wrong...with our consciences...with tough questions about faith....with too many things to list them all this morning. So, in one way or another, we all wrestle with something in life.

In many ways, the entire Bible echoes the story of Jacob. After all, Jacob was the father of Israel...his name was later changed to Israel and his life was characterized by deception, by being part of a dysfunctional family, conflict, and he is known as the only human who had physically wrestled with God and lived to tell about it. In spite of all of this, God used Jacob in some incredible ways. And in his story, we are going to see some insights into who God is, and who he calls us to be. So, if you have ever wrestled with God, the next few weeks might be just what you have needed.

The story of Jacob has a lot of flavor for those who listened to them thousands of years ago. The story would have entertained its listeners in ways that we might not see today. The story told the Israelites a lot about themselves, about God, and about their neighbors...in particular, the Edomites.

By the time these stories were written down, some time after the time of Jacob, the descendants were all ready living in the land...Canaan by this time is now Israel to the north and the Edomites to the south.

Edom is made up of the descendants of Jacob's brother...Esau. One thing this story does is explain why Jacob's descendants, Israel,, have a better peace of land than Esau's...Edom. In a way this is a jab at the Edomites and would have been a bit comical to the Israelites who told and retold this story for hundreds of years.

To imagine the rivalry of these two nations it is best to imagine the rivalry locally of the MSSU and PITT. Rivalry in college sports is kinda a fun thing. Each school takes up good jokes about their adversary, and sometimes at sporting events tempers can flare a bit. For the most part though, its all in good fun. Sometimes the Edomites and Israelites tweaked one another...and sometimes things got worse and they took up arms against one another. This is the story of these two nations and peoples.

So, we are going to be telling the story of Jacob and Esau over the next four weeks...and I want to start today with some different scenes starting with the beginning of the story...**The Birth of Jacob and Esau.**

Lets start by reading in Genesis 25: 23, but first, let me setup the scene. Jacob and Esau's father was Isaac whose father was Abraham. You know....from the song..."Father Abraham, had many sons....many sons had father Abraham." Isaac's wife was Rebekah and after 20 years of not being able to have children, and Isaac's prayers to the Lord for children, they find that she is pregnant. (Isaac was 60 at this time and Rebekah was about 40) She is experiencing pains, like there is a battle going on within her womb, that don't seem right so she's asking the Lord, "Why is this happening to me?" And this is the reply she got.

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." (vs 23 NIV)

Okay, this explains what she is experiencing. TWINS! Twins that are all ready wrestling with one another in the womb. These twin boys will be the beginnings of two different nations that are not

going to get along too well. Another thing we learn in this is that one nation will serve another, in fact the younger will twin, and nation will be served by the older brother. This surprising prediction contradicts the ancient social principles where the firstborn has the right and responsibility to rule the family and preserve its property after the father dies. This reversal of the normal social order of things is important in the Jacob story...as well as throughout the scriptures. Jesus even tells us that the first shall be last and the last shall be first. This is a consistent theme in the Bible that we looked at in the Ripple Effect a couple months ago...God roots for the underdog. Lets continue in the story...

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. (vs 24-26)

Now, to an audience 4,000 years ago, this would have gotten a few laughs. Here's why. The boys are born and out comes one boy with his brother grabbing his heel right behind him. That must have been an interesting visual to have seen. Rebekah names the first son Esau, which means "hairy". Does this sound like a pretty baby to you? He is also referred to as Edom which means "red".

Rebekah names the second son Jacob, which means "heel-catcher" or to pull someone's heel. Today our use of this phrase would be more like "leg-puller". You know, like pulling someone's leg is a term that is used when we refer to trying to trick someone. Wow, Rebekah, what a beautiful boys you have. What did you name them? "Hairy and Trickster." What does this tell us about the story to come? Well, with a Jacob (trickster) in the house, Esau will have to watch out or get burned on occasion. That's just what happened. Esau grows up to be a rugged outdoors men who is the apple of his father's eye...and Jacob is more of a home body, would rather hang out in the tents all day, and is the favorite of his mother. He's a momma's boy, more refined, with the knack for a more domestic life. This is the family dynamic for what is to come in the story.

So with this in mind, let's look at another scene...**A Bowl of Stew and the Birthright.**

Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished. He said to Jacob, "Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I'm famished!" (That is why he was also called Edom.) The word for Red is Edom. His descendants are called Edomites...named after a red bowl of stew.

Jacob replied, "First sell me your birthright." "Look, I am about to die," Esau said. "What good is the birthright to me?" But Jacob said, "Swear to me first." Jacob is tricking his brother here for the birthright...the power and property of his father after he dies...all for a bowl of red stew.

So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, and then got up and left. So Esau despised his birthright. (vs 29-34 NIV)

Think about this story. It's kinda over the top. Esau has been doing his manly man things out in the country and comes in famished. He wants some of that stew and he wants it now. So trickster says, "sure, but first give me your birthright." What is the birthright? It's the inheritance. I just worked on some retirement stuff this week and in it my children are beneficiaries in equal portions. In Jacob and Esau's day the oldest would get a double portion of the inheritance. So the estate would be divided up into three parts instead of two. Esau would get 2/3rds and Jacob would get 1/3rd. So, for one bowl of stew, Esau is willing to give up half of his inheritance.

I don't know about you, but that must have been some really good stew for the price. The point is, Esau despised his birthright. He did not care for it like he should of. Now this is to explain why his descendants, the Edomites, have a worse piece of land than Jacob's descendants, but it also points out what happens when we are driven by instantaneous gratification. Esau's desires of that one moment were more important to him than the future of himself and even his family.

Maybe you've been there. I have before. Getting so wrapped up in our own wants in the moment that we jeopardize our future. Mounting up so much debt on nothing important so that we spend years trying to free ourselves from that debt. Or, having a sexual craving that we indulge in and in as a result we throw away careers or marriages, families are destroyed, reputations ruined, all for a

brief moment of physical pleasure. Those are some drastic examples, but you understand that sometimes we all wrestle with wanting what ever “it” is and wanting it now.

Now that’s Esau, but what about Jacob? What can we learn from the father of Israel? What type of man s Jacob in this? Manipulative? Selfish? Jacob takes advantage of his brother in this. He seizes his moment to get a leg up in life...at the expense of his own relationship with his family. When have we been like Jacob? When have we taken credit for something we did not do in order to be looked more favorably upon by a boss or teacher? When have we seized our moments for personal gain at the expense of others? At think in some small ways, we’ve all been both Esau and Jacob at some point.

Let’s continue in the story a little later...let’s move forward to chapter 27. Esau and Isaac are 40 now and their father Isaac is dying. (27:1-4) **When Isaac was old and his eyes were so weak that he could no longer see, he called for Esau his older son and said to him, “My son.” “Here I am,” he answered. Isaac said, “I am now an old man and don’t know the day of my death. Now then, get your equipment—your quiver and bow—and go out to the open country to hunt some wild game for me. Prepare me the kind of tasty food I like and bring it to me to eat, so that I may give you my blessing before I die.”**

But Rebekah, Hairy and Trickster’s mom steps into the story...take a look at what she does.

(v 5- 10) Now Rebekah was listening as Isaac spoke to his son Esau. When Esau left for the open country to hunt game and bring it back, Rebekah said to her son Jacob, “Look, I overheard your father say to your brother Esau, ‘Bring me some game and prepare me some tasty food to eat, so that I may give you my blessing in the presence of the LORD before I die.’ Now, my son, listen carefully and do what I tell you: Go out to the flock and bring me two choice young goats, so I can prepare some tasty food for your father, just the way he likes it. Then take it to your father to eat, so that he may give you his blessing before he dies.” (and you might be thinking that your family is a bit dysfunctional...here is a biblical definition of dysfunction)

(v 11- 22) Jacob said to Rebekah his mother, “But my brother Esau is a hairy man while I have smooth skin. What if my father touches me? I would appear to be tricking him and would bring down a curse on myself rather than a blessing.” His mother said to him, “My son, let the curse fall on me. Just do what I say; go and get them for me.”

So he went and got them and brought them to his mother, and she prepared some tasty food, just the way his father liked it. Then Rebekah took the best clothes of Esau her older son, which she had in the house, and put them on her younger son Jacob. She also covered his hands and the smooth part of his neck with the goatskins. Then she handed to her son Jacob the tasty food and the bread she had made.

He went to his father and said, “My father.” “Yes, my son,” he answered. “Who is it?” Jacob said to his father, “I am Esau your firstborn. I have done as you told me. Please sit up and eat some of my game, so that you may give me your blessing.” Isaac asked his son, “How did you find it so quickly, my son?” “The LORD your God gave me success,” he replied. (Notice Jacob’s mentioning of God as Isaac’s God, and not his own. This will be important later in the story)

(v 21-27) Then Isaac said to Jacob, “Come near so I can touch you, my son, to know whether you really are my son Esau or not.” Jacob went close to his father Isaac, who touched him and said, “The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau.” He did not recognize him, for his hands were hairy like those of his brother Esau; so he proceeded to bless him. “Are you really my son Esau?” he asked. “I am,” he replied.

Then he said, “My son, bring me some of your game to eat, so that I may give you my blessing.” Jacob brought it to him and he ate; and he brought some wine and he drank. Then his father Isaac said to him, “Come here, my son, and kiss me.” So he went to him and kissed him. When Isaac caught the smell of his clothes, he blessed him...”

There you have it. Jacob, with the help and encouragement of his mother once again takes advantage of the situation for personal gain. This is a big deal. The death-bed blessing is critical in these times. The words of the father give power to and shape the future of the son that he gives them to. Not just the son, but the family as well. You may ask, “Why not just take back the blessing, or say it

again to Esau?" Isaac's world saw words as potent, not trivial (unlike ours, which says, "They're just words"). Often we can't just say, "I didn't mean it" and undo the harm words cause. Later we will see that Esau's words at the end are angry and ominous. We might not be familiar with this type of blessing in our culture, but think about this. We all speak blessings into other's lives. Our children, our friends, other people in general. And at the same time we all have the ability to speak curses or negativity into others lives.

Our words carry with them a tremendous amount of power. Do you understand that? So, who are you blessing? Words have an amazing ability to build people up and tear them down. Once at the store I can remember hearing a woman, who I assume must have been having a bad day, raise her voice to her child. Now, I don't know what transpired before this sentence, but it was this sentence that she said that has stuck with me for years. In front of everyone around she rather loudly asked her kid, "What's wrong with you? Are you just stupid?" The look in her child's eyes was one of instant deflation. He was humiliated in that moment, and I can only imagine that the humiliation did not end instantly. I imagine that he had heard that comment before. What do we learn from this? Speak blessings into others. Who are you blessing?

Now, Esau has come back into the picture later that day and Isaac realizes what has happened. I guess it is safe to say that Esau is pretty ticked off. He goes into his father and asks, "Dad, don't you have a second blessing for me?" Sadly, the blessing had been given. Jacob has made off with the blessing, the fortune, the future and in verse 41 we see that "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." Yep...I think Esau is ticked. You would be too right?

Rebekah hears all of this and sends Jacob away for protection. Jacob runs and takes refuge with a relative in the land of Haran until the time it is safe for him to return. Kind of ironic isn't it? A blessing and inheritance doesn't do much good if you can't stay home to receive them does it? Another tragic part of this story is that that day when Jacob could return home to his mother did not happen. Rebekah died before she was able to see her beloved son again.

I want to finish up the story today in chapter 28. Jacob is on the run...headed to another land and has to stop for the night to rest. And as he sleep he had a dream and encounters God. You may have heard of it referred to as Jacob's Ladder. At the top of this staircase he saw reaching up to heaven stood the Lord and he said, **“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.”** (v 13-15)

And check out Jacob's reaction... **When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it." He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."** (v 16-17) Jacob finally got it. He recognized God at work around him and in him.

Here is the thing...here is the take away for us. Even though Jacob was deceitful. He was selfish and heartless toward his own flesh and blood...God still wants to connect with Jacob and do something great with his life...and God wants to connect with you, even when you have been Jacob. Jacob has a change...his life will never be the same, and as a result, ours can be the same. If we let it. In the next few weeks we will see some of the greatness that happens as a result of this tricksters conversion. But for today, may you fully know that regardless of where you are in this life, what part of life's story you are writing, whatever you are wrestling with, whatever you've done or are doing...God calls out to you. He wants to be your God, your hope, your future. And that is good news.

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