

“The Surprising Story of Jacob”

Robert M. Thompson, Pastor

Corinth Reformed Church
150 Sixteenth Avenue NW
Hickory, North Carolina 28601
828.328.6196 corinthtoday.org

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“If God could use Jacob, he can use anybody!” (E. V. Hill)

Genesis 28:10-22

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Alone, anxious, and afraid

What happens when life turns out exactly like you dreamed, and it’s somewhere between disappointing and terrifying?

That’s what happened to a man named Jacob and his mother Rebekah. The two of them conspired to have all of the rights and blessings of Jacob’s older brother Esau, the firstborn, transferred to Jacob. Their plan worked to perfection. I don’t know if they ever thought about what would happen next. Maybe that Esau would say this? “I’m so happy for you, younger brother! Just think how blessed your future is going to be! Isn’t our mother wonderful for working all this out?” Not a chance.

Instead, Esau hated his mother and conspired to kill his twin. And he could do it. He was not only capable physically, but emotionally. Now Rebekah and her Mama’s boy, the homebody tied to his mother’s apron strings, faced the terrifying prospect that Esau would recover that birthright and blessing by murdering his twin. Jacob and his mother have exactly what they had worked half a century to achieve. And it’s not what they imagined. Instead, it’s horrifying.

Can anyone relate? I can. I remember (foolishly) telling a small prayer group in seminary thirty years ago that someday I wanted to pastor a church of 2000 members. One day this past week within the space of a few hours I went from a peaceful day to dealing with all sorts of unplanned challenges. I started thinking a church of about 200 would be really nice.

So it goes. Maybe you finally got that promotion you dreamed about. Maybe you snagged that dream spouse. Perhaps you finally got out of the marriage that was

stifling you. Maybe you achieved a goal you never thought possible. Perhaps you finally had the courage to tell somebody off when you've been holding it in. Maybe you bought that car or home or vacation you've dreamed about. Whatever it is, you've accomplished what you thought you wanted to do for...almost ever. Now that you're there, you realize your dream comes in a package deal with surprising costs – maybe financial, but definitely relational and spiritual. The satisfaction is not there, the joy is not there, the certainty is not there.

If that's your world, you can relate to Jacob. He's alone, anxious, and afraid.

Shaggy and Liar

Jacob is one of the big three often linked – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the patriarchs. We've been talking about Abraham for a few weeks. Isaac gets much less attention in Genesis, except for his birth and his old age. Jacob we know more about.

When Rebekah was pregnant with twins, the LORD spoke to her and said, "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" (25:23). So it's unfair to put all the blame for Jacob's story on Jacob. From before he was born, his mother knew it was God's will for Jacob to be the chosen one. She just went about it in the wrong way, passing on her devious nature to her favorite son.

The first of the twins to emerge from the womb was covered with red hair, so they named him "Shaggy." That's what "Esau" means. They also called him "Edom," which means "Red." His younger brother emerged holding on to Esau's foot, so they named the second boy "Heel Gripper." That's what "Jacob" means. But it has a figurative meaning as well: "Deceiver." So Jacob was called "Liar" from birth.

Shaggy was a man's man. He was Daniel Boone, Tim the Tool Man, and Luke Kuechly rolled into one. His Dad, Isaac, loved the wild game he brought home.

Liar, on the other hand, was a Mama's Boy. He loved the quiet life at home, enjoyed cooking and hanging around the tents. That's OK with you're 5 or 10 or even 15. Liar was still Mama's boy in his 20s, 30s, and even into his 40s.

One day Shaggy came in from a hard day hunting, empty-handed and famished, only to find Liar had been cooking stew all day. Shaggy traded away his rights as the first born son for some of Liar's stew. Whatever! Who cares about the future, right?

When the twins were 40 Shaggy married two Canaanite women. Liar was still Mommy's little helper.

Some time later, when Isaac was old and blind, he called Shaggy in to his room. He said, "Shaggy, go hunt some of that wild game I love, and let's have a roast, my boy. Then I'm going to bless you before I die."

Off Shaggy went, but Rebekah overheard the conversation. Quickly she concocted a plan to have Liar cook up some Shaggy-style food, cover his arms with animal hair, and steal the blessing before Shaggy got back. It worked like she planned it, and Liar stole the father's blessing as well. That led to the murder plot.

Afraid she would lose both her sons, Rebekah then told Isaac he needed to send Liar to the old country to find a wife. "Otherwise," she said, "he's going to marry one of these awful Canaanite women like Shaggy married." Isaac bought that lie as well, and sent Jacob off to find a wife in the same location where Abraham's servant Boolie¹ had found Isaac a wife. As soon as Liar left home, Shaggy realized marrying these Canaanite women wasn't something that pleased Dad, so he married one of his cousins, Ishmael's daughter.

The dream

There's nothing about the story of Liar (Jacob) that will prepare you for what happens next. He's on a journey that will ultimately be 500+ miles, but about 50 or so miles in (probably at least the second day), he stops for the night in a place called Luz, a little north of Jerusalem.

He apparently didn't put a pillow in his backpack, so he used an oblong rock. As he fell asleep, he had a rather strange experience. I'll give you a free paraphrase that combines the Hebrew Bible with my own imagination. What's missing in most translations is a word sometimes translated "Lo!" or "Behold!" I'm going with "Wow!"

And he dreamed. And Wow! a stepladder with its base on the earth and the top reaching heaven. And Wow! God's angels were ascending and descending. And Wow! Yahweh himself was standing at the top.

That's what Jacob *saw*. We don't really know whether it was a ladder, the kind armies would use to scale a wall, a stairway up a ziggurat, or a two-sided ladder, like a stepladder. The messengers were ascending and descending, and God was at the top.

What's more important than what Jacob saw is what he *heard*. His dream also included what Yahweh said. It was mostly a restatement of what God had said to Abraham (12:2-3, 15:1,5; 17:4-8) and Isaac (26:24). It was the promise of descendants who would live in the land where he was sleeping. They would be countless in number, and the blessing would extend from them to the whole world. God also added some personal promises: "I will go with you." "I will watch over you." "I will bring you back to this land."

The words of God addressed Jacob's fears. Remember, he's all alone. His brother wants to kill him. He has a long journey ahead and an uncertain future after that. And he hasn't exactly lived the kind of life that would merit God's favor. He

¹ That was the nickname I gave to Abraham's servant in [last week's sermon](#).

wasn't all bad. Loyal to his Mom he had been a good helper around the house. But he had participated in scheming to steal his brother's birthright and father's blessing.

When Jacob woke up from his dream, it was still night. He was terrified. "Surely the LORD was in this place," he said, "and I was unaware." The visit of your God was usually the occasion for both awe and dread, and both ideas are intertwined in Jacob's response. He adds, "This is none other than the house of God, the gate of heaven."

When he woke up the next day, he stood that oblong rock on its end, poured oil over it, and renamed Luz "Bethel," which means "House of God." This is a place Jacob wants to remember as a place where he met God.

Then he made a "vow," which is different than an oath or a covenant. Remember, it was God who initiated the covenant with Abraham. There's been no covenant ceremony here, no cutting apart of animals, not even placing his hand on anyone's thigh. Jacob is responding to God's blessing with his own promises.

Jacob's been criticized for what he says to God in vv. 20-21, but I'm going along with those who give him the benefit of the doubt. "If" can mean "since," so this is what I think he said in his vow –

God, since you're going with me, and since you're watching over me and providing for me, and since you've promised to bring me safely back, I'm all yours. I will never forget "God's house" where you met me, From this day on I will be a tither.

The Surprising Story

So how does this connect to our lives, particularly to those times when we are disappointed because life didn't turn out like we expected?

First, don't be surprised at the surprise. Adam learned that God creates and instructs. Noah learned that God promises. Abraham learned that God tests and provides. Isaac learned that God guides. Jacob learns that God *surprises*.

When your life takes a dramatic turn for the worse or for the better, and you're standing in a place you never thought you'd be, you can know that what surprises you about this moment is not a surprise to God. He wants to startle you from complacency into action. That's why he will regularly bring the unexpected into your world.

Second, it's time for a heart checkup. I've read or heard opinions this week on whether Jacob was a good guy or a bad guy. Yes. The same is true of Esau, Isaac, and Rebekah. As Aleksander Solzhenitzyn said, "The line between good and evil runs through the heart of every man."

I included that quote in my Pastor's Pen in our church newsletter this week. We want to choose sides about who's good (my side) and bad (your side) in a conflict, like the one right now about the flag, the national anthem, and the NFL. I understand when the issue is important, but the people on both sides have both insights and blind spots. This story, like every other conflict, is not about the good guys v. the bad guys.

What God wants to do when he jolts you with the unexpected (good or bad) is to prompt a spiritual inventory. Where has my love for him grown cold? Where have the idols taken over? Where have I become proud, complacent, or bitter? Where have I isolated myself from people who can speak truth into my life?

Third, prepare to meet God. The part of Jacob's visual dream that captures me the most is the part about angels ascending and descending. Angels have appeared in Genesis before, but not like this. They represent the interchange between God and humans, but in tangible, visible form. Don't get hung up on the angels, but don't overlook them either. God doesn't need angels, as if he's so busy watching over the world he needs help. God uses angels for our sakes. They are sometimes visible in Scripture and in some people's experience, but always a way for us to visualize God's presence, protection, and guidance – his intimate involvement in our lives.

Jesus borrowed from this story in the very first chapter of John's gospel, when he was just beginning to reveal himself to a close circle. Nathanael was amazed that Jesus knew his story without anyone telling him. Jesus answered, "That's just the beginning. You're going to see heaven opened and God's angels ascending and descending." This was the heart of Jesus' mission – to be the ultimate revelation of two-way connection between heaven and earth. God doesn't always use literal angels, but our messages get to him and he speaks to us. Jesus' incarnation is the Ultimate Messenger.

Fourth, remember this is not the end of your story. We're going to take a break from Genesis and come back here after four weeks of pondering the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. When we come back, we'll continue with Jacob's story. That's appropriate, because Jacob's interaction with God is also on and off.

One aspect of the story in Genesis 28 that's most surprising is that God doesn't deal with Jacob's scheming nature. He doesn't discipline him, doesn't rebuke him. Whether Jacob gets it or not, I'm not exactly sure. I do know that 20 years into his story, he's still living out his name, "Liar." He's not fully transformed here. But God is not finished with him.

Ultimately, Jacob's story is about grace. The Apostle Paul uses Jacob's story (and Malachi's quote, "I loved Jacob but hated Esau," as a reminder that God chooses based on his purposes, not on our character. E. V. Hill preached a sermon in chapel when Linda and I were in Columbia Bible College in which he said, "If God can use Jacob, he can use anybody." Amen.