

Title: Grasping - Jacob
Passage: Gen 32:22-30
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Series: Willing Servants

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We have at times used a benediction prayer. From Bill Brown at Syndal Baptist

““Lord I am a willing worker, you are a gracious God, there are seeking souls, Use me today for your purposes”

The prayer has a weak link - ‘willing worker’. There is a mix of willingness. A mix of focus, degree, ability, ambition. In our service, devotion and willingness we are flawed. We can be aware of this and hold ourselves back. We feel unable and therefore unwilling.

We begin a series reflecting on imperfect people who were still willing servants of God.

Flawed People, who was God able to use for his purposes, but they were willing to serve.

Jacob is a complicated man from a complicated family.

This family happen to be the lineage of faith that lead to people of Israel.

Abraham, Isaac, Jacob.

These are people used by God, but as we see in Genesis are far from perfect.

By the time Jacob waits anxiously at the ford of Jabbok he is 97 years old and he knows he has sown and reaped trouble.

Later when he is asked by Pharaoh how old he is he sums up his life “My years have been few and difficult, and they do not equal the years of the pilgrimage of my fathers. (Gen 47:9)

Jacob was born to Isaac and Rebekah and was the younger twin to his brother Esau.

Before he was born Rebekah felt the twins fight and God told 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.” Genesis 25:23

He was given the name Jacob, which has the idea of “grasping”, because he was born holding on to his brother Esau’s heel. This name and the prophecy captured Jacob’s character in key moments of his life.

Jacob was never content to be second at anything. He took every advantage he could to get ahead.

He didn’t want to be second to Esau so he took what Esau had.

We see him grasping for Esau’s birthright in exchange for a bowl of soup.

We see him at his mother’s request grasping Esau’s blessing, in borrowed clothes, taking advantage of his father’s blindness. And taking the blessing intended for Esau’s.

When asked by his father, “Who are you, my son?” He replied, “I am Esau, your firstborn.” (Gen 27:32)

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“28 May God give you heaven’s dew
and earth’s richness —
an abundance of grain and new wine.
29 May nations serve you
and peoples bow down to you.
Be lord over your brothers,
and may the sons of your mother bow down to you.
May those who curse you be cursed
and those who bless you be blessed. Genesis 27:28-29”

This was no trivial matter

When Isaac discovered Jacob’s deceit he trembled violently Genesis 27:33

Esau cried out loudly, bitterly and swore when his father died “The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob.” Genesis 27:41

For fear of his life, his mother sends Jacob away.

He went to his uncle Laban’s family and meets the woman he wants to marry, Rachel.

Jacob must take after Laban as a similar deceit is practiced on him.

After his wedding night, he discovers that he has married Leah, not, as he thought, his beloved Rachel. He complains to Laban

Laban replies: “It is not done in our place to give the younger before the firstborn.”

This is what it is like to taste your own medicine.

Laban clearly knew what Jacob had done to his own older brother.

After Rachel has given birth to Joseph, Jacob wants to return home. Laban urges him to stay and tells him to name his price. Jacob deceives him into a deal from which he significantly profits as his flocks increase more than Laban’s. Laban and his sons are unhappy with the result that Jacob runs away from Laban in fear of his life.

Now after 22 years earlier of running from home, Jacob is returning. He sends a careful message to Esau

Ch 32

‘Your servant Jacob says, I have been staying with Laban and have remained there till now. – I am not hiding from you

5 I have cattle and donkeys, sheep and goats, male and female servants. – I won’t steal what you have
Now I am sending this message to my lord, that I may find favor in your eyes. ” Genesis 32:4-5 – I am coming humbly, wanting to start over.

Esau replies with a force of 400 men.

Jacob, says the Bible, was “very afraid and distressed”

Jacob kicks into contingency planning to placate Esau and protect his own.

- He dispatches gifts of flocks and herds (diplomatic and strategic)
- He prays to God for protection. This is only the 2nd time we see Jacob praying. The 1st at Bethel, and not great. Essence - “If God is good to me then the LORD will be my God” Genesis 28:20-22.
- He divides his camp into two, so that if one is destroyed the other may survive.

This activity is not only covering all the options. It gives us a sense of the stress he is under.

The real struggle is what happens through the night.

Jacob alone at the ford of Jabbok, wrestling.

Who is he wrestling with?

Jacob sees he was wrestling with God “because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.”

Genesis 32:30

He is 97 so can't imagine what kind of wrestle this is. In the end the man cripples Jacob easily.

It must be Jacob simply is holding on, he will not let go. But it seems the man won't let go either.

Jacob is wrestling for his own blessing. Struggling.

God takes that tenacity, that struggle and redefines it: [slide]

“Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.”

Jacob has struggled for so much, never wanting to miss out, never content to be second. Doing whatever he can to gain advantage. He has grasped for so much, it has led him to this moment. He is now holding onto God for dear life. Something has to change. Jacob has to change.

Rabbi Jonathan says [slide]

“In the past you held on to Esau's heel. In the future you will hold on to God. You will not let go of Him; He will not let go of You. Now let go of Esau so that you can be free to hold on to God.”

God gives Jacob a new name. Israel – one who wrestles with God. Jacob struggled, Israel will struggle. But now

The next day we already see the difference in Jacob

– He let go of Esau.

He gives back Esau's blessing

The abundance

The bowing down

He is content “I have all I need”

He sees in the face of Esau “For to see your face is like seeing the face of God” Genesis 33:10

- He sees in his brother, and all of the experiences and fears his brother represents the hand of God. He has wrestled with this, and discovered who he really is.

Jacob was no angel, God used him for his purposes. But it was not until the ford of Jabbok Jacob discovers how to be willing.

Was Jacob wrestling with God, or himself?

That's the gift of a crisis – it forces us to ask the deeper questions

“Who am I and what really matters to me?”

Jacob could have missed this moment. Given in, or blamed others. But he held on

“I will not let You go until You bless me.”

Jacob held on, and found himself as God knew him to be.

What we learn

God can take our flaws and turn them for good

It's our willingness to hold on to God, no matter what that opens our future.

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“We are, on most days, a hard mix of true prophet and wayward voice, a mix of your call to justice and our hope for shalom. Here we are, as we are, mixed but faithful, compromised but committed anxious but devoted to you.

Use us and our gifts for Your newness that pushes beyond all that we can say or imagine.”

- extract “Called Beyond Comfort Zone” by

Walter Brueggemann

Response/Prayer/Care cards