

Jacob: A Life of Trickery

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[0:00] This morning we're going to continue our series through the book of Genesis. It's really not through the entirety of the book, but it's an intense focus on the life of Jacob.

And this morning we come to a portion that's in another installment of Jacob being a tricky trickster, deceiving those around him.

But as we'll see in a minute, the deception is not simply at the hands of Jacob. So if you turn to your Bibles, turn with me to Genesis chapter 30, verses 25 through 43.

And as you turn there, let's give attention to the reading of God's word. So Genesis 30, verse 25. As soon as Rachel had born Joseph, Jacob said to Laban, Send me away that I might go to my own home and country.

Give me my wives and my children from whom I have served you that I may go, for you know the service that I have given you. But Laban said to him, If I have found favor in your sight, I have learned by divination that the Lord has blessed me because of you.

[1:12] Name your wages and I will give it. And Jacob said to him, You yourself know I have served how I have served you and how your livestock has fared with me.

For you had little before I came, and it has increased abundantly. And the Lord has blessed you wherever I turned. But now when shall I provide for my own household also?

And he said, What shall I give you? Jacob said, You shall not give me anything. If you will do this for me, I will again pasture your flock and keep it.

Let me pass through all of your flock today, removing from it every speckled and spotted sheep and every black lamb in the spotted and speckled among the goats, and they shall be my wages.

So my honesty will answer for me later. And when you come to look into my wages with you, everyone that is not speckled and spotted among the goats and black among the lambs, if found with me, shall be counted as stolen.

[2:12] And Laban said, Good, let it be as you have said. But that day Laban removed the male goats that were striped and spotted and all the female goats that were speckled and spotted and everyone that had white on it and every lamb that was black and put them in the charge of his sons.

And he set at a distance of three days journey between himself and Jacob, and Jacob pastured the rest of Laban's flock. Then Jacob took fresh sticks of poplar and almond and plain trees and peeled white streaks in them, exposing the white of the sticks.

He set the sticks that he had peeled in front of the flocks in the troughs, that is the watering places, where the flocks came to drink. And since they had bred when they came to drink, the flocks bred in front of the sticks.

So the flocks brought forth striped and speckled and spotted. And Jacob separated the lambs and set the faces of the flocks toward the striped and all the black in the flock of Laban.

He put his own droves apart and did not put them with Laban's flock. Whenever the stronger of the flock were breeding, Jacob would lay the sticks in the troughs before the eyes of the flock that they might breed among the sticks.

[3:24] But for the feeble of the flock, he would not lay them there. So the feeble would be Laban's and the stronger as Jacob's.

Thus the man increased greatly and had large flocks of female servants and male servants and camels and donkeys. Let's pray together. Lord, we need your help this morning.

We need your help to see the beauty of Jesus. Father, we pray that you would bless not simply the reading of your word, but our hearing as well.

Father, that we might imbibe it in our hearts and that we might worship you because of it. And we pray these things in Christ's name. Amen. Whenever I think of the life of Jacob, I think of a man that

I knew when I was a child.

And this man, he was an older gentleman and he was a friend of my grandfather. And I would see him no matter where I moved in the world. He always seemed to keep up with me. And I would hunt with him and I would fish with him.

[4:26] I would see him on the lake. And he's a pretty unassuming older gentleman. I'm pretty sure that he had a uniform. And that uniform was overalls at all times.

No matter the heat of the summer or the cold of the winter, that man wore overalls. And one day, I asked my grandfather, because I knew him as an older gentleman that no longer worked, I said, what's this guy's deal?

I'm pretty sure is how I said it to him. Kind of in a disrespectful way. Like, what's this deal with this older man who only wears overalls? Who knows everything about my life? Like, what was he about?

And he revealed who the man truly was. He said he was the man who saved the state of North Carolina. And I was like, you have to be kidding me, right?

This man who wears overalls that I see sitting at the gas station more often than not saved our state. You see, this man that wore overalls in his old age also wore a business suit in his younger years.

[5:27] He was a lawyer by trade. He actually looked like Matlock. So Andy Griffith of the 80s and 90s, the show Matlock, where he was in the courtroom. But he wasn't a courtroom lawyer at all.

He worked for our state version of the IRS. And as he did so, he would go and travel to all these other banks and financial institutions many times in New York City.

And if you're from North Carolina and your uniform is overalls, you hate New York City, okay? And he would travel there, and he would try to negotiate deals with these financial institutions. In doing so, to raise money, to sell bonds.

And he would do all the paperwork and negotiating. And on one such trip, he was hoodwinked. Or at least that's what the Wall Street bankers thought. Apologies to all you reputable financial institution employees that we have in our midst.

But they thought he had, they had him. What they didn't realize is this man was very much like Jacob. He was deceitful, but so were they.

[6:28] You see what they did when they agreed to the negotiation of the terms, they slid a contract to him. And he signed it. But what they didn't realize is that he noticed that they had changed the terms.

And so he signed it and then slipped it into his briefcase. And as he did so, he pulled out another version that he had already signed and slid it across the table to them. So these high-moving, very well-dressed New York City bankers had been hoodwinked by somebody they thought was a bumpkin.

He was slow talking. So surely his mind moved equally as slow. But what they didn't realize until their error was uncovered weeks later was that they had been had.

The tricksters had been tricked by an even greater deception. This slow-talking lawyer, much like Jacob in our story, had saved the state from financial ruin.

And Jacob, much like he's tricked Laban all these years, is now reversed. Laban is the one who's tricking Jacob, or so we think.

[7:39] Deception, reversal, financial ruin. All these same things that we see in this story. The same thing that we've seen time and time again in the life of Jacob.

This is just another installment in that story. But unlike the man who saved North Carolina, the story of Jacob and Laban is not simply a story of cunning deception and leather briefcases and the old switcheroo of contracts, or switcheroo of wives, or Wall Street bankers, or fox of sheep and goats and all this craziness with stripes and sticks.

This story of deception is one of the deceiver being deceived, and then the deceiver deceiving. But in all the midst of that, in all of that, God is still present, which is the hard part of the story, because if we read it, we ask, where is God?

In the same way, we do that. We forget God is at work in our lives. We forget, even when we read the story of Jacob, because we don't even really see mention of him that often.

We forget. We see the characters. We see the plot line. We see all their faults, their failures, their sin. And we question, what's the difference between Laban and Jacob?

[8:59] They're both tricking each other. We see their shady business deal. And just like in our own lives, we get enamored with the hurry, the hurt, the pain, the loss, the details, the logistics. We feel worry over things that we can't control. We feel sadness. We feel loneliness. And in all of that, God is at work.

The anger, frustration, falling again, sinning again, wrestling with sin, and winning and losing. We remember that God is at work, just as in the life of Jacob.

God is at work. God reigns no matter the circumstances, and he reigns even now. So let's look and see how Jacob's deception, or how Jacob is deceived, and yet God still reigns.

The irony in that statement of Jacob being deceived is he's most often the one that's doing the deceiving. He's the tricker, but now he's being tricked. This section begins on the heels of what we've seen so far in the life of Jacob.

[10:11] If you remember, he got the old wife switcheroo, and he realized it, and then he said, hey, I'm going to stay a little bit longer to gain her back. I'm going to stay a little longer, as he worked for Laban.

So he comes with this ask. The first verses that we read were this ask. As soon as she had borne Joseph to Jacob, he says to Laban, send me away that I might go to my home and country.

If you have kids, it's like saying this. Not just, I want ice cream. I want ice cream, ice cream, and I want it now. Okay, that's what he's saying. I want to go home.

It's direct. He's not saying, please let me go. He says, I want ice cream, ice cream. I want to go home, and I want to go home now. And Laban is kind of caught off guard, but he shouldn't be at all, right?

Remember, there's going to come a point where Jacob asks for his children, and it's kind of murky here because children that are born in slavery to a master belong to the master, but Laban is no ordinary master, right?

[11:21] He's his father-in-law. So is he his master? I don't know. But he asks to take his children and wives and go to his home. And Laban responds to this request.

How? He acknowledges that Jacob is the source of his blessing. I don't think it's all flattery at this part. It's not deception. But he says, you are the source of my great wealth.

And in doing so, Jacob points him to something greater than even himself. In the middle of this, it's not just trickery.

Laban's not coming to him and saying, I'm going to appease you. There is a part of that that might be true, but he's pointing him to a greater reality. And in doing so, we see Laban's confession of what he actually believes.

If you look with me at that beginning section, we'll see what Laban really thinks about God. He says to him, not only if I have found favor in your sight, I have learned by divination that the Lord has blessed me because of you.

[12:28] The Lord has blessed him because of Jacob, because of Jacob's God. But Laban combines the worship of the true God with a magic trick.

Now, Israel does some really terrible things in its history, but they know that they're not supposed to do magic tricks. And so what we see here is a comparison of the world's way and God's way.

He's not misunderstood at this point. They've both done wicked things. But in doing so, we see Jacob's realization. He knows the reality that God is true and that God has blessed Laban because of him.

But we also see Laban's heart on display. He's not faithful. There's a mix of faithfulness and worship of all those other nations around them.

And the message for us and the billboard with the flashing lights and the bright colors is Laban is not the good guy. He's wicked. And in doing so, we should realize that Laban, yes, is shrewd.

[13:33] That's why he says to Jacob, name your price and I'll stay. The deal that he wants to make with him is at the expense of Jacob's life and he wants greater wealth.

So what does he do? Jacob begins with recounting how God has blessed Laban financially. The reason I'm saying that is because this livestock is not just simply cattle.

We have to think bank accounts and it's big. And Jacob says, before me, you were poor. You had a little and now you have a lot. He says not arrogantly that the Lord has blessed me wherever I have turned and in turn has blessed you.

The image here is that God is walking in the footsteps behind Jacob and he's blessing him in every footsteps. Where he walks, God is there.

God is the one who's caused this increase and not my savvy. So Laban, get it straight. It's not me, but it's God. So Jacob at this point, we think, we know both of these individuals are tricksters.

[14:43] We know something is coming, but what's coming? And at this point, as a reader, we have to wonder, how is this going to end up? Laban is rich and getting richer and Jacob wants to leave.

We're kind of having an impasse. What's going to happen? And Jacob pitches his plan to Laban and he says this, I'll keep all your flocks for you, all the sheep and all the goats and for everyone that's spotted or discolored, I'll keep that one and you keep the really good looking ones. And then we're going to separate them and when I go to leave, we know all the discolored ones are mine and all the ones that look really great are yours. And if you know, you'll know if I've been honest because we can see it.

Now there's something in us that makes us hesitate because we know they both have a history of tricking one another. It's just like when you know, when you watch a movie and you hear the ominous music and the lights change color, we know something's about to happen but we don't know what.

And we think something's going to happen because we're really sure that they're both really deceptive. And the warning signs are all there.

[15:56] It's not just the music or the change in lights. It's even in Laban's name. His name means white. His name is pointing to the fact that he's going to accumulate all the sheep that are pure and all of these things.

So as a reader, it should be flashing to us. Something is about to happen but we don't know what yet. And Laban responds and we see it. Look at verse 34.

Laban hears this plan and doesn't hesitate. It's a deal too good to pass up. And he says this, good, let it be as you have said.

Now keep in mind, this is a culture where negotiation goes back and forth and there's none of that because the deal is too good. And now we know where the trick is. Laban is running some kind of play but we don't know it yet.

And he runs to tell his sons, get all the striped ones, get all the spotted ones and then we're going to take them away. So Jacob starts with nothing. And so when he goes to leave, he's not going to actually take that much.

[17:01] And they go at a distance and Jacob, the deceiver, is deceived once again. When we think about Laban and Jacob and the story about goats and sheep and the trickery that's involved, we have to think not some mastermind plan.

We have to think like the three stooges. If you know the three stooges, there's a bit in their comedy trio and one of them will trick the other one by waving his hand and then what happens next?

He gets punched in the face or he gets poked in the eyes. That's what's going on here. Laban is waving his hand like this and then he punches Jacob in the face because he's distracting him and then he takes from him.

That's all good and well. We know Jacob, we know Laban is really up to his old tricks. But what are we supposed to take from this?

How are we supposed to apply this? What does this mean for us? We don't have, probably most of us don't have goats or sheep. Probably most of us would say we shouldn't wave our hands and then punch someone in the face.

[18:20] That would be a good thing. We shouldn't deceive one another. The story of Jacob is not really a story of scamming and scheming. That's present, but it's rather one of God's blessing, especially this section.

Who is the one that causes the growth? Who is the one that causes the increase? It's God. God is the one that does it. It's not Jacob's cunning. It's not Laban scheming and planning.

Jacob reminds Laban of that, that God is following. God is walking in his footsteps. But we, when we look at this story, when we look at our own lives, do we think that's true?

Do we think that we have what we have because we're wise or we really work hard? And the reason that others don't have any is because they're lazy or foolish?

Or do we think that God is the one that causes everything to increase? After all, Jacob's life is a mess if you look at it.

[19 : 25] He's enslaved to his father-in-law. He doesn't have any children. He's duped into a marriage. Then he struggles to have a child. And then he wants to go home, let alone his relationship with his brother.

Jacob is surely not blessed. We can look at his life and think his life is a wreck. And yet Jacob will say he is blessed.

Laban is blessed because of Jacob. Jacob is blessed as well. How can we think like that when we think of all the difficulties that have befallen Jacob?

How can we think of that when we don't have those things? When we don't have this promised blessing? We don't have the full bank accounts or the full flocks.

We don't have the children or the children who don't get along and hate each other so much like Jacob and Esau. Or we don't have our health, wealth.

[20 : 31] After all, I struggle. I hurt. I can't even get out of bed without pain. My marriage is not Jacob and Rachel, but it's Jacob and Leah.

I don't want her or him. How am I blessed? The truth is, Jacob could say all those things as well. And yet he is blessed.

Why? Not because he is rich, but because he has the Lord's presence. It's there with him. He's certain of that promise that was made to Abraham that's now his, that he will increase.

And yet Jacob falters, just like we do. We doubt. We have uncertainty. We don't remember. We don't see God's hand in our story.

And so what do we do instead? We scheme and plot and come up with all kinds of plans. If you have faith in Jesus this morning, remember that you are blessed.

[21 : 32] You are blessed and rich beyond all measure. And I don't mean that in a trite way, but think about you have the presence of the Lord. If you have faith in Jesus Christ, it doesn't matter if you have a wife or a husband.

You have the Lord. It doesn't matter if you have children. It doesn't matter if you have riches. It doesn't matter if you have all those things and then you lose them because we have Christ.

Those promises that were made to Abraham and now to Jacob, glory beyond compare, are not sheep and goats. It's something far greater that God was gracious to you just like he was to Jacob. Yet we forget that because we get involved in the sheep and the goats and the bank accounts and the striped sticks and all of that.

You're not blessed because you've earned it. You're blessed because God has been gracious to you, because he's been merciful to you, because he's forgiven your sin.

[22 : 37] The riches that await are not gold or flocks, but God himself. And the story of Jacob points to this greater reality that that is what makes you wealthy and blessed, even in the muck and messiness of life.

Is that enough though? Or do we so often think, I want Jesus plus all of those things. I want my Jesus and I want my health. I want my Jesus and my kids to be smart or to graduate or go to college.

And I want Jesus and a bank account. When we do that, we think like Laban. And God, when we read this story, is trying to show us, trying to put us at the intersection of Jacob's life and say, see, I've loved you and been merciful and I've blessed you even when you can't see it.

Even when you don't know it and even when you don't acknowledge it. So how could we look at him and say, we haven't been blessed, that it's not enough. This morning, if you're with us and you've never tasted or seen that goodness, I invite you to explore that.

Just like the prophet Amos says, seek the Lord and live. Jacob is saying the same thing. In the Lord, you are blessed. Seek me and be blessed.

[24 : 08] Seek the Lord and live. Maybe our love has grown cold. Our relationship is stagnant and we think to ourselves, I don't feel that blessing here and now.

That's normal. That's life in this world. That's life with sin. May we be encouraged just as we look back at Jacob's life and see God's hand, even in blessing him, we see all the ways the Lord is working in our lives.

May we be reminded of that. And these stories of Old Testament people are road markers along the way for God to point us back and say, look at Jacob's life and see how he's worked and look at your

own life and see how he's worked in spite of what you see and feel that God is at work. God is reigning. So Laban deceives Jacob once again and God reigns. But Jacob deceives again and God reigns.

Jacob's got a plan for this. We have to remember, this is not an isolated series of events that unfold in the next day, but over the series of next year. You can't increase a flock of sheep and goats.

[25 : 19] I hate to break it to you. I'm no high school biology teacher, but that doesn't happen overnight. Okay. So this is a series of days or years, not just hours. So Laban has tricked Jacob once again, but Jacob has a plan and this plan has two parts.

The first one is really, really strange. Okay. I admit that from the outset. Look at verse 37. He takes sticks of poplar, almond, and plain trees. He peels off the white or he peels off the bark.

So there's white streaks in them. And so they can see the whites of the sticks. And then he sets the sticks that he's peeled in the watering places so that when the sheep and goats come to drink, they're exposed to that.

It's really an ancient wives tales. What's going on here is that if you're about to have a baby or you're about to conceive, whatever you see is going to be impressed upon that baby that you give birth to.

So you see sticks, you get a striped sheep. You see sticks, you get a spotted lamb. You see sticks, you get a striped goat. Drink water in front of the trees with the bark off and you get speckled, striped, and spotted flocks.

[26 : 32] I don't know how that works. I don't actually think it does work. All right. Which is kind of the point, right? John Calvin, the great French theologian, says this, that God superintends the normal course of normal animal husbandry to make these striped and speckled sheep.

And even as he does so, Jacob has another trick up his sleeve. He takes all the really healthy sheep and moves them away. And those are his. And he only breeds those together.

And then he takes the weak, weak, and feeble. And those are Laban's. And the result of all of this, we see at the very end. Look at verse 42.

But for the feeble of the flock, he would not lay them there. So the feeble would be Laban's and the stronger Jacob's. So in all of this, he's tricked Laban again.

Laban had him tricked and Jacob tricks him back through this hokey process that God miraculously blesses. So in all this scheming, God is still at work and has caused Jacob to be successful.

[27 : 43] And we see this report in verse 43. Thus the man increased greatly and had large flocks, female servants and male servants, and camels and donkey.

Jacob increased greatly. Or literally, he increased very, very, which I think is really funny. But that really funny language, increased very, very, is the same language that God uses of Abraham when he promises to bless him.

Abraham, you're going to increase very, very. Jacob, you're going to increase very, very. It's very easy in stories like these to miss the bigger part of the plot.

We can focus on the sticks. We can focus on the stripes. We can focus on how goats and sheep and baby goats and sheep come into existence. And as we do so, we miss not just names and actions.

We miss God in the midst of it. We think about the characters. And there's so much to glean from all the characters and all their failings. And we think about what would we do?

[28 : 53] The point is not what you would do if you were a shepherd or what you would do if you raised goats. We have to look at this and see God's hand. The point is not for us to think about how terrible our in-laws are because I'm pretty sure none of us have been enslaved to our father-in-law or mother-in-law.

The point is not for us to look at Jacob and see all of his sin. It's that, but then to see God working in the midst of that. After all, I don't have sheep.

I may or may not have in-laws. I may or may not have children. I may or may not have a wife or two like Jacob or servants.

But Jacob is a man that's following after God, that sins, that goes out and cheats on business deals. All of these things are true, but the reason these stories of Jacob are so powerful is that we can see God working even when he doesn't show up.

In the midst of this, there's a notable absence of reference to God and that should stand out to us. That should be like alarm bells saying, where is God in this?

[30:08] But we do the same thing in our own lives. In our loss, we ask, where's God in the midst of this? In our relationships, we think, where is God in the midst of this?

In wanting a husband, we think, where is God in the midst of this? When we get frustrated at kids because they won't obey, we think, where is God in the midst of this? When we don't have enough money to pay for our rent, we think, where is God in this?

In our sadness, because we feel alone, we think, where is God in the midst of this? When we see Jacob, we think, where is God in the midst of this? When we feel like quitting all of this, we ask, where's God in the midst of this? When we have all these things and then they're taken away from us, we ask, where's God in the midst of this? God reigns. We have to think of that. We have to be reminded of that in our own lives. And when we read the life of Jacob, that God is reigning, whether they're blessed financially, whether they don't have children, whether they're enslaved, or whether they're free, whether they're at home or they're in a foreign, far, far land, whether we plot and scheme or whether we don't even have the energy to fight, God reigns.

This morning, may we be reminded not just of Laban's deception, not just of Jacob deceiving, but in the midst of all these things that God reigns. And we have to hold fast to the reminder from the lips of Jacob that God has blessed you. Let's pray. Lord, may we be reminded in the life of Jacob of your reigning power, of blessing, of plenty of want, and all of those times in between that you reign. Father, by your good hand, you cause us to prosper. And by your good hand, you take things away. May in all of that, we confess that you are great, that you reign, and Father, you have blessed us. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Let's stand and sing in response to God's word. Amen.