

Love for the Unlovely: The Story of Grace in the Life of Jacob

All Things New (Genesis 35-36)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC English Service on June 15, 2025

Introduction

- ❖ This morning I'll be wrapping up our series on the Life of Jacob. For the last few years, we've been dipping back in the book of Genesis every so often. We started with a series on the first eleven books. Then did another one on the Life of Abraham. After this, we'll take another break and start a series through the book of Hebrews this summer. And then we'll jump back into Genesis this fall to cover the life of Joseph. And then, Lord-willing, we'll finish preaching through all fifty chapters of Genesis by the end of the year.
 - If you recall, we titled this series "*Love for the Unlovely: The Story of Grace in the Life of Jacob*." **The point we've been making over and over again is that Jacob is not your typical protagonist in a story. Because he really starts off as the antagonist.** He's cheating, lying, and manipulating. This bad behavior starts literally on Day One – the day he was born. We're told he came out of his mother's womb grasping his twin brother's heel. As if he were trying to pull his brother back so he could exit first and be the firstborn. And that's where he got his name. Jacob means "*he who grabs after heels*." It became an idiom for cheaters. They're heel-grabbers.
- ❖ **The point is – Jacob is not even the hero of his own story.** He's not the focus. Remember, it's the story of *grace* in the life of Jacob. **God is the hero, and the focus – this whole time – has been on his grace.** Over and over again, God graciously blesses this undeserving heel-grabber. For inexplicable reasons, he continues to love this unlovely, unlikable character.
 - **Now if you think that's unfair – that that's unjustified – that just tells me you don't realize how good God's grace is and how much you and I need it.** As much as Jacob. I'd caution you against complaining about God being so kind to unlovely, unlikable people. Because we're fooling ourselves to think we're any different. That we're any better than someone like Jacob.
- ❖ **And let's be clear – receiving God's grace doesn't mean avoiding consequences.** It doesn't give you a pass to do despicable things and hurt others without having to face the repercussions. Just look at Jacob. Throughout his life, he faced consequences for his deceptive actions. He got what was coming. **But, because of grace, he never lost God's love. In the end, all things worked together for his good.**
 - Now did he deserve that? Did Jacob deserve such a prominent place in God's kingdom? Such an important role in God's plan of redemption? **No, but that's the point of grace. And that's our only hope.** That God would be equally gracious to *us* and include *us* in his kingdom and in his plans. That's our greatest need – to have God's grace in our lives, leading us to repentance, redeeming our sins and failures, transforming us into new creations.
- ❖ **Friends, as we wrap up Jacob's story, we're going to see one more display of God's grace in his life.** Last week, we studied a dark chapter. Genesis 34 exposed a lot of sin and shame. Jacob was implicated for his passivity in the face of an outrageous sin committed against his daughter. And his sons were guilty of an outrageous sin committed against all the men from the city of Shechem.

- ❖ **And this is supposed to be God's chosen man and his chosen family.** Chosen to be the channel of his covenant blessings – to be the line from which a Savior of the world will arise to redeem and reverse all the effects of the Fall. Seems like a pretty poor choice so far. **But, as the saying goes, God doesn't choose the qualified but, by his grace, he does qualify the chosen.** He will not leave them to their own devices but will assuredly intervene to lead his chosen to repentance and to a renewed commitment to follow after him.
 - That's what we see happening to Jacob and his family in this morning's passage. We're going to tackle chapters 35-36 as a whole. We won't have time to go into great detail, but we'll cover broad strokes. In Jacob's experience of renewal and recommitment, there are three movements – three sets of actions – that take place: We're going to witness (1) a putting off and putting on, (2) a renaming and re-covenanting, and (3) waiting and trusting.

Putting Off and Putting On

- ❖ The first movement to witness, in the renewal of this chosen family, is an act of putting off and putting on. **Some of you can tell that I'm borrowing the language of the NT to explain what's happening here.** In Colossians 3:9-10, the Apostle Paul speaks of putting off and putting on to describe the experience of grace. I think that language is fitting to describe what was happening to Jacob and his family as they experienced renewal and recommitted themselves to the LORD.
- ❖ Last week, we noted how Chapter 33 should've ended with Chapter 35. Jacob should've settled his family in Bethel to begin with, but he delayed that decision until now. Back in Genesis 28:20, while on the run from his brother, while resting in Bethel, Jacob made a vow – **that if the LORD would be with him and keep him and bring him back from all his sojourning – then the LORD would be his God and he would build an altar there.** But at the end of chapter 33, he settles instead at Shechem. Bethel was only twenty miles further, but, by settling in Shechem, Jacob essentially settled for a partial obedience. And he and his family paid the consequences, as we saw in the last chapter.
- ❖ So that's the background to this merciful moment in v1 where God speaks to Jacob. He doesn't shun him. **In spite of all his failures, the LORD doesn't give him the silent treatment.** He says to Jacob, *"Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there. Make an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau."*
 - **The LORD calls Jacob to fulfill his former vow.** Giving him another chance to do the right thing. To go up to Bethel and dwell there. Now Bethel is geographically south of Shechem, but, topographically it's elevated a thousand feet higher. So you would literally *"go up"* vertically to Bethel. You would have to make an ascent.
 - **So this mission he's called on – to ascend this high place and build an altar to God – is really a call to worship.** It's a chance for Jacob to renew his devotion to the LORD. Going *up* to Bethel would symbolize a spiritual ascent from the depths of sin that had marked the previous chapter of his life.

- ❖ **But before they're ready to make that spiritual ascent, Jacob recognizes that he and his family need to put off and put on.** They need to put off their former idols and put on new garments. Look at v2, *"²So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, 'Put away the foreign gods that are among you and purify yourselves and change your garments. ³Then let us arise and go up to Bethel, so that I may make there an altar to the God who answers me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone.'"*
 - **I'm sure the foreign gods he had in mind included the household gods that Rachel had taken from her father's house.** And after plundering Shechem, I'm not surprised if they collected a few more. If you recall, we're talking about figurines depicting various gods, usually situated in a shrine, in the corner of an ancient house.
 - **Each god would have its own responsibility over this or that function in ancient society.** If you want rain, pray to this god. If you want a child, pray to that one. This is the god for protection. This is the one for prosperity. This is the god you pray to when you're sick. That's what these foreign gods were for.
- ❖ And we're told in v4 that everyone in Jacob's household gave up their idols. *"So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods that they had, and the rings that were in their ears. Jacob hid them under the terebinth tree that was near Shechem."* Some translations say that he buried them under an oak tree. What kind of tree it was doesn't matter. **What matters is that Jacob took all their foreign gods (their idols) – and didn't just hide them – he buried them. He put them to death.** It's like they held a funeral. It was to say goodbye to their idols. To show their intent to serve the LORD only. That's what this putting off of foreign gods was meant to signify (cf. Josh 24:14). It revealed the genuineness of the repentance in their hearts.
 - **It also exposed the futility of their idols.** So far, we've seen that foreign gods can be stolen. They can be hidden. They can be sat on and stained with menstrual blood. And now they can be buried. You can cover them with mounds of dirt, and they can't do anything about it. **These idols are helpless. So how can they help you?** Don't waste your time on them. Bury your idols. Put them to death.
- ❖ So that's one way Jacob and his family demonstrate their repentance and renewed commitment to the LORD – by a putting off of idols. **But there was also a putting on – of new garments.** V2 said to *"purify yourselves and change your garments."* Jacob was probably thinking in terms of ritual purity. They were on their way, after all, to build an altar to worship God. Having clean clothes was important ceremonially.
 - **But this image of new clothes is also used throughout Scripture to convey a sense of moral transformation.** By changing clothes, you're communicating that you're a new person. You're signifying that some kind of spiritual change has taken place in you. **Think back to the first instance in human history of a change of clothes.** At the end of Genesis 3, after God had confronted Adam and Eve, before banishing them from the Garden, he changed their garments. He exchanged their flimsy, self-constructed fig leaves for animal skins that he had prepared for them. **That changing of clothes signified that Adam and Eve – though now sinners – were forgiven sinners.** They were objects of God's mercy and grace.

- ❖ And there are other times in Scripture where clothes are changed. In **Zechariah 3**, Joshua the high priest is described as “*clothed with filthy garments*” and being accused of his sins by Satan. But then the angel of the LORD calls for his filthy garments to be removed and replaced with pure vestments and a clean turban. And he says to Joshua, “*Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you.*” (Zech 3:4) New clothes communicate a newness of life.
 - **And, as we mentioned, Paul used this imagery in a few of his letters to convey the Christian’s spiritual transformation.** Where, by God’s grace, we put off the old self and put on the new. It’s described very much like a changing of clothes.
- ❖ Friends, there will be plenty of times in your walk with the Lord when you find yourself in Jacob’s shoes – when he was at the end of Chapter 34. When you find yourself neck deep in sin – when your life is marked by either an active or passive disobedience – then remember God’s grace. **Remember that your life in Christ is now too the story of grace.**
 - It’s because of his grace that he hasn’t abandoned you. He still speaks and he’s calling you to repentance. To renew your commitment to him. But real repentance will manifest itself in that dual commitment to put off and put on.
- ❖ That means identifying your idols and burying them. Confessing your sins and putting them to death. Halfway measures won’t cut it. It’s not enough to just find a balance with the idols in your heart. Or to effectively manage those sins you struggle with. **No, repentant people make it a goal to bury their idols. New creations in Christ try to kill their sins – to put their sinful nature to death.** That’s what Christians do.
 - And as we put off the old, we also put on the new. We put on new clothes. And not the flimsy fig leaves of self-righteousness. **No, like Joshua the high priest, our filthy garments of sin have been removed. Because Jesus traded us for them at the cross.** He offered us his perfect righteousness to wear. And he put on our filthy rags and climbed up that cross to die for our sins.
- ❖ If you’re in a place in your walk marked by a Chapter 34 kind of darkness and you feel led to repentance – if you want to make a change – then there are certainly practical changes to be made. Where you’re going to need to put off old habits and behaviors and put on new ones. **But prior to that, on a heart level, real change in the Christian life must be rooted in believing that your garments have already been changed.** That your identity as a new creation is rooted in Christ and in his righteousness.

Renaming and Re-Covenanting

- ❖ Which leads to our second point, to the second movement in this passage, where we witness a renaming and a re-covenanting. Technically, Jacob is re-renamed since something similar took place back in Chapter 32. And the LORD offers the same covenant promises that he already made to Jacob back in Chapter 28. That’s what we mean by a re-covenanting.
 - Understandably, to us readers, vv9-15 sounds redundant. We’ve already covered this ground. But, for Jacob, these verses are necessary and comforting. As he calls him to repentance, God is reinforcing the newness of Jacob’s identity. Now he’s Israel.

- ❖ Before we look at his re-renaming in v9, let's briefly consider what takes place in vv5-8. After burying their foreign gods and leaving them behind in Shechem, Jacob and family make the journey to Bethel. **We're told that "a terror from God" fell upon the inhabitants of the cities along the way, preventing them from terrorizing Jacob and his household.**
 - And when they arrive at Luz – where God first appeared to Jacob in a dream – he re-renames it. The first renaming took place in Genesis 28:19, and now, in v7, he does it again but with a slight tweak. **He sets up the altar and calls the place El-Bethel, which means "God of the House of God."** *El* being the Hebrew word for God. That might seem insignificant, but for Jacob, it meant his focus is now on the very God he encountered there rather than just on the sanctity of that particular site.
 - **And then we read of Deborah's death in v8.** She's the nurse of Rebekah, Jacob's mother. It's odd that we don't read of Rebekah's death. Which suggests that she died at some point during Jacob's twenty-year sojourn. She never got to reunite with her beloved son in this life. Likely a sad consequence of her actions in encouraging Jacob to deceive his father and cheat his brother.
- ❖ Now, in v9, it says God appeared to Jacob again and blessed him again (cf. 28:13-15; 32:29). And re-renames him in v10, *"And God said to him, 'Your name is Jacob; no longer shall your name be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name.' So he called his name Israel."* The first renaming took place over twenty years ago when he struggled all night long with God. Which prompted the name change to Isra-el, "He who struggles with God (with *El*)."
 - Think about the significance. Prior to that divine encounter, Jacob was identified by his sin, by his biggest flaw, by his worst trait. He was a heel-grabber, a cheat. **But after encountering God, he's now identified – not in relation to his sin anymore – but in relation to God.** He's not a perfect man. But he *is* a man in relationship with God. He's a man who struggles. He struggles to trust and obey God. **But what's most important is that in his name – in his identity – is God.**
- ❖ Friends, if you're in the same boat as Jacob – if you're trying to renew your commitment to the Lord – then this is the same message you need to hear. If you repent of your sins and trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior, then you are Christian. **Christian may not be your actual name, but it is your most fundamental identity.** Which means you need to see yourself as identified – not in relation to your sin anymore – but to Christ.
 - **One problem I notice, when Christians try to renew their walks with the Lord, is that they're often solely focused on trying to sin less.** Sinning less is obviously a good thing. But that's like if Jacob was just focused, every day, on trying to grab less heels. He won't get very far with that. Because all he'd be trying to do is to manage his old identity. He needs to focus on his new identity as Isra-el.
 - The same goes for us. Your focus should be primarily on your new identity (your new name) as a Christian. Think about how good and healthy fruit is a byproduct of a tree that's good and healthy at its root. **Tending to the roots of a fruit tree make a far greater impact than picking at the branches.**

- ❖ Now in addition to re-renaming Jacob, the LORD re-covenants with him in v11, *“¹¹And God said to him, “I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body. ¹²The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you.””*
 - So here we have El-Shaddai (God Almighty) reinforcing the covenant blessings that Jacob had already received earlier in the story. Back in Chapter 28:3, his father Issac had blessed him, praying over him, *“God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples.”* The LORD re-applies that same covenant blessing on Jacob here in our chapter.
- ❖ Now you might think Jacob is already pretty fruitful at this point. He has so many children. But v11 makes clear that the LORD has in mind – not more sons and daughters – but nations and kings. **The covenant made to Abraham, to Issac, and now to Jacob (Israel) is a promise that, one day, kings will come from your loins.** And a Royal Seed will arise out of this line of kings to crush the head of the serpent (Gen 3:15) and redeem God’s people and all creation from the curse of sin. That was the covenant blessing Jacob was so desperate for.
 - **That’s what made having a son such a vital objective for God’s people. Because they each held out hope that perhaps their son could be *the* Son, this Chosen King.** That’s the hope Rachel’s midwife was holding out to her. We’re told in v17 that her labor was hard and she was dying. So her midwife tried to comfort her with news that she’s having another son. Rachel, with her dying breath, names him Ben-oni (son of my sorrow). After she dies, Jacob changes it to Benjamin (son of my right hand).
- ❖ And then, like adding insult to injury, Jacob hears, in v22, that his oldest son Reuben slept with Bilhah, Jacob’s concubine and maidservant to Rachel. **This outrageous act of incest is condemnable on many levels.** Not least as a shameless power grab. By bedding his father’s concubine, Reuben was making a claim to usurp his father’s authority over the family. Apparently Jacob’s persistent passivity cost him credibility in the eyes of his own sons.
 - **These sorrowful and shameful moments – included at the tail end of Jacob’s story after he’s been restored in his walk – seem out of place.** Why would they be included? It’s like we’ve said before. They serve as needed reminders that, even after we’ve repented and renewed our commitment to the Lord, there’s no promise or guarantee that everything in life will be smooth and peaceful.
- ❖ **But what *is* guaranteed is God’s faithfulness to his covenant promises. God won’t fail to keep all his promises to us.** That’s the subtle message being sent by the inclusion of this brief genealogy of Jacob at the end of his story. Look there in vv23-26. **It’s just a reminder that – no matter how much Jacob failed in his life story – God never failed Jacob.** He made him fruitful. He helped him multiply.
 - **And one of these twelve sons will bear the covenant blessings and pass it on to the next generation and the next – until that Chosen King arrives.** That’s an open question and theme carried forward in the rest of Genesis as the spotlight shifts to Joseph. Lord-willing, we’ll return to those chapters and explore that theme further.

Waiting and Trusting

- ❖ But we're going to look at one more chapter – Genesis 36. We didn't have time to read it earlier, and admittedly it's a pretty dense read. It's a genealogy of Esau spanning multiple generations. **Narratively, it's there to serve as a bridge between Jacob and Joseph. But theologically, it's there to teach God's people about waiting and trusting.** This leads to our third movement. In this genealogy of the other brother, there's a subtle, underlying message for the descendants of Jacob. The people of God must learn to wait on him and trust in him to fulfill all his promises.
- ❖ **This point is clear enough without having to go into all the details on all the names and locations mentioned here.** There are a few interesting things here and there. But even if all you do is briefly scan these verses, I think you get the bigger point. Just note how many chieftains and kings are listed here. And listen to v31, *"These are the kings who reigned in the land of Edom, before any king reigned over the Israelites."*
 - **Earlier, we saw God re-covenanting and promising that nations and kings will come forth from Jacob and his kin. But, so far, all the nations and kings seem to be coming forth from Esau.** And we know that during the lifetime of these many generations of Esau, the generations of Jacob were languishing in a foreign land. Not only did they lack a king, they were enslaved to the king of Egypt. That's the story of the book of Exodus.
- ❖ Obviously, the discrepancy is great. **And I'm sure quite discouraging for God's people. Will they still believe?** Will they still trust in God's promises in spite of what their eyes are telling them? Will they hold out hope – even as they're suffering and slaving away in exile while the generations of Esau are prospering and enjoying their own land? **Are God's people willing to wait? Are they going to trust in his covenant promises?**
 - Again, those are the open questions that are carried forward in the rest of the OT. And those are the same questions posed to God's people today. **Are we willing to wait? Are we going to trust?**
- ❖ Friends, if you're in a similar place as Jacob in your walk with the Lord – where you're coming out of a dark time; where you previously felt distant from God; but now you're trying to renew your walk – **you have to accept the harsh reality that, in time, you're going to stumble again.** The darkness may return.
 - Praise God that he's led you to repentance, but just know that it's *not* going to be smooth sailing from here on out. **You have to brace yourself for disappointment. You'll have to prepare to deal with discouragement.** You'll have to learn to wait. And to trust that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Christ Jesus (Phil 1:6). Do you trust in God's promises? He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.