

Transformed Characters **The Pre-Transformed Jacob – Grabber & Deceiver** **Gen 25:19-34**

The Grabber & Deceiver

We come to the second in the series of transformed characters – Jacob. He is the younger of a pair of twin boys, born to answered prayers from his father, Isaac. His name, which in Hebrew means “he takes the heel”, has the connotation of “deceiver”. We are told that in the womb, he and his twin brother Esau had started fighting, prompting their mother Rebekah to ask why. The answer was prophetic:

“Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger.” (Gen 25:23)

One needs to grasp the subversive nature of this prophecy in a milieu where firstborn sons received double the inheritance of the younger ones. Walter Brueggemann points out how it demonstrates that “God’s gift of blessing has no visible or necessary connection to the conventional ordering of life.” But while Esau’s callousness with regard to his birthright (Gen 25:32) is objectionable, Jacob’s exploitation of Esau’s weakness at his hour of need is even less defensible. As we read on to Gen 27, exploitation escalates to outright treachery as Jacob pretends to be Esau and tricks his father into giving him the blessing Isaac intended for Esau. Our puzzlement with God’s choice of Jacob heightens.

In fact, Jacob uses God’s name falsely, claiming that he (or rather “Esau”), was able to hunt down the game (which was not really game) for Isaac because “the LORD your God granted [him] success” (Gen 27:20b). Yet God does not intervene to expose the deception there and then, and Jacob gets the blessing which Isaac meant for Esau. We wonder: why would God allow such a scoundrel as Jacob to be blessed?

The Dysfunctional Family

Interestingly, it is reflective of this perplexity that much is made of the dysfunction in Jacob’s family. Commentators highlight the fact that “Isaac loved Esau... but Rebekah loved Jacob” (Gen 25:28), explaining the devastating consequences when parents practise favouritism. They note that eavesdropping instead of direct communication was the norm in the family (Gen 27:1-5, 42). They cast doubt on Isaac’s competence as the patriarch of the family, since he disregards God’s prophetic word, insisting on blessing Esau instead of Jacob, just because he liked to eat what Esau hunted. They point out that Jacob was merely following his mother’s plan in Gen 27; Rebekah orchestrated the entire ruse. Finally, they decry how wife betrays husband by colluding with her favourite son to trick her almost-blind husband. The intrigue in this family rivals any modern reality programme. Perhaps it is unreasonable to expect any child born to this family to be of sterling character?

Why Bless Jacob?

But do inborn personality and dysfunctional parenting mitigate Jacob’s unlikeable

qualities, and help to explain why God blesses him? Let Ronald S Wallace help to articulate our uneasiness that God's choice of Jacob seems to contradict His holiness:

"Any fair examination of the minds and attitude of these three people (Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob) before God must lead us to the conclusion that what each first needed was not blessing but correction – a re-orientation of life, moral uplift, more concern for people other than themselves. And yet God ignored their immediate needs and began by pouring out His blessing on them... Does it not seem to contradict what the bible says elsewhere about God's holiness? For it seems to bring Him down with great and free blessing into the heart of human disobedience and insincerity. It seems to make His grace cheap. It can suggest that even the Holy Supper of our Lord can come in power to "unworthy" people without their already showing signs of repentance.

Though we have to admit the force of such objections we still believe our interpretation of this incident to be the only one possible. Therefore we have to acknowledge, and even be glad, that sometimes, before God brings people under strict discipline and changes them in any radical way, He first makes them certain of His favour in such an exciting manner."

The uncomfortable truth is this: we are all Jacobs. If God will show His favour to us only when we are worthy of it, we will never know Him. That is grace: wonderful, amazing grace: "but God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). Without grace, none of us will know God. Jacob may not know much of God's character at this point, but because of God's grace to him, Jacob will exclaim when he realises later "I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of love and all the faithfulness that You have shown to Your servant" (Gen 32:10a).

Grace for God's Purposes

This grace shown towards Jacob needs to be seen in the larger framework of the purposes of God. God's plan was to bless all the families of the earth through the seed of Abraham, and so He will bless Jacob. So we revisit one of the great tensions of the Christian life: God's sovereignty versus man's free will. Both are somehow true. To quote Ralph Wilson:

In spite of man's evil, God will still work good out of it and further His plan in spite of it. True, man's evil causes great pain and suffering, which God does not always shield us from – nor did He shield His own Son – but He will work out His plan.

Transformation Will Come

The familiar adage that "God loves us the way we are, but too much to leave us that way" (Leighton Ford) shall prove true in the way God deals with Jacob. We shall see that after he gets the blessings, God will deal with his dishonesty and his tendency to trust his own ingenuity instead of God. The trials - and the transformation - will come. Stay tuned.

Sources:

Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1982).

Ronald S. Wallace, *Isaac & Jacob: Genesis 24-36* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc, 1982).

Ralph F. Wilson, *Discipleship Lessons from the Life of Jacob* (Loomis, CA: JesusWalk©Publications, 2010).

Questions for Cell Discussion

Question 1

Read the passage in Gen 25:19-34. What can we observe about the contrast between Jacob and Esau?

Question 2

Read Gen 27:1-41.

What further contrasts can we observe between the brothers?

Do you find your sympathies drawn to Jacob? If so, why? If not, why?

Question 3

From what we have observed thus far, would you conclude that Jacob deserved to be chosen by God? What does it tell us about God's choice to bless Jacob?

Question 4

In the passages above, we see that the pre-transformed Jacob is deceitful and scheming. Indeed it is hard to face up to deceit and manipulation in our own lives; we tend to rationalise it as "being resourceful in the face of disadvantage" instead.

Ask the Holy Spirit to show us whether we are guilty of such deceit in our own lives. How should we respond to these areas of darkness when He reveals them to us?

