

Date: June 28, 2020  
Series: *Heroes of Faith*  
Title: *The Faith of Jacob*  
Preacher: Mark Adams  
Scripture: Genesis 32

Thank you Horton family! I love that hymn; especially the second verse where it says: *"Praise the Lord! for He is glorious; never shall His promise fail; God has made His saints victorious; sin and death shall not prevail."*

As you may or may not know, I am a big fan of superheroes; the comics, the movies, the t-shirts, the whole nine yards. And as a fan bordering on an expert, I want to begin this morning by comparing two of the most popular superheroes---Batman and Spiderman.

Let's start with Batman. In the movie *Justice League*, there is a scene in which the Flash asks Batman what his superpower is. The Bat replies, *"I'm rich."* And that was an accurate answer from the caped crusader. Bruce Wayne inherited billions and he has used all that capitol to buy tons of cool bat-gadgets; everything from the Batarangs on his utility belt, to his Batmobile. But he has no actual superhuman abilities, he just has enough money to buy the stuff necessary to make him seem super.

What about Spiderman? Well, Spidey, aka PETER PARKER, is a superhero because of a bite he received from a radioactive spider. He can swing from webs, climb walls, and has the strength of 50 men. Plus, he has a spider-sense that warns him of danger. In short, Peter's nature has been changed. Thanks to the chomp of that radioactive arachnid, Spiderman has a new power accessible to him, within him. As the song goes, he can, *"do whatever a spider can."*

If you're wondering why in the world I'm bringing this up, it's because what happened to Peter Parker is a picture of what happens to us when we come to know Jesus. As Paul puts it, ***"If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation. The old has gone. The new has come."*** (2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 5:17) You could say that Christ in you makes you more like Spiderman than Batman because something---SOMEONE---outside of you, has entered into you and changed your nature. You now have access to super-human power that you did not have before. Through faith in Jesus that power enables you to become a new person, less and less like you and more and more like Christ.

This morning as we finish up our study of the Hall of Faith Heroes in Hebrews 11, we come to an individual who is a perfect example of the way God can change a person. His name is Jacob and we see this change culminate in our text for today, Genesis chapter 32. Open your Bibles to that chapter and keep them open.

Jacob's parents were Isaac and Rebekah and they had been married for 20 childless years before finally, Rebekah learned she was expecting---not just ONE baby---but TWO. She prayed because it felt like the twins in her womb were fighting with each other. God explained, ***"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 25:22)

Two boys were born and it was obvious they weren't identical. The firstborn was covered with red hair, so his parents called him *"ESAU"* or *"red."* And the second son didn't wait a few minutes to emerge like most twins. No, as Esau popped out, Jacob followed literally on his heels; in fact that's what baby Jacob's hand was gripping. Because of that his parents called him *"JACOB"* a name that means *"grabber."* Jacob lived up to this name because he was grabbing things from others all his life.

Let me put it like this. Before God changed him, Jacob was not a very likeable guy. He cheated his brother out of his inheritance and later tricked his father into giving him the blessing that was intended for Esau. I mean, Esau's heel wasn't the only thing Jacob grabbed from him. Max Lucado says, *"Jacob was the riverboat gambler of the patriarchs, a master of sleight of hand and fancy footwork. For Jacob, the ends always justified the means."*

Yet, this conman would be the one God would use to found the Hebrew race. Jacob's 12 sons would be the heads of the 12 tribes of Israel. Plus, Jesus would come from Jacob's lineage. But Hebrews 11 says nothing of Jacob's conman ways. No, in those verses Jacob's faith is compared to that of his grandfather, Abraham.

Well, how can a trickster and a cheat turn into a faith superhero? The answer is God. Our Creator can re-create anyone. That's the point of this morning's message; God-empowered change. I want us to look at how God re-created Jacob for insights as to how He can mature and empower you and me to become less like our old selves and more like Jesus.

Okay, after Jacob stole his brother's blessing, Esau vowed that as soon as their dad died, he would kill his conniving brother. Rebekah learned of Esau's vow and fearing for her favorite twin's safety, she sent Jacob to live with her brother, Laban up north in Haran. Jacob worked there for his uncle for 20 years. In that time, he got two wives; Laban's daughters Rachel, whom he loved, and her homely big sister Leah, whom Jacob was tricked into marrying. Understand, in many ways Jacob met his match in Laban because he was constantly coning, cheating his nephew. But, in spite of that, as promised, God blessed Jacob and when he Laban---he took his wives and eleven sons and vast wealth with him.

That brings us to this morning's text where we read that when Jacob arrived back at the border of his homeland, Canaan, he was met by a band of angels. Twenty years earlier when he left Canaan on the run, Jacob saw angels in that same place. Remember? He used a rock for a pillow and in his dream, he saw, ***"...a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to Heaven and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it."*** (Genesis 28) Jacob saw God at the top of the stairs and God said to him, ***"I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac...all peoples on earth will be blessed through you...I will watch over you and bring you back to this land."*** (Genesis 28)

So, this second visit by angels was a reminder of God's promise. And it is at this point we begin to see God changing Jacob because he decided to visit his brother Esau and he didn't HAVE to do that. Esau had settled far to the south in Edom. Edom was not on the route back to Canaan but Jacob still decided to make a side trip to see him. My point is, it wasn't a geographical necessity that Jacob see Esau, it was a spiritual one. Jacob had matured such that he knew he had to make things right with his brother. I can't help but think of Jesus' words in Matthew 5 where He says, ***"If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you---leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift."***

Jacob knew that before He could give God His life, he had to be reconciled with Esau. God doesn't waste our pain, so I'm thinking He used those two decades of enduring the conniving trickery of Laban to help Jacob understand how his elder brother felt to be the brunt of Jacob's trickery.

Well, Jacob decided to send messengers ahead to let his brother know he was coming. But Esau must have heard Jacob was in the area because when Jacob's messengers returned, they reported that Esau was already on the way to meet Jacob and that he was coming with an army of 400 men. Now if you wonder why he would bring an army to a family reunion, Esau was probably still angry with his brother. He also might have thought

that Jacob was returning to make a claim on Esau's land---returning to subjugate his elder brother. I'm sure Rebekah had told him what God had said about the older serving the younger.

Well, when Jacob heard of this army on the way led by his brother, he was terrified. He decided to divide his household and possessions into two groups thinking if one was attacked by Esau's army, the other might survive. And with that done---and nothing else to do---for the first time in his life Jacob prayed.

In his book *Growing In The Seasons of Life* Charles Swindoll tells the story of an airliner in 1968 bound for New York that began its descent when the pilot realized the landing gear had refused to engage. He asked the control tower for instructions as he circled the landing field. The airport sprayed the runway with foam as fire trucks and other emergency vehicles moved into position. Disaster was only minutes away. The passengers were told of each maneuver in that calm, cheery voice pilots manage to use at times like this. Flight attendants glided about the cabin with an air of cool reserve telling the passengers to place their heads between their knees and grab their ankles just before impact. It was one of those I-can't-believe-this-is-happening-to-me experiences that led to many tears and even a few screams of despair in the cabin.

The landing was only a few seconds away when the pilot announced over the intercom: *"We are beginning our final descent. At this moment, in accordance with International Aviation Codes established in Geneva, it is my obligation to inform you that---if you believe in God you should COMMENCE PRAYER."*

Well, the belly landing went off without a hitch. I mean, the plane was severely damaged, but no one was injured. A relative of one of the passengers called the airline the very next day and asked about the Geneva prayer code deal that the pilot had quoted. But all the airline would say is, *"No comment."* Think of it. The only thing that brought out into the open a deep-down secret prayer rule was crisis. This is like so many of us because, like Jacob here, only when death and disaster is imminent, only when everything else has been tried, only then do we crack open a hint of recognition that God just might be there and that we should commence prayer.

Jacob's prayer is in verses 9-13. He admitted his unworthiness and got honest with God saying, ***"Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him---that he may come and attack me, the mothers with the children."*** (Genesis 32:11) I'm sure this FIRST time in honest prayer with God wasn't Jacob's last because he got a taste of the blessing that prayer is. And we must learn this as well because prayer is a powerful RE-CREATION tool. Yes, prayer changes things---but it also CHANGES us---and it did Jacob.

Andrew Klavan is a popular novelist who was raised in a non-practicing Jewish home. He says that for the first 45 years of his life, he lived as a *"philosophical agnostic and a practical atheist."* But he eventually became a Christian. Klavan explains how it happened. He says:

*"Looking back on my life, I see that Christ was beckoning to me at every turn. When I was a child, He was there in the kindness of a Christian babysitter and the magic of a Christmas Eve spent at her house. When I was a troubled young man contemplating suicide, He was in the voice of a Christian baseball player who gave a radio interview that inspired me to go on. And always, Jesus was in the day-to-day miracle of my marriage, a lifelong romance that taught me the reality of love---and helped me to believe in the greater love that was its source and inspiration. But perhaps most important for a novelist, Christ came to me in stories. Slowly, I came to understand that His life, words, sacrifice, and resurrection formed the hidden logic behind every novel, movie, or play that touched my deepest mind. I was reading a story when that logic finally kicked in. I was in my forties, lying in bed with one of Patrick O'Brian's great seafaring adventure novels. One of the characters said a prayer before going to sleep, and I thought to myself, 'Well, if he can pray, so can I.' I laid the book aside and whispered a three-word prayer in gratitude for the contentment I'd found, and for the work and people I loved. I said: 'Thank You, God.' It was a small and even prideful prayer: a self-impressed intellectual's hesitant*

*experiment with faith. God's response was an act of extravagant grace. I woke the next morning and everything had changed. There was a sudden clarity and brightness to familiar faces and objects; they were alive with meaning and with my own delight in them. I called this experience 'the joy of my joy,' and it came to me again whenever I prayed. Naturally I began to pray every day."*

Eventually, Klavan wrote a book entitled: *The Great Good Thing: A Secular Jew Comes to Faith in Christ.*

Prayer, time with God, changes us as it did Klavan; leads us to being RE-BORN as in prayer we put our faith in His Son and the more we commune with Him in prayer, the more we become like Him.

Well, after his prayer, perhaps following a suggestion God gave him in response to his prayer, Jacob decided to send gifts to his brother. He assembled more than 550 animals arranged in five groups of goats, sheep, camels, etc., a gift fit for a king. And for maximum impact, Jacob staged his gift, spacing the droves of gift livestock out so that Esau would have just enough time to admire the animals and interact with the servants before the next group arrived. Jacob told each his servants to say with their herd, ***"These animals belong to your servant Jacob. They are a present sent to my lord, Esau. And moreover, he is behind us."*** (vs18)

I want you to note something NEW about Jacob---his humility. He who had been told he would be served by Esau---referred to himself as Esau's servant and he gave his big brother the title: LORD.

Well, after the final gift, Jacob sent his wives and children, only he was left. Think of it. For the first time in his life Jacob wanted to be last! That night he was alone in that dark ravine by the river Jabbok. The next day would be his "D-day." One way or another, he and Esau would meet and have it out once and for all. Jacob had no more tricks up his sleeve. No red stew. No goat-hair disguise. As Jacob waited by the Jabbok, I think he was earnestly TRYING to trust God to save him when he met his brother.

Then suddenly a mighty man threw his arms around Jacob. He knew immediately that this man was stronger than he was. So, he wrestled as if his life depended on it. Ironically, that's what "*Jabbok*" means---"*wrestle.*" At first, he might have thought the man was Esau come to kill him, but he noticed his attacker didn't wrestle to win, He seemed to wrestle for the purpose of wrestling. The fight went on all night. Then the stranger touched Jacob's hip. It wasn't some roundhouse blow, no wrenching twist, just a touch. But with that touch Jacob's hip gave way. He must have thought, "*Who is this man who can cripple with a mere touch?*" Then Jacob realized it was God; the very God Whose blessing he had been scheming to get all his life.

And at that point I think perhaps Jacob wept---his tears muddying the dirt on his face. His hip burned with pain---his strength was gone. He didn't even have a leg to stand on. Jacob's mighty will gave way and he collapsed in tears, begging, ***"Please don't leave without blessing me."*** He was completely humbled before God.

God asked, ***"What is your name?"*** (verse 27) Of course, God knew Jacob's name, so it wasn't a request for identification. It was a request for confession. And that's what Jacob did. He confessed, *"My name is Jacob and I have lived up to that name. I am a heel-grabber, deceiver, cheater, conman---Guilty Your honor."* God's reply was utterly unexpected. In His amazing grace He said: ***"Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome."***

Now, the word "*ISRAEL*" means, "*God struggles.*" That's a funny name for God isn't it? Why would an all-powerful being EVER need to struggle? God struggles for only one reason---to lead us to Himself---wrestles with us to help us see our need for Him. I'm told that lifeguards who approach a person about to drown and panicking, they put them in a choke hold that hurts but helps them see their need to be saved. God does that

at times. He wraps His almighty arms around us and says, ***“Come, let us reason together. Though your sins be as scarlet they shall be as white as snow. Though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.”*** (Isaiah 1:18)

As sinners we have all had experiences like Jacob---those times when our sins catch up with us. Many “run,” they brush their sin off by rationalizing our actions or blaming them on others. What we need in these times is a confrontation with our Master. We need to get close enough to Him so that we can see our sin and confess it. Like Isaiah who said, ***“I am a man of unclean lips...”*** Only then are we forgiven and healed. Only then does our faith begin to grow toward “super-hero status.” Do you remember David’s words in Psalm 32? ***“When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to You and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord.’ And You forgave the guilt of my sin.”***

Let’s pray.