Jacob's Calling

He Who Wrestles with God: A Study of the Life of Jacob, Sermon 1

Genesis 25:19-34 | January 28, 2024

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(Small Group Discussion Questions on page 9)

Imagine you are living in the early Iron Age—around the 12th or 13th century BC. You are a young member of a nomadic people who go by the name Israel. Your people are encamped east of the Jordan River, in the plains of Moab. Your leader, Moses, is preparing you for entrance into a land promised by God—the land of Cana. Moses, worn by battles with Pharoah and forty years in the wilderness, stands and begins to speak:

> [1]Hear, O Israel: you are to cross over the Jordan today, to go in to dispossess nations greater and mightier than you, cities great and fortified up to heaven, [2] a people great and tall, the sons of the Anakim, whom you know, and of whom you have heard it said, 'Who can stand before the sons of Anak?' [3] Know therefore today that he who goes over before you as a consuming fire is the LORD your God….[4]"Do not say in your heart…. 'It is because of my righteousness that the LORD has brought me in to possess this land…." [5] [But] because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is driving them out … that he may confirm the word that that he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob (Deut 9:1-5).

You turn to your aging parents—part of the generation that spent 40 years in the wilderness—and you ask, "Who is Jacob?" They tell you his story. He was a complicated man, but he was called by God. Over time, God wrestled Jacob into order. Most importantly, they tell you, God changed Jacob's name to "Israel," so you along with your kinsmen all bear his name.

Moses wrote down the first five books of the Bible during this time when Israel was preparing to enter Cana. The people were outmatched. Many were saying entering Cana was an impossible endeavor, a fool's errand. Moses knew the only thing that could prepare the people and give them confidence, would be the stories of their ancestors. Why? Because in these stories they meet their God—and they learn afresh God's call upon them.

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I wonder what you would tell an adult child on the brink of something big—stepping into a career, going off to school, getting married, having a first child. You know from experience that they're entering a land filled with joy and new challenges. What would you tell them to prepare them? What kind of guidance or confidence would you offer?

This is one of the purposes of the story of Jacob—which Moses records in Genesis 25-35. It is meant to instruct a new generation of Israelites in what it means to live under God's calling.

And this is what it means for all people of God, today. The life of Jacob—which we will consider in our winter sermon series—is not a romantic tale. Nor is it simplistic moralism. It is raw. Dark at times. Brutally honest. It bears witness to what it's like when God claims a life and calls a people to be His own. It is meant to disabuse of naiveté, but also to instill an unshakable confidence—not confidence in ourselves, but confidence in the God who calls and claims us.

We begin our study of Jacob's life by turning to his beginnings—his birth and early years, recorded in Genesis 25:19-34. In this passage, I will draw our attention to the most significant theme that surfaces: *election—the call of God on Jacob's life, and what it means to live under its grip.* This divine calling becomes the backbone of Jacob and must be the backbone of all God's people. We'll see two things about this call of God: The call of God sets us free—free from other powers, and sets us in fire—where we are transformed.

I. The Call of God Sets Us Free

Our passage begins in verse 19, telling us we are hearing about the family of Abraham's son, Isaac—his marriage and first children.

> These are the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham fathered Isaac, **20** and Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, the sister of Laban the Aramean, to be his wife. **21** And Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren. And the LORD granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived. **22** The children struggled together within her, and she said, "If it is thus, why is this happening to me?" (Gen 25:19-22).

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Rebekah then goes to inquire of the Lord, and it is with the Lord's response—a prophecy—that I want to focus:

> And the LORD said to her, "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 25:19-23).

Without explaining why, God simply asserts the destiny of the boys in her womb: Esau, the older, shall serve Jacob, the younger. Not only that but the destiny of nations is foretold in God's announcement.

Calling as Theme

In this pronouncement, God is making known His election, or calling—who He is setting apart for his purposes. When Paul comments on this passage, it is the theme of election He emphasizes, and how it takes place before the children are born:

> When Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, **11** though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls— **12** she was told, "The older will serve the younger" (Rom 9:10-12).

Biblical Theology of Calling

The theme of calling runs throughout scripture. Sometimes it's upon individuals: Jeremiah the prophet is called—"before you were born, I consecrated you" (Jer. 1:5). So, too, Paul—"when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace" (Gal 1:15). (In Greek, the word election literally means, "called out," and carries the same sense as simply speaking of being "called"—the terms are used interchangeably in Scripture[1]).

Other times, we hear of a group being called, such as Israel, "The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people" (Deut 7:6-7). And Jesus says to those he gathers, his church, "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (John 15:16).

The calling of God forms something like the backbone of the people of God: *God chose them, they did not choose Him*. Their identity, strength, and purpose are rooted in the call of God, not human opinion.

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What should we make of this theme in Jacob's life? And in what sense is it freeing? One might even argue that it's confining. There are, in fact, two common objects to the idea of God's election, or calling.

Unjust? No! It's Merciful.

The first is that it's unjust. That God chooses some, but not others, feels unjust. Paul certainly knew of this question, which is why he goes on in Romans 9, "What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part?" (Rom 9:13).

The call of God, however, is not unjust, but merciful. If we allow the Bible to frame things for us, it is humankind, not God, that does the rejecting. In Genesis, God lovingly creates human beings in His very own image and creates for them an amazing world to call home. But one by one, they reject Him: Adam, then Cain, by the time of the flood the entire race has rejected God, and after the flood people gather in Babel to reject God.

And this is the case with Esau—God is not rejecting Esau, but Esau is rejecting God. This is what it means when Esau sells his birthright for a bowl of soup (vv 29-34). That birthright represented the blessing of God. Esau's grandfather, Abraham, lived into Esau and Jacob's 15th year. Surely, he told the boys about the promise of blessing God put upon the family—lands, peoples, blessings to all the world—and this was for the firstborn to carry forward. But all this, Esau rejects, as v.34 states starkly, "Esau despised his birthright".

God's calling is not a sign of injustice but of mercy. It is the first rays of mercy and grace breaking into a dark world. And God is totally free to extend those rays to whichever underserving sinner he chooses, as Paul goes on:

> Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! [15] For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." [16] So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy" (Rom 9:14-16).

Limiting? No. It's Freeing.

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A second objection is that the call of God is confining—it suffocates our free will. But this is again to get things totally upside down. The call of God actually frees us—and this, in two ways.

- **Free from the bondage of privilege and performance**

First, it frees us from the bondage of privilege and performance. God's call so often topples social conventions. He doesn't choose the people the world would choose—but the younger, the lowly, the outcast—even the sinner! In Jacob's world, the oldest child got the birthright, and this meant a double portion of the inheritance, future leadership of the family, and a special blessing. But God consistently upends these social norms in His calling—He tends to favor the weak, lowly, and even the sinful.

Israel is weak, but chosen:

> The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. **7** It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples (Deut 7:6-7).

And Paul says of the Church:

> For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. **27** But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; **28** God chose what is low and despised in the world (1 Cor 1:26-28).

Jesus builds his kingdom with "the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Matt 4:3-6).

Not privilege: You don't have to be important, or fortunate in the world's eyes to be chosen. Because we live in a democratic society that has come so far in giving each individual opportunities, we can scarcely feel the power of this truth. In the ancient world, if you were born low on the ladder, that was a fact of life and there was no changing it.

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Not performance: And you don't have to perform your way into God's favor. Look at Jacob—born a heel grasper, then turning into a deceiver and trickster. He does not perform his way into God's election.

- **Free from bondage of determinism—the fate of our genes, constraints of culture, power of sin**

The call of God frees us from the systems of privilege and performance. And it also frees us from the bondage of what I might call *determinism*—powers greater than us that control us. Ironically, there is a growing theory in the world of science that limits human freedom far more than any notion of God's calling.

Stanford neurologist, Robert Sapolsky, has made waves with his recent book titled, *Determined: A Science of Life without Free Will*, in which he writes,

> You cannot decide all the sensory stimuli in your environment, your hormone levels this morning, whether something traumatic happened to you in the past, the socioeconomic status of your parents, your fetal environment, your genes, whether your ancestors were farmers or herders. … we are nothing more or less than the cumulative biological and environmental luck, over which we had no control, that has brought us to any moment.[2]

Sapolsky spends 500 pages arguing that we have absolutely zero free will. He may go too far. But his thesis shares things in common with how the Bible understands humans after the fall. Humans are created with a will, to be sure; we are not robots. We are created to freely choose God—to love Him and to serve Him. But after the fall, the Bible describes us differently: we have darkened minds, hard hearts, and are slaves to passions (see Rom 1) "That which we want to do, we cannot do," Paul explains (Rom 7). Just watch Jacob—according to the flesh, he is a man mastered by dark forces and social constraints.

The call of God liberates us from determinism. How? By becoming a stronger power. To be called by God is to have a *destiny* greater than any *determinism*: The call of God is the power of God claiming our lives. It is God's determination to save us to transform us. To be called by God is to live according to the destiny God has for you, rather than being determined by other powers. God, rather than our genes or environment or experiences or sin, determines who we are and what we become.

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Walter Brueggemann, a brilliant Old Testament scholar, I think captures well what it means to be under this call:

> It affirms that we do not live in a world where all possibilities are kept open and we may choose our posture as we please. It does not deny freedom. But it requires us to speak also about *destiny*, about the working of this Other One who will have a voice in the future. There are some options that are closed and some choices denied this people of God. Jacob had some freedom. He could stay or go. He could fear or care. But all his freedom is bounded by the choices God has already made on his behalf.[3]

Israel's sense of identity, direction, and confidence—as she stands dwarfed before the giants occupying the promised land—all comes from the call of God upon her. She is nothing without this.

Do you live under the call of God? Or do you live under some other voice, some other power? Maybe it's the call of your own, inner voice that you think leads you; perhaps it's the cacophony of voices around you. None of these amounts to a call that is powerful enough to secure and uphold you. But the call of God is.

To be sure, this story is a cautionary tale as much as a comfort. Esau remains deaf to the call. Just like there were two thieves on the cross, one saw Jesus, and one rejected him. The fact that one was called means we have hope; the fact that one did not turn to Christ, keeps any of us from presuming.

But if you are here, in church today, doesn't it seem as though God is calling you? Most people are not in church today. But here you are, sitting and listening to the Word of God. Dear friend, you too have a birthright, like Esau. The birthright of someone made in the image of God, designed to be God's son or daughter. You don't need to despise it like Esau did his. The voice of your Father calls to you, as the voice of Jesus Christ—the promised Son of Jacob. Jesus says,

> Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. **29** Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. **30** For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matt 11:28-30).

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As the writer of Hebrews says, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.” (Heb 3:15).

II. The Calling of God Sets Us in Fire That Refines (vv 19-34)

Lastly, and as we move to close, I want to address those who know they are called by God. And for us, we need to be clear that the call of God not only frees but sets us in a refining fire. When God claims Jacob, He determines to transform him. And this is painful.

Notice that the chosen people of God in this passage all struggle—especially Isaac and Rebekah. Isaac was the boy that Abraham and Sarah prayed for and waited 25 years for; the boy Abraham brought back down Mount Moriah, as though resurrected from the dead. Rebekah was the chosen bride of Isaac, whom Abraham had sent his servant up north to his kin to meet. This is the chosen couple! Things should unfold easier now.

But notice that Rebekah is barren (v21), and between the time when Isaac starts praying for her, when he is forty (v24), and the birth of the twins, when he is sixty (v26), twenty years go by. That is an eternity, especially for a woman in the ancient world. And then once the pregnancy comes, it’s brutal. The boys are clashing within her, she is in distress, and as it turns out, her sons are destined for conflict.

What we must see when we look at God’s elect—from Abraham and Sarah, to Isaac and Rebekah, to Jacob, to Joseph—is that hardship is not a sign that one is outside the call of God, but may be a sign they are in the middle of it. It seems that waiting is the norm for God’s people.

Two implications of this for the people of God’s calling:

- One, do not confuse waiting or great hardship with thinking you are outside God’s will. Perhaps you made a decision long ago—a marriage, a job, a move—and at the time, you really knew it was God’s will. But then things became hard, brutally hard; or things have not unfolded as you thought. And now you wonder if perhaps you made a mistake. But know this: hardship is not a sign you made the wrong decision but may be a sign that God has you right where He wants you.

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- Second, feel the confidence that God is at work in the midst of this conflict. And when we are called, God's purposes will not fail in our lives. Despite Jacob's struggles and failures, as we will see, God's purposes for him prevail.

What does Moses want the next generation of Israelites to know before they enter the land? What would he want us to know? That those called by God can have total confidence in God. Or, as Paul says in Romans 8:29-30,

> For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. [30] And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

Let's pray.

Questions for Small Groups

Members of your small group are encouraged to listen to the sermon if they were not there on Sunday. We also encourage you to begin your small group meeting with prayer and then by reading Genesis 25:19-34. The below questions are suggestions for how to have a meaningful discussion about the passage—but you may have better questions that come up in your group.

1. Do you believe you have free will? Name a few things about yourself that you did not choose. How does that impact your understanding of free will?

2. If you are a Christian, do you believe you chose God, or did God choose you? Offer a passage or two from scripture to support your point.

3. What characteristics of Esau do you dislike in this story? What characteristics of Jacob do you dislike?

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4. Have you ever prayed and waited for something for a long time? How did God work on you during that season of waiting? Share about this with your small group if you are comfortable.

Endnotes

1. As an example of the interchangeability of the terms "election" and "calling," see Romans 9:11, "… though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of **election** might continue, not because of works but because of him who **calls**" (Rom 9:11).

2. Citation comes from John Fischer's review. Find online: https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/determined-a-science-of-life-without-free-will/

3. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (United Kingdom: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2010) p. 215.

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