

Genesis 32: 9 – 30

'Jacob's Story'

Introduction ...

A story with so many twists and turns, a story of repeated deceptions, a story in which the central character does not receive his 'deserved' come-uppance.

That's a fair description of the story of Jacob ... part of which we heard tonight. The whole story starts part way through Genesis 25 ... incorporates tonight's passage in Genesis 32 and carries on to merge with the story of his Joseph from Chapter 37 onwards.

Background ...

Jacob, you might recall, was the younger of twins born to Isaac ... and Jacob was named as such – his name could be translated as '*Grabber*' – because he grabbed the heel of his brother Esau as they were being born.

And Jacob spent much of his life trying to grab what he could, aiming to be Number One ... not caring who he trampled on in the process.

Yet it is Jacob ... not Esau ... and not anyone else in these chapters that God interacts with. Tonight's passage begins with a prayer from Jacob. And he's certainly right to be worried and to need God's help as he plans to return home ... to his brother Esau who he had treated abominably in the past.

John Goldingay, an Old Testament scholar makes this comment on the start of our passage:

Jacob is praying, movingly and sincerely as far as one can tell, as he casts himself on God ... but then he returns to being as calculating as ever as he divides his company into two! There is an ambiguity and ambivalence about him. At one moment he can pray – listen to God and speak to him ... the next he is devious and calculating.

It is in the context of all this that God once more meets with Jacob. And let's notice the great surprises in this section: It's God's initiative – not so much Jacob wrestling with God as God wrestling with him.

And Jacob was not beaten – until God in a sense cheated – the use of supernatural power to dislocate his hip ... and even then Jacob clung on ... and he asked for a blessing.

You might have thought this was an odd thing to ask ... following a fight. And it goes back to the start of Jacob's deception and his troubles. As a young man he'd cheated his brother Esau out of their Father's blessing ... yet this had not brought contentment or happiness ... Jacob is still searching decades on for blessing, for approval ...

Renamed ... And God renames him Israel. Not Jacob the *Grabber*, but Israel ... which means '*God struggles*' ... but also to all who read Genesis, Israel also means the people God has chosen – 'us'.

So Jacob's story doesn't only merge with the story of his son, Joseph, later in Genesis ... it also links through the centuries ... to the here and now ... Through the first centuries of the people of Israel, through the prophets and to the chosen Messiah – to the Early Church and to us.

Application ...

The history of the Church – here and more generally ... the history of our own lives may well have twists and turns ... but probably less so than Jacob's ... but what his story confirms for us is that:

God does not only work through those whose lives are upright ...

God can use all types of people to further his purposes.

God may sometimes deal with us in the way that we deal with others ...

God makes himself vulnerable to us yet God's purposes prevail.

For Jacob – the one who snatched a blessing from his brother, becomes Israel. God will struggle on with us ... to bring blessing to all peoples on earth.

Amen.