

I want to begin my sermon with a multiple-choice-question: *If you could have one of the following super-powers, which would you choose?*

- a. Super Strength
- b. Super Speed
- c. Invisibility
- d. The ability to fly

By a show of hands, how many would choose super strength? How many would choose super speed? How many would choose invisibility? How many would choose flying?

In our culture there are hundreds of movies and thousands of comic books dedicated to the superhero—that super-human being who has super-human-powers. But no matter the superhero, or their super-power, they all have one thing in common: the super-human ability to control outcomes.

They can stop the bad guys (and bad girls), they can save people from burning buildings, and even avert nuclear disaster. When I was young I dreamed about having super powers; as I grew older these dreams were relegated to the realm of fantasy, but the desire to control outcomes never quite goes away. If we had super-powers, we could protect ourselves and those we love. We could turn back time. We'd have the power to get what we want and avoid what we are afraid of.

The temptation to manoeuvre, manipulate, and control tends to surface in the place of our greatest fear, or, our greatest desire. It's the person who is terrified of rejection who uses emotional manipulation to keep loved ones close, on a leash. It's the person

with a burning desire to make it to the top, who is willing to step on people along the way.

What are your greatest desires? What are your greatest fears? Where are you most likely to manoeuvre, manipulate, and control?

Last Sunday we looked at the life of Abraham—his life was marked by faith, testing, and sacrifice; this Sunday we will take a closer look at his grandson, Jacob. The first half of Jacob's life was marked by deception, manipulation, and control. As we consider Jacob's life, may God give us the grace to consider our own lives; are we walking in the way of Jacob, or, in the way of Jesus?

1. The Way of Jacob: deception, manipulation, and control.

Jacob's story really begins before he was born. Rebekah and Isaac were childless and they prayed for a child; shortly thereafter Rebekah conceived. Her pregnancy was difficult, or at least seemed abnormal to her, but without the modern convenience of ultrasound, she couldn't be sure.

When Rebekah asked the Lord what was going on inside her womb, He revealed that she was pregnant with twins. In Genesis 25:23-26 God said, “*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.*’ *When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb. The first to come out was red, and his whole body was like a hairy garment; so they named him Esau. After this, his brother came out, with his hand grasping Esau’s heel; so he was named Jacob.*”

Rebekah was surprised to discover she was having twins, but she was

also surprised by God’s prophetic word—*the older would serve the younger*. Jacob and Esau were born into a culture that functioned on the principle of primogeniture: the oldest son, upon the death of the father, became the head of the family, and received a double portion of the inheritance—this was their “birthright”.

This practice destined the oldest son to significant advantage and every other son to disadvantage, but here, God reversed the order. “*The older would serve the younger*” meant that God intended for the promises given to Abraham, the promises passed on to Isaac, to be given to the younger son.

We’re told that when Rebekah went into labour, Esau was born first but Jacob followed quickly behind, coming out of the womb grabbing his brother’s heel. The name Jacob literally means “*he grasps the heel*,” but it is a Hebrew idiom for “*he takes advantage of*” or “*he deceives*.” As we read Jacob’s story we discover that the way he entered the world foreshadowed the way he would live. The next two chapters in Jacob’s life make this abundantly clear.

a. Jacob steals the birthright (Gen. 25:27-34): Esau and Jacob may have been twins but they were polar opposite. Esau was hairy; Jacob was smooth. Esau was wild, brash, and unsophisticated; he lived in the moment, was driven by his desires, he thought with his stomach. Jacob was more sophisticated and calculated; he was shrewd, conniving, and had his eye on the future. Esau was older, bigger, stronger, but Jacob bided his time and waited for an opportunity to outwit his dimwit brother.

One day Esau came in from a hunting trip, exhausted, famished, and found Jacob cooking stew. Esau hadn’t thought ahead, he hadn’t

brought enough food or drink with him—no surprise there!—and by the time he got home he was ready to collapse. Jacob, being Jacob, took advantage of his brother’s weakness.

Genesis 25:30-34, “[Esau] *said to Jacob, ‘Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I’m famished!’ ...***31** *Jacob replied, ‘First sell me your birthright.’* **32** *‘Look, I am about to die,’ Esau said. ‘What good is the birthright to me?’* **33** *But Jacob said, ‘Swear to me first.’ So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob.* **34** *Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, and then got up and left. So Esau despised his birthright.”*

Before Jacob was born, God has spoken a prophetic word—*the older would serve the younger*—but God had not specified how this would happen. Jacob wasn’t a wait-for-God-to-work kind of guy; Jacob was too busy trying to secure God’s promises through his own efforts. When you live a life of grasping, there’s neither time, nor room, to receive anything from God. Grasping, scheming, taking—this was Jacob’s way.

b. Jacob steals the blessing (Gen. 27): Jacob wasn’t done after stealing the birthright, he found a way to steal his father’s blessing too.

The day came when Isaac fell ill; he was old, blind, and sensed he didn’t have long to live. So he called Esau to his bed and said, “*I am now an old man and don’t know the day of my death. Now then, get your equipment—your quiver and bow—and go out to the open country to hunt some wild game for me. Prepare me the kind of tasty food I like and bring it to me to eat, so that I may give you my*

*blessing before I die.*¹

There are two things wrong with this picture. (1) The discussion of the blessing was done in secret. The passing on of a blessing was typically a family event, but not here; Rebekah and Jacob were to be kept in the dark. (2) Isaac's decision to bless Esau is in clear opposition to God's direction.

The blessing in question is the promise that God gave to Abraham—land, descendants, protection, honour. God had made things abundantly clear before the boys were born—*the older will serve the younger*; God's promises to Abraham were to be passed on to Jacob. But Isaac had other plans: *Esau is the oldest, Esau is my favourite, and Esau will receive my blessing!* What Isaac didn't know was that Rebekah was listening outside the tent; when she got wind of Isaac's scheme, she devised one of her own.

She found Jacob and spelled out the plan: *“I know the kind of food your father likes, I can prepare it before Esau returns. Your father is blind as a bat, and you and Esau have similar sounding voices; once I prepare the food, bring it to your father and pretend to be your brother.”*

If Jacob had been a different sort of man he would have refused, but his response reveals that he wasn't concerned about the morality of the plan, only about whether it would work. Jacob wasn't the kind of person to leave anything to chance; deceit and manipulation became

his go-to-strategies to get what he wanted in life. Jacob followed his mother's scheme to perfection, he duped his blind father, telling lies with practiced ease.

After eating Rebekah's food, Isaac blessed Jacob, thinking he was Esau: *“May God give you heaven's dew and earth's richness—an abundance of grain and new wine. May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you. May those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed.”*²

Moments after Jacob left the tent, Esau arrived, and when he discovered what his brother had done, he made a vow to kill him. The scene ends with Jacob running for his life and hoping to find shelter among extended family in a distant country.

2. Interrupted By God (Gen. 28:10-22): In the next chapter of Jacob's story, he was interrupted by God. Jacob fled from his brother, but when the sun set he laid down to sleep, using a stone as a pillow. That night he had a dream in which he saw a stairway connecting earth and heaven, with angels ascending and descending.

Above the stairway stood the Lord, and He spoke to Jacob saying, *“I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the West and to the East, to the North and to the South.*

¹ Genesis 27:3-4.

² Genesis 27:28-29.

*All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”*³

“**16** *When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, ‘Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it.’*” Isn’t this the truth? We can be walking through life, feeling utterly alone, completely unaware that God is all around us. Surely the Lord is in this place? God is not a geographical deity, bound to particular places—He is everywhere, all the time. There is no such thing as a God-forsaken place, situation, or relationship.

The next morning, Jacob took the stone he had used as a pillow and he set it up as a pillar—an altar—to God. And he made a vow saying, “*If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father’s household, then the Lord will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God’s house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth.*”⁴

Jacob was running scared; for the first time in his life he was alone—a self-imposed-exile. He had swindled Esau out of both birthright and blessing, but in light of what had happened, there was no guarantee he could ever return to claim them. This was the darkest moment of his life; his ability to outmanoeuvre others had just blown up in his face. And it was at this moment that God chose to reveal

³ Genesis 28:13-15.

⁴ Genesis 28:20-22.

Himself to Jacob. There is something about desperation that opens us to God; desperation has a way of reminding us that we cannot control everything, that perhaps we need God after all.

Waltke notes that God reaffirmed the future promises concerning land and descendants but He also made three personal promises to Jacob: (1) *I am with you*—Jacob felt utterly alone, but he was not; God was with him as he ventured into the unknown. (2) *I will watch over you*—this is a promise of protection. (3) *I will bring you back*—this is a promise of homecoming.

Jacob’s encounter with God was profound, but we discover that Jacob wasn’t instantly transformed. Note Jacob’s response to God’s promises was conditional: *if you do what you have promised, **then** you will be my God, and I will give a tenth of all I receive back to You.*

Up until this point, Jacob had trusted no one but himself, but this encounter with God opened Jacob to the **possibility** of trust. The door to Jacob’s heart had opened, even if it was only just a crack; as it turned out, it would take further hardship for the door to be swung open wide.

Let’s look at the third chapter in Jacob’s life.

3. The Law of Reciprocity (Gen. 29-31): Galatians 6:7 spells out the principle of reciprocity: a person reaps what they sow. If you put

an apple seed in the ground, an apple tree will grow; if you plant an oak seed, an oak tree will grow; and if you blow on a dandelion, the seeds will scatter and produce many dandelions.

What's true of agriculture is equally true in the rest of life. Fear begets fear; anger begets anger; violence begets violence—it's the law of reciprocity: we reap what we sow. Jacob had been sowing seeds of deceit and manipulation for years, in fact, until the death threats from Esau, Jacob had come through relatively unscathed—that was all about to change. Jacob would now learn the hard way, through his future father-in-law. Laban, was a master manipulator and for the next 20 years, what Jacob had done to others, was finally visited on him.

Chapters 29-31 spell out the details, but I will tell you the abridged version. Jacob arrived in Paddan Aram and was welcomed by his extended family. Jacob fell in love with one of Laban's daughters, Rachel, but being penniless, he had nothing to offer as a wedding dowry. And so, Jacob offered to work among Laban's flocks for seven years. Laban accepted, and when the seven years had been completed, a wedding feast was thrown—food, dancing, and drink... lots of drink. We're meant to understand that Laban took advantage of Jacob's drunkenness—the veiled bride he presented to Jacob was his oldest daughter Leah, not Rachel.

Jacob woke up the next day with Leah at his side; he felt foolish, furious, and hung over—he had been outwitted by Laban. When he confronted his father-in-law, Laban downplayed his own deception: *“It is our custom to marry the oldest daughter first; of course you*

can marry Rachel too, but the price is another seven years of service.”

You reap what you sow. Jacob had taken advantage of his own father's blindness in order to gain the blessing; Laban used the veil, drink, and the darkness of night, to blind Jacob to the switching of the brides. Jacob lived with Laban's tricks, deceit, and manipulation for 20 years; he was forced to swallow a long and bitter taste of his own medicine.

4. Wrestling With God (Gen. 32:1-32): The final scene we're going to look at today can be found in Genesis 32. Jacob, his wives and children, we're returning to the place where Jacob had grown up. Twenty years earlier, Jacob had run from his home—a single man with nothing to his name; he was now returning as a married man, with a huge family, and great wealth. But some things hadn't changed—Jacob had not yet become a man of trust and dependence on God. Jacob was a planner but he was not yet a pray-er.

As Jacob journeyed home, he considered the threat that might be waiting for him. Esau hadn't forgotten what he had done, but had he forgiven? Jacob wasn't sure and so he sent messengers to Esau to gage the situation, and they returned with the following message: *“Esau...is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him.”*⁵ It didn't sound like a welcome party, it sounded like an army bent on destruction.

Jacob's familiar way—deceiving, manipulating, controlling—

⁵ Genesis 32:6.

couldn't help him in this situation; he couldn't think of a way to outmanoeuvre Esau's army. And so, Jacob divided his family and flock into two groups; "*If Esau attacks one group, perhaps the other group might escape.*" Jacob had no confidence in his plan, and with nowhere else to turn, Jacob turned to prayer.

Genesis 32:9-12 says, "*Jacob prayed, 'O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, Lord, you who said to me, 'Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper,' I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two camps. Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children. But you have said, 'I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.'*"

This is quite unlike Jacob. "*I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have showed me*"—Jacob recognized that he hadn't got to where he had on the basis of his own scheming. At Bethel, God promised to be with him, to watch over him, and to bring him home. In the past, Jacob had always tried to secure God's promises through his own effort, but with an army bearing down on him, there was nothing left to do but pray, hope, trust.

The next day, Jacob sent his wives, his children, and his flock ahead of him, but he remained behind. Vs. 24 says, "*24 So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. 25 When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. 26 Then the man said, 'Let me go, for it is daybreak.' But Jacob*

replied, 'I will not let you go unless you bless me.' 27 The man asked him, 'What is your name?' 'Jacob,' he answered. 28 Then the man said, 'Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome'... 30 So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared." 31 The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip."

It's a bizarre encounter, and it's not until after the fact that Jacob realized what had taken place. Jacob wrestled all night with a man he couldn't outwit or outmanoeuvre; Jacob was outmatched and the best he could do was simply hold on. When daybreak came, this "man" touched Jacob's hip and it was wrenched; it turns out that Jacob wasn't wrestling a mere man; He was wrestling God and he didn't know it.

The man asked, "*What is your name?*" And Jacob was forced to own up to his name, and, to the behaviour that has dogged him his entire life: "*My name is Jacob—I'm a deceiver, a schemer, a manipulator... I try to control everyone and everything.*" With this confession, God renamed him: "*Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome*".

Conclusion: In telling you the first half of Jacob's story, it would be easy to focus on all that is wrong with him, and yet, his story is filled with hope. The consistent thread running through Jacob's story is the faithfulness of God. We look at Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Esau, and all we see is division and deception, but God saw a family that He could redeem.

No matter how crass Esau was, or conniving Jacob was, God continued to show up, to work, to provide. In Jacob's darkest moment, when He felt utterly alone, God appeared, promising to be with him, to bless him, and to bring him home. When we read these stories, we aren't meant to slip into moralizing—*don't be like Jacob*—instead, we are meant to notice God. *What is He like? What is He saying? What is He doing?*

Ultimately Jacob's story is a story about grace—Jacob gets what he doesn't earn or deserve. Jacob's story is about a long-suffering God. God waited patiently as Jacob experienced the consequences of his actions. God waited patiently for Jacob to realize the futility of trying to control outcomes. He waited patiently for Jacob to turn, to pray, to trust. It took longer than it needed to. It was more painful than it needed to be. But God loved Jacob, and for this reason, God was willing to wait.

God is waiting patiently for us too. The temptation to manoeuvre and manipulate tends to surface in the place of our greatest fear, or, our greatest desire. These are the places where we wrestle with others, with ourselves, and even with God. When we finally stop wrestling with God, and start clinging to Him, we find that it's in God's heart to bless us.⁶ But we cannot receive God's blessing until we are broken enough, humble enough, to recognize that He has what we need.

Communion: We come to the Lord's Supper this morning remembering that the great danger in life is in thinking that we can

make life work on our own, or, that we can find true satisfaction apart from God.

The Bible describes “becoming a Christian” in many different ways, but in John 6 Jesus describes it in terms of *coming to Him and believing in Him*. When we *come to Jesus* we leave certain things behind—we leave behind our self-reliance, our pride, our achievements. God doesn't invite us into relationship on the basis of our own merit; we are invited because we are loved.

Becoming a Christian means *coming to Jesus and believing in Jesus*. We give up the notion that we can live without God and still find satisfaction for our soul. We give up the notion that we can make ourselves right before God and come to celebrate the truth that Jesus's perfect life, His perfect sacrifice on the cross is what makes us right with God—it doesn't depend on **our** effort but on **His** mercy.

This Holy Meal provides us with an opportunity to meet with God, to receive His love, mercy, and forgiveness anew and afresh. As you come forward this morning, come with your burdens and lay them down before Jesus. Come with your sin, asking for, and expecting to receive mercy. Come with your attempts to manipulate and control, asking Jesus to open your hands to receive God's blessing. God loves you and is waiting patiently for you.

At this time I would like to invite those who are serving to come and take their place. We will have three serving station up front, and one/two in the balcony. As the band begins to play, you can make your

⁶ Waltke, 448.

way to those serving the bread and cup; please come, row by row, beginning with the back row.

First Service: For those in the balcony, those serving will begin on the left side first, and then they will bring the elements over to the right side.

Worship

Benediction: May the Lord satisfy you with His unfailing love, that you may sing for joy and be glad all of your days.⁷

⁷ Psalm 90:14.