

July 24,11 Genesis 25-33; 25:23,24

THE SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS

Every year there is a car commercial that brings back a fictional guy who knocks on the TV camera and says something about “opportunity is knocking, now is the time to get the best car deals.” This morning I bring before you a fellow I think had some great opportunities to serve God. Jacob is his name. His wasn’t an easy life since he was born a twin and fought with his brother in and on the way out of the womb. They seemed to have struggled to see who would be first in this life. Esau won. He came first with Jacob grabbing onto his ankle still trying to fight for first place. Ever since that time I am sure they fought like brothers. Esau was a rugged hunter. Jacob took care of the flocks. If you read about Jacob in Genesis you find he is a cheat, a scoundrel, a deceiver, and who knows what. Not someone we would chose for a critical job, not with those credentials. However, with his life in the hands of God he is a man God can remake. This is his story. A story of a man God took and remade and changed his name, a man who went through the school of hard knocks before he finally became God’s man, and his sons of course became the 12 tribes of Israel.

What can we learn from his story? We learn God can transform anyone. We also learn that each of us belong to the school of hard knocks always learning about lives situations. Stuart Briscoe writes “There is no such thing as graduation from the School of Christ this side of eternity. And as this school always offers graduate courses in hard knocks there are many opportunities for those who really want to grow!” Some of you have seen those bumper stickers that say “God isn’t through with me yet!” We are still in class. Each Sunday at 9 a.m. the bell tolls and we are called to the classroom where God presides teaching us things of faith and how we as his chosen should live in this world. It’s an ongoing course where you receive your diploma on the other side when you receive

your crown. So students, you can take notes if you wish. But most importantly, listen to the our teacher. He has words of hope for us to hear. He has words of correction that we need to hear. He has words of love to share with us all.

So may the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob continue to teach us all. May our ears and hearts be open to learn that which God wants us to learn in order for us to be the best we can be as we take courses in God's school of hard knocks.

Our subject today Jacob. The first time we hear about Jacob is when he **cheats** his older brother out of his inheritance and his blessings. We might say he took the opportunity that was before him when Esau came from the fields starving. Have you ever been famished? I mean really, really hungry? We have heard how people are so hungry they steal food. Well that was Esau that day. But he didn't steal any food. He sold something. Maybe he didn't catch a thing and when he came home Jacob had just finished cooking a big pot of chicken noodle soup, picked fresh veggies for a salad and there was the aroma of fresh bread baking. It was too much for Esau. He was famished. He asked his brother nicely to share a bowl with him since he was starving. Have you seen those commercials for Klondike ice cream bars? They ask, "What would you do for a Klondike bar?" Jacob, being who he was, a cheat, asked, "What would you give for a bowl of my chicken soup and a slice of newly baked bread?" The more Esau smelled the food the hungrier he got. He said, "Tell you what bro, I'll sign over my rights as first born to you." So Brother Jacob gave him the soup after perhaps they shook hands to seal the deal and that is how Esau was cheated out of his inheritance.

We perhaps think this is a stupid thing and that Esau would renege on his promise. But how many people do you know who have done some stupid things? Read the newspaper. Watch the news on TV or watch Judge Judy and you think no one has a brain.

Never mind looking there. Look at some stuff you might have done. Esau was hungry and Jacob took the opportunity to get something he wanted from him.

The plot thickens when their dad was dying and it was time to give the family blessing. Isaac was pretty blind and knew his time on earth was coming to an end and since Esau was his favorite son and his firstborn, he was to receive the family blessing which could not be reversed. One day Isaac told Esau to hunt for food and cook it and he would give him the family blessing. His mother overheard the conversation and told Jacob, that was her favorite, that she wanted him to have the blessing. They concocted a plan where she would cook the meal and Jacob would dress, feel hairy and talk like Esau. And so the plan was hatched, and because it was dark in the tent and Isaac's eyesight gone, Jacob **deceived** his father and stole his brother's blessing. Bad enough his brother, but his father? When Esau came back with his food ready to receive his firstborn blessing it was with great shock he learned that Jacob deceived them and stole the blessing.

So you can see what kind of man Jacob was. What a life. Did you know Jacob means "deceiver?" His mother and father named him well. And he lived up to his name.

You know how that turned out? Esau was mad as a hornet and vowed he would kill Jacob. Hearing this Rebekah sends Jacob off to her brother Laban's to find a wife, and find safety until the fires of anger have gone out in his brother. In other words, Jacob ran for his life.

He rested in the desert the first night and had a dream of a ladder to heaven and God coming down speaking to him. We all know the story of climbing Jacob's ladder. You guys sang that song last week. Through that first encounter with God Jacob found out this...God promised him many children...all people on earth will be blessed through him and his descendants....and here is the most important thing. God would bless and be with

him always. Here are God's words to Jacob that day. *"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."* Jacob woke and realized he had been in the very presence of God. When he packed his things for the rest of his journey he paused before the alter he built and vowed, *"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 house, 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 a tenth."*

Isn't it amazing that God still had his hand upon Jacob after all that did? A cheater, a deceiver and who knows what, yet God's hand was still upon him. You see, God doesn't call just the good guys. He calls people to be good. He doesn't call the perfect to follow. He calls people to follow and he will make them 'perfect.' School was in session. Jacob was in the process of learning lots about following God. Right now it was a crash course for the next part of his journey. He found it wouldn't be easy. But he was learning the hard way.

I understand my friend preached about being an over comer last week and though I didn't listen to his sermon I bet the way to overcome things is through faith. It has to be. It is because of our God that we can be over comers. It is because he is with us always that we can deal with things. We are in classes throughout our lives on this earth. We enter The School of Hard Knocks the moment we exit our mother's wombs and we remain in class until we take our final breath. In those years of training, struggling, there are blessings. We learn to walk by faith, to trust in the God who made all things possible. We learn that where things seem impossible, nothing is impossible with God. We learn from the Scriptures stories that reassure us about our God. We learn the good, the bad, the ugly. We learn about trust and faith and what prayer can do. We learn things often happen in our

lives that are opportunities for our faith to grow and prepare for the next test. We learn to be God's children directed and led by God. We learn that the world has its ways and beliefs and God has his. We learn there are lots of people like the old Jacob who cheat and are deceivers preying on God's people. We learn that the world's way falls short and God's way is the best. One road leads to destruction, the other leads to blessings. We know these things, yet, well we might not always do the right thing. Sometimes we get A's and sometimes we get C's and some even get D's and F's in the classroom of life.

Jacob's ladder experience should have been a life transforming moment, and in some ways it was. It gave Jacob something to think about. Seeds were planted in Jacob's heart. But when you read on you find that he met his match with his Uncle Laban, who also was a cheat and deceiver. When Jacob's eyes fell upon Rachael, one of Laban's daughters, his heart began to flutter and he knew he had found the love of his life. He and Uncle Laban struck a deal. Since Laban saw how Jacob had been blessed he said if Jacob worked 7 years for him he could have Rachael for his wife. Jacob agreed and those 7 years flew by and when they were over they planned the wedding and all that was required. Laban was to bring Rachael to Jacob's tent to cement the marriage. In the morning when light came Jacob saw it was Leah, the oldest daughter, whom he had married and he was furious with his Uncle. He had been deceived.... What's the old saying? What goes around comes around? Laban makes another deal with Jacob that if he worked 7 more years he could have Rachael too. And since he loved Rachael more he worked 7 more years.

Cheated and deceived Jacob was learning there were others in this world just like him. But there was something else he was learning. He was learning God was keeping his promises. Jacob was being blessed. It was if he had the Midas touch for everything he did was blessed by God. His flocks grew and grew. Even when Laban tried to take the best of the flock, Jacob's flocks grew better. It was amazing.

Finally time came when Jacob decided to go home. It had been 21 years since he left home and he wanted to see his family again. He hoped Esau had forgiven him, that his dad also would forgive him for deceiving him, and he missed his mother. So Jacob and his family left in the middle of the night taking all that they had and started home.

Was Jacob's life changed? No! But God wasn't through with him yet. He had other classes he needed to take. Classes like, trust, faith, forgiveness and surrendering. Classes on the faithfulness of God versus the faithlessness of man. God had taken care of him and blessed him. In reality it seems Jacob might have had a C- in dealing with Laban because he still was the cheater and deceiver just like his uncle. But now he was heading home to meet his brother and he didn't know what was going to happen. Would his brother still be angry? Does he still want to kill him for cheating him out of his inheritance and his blessing? It's been 21 years will he forget? Will he be harboring the hurt and has it festered like a boil? Jacob decided he would take a chance and head home.

We come to his final class. While heading home and hearing his brother was coming to meet him with 400 of his best men Jacob was concerned for his life. It seems Esau hadn't forgotten and perhaps was still angry. So Jacob divided the flocks and his family and decided to stay well behind instead of leading them home. And when night came he slept under the open sky and once again had an encounter with God. They wrestled, according to the Scriptures. They wrestled all night and Jacob seemed to have won. But when morning came two things happened to Jacob. First, his hip was out of place to remind him of this very day so he would not forget he wrestled with God. The second was that he got a new name. Instead of Jacob, which means "deceiver" God gave him the name Israel, which means "he struggles with God." Jacob had graduated from college and was ready to get his PHD

The next day, Jacob heads to the front of the line to be ready to meet Esau. A humbled Jacob, his life being transformed, kneels in front of his brother and begs his forgiveness. But instead of anger and hurting words, he found hugs and kisses and welcome home messages. And Jacob realized that God had kept his promise. He was with him, and he had blessed him. He got an A in the class on forgiveness and humility. It had been here that the God of his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac became his God.

Tremendous story and one sermon does not do it justice because what you realize is this man who did so many bad things was transformed by the Grace of God to be the father of the tribes that would grow to be the nation of Israel in Egypt. His sons would grow up and their stories are not so good either. But these are the chosen by God who are part of our own heritage as Christians. But God wasn't through with him. He kept learning as he grew and there is much more to his story as found in the rest of the Book of Genesis.

And for the rest of us, what does it mean? Well I'm sure there are many who have had their God moments when God has spoken and assured you of his presence. I'm also sure there are many who have wrestled with God from time to time for a variety of reasons and perhaps you have found your peace. And finally there comes a time that like Jacob, we surrender to God and God transforms our lives and we surrender to God's will.

All of this is a process. It begins in the very beginning of our lives and continues till the last breath that we take on this earth. The one thing we know for sure is this....God is still with us. God continues to knock on the doors of our hearts. God still transforms those who allow him into their lives. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is our God too. And we already know this....God is good.

That school of hard knocks isn't easy. But we have a great teacher who has finished the course. His name is Jesus Christ. He went through this course Cum Laude. So can you.