

The Life of Jacob

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[0 : 0 0] Now we're going to read God's word again in chapter 32 of Genesis and in between times as since there's so much there's too much to read in terms of a public service worship service but just to say that between chapters 25 and chapter 32 Jacob really riles his brother Esau by some of his trickery and has to make off to make his escape to a relative's home in the far East man called Laban that's where he gains himself a couple of wives a couple of concubines and as you imagine his family becomes rather large quite quickly with those although there was a there was some barrenness on the part of his wife's for a while and then by chapter 32 he's wanting to return back home and he's very very fearful because he's not sure well he's he actually is sure he's pretty sure his brother Esau is not going to receive him kindly perhaps the very opposite so he we pick it up at chapter 32 at the beginning Jacob also went on his way and the angels of God met him when Jacob saw them he said this is the camp of God so he named that place Mahaneim which means two camps Jacob sent messengers ahead of him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir the country of Edom he instructed them this is what you're to say to my master Esau your servant Jacob says I have been staying with Laban and I have remained there till now I have cattle and donkeys sheep and goats men servants and maid servants now I'm sending this message to my Lord that I may find favor in your eyes when the messengers returned to Jacob they said we went to your brother Esau and now he's coming to meet you and 400 men are with him in great fear and distress Jacob divided the people were with him into two groups and the flocks and the herds and camels as well he thought if Esau comes and attacks one group then the other group that's left may escape then Jacob prayed oh God of my father Abraham God of my father Isaac oh Lord who said to me go back to your country and your relatives and I will make you prosper I'm 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've become two groups save me I pray from the hand of my brother Esau for I'm 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 he spent the night there and from what he had with him he selected a gift for his brother Esau 200 female goats and 20 male goats 200 us and 20 rams 30 female camels with their young 40 cows and 10 bulls 20 female donkeys and 10 male donkeys he put them in the care of his servants each herd by itself and said to his servants go ahead of me and keep some space between the herds he instructed the one in the lead when my brother Esau meets you and asks to whom do you belong and where are you going and who owns all these animals in front of you then you're to say they belong to your servant Jacob they're a gift sent to my Lord Esau and he's coming behind us that's Jacob is coming behind us he also instructed the second the third and all the others who followed the herds you're to say the same thing to Esau when you meet him and be sure to say your servant Jacob is coming behind us for he thought I will pacify him with these gifts I'm sending on ahead later when I see him perhaps he will receive me so Jacob's gifts went on ahead of him but he himself spent the night in the camp that night Jacob got up and took his two wives his two maid servants and his 11 sons and crossed the Ford of the Jabok after he had sent them across the stream he sent over all his possessions so Jacob was left alone and a man wrestled with him till daybreak 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 then the man said let me go for it is daybreak but

Jacob replied I will not let you go unless you bless me the man asked him what is your name Jacob he replied he answered then the man said your name will no longer be Jacob but Israel which means a prince with God because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome Jacob said please tell me your name but he replied why do you ask my name then he blessed him

there so Jacob called the place penny L saying it is because I saw God face to face and yet my life was spared the sun rose above him as he passed penny L and he was limping because of his hip therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip because the socket of Jacob's hip was touched near the tendon amen a Lord bless to us those readings from his holy and inspired word now there's some very enigmatic parts of that particular those particular scriptures particularly in the second one we were either this enigmatic mysterious stranger who wrestles with with Jacob we also hear of the the very strange habit the Jews have of not eating the meat of an animal close to the to the hip because of the tendon was touched by this stranger in order to cripple Jacob and thus bring their wrestling match to conclusion however before we look at Jacob let me just begin by saying this the Bible does not have an optimistic view of human nature that's not the message of every pulpit in our land I think in quite a lot of pulpits the the mess the the view of human nature would be rather more optimistic but if we go by what this book says then we come to the conclusion that man by by by nature is in sin in Psalm 51 the psalmist David in a state of repentance justifies the doctrine of inherited sin more commonly knows original sin but when he writes I was shaping in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive me David doesn't mean that his mother was an immoral woman playing the adulteress or the whore rather he was reflecting on the fact that long before he himself David had coveted his neighbor's wife and committed adultery with her there was something in his own nature which which that had responded to which had given a context to that for that sin to happen something which to which he had given rain and that was his own sinful nature which which he in the in Sam 51 identifies as prenatal or anti-natal if you prefer and that is that is consonant with the rest of the Bible in the in the another Sam we would find the in Sam 58 we read that the wicked are estranged from the womb speaking lies even for even from the womb and just in case you think well that's the wicked that's not me then you just need to turn to Romans chapter 3 where Paul in trying to show that there is no basic advantage to being from a family in terms of your nature I mean no basic advantage regarding your nature in being from a church family a religious family a godly family you are still as much a sinner as someone who comes not from a godly family not from a church family and the two groups he is dealing with there he says are the Jews and the Gentiles and he says scripture has concluded that both of these groups in fact that means all all men and women everywhere are sinners by nature he says we it says as it is written there is none righteous this is in the sight of God this is in terms of your nature and my nature when held up to and compared to the nature of God himself then we are we are we're like sinners he says there's no one righteous not even one no one who understands no one who seeks after God you may say wait a minute I know lots of people who seek after God we will come to that in a minute as to what makes them seek after God but in the meantime in terms of personal goodness we can say this from from from what we read in the Bible we possess no goodness that we did not receive apart from our nature our own natures never produced one ounce of goodness in their life I'll say that again our natures by themselves never produced one ounce of goodness in their life there was our natures by themselves never produced one good act in their life see where does that come from then there's only one person who can produce good and that is God as Nicodemus said when when when or rather it was when the rich young ruler came to Jesus and said good master what must they do to inherit eternal life Jesus was was wondering about the young man's presumptuousness not knowing anything about Jesus as yet except he was a popular teacher and a good one and he says there is none good except God why do you call me good and so this is where we have to make a distinction between types of grace but we'll come to that in a moment suffice it to say that when [10:34] Paul is writing in Romans about there being none good none who's not even one he says who seeks after God it's all in the context of what we can produce in and of ourselves as born the nature with which we are born and so then even before birth we can assert that there is developing within human beings a tendency to go astray which if we take to be normal human development as the Bible would take it identifies the need for human beings to receive a new nature from God before they can be received as the children of God no one is born into this world as a child of God no one we're all born as creatures of God we're children and of God in the sense that we look to him as the father of all things in a very loose sense but in the sense in which the scriptures speak of the children of God who receive the blessings of God and eternal life from God no one is born into that situation no one is naturally a Christian in other words John makes us very clear in the first chapter of his gospel when in verse 13 and I'm paraphrasing that verse because

I think we need to paraphrase it to fully understand it he says children who are born not because of the genetic mingling of parents or of mere sexual desire or of human will but born from God as Jesus said to Nicodemus born from above your spiritual birth does not find its place anywhere upon this earth if you're a Christian today it's because there was a new birth that you were given from above that happened at a time in your life you may not even be aware of it we don't know if a Christian is able to say oh that's the moment I became a Christian that's the the the week I became a Christian some Christians can't say that but we can assert most definitely that it did happen at some time normally it would be subsequent to your birth now the reason I'm laboring this is because when we come to look at the story of Jacob it is actually it's very much to do with this we just come back to the distinction of grace when God makes someone a child of God through the Holy Spirit working in their life bringing them to faith in Jesus

Christ that is what we call saving grace when someone who will be a Christian or not a Christian does a good thing that's what we call common grace that was the week that's the common grace God favours all mankind with all humankind have received God's grace in order that this world in which we live be not hellish without the common grace of God the world would be even more hellish than it already is in some places God makes it survivable in order why in order to cut throughout history to call his children to himself and eventually to form a community of faith which later will be with him forever anyway the grace of God which triumphs over the sinful nature and overrides sin is called grace that that that is that is what we're calling about this here and it can be very well seen illustrated in the life of Jacob who was the father of the tribes of Israel three points Jacob the twister and we're looking at Jacob the wrestler then we're going to look at Jacob at rest I was going to say the rest there we don't normally say someone who's resting someone's a wrestler Jacob at rest so first of all Jacob the twister the twistedness of Jacob's nature can be seen from the very start Rebecca's mother wondered why these twins were struggling so much with each other and you know it's really amazing to think that there are things that in terms of the prenatal life of the fetus that we just don't understand and there's think there were things going on there just like when Elizabeth comes meets Mary and she's bearing John the Baptist the babe leaps in her womb at the approach of Mary and the son of God now forming there in

Mary's womb there are things that at a spiritual level who said that children before birth cannot be spiritual I did say no one is normally born spiritual John the Baptist was a Christian before he was born on the contrary Jacob was bearing out his sinful human nature before he was born because as he was born the little fist grabs hold of his brother's heel and tries to pull him back and says no no you get back here me first I want to be first and that's that's that's basically what human sinful nature is about me first I want I want everybody to serve my interests my way or the highway my way takes priority and that's that's what he did there and that's why he was called Jacob and it was I'm sure that those who saw it would thinking oh how cute how cute the little boy that's been his brother's heel I'm not by the way absolutely sure of the extent of of sinful intention there wasn't that but whatever it was it set the tone for what was going to happen later it certainly did that because Jacob means supplanter Jacob means cheat twister if sorry guys if you're you may I'm not gonna ask you any Jacobs here I apologize to you this is not personal but if your name is Jacob it means cheat twister and if you think you've got off the hook there you say well I'm not called Jacob are you called James because James is just the other version of

Jacob exactly the same meaning the those who followed James the second and one if it's Charlie called the Jackal bites for that reason anyway but we see this thing about me first every day we see it especially this time of year that the January sales I mean I don't bother going to the January sales because I just can't be bothered with the stress and all the you know it's hard enough getting Christmas presents but if you've got to go out and box in day or these sales right after Christmas and struggle and you know he's virtually see mayhem and women prepare to hit other people with handbags and with umbrellas and maybe not just women sometimes as well so people really want to be first in getting all the goodies we see it most especially if you're a motorist you see it in the terms of the roads people are wanting to be first don't like others to be in front of them personally I don't like people being behind me but that's another point but a lot of people don't like to be to have others there in front of them they want to be ahead no matter what the speed limit says so Jacob was a bit like that thruster he want twister and so anyway that's the that's that's where the tone was set we see in that chapter 25 though secondly that what was seen to be cute at first turned out to be true as the boys grew up Jacob began to resent his brother deeply for being the firstborn the first born we get the lion's share of the inheritance normally a double portion and he would be you get

the birthright the claim to authority in the family and that later he saw because he was born first and Jacob worked out a cunning ploy to procure his brother he saw his inheritance you see that we read that in verses 20 7 to 34 what annoyed Jacob most of all was while the rights of the firstborn meant everything to him they meant nothing to he saw he saw couldn't have cared less really all he wanted was a pot of red lentils to that was what was in his mind when it came in from from the the fields and so Jacob convinces he saw to sell him the birthright for this lovely stew this length red lentil and bean stew they made and we see from this episode that Jacob was a bit of a del boy in the way he went about things there's a third episode really showed Jacob up that he lived up to his name a few years later when old Isaac was going to die we didn't read this one but I knew I was going to tell you anyway Isaac who was a bit of a hypochondriac actually because I think he lived for about 15 years after this or something like that but I'm dying get my get my firstborn son in I'm going to bless him you know and Jacob's mum got in on the act as well the right bunch of connivers these people that the chosen people of

[19:26] God a real bunch of connivers because where Isaac favored he saw Rachel favored sorry Rebecca favored Jacob and she said she said now son just just get your get those animal skins on to make it seem your dad's blind he can't he's blinds a bat he can't see a thing but if you put on these animal skins and on your neck and taking his favorite food then you'll get the blessing and that's exactly what did what happened old Isaac says well this is the voices Jacobs but you smell like you saw that was basically what it was and he got the blessing and so he twisted his and manipulated and cheated again she did his brother and after that time he just had to go because he saw wanted blood and so that it's a situation after he's been in that situation the years later coming back now wanting to go back home because no matter how much people have dirtied their ticket at home home is still home and they still want eventually to go back there and Jacob had on his way to his uncle Laban's house escaping from me so I had a religious experience at a place called

Luz and in a dream he saw the angels of God going up a staircase between heaven and earth and in that dream God appeared to him and God's in the dream mentions to him this covenant this special agreement that he had between him and Jacobs father and grandfather Rebecca Isaac and Abraham and any God promises to be with him in the dream to secure his future bear in mind Jacobs not a man very used to having God in his life day by day and he was very afraid because of the dream who this is none other than the house of God so I'll call it Bethel which means house of God and he set up a memorial stone and he may started to give contributions to religious causes I'm going to give a 10th he made a deal with God and it was full of ifs if this and if that it was so conditional this was a vow made by a man who was not a man of faith you see the difference between a religious man and a man of faith religious people want to negotiate with God people of faith just want to follow God and so as a religious man of sorts he says I'm going to set up this altar here and I'm going to start giving a tenth of what you know and and he was it was his insurance policy for the future he says if you if God will be with me and if he'll give me bread and if he clothes me and if

I can if he makes it so I can return home one day then God will be my God okay but not until then not unless I'm sure of all those things and even the most upright of religious people try to manipulate things to their own advantage they want to be insurance policy for eternity they want to have the funeral service in the church they want to have all sorts of things that will make them look good at the end of the day but they do not on a day by day basis have God there if they're lucky is lucky if they're there if he's there in the mind so that was Jacob God was pretty much there although he was there in the dream he went back to the other day after I think anyway Jacob went live with Laban got all these wives children and then the years passed I say and Jacob lived look at Jacob the wrestler he lived with his uncle married his daughters Laban church proved to be every bit as cunning as he was Jacob thought he was going to get Rachel as his wife but when he was at night in the darkness and probably when I think Jacob might be in a little bit light-headed because of the wine flowing at the wedding Leah the other daughter was slipped in between the blankets and the Bible is quite funny at that point I says and in the morning behold it was Leah and not Rachel so then he thought well that's a bit of that's a bit cruel but Laban said I'll tell you what promise you'll serve me another seven years I'll give you Rachel as well I'll throw her into the bargain and that was what it was so he gained a family children worldly goods he and Laban were always trying pitting each other's wits against the other there's all sorts of interesting wee stories about how Jacob made a kind of agreement that he would have of the flock only the speckled ones and he wouldn't take

anything from his flock that was that was you know straight color one color those could be labours but then you go and see how he tries to make the speckled animals mate and the self-colored animals not mate so he could have a stronger flock than labours it's all very very sad and funny at the same time anyway he was missing home and so he went back he was going back home suddenly hears he saws on his way with 400 men you didn't go with 400 men just to say hi and have afternoon tea you went basically to have an argument with somebody a fight and a bit like William Wallace and the English you know but like that and he heard it so he saws on his way with these men so what do you do when you're terrified what do you do when you're terrified what does anyone do people respond differently don't they but Jacob when he was terrified he decided that he was going to exert his cunning once again so he sets he decides on giving a gift to Esau in different groups so he could soften them up as each you met each group he'd be softer and he'd finally meet Jacob once he was really softened up he also decided to split the traveling group into two if one was attacked then the other one might go as well might get away here was a man who was really really afraid even after all his scheming and imaginations to keep himself on the winning side and have the edge he'd now reached the point where he could lose it all in a vengeful attack by his brother this was a really risky dangerous situation for Jacob and he made a very fearful prayer like a man in the trenches I don't personally believe that he that that faith entered a lot into that prayer of his at verse 24 of chapter 32 he was praying that prayer in the same pretty much the same way as someone might pray the Lord's prayer in the trenches that sort of that's why they call it a trench type prayer he knew all the right language people who pray like Jacob prayed here often know the right language this

was the language of their ancestors these were the traditional prayers this was the traditional phrase theology that he had come to know in his background he'd heard it all it is Nehita grasshopper from Isaac who'd heard it all from Abraham and God was their God and their families God yeah so that was his resort but so he actually it was a prayer of fear and and then then we come to a very very telling little verse verse chapter 32 and verse 24 it says so Jacob was left alone he was left alone and nobody else to support him there as long as there is people around some folks they they can feel they're not utterly deserted but to be on their own at least now one thing he had he hadn't had up till then he had the opportunity to reflect in a quality way to give true focus they say that for a condemned man to be to be hang first thing in the morning nothing concentrates the mind more than I think Jacob was beginning to find his his concentration because he really believed he was going to die and what happened next is is to a certain extent shrouded in mystery because all we're told is there was a man and this man wrestled with him till daybreak it's very economical in its use of language there didn't say and suddenly there was this blinding light and out came this man just as this a man wrestled until daybreak who was this man where did they come from how did he come to grapple with Jacob we don't really know that but first of all it's likely that the Jacob might have taken him to be a some sort of agent of

Esau who'd come to do him harm somebody's just suddenly jumping on you sometimes sometimes this episode in Genesis 32 is taken to be signify the power of prevailing prayer but it's clear from the scripture that that's not what it was at the beginning that's not what it was majorly it may have included that by the end of it but that's not what it really stands for this man wrestled because the man was wrestling with him it doesn't say Jacob was wrestling with a man the man was wrestling with him and as we read to the end of chapter 32 the the identity of this wrestling stranger becomes clear that this was none other than God himself in a human-like form not just some created angel there are many other instances in the Old Testament where God appears in a human likeness and a human form not truly human but in the form of humanity in a body even if it's a temporary body we don't know the majority of opinion is that this was a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus that this person wrestling with Jacob was Jesus because Jesus is the one who has made God known he's the one who is he's the only person of the Trinity who has ever taken a body and come to human beings in that way so this was probably some pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus but why was he wrestling with Jesus with Jacob two reasons are clear firstly to break down Jacob's self-reliance and bring him to an end of himself something he'd never really and they've never really happened to him in this physical struggle we see a picture of what's actually happening inside Jacob and so often there are symbolic actions in scripture this is a kind of symbolic action Jacob was really wrestling as Jesus said to Paul in the road that Saul the road to Damascus it's hard for you to kick against the goads Jesus knew what was going inside Saul equally what was going inside Jacob was very similar here it was all coming to a head all that rebelliousness all the twistedness all the

cunning deceit and guile by which he'd lived by his wits for all those years in the land of Laban and by which he'd deceived and cheated his brother out of his birthright and then out of his blessing it's all coming to a head now he's beginning to see who exactly is and he's coming to the point where he is no longer going to have any resources left to resist God secondly to help him see that no amount of cleverness or human ingenuity will suffice he will have to depend on God's grace and power to see him through the next hours at first he doesn't realize who he's struggling with and he exerts himself to the utmost to try and win the fight now it seems for a wee while as though he's actually winning but clearly God is allowing him to give it his best shot to struggle with him to reach the end of his energy and the struggle continues till daybreak whether God could have brought things to an end sooner there's no doubt he could but he wanted to bring Jacob to the end of himself first here was somebody who couldn't be influenced by guile deceit trickery or worldly power Jacob couldn't negotiate his way out of this wrestling match it just was it was it was a clear head to head with God and sometimes that's what God does we can dodge and dive and weave as much as we like in our lives trying to avoid him ducking this way dive and weave that way oh human beings can be very skillful at avoiding God and confrontations with him and challenges from him it's so we are so full of ingenuity when it comes to those things but eventually if God has his name set upon us as

[32 : 01] he had his name set upon Jacob there's going to be a head to head at some point God is going to bring us to the point where we will have to wrestle with him and face him and deal with him and that's exactly what was happening here and at length the Lord brings matters to conclusion by a simple touch just touching the hollow of Jacob's thigh and dislocated he crippled him dislocating it permanently but then it was so damaged it was not going to stay back in that that joint was not going to stay locked together again and he was going to be struggling he was going to be limping from that day till the day of his death as a reminder of that day of that night and he now knew who the stranger was and knowing who he was he said he implored his blessing he knew that he needed God to favour him and to bless him to bless his ways and what was what was going to happen and not just in the next few hours but in the next few years and from cunning as someone says from cunning he had come to clinging and from resisting he'd come to resting see he was he was no longer holding himself up he was just clinging on to God clinging and we read that God blessed him there he blessed him there God had now conquered Jacob Jacob was now clinging to God no longer just using religious family traditions and practices as pegs upon which to hang his religious thoughts he was now he now realized that he'd faced God there and that's why I called the name of the place Peniel which means the face of God I have seen God face to face and I've lived to tell the tale because God's intention was not to kill but to give him life as Jesus said I have come that they may have life and that they may have it the more abundantly life in all its fullness and that was what he'd come to offer to Jacob so Jacob the wrestler then we'll see Jacob at rest after that his life was different he still had problems with Esau he still didn't trust his brother and that's the thing being coming a Christian doesn't make all your problems suddenly disappear but it does give you more clarity on how to approach problems and and you look at things through a godly perspective and not just through that selfish perspective that you've had before and he had difficulties with his children you can see all that in the Bible the Bible is very brutal in its frankness but as a sign of that change that took place in his life God called him not Jacob any longer because he knew all too well what that meant Jacob the twister the supplanter the cheat the deceiver the squirmer he'd now he called him Israel which means a prince of

God and he was now in a position to know the life of blessing does not come through human cunning and shrewdness he was never happy just by having worldly possessions and no one ever is no matter how much you try and get for yourself at the end of day some of the most unhappy people in this world are people who have the most in terms of worldly possessions and advantages you read I've just read a couple of weeks ago somebody who took their own life and you think you know this person seemed to have everything so it comes that the the life of blessing comes through a personal encounter with the living god face to face with Jesus Christ and years later when Jacob was dying we read in Hebrews 11 that he blessed his grandchildren and that he was leaning upon the top of his staff this leaning wasn't just because of his advanced years this was because what John White has called the crippling in the chasm that night he was crippled when when Jacob learned that in order to rise up by God's grace had to be brought down in weaknesses first realizing that without Christ he was nothing and that he could do only do things all things only through Christ

who was strengthening him that's why Paul later on was saying when i'm weak then am i strong Jacob was stronger now than he'd ever been morally and spiritually although he was physically much weaker than he'd ever been and sometimes that is the way the way to go sometimes this this what this world called strong in terms of athletic prowess or strength in terms of of the way we use authority or power or possessions that's not true strength strength comes through the god life god working and living through us so in conclusion what does this teach us as we enter this new year are we like Jacob motivated by self-interest that drives us to succeed even if it means trampling over others do we give god lip service and a wee compartment in our lives making a token acknowledgement from time to time of his existence and his relevance to our families in the past god of my father's yes but are you god of my life when trouble is times do we send up panic prayers almost as a knee jerk reaction if the answer to these questions are yes then we're like the old jacob who had never really truly known what it was to walk by faith but on the other hand if we've reached an end of ourselves because of our circumstances been left by ourselves alone without any support and in that situation had a personal encounter with the living god through jesus christ and grappled with the challenges with which he's then confronted us that's that is that is the beginning of true life have we experienced a self-emptying which has compelled us to cling to christ instead of to our own imagined resources have we been filled with his blessing of a new nature and with his spirit as god's word says if anyone who is in is in christ he's a new creation all things passed away everything becomes new and the really important question for me out of the jacob story and i take this to myself as much as giving it to you is on whom are we leaning as we enter this new year it was said of jacob in his latter years that he lent upon his staff it's which is a piece of wood but the staff he lent on was much more than that sometimes it's said that christians use religion as a crutch for their lives and i was with callum and liz last week last weekend by the way and callum was saying to me he was reminding me of this how sometimes people say religion is just a crutch for people's lives isn't it but but callum was says although there's no crutch as such there is a leaning there's a definite leaning so on whom are we leaning and depending because we do need someone far greater than ourselves to lean on and depend on may we as we enter this new year may we have the joy of discovering that that person is jesus christ let's pray gracious god our heavenly father we pray that you will bless us today as we as we seek you through your word help us to use and these old testament stories as not just little stories to tell the children but also stories and histories and from which we can gain valuable truths for our own lives we pray that we would we would not be those who are left with an old nature of selfishness and self seeking and self justification would rather give us the new nature which is in christ that we might know that righteousness which is of god from god by faith and jesus in his name we pray amen