**Turn the Page Week 3 – Striving to Surrendered**

**Message Big Idea**: “Turn the Page” by surrendering control of your life to God.

**Scripture:** Genesis 31-33, Hebrews 13:5

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Introduction**

*(Series Graphic) (Holding Bible)* The Bible is the kind of book that so many of us don’t pick up because we don’t even know where to start. When I was a kid, my church’s youth group played a game where the reference to a Bible verse was called out and the first person to find it and read it won the game. I got the impression that everyone else in the room was a Bible brainiac, and I was the only one that was lost. The funny thing is, I still struggle to find half the books in here! …like the book of Haggai. I can spend days looking for that one!

We know the Bible is important. In fact, research shows that regardless of where a person is in their spiritual journey, regularly reflecting on Scripture is the most impactful practice a person can experience for spiritual growth. That’s why we’re on an 11-week journey through the Bible to help all of us engage Scripture.

In addition to what we’re doing here on Sundays, there is a Monday through Friday *(Graphic)* **Turn the Page Bible Experience** that we are encouraging everyone to participate in. It’s not too late to sign up for either the podcast or email version by going to our app or website. You can find the past weeks’ content on our website as well.

This series is a great opportunity to gain an overview of the Bible, but this isn’t meant to just be an exercise in head knowledge. Our goal is that as we engage the Bible we will come to know God and his ways, and allow the Holy Spirit to use the pages of this book to transform our lives.

This week we’re in a section of the Bible made up of Genesis 12-50 known as the period of “The Patriarchs.” Here’s a quick overview:

**Video: Overview of Patriarchs**

Last week we learned that God initiated a new beginning by making a covenant with Abraham declaring that his descendants would become a great nation, “the people of God,” who would be blessed to be a blessing. But as we turn the page, we find that living into this identity as “the people of God” is not something that just happens. It’s a journey. And along the way, there is some wrestling.

**Overview of Jacob**

*(Family Tree Graphic)* As the story of this family moves forward, Isaac and his wife, Rebekah, become parents of twin boys, Jacob and Esau. Already, the birth story hints of the kind of trouble you only see on daytime talk shows. We’re not talking Oprah either. These are Jerry Springer problems. *(Genesis 25:25-26a)* Jacob, the second born, is given a name that means: **“he deceives.”** (*add:* Jacob = “he deceives”) I’m not sure what you could do at birth to deserve such a name, but he definitely goes on to live up to it.

For example, he deceives his brother by stealing his birthright in exchange for a bowl of soup. Then, with the help of his mother, Jacob deceives his dying father. In Isaac’s last days, his vision is so bad that he can only recognize his sons by touching their arms. Apparently, Esau is *really* hairy. When Isaac wants to give Esau a blessing, Jacob takes some lamb’s wool and covers his arm with it. Somehow his dad is fooled by the deception and gives his blessing to Jacob instead.

You can only imagine how well this goes over with Esau, right? In his rage, Esau swears he’s going to kill his brother so Jacob is forced to flee. For the next 20 years, Jacob lives in a distant land with his uncle Laban, and the two of them take turns deceiving one another there as well.

Trouble seems to have a way of finding Jacob, until finally there is a turning point. As we turn the page to Genesis 31, Jacob’s life is about to change.

**Jacob, The Striver**

After 20 years of living in a foreign land, *(“The LORD said to Jacob, Return to the land of your Fathers and your relatives…”)* God speaks to Jacob and commands him to return home. But there is a sticking point with this command...a big one.

Remember, Jacob has lived his life deceiving, striving, and manipulating. He was always only looking out for #1, and he was willing to do whatever it took to get ahead.

As a result, Jacob left piles of wreckage from all his schemes behind him. The oldest and most significant “wreckage” was with his brother Esau. Esau had every reason to hate Jacob after he swindled their dying father and stole the blessing. Jacob’s striving and grasping had torn his family apart, and left a rift with his brother that seemed beyond the reach of forgiveness.

So, the sticking point for Jacob in this moment is this... In order to return to his homeland, he has to pass through a territory called Edom which is run now run by guess who?!?! Esau!!! Yikes!!!

I think it’s safe to say that realizing you’re going to come face to face with a person who wants to kill you doesn’t feel good. Especially when you’re going to encounter that person in a place where they have the power to do so without consequence.

God knows that Jacob will likely be terrified at this prospect, so when he commands Jacob to return home, he promises something very important:

**“The LORD said to Jacob, “Go back to the land of your fathers and to your relatives…** *(add)* **and I will be with you.” –Genesis 31:3**

When God personally promises to “be with” Jacob, Jacob should have confidence, right?

It makes me think of a story I read about Bears player *(picture)* **Kyle Long**. Evidently, there was 9-year old boy named Andrew from Huntley, Illinois that was being bullied on the bus everyday. The bullying got so bad, and Andrew’s father felt so desperate for his despondent son, that he reached out to Kyle through social media. He thought maybe if a famous football player shared a word of encouragement with Andrew, it might help. Kyle’s response was immediate and surprising: *(picture) “I’ll ride the bus with him,”* he said.[[1]](#endnote-1) Can you imagine a 6 foot 6, 315 pound guard riding the bus to school with you? That would do wonders for your confidence!

*(Genesis 31:3)* In essence, God says to Jacob, *“Don’t worry, I’ll ride the bus with you. I’ll be with you.”* It is a promise, a personal guarantee.

So the question is: How will Jacob walk into this encounter? He ought to be strutting with faith and confidence, right?

Not so much... Jacob shifts back into his conniving ways. *(Genesis 32:7-8)* He is filled with fear and distress so he divides his family and everything he owns into two camps. He hopes to trick Esau so that when Esau kills everyone in one of the camps, he might be fooled into thinking he got everyone.

These are not the actions of a man who is resting in God’s promise. This is a man striving to save himself.

Yet from this place of faithlessness, desperation, and fear; Jacob finally takes a break from his anxious striving and calls out to God in prayer.

*(Genesis 32:9-12)* He prays this amazing prayer affirming God’s faithfulness in the past and *(Highlight verse 12)* recounting God’s promise to be faithful and kind to him and his family in future generations!

Surely ***now*** Jacob will be at peace and full of faith, right?

Nope. *(Genesis 32:13)* In the very next verse, Jacob continues his plotting and striving. Right after he says “amen” to his prayer of trust in God, he immediately starts scheming and preparing an elaborate bribe for Esau. Despite what God has promised him, over and over again, Jacob still stubbornly tries to take matters into his own hands. He continues to place his trust in his own efforts to pacify or trick Esau, rather than trusting in the promises of God.

But none of his efforts give Jacob any real peace.

**Jacob Wrestles With God**

The night before he faces his reckoning with Esau, we find Jacob alone, standing on the bank of river in the middle of the night, filled with anxiety.

And then something very unusual happens... As Jacob stands alone and afraid, *(Genesis 32:24)* he literally starts wrestling with God…with God in human form (although Jacob doesn’t realize at first that it is God). They wrestle through the night, until the light of dawn.

**“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 answered.” –Genesis 32:26-27**

Now, of course, God already knows his name. He knows everything about Jacob. So why does he ask him to say his name?

Remember the name “Jacob” literally means “he deceives.” By asking him to say his name, God is asking Jacob to confess the truth about his character. He has to admit, “I am a deceiver.” That is who Jacob has always been…a striving, scheming, conniver.

Jacob has to acknowledge the reality of his current identity before God, but then, God blesses him with a new name, a brand new identity.

**“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.’” –Genesis 32:28**

One of the meanings of this new name, “Israel,” is **“he struggles with God.”** But another meaning of the name is (*add:* Israel = “God Fights”) **“God fights.”**

This deceiver, this schemer, this striver who struggles to put his trust in God is given a new name meant to remind him that God will fight *for* him. Jacob thought this return to his homeland required more plotting and scheming, but God wants him to understand that his self-sufficiency is a dead end filled with wreckage, fear, and anxiety. Instead, he wants Jacob to put his trust in God and let God fight for him.

This is an incredibly beautiful moment in the story of God and his people. Throughout his entire life Jacob has been striving to seize God’s blessing by his own efforts and by any means necessary.

God meets Jacob in his stubborn striving and patiently wrestles with him, until he is ready to embrace **surrender**.

Before he lets Jacob go, God touches the socket of his hip, and from that point on, Jacob walks with a limp, a constant reminder that he is to no longer walk in his own strength but to rely on God in faith.

As he limps away from the scene…

**“Jacob called the place Peniel,** which means “face of God,” **saying, ‘It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.’” –Genesis 32:30**

**Our Story**

In reading Jacob’s story, there’s a part of me that’s astonished at how someone could be so slow to figure it all out. What was he thinking? Why all the scheming and striving?

But I wonder if Jacob might say the same thing of us if he could read our stories. Time and again we strive to seize control from God and take matters into our own hands.

* We strive in relationships to get what we want from people.
* *(add)* We strive in our finances because we never feel like we have enough.
* *(add)* We strive to maintain an image because we want to be seen a certain way.
* *(add)* We strive to achieve filling our calendars with so much busyness.

Our striving has all the hallmarks of a bull in a china shop. *There is wreckage in our wake.*

And it’s wreckage that we, like Jacob, typically spend years trying to ignore.

* Our striving has left brokenness in our relationships. We try to ignore the hurt and the pain, but we know it’s there. We’re faced with the wreckage every time we see the person or are reminded of them.
* In the wreckage of our finances, it’s just easier to find ways not to think about it. Any way we can divert our attention to something else and put off the problem is sweet relief, but the wreckage remains.
* In our striving to maintain an image, the wreckage piles as we twist stories and white wash the real truth. The outside is clean, but the inside is a disaster.
* In our striving to achieve, we’ve often ignored what is most important to us. We’ve left damage in our wake, but we convince ourselves that we should just keep going.

Let me ask you: **What are you striving for?** What keeps you up at night? What are you trying to control, manipulate, and scheme?

Don’t get me wrong. We’re not saying don’t take any action. Just sit back, “Let go and let God.” We’re talking about being honest with ourselves in how we strive for our own agendas. When we’re trying to do life in our own power, fighting our own battles, we’re going to leave behind all kinds of wreckage that sooner or later we’re going to have to face.

The question is, what will you do at that moment? Will you just keep striving? Or will you surrender your life to God?

What makes all of this so hard is that, like Jacob, this letting go, this trusting in God, doesn’t simply happen with the snap of a finger. Living into our identity as “the people of God” is a journey, and a lifelong one at that. And this journey calls us to a life of daily surrender.

**Response**

I want to ask you to do something with me today. Hold out your hands with your palms up like this.

In your left hand *(TP should hold out right hand to mirror audience),* I want you to think about the biggest area of struggle in your life. This is the place where you feel like you have to strive more than any other to make it work. Consider its weight. It’s heavy with worry, heavy with anxiety, heavy with failure and regret. It’s a weight you’ve been carrying for a very long time.

Now in your right hand *(TP left hand)*, consider the immensity of God. We’re not even through the first book of the Bible and God has already shown his power through creation and his covenant promise. Imagine the immensity of his power in speaking creation into existence. He said, “Let there be” and galaxies began to spin. Consider his promises. His promise to love his people. He never breaks his word. He’s always trustworthy. He’s always faithful.

Let me ask you, what has more weight? The left or the right? The weight of your struggle and striving or the weight of his power and promises? Who will you trust the most? Your strength or his? There has never been a single time that God couldn’t handle the weight. Our striving has to fall in *(hands up)* surrender to God.

**Conclusion**

When Jacob finally came face to face with Esau, he finds that all his scheming all his striving and all his anxiety was for nothing.

As Jacob approaches his brother, bowing and limping, Esau catches one sight of him and starts running. *(Genesis 33:4)* He reaches Jacob and embraces him, kisses him, and there they wept together.

You see, God always delivers on his promises. All along, God said to Jacob, “I will be with you. Trust me.” Jacob didn’t have to worry, scheme, or be afraid. He could give up his striving and surrender to the God who fights for him.

And the same true for us today... The more we allow ourselves to get caught up in striving in our own power, the more we experience anxiety, wreckage, and sleepless nights. The more we surrender our lives to the God who fights for us the more peace and blessing we will experience in life.

The promise given to Jacob is the promise that is ours. God says:

**“Never will I leave you;**

 **never will I forsake you.” –Hebrews 13:5**

Whatever you came in here carrying today, whatever you have been striving to make happen in your own power, you can surrender it to God.

He will fight for you.

He will be with you.

He is our God, and we are his people. Never will he leave us. Never will he forsake us. We can trust in him.

**Communion Idea**

Jesus is the ultimate expression of the God who fights for us. He came, he fought, and he declared victory over everything we could never accomplish through our own striving. His victory for us on the cross is the fulfillment of the name “Israel.” And now we take on his name as Christ-followers. Christians. Our reality is not just that God fights for us, but that God has already fought for us...and won!

It is in Jesus that we receive the promise of forgiveness.

It is in Jesus that our relationship with God is restored.

It is in Jesus that power of sin, fear, and death are overcome.

Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection are the declaration of the ultimate victory God has won on our behalf. A victory that is freely given to all who would receive it.

Perhaps there is no better symbol of this gift than communion as we remember the price that was paid, the body and blood - the bread and the cup, the blessings we receive through his victory.

1. http://www.espn.com/chicago/nfl/story/\_/id/10886636/kyle-long-chicago-bears-supports-boy-bullied-school [↑](#endnote-ref-1)