

God Changes People - Kevin Miller, 30 minutes, **Genesis 28:1-22** (#517)

Introduction: Do people really change? That is the question that our entire society wrestles with in all kinds of contexts. It comes up when you go to a class reunion – you remember him as a bully, but maybe he’s a great guy now? Change comes up when family gets together: she was spoiled in her teen years, can she grow out of it? And change comes up again with our criminal justice system: once somebody has served their time, do we help them to move on? Or does a con always return to their ways?

This morning, I want you and I to believe that people really can change. And the change we’ll see is more than – different from – some sort of change brought on by a new attitude or a self-improvement program. Instead, what we’ll see today is that encountering God changes people.

This, of course, is what happened to Nathaniel in **John 1**. Philip comes to him and excitedly says that he has found the promised Messiah, yet Nathaniel’s reply is derogatory – as soon as he hears that this “messiah” is from Nazareth, he says “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” He’s unconvinced, to say the least. Yet Philip persuades Nathaniel to at least come and see, and the result, as **verse 49** records, is that meeting Jesus changes everything for Nathaniel. He goes from doubting to believing: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” Meeting God changes everything. I’m referring to **John’s gospel** not just as an example of change, but also because of what Jesus says in **verse 51**: “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

Now that’s a puzzling picture isn’t it? We’ll unpack the meaning later in the sermon, but I want us to start off by seeing that Jesus Himself is referring to our passage today – He is referring to Jacob’s dream in **Genesis 28**. Let’s start there...

28:1-9 Does God change people? We see two big examples right here. If you were with us last week, Isaac called Esau – not Jacob. And his plan was to bless his oldest son, not his youngest. Of course, everything has changed in between: Isaac’s wife Rebekah came up with a plan for Jacob to get the blessing instead. And while

she might have argued that Jacob deserved the blessing – the Lord had told her so, after all – that certainly doesn't excuse her deceptive behavior in the slightest. Nevertheless, God's plans are exactly what would come to pass, with Jacob receiving the blessing from his father instead of Esau.

So, as we now read here, Isaac has had a complete change of heart, hasn't he? Why? Though not spelled out, it sure seems like he has given in to God's prophecy of the younger ruling over the older. Jacob has received the blessing and Isaac will finally step up – in ways somewhat similar to how his father Abraham had – and point Jacob towards future faithfulness when it comes to finding a wife who won't lead him astray from God's promises to His people.

Yet, it's not only Isaac who seems changed; Esau is undergoing a bit of a revolution as well. We read that he knows about Isaac's continued blessing – maybe even favor? – for Jacob and Esau apparently is starting to realize some of the error of his ways. He takes inventory: he already has two wives, neither coming from their family clan, which he well knows has displeased his parents greatly, perhaps even outright costing him the blessing that (in human terms) would have been his. So, perhaps in an effort to get back into his family's good graces, if not into God's blessing, Esau looks for a third wife from the extended family rather than from a foreign tribe.

Now, we need to be clear: while Isaac is blessed by God, we don't read anything similar of Esau. And so it makes sense for Isaac to be changed, at least indirectly, by the events of the previous chapter and to recognize God's plan in them. Here, Esau has clearly been changed, but we don't see any sort of encounter with God. That's important, because Esau's efforts are just worldly grasping at best. Sure, he chooses a wife from the extended family, but she is from the Ishmael side of the family: ironically, the side that God Himself specifically rejected from carrying forth the promises of Abraham.

What should we take away from this? From Esau, I think we need to see the emptiness of trying to achieve any kind of righteousness or favor on our own – whether with God or the people around us. Esau is never said to have regained his parent's favor. And spiritually, even at this point, he doesn't seem to have much –

if any – awareness or care for what God intends through his extended family. It's little different for you or I in this world: we can try to make all of the changes we'd like, but if they aren't ultimately empowered by God and in connection with His plans, they won't amount to much of anything.

Maybe you are like Esau this morning: you want blessing, you want acceptance. You've even tried to get it in various ways on your own terms, doing the best you know how. Friend, if that's you, let me point you to the God who will change you – but on His terms, instead of yours. Turn to Jesus, acknowledge that your efforts at righteousness have failed. Call on Christ as the Savior you need. I guarantee you, an encounter with Jesus will bring about change in your life – a change that will only continue as you follow Him.

But where is Jacob in all of this? Let's catch up with him next...

28:10-17 No hotels in the area? Just grab a rock. That's what Jacob does! He's been journeying for some time and he decides to call it a day, setting up camp as the sun sets. As he sleeps, God gives him an amazing dream. There is a ladder, a flight of steps between earth and heaven and Jacob sees angels going up and down them, with the Lord standing at the top. Alongside the imagery, Jacob hears something – the Lord announces Himself to Jacob in no uncertain terms: He is the God whom Abraham trusted in just as He is the God who Isaac trusts in.

What's just as remarkable is what this God goes on to tell Jacob: He reiterates that Jacob shall be blessed with land (**verse 13**), offspring (**verse 14**), and the presence and protection of the Almighty Himself (**verse 15**). That same blessing given to Jacob would be a blessing for the entire world – which, by the way, means that you and I, even though we aren't Jews, are nevertheless blessed by how God worked in and blessed people like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who are essential forerunners of Christ's own family line.

Don't forget this passage: just as God spoke to Abraham and Isaac, now He has spoken to Jacob. It isn't just that Jacob received the blessing and so he will inherit God's promise – it's that God Himself has chosen Jacob and *that's* why he received the blessing.

Yet, all of this is a bit challenging, isn't it? Jacob is something of a scoundrel: purchasing Esau's birthright, more recently deceiving his own father to get the blessing that was intended for Esau. Certainly not the sort of example at this point that we'd want any of our young men to follow! But can Jacob change? That's the question. Can Jacob's future be different from his past? Can yours? Or mine?

Jacob's response in **verse 16** certainly changes the narrative, doesn't it?

Encountering the Lord has changed him. And, as we follow Jacob's life, we'll see that God will keep His promise to be "with" Jacob – often in spite of his wayward ways. How much more amazing, then, to realize that this is the constant theme of what God promises to His people. Do you remember what Christ was called in **Matthew** when His birth was being prophesized? He was called "Immanuel" – which means "God with us." Isn't that an amazing truth: that in Christ, God is with His people. And isn't that amazing promise what is carried forward in the Great Commission of **Matthew 28**: "I am with you always, to the end of the age"?

Brothers and sisters: the Lord is with us, He is with His people, He is with His church! How is that changing you? If it's not, then you need to check your pulse – the God of the universe not only saves His people, but then He also promises that He is with us. That's the point of Jacob's ladder, isn't it? That there is a connection between earth and heaven – that God hasn't, as the deists and many "spiritual but not religious" people claim, created everything and then just abandoned us to our own devices. And what is that connection? It's not found in the practices of Islam or the emptiness of Buddhism. It won't be found in lifehacks or by some sort of self-improvement spirituality. No, as we pointed out in the introduction, Jesus is the ladder, He's the staircase. Jesus is the connection between heaven and earth. No wonder that He tells us that nobody can come to the Father except through Him (**John 14:6**)! Quite simply, there is no way to heaven apart from Jesus – no other roads lead there.

Is that the path you are on? Is He the Savior that you follow? Has your life been changed by encountering Jesus? If it hasn't, then you need Him. And that's true no matter what your past has looked like – no matter your sins and mistakes, no matter what aisles you've walked or baby baptisms you've been through. If you haven't been changed by Jesus, then come to Him now.

And if you have encountered Jesus? If you do trust Him and do follow Him, yet life still doesn't seem to be adding up? Well, let's keep reading...

28:18-22 In these verses, I've often been tempted to see Jacob in mostly negative terms. I mean, come on, the guy really thinks that he can create a house for God out of a rock? Isn't this almost pagan, with holy places and such? But you know what? Thinking that way would make me wrong in at least two ways – and maybe these are things you need to see as well. First, you and I need to remember where Jacob had come from: spiritually, what we see in this chapter is nothing less than conversion. Whatever background that Isaac and Rebekah had given to him – and certainly their family life wasn't ideal – Jacob hasn't seemed to want much of anything to do with the Lord until this point – he's been passive toward God, having an unremarkable spiritual life, at best. Yet, encountering the Lord has changed him. Jacob is still in process, just like you and I are. And he will still be changing all throughout – don't misunderstand, he'll still make all kinds of boneheaded decisions. But the Jacob after the dream is on a completely different trajectory than the Jacob before the dream.

Second, you and I need to remember that oftentimes the Lord uses His very creation as part of changing His people. I don't mean that we should ever worship the things of this earth, but that – much like with Moses in **Exodus 3**, there is such a thing as holy ground – not because of anything inherent to a place or to the earth, but because God Himself makes it so by His presence. We never worship the creation or the blessing; we only worship the Creator and the Bless-er. But part of how we worship is through our actions in the here and now. And if that's the case, then look no further than how Jacob himself has been changed. Allen Ross says it well: the empty place that Jacob went to “became a shrine, a stone became an altar, and a fugitive became a pilgrim – God in his grace revealed himself to Jacob in that place.” No wonder Jacob wants to set up something to remember the experience!

It is tempting to read Jacob's vow in **verses 20-22** in a negative light, almost as if he is bargaining with God. While that's possible, much of what Jacob says is actually what God has already promised. Thus, Jacob's vow happens not because

he isn't trusting the Lord, but instead, he offers the vow precisely because he believes that the Lord will do what He says He will. Jacob's vow is an act of faith, imperfect though it may be.

Where does all that leave us? Meeting God, encountering the Lord, changes people. It certainly changed Abraham and Isaac. It affected Esau, even if from afar. It has radically changed Jacob's life. It turned Nathaniel from skeptic to committed follower of Jesus. And He can change you. I've already mentioned how you can follow Jesus. But how does the Lord change those who are already following Him?

For that, I would simply say that Jacob's response should be our response – not necessarily the rock and the oil, but the worship. Much like priests would in later years, Jacob's actions are part of a worship service meant to honor the Lord God. What do your actions show about you? Do they reflect how God has – and continues – to change you? Are you here this morning to worship Him for how coming to Jesus has changed your life? If you are, then smile, sing! You can even clap your hands! Whatever you do or don't do externally, make sure that in your mind and your heart you have a gladness to you, an unshakable joy that comes out with your words and your actions. If you're feeling a bit dry, take a moment to mentally review what the Lord has done in your life – I assure you, even if you are new to the faith, it's already a long list! So let's worship Him and enjoy Him together, the God who is with us... Let's pray...