

IF YOU ARE A SUPERSAINT, THIS BOOK IS NOT for you. If your halo never tilts, your faith never wavers, your Bible never closes, and your feet never stray from the straight and narrow, let me save you some time. You won't relate to this story.

Are you squeaky clean? Is this your only question about faith? Why would people question their faith? Is your heart so fully set on heaven that you use Pearlygate.com as your email address? Do you begin your day with an "Our Father" and end your day with an "Amen" and never interrupt the prayer?

If so, congratulations! My hat is off to you. Here is a standing ovation. And here is an honest disclaimer: these chapters were not written with the likes of you in mind.

This book is for members of the Tilted Halo Society. For

strugglers among us and the fumbler within us. For those of us who are part saint, part scoundrel. We mean well, but do well? Well, we don't always. We have breakthroughs, for sure, but breakdowns as well, often in the same hour. We need no reminder of our failures. We have not forgotten them. But we could use a refresher course on God's stubborn refusal to give up on us.

And no one is more suited to the task than Jacob, the flawed patriarch.

He is, by definition, a patriarch. Yet in the team photo of Bible heroes, he looks out of place. There stand Abraham and Isaac with their rush of hair, strong shoulders, and chiseled features. Mount Rushmore-ish, they are. Then there's Jacob, the little guy wearing the sunglasses and poker visor. He doesn't seem to fit.

Jacob's nickname contains the same consonants as the Hebrew word for *heel*. Appropriate, as he exited the womb with a hand on his twin brother's heel as if to say, "Oh, no you don't, you fuzzy brother. I want the top spot." A triumph of irony, this was: Jacob beginning life the way he would live it, grasping for a better position. Jacob's nickname was Deceiver, and deceive he did.¹ He took advantage of his famished sibling, pulled the wool over the eyes of his dying father, and met his father-in-law's guile with guile.

Prodigy? No. Prodigal? That fits. Jacob never fed the pigs, but he did wrestle in the mud with, if not God, Someone like God. All night the two grunted, gripped, and groped until, as the day broke, Jacob pinned him down and begged for a blessing. The blessing came but at a cost. Jacob was given a new name: Israel. But Israel's hip was out of joint.

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He walked with a limp.

Sound familiar? You've wrestled with God about your past, your future, your pain and problems. You, like Jacob, have walked away with a gimp in your spiritual gait. Some people mount up with wings like eagles, a few run and never grow weary, others walk and never faint.²

You? Me? Jacob? We limp.

Jacob's story is for limpers.

I spoke with a limper last evening. We sat together at a dinner party. A dozen folks shared a meal, a bottle of wine, and a gorgeous South Texas sunset. The husbands sat outside on a backyard deck. I was the newcomer. "What kind of work are you in, Max?" I winced at the question. Nothing dampens lively conversation more quickly than the discovery of a clergyman in the circle. (Confession: when I'm on a flight and am asked about my profession, my answer depends on my energy level. If I'm in a mood to chat, I say "writer." If not, I say "preacher.")

"Well, I'm a pastor." Silence. The supersaints at the table (there is usually one or two) shared news about their Bible study in which they have learned so much. The limpers (there are always several) apologized for their language and made a joke about passing the offering plate after dessert.

The chitchat resumed, but the fellow to my right, in a voice intended for my ears only, began to talk about his faith, or lack thereof. If he wasn't eighty years old in age, he certainly was in appearance. His eyelids drooped to half-mast; his shoulders slumped. He puffed on a cigar and sipped on a glass of pinot noir. His uncle, he told me, was a pastor. The uncle had baptized him in an Alabama river. But that was seven decades ago. He's buried

a child since then, buried some dreams as well. He's built and lost a business or two since then. He's wrestled with God since then. "I guess I'm God's lost cause," he said.

He would find a kindred spirit in Jacob.

Jacob's story is hard to read because he misbehaved so often. Then again, the Jacob story is a relief to read because we misbehave so often. We wonder, *If God could love and use Jacob, might he be willing to do the same with us?*

Jacob lived 147 years.³ Yet the heart of his narrative covers only twenty years of his life (ages seventy-seven to ninety-seven)⁴ and eleven chapters in the book of Genesis (25–35). We know very little about Jacob's life outside of those twenty years. But what we know of those two decades is worth pondering.

The setting is southern Israel some two thousand years before Jesus was born. The main characters are bedouins: tent dwellers and sheep watchers. The land about them is vast and rugged. Their story is a multilayered mosaic that begins with Jacob's grandfather.

Abraham was wealthy in herds and flocks, silver and gold. He was also affluent in faith, so rich, in fact, that he set out from his homeland in search of a new land that would serve as the heartland of a new nation.⁵

His faith allowed for a new nation but not a new baby. When God told Abraham and his wife, Sarah, it was time to buy a stroller and decorate a nursery, they cracked up. Abraham was pushing a hundred years of age; she was nigh on ninety. The thought of bouncing a baby on bony knees left them in stitches.⁶ She made a joke about parents and child being equally toothless. Abraham agreed, "We'll all be wearing diapers!" He fell on his face in a fit of laughter, and she giggled herself into a knot.

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But the baby came. They named him Chuckles. Well, not exactly, but they might as well have because Isaac means “laugh,”⁷ proof that when it comes to miracles, God has the last laugh.

In his later years Abraham decided to find Chuckles a wife. Abraham sent a servant back to the land of his birth to “get a wife for my son” (Gen. 24:4 NIV). The servant prayed for God to grant him success. He’d hardly said an “amen” when he looked up and saw Rebekah, Isaac’s wife-to-be. The servant sought the blessing of Rebekah’s father and the permission of her brother. The brother was named Laban. Remember that name. In short order he will trick Jacob, who had just tricked his father, Isaac, and his brother, Esau. Lots of tricking in this story.

Laban gave Rebekah to the servant.

The servant gave Rebekah to Isaac.

Isaac gave his heart to Rebekah.

And Rebekah gave twin sons, Jacob and Esau, to Isaac.

There was tension between the brothers from the get-go. Rebekah’s womb felt like a cage fight. “The children struggled together within her” (Gen. 25:22 ESV). The description in Hebrew reads, “The children smashed themselves inside her.”⁸ Once, as they kicked at each other, she begged God for an explanation. He gave this:

“Two nations are in your body,
and two groups of people will be taken from
you.

One group will be stronger than the other,
and the older will serve the younger.”

(GEN. 25:23 NCV)

GOD NEVER GIVES UP ON YOU

In the ancient clan plan the elder son would inherit superior rank over the younger. Yet in God's plan Jacob would trump Esau. *The older will serve the younger.* Had God not said it, Rebekah never would have imagined it.

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. (Gen. 25:24–26 NIV)

Esau grew to look like the guy in charge. Manly, ruddy, and hairy. So hairy that they named him Hairy or, in the mother tongue, Esau, which rhymes with *seesaw*, an apt name for a man whose life was destined to be full of ups and downs.

Esau was a hunter. He had a closet of camo gear and drove a 4x4 truck complete with a rifle rack, mud tires, and a bumper sticker that read "I'd rather be fishing." He was never so happy as when he was tracking a deer or stirring a covey of quail. Bucks. Ducks. Trucks. That was Esau's world. Chuckles loved him.

And Rebekah loved Jacob. He was more metro than macho, more bookish than brawn, more indoor than outdoor, more Saturday in the library than weekend in the wild. Jacob was, well, let me just say it because you'll soon read it. Jacob was a mama's boy. He was a "quiet man and stayed among the tents. Isaac loved Esau. . . . But Rebekah loved Jacob" (Gen. 25:27–28 NCV).

This was some family. Brothers who squared off in the womb. Parents who played favorites. Esau and his brawn, Jacob and his

brains. Dysfunction junction. A therapist could have paid her child's college tuition by counseling this brood.

Even so, the twins might have coexisted were it not for the aforementioned birthright privilege. It promised financial perks, preeminence in the clan, twice the inheritance, and all the privileges. But most significant was this: the firstborn of Isaac would be the next bearer of the covenant that God had made with Abraham, namely that God would bless the world through the descendant of Abraham—Jesus Christ (see Gen. 12:3; Acts 3:24–26).⁹

We would logically assume, then, that Jacob would be one special dude, a who's who in the Holy Hall of Holiest People. Shouldn't he love the poor? Comfort the sick? Counsel the distraught? Write proverbs? Pen a few psalms? Be born with an iridescent glow? One would think so.

He did none of the above. He will have his moments. Just not many. He will inspire us, yes. But bewilder us even more. His résumé was more the stuff of the Happy Hour Highball Club than a Sunday school curriculum. He married two sisters but loved only one. He was passive while his wives squabbled. He slept with the maids. His family worshipped foreign gods. He chose to do nothing when his sons went Rambo on a village, slaughtering a tribe. His oldest son had an affair with his maidservant. His favorite son was sold into slavery by his brothers. He spent two decades as a fugitive. He was a dyed-in-the-wool sneak. The guy never preached, prophesied, or said anything worthy of being framed. If you are looking for a star in a Hallmark movie, Jacob is not your guy.

If, on the other hand, you want to see God's steadfast devotion . . .

GOD NEVER GIVES UP ON YOU

If you need to know how long God will put up with a scoundrel and his scandals . . .

If you are wondering if God's plan has a place for botchers, bunglers, schemers, and Joad-like last chancers who toss a coin to choose between their will and God's will . . .

If you could benefit from a tale of God's unending, unbending, unswerving faithfulness . . .

If you wonder if God could use a person whose halo has slipped . . .

Then the story of Jacob is what you need.

When God wanted to identify himself to his people, he declared himself to be the God of Abraham, Isaac, and *Jacob*.¹⁰ Not just of Abraham and Isaac. He's also the God of Jacob.

God used Jacob in spite of Jacob. Period.

The word for such devotion? *Grace*. Grace came after Jacob. Grace found him in the desert. Grace protected him when he lived in exile. Grace wrestled him to the ground in Jabbok and blessed him. Grace led him home to Canaan.

Jacob's story is a testimony to divine, unexpected, unrequested, undeserved kindness.

Do you know such grace?

Grace is God as grand marshal, leading his ever-swelling parade of has-beens and never-weres out of halfway houses and prisons and into his palace.

God's grace isn't available just on Sundays. It claims every tick of the clock.

God's grace isn't only as good as you are. God's grace is as good as he is.

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God's grace isn't a lucky charm crucifix on a necklace. God's grace is a tiger in your heart.

God's grace did not happen
one time,
long ago.

God's grace happens
now,
today . . . to anyone who'll so much
as give God a prayer.

His grace never quits.

That's the kind of God he is—he's the "God of Jacob." Our God is the God of those who struggle and scrape, sometimes barely making it, hanging on for dear life.

So if you are looking for sterling-silver heroes of Scripture, I refer you to Daniel or Joseph. If you are aspiring to split Red Seas or call fire from heaven, Moses and Elijah would be more to your liking.

But if the years have left you cracked in a few places, if the bounce in your step has given way to a limp in your walk, if you wonder, honestly wonder, if you are God's lost cause, then I've got just the story for you.