

Do you have a favorite movie with a bad ending? I don't mean a bad movie - we all have our guilty pleasures. I'm talking about a great movie that doesn't have a typical happy Hollywood ending.

One of mine is Arlington Road. It's a pretty dark movie, one about domestic terrorism. The main character is a professor whose wife died in the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. He's become sort of a conspiracy theorist, and the movie is about how he becomes convinced his neighbor is secretly a terrorist.

For a good chunk of the movie, you're not sure if he's crazy or if the guy really is a terrorist. But as the film moves toward its climax, of course it turns out he's right. He's been sneakier than his neighbor and he's finally got the proof he needs. So he rushes to inform the FBI and save the day in the nick of time!

Only... it turns out, the whole thing was a set-up. I warned you this movie has a bad ending, right? Another terror attack happens, and the main character, our hero professor, dies in it. And worst of all, his neighbor frames him to take the fall.

The crazy conspiracy theory professor who blamed the government for the death of his wife takes the blame for the attack and his neighbor gets away scot free to plan another attack.

It is a bummer of a movie.

What makes it so awful is that the whole time you think you're watching a story with a happy ending. The professor outsmarts the terrorists and, against all odds, foils the attack.

But it turns out, the terrorist was playing a totally different game. The professor won every battle and lost the war. He succeeded everywhere he was *supposed* to succeed so that he could lose where it counted.

I've never been a victim of nefarious terrorist plots, but I have won plenty of arguments and lost the war.

Whether that's in my marriage or friendships or former friendships, I can't tell you how often I've dug deep and really went after that argument, outsmarting or bullying my way to the other person conceding.

I win the argument.

But I damage, or even lose, the relationship.

Friends, I want to talk today about how we engage each other. I want to talk about how we learn to fight with each other. And I want to talk about how often we are focused on the wrong issue. How often we win every little battle we're in but lose what really matters.

And we're going to find the gentle, insistent voice of God, whispering at every turn for us to listen and find a better way to live and love.

Message

Our summer series is called "The Way, Way Back". Hopefully that calls to mind summer vacations, road trips and fights over who got to ride in the way, way back of the station wagon. (I know, no one drives station wagons anymore because we got SUVs and convinced ourselves they're different.) This series is all about the things we learn when we're willing to leave home - aka our comfort zones.

We're in the book of Genesis, following the patriarchs and matriarchs of our faith as they follow God on road trips of their own. We first met Abraham, and then his son, Isaac. Last week, we met Isaac's twin boys, Esau and Jacob. We saw how Isaac's wife, Rebekah, did everything she could to follow God's commands, even when her husband ignored them.

The results, unfortunately, were catastrophic for the family. Jacob was forced to flee for his life, so his mother sent him to her brother, Laban. Last week, we saw Jacob at a rock bottom, alone, with nothing to his name.

[Scripture Slide] Turn with me to Genesis 29. We're going to be looking at the 20 years Jacob lived with Laban, so we're going to be working through a number of stories from Genesis 29-32.

This is one of those parts of the Bible where things get very strange. You should definitely take time this week to read through these stories. They're full of double-crosses and folk magic and more. It gets weird.

We're doing a high-level view so you can get a sense of who Jacob is. Remember that his name means "Deceiver". He's the sneaky kid. The one who tricked his brother out of his rightful blessing.

Now he's about to meet his uncle, and you're going to see that being sneaky is a family trait. It's going to start out nice, but pretty quickly becomes a contest between Jacob and Laban.

It's a question of which fox is the craftiest? Who can out-fox the other? And I want you to consider as we work our way through the saga of Jacob and Laban, whether it's possible that Jacob is winning every battle, but losing the war.

Let's begin where Jacob meets his future wife, Rachel, and then is introduced to his father-in-law to be. Everything begins well. Jacob comes across his wife at a well (just like how his dad met his mom!). And they hit it off right away:

Jacob kissed Rachel, and he wept aloud. He explained to Rachel that he was her cousin on her father's side—the son of her aunt Rebekah. So Rachel quickly ran and told her father, Laban.

As soon as Laban heard that his nephew Jacob had arrived, he ran out to meet him. He embraced and kissed him and brought him home. When Jacob had told him his story, Laban exclaimed, “You really are my own flesh and blood!” -- Genesis 29:11-14

Things are off to a good start! Laban invites Jacob into his home as one of his own. And Jacob asks to marry Rachel. Because Jacob had to flee from home, he shows up at his uncle's empty-handed. He doesn't have anything to offer as a dowry. So Laban agrees to let Jacob work for seven years in lieu of a dowry.

The seven years pass quickly for love-struck Jacob. And finally, the time comes:

Finally, the time came for him to marry her. “I have fulfilled my agreement,” Jacob said to Laban. “Now give me my wife so I can sleep with her.”

So Laban invited everyone in the neighborhood and prepared a wedding feast. But that night, when it was dark, Laban took Leah to Jacob, and he slept with her.

But when Jacob woke up in the morning—it was Leah! “What have you done to me?” Jacob raged at Laban. “I worked seven years for Rachel! Why have you tricked me?”

“It’s not our custom here to marry off a younger daughter ahead of the firstborn,” Laban replied. “But wait until the bridal week is over; then we’ll give you Rachel, too—provided you promise to work another seven years for me.” -- Genesis 29:21-27

Okay don't get hung up on the polygamy or marrying sisters who are both your cousin... those are all common practices in the ancient world. WE think it's super-weird, but they wouldn't have.

The weird part was the trick Laban played on Jacob, essentially extorting Jacob for seven more years of work. Jacob the Deceiver gets deceived. The swindler gets taken.

It's not just that Laban is a jerk. Jacob proves to be a master shepherd, and the flocks under his care are more numerous and healthy than any of Laban's other flocks. So Laban saw it as in his interests to keep Jacob in his employment as long as possible.

Seven more years pass, and as you can imagine, Jacob is ready to leave. It was common in the ancient world when you released someone from your service not to send them away empty handed. The idea was that they helped generate this wealth, so they were entitled to a significant part of it.

Jacob comes up with what seems to have been a fair deal. In modern terms, he says he'll take all the animals that show recessive traits - which are obviously rare. Laban agrees, but then the master trickster strikes again:

Jacob replied, “Don’t give me anything. Just do this one thing, and I’ll continue to tend and watch over your flocks. Let me inspect your flocks today and remove all the sheep and goats that are speckled or spotted, along with all the black sheep. Give these to me as my wages. In the future, when you check on the animals you have given me as my wages, you’ll see that I have been honest. If you find in my flock any goats without speckles or spots, or any sheep that are not black, you will know that I have stolen them from you.”

“All right,” Laban replied. “It will be as you say.” But that very day Laban went out and removed the male goats that were streaked and spotted, all the female goats that were speckled and spotted or had white patches, and all the black sheep. He placed them in the care of his own sons, who took them a three-days’ journey from where Jacob was. -- Genesis 30:31-36

Now this is one of those places that gets weird: Laban's goal is to make it financially impossible for Jacob to leave. But remember Jacob is a master shepherd. He spends the next several seasons breeding the animals such that the number of recessive-presenting animals grows enormously.

Once his flocks animals are numerous, Jacob convinces his wives it's time to leave. By now, Jacob has 12 children and a wealth of livestock. He's technically already gotten Laban's permission to leave, so they decide just to pack up and leave:

Jacob put his wives and children on camels, and he drove all his livestock in front of him. He packed all the belongings he had acquired in Paddan-aram and set out for the land of Canaan, where his father, Isaac, lived. At the time they left, Laban was some distance away, shearing his sheep. Rachel stole her father’s household idols and took them with her. Jacob outwitted Laban the Aramean, for they set out secretly and never told Laban they were leaving. -- Genesis 31:17-20

This is where we find Jacob - he's on the run with his whole family and sizable wealth. It's easy to want to root for Jacob here - the young fox outfoxed the old fox. It feels like a great ending. Jacob won!

But the very next story reminds us that all is not as it seems. Because Jacob doesn't have anywhere left to go. He's out of family, which meant, in the ancient world, he was out of safe places to run. So Jacob decides to head back to Canaan, to the land that is technically his by birthright.

But his brother's still there. Esau - the guy who was ready to straight-up *murder* Jacob for stealing his birthright. And Jacob hasn't forgotten that. He sends messengers ahead to scout. Look at what happens:

After delivering the message, the messengers returned to Jacob and reported, “We met your brother, Esau, and he is already on his way to meet you—with an army of 400 men!” Jacob was terrified at the news. He divided his household, along with the flocks and herds and camels, into two groups. He thought, “If Esau meets one group and attacks it, perhaps the other group can escape.” -- Genesis 32:6-8

So Jacob is on the run from his father-in-law and planning how to ensure at least some of his family survives when his brother annihilates him with an army.

On second thought, this doesn't sound much like a win for Jacob, does it?

He won the battle with Esau - he got his birthright. And he won the battle with Laban - he got away with his family and flocks.

But where has that gotten him? What does Jacob the trickster have to show for a life of deception and trickery? Nothing but fear and insecurity.

He won the battles and lost the war.

I want to stop here this week. If you know the story of Jacob, you know God remains faithful to him, to the promise God made to Jacob. Jacob's story isn't over.

But that's because of *God's* faithfulness, not Jacob's. So yes, there's a sermon where we celebrate God's faithfulness. That's next week.

But I don't want to skip past this Jacob, afraid and running for his life.

Because too often, we let God's grace excuse our sinful behavior. Too often, we act how we want and say a prayer to God to keep us safe. We blow up relationships and pray that God will pick up the pieces.

And let's remember that Jacob didn't come up with this deceptive behavior on his own. Remember, his grandfather Abraham routinely lied to people that his wife was his sister (and we skipped this story, but Isaac, Jacob's father, did the same). Jacob's mother, Rebekah, masterminded the stealing of Esau's birthright, and Laban the master trickster is *her* brother.

Jacob's deceptive nature is a family trait. But it's not one that has served his family well. He hasn't seen his parents in 20 years. His brother wants to kill him (as far as he knows). And he can't even reach out to his extended family because he burned all those bridges.

Do you have any of those family sins? Behaviors that run all through your family tree but have caused more pain than good? Maybe workaholicism or anger or abuse. Maybe co-dependency or addiction.

Isn't there a better way?

God's grace isn't only good news for those who have blown things up. It's also good news for any of us who come from less-than-perfect families, any of us who win battles and lose wars. God wants to transform us into holy people, people who heal rather than destroy.

Paul, writing to the churches in Galatia, reflects on the characteristics of a holy life:

The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. -- Galatians 5:22-23

It's hard to call Jacob a peace-maker. He doesn't seem to have been particularly kind or gentle.

What about you? I know I relate to Jacob - for a lot of my life, I didn't value kindness or peace-making. I valued being right (which you'll note isn't one of the fruit of the Spirit). I got *very* good at winning arguments, and it took a long time for me to see that was the wrong fight to win.

You know what's worth fighting for? People. Relationships. Human dignity.

Being right so often comes at the expense of those. It doesn't matter how right we are when we leave a trail of bodies behind us. Eventually, that sort of faith leaves us right where Jacob was: out of bridges to burn, afraid and insecure and begging God to be merciful to us even though we haven't been merciful.

Examen + Communion

[Communion Slide] Christ affirms we are worth dying for. We receive his grace that we might become a community of peace-makers.

1. When have I made it a point to affirm the dignity of others in the last week?
2. When have I focused on being right or having my way?
3. When in the next week will I be tempted to be right or have my way?
4. How can I choose to embody the fruit of the Spirit in this next week?

Assignment + Blessing

What can you do this week to affirm the humanity and dignity of someone you've been against?