

WIN
from
WITHIN

FINDING YOURSELF BY
FACING YOURSELF

JOHN W. GRAY III

Foreword by Steven Furtick



New York Nashville

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For a seed to achieve its greatest expression, it must come completely undone. The shell cracks, its insides come out and everything changes. To someone who doesn't understand growth, it would look like complete destruction.

—Cynthia Ocelli

And He said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed.”

—Genesis 32:28

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Foreword

Different people appreciate different things about John Gray. Some marvel at his ability to break demographic barriers and shift an atmosphere by infusing an entire room with laughter. He's made me laugh until I was out of breath on many occasions, so I understand firsthand how infectious his spontaneous, self-effacing humor can be. But that's not what I appreciate most about him.

Others will cite the depth of insight he brings to the biblical narrative, and his matchless ability to articulate universal truth with the warmth of a personal conversation. I, too, have sat mesmerized as he transported me so fully into a story or principle that I felt like I was hearing the most familiar wisdom for the first time.

And yes, he can sing too. His vocal runs and range make the rest of us wonder if God accidentally unevenly distributed talent on the day John was born.

For most people, this disproportionate mix of gifts, brilliance, and larger-than-life personality would probably be

too much to handle. Most people with a fraction of these abilities would probably become the president of their own fan club. Not John. That's what I appreciate most about my friend. Since I've known him, I watched him win over and over again. I've watched doors of influence open to him, and I've watched him limp—not strut—through them.

I've watched him pay the price again and again to win from the only place true victory is possible: within. He fights to maintain a love for people that is never consumed by the size of the crowd. In an age of cliché-infested Christianity, I've seen John demand depth of himself as he wrestles with his own weakness in the shadows of his success. The fact that he has now written about this struggle with his trademark inspiration and vulnerability in tandem is a gift to us all, just as John himself is.

—Steven Furtick, Charlotte, North
Carolina, August 2018

Introduction

What Matters Most

I'm leaving you! I'm packing the kids, getting in the car, and going to my mother's house in Alabama. I won't tell anybody, but I'm not staying!"

With those words, my wife walked out of our home. My life, as I knew it, was over. John Gray, the pastor, the preacher, the traveling evangelist, the guy from TV, the person everybody celebrates, was a private failure. Every principle I'd ever taught came back to haunt me. Every single thing I'd ever believed about myself, relationships, and God walked right out the door behind my wife.

That singular, transformational moment was the result of many moments I'd lived in my forty-four years, moments when I was unable and maybe even unwilling to see the heart of the person I'd promised to love, honor, and protect. So much so that she'd rather go back to the home of her childhood than live another day with me.

To the world, though, I was a magnificent success. I

traveled around the world speaking at all the big Christian conferences. I preached at the largest church in America. And yet, every single day, I was dying on the inside. I was afraid to confront the real issues of my life and ill-equipped to handle the responsibilities of being a husband and father. On top of that, I was unwilling to seek help from those who I knew could be trusted. I allowed the voice of skepticism to convince me that I could protect myself from the blunt force trauma wrought by my choices.

Beyond the sting of my wife's words and the silence that followed, I was left with the reality that what people knew of me was about to change. Everything that I ever said, the monuments of words I built, was going to come crashing down.

And you know what I felt?

Not fear.

Not shame.

Not even guilt.

I felt utter, unequivocal relief.

Finally, the man who had been living two lives in one body would be able to come out from the shadows and declare, "This is me. This is John Gray."

My wife was right. I had abandoned her in the middle of our marriage to nurse, build a monument to, and celebrate me. *She should be glad that I chose her*, I thought.

Something was very wrong with me.

The time for excuses and blame was finally done. I found myself arguing with God. “You’re all-knowing and all-powerful. I prayed to you,” I would say. “I asked you to deliver me from these habits, from these thoughts, from these things. I asked you to help me and you didn’t.” I found myself placing blame elsewhere. “I didn’t have a father. You were never there and neither was he. Oh, yeah, and my wife? She doesn’t understand. She’s not a man. She doesn’t do what I do.”

I was the king of deflection. In my mind, my failures were everyone else’s fault. I refused to face anything that would cause me discomfort for very long. If I sensed discomfort, I would change the temperature. If things got too hot, I’d leave. If it got too cold and I felt exposed, I’d layer up. I layered up with comedy. Get someone laughing and you can generally deflect any arrows heading your way.

For a little while, at least.

The worst was when I used my gift to redirect something God wanted to challenge me on. Because I have a gift of discernment, I can always spot when someone else is going through. A classic tactic of mine would be to read someone else’s mail before they could dig into mine. That way, whatever they came to tell me would be lost in the reality of their own humanity. In other words, before someone could come sweeping around my front porch, they’d better check their whole house.

In my mind, I set the rules. I set the boundaries. And no matter who you were, if you stepped out of bounds, that

very cold part of me that had been fostered over years of being rejected and laughed at in the back of buses on the way to school, that protective casing I created over my emotions and heart, would kick in. I knew how to keep the word of God, the people of God, and even the voice of God out. And I would pat myself on the back for being a survivor. Yeah, I may not be perfect, but look at you. I may not be doing what I need to do, but look over there, look at what he's not doing. That's how gifted men often never heal, grow, or mature. They always have a trick up their sleeves to make people stop challenging them to do exactly those things.

When you're gifted and talented, and your gift has become a commodity, people don't often confront you. Sometimes it's because they need you in some capacity. Other times it's because they are fascinated by or desire you. All of it put me in the worst conundrum. Isolated by my pain, I wanted to be as free as I encourage others to be from the pulpit, but I didn't have the guts to face the root cause of my pain, the root cause of my insecurity. So the life I was living was the life I'd created in a world of my own making. I needed people to tell me the truth, especially when I didn't want to hear it. In fact, I would go as far as to say that if a friend or loved one doesn't make you mad on occasion with their assessment of something you have done, then the relationship is likely not real. If we surround ourselves with yes-men, we risk never becoming everything God wants us to be.

I was headed down that road. I would do anything to not deal with me, and as a result, the woman to whom I promised forever took her forever and walked out the door, taking with her the real legacy of my son and my daughter.

As I was writing this book, my entire life, as I knew it, was over.

And that's exactly what God wanted.

The scariest part of it all is, I was in a "high season." I'd never preached better and never had more opportunities. Every door was opening for me. But the danger of the moment I was in was this: I assumed that because doors were opening for me, God was pleased. It never occurred to me that gifts and callings are truly given without repentance, and we can serve God in one area of our lives and be totally in rebellion and denial in others.

This is how leaders fall.

The pride in our gifts causes us to misinterpret the favor of God. There is a profound difference between God choosing you and God needing you. Something in me mistook God *using* my gifts for God *needing* my gifts. Inasmuch as God is all-powerful and all-knowing, He doesn't need anything. God didn't need me.

But...

God chose to use me as a testament to grace. Sitting in a room alone with the words of my brokenhearted wife pounding against the cavernous, empty space inside of my

unsubmitted heart, I learned that this was the only way God was ever going to reach me. Success didn't reach me. Opportunity didn't reach me. So God allowed the only one who truly saw me for who I was *and stayed anyway*, and loved me through it, over and over and over again, to be willing to walk away. The one who'd given me the most grace was fed up. Only then was I forced to look inside at the landscape of a man who had everything and nothing. How did it come to this? How did I become the most successful empty man in ministry? How in the world were so many people fooled, and if they weren't fooled, then why didn't they say anything?

For most of us, there is a duality: the desire to be more, to become more, to achieve more, and to manifest more. There's a quickening, a stirring, that says this iteration of me is not the very best me. We can feel it! But too many of us get stuck and don't go after all that they could be. Or we buy into false notions of what "winning" looks like and end up sidetracked from our purpose.

I don't want that for you, and that is why I'm writing this book.

Inside of this human existence, there is a dynamic human-divine relational exchange that's not only an opportunity for relational partnership and intimate fellowship with God, but also an invitation to do something with the

seed of God. To grow! The problem with growth, with becoming great, is that you cannot feel comfortable if you're going to be great. God won't let you. He will stir you. He will shake you. He will prod and push you. It's because He loves you too much to let you die average unless you absolutely choose to.

What I want you to get out of the experience of reading this book is to spot and identify areas where you've stopped moving forward. Look for those places that were supposed to be temporary moments of rest or reflection but which you've made a home. One of the things that happened with Hurricane Katrina was that FEMA came in and created temporary housing, but because of inability, apathy, or the bureaucratic quagmire that often exists as it pertains to social services—or all three—temporary housing became permanent housing. What was supposed to last six months has, for some, lasted until this day. And so it goes with our lives. Some of us are stuck. Some of us are in a moment, much like I was, when everything is falling down around us and it's time for us to move. To do something we've never done before.

My hope is that when you finish reading, you'll say, "Wait a minute! There's some places in my life where I have set up camp and I was never supposed to stay there. Maybe it's time for me to face down the things that are holding me back. Maybe my whole understanding of what it means to win in life is wrong."

* * *

Winning doesn't come from things. It doesn't come from obtaining a position or some social status. It doesn't live in the accolades you receive or your achievements. So whether that's being faithful to three hundred, thirty-three thousand, or three million, winning was never about the size of your platform. Winning comes from knowing God and being in His will. It comes from doing what you were created to do in a way that is authentic to your calling.

In my world, it looked like I was winning. I had a big platform—looks like a win. Nice house? Another win. Nice cars? A total win. Married with kids? Yep, looks like a win. Scan all the pictures we post on social media and they certainly look like wins. But those were all one-dimensional images masking the three-dimensional reality that I was empty. I had become hollow because I had given everything that I was to everyone else and had not cultivated the necessary places of spiritual nourishment for my soul. My prayer life began lacking tremendously. I found myself going to the word only when I needed to preach or to give something to someone else. In every significant area, I was losing. I was losing emotionally. I was losing relationally and physically. I was losing spiritually because I was not hungering for the word.

One day I looked in the mirror and said, "That's not the man I want to be." It wasn't just a discomfort with my physical self. I was clear that the physical stuff was the

final manifestation of my unhappiness. There were way too many times when I'd put up a social media post and then cringe when people responded to the smile and perceived triumph. I knew the truth. They had no clue of the challenges behind that smile. They had no clue of the pain behind it. They had no clue of the tears I cried just minutes before the pic was taken. What I realized when I looked in the mirror was that I could very well breeze through life having done nice things but nothing great. I would end up being a very low-voltage, low-capacity version of who I'm called to be.

But God wasn't done with me yet. And in that way, I learned that true winning also looks like losing. That's the gist of this book and why Jacob's story is integral to mine and maybe even to yours. See, God used—and is still using—all those broken areas in my life to awaken me, to teach me that my appetites need to change as more responsibility comes. It is an uncomfortable place to realize that you have been gifted with everything you ever wanted just so God could show you that it's nothing that you ever needed.

God is saying to us all that none of those superficial wins I just mentioned can be our end goal. We must be willing to lose it all in order to truly win. Winning from within is about facing ourselves, our deficits, and understanding that true victory happens at the spiritual level.

What is at the root of the losses, the deficits in your life?

I've outlined some of mine here. My marriage suffered. My children suffered. I thought I was only supposed to be the provider. I would come in and out of town from serving the people but couldn't muster the energy and strength to help my kids with their projects in kindergarten. I was so "on fire" for God but I had no energy for my first ministry—my wife, children, and even my own health. These were what mattered most.

The physical, emotional, spiritual, and relational areas of our lives that might be in total disarray are often the same pathways God will use for our self-discovery. I wish there was an easier way to become a man or woman, but there is not.

This is why I identify with Jacob and why he is very much a thread in this book. Jacob was the twin brother of Esau in the womb. From the womb, he wanted to be first, but he was always coming up second. He was always losing.

When you watch football or other sports on TV, no one ever says, "We're number two!" Everybody says, "We're number one." Well, Jacob was perpetually the second guy. He was always coming up short. Esau came out of the womb with Jacob grabbing his heel, and so Jacob's name means supplanter, or heel grabber. Scripture reveals him always grabbing for something he wanted, trying to be something other than what he was. I imagine he was never comfortable in his own skin.

But here's the thing: in all his grabbing, Jacob lacked the aggression and physical form to take over. Esau was

the hunter. Esau was the alpha male. His father loved him. Isaac was like, “That’s my dude. He’s hairy. He kills things. That’s my boy!” And Jacob, well, he became the one his mama took to. In an ancient, patriarchal Middle Eastern culture, I can’t imagine that your manhood is celebrated when you’re in the house cooking with your mama. You’re over there doing dishes while your brother’s outside with his homies? They’re doing archery and bow hunting and you’re like, “No, mama, I’ll just stay with you.”

So I think Jacob represents for so many of us this longing to be something other than what we are. And this wasn’t entirely bad in and of itself. There was something in him that knew he was created for more but didn’t know how to manifest it. He didn’t know that “grabbing” wasn’t always the way to win. So everything in Jacob’s life revealed his duality. He had a high work ethic but there were times when he lacked integrity in the way he did things. Whew, doesn’t that sound familiar? How many of us will trade a little bit of this to get to that? Jacob is a picture of this trade-off: “What do I have to do to get where I want to go?” He would manipulate things in his favor. He was sneaky. He was tricky. He was dishonest.

Whether we want to admit it or not, there are times when all of us have made certain emotional or spiritual or moral trades in order to win, in order to get certain things we want. But in doing so, we trade the truth of who we are for the illusion of who people want us to be. So, like me, Jacob was always two people, and he spent the early part

of his life running away from who God was shaping him to be.

But isn't it just like God to say to you, me, and Jacob: "I chose you. You're exactly whom I chose. I knew everything about you and I still chose you. I know all your character flaws, and I still chose you. I know all the places where you lack the necessities of who you believe you're called to be, but if you will face yourself, you will get the key to the final you. The you that is established. The foundational you from where I will begin to establish legacy."

Jacob wrestled with God. The Scripture says, "A man wrestled with him" (Gen. 32:24), and it's in that kind of wrestling, that engagement with God, where we *become*. It's in that place where we awaken. It's in that place where we ignite our passion and our potential.

But the angel of the Lord said, "What is your name?" What the angel was saying is, "Who do you think you are?" He said, finally, "I am Jacob." In other words, "I am the supplanter. I am the trickster. I'm the inauthentic one. I'm the mask wearer. I'm the con artist." Then the angel said, "No, your name will no longer be Jacob but Israel for you had contended with God and with man and have prevailed. You win" (see Gen. 32:28).

What does it mean when somebody says, "That's John Gray"? What will it mean after I'm long gone? Will that name be marked by my bad decisions? Will it be marked by my worst moments? Or will it be marked by the truth of who I was as I was becoming? I hope it's the latter. I think

for every human being, that's what we want. I don't mind the places of my failure. I do mind if it's the only thing I'm known for. I want to be more. I want to be known for more than just the things that I did not do properly or correctly, the hurt I caused. I don't mind the work, because it's necessary for the texture of the full portrait to emerge. This work is necessary to win.

Jacob didn't win in his life by his own hand. It wasn't his doing. The journey for Jacob required both personal responsibility and, even more significantly, a supernatural touch. Jacob won because his whole life was a search to find out who he really was. Jacob found himself by facing himself, and in acknowledging his past, the totality of his journey, God announced who he *really* was and who he would be remembered as. In that moment, he had victory. The goal of this book is to help readers begin the process of discovering who they really are in Christ. Knowing who we are is the fuel for knowing what to do with the rest of our lives.

This is what winners are made of. You cannot win until you lose it all. In my case, I had to look into the darkest places of my soul and say, "God, this isn't You. This was never You. This doesn't look like Your word, and I have treated the woman You gave me with utter contempt. There's nothing about my life that even remotely resembles an authentic relationship with Jesus." But I sure was preaching my heart out. I shouted to the rooftops that Jesus saves, but I never let Him save me. I trusted God for

everybody else, but I didn't trust Him with my own pain, my own shame, my own guilt, and my own brokenness. In fact, I could sell you God, but I gave God the side-eye. It's like a man who sells a product that he doesn't use. I was a salesman.

I had become the thing I hated: a professional Christian. I didn't know how to change. I was lost, and I was lost in front of millions of eyes. I was lost on TV shows, in church services and conferences. I was smiling and lost; preaching and lost; broken and lost. I had lost it all. I had lost my wife, my children. Every platform I had was poised to be gone in an instant.

But in that moment, when all was lost, God said, "Now we can begin."

CHAPTER ONE

Mama's Boy

When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day has broken." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob."

—Genesis 32:25–27 ESV

I am Jacob."

It's just one sentence, but it is a profound shift in history. A man states the truth, and God takes that truth, expands that truth, expounds upon that truth, and makes a nation out of a simple statement. He said, "I am Jacob," and God said, "You are Israel." That moment reveals a man and his process. Jacob's pain was interpreted and filtered through

the lens of an eternal God who created him for this uncomfortable, necessary, face-to-face encounter, all so that what was in him would emerge. But it could only happen when Jacob was willing to engage God with the truth of himself. God turned that truth into a nation, and that mama's boy who dwelled in tents became the father of a nation whose descendants are as numerous as the grains of sand on the seashore.

Who exactly is Jacob? How is it that this man got to see angels ascending and descending upon a ladder? I suppose you have to start with the prophecy over him.

Isaac prayed hard to GOD for his wife because she was barren. GOD answered his prayer and Rebekah became pregnant. But the children tumbled and kicked inside her so much that she said, "If this is the way it's going to be, why go on living?" She went to GOD to find out what was going on. GOD told her,

Two nations are in your womb,
two peoples butting heads while still in your body.
One people will overpower the other,
and the older will serve the younger.

When her time to give birth came, sure enough, there were twins in her womb. The first came out reddish, as if snugly wrapped in a hairy blanket; they named him Esau (Hairy). His brother followed, his fist clutched tight to Esau's heel; they named him Jacob (Heel). (Genesis 25:21–27 MSG)

When Rebekah was pregnant, the word of God said two nations were in her womb, and the older shall serve the younger. This was a prophetic declaration made long before Jacob ever grabbed his brother's heel and pushed his way onto this plane. This is important to understand as we look at the context of the life of Jacob. It's easy for us, especially me as a preacher and pastor, to interpret Jacob's life solely through the lens of him being a supplanter, trickster, and heel grabber. He was certainly all of those things. He absolutely had character issues. But he was also chosen by God despite these things. For some, this is evidence of a kind of divine election, and for others it reflects God's understanding of the depth of Esau's failings.

So was there some flaw in Esau that ultimately would have been greater than anything that Jacob could do? Was his heart that problematic? Or was this God simply choosing Jacob regardless? I'm inclined to believe the former but I'm not sure I can break this down either way. At the end of the day, here's what this story indicates for me: Jacob was the beneficiary of a great prophecy before he was even born. His purpose was greater than any negative thing attached to his name. We should all take note: We are all God's creation. We all have a purpose that existed long before any of our flaws did. And that purpose will outlast us.

You see, Jacob has been dead for thousands of years. The texts by which we learn of him are also a few thousand years old. And yet here I am, writing about him. Referencing him. Applying his life to my own. How does that happen?

In short, God talked about him. When God speaks you into being, you cease being just an idea. God's word created the universe, so His word about you has the power to make you eternal. You become something that cannot be ignored. But not only is your purpose particular to you; so is the journey you must walk to get there.

Mama's Boy

I alluded to this earlier, but Jacob was a mama's boy, a mama's boy living in the house with his father. In our modern context, we often associate mama's boys with young men who don't have their dad around. Or, if their dad is around, they don't live in the same house. This is a little different. It was clear from Scripture that Isaac loved Esau. Genesis 25:28 says, "Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob." Esau was the hairy one who would kill things and make great food. Jacob dwelled among the tents. He was a homebody. Esau was, according to all the criteria of the time, a man's man, and Jacob was soft. I imagine Isaac thought, *Yeah, you're my son, Jacob, but Esau is the preferred one.*

In the culture and climate from which Jacob emerged, it's clear that the firstborn was favored. The firstborn was usually the one who received the inheritance from the father. The firstborn usually held all the rights and the authority related to the estate of the family. That is, unless

there's an intervention by God, as there was in this case. Nevertheless, both the biblical and historical precedent are clear: Isaac loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

Which is weird, because you don't usually expect a mother to play favorites. Especially when they have sons. Especially in that culture. The firstborn that breaks the womb is consecrated to God. This is major. And yet Rebekah was like, "Yo, I just love Jacob." For most of us, when raising children, we love them equally. When a mother births a child—a son or daughter—under what circumstances would you cease to love them? None. Yet that's not necessarily what we see here.

Allow me a little room here for speculation. I think Rebekah might have seen that Jacob was not being embraced by his father. Isaac might have been saying, "Esau is the firstborn. He gets the double portion. I need to invest here." But Rebekah held on to the prophecy. Rebekah held on to the word about her little boy. She responded to Jacob according to the word.

Not unlike another mama's boy—this one from Cincinnati, Ohio, and not ancient Canaan.

There was never a point in my youth when I was not with my mother. No matter what my mother was doing, she kept me close. When she was going to college at night, she would pick me up at the after-school program after work and we would go to Redding Road to eat. Then we would drive to where she was having class. I would sit in this little open area while she went to class, and I knew not to act up. I knew not to be loud. I barely moved but I was there. When we were

at church, or if she had rehearsal, I was there also. Even if I wasn't singing, I was there. My mother made sure that at every juncture—no matter what might have been going on—I knew I was not an afterthought. I was constantly in her thoughts. I was constantly a part of the fabric of the decisions that she made. That's what happens when you love someone.

So I don't think we can write off Jacob as *just* a mama's boy—with all the negative connotations that come with that—without some careful thought of the positive impact of that. Rebekah loved Jacob. And while we can debate all day as to whether she should have *preferred* him (or Isaac, Esau), I think the key thing to remember is that because of her love, she saw Jacob. It's likely that she hurt for him, as she knew that Jacob might have longed for a more meaningful relationship with Isaac.

I get this.

The truth is, my mother was all I had. I didn't have anyone else. I didn't have the luxury of a father speaking into me. He wasn't around, but my mother was, and she invested in me. Everything that I am is because she invested it or prayed it. If I ever have impact beyond my life span, it will be because my mother loved me.

The Drawbacks

All this said, identifying as a mama's boy doesn't make you weak but it does have some drawbacks. It did for Jacob and

it certainly did for me. The connection between a mother and child is natural. In most cases, moms are the first to nurture and care for the child, feeding him or her from her own breast. But what is initially a perfectly natural bonding experience—a significant connection for growth—can turn into codependence. And that codependence could negatively impact the development of a son into a man.

One place where I wish my mother had maybe prepared me a little better is for the aggression and toxicity that can come from masculinity. Growing up as a tween and teen in the late '70s, early '80s, there were moments where you had to fight. It just happened. Dudes on the playground were taking in the pop culture around them and being aggressive. There was this instinctual, animalistic, posturing thing going on. *Who's the strongest in the crew? Who's the weakest?* I remember being in my home and telling my mom that these guys were pushing and bullying me, and she told me not to fight. I'll never forget what she said: "I never want you to fight unless you are absolutely in a corner and cannot get away. Do not fight. The only time you have permission to fight is if you are physically backed into a corner and cannot get away." And I took that to heart.

The problem is, very rarely are you actually in a physical corner in a fight. So I became the guy that would encounter these aggressions and would not defend myself. I'd walk away or I would figure out some other way to get out. Without any explanation of why it's not good to fight or why defending myself might be necessary in more instances

than being in a corner, it messed with me. I constantly thought, *Am I weak?* I had no construct for knowing what was strength or weakness. So in my young mind, I bought the lie that I was weak because I wasn't aggressive. Which led to, I was uncool because we didn't have cable or a VCR growing up, so I didn't know all the current lingo. Which led to all the other ways I felt less than, and ultimately to insecurity.

In one way, being a mama's boy was great because I knew that my mother would protect me. She loved and provided for me. But the drawback was the insecurities that came when I didn't have a clear understanding of my identity as a man or my manhood. Being a mama's boy leaves you open to seeing yourself as weaker or less than, when in fact you're just *different from*. My life was evidence of this and clearly, so was Jacob's. The dynamic between Esau and Jacob was a "greater and less-than" situation from the beginning. Remember the prophecy?

And the LORD told her, "The sons in your womb will become two nations. From the very beginning, the two nations will be rivals. One nation will be stronger than the other; and your older son will serve your younger son." (Genesis 25:23 NLT)

The one who was supposed to have the double portion was actually going to end up serving the one who shouldn't have the inheritance. But what happens in the duration?

What happens before the prophecy comes true? For Jacob, for me, and maybe even for you, a lot of *less-than* thinking. For the longest time, I had a *less-than* mentality. I don't know that I would call it a loser's mentality, but it was a less-than mentality. When we would play sports on the playground after school, I would be picked last, and that's just what it was. I knew I was going to be picked last, because I wasn't athletic and my working mother who grew up during a certain era didn't cultivate that in me.

These kinds of events in our lives, things that reinforce the less-than mentality, can mess with our psyches. It's easy to lose sight of your purpose, the word God has spoken over you, when you are in certain environments that make you feel less than. It's hard to see the win down the road when you're constantly losing. And so, all too often, we'll start manipulating situations in order to figure out ways to ascribe value to ourselves because, like Jacob and Esau, the natural order of things has put us in a position deficit—and it seems like all the mama's love in the world can't make it right. And yet, our inheritances still seek us out.

Your Inheritance Is Looking for You

I know that the idea of an inheritance seeking you out sounds strange, especially in light of our exploration of Jacob and his manipulations to obtain an inheritance. But that's exactly why it's important to understand. See, despite

what people said about him, or even any “less-than” thinking he might have had, the word from the Lord that was spoken when Isaac and Rebekah gave birth to Jacob and Esau still remained. No matter what happened between that prophecy and the moment Jacob became Israel, God still pursued Jacob with promise in hand. Yes, He disciplined him. Yes, Jacob had to go through a process of refining his character. We’ll dig into all of that. But the inheritance was his and it sought him out.

Allow me to maybe make this more clear: Two years ago, I got a phone call when my wife and I were still living in Atlanta. The person on the other end of the phone asked for “John W. Gray III.” My whole name. So you know what I thought, right? I was prepared with my “I have no money, Bill Collector” response. The person on the other end of the phone said, “No, we actually have an inheritance for you because your grandfather was working on a top-secret government project.”

I was stunned.

My grandfather passed when I was two years old of a certain, very specific, and rare type of cancer. It was likely because of the materials he was working with on the job. The person went on to share how they’d been actively looking for his heir, and because my mother had kept her married name even after the divorce, they were able to find her, then me. They said, “Because of what your grandfather did, we have a check for you.”

Because of what my grandfather did.

I didn't earn that check. I didn't know it was coming.
But it was mine.

My inheritance was looking for me.

The Role of the Family in Identity

The earliest definition of who we are usually comes from the people who influenced us. More clearly, from those who raised us. Very rarely does a person graduate beyond what's been declared over them—particularly from the primary caregiver, the parental structure, whether it's the actual birth parents, adoptive parents, or extended family. Sometimes those dynamics can be healthy, and other times not so much. I think every parent who has some modicum of stability in their mental makeup believes that their child is the best thing that's ever lived, and they want to see them do well. But there are also other factors that play a part in parents putting their children in unhealthy predicaments and teaching them bad habits.

Now Rebekah was listening when Isaac spoke to his son Esau. So when Esau went to the field to hunt for game and bring it, Rebekah said to her son Jacob, "I heard your father speak to your brother Esau, 'Bring me game and prepare for me delicious food, that I may eat it and bless you before the LORD before I die.' Now therefore, my son, obey my voice as I command

you. Go to the flock and bring me two good young goats, so that I may prepare from them delicious food for your father, such as he loves. And you shall bring it to your father to eat, so that he may bless you before he dies.” But Jacob said to Rebekah his mother, “Behold, my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I am a smooth man. Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be mocking him and bring a curse upon myself and not a blessing.” His mother said to him, “Let your curse be on me, my son; only obey my voice, and go, bring them to me.” (Genesis 27:5–13 *ESV*)

If you look at Rebekah and Jacob, you see that while she loved Jacob, she also, in many ways, taught him how to be sneaky. How to connive. The family dynamics were not healthy, and a segment of Jacob’s questionable moral compass could have been a direct reflection of the emotional absence of his father and the overcompensation of his mother.

Even though I did not see myself in any particular way—good or bad—my mother always seemed to have what I thought were rose-colored glasses when it came to me. At first, I thought it was because I was an only child. When I look at the dynamics of my family—my mother and her siblings especially—she’s really unique. She stands out from her seven brothers and sisters in that she really embraced the principles of Christ fellowship and discipleship and

implemented the word, study, and prayer, living it out on a daily basis. Her life was so extraordinary that I'm actually living in the residue of it.

I have not yet invested the time that my mother has in her relationship with God, but I'm a beneficiary of it because she spoke to me as if she knew something I did not know. And when you hear over and over again a particular thing, you begin to believe it even if you don't see it. That thing can be negative, as in the case of Jacob and Rebekah, or positive, as in the case of my mother. I think many of us are shaped by the words of people who have been given authority and power over us.

Family dynamics are significant. For example, one of my uncles was developmentally disabled. Still another battled mental illness and was on government assistance. The men in my family were not anything to emulate. So, in terms of how I would need to define myself, being a mama's boy was the only chance I had of breaking that cycle. If I was going to become like the men in my family, then addiction and bad decisions and all types of other vices would've been my life. It's very clearly in my bloodline, and it's in my DNA. And yet there are things I've done, stuff that's manifested, that I would not possibly have been able to do without my mother's influence. Family dynamics and their influence is not just about nature or just about nurture. It's not binary. There are some things that are nurtured and there are some things that are innate.

Jacob didn't manipulate because he was wicked. He

manipulated, he connived, because he was influenced by the family dysfunction. But it's not all on Rebekah either. Jacob stole the birthright because he wanted more. The truth is, most of us wrestle with our actual identities and manipulate our way to the one we think we want, because we just want more.

More and More and More

The word *more* is linguistically small, but it's huge when we consider its various meanings. It's a broad word and it can mean anything to anybody at any time. When we aren't strong and secure in who we are or in what we're purposed to do, we tend to want more than what's allotted to us. Big more. Which is different from wanting more of a specific, tangible thing. Little mores. There are lots of people who want the proverbial more. Big more. Not necessarily more money or clothes. Those are little mores. Wanting more money is usually about wanting more freedom. See? That's a little more vs. a big more. Wanting more money is really about being able to breathe and not worry about having to pay bills or if there will be money in the account for food.

I've been in seasons of wanting more. To the casual observer, saying this might sound or look selfish, self-centered, or ungrateful, because I have a nice house; I've got nice vehicles; I'm at a big church. And yet the evidence of my needing to find my big more was when I realized that,

despite all those things, I was profoundly unhappy. There is not a house, car, or church building on the planet that can satisfy the longing in the soul.

I don't want to be well known. I want to matter. I want what I do to matter. And that's where I think I identify with Jacob's "grab" for significance. As manipulative and wrong as it was to steal his brother's birthright, it's entirely possible that Jacob believed himself to be drifting into a very certain anonymity. He was a mama's boy, not a great hunter. He was second born, not first. These things must have weighed on him. I've always said that the only thing worse than dying is being forgotten.

"You ever heard of John Gray?"

"Who? Nah. What'd he do? Who was he?"

I don't want that. I want people to say, "Oh yeah, John Gray lived and he did something great." But here's the catch: Greatness is not defined by the magnitude of one's platform or the number of eyeballs on you. Greatness has nothing to do with status or the level of applause you receive. Greatness is defined by functioning in and meeting the threshold of what is acceptable and pleasing to God in your life.

All I've ever wanted was for God to be pleased with me. It's the only reason He's still using me with all my flaws and screwups. So much of what has happened in my life has been so atypical that, if I'm honest, there are many, many nights I dream of going back to Cincinnati, finding work, getting a little apartment for my family, and singing at the local church. That dream, I think, is about drifting into

invisibility because, by man's account, there is absolutely no reason why God should use me—except that I love Him and I only want Him to be pleased.

Thousands of years apart, Jacob and John both came to the moment of awareness and discovery. Maybe this is where you are too. In order to establish an eternal legacy, Jacob had to stop running and face himself. John Gray also had to stop running and face himself. And *you* must stop running and face yourself. Everything that Jacob believed in was on the other side. If he turned back, he was going to have to face Esau, and if he went forward, he was going to have to encounter God. Either way, he was going to have to wrestle. Who he chose to wrestle and who he chose to engage is why we're talking about him now. That's the lesson. Whether you are a mama's boy or a daddy's girl or neither, if you only engage the people from your past or the things from your past, then that gives you only one access point. But when we engage God, He can give us an understanding of where we came from in a way that no one else can.

The difference between Jacob wrestling Esau and Jacob wrestling with God is that, with the former, he would've only been battling with the demons of his childhood. Jacob was seeking his blessing the right way this time. Instead of wrestling to obtain an earthly blessing, he was wrestling God for God. Because God, in that moment, was all he wanted. God was the only one who could heal and change his heart. There was so much more at stake.

When Jacob wrestled God, he was actually battling the better angel of his future—the thing that was promised, the thing that was prophesied, the *more* that he so desperately wanted. We are all in a battle between our flesh and our spirit; between our history and our calling; between our nature and the prophetic word that's been slowly nurtured over us by an oh-so-patient God.