

Wrestling With God

Genesis 32

Introduction

I must confess that when I began this series on the life of Jacob, I figured that we would cover it in two sermons. This is the fourth and I know that we have one more to go. He has been a colorful man who has led a very interesting life.

I think the reason that Jacob has especially appealed to me is that he has epitomized the struggle that we have in our daily walk with the Lord. I also think that Jacob personifies what our culture is trying to produce in us; that is, a man who goes after what he wants, who does not care what methods he may use, whose only concern is that he makes it. People are merely stepping stones in Jacob's way as he scratches and crawls and climbs his way to the top of the heap.

I am afraid that this attitude has invaded Christianity as well. In fact, you and I struggle and resist anyone who gets in our way to get what we want in life. However, the person who is standing in the middle of our path is often God, so we take Him on too.

In our passage today, I want to offer you a ringside seat to a wrestling match that is unlike any other recorded in human history. In this match, a man is engaging in hand-to-hand combat with God. Mark this passage well because it will provide a living illustration of what you and I do time after time after time as we wrestle with God and struggle with Him to have our way. So take note and I trust we will see ourselves in the struggle of Jacob.

Jacob Returns To Shechem

Turn your attention to Genesis, chapter 32, today. Let us begin with the first couple of verses and we will cover the thirty-two verses in this powerful passage of scripture.

Now as Jacob went on his way, the angels of God met him. Jacob said when he saw them, "This is God's camp [or host]." So he named that place Mahanaim.

The word "camp" comes from a Hebrew word that could be translated, "legion". He is saying, "This

is God's legion." There could have been thousands, or perhaps even millions, of angels.

As we have previously discussed, Jacob is now returning home. He has left Laban, with whom he has been struggling and scrapping and fighting for twenty years. He now has his wives, his children, and his herds of cattle; he is a wealthy man. But with every step closer to his homeland, one word is racing through his mind, "Esau . . . Esau."

You may remember the way in which Jacob tricked Esau out of his blessing and birthright. You may remember that he had to flee during the night to escape assassination. He has been away for twenty years, and Esau has probably been some fleeting cloud on the horizon of his mind. Now, with every step toward home, it begins to pound in his heart.

Shakespeare once wrote a powerful truth that, "conscience makes cowards of us all."

I think that Jacob was perhaps filled with terror as he drew closer. So God came in a reassuring and wonderful way by giving him a vision, or a view, of the thousands of angels who are, in effect, on the side of the Godly. Even though he had acted in an ungodly manner, Jacob was God's patriarch; he was the next in line. Isn't it fascinating to consider, ladies and gentlemen, that when Jacob started on this journey twenty years earlier, he had been met by the angels. We refer to that story as, "Jacob's Ladder".

Jacob's plight

Now Jacob is going back home and once again, God comes to him and, I think, reassures him and encourages him in a powerful way. God is saying, "You are not alone." Jacob, however, does not really listen or see, as we will note his plight in verses 3 through 5. He is apparently encouraged enough to send messengers.

Then Jacob sent messengers before him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. He also commanded them saying, "Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: 'Thus says your servant Jacob, 'I have sojourned with Laban, and stayed until now;

I have oxen and donkeys and flocks and male and female servants; and I have sent to tell my lord, that I may find favor in your sight.’”

In other words, Jacob is sending messengers to Esau saying, “I’m coming home. I’m coming back. Hopefully, we can pow-wow somewhere and reach an agreement.”

Jacob has not suggested that he will give anything away yet, he just wants to play his odds and see what the chances are of Esau allowing him to live. So he sends messengers.

The messengers return with shocking news. Look at verse 6.

The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, “We came to your brother Esau, and furthermore he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him.”

In other words, “He heard you were coming, even before you were going to tell him you were coming, and he has armed four hundred soldiers. He’s got a crack commando team coming to meet you.”

Do you know what Jacob does? Look at the next verse, verse 7.

Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; . . .

(that is biblical terminology for being scared out of your mind),

. . . and he divided the people who were with him, and the flocks and the herds and the camels, into two companies;

Jacob makes two groups and perhaps, puts one in front of the other. Why does he do this? Verse 8 will tell us.

for he said, “If Esau comes to the one company and attacks it, then the company which is left will escape.”

I am assuming he is in that second company!

Can you imagine being part of Jacob’s tribe and getting a slip of paper that says, “You’re in the front group.”

“Thanks a lot, Jacob.”

He is back to the cold-hearted, uncaring Jacob. He thinks, “Let the first group get slaughtered – that will at least give me a chance to flee.”

Jacob is back to conniving and manipulating.

However, let us face the facts – Jacob has heard the news of Esau; undoubtedly that Esau is the “king” of Edom. He is now a powerful chief who rules over perhaps, thousands of people. He is the commanding officer of this territory that Jacob has got to get through.

What a dilemma Jacob is in. He cannot run because Laban is behind him. As we studied in our last discussion, there has been a covenant of distrust between Jacob and Laban stating that they cannot go back across the border. Then, Esau is in front of him. Now what? Jacob is filled with fear.

Jacob is like the little boy who had a part in his school play. He was to speak the lines, “It is I! Be not afraid.” So he practiced it, “It is I! Be not afraid.” Then he got up on stage and saw all of the people, and all he could fumble out was, “It’s me and I’m scared to death.”

That is Jacob – he is literally frightened to death.

Jacob’s prayer

What would you advise Jacob to do if you were there? If your advice is, “Pray, Jacob,” then you have done well.

Notice Jacob’s prayer in verse 9. I love the first two words and I can just hear the emotion. This is like a time when you are backed up against the wall and the first thing that comes out of your mouth is, “Oh Lord!”

Jacob said, “O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord, who said to me, ‘Return to your country and to your relatives, and I will prosper you,’”

In other words, “Remember, Lord, You told me to do this.”

Continue to verse 10.

“I am unworthy of all the lovingkindness and of all the faithfulness which You have shown to Your servant; for with my staff only I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two companies.”

Jacob then petitions God in verse 11.

“Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, that he will come and attack me and the mothers with the children.”

Notice that Jacob puts himself first, and then the moms and the children.

He ends his prayer in verse 12.

“For You said, ‘I will surely prosper you and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which is too great to be numbered.’”

In other words, “Lord, You promised that I would father a multitude, so it doesn’t make sense for me to lose my life here in the land of Edom.”

Let me stop at this point to give four elements in this prayer. They are good elements, but they are lacking. They include:

1. First, in verse 9, Jacob addresses God with respect;
2. Secondly, in verse 10, he admits his own unworthiness;
3. Thirdly, in verse 11, he petitions God;
4. Fourthly, in verse 12, he reminds God of His covenant promise.

Let me make one practical point concerning this prayer, however. Although I said there were several good elements, I notice that one element is missing. It is the element of relationship.

Did you notice that Jacob went to God and said, “O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac”? Why didn’t he say, “And *my* God too?” What happened to that?

I think the reason is that this is the prayer of a man who had not developed a personal relationship with his God and, for twenty years, had neglected Him. In fact, men and women, this is the first recorded prayer of Jacob. Because he has neglected God, now when he goes to God, he is embarrassed; he is awkward.

It is the same way, when we have neglected God in the good times and then, something happens, what do we do then? We go to the Lord and apologize for approaching the throne of grace because we know we have ignored Him up until this point. The way to boldly approach the throne of grace is to live a consistent Christian life. Then, when good times or bad times come, you can walk right into the throne room. We also do not have to barter with God and say something like, “Lord, remember Your promises; remember me.”

Jacob’s plan

I do not think Jacob got much out of this prayer meeting because as soon as he says, “Amen,” look at what he does in verse 13. This plan of his is a classic, by the way.

So he spent the night there. Then he selected from what he had with him a present for his brother Esau:

Jacob is going to bribe Esau. Look at verses 14 through 16.

two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, thirty milking camels and their colts, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys. He delivered them into the hand of his servants, every drove by itself, and said to his servants, “Pass on before me, and put a space between droves.”

In other words, he is going to soften Esau up.

Esau is going to come along to perhaps, kill Jacob. He is going to be confronted with two hundred female goats. He might say, “What’s this?”

The servant will reply, “This is from your servant, Jacob. It’s a present. Please accept.”

He will accept and then, he will go a little further and run into twenty male goats. He might ask again, “What’s this?”

Again the servant will answer, “This is a gift from your servant, Jacob.”

This goes on and on and on. The plan is that hopefully, by the time Esau gets to Jacob, he is just so thrilled and so thankful, so filled with appreciation, that he says, “Jacob, I’m ashamed of myself. Guys, put your spears down. We’re not going to hurt him.”

That was Jacob’s plan. Continue to verses 17 and 18.

He commanded the one in front, saying, “When my brother Esau meets you and asks you, saying, ‘To whom do you belong, and where are you going, and to whom do these animals in front of you belong?’ then you shall say, ‘These belong to your servant Jacob; it is a present sent to my lord Esau. And behold, he also is behind us.’”

So, this is the place where Jacob is. He divides all of his goods.

God Responds To Jacob

Now look at verses 22 and 23.

Now he arose that same night and took his two wives and his two maids and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream. And he sent across whatever he had.

Then, note verse 24a.

Then Jacob was left alone . . .

I think, ladies and gentlemen, that it is very significant that the text emphasizes what is assumed – that Jacob is now alone. He has completely bottomed out. He has reached, finally, a hurdle that he cannot seem to clear. And he has a silly little scheme that he knows will not work. Esau has been festering for twenty years to take Jacob’s life. And there he is, at the stream called Jabbok, all alone.

It is at this point, ladies and gentlemen, that God came to meet Jacob. That is also when God comes to meet you and I – when we have bottomed out. We might even have a silly little scheme up our sleeve, though we know there are hurdles we cannot cross. That is when God instigates His plan.

The Lord wrestles with Jacob

God comes to Jacob in the form of a wrestler. Note verse 24 again.

Then Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.

Now Hosea, in chapter 12, will let us in on the fact that this wrestler is actually, “*the angel*”. The definite article indicates that this is, in fact, the pre-incarnate Christ. This is a Christophany; this is an appearance of Jesus who is always “the angel of the Lord” in the Old Testament. So this is no mere man, although Jacob may perceive him to be a man. This is pre-incarnate Christ who comes to wrestle with Jacob.

The wrestling match lasted all night, and I think that is a picture of Jacob’s stubbornness. Let me read what Arthur Pink writes concerning this:

God was not wrestling with Jacob to gain some object from him, it was to reduce Jacob to a sense of nothingness; to cause him to see what a poor, helpless, and worthless creature he was. And it was to teach us, through him, the all-important lesson that in recognized weakness, lies our strength.

This text is confusing. We do not know how they grappled or how it come about. We are not sure of all of the details. We do know that they grappled and

wrestled throughout the night and that God was, in effect, bringing Jacob to a sense of utter helplessness.

The Lord disables Jacob

At some point during this match, this stubborn man came to a realization – perhaps it was after he was touched. Note verse 25.

When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he [Christ] touched the socket of his thigh; so the socket of Jacob’s thigh was dislocated while he wrestled with him.

Notice that something happens after this. Jacob begins to plead with God for a blessing. This time, it is not a covenant blessing. This time, it is a personal blessing. Note verse 26.

Then he [Christ] said, “Let me go, for the dawn is breaking.” But he [Jacob] said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”

In other words, the wrestling has ceased and now, Jacob is clinging. This is like something my son does. He grabs me by the leg and begins to cling. When I try to shake him off, it is very hard to do.

So Jacob is clinging to the leg of this man who is now recognized by him as something other than mere man. And Jacob says, “I will not let you go until you bless me.”

Jacob is not asking for the covenant – he has that blessing. He is saying, “I will not let you go until you impart to me something of your character; your strength.”

What a pitiful picture. Jacob, who is unable to wrestle because his hip is dislocated, is hanging on, pleading, crying, begging for, what I believe is, a personal relationship with the God he has neglected. I think, by the river Jabbok, he realized how insignificant his life really was. He had spent twenty years scrapping and scheming and fighting – for *what?* For some rams, some cows, some goats – *big deal*. Now he is more than willing to give it all up just to live.

I wish that God would give us all that kind of experience. A time when we come to the end of ourselves and recognize how insignificant life’s pursuits are – unless we pursue God.

I remember as a teenager one summer, cutting grass, saving up the money, and talking my parents into letting me buy a plane ticket to Minnesota. My family always went to Minnesota in the summertime

for vacation. It was a twenty-four hour drive and that summer, I would make it in just a few hours and enjoy a flight, while my family would drive. I had never flown before and I will never forget the words my father said as he took me to the airport. He probably wondered if it went over my head, but it impacted me. He said, “Stephen, when you get on that plane and you start going up, make sure you look down and notice how small everything is.”

I will never forget that because as the plane ascended, I looked out the window and noticed that the largest things looked so insignificant. It was the best that earth could provide, but when you get up that high, it looks like the head of a match. I think that is what Jacob realized by the brook Jabbok.

Application – Three Secrets To Spiritual Strength

In the next few verses, ladies and gentlemen, I want to give three principles for spiritual strength. They are not profound and are often ignored, but do not miss them.

Jacob recognizes the presence of God in his life

1. First, Jacob recognizes the presence of God in his life.

Note what happens in verse 27.

So he [Christ] said to him, “What is your name?” . . .

This is more than just asking for his name. As you know, the meanings of names were very significant. He was, in effect, asking, “What kind of man are you that I should bless you?”

Jacob responds in the last part of verse 27,

. . . And he said, “Jacob.”

He is saying, “My name is Jacob – deceiver, supplanter, schemer.”

Then notice what happens in verse 28.

He said, “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; . . .”

In other words, “Your name will no longer mean, ‘you prevail, you scheme, you manipulate, you rule your own life.’ Your name will now be ‘Israel,’ meaning, ‘God rules, God prevails, God is in control.’”

“. . . For you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed.”

Continue to verse 29.

Then Jacob asked him and said, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And he blessed him there.

Now note what Jacob recognizes in verse 30a.

So Jacob named the place Peniel, for he said, “I have seen God face to face . . .”

Jacob recognized that he had been in the presence of God.

It is interesting that Jacob named the location of his first encounter with God, “Bethel,” which means, “the house of God”. Then, in the beginning of this chapter, when Jacob had his second encounter in seeing the host, he named the location, “Mahanaim,” which means, “God’s camp,” or perhaps literally, “two camps”. So he is saying, “This is God’s house; this is God’s host.” Now, in this third encounter, however, he names the location “Peniel,” which means, “this is God’s face” – “this is *my God*”.

It sounds so simple, and yet, I believe it marks a profound separation between the weak believer and the strong believer. The weak believer having so little trust, so little faith, and the strong believer having great, developing, growing trust and great faith. What is that separating line between the two types of believers? The strong believer recognizes that God is alive and present – whether it is in triumph or tragedy – whatever happens, *God* is there; *God* is involved in my life. Jacob recognized that.

Jacob admits the grace of God

2. Then, because of that recognition, the second principle can be applied, which is that Jacob admits the grace of God.

Look at verse 30 again.

Jacob named the place Peniel, for he said, “I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved.”

Jacob did not say, “I’ve seen God and boy, was He impressed with me,” or “I’ve seen God and He patted me on the back and said, ‘Jacob, you’ve had your shortcomings but you’re all right by me.’”

Anyone who meets with God will come away with an awareness of His glory and His grace. And, I think, humility will be a result of such a meeting.

Let me read what H. A. Ironside once said. Ironside, in his later years, was a tremendous expositor who lived in Chicago. When he was younger, he once felt that he was not as humble as he should be. So he asked an older friend what he could do about it. This friend replied, "Make a sandwich board and on that board, write the plan of salvation. Then, walk through the shopping and business district of downtown Chicago for a day."

A sandwich board, as you may know, is a board that you wear with writing on the front and then, slung over your back is another board with writing as well. You may have seen cartoons of characters wearing these with "Repent!" written on the front and "The end is near!" written on the back.

So Ironside followed his friend's advice and upon completion of this humiliating experience, he returned to his apartment. He took off the sandwich board and as he did, he caught himself thinking, "There's not another person in Chicago who would be willing to do that."

Ladies and gentlemen, you cannot drum up humility by some experience. Humility comes from meeting with God; from recognizing His presence and His part in your life. From such a meeting, you come away with a sense of your weakness and His strength. There is nothing you can do to become humble, it comes as a result of the company you keep.

Corrie ten Boom was once asked if it was difficult for her to remain humble because of the way God was using her. Her reply was, "When Jesus Christ rode into Jerusalem on, what we now call, Palm Sunday on the back of a mule, and everyone was waving palm branches in the air and shouting, 'Hosanna!,' while throwing garments on the road and singing praises, do you think for one moment, it entered the head of that mule that this praise was for him?"

Oh, what God could do in and through us if we just did not care who got the credit.

Jacob accepts the plan of God for his life

3. After recognizing God's presence and admitting His grace in his life, Jacob then accepts the plan of God for his life.

Would you notice the next verse, verse 31.

Now the sun rose upon him just as he crossed over Penuel, and he was limping on his thigh.

As a matter of fact, Jacob will limp the rest of his life. That limp will be a constant reminder that God had invaded his life. That limp will be a living illustration of the fact that God met him there. And you never hear Jacob complaining about that limp.

I wonder, my friend, if you are wrestling with God today. Is there some turmoil in your soul? Is it sin? Is it rebellion? Are you slipping; are you scheming? The wonderful thing about this is that when you and I curl up beside the brook Jabbok, trembling as we might be, faced with hurdles that we cannot clear without answers, it is there that God can touch our lives.

I think of Jacob, the schemer, being given a new name of Israel. And I would imagine that in your life, if we were to apply this today, if you are without Jesus Christ, the accuser can dredge up all the sewage related to your past life and say, "There's no way. Your old name is too spotted for God to give you a new one." And yet, Jacob was given a new one.

The interesting thing is, ladies and gentlemen, we who have accepted Jesus Christ, do not yet know what our new name is. We refer to it as "Christian," but that is the name that the world gave us in Antioch, when the world began to first call the disciples, "Christians" (Acts 11:26).

Revelation, chapter 2, also talks of our new name. It makes reference to an interesting cultural custom in which a man who was about to be married would buy a precious jewel. On the back of that jewel, he would have a jeweler inscribe a pet name; a precious name for his bride. No one would know what that name was, except her. God says through John, in Revelation, chapter 2, verse 17b,

. . . To him who overcomes, . . . I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.

Think of it, we, as overcomers, have been given a new name too.

Jacob is given a new insight that God is involved in his life, and he is given a new walk. As the sun rises and casts shimmering light on the waters of the Jabbok, Jacob limps forward to meet Esau. This time, however, his head is held high and his heart is filled with the assurance that God is involved in his life. God is a sovereign God.