

## Israel: The Contender

I once read a devotional that talked about a man complaining that he had to sit and listen to his pastor preach every week, especially since he could scarcely ever remember anything his pastor said!

But then he realized he also couldn't even remember what he'd had for breakfast in the morning, and he figured he should probably still keep having that.

All that to say, you've likely heard much of what I have to say today before, but like a good breakfast does good for the body, I hope that our reflection on God's Word this morning brings some nourishment for our spirit.

We're continuing on in our study of major figures in Genesis in our 2nd week on a man named Jacob - soon to have his name changed to Israel. Just about a year ago, when I joined this congregation for the first time to candidate for the position as senior pastor, I shared with you some thoughts on the same passage that we're covering today.

At its heart, while dealing with struggle and wrestling with the Lord, is really a lesson on how we ought to respond when confronted with our deepest fears.

Join me in Genesis chapter 32, verse 22:

Genesis 32:<sup>22</sup> That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. <sup>23</sup> After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions.

<sup>24</sup> So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. <sup>25</sup> When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. <sup>26</sup> Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."

But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

<sup>27</sup> The man asked him, "What is your name?"

"Jacob," he answered.

<sup>28</sup> Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."

<sup>29</sup> Jacob said, "Please tell me your name."

But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.

<sup>30</sup> So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

<sup>31</sup> The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip. <sup>32</sup> Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip, because the socket of Jacob's hip was touched near the tendon.

Let's Pray.

Many years ago, a man's car broke down on the side of the road. He was out working on the car, unsuccessfully trying to get it started, when another man stopped to help.

The second guy looked at the engine, worked on it for just a minute and told the first man to start it up. The car immediately started with no problem. Baffled, the owner of the car asked his helper, "How did you fix the car so quickly and how did you know what it needed?" The man answered, "I am Henry Ford. I built the car. I know what makes it work."

We like to think that we know ourselves better than anyone else - I mean, we've lived with ourselves our whole lives. But God is the one who created us - in His image, no less - built us from scratch - knit us together in our mother's wombs.

And when things break down, He knows what we need better than we - or even any mechanic, doctor, or pastor - ever will.

In our passage this morning, we've caught Jacob at a time in his life when things have broken down.

Jacob cheated his brother out of his birthright, then fled for his life in fear of Esau's angry retaliation. He journeyed in the region of Aram, where ended up getting married - TWICE - not because he wanted to, but because his father-in-law tricked him into marrying his oldest daughter before Jacob could marry the daughter he really loved - Rachel.

Ironically, the trickster got tricked.

Jacob and his wives ended up having lots of babies, and eventually felt the need to set out on their own after some tension built up with the in-Laws.

As he's journeying away, Jacob hears a startling message from God: In ch. 31:3 - "Go back to the land of your fathers and relatives, and I will be with you."

In the midst of a trying time, God reminds Jacob that he made a promise to Abraham that he intends to keep with him.

He gives him a vision for a life returning home and experiencing joy and flourishing with him.

But there's a hitch - Going home means facing the brother he snubbed...

The entire first part of this chapter involves Jacob pleading with God to save him from the wrath he is sure he is about to face from his brother Esau. He doesn't see any options, so he starts sending waves of people and gifts hoping to appease Esau before they meet.

My son has actually developed a similar strategy when he does something wrong: Anytime he's caught with something he shouldn't have, he immediately tries to pretend like it was a gift he was just holding onto for us.

Jacob sends his wives and kids over first with loads of gifts - hoping that maybe he can distract Esau from the fact that he stole what was rightfully his all those years ago.

But he doesn't think it'll be enough, and in the middle of the night, we get a brief glimpse at this really poignant moment in Jacob's life with God.

In verse 9 of the same chapter, Jacob prays:

*"<sup>9</sup> O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, Lord, you who said to me, 'Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper,' <sup>10</sup> I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two camps. <sup>11</sup> Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children. <sup>12</sup> But you have said, 'I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.'"*

Then as he sits there by the river alone, in the middle of the night, he's suddenly caught up in a wrestling match. We have no real clue as to who the man is until the end, when Jacob says that he has "seen God face-to-face, and yet was spared" - so we know that in some profound way God appeared to Jacob in the form of this man.

The event is actually very important. Jacob has been all wound up with anxiety precisely because he's afraid of a fight with his brother. Esau is the big hairy hunter. Jacob is the clever mama's boy who stayed home to cook.

And now, after Jacob asks God to save him from the fight, God ends up fighting Jacob himself!

There's something fishy going on here, because it says that they're wrestling ALL night and the man sees that he's not going to overpower Jacob... and proceeds to dislocate Jacob's hip with a simple touch.

That's not normal human strength. That's something supernatural - which reinforces that this must've been some sort of Divine encounter... But if he can do this, why is there any contest at all?

OBVIOUSLY he could have easily overpowered Jacob. But he doesn't, because it's not about the fight - it's about what comes next.

The dialogue here is rich:

Angel says, "Let me go."

*"Not unless you bless me"*

"What is your name?"

This is important, because this scene has happened before. The last time he was asked this question, he was looking for a blessing from his father.

His brother Esau had gone out to hunt, intending to come back and receive a blessing from their father, so Jacob got all dressed up with goatskins so he'd be hairy like Esau and went to go bring some meat to his dad and get the blessing.

He says, "Dad, I'm back!" - Isaac is mostly blind by this point and he can tell it's one of his sons, so he asks, "which one are you?" - "I'm Esau, your firstborn; I'm back for my blessing."

[Pause]

Now the Lord asks - you want a blessing? What's your name?

"Jacob"

All of his life up to this point, Jacob has been defined by this name that was spoken over him at birth.

A simple translation of the name Jacob would be "supplanter, or deceiver." In Hebrew, Jacob's name literally means "grasps the heel." Earlier in his story, the text tells us that Jacob literally came out of the womb grasping the heel of his twin brother, Esau.

That phrase also apparently has some connections to deceptive action. It's implied that "grabbing the heel" is a way of saying that this person takes advantage of others.

Finally at his most desperate breaking point, Jacob says, "Yeah that's me - I'm Jacob, the heel grasper, the deceiver, the trickster... I'm the guy who does whatever he needs to to get what I need..."

For Jacob - real transformation only happens once he confronts his deepest wounds and fears and surrenders to God's will.

A few weeks ago when we looked at Isaac's pivotal moment on the mountain with his father Abraham, we explored the pattern of downward mobility throughout scripture:

It's in the Journey of Descent that we find real life - not by earning salvation and love through any sort of righteousness of our own - but by surrendering control to God in faith.

We ACCEPT God's love exactly as we are, giving us the courage and strength to come to an AWARENESS and EXAMINATION of our true condition - in all our good and bad, beauty and brokenness.

Then, we may be led into SURRENDER - not a passive resignation, but a full relinquishment of control.

And it's only THEN that we can begin the journey into healing and wholeness - to PURGE ourselves of sin, be PERFECTED by the Holy Spirit in healthy/holy living, and be AWAKENED into Christlikeness.

THIS is why we say that Jesus is the WAY, the TRUTH, and the LIFE.

Without Jesus, there's no possible way that we could truly find life - because He's the only one that can be trusted with our brokenness. He's the only true and perfect image of the God who loves us and wants to save us.

Without the cross and the resurrection, we'd surrender in our vulnerability, and be completely condemned because we don't measure up.

Without God's covenant love, we'd be lost. Broken down, with nowhere to go but the junkyard.

But WITH GOD - we find that there is hope in our darkest moments. There's a shepherd who can lead us through the valley of the shadow of death. Jesus calls us to die to self, and in that death we receive new life.

While that receives its fullest expression in the salvation we receive in Jesus - God has always been about that same redemptive work.

In His dramatic show of love and compassion, the Lord tells Jacob, "No, that's not your name any more. You'll be called "Israel"."

Israel means "contends with God/prevails with God."

He says you are no longer the deceiver who takes advantage of others - that's not who you are, nor who you were meant to be; and it's not what I see in you. You are the one who struggles with God and breaks through. You're an overcomer.

Jacob walks away with a whole new identity, and a limp to prove it.

For Jacob - real transformation only happens once he confronts his deepest wounds and fears and surrenders to God's will.

This is not an uncommon theme in scripture:

- Abraham is promised to become the Father of many nations, but only has one heir of the promise after years of trying and mistakes made along the way. Near the end of his life, God asks him to give up that same son. He must answer the question: Do I believe God will "make me a nation" even if I sacrifice my son?
- Moses is charged with the task of confronting pharaoh and leading his people out of Egypt. In a shocking turn of events, God "seeks to put him to death" before he returns to Egypt, just like the pharaoh's attempted when we ran away in the first place. He must answer: Do I really believe God wants to be in covenant with me?

- Jesus himself experiences a series of temptations at the beginning of his journey that hit at the very human question that will follow his entire ministry: Do I believe the Father will give me what I need?
- ◆ In the wilderness, he rebuffs Satan's temptations for bread, celebrity and authority even though he will face hunger, rejection, and humiliation.
  - ◆ In the Garden of Gethsemane he pleads with God to take this suffering from him, but surrenders to the Father's will.
  - ◆ On the cross he cries out, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" (there is a ton to unpack from that moment, but just sit for a second to realize that this is one of the few times Jesus addresses Him as 'God' instead of 'Father.' And yet he submits and surrenders and is glorified.

There is a powerful truth undergirding scripture that the path toward spiritual maturity is not through effort and success but through inviting God into our places of woundedness and fear.

The profound thing about Jacob's wrestling match is that he did not come out the other side at fully righteous or holy. Jacob's night of wrestling allowed him to fully surrender his fear so that God could heal and transform him. But that was only the first step in a much longer journey.

Jacob will continue to make new mistakes and familiar mistakes - but this event will mark him and his descendants forever.

The last few verses here are strange, but really important.

Jacob is so transformed by this experience that he not only gives the place a special name, his descendants end up changing their eating patterns just to remember what happened at this place!

It may seem silly, but this small act would have a huge impact on his descendants. Every time they avoided the tendons at the hip in their meat, they'd remember that night that Jacob received his new name. That time God told their great-grandpa Jake that he had nothing to fear, that he was worth something, and that God would be with him always.

Just a chapter later, there's another little Easter egg hidden for later readers looking back on God's activity here.

- When Jacob and Esau finally do come face-to-face, there's no conflict at all. Esau ends up greeting Jacob with open arms, and they go on from there at peace.
- In 33:17 it then says that "Jacob...went to Sukkoth, where he built a place for himself and made shelters for his livestock. That is why the place is called Sukkoth."

Last week, I mentioned briefly the Jewish festival of Sukkot - a fall harvest festival among the Jewish people where they remember how God provided for them while they dwelt in tents in the wilderness.

Sukkot/Sukkoth means “shelter”/”booth”/ or “tent” - it’s the same word here describing the shelters Jacob made for his livestock.

God has always emphasized for His people the importance of REMEMBERING these moments of faithfulness, because He knows how easy it is for us to be discouraged in the next trial.

Why do we what we do at Church every Sunday? Why do we gather at special times, like our Communion service next week? It’s because whether we realize it actively at the time, all these built up moments of faithfulness train our hearts, minds and bodies to be attuned to the work of the Spirit within us.

- When it comes to life transformation, and journeying toward Christlikeness and wholeness, we need more than bible knowledge.
- We need to experience and remember the real events of God’s goodness in our lives and allow them to shape us in our places of deepest longing.
- We need Community and Rhythms of grace together in worship.

Wholeness in Christ is not a simple process. We’re all broken people on a journey towards healing and redemption, and that journey often exposes our deepest fears and wounds.

The only way forward is to surrender in humility before the God who loves us intimately and is unrelentingly faithful.

It’s a daily process, and it takes reminding ourselves regularly of his past and present faithfulness in order to combat the lies that motivate us to turn the other way.

Where are you at this morning?

1. Maybe you’re just starting your journey and need to invite God to show you His love and guide you to a revelation of your place of need?
2. Maybe you’re here this morning and ready to surrender to God in a new way?
3. Maybe you’ve already surrendered your life, but you’re asking for help to remember and abide in His presence for renewed faith?

As we sing this last song - take some time to reflect and invite the Lord to speak to you this morning.