

41. Wrestling with God

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Two decades before, Jacob had fled from Esau to Laban, and now he was fleeing Laban only to be confronted by Esau. After twenty years, Jacob's past was catching up with him, and he was afraid. It's strange how we convince ourselves that we can escape the past and not reap what we've sown. We try to forget our sins, but our sins don't forget us. What Jacob did to his father and brother was forgiven by God, but neither time, nor locations could change the consequences of those acts.

As we study Jacob's actions during this crisis time in his life, we see the conflicts all of us occasionally experience between faith and fear, trusting God and scheming, asking God for help and then acting as though we don't even know God. A crisis doesn't make a man; it shows what a man is made of.

While we are going to be silent viewers of Jacob's scheming and wrestling with God this morning, we are going to realize that we often do the exact same thing as Jacob. Let's learn to trust our Lord instead of scheming.

A. GOD'S CAMP

Genesis 32:1-2 So Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. 2 When Jacob saw them, he said, "This is God's camp." And he called the name of that place Mahanaim.

Jacob noticed that he was not alone. Now Jacob could see God's angels with him and it provided great encouragement to him.

This wonderful revelation of God's presence and care came after Jacob finally separated from Laban, the worldly man. Separation from the world always brings greater insight about God to the believers of Jesus Christ.

God gives us a lot of reminders that He is in control of everything all the time. It is up to us to accept His reminders. But if we choose not to accept His reminders, even if God Himself shows up in front of us, we still would be afraid and fret about the future for nothing.

B. THE 400 MEN WELCOMING PARTY

Genesis 32:3-8 Then Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau his brother in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. 4 And he commanded them, saying, "Speak thus to my lord Esau, 'Thus your servant Jacob says: "I have dwelt with Laban and stayed there until now. 5 I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, and male and female servants; and I have sent to tell my lord, that I may find favor in your sight."'" 6 Then the messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau, and he also is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him." 7 So Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people that were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two companies. 8 And he said, "If Esau comes to the one company and attacks it, then the other company which is left will escape."

Jacob was not so sure about this 400 men welcoming party. He was wondering if this is gonna be a happy reunion or an army to slaughter his family.

So, Jacob started to trust himself and his own schemes again. He tried to appease Esau with gifts. He divided his company into two bands and ignored the protecting army of angels. He sure wants to save his own skin in his own way.

When Laban confronted Jacob with a hostile group, Jacob boldly stood up to him and spoke his mind. But with Esau, Jacob was afraid to meet him. This was because Jacob knew he was in the right with Laban, but he knew he was in the wrong with Esau. Shakespeare was right when he wrote, "Conscience does make cowards of us all."

In a similar way Jacob represents many Christians who have Jesus in their hearts, yet they are terrified for their unknown future and haunted by their ugly past sins. God is our Protector for our future and our past sins that were forgiven with the blood of Jesus our Savior.

C. IF ALL ELSE FAILS, THEN LET'S PRAY

Genesis 32:9-12 Then Jacob said, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, the Lord who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your family, and I will deal well with you': 10 I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth which You have shown Your servant; for I crossed over this Jordan with my staff, and now I have become two companies. 11 Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, lest he come and attack me and the mother with the children. 12 For You said, 'I will surely treat you well, and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.'"

I am sure that you all hear this phrase, "If all else fails, then let's pray." After taking these steps in carnal confidence, he asked for God's help. That is an absurd and wrong thing to do. We should pray first, then take actions as the Lord leads.

However, Jacob still came to God with his prayer. Jacob was reminding God with His promise 'Return to your country and to your family, and I will deal well with you'. Listen, many of our prayers fall short because there is none of God's Word within them. Often there is none of God's Word in them because there is little of God's Word in us.

If you have a prayer request, reflect it against the Word of God. Do you find any of God's promises that will cover your prayer request? Then, you have the confidence that it will be done according to His will and time. Rest and know that the Lord is on it. If not, you can pray millions of years, you ain't gonna get it.

1 John 5:14-15 Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. 15 And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him.

Many of us take our burdens to the Lord in prayer. We just spread them out before Him. Then after we get through praying, we get right up and put each little burden right back on our back and start again with them. That is not the way we should do.

George Mueller, a great man of faith and prayer, was once asked what was the most important part of prayer. He replied: "The 15 minutes after I have said, 'Amen.'"

D. THE OLD NATURE STILL RULES

Genesis 32:13-21 So he lodged there that same night, and took what came to his hand as a present for Esau his brother: 14 two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, 15 thirty milk camels with their colts, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and

ten foals. 16 Then he delivered them to the hand of his servants, every drove by itself, and said to his servants, "Pass over before me, and put some distance between successive droves." 17 And he commanded the first one, saying, "When Esau my brother meets you and asks you, saying, 'To whom do you belong, and where are you going? Whose are these in front of you?' 18 then you shall say, 'They are your servant Jacob's. It is a present sent to my lord Esau; and behold, he also is behind us.'" 19 So he commanded the second, the third, and all who followed the droves, saying, "In this manner you shall speak to Esau when you find him; 20 and also say, 'Behold, your servant Jacob is behind us.'" For he said, "I will appease him with the present that goes before me, and afterward I will see his face; perhaps he will accept me." 21 So the present went on over before him, but he himself lodged that night in the camp.

In man's thought, this might be a good idea with an escape plan, but not in God's. Unfortunately, Jacob would rather depend on his own capability than God's.

We've already learned that faith is living without scheming. But before we criticize Jacob, we need to examine our own hearts to see if we've ever been guilty of praying piously and then depending on our own schemes and resources. It's true that faith without works is dead, but Jacob's gift to Esau was not a work of faith because God didn't command it. You've heard, "Heaven helps those who help themselves," but it is totally unbiblical. True faith is based on God's Word, and whatever we do that isn't motivated by faith is sin, no matter how successful it may appear.

E. THE FIRST MMA FIGHT

Genesis 32:22-30 And he arose that night and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven sons, and crossed over the ford of Jabbok. 23 He took them, sent them over the brook, and sent over what he had. 24 Then Jacob was left alone; and a Man wrestled with him until the breaking of day. 25 Now when He saw that He did not prevail against him, He touched the socket of his hip; and the socket of Jacob's hip was out of joint as He wrestled with him. 26 And He said, "Let Me go, for the day breaks." But he said, "I will not let You go unless You bless me!" 27 So He said to him, "What is your name?" He said, "Jacob." 28 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." 29 Then Jacob asked, saying, "Tell me Your name, I pray." And He said, "Why is it that you ask about My name?" And He blessed him there. 30 And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: "For I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved."

I believe that God got Jacob's full attention by now. He has uncle Laban in the back of him who doesn't mean anything good, and he has his brother Esau with his 400 horsemen ahead of him. Jacob is no match for either one. He is caught now between a rock and a hard place. And he doesn't know which way to turn. Do you think he wanted to take on a third opponent that night? I don't think so.

It is when we get alone with God, good things begin to happen. Let's not think that the preincarnate Christ who is God Himself couldn't handle Jacob, that the struggle lasted all night long. It was not Christ who was struggling against Jacob, it was Jacob. He didn't want to yield to God, because he was a manipulator, con-man, and supplanter. He always wanted his way. But now he was cornered and pinned down.

I believe that the first portion of v25 is one of those poor English translations for this incident. Let me put it this way. Let's say you have a four years old son who is jumping on you and wants to wrestle with you. He thinks that he is winning because he is on top of you and putting his arms around your neck with all of his strength. Then a phone rings. So you get up to answer the phone. But the boy is still hanging on your neck and still thinking that you two are in wrestling. You can stop that child anytime you want because you are completely in control and you have the power to change the situation any way you want.

I've learned martial arts for years in various disciplines, but I have never seen any martial art master who simply touches the opponent's hip socket and puts it out of joint. I bet Jacob got a rude awakening in the middle of the night.

This is an invaluable place where God pins us down. There is something to be said for every person doing his "wrestling" with God, and then acknowledging God's greatness after having been defeated. We must know that we serve a God who is greater than us, and we cannot conquer anything until He conquers us.

Jacob has been reduced to the place where all he can do is hold on to the Lord with everything he has. Not a bad place to be. Before Jacob could be delivered from the hand of his brother, he had to be delivered from his own self-will and self-reliance.

When Christ asked Jacob for his name, he must have felt a sense of shame, admitting his name was "Jacob," meaning "con-man, supplanter, and cheater."

The name 'Israel' is a compound of two words – 'sarah,' meaning, "Prince or Princess," "fight," "struggle," or "rule." And 'el', meaning, "God". Some Bible scholars take the name "Israel" to mean, "He who struggles with God" or "He who rules with God." But in Hebrew names, God is not the object of the verb but the subject. Daniel means "God judges," not "he judges God." So this principle shows us that Israel means, "God rules."

As I mentioned it before this is when the nation of Israel started. Until then, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were Syrians.

Here something great happened to Jacob. Jacob went from cunning to clinging, from resisting to resting in God. Now he was not fighting with the Lord, but rather hanging on the Lord.

Jacob thought the real enemy was outside of him, Esau. The real enemy was his own carnal and fleshly nature, which had not been conquered by God.

How about you? Are you trying so hard to make something happen? Is it in a relationship with someone? Or is it your business? Whatever that is, instead of coming up with all of your worldly tricks, why not cling on to the Lord who made everything in the universe with His words. Instead of resisting the will of God in your life, why not resting in God? Because He will not give you anything bad for you.

F. A GOOD REMINDER TO CARRY AROUND

Genesis 32:31-32 Just as he crossed over Peniel the sun rose on him, and he limped on his hip. 32 Therefore to this day the children of Israel do not eat the muscle that shrank, which is on the hip socket, because He touched the socket of Jacobs hip in the muscle that shrank.

The first memorial is the name of the place. Jacob named the place Peniel "Face of God".

The second memorial was a permanent limp. Jacob would remember his being conquered by God with every step he took for the rest of his life. This was a small price to pay for such a great reminder from God.

G. APPLICATIONS

1) Separation from the world always brings greater insight about God to the believers of Jesus Christ.

2) We shouldn't expect God to bless our ways that He didn't lead us to do. It's better to pray and ask Him first, then obey what He tells us.

3) Instead of fear, we should have faith in the Lord. Instead of resist, we need to rest in His mighty power.