

Sermon on Gen. 32:22-32, Nov. 14, 2010

Today's story from the Book of Genesis relates to a man named Jacob. Years before this scene, Jacob had tricked his brother Esau out of his blessing and inheritance as the firstborn son. Esau was furious and planned to kill Jacob, who then fled the country. Now, decades later, Jacob prepares to return to his homeland and fears that his brother might still try to kill him.

Jacob approaches the Jabbok River, which served as a border of Esau's territory. Jacob decided that he would try to appease his brother, so he sent his servants ahead with a huge gift. Later that evening he sent his wives and sons across the river, and then sent the rest of his servants and possessions across.

So that night Jacob was alone on the banks of the Jabbok, facing his past, his fears, and an uncertain future. And later that night, the most famous and perhaps strangest wrestling match in history occurred. An unknown man appeared and wrestled with Jacob throughout the night, leaving him and us with precious insights into what it means to follow God. Please follow along in your Bibles as I read Genesis 32:22-32, on p. .

“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. After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. 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. Then the man said, “Let me go, for it is daybreak.”

But Jacob replied, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” The man asked him, “What is your name?” “Jacob,” he answered. 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.”

Jacob said, “Please tell me your name.” But he replied, “Why do you ask my name?” Then he blessed him there. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.”

The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip. 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. *This is the Word of the Lord.*

That night Jacob wrestled with God. All of us have wrestled with God at times as we've struggled to do our things our way. We've wrestled with God as we tried to understand why bad things happen. Perhaps we've wrestled with God about His call on our lives, or about the things He has asked us to give up for His sake. We've all wrestled with God at some point, so we can all learn something valuable from this Wounded Wrestler.

The first lesson Jacob's example teaches is our need to admit that our way doesn't work. It's true that by crossing the Jabbok River, Jacob was going to be entering into Esau's territory. But to God, something far more important was going on. Jacob was about to re-enter the land that God had sworn to give to his descendants: the promised land. God wasn't about to allow Jacob to enter that land of divine blessing and favor on Jacob's terms or under his strength. To receive God's promises, we must do things in God's perfect, loving way, and no other.

So the Lord appears in the form of a man and wrestles with Jacob, not for sport, but in order to show him a few crucial truths. The God-man said to Jacob, "...you have struggled with God...and have overcome" (v. 28). And yet as we read the text it is clear that Jacob didn't "overcome" during the wrestling match in the sense of defeating God. They wrestled all through the night. It appeared that it was going to be a draw until the Man dislocated Jacob's hip with a simple touch. It was as if God allowed Jacob to give Him his best shot, and then God showed his complete superiority with a single touch.

This scene reminds me of the times when dads wrestle with their young sons. They let the youngsters knock them down and shove them around, but in an instant a Dad can put a boy in his place to remind him who is really in charge. That night Jacob found out that he couldn't push God around and continue to do things his own way. This is what 1 Cor. 1 means when it says that "...the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength." Jacob learned that he would be entering the promised land on God's terms, and only on

God's terms, for Jacob's own good. Proverbs 14 explains that "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death." This mystery wrestler was there that night to show Jacob God's way of doing things. ///

In 1849 a wagon train was traveling through Death Valley to follow the gold rush into California. As they trudged through Death Valley, they looked ahead and saw a sheet of water they all believed to be Owen's Lake. But it was just a mirage created by the intense heat. The harder they pressed on to make it to the water, the more frustrated they became. When we try to accomplish things in our own way and in our own strength apart from God, we are just like that wagon train pursuing a mirage. We will never be successful because our human way simply doesn't work. On the other hand, living according to God's ways always leads us to blessing.

Is there anything that you have been trying to do under your own strength, without trusting in God or relying upon Him? Have you been trying to reach God by doing good works? Perhaps you have been trying to manufacture a holy life by trying to be a good person. Maybe you think you know how to please God and gain salvation, and you won't admit that you really don't have a clue. Or, maybe you are trying to give up a bad habit by sheer will power. Whatever it is, it's time for you to admit that you can't do it on your own. Admitting that our way always falls short of God's glory is the first step to truly seeing our desperate need for Him. It is time to stop doing things your way, and start doing them God's way. It is only by God's grace and mercy that you can be blessed with a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. It's only through His touch that you can be delivered from the grip sin has on your heart. And it's only through the Holy Spirit that you can be empowered to live a holy life.

So the first lesson Jacob teaches us is that our human way always falls short. The second lesson Jacob learned was to trust that God alone is sufficient for our needs. God proved Jacob's insufficiency when He maimed Jacob with a single touch that dislocated his hip. Though he was strong compared with other men, Jacob realized that his power was nothing compared to the One he wrestled against. It's clear that Jacob knew he was wrestling with God because he says in verse 30, "I saw God face to face;" a better translation is "person-to-person." In his weakened condition, Jacob finally acknowledged that God is greater. By seeking God's blessing, Jacob humbled himself and exalted God.

This is the same point that the Lord makes to the apostle Paul when He says, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). Jacob’s injury helped him to believe in God, so God’s power could then be demonstrated through his humbled state.

When everything is going smoothly in our lives, it’s easy to say that we trust in God’s power, and believe He is sufficient to provide for all of our needs. But when the rubber meets the road, we may show that our belief was only head-knowledge. Or, we may say we believe in God but trust Him only when it’s convenient. We need to realize day in, and day out, that we have no one else to turn to besides God. Instead of relying upon ourselves, we need to be like Jacob, humbling ourselves before Almighty God and entrusting ourselves into His loving hands. God is sufficient. So believe it in your head, trust it in your heart, and live it in your words and deeds.

Jacob demonstrated his belief in the sufficiency of God by asking Him for a blessing, which leads us to the third lesson for today. But before God would bless him, the Lord first insisted that Jacob state his name. Why? Didn’t God already know that his name was Jacob? Of course. The name Jacob means “supplanter,” or one who behaves deceitfully. By answering and speaking his name to God, Jacob confessed his true nature as a sinner. This reminds us that God will not bless anyone who does not first confess their sinfulness. The Book of 1 John states that, “If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). And King David testifies in Psalm 32, “I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord’ -- and you forgave the guilt of my sin” (Psalm 32:5). The greatest blessing that God can bestow on anyone is forgiveness and cleansing from sin. That blessing can only be received when we confess our sinfulness to Him, and completely trust in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. ///

King Frederick the Great of Prussia was once touring a Berlin prison. The prisoners fell on their knees before him to proclaim their innocence in the hopes of being freed-- except for one man, who remained silent. Frederick called to him, “Why are you here?” “Armed robbery, Your Majesty,” was the reply. “And are you guilty?” “Yes indeed, Your Majesty, I deserve my punishment.” Frederick then summoned the jailer and said, “Release this guilty wretch at once. I will not have him kept in this prison where he will

corrupt all the fine innocent people who occupy it” (Today in the Word, December 4, 1992).

Like that honest prisoner, you are guilty of sin. So am I. God wants us to admit our sinfulness to Him, because only then can He bless us with forgiveness and cleansing. There is no way we can erase our sinfulness except through the forgiveness offered to us through Jesus Christ. Our way doesn’t work. Admit it. God is sufficient. Believe it. You’re a sinner. Confess it.

This leads to our fourth lesson. As soon as Jacob spoke his name to God and thereby confessed his sin, God changed his name. For the Hebrew people, a name spoke of your character or nature. As we’ve already seen, Jacob’s name reflected the sinful state of his heart. By changing Jacob’s name, God showed that He had changed Jacob’s heart, and his destiny. We’re told here that his name was changed to Israel because he had struggled with God and with men, and had overcome. But the point isn’t that Jacob overcame God in the wrestling match. Jacob overcame when he confessed his sin, and had his heart transformed by the Lord.

Jacob’s wrestling with God for a blessing shows us that we must desire to be changed, inside and out. We need to hunger and thirst for righteousness, and not be content with spiritual mediocrity. In the book of Ezekiel God promised to transform us when He said, “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you” (36:26). We must desire that change of heart the way David did when he prayed, “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me” (Psalm 51:10). Like Jacob we must come to God with a genuine desire to be transformed, leave our sinful habits behind, and not rest until the Lord blesses us.

There once was a man who worked with children who lived in sewers in a South American country. He went into the sewers himself to try and help the children who were living there. Close your eyes and try to imagine being one of those children. They were nearly blind due to living underground. They were beyond filthy due to living in the waste from thousands of homes. Imagine that this man offers you a chance to leave and start a new life. At first, you jump at the opportunity. But as he leads you out, your eyes become more accustomed to the light at the end of the tunnel, and you start to see your wretched state. You notice the excrement on your clothes and in your hair. No matter

how hard you try, the stains will not go away. And of course, the closer you get to the entrance of the tunnel, the dirtier you appear.

It's natural that you would shy away from coming out of the sewer until you're fit to be presented to the outside world. The problem, of course, is that you cannot be made clean until you come out of the sewer. To be saved, you will have to face your own filth. For some of those children, the desire to be set free and transformed was overcome by their desire to cover up their shame, so they went back. But others were humbly willing to admit their need to be set free from their filth. So they stepped out into the light, exposing their filthiness so they could be transformed. When you look upon your sinfulness, which child are you? Jacob confessed his filthy sinfulness and his need for God's cleansing, and that opened the way for God's forgiveness and blessings in his life. We are all sinners who need a change of heart. So, do you want to be changed?

Our final lesson from Jacob's wrestling match shows the power of transformation through God's holy touch. Humbled and weakened in himself, Jacob could enter the promised land because he was strong in the Lord. Note that at the start of this passage, Jacob began wrestling with God while it was still dark, which was symbolic of his spiritual condition. But after his encounter with God the sun rose above him; he had literally passed from darkness to light. 1 Peter 2 describes this transformation for those who give their hearts to Christ; it says, "[God] has called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." And in Colossians 1:13 we read, "God has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." Like Jacob, we can pass from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. The grace of God has opened for us the promised land of forgiveness and spiritual healing. The question is: will you enter in?

Scientists have studied a native tribe in South America whose people had been dying prematurely for generations. After thorough investigation, the cause of the malady was determined. They suffered from a disease transmitted by an insect that lived in the walls of their adobe homes. This new information presented several options. The tribe could move to another area where those insects don't exist; tear down their homes and rebuild them in the same place; use insecticide to rid their homes of the bugs; or, continue living as they had and die early.

Surprisingly, the tribe chose to remain just as they were and do nothing about their problem. When it comes to trusting God, many people do the exact same thing. Like you, they have heard the Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ. They know that they must give their whole lives to Christ to receive forgiveness and eternal blessing. But instead, they decide to remain unchanged. They prefer to stay in their spiritual sewer.

This is not a new dilemma. Even when Jesus preached during His earthly ministry, people hardened their hearts and turned away. And people who have been in the Church their whole lives can be stubborn and resist living according to God's way. As a result, they suffer spiritually, shortchange themselves, and dishonor God. He still wants to touch their hearts and transform them, but they prefer to do things their own way, as if they know better than God. No matter who you are, today is the day of decision. Through the Word of God here in Genesis, the Lord is calling you to be like Jacob.

(1) Admit that your way is wrong, and God's way is always best and right. (2) Trust deep down that God is more than sufficient to care for all of your needs. (3) Confess to God that you are a sinner. (4) Desire with all your heart for God to change you and transform you to be like His Son, Jesus. (5) Turn away from your sin, and enter into God's promised land of forgiveness and new life.

Today the Kingdom of God is at hand. Today is the day of salvation. May you open your heart to trust in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, receive His abundant mercy, and leave here a new person who has been touched and transformed by the loving hand of God.

*Let us pray.*