

A Deeper Look 4

“At Wrestling with God”

“This left Jacob all alone in the camp, and a man came and wrestled with him until the dawn began to break. When the man saw that he would not win the match, he touched Jacob’s hip and wrenched it out of its socket. Then the man said, ‘Let me go, for the dawn is breaking!’ But Jacob said, ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me.’ ‘What is your name?’ the man asked. He replied, ‘Jacob.’ ‘Your name will no longer be Jacob,’ the man told him. ‘From now on you will be called Israel, because you have fought with God and with men and have won.’ ‘Please tell me your name,’ Jacob said. ‘Why do you want to know my name?’ the man replied. Then he blessed Jacob there. Jacob named the place Peniel (which means ‘face of God’), for he said, ‘I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been spared.’ The sun was rising as Jacob left Peniel, and he was limping because of the injury to his hip.” Genesis 32: 24-31

The story before us today concerns Jacob, an interesting character in OT history and Hebrew lore. Jacob was the son of Isaac, the grandson of Abraham, and the twin brother of Esau. Jacob walked with God, but it was not always a recognizable gait, if you know what I mean. Jacob wrestled with God, but the match was about more than just winning or not...if you know what I mean.

Jacob came into this world seconds after his twin, ‘grabbing at Esau’s heel’, is how the Bible describes his birth. The name Jacob literally means; “grabber”. He went on to hatch a plan to deceive his brother and father, with the help of his mother, and ‘grab’ his elder brother’s birthright. He grabbed at the chance to earn the love of lovely Rachel, and grabbed a bit of humility as he was forced to work another 7 years after being deceived with her sister Leah.

He encountered God on a ladder, which we’ll discuss in a minute, but the immediate context of our text today must first be considered.

Jacob was about to meet his brother after 20 some years of estrangement. This brother, who vowed to kill his sibling for stealing his blessing, was coming for a visit, and Jacob was scared. He was preparing himself for what might happen when he and his brother finally met, and he prayed. While he prayed, he dreamed of the wrestling match.

Some of us are wrestling with God right now. Some of us are struggling financially to the point that everything else in our lives is getting out of whack. Maybe it's because of our own doing, or the result of some reversal of fortune, or loss of a job, but we are wrestling with God.

Some of us are wrestling with God because of a Doctor's diagnosis, and the fear that spreads among our loved ones. We think we're strong, we can lick this foreign intruder, but in our heart of hearts...we're not so sure...it's almost like a wrestling match.

Some of us are wrestling with God as our broken hearts grieve the loss of loved ones prematurely taken from us. We know we are supposed to 'get on with life', but the triteness of that statement leaves us hollow and haunted by the fact we are having a hard time wrestling any meaning or purpose out of our suffering.

Some of us are wrestling with God over the calling He has placed on our lives. We are tired of the unfounded criticism, and the behind the back evil that drains our energy, and saps our spirit. Some of us are just plain mad at God for some injustice that has been done to us, or some hurt that has been inflicted on us.

Some of us are wrestling with God because we know God wants to take us to places of deeper spiritual depth...and we'd just as soon not go! Places where God might require us to do more than we think we can, or give more than we think we can. It is a wrestling match, this Christian living, and sometimes it's really hard.

The study of Jacob's wrestling match along the Jabbok River might be helpful to those of us wrestling with God. Even if we're not engaged in a match right now, you might still find some help for that match that will inevitably come your way. In this riverside encounter Jacob learned four lessons, and they were hard.

1. THE REAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WINNING OR LOSING

When the man saw that he would not win the match, he touched Jacob's hip and wrenched it out of its socket.

Vince Lombardi captured the essence of what people in our country and culture think about winning and losing. He said; “Show me the man who doesn’t hate losing... and I’ll show you a loser.” A bit strong maybe, but the sentiment most would share in this room. Jacob shared it, and it showed in his persistence and perseverance with this angelic “man” being who came from heaven. Jacob was intent on winning, and for the record there is nothing wrong with winning, when winning is done the right way, and when winning is not the ultimate goal, and when winning does not demean those who are losing!

All of us set out to win in this life, but we must not discount the fact that often more is learned about life through losing. I used to tell the DWU Football Team after an especially embarrassing loss, that humility is an admirable quality, and unfortunately there is only one way to get it. I’m not saying you can’t learn anything from winning, but you learn more about yourself, about others, and about life when you are losing.

Think of the compassion with which a widow shares her experience with another newly widowed friend. Think of the cancer survivor, or stroke victim, or the bypass patient...whose very presence in this room is a strong statement of faith, and a remarkable reminder that even from losing...we can learn much...even how to live... better.

Whatever the mat upon which you wrestle today, don’t be so pressed to make sure that you “win”, just make sure that you are learning all that God wants you to learn, from whatever it is that you are going through. If your wrestling match is happening back by God’s “woodshed” and you’re getting a good going over...don’t circumvent the process by insisting it end prematurely. Stay, stay in the woodshed till God is through with you...so you don’t have to come back again so soon! Winning and losing...it’s not always as it appears. The second lesson Jacob learned:

2. BEING BLESSED OR BEING CHANGED

But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go unless you bless me.'

So many churches in our world have become little “Bless me clubs”, where personal preferences seem to be the overriding standard of operation; where maintenance of the status quo is the only objective; and where meeting the budget and paying the bills, are the sole mission and purpose for the churches existence.

So many of our prayers have become little “Bless me, or bless so and so”, prayers. How dare we presume to know that what we need most from God is a blessing? How dare we presume upon God to extend blessings to anyone, or anything; assuming we know what they need or don't need? No wonder Jesus at his darkest hour uttered the prayer we so desperately need to re-learn...”Not my will, but thine be done.”

I think we have too often settled for being blessed by God, and have rejected being changed by God. There is nothing wrong about seeking God's blessing, and praying for God's blessing, but don't discount the fact that God might have something more for you or your prayer recipient. Jacob was so intent on wrestling a blessing out of God (the same way he grabbed one from his father and brother) it took a good swift kick in the...hip to forever remind him. Blessings are great, but becoming more like God, even through the sufferings of life, are the changes that last.

Sometimes I look at an elderly saint of God shuffling, or limping into God's house, and I think; what trials have they endured; what scars of suffering do they carry in their souls; what have they survived, what tragedies have they overcome...to earn that limp? I bet they didn't settle for the blessing, they put a headlock on God, till their lives got changed! A lesson we all need to learn. #3

3. AN ENCOUNTER WITH GOD CAN LEAVE US LEAPING OR LIMPING

The sun was rising as Jacob left Peniel, and he was limping because of the injury to his hip.”

Prior to the wrestling with God dream Jacob had; he had another dream. Earlier in his life as he slept on his stone pillow (no wonder those OT saints had weird dreams), God appeared to him on a ladder, with angels moving up and down the ladder. You know the song...

At the end of that dream God spoke to Jacob and said:

"What's more, I am with you, and I will protect you wherever you go...Then Jacob made this vow: 'If God will indeed be with me and protect me on this journey, and if He will provide me with food and clothing, and if I return safely to my father's home, then the Lord will certainly be my God. And this memorial pillar I have set up will become a place for worshiping God, and I will present to God a tenth of everything he gives me.'" Genesis 28: 12-13, 14-15, 20-22

Jacob named that place, Bethel; which means the house of God.

Let's consider and contrast the two definitive experiences of Jacob's life. The first was at a place called Bethel, the house of God; the second was at a river called Jabbok, the place of struggle. At Bethel, Jacob saw a ladder, at Jabbok, he saw the Lord. At Bethel he became a believing man, at Jabbok, he became a broken man. At Bethel he became a Son of God, at Jabbok, he became a saint of God. At Bethel he died to his sins, at Jabbok, he died to his self. He left Bethel with a spring in his step; he left Jabbok with a lasting limp and a forever changed heart. All people need a Bethel experience, a time when we meet God and receive Him and become His child. Isn't salvation wonderful?

However, many never go beyond that! They get saved and that's it, they never grow closer to God's ideal of Christ's righteousness being transplanted in their transformed lives. This is our unique message as Methodists, the doctrine of sanctification that people can not only know and experience the forgiveness of their sins, they can have power over their sins! You might say Jacob got saved at Bethel, and Jacob got sanctified at Jabbok. It wasn't that Jacob got more of God at Jabbok, but that at the Jabbok River, God got all of Jacob!

The difficult experiences of our lives leave us limping, because we usually meet God in the most difficult times and places. As important as it is to celebrate the festive times in our lives with singing, dancing and leaping...we must not overlook the fact that each difficult experience we endure and survive...draws us closer to God...and makes us more like God...and leaves us limping. Each difficult experience we endure and survive, leaves us with a "spot of death" where we are reminded that we have been touched and healed by the finger of God. Which leads to lesson #4

4. GOD'S HANDS OR GOD'S FACE

for he said, 'I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been spared.'

Jacob had experienced the hand of God from Bethel, all along his journey, even in the disappointments dealing with Laban and his two daughters, Jacob had come to know the hand of God. What he didn't know while facing the uncertainty of meeting his estranged brother; was the face of God

We often settle for God's hand of guidance, protection, and provision, when it is God's face we ought to be seeking! You see, you can receive from the hand of God, and never know the face of God, but you can't know the face of God and not receive from the hand of God. Let's not settle for God's hand, when God's face is available. God's hand is not bad, don't get me wrong; but God's face is better!

Here's what Jacob learned, that we must also learn. God's face appears at the point of our greatest failures. God's face appears at the point of our greatest needs. God's face appears at the point of our most serious suffering. God's face appears at the moment we admit our weakness. It was a hard lesson for Jacob to learn, so God struck him at the point of his greatest human strength, the strongest of our human muscles. He knocked his hip out of its socket and as Esau saw Jacob limping humbly toward him, Esau knew this man was different, this brother was broken; this limping sibling...had seen the face of God. What a sweet reunion ensued.

So, Shall we continue to insist on winning, at any cost, or strive to learn from our losing, even lose on purpose occasionally? Shall we continue to settle for the blessing, or hang on to the hope of being changed, becoming more like Christ? Shall we go on living in Bethel, or limping from Jabbok? Shall we continue to enjoy the hand of God, or dig deeper to discover the face of God? You know what you need to do, just do it! Don't be a grabber, be a limper! AMEN

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2. BEING _____ OR BEING _____

But Jacob said, ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me.’

3. AN ENCOUNTER WITH GOD CAN LEAVE US _____ OR _____

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