

The Transformation of Israel

Genesis 32:1-33:20

Introduction:

I'm not sure what your wrestling background is. I didn't grow up in a WWF (WWE, thanks World Wildlife Fund). I didn't escape Hulk Hogan, Andre the Giant, Macho Man Randy Savage, etc. But, hate to break it to you, it's not real. But I have met a few *real* wrestlers. Those high school guys who work out in trash bags and heated rooms to lose weight. Have you ever tussled with one of them, it's a different kind of strong! Today we see the ultimate wrestling opponent.

Synopsis: Last section focused *primarily* on Jacob before we end our study with Judah and Joseph (respectively).

- Jacob's life has been marked by **schemes and deception**. He was born grasping his twin brother's heel, later on he weaseled his older brother, Esau, out of his birthright. To top it off he then tricked his Father into giving him his brother's blessing.

Despite the spurious methods, the blessing and promise of God for Jacob is legitimate. When he was homeless, spouseless, and penniless, sleeping on a rock under the stars, God met him at Bethel and confirmed his plans and promises.

- God confirmed his identity: **I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac** (28:13).
- He promised a land: **The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring** (28:13).
- He promises a family: **Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth... and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed** (28:14).
- And this promise is guaranteed by the personal presence of God himself: **Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you** (Gen 28:15).

Last time we saw Jacob, he was working for his uncle Laban, having married Laban's daughters Leah and Rachel.

- During his 20 years working for Laban, despite many tricks by his uncle and plenty of turmoil in his household, God *had* multiplied his family. He leaves Haran with wealth and 12 children (+servants, livestock, and more). The text makes clear that **Jacob's prosperity is not from his own ingenuity or Laban's generosity, but God's grace!**
 - His prosperity puts him at odds with his uncle until, finally, **God tells him to leave and return to the promised land.**¹
- With stealth, he fled Haran and his uncle Laban. The whole episode is a story in and of itself, but we're going to pick it up in **chapter 32**.

As we jump into this week's story, let's keep a question in the back of our mind: **How do you follow God when you're afraid of where he is taking you?**

1. Lingering Fear (32:1-21)

¹ Gen 31:11-16

Witness: Even at the beginning of this section, we are reminded that God is with Jacob as he's visited by the angels of God.²

- From our vantage point, we can learn from Jacob's story. Whether he realizes it or not, God is always with him. He meets him at Bethel (ch. 28) and promises to be with him. An angel of the Lord tells him directly to leave Laban and go back to the promised land (ch. 31). In today's story, we see multiple encounters with God and his messengers.
- Jacob's journey is constantly filled with the presence of God.

One distinguishing doctrine of Christian theology is the "witness" of God. God is not distant, disconnected, or disinterested. He doesn't send us on a journey and wait to hear back from us. He is with us goes with us wherever he sends.

- This isn't a general sitting in a war room waiting to hear back from the seal team they sent into battle.

That's why Jesus says "[He is] with you always" and "[He] will never leave you nor forsake you."³

- I honestly think one of my main problems when I'm in a difficult situation, or a challenging circumstance, when I'm suffering or discouraged or defeated, is I forget that **God is with me**. He is with you. You're not alone.

Deal With It: Jacob had fled almost 500 miles NW to get away from his brother who he had deceived. The last time he heard from Esau, was two decades before when he wanted to kill him. Having successfully freed himself from Laban, now Jacob has to face his greatest challenge, facing his brother Esau.

- He knows heading "back" is going to take him right near Esau's new territory.
- He sends messengers ahead to check the temperature of the relationship.
 - Is this reconciliation? Exploration? Brokering a deal? It's hard to say.

God's call to return to the Promised Land means he has to **deal with this lingering situation**.

- Sometimes we think that coming to faith means all the broken relationships of our past life are magically healed. *They're not*. We still need to deal with them.
- The difference, as we will see, is that Jacob will enter this situation with a transformed attitude, faith, and perspective.

Esau's Silence and Jacob's Fear: But we see Jacob's lingering fear when his lead party returns. The not knowing is the worst part. Esau is coming with 400 men. "Nothing could be more ominous than Esau's silence and his rapid approach in force."

- Is this a party? Why so many people? Jacob believes this is the end.
- So Jacob does two things. (1) He plans. His plan is to split his camp into two so that, if one is taken, the other can survive. *Planning is ok*. (2) But he also prays.

Prayer of Fear and Faith: ⁹ And 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 kindred, that I may do you good,' ¹⁰ I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan,

² Cf. Abraham (Gen 18:2) and Lot (Gen 19:2).

³ Matt 28:20; Heb 13:5

and now I have become two camps. ¹¹ Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, that he may come and attack me, the mothers with the children. ¹² But you said, 'I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.'"

- Jacob's pray is of beauty and faith. It is God-directed and humble. It is honest ("I am afraid"). It is based on God's promises.
 - It is both faithful and fearful at once. There's a little bit of an echo of the prayer of the Father of the demon-possessed boy in Mark 9: "I believe; help my unbelief!"
- I think this is really the moment in Jacob's life where the promises of God go from his mind to his heart, where the truth of God's presence goes from the surface deep into his soul.
 - He is asking for deliverance based on the command and promise of God, not on his own ability or worthiness. We can't come to God and say, I've served you and been good, and put my money in the offering plate, so you owe me one. **We go to God completely dependent on his grace.**

Fear of the Unknown: If I'm honest, I can identify with Jacob's fear. I've obeyed God, I've walked his path, and yet I worry that God has just brought me this far to let me down. I worry that he will not provide (even though he's provided every time).

- "My experience is that learning to follow Jesus is mostly about unlearning following myself" (Parsons).
- I think anxiety and fear often grow in the soil of the unknown. When we can't control the outcome, we struggle to have peace and trust God.
 - But there's beauty in not knowing. There is peace in the fact that we can't control it. What that means is we aren't strong enough to handle it. In that weakness, we have the perfect opportunity to trust God.
 - "If God is our strength, then we need not fear our weaknesses" (Wyatt).
 - "So many people live in dread and anxiety of their worst fears becoming reality. Let me report from the front lines: even there He will hold you, sustain you, and guide you. He gives grace in our hour of need, not grace for us to imagine enduring it in advance" (Erik Reed).
- The task of the disciple is to learn to recognize our King's voice and to obey. Even as we wrestle and struggle, even with fear and uncertainty, we obey.

Scene Shifts: After he sends his delegation, he crossed the Jabbok river along with all that he he and he was "left alone" (v. 24).

- And it's in the silence, in the darkness, in the fear, at the bottom, when he has nothing left that God meets him. **I think silence is fertile ground for finding God.** It is in the still small voice that God spoke to the prophet Elijah. It is in solitude that Jesus met with the Father.
 - Sometimes we are so addicted to the spectacle we forget that the noise of the world is not conducive to meeting with God.

2. Wrestling with God (32:22-32)

The Context of Transformation: The transformation happens in the dark. The God of promise met him again by surprise. Unannounced and without warning, God is there.

- Again, Jacob is not searching or seeking God, but God finds him. God cares enough to come to us. Jesus left his throne to save us. He is happy for you to wrestle with him.⁴

And in the wrestling, you will learn that **he is God and he is here**.

In the struggle, God strips him of his strength so he has to surrender. God showed up to chasten his pride and challenge his tenacity. In the struggle, God strips *us* of our strength so we have to surrender to him. He humbles us so we can learn to hold on to him and him alone.

- **The great heroes of the faith are not the celebrity pastors who hog the limelight but the faithful servants who found God in the darkness.** These are the ones “of whom the world was not worthy” (Heb 11:38). Baptist Missionary, William Carey, set sail for India in 1793 along with his pregnant wife, son and daughter, never to return to England. He would die in 1834 among the people he had given his life to. While there his son Peter died and his wife suffered a breakdown. He wrote in his journal, “This is indeed the valley of the shadow of death to me... but I rejoice that I am here notwithstanding; and God is here.” After seven years he baptized his first convert. By the time he died, he had spent 41 years in India. More than 700 came to Christ. He translated the entire Bible into all the major languages of India and spawned a global missionary movement. In the wrestling, in the suffering, in the darkness, God is working.

The crisis is not an obstacle to God’s blessing, but an opportunity for it. It is good that Jacob is exposed to a situation that is beyond him. He’s smart and resourceful, if he can handle it, then he can be Lord of his own life. It is only in his desperation that he learns to depend totally on God.

- There is an apocryphal saying that floats around saying “God will not give you more than you can handle.” That is (to use the theological term), “malarky.” All of us, everyday, are presented with situations beyond our control. God will often allow things that you can’t handle but there is **nothing that he can’t handle**.

What Does It Mean to Win?: It says that Jacob “prevailed” in his wrestling match with God.⁵ What does this mean? Does this mean he *beat* God.

- God dislocated Jacob’s hip with a gentle touch. This was a severe and apparently permanent injury. The context makes it clear that Jacob didn’t *beat* God but he did “win” or “prevail” in some sense. Jacob understands this because his survival is described as “deliverance.” Just being in God’s presence and walking away unscathed is an act of mercy.
- In fact, what good would it do to “beat” God. (1) He **can’t** beat God and (2) if he could then he wouldn’t need his blessing. Our goal in wrestling with God is not to bend him to our will, but to hold on to him.
 - What does it look like to hold on to God? For most of us, it means we have to stop holding on to our dreams and preferences. Far too often and for far too

⁴ God as the identity of the combatant is made clear by the name of the place, Peniel (“face of God”).

⁵ Gen 32:25, 28.

many people, they come to God with an agenda in search of a gospel useful enough to accommodate it.

Persistence: He prevailed not by subduing God but by not quitting. The substance of his victory is that he held on. You know, there is a lot to be said for spiritual victory simply being perseverance (e.g., “too dumb to quit” both PhD and church planting).

- There are a lot of theologians and Sword Drill champions, VBS MVPs and choir members who have missed a key component of discipleship—**perseverance**.
- **The older I get, the less I am interested in how fast you start the Christian race or even how fast you run the Christian race, what I care about is that you *finish the Christian race*.**

God is calling each of us to persevere. Persevere in our trust, persevere in our obedience, persevere in our prayer.

- We think growth comes from ecstatic visions or theological acumen, but often it is the result of perseverance, of continually going to God. Too many Christians fail to mature because they quit!
 - This is true of lots of things: I’ve taught guitar a number of times. You know what stops someone from learning to play the guitar? Impatience. They want to be as good as someone who has practiced a lifetime in a week or two (e.g., callouses, muscle aches, etc.).
 - I read a study from the elite Berlin Academy of Music: They divided accomplished violinists into three groups: (1) world-class soloists, (2) high-level performers, and (3) those who were good but unlikely to play professionally. They found all of them started playing at roughly the same age and practiced about the same amount of time until the age of 8, but that is when their practice habits diverged. The researchers found that by the age of twenty, the average players had logged about four thousand hours of practice time; the good violinists totaled about eight thousand hours; the elite performers ten thousand hours. While innate ability dictates some of your potential, it is persistence that determines whether you will be great or not.
- One thing Jesus taught about prayer in the Gospels is that it requires persistence.

It is good and important that we don’t give up. God is glorified by us when we don’t give up. God is glorified when we keep on believing, keep on praying, keep on seeking.

- Persistence compels us to the true center of prayer, which is not something but someone. And this is what Jacob discovers. In the struggle, he encounters the “face of God.” Do you want God even more than you want what you are asking for?

Jacob would only be ready to receive the blessing of God when he found that God was the great treasure of that blessing.

- If God had given him dominion over Esau or material wealth when he was a deceptive young man, he wouldn’t have been able to handle it.

Transformed and Limping: Look how God **asks** Jacobs's name.⁶ I love when this happens. It's not like he doesn't already know his name. He's not asking his name because *he* doesn't know it, he wants Jacob to **admit it**.

- Jacob's name means "heel grabber" or "deceiver." So Jacob, is saying, "I'm Jacob, the liar, the deceiver." It's a moment of confession. **What's your baby's name? Oh, this cutie? This is little liar.**
- God humbled and redirected Jacob's reliance from himself to God. God took Jacob's will to win, to attain and obtain a blessing, and purged it of self-sufficiency.

This is Jacob's repentance. And repentance comes before transformation.

- Jacob has surrendered yet persevered. He has been humbled yet blessed. He has show strength and admitted weakness. He has won the fight by losing.
 - This is at the heart of the gospel. Christ calls us to have life in him by dying to ourselves, to find our lives by losing them.⁷ **You can't have life in Christ until you die to yourself.**

And his transformation is marked by his new name—Israel and a new walk. Jacob walks away from this encounter a new man with a new limp to remember it by.

- I love the limping Jacob as a picture of victory. **"One sign you've encountered God is you walk with a limp, not a strut"** (Smethurst). There is no more arrogance in Jacob, just simple faith.
- **"I am sure that I have run more swiftly with a lame leg than I ever did with a sound one. I am certain that I have seen more in the dark than ever I saw in the light—more stars, most certainly—more things in heaven if fewer things on earth. The anvil, the fire, and the hammer, are the making of us; we do not get fashioned much by anything else. That heavy hammer falling on us helps to shape us; therefore let affliction and trouble and trial come"** (Spurgeon).

Notice that at the end of this encounter, God does not say to Jacob, he will deliver him from Esau. There is no promise Jacob will live through the encounter with Esau. What God assured to Jacob in this wrestling encounter is his personal presence.

- Sometimes the greatest effect of the night of wrestling with God is **not a change of your situation; it's a change of your identity**. You go from being Jacob (one who manipulates) to Israel (one who trusts).
- Jacob thought Esau was his primary problem and what he needed God to do was change Esau. In actuality, Jacob was Jacob's biggest problem and it's Jacob that needs to change. **Sometimes, in prayer, God changes the situation; sometimes he changes you.**

3. Surprising Reconciliation (33:1-20)

Esau Cometh: No escape from reality. God changes us but sends us to deal with reality. Jacob is changed, he goes out (with his family now) to meet Esau, expecting the worst. He humbles himself (no longer deceiving). He realized what sin he had committed against his brother.

- Once you fear God, you have no need to fear your enemy.

⁶ Gen 32:27

⁷ Matt 10:39; Matt 16:24

Surprising Grace of God: Esau doesn't come to kill him, he comes to reconcile with him. Those 400 men are not an invading force but a welcome party, an escort.

Blessing Accomplished: Notice a few things that wrap up the Jacob and Esau narrative. In the womb, Jacob was chosen by God. The older (Esau) would serve the younger (Jacob). Neither understood how this was possible. Esau was the stronger, older, preferred by the Father.

- So Jacob schemed and plotted and got the birthright and the blessing, but nothing changed. Esau was still stronger, Jacob fled. But now, in humility, Jacob returns to reconcile and God gives him the thing he promised. **Jacob wins supremacy through humility, not power.** And Esau willingly humbles himself.
- Because of God's favor, Jacob's fear of Esau becomes a friendship.
- Ultimately, the promise and blessing of God are fulfilled in the coming of the promised son, Jesus.

Conclusion:

Maybe it's time you wrestle with God. Maybe it's time you take your fear and worry and anxiety to him.

- Go to him. Persevere. Hold on and don't let go.
- You're likely going to come away limping but you'll come away God's transformed child. God humbles us to exalt us.