

Sermon: Wrestling With God - Genesis 31-33

A man named Jack was walking along a steep cliff one day when he accidentally got too close to the edge and fell over. On the way down he grabbed a branch, which temporarily stopped his fall. He looked down and to his horror saw that the canyon fell straight down for more than a thousand feet. He couldn't hang onto the branch forever, and there was no way for him to climb up the steep wall of the cliff. So Jack began yelling for help, hoping that someone passing by would hear him and lower a rope or something. **"HELP! HELP! Is anyone up there? HELP!**

After a while he heard a voice.

- "Jack, Jack. Can you hear me?"
- "Yes, yes! I can hear you. I'm down here!"
- "I can see you, Jack. You are going to be alright."
- "Yes, but . . . Who are you, and where are you?"
- "I am the Lord, Jack. I'm everywhere."
- "The Lord? You mean, GOD?"
- "That's Me."
- "God, please help me! I promise if You'll get me down from here, I'll stop sinning. I'll be a really good person. I'll serve You for the rest of my life."
- "Easy on the promises, Jack. Let's just get you down from there; then we can talk. Now, here's what I want you to do. Listen carefully."
- "I'll do anything, Lord. Just tell me what to do."
- **"Okay. Let go of the branch."**
- "What?"
- "I said, let go of the branch. Just trust Me. Let go."

There was a long silence. Finally Jack yelled, **"Help! Help! is anyone ELSE up there?"**

(source unknown)

Have you ever felt like Jack? We say that we want to trust God with our life, but when we find out how difficult life may become – even with God's promised help – we can't handle it and try to look elsewhere.

When God says, *"Let go of the things that stand between you and Me, and trust Me with your life,"* it sounds pretty scary. But when we do let go, we find freedom and safety in His hands as you learn that God can truly be trusted with every part of your life ... but, like Jacob, sometimes you may have to personally wrestle with God for a while until you come to your senses.

Today, we are taking a final look at the life of Jacob. The humble man whom God now instructs to return home is far different from the spoiled young swindler who had to run away twenty years earlier. Jacob has learned the value of hard, honest, work. He has also learned that he has been blessed and protected from harm by God throughout these twenty years of his exile in which he had gathered not only a large family but also wealth sufficient to care for them all.

So when God calls for him to go and promises to bring him safely back home, why does Jacob now seem so fearful of doing so? I offer as an answer that faith is easy when the demands are little, but when faced with a fiery furnace, or giants in the land, or your possibly still angry brother

headed your way with 400 horsemen..... that's when you learn whether or not your faith in God is complete.

Since this particular story spans three Biblical chapters, the only way I can tell it is by summarizing and commenting while reading some the highlights from the episode. But I have also given you these chapters of Genesis in a handout so that you can track along with me now and read it again for yourself later

[**READERS NOTE:** Church attendees were given a handout of Genesis chapters 31-33. Those of you reading this sermon only have highlighted portions.]

Let's begin with God twice telling Jacob that it is time to go home.

*^{31:1} Now Jacob heard that the sons of Laban were saying, "Jacob has taken all that was our father's; he has gained all this wealth from what belonged to our father."² And Jacob saw that Laban did not regard him as favorably as he did before.³ Then **the LORD said to Jacob, "Return to the land of your ancestors and to your kindred, and I will be with you."**⁴ So Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah into the field where his flock was,⁵ and said to them, "I see that your father does not regard me as favorably as he did before. **But the God of my father has been with me.***

*⁶ You know that I have served your father with all my strength;⁷ yet your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times, **but God did not permit him to harm me.***

In his conversation with Leah and Rachel, Jacob also reveals that having had an earlier dream, this is actually the second time God has both reminded him of His promised protection and told him to get going NOW!

*¹³ **I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me. Now leave this land at once and return to the land of your birth.**"*

Rachel and Leah agree that they are also ready to go, since their father Laban has only treated them like property to be sold and then spent all their dowry money on himself. Perhaps, her intention to regain some of their lost inheritance is also the reason why before they depart, Rachel secretly steals Laban's family idols - which are usually made of gold - (basically she raided the family bank account).

Why did Jacob have to be twice told to go, and even then waiting for Laban to be out of camp before sneaking away? Because, as he explained once his angry father-in-law caught up with them, that he feared Laban would try to keep his daughters, his grandchildren, and send Jacob away empty handed (cf. verses 31:31 & 42). Even with God's previously proven and promised future protection for a safe return back home, Jacob still feared Laban more than he trusted God.

But then we hear from his own words that Jacob had real reasons to fear Laban had not God intervened by personally warning Laban not to harm Jacob. Laban said...

²⁹ It is in my power to do you harm; but the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying, 'Take heed that you speak to Jacob neither good nor bad.'

⁴³ **"The daughters are my daughters, the children are my children, the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine.** But what can I do today about these daughters of mine, or about their children whom they have borne?"

Thus heeding God's warning, Laban lets Jacob and all his possessions go unharmed. The two men set up a boundary marker over which they both pledge not to cross with the intent of harming the other. They also take an oath which has come to be known as the **Mizpah blessing**:

"May the Lord watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other."

Today you can find this "blessing" written in cards and even engraved on wedding rings... when in reality it was not meant to be a heartwarming sentiment but rather an agreement between two people who could not trust each other.

⁴⁸ Laban said, "This heap is a witness between you and me today." Therefore he called it Galeed, ⁴⁹ and the pillar **Mizpah**, for he said, ⁵⁰ "If you ill-treat my daughters, or if you take wives in addition to my daughters, though no one else is with us, remember that God is witness between you and me."

That evening they shared a meal and the next morning *Laban rose up, and kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them; then he departed and returned home.*

With his fearful meeting with Laban now – as promised with God's assistance – safely resolved, Jacob next needs to figure out how to face his brother, but before he does that, God gives him another spectacular assurance of His divine protection. Chapter 32 opens with Jacob receiving an amazing vision.

^{32:1} **Jacob went on his way and the angels of God met him;** ² and when Jacob saw them he said, **"This is God's camp! [God's Army]."**

What could this vision mean other than God showing Jacob that he and his family were surrounded by God's protection and they need not fear any human harm.

So with this added confidence Jacob next sends a letter to his brother stating that

- he was coming home and that
- he was giving back to Esau his stolen blessing (this is indicated in verse 4 by Jacob calling his brother **"my lord Esau"** and referring to himself as **"your servant Jacob."**).
- He also indicates that he has earned enough wealth on his own so that he wasn't looking for any of the family inheritance and
- perhaps now we can let bygones be bygones and live together in peace.

But with the messengers return so also comes Jacob's fears. The messengers reported,

"We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him." ⁷ **Then 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 thinking, *"If Esau comes to the one company and destroys it, then the company that is left will escape."*

After sending half of his people and property into hiding, Jacob then prays one of the most beautiful and heartfelt prayers recorded in the Bible; remembering God's previous and promised future blessings – including making his descendants like the sand of the sea; which would be hard to do – he reminds God – if Esau now kills them all.

⁹And 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, and **I will do you good,**'¹⁰**I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant,** for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies. ¹¹**Deliver me, please,** from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; **he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children.** ¹²Yet you have said, 'I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number.'"

For twenty years, Jacob has both experienced and been personally assured of God's continuing protection. He has even seen God's protecting army and yet, still fearing his brother, Jacob once again resorts to scheming up ways to protect as much of his family as possible.

Apparently, still unconvinced of God's ability to protect his family, Jacob decides to shower Esau with gifts, in this case 550 head of livestock - sheep, goats, camels, cows, and donkeys – which if accomplishing nothing else would at least slow Esau's approach and diminish his ability to launch a surprise attack against Jacobs camp.

Still fearing such an attack, Jacob next puts his family and everything else he had in camp on the opposite side of the river and spends the night alone waiting for Esau to arrive. But to his surprise it is not Esau but God Himself who now decides to go a few rounds with Jacob. This is one of the strangest episodes in the Bible.

²⁴**Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.** ²⁵When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." ²⁷So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸Then the man said, "**You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.**"

We don't know who this man was: perhaps an opportunistic thief, an angel, or God himself – which is who Jacob thought he was fighting – as he indeed had been striving with God and man for his whole life. So the name given in blessing was most appropriate for the life he had lived up until now.... But it also signified that Jacob was a changed person. Jacob is now someone who has prevailed against both humans and in some way even with God. He has become someone who can now bravely face even a fast approaching brother with 400 horesmen. Which is what happens next.

In the morning, limping exhausted back into camp and seeing Esau's approach (a big cloud of dust with a lot of bleating sheep and lowing cattle), Jacob bravely puts his family in formation for a formal presentation and then stands in front of them to meet his brother. Still working his plan, as Esau pulls up, Jacob begins bowing – seven times face to the ground – but like the father with his prodigal son, Esau doesn't even let Jacob finish before pulling him up in a bear hug with the two formerly estranged brothers kissing and weeping together over the twenty lost years.

Esau then tries to give all the livestock back, but Jacob insists, "**I have everything I want,**" so his brother should keep the gift (remember Jacob still has another half of his herds and holdings hidden behind a hill) and while no longer fearing Esau but perhaps still wary of him or 400 his riders, Jacob also refuses any escort. He really need not have feared them anyway because he now knew that he traveled with the best protection possible, God Himself keeping His promise to bring Jacob safely home.

¹⁶*So Esau returned that day on his way to Seir...* ¹⁸*[While] Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem, ... where he camped before the city.* ¹⁹*And from the sons of Hamor, Shechem's father, he bought for one hundred pieces of money the plot of land on which he had pitched his tent.* ²⁰**There he erected an altar and called it "El-Elohe-Israel" [God is the God of Israel].**

With his changed name, Jacob now boldly tells the world the source of all his blessings.

The next sadness in Jacob's life will be in a few years' time with the loss of his beloved Rachel while birthing their twelfth son Benjamin. But the happy conclusion to this chapter in his life finds Jacob eventually settling back at the place he had originally named **Bethel – the house of the Lord**, where God first promised His protection for this wandering trickster – and where now we assume the man known as Israel, "One who has wrestled with God," began offering back to God that promised tithe for having kept him in food, clothing and in bringing him safely back home.

What then should you take home from this tale?

Chapter 11, the faith chapter in the letter to the Hebrews opens with this assertion.

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. ... And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. (verses 1-2, 6)

Then it begins listing out great men of faith from the earliest of times.

- There is Enoch who preached the gospel and boldly warned of the impending flood.
- There is Noah who by faith built the ark which safely brought his family through the flood.
- There is Abraham who followed God's voice to the promised land and who even offered up his only son at God's command
- There is Isaac who in faith willing submitted
- And yes there is also Jacob, who *when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, 'bowing in worship over the top of his staff.'*

The story of Jacob, the "Heel Grabber," ending his life as Israel, one who had wrestled with both man and god and prevailed, is one of a hard fought faith and proof that God can be trusted with every aspect of your life.

What cliff are you still hanging from, what band of 400 horsemen do you fear? Why don't you hand them all over to God and let his angels surround you. You are going to be alright.

Lets pray about this.