

**“THE STRUGGLE OF FAITH”**

In the previous passage, we saw how Jacob finally escaped from the clutches of his scheming uncle Laban. And we saw in that passage that Jacob was only able to do so because God was on his side. Now, as Jacob returns home and prepares to meet his brother Esau, the Lord is going to show him that he is still entirely dependent upon him. In this remarkable passage, Jacob realizes that he is completely overmatched. He sees that his only hope is to cling to the Lord in faith. And thus this passage provides us with a vivid picture of what the Bible means when it says that we are saved by faith alone.

As Jacob journeys back to the land of Canaan, he is met by the angels of God. You will recall that the Lord also appeared to Jacob when he was leaving the promised land twenty years earlier. At that time, God assured Jacob that he would be with him during his period of exile, that he would fulfill all of his promises to him, and that he would bring him back to the land of Canaan. Well God was true to his word, as Jacob returns home God appears to him again. The camp of God accompanies him as he makes his way back, assuring him that God is still with him. This serves as a reminder to us that, while God never forgets his promises, we sometimes forget them. And, like Jacob, we need the Lord to remind us of what he has promised us.

As Jacob approaches the area where his brother Esau had settled, he sends messengers ahead of him in order to try to make peace with Esau. But the report brought back by those messengers is very disconcerting. They tell Jacob that Esau is coming to meet him, along with four hundred of his men. Four hundred men made for a respectable

military force in those days. Earlier in Genesis, we saw that Abraham was able to rout the invading kings with an army of just under four hundred. While the messengers do not specifically say that Esau is coming to attack Jacob, you can imagine what must have been going through Jacob's mind after hearing this report. He had no reason to believe that Esau's attitude towards him had changed over the past twenty years. Jacob was "greatly afraid and distressed."

We can understand why Jacob would be afraid in such a situation. Fear is our natural response when we believe that our safety, or that of our family, is in jeopardy. We should not look down upon Jacob for being afraid. Courage is not the absence of fear, but a way of responding when we are faced with fear. It is the determination to do what we know to be right when we are confronted with a fearful situation. And isn't this what we see Jacob doing here? He does not change his plans when he learns that Esau is coming. He does not turn tail and run. He does not look for a new place to settle his family. He keeps pressing forward to Canaan, just as God had commanded him. And as he does so, there are three things that he does in response to this troubling news about Esau.

First, Jacob takes defensive measures. He divides his people into two groups. It was not wrong for Jacob to do this. He was exercising prudence, looking for a way to protect his family in case of attack. This reminds us that the life of faith is not, as the saying goes, a matter of "letting go and letting God." God works through means. He wants us to act wisely when we are confronted with difficult situations. Jacob did the right thing in trying to protect his family.

The second thing that Jacob does in response to the report about Esau is to pray. It goes without saying that this is the right way for a believer to respond when he is afraid. In the psalms, the Lord says, “call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.” [Ps. 50:15] This is essentially what faith is: it is calling upon the Lord, asking him to deliver us from our troubles. And the prayer that Jacob offers here bears the marks of true faith. First of all, we see his faith by the way in which he addresses God. He calls him the God of Abraham and Isaac. He is the God who proved himself to be faithful to Jacob’s forefathers. And Jacob then calls him the God who commanded him to return to his homeland and who promised to bless him. By addressing God in this way, Jacob is saying that he is trusting the Lord to show him the same faithfulness that he showed to Abraham and Isaac.

Next, we see Jacob’s faith by the way in which he approaches the Lord in this prayer. He prays with a humble spirit. He thanks God for all that he has done for him, for all of the ways he has shown his kindness to him. And he admits that he did not deserve any of the good things that God has bestowed upon him. This is very significant. We can be tempted to approach God in prayer as if he owed us something, as if we were somehow deserving of his help. And this is especially true during times of crisis in our lives. We think that God would be unfair to us if he did not give us what we want in those situations. But that is a mistaken notion. We are utterly unworthy of even the least of God’s mercies, and Jacob acknowledges that here.

Jacob knew that he did not deserve to have his prayer answered, but this did not prevent him from praying. And this is another way in which we see his faith on display in this prayer. He opened up his heart to the Lord and he asked him to deliver him. He admitted that he was afraid, and he asked God to save him and his family.

And what was the basis of this request? Jacob based his prayer upon God's promises. He reminded the Lord of what he had promised him. He prayed, "But you said, 'I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea.'" Jacob allowed God's word of promise to guide his prayers. He reminded God of his promises. How could those promises be fulfilled if Esau wiped Jacob and his family out?

Jacob responded to the report of Esau's approach by taking defensive measures and by praying. And then he did one more thing. He did all that was within his power to seek reconciliation with his brother. This was the purpose of all of the presents that he sent ahead to Esau. It is important to note that Seir, the land in which Esau was living, was not on the way to Bethel, the place where Jacob was going. Jacob went out of his way to meet Esau. Why did he do that? Because his conscience told him that he needed to set things right with his brother. Jacob knew that he had sinned against Esau, and he determined to do what he could to reconcile with him.

This brings us to the most fascinating part of this passage: Jacob's encounter with God at the ford of the Jabbok river. Jacob was obviously quite troubled at this point, a fact that is made evident by his decision to cross the Jabbok, a swift-running river, with his wives and children, at night. People did not normally do that. We get the picture of a

man in a restless and worried condition. And even though he manages to get his family safely across to the other side, Jacob somehow ends up on the opposite bank, all by himself. Thus, the stage is set for this highly mysterious transaction between Jacob and the Lord.

The passage tells us that a man came and wrestled with Jacob until the break of day. But it is not very difficult for us to see that this was no ordinary man. Jacob would realize this after the struggle was over, saying that he had seen God face-to-face. The prophet Hosea tells us that it was an angel with whom Jacob wrestled that night. It was the angel of the Lord, that mysterious figure who appears several times in the Genesis narrative, often in a manner that makes it difficult to distinguish between him and the God whom he represents. In this passage, the man who wrestles with Jacob is most definitely more than an angelic being. He is God in the form of a man, anticipating the day when the Son of God would become incarnate in order to deliver his people from their sins.

And like the incarnation, this encounter was an act of great condescension on the part of God. Jacob was no match for God, not even for God in the form of a man. This man was able to cripple Jacob by simply touching his hip. He would have had no problem making short work of Jacob if he had wanted to do so. But he did not do that. He actually allowed Jacob to prevail against him, kind of like those times when a father wrestles his young children and lets them win the match.

Why did God do this? He did it because Jacob had to see that he was in a situation that was completely beyond him. Jacob had outwitted his brother, his father, and his uncle. But now this scheming deceiver would be brought to the point of seeing that he had no other hope but to place himself entirely in the hands of the Lord.

Consider what had to happen in order for Jacob to be brought to that point. God had to appear as Jacob's opponent, at least at first. Do you remember what Jacob said in the previous chapter? He said that God was on his side. Well, it certainly did not seem like God was on his side when he was grappling with him alongside that river. There are times in our lives when the Lord seems to be against us. There are times when we are not able to understand what God is doing in our lives, times when it seems as though he is abandoning us. God is the one who appoints our trials and tribulations for us. There is nothing that is outside of his providential control. God knew that Esau was coming with those four hundred men. He is the one who sent them. And in the same way, God knows the things that are of greatest concern to you and to me. These things are not beyond his control. He has ordained them for us. And because this is true, there is a sense in which we are wrestling with God as we wrestle our way through our trials and temptations.

This is a profound truth, one that we would all do well to meditate upon on a regular basis. But as we do so, we need to remember one other thing. We need to remember what happened in Jacob's wrestling match. We need to remember that Jacob won. And why did he win? He won because God wanted him to win. It was God who enabled Jacob to prevail in the 'jolt at the Jabbok.' Listen to what Calvin says about this:

“For we do not fight against him, except by his own power, and with his own weapons; for he, having challenged us to this contest, at the same time furnishes us with means of resistance, so that he both fights *against* us and *for* us.”

And what is the weapon that God gives us for the contest? It is faith. It was faith, God-given faith, that enabled Jacob to keep on clinging to God until he blessed him.

As Calvin said, God is both against us and for us. God is against us in our sin. And the only way he can be for us is by first bringing us to see that our sinfulness sets him against us. We have to come to see our utter hopelessness before we can receive the blessings that God pours out upon his people through Christ.

As Jacob and the man wrestled through the night, and as day began to break, the man was anxious to get away. But Jacob would not let him go, not until he blessed him. Then the man asked Jacob his name. But when you think about it, this is a bit odd. This mysterious man is actually God, and God certainly knows Jacob’s name. He does not need Jacob to tell him. So why does he ask him his name? He does so because he wants Jacob to admit who he is. Remember what the name ‘Jacob’ means in Hebrew. It means ‘cheater.’ By admitting that his name is ‘Jacob,’ Jacob was owning up to his character. He was confessing his sin. And when he did so, the Lord gave him a new name; he gave him a new character. He would now be Israel, because he struggled with God and he prevailed.

After the man departed, Jacob became aware of the significance of what had just taken place. He realized that he had seen the face of God, and he was still alive. This explains why the man wanted to leave before the break of day. He did not want Jacob to see his face, because no man can see the face of God and live. Yet by God's grace, Jacob's sight of the Lord resulted in blessing instead of death.

When Jacob first sat down by the Jabbok river that night, he thought that his greatest concern was his problem with Esau. But by the time morning had dawned, he had an entirely different perspective. He had come to see that it was God, not Esau, with whom he had to do. And he realized that the only thing that truly mattered was for him to receive God's blessing. Jacob's experience that night provides us with a vivid picture of the struggle of faith, a struggle that characterizes the life of every Christian. In this struggle, the Lord continually confronts us with the fact that we have nothing but him to rely on. In the words of Edmund Clowney, "Faith wins when it knows that all is lost, and clings to God alone." [*The Unfolding Mystery*, 73] This is how the Lord wants you to respond when you feel overwhelmed by your trials and temptations. He wants you to see that your only hope is to cling to him in faith. And he wants you to see that he will enable you to prevail in the great fight of faith.