

Title: Unless You Bless Me
Date: December 15-16, 2018

Texts: Genesis 32:1-2, 22-31
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Unless You Bless Me

[FCF: Self-reliance and weak faith born out of “one camp” mentality.]

Proposition: God blesses people who persevere in faith.]

Introduction:

This week in my Google feed came the announcement of the discovery—after 240 years of searching—of the wreckage of the American Revolutionary warship the *Bonhomme Richard*.¹ The *Richard* was the ship commanded by John Paul Jones during the Battle of Flamborough head in 1779. Jones had started the trip with seven ships, but two abandoned him, and a third got lost on a reconnaissance mission. Still, when the squadron came upon a British convoy escorted by only two warships, he must have thought they still had the upper hand. Yet, when Jones commanded they form a line for battle, two ships ignored the order, and as soon as the conflict began two of his largest canon exploded below deck making it risky to try to use the other four 18 pounders, and leaving only his smaller canon. He was now heavily out gunned, not to mention much slower than the British frigate *Serapis*. When things couldn't possibly get any worse, as Jones sought get in close enough to the *Serapis* to board the ship with his marines, the *Alliance* (one of the ships which ignored his order to form a line) returned and began to fire on Jones and the *Richard*. In the heat of this battle the captain of the *Serpais* called out to Jones asking whether he was ready to surrender, to which Jones famously replied, “I have not yet begun to fight!”

Jones and his crew persisted and persevered, and were eventually able to come alongside, board, and take over the *Serpais*. Though the battered *Richard* sank the next day, the perseverance of Jones and his crew won one of the earliest and greatest naval battles in American history.

Perseverance is a critical element to success, not only in the 18th century but today. In our marriages and relationships, careers and commitments, we tend to want magic bullets and quick fixes. But history and every area of life tells us that perseverance is key. And this is even more true in our spiritual lives, perseverance is crucial, we must keep fighting the good fight, keep trusting God if we are to receive God's blessing. That's what Jacob's story teaches us:

God blesses those who persevere in faith.

and it also instructs us on how we can persevere. So first notice,

I. God blesses those who persevere in faith.

A. Perseverance is the commitment to keep on trusting God.

We have spent several weeks now talking about Abraham and his wife Sarah, and last week we heard a little about Isaac the promised child. We've come at it from various angles, but

¹ One among many articles, <https://www.popularmechanics.com/military/navy-ships/a25561635/shipwreck-bonhomme-richard/>

it is clear that the main theme running through the last seven or so messages is **faith—really trusting God**. Will Abraham and Sarah trust God to keep his promises, and can we trust him too?

Now, we've fast forwarded almost 140 years, through Isaac's life, to Jacob. And though God has proven his faithfulness to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, we find ourselves again asking in chapter 32 "Will Jacob trust God? Will he persevere in faith?"

You can see that this is a story about perseverance in v. 25 when it says: "the man saw that he was not able to prevail against Jacob." Jacob was not overcome, he kept on wrestling. Verse 26 also displays Jacob's perseverance as Jacob says: "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

But it was more than just a physical struggle, the prophet Hosea tells us in 12:4 that:

*4 [Jacob] strove with the angel and prevailed;
he wept and sought his favor.*

Jacob persevered in the wrestling match, and in the weeping and crying out to God for favor and blessing. Perseverance is a holy persistence, a persistent faith, the commitment of our hearts to keep on trusting and indeed crying out to our God.

(B. God does bless those who persevere in faith.)

And God does bless him in verse 28, praising his perseverance and calling him "Israel" for he has "striven with God and with men, and prevailed." This name change is a blessing in two ways. First, being reaffirmed as the one who has prevailed with men reassures him that his enemies will not prevail against him. And second, having persisted with God meant that God would indeed keep his promise to multiply Jacob's offspring as the "dust of the earth" and in him his offspring all the families of the earth would be blessed.

Jacob needed this blessing, because there was an enemy on the horizon, and he was painfully aware that his resources would not be enough to stand the test.

Jesus himself told his disciples that God blesses those who persevere in the parable of the persistent widow in Luke 18:1-8 where through her perseverance and persistent appeals even an unjust judge finds in her favor. Jesus tells the disciples in v. 7

7 And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them?

If the unjust judge responds to the persistence of the widow, how much more will God respond to the perseverance of those who have faith in him. God blesses those who persevere in faith, but it may be that

C. The nature of the blessing for us may be unexpected.

When I say God blesses those who persevere, I'm not advocating "name it and claim it" theology. Jacob's example of perseverance is not teaching us that God is a vending machine in the sky, and when you push the perseverance button he gives you a Zagnut bar: zagged up in hot fudge, cookie dough, honey, and peppermint dust.

The blessings the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) receive, as well as the concentration of miraculous happenings in their lives is not *impossible* for us, but nor is it going

to be the normal experience in this age. This is because they hold a particular place in the plan of redemption which we do not hold. God was unfolding and establishing his plan in a way that required the material blessing of the patriarchs as well as the concentration of miraculous and supernatural experiences with God.

We too may receive direct, tangible blessings, but 1 Peter 1:4 tells us that the ultimate blessing God gives to those who persevere through faith in Jesus is:

*3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to an **inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you,** 5 who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time*

God blesses those who persevere in faith, so in the words of the great philosopher Michael Gary Scott, “Never, ever, ever give up.”

But how do you do that, how do you persevere. If God promises to bless those who persevere, why do we sometimes have such weak faith?

II. You will only persevere if you remember there are two camps.

Self-reliance is the enemy of perseverance.

(A. Jacob Is tempted to be Sinfully Self-Reliant)

Jacob has always been sinfully self-reliant, he fought with his twin brother from womb. And when the Esau was born Jacob grasped his heel. He is one who slyly seeks to supplant his older brother, to gain the upper hand. He tricks Esau out of his birthright, and tricks their father Isaac, blind in his old age, into giving him Esau's blessing.

Despite these things, Jacob has received God's promise and God's favor in his life. By the time we meet him here in Genesis 32 his flocks are fruitful, and his quiver is full with 11 sons. But there is also a crisis brewing, which has brought up old tendencies.

Jacob has prospered in the land of his father-in-law Laban, but now God has commanded him to return to his homeland. In Genesis 31:3

3 Then the LORD said to Jacob, “Return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred, and I will be with you.”

He'll have to face his brother Esau. As you might imagine, Jacob is afraid to return and face his brother whose birthright and blessing he stole so many years ago.

Jacob sets out to obey the LORD, but as chapter 32 unfolds, we see Jacob's struggle to persevere in faith. Verses 22-23, sending his household (wives, servants, children, and everything else he had) across the Jabbok river is just the last step in a long process of trying to manipulate the circumstances of his pending reunion with Esau. He has always been self-reliant to a fault. No matter what it takes, by hook or by crook, he has been able to summon strength or sufficiency from within.

Now, at the river Jabbok, about to cross into his homeland with Esau on the way with 400 men, he's played all of his cards, and in the morning he will face the music. And all the material

goods he has, and his self-reliance aren't going to be enough to stand up to Esau and his 400 men. The beginning of verse 24 poignantly captures the moment "*And Jacob was left alone,*" and he seems to have come to realize his schemes and plans—he himself—will not be enough for the faceoff with Esau.

Perhaps in this picture you hear the echo of some moment in your past where you came to the same stark realization. Or perhaps you have so manipulated your life situations you live in constant fear of being found alone with no further strategies to deploy and no more tricks up your sleeve. Or maybe you're still back in the land of Laban, putting in work and killing it. I think you know deep down that the constant drive for more, more, more shows the impotence and emptiness of self-reliance. Be warned there is a day coming, when you'll face your Esau and we'll see if you are up to the task. Perhaps you will rise to the occasion, but some day you will stand before a Holy God who will not be impressed with your track record, no matter how outstanding. For the only record he counts as righteous is the perfect life, death, and resurrection of Jesus received through faith.

Self-reliance is ultimately foolish because it ignores God.

(B. Wrestling with God is a reminder of God's presence.)

But God will not be ignored, and he meets Jacob in this moment with a reminder in the form of a test. Verse 24 goes on:

And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day.

The man turns out to be more than a man. The prophet Hosea looks back on the life of Jacob in Hosea 12:3-4 and says that Jacob wrestled with an angel.

*3 In the womb he took his brother by the heel,
and in his manhood he strove with God.*

***4 He strove with the angel and prevailed;
he wept and sought his favor.***

*He met God at Bethel,
and there God spoke with us—*

This may be simply an angel standing-in for God, but Jacob's reaction implies, and in light of the New Testament it seems better to take this as the second person of the Trinity, we might say the pre-incarnate Christ. At the end of WrestleMania 2000 BC, Jacob says in v. 30:

So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered."

C. To persevere we must remember there are two camps.

God wrestles with Jacob as a reminder that there are two camps. I say it that way, "two camps," because that is how this chapter actually begins. At the beginning of Jacob's journey we read in Genesis 32:1-2:

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!" So he called the name of that place Mahanaim.

Mahanaim means "two camps"— God's camp and Jacobs camp. This is signal to Jacob and the reader that whatever is about to take place isn't just about the physical realm. God is present, watching over Jacob, and fully involved with the unfolding of his plan.

In fact, it seems to be stronger than simply a reminder that God is there. The Hebrew word for "camp" often refers to a military camp, and the only other place in the OT where the exact phrase "camp of God" occurs (1 Chronicles 12:22) it refers to a military camp. The implication for Jacob as he begins his journey is that God is not only there, but he is there to protect Jacob with the army of heaven.

Somewhere between Mahanaim and the river Jabbok, Jacob seems to have forgotten there are two camps. Or at least he's too focused on Jacobs camp, and the physical realm where his ideas and actions work themselves. The wrestling match then serves as a reminder, there is a spiritual realm, God is at work in the lives of those who have faith.

Illustration:

Are you ever like Jacob? Somewhere between the sermon and the struggle, God fades to the background. Between that last answered prayer and the next predicament, you go back to old tendencies. I confess to you I'm a lot like that.

Just to be real, one area I've been feeling it a lot is parenting. It's a lot of correcting the same behavior for the 1000th time, trying to keep your cool when you are literally living out the plot of a parenting meme.

I'm sure there are some contributing factors like the sugar and consumerism induced frenzy that is the season from Halloween to Christmas. But really the bigger problem is this: I don't know what else to do. I'm at the end of my rope. I don't have the energy. I, I, I... Recently, I've been prone to forgetting God is more invested in this than I am, and there are spiritual dimensions at play here that I have to remember and consider. There are two camps!

Is there any area in your life where you're so focused on what you're trying to do, and what you think is in your control, that you are getting frustrated or fearful and failing to remember and rely on God?

Self reliance is the enemy of perseverance, which means self-reliance is the enemy of blessing. Remember there are two camps!

But also,

III. You will only persevere if you are willing to limp.

A. God's people often walk with a limp.

The wrestling match is not only a reminder, it is also a test. As is often the case, Jacob's test is part of the means by which God strengthens faith and develops perseverance. Just as the

test of Abraham served to clarify and demonstrate Abraham's faith, so wrestling with God galvanizes Jacob. But in God's tests there is some risk and sacrifice, Abraham risked Isaac, Jacob risks life and limb. Faith seems to imply risk doesn't it? And often perseverance is costly.

This is what we see in v. 25:

25 When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.

God merely touches the hip of Jacob and puts it out of place. Jacob was never strong enough to stand the test on his own, God was restraining his own strength for Jacob's sake. The wrestling was a test through which Jacob's vice of ambition and self-reliance was turned into perseverance, and the limp would be a reminder that he should never return to his old way but always depend on the Lord.

As JI Packer says in *Knowing God*:

God lamed him (32:25), putting his thigh out of joint to be a perpetual reminder in his flesh of his own spiritual weakness, and his need to lean always upon God, just as for the rest of his life he had to walk leaning on a stick.²

This was true of the Apostle Paul as well, he spoke of a thorn in the flesh which God would not remove so he might teach Paul the sufficiency of his grace and power (2 Cor 12:7-10). God used several hard situations, things which really hurt, to bring me to and keep me in true dependence on him. If you are a follower of Jesus, God will work in your life this way to teach you to depend on him. As Bruce Waltke says:

The limp is the posture of the saint, walking not in physical strength but spiritual strength.³

(B. We fear walking with a limp.)

So why don't we persevere? Because we don't want to limp. Why don't we persevere in obedience to Christ, in loving our neighbor as ourselves, in giving sacrificially, or maybe in faithfully reading Scripture, or casting our cares on him in prayer? Because we are afraid it will cost us something.

I was meeting with someone recently and we were talking about the struggle to really trust God with everything. And he said something to the effect, "Sometimes we're afraid of how God will answer our prayers." I think that's right, we don't want to limp, we don't want God to answer our prayers in some way we don't like or don't think we're ready for.

But we know that Jesus that Jesus requires us to die to ourselves, he says in Matthew 16:24-25:

24 Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 25 For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

² JI Packer, *Knowing God*, p. 106, Kindle Edition.

³ Bruce Waltke, *Genesis*, 450.

Limping is scary enough, let alone dying. And it's easy to get focused on "deny himself take up his cross and follow me" all we can see is what we're going to lose or miss out on. But notice what Jesus says in v. 25: anyone who loses his life for his sake will find it.

C. There's blessing through perseverance, but the blessing comes with a limp.

Jesus is promising greater joy and blessing on the other side of self-denial and taking up his cross and following him. This is the patter of the Gospel—through the agony of the cross, Jesus purchased eternal life, life with God: Father, Son, & Spirit for those who believe. This is the inheritance 1 Peter spoke of—but you can actually begin to experience that life with God here and now by trusting in Christ.

The story of Jacob points us to this new or renewed life with God. Notice v. 31, after this harrowing night of wrestling, it says:

31 The sun rose upon [Jacob] as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

Isn't that a beautiful picture? Jacob was alone in the darkness at Jabbok, but now – though limping—he lives in the light of the sun. Going, as it turns out not to a battle but to his brother's embrace, for God has been at work.

The rising of the sun is a symbol of God's grace, but it's also an invitation to us: will you come out of the darkness of self-reliance, into the light of the Sun of Righteousness. As my favorite Christmas hymn, *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* by Charles Wesley and George Whitfield (two of my heroes) says:

Hail the Heav'n-born Prince of Peace
Hail the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and Life around he brings,
Ris'n with Healing in his Wings

There's limping and self-denial, but perseverance in faith leads you to live in the light of God's blessing. Amen.

²⁴The LORD bless you and keep you;

²⁵the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;

²⁶the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.