

Three Keys to Blessing

Genesis 32

INTRODUCTION/CONTEXT: We are calling this series, “**We who Wrestle**”, partly in homage to the Jordan Peterson book by a similar title, and primarily because wrestling and struggling have been the features that mark every narrative in this section of Genesis.

- In the Womb, Jacob and Esau wrestled against one another.
- As Young Men, Jacob and Esau strived against one another, as Esau gave Jacob his birthright for a bowl of stew.
- As Adults Jacob tricked Esau out of his Patriarchal Blessing.
- And lest you believe Esau is the problem, notice what happened when Jacob traveled to Haran. We find Jacob striving with Laban for over 12 years until the two men came to the brink of war. But they didn’t make war - they entered into a peace treaty, likely never to see one another again.

Now we come to the most pivotal moment in Jacob's life - as he faces his most powerful opponent - in the passage before us, Jacob will wrestle Jesus Christ Himself, and he, that is Jacob, will never be the same again.

TEXT: Genesis 32:1–32 (ESV)

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

Mahanaim - means two camps - referring to Jacob's camp and the Lord's Camp.

3 And Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau his brother in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, 4 instructing them, “Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: Thus says your servant Jacob, ‘I have sojourned with Laban and stayed until now. 5 I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male servants, and female servants. I have sent to tell my lord, in order that I may find favor in your sight.’ ” 6 And the messengers returned to Jacob, saying, “We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and there are four hundred men with him.”

Note to Self - When you see a man or woman building an army, it is a likely indication that he or she intends to go to war. Have you ever witnessed a person trying to gather troops against you? Perhaps not physically, but socially, emotionally? A fight is coming.

7 Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed. He divided the people who were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two camps, 8 thinking, “If Esau comes to the one camp and attacks it, then the camp that is left will escape.”

Jacob's strategy is a divided camp - if Esau attacks one camp, the other stands a chance of escape.

Now notice Jacob's prayer - he hasn't done a lot of this by the way. Sometimes difficulties in life are there to drive us to our knees, where we ought to have been already.

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, 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.' "

Prayer saturated strategy is the key to great leadership. The text does not indicate that God presented Jacob with some ingenious plan. It seems that Jacob prayed and then planned. He did the best he could with the wisdom he had. Most of life is that way. We pour out our situation before the Lord, then trust Him to illuminate our thoughts and plans. Notice the maturity in Jacob - no longer conspiring, no longer deceiving, he simply prays.

¹³ So he stayed there that night, and from what he had with him he took a present for his brother Esau, ¹⁴ two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, ¹⁵ thirty milking camels and their calves, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys. ¹⁶ These he handed over to his servants, every drove by itself, and said to his servants, "Pass on ahead of me and put a space between drove and drove."

So he is sending these gifts out in waves - first 200 goats, then 200 sheep, then the camels and oxen. Then, in verses 21-22, Jacob sends his family over the Jabbok.

24 And Jacob was left alone.

Let that sink in for a moment - Jacob is soon to face Esau, who, as far as Jacob knows, has been planning to murder him for about 20 years. He is there in the desert, utterly alone - at least, so he thinks. As Jacob sits there in the twilight, a mysterious figure appears.

ILLUSTRATION: When I was around 16, my cousin and I had the bright idea of camping out overnight in an old salt-peter cave. We discovered quickly that it is not a good idea to build a fire in a cave, because you smoke yourself out. So we made camp at the mouth of the cave. Around 1 AM that night, deep in the woods, we heard men talking; they were coming toward us. Our minds raced, we quickly put out the campfire, hid, and loaded one round in the chamber of a 22 pistol I carried. It turned

out to be a few local men who also decided it was a great night to go spelunking. Go figure.

Jacob wasn't so lucky - the enigmatic figure that approached Jacob attacked him, slamming him to the ground, and proceeded to beat the living daylights out of him.

24b. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day.

ILLUSTRATION: Now, the Bible is notoriously understated. If you have never trained in combat sports, you will not appreciate the gravity of that statement. Wrestling is different than boxing - if you see a boxer, his body is huge above the belt, but he hardly trains his legs. Wrestlers must engage every single muscle, almost without pause, for the duration of the match. In **Olympic wrestling**, a match consists of two 3-minute rounds with 30 seconds of rest between rounds. Total wrestling time: 6 minutes (not counting the break).

This man wrestled Jacob all night long....And think of what we know about Jacob - he wasn't known for his fighting skills. He is the interior decorator of the family. But here he is in man-to-man combat for hours, neither prevailing nor being conquered.

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.

ILLUSTRATION: I don't know what that feels like, and I hope you don't either. But my grandmother's knee would get out of socket from time to time, and it appeared to be one of the most excruciating pains a person can experience.

Get the picture - this man had wrestled Jacob all night long... then, when he is done, he simply touches the socket of Jacob, rendering him helpless.

ILLUSTRATION: When Cole was little, we would play fight from time to time, but realize when a Dad wrestles a little boy, he isn't really fighting. I would let him get me in a headlock, and just when he thought he had me, I would throw him around like a ragdoll. We did that for years. A few months ago, he got this look in his eye, and I could tell what he was thinking... he just might be big enough to take the old man. I said, "Son, I'm not as good as I once was, but I'm as good as I ever was... plus I don't fight fair... so think long and hard before you challenge me".

Whoever this bewildering figure was, he had simply been playing with Jacob. A simple touch rendered Jacob's leg useless.

Up until this point, Jacob presumed that the greatest threat to his existence was Esau, but now he recognizes that this mysterious figure is his greatest threat.

²⁶ Then he said, "Let me go, for the day has broken." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

Catch that - the mystery man is ready to depart, but now Jacob locks in... he isn't hoping to submit that man... he wants his opponent to BLESS HIM.

Somehow, in the midst of this struggle, Jacob had enough mental fortitude to deduce that this stranger had the capacity, not only to destroy Jacob, but also to bless him. In other words, this man he was battling was not only his greatest threat, but he was also his only hope.

Before, Jacob gained a blessing by trickery and scheming, but not with this man; Jacob was completely at the mercy of this all-powerful opponent - if he would receive this man's blessing, he would bless him with eyes wide open.

27 And he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” 28 Then he said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.” 29 Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed him. 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.” 31 The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. 32 Therefore to this day the people of Israel do not eat the sinew of the thigh that is on the hip socket, because he touched the socket of Jacob's hip on the sinew of the thigh.

Wow, what a scene - the identity of the man is now plain - this is the preincarnate second person of the Godhead - better known as Jesus of Nazareth.

- In Genesis 12, we see that God blessed Abraham through a covenant promise.
- In Genesis 26, God blesses Isaac by reiterating that promise.
- But here in Genesis 32, Jacob needed more than a conversation with the Almighty.

He needed to be broken before he could be blessed.

Imagine Jacob, now Israel, walking into camp the next morning, leaning on a crutch... Rachel runs out and says, " Oh my goodness, what happened to you... He smiles and says, "I got blessed".

NOW - what does this mean for you and me?

1. **Solitude** - Jacob has his most significant encounters with God when he is all alone. Remember, when he first left Canaan for Haran, he encountered God in the vision of the ladder with angels ascending and descending - with the Lord at the pinnacle. Now, he encounters God, only after he had sent everyone else away.

We hope you encounter God here today, but can I be honest with you? The real goal is that you will encounter Him in a greater way when you are all alone.

ILLUSTRATION: Last night, a lady told me that she visited our church for a friend's baptism and has attended ever since. She said, on New Year's Eve, I found myself sitting up reading my bible, then she said, You have to realize - I'm not the kind of person who would do that. Something had changed.

Henry Newan said, *"Without solitude it is virtually impossible to live the Christian life".*

Yet, solitude is what some of you fear the most. So you fill your life with 1001 triflings. Little amusements, distractions, just so you aren't alone with no one but God. But please understand - that is where the blessing is. When everything else has been sent away, and you are there alone in the quiet.

You are what you are in solitude, nothing more, nothing less. We live in a day where leaders will quote scripture, talk about God, yet their personal lives are filled with sin and hypocrisy. True Christianity begins in the private areas of our lives.

Solitude...

2. Struggle - We meet God's greatest blessing at the point of our greatest weakness. God often encounters us not in strength or success, but in vulnerability and pain, wrestling us into transformation rather than comforting us there.

In our culture, people speak of a religious experience in terms of a deep inner peace. However, in scripture, we see that God most typically steps in to our lives at the point of greatest distress.

- **MOSES** - It wasn't in the Palaces of Egypt that Moses encountered God. It was on the backside of Middian, with lips trembling and hands shaking, that he beheld a bush burning yet not consumed.
- **GIDEON** - hiding in fear of the enemy, threshing wheat in a wine press so no one would see him, trembling in fear, that Gideon encountered the Angel of the Lord.
- **HANNAH** - in the Humiliation of Barrenness, God visited her.
- **ELIJAH** - running in fear from Queen Jezebel, depressed and wanting to die, it was then that he encountered God.
- **JOB** - lost everything, sitting on a pile of ashes, despairing of life, when God stepped into his life.
- **PETER** - having denied Christ three times, in the bonds of guilt and shame, when Christ said, "feed my sheep".

Listen, God knows you struggle. He knew that when He sent Jesus to die for you. Let him meet you in your struggle.

Solitude, Struggle...

3. Submission - When Jacob demanded a blessing, God had him right where he wanted him. That's the funny thing about God, He doesn't mind blessing us as long as we recognize Him as the source.

BLESSED - is a word rarely found outside of the Bible in the Greek language. In fact, it was only found in reference to the Greek Pantheon of gods, "The blessed gods". Yet, it was the first word of the first sermon Jesus ever preached. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of God."

How do we know that Jesus brought Jacob to a place of submission? He changed his name. I've told you before that nothing indicates authority more than changing a name.

ILLUSTRATION: Trump changed the name of the Gulf of Mexico to the Gulf of America... why? Because he could. It was within his authority.

When I married Julie, she came under my authority as the head of our home, thus her name changed from Bearden to Terry.

When you have a child, the Doctor doesn't name the child - the parents name the child, why? The child is under their authority.

Now that Jacob has come into submission under the Authority of the Lord, the Lord renames him.

Jacob means - grasper and deceiver, which was fitting up to that point.
Israel means - God strives.

Jacob had spent his life: Grasping, Manipulating, Taking blessings by force. But at Peniel, that striving finally meets its match. So the name Israel does *not* celebrate Jacob's strength. It memorializes his weakness transformed by God.

How does God bring Jacob to this point of blessing? This is very important - ***GOD CONDECENDS TO JACOB'S PLACE.***

The text tells us that the wrestler "could not overpower" Jacob (verse 25), yet touches his hip effortlessly and renders him helpless. God couldn't overpower Jacob without losing Jacob; can you see that this hints at voluntary weakness?

So this all-powerful transcendent being, who could simply touch a man and make him limp, condescends to wrestle with a mere mortal.

This paradox points to Jesus, the ultimate wrestler who bore the full weight of divine justice on the cross, taking our curse to give us blessing (Galatians 3:13-14).

In a few moments, we will celebrate that fact in communion - we will remember that the transcendent God, the Ancient of Days, stepped out of Eternity into Time, and was born in a manger in Bethlehem.

CONCLUSION/INVITATION:ILLUSTRATION: Art historian Kenneth Clark, a secular skeptic, experienced overwhelming heavenly joy in a church, but recoiled, feeling morally unworthy: "My life was far from blameless... I was completely unworthy of such a flood of grace." Confused, he let it fade, unable to reconcile holiness with his flaws. Like Jacob's astonishment at surviving God's nearness, Clark highlights the conundrum: How can a holy God bless the unholy?

The answer is Christ's weakness—emptying Himself (Philippians 2:6-8), becoming a servant, dying for us.

Now, with the power to cast us into Hell itself... he condescends and wrestles with us, like a loving father, until ultimately he brings us to a point of submission and changes us into something entirely new.

Through the Cross, He who had the power to conquer us, he forgave and blessed us... what is the name of this wrestler? This suffering sage? You know His name...