

It's an old story, so old in fact that some of you have never heard it. A hiker, walking near the edge of a steep cliff and fell over the side. Fortunately, he was able to grab hold of a tree limb. As he dangled in mid-air, he cried out for help, "Is anybody up there?" After a few repeated attempts he heard a voice, "I am here." "Who are you?" "I am the Lord." "Can you help me?" "Of course I can. I am the Lord. But you need to let go of the branch." "Let go of the branch?" "Yes." There was a pause and then the man cried out, "Is anybody else up there?"

The story highlights a demanding decision we face every day - to live my life relying on my own strength and my own cleverness or to surrender my self-sufficiency and throw the full weight of my devotion upon the Lord. One choice is the pathway to God's blessing, the other to disappointment. Prov. 3:5,6 says it this way, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart. And do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He will make your paths straight." The only way I will ever be who God made me to be and do what God made me to do is by acknowledging my self-sufficiency and trusting in the Lord. That simple message is conveyed in an awkward family photo of a man named Jacob in Gen. 32.

Jacob was a clever scoundrel. He survived by his wits. He manipulated people. Like so many OT characters, his name expressed his nature. Jacob means "heel-grabber." He came out of the womb grasping his twin brother Esau's heel. Later, he grabbed Esau's birthright and then his paternal blessing from his father Isaac. His ambition knew no bounds. He even deceived his uncle to get the beautiful Rachel but cleverness must have run in the family because Laban had the last laugh when, after 7 years of working to get Rachel, he awoke on his honeymoon to find that he had married the other daughter, Leah. So, Jacob worked another 7 years to get Rachel.

When we get to Genesis 32, Jacob is not where he is supposed to be. He is living outside the land that God promised to him because he is fearful that his brother Esau will kill him. He is about to have a close encounter with the God of Abraham at the threshold of the land promised to him and to his descendants. I want you to pay close attention to this strange story and consider what it might mean for you. Gen. 32:22-32...

**I. There is a Jacob in all of us.** Many of us are master manipulators, dealing deviously with others determined to come out on top. We love to win. A shrewd businessman is now president in part because he hammered away at the idea of winning. He knew that in our self-centered culture "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing." Winning is what matters. When we carry that mindset into the spiritual realm we may even try to manipulate God to win His blessing. In fact, some of us came here today to manipulate God. "Maybe if I go to church I will get a blessing. Maybe if I pray I will get that job or that spouse." At some point we have all been guilty of cuttin' deals with God.

Jacob is the poster child for a self-centered, self-willed, self-seeking life. His descendants displayed the same stubborn characteristics. They forgot the Lord. Even today, the sons of Israel forget. Yigal Allon was an Israeli who fought valiantly for the re-establishment of a Jewish nation. Once this was accomplished his conclusion was not, "Give thanks to the Lord" or "To God be the glory." His words are imprinted on the wall of a small museum on the Sea of Galilee, "I believe in the driving force of man's spirit and his will power." Yigal Allon. That's what Jacob believed but that was about to change because God had an appointment with Jacob at the Jabbok.

**II. There is a Jabbok for all of us.** The Jabbok represents the place where we come face to face with God. It is at the Jabbok that Jacob met his match. A couple of things happened that night.

a. God wounded Jacob in order to heal him. Until we are humbled by God we will not experience all that He has for us. There are only two avenues to God's grace - voluntary brokenness or involuntary brokenness. Chan Gailey...Sports Illustrated on the line...prepares himself for the interview...guys says, "Is this Chan Gailey?" Yes, this is Coach Gailey. "This is Sports Illustrated and I'm calling to remind you your subscription has expired." Gailey says, "You are either being humble or you are being humbled." Jacob was being humbled.

Jacob lived with a limp the rest of his life. God was not about to allow Jacob to enter the Promised Land on his own terms and in his own strength. God has no use for the self-sufficient so He touched the strongest part of Jacob's body and when He did, his strength withered and with it his cockiness. He could no longer depend on his own cleverness and strength. God did a similar thing to the apostle Paul who said, "Most gladly will I glory in my infirmities that the power of Christ may rest on me. For when I am weak, I am strong." A. W. Tozer said, "It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly until he has hurt him deeply."

b. Jacob was blessed by God. He began fighting God but ended up clinging to Him. He fought God all his life and once he recognized that he could not prevail, he made the wise decision to cling to God until he received a blessing. Jacob grabbed hold and would not let go. Here his willfulness found its proper expression. He had been using his cleverness and his ambition to outsmart his opponents but now he exercises his determination in laying hold of that which matters the most - the blessing of God.

Don't miss this - God gave Jacob his personality. Jacob was born a grabber. That was his nature. But he was always grabbing the wrong things. Every growing Christian confronts the painful realization that you possess some unsavory personality defects. You may have been born a strong-willed child. You are a competitor. That's ok. It is a pitiful version of Christianity that seeks to tame the lion in us and turn us into a bunch of lambs. If you are competitive or quick-tempered or driven or possessive or you have any other traits that are frowned upon among religious people, take heart. Your problem is not your temperament, it is your target. It's not your personality, it's your priority. Jacob will not let go of God. His ambition and tenacity used to gain an advantage over others is now used to get what matters most - the blessing of God. Saul of Tarsus was a fiercely-driven individual. Then he met Christ and became...a fiercely-driven individual. His personality didn't change. His target did. He didn't persecute Christians, he produced them.

**III. There is a new name offered to all of us.** Jacob left the Jabbok as Israel. He had a new name. He was Jacob the heel-grabber. He is now Israel, which means "God prevails." In the ancient world, a name represented the essence of the person named. A name is not a mere label of identification; it is an expression of the essential nature of its bearer. A man's name reveals his character. A change of name signifies a change of nature or essence. That is why a king receives a new name on his ascending the throne. When a new pope is chosen, he chooses a new name. On 3/13/2013, Jorge Mario Bergoglio became Pope Francis.

When the divine being asks Jacob "what is your name," He is forcing him to confess his nature. I'm a habitual grabber. Once he confesses his nature, He gets a new identity. You are not Jacob, you are Israel. Then Jacob asked the divine being His name but He wouldn't give it. That's because the one doing the naming has priority over the one named. So God simply asks, "Why do you want to know my name?"

What is your name? You have a name that describes you but God has a name that defines you. Who we really are is who we are in God's presence nothing more, nothing less. You may think you are who your friends think you are, your family, your church. But the real question is, "Who am I in God's presence?" What is your real name? Some of you need a name change. Stop letting your past determine your future. Your past always informs your future but your past never determines your future. The same Jesus who renamed Jacob also renamed Peter. You're Simon but I call you Peter. And He wants to give you a new name.  
You call yourself anxious? I call you shalom.  
You call yourself unlovable? I call you beloved.  
You call yourself an addict? I call you free.  
You call yourself rejected? I call you accepted.

God loves you so much that He will do whatever is necessary to humble you and heal you so that you are useful to Him. He will take you where you never wanted to go to make you who you always wanted to be.

If you are up against it this morning, take some time and ask the Lord, "Jesus, are these trials merely your mercy in disguise?"