

I Will Not Let You Go Unless You Bless Me!

Genesis 32:22-32

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

What a great lesson we have in this Old Testament text. Before this point in Jacob's life, he had sought by "grabbing," "supplanting," and deceit to obtain the blessings of God's grace. He drove a hard bargain to gain Esau's birthright, he had lied to his father to obtain the blessings. Of course, Laban switched Leah for Rachel, but Jacob made a deal for her as well. He manipulated the flocks and herd he cared for so that his portion grew more rapidly than Laban's. All this demonstrated Jacob's lack of trust in God, and so we arrive at these events seeing that Jacob needs a transformed life.

We come to this place and find that Jacob is afraid; his past sins against his brother haunt him. He is only too well aware that, all things being equal, he deserves brother's wrath.

But it is at God's instruction that Jacob is returning to "the land of his birth" with his large family and the wealth that he has accumulated, and he is afraid. It had been reported to him that Esau was coming toward them – with 400 men. Jacob is afraid Esau is coming to take the revenge upon him he has waited twenty years to take. He had sent gifts ahead of him to Esau over the river in the hopes of easing Esau's anger at him.

Jacob had come from one struggle with his father-in-law Laban, and expected to be heading into another with his brother Esau. But God has told him to return – God has promised him His blessings. Still, Jacob is doubting!

As we come to the events of our text, it is good to remember that Jacob had prayed to God only a few verses earlier, "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, 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. 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. 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.' " (Genesis 32:11-12)

This prayer is a confession of his unworthiness, but also of his hope in God's promises. After this prayer Jacob sent his family over the river but he stays behind. He might have done this to make sure all had crossed and nothing was left behind, but there is more to it. He wanted to be alone. He wanted to pray to the Lord again. Jacob was struggling with himself, he wanted to believe God's promises but he was afraid. God had told him that he would be good to him and give him many offspring, but he was still scared.

Jacob wrestles with the Lord, he is engaged in prayer that involves his whole body. We remember Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane; His prayer was so intense that His sweat became as drops of blood. Jacob's prayer is a physical wrestling with God. God comes to him in physical form, and as we see, with but a touch could have at any time disabled Jacob, but instead wrestles with Him all night.

God must oppose Jacob because Jacob's will is not yet broken. Jacob knows of his unworthiness, he knows that his sin makes him unworthy of any of the promises God has made to him, but he is still doubts those promises. God wrestles with Jacob until dawn and lets him live. He gives him the name Israel, which means "He struggles with God and prevails" – by God's grace – by God's mercy.

This event takes place to show unto Jacob that indeed, the promises God has made, He will accomplish. And we know that Jacob was reconciled to his brother Esau, and his children did become a great nation.

We should take comfort from this event. God has promised to be with us and bless us with His goodness and mercy. Jacob knew the right words and could perform the right actions . . . but his heart still was not completely the Lord's.

You know it is easy to have superficial faith. However, a crisis forces us to grapple with our real feelings and our true faith. God provokes this crisis to bring Jacob to a point of genuine faith. When Jacob called out for a blessing from God, the wall had finally been broken down.

God did not just want Jacob's worship. He wanted his heart. And He wants the same from us – He wants your heart and your all.

This is the point everyone needs to arrive at. We need to realize that we are the problem and we need someone to change us. It is a faith issue, that we doubt God's grace toward us. It is as we wrestle with God, as we have struggles in faith and come to see God's goodness even in the midst of our sins, and only then, that we receive our new name. In Jacob's case, he was given the name "Israel" which means "He struggles with God" or "God Prevails". His new name was a reminder of this encounter, and the lesson that we need God.

To everyone who believes today, God also gives a new name. We are changed from "sinner" to "saint". From "rebel" to "friend". From "enemy" to "son".

Why Did God hurt Jacob's hip? The answer to this question is simple: the scars remind us of what we have learned. Just like a wedding ring reminds us of our promise of commitment, so our scars remind us of our need for God.

God brings struggles into our lives in the hope of producing faith. When do you wrestle with God? When a child is deathly ill... when health is replaced by illness... when the earth and forces of nature overwhelm... when a loved one lays close to death... when job troubles arise... In a word, we wrestle with God when life crashes in around us.

It is in these moments that we have a choice. We can give up, or look up. We can continue to rely on ourselves, or we can see how helpless we truly are and turn to the Lord. We can resist the Lord, struggling against Him, or we can trust Him.

God allows the difficulties in our lives to bring us to a point of decision. Without the hard times we might go on our merry way and never have to consider whether we *really* trust God. We need to realize that the greatest problem in life is not our circumstances, but our heart. Jacob felt his life was filled with problems. He was exhausted from fighting Laban, and now worn out just thinking about having to confront Esau. But what Jacob didn't realize was that the greatest battle being waged was the one being waged in his heart. The ultimate issue was this: "Who will be in charge?"

Jacob wanted God's blessing but did not want God's ownership of his life. He wanted God to "bail him out" of the hard times, but he did not want to submit to God in his living. Despite all the blessings that God had given Jacob, Jacob had a surface faith in which he wanted the benefits of God, but did not want to surrender himself to God's will and trust God's grace.

Sounds familiar, doesn't it. Trust of God isn't an easy thing. We wrestle with God. When tribulations come, we may wear out our knees in prayer. But do we trust the promises of God? Do we leave things truly in the hands of God, expecting that He will work things out to our best benefit, to our being built up into the eternal children He will make of us?

We'd like to see God face to face, as long as our sins would not cause Him to destroy us. We'd like to confront Him and ask a blessing of Him.

Dear friends, it already happens. We might like it to be a bit more spectacular, but we already see God face to face. He already comes to us with His incredible blessings.

Jesus is the face of God – He took on flesh and endured our sorrows. He is intimately acquainted with the trials and tribulations of life. Even after the incredibly vile treatment that He received at the hands of wicked men, as the lifeblood dripped from His pierced flesh, and death was but moments away, Christ proclaimed His faith, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”

Our sinful expectations, namely our lack of trust in God, are crucified in Christ's flesh, and He would give to us His faith.

Christ, the very face of God is present with us today, as He promised, “Wherever two or more are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” (Mt. 18:20) He comes to us to bless us. He is the Word which we hear hidden under the voice of pastors. He speaks to us and strengthens our faith, granting us forgiveness, and giving us life and salvation.

We may doubt, even as we gather together in His name, so He comes to us, face to face. He feeds us of His very own flesh and gives us to drink of the blood which He shed. He does so in order to bless us. In this meal He comes to us and fills us with Himself. He renews in us the faith to trust in Him, as He fills us with His promise.

We see the Lord face to face, and He does not let us go, but blesses us – now and forevermore. Amen.