

## **STRUGGLING TO BE BLESSED**

Genesis 32:22-32

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### **SCRIPTURE**

The same night [Jacob] got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. <sup>23</sup>He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. <sup>24</sup>Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. <sup>25</sup>When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. <sup>26</sup>Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." <sup>27</sup>So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." <sup>28</sup>Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." <sup>29</sup>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. <sup>30</sup>So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." <sup>31</sup>The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. <sup>32</sup>Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle (Genesis 32:22-32 NRSV).

### **INTRODUCTION**

I went to high school with a lad named Stu Miner. He was a member of the wrestling team, although he was not really known for being a wrestler. He was best known for being a long distance runner. He had incredible stamina. He did not look like a wrestler – he was all skin and bones. But he was fascinating to watch. During the first two periods his opponent would have the advantage and rack up a lot of points. But during the third period his opponent would tire and start to weaken but not Stu. He would begin to get the upper hand and before the buzzer sounded would pin his exhausted opponent to the mat and win. It happened so often it became his signature move.

There is a lesson in this, if you permit me. In life, it does not matter if it looks like you are winning. It does not matter if it looks like you are losing. What matters is how you finish.

Jacob was the grandson of Abraham and Sarah. Much of Jacob's life looked like a struggle – a struggle he was losing. He was looking for something. Happiness. Satisfaction. The pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. He was looking for what the Bible calls a blessing. He struggled for this. He fought for this. He lied and cheated for

this. But when it came, it was not what he thought it would be.

### **1. LOOKING FOR BLESSINGS IN OUR STRUGGLE WITH FAMILY**

Jacob struggled in his family relationships. He was the younger twin to his brother Esau. The two did not get along. Jacob struggled with his father Isaac especially since Isaac favored Esau. Later Jacob struggled with his father-in-law Laban. The product of his time and culture, Jacob ended up with two wives who also did not get along with each other. They had children and the adult children did not get along with each other. So it was one conflict after another with his relatives and in-laws. Don't tell me you cannot relate to any of that!

Families often struggle. It is often the first struggle we ever have. Calvin Miller (1936-2012) was a pastor, author, and seminary professor. He told about the struggles he had raising teenagers. He had a rule in his house that they could not date until they were 16 years of age. When his daughter was 15 years and 9 months old a boy asked her to go to the Christmas dance. So what did Miller do? He said, "No." His daughter was furious. She said to him, "Dad, I just hope that between now and February the Lord comes back so you have to live with yourself for all eternity knowing that I never had a date!"

Families face many challenges today. But the truth is that in every age families face challenges and struggles. It is a rare thing to get along with all your family members. You know the old saying, "You can choose your friends but you can't choose your relatives."

There was a man named James from Cambridge, Massachusetts. He was related to William and Henry James. Henry was a famous author and William was a famous psychologist and philosopher. Anyway, this man would introduce himself and people would invariably say, "James, eh? Any relation to Henry and William?" After awhile this started to bother the man. In fact, he got so annoyed at being overshadowed by his famous relatives that he moved to Colorado. There he would introduce himself and people would say, "James, eh? Any relation to Frank and Jesse?" The thing is, he decided to remain in Colorado. He actually preferred being associated with outlaws to being overshadowed by his famous blood relatives!

### **2. LOOKING FOR BLESSINGS IN OUR STRUGGLE WITH ENVY**

Jacob not only struggled in his family relationships, he also struggled within himself – his emotions and desires. He was plagued by envy.

His brother Esau was the first born in the family – but only by a few seconds. But because he was the first born he was supposed to receive the birthright and the family blessing. All the children were supposed to receive some portion of the inheritance but the

birthright was a double portion that ordinarily went to the first born son. Whoever received the birthright would also become head of the family and the head of any family business. It must have galled Jacob that his older by a few seconds brother would receive such an “undeserved” blessing.

Jacob was also envious of the man who would become his father-in-law. Laban was quite wealthy. But Laban was also lazy, manipulative, and dishonest. It must have galled Jacob to see a man like that have so much. And that same time Jacob thought of himself as more deserving, more worthy and yet he was denied what he thought was rightfully his.

Envy is dangerous. In Proverbs we read, “A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones (Prov 14:30 NIV). Who among us has not been plagued by envy?

Envy is destructive. It divides families, ruins friendships, and eats us up from the inside. Leveling is envy's goal, a goal that can never be reached. Since envy renders us forever discontented, we lose the ability to rejoice. Envy brings dejection. "My feet had almost stumbled," cries the psalmist (Ps 73:2), describing when he looked upon the prosperous as arrogant and wicked.<sup>1</sup> It may be that the prosperous are arrogant—at least, some of them. It may be that the prosperous are wicked—at least, some of them. But it may also be that the prosperous are no more arrogant or wicked than anyone else.

Envy poisons; envy embitters; envy blinds. It does even more; it renders us self-pitying, self-righteous whiners. And the doubts produced cannot be overcome by winsome arguments. They must be prayed.

Victor Shepherd tells about seeing an aerobatics display:

As the plane rolled and twisted and flipped upside down, the pilot looked for the ground every two seconds, constantly reorienting himself. Because his maneuvers were so extreme and so sudden, he could easily lose his bearings; and because he was so close to the ground, he had no margin of error. He reoriented himself—“Where’s the ground?”—at least every two seconds; otherwise he would crash.

He goes on to say:

In the course of the insane envy that comes upon us, we too roll and twist

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<sup>1</sup> If you are struggling with envy then read and re-read Psalm 73 until you understand the conclusions of the psalmist.

and flip upside down. The only way we can keep from crashing. . .is to reorient ourselves constantly by looking for that groundedness which is God.

### **3. LOOKING FOR BLESSINGS IN OUR STRUGGLE WITH GOD**

Why was Jacob at Jabbok?<sup>2</sup> The reason Jacob was at the river Jabbok was because he was preparing to meet with his brother Esau in order to try to mend their broken relationship.

As I mentioned earlier, Esau was the firstborn. Jacob came next, and when he came out he was grasping onto his brother's heel, foreshadowing what he would be through much of his adult life – a grasping, scheming, deceiver.

As these two boys grow up, they become two dramatically different people. The parents make the mistake of playing favorites. Isaac dotes over Esau and plans on giving him everything – not just the birthright and family blessing, but everything. Rachel learns of this and she helps Jacob trick his dad into stealing the family blessing from Esau. Oh, what a wonderfully dysfunctional family this is! Things get so bad that when Esau realizes he has lost both his birthright and blessing to his younger brother, he plans to kill him.

Jacob flees. During his flight he has a strange vision.<sup>3</sup> In this vision God re-assures Jacob:

Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you” (Gen 28:15 NRSV).

After twenty years Jacob decides to return home and face his brother Esau. He decides to go back and be reconciled to his brother or die trying. He is still struggling to be blessed.

Jacob has a life-changing encounter with God on the way. Jacob, the man who lived in deceit, envy, and fear, wrestles all night with what he thinks is a man. Jacob says, “I will not let you go until you bless me” (Genesis 32:26). He discovers he is wrestling with God (an angel of God), and God says, “I'm going to give you a new name – Israel.”

For a long portion of his life, the name of the man in our story was Jacob, the deceiver,

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<sup>2</sup> The area was also known as Peniel or Penuel. Both names mean “face of God.”

<sup>3</sup> He sees a kind of strange staircase with angels of God ascending and descending from heaven. Sometimes this is mistakenly referred to as a ladder as in “Jacob’s Ladder” but its really more like a staircase. In any case, this is another affirmation that God is both transcendent and immanent. There is a connectedness between heaven and earth.

who lived out the meaning of his name. Now God gives him a new name, Israel. This new name points to his future. His new name means, "he who struggles with God."

Esau comes with four hundred men. But when he sees that his brother has come alone to face him, he has a change of heart. We read, "But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept" (Gen 33:4 NRSV). This was a rare happy ending in Jacob's life.

Jacob discovered at Jabbok that all of his struggles in life had really been struggles with God. At one point as he was wrestling with the angel of the Lord, the angel touches Jacob's hip and dislocates it. Consequently it was no longer a wrestling match. Jacob cannot win – at least not in any physical sense. He has only one hope. He's going to cling to this angel until he gets what he wants. And what is it that he wants? He wants to be blessed.

Here is the irony of that request – that is precisely what God wanted to do from the very beginning. The Lord had a blessing for Jacob and Jacob kept missing it. He kept getting it confused with other things. God had promised to be his God, the same promise he made to his grandparents. A great nation would come from him and through that nation the power and salvation of the Lord would be revealed to the world. God would not abandon Jacob. God had a purpose for Jacob. That was his blessing. It took a wrestling match which left him humbled and broken in order to discover that truth.

Before the wrestling match at Jabbok, Jacob built small altars wherever he traveled and dedicated them to the God of his ancestors. After Jabbok that changed. Oh, he still built altars. But now he dedicated them to the God of Israel – his God.

Who did you come to worship? Are you here to worship the God of your ancestors? Are you here to worship the God that other people talk about? Or are you here to worship your God? The God you know and who knows you? It makes a huge difference.

### **CONCLUSION**

In life, it does not matter if it looks like you are winning. It does not matter if it looks like you are losing. What matters is how you finish. And how well we finish depends on our relationship with God.

I wonder how often our struggles in life are really struggles against God. We are willing to fight for our happiness, even cheat if necessary, but the blessing only comes when we surrender to God.

Like Jacob, we are all frail and flawed human beings struggling to be blessed. We are

looking for something. It may be better health. It may be an improved financial picture. It may be a better relationship. We are struggling to be blessed.

The struggle ends when we realize we did not have to struggle in the first place. God has a blessing for us. It's been there all along. But we often get it confused with other things. Now there is nothing wrong with wanting better health or an improved financial situation or an abundance of friends but life offers no guarantees for such things.

What God offers is more reliable, more enduring: God will not abandon us. God has a purpose for us. God will be our God. Through faith in Jesus Christ we receive something far greater than any earthly blessing: the delight of friendship with God, the privilege of service, and the joy of life everlasting.