

Scripture Reading: Genesis 32

“32 So Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. 2 When Jacob saw them, he said, “This is God’s camp.” And he called the name of that place Ma-ha-nAim. 3 Then Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau his brother in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. 4 And he commanded them, saying, “Speak thus to my lord Esau, ‘Thus your servant Jacob says: “I have dwelt with Laban and stayed there until now. 5 I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, and male and female servants; and I have sent to tell my lord, that I may find favor in your sight.”’ 6 Then the messengers returned to Jacob, saying, “We came to your brother Esau, and he also is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him.” 7 So Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people that were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two companies. 8 And he said, “If Esau comes to the one company and attacks it, then the other company which is left will escape.” 9 Then Jacob said, “O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, Jehovah who said to me, ‘Return to your country and to your family, and I will deal well with you’: 10 I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth which You have shown Your servant; for I crossed over this Jordan with my staff, and now I have become two companies. 11 Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, lest he come and attack me and the mother with the children. 12 For You said, ‘I will surely treat you well, and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.’””

“Jacob Wrestles with God”

Chapter thirty-two here in the Book of Genesis begins the 2nd half of Jacob’s journey back to the Promised Land. He has left behind his Uncle Laban whom God protected him from and now faces the taunting task of making peace with a brother who was VERY angry with him as he fled some twenty years earlier.

- Your Pastor once again faced the dilemma of how to properly take us through this chapter!

There are so many details and rich images here that we could easily spend an entire season on the various topics. The other option is to see it focusing on the encounter that Jacob had with the Living God and that is what I have decided to do with a single sermon!

So the text that I read gives us a pretty straight forward opening: As Jacob continues his journey he is again encouraged by God as he is met with a host of angels at a place he names Mahanaim. This Hebrew name means two camps or two hosts and is very relevant as we shall see Jacob traveling between two enemies, dividing his group into two camps and now assured of victory by a host of angels! With such confidence Jacob sends his messengers ahead to assure Esau that he comes in peace & with great wealth.

- Of course his human confidence and demeanor is dampened when he hears that Esau is coming out to meet him with 400 men!

In fact our text said that he was “greatly afraid and distressed.” I would point out again that we must remember how the Apostle Paul teaches that these Old Testament Saints are given as our example!

Yes, we know we are to be anxious for nothing, but how often are we able to go forth from reading or thinking about that verse and quickly find ourselves afraid and distressed.

However, we also have his example with regard to doing better...

- Jacob responds to the perceived threat by taking steps to protect at least some of his family & wealth by dividing them into two camps.

And then we see that Jacob is truly a changed man as he finally turns to the Lord in prayer, addressing him as the God of Abraham & Isaac & reminding Him how He commanded Jacob to return, as he is now doing! He recognizes that all of his blessings have come from God as he says that he crossed the Jordan long ago with only his staff and now returns with two companies of people and wealth!

Jacob confesses that he is not worthy of the least of all the mercies and truth that he has been shown as God's servant. Again, this is our example and an important lesson we so often forget, because it is easiest to forget God at the very time that He is richly blessing us!

- Sadly, as with Jacob here, it is usually those trials and tribulations that bring us back to where we belong!

Jacob prays for deliverance from his brother Esau for the sake of his wives and children and then properly reminds God of His promises:

“12 For You said, ‘I will surely treat you well, and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.’”

- Here are important lessons for our prayer life: Be specific and claim the promises of God!
- And thus it is important to know & remember His promises!

When matters big or small are weighing us down we need to remember the promises so we can bring them to God's remembrance as Jacob did here. This is why we proclaim and we should all rejoice to hear the Good News each week after our confession of sin!

- God has promised to put our sins into the depths of the sea and that He would never leave us nor forsake us.
- Those are the promises we need when we are feeling wretched or alone!

God has promised to fill the earth with His Kingdom and to bring all the nations of the earth under the feet of Jesus...

- That should get us through any election season, whether it is our crazy presidential race or the local dog-catcher.

While world events can be overwhelming at times, we know that God knows where history is going! But we cannot just sit back and watch what happens! We must act as we see Jacob doing here!

The news of four hundred men coming with Esau brought distress; and prayer has now brought hope and thus Jacob is ready for action with the right perspective just as we should be as we are commissioned each week as the Body of Christ & each day individually as we are encouraged by God's Word.

And so our story continues...

“13 So [Jacob] lodged there that same night, and took what came to his hand as a present for Esau his brother: 14 two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, 15 thirty milk camels with their colts, forty cows & ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten foals.”

The man who left with only his staff returns with great wealth such that he can present all this to his brother...

- Truly God loves to bless His people!

Jacob then sends these gifts out with his servants in the hopes of winning Esau's favor...

- This is not a lack of faith on Jacob's part but rather a confident response to his time in prayer!

16 “Then he delivered them to the hand of his servants, every drove by itself, and said to his servants, “Pass over before me, and put some distance between successive droves.” 17 And he commanded the first one, saying, “When Esau my brother meets you and asks you, saying, ‘To whom do you belong, and where are you going? Whose are these in front of you?’ 18 then you shall say, ‘They are your servant Jacob’s. It is a present sent to my lord Esau; and behold, he also is behind us.’” 19 So he commanded the second, the third, and all who followed the droves, saying, “In this manner you shall speak to Esau when you find him; 20 and also say, ‘Behold, your servant Jacob is behind us.’” For he said, “I will appease him with the present that goes before me, and afterward I will see his face; perhaps he will accept me.”

Again we see quite a change here with Jacob: The brother who strove to make the decree of God come true by doing all he could to best his brother, by whatever means, is now willing to come as his brother’s servant, acknowledging him as the elder and trusting God for the ultimate outcome of who should serve whom.

- This was a very hard lesson for the disciples of Jesus to learn and it is often the same with us today.

Listen to how Jesus instructed the disciples who wanted the best spots...

Mark 10: “ But Jesus called them to Himself and said to them, “You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. 43 Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. 44 And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all.”

- This is now seen in the life of Jacob: The man whom God said would rule, now comes as the humble servant!
- Jacob left in arrogance and returns in humility.

You should begin to see my struggle with just how many sermons it could have taken to cover all these lessons...

- We see Jacob pray and then Jacob acts.
- We see Jacob sending gifts to his estranged brother which is a picture of how we send the Good News to a needy world.
- These images are all rich and very important in our lives!

But I must press on to what I think is the focal point of this chapter...

21 “So the present went on over before him, but he himself lodged that night in the camp. 22 And he arose that night and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven sons, and crossed over the ford of Jabbok. 23 He took them, sent them over the brook, and sent over what he had.”

- Jacob now prepares his family for the journey and as Jesus was that night in Gethsemane, he is now alone on the north shore of the river... But not for long!

24 “Then Jacob was left alone; and a Man wrestled with him until the breaking of day. 25 Now when He saw that He did not prevail against him, He touched the socket of his hip; and the socket of Jacob’s hip was out of joint as He wrestled with him. 26 And He said, “Let Me go, for the day breaks.” But [Jacob] said, “I will not let You go unless You bless me!” 27 So He said to him, “What is your name?” He said, “Jacob.” 28 And He said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed.” 29 Then Jacob asked, saying, “Tell me Your name, I pray.” And He said, “Why is it that you ask about My name?” And He blessed him there. 30 So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: “For I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.”

- So Jacob was alone and began to wrestle with a man...
- In the end we know that the man is the Angel of the Lord as Jacob confesses that he has seen God.

We have here another Old Testament appearance of the Son of God like where He walked with Daniel’s friends in the fiery furnace or visited with Abraham before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

We also know that this was a serious physical encounter because the term wrestle is the one used for a wrestling match. It is used seldom in the Scriptures with the Apostle Paul using it as a contrast to our spiritual battles in his Epistle to the Ephesians:

“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.”

- The only other place it is used is here in the life of Jacob, whose name remember means Supplanter.

Jacob’s mother used that term to describe what was going on in her womb as the twins wrestled and now we see Jacob wrestling with God.

- Of course we should see that this is where we get the idea of wrestling with God in prayer and it is a good & helpful way of thinking of prayer.

But there is much more here to see and it truly was the early Church fathers who give us insights here because they often saw the richness of the images that God uses in His Word. So let’s quickly consider what happened and how we should learn from it... And then I will let Ambrose the Bishop of Milan have the final word much as I did with the Apostle Paul on the truth of the resurrection at Easter!

- We do not know how late it was when this man came but we know that they wrestled until near daybreak.

The early fathers clearly saw the work of Jesus here and that is confirmed in my mind when Jacob is given his new name & a later reference made about this event by the Prophet Hosea. As we have journeyed through this Book of Beginnings we have tried to see Jesus and His work because that is what Jesus told the Pharisees and his own disciples should be found here the Old Testament Scriptures.

And here is one place where the early Fathers clearly did.

- They see Jacob representing the Jews who would ultimately strive with Jesus...
- And as Jacob did this night they would prevail!

Of course this is seen as the cross and the very purpose of God, as has to be the case here when we have a man prevailing over the Angel of God who can cripple him with a mere touch. And of course they see the end coming with the dawn when Jacob is allowed to hold the Angel no longer, just as the grave could no longer hold Jesus on that first Easter morning. And yes, just as Jacob demands a blessing, the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus becomes a blessing to many of Jacob’s descendants as we shall see again shortly in the season of Pentecost.

But our story draws to a close with a wounded Jacob:

“31 Just as [Jacob] crossed over Penuel the sun rose on him, and he limped on his hip. 32 Therefore to this day the children of Israel do not eat the muscle that shrank, which is on the hip socket, because He touched the socket of Jacob’s hip in the muscle that shrank.”

Yes there was a blessing for Jacob and one day many in Israel! And yet there was also a reminder of their great sin in crucifying the Savior which led to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD70.

Thus while we have no command of this remembrance in the food laws, it was a tradition that remembered an important event that the Prophet Hosea refers back to as he prepares a rebellious Israel to meet their Messiah.

Hosea 12:2 “Jehovah also brings a charge against Judah, And will punish Jacob according to his ways; According to his deeds He will recompense him. 3 He took his brother by the heel in the womb, And in his strength he struggled with God. 4 Yes, he struggled with the Angel and prevailed; He wept, and sought favor from Him. He found Him in Bethel, And there He spoke to us— 5 That is, Jehovah God of hosts. Jehovah is His memorable name. 6 So you, by the help of your God, return; Observe mercy and justice, And wait on your God continually.”

Just as Jacob struggled here and was both wounded and blessed so the nation that would come from his loins would be wounded and blessed with the coming of the Messiah! We rejoice with the thousands saved at Pentecost and the conversion of many Jews later in the Book of Acts, but we also know that judgment was also coming in that generation in AD 70.

- **Now it is interesting that the blessing that Jacob receives here is a new name!**

Jacob is now Israel: He goes from the Supplanter to the prince with God!

Now a few months ago I made mention of the interesting fact that when Abram is given his new name by God we never see his old name used again and yet with Jacob both names can be found in the Scriptures in many places. Well, I think this event gives us the insight we need to see why: Abram is treated by the Apostle Paul and others as the father of our faith and thus the old man is left behind.

On the other hand, as we saw with the Prophet Hosea, Jacob is seen as the nation of Israel which of course comes from his new name. This chosen nation would at times be the old Supplanter and at times the prince with God. They would play a major role in God's grand story of salvation which is why the Apostle Paul in Romans nine can say they were those, "to whom pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises; 5 of whom are the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God. Amen."

So yes the Messiah came through Israel just as God promised, but Israel would also strive with God and in the end prevail with the crucifixion of the Lord of Glory, their own Messiah. I think this helps us understand why both names continued to be used. It was also a truth seen clearly in the early church...

- **So as I promised I want to give the final word on this important event to Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan who summarized it this way:**

"Therefore Jacob, who had purified his heart of all pretenses and was manifesting a peaceable disposition, first cast off all that was his, then remained behind alone and wrestled with God. For whoever forsakes worldly things comes nearer to the image and likeness of God. What is it to wrestle with God other than to enter in upon the struggle for virtue, to contend with one who is stranger and to become a better imitator of God than the others are? Because Jacob's faith and devotion were unconquerable, the Lord revealed his hidden mysteries to him by touching the side of his thigh. For it was by descent from him that the Lord Jesus was to be born of a virgin, and Jesus would be neither unlike nor unequal to God. The numbness in the side of Jacob's thigh foreshadowed the cross of Christ, who would bring salvation to all people by spreading the forgiveness of sins throughout the whole world and would give resurrection to the departed by the numbness of torpidity of his own body. On this account the sun rightly rose on holy Jacob, for the saving cross of the Lord shone brightly on his lineage. And at the same time the Sun of Justice rises on the person who recognizes God, because he is himself the everlasting light."

And that confidence is reflected in a song that has become one of our favorites and perhaps a bit too familiar so that we forget to actually hear and meditate on the words we are singing: "This cornerstone, this solid ground firm through the fiercest drought or storm. What height of love what depths of peace, when fears are stilled, when strivings cease! My comforter, my all in all, here in the love of Christ I stand!"

Communion Meditation: Hosea 12

"4 Yes, he struggled with the Angel and prevailed; He wept, and sought favor from Him. He found Him in Bethel, And there He spoke to us— 5 That is, Jehovah God of hosts. Jehovah is His memorable name. 6 So you, by the help of your God, return; Observe mercy and justice, And wait on your God continually."