

Wrestling with God

Michael Coffey, Adult Generation Pastor

July 12, 2015

Some people seem to come into this world just to irritate and take advantage of others.

They're takers rather than givers – Jacob one of these

Name of Jacob literally means “grasps at the heel;” often translated as “deceiver.” Why put such a moniker on a baby??? – Inquiry while twins fighting in womb; younger serving older (adverse to Middle Eastern mindset/worldview)

History proved the correctness of both names (Esau – red, outdoorsman, earthly, profane, spiritually insensitive... and Jacob – wily, conniving, self-confident BUT capable of spiritual insight). Proof? – Esau despised his birthright and Jacob obtained it; Jacob exploited Esau and later tricked his father to take Esau's blessings also.

Esau threatens to kill Jacob so he flees, lives with his uncle (his mother's brother) and begins a contest of wiles and will with someone as devious and manipulating as himself. Laban makes him work for 7 years in order to receive Rachel as his wife; but tricks him on the wedding day and substitutes Leah, Rachel's older sister, thus necessitating Jacob to agree to more years of servitude in order to get Rachel as his wife. Laban continues to defraud and take advantage of him through the flocks, but God blesses Jacob with many children and great herds and wealth. Finally, the family tension becomes so great that Jacob decides to return to his home, the land of promise and sets out with his wives, children, servants and animals.

In Genesis 32 – Jacob is heading home, following a final confrontation with Laban, to face a brother who he tricked and outsmarted, and who said he planned to kill him when the opportunity presented itself. 20 years for smoldering resentments of past hurts and wrongs to fester and grow, so Jacob is rightfully afraid and worried.

He sends gifts of goods and livestock ahead of him in groups, in a Middle Eastern gesture of a subordinate offering gifts to a superior. Not convinced that these gifts will placate Esau's anger, he splits his family into groups and sends them ahead also. He's between the proverbial rock and hard place – he's burned his relationship bridges with his brother decades ago, and with his uncle for the last two decades. It's time to face the music of what his scheming, wiles, trickery and deception have yielded, so he's trying to curry favor, even willing to offer his wives and children as the buffer between himself and danger. His basic nature, which he has relied upon all these years is still unchanged – trust in his own resources; his wits; his plans and schemes, his craftiness. God knows that and plans to meet him in Chapter 32. (many of you are modern day Jacobs – lip service and weekly attendance, but when life becomes hard, dangerous or frightening, you still believe your own wits and cunning are your best tools or chance – whether it is over career progression, kids, marriage, whatever... if life throws you a curve ball, your immediate reaction is to raise the same human strengths or skills that you've trusted in the past).

Genesis 32: 22-32

SLIDE Who is the man? The text says that after Jacob sent the gifts, later that night he sent his family, but he remained behind, all alone. Vs. 24 simply says SLIDE “So Jacob was left alone and a man wrestled with him till daybreak.” This God, appearing as a man, a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ, the 2nd person of the Trinity, to confront Jacob. How do we know this? Vs. 30, Jacob says, after wrestling with the man all night, SLIDE “I have seen God face to face and am still alive.” SLIDE A corollary passage in the book of Hosea agrees: “Their ancestor Jacob struggled with his twin brother Esau while the two of them were still in their mother’s womb; when Jacob grew up, he fought against God – he fought against an angel and won. He wept and asked for a blessing.” (Hosea 12:3-4)

SLIDE – Why would God Pick this Fight? Jacob’s in a tough place. Behind him laid his past struggles and deceptions with his early family; his angry manipulation battles with his uncle Laban – and before him lay a probable angry or deadly confrontation with his older brother. GOD SEEMS TO PICK THIS EXACT CRISIS MOMENT TO CONFRONT JACOB WITH THE FACT THAT ALL THESE PARALLEL STRUGGLES AND CONFLICTS HAVE A CONNECTENESS WITH HIS REAL STRUGGLE – HIS LIFEFLONG STRUGGLE WITH TRUSTING GOD.

God is the initiator in of this conflict or wrestling match. That’s a powerful statement! How did God approach him that night? Did He speak or did they simply begin the struggle upon seeing one another? The text doesn’t say. However the struggle began, God came looking for Jacob.

SLIDE- Can a Human Fight God to a Draw? It seems inconceivable to ask if a man could fight God to a draw? How could such thing be possible? The “man” always had the ability to disable Jacob – at any moment. When dawn came and God wished to leave, He simply touched Jacob’s hip and it immediately wrenched out of joint. Now if God could have ended the struggle at any moment of His choosing, why did He allow it to continue until dawn? I WOULD SUGGEST THAT THE STRUGGLE WAS NECESSARY FOR THE GROWTH OF JACOB.

- The Lord wrestled and persevered with Jacob for the entire night until Jacob was exhausted
- The Lord “allowed” the give and take struggle to last
- Jacob needed to reach the point where his human strength failed and then the Lord could break through what had been a lifetime of strong will, sinful nature and manipulative actions.
- At the moment of Jacob’s exhaustion, God touched his hip and (dislocating it) Jacob , finally spent, saw some eternal truths for the first time in his life

SLIDE – You could try harder in your own strength, but you will still fail;

-You cannot prevail against God and His ultimate will;

- God can choose to prop you up during your struggle or can defeat you instantly;
- God is superior to all living creatures;
- God is good, willing to come to us and willing to bless us

Remember, there had been previous times when Jacob had worshipped God, prayed to Him and worshipped Him and hoped in the Lord. MANY PEOPLE KNOW THE RIGHT WORDS AND PERFORM CORRECT RELIGIOUS ACTIONS, BUT HAVE NOT GIVEN THEMSELVES TO THE LORD. A CRISIS MOMENT, THEY STILL BELIEVE THAT THEY THEMSELVES ARE THEIR OWN BEST OPTION.

God asks us to offer our hearts and our lives to Him as a living sacrifice (Rom 12:1-2). So many people have a superficial faith, and don't know that they have any other option about how to live their faith.

A crisis, especially a God-initiated crisis, forces us to grapple with our faith and our true feelings. God provoked the crisis in order to bring Jacob to a new level of faith. When the broken and spent Jacob called out to God for a blessing, a wall of resistance had finally been broken; a life changing insight had been gleaned; a newfound need and trust had been planted.

Jacob knows he's exhausted; he's hurt and he's even more helpless than when the night first started. His need for God and faith in God had never been more genuine. God wanted Jacob's heart – HE WANTS THE SAME FROM US.

SLIDE-Why Does God Ask Jacob for His Name?

Do you find it strange that God asked Jacob for his name? God had sought Jacob during this night of isolation and initiated the struggle. He obviously knew who Jacob was? Why did He ask him for his name?

Ravi Zacharias' explanation of this moment is brilliantly insightful: "Think of all that God could have said by way of reprimand. Instead He merely asks for Jacob's name. God's purpose in raising this question contains a lesson for all of us, a question too profound to ignore. In fact, it dramatically altered Old Testament history. In asking for the blessing from God, Jacob was compelled by God's question to relive the last time he had asked for a blessing, the one he had stolen from his brother. The last time Jacob was asked his name, it had come from his earthly father whom he was deceiving to steal a brother's blessing. Jacob had lied then brazenly saying, "I am Esau." Now he found himself, after many wasted years of running through life looking over his shoulder, before an all-knowing, all-seeing heavenly Father, once more seeking a blessing. Jacob fully understood the reason and the indictment behind God's question and he answered, 'My name is Jacob.' 'You have spoken the truth,' God said, 'and you know very well what your name signifies. You have been a duplicitous man, deceiving everyone everywhere you went. But now that you acknowledge the REAL you, I can change you, and I will make a great nation out of you.' Greatness in the eyes of God is always preceded by humility before Him. There is no way for you or me or anyone else to attain greatness until we have come to Him."

THIS IS A KEY MOMENT IN ALL OUR LIVES

- It is the moment we finally stop trusting in ourselves and our talents, our strength, our experience, knowledge, heritage or whatever we use as props in this harsh world;
- It is the moment we realize we need God – and that we must cling to Him for any hope of future of eternal significance

At the end of the struggle, God gives Jacob a new name, Israel which means "God fights" or "He struggles with God" or "God Prevails." For many of you, who became Christians, maybe early in life, you've exhausted yourself and your own strength trying to live a supernatural life that only Christ can give and empower. You've failed and failed and it's time to encounter God and His promise of abundant living through His power NOT your own. It's time to change your name from Christian to Disciple.

SLIDE – How Do We Apply This Story to Our Lives?

First, recognize that your current struggle has not caught God by surprise and that He may in fact be orchestrating this crisis moment in your life to produce change in you. When do many people struggle with God?

- When a loved one dies;
- When defenseless babies or little children suffer or pass too quickly;
- When a spouse changes or leaves; when an engagement is broken or love is unrequited;
- When illness comes and replaces health;
- When the unimaginable happens to you or someone you love;
- When the career and life plans halt, reverse or come crashing off the rails;
- When nature or finances or life is frighteningly out of control;

A crisis can bring us to insights we would never have without it. It can bring us to a decision we would have never made otherwise. It can force evaluations of ourselves and our lives we would have wasted years without doing otherwise.

A second way of applying this story to our lives is to recognize that the greatest problem we face in life is NOT our circumstances – but our heart. Jacob felt his whole life had been one of striving and struggling. What he didn't realize was that the real battle was found in his heart, not outside of it. It is the same struggle or question that all of us must wrestle with and answer: Who will be in charge of my life?

Like so many unbelievers and believers today, Jacob wanted God's blessing, BUT did not want God's ownership of his life. He wanted God to save and protect him, but did not want to submit to God for daily living. Jacob had a superficial faith – wanting blessings and benefits, but no real relationship with God.

Crises will hopefully open our eyes to see the greatest need we have is not deliverance from the hard circumstance... but deliverance from ourselves. GK Chesterton once read an article in the London Times that asked the question, "What is Wrong With the World?" He took a sheet of paper and wrote two words: "I am."

Third, we apply to our lives the story of Jacob with God when we recognize that God pursues us, even while we resist Him. God cared about Jacob and He cares for you. He came looking for Jacob and even wrestled Him until he changed. He's willing to do the same for me and for you.

God IS with us during our crises. CS Lewis once wrote, "Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, BUT shouts in our pain. It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world." He allows pain in our lives in the hope that we will hear Him and respond. If we've been unwise, like Jacob, maybe for many, many years... then wrestling with God may prove to be one of the wisest things we've ever done or could do.