

JACOB WRESTLES WITH GOD

Genesis 32:1-33:11

Lesson 14a

Key Verse 32:28

"Then the man said, 'Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome.'"

1. Jacob's struggle with men

Jacob was a man of struggle. His struggle began in the womb; he was born clutching his twin brother's heel. He was not satisfied with the number 2 position. He wanted to be number 1. He waited for an opportunity. Then one day, when Esau was hungry, Jacob offered him a bowl of bean soup in exchange for his birthright. Esau's philosophy was, "You can't eat a birthright!" A little later, Jacob deceived his brother and his blind father and received the blessing of the first born. It was a costly victory. Esau was angry and vowed to kill him, so he had to leave home. He fled for his life to Paddan Aram, his mother's home. As he set out, he met God and God turned his escape into a pilgrimage. In Paddan Aram, he struggled with his uncle Laban for 20 years. First, he struggled for the sake of a woman. It took him 14 years, but he worked and waited and won. He married Rachel. In the course of his struggle, God blessed him with not only Rachel, but with 4 wives and 11 sons. Second, he struggled for wealth. He worked hard and used all his skill, but still he would have failed. But God protected and blessed him and he won. Again, victory was costly. He had to leave Paddan Aram. He fled, but his father-in-law caught him. But God was with him and Laban let him go peacefully. So Jacob left behind him his angry father-in-law and former employer and continued his pilgrimage back to Canaan and his father's house. God was working in these events to train Jacob and to bring him back to the land God had given his forefathers. More than this, God was waiting for the opportunity to change Jacob into a spiritual man. Jacob had struggled with man and won. Now he had to struggle with God.

2. The God of Mahanaim (32:1-21)

As Jacob drew near his home country, he began to think about the 20-year old unsolved problem he had left behind him. Soon he must face Esau, the brother who he had deceived and from whom he had fled--the brother who had vowed to kill him. Jacob's past had caught up with him. He had struggled and gotten everything he wanted. But he had no peace. His heart was full of fear. He feared for his life. He feared that he would lose everything he had worked to get--his family and his wealth. Success and human achievement had not prepared him to meet Esau. His success only brought him fear, distress and anxiety. He couldn't go back, because angry Laban was behind him. He was trapped by the fruit of his own sins.

As he went on his way, God tried to relieve his fears. 32:1 says, "Jacob also went on his way, and the angels of God met him." God had promised to be with Jacob, and he had sent an army of angels to remind Jacob of this. But Jacob was too preoccupied with his own problem to realize what it meant that an army of God's angels was with him. He saw them and commented, "This is the camp of God!" And he named the place where he met the army of angels, "Mahanaim" which means "two camps." It was the time to remember God's grace and claim God's promises, but he clung to his fear, and, as he drew nearer and nearer to Esau, his fear grew bigger and bigger.

Fear is a terrible thing. It is a tool of the devil. Hebrews 2:14 tells us that the devil holds men in slavery by fear--fear of death. Fear is the opposite of faith. Once Jesus rebuked his disciples who were trembling in fear

because of a storm, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" (Mk 4:40) If one's heart is full of fear, he can have no peace. Many people in our violent and corrupt world are full of vague fears.

Jacob began to calculate. He sent messengers to Esau announcing his arrival, and asking for Esau's favor. When the messengers returned, they told Jacob that his brother Esau was coming to meet him with 400 men.

There was nothing in the messenger's report to indicate that Esau and his 400 men had hostile intentions, but Jacob immediately interpreted this as a hostile action. Jacob's fear convinced him that Esau wanted to kill him. He was terrified. He knew that he and his family and possessions were extremely vulnerable; he had many women and children and slow-moving flocks and herds. How could he defend himself and all of these?

Verse 7 says, "In great fear and distress Jacob divided the people who were with him into two groups, and the flocks and herds and camels as well. He thought, 'If Esau comes and attacks one group, the group that is left may escape.'" He was planning to save something in the event of an attack.

Then he prayed. Jacob's prayer is in verses 9-12. He prayed to the God of Abraham and Isaac, to the God who had commanded him to return to his own country and relatives, and who had promised to make him prosper. He acknowledged God's great grace in his life. Verse 10 says, "I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two groups." Then he got to the main point in his prayer: "Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid that he will come and attack me..." He again reminded God of his promise to make him prosper and make his descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted. How could he have many descendants if "the mothers with their children" were attacked and killed?

After praying, Jacob was still restless. He had no peace. He was full of anxiety. So he sent a gift to Esau. It was an expensive gift of goats and sheep, camels and donkeys. These were sent in three groups, and the servants attending the animals were to announce, when asked, that these animals were a present from Jacob to Esau. Jacob's purpose is clear; verse 20b says, "For he thought, 'I will pacify him with these gifts I am sending on ahead; later, when I see him, perhaps he will receive me.'"

Even sending the expensive gifts to Esau did not bring peace to Jacob's troubled, anxious heart. Man's basic life problem is not solved by compromise. Jacob had to meet God. He had to be changed in his inner man. That night he slept in the camp. But in the middle of the night, he got up and moved his family across the river. He also sent all of his possessions across. That night, Jacob remained alone. He was without his family and without his worldly possessions. Everyone must meet God alone. We cannot depend on anyone or anything.

3. The God of Peniel (Jacob struggles with God) (32:22-31)

That night Jacob wrestled with God. He would not give up. Even when his hip was thrown out of joint, he held on. He said, "I will not let go until you bless me." Jacob had everything. What blessing could he want? He wanted peace. He wanted freedom from fear. He wanted a spiritual blessing.

Toward the end of his life, Jacob confessed that man's life is a pilgrimage (47:9) This is a precious truth. Even though we work hard and live well, we must not forget that man's life is a pilgrimage. We must also remember that we need God's blessing. No matter how hard we work, without God's blessing our lives are empty and miserable. Jacob knew that though he had worked hard, he had succeeded because of God's blessing. Now he wanted a spiritual blessing. He wanted God's living presence in his life. He wanted to be a spiritual man.

Finally, when Jacob refused to let go, even at daybreak, after his hip was injured, the Lord asked his name. He said, "My name is Jacob"--the deceiver. God helped Jacob to discover himself. For the first time he saw himself as a selfish deceiver. Jacob was ready for a new name and a changed character. God gave him a new name--Israel. Israel means "one who struggles with God." One who struggles with men becomes proud and fearful if he wins; he

despairs if he loses. But one who struggles with God lives life on a different level. Not only was Jacob's name changed; his inner life and character were also changed. He began a new life as a spiritual man. He walked with a limp, but his face was shining, and he named that place Peniel, the face of God.

4. The meeting with Esau (33:1-11)

Then the dreaded moment came. Jacob looked up and there was Esau coming with his 400 men (33:1). He arranged his family with Joseph and Rachel in the most protected place, and he went ahead and bowed to the ground as he approached his brother. The meeting turned out to be an anti-climax. Esau had forgotten all about his grudge against Jacob. Jacob looked at Esau's smiling face and said, "Seeing your face is like seeing the face of God." He knew that the resolution of his life problem was an act of God and a direct answer to prayer. Often the things we fear and dread most become like a morning mist when we commit them to God in prayer.