

Waiting and Wrestling - Kevin Miller, 30 minutes, **Genesis 32:1-32** (#522)

Introduction: As each year goes by and I learn more about the Lord and about people, I'm increasingly convinced that we are shaped more by our struggles, and even our failures, than by our victories. Our successes rarely stem from our own skill or wisdom, which means that there often isn't as much to learn from them as from our failures – from those times when we can look back and see how we've messed up; when we have cried out to the Lord to help us endure; or when we've been through a difficult season of life and had to rely upon the body of Christ in ways that we hadn't before.

This thought isn't original to me, of course. Isn't it James' point, when he writes: "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing"? The reality is that you and I need to be challenged, we need to be pushed and made uncomfortable, we need to change – those are the means that God normally uses to grow us: to deepen our dependence upon Him, to reinforce our trust in Jesus, and to refine us into followers of Christ. Christians who try to avoid hardship often find that when tough times come – and they do, for all of us – then they don't have the roots of endurance that they'll need to faithfully weather the storm.

I bring all of this up because we are going to see a different Jacob in this chapter. He's a Jacob with a past – he has plenty of baggage, after all. Yet, he's also a Jacob who has been directly changed by God – a Jacob who has grown into the promises that God has given to him and his descendants. If Jacob's past has changed him, then we'll learn today that this same past will also be used by the Lord to continue to refine this imperfect follower of God. And that, dear friends, is a lesson we all could use. Let's see it for ourselves in **Genesis 32**...

32:1-8 Finally, Jacob is free of Laban. In fact, we won't read anything more of Laban personally. There are only a few other references to him past this point in Genesis, and all of those references are pointing back to **chapter 31** and before. A new page has turned in Jacob's life. But then again, it's a new page returning to an unresolved situation: Laban may be dealt with, but what about Esau? When last we

read of him, Esau was scheming for a way to kill Jacob. Now Jacob is returning home. Is Esau sharpening the knives, as it were; just waiting for Jacob to appear over the horizon so that he can finally exact his revenge?

Jacob does something quite wise in **verse 3**. Whereas a less confident man might try to sneak back home, either avoiding confrontation entirely or at least seeking to put it off as long as possible, Jacob takes the opposite tack. He sends messengers directly to Esau with a message couched in the most humble of terms. That message? Jacob is returning home, and he wants Esau's favor.

Now that's nice, isn't it? Good job, Jacob! But, it doesn't seem to work, does it? That's a lesson for us all: doing the right thing, the wise thing, acting according to what the Bible commands, is no guarantee of a problem-free life. Just look at the apostles and the early church: though imperfect, their faithfulness shined forth in all kinds of ways and situations. Yet – don't miss this – they were always in some kind of trouble or trial. Let me offer that to you as well: don't buy into our culture's idea that "being good" or "doing the right thing" will somehow make your life smooth sailing. The Book of Proverbs indicates that your life will indeed go better than otherwise, but nowhere are you or I promised ease if only we would obey the right commandments and apply ourselves to the right actions. Jacob is growing, but he still has a past to reckon with. Which is what we see here...

The messengers return and the news seems bad: Esau is on the way and there are four hundred men with him! I've sometimes said that if you see me dressed up in a suit and tie, either something really hard has happened – a funeral – or something really great: a wedding. So it is here with Esau: either this is a wonderful welcome-home gathering, or it's a small army about to bring the hurt to Jacob.

For Jacob's part, he assumes the worst – and who wouldn't, given how things were left off? He immediately starts to strategize, a bit like a military commander: if he can divide his flocks and his people, then at least Esau can't get at everyone.

Before we keep reading, ask yourself what you would do. You're not perfect; neither am I. Perhaps it's a family get-together, where you all haven't gathered since before COVID and things weren't left on a good note. You've tried to make

amends, but is anything really better? Or maybe you are returning to a job that you've been absent from for awhile now, and you know the boss wasn't thrilled with you even before you ducked out. I'm sure you can imagine all kinds of situations that aren't too different from Jacob's. Hopefully, you've done the wise thing and tried your best to set relationships on solid ground, or – barring that – to give them a complete reset. But what if it doesn't seem to be working? What if you are faced not with the welcome arms of four hundred people, but with an army dead set against you? That's Jacob's situation – let's see what happens...

32:9-12 So what does Jacob do? He prays. This is a very different prayer than we might expect from Jacob. Whereas previously, his praying seemed more like bargaining with God, now – here – we find the sort of prayer that results from being changed by the Lord. Jacob prays, recounting how God Himself commanded him to go on this journey. Indeed, how God had promised that Jacob would return home someday. Now Jacob is on the way, and it looks like his life will be forfeit. He tells God the situation – not because the Lord doesn't know but because Jacob is simply being honest in every respect. And then he makes his request in **verse 11**: “deliver me!” But Jacob's prayer doesn't stop there. Notice also **verse 12**: Jacob's request isn't just “God, don't let my life be hard... don't make me go through this trial...” but instead it is a reminder to the Lord of the very promises that He made to Jacob. Promises to do good to him and to multiply his family line.

Isn't this how you and I should respond? Shouldn't we be in prayer, on our knees, before our Holy God? Too often our prayers fall short of this (at least mine sometimes do!) – they fall into the trap of asking the Lord to bless our own efforts, our own strategies, rather than simply asking God Himself to work things out. Too often, our prayers come from a setting where we think we are in the right and that God is somehow wronging us if He lets trial or hardship come our way. And too often we forget to pray according to what the Lord Himself has said.

So, what are you and I to do in situations like these? Start by calling out to the Lord. Not last, but first. We are already depending upon Christ's work to save us, why would we think that God would care any less for the other things that happen throughout our lives?

Next, bring praise to the Lord. Not in an effort to butter Him up – never try to manipulate God! – but instead out of a genuine recognition that whatever situation you may be facing, God has genuinely been good to you. If you are in Christ, you have the promise of salvation, and therefore God has already been better to you than you’ll ever deserve. Thank Him for that.

Third, bring your request to the Lord. You don’t need to hem and haw, just bring it to Him, state what you need. Not because He doesn’t know, but because you are His child and children bring their needs to their loving Father.

Last, pray according to what the Lord has said. In Jacob’s case, it was what God told him directly. In yours and mine, it is what has been preserved for us in the Word. For example: are you worried about our church? About families who have drifted away? About unresolved situations? About finances? About how our church will cope in an increasingly hostile world? Pray for the leadership and I, of course. Pray for all those sitting here in the pews. But most of all, pray according to what our Lord has said: “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (**Matthew 16:18**). It’s Christ’s church – not yours, not mine!

We have a disciple-being and a disciple-making role to play, but that only happens according to Christ’s power and work. If Jesus does not do the work, if He does not build His church, if He does not sustain and preserve His people through trial and hardship, through lean and plenty, then I guarantee you that no wise ministry strategy, no amount of money, staff, buildings, or committed volunteers – nothing we can humanly do – will amount to anything worthwhile. Jesus is in charge. And so, when we pray, we pray with examples like these: “Ok Lord, you said you’d build your church. You do the work. Do it through me and around me and in spite of me, but you do the work. Help me to trust you as I wait. Help me to know what my response ought to look like. Thank you for your promises that will prove true even when I can’t see how.” That’s the prayer of faith and that’s what we see from Jacob in these verses.

Yet, as crucial as this kind of praying is, the story isn’t over for Jacob...

32:13-21 So great is Jacob's concern, that even right there in the night he sends a fairly massive present to Esau. He hopes to placate him, to somehow turn Esau aside from what seems to be the obvious slaughter that is coming. The servants are to go ahead with groupings of this present, becoming something like a progressive Christmas for Esau: presents coming continually, all in an effort to turn aside what Jacob sees as inevitable.

Which brings up a question: Jacob prayed to the Lord, he is trusting in God's promises, what's he doing with all this gift-giving? Isn't this evidence that he doesn't really believe? If God has it all under control, then shouldn't Jacob just be able to sit by and wait for the Lord to miraculously turn things around?

Dear church, don't confuse faithfulness with passivity. "Let go and let God" is not a phrase found in the Bible. It's true that the Lord is sovereignly in control of all things, but notice that nobody who trusts Him in the Scriptures takes that to mean that they should sit idly by, twiddling their thumbs. They may have an active role to play, or perhaps they are simply to wait – but both are far from being passive. I think that waiting can sometimes be the hardest work there is, at least if we are faithful in it. Let's think about prayer for a moment: there's no point in praying if you don't actually believe God is in control. Yet, if you do believe He is in control and knows all things – including your very prayers before you say them – you still pray because that is how you express your trust and dependence on the Lord. And then you act in the wisest and best ways that you know how, which is what Jacob does here. Nothing that he does contradicts anything he prayed. What if, in God's sovereign plans, Jacob's gifts are what the Lord intended so that Esau's mind would be changed? Jacob's actions are those of a man committed to the Lord, trusting the Lord, and acting in the best way that he knows how.

Let's keep reading and see where all of this ends up...

32:22-32 During the night, Jacob sends his family across the river, leaving him alone, and it is then that we get the famous story of a man coming and wrestling with him in the night. There are, of course, many explanations and theories as to who and what is happening, but let's just stick with the text – God will tell us

everything we need to know, even if He doesn't choose to reveal the answer to every question and curiosity we might have.

The wrestling happens until the break of day, and it – at first – appears to be a fairly even match, with neither the mysterious man nor Jacob the “heel grabber” winning outright. As day breaks, the mysterious man touches Jacob's hip socket – and apparently a touch is all it takes! – putting it out of joint. He tells Jacob to let him go – the night is over, the match is done. Jacob, for his part, recognizes something vital: this isn't just some random stranger who is out for a bit of sport! No, this is somebody who can bless him – somebody supernatural.

The man asks Jacob his name, which is important for the contrast: Jacob will go from being the “heel grabber” to being Israel – a play on the Hebrew for “He strives with God.” Isn't that a great summary of Jacob's life, by the way? In response, he asks the stranger's name, but doesn't get it, which I take to mean something like: “Really? You are asking my name? Isn't it obvious?” Before leaving, the stranger blesses Jacob, just as was asked. For his part, Jacob gives a name to this barren place: Peniel, “the face of God.” He then limps forward into the new day, and we are treated to a historical note, which shows us that **Genesis** was written to instruct God's people about what had happened even before they came on the scene. Isn't God good to preserve these truths down through time?

To know the Lord is to be changed – that's probably obvious. But oftentimes the change involves more than you might have thought. Sometimes the change you need is to not only be called out, but to be marked out as well: to walk with a limp as an ever-present reminder that the Lord will care for you, and that you are constantly in need of His daily grace and mercy. This is, after all, what Paul himself wrote of in **2 Corinthians 12**: “Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness’.” We need weakness, we need humility, if we are to depend upon the strength of our Savior who has done the work of living, dying, rising and – soon – returning. So let's boast of our weakness in order to boast of Christ's power: His power to deliver us, to sustain us, and to see us safely into our heavenly home alongside our King and Savior...