**JACOB WRESTLES WITH GOD**

May 20, 2018

Genesis 32:1-35:15

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.”

Jacob was a man of struggle. His struggle began in the womb; he was born grasping 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 lentil 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. We are all like Jacob in many ways. We struggle like him to obtain the perishing things of this world, because this is the characteristic of sinful men. But God waits patiently for each one of us to repent of our sins and to struggle with him and to grow on a higher plane into spiritual men and women.

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. Verse 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. God was saying to Jacob, “Look, Jacob! I am right here with you. Trust in me. Just trust in me. Don’t be afraid!” 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?

The Bible tells us that the man who fears God, there will be no fear. Psalm 112:7-8 says about the man who fears God, “He will have no fear of bad news; his heart is steadfast, trusting in the Lord. His heart is secure, he will have no fear…” But Jacob did not fear God or trust in God at this time. Jacob did not want to surrender himself to God’s help. Just as he held onto Esau’s heel as he was born, he was holding onto his material possessions, wives and children, instead of holding onto God. He became very nervous and made a plan to divide the people who were with him into two groups and the flocks and camels as well. He calculated and said, “If Esau comes and attacks one group, the group that is left may escape.” It looked like a good plan, but it gave him no real peace. So what did he do?

He made a 911 emergency prayer to God. 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? From his prayer, we see that Jacob grew in his faith through 20 years of training. 20 years ago when he made his vow, he did not mention any of God’s promises. He was not interested in God’s covenants. But now look at his prayer. His prayer is still very selfish. However, he is praying based on God’s promises. He thanked God for his grace in his life.

After praying, Jacob was still restless. He had no peace. He was full of anxiety. So he sent a gift to Esau. It was a very 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.

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 unless you bless me.” Jacob had everything. What blessing could he want? He wanted peace. He wanted freedom from fear. He wanted to be free from guilt. He wanted a spiritual blessing. Usually a wrestling match lasts about ten minutes. This is because it is very exhausting to both opponents and one has the chance to get hurt. But Jacob wrestled all night until the sun could be seen rising in the eastern sky. From this wrestling match we can see clearly that Jacob is someone that does not give up too easily. 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 found peace through the forgiveness of sins. He walked with a limp, but his face was shining, and he named that place Peniel, the face of God. Jacob had struggled with men and had won. Though he had won, he was not really victorious, but only burdened with sin. Now his life would be different as he struggled with God. God said that he had struggled with God and had overcome. Had Jacob beaten God? Had he outwrestled God? No. Jacob lost the physical battle, but he won the victory. He learned to triumph through defeat and to be strong through weakness. Here we also learn God’s amazing love for Jacob. He let Jacob struggle with him all night and lay out all his fear and trouble on him. In this way, they grew closer just as father and son grow closer through wrestling together. God invites us to struggle with him and lay out all our fear and trouble on him. We will know God better through our struggle with him.

But notice that even though his name was changed, he was continued to be called Jacob. It means that his inner heart was not really changed. He had God’s peace in his heart--perhaps for the first time in his life. Then he suddenly became tired of wandering and tired of struggling with men. He forgot about his holy pilgrimage and the calling God had given him to be a patriarch of faith and a blessing to all people. He forgot about the blessing of Abraham and his inheritance in Canaan; he forgot about his own promise to return to his father’s house and worship God at Bethel. He took God’s blessings with a firm hold, but he only wanted to use them for himself. He camped within sight of the city of Shechem; then, he bought the land. He planned to settle down there in Sukkoth. Does this remind you of Lot? Many people become nominal Christians because they receive God’s blessings and want to sit down and enjoy their peaceful and blessed lives. However, God blesses us so that we can be a blessing to others. He calls us into his redemptive history so that he can use us in his great task of evangelizing the world in our time. He wants us to remember our promises and keep them. We must travel the pilgrim road by faith from first to last, until we reach our destination, the kingdom of God, and claim the inheritance God is keeping for us in heaven.

God did not bless him at Sukkoth. Something terrible happened that made it impossible for him to remain there. Chapter 34 tells the story of the tragic involvement of Dinah, Jacob’s only daughter, with Prince Shechem. It was not pleasing to God for Jacob to make a treaty with the

people of the land and intermarry with them. Had he done this, he would have compromised his faith and lost the covenant blessing. So God used this tragedy to push him to complete his journey back to Bethel.

God came to Jacob when he was in danger of being annihilated by the people of the land. He said in 35:1, “Go up to Bethel and settle there, and build an altar there to God who appeared to you when you were fleeing from your brother Esau.” God reminded Jacob of his vow. He reminded him of his protection. Jacob accepted God’s word and repented--for the first time. He ordered his household to get rid of the foreign gods and purify themselves. He said, “Let us go up to Bethel, where I will build an altar to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and who has been with me wherever I have gone.” He remembered God’s grace. When he set out for Bethel, the terror of God fell on the people of the land and no one pursued him. God’s hand of protection was on him.

Jacob arrived in Bethel and God again appeared to him and blessed him. God said, “Your name is Jacob, but you will no longer be called Jacob; your name will be Israel.” God renewed the covenant promises which he had made to Abraham. Jacob set up a stone pillar there at Bethel. He remembered this personal meeting with God in this place where he had first met God and

made a vow. God held on to that vow and for 20 years he had been with Jacob to bless him and train him and bring him back to that place. But he was not the Jacob who left; he had become a new man. He had become Israel, a man who struggles with God. His life and faith had been

self-centered. Now he worshipped the God of Bethel--El Bethel. He had become a God-centered man.

May God help us to meet God personally and struggle with him in prayer so that we may grow as spiritual men and women, and have peace and sense of victory in our hearts.