



## Part 64 – The Glorious Defeat

### Genesis 32:1-32

The events described in this passage represent yet another turning point in the life of Jacob. His determination to be reconciled to his brother and subsequent encounter with God are revealing moments, both in the life of a human being but also in the history of redemption. Though we will not have the same sort of experience

as Jacob did that fateful night by the River Jabbok, we certainly need the same realization concerning ourselves, our sin, and our God. “In Jacob’s pilgrimage, the way to the heights now led through a valley of humiliation which he made no attempt to skirt.”<sup>1</sup>

#### ***Jacob plans and prays.*** (Vv. 1-21)

Vv. 1-2 – The account begins with the same language we found in Jacob’s angelic encounter at Bethel: “Angels of God.” Jacob’s designation of the place as “God’s camp” reflects the angel’s mighty presence and protection. “God’s camp” is militaristic language. The presence of the angels is an expression of God’s concern to protect Jacob. So, the section opens the vertical dimension of the story before the horizontal, a point to which we will return.

Vs. 3 – Before he returns to occupy the Land God had promised him, Jacob must be reconciled to his brother. Geographically, there was no reason for Jacob to travel that route. Mount Seir was in the far south. Bethel was in the north. There was no need for him to go through the land of Esau. But given that the Land of Promise bordered Esau’s land, Jacob knew an encounter was inevitable. It seems Jacob determined to seek peace now, rather than later.

Vv. 4-5 – Notice the language Jacob instructs his servants to use in their approach to Esau. Jacob takes the role of servant to the master even though God had determined that “the older will serve the younger.” In a sense, Jacob, trusting in God to fulfill his word, places himself at the mercy of his brother. “Like Abraham with Lot, Jacob takes the first step toward giving up the rights of his election to the blessing (13:1-12), trusting God to fulfill the promise.”<sup>2</sup>

Vv. 6-8 – Jacob received word that Esau has assembled 400 men. Understandably, Jacob is anxious given Esau’s previous pledge of murder. So Jacob makes plans to minimize losses should Esau attack. He separates his people and flocks into two different camps so that, should an attack occur, some of his household may still escape to safety. Was such a move a lack of faith? Perhaps. It may also be the prayerful plan of a man who wishes to expose his household to as little risk as possible given the circumstances. Planning and responsible choices are not the enemy of faith but a complement to faith.

Vv. 9-12 – Jacob’s plans are accompanied by prayer. Notice again the humility apparent in Jacob’s words. This prayer is the longest recorded in the Book of Genesis and serves as a worthy model for Christian prayer. The prayer “rests securely on the foundation of covenant, command, and promise (vs. 9), and shows the true spirit of worship in its wonder at God’s mercy (vs. 10), seen as beyond all deserving.”<sup>3</sup> His prayer is laden with God’s own words, showing that Jacob was not asking God for anything other than what he’d already promised. Unable to manipulate circumstances the way he once did, Jacob leans fully upon God’s grace. This is the prayer of a man of faith; a man whose heart has been humbled in the fires of adversity.

Vv. 13-21 – Jacob arranges to meet Esau with a long train of gifts of livestock; a total of 550 animals. Jacob’s goal is to propitiate Esau’s wrath. There is nothing in the passage that casts a negative light on this plan. Neither are we to conclude that Jacob is cowardly by placing himself behind the train of gifts. Rather, Jacob is simply employing what would have been a common way to assuage the anger of an offended king. The presentation of the gifts first, indicated the sincerity of the one seeking reconciliation.

#### ***The LORD wrestles Jacob.*** (Vv. 22-27)

Vv. 24-25 – This “man,” a stranger, who appears from nowhere, initiated the fight. The reference to daybreak indicates that the desperate struggle lasted through the night. The darkness of night was also the

<sup>1</sup> Derek Kidner, Genesis, TCOT (Grand Rapids: IVP, 1967) p. 167

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Waltke, Genesis: A Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001) p. 442

<sup>3</sup> Kidner, 168

reason Jacob had not recognized his attacker. We are not told precisely how Jacob recognized that he was fighting with the Lord. Certainly, the Lord's presence is always self-authenticating. There is a world of meaning to ponder in the fact that Jacob is said to have fought this man to a standstill who had but to touch Jacob's hip to make him lame. God was humbling himself to fight Jacob on nearly equal terms.<sup>4</sup>

Vs. 26 – Jacob realized that he was fighting with a supernatural opponent. Why did this “man” want to end the contest before daybreak? Did he wish to continue to hide his identity? Perhaps there is also something of the idea that human beings are not able to look upon God, though here God has taken the form of a man. In any case, it is a disclosure of the supernatural character of Jacob's opponent. He was not there to chat with Jacob or satisfy his curiosity but to put Jacob to the test, and the test had been passed.

Vs. 27 – The angel of the Lord obviously knew who Jacob was. The point of the question was to force Jacob to say his own name which meant “the supplanter” or “the cheater.” Recall how Esau, realizing he had been deceived said of Jacob, “Is he not rightly called Jacob? He has deceived me these two times” (27:36). In the ancient world names were intertwined with character and destiny. By telling the angel of the Lord his name, Jacob was forced to acknowledge the sort of man he had been.

- That night by the River Jabbok, Jacob trembled with fear of his brother Esau even as he sought the Lord in earnest prayer. Had Esau's anger against him diminished over the years? Was he still determined to kill Jacob? In the middle of that anxious night God came to Jacob, literally, in the form of a man. This was what theologians refer to as a *Christophany*, a pre-incarnate appearing of the Son of God. And there, The LORD initiated a physical struggle with Jacob. It is a fascinating and mysterious scene. Like a father wrestling with his 3-year-old child, God allowed Jacob to prevail up until that moment Jacob was ready to yield to the inevitable and necessary defeat. It was the glorious defeat of everything that made Jacob's name such a fitting label. All Jacob could do was plead for the blessing of God. There was no bargaining, only need and the faith that God was sufficient.
- What is true faith, after all, but just that state of mind in Jacob that caused him cling to the Lord and then to say, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” It is what a man says who realizes that he needs nothing but that which only God can give him. It's been said that, “Christianity is not for the well-meaning, it is for the desperate.” The other religions of the world may well be for the well-meaning, but the infinite-personal God who reveals himself to sinners, he is for those who know themselves to be hopeless without him and who desire nothing beside him.

***Jacob gets a new stride and a new name.*** (Vv. 28-32)

Vs. 28 – Jacob's new name indicated the cleansing he now had from his sinful past. Remember, both Abram and Sarai were given new names to signify their new position in the plan and purpose of God. Jacob's old name recalled his underhanded and selfish dealings with others. His new name, Israel, would recall his having wrestled with God and “prevailed.” Of course Jacob did not defeat the Lord. Jacob “prevailed” by the Lord's own hand.

Vs. 29 – God withheld his name from Jacob. His counter-question amounts to asking, “Jacob, don't you realize who I am?”<sup>5</sup>

Vs. 30 – “Peniel” means “face of God.” God told Moses that no one can see God and live. The glory of God is a mortal danger to fallen creatures. But Jacob had seen God, if only in the form of a man and if only in the dark, and had survived. Obviously he will now survive his meeting with Esau.

Vs. 32 – God left his mark on his servant. Jacob walked away from Peniel with a limp, a permanent reminder of this contest with God, which Israel fixed in sacred memory in their dietary customs; a reminder of the promise of victory that the Lord has made to those who trust and cling to him.

- The glorious defeat at Peniel was that of God over the old Jacob. Through many dangers, toils, and snares, Jacob had, by God's grace, become a man of faith. The night long wrestling match “brought to a head the battling and groping of a lifetime....It was against God, not Esau or Laban, that he had been pitting his strength, as he now discovered; yet the initiative had been God's, as it was this night, to chasten his pride and challenge his tenacity...The crippling and the naming show that God's ends were still the same: He would have all of Jacob's will to win, to attain and obtain, yet purged of self-sufficiency and redirected to the proper object of man's love, God Himself. It was defeat and victory in one.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Waltke, 446

<sup>5</sup> Waltke, 447

<sup>6</sup> Kidner, 169