

Israel: God Wrestler

A Tale of Providence and Grace

Text: Genesis 27:38; Genesis 32:9-10, 28

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Esau said to his father, 'Have you only one blessing, father? Bless me, me also father!' And Esau lifted up his voice and wept. Genesis 27:38

And Jacob said, 'O God of my father Abraham...I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown your servant...' Genesis 32:9-10

Then the man said, 'You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.' Genesis 32:28

We have had a series of messages in which we are trying to see the broad sweep of the Biblical story. The message this morning is about the one of whom we read, Jacob. You can tell that there's material there for a dozen sermons, and I've done series on Jacob in the past. This morning, I will simply hit the mountain peak of that story. I am not treating the story of Jacob this morning in order to find the preaching values that are there or the applications that are there for our life so much as, rather, to see the story of Jacob in the larger puzzle of the whole biblical story.

The first eleven chapters of Genesis are Israel's understanding of where it fit into the broad scheme of things. Those first eleven chapters were stories told, by which Israel gave expression to its understanding of where it stood in relationship to the whole cosmos and the whole sweep of human history. In those eleven chapters it witnessed to its understanding of the human situation, why life is like it is. Those stories, so profound, gave expression to the best insights that Israel had about the world, about God and the human condition.

Then last week we moved from that universal scope to the more particular focus, because that was Israel's story. In the 10th chapter of Genesis you have the table of the nations, and it is out of those nations that God calls one family, and the call was to Abraham and Sarah. We looked at that story, that really beautiful and tragic story, of Abraham and Sarah who had to trust God in the extremity, yet

who in the meantime took things into their own hands so that Sarah's slave girl, Hagar, bore Abraham a son, whom he loved. And Sarah, being so human, forced the slave girl and her son out of the tent. The tragic story of Ishmael, the firstborn, Abraham's beloved, but who was turned away. The question is this matter of God's choice in selection. Does it always have to be a case of one who is elected and one who is rejected? Isaac, the child of promise, comes—Ishmael is rejected. Ishmael, as it were, Abraham's son by normal, natural means. But Israel understood that, ultimately, the fulfillment was not the product of human ingenuity or human potential; it was a miracle, it was the creation of God. So out of Sarah's barren womb must arise the child of promise, Isaac.

Then Isaac's story is told, although Isaac is not a very colorful figure and he doesn't get a lot of press. He takes a wife, Rebecca. Abraham sends his servant back to the home territory in order to secure a wife for Isaac, and Isaac and Rebecca are married. But, do you remember? Here again, Rebecca is "barren." It is not the case that once God gets this whole thing going by grace that it can kind of generate itself. No, not at all. Once again, a barren womb seems the way for this people, from whom will come, the promise says, children as numerous as the stars of the heaven. This time conception occurs. It's a tough pregnancy. Rebecca wonders if she shouldn't die, and then she is told, "two nations are in your womb," foreshadowing the conflict that will come down through the ages, beginning with the brothers Esau and Jacob. Esau, the first out of the womb, his heel grasped by his brother Jacob, giving his brother his name, "heel" or "supplanter" or "grasper," setting us up for the conflict between these two brothers. Again the ordinary way of things will be upset because it will not be the firstborn, it will be the second son, Jacob, who will be the bearer of the promise.

"Why?" you say. "Why?" I say. The inscrutable mystery of God. I don't know. The story runs smack into it again. Not Ishmael but Isaac. Not Esau but Jacob. And all our sympathies are with Esau. He's the kind of kid that everyone would love. But Jacob, soft skinned Jacob, was his mother's favorite. One day Esau comes in famished and Jacob is stirring up a pot of stew, scheming and planning, always thinking. Shrewd Jacob says, "I'll give you the stew for the rights of first birth." Esau said, "What's the future? It's now that I am hungry. Give me the soup." But then the really tough part of the story. Isaac is old now. He is blind. He is ready to die. He is ready to bestow that final blessing on his firstborn, so he calls Esau and says, "Go to the field and hunt and bring me venison, fix me a stew, and I will bless you." You know the story. Rebecca hears and tells Jacob to go get a kid. They cook it up and she puts hairy skins on his soft arms and sends him in to the blind old man to pose as Esau in order that he might get the blessing. Isaac gives Jacob the blessing, even though suspicious about the identity of this one. Esau comes back and weeps bitterly. Once again, the same cry as Ishmael. "Is there only one blessing? Can you not bless me, oh my father?" But the deed is done, the word has been spoken, the word cannot be recalled. That's the way it was in that culture, in their understanding. And if that's the understanding that everyone shares, that's the way it is. That has power.

So Jacob has to flee because Esau says, "Now twice he's done it to me, I'll kill him." So Jacob flees a days' journey and finally, exhausted, lies down to rest and, of course, one would suspect that he would be wide-eyed all night, trembling with guilt and fear. Not so. He lies down and sleeps like a baby and has a dream so magnificent that it brings tears to our eyes. There's a heaven. There's a ladder stretching up to heaven with angels coming up and down, and at the top is God. A revelation, an epiphany, call it what you will, an experience of an encounter with the living God who says, "I am the God of Abraham and of Isaac, your father. I will be your God and you will be the covenant child, and I will bless all nations and I will be with you wherever you go. I will keep you and I will bring you home." Amazing, isn't it? He goes off to his uncle to find himself a wife. Leah, and then Rachel. Leah is given to him by subterfuge, but he works longer and he earns Rachel. He loves Rachel. But Rachel is what? "Barren."

Here we are again. Finally through all the prosperity he gains his flocks and his herds and Rachel has a child, Joseph. The wife, the love of his life, gives him the apple of his eye. In late years he prepares to go home, to meet Esau. Always equal to the task, probably with a yellow pad or two, making notations, he plans and he schemes, ready once again to manipulate this weaker brother.

Then, the night before the encounter, he sends his family over the brook and remains on the other side in the darkness alone. The story tells us a man assaulted him. A man? A demon? No, we read between the lines. This is none other than God. Jacob wrestles with God. He wrestles all night and seems almost to prevail, but the dawn is about to break and the match must be over before sunrise. At the moment it seems that Jacob will prevail, his thigh is "touched," and he is crippled. Now he clings to the other, but not in order to overcome, but rather he clings to the other out of need, crying out, "Bless me. I will not let go until you bless me."

As a result, he is given a new name. No longer Jacob the deceiver, the supplanter, the grasper, but "Israel"—God wrestler. The name in that culture also signified the person, and the new name signified a new person. Jacob is born anew at Jabbok that night as he wrestles with God, striving with every ounce of energy to prevail, finally crippled, fearfully wondering who this was, only to discover that he has struggled with the God of all mercy who blesses him there. The sun begins to light the conflagration in the eastern sky, and we see Jacob limping off. He seems even to be dancing on that crippled leg. He has been crippled by a very great grace. Fascinating story. The Hebrews telling about their roots. Israel is trying to understand who it is. It is trying to understand itself in the light of the whence of its birth. Abraham, Isaac . . . but Jacob?

I don't suppose it is true any more in school classrooms. But it seems as though when I was attending there was always a picture of George Washington, father of the nation. Wasn't George Washington the one who never told any lies? I mean, founding fathers and mothers should be heroes and heroines. They should be

exemplars. They should be models. They are those who are held up to us as great figures, and we are called to emulate them. But Israel claims Jacob as its father, this schemer, this planner, this usurper, this manipulator, this exploiter. This one they say is our father. Israel telling its story in terms of this man, and believing that God worked through one like that. That all is so much of grace that it actually scandalizes us. No morality play, this. No whitewashing of the forefathers and foremothers in order to claim a squeaky clean past.

This is a people who knew that God worked with the raw material of human history and of humankind, and that a Jacob was in the line of covenant blessing. How could God use a Jacob? How could God further God's purposes, God's eternal purposes of love and grace through one like that? Yet you see that's exactly the heart and center of biblical faith. Finally, Israel knew that it was given life by God, that life was gift, that all was grace, that there was nothing in itself, no righteousness or goodness or mercy or merit. There was no claim at all on this one who moves inscrutably, and blesses, who wrestles with us and struggles with us, but finally will overcome us.

I loved Ruth's phrase "knocked to her knees by grace." It is only grace that finally knocks us to our knees. You see, it is in stories like this that you see what the Bible is all about. I will tell you that my whole understanding of grace arises out of these stories. My understanding of grace comes not out of the New Testament, even though it's there. It was in this sense of God choosing this people from progenitors like this one that it had to be all of grace, that choice, that selection, that election which brought with it in the very choice and selection, tragedy and disappointment and rejection. That very choice, that selection, that was not in order that the rest might be abandoned, but it was a choice of these in order that all might be embraced.

If God would choose these, if God would use these, then God will use anything, anyone. Then it is all of grace, radical grace. Radical grace! And if it is radical grace in its foundation, it must be radical grace to the end of time and to the whole expanse of the human family. It is grace because God is grace. Will you question God? Will you put God on the stand? Will you say, "Why God?" Sure you will and the only answer is "I am God, and I am full of grace."

That's the story of this scoundrel who was finally conquered by grace at Bethel. In the midst of his guilty night, there heaven opens up and God says, "I will be with you, and I will keep you wherever you go. I will bring you home, 'through many dangers, toils and snares. I have already come. 'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will bring me home.'" Amazing Grace.