

Jacob Called Israel

Fall Quarter: God's Exceptional Choice

Unit 1: God Calls Abraham's Family

Lesson 3

Sunday School Lesson for the week of September 18, 2022

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Lesson Scripture: Genesis 32:22-32

Key Text: *The man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you struggled with God and humans and have overcome."*

Lesson Aims

1. To recognize our experiences of "wrestling" with others and God in our modern experiences.
2. To understand the background and context of Jacob's wrestling.
3. To comprehend the intention and meaning of this story as it relates to our life and faith.
4. To embrace the transformation that emerges for being faithful to God, and to our calling in life.

Thrust of this Lesson

Everyone struggles to be true to self and to God. We have all wrestled against the actions of others that conflict with our conscience, against cultural trends that seem antagonistic to our faith, and against God whose will and call so often challenge us. Our text is a meaningful narrative that recognizes such conflict in life and reveals the hope and promise awaiting those who remain true to their faith. As people of faith and as a people loyal to truth, we often wrestle with our conscience and God. This narrative serves as a great metaphor of this wrestling.

Context of the Narrative

Jacob stole his brother Esau's birthright. The animosity between the two brothers is long-lasting and intense. In our text Jacob is preparing to encounter his brother for the first time in years. He is overwhelmed with the fear of losing his life, family, and possessions. What Jacob and Rebekah did to Esau was a violation of near-eastern culture and law. Stealing the birthright was a serious breach of social contract.

Many often ask why Isaac did not take the birthright back from Jacob and bestow it upon the rightful recipient. The birthright was passed through the rite of the father laying his hands upon his son and pronouncing his blessing and inheritance over the son. Rebekah and Jacob slyly took advantage of Isaac's poor eyesight. They covered Jacob in hairy animal skins so that when Isaac placed his hands upon Jacob he would think it was Esau kneeling before him. Esau was a ruddy man with significant body hair. His complexion and appearance were far different from his fraternal twin brother. Thus, Isaac was deceived when he placed his hands upon Jacob. He felt the animal skins and believed it was Esau who knelt before him. Isaac spoke the birthright over Jacob mistakenly. So why didn't Isaac nullify his actions upon learning he had been deceived? In

the near-eastern world, words possessed creative power. Notice in the Hebrew story of creation God “spoke” the world into being. Once the word was spoken it was irrevocable. It set forth a course of action. Thus, Isaac could not reverse his mistake, regardless of the deception involved. The word that had been spoken was already active.

A spoken course of action could only be altered by “another word.” The original word was not totally eradicated, it was overcome and overpowered by a new word. However, this new word would have to prove more powerful than the already spoken word. It is important to remember that Jesus was the “Word.” Read John 1. Humankind had unleashed a word of sin and rebellion in the world. Jesus was a new word, a new course of action, a redemptive course of action far more powerful than the actions of humankind. Jesus was not just “a word.” He was “the Word.” This Word was unstoppable and nothing can overcome it.

Having stolen the birthright of Esau and living terrified of Esau’s revenge, Jacob devised a strategy. Jacob may have been deceptive and sly; however, he was smart. First, he would offer Esau a generous gift. Jacob would make this offering in hopes of softening Esau’s heart and soothing his angry spirit. Secondly, Jacob divided his family and possessions into two camps. This would ensure that a remnant of his name and family would survive if Esau attacked. The Hebrew people had a poor understanding of the afterlife. They did not understand the afterlife with clarity. Consequently, they developed a strong affection for “continuing to live” through your children and descendants. A person continued after death through their descendants. Should a man completely lose his family, life would go on as if he never existed. Thus, Jacob is smartly ensuring a remnant would exist should he die in battle with Esau. Thirdly, Jacob most likely wanted to impress his brother. Esau would see how richly blessed he was by God. Perhaps Esau would note that God favored Jacob and think twice before attempting to kill him.

Whatever the reasons behind Jacob’s actions in preparing to meet Esau, the meeting did not go smoothly. Esau was overt with the desire to reestablish a relationship. Jacob must have been greatly surprised! Esau greeted him with kindness and warmth. In contrast, Jacob was stiff and formal. There might have also been some “one ups-man-ship” involved. As Jacob calls attention to his wealth, which he states is a blessing from God, Esau counters that he too is a blessed man. If we continued to read the ensuing narrative of Jacob and Esau’s meeting, we would learn their tense relationship continued and over the years animosity would again rear its head. The one ingredient missing from Jacob’s meeting with Esau was his own personal integrity. He had taken advantage of his brother’s hunger, had been easily swayed by his mother, and doesn’t appear to desire a meaningful reconciliation with his brother. Instead, he is trying to save his own life and family. Esau isn’t someone with whom he is seeking reconciliation; he is someone Jacob is attempting to get by.

Our text occurs as Jacob has finished developing his strategy and is preparing to meet Esau. Prior to meeting Esau, Jacob has some wrestling to do. He must wrestle with himself. Jacob must deal with his fears and his propensity toward deception. He must wrestle with what Esau means or should mean to his life. He is not meeting a stranger. He is meeting his brother, a brother he has seriously wronged. Jacob must wrestle with God. God has chosen to use Jacob in spite of his flawed character. The calling to represent God and the Covenant would weigh heavily on anyone’s shoulders. The person of the angel represents all of the wrestling occurring within

Jacob. Remember, finite man could not see, touch or even speak the name of God. In the O.T. especially, God speaks through intermediaries. These intermediaries were angels. However, when an angel speaks the message is understood as being from God and is referred to as the “word of the Lord.” Likewise, wrestling with an angel of the Lord was akin to wrestling with God.

Do you believe this context is important in understanding the narrative and its message? In what way does the context help you in reading this text?

Important Points in the Narrative

The Night

Jacob encounters the angel at night. Jacob has entered a state of solitude prior to meeting Esau. It is in the night that the angel appears. It is important to remember the night is most often the time we wrestle with others, God, and ourselves. During the day we engage in various activities and are easily distracted. However, when we lie down at night, the quiet invites us to think. It is in the night that our fears and struggles come out to play. Many of us are accustomed to the phrase the “dark night of the soul.” This phrase reminds us that it is usually in solitude and darkness that our most serious wrestling occurs. In Matthew 14 the disciples are trying to sleep in a boat upon the Sea of Galilee. Jesus approaches them, walking upon the water. The text reads that it was the fourth watch of the night. This was considered the darkest time of night and often the loneliest. The disciples are terrified. They thought Jesus was a ghost. Many of the Galilean people believed in ghosts. Fisherman often believed ghosts were responsible for the frequent storms that occurred on the sea. During the fourth watch of the night Jesus enters their fear. It is night in our narrative. Jacob lies in solitude. The fear and anxiety in meeting Esau most likely kept him awake.

Can you recall particular struggles in the night? Why do you think the night is often the time we worry and fret? What do you think is ongoing in the heart of Jacob as he lies in solitude? Can you identify with him?

The Angel Represents both God and Jacob’s Inner Struggle

One of the ways that we deal with our inner struggles is to project them outside of ourselves. If we can project our fears and sins upon another, they seem easier to fight. God often used this facet of our frail humanity to address our need for redemption and hope. The scapegoat in Leviticus 16 provides an insightful example. The people within the Hebrew camp chose a goat once a year upon which they cast their sins. They would project their inner sins upon an outside object: the goat. The priest would wrap the horns of the goat with a scarlet cord. He would then lay hands upon the head of the goat and transfer the people’s sins upon it. The goat was then sent outside the camp where it almost certainly died. It was far easier to cast them upon the goat than deal with them internally. In the dark of night Jacob is about to wrestle with an angel. In truth, he is wrestling with himself and his God. The angel is the messenger of God and serves as the projection of Jacob’s inner struggle.

Each of us has used blame to project our sins and mistakes upon another. Whether we are aware or unaware, we are attempting to avoid dealing with our own struggles. If we can project them

upon another, we can walk away and forget them. However, all blame is a waste of time. We carry our sins and mistakes within us no matter how strongly we attempt to cast them elsewhere.

Can you recall a time in which you projected your struggles upon another through blame? Why do you believe things did not go more smoothly between Jacob and Esau? Can you attest to the worthlessness of blame? Instead of blaming another or casting our inner struggles elsewhere, what is the best way to face those struggles?

The Wrestling Match

The angel approaches Jacob during the night and when Jacob is alone. The text does not offer any detail as to exactly how the angel approached and appeared. We read that Jacob is alone and the narrative immediately moves to the wrestling match. The match is long and tiresome. Naturally, we might ask why the angel didn't force Jacob into submission immediately. Certainly, an angel of the Lord can overwhelm a man. Consequently, we might conclude that the angel wanted a long period of wrestling without desiring to "beat Jacob."

Since the angel did not overcome Jacob, we might consider the fact it was the wrestling itself that was important, not the outcome. God desires that each of us "own" our sins and frailty. If Jacob had been forced to face his struggles by force, would he have become a better man? God's desire is for each of us to come to the realization that we are sinful and in need of grace. God doesn't force us to confess or accept grace. Most of us arrive at a point of humility and acceptance after wrestling with God within ourselves. It is this act of wrestling that helps us arrive at this point of confession and acceptance. Usually, this wrestling occurs over an extended period of time.

The very act of the angel approaching Jacob in the night was an act of grace. Jacob had not asked for such an encounter. In the angel the Lord has walked into Jacob's fear and struggle. We are never left alone in our fear. As we wrestle within ourselves, we would benefit from asking, "Whom am I wrestling?" Am I just wrestling with my own conscience? Yet, who is it that speaks in my conscience? The act of wrestling is a moment when God is especially present. God is in our wrestling and will not leave until the struggle is over. Believe me, we will always leave blessed.

When I experienced my call into pastoral ministry I did not immediately accept. In my mind I possessed too many disqualifying character flaws. For over six weeks I offered God a litany of my sins and weaknesses in hopes the Lord would choose another. However, God did not leave me alone. We wrestled. I developed a severe twitch in my eye from the anxiety. At last, I arrived at a point of submission. I realized if God called me, God could shape me and use me.

Jacob wrestled with the angel of the Lord all night. Jacob wrestled long and hard. Though neither Jacob nor the angel overcame the other, Jacob did arrive at an important place in his life. He knew he needed the angel's blessing; he needed God's blessing. Jacob was intent upon receiving this blessing. "I will not let you go until you bless me!" is strong language. At least Jacob realizes he cannot leave this moment without having received the blessing. Jacob wants to know he has God's blessing before encountering Esau. The fact that Jacob believed his wrestling

opponent could bless him implies his awareness that the man was an angel of the Lord and represented the Lord.

Jacob wants to know the name of his opponent. The angel refusing to give his name is an indication it is the angel of the Lord. Jacob senses this is not a normal man with whom he has wrestled. The angel eventually reveals to Jacob he is the angel of the Lord.

Can you share a time when you wrestled with God? Did you realize God was present in the wrestling? How long did you wrestle? Is the wrestling over a concerning matter? At what point did you feel the wrestling was over? Can you share a moment or moments when you arrived at an important decision after wrestling with God? How do you think your life would be different if God forced you to be receptive? Do you believe there was merit in the wrestling? Can you explain why? Can you identify God's presence in your struggle and wrestling?

The Changing of a Name

The blessing appears to be related to Jacob's accepting his call to lead the covenant people. In both old and new testaments, a change in name occurs at a pivotal moment in God's redemptive history. Abram and Sarai became Abraham and Sarah. Jesus would change Cephas into Petros, or Peter. Finally, Saul's name was changed on the Damascus Road to Paul. In our narrative, Jacob's name is changed by the angel of the Lord to Israel.

As the angel allowed Jacob to wrestle all night, he was letting Jacob know that if Jacob strived against him, he could face Esau with strength. However, there was more substance to the blessing than Jacob imagined. Jacob wasn't anticipating the name change, or the scope, breadth, and depth of his role in God's redemption. God always has more in store than we expect. As a pastor I have experienced tremendous moments of God's grace and love. I could not have imagined the life I have lived. This incredible journey is available for all of us. We will encounter obstacles and struggles. There will be moments of wrestling. However, God will always bless us.

Though God is present in our every moment, there are special moments that profoundly redirect our lives. Can you recall a particular season of struggle in your walk with Christ? Can you share such a moment of redirection in your life? Can you share an experience in which God did far more than you asked?

The Limp

We are not given the reason for Jacob's energy. On the surface it appears the angel touched Jacob's hip to bring the wrestling to an end. Sunrise was approaching. However, Jacob continued this limp in the days following. The limp became a symbol of God's touch upon Jacob and the nation of Israel. The narrative shares the people of Israel's refusal to eat that part of an animal. Therefore, the limp became a spiritual sign. The limp certainly would have reminded Jacob of that night and the changing of his name by the angel of the Lord. Personally, I also think it reminded Jacob that though he persevered, he was still a fragile man in need of God's blessing.

Now forty-four years after receiving my call, I never develop a twitch in my eye without thinking of the experience of my calling. Of course, this is a subjective and personal experience for me. Still, God's people have created altars and memorial to remember special moment in their walk of faith. Each of us has our own "limp," that object or experience that reminds us of what God has done in our life. For some it is a hymn, a text from the Bible, or a special place. Remembering we are a blessed people is important for appreciating God's love and grace.

Can you identify such a "limp" in your Christian walk? Was there a moment in your life that you can call a "definitive moment?"

Prayer

Almighty God, we thank you that you are present in our joys and struggles. Thank you for being that voice in our conscience, calling us to consider the consequences of our actions. Thank you for all the reminders of your love and grace in our life. Give us the grace to face our sins and the weaknesses within us. Empower us to live honestly, avoiding blame and accepting our sins and failures. Open our hearts to receive your forgiving grace in Jesus Christ. Thank you for never leaving us, for never removing the call upon our life, for the strength that allows us to embrace and live that call, and for using us in ways beyond our imagination. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.