

“Fighting God”
Genesis 32:22-32
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READ the story Genesis 32:22-32 with introduction to the setting.

For God to most bless a person he most usually has to break them!

It was shortly after the death of his 24 year old son Ross, that I first met Bob Buford.

By the time Bob was 40 he was a multimillionaire cable television owner.

Everything he ever touched turned to gold.

His son, Ross, had graduated from college and in his second year in business made over a ½ million dollars.

Like father like son.

But Ross drowned trying to cross the Rio Grande River, though his body was not discovered for four months.

When I met Bob he was a chastened man.

God met Bob in that hardest time of life, woke him up, and changed him.

Six years later Bob wrote: “As horrifying and sad as it was, and is, to have lost him. Ross’ disappearance and death also provided the greatest moment of rare insight and grandest gestures of immeasurable grace and joy that I ever hope to experience. Utter emptiness and brokenness left me feeling awful and wonderful at the same time... I was forced to lean on God entirely in those dark weeks after Ross’ death, to think often of the Scripture verse, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not to your own understanding.” I learned that God truly is sufficient and that his strength is made perfect in weakness.” (from Buford Halftime p57-58)

To be a Christ-follower is so contrary to our natural bent and so contrary to the way the world does things, that God usually has to break us to make us.

And that breaking may take place in a decisive moment or over a long period of time.

Jacob's late-night experience, in chapter 32 of Genesis, is an illustration of the kind of breaking that God often has to do to remake us into his image.

Each of us is at a certain stage in life – often related to age.

Some of you are in the early years of your life and in your Christian life. Life looks grand and you are thoroughly engaged in living it.

Others of you have encountered some of the bumps and scrapes of life and life has lost some of its luster – even your Christian experience has begun to raise questions for which you wonder if there are answers.

Still others of you have gone through the fire of life, life's greatest tests, and you have found God more than sufficient.

Still others are in the crucible of life right now, feeling all the pressure of life, and not certain how it will all come out – whether you will even make it.

I want to show you an overview of Jacob's life and I want you to try to find yourself somewhere on his journey.

I want you to watch how Jacob's experiences and responses change over time and see if you identify with one of the stages in the development of his character.

Back in Genesis 27 we are told something of Jacob's early life. Probably none of us would like to identify too closely with the kind of scheming young man he was.

But Jacob is not unlike how we are taught to be.

He saw opportunities, he was clever, and when the brass ring came close he grabbed it.

He tricked his brother, he tricked his father and with his mother's blessing he wound up positioned to inherit his father's wealth and future.

He gave lip service to a relationship with God and probably believed he had one but in his early life the story is not about God, it's all about Jacob.

In spite of Jacob's egocentricity, God was gracious to Jacob in this early stage of Jacob's life.

When his brother sought to kill him, Jacob fled to another country.

I find it interesting that the text never says that Jacob was afraid of his brother at this time. Jacob's mother had enough sense to be afraid for Jacob but Jacob seems to be so full of himself that he hardly recognizes the danger.

But on Jacob's way to a new country, God meets him.

It's recorded in chapter 28 and Jacob dreams of a ladder or stairway leading from earth to heaven and the Lord makes a promise to Jacob – declaring God's presence and blessing.

But you get some idea of the level of Jacob's relationship with God when you read the vow that Jacob makes at that time.

Genesis 28:20-21 "If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's house, then the Lord will be my God..."

Jewish rabbis through the years have responded to this vow of Jacob by asking with sarcasm, "And if not, God won't be God?"

What "chutzpah".

How immature must Jacob's faith be, to almost threaten God that if God doesn't come through then Jacob won't follow.

And yet isn't that where many of us are in our relationship with God?

We have this understanding with God, or so we think, that if God holds up his end of the bargain then we will hold up ours.

If life goes fairly much as we have it planned, then we will be good Christians, doing what good Christians are supposed to do – go to church, give money and put in a little time in some service capacity.

And with a good attitude, because after all, we have a deal with God.

Jacob has every intention of holding up his end of the bargain.

Jacob seems to be the epitome of the cockiness and self-assurance of some young people.

But as we grow only a little older, life begins to test us, push us, and show us the limits of our abilities.

Somewhere in mid-life the cockiness we had earlier begins to yield to questions.

Over the next 20 years (recorded in chapters 29 and 30) we see evidence of Jacob maturing slowly in his faith.

Through a great number of bumps and scrapes in life, where Jacob is cheated over and over again but nonetheless prospers, Jacob learns how God's hand is graciously working in his life.

He credits God with protecting him, he credits God with providing for him, and he credits God with giving him the wealth he enjoys.

But, during those years, just beneath the surface there seems to still be a trust in his own industry and cleverness that matches his trust in God.

He seems to be of those who believe that "God best helps those who help themselves".

He's thankful to God, he trusts in God, but he also just as much still trusts in himself. **Is that where you are?**

And then life crashes.

Jacob meets a situation that frightens him as nothing else ever had before.

He is running from his uncle Laban who has the power to take away all his wealth and even his family.

And no sooner does he escape from that, than he anticipates meeting his brother who has threatened to kill him.

With his brother and 400 men coming, probably to slaughter him and his family and steal everything he has, we are told that Jacob is in great fear and distress.

With a new sense of dependency on God, Jacob pleads with God in prayer.

Genesis 32:9-12 “O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, O Lord, who said to me, ‘Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper.’ I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant... Save me I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children.”

With death imminent and little room to maneuver Jacob reaches out to God.

But as good as his prayer is, there is apparently still a little of self-sufficiency left in Jacob.

He devises a plan to meet his brother with a number of gifts to hopefully pacify his anger and get him to change his mind.

Night finally comes and there is nothing more to do but wait.

But still trying desperately to think of something to do Jacob gets up, even after dark, and takes his family and all his possessions that are left and crosses the Jabbok river.

Is he trying to place them strategically – still trying make something work?

Still trusting as much or more in his own ingenuity as in God?

Then Jacob crosses back over the river to be alone – and to await his fate.

What happened next is told in such sparse terms that we can say only a few things with certainty.

But clearly the incident is fraught with significance.

The facts of the story seem to be these:

A man attacks Jacob at night.

The fight between them goes on all night.

The man couldn't overpower Jacob until he
wrenched his hip out of its socket.

Even though the man attacked Jacob, he now asks Jacob to release him.

Jacob demands a blessing before agreeing to release the man.

The man asks Jacob his name to which Jacob must admit it is Jacob.

The man then gives Jacob a new name in place of the old.

Jacob asks for the man's name, but the man refuses and instead blesses Jacob.

Jacob finally realizes what has happened and names the place where this happened, Peniel (the face of God) because he had seen God face to face and yet his life was spared.

Jacob left the place limping.

To understand this story in the context of the development of Jacob's faith it is important to see that Jacob didn't start the fight.

This is not a story of Jacob coming to the end of his own resources and calling out to God.

Jacob didn't spend the night begging for God's protection.

This is not a lesson in the importance of prevailing prayer.

Instead, it is God who comes to Jacob.

If Jacob was afraid before imagine his fear when he is attacked.

Jacob doesn't know until later that it is God in human form who is fighting him.

This fight was hard, it was to the death.

God often doesn't tell us what the struggles of life are about.

He doesn't reveal that he is behind them.

He pushes us to the very end of ourselves that we might realize that he alone, not he and us together, but he alone is our life and strength.

But Jacob wouldn't give in.

Jacob persisted in his belief that he could overcome by his own strength.

Jacob wanted to hold on to his own way of doing things.

When push came to shove, Jacob still trusted more in himself than in God.

Then God made the next move.

Verse 25 says, "When the man saw that he could not overpower (Jacob), he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man."

With everything in himself, Jacob fought to retain some sense of self-sufficiency.

But God wouldn't leave him.

God loved him too much to let him alone in his self-sufficiency.

God took the next step to break him.

God dislocated his hip.

The pain must have been excruciating.

God will be as strong as he needs to be to bring us to full faith in him instead of ourselves.

Has God ever wrestled with you that way – and you didn't even know it was God?

Sometimes the match goes on for weeks or months.

We struggle with some situation in our lives, desperately trying to control it, to turn it around.

We know God is there but we still depend more on our own efforts than on God.

We still aren't convinced that we can't, on our own, overcome this situation.

We wrestle, we strive, we fight, resisting to the bitter end the idea of giving up and casting ourselves wholly on God's mercy.

Then God delivers one more blow and we fall crushed at his feet.

We give up, we surrender, and we are at his mercy.

There is no more vulnerable moment in all of life – but it is exactly at that moment that we begin to exercise real faith, the kind of faith God has called us to.

Roberta Hoesteness described that faith this way, “It is the image of the trapeze artist. What is faith? Faith is not the safe climbing of the ladder. Faith is being willing, vulnerable, and courageous enough to let go of the safety and security of the swinging bar, in the middle of the air, in order to take the hand of the one you meet.” (in Moyers 311)

A significant change takes place at this moment in the fight.

Like a defeated boxer, Jacob clenches his adversary.

He can’t deliver any more blows, he can’t possibly win the fight with a dislocated hip but he can cling to the man – and Jacob does.

I think Jacob recognizes at this moment who this man is – none other than God himself.

And when Jacob realizes his complete and absolute dependence on God – Jacob demands a blessing.

Such a demand is not foolish – We can demand what God has promised – because the very demand admits that God alone can supply it.

One writer said, “Now crippled in his natural strength he became bold in his faith.” (Ross p557)

In his hymn “Jesus lover of my Soul”, John Wesley captured this moment with these words, “Other refuge have I none; Hangs my helpless soul on thee. Leave, ah, leave me not alone, still support and comfort me.”

Jacob is conscious at last of the futility of all his efforts and he clings to God, seeking what God alone can give.

God then takes Jacob down one step further into submission – God asks Jacob to admit his name.

With his own lips Jacob has to say I am Jacob – deceitful, crafty, self-sufficient.

And with that admission, God then says to Jacob I am giving you a new name – the name Israel.

That name, Israel, literally means God rules.

Before you might have been known as IsraJacob or Jacob rules but now you will be known as Israel, God rules.

The man's further comment that Jacob's name will be called Israel "because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome" is difficult to understand.

I think the Latin translation of the Hebrew might help us.

"You have had power with God; much more shall you prevail with men."

His power with God was by clinging to and trusting God.

His power with men comes from power with God.

So real and transforming was this experience that Jacob called the name of the place where it happened "Peniel" (face of God) saying, "It is because I saw God face to face and yet my life was spared."

Jacob met God that night.

God graciously took Jacob to the very end of himself and beyond to where Jacob had no possibility but to cling to God.

And the text says that the next day Jacob was limping – what a reminder of his inability and God's ability.

Like the Apostle Paul's thorn in the flesh, Jacob might have had the limp the rest of his life – as a very real reminder of the grace of God to break him to make him.

2 Corinthians 12 "...There was given me a thorn in my flesh... I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

The next morning, in faith, Jacob met Esau.

In chapter 33 we are told that Jacob arranged his family in a certain order then "He himself went on ahead" to meet Esau.

He didn't know what the outcome of that meeting would be but he went depending on God, not on himself.

We will see in the weeks ahead that though Jacob is not a perfect man, he is a changed man.

God didn't create us to be independent of him, to be our own god.

He created us to be as dependent on him as grapes are to a grape vine – to use Jesus' analogy.

Yes, we are capable of going our own way, of exercising independence, of being the god of our own lives but the end of that way is eternal aloneness.

Yes, we are capable of going for years with a kind of self-help program in which we ask God to bless.

But the end of that way is frustration and fruitlessness.

What we were created for was a relationship with God that recognizes his sovereignty in our lives and lives in contented dependence on him.

Last night in this room I heard an outstanding testimony of this very struggle in life – the struggle against dependency.

Bob Heykoop spoke for many of us when he described the first years of his adult life as Christian but self-sufficient.

But God has wrestled Bob into contented submission – submission to a God who wishes to bless him more than Bob could ever have imagined when he was trying to make it all happen himself.

Yes, Bob has a limp, it is called cancer, but Bob has a new relationship with God.

Where are you in life?

Maybe you call yourself a Christian but the truth is you rely totally on your own strength and cleverness.

God is but a nice add-on in life.

God isn't even wrestling with you yet.

Maybe you are at the place where life has bruised you deeply and you are wondering if you have the energy and ability to go on.

Is God laying hold of you to get you to see that you need him like you never have before?

Maybe you are in the struggle right now.

God has you down on the mat but you are resisting with everything in you – afraid to surrender to God – afraid he won't be able to bless you like you have been able to bless yourself.

Where are you in life?

This morning I want us to just come to him and ask him.

I want you to take the time to think about your life and your relationship with God.

I want you to spend time in his presence deciding whether you will allow him to truly be your sufficiency.