

This morning I am going to tell you a story.

If you want to understand your Bible, this is one of the most important stories to remember.

It is the story of one man, when God met him and changed him at a critical moment in his life.

It is part of a much bigger story, the Bible story... God as He relates to people... begins in a garden and ends in a city.

It begins with Adam who God created and placed in a perfect paradise.

But Adam disobeyed, rebelled, and lost paradise.

Soon the earth that God created was filled with murder, sexual immorality, greed, and corruption. Sin carried a terrible curse.

This is why people are so messed up today. It is why the world is so messed up.

The whole Bible is a record of God's unfolding plan to get people back to paradise with Him.

Not the same old paradise that could fall into sin all over again,

But a new heavens and a new earth, better than the first, uncorrupted and incorruptible.

So, in light of His plan, God picked out one man from all the peoples on the earth.

His name was Abram.

God made a promise to Abram... blessing, land, descendants, and God's own presence.

Abram believed God, and God counted his faith as righteousness. Abram's faith in God made him righteous.

So, God changed his name to Abraham = "father of a multitude"

And, God changed the name of his wife, Sarai, to Sarah = "princess"

See, names in the Bible are very meaningful. They tell us something about that person and about their future.

God redefined Abraham in light of His promise.

Abraham was the father of Isaac, the son of the promise.

Isaac was the father of twins.

The older, Esau, did not value the promise and blessing of God.

The younger, Jacob, wanted the blessing and birthright and stole them from his brother by deception.

So, Esau wanted to kill Jacob and Jacob fled to Haran and found a wife, two wives... or four...

God met him on the way, but Jacob didn't know much about God.

In Genesis 28 God made him a promise, but Jacob made it into a bargain.

Jacob was mistreated by his father-in-law and learned to live by his wits. He was hard working but didn't trust anyone.

This is what his name meant.

Yet, through all Jacob's struggles and troubles, God protected him and blessed him. God had made a promise.

But, now comes Jacob's greatest challenge.

He is returning to the land that God has promised to him and his fathers.

He knows that he will have to face his brother, Esau.

And, God has a special lesson in store for him. God is going to change him... as God is committed to changing each of us.

We meet up with this timeless truth...

God often cripples us in order to change us and He has to change us in order to bless us.

or Proverbs 16:9

or Deuteronomy 31:8

or Hebrews 13:6

First, God sets Jacob up to learn the lesson.

I. God's camp. vss. 1-2

This is such a strange and unique event. There is really nothing else like it in the whole Bible.

Jacob is just about to cross the Jordan into Canaan and he discovers a camp of angels.

Did you know that angels came in camps?

What are they doing here?

Why does Jacob meet them at this particular time?

Well, we will just stick all these questions in our pocket and save them for later.

Let's see what Jacob is up to.

II. Jacob's fear. vss. 3-8

Jacob sends his servants out ahead to Esau to tell him of his wealth and friendly intent.

They return to Jacob with grim news. Esau is on his way with 400 men... no animals.

Why would someone do that. Jacob knows. It is a war party. It's got to be.

So, Jacob "is greatly afraid and distresses."

Therefore, Jacob begins to formulate a plan. He divides his company. Hopefully one of them will escape.

And then Jacob prays. He's at least 60 years old and this is the first time he has sought God in prayer.

III. Jacob's prayer.

vss. 9-12

This is a good prayer. Do you see what Jacob is doing in this prayer?

vs. 9 God, you're the one who told me to do this. Implication: So, God you have to keep me safe.

vs. 10 We see Jacob's humility and his gratefulness to the Lord.

vs. 11 A plea for deliverance, an honest admission of fear, and a reminder to God that there are women and children there.

vs. 12 A reminder to God of God's own promise.

Implication: God, if You're going to keep your promise You have to keep me alive... and all the wives and children.

Before we become too critical of Jacob, it is important to see that this is a very good prayer.

It is the kind of prayer that you and I need to pray.

Moses prayed prayers like this. David prayed prayers like this. The prophets prayed prayers like this.

Jacob is asking the Lord to be true to His character and His word. We need to pray like this as well.

This is one of the great prayers of the Bible. There is no problem with this prayer.

The problem is that Jacob's subsequent actions show that he does not really think that God will answer this prayer.

IV. Jacob's plan.

vss. 13-23

This is not an example of courage and bravery in the face of danger.

Jacob does the sort of thing that Jacob has always done... he comes up with a sneaky plan to take care of himself.

He is going to try to bribe Esau with all that he has, little by little. He might even get to keep some of it.

His servants with the animals will go ahead of him... troop by troop...

Even his family will go ahead of him. If Esau seems angry still, Jacob will flee.

Clearly Jacob is not the model of courage.

It is also clear that he's not confident that God will protect him... so he'll do it himself.

Imagine the struggle inside of Jacob at this moment... trying to trust God who he barely knows.

He wants to believe that God is willing and able to save him, but he's still trying to save himself.

He's wanting to trust God, but really is trusting more in himself and his strategies and plans.

The present problem, Esau, seems bigger than the promise of God... bigger even than the camp of angels that he just saw!

After all, what other reason would there be for God to show him a whole camp of angels...

unless God was showing his presence to protect Jacob?

What camps of angels might there be around you, your family, this church?

Why is it so difficult to trust God rather than our own plans and strategies?

This is our struggle too... and so God meets Jacob. No, God attacks Jacob... but, at first he does not know that it is God.

Everyone and all his possessions have been sent on ahead. Jacob is all alone.

V. God wrestles Jacob.

vss. 24-32

vss. 24-25 The word "wrestle" means to fight in the dust. And they fight all night.

The mysterious man cannot beat Jacob and so the man strikes him in the thigh and dislocates his hip.

Now the sun is rising and Jacob is beginning to be able to see his opponent.

Somehow, by now, Jacob has figured out that the mysterious man that attacked him is God.

They are entangled in the dust, Jacob in pain, but he will not let go... and they have a conversation.

It is a conversation about, of all things, blessing and names.

vss. 26-29 This is a fascinating conversation that follows an interesting pattern.

God wants to go away. Jacob demands a blessing.

God asks Jacob's name. Jacob gives him his name.

God changes Jacob's name... "Israel"

Jacob asks God's name. God does not give Jacob His name.

God gives Jacob a blessing. God goes away.

You could think of this like a sandwich within a sandwich. Two kinds of bread with the meat in the middle.

But, let us not ignore the breads.

The outside bread: Jacob demands a blessing. Jacob receives the blessing from God.

This is the sense in which Jacob prevailed in the fight with God. He got what he wanted.

God could not get away until He blessed Jacob.

Of course, this was obviously God's intent. God has already promised to bless Jacob.

But, here, Jacob presents for us the perfect picture of the believer clinging to God and His promise.

We ought to pray this way, "God, I won't let go of you until you make good on your promise."

The inside bread: God hears Jacob's name, but Jacob does not get to learn God's name.

I don't know why. Perhaps Jacob is not ready. He is only just learning about who God really is.

God does not really answer this question until Moses asks it in **Ex. 3:13-15**.

The meat (vs. 28): God takes Jacob's name and changes it.

This is what God does with those who are a part of His promise plan.

It used to be and still is in many parts of the world that when someone believes in Jesus, he or she gets a new Christian name.

When we really come to know God and believe in Him, He redefines who we are for all to see.

This is why people in the New Testament who believe in Jesus the Savior want to be baptized.

They are new people and they want everyone to know it. God makes us new.

Before you know Jesus Christ you might be a murderer, adulterer, a gossip, or a sneaky cheater like Jacob.

But, now if you believe in Jesus you are a new creature, a new creation in Christ. (1 Cor. 5:17)

You are no longer who you were. You are called a Christian.

Jacob's new name is "Israel" = "God fights" or "One who fights with God."

Jacob's old name indicated a guy who struggled and cheated... but now he is defined in relation to His God.

This is what Jacob did. He fought with God... and prevailed. He received the blessing.

But, this will characterize his life now... a man who fights with God.

And, this is what Jacob will do. Nothing in his life will be easy... learning about God from God will be a struggle.

And, when his family finally becomes a nation, that nation will be called Israel. They also will fight with God.

Nothing will ever be easy for the people called Israel... the people who have God's promise.

If you don't understand this, you cannot understand the Old Testament.

The people of the promise constantly struggle with God.

The same is true for us.

We make it difficult for God to work in our lives. We resist His lessons. We forget what He has said.

We wander away. He has to bring us back. Sometimes the bringing back is rough.

We pray. And, we struggle to believe that God will answer our prayers. Sometimes we wonder if He's there at all.

We disobey. He has to discipline us. (**Heb. 1:5-11**)

It is not a good thing to fight with God... but it is who we are.

It is better to have God and live in His promise, even if there are struggles, than to not have Him at all.

And, in the struggles, God teaches us. He teaches us that He's in control... that He has camps of angels...

And that we need to trust Him and obey Him.

After God leaves, Jacob reflects on the encounter.

vs. 30-31 He realizes that He has seen God and lived... so he names the place for the experience.

He understands that this, in itself, is a mercy of God.

God is far more dangerous than Esau... and yet God spared him.

And, God changed him... his name... who he is... and God changed him physically. He is now a cripple.

He cannot run from Esau. He is forced to trust God.

God does this to us too. Is it difficult for you to really trust God?

God is so committed to you that He will find a way to make you trust in Him.

That's not a pleasant thought... and yet again... maybe it is... in light of His promise.

He wants to get you to glory, a new body in a new heaven and a new earth.

A little pain now is worth it.

vs. 32 So, the people of Israel in Moses' day remember this event every time they eat.

They remember who they are.

Jacob's descendants, the people Israel, who struggle with God themselves, forever remember the origin of their name.

It describes them.

It describes us.

We do struggle in life. Sometimes our struggle is with God Himself.

But we never let go of God... and we cling to His promise.

There is no treasure in all the world like God and His promise.

To be God's people means to cling to His promise. To believe in Jesus Christ means that we will never let go of that promise.

It is a promise of a new identity given to us by God. We are new creations in Christ Jesus.

It is a promise of salvation that Jesus gained for us on the Cross.

It is a promise of blessing to us... and through us to others.

It is a promise of a perfect king in a heavenly kingdom.

It is a promise of a promised land and God's personal presence forever.

And, to believe in Jesus Christ is to trust that He keeps all of His promises... even when we struggle.

Amen.