

The Jacob Narrative: The Conflicted Call of God

Twelve

32:1-34:31 Jacob at the Jabbok

Jacob Makes Preparations

Before we can really understand Jacob's encounters with God, we need to go back and remember how we came to this point. In the last two chapters we discovered Jacob to be a sneaky, conniving crook who swindled his brother Esau out of his birthright and later, with the help of his mother, Rebekah, cheated Esau out of his father's deathbed blessing. At this point Esau made a vow that he would do everything in his power to kill Jacob. So Jacob fled his brother's wrath and went to live with an uncle named Laban. There he fell in love with one of Laban's daughters, the beautiful Rachel. Laban tricked Jacob into marrying his older daughter, Leah. Finally, after agreeing to work another seven years for Laban, Jacob married Rachel, too. Eventually, after the birth of Joseph, he began preparations to return to his homeland.

Actually there were some good reasons for Jacob's decision to leave Laban's house. For one thing, his kinsmen had ganged up on him; for another, Rachel had stolen Laban's prized possessions, his household gods. Isn't it interesting that in the midst of his conniving and plotting, Jacob hears a call from God to move on! At any rate, he loads up his two wives, his children, and all his worldly possessions and starts home.

Jacob, however, faces a real dilemma. He cannot stay at Laban's house because of what he has done, and he is afraid to go home because of Esau's vow to kill him. Many thoughts probably cross his mind. Is it worth the risk? Is Esau still angry after all these years? Will Esau still try to kill him, or will he be able to forgive and forget?

Jacob's preparation for meeting with Esau is described in Genesis 32:1-21. Read those verses now. The appearance of the angels (vv. 1-2) is somewhat unexpected. Perhaps they are to serve as Jacob's bodyguards for "safe conduct" home. There is a similar appearance as the children of Israel enter the land of promise in Joshua 5:13-15. A further parallel can be found in Psalm 34:4-8. See especially verse 7, where "The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them."

Following the departure of the angels, Jacob makes contact with his brother (vv. 3-8). He is obviously anxious about the meeting. It is interesting to see Jacob adopt a posture of deference. Based on his actions in 25:27-34 and 27:1-45, it is not at all what we expect. Obviously the reconciliation which Jacob seeks will not come easily. A wrong move at this point could prove fatal.

Because he recognizes his vulnerability, Jacob prays to God (vv. 9-12). This is the only extended prayer recorded in the book of Genesis. As such, it is worthy of special attention. Read the prayer through, then consider the following comments:

Verse 9: Notice how Jacob addresses God. Here we see a parallel to the call of Abraham in 12:1-3. Jacob is recalling that God has made promises in the past, and he wishes to hold God to them. There is a note of insistence here that the original journey of the first patriarch should be continued or completed. There may also be a parallel to the later return of Israel from exile (see Isaiah 40:1-11).

Verse 10: Here Jacob affirms that the changes in his life have all been God's doing. Perhaps his deference is a means to motivate God to protect him. You may want to compare this attitude toward God with David's in 2 Samuel 7:18-20 and Solomon's in 1 Kings 3:6-7. Two phrases here need some explanation. The word "least" acknowledges Jacob's role as the younger son who has been extraordinarily blessed. This sounds a familiar biblical theme: God's concern for "little ones" of the world. For other examples see the account about Gideon in Judges 6:11-18; the choice of David in 1 Samuel 16:11, 12; the remission of judgment in Amos 7:1-6. See also Matthew 10:42 and 18:6, 14. The phrase "steadfast love and faithfulness" is the way Israel most characterizes God (see Exodus 34:6). Jacob knows that God's heart is steadfast and faithful because his life is a miracle brought about by God. In this way he is a model of those who live by the faithfulness of God alone.

Verse 11: Jacob's prayer is a straightforward request for deliverance. Many similar petitions are found in the Psalms: see 7:1-2; 31:15-16; 59:1-4; 143:9.

Verse 12: Jacob appeals back to the initial promise (see verse 9). He is deferential but bold in making his case.

God does not answer Jacob's prayer immediately, but at least Jacob recognizes God as the One to whom he can turn in the midst of his crisis. After the prayer, Jacob resumes his preparation for the meeting (vv. 13-21). The gifts he prepares for Esau are designed to impress the offended brother with Jacob's generosity and wealth. Having entrusted himself to God, Jacob now hopes to appease his brother.

Jacob at the Jabbok

The story continues as in 32:22-32 Jacob and his clan are camped on the banks of the Jabbok waiting to cross the stream. Now read these verses. Jacob has placed his family on the other side of the stream from where he will spend the night. One would like to believe that Jacob put them over there for their own protection but, knowing Jacob, we suspect he might have done it for his own protection! Anyway, Jacob spends the night alone and settles down to try to get some sleep.

Suddenly, someone seizes him. The text does not reveal the identity of this “man.” Perhaps at first Jacob believes the man to be Esau coming to exact his pound of flesh. But as the match continues, it becomes apparent that this one with whom Jacob wrestles has more than human power. As dawn begins to break, Jacob realizes that his opponent during that night-long wrestling match was not his brother, Esau, or even a person in a dream, but God. What a picture is portrayed here! Jacob is afraid of his brother and God yet willing to enter into the fray with either of them.

You may have several questions at this point. If this “man” is somehow a messenger representing God, what does it mean that Jacob wrestles him to a draw? What does this suggest about the kind of man Jacob is? How may this incident demonstrate a relationship between God and our most serious struggles? Also note Jacob’s naming of the location as the place where he has seen God “face to face” (v. 30). What does this unusual designation signify? Definite answers to these questions are not given in the text itself. That is one reason the passage has received so much attention in the history of interpretation. Clearly we are dealing here with a man who is no ordinary man. Nor is this an ordinary story about an ordinary God. It seems most plausible that the unknown wrestler is God or a representative of God. It is also clear that in the present form of the passage Jacob’s anticipated meeting with Esau and his encounter with the unnamed opponent at the Jabbok are to be kept together. On the path toward reconciliation with his brother, Jacob must also deal with God. Our struggles with the divine blessing and our relationships with those we encounter in the light of day are interrelated.

At the end of their match the wrestlers are exhausted, and they engage each other in conversation (vv. 26-29). There are three exchanges between Jacob and his adversary. Read each and consider these comments:

Exchange #1 (v. 26) Jacob seeks a blessing, but the stranger ignores the request for the moment.

Exchange #2 (vv. 27-28) Jacob receives a new name and hence a new identity. He had been the heel or trickster or supplanter. Now he is the one who has faced God and prevailed. He will thus bring a new power to his meeting with Esau.

Exchange #3 (v. 29) In this exchange Jacob takes the initiative and speaks first. He asks the name of the stranger, but the stranger does not grant that request. Perhaps Jacob is asking to know God's name, to overcome the mystery and distance between heaven and earth. The stranger does not comply with this wish, but returns to the first request, blesses Jacob and departs.

The final aspect of Jacob's encounter with God is also troubling. Jacob, the man who embodies all the hopes and dreams of the people of God, the one who encounters God and is given a new name, walks away from the Jabbok with a limp. It is bad enough thinking of having to struggle with God, but the idea that God may mark a person with an infirmity is too much for some of us to take. That is not what we want hear.

Unfortunately, there are more than enough people in our world who will deny that God acts this way. Their message is that if you are a Christian, then you are related to a God who does away with problems, pains, and crutches and who showers material blessings on all who follow. That message does make a certain amount of sense to Christians. After all, we are followers of the Risen Christ, the one who was ultimately triumphant over the trials and tribulations of this world.

That message, however, seems inconsistent with the realities of modern life. Christian families are being torn apart by family and marital strife and career pressures. Calendars of community counseling workers are filled to overflowing. Drug and alcohol treatment centers are doing a booming business. More and more teenagers are finding suicide a way out.

Again we are confronted by several serious questions. Why was Jacob limping? How is his limping related to the "cost" of God's blessing? In what way does Jacob's struggle with his sacred vocation anticipate Jesus' struggle with his calling?

These questions also are not answered in the text. It seems the outcome of Jacob's rendezvous is ambiguous. It is an awesome experience to struggle with the presence of the Almighty. One may bear the marks of the encounter for life. Jacob receives a blessing, but he is now a cripple whose limp affirms that only God is God. Weakness has been blended into the power of Jacob's new identity, and power has been combined with his weakness. This same duality marks the future life of Israel, a nation whose call by God is mingled with its vulnerability. The same theological motif anticipates the discussions of Jesus with his disciples (Mark 10:35-45) and the "good news" of the cross.

Jacob Meets Esau

The text does not reveal how Esau spent the night before he met Jacob. Did he pass the time reviewing Jacob's many deceptions, or had time healed his fierce anger? Was he eagerly anticipating the revenge he

would finally obtain the next day? There is no way to know, but Esau's behavior soon indicates that he, too, has participated in a wrestling match in his soul.

Unlike his encounter with the stranger, Jacob is prepared for his meeting with his brother (see Genesis 32:3-8 and 32:13-21 to refresh your memory concerning his negotiations and strategic planning). Now read the account of the brothers' approach to one another (33:1-11).¹ The text is dominated by two phrases: Jacob is concerned to "find favor" with his brother, and he and his entourage all "bow down" before Esau. Clearly Jacob is the one who fears the encounter. The passage also indicates Rachel and Joseph are the two whose protection is most important.

Esau's reaction to Jacob's overture is somewhat unexpected: "But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept (v. 4)." What a picture the narrator paints for us. The wronged, manipulated, cheated, supplanted brother runs and embraces the manipulator, cheater, supplanter. It is almost too much to believe. In his book *Messengers of God*, Elie Wiesel recounts one ancient midrash (interpretation) of the encounter which suggested that Esau ran toward Jacob with the intention of biting him on the neck. However, Jacob's neck miraculously turned to marble so that Esau hurt his mouth. That was the reason for Esau's tears (p. 118)! In some ways it is easier to accept the idea that Jacob's neck turned to marble and that Esau hurt his mouth on the marble than it is to believe that Esau's heart has been changed to the extent that he runs toward Jacob and embraces him in reconciling love.

The significance of the brothers' meeting may be seen more clearly when it is set alongside Jacob's encounter with the stranger the night before. As we indicated above, these two meetings belong together. When so viewed the texts warn us about "cheap grace" and easy reconciliations. The narrator demonstrates this connection in his arrangement of the materials on the motif of "face":

Afterwards I shall see his *face* (32:20).

For I have seen God *face to face*, and yet my life is preserved (32:30).

For truly to see *your face* is like seeing the *face of God* (33:10).

There is something of the estranged brother in the encounter with the holy God. And there is something of the blessing of God in the meeting with the forgiving brother.

The theme of reconciliation is prominent in both of Jacob's meetings. A striking New Testament text on the same theme is 2 Corinthians 5:16-21. In both this passage and Genesis 32-33 the starting point is God's

¹ We will not comment on 33:12-34:31 in this chapter. You may want to read this material to see how Jacob and Esau part from one another and where Jacob settles.

reconciling work. In both texts a mandate for reconciliation with others follows. You may also want to review 1 John 4:12, 20-21 for a strong affirmation that love of God and love of brother belong together.

In Robert Frost's poem "Mending Wall" there is this poignant line: "Something there is that doesn't love a wall, that wants it down . . ." ¹ Most of us share Frost's sentiment. We do not like to see brothers and sisters at each other's throats. We have a low tolerance for iron and bamboo curtains or any other structure that divides human beings from one another. Our consciences will not let us rest when we have lied, cheated, and manipulated other human beings for selfish purposes. There is something (or someone) that wrestles with us as long as we are alienated from other people. As Jacob discovered and we have learned, the someone is God, who created us for life together and who will not let us go until the work of reconciliation is finished.

Some Final Notes

Down through the centuries the spiritual descendants of Jacob have struggled with the pain and blessing of being the people of God. That struggle continues in our own time. Those in the community of faith bear many names, but above all they bear the name of the one who struggled up a hill called Calvary and was raised from a tomb in a garden on Easter morning.

Jacob's encounter with God did not do away with his problems or his pain any more than our encounters will erase our struggles and our hurts. Jacob, however, discovered something far more valuable: God's transforming presence in the midst of his life. Frederick Buechner is right:

. . . Luckily for Jacob, God doesn't love people because of who they are but because of who he is. *It's on the house* is one way of saying it and *it's by grace* is another, just as it was by grace that it was Jacob of all people who became not only the father of the twelve tribes of Israel but the many times great grandfather of Jesus of Nazareth, and just as it was by grace that Jesus of Nazareth was born into this world at all. ²

¹ Robert Frost, *Complete Poems of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1967), p. 48.

² Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 58.