

Daring to Draw Near, 5

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Last week we began a study in the life of Jacob. We're looking at a pivotal moment in his life. Jacob was a notorious swindler and scoundrel, you will recall from last week, and he had swindled his brother, Esau, out of the family birthright. In his father, Isaac's, last days when Isaac's eyes were useless and his hearing was bad, Jacob dressed as Esau in order to get the family blessing and inheritance. Esau was the true firstborn and he was played for a fool. The two parted ways and God began to get Jacob's attention. Remember what we said last week? Jacob struggled half of his life to gain for himself the very things that God had planned to give him anyway.

Well, there came a time in Jacob's life when Jacob sought to normalize his relationship with Esau so he sent tribute, which is to say material possessions, and he sent that on to Esau in the hopes that he would placate Esau. It was also a display of power with the hopes, perhaps, of intimidating Esau so that no harm would come to Jacob and his family. One of the great ironies was that Jacob spent such a great deal of time and energy wrestling the family's birthright away from Esau and now, when it mattered, he couldn't even use the family privilege he had swindled into ownership. Isn't that just like sin? It sounds so attractive until you own the sin, then it is only bitter. John Piper calls the desire for sin deceitful desires. Augustine called such desires fruitless joys. And C. S. Lewis calls it pleasures snatched by unlawful acts.

You remember the movie "Wall Street." It was a movie fundamentally about greed. Michael Douglas was the indomitable Gordon Gekko who was absolutely sold out to greed. In one speech he actually says, "Greed is good." Charlie Sheen played the part of a young, naïve, impressionable man seeking to make a career for himself as a stockbroker and his father in the movie was played by Martin Sheen, his father in real life, and he was an honest, hard-working man. And Charlie Sheen started taking shortcuts and ended up more like the new, sexy, rich role-model than his older, middle-class, working-class, honest father. And at the end of the movie, the SEC has him arrested and in a classic movie line, one of the classics of all time as handcuffs were drawn and ready to snap around his wrists, Charlie Sheen says to the law enforcement officials, "I don't suppose you're here to open a self-directed IRA?" He is then led out through the offices a completely broken and humiliated man. The picture was much the same as Jim Bakker as his empire came crumbling down around his shoulders, felled by the same issue, greed. I

still have that picture of a sobbing Jim Bakker, broken and humbled, being led away in handcuffs. Sin may be sweet for a time, but its end is destruction and bitterness.

Such was the case with Jacob who had stolen the family birthright but couldn't use it when he needed it, and Jacob was ultimately subdued, humbled and broken by God as Jacob wrestled with him by the Jabbok Creek. We use two illustrations to describe this effect. First of all, it was Churchill's protection of the broken Enigma Code, by the sacrifice of the city of Coventry to German bombers. And then we also looked at Michel de Montaigne and his enlightenment quote, "There are triumphal defeats that rival victories."

Jacob was humbled and broken and was asked his name. He said it. He owned it. "My name is Jacob." The last time he was asked for his name, he said, "My name is Esau." But inasmuch as Jacob means swindler, God by asking his name was forcing him to own his sin and when he did, God gave him a new name, Israel, releasing him from his sin and his debt. We read this in Genesis 32:22-31, "The same night he arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had. And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, 'Let me go, for the day has broken.' But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go unless you bless me.' And he said to him, 'What is your name?' And he said, 'Jacob.' Then he said, 'Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.' Then Jacob asked him, 'Please tell me your name.' But he said, 'Why is it that you ask my name?' And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered.' The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip."

That's the story that we went over last week. That's the very simple story of Jacob and his wrestling with God at the Jabbok Creek. What is the takeaway from all of this? Well first, I suppose if we all had names as descriptive as they had in biblical times we all would have the name Jacob as one of our names. We all have in us something that is bent. We all have the propensity to sin. The Bible says, "There is none righteous, no, not even one. There is none who seeks God. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Now, we have to admit that we're uncomfortable with people referring to us as sinners but it's true. Jesus said, "Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect," and that lack of perfection is what the Bible refers to as sin. You may consider yourself better than your friends or your neighbors or maybe the person that you're sitting next to right now, or maybe you think of yourself as better than your pastor, Pastor John, and you very well may be but you aren't measured against your friends, against your neighbors, against your seat-mates, and you're not measured against me. You are measured against Almighty God and when you pass from this life into the next life; you won't meet your neighbors to give an account of your life; you won't meet your seat-mates when you give an account of

your life, you won't meet me in order to give an account of your life. You will meet Almighty God, a holy God, and you will have to give an accounting of your life.

Now, the worst news than that is that sin has teeth. You see that sin has caused a yawning chasm between you and God and that chasm is impassable, at least it is by yourself. The worst news is that there is nothing that we can do about it in and of ourselves to cross that chasm, resolve the predicament of separation from God. But there is good news and that is that God did for us what we could not do for ourselves. God came to Jacob in his aloneness. God came to the world in its inability to cross that chasm and before the very first breath was taken on this planet, God's plan was taking shape. The Son of God would come into the world, Jesus Christ, and he would live a perfect life and at a time and place of his choosing, he would surrender himself, bear a trial, bear a beating, and ultimately suffer crucifixion, and while on the cross, Jesus would bear the humiliation of our sin on him. Not only would he die physically, but he would die spiritually which is to say that he would experience hell, not because he deserved it, but because I deserve it and he was standing in for me. But death couldn't hold him and on the third day, he would emerge from his tomb to the consternation of his enemies and the joy and delight of his apostle friends.

Now, God doesn't forgive capriciously or randomly, only to those who respond to him in faith and repentance. I would implore you today to surrender to God by believing. By believing that you are helpless sinners, that you can't fix your dilemma by yourself, and by believing the good news that God did for us what we couldn't do for ourselves. In fact, the Bible says, "He made him who knew no sin, Jesus, to become sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." First of all, we need to surrender to God by believing the bad news and the good news, and then we need to turn from our sin and turn from ourselves as being on any day good enough to earn or deserve God's favor, and to turn to live with and for God.

Jesus wrestled with God for you in the garden of Gethsemane when he asked three times, "Father, if it would be your will, take this cup from my hand." That cup was the cup of God's wrath and Jesus was wrestling for you in the garden. And then Jesus wrestled on the cross for you when he said, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus was wrestling for your soul. If you've been running, I implore you to quit running and surrender to God and I think that's the first takeaway from this passage.

Secondly, I'd say, trust in the unseen forces of God to work on the prayers that you pray. There was a time somewhere about 900 BC plus or minus, when the king of Assyria was waging war against Israel and Elisha was a burr under the saddle of the king of Assyria and so when the king of Assyria found out that Elisha was away from the conflict, he sent his army to insure that Elisha was isolated. Elisha's servant went to the door that morning and was frightened when he looked outside to find the armies of Assyria had surrounded the city and his servant, Gehazi, said, "Elisha, whatever shall we do?" And Elisha said, "Do not be afraid for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." Now, that to Gehazi must have sounded like empty rhetoric, platitudes he's thrown at me, but Elisha prayed for Gehazi and God opened Gehazi's eyes to see the forces of God, the

otherwise unseen forces of God ready to move and here's how it reads in 2 Kings 6, "When the servant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was all around the city. And the servant said, 'Alas, my master! What shall we do?' He said, 'Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.' Then Elisha prayed and said, 'O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see.' So the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. And when the Syrians came down against him, Elisha prayed to the LORD and said, 'Please strike this people with blindness.' So he struck them with blindness in accordance with the prayer of Elisha."

Really Jacob's case was much the same way. In Genesis 32:11 he says, "Please deliver me from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, that he may come and attack me." Jacob's prayer was out of fear but looked what happened. Genesis 33:4, "But Esau ran to meet him and embraced Jacob and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept." In that instance, Esau wept out of love but Jacob wept out of relief. The larger point on prayer is: God is working in unseen ways to accomplish his purposes in answering our prayers and the message is as we pray, trust that God is at work in ways we can't even imagine to accomplish his purposes and answering our prayers. It might not always be in accordance with our expectations as far as outcomes go, but be assured God is working for his purposes.

By the way, Elisha was a great prophet. Prophets brought light into the world by declaring God's timeless truth. And Elisha as a prophet foreshadows another prophet who came into the world. Elisha was the prophet who brought spiritual light into Gehazi's eyes but John would tell us later the true light which enlightens everyone was coming into the world. "He was in the world and the world was made through him and yet the world did not know him. He came to his own but his own did not receive him, but to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God who were born of God."

So the second way is to trust in the unseen forces of God; to work on your prayer even before you pray. I think a third takeaway is struggle with God is the ultimate struggle. Jacob had a lot of things, a lot of struggles, a lot of issues on his mind, but there was a larger struggle that needed settling first, his struggle with God. You may have a great many things in life about which you're concerned but your biggest struggle is with Almighty God. Settle your known outstanding accounts with God before you take up issues with other people.

I think there's a fourth takeaway here and that is the larger point of prayer is dependence on God. Whatever else you're praying for, remember that the larger point of prayer is that you are a poor desperately needy sinner who is coming to a loving heavenly Father in dependence on his sovereign mercy, and whatever we ask for, are just things, but when our attitude is correct, we are showing our dependence on him. And God took the hip out of its socket, not the collarbone, not the elbow, not the finger but the hip so that the only way Jacob had to stand up was to lean on God. You remember this quote by George

MacDonald, "Communion with God is the one need of the soul beyond all other need. Prayer is the beginning of that communion and some need, whatever that need might be, is the motive of that prayer. So begins a communion, a talking with God, a coming to one with him which is the sole end of prayer."

I think there is a fifth takeaway here and that is Jacob had two names. After the wrestling at the Jabbok Creek, Jacob was given a new name, he was given the name Israel. So he had two names: Jacob which means swindler, and Israel which means God prevails. Martin Luther would one day describe mankind as simul justus et peccator, simultaneously just and sinner. The two names of Jacob remind us of that likewise.

I think there's a sixth takeaway and that is that Jacob's new name was an act of God. You know, this is important to point out that this change in name in Jacob from swindler to Israel, which is God prevails, came about not because of Jacob's cleverness, because of his shrewdness, or his success in business affairs, but because of God's overpowering assault at the Brook Jabbok. We get our new name, Christian, not because of our cleverness or shrewdness or hard work or success, but because God overcame us.

A seventh takeaway, Jacob starts out ambivalent towards God but as circumstances begin to spin out of control, God displays a larger and larger role in his life. Jacob's prayer life goes from 0-60 in a matter of seconds as trouble mounts for him. The first time we ever see Jacob pray is in Genesis 32:9. Doesn't that sound familiar? How much better would it be if we had trusted the Lord earlier? How much better would it be if we had used prayer as our first resource rather than our last resort?

And finally, the last of the takeaways, when God is your adversary, there is no peace. If you struggle with peace or a lack thereof in your life, if your life feels like chaos, then you need to see how you're doing with God. It's in the struggles and sufferings that we're taught to abound on dependence; to abandon our own self-dependence and look to the cross, clinging to God alone for blessing. If we assume God's will for us is prosperity and riches, then suffering will never make sense and we'll always lack peace in our life. Prayer is first dependence on God. Prayer is movement from ambivalence towards God to dependence on him. Prayer is submission to God and his agenda.

Those are the things that we learn from the life of Jacob. "Then Jacob asked him, 'Please tell me your name.' But he said, 'Why is it that you ask my name?' And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, 'For I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been spared.'"