

## Genesis 32

### *Wrestling With God*

Just a quick glance at this past week's headlines and you know our country faces some big problems. Here's a few: Lawmakers Hold Emergency Hearings On Swine Flue, US Says Pakistan Terror Threat Up, Chrysler Files For Bankruptcy, Storm Toll Rises As Couple Found Dead, North Korea Duels With Iran For Top Axis Ranking, Congress Approves \$3.4 Trillion Spending Blueprint.

And that's just a small sample of the stories that assault our senses every single day. If we're not careful all of the bad news can have unintended consequences.

Just last month the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration started a Web page to alert people to warning flags of persistent depression, anxiety, sleeplessness, fatigue, excessive irritability or anger that might come because of the economy.

How do we face the turmoil and uncertainty of our day? What would God want us to think, say, and do in response to the big issues of our day that are completely out of our control?

Here at Faith Community Church we believe that God has answers for us in the Bible.

It might be thousands of years old, but the Bible claims to come from God. If it did, then it should have timeless wisdom to help us face the difficulties of life no matter at what point in history we happen to live.

We're currently in a detailed study of the book of Genesis, which is the very first book of the Bible. The other day I picked up a booklet explaining the beliefs of a certain large religious denomination.

It says, "We see the Bible as foundational to our faith, however we do not insist on a literal interpretation of the Bible. We see the Bible as a faith document that leads us to salvation, not as a history text."

When speaking of the Genesis creation account it explains, "The religious significance of questions like, is the world basically good or evil, and where does sin come from overshadow any historical significance. We recognize the Bible is a complex document with many different authors and points of view."

This particular denomination, like so many in our country, is hemorrhaging parishioners in mass quantities. The reason should be obvious.

If the Bible isn't a trustworthy historical document and it contradicts itself by asserting different things about the same subjects then why would we waste our time learning it?

If religion is whatever you want it to be then go home and create your own personal faith, but why show up here and listen to me talk about an unreliable book?

The truth is, the Bible claims to have come to us under the inspiration of God and it lives up to it's claims. Scientifically, prophetically, historically, and experientially the Bible proves it's unlike any other book that's ever been written.

That's why we read and study the Bible. That's why we preach, teach, and counsel from the Bible in this church. And that's why we're going to open the Bible again today. We want the richness of God's wisdom, and direction.

### **So open you Bible to Genesis chapter 32. Page 31**

Adam and Eve, sinned against God and we've all followed in their footsteps. That sin has separated us from God who is holy. But the Bible tells us that God loves us and wants to reunite us with Himself.

There was only one way to deal with that sin. A price had to be paid. Interestingly, our English word "pay" originated from the Latin word pax, which means "peace."

The idea of making a "payment" arose from the sense of pacifying (or making peace with) a creditor.

Sin makes us a debtor. Our creditor is God. The problem is, there's nothing we could pay that would appease Him. Anything we could offer would be inferior because God is perfect. That would present a real problem if God hadn't made Himself the payment as well as the creditor.

All the way back in the Garden of Eden, as soon as Adam sinned God made a promise. He would send a redeemer. He would become the price payer.

The rest of the Old Testament is the story of God preparing the way. He eventually come into the world as a descendant of the Jewish king, David. He came as a Jew from the tribe of Judah.

We know Him as Jesus Christ. Christ is God in the flesh who paid sin's awful price on the cross.

In Genesis, we're way back in the process about 3700 years ago. God chose a man named Abraham and promised to bless the world through him. The last 38 chapters of Genesis tell us what happened to Abraham, his son Isaac, and his son Jacob.

It's Jacob that we read about in Genesis 32.

Jacob started life as a conniver and a schemer. Over time God used people and events to shape Jacob into a godly man. He originally ran from his home because he cheated his brother Esau out of the family blessing and Esau wanted to kill him.

Jacob spent 20 years with his uncle Laban. Now he's wealthy, has a much different character, and has truly become a worshipper of Jehovah God.

It's time for this ancestor of Jesus to go home and face Esau. But there's still a few more lessons about faith that God has for Jacob. Hopefully in Jacob's lessons we'll be able to see ourselves and learn some faith lessons ourselves.

*I. To Really Grow In Faith We Have To Get Alone With God*

### **Read verses 1-2**

We love to have life under control. We want everything to go our way. But God often has to bring us to the absolute end of our resources to show us how much we really need Him. That's what's happening to Jacob.

God brings us to the edge of life, but He always shows us He's with us. Jacob's going to have a face-off with his hostile brother but first God peels back the spiritual curtain and lets him know that he's in the company of angels.

Jacob says, "This is God's camp. God's in charge here." That should have been reassuring. God had shown Jacob that he was accompanied by angels at least twice before.

We have this promise *The angel of the LORD encamps all around those who fear Him, And delivers them.* Psalm 34:7

But now, what we know to be true spiritually and what we really live out can be two different things.

### **Read verses 3-5**

It's interesting that Jacob had lorded over his brother 20 years before this by tricking him and stealing the family blessing. Twenty years of living under his unethical uncle Laban had taught him to trust God instead of trying to finagle things.

Now he calls his brother "lord" which was proper because Esau was the elder. And while he didn't admit to stealing the blessing he basically says, "I'm not back to claim anything. God has prospered me and I'm doing OK."

### **Read 6-8**

Jacob says, "I have sent to tell my lord, that I may find favor in your sight," but the messengers come back with, "You're brothers coming to meet you and he's bringing 400 guys with him."

That didn't sound good. If Esau was just coming out to say, "Jacob, you're finally home. The whole family's been waiting to hear from you," he wouldn't need to bring a small army.

Do you see what's happening? Jacob, who's learned so much about trusting God in life, comes up against something unexpected and he's filled with fear. All of a sudden he's making preparation for disaster.

**Look back at 28:13-15** That was 20 years ago.

This was literally weeks ago... **31:11&13**

God gave Jacob specific, clear promises and instructions. Everything was great until something happened that Jacob couldn't understand. He finds out about his brother and his 400 man militia and Jacob begins to fall apart.

His first reaction was fear, then panic, then he starts making survival plans. Oriental caravans commonly split for safety.

What about God's promise of the land? What about the direct orders he got from Angel of the Lord? What happened to "This is God's camp?"

I think Jacob was just like most of us. We have the promises of God, *I will never leave you or forsake you. I'm with you always, even to the end of the age. Be strong and very courageous, that you may observe to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may prosper wherever you go.*

We say, "OK, God. I'm going to face life knowing that you're there facing it with me." Until. Until we come up against something real big, something we can't really handle, something we have no control over. Then all of a sudden we panic.

I wonder how often is God letting us come up against impossible situations so He can show us how much we need Him. Like Israel at the Red Sea with Pharaoh's army coming up against them.

What should we do that really expresses dependence on God? We should pray. So Jacob prays.

### **Read verses 9-12**

He prays, but his prayer is an interesting mixture of faith and doubt. He says, "You're the covenant God of my fathers. I don't deserve anything from you. I'm just doing what you said to do. But I'm afraid. I fear my brother Esau and what he's going to do."

It's like, "I know I can trust you God, but..."

Ever pray like that? I'm sure we all have. It's hard to really trust God when things look bad, isn't it? It's hard for us to get to that place where we can say, "God I don't see how You're going to get me through, but I'm going to trust you anyway."

It's hard, but that's exactly where God wants us. And that's the place of real freedom. When you get to the point in life where you can say, "I may not understand everything but I don't have to because I know God's got a plan," you are free.

The Bible says, *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition,*

*with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:6,7*  
NIV

Jacob was on his way to that point but he wasn't quite there yet. He was afraid, but he didn't need to be. God had everything under control.

### **Read verses 13-21**

There's nothing wrong with planning and there's nothing wrong with using our God-given wisdom. But in this case it was like Jacob said, "I know this is all about you God, but I'm still having a problem believing You."

One of my favorite passages in the Bible is in Psalm 37. Psalm 37 is a chapter that asks the question "Why do the wicked seem to do well and the righteous seem to suffer?"

In answering that there's a series of concise, expressive, directives from God. He says, "Don't get all caught up with other people. You just worry about you."

And here's what we're supposed to do:

*Trust in the LORD, and do good; Dwell in the land, and feed on His faithfulness. Delight yourself also in the LORD, And He shall give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD, Trust also in Him, And He shall bring it to pass. Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for Him. Psalm 37:3-7*

That's what a person who's mature in their faith does.

### **Read verses 22-24a**

Jacob is still so uneasy he can't sleep so he sends the rest of his household on over the brook and *Then Jacob was left alone.*

This was going to be the most important crisis in the life of Jacob. He was going to completely alone with God. Why was this so important?

Because Jacob's biggest problem wasn't Esau or anyone else. Jacob's biggest obstacle to being everything God wanted him to be was Jacob.

We think our biggest problem is our kids, or our job, or our spouse, or whatever. We think, If God would just get rid of this person or change this situation, life would be great. If God would bring world peace or get the financial institutions back on track we'd be fine.

The truth is, our biggest problem is our self-will, self-purpose, self-defense, self-desire, self-righteousness, and self-trust. Our biggest obstacle to really following and trusting God is us.

### **Read verse 24**

This "man" Jacob wrestles with turns out to be what the theologians call a theophany. It's an appearance of God. This turns out to be the decisive night in Jacob's life. It was the turning point.

He was left alone with God, which is the only way we're ever going to really be able to understand ourselves. We need to get away from our world, away from our thoughts about ourselves, away from our reasonings and imaginations, alone with God.

There are plenty of examples of God working with people when He gets them alone. God had to get Moses out in the desert to teach him and mature him. When Moses came out of the desert he was a different man. He was ready to lead Israel out of Egypt.

A number of times in the Psalm David writes about what God taught him in the alone times. Even Jesus made time to be alone with His Father. If that was important for the Son of God, how much more important is it for us?

There are things in life that can only be wrestled out and decided when we're alone with God.

*I. To Really Grow In Faith We Have To Get Alone With God*

*II. To Really Grow In Faith We Have To Be Brought To The End Of Trust In Ourselves*

### **Read verse 25**

Jacob's plan was to stand guard against any night attacks from his brother. He didn't leave anything to chance. But as he stood watch, Jacob was suddenly assailed by a

man who wrestled with him.

It was dark. Jacob didn't have the slightest idea who the guy was. He was under attack so he fought back. What he didn't know at first was, this was God in the form of a man.

Now obviously this passage gets the award for being one of the most unique in the Bible, but I think it's often misunderstood. A lot of times it's used to teach that we need to persevere in prayer but notice something, it was God, not Jacob who started this wrestling match.

Jacob seemed to be resisting. This passage really teaches God's perseverance with us until He breaks us and remakes us.

Jacob was apparently a pretty tough guy. He'd been out there with the flocks for the past 20 years in the cold and the heat, trudging through the hills and fighting off wild animals. I'm sure from his point of view he was successful in almost everything he attempted.

So at first he fought hard. Of course, it's a serious thing to resist God who's only intent is to bless us. Jacob had to learn that he never could really gain the birthright, the blessing, and the land of Canaan by his own cleverness. They were going to be his by faith alone as gifts from God.

Jacob's biggest challenge was just ahead. Esau was heading his way with 400 men. How was God going to humble him so Jacob would trust him completely? God cripples Jacob.

Now at first you might say, "Why would God wrestle with the guy in the first place? Why didn't He just pin him instantaneously? But then we look at our own lives. How long has God had to wrestle with us? Because God is patient He works with us for weeks, months, sometimes years to bring us to the point where He wants us to be.

Now think about this: God's been waiting for 20 years for Jacob to come to the end of himself. Jacob still wasn't quite there so God dislocated his thigh and maimed him for life.

Does that sound cruel to you? Does that make God sound heartless and uncaring?



The truth is, He cares for us more than we'll ever know. It's a serious thing to resist God.

Sometimes God has to touch some area of our life to cause us to stop fighting Him. He doesn't do that because He's cruel. He does it because He knows how important it is.

Jacob still depended too much on himself and his ability to get things done. God had to touch his physical body to cause him to realize his need of depending on God.

The first key to Jacob getting where he needed to be spiritually was to get alone with God. The second key was he had to be brought to the end of himself.

He wasn't any match for Esau's army so God had to make him see his utter weakness.

What is it that God has to do to bring us to the end of ourselves? What is He going to do individually, nationally, internationally to bring us to the end of ourselves?

It's not that we don't want to try to resolve problems with the economy, enforce the law against criminals, and discover new treatments for disease. It's not that we don't want to work hard and save and try to better ourselves. It's that we also have to hear the message that God has for us.

We can only do what God has allowed and everything has limits. We can eradicate a disease and three new ones pop up. We can smooth over an impending financial crisis, but there's usually another one waiting around the corner. We can work hard and save and then have our savings wiped out overnight.

In the end, our very lives are in the hands of God. About a month ago we were talking to a doctor about my wife's mother. She had been in the hospital for a month and nothing seemed to be helping. At one point the doctor said, "I don't know all the answers. I'm not God." That's all he could say.

We're not God and in the end we have no control over the most important things of life. How do we face all this stuff then? We face it in complete and total dependence on our sovereign God.

Self is the strongest antagonist we face. But look what happens to Jacob. After his power was broken because his thigh was out of place his whole attitude changed.

*I. To Really Grow In Faith We Have To Get Alone With God*

*II. To Really Grow In Faith We Have To Be Brought To The End Of Trust In Ourselves*

*III. To Really Grow In Faith We Have To Learn To Cling To God*

### **Read verses 26-30**

At last Jacob was where God wanted him. Jacob couldn't wrestle any more. All he could do was cling. He traded cunning for clinging and resistance for rest.

Jacob sort of half knew this before but now there was no question in his mind. Real success comes by the blessing of God. I believe all this wrestling was nothing but a demonstration of what had been going on for the last 20 years.

Theodore Epp writes, "Jacob won more through this one solitary defeat than he had won through his many years of walking according to the flesh. Before the fullness of blessing could come, there had to be a total collapse of his strong self-will. What was true of Jacob is also true of us. We must come to the end of ourselves."

"Jacob had stolen the blessing from Esau; now he was clinging to the Lord for his blessing. Jacob had contended with Esau and Laban and had succeeded, but when he contended with God, he utterly failed."

Here he is clinging to God and God changes his name. His old name was *Yaaqob*, "the heel catcher." His new name was *Yisrael*, "the one who fights with, or for, God."

Jacob's plan to meet Esau had been formulated but now God took over. God had everything under His authority including Esau. From now on it wasn't Jacob who'd be running his life, it would be God.

When we cling to the Lord in our life, when He becomes our strength, we begin to see everything differently. Instead of fear and worry controlling us, we have a settled confidence that God's in control.

We can be concerned about the events of our world but we don't have to be intimidated and tyrannized by them.

In this chapter Jacob was going to send his servants, his flocks, and even his family out first then he was going to meet Esau. In the next chapter Jacob is a changed man so he leads the way.

I don't know where each one of you is on your spiritual journey, but I know this: Our spiritual life begins by recognizing our own helplessness and trusting Jesus Christ as Savior. But that idea of helplessness doesn't stop there. If we really want to be everything that God has designed us to be we need to stop wrestling with God and just let Him takeover our life.

The New Testament puts it this way: *I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.* Romans 12:1-2

*For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.* Colossians 3:3

How do we face the turmoil and uncertainty of our day? What would God want us to think, say, and do in response to the big issues of our day that are completely out of our control?

God wants us to learn that He's utterly, absolutely, perfectly, unreservedly trustworthy.