

Genesis 32: Wrestling With God

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In Genesis 25, Abraham passes away, and Isaac, the child of the promise of God became the next patriarch of the family. Verse 5 says, "Abraham gave all that he had to Isaac", and God blessed his son Isaac. When Isaac was 40 years old he took a wife—Rebekah. Amazingly, she was barren just as her mother-in-law Sarah had been. Isaac prayed on her behalf, and the Lord answered him, and Rebekah conceived. Apparently this is a theme running throughout the Bible. God's people quite often can't have children until they turn to him in faith, and then in His timing their prayers are answered. Is it possible that God wants them to know that He is sovereign, and the resulting children are children of faith that He wants dedicated to Him?

The Original Soap Opera

I think all the TV shows got their ideas for soap operas from this biblical family. Right off the bat the twins within Rebekah are struggling and competing with each other. It reminds me of Bobby and J.R., the two sons on the old TV show DALLAS. They will be polar opposites in every way. The father Isaac will like Esau best because he will be an outdoorsman, a macho hunter that his dad can hang out with at the deer lease. Rebekah will like Jacob best because he hangs around in the tent with her, is sensitive and more of a momma's boy. Both of the sons will aspire to be the patriarch of the family, and both parents will conceive deceptive plans to help their favorite get what he wants. Thus, their story is a drama of competition, greed, deception, and broken relationships. There were no heroes in this story.

We soon learn that Esau is not a good guy, he has several marriages (at the same time), he has little regard for the birthright, he reneges on a deal, and he brings grief to his parents. Meanwhile, we learn that God revealed to the family early on that He would choose Jacob as the child of the promise. Even though Esau was born first, God chose Jacob to work His sovereign plan through. God even "appeared" to Jacob when he was a young man and told him, "I will be with you and bless you". This included all the promises God had made to Abraham and repeated to Isaac. God would give him and his descendants the land, and "by his descendants all the nations of the earth shall be blessed." We know that this refers to the salvation God will accomplish through Jesus Christ.

Can You Steal What God Has Promised to Give You?

Esau and Jacob continued to jockey for position as their father's death came closer to reality. When Isaac got old and his eyesight very bad, he conspired to give Esau the birthright, even though he knew that God had promised it to Jacob, and that Esau had already sold it (25:33). In Genesis 27, Isaac privately called Esau in and told him to go out and kill some fresh game to cook so that while eating his favorite meal, he would bless Esau with the birthright. But Rebekah is sneaking around listening, and hears the whole conversation, so she hatches a sneaky deceptive plan of her own. She cooks up Isaac's favorite dish, dresses Jacob up like Esau, and instructs Jacob to go in and impersonate Esau so that the old man will bless Jacob by mistake and Jacob would get the birthright. Jacob's voice impersonation is terrible, but blind Isaac feels his arms and they are hairy like Esau's---by the way, Esau means hairy.

What was all this sneaking around and deception about? Gen.27:29 explains this, "May peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you; be master of your brothers". This was about who would be TOP DOG, who would call the shots, and be in control. At least that is how the people perceived it. God's promises were entirely different, and Jacob would spend a lifetime struggling with God's will. Did God zap him with lightning like he deserved? No, God allowed him to be a victim of the consequences that resulted from this soap opera. When Esau got back, he cried out in anger, and swore to kill Jacob.

We found out that Jacob's name means "supplanter" because in 27:36, Esau says he supplanted me by deception twice. He meant that Jacob had taken his place by deception. In time, the word Jacob became synonymous with deceiver.

Knowing that Esau was going to kill Jacob, Rebekah sent Jacob away for an extended visit to her family in Paddan-aram. Again she deceives Isaac by using the ruse that Jacob can find a wife there. Isaac had no idea that Jacob would be gone for 20 years, and he would never see him again.

A Dose of His Own Medicine

Genesis 29-31 gives us the story of Jacob living with his Uncle Laban for 20 years. If Jacob's name meant deceiver, then Laban's must have meant King of Deceivers, because Laban proceeded to trick, use, and deceive Jacob the whole time he was there. When Jacob finally left and quit working for Laban, he defended himself by summing up his 20 years there by telling Laban--- I have been with you for these 20 years and I made you rich, yet you deceived me many times and changed my wages ten times. Jacob left there a changed man. Before, he had been full of pride, greed, and falsehood. Life was all about himself and what he wanted. Now, after twenty years of living with the consequences, or as I would say, a 20 year dose of his own medicine, he humbly returned home.

Reconciliation

Jacob's greatest fear loomed in the distance, his brother Esau had sworn to kill him. As Jacob approached his family's home in Canaan, the word came that Esau was coming out to him with 400 fighting men. Jacob's response tells us a lot about the new humble Jacob. In Genesis 32:9-12, Jacob bows down and prays to the Lord God. Using phrases like "I am unworthy", and "Deliver me", Jacob bows to the will of God and humbly trusts God for the outcome. Furthermore, when he met Esau, he bowed down to Esau, then offered him many presents. He attributed all his property and family to the grace of God, and he offered it to Esau. Overcome by Jacob's humility and generosity, Esau reconciled with his brother in Genesis 33. How do you face the Esau of life? How do you overcome insurmountable problems? Jacob trusted God and God made him a different person. This is confirmed by his name change in Genesis 32:28. Jacob was strong willed, but came to be changed from the inside out, and finally desired and trusted in God's will.

Your Name Shall No Longer be Jacob, but Israel

Did you ever wonder why the nation of Hebrews was called Israel? Jacob had twelve sons and they had many descendants, but Jacob was renamed by God in Genesis 32, and his descendants would be called by his new name. In verse 23, Jacob goes off alone the night before his fearful meeting with Esau. He was no doubt praying and asking God to help him. Genesis 32:24 says Jacob was alone, and "a man wrestled with him until daybreak."

Interpretations of this passage have been varied, and some are ridiculously wild. Did he actually wrestle with a man, or was it an angel, or as he said at the end, God Himself?

Many theologians prefer to speculate on allegorical interpretations, but the thing that seems clear to me is that the author intended it to be taken literally. Therefore, I look at it as an actual event. The wrestler was in the form of a man, but had the power to touch Jacob's hip and dislocate it. After it was over Jacob said, "I have seen God". This mysterious wrestler was either an angel sent by God or God in human form. Whether it was God's messenger or God Himself, or as many believe, the preincarnate Christ; Jacob was wrestling with God as He had done all his life.

This struggle with God made God's presence and purpose all the more real to Jacob. He was actually clinging desperately to God and must not let go. If he let go, God would leave him, and so he clung desperately to Him pleading for his prayers to be answered. Is God a weakling that could not break Jacob's grip? Of course not, God in His grace allows us to hold on, to cling to Him in hope. Finally God gave him full assurance of His blessing. The prophet Hosea recounts this encounter and said that the wrestling involved Jacob weeping and giving supplication. Apparently, God desires us to persist in our prayers and our clinging to Him.

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After Jacob's persistent supplication for a blessing, the wrestler asked him his name. A man's name was linked to his nature, so the point is that by saying his name Jacob, he confessed that he was a deceiver. The blessing took the form of a new name--Israel. Israel could mean "God fights" or "striving with God" or "contending with God". Because of Jacob's history and the future history of the nation, I prefer "contending with God".

It is significant that he received this new name before reentering the promised land. Blessing would not come by self-reliance, but by the grace of God. Only faith and dependence in God's blessing overcomes the world, but like us Jacob had to learn the hard way.

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