

Introduction:

- A. When you're facing something really scary do you ever think, "Well, by this time tomorrow it will be over, one way or another"? Maybe that's what Jacob thought that night when he was left alone along the bank of Jabbok River, on the border of all God had promised him. After 20 year of exile far away from the wrath of his twin brother, Esau, he was going home, at God's instruction, but before he could get home he had to face Esau—who was coming toward him with 400 men. That's what his tomorrow held.

But if that prospect wasn't terrifying enough, Jacob discovered he wasn't as alone as he thought because he was ambushed by a mysterious and mighty man who wrestled with him till daybreak. It was God in human disguise who wrestled Jacob into submission, dislocating his hip to get finally bring him down. But still Jacob hung on, weeping and begging for mercy. *"I will not let you go till you bless me."* And that's when—get this!—God gave in. There's Jacob, crippled, exhausted, weeping and begging for God's mercy, and God says, in effect, *"You win."* Mercy, of course, is a gift God doesn't *have* to give us. It costs him, yet he surrenders it when we ask. So God said, *"You have struggled with God and people and you have overcome."*

In response to Jacob's desperate plea for God's blessing, God *did* give him a three-part blessing: (1) a limp to remind him that God meets us when we're weak, (2) a new name, Israel, to remind him that he could prevail with God and man through the mercy of God, and (3) a glimpse of God's face which was like the dawn of a new day—a new life. **Those are the blessings Jacob God when he pled for God's mercy.**

B. But now, about Esau. **Gen. 33:1-3**,

Jacob looked up and there was Esau, coming with his four hundred men; so he divided the children among Leah, Rachel and the two female servants. He put the female servants and their children in front, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph in the rear. He himself went on ahead and bowed down to the ground seven times as he approached his brother.

- C. You need to ask yourself why God arranged these two confrontations to happen back-to-back? *Illus.*: I had two conversations on Friday, one right after the other. First, I talked with a friend who told me that this past year had been one of the hardest of his life. After years of hard preparation for ministry, nothing opened up. He was unemployed for months. Dealt with frustrating and fruitless red tape. Struggled with deep resentments. A romance put on hold. Then, just in the last two weeks he felt God say that his hard service was over and there was a new day.

The next conversation was with a friend whose wife cannot find work. She's been in another state for six weeks looking because they want to get back there. He was obviously heavy-hearted. Still wrestling. What's going on?

Such are the stories of our lives. **Here's what we often miss: the real struggle isn't with our circumstances but with God.** Will we submit to him? **God wrestles with us in that dark place of waiting for tomorrow.** That is what Jesus did in Gethsemane.

- D. Jacob's wrestling with God was preparation for the thing he feared most—meeting Esau. So what will tomorrow bring? What happens after we have successfully wrestled God for his merciful blessing?

I. WE FACE OUR FEARS WITH FORTIFIED FAITH (33:1-3)

- A. Jacob might still have been afraid but not the way he had been. After all, he had wrestled with God and even seen his face yet come out alive, so what could Esau do to him? Plus, he had a new faith-boosting name, Israel, signaling that he was a man who *overcame* when he struggled with God or man. As Christians we repeat **Rom 8:31**, “*If God is for us, who can be against us?*”
- B. Putting our fears into God’s hand and leaving them there is like trying to tuck an octopus into bed. Our fears just keep squirming out. So we go back, again and again, to our God-given blessing:
1. **Now you know that weakness is where we find God’s grace and strength.** Weakness is the ground faith stands on. It is our secret advantage. God says, “*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*”
 2. **Now you know that you *are* a God-Wrestler and your strength lies in your determined, persistent prayer,** because that is our go-to wrestling move. Our prayers, stained with blood, sweat and tears, move God and man. We are Israel, God-Wrestler.
 3. **Now you know what it is to meet God face to face through Jesus. You’re not alone.** He makes God real and personal to us. We meet him in Scripture and prayer and in worship and fellowship with God’s people till the foreboding shadows of our fears are lost in the light of God’s face.
- C. Tomorrow may still be frightening but we do not face those fears as we once did. Now, having wrestled with God, our faith is fortified, and faith pleases and moves God.

What happens next is a stunner—the surprise ending that, if you didn't already know it, would leave you teary and sniffing.

You've got to *see* this scene. The two men see each other across hundreds of yards. The time has come. Jacob tentatively begins to approach Esau, bowing every so often, seven times in all, trying to convey his intention to honor Esau. Across the way is Esau—too far to see his face but Jacob sees his unmistakable red hair and beard, his bear-like bearing. Behind Esau his 400 men wait—big, sullen men with weapons. Behind Jacob waits his trembling family, his 11 sons with their mothers trailing back to Rachel and Jacob's favorite son, Joseph. The mothers hush their kids. The air is heavy and hot. Then, the ending no one expected. **V.4:** *“But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept.”*

The next verses just drip with grace. Vv.5-11:

*Then Esau looked up and saw the women and children. “Who are these with you?” he asked. Jacob answered, “They are the children God has graciously given your servant.” Then the female servants and their children approached and bowed down. Next, Leah and her children came and bowed down. Last of all came Joseph and Rachel, and they too bowed down. Esau asked, “What’s the meaning of all these flocks and herds I met?” “To find favor in your eyes, my lord,” he said. But Esau said, “I already have plenty, my brother. Keep what you have for yourself.” “No, please!” said Jacob. “If I have found favor in your eyes, accept this gift from me. **For to see your face is like seeing the face of God**, now that you have received me favorably. Please accept the present that was brought to you, for God has been **gracious** to me and I have all I need.” And because Jacob insisted, Esau accepted it.*

The two men confronted each other with the nitro-glycerin of relationships—hatred from Esau, fear from Jacob. An explosion

waiting to happen. But God defused the relationship. We have seen how God's grace changed Jacob. We don't know how it was that God changed Esau's heart but it was clearly a miracle because he hadn't brought those 400 men just to have a reunion! But now his men were left standing there looking at each bewildered.

This passage isn't a promise that God will miraculously mend terrible relationships, though we should never sell grace short!

Nonetheless, this portrays something even deeper. Let's put it this way:

II. GOD IN HIS GRACE RUNS TO EMBRACE YOU (33:4-11)

- A. **Kenneth E. Bailey** wrote a book entitled, *Jacob & the Prodigal: How Jesus Retold Israel's Story*. His point is that Jesus' precious story of the prodigal son bears a striking resemblance to our story today about Jacob.
- B. You remember in Jesus' story, I'm sure, how the younger of two sons, demanded his inheritance as if his father was already dead, and left for a far off country without a backward glance. Jacob (also the younger of two sons), did that, too.

You remember how having squandered all he had, the prodigal son was left broke and reduced to feeding pigs. Not unlike the 20 years Jacob spent under the thumb of his greasy uncle Laban.

Then, Jesus said, "*he came to his senses,*" which happens to be a pretty apt description of what happened to Jacob that night he wrestled with God.

In Jesus' story, the son trudges home, not so much repentant as out of options. The prospect of facing Esau was about the same as the son's prospect of facing his father whom he taken advantage of. Both of them prepared contrite speeches hoping to pacify the one they feared.

But in Jesus' story, "*while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.*" Did you notice the language in **v.4**? "*But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept.*" It's no coincidence that Jesus used such similar language. Jacob was a prodigal coming home. We know that Esau himself was nothing like God. Far from it! But **what we're actually seeing here is God's grace exemplified through Esau**, and I suspect no one was more surprised by it all than Esau himself.

- C. In v.10 Jacob says, "For to see your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favorably." 'Face of God' (Peniel), of course, is the name he gave the place where he'd just wrestled with God, and where he had seen God's face and his life was saved. Think about this. **that is a remarkable thing to say to someone—anyone.** Even if you met your dearest loved one, you wouldn't say, "*Seeing your face is like seeing God's face.*" The Bible is up to something here!

What Jacob meant is that when he looked at Esau, his face tear-stained and grinning, glad and forgiving, **he saw the face of God's grace.** He saw God's grace working before his eyes. Just like in Jesus' story. **The face of God's grace.** More than in Jesus' story we see the grace of God's grace in Jesus himself.

- D. Grace is the face of God. Grace, through Jesus Christ, is God's greatest gift to us: "*The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious unto you.*"

Vv.12-19 describe how Esau returned to his home to the south and Jacob finally makes his way to the land God had promised to give him. **V. 18** says, *“he arrived safely at the city of Shechem.”* He was finally home, finally back to the place God had promised him. **This brings him to the climax of his life.** John Newton wrote...

*Thru many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.*

III. **“GRACE WILL LEAD ME HOME” (33:12-19)**

- A. You know by now how I treasure the idea of home. It isn't about a sense of nostalgia, of hoping to return to the little green house I grew up in, though I had a wonderful home. I treasure it because I don't think people know who they are if they have no home and also because I'm homesick. **John Cheever** wrote, *“Fifty percent of the people in the world are homesick all the time... You don't really long for another country. You long for something in yourself that you don't have, or haven't been able to find.”* [#1938]
- B. So where is home for us today, for us who have put our faith in Christ? Where is our home when we come from every tribe and language and people and land? Home for us is kind of like those Russian nesting dolls. **We have a home, in a home, in a home.**
1. We are at home in God; in Christ. I'm at home when I enter into prayer with the Lord, when he goes with me into life. **Michael Card** put these words in God's mouth: *“In this fearful, fallen place, I will be your home.”* **Wherever we are with God we are safely home.**
 2. We are at home when we are among God's family, our brothers and sisters in Christ. It isn't a coincidence

when someone comes to Village Church, or any good church—even from a faraway country—and says, “*When I came here I felt like I was home.*” The Bible says, “*you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household.*” Eph 2:19 **When we are part of God’s family we are home.**

3. And we have a home place prepared for us by Jesus himself. I heard **Dr. Robert Smith, Jr.**, speak of the day “*when we step on the other shore and wring the dark waters of our tribulations from our garments.*” Gary Brown and I visited Don Hahn this week, who is in hospice care. I read to him from Rev. 7 where John saw the saints in white robes before God’s throne.

*‘Never again will they hunger;
never again will they thirst.
The sun will not beat down on them,
nor any scorching heat.
For the Lamb at the center of the throne
will be their shepherd;
‘he will lead them to springs of living water.’
‘And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’*

- C. Like the nesting dolls, we **have a home in God, a home among God’s family, and a home in God’s land.**

Conclusion

When Jacob finally got home, after all the long years and struggles with God and man, he was no longer really Jacob. **He was Israel, the God-blessed God-Wrestler.** Newly minted. Recreated by the grace of God. Born again, you might say. He had come to know the uneasy blessing of the God who won’t let go.

V.20, “*There he set up an altar and called it El Elohe Israel,*” which means *God is the God of God-Wrestler*.

So right there where he lived every day he would see that pile of sacred stones, and be reminded—along with his sons—of their Almighty God.

In hard seasons we must wrestle with God till we are humble and he surrenders his mercy. But, oh, how sweet it is to walk out, limping, into the sunshine of God’s smile. How wonderful it is

- when God’s grace replaces our fears with faith,
- when his grace runs to embrace you and surprise you, and
- when God’s grace leads us home.