

Introduction

Following hot on the heels of Led Zepplin and the Rolling Stones in recent weeks, the band to mention today is U2. In their politically charged song, 'Bullet the Blue Sky' from the 'Joshua Tree' Album, Bono sings...

*In the locust wind comes a rattle and hum,
Jacob wrestled the angel and the angel was overcome.*

Though perhaps with wrestling in our reading, the obvious introduction is our good friend and mission partner, Wayne the 'Punisher' Pickford pictured here at the back in the purple at the opening of Berkeley Life Centre - 18 years ago.



This picture, with an article, was in the recent Southern Cross Magazine.

And even closer to home, how could we not think of our very own 'Stone Cold' Steve. OK, our Steve is hardly stone cold (and that name is taken anyway) so perhaps we go with 'Steve the Staninator' or perhaps 'The Puninator.'

But what exactly is going on in today's Bible reading with its wrestling match? Jacob wrestles a man, or is it an angel, or is it God? What an epic fight, and what a great manoeuvre – dislocation by a touch. And then there's a name change and a blessing.

So keep your Bibles/Sheet/App open as we look at Genesis 32-33 and let's pray as we look at it together.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, As we look at another well known, and unusual part of Jacob's story, help us to learn more about ourselves, and more about You and Your grace. In Jesus' Name, Amen

1a. Jacob's Life of Struggle 25:19 - 32:8

Did you hear what the wrestling opponent says, as he changes Jacob's name?
32:28 'You have struggled with God and with men...' And hasn't that been the story of Jacob's life? We have seen his struggle right through this series.

He has struggled with men. He struggled with his brother Esau, in the womb, then out of it, to steal his birthright. He struggled with his father, as he lies his way to getting the blessing. So Esau observes 'Isn't he rightly named Jacob?' (27:36) Jacob the grasping deceiver.

And so he struggles with Esau, who wants to kill him. He struggles with his uncle who becomes his father-in-law, twice over. He struggles with his wives, with fertility issues and with sleeping arrangements.

And he has struggled with God. Jacob's first recorded words about God were somewhat distant as he only can identify the LORD as his father Isaac's God (27:20).

But then at Bethel, with the stairway dream (28:10-22) we see a genuine response to that personal encounter with God, that we could call his conversion. 'The LORD will be my God!' (28:21)

But the struggle goes on as the LORD seeks to mould him, to transform him, and part of that is confronting him with his own sin as Jacob is on the receiving end, deceived by Laban.

At times there is still a '*God of my Fathers*' feel, but also a growing in '*fear of the LORD*' and a growing in his relationship with God. Jacob has struggled with God and with men, and it continues as he returns to the Promised Land and prepares to meet Esau his twin brother, who wants to kill him for deceitfully taking his birthright and blessing.

It's not a geographical necessity, for Jacob to encounter Esau right now; he doesn't have to go as far south as Seir where Esau is; but it is a moral and spiritual necessity. The struggle of 20 years ago needs to be faced and dealt with. The burden of his sin against Esau, against his father, against God, cannot be ignored.

It says something of Jacob's growth that he is prepared to take the initiative, but it remains for him a struggle. He certainly prepares carefully - indicating he comes bearing gifts - but the return of the messengers is not encouraging. It's not clear how Esau is reacting - he's coming with an army of 400!

And so, (32:7-18) in great fear and distress, Jacob divided the people who were with him into two groups, and the flocks and herds and camels as well. He thought, 'If Esau comes and attacks one group, the group that is left may escape.'

1b. Jacob's Prayer of Dependence 32:9-12

Jacob takes prudent action, and then, in verse 9, Jacob prayed, 'O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac.'

It's a strong prayer, a personal prayer. God is still the God of Abraham and Isaac, but he is also LORD (in caps in the Old Testament is the traditional way that Yahweh is translated), the personal covenantal name of God, he is the God who has spoken to Jacob.

And it's a humble prayer. (32:10-12) 'I am unworthy of all your kindness and faithfulness; You have blessed me. Save me from Esau, for I am afraid he will attack. But you have said, 'I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea.'

There's a sermon on prayer just in there. This is a prayer which relates to God's covenantal promises; to His character. It's a prayer in which Jacob pleads his own unworthiness; in which he acknowledges the blessings he has received; in which Jacob confesses his terror, and expresses his reliance on the faithfulness of God to his promise.

It's a prayer I don't think Jacob could have prayed twenty years earlier, and reflects the growth that has resulted from two decades of struggling with man and with God.

1c. Jacob's Plan of Action 32:13-21

And, having prayed, Jacob doesn't just sit there, he gets to work. As we heard, it's a sensible strategy. Jacob selects 100s of animals - goats, sheep, camels, cattle, donkeys - and send his servants in three groups to greet Esau with courtesy and respect and present the herds as gifts to Esau. And he thinks (32:20b) 'I will pacify him with these gifts I am sending. When I see him, perhaps he will receive me.'

It's a smart approach, but his prayer shows that he is dependent on God, that he knows things are way beyond his control.

Prayer and action are not mutually exclusive. In fact frequently prayer demands our action (or someone else's) as part of the way God answers our prayer.

It's been 20 years since Jacob left the promised land, 20 years of struggling with man and God, and now as he returns, he still has a ways to go, but he has learned humility, tenacity, godly fear, reliance on God's promises and how to pray.

What have you learnt in the last 20 years? Have you grown through the struggles of your life?

2. God's Touch of Grace 32:22-32

Having prayed and prepared to face Esau, to return to a struggle he ran away from 20 years earlier, then comes the wrestling match. The wrestle stands as a metaphor, a parable for Jacob's life - he has struggled, and is still struggling, with God and with man. I call it a metaphor – but it actually happened – a real, physical wrestle.

We think of Esau as the big, hairy, man's man, and although Jacob was a bit more of a home-boy, he's certainly strong enough to move a stone normally moved by two men, as he did 20 years earlier to impress Rachel. (29:10) And he has done physical work for Laban for 20 years, and he is strong enough to wrestle this 'man' for some hours.

And who is this 'man'? Whoever it is has supernatural strength. He might hold back his full strength for hours until daybreak, but then he pulls out that secret move - the dislocating touch. Our very own 'Puninator' has, of course, just had his hip fixed, so in wrestling jargon, this hip dislocating move is now known as the 'reverse Steve' or the 'anti-Stani.' The Hebrew word actually implies a soft touch, but that's all it takes to wrench the hip.

This 'man' as he is described, is clearly more than a man. Hosea calls him the Angel (Hosea 12:3-4), and Jacob knows he has seen God face to face (32:30).

With the touch that wrenches the hip, you would think it would all be over. I'd be rolling away in agony, but Jacob hangs on. The touch has convinced him this is no man, so he hangs on and asks for a blessing.

Is this the grasping Jacob greedily after something, after a blessing like he was 20 years earlier? No, I think this is the Jacob who has come to the end of anything he can do; this is the Jacob who expressed his total reliance on God in his earlier prayer; this is the Jacob of whom Hosea was later to say:

In the womb he grasped his brother's heel;
as a man he struggled with God.
He struggled with the angel and overcame him;
he wept and begged for his favour. Hosea 12:3-4

It was not from pride that Jacob asked for blessing, but with humility and tears. His request came when he was at the end of himself, in agony, helpless. “I will not let you go unless you bless me” (32: 26) was not a defiant demand, but a tear-choked plea.

The man asked him, ‘What is your name?’ (32:27) The last time someone asked him that – he lied and said, ‘I am Esau’, but now he answers, ‘Jacob.’ It’s almost like a confession – ‘I am a grasping deceiver’.

Then the man said, ‘Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome’ – (Israel means, ‘he struggles with God.’) (32:28)

Overcome? Surely he has lost? He can’t go on, he can only hang on. Overcome? Someone has said, ‘Jacob overcame when he came to the end of himself. His weakness birthed strength. His defeat wrought victory. His end was his beginning.’

That’s why I call this section, indeed the whole sermon, ‘A Touch of Grace.’ Because the touch that cripples Jacob, the touch that brings him to his knees, is the touch that brings Jacob to the point of realising, even more than he had the previous day in his prayer, that he is totally and utterly dependant on God. It is only when he gets to this point that he can be truly blessed. Having to face Esau and his army has brought him to that point and the all night wrestle hammers the point home.

As Jacob in his prayer had expressed his unworthiness and claimed the promises of God, and as Jacob in the wrestle hung on because he couldn’t stand, we too must get to that point of realising we are unworthy, that on our own we can do nothing - that we too are Jacobs - we too are deceivers, liars, cheats - or fall short in other ways.

And sometimes we have to be brought low, knocked off our feet, face some crisis or difficulty to get to that point and if that happens, if we are crippled, then that is a touch of grace. And if we see it for what it is, then we must hang onto God and claim the promise that we can be blessed through the offspring of Jacob, that we can be saved as we place our trust in Jesus.

We need the touch of grace when we turn to Christ for the first time - when we repent, trust in him as our Saviour, and acknowledge him as Lord, when we respond to the incomparable riches of God’s grace expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus who died for us, taking the penalty for our sin.

But how easily we forget, get busy, get proud, take for granted, and we need a touch of grace – perhaps even a crisis – that God in his grace brings so that we might see afresh that we need to hang on to him and receive the blessing that he brings.

His name having been changed, Jacob asks, (30:29) ‘Please tell me your name.’ No name is given, but a blessing is. We aren’t told what the blessing is, but I wonder if it might not have involved a reaffirmation of those promises - land, descendants, the blessing of all peoples - and, importantly in the present setting, with Esau on the way, ‘I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go.’

And certainly, this blessed man has two new distinctives - a new name and a new crippling. “The new name cannot be separated from the new crippling, for the crippling is the substance of the name.” (Brueggemann).

Jacob probably walked with a limp for the rest of his life - a constant reminder of that night; and of his weakness. Jacob’s strength, paradoxically, was in his weakness.

Have you been there? To that place of weakness, for first time, and later in your journey. Do you walk with a limp that reminds you of your dependence on God?

About 10 years ago, I burnt out. Pastoring a church, I had too much on my plate, and was too busy. And in that situation it is easy to rely on your skills, experience, even your spiritual gifts – but not God. And in that situation, in ‘burning out’, I realised afresh that I had to hang on to God, that in life and in ministry I am dependent on Him. So I walk with a limp as it were, and I am reminded of my weakness and my dependence on God. If God hadn’t touched my hip when he had, I could have really crashed and burned. I thank him for that touch of grace, that his strength is made perfect in my weakness.

And I guess most if not all of us have been there in some way: Sickness, death of a loved one, disappointment in a relationship, loss of job.

It doesn’t matter if these hard times are the result of sin - in our lives, or the sin of someone else against us - or just circumstances in a world that has lost the perfection of the garden. In whatever way, God in his grace uses it all, so that we might more fully depend on him.

I think it is important we understand this because in some streams of Christianity there is an overly triumphalistic emphasis that forgets that to overcome is to be taken low.

It’s nothing new though. Paul had to address it in his day with the so-called super-apostles and he talks about his ‘thorn in the flesh’ (2 Corinthians 12:9-10) and says, ‘I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.’

The touch to the hip was a touch of grace for Jacob who, ‘by the time the sun rises, though he may walk with a limp, is a stronger and better man.’ (D. Carson)

And it is when we are at the end of our capabilities, when we are totally dependent on God, that we overcome, because, our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness. On Christ the solid Rock we stand. Christ alone is our Cornerstone.

3a. Jacob’s Restitution of Esau 33:1-17

And so the meeting with Esau occurs - Esau and his army! (33:3) Jacob went on ahead and bowed down to the ground seven times as he approached his brother.

Isn’t that interesting? What had Isaac said 20 years earlier when mistakenly blessing Jacob thinking it was Esau? (27:29) May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you.

But now Jacob bows to Esau and in a symbolic way returns the blessing he had stolen, along with the gifts. Of course Jacob remains the God-determined heir of the promises to Abraham but some sort of restitution is made.

The reunion goes much better than Jacob could have expected as, (33:4) Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept.

God has answered Jacob’s prayer and remained faithful to his promise. He has been at work in Esau, who doesn’t hold the grudge. (33:8) ‘What’s the meaning of all these flocks and herds I

met?’ ‘To find favour in your eyes, my lord,’ Jacob said. But Esau said, ‘I already have plenty, my brother. Keep what you have for yourself.’

Custom dictates that Esau refuse and that Jacob insist, and that this goes back and forth, but Esau certainly doesn't take much persuasion and accepts the gifts.

In the exchange we see something interesting. (33:10) ‘If I have found favour in your eyes, [says Jacob] accept this gift from me. For to see your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favourably.’

It was in this God-induced, weakened, dependent state that Jacob prevailed with Esau. God did it all. Esau left his 400 men, sprinted to Jacob, and forgave Jacob's grievous sins. Esau's face was like the face of God to Jacob because he forgave Jacob, and because Jacob could see God at work answering his prayer.

3b. Jacob's Declaration of Faith 33:18-20

Well they go their separate ways and we read, (33:18-20) after Jacob came from Paddan Aram, he arrived safely at the city of Shechem in Canaan and camped within sight of the city. For a hundred pieces of silver, he bought, from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem, the plot of ground where he pitched his tent. There he set up an altar and called it El Elohe Israel.

El Elohe Israel means ‘The Mighty God is the God of Israel.’ God of Israel, that's not the nation of Israel, the nation doesn't really exist yet. Israel is the one renamed from Jacob to Israel the night before!

Jacob, now Israel, in his clearest declaration of faith to date, is saying, ‘The Mighty God is the God of *me*.’ He's been through the struggle, he has thrown himself on God's mercy, he has been touched by grace, and because he now walks with a limp he can declare, ‘The Mighty God is the God of me!’

Is that your declaration?

Conclusion

When hardships come into our lives, and they will, may we recognise in them the touch of God's grace, so that, by the time the sun rises, though we may walk with a limp, we will, by God's grace, be stronger and better; knowing our utter dependence on Him, knowing The Mighty God is our God and that his grace is sufficient and his strength is made perfect in our weakness. Amen.

Prayer