

3—When God picks a fight

SERIES Resting in God's Promises: Jacob's journey

KEY TEXT—GENESIS 32-33

A STRANGE PICTURE OF GOD

There are many astonishing pictures of God in the Bible. In Genesis, God appears as someone who creates the whole world out of nothing. In Isaiah, God is a shepherd who holds a lamb close to his heart. In the Gospels we see the strange sight of Jesus whipping people out of the temple precincts, and later dying like a criminal on a cross.

But the picture of God in Genesis 32 has to be one of the strangest. God appears incognito in the middle of the night, and starts a fight with Jacob.

Why would God Himself come down to earth specifically to pick a fight, that apparently went on for hours, with a man who was by himself, and was already scared stiff?

What was so important that God would do that? And could the situation ever arise, that God may want to come down and pick a fight with you?

BACKGROUND

Let's review the main events that lead up to this story.

- God tells Rachel, Jacob's mother, that one day Jacob's older brother Esau will serve him (Genesis 25:23). Rachel and Jacob later conclude that the only way for this to happen is for Jacob to deceive his father into giving him the birthright (Genesis 27:1-40).
- Esau is so angry that he decides to wait for his father to die and then he will kill his brother (Genesis 27:41-45).
- Jacob flees to his uncle Laban. Along the way, God appears in a dream to encourage Jacob with the promises given previously to his grandfather Abraham, of land and many descendants (Genesis 28:10-22).
- As Jacob tried to manipulate circumstances to get God's blessing, Laban continually manipulates and deceives Jacob over the marriage of his daughter and his wages (Genesis 28-29).
- After 20 years of hard work for Laban, God tells Jacob to return home (Genesis 31:3), although by now, both his mother and father are dead. Because of the treatment received from Laban over these many years, he decides to flee secretly with his wives, children, and possessions. However, Laban catches up with him and is angry that Jacob did not tell him of his leaving. It ends well with them making a covenant of peace (Genesis 31:43-55).

Now at God's command, Jacob is on his way home. He is expecting to meet a brother who grew up being told he

would serve his younger brother, who had been manipulated into selling his birthright, and who had promised to kill Jacob, and who thought in Jacob's absence he at least owned everything in the family.

ON THE WRONG SIDE OF THE BORDER

God reveals His guiding presence to Jacob as he continues the journey home (Genesis 32:1-2). But undoubtedly nagging doubts of his brother's attitude towards him prompts Jacob to send messengers ahead to smooth the way. However, he is told that Esau is coming with 400 men (Genesis 32:3-6).

Naturally, Jacob doesn't find this encouraging for he is overcome with "fear and distress" (Genesis 32:7-12). It appears Jacob is so stressed that he starts organising gifts to send to Esau even though it is night (v13). Later in the middle of the night, Jacob is still so scared and decides to send his family over the Jabbok river for safety (Genesis 32:22-23).

Jabbok River A large, fast flowing tributary running into the river Jordan 15 klm north of the Dead Sea. Importantly, the river was later described as a frontier of Israel.

At this moment of the story, Jacob's family have crossed over and are in the promised land. But Jacob is by himself, full of fear, on the other side.

FIGHT AT THE BORDER

Verse 24 begins, "So Jacob was left alone". What was Jacob doing there alone? What would you be doing if you were alone and scared to pieces for fear your brother was coming with a small army to kill you? Probably praying.

It is at this point that God creeps up to Jacob in the darkness and grabs hold of him.

²⁴ So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. ²⁵ When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. ²⁶ Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." ²⁷ The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. ²⁸ Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome." (Genesis 32:24-28)

Here are two questions to help us unpack this passage:

1. Who is wrestling Jacob? Verse 24 just refers to "a man", but as we see at the end of verse 26, Jacob has realised that this is not an ordinary man but someone who can give him a

blessing. Then in verse 30 it reads, "So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared." The prophet Hosea mentions this event and also indicates Jacob wrestled with God (Hosea 12:4-5).

2. Why did God (Jesus) want to fight Jacob physically, and at a time when he was most vulnerable? This is getting to the core of the story. Why did Jesus appear in disguise in the middle of the night to increase the fear of a man who was already beside himself with stress and anxiety? Notice the following:

- a. **Jacob had received multiple divine assurances.** He had been given an incredible dream of God's presence 20 years before. He had been told by God to return home. He had just seen two groups of angels walking with them. **But, Jacob was still afraid**, "In great fear and distress Jacob divided the people..." (v7), "Save me, I pray from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid..." (v11)
- b. According to Hosea 12:4, the wrestling ended in Jacob begging God for His favour and blessing, which was something more than just receiving a promise.
- c. Jacob's need for this blessing was so strong that even though Jesus dislocated his hip, he would still not let go. Jacob would have been experiencing searing pain. He would have not been able to fight anymore but would be literally hanging on to Jesus, refusing to let go until he had received the blessing he craved.

WRESTLING TO CROSS THE BORDER

Why did God come down to wrestle with Jacob?

- **Jesus came to fight Jacob physically to clarify and intensify Jacob's internal, spiritual, longings.**
- **While Jacob had received multiple promises through the years, these promises had never become his experientially. For Jacob, these were paper, intellectual, theoretical, ideas, that only became real through a personal encounter with God.**
- **The blessing Jacob craved was forgiveness. He had never been at peace. He continually wondered how God's covenant blessings could be passed on to a liar and a**

deceiver. When Jacob realised God had arrived, he was not going to allow God to leave without the assurance that he was truly forgiven.

I don't think it is coincidental that Jacob only crosses the Jabbok into the promised land once he knows he is forgiven.

LIVING WITH A LIMP

Jesus gave Jacob a new name (Genesis 32:26b-30). But Jesus didn't leave Jacob only with a blessing and a new name. He also leaves Jacob injured, "The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip." (v31)

Genesis 33:1 continues with a terrifying statement, "Jacob looked up and there was Esau, coming with his four hundred men". In view of the story so far, what would it be like to be meeting your brother who you think wants to kill you—and now you can't even run away? But it doesn't matter. Jacob knows God's promises, AND he is experientially at peace with God. The next thing that Jacob knows is happening, is that he is weeping in his brother's arms (Genesis 33:1-4). Oh, what needless pain we bare! God had arranged everything for Jacob.

And when God is directing your life, you do not need to worry about anything either. But to bring you to the point of utter dependence on God—down from the heady heights of your self-sufficiency, so that you will finally turn to him with your whole heart—God may have to come down out of Heaven and cripple you—which you don't really want to happen if you can help it.

APPLICATION

What are you fearful about today? Before you can overcome the fears, stresses and anxieties concerning the people and situations you are in, you have to wrestle with God first. But then you will be able to be at peace—even in the middle of terrifying situations—because you know, in your own experience, that God is with you.

What has been rolling around in your heart for years, causing you fear and pain, that could be resolved in moments if you chose to get on your knees and wrestle with God in prayer until He blesses you?

1

LIFE POINT

I may have to fight before entering the Promised Land

2

LIFE POINT

I have to experience God, not simply know what He has promised

3

LIFE POINT

I have to wrestle with God before I can overcome people

4

LIFE POINT

God may come out of Heaven to bring me to dependency on Him