

From Self-Reliance To Dependence on God

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 16 February 2020

Preacher: James Lapping

[0 : 00] Jacob also went on his way, and the angels of God met him. When Jacob saw them, he said, This is the camp of God. So he named that place Mahanaim.

Jacob sent messengers ahead of him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. He instructed them, This is what you are to say to my lord Esau.

Your servant Jacob says, I have been staying with Laban and have remained there till now. I have cattle and donkeys, sheep and goats, male and female servants.

Now I am sending this message to my lord, that I may find favor in your eyes. When the messengers returned to Jacob, they said, We went to your brother Esau, and now he is coming to meet you, and 400 men are with him.

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.

[1 : 06] Then Jacob prayed, O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, Lord, you who said to me, Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper.

I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two camps.

Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children. But you have said, I will surely make you prosper, and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.

He spent the night there, and from what he had with him, he selected a gift for his brother Esau. 200 female goats and 20 male goats, 200 ewes and 20 rams, 30 female camels with their young, 40 cows and 10 bulls, and 20 female donkeys and 10 male donkeys.

He put them in the care of his servants, each herd by itself, and said to his servants, Go ahead of me, and keep some space between the herds. He instructed the one in the lead, When my brother Esau meets you and asks, Who do you belong to, and where are you going, and who owns all these animals in front of you?

[2 : 25] Then you are to say, They belong to your servant Jacob. They are a gift sent to my lord Esau, and he is coming behind us. He also instructed the second, the third, and all the others who followed the herds, You are to say the same thing to Esau when you meet him, and be sure to say, Your servant Jacob is coming behind us.

For he thought, I will pacify him with these gifts I am sending on ahead. Later, when I see him, perhaps he will receive me. So Jacob's gifts went on ahead of him, but he himself spent the night in the camp.

That night, Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven sons, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions.

So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. 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.

Then the man said, Let me go, for it is daybreak. But Jacob replied, I will not let you go unless you bless me. The man asked him, What is your name?

[3 : 40] Jacob, he answered. 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.

Jacob said, Please tell me your name. But he replied, Why do you ask my name? Then he blessed him there. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, It is because I saw God face to face, and yet

my life was spared.

The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip. Therefore, to this day, the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip, because the socket of Jacob's hip was touched near the tendon.

This is the word of the Lord. A bit like a long vets list of animals, wasn't it?

Maybe. I'm alone on that one, I guess. Right. Okay. Let's pray. So, Father, we pray that you'd speak to us now through your word. We pray that we'd turn away from grasping, and that we'd lean on you more and more and more, as we await the glorious day when we'll enter your promised land.

[4 : 57] Amen. Well, my brother lives in Australia, and he's got a couple of kids. He's got Josh, who's got the biggest dimples of any kid I've ever seen in my life, in these thick, horned spectacles.

And then he's got a little girl, Holly. And I remember Holly as a youngster, one day trying to struggle with her shoelaces, and she was adamant that she was going to tie them by herself without the help of anyone whatsoever.

And as this progressed on and on and on, and the adults were getting more and more bored by the anticipation, they thought they might help Holly out, but she wouldn't have any help whatsoever. She was determined to be absolutely independent. She was determined to do it herself and to be self-sufficient. And I wonder if there's a bit of a truth in that, in that in many ways in our spiritual lives, we're a bit like that.

We're determined to be independent. We are determined to be self-sufficient. And I guess that's only logical. We come to university, we get good degrees, and we are taught at our degrees to get on, to be self-sufficient, to be independent, to be able to make decisions and govern our lives.

[6 : 20] And what we see in this passage tonight is we see that Jacob, who grasps after things in his own strength, and we've seen that over the last couple of Sunday evenings, going from someone who is entirely self-sufficient and independent to being utterly dependent on God.

And the point that we're going to take away from tonight is that if we as a church and as the people of God are going to see God's promised land, then we need to give up being graspers, that is, people who are self-sufficient and independent, and grow on to be people who are dependent on God in all that we do and say.

And so you might be here tonight as someone who's going well in the Lord. You are flourishing as a Christian. But there might be one area in your life where you're still hanging on determinedly and doggedly, being self-sufficient, not wanting the Lord to enter there.

It might be your career, your university course. You think, if I can only get through this course, get a good degree, then I'll get a good job, and then I'll be made, and then I'll find my identity and meaning.

It might be a relationship. You might be so invested in a relationship that you hang everything on it. And that's the thing where you're going to be independent from God and self-sufficient.

[7 : 57] But it might be that you've come here tonight and you know God, you're trusting God, and you have a saving faith. But in many ways, in almost every other aspect of your life, you live entirely independently of God.

It's as if God has set you in motion and you've said, I'll carry on by myself from here, Lord. I trust you, but I should be all right from here on out.

And then you might be here tonight as someone who's never been to church before. And tonight's perhaps the very first time that you're hearing the Christian gospel.

And up until this point, you have lived self-sufficiently and independently simply because, well, you haven't known any other way to live.

And what we see in this passage is that the only way that we're going to become dependent on God and give up grasping, give up being self-sufficient, give up being independent, is if we meet God.

[9 : 03] And well, by way of context, we're in Genesis. And we remember that Genesis is written to God's people a long, long time ago who have been rescued out of slavery of Egypt.

And they're headed to this promised land, this land that was promised to Jacob and his father Isaac and to his grandfather Abraham. But between them and this land lies many enemies, including some of Esau's descendants.

And then over the last couple of Sunday evenings, we've been looking at the story of Jacob, whose name literally can be translated as someone who grasps after things or alternatively perhaps as a wrestler or a deceiver.

And so we're in this section of the Bible after the Garden of Eden, after the flood, after Abraham, but before God's people go down to Egypt with Jacob's son, Joseph.

And so I thought as we look at this passage tonight, we might divide it up into three ways. I'll give you the points if you're a note taker. The first one is the grasper in distress, verses 1 to 8.

[10:19] And then the grasper who prays for deliverance, verses 9 to 21. And then finally, the grasper who gains blessing and a new name, verses 22 to 32.

So let's look at our first point then. We'll zoom through this and then get some tea. Maybe not tea. The grasper in distress, verses 1 to 8.

And Jacob's name is particularly apt for him because throughout the story, we've seen Jacob grasping onto things. He is entirely self-sufficient and independent.

That's his default setting. And rather than wait for God, Jacob's natural instinct is to grab onto things, to try and make his own way.

And the upshot of that is that behind him, he's left this trail of relationships that have been derailed and destroyed and destruction away.

[11:21] And we saw that firstly in the promises given to Jacob's mom, Rebecca, that the younger son, Jacob, would rule over her older son, Esau.

And rather than trust God, Rebecca and Jacob sought to trick Jacob's father into gaining the blessings that were promised to Esau and his birthright by themselves.

And so what happened is what we saw is that Esau swears that he is going to kill Jacob as soon as his father dies. So he's got this great enemy ahead of him.

And then we notice that Jacob fled from Esau to his uncle, Laban, and that's who we looked at over the last two Sunday nights.

We saw that a similar pattern happens there. God has promised Jacob that he'd go with him, that he'll prosper him, and so Jacob has come to trust God.

[12:21] But still, Jacob ends up grasping and trying to be self-sufficient as he had served Laban.

And so he has had to flee Laban last Sunday night in the middle of the night. And the Lord has promised him that he would go back to, the Lord has commanded Jacob to go back to the land of your fathers and to your relatives and that God will be with him, I will be with him.

We saw that last Sunday night. And throughout all these occurrences where we've seen Jacob grasping, we have seen the Lord watching over Jacob providentially, honoring his promises.

And so we shouldn't be surprised that at the very first verse of our reading tonight, what do we see? We see the angels of God met Jacob as he is on his way back to the promised land, to the land of his people.

And so Jacob's immediately returning home to where God has instructed him to go. But before him, ahead of him, he knows there lies a great big enemy in Esau.

[13:36] And so verse 2, he sends some messengers ahead of him to find out what the lay of the land is, how bad the damage is, how much danger there is.

And they bring back this really distressing news. And we read verse 4-6, Esau is coming. Esau who's wanted to kill Jacob.

And not only is he coming, but he's got 400 men with him. And so Jacob naturally assumes that this isn't a welcoming party, but that this is a mini army out to get him.

And so Jacob, all his scheming, all his grasping, he looks trapped in this situation. He looks finally caught. Behind him is Laban, who he had to serve as a slave pretty much.

And ahead of him lies Esau with his army. Looks like an impossible enemy. And the authors, Moses, who wrote the story, his first hearers might have empathized.

[14:39] So we remember behind them lay slavery in Egypt. And as they head to the promised land, ahead of them lay these enemies, whom they would have to conquer to get into the land.

And all the while the Lord was watching patiently. And no matter what happened, there was no scheming, no grasping that could get them out of that, that could get them into the promised land. And it might be that as we sit here tonight, some of us, feel a bit trapped like that. We might have grasped after things and in our sinfulness we've maybe been caught out.

Maybe it's been something small that's looming over our lives and holds us feeling hemmed in.

Maybe it's something big that threatens to ruin our careers, ruin our marriages, ruin our prospects for the future.

And another way, we might be like Moses and his initial here, behind us is the slavery to sin and death and ahead of us in the Christian life are those enemies of the flesh, the world and the devil. [15:51] And the question for Moses' first here is, and the question for Jacob, and the question for us here tonight is, will we go on grasping or will we lean on the Lord in all things?

And so that's our first point, the grasper in great distress. The next thing that we see in verses 9 to 21 is the grasper who prays for deliverance.

And Jacob's distress and his fear is so great that he does something that we haven't seen him do at any stage in his story before. I wonder if you noticed that he's stepping completely out of character and that he prays willingly, completely of his own accord, unprompted to God.

And I thought we might just look at that prayer and pick out some thoughts, verses 9 to 12. And the first thing that we notice is that he prays to the covenant God of his fathers on whom he has trusted and whom he has placed his trust that we remember.

So he says in verse 9, O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, Lord, you said to me, go back to your old country and I will prosper you.

[17:10] And it's a prayer really for God to help him to be obedient, to do the thing that God has told him to do.

And secondly, the second thing that we notice in this prayer in verse 10 is that he admits entirely his dependence on God and his gratitude on God for everything.

What does he say in verse 10? I'm unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servants. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two camps. God has honored his promise. He has prospered him. Everything that Jacob has comes from God. And then thirdly, he makes a plea. He begs God.

What does he say? I pray from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid that he will come and attack me. Also the mothers with their children.

[18:12] And then finally we ask that he asks that God would do these things, not because he is worthy, not because he deserves it, but because God has promised Jacob as he promised his father Isaac and promised his grandfather Abraham that his descendants will be like the sands on the seashore and it's pretty hard to do that if all your relatives and descendants have been wiped out.

So he's asking God to honor his promise and it's a wonderful prayer. It's one of the great prayers of the Old Testament and in it we see Jacob who is so used to grasping, so used to reaching out, so used to wanting to get things done all efforts and grasping.

What does he do? He throws himself on God for mercy. It's the kind of prayer that a Christian prays or someone who wants to be a Christian might pray.

It might be something on the lines like Father you are my God. I come to you empty handed.

Nothing I can do can impress you but I throw myself on your mercy.

Please won't you save me. Not because of anything I have done. In fact just the opposite but because you are a good father who delights to watch over us and give us good gifts.

[19:44] And Jacob having prayed Jacob goes on to act in faith and he makes preparations for Esau's coming. So he sends his family across that river the fords of Jabbok and he spends his brother and supposed enemy Esau.

And so we see our third point there. The grasper who gains a blessing and a new name. Verse 22 to 32. And it's during this night alone as Jacob is preparing himself that we read in verse 24.

So Jacob was left alone and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. And it's a really mysterious passage. It's a really mysterious illusion.

It's deliberately ambiguous to heighten the suspense in it. But I thought we might just make a couple of observations here.

And the first is this. I wonder if you noticed look down at verse 25. The man is strong enough to cripple Jacob with the lightest of touches. The word there is really how you might touch a baby's lip.

[20:58] It's the absolute softest of touches. But with it he wrecks Jacob's hip. But the man is also weak enough that Jacob can contend with him all night.

And so you get the impression that this man is very much like a prop forward who's wrestling with a baby or a big lock or a giant. Everyone knows who's going to be the victor there.

But everyone knows that it would be really bad form for a prop to absolutely use all his strength and might on a baby. And so verse 25 we reach that Jacob's hip has been wrenched.

The fight for all intents and purposes is over. The next thing that we notice is that Jacob recognizes that this man is powerful enough to bless him but that the man himself is more important than that blessing.

So just look down at verse 26. And then the man said let me go for it is day break. But Jacob replied I will not let you go unless you bless me. But then look what he goes on to say in verse 29.

[22 : 15] Jacob said please tell me your name but he replied why do you ask my name and then he blessed him there. You see Jacob wants to know who the man is. He wants to know his name more than he wants the blessing.

And the narrator doesn't even go on to say what the blessing is. The third thing that we notice is that Jacob gains a new name. And what that means what that symbolizes Hebrew names in the Old Testament are very important.

They mean something very much in more African traditions if you know that. So I had a friend called another sheep growing up. He was the last child in the family.

But Hebrew names mean something. And Jacob new name he realizes the new name the real enemy. that has been conquered is not his brother Esau but his own sinfulness in grasping after things and not running after God.

That is the great enemy that Jacob has had to conquer. So just look at verse 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.

[23 : 33] The thing that caused Jacob so much distress and strife in life was not his enemies not his physical enemies or whom he is in competition with but his own sinfulness his own grasping after things his own independence and self sufficiency.

I wonder I wonder if that's true for you if things have gone wrong in your life more than you should have instead of trusting God to rule in those situations.

And the thing that Jacob needed to be delivered from was that grasping of that wanting to be self sufficient and it was something that he was entirely blind to.

He had to meet God to learn not to grasp. And so often in life it's the things that we are blind to that we're so desperate for those are the things that hurt us the most and those are the things where God has to act in our own best interests even if it means that it might hurt us and harm us so Jacob here he leaves this account with his hip in tatters but he leaves a transformed man and it's an incredible kindness of God to act in that way to heal Jacob of wanting to grasp even though Jacob wasn't even aware that that was something that he needed to be healed from God it's incredible kindness for God and the challenge for us there is do we love comfort do we love our self sufficiency more than we love the maker and more than wanting to grow in

God and the fourth thing that we notice there in the struggle is that it's not so much that Jacob has struggled with God to be called Israel but Israel could also be translated that God fights for you and the thought that so Jacob thought that he had to fight for everything in his life all along God was fighting for him and then finally we notice the real miracle in the story I wonder if you noticed that if you picked it up when you reading in verse 30 so Jacob called the place Peniel saying it is because I saw God face to face and yet my life was spared you see Jacob recognizes that he's a grasper. He recognizes that in many ways he has rejected God and that he is a sinner in the presence of a holy and righteous God. He knows the man's power. He knows that he has been defeated by the lightest of touches.

[26 : 33] And yet he survives and is blessed through it. And then finally what we see is when Jacob left the promised land in verse 28 we saw the sun setting but here we see the sun rise in chapter 32 on a new humbly dependent Jacob.

It's a new day for Jacob. He's been utterly transformed and it's a new day that we're invited to join him as we trust God and grow in him.

And Jacob has been radically changed for the better through meeting God. And having met God eye to eye being changed and transformed he could now meet Esau eye to eye.

No longer afraid, no longer Jacob the grasper but Jacob who struggled with God and for whom God fights. And so Jacob could enter the promised land not on his own strength but as he meets God he is transformed from grasper into someone who leans on God in everything.

And he could never enter the promised land without being transformed in that way. And the point of the story for Moses' first here as the nation of Israel is that as they headed to the promised land their victory would not come in the usual ways.

[27 : 56] The victory for them would not come through grasping, not through political powers. But the victory in reaching that land would come by leaning on God, by trusting God.

And the point for us is that the blessings of knowing God and entering that heavenly promised land come by God's gracious provisions. Behind us is slavery.

Ahead of us lies that land with enemies between. The only way we'll get to that land is if we trust God entirely and give up grasping and giving up holding on.

Even if that means in some ways that we might be, God might have to care for us when we didn't know that we needed caring for.

And the challenge for us in this passage is won't we stop grasping and recognize the awesome God that has shown us that he cares for us. So finally, here's how one commentator puts it, how he closes this passage.

[29 : 02] He goes, Jacob saw the face of the Lord dimly. We see the light of the glory of God in the face of Jacob, Jesus Christ. Jacob asked for God's own name and we're baptized into the name of the triune God.

Through the name of Jesus, exalted above every name, we bear the name of almighty God as our heavenly father. Isn't that better than anything that our grasping and struggling for in life?

Anything that we might hedge in and want to hang on, no matter how dear it is for us, would be.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to be God's children, leaning on him, loved by him, having him fight for us in everything?

Let me close in prayer for us. So Father, we thank you that you've called us not to be graspers, but you've called us to be people who trust in you in all things.

Please won't you help us to give up our self-sufficiency and independence and trust you in all things, even in the hard bits of life. In Jesus' name, Amen.