

## ***Trapped!***

Genesis 32:22-32

Also Psalm 17:1-7, 15; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21

### ***Trapped!***

Jacob was trapped, and although this event happened long ago in circumstances vastly different than ours, I am sure that everyone knows what it is to be trapped. Your dad calls you to help in the yard and your mother orders you to clean your room – Now! Your trigonometry teacher demands that you hand in all the lessons he will have covered while you are with your high school band in Texas. Your boss announces that the CEO will be at the office party and everyone is required to attend – on the same night as your daughter’s senior recital. While these are not life-and-death situations, they put you in the miserable situation of being unable to escape without causing further problems. Christians in other countries *do* encounter life-and-death situations. We periodically read about believers in China or India or Muslim lands who seek to live as faithful Christians and good citizens, but find themselves trapped in no-win situations. Pastor Stone tells of the time he and his brother took a wrong turn in New York City and found themselves on the run from a gang of thugs. But at least for them there was a way out. For Jacob there was no way out.

Jacob has spent his life on the run. He had to leave home in a hurry when he deceived his father and cheated his brother Esau out of his birthright. Esau vowed to murder Jacob, and Jacob did not wait to see if he was serious or not. He landed in Mesopotamia in the household of his uncle Laban, and found someone as tricky as he. Fast forward 20 years and Jacob had two wives, eleven children, and large flocks. In spite of misuse by Laban, Jacob had prospered enormously – and provoked Laban to jealousy. While Laban was on a three-day out-of-town trip, Jacob gathered his family and possessions and fled. Laban was livid and raced after the company to recover his daughters and grandchildren. Jacob would have been collateral damage if God had not personally intervened and warned Laban not to harm Jacob. Laban and his militia caught up with Jacob and had an extremely tense visit. In the end they cut a covenant, promising to respect each other’s property. But would any shrewd person trust Laban to keep his word?

So Jacob continued on his way to Canaan – where he had left Esau. Jacob was not stupid. It was *God’s* idea that he return to Canaan – the land God had promised to Abraham, Isaac, and now to Jacob. And along the way he was encouraged by a detachment of angels which God had posted to watch over him. But when he sent messengers to Esau to announce his return, Esau set out to meet Jacob with his own militia of 400 men. Jacob was trapped. If he returned to Mesopotamia, Laban would capture his wives and children and probably kill him. If he continued toward Canaan, Esau could get vengeance for Jacob’s theft. There was no way out.

What do you do when there is no way out? Do you scheme harder? Do you give up? Do you pray? Jacob was never the giving-up type. He sent massive presents ahead to Esau, hoping to cool Esau’s violent temper. And then he prayed.

### ***Attacked by God***

The story of Jacob’s wrestling all night with God is often told as an example of persevering in prayer. There is some truth in that, but it misses the point by a mile. Jacob was trapped. He was going to lose everything either to Laban or to Esau, so he prayed. How do you pray in such a dire situation? Jacob reminded God that it was *His* idea to return to Canaan. Then he confessed his unworthiness, and finally asked God to deliver him from Esau.

It’s night, and Jacob cannot sleep. The darkness smothers Jacob as he lurches between worry for his family and prayer that God would do *something*. Anything! Jacob will take any solution God provides. Where there are no artificial lights, night is impenetrably dark. Suddenly someone reaches through the darkness and grabs Jacob! Could it be Laban, that lying, thieving, double-crosser? Could it be Esau,

bypassing Jacob's lavish gifts and determined to finish him off for good this time? It was a terrifying experience, and you have to give Jacob credit for putting up a good fight. Wrestling is by far the most exhausting sport. Ask Pastor Stone. A few minutes on the mat are more tiring than an hour on the gridiron, and this contest lasted all night! Here we have two very determined men – or at least one determined and the other desperate. Jacob was fighting for his wives, for his children, for his life! This is it. Everything is on the line! All night they wrestled, both determined, one desperate, until the sky began to lighten with the morning.

Then the stranger cheated. The cheater was cheated! Seeing Jacob would not give up, the stranger touched Jacob's hip socket and threw Jacob's hip out of joint. That must have been a powerful touch! Then Jacob knew that his adversary was much stronger than he, and true to form, Jacob drove a hard bargain with him. As the greater, this stranger was in a position to grant Jacob a blessing. So Jacob demanded a blessing as the condition for letting him go. Jacob would never be able to beat this man, but perhaps at least he could squeeze a blessing out of him!

### ***Blessed by God***

Odd, Jacob asked this stranger for a blessing, and the stranger asked his name. Did he not know whom he had attacked? But what the stranger did was force Jacob to admit who he was – Jacob, the supplanter, the cheat. That was his name and that was his nature. Now overly pious preachers love to dwell on Jacob's many sins and the blackness of his heart. Of course Jacob was sinful. Who finds that an amazing insight? All people are sinners, and often the most civilized are the worst. And all of us make excuses. No one dwells on his own sin. All of us attempt to construct a life which has the trappings of virtue even though sin lies buried deep within us. But Jacob was also a worshiper of God and obedient to God's commands. What this stranger did was force Jacob to admit who he really was. He tore the mask off of Jacob's carefully constructed image and revealed the ugliness of his soul.

Then the stranger gave Jacob a new name. Perhaps Jacob suspected divine involvement in the dislocation of his hip, but now it was certain who this stranger was. Jacob was holding God in his arms! God is the one who creates and names. God named Abraham. God named Isaac. And the man naming Jacob must be God – God most high, the God of Abraham and Isaac. When Jacob was wracked with worry in the night, God had come to him, but not to comfort or reassure. God came to attack, and now Jacob was holding God hostage to his pathetic bargain! Now the man known by the whole world as the cheater – the rich, successful, self-made deal-maker – will declare to the world – every time he introduces himself – that God prevails; for that is what Israel means<sup>1</sup>. Jacob is the man who fought and lost. He thought he could salvage a blessing out of the match, but the blessing is an announcement of his failure. Jacob fought God and God won, and Jacob will broadcast his failure all his life.

When God came to answer Jacob's prayer, He permanently disabled Jacob. You might think that a limp is a significant inconvenience, but nothing major like a heart attack or losing an arm. I know a man who has a very noticeable limp and it does not hold him back much. He cannot run, but he can walk pretty fast and it does not interfere with his work – because he is a professor. Jacob was a shepherd. With an operation as large as his he certainly had hired hands, but *he* had to be able to shear the sheep, assist in lambing, drive predators away, etc. Jacob was in the same position as an artist who becomes blind, or a preacher who becomes mute. Jacob was severely compromised by his limp. It was humiliating, it was with him all the time, and it was a public demonstration that he was not the man he used to be.

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<sup>1</sup>James Boice, *Gensis; An Expository Commentary*, volume 2 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1985) p. 820.

Jacob was trapped by two murderous adversaries, so he turned to God for help. But God did not send angels to attack Esau, or a cloud to protect Jacob's company, or another army to tie up Esau. In fact God did absolutely nothing to Esau! God instead attacked His greater adversary. For in spite of Jacob's religious appearance, Jacob was more into his own tricks than God's provision. Don't misunderstand – Jacob worshiped God. He knew the God of Abraham and Isaac. God had met him on the way to Mesopotamia, and God had appeared to Jacob very recently and encouraged him to return to Canaan – and Jacob obeyed. Jacob was not a malicious pagan. He was a man who worshiped God and did as he pleased. He did not seek God's direction on how to approach Laban or Esau, or how to protect his family and household. Jacob was a normal God-worshiper – worship God as do as you please. But now as he is about to enter Canaan, God's land, normal is not good enough. If Jacob is to be used by God to establish a nation devoted to God, he must submit to God in all things. No longer may he live by his wits. God had to break Jacob's pride and self-reliance before he would be useful to God. It turned out that Jacob's greatest enemy was not Laban or Esau, but God. The blessing that Jacob didn't ask for, but needed, was to lose to God.

Jacob loved to remind God that it was *God's* idea that he return to Canaan. When God made a clear appearance and told Jacob what to do, Jacob was willing to follow. But it appears that Jacob had little to do with God otherwise. Jacob did not have the easy companionship with God that Abraham had. Abraham made mistakes and sinned also, but Abraham's relationship with God was more than obedience when given orders, or cries in desperation. Even in obeying God's direction to return to Canaan, Jacob blamed God for his hardships. What we see here in the dark is not the conversion of a pagan, or the prayer of a spiritual giant. Here we see God blessing one of His own beloved children. The time had come for God to draw closer to Jacob. Jacob had worshiped God from a distance, but now God came and wrestled him to a relationship of intimacy. The defining fact about this man was no longer that he lived by his wits, but that he was ruled by God. Jacob resisted all night, but in the end God won. Jacob died and Israel was born.

Do you want to be blessed by God, or are you having second thoughts? As subsequent chapters in Genesis will unfold, Jacob will get along with Esau, he will survive numerous harrowing situations, and he will live to a ripe old age. So yes, Jacob was blessed by God. But if this is how God blesses people, is there a better alternative? There isn't. There was no one by the river but Jacob and God, with Laban and Esau on either side – and there is no one who can deliver you either except God. Only God has the power to ward off your enemies, heal your diseases, comfort you in sorrow, provide for your daily needs, and usher you into eternity. When you find yourself trapped, only God can deliver you. But the truth about you is the same as the truth about Jacob. The central problem is not the enemies around, but the sin within. Today you have come with a list of blessings you want: a handsome, romantic husband; a beautiful sexy wife; a thoughtful, appreciative boss; a nicer house; glorious success at work or in school; friends who fully understand and support you; a fitter body. There is nothing inherently sinful about any of these things. The sin is not in wanting good things. The sin is in *scheming* to get what you want. The sin is worshiping God and doing as you please. The blessing you desperately need is for God to come to you, to conquer you, kill your sin, and rename you from “self-made man” or woman to a man or “woman submitted to God.”

### ***Ready to Conquer***

Morning had arrived and it was time to face Esau. Jacob did not know what would happen. God had not made any promises about this encounter. I'm sure Jacob desperately hoped that God would intervene. Surely he wanted God to promise to go before him, to protect his wives and children, to preserve his household. And with good reason – God had sent him back to Canaan and long ago had promised to give him this land. It's not as though God was absent. God was very present – all night long! It's that God did not do what Jacob wanted Him to do. All night Jacob had defended himself against this mysterious attacker and at dawn discovered it was God. But all he had to show for it was a new name and a limp.

Have you ever had this experience? You were in a desperate situation and you turned to God and God heard you, but the answer to your prayers was not at all what you expected. You wanted a job in Washington, but He gave you one in Allentown. You wanted to marry Jack, but God gave you John. You wanted wealth, but God gave you poverty. What do you do about that? Do you get angry with God? Do you give up on God and try to get on without Him? Do you put up good show of worshipping God, but abandon Him in your heart?

Jacob had to face his murderous brother. He had no comfort from God about this encounter. And now he was worse off than the day before. Now he was crippled. But one thing made all the difference. Jacob had seen the face of God – and lived! If God intended to kill him for his sins, He could have done that in the night. God had a lot of opportunities to make Jacob pay for his wickedness. The astonishing, wonderful, exhilarating reality is that Jacob was still alive! And if he was alive, God must still have a future for him. So Jacob, limp and all, crossed the river to meet Esau with the sun rising behind him. Of course the sun was rising. It was morning. This notice is not here to inform us of astrological conditions, but as a sign. This was a new day in the life of Jacob and of the world. God was now ruling over Jacob, and through him God was entering Canaan to establish His rule there. Israel was God's instrument to continue what God had begun with Abraham and would continue for all time. God conquered Jacob, then land of Canaan, and then the whole world.

Having been conquered by God, Jacob is now ready to conquer the land. Jacob invaded Canaan by crossing the river, just as Joshua will do later to exterminate the wicked Canaanite culture. Just as Elisha to reconvert the northern tribes and re-establish worship of the true God. Just as the true Israel who rose out of the river to conquer all His enemies once and for all. Jesus drove out the demons, healed the sick, fed the hungry, destroyed the false shepherds as a taste and a sign that the rule of God had arrived. Then Jesus was attacked by God as He bore our sins on the cross, His flesh savagely torn apart absorbing all the divine fury of sinful men. Then it was over. As the sun rose on the third day, Israel emerged from the tomb, wounds and all. For the horrifying death by crucifixion was merely a heel wound for Christ, but a mortal wound for Satan and sin. Satan is now chained up awaiting final destruction, sin has been conquered in the flesh, and Jesus is enthroned and is extending His rule over the whole world.

### ***The Gospel***

This is the gospel! Jacob was a hero of the faith who suffered many trials but remained faithful to God. Yet Jacob could not conquer Canaan or even his own sin. The good news is that the final, universal victory Jesus accomplished is ours when we are joined to Him in baptism. Jesus said that John the Baptist was the greatest prophet, but the least in Jesus' Kingdom would be greater than John. That's us, folks! Just as God came to Jacob in the night, so God comes to us in baptism. Just as Jacob saw the face of God and yet lived, so we see God in worship and receive eternal life. Just as Jacob held God in his arms, so we hold God in our hands as we receive bread and wine. Just as Jacob was crippled by God, so are we when God slays us with His word. And just as Jacob was equipped to conquer, so we are equipped to conquer.

Jacob did not go to God. God came to him. Jacob gets no pious points for seeking God, nor do you. Any time we meet God, it is because God seeks us, not we seeking Him. But Jacob does get pious points for one thing. He hung on. All night, through terrible exhaustion, hope of victory fading as the night, Jacob never let go – and this is the lesson for us. Stop fooling yourselves. You don't much seek God. You get busy with life's necessities, you have your own plans and agenda, you are trying to keep yourself afloat in the trials you face. When we do pray, our prayers are weak and self-centered. It's OK. God does not notice how distracted you are. God does not hear your weak, self-centered prayers. When God looks at you He sees a glorious radiance. When God listens, He hears a voice which penetrates deep into His soul. God is eternally thrilled with His own Son. God is delighted with Jesus! He loves to hear His voice and is quick to answer

His prayers. And there you are, in Jesus. God treats you the same way He treats Jesus because you are in Jesus. When God looks at you, all He sees is the brilliance of Christ.

Brothers and sisters: hang on to Jesus! You will go through dark and tumultuous nights. There will be times when you do not know what is happening or what to do. You will be attacked and injured. There may come a time when your family and friends will abandon you. You may lose your job or your health. Hang on! Never let go of Jesus. Let His words sink deep into your soul. Pour out your soul to Him. Take Him in your hands and into the depths of your body. If you do this, whatever happens, you will conquer. And there will come a day in which you cross the final river to the joyous shouts and thunderous applause of angels and archangels and all the host of heaven – a conquering hero – not because of what you accomplished, but because you hung on to the true Israel who conquered and gives you the credit.

***Prayer***

Eternal God, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, we come to You with many urgent desires and foolish ideas. We think that by very earnest prayers we can coax You into granting our wishes – as though Your original intent was to ignore us, and as though we know better than You what is best for us. Even when we come to You, it is because You came to us first. We confess our foolishness and self-centeredness. Forgive us, O Lord, for the sake of your dear Son Jesus Christ. We praise You for joining us to Christ and making His victory ours. Help us to hang on to Jesus.

Lord, we are faced with great burdens and we fear many troubles. Surely You are at work saving Your people and blessing the world, but we struggle to believe, our hope grows weak, and our love grows cold. Help us to hang on to Christ! And in our darkest moments when we feel we cannot hang on any longer, hold on to us. And in the end usher us into Your heavenly Kingdom in the triumph of that true Israel, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

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