

Foundations: Jacob IV--BEING FAITHFUL
Genesis 32:22-30

There is a story about an atheist... who falls off a cliff. As he is falling, he manages to reach out and grab a small root. He's just barely able to hang on... and soon feels his hand slipping. In desperation, he screams, "God, if you are up there, help me."

God calls to him, "Son, do you believe in me?" "Yes," cries the now *former*-atheist, "I believe in you! What do you want me to do?" God's voice is loud and clear: "I want you to trust me and let go of the root." There's a long pause, then the man yells, "Is there anybody else up there?"

It's an old, old struggle, yet... ever new—our way, or God's way. It's a struggle in my life, and in yours. And a lot is at stake in this struggle. Proverbs 14:12 says: "There is a way that seems right unto man, but in the end it leads to death."

Jacob's whole life had been a struggle between his way and God's, and following his own way had just about gotten him killed. It seemed so right to Jacob, but it led him to the brink of death. But God was not through struggling with Jacob. In the end, God would have His way in Jacob's life.

Jacob hadn't seen his brother, Esau, in a long time—not since he and his mom cheated Esau out of their father's blessing leading to Esau's vow to kill Jacob. Knowing that Esau was quite capable of killing him over this, Jacob went on a long journey which included a fascinating encounter with God—you remember Jacob's ladder.

His journey also took him to Haran and a conniving Uncle Laban who managed to get 14 years of labor out of Jacob in exchange for the hands of his two daughters in marriage—one of which, Rachel's, he truly wanted. It's a strange story—if you missed it last week, you'll can get the CD or go on-line to hear it!

Twenty years have gone by now, and Jacob is on his way back home. It seems to me that Jacob's story is like a greatly-extended version of Jesus' story of the Prodigal Son, who because of friction with his father also left home. Neither Jacob nor the Prodigal knew if they would ever be welcomed back home again.

In today's text, we find Jacob at the Jabbok River. To cross that river meant entering into Esau's territory—potentially a dangerous

thing to do. Jacob seeks to make amends with his brother by sending him gifts. His servants leave camp with 220 goats, 220 sheep, 30 camels, 40 cows, 10 bulls, and 30 donkeys.

Maybe after such a generous gift, Esau would decide to forgive him rather than carry out his plans to kill him. Later that evening, he sends his wives and sons across the river along with the rest of his possessions.

So... Jacob is left all by himself on the banks of the Jabbok. That night the most famous and bizarre wrestling match in all of history takes place. An unknown man appears and wrestles with Jacob all through the night. So, with that bit of background, please follow along as I read **Genesis 32:22-30**:

22 That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. 23 After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. 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 men and have overcome." 29 Jacob said, "Please tell me your name." But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there. 30 So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

So, the implication is... Jacob wrestled with God. I suppose all of us have done this at times—not like this, of course; but we've battled with God as we've struggled to do things our way instead of His. We've questioned why God lets bad things happen to good people.

We've resisted God's call on our lives—either feeling incapable or just not wanting to do what God was asking. We've quarreled with God over things He challenged us to give up for Him. We've all wrestled with God in some way, so we should all be able to relate to--and possibly learn from--the experience of Jacob.

1. I want to share with you two observations about this encounter between God and Jacob—both based on the firm conviction that God’s ways are always better for us. The first is this: **Being Faithful Means Choosing God’s Way Over Ours.**

By crossing the Jabbok, Jacob would be entering Esau’s territory. From God’s perspective, however, what really matters is that Jacob would be back in the land that God promised to give to Abraham’s descendants—what we call the Promised Land.

So God appears in the form of a man (theologians call this a “theophany”) and this God-man wrestles with Jacob in order to teach him a lesson. When the wrestling ends, he says, “...you have struggled with God...and have overcome” (v. 28).

Now, that makes it sound like God lost and Jacob won, doesn’t it? But this is really not about God’s inability to overpower Jacob or anyone else. This is about the limits God places upon Himself.

If you’re fighting God, He won’t overpower you. He won’t crush you and take away your will. He won’t force you to follow His way. This must be your decision—and yours alone.

God wrestles Jacob all through the night, and it appears this fight is going to end in a draw until God dislocates Jacob’s hip with a simple touch. God allows Jacob to give Him his best shot, and then God shows his complete dominance... with just a touch.

You can try to push God around and do things your own way--but only for just so long. The Bible says, “...the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength” (I Corinthians 1:25).

Jacob finds this out the hard way. He can struggle with God for a time, but God always determines when the match is over—and Jacob also discovers that he won’t be able to return home on his own. He’ll need God’s presence and strength to be successful.

All this raises a question concerning what you and I may have been trying to do in OUR own strength? Can you think of anything in your life that you’ve struggled with for a long time only to be frustrated over and over again? Maybe it feels like you’ve been wrestling against God Himself.

Well? We reach a point where we need to admit that we can't do it, that our way isn't working and won't work. Maybe it's time to stop doing things our way and start doing them God's way.

Back in 2006, Sylvester Stallone shocked the entertainment world by resurrecting the movie hero, Rocky Balboa, for one more film.

Then, while promoting the film, Stallone shocked Christians with the revelation that his faith had impacted the writing of the first Rocky film, AND that his decision to create the final movie was inspired by his renewed commitment to Christ and His church.

This is for real. Stallone discussed this in an interview with *Citizenlink.com.*, and it was reported in several Christian periodicals. Here's what Stallone's said:

I was raised in a Catholic home, a Christian home. And I went to Catholic schools and I was taught the faith and went as far as I could with it. Until one day, I got out into the so-called real world, and I was presented with temptation. I kinda', like, lost my way and made a lot of bad choices."

But Stallone added that those bad choices ultimately left him unsatisfied--especially his decision to place fame and career ahead of his family. As a result, Stallone said he was increasingly pulled back toward his Christian roots.

"The more I go to church," he says, "and the more I turn myself over to the process of believing in Jesus and listening to his Word and having Him guide my hand, I feel as though the pressure is off me now."

As part of this changing of his ways, Stallone says he realizes another poor choice had guided his previous life: self-reliance. "You need to have the expertise and the guidance of someone else," he says.

And in a reference to boxing, he adds, "You cannot train yourself. I feel the same way about Christianity and about what the church is: The church is the gym of the soul."

Hey, that's Rocky, friends! If even Rocky runs into problems trying to live life his own way, if Rocky can't win at that, what chance did Jacob have? Or us? Maybe it's time to choose God's way over our

own! Which brings us to the second observation I want to share with you in regard to this Scripture:

2. Being Faithful Means Embracing God's Way As Our Own.

And I don't mean to imply this is easy. It wasn't easy for Jacob. We just heard how Sylvester Stallone described His struggle. And if we're honest, we'll admit to facing some struggles as well—times when we wrestled with God and His will for us.

God convinces Jacob that his way isn't going to work when He disables him with a single touch to his hip. Jacob immediately realizes the greatness of the One with whom he is wrestling. We know this because Jacob says, "I saw God face to face..." (v. 30).

Injured and limping now, all Jacob can do is hold on and ask for a blessing—that's Jacob's way of acknowledging that God is greater than him. He's humbling himself and exalting God.

Now think back to that earlier time when Jacob sought a blessing. It was from his father on that occasion—when he received the blessing that was not supposed to be his, but his brother's. There was no humility back then, only pride. No respect for his father either, only an attempt to exalt himself.

But here, Jacob has learned his lesson, letting go of his own way in order to embrace God's way. He does so, however, only after a great struggle. He chooses to embrace God's way only after he finds himself wounded and lame.

Do you remember what God said to the Apostle Paul? "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness..." (II Corinthians 12:9).

Only in his weakened condition does Jacob finally put his full trust in God; and we learn in the rest of Jacob's story that God's power is indeed made perfect in Jacob's weakness.

In a recent conversation, the name of SC native Lee Atwater came up. Atwater was one of the most notorious campaign managers ever. In my opinion, he left a very ugly legacy.

Dan Quayle was once asked in an interview how he would feel if Lee Atwater was running his opponent's campaign instead of his own. He replied, "I wouldn't run." He was serious. This is what's so wrong with politics—why it's such a dirty business.

But here's why I'm sharing this story. Just 14 months after his biggest election victory, Lee Atwater was diagnosed with a very aggressive brain tumor. During the year he had left to live, he distanced himself from his past ways of living by embracing something more akin to God's ways. In case you haven't heard it, I invite you to listen to Atwater's confession:

"Long before I was struck with cancer, I felt something stirring in American society. It was a sense among the people of the country--Republicans and Democrats alike--that something was missing from their lives, something crucial. I was trying to position the... Party to take advantage of it. But I wasn't exactly sure what 'it' was. My illness helped me to see that what was missing in society is what was missing in me: a little heart, a lot of brotherhood."

For some reason, though, we still don't want to hear that message. Maybe... when we're on *our* death bed...

It was a wounded Jacob that now asks God for a blessing. But first God insists that Jacob tell Him his name. Why? God already know his name.

Well, remember that the name Jacob means "supplanter"--one who tries to take the place of another deceitfully. Jacob had always managed to live up to his name! By speaking his name here, though, Jacob is confessing this--he is confessing to God his sin against his father and brother, as well as his sin against God.

God will not bless us, friends, until first we confess our sin. John taught this truth when he wrote, **"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).**

And this is when life begins for us—when we cross over into God's Promised Land. We abandon our ways—whether they are motivated by fear, pride, selfishness, greed, or plain old apathy toward God. We confess our sin, leave our old ways behind, embrace God's way as our own, and He gives us a new name.

Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Embrace Jesus Christ. Make His way yours. Follow Him—faithfully. Christian, you bear His name!

For Bulletin



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