

A STORY OF GRACE/Week Four Notes Relentless Grace/Genesis 32-34

When we read difficult events, especially in the Old Testament, keep in mind that we cannot impose our 21st century thinking onto an ancient text. Neither can we approach the text with erroneous presuppositions or faulty questions. If we walk away from Scripture with a negative assessment of God, it is our assessment that is wrong, not God. Furthermore, as we study events in a person's life, we must always remember our focus is God and what He is revealing about Himself to us through the life of a person (like Jacob).

God has done much for Jacob thus far. He has chosen, blessed materially, blessed family, guided Jacob, revealed Himself to Jacob in every crisis, and kept Jacob...all by grace. Grace, however, is not the fluffy side of God. In fact, grace, God's favor towards us, is willing to do the hard work of conforming us to Christ (sanctification). Grace is willing to do the hard work in Jacob too, forming him into a man of faith and obedience.

Grace is Willing to Wrestle and Wound. At the end of Gen. 31, Jacob has left one difficult situation and braces to face another—meeting his brother Esau. Genesis 32:1 is understated but loaded with encouragement. God's angels meet Jacob as he sets out. Jacob sees them and his heart should be encouraged. He calls the place *Mahanaim* meaning two companies...the company of angels and his own large company of people. (Read 2 Kings 6:15-17, Psalm 34:7). Regardless of God's encouragement, Jacob sends a message to Esau, intending to soften up Esau before the two brothers meet face to face. The messengers return to Jacob only to say Esau is coming with 400 men. Jacob assumes Esau means to kill him. Filled with fear Jacob prays.

Genesis 32:9-12 is a wonderful, theologically correct prayer. But it is prayed by a man who has little faith. Jacob knows a lot about God, but his heart is lacking faith and obedience. After praying, Jacob formulates a plan to appease or pacify Esau (verse 20). He sends groups of animals toward Esau, each group accompanied by a servant. Each servant will recite a groveling speech to Esau...group after group after group approaches Esau. Jacob is hoping Esau will accept the animals as gifts. Remember, God told Jacob to return. God promised to be with him. God told Jacob He would not leave him. But Jacob trusts his own plans rather than God's words. After sending servants with gifts and also getting his wives and children across the Jabbok River, Jacob is alone (32:24).

So often God speaks to us when we are alone, without distractions. Certainly, He speaks to us in large gatherings but His voice is best heard with clarity and intimacy when we are alone. Jacob has come to the end of his resources and ideas. He has prayed, planned, and appeased. There is nothing left to do but wait. In the waiting, Jacob is afraid.

Genesis 32:24-31 is a familiar story, but mysterious. The wording is important if we want to grasp the significance fully. As you read, remember that many doctrines which you and I have a decent understanding of had not yet been revealed to ancient writers of Scripture. God reveals truth in His way and in His time. Ancient writers had only what God wanted them to have. The doctrine of the Trinity was not completely revealed in the early writings. Neither was there a clear distinction between angels, messengers of God, or God Himself. Genesis 32:24-31 is one of those occasions that seems to use ambiguous language. Some translations will say an angel wrestles with Jacob, Others say a man (divine man) wrestles with Jacob. Other translations say God wrestles with Jacob. None are wrong if we understand God is the initiator of the wrestle. Personally, I believe preincarnate Christ...Jesus before Bethlehem... is wrestling with Jacob. Verse 24, notice the "man" wrestles with Jacob. God is the initiator and the aggressor. God has some hard work of grace to do in Jacob's life. Jacob is not wrestling with God, rather God is wrestling with Jacob.

Verse 25 is important! This wrestle is not a battle for physical strength. If it were, God could incinerate Jacob with a single word. This battle is about bringing Jacob's stubborn, self-sufficient will into submission to God. This is a spiritual battle for surrender to God. But Jacob will not spiritually surrender.

Listen! Surrender for the believer is not a place of defeat. It is wonderful place of spiritual victory. Surrender is when Christ is in control. We lay down our plans, our manipulating, our schemes, our self-sufficiency, and our will. We learn to trust Him fully, expressed daily through a life of faith and obedience. Jacob refuses to be conquered. He would rather hold on to his life of faithlessness. God wants more for Jacob than Jacob can imagine. God wants more for us too and He is willing to wrestle with us. When God wrestles with us, it is the Holy Spirit working in the inner man, convicting us, transforming us, using Scripture to change our thinking and ultimately our behavior. Because God loves us so much, He will go to any length to bring us into a life of surrender. For stubborn Jacob, God will have to cripple him to conquer him spiritually.

Certainly, God is not angry with Jacob. The Bible says He simply touched Jacob's thigh. He took Jacob's physical strength so He could give Jacob spiritual strength. A.W. Tozier said, "God cannot fully bless a man unless He has conquered him." *Please do not misunderstand this principle.* Every physically illness or malady is *not the wounding of God.* Every bad thing that happens to us is not God trying to get our attention and teach us a lesson. (we will discuss this further in week 5). BUT, God will work in our lives in ways that feel uncomfortable to produce maturity and steadfast faith in us. The takeaway for me, is when God is using the Holy Spirit to convict me and wrestle with me about something in my life, I must listen and confess at once! I must trust His heart towards me even when sanctification is the hard work of grace. God desires to set us free from the tyranny of ourselves. God wants to set Jacob free of Jacob.

Verse 26-27. After God touches Jacob's thigh, Jacob goes from wrestling to clinging. He has no more physical strength. His agonizing cry to the Lord is not a stubborn demand. It is the painful cry of a broken man who genuinely wants all God has to offer. In his fresh brokenness, the Lord asks Jacob his name. God is not looking for information. He simply wants Jacob to acknowledge what kind of person Jacob is. It is interesting to me that we have no record of anyone asking Jacob his name since Genesis 27 when Isaac asks, "Who are you, my son?" And Jacob says, "I am Esau." Jacob must now realize that he has always been the supplanter, the heel-grabber, the manipulator, the opportunist, the schemer, and the deceiver. In his moment of acknowledgment, God changes Jacob's name to Israel. A name change in Scripture denotes a change in identity, a new opportunity to serve God, a fresh start. God gave all of these things to Jacob... and God blessed Jacob (Vs 29). Jacob renamed the place Peniel, which means the face of God. God never healed Jacob of his limp. It would be his forever reminder that God loved Jacob enough to wrestle and even to wound—the hard work of grace that brings us to surrender.

Why does God care so much about bringing us to surrender? Because lack of surrender to Christ is rooted in pride. God hates pride. It was the great sin of Lucifer/Satan/ Star of the Morning (Isiah 14:13-14). It is the sin which Satan, the serpent, perpetrated onto mankind in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:1-5, "...you will be like God"). James 4:6 says God opposes the proud. He is in aggressive position to come against our pride. He will initiate the wrestle and be the aggressor against our pride. He hates pride because He loves us. He is willing to empty you of you. Me of me. James 6:10 reminds us to humble ourselves. God gives us every opportunity to humble ourselves. Humility is not a doormat mentality. Instead, it is declaring our total dependence on Christ.

Grace is Patient but Not Passive. Genesis 33. Shockingly, no sooner than the sun rises, Jacob seems to forget everything that has just happened to him at Peniel. He meets Esau face to face, but bows down and grovels instead of remembering the promises of God (verses 3, 4, 10, 11) Esau is genuinely happy to see Jacob (verse 4), but Jacob soon leans into deception. Esau reluctantly takes Jacob's gifts and asks Jacob to travel with him. Jacob refuses with lies. "The children are frail. The animals are tired" (Verses 12-14). Jacob promises to come later, at a slower pace. Instead of following Esau as he promised, Jacob goes

another way. He does not see his brother Esau until their father Issac dies. Grace is patient. God is very quiet in these verses.

When Jacob travels away from Esau, he eventually stops in Succoth. He builds a house in Succoth and stays. He is technically in the land that God will give to Jacob, but it is not home. It is not Hebron where Issac still lives. Jacob delays. Delayed obedience is disobedience. Jacob has had a spiritual encounter with God, but still living in disobedience. God is silent. Grace is patient.

After Succoth, Jacob moves closer to the city of Shechem. The city is a well-fortified Canaanite city named after Shechem, the son of Hamor the Hivite. Shechem and his father Hamor rule the area. Jacob buys property and digs a well (John 4)...both signs of settling down. Again disobedience. God said, "go home." Ten years will pass since his experience at Peniel before Jacob sets one foot toward home. Jacob has willfully disobeyed God by living in Succoth and then Shechem. While grace is patient, God is not passive. He allows Jacob to live in the consequences of his disobedience. What a high price Jacob will pay for disobedience.

There is no mention of God in Genesis 34. This is very difficult account. Jacob's daughter Dinah is raped by Shechem. His lust is confused with love and he wants to marry her. In fact, he kidnaps her and keeps her at his house (Verse 26). When Jacob hears the news, he stays quiet. He waits until his sons return from keeping the flocks. We don't know how long he waited...maybe days. A good father would have been outraged, but Jacob is afraid and silent. When his sons return, Hamor comes to speak with Jacob. Notice as you read, Jacob still says nothing. His sons on the other hand hear the news and have plenty to say. Hamor presents a solution. He proposes they all live together, intermarry, share their wealth...one big happy family. And on top of that, he will pay any amount of money to Jacob for his son to marry Dinah.

The brothers deceive Hamor (imagine that). They will not agree to Hamor's proposal unless all the men of the city are circumcised. Circumcision was only for those who had a unique covenant relationship with Yahweh (Genesis 17:9-14). The sons of Jacob are not interested in right relationship with God. They are interested in incapacitating all the men so they can kill them. The men foolishly agree and on the third day after circumcision, Levi and Simeon (Dinah's full-blooded brothers) slaughter all the men of the city. The other brothers, except Joseph, loot the city and take the women and children captive. Jacob's response is a weak self-centered response (read carefully Gen. 34: 30-31). Keep in mind, almost 500 years later, God will tell Joshua and the people of Israel to kill the Canaanites. *God said nothing to Jacob or his family about killing Canaanites.* God's plan for occupying the land had not yet unfolded. Killing the Hivites at Shechem was sinful...even though they were a godless people.

How did Jacob get into such a terrible spiritual and moral mess? One choice at a time. There is an old saying: *"Sin will take you farther than you ever planned to go, it will keep you longer than you ever planned stay, and it will cost you more than you ever planned to pay"* Jacob paid dearly for his disobedience, not because God wrestled with him again, rather God allowed Jacob to live in the mess he had made for himself. Grace is patient but not passive.

God will allow us to live in the consequences of our sin, dear one. But He yearns for our repentance. Grace will always move us toward repentance when we have sinned. By faith we respond to the work of grace. We confess our sin, meaning we agree with God about the sin. (1John 1:9). By faith, we receive God's forgiveness and His cleansing. Read Psalm 51:10 and Psalm 139:23-24.

Even while the consequences of sin remain, God redeems. He buys back and makes new. He is not obligated to restore everything we lose to sinful living, but He always redeems. Read Isaiah 43:18-19. He makes a roadway in the wilderness and rivers in the desert... even if the wilderness and desert are of our own making. Grace is always at work. God is always love, but He is not passive. He will do whatever it takes to bring us to surrender...the place of greatest victory, joy, and peace.