

The Crisis that Cripples

Series: Jacob Have I Loved

by David H. Roper

In the thirty-second chapter of Genesis we continue learning from the life of Jacob, this great patriarch of Israel. What a life it was! It impresses me that Scripture is completely candid about the heroes, the great men of faith whose lives are chronicled in its pages, and does not try to cover up their misdeeds. You can look through all the literature of the ancient Near East and you will not find anything comparable. All their heroes--the great monarchs of Assyria and Babylon and Egypt, and the Hittite kings--are never presented in a bad light but always at their very best. But Scripture is very open and honest about the men whose exploits are recorded in its pages, because God is not concerned primarily about where we are, although he is concerned about progress in our life; he accepts us exactly where we are. He is perfectly candid about the way he looks at us. He is never disillusioned; he knows what we are like. And as we see these men portrayed in all of the honesty of Scripture, what an encouragement this is to us! God loves us as he loved Jacob.

The ancients had a very interesting philosophy of history. It was centered around two words: fate and nemesis. By "fate" they meant not that things were determined by God or the gods but that all of life was fixed, that you really could do nothing to alter your destiny. Fate was always in tension with nemesis. Nemesis is a difficult idea to convey, but basically it is this: In working out your destiny, at times you may come in conflict with the gods; and if so, you will make them angry so that they will act in wrath toward you.

The poem, *Metamorphoses*, is a good illustration of these two principles at work in this view of history. It is the story of Cupid and Psyche. Psyche was the youngest daughter of a well-known king of that day, the most beautiful woman on the face of the earth. That was her fate, her destiny. All men fell in love with her, deified her. And the gods became very angry because the attention of mankind was directed away from them toward Psyche. Out of their jealousy, particularly the jealousy of Venus, terrible things began to happen to her. Cupid was ordered to work out some really dreadful things in her life, all because she had angered the gods.

It sometimes seems that this philosophy of history has somehow crept over into our thinking as Christians, because of our concept that sin in our life makes God angry. He is viewed as a crotchety, irritable old man who is easily upset; therefore you have to walk on eggshells lest you offend him. You must be very careful not to make him mad, for if you offend him, he lashes out in wrath against you. He has a very very short fuse.

But how far this is from the truth! God is not offended at sin because it reflects on him or does something to him; he hates sin because it does something to us. It destroys us, and it destroys those around us. That is why he hates sin, and that is why he wants to root it out of our lives. Jesus came to deliver us from sin. That was the purpose of his coming--to set us free from our animosity toward ourselves. At times he may have to deal with us very harshly, because he loves us and wants to root out of our lives the things which are so self-destructive. We will see this in the life of Jacob.

We already have seen something of the ambivalence of this man. He was both a man of faith who trusted God and also a man who trusted himself, and he could not decide which was more trustworthy. Finally there came a climax in his life when he had to face the facts, face who he was, and deal with his tendency to manipulate others and to trust his own schemes and plans. This crisis is his wrestling match with God. To many people this appears to be a story right out of ancient folklore. It is so strange--and yet so meaningful in terms of our own experience with God. Let us begin at verse 1:

Now as Jacob went on his way, the angels of God met him. And Jacob said when he saw them, 'This is God's camp.' So he named that place Mahanaim. [The word means "two camps" - ours and God's.]

This chapter begins the third phase of Jacob's life. The first phase took place in Canaan, and was a period of about seventy to seventy-five years when he lived with Isaac his father, and Esau. We looked at that phase in detail and saw that his chicanery resulted in the breakup of his family, his alienation from his brother Esau, and his departure from the Promised Land. The second phase is the twenty years of Jacob's sojourn in Haran. There he appeared to be a man of faith. He trusted God, and God richly blessed him. As he says in this passage, "I crossed the Jordan with only my staff in my hand, and now I come back an extremely wealthy man, with flocks and herds and a large household." God blessed him, because he let God fight for him.

But he never could settle the issue; he is still struggling. And when he comes back into the land at the beginning of this third period in his life, God confirms again, in a very personal way, his determination to meet Jacob's needs. As he did at Bethel, he tears away the veil so Jacob can see reality. He now knows, as the Psalmist knew, that "the angel of the Lord camps round about those who fear him." He is not shut up to his own resources. Though he is an extremely wealthy man, he is not to rely upon his wealth and the armed might of his household, but rather upon the power of God. God is encamped with him, and wherever he goes, God will fight for him. So God shows him again that there are really two camps. There are his resources, but beyond these, the angel of God encamps round about him.

But notice, as we look quickly through the first part of this chapter, that Jacob vacillates between faith and planning. He prays, and then he schemes, and he prays, and he schemes. He is so much like us. We lay plans, and then we say, "God, bless our plans." We scheme and strategize, and then we try to get God to go along with us. We are just as ambivalent as Jacob. We trust God, but then we trust ourselves as well. Verse 3:

Then Jacob sent messengers before him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom.

Here is a foreview of Jesus' words in Matthew 5: "If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering before the altar, and go your way, first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering." Jacob knows that before he can come back into the Promised Land and enjoy the blessings of God he must be reconciled to his brother Esau. So he sends servants to Mt. Seir to effect some sort of reconciliation with his brother. When he sends them, he rehearses very carefully in their ears what they are to say. Because, ultimately, his dependence is upon words. "You must say it the right way." He does not believe what Paul says in 1 Corinthians--that the kingdom of God does not come by words, but by power. Notice that he is almost comically over-organized, as he tries to plan for every eventuality:

He also commanded them saying, "Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: 'Thus says your servant Jacob, "I have sojourned with Laban, and stayed until now [that explains my delay, and is why I haven't contacted you]; and I have oxen and donkeys and flocks and male and female servants; and I have sent to tell my lord, that I may find favor [literally, "grace"] in your sight.'"

Esau might well have thought that Jacob had died. He had not heard from him and did not know where he was, and he might have believed he (Esau) still would receive the inheritance. Jacob was afraid that when Esau heard he had been in hiding, he would come and kill him. That was what he had vowed to do when Jacob left twenty years earlier. Jacob knew that what he needed was grace in Esau's sight--unmerited favor. He did not deserve Esau's friendship, did not deserve to be reconciled to him, and so he appealed to Esau to be gracious and to grant him a

favor he did not deserve. Verse 6:

And the messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau, and furthermore he is coming to meet you, and [by the way!] four hundred men are with him."

Jacob does precisely what I would do--he panics. Verses 7 and 8:

Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed, and he divided the people who were with him, and the flocks and the herds and the camels, into two companies; for he said, "If Esau comes to the one company and attacks it, then the company which is left will escape."

Here he is, back to his plans again. God had promised that he would protect him and would do good to him. Jacob is merely trying to help God out! God said, "Jacob, be still, and I will fight for you." And Jacob says, "Well, there are a few things I have to do first." So he divides his company. I would love to have been there that night to watch him try to divide up his belongings--which sheep would go there, and which would stay here; which servant to send where--because he did not know which group would be attacked first. He must have been tied up in knots, but he was merely trying to help God out.

I remember coming home some time ago after being away for a long time. My wife Carolyn and I were praying, and I was thanking the Lord for taking care of things while I was gone. She laughed! I said, "What's the matter, what did I say?" She said, "Well, who do you think takes care of things while you're here?" I felt suitably rebuked. But is not that the way we order our business? "Lord, I'm going to be away for awhile; take care of things." "Lord, I'm back on the job now; you can take off. Everything's fine." Jacob is setting up a program, a scheme that will protect him. Then, having made these plans, he prays:

And Jacob said, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord, who didst say to me, 'Return to your country and to your relatives, and I will prosper you [I will do good to you], 'I am unworthy of all the loving kindness and of all the faithfulness which Thou hast shown to Thy servant; for with my staff only I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two companies. Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, lest he come and attack me, mother with children. For Thou didst say, "I will surely prosper you, and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.'"

Now, that is a good prayer. But, having prayed it, he immediately begins to plan again. He divides the company further into smaller groups and sends some of them ahead as presents to Esau, that he might be appeased by these gifts and perhaps spare him. At verse 22 we come to the heart of this passage:

Now he arose that same night and took his two wives and his two maids and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. And he took them and sent them across the stream. And he sent across whatever he had.

Mahanaim is about five miles upstream from the ford of Jabbok. Jabbok means "wrestle". It received its name from the event that was to take place this night. At this point, it was merely a ford. Do you see what Jacob is doing? He leaves the main body at Mahanaim and, under cover of darkness, travels down to Jabbok and sends his wives and children across, five miles away from the main body. He is still trying to protect himself. He is hopeful that Esau will meet the rest of his household and that perhaps he will be spared.

Then Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. And when he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he touched the socket of his thigh; so the socket of Jacob's thigh was dislocated while he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the dawn is breaking." But he said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." And he said, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but

Israel; for you have striven with God and with me [men] and have prevailed."

Then Jacob asked him and said, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And he blessed him there. So Jacob named the place Penuel ["the face of God"], for he said, "I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved." Now the sun rose upon him just as he crossed over Penuel [same name, different spelling], and he was limping on his thigh. Therefore, to this day the sons of Israel do not eat the sinew of the hip which is on the socket of the thigh, because he touched the socket of Jacob's thigh in the sinew of the hip.

What a strange story--a man wrestling with God! There are several observations about it I would like you to make. The first is that God had to isolate Jacob before he could get a hearing. Jacob's life was so filled with distractions and preoccupations that he could not hear God. God had been trying to speak to this man repeatedly, and had, on occasion, gotten his ear. But by and large Jacob's life was filled with things--good things--but things which distracted him. So God had to get him alone, where he was literally at the end of himself, where he had no one to distract him, before he would listen. These words were spoken to a British educational society:

There is a crowd of busybodies, self-appointed masters of ceremony, whose life is devoted to destroying solitude wherever it exists. They call it "taking people out of themselves or waking them up" or "overcoming their apathy."

If an Augustine, a Wordsworth, should be born in the modern world, such leaders would soon cure him. If a really good home, such as the home of the Rostovs, in War And Peace, existed today, it would be denounced as bourgeois, and every engine of destruction would be leveled against it. And even where the planners fail and someone is left physically by himself, the radio has seen to it that he will be, in a sense not intended by Scipio, "never less alone than when alone". We live in a world starved for solitude, silence, and privacy, and therefore starved for meditation. When the modern world says to us aloud, "You may be religious when you are alone," it adds under its breath, "I will see to it that you are never alone."

This is what our modern secular world does to us. It keeps us preoccupied. We have something plugged into our ear at all times, so we really do not have time to hear God. The first thing God does to Jacob is to get him alone where he will listen.

Then "a man" wrestles with Jacob. Now, this is a real wrestling match. This is not intended to be some metaphor describing Jacob's struggle with God in prayer; he really wrestled physically. He struggled all night. The term translated "wrestle" in verses 25 and 26 is found nowhere else in the Old Testament. It comes from a word which means "dust." They were rolling in the dust. This was no phantom; this was a real encounter which resulted in an injury that Jacob carried with him for the rest of his life.

The second thing that I want you to notice in this account is that he wrestled with a God/man. It says it was a man in at least two places in this passage. It was a man; and yet twice it also says he wrestled with God. In verse 28, the man says, "You have striven with God and with men, and prevailed." And Jacob calls the place Peniel, "the face of God," "Because I have seen God face to face." This is another of the foreviews of the God/man who would be fully revealed in Jesus Christ. Throughout the Old Testament you find instances of encounters between a man who clearly was a man, and yet he is God. Abraham had just such an experience. This was the God/man that Jacob had to reckon with. It was a real encounter with the person, the individual, who was God incarnate.

I would also like for you to notice that surrounding this event is an aura of mystery. The God/man asks Jacob for his name, and Jacob responds. But the God/man does not reveal his own name to Jacob. And when day begins to break, and they are struggling, the God/man cries out to be released before the dawn comes. I am sure he did not think he was going to turn into a pumpkin. There must be a reason far more significant than that. I believe what we see in this event is the mystery which surrounds the Person of God. He knows us through and through, but we will never know him until we see him. Paul says we will know then, even as we are known.

The ancients believed that if you possessed the name of a man you could control him. Perhaps in some sense this is why the God/man does not reveal his name to Jacob, as he does later on to Moses. Perhaps Jacob thought that the mere possession of this name would give him control over the God/man. But you cannot control God. You cannot plan, and then ask God to bless your plans. You cannot put God into that kind of box. He does not work that way. He does as he pleases. He is sovereign. He invites investigation, and gives revelation, but we can never fully comprehend him. We cannot lay hold of him and force him to do what we want done.

There is something else I see here which is very strange. He cannot defeat Jacob until Jacob submits. Now, this is the God/man. Isaiah 40 says that God, who has created the stars, calls them all by name, and leads them forth as a shepherd cares for his sheep. When night falls, the stars come out at his command, just as the shepherd calls out the sheep; he has that kind of control over the universe. And yet he cannot defeat a mere man. Why? Because, in some way that we will never comprehend, God has limited himself. He will not press us to the mat, he will not force himself upon us. He has subjected himself to our own attitude toward him, and he can win only when we submit. As long as we resist him and struggle against him and defy him, he cannot overcome us. It is odd that God has so limited himself. But it is because he will not violate our personality. He has given us the right to choose, and to choose against him, if we so will. He will not act against our will; we must submit. And it was only when Jacob submitted that the God/man had control over him.

You notice that the real crisis comes at the point when Jacob is crippled. The struggle goes on through the night. The day begins to dawn, and the God/man cannot overcome Jacob. So he touches him on the socket of the hip and the hip is dislocated. If you have ever dislocated a joint, you know what a painful experience it is. Jacob is changed from a man who is defying the God/man to someone who is dependent upon him. He begins to cling to him, and will not let go, because he realizes that his strength is gone. The thigh muscle is the strongest muscle in the human body. It is a symbol of Jacob's strength and of his reliance upon his own ability. The God/man touches that point of his body, and his strength is gone. Now he can only cling to the God/man and call out to him for blessing.

Notice that in verse 26, the God/man says, "Let me go, for the dawn is breaking." But then Jacob says, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." Then the God/man asks him the key question: "What is your name?" There are several ways of asking that question in the Hebrew. To one the proper response would merely be to give your name. Another asks you to tell the character, or nature, of your name, and it is this question the God/man asks -- "What is the nature of your name?" And Jacob says, "Jacob." Do you remember what Jacob means? "The heel-grabber," "the one who trips others up," "the schemer," "the manipulator." You see, Jacob had to be utterly broken before he realized what he was. And when he saw that, when he came to the end of himself and admitted what he was, then the God/man gave him a new name -- Israel, "One who has exerted himself with God," or "A prince with God," "An exalted one with God."

This grew out of Jacob's willingness to admit his own weakness. Had he given up at any previous time, he could have received that name. But Jacob, like us, was so aggressive and contentious and prideful, and so bent upon asserting himself and getting his own way, that the only way the God/man could prevail was to take away his strength, and so he crippled him. As a result, Jacob came to a moment of truth. He saw who he was, and he received a new name--"A prince with God". And notice that until Moses' day, the sons of Israel did not eat the sinew on the socket of the thigh. They made a memorial of Jacob's weakness. They celebrated weakness instead of strength.

Would you look with me at three passages of Scripture which expand this passage a bit. One is the New Testament counterpart of it, 2 Corinthians 12. When Paul was on his first missionary journey, he was stoned in Lest. Many people think he died as a result of that stoning, and at that time was given a series of visions and revelations which could have exalted him.

Paul was a brilliant man, well trained very capable, and he always had a tendency to trust himself. These added revelations, of course, would have made him unique. No one had come back from the dead, apart from Jesus Christ. And so in chapter 12, verse 7, he writes,

And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me-to keep me from exalting myself!

The Greek word translated "buffet" means "to strike with a fist." This is interesting, is it not, in light of Jacob's wrestling experience! But in Paul's case it is a messenger of Satan. We know that Satan does not operate apart from God's Sovereign design. Satan's purpose may be to destroy, but God uses that evil purpose to accomplish good in our lives, and he stands behind all of Satan's activities against us and accepts responsibility for them. So he allowed Satan to buffet Paul, to strike him with the fist.

Verse 8:

Concerning this I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me.

We do not know precisely the nature of his affliction. Scholars have suggested various maladies. It was probably some terribly disfiguring, very debilitating eye disease. We know that he was virtually blind at the end of his life, and somewhat repulsive to look at, for he tells us so. Perhaps he contracted an eye disease while he was in Arabia, because he carried it throughout his entire ministry. Many times, I am sure, Paul must have felt that he would be a much better servant if he did not have this affliction, and so he asked the Lord to take it away. "Lord, I could do so much better, I could be so much stronger, I could accomplish so much more if I did not have this inhibiting condition."

And He said to me [Here he uses a verb tense that indicates this is an action that is irreversible: "He has said it and keeps on saying it."] **'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.'**
Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

"When I stop trusting myself, when I stop scheming, then I am strong. Either I am trusting myself, or I am trusting God. And the strange paradox is that when I trust myself, I am weak; when I trust God, I am strong." Paul came to the place where he utterly distrusted himself. We all must come to that place. Jacob had to come to that place through the discipline of the God/man in his life.

Let me show you another passage in the book of Hosea, chapter 12, beginning at verse 2. This was God's last word to the Northern Kingdom before they went into captivity. He had appealed to them numerous times with no response. The northern tribes--Israel, as they were called--also bore the name of Jacob, and that is why he addresses them as Jacob in this chapter.

The Lord also has a dispute with Judah [the Southern Kingdom]
And will punish Jacob according to his ways;

He will repay him according to his deeds. In the womb he took his brother by the heel, And in his maturity he contended [was a prince] **with God.**

Do you see what he is saying? In his immaturity as an infant, he took his brother by the heel. But in his maturity, he was a prince with God. Now, where are we in that continuum? If we are still trying to get things our own way, by our own strategy, we demonstrate that we are immature. But in our maturity we will give up, as Jacob did, and will let God fight for us.

The next line goes on,

Yes, he wrestled with the angel and prevailed...

That is what the God/man said: "You have prevailed over me." Do you know how to win with God? You lose! You give up. If you want to lose with God, then struggle with him. But if you want to win, give up. Jacob gave

up, and Hosea says he was a mature man:

**He wept and sought His favor.
He found Him at Bethel,
And there He spoke with us.**

You see, these things happened not merely for Jacob; they are for us.

One other passage, a familiar one, Psalm 18, beginning at verse 25:

**With the kind Thou does show Thyself kind;
[Ah, we like that! When we do what is right, God responds in like manner.]
With the blameless Thou dost show Thyself blameless;
With the pure Thou dost show Thyself pure;
And with the crooked Thou dost show Thyself astute.**

Actually, that last line could be translated, literally, "With the crooked you will wrestle." We like the idea of God's being kind when we are kind, blameless when we are blameless, and pure when we are pure. But we do not like the idea of God's wrestling with us when we are devious and deceitful.

But that is exactly what David says, and the next verse tells us,

For Thou dost save an afflicted people...

There may be times when God has to wrestle with us, and he may have to break us. But he does it because he wants to set us free. It is not because he has somehow become hostile toward us; it is because he wants to deliver us. Now, not all affliction comes into our life because we are rejecting God. There are other reasons for it. But there are times in our life, when we have struggled with God and have defied him, that he will bring into our life the sort of loving discipline a father brings into the life of a recalcitrant child--in order to save him. And that is what this passage tells us:

**But haughty eyes Thou dost abase.
For Thou dost light my lamp;
The Lord my God illumines my darkness.
For by Thee I can run upon a troop;
And by my God I can leap over a wall.**

These are the sort of exploits we can do when we are weak, but which we cannot do when we are strong. When we admit that we cannot leap over a wall, that we cannot run over a troop, that we do not have what it takes to live life as God intends it to be lived, then we have his strength. We become a prince with God.

Now turn back to the Genesis passage again, verses 30 and 31:

Jacob named the place Peniel, for he said, "I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved." Now the sun rose upon him just as he crossed over Peniel, and he was limping on his thigh.

Jacob limped for the rest of his life, as far as we know. He never recovered, because God left this mark in his body to remind him of his weakness, just as he left Paul's thorn in the flesh. And God gave him a sign of his continuing presence, hidden away in this verse: "Now the sun rose upon him as he crossed over Peniel." Have you ever noticed that the Gospels say that after Judas left the upper room, it was dark. In contrast, when Jacob left this experience with God, the sun rose upon him. This is what God promises you: his presence, his power, which grows out of your weakness.

Father, we certainly can identify with Jacob in this experience. We have all been there...or perhaps are there right now. In the darkness of this moment we are wrestling with you. We ask that our will would be submitted to you, so that we might--as we know from this passage--prevail, that we might be victors. Thank you, Father, for the fact that you never give up on us. There may be continual wrestling, and you may have to break us many times, but you never give up, for you love us as you loved Jacob. We thank you in Jesus' name, Amen.

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