

The end of counterfeit gods

Gen 32:22-32

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Genesis 32 is a chapter in two halves.

The first half I understand.

The second half, if it weren't for Keller's book,
it would still be a mystery to me.

Sad but true.

In the first half of the chapter,

Jacob is travelling home after living with his uncle Laban for 20 years.

That is, he's been in upper Mesopotamia,

away from the land that God promised his grandfather Abraham.

Why did he go there?

Because he had cheated his brother Esau out of his birthright
and out of his Father's blessing.

Esau was hopping mad,

and declared that he would kill Jacob

as soon as his Father died.

It was 'I won't kill you now

because it would grieve my father whom I love,

but as soon as he's gone,

you're dead meat.'

But Jacob has overstayed his welcome with Laban now.

Laban is growing jealous

that Jacob had become more wealthy than he is,

especially given that all Jacob's wealth

came from flocks that were his as his wage for working for Laban.

But it wasn't just about overstaying his welcome.

Jacob was also now the inheritor of the promises

that God had made to his Grandfather Abraham.

You remember those promises in Genesis 12.

The promises Land.

A great multitude of descendents.

And a relationship of blessing with God.

Because Jacob had taken his brother's birthright,
those promises now belonged to him.
So if God is going to give you the Promised Land,
you can't keep living in upper Mesopotamia forever.
And God himself spoke to Jacob and told him to go home.
Which was all very well,
but there was the small matter of Esau.
Last Jacob had heard of him 20 years previously,
he was of a mind to kill Jacob.
How is he going to respond 20 years later?
So as he's approaching the land,
Jacob takes a cautious and prudent approach.
He hears his brother is coming out to meet him with 400 men.
He sends out two advance parties with gifts for Esau.
Very generous gifts -
goats, sheep, camels, cows, donkeys.
If his twin brother was still harbouring a grudge against him
these may well brighten his mood.
And Jacob separated his family into two groups,
if Esau and his men attacked one group,
the other might escape.
It's all sensible stuff.
I understand the first half of the chapter.
And then you get to second half of the chapter that we read out today.
Jacob sends his wives and eleven sons across the river ahead of him
and he stays behind by himself at night.
Why?
Some bloke appears out of nowhere and wrestles with Jacob all night.
Who is the bloke?
Where did he come from?
And why are being told about this?
When he has wrestled all night without overpowering Jacob,
the man gives him a light tap on the hip and wrenches Jacob's hip.
What was the point of wrestling all night
if you could finish it at any moment with a tap?
The bloke having wrestled all night wants to leave when it is daybreak.

Why is that?
Jacob won't let go of the man unless he blesses him.
Why is that?
And what is the significance of the blessing?
And then after it is all over,
Jacob decides that it is God that he was wrestling with.
OK, how did he know that all of a sudden
when he didn't know it all night?
And why was God interested in a wrestling match?
For me at least,
it is a hard passage to understand.
And then once I understand it,
it's a hard passage to put into practice.
But we'll get to that later.
Let's see if we can untangle what the passage means first.
I think Jacob knows that it is God he was wrestling with
for a few reasons.
First, the guy wrestles with him all night,
which looks pretty human.
But then when he wants to go,
he just effortlessly wrenches Jacob's hip.
We aren't talking about dislocating a little finger here,
we are talking about dislocating a grown man's hip.
I'm pretty sure I couldn't do that if I pushed with all my might.
Jacob's wrestling partner did it with a light tap.
That looks suspiciously like someone
who had been disguising their true power,
power that is more than mere human power.
And then there is the matter of the name.
Right through the Old Testament,
the name of God is a bit of a mystery.
That's why we have this slightly irritating translation
"The Lord" in capital letters in our Bibles.
And here, Jacob's wrestling partner won't reveal his name.
That's another clue that we are dealing with God.

A third clue is the wrestler's desire to depart at day break.
What's the hurry to get away?
In the Bible, no one can see God face to face and live.
Maybe it was OK
for Jacob to see the shadowy silhouette of God at night,
but if he saw him during the day he would die.

So it's God.

Why is he wrestling with Jacob?

You could view the whole of Jacob's life as a wrestling for blessing.

He wrestled his brother Esau

while they were still in their mother Rebekah's tummy.

And God revealed that was because

the nations that came from the two men would strive against each other.

Then Jacob sought his father Isaac's blessing.

But Isaac liked his more manly son Esau better.

Then Isaac sought the blessing of marriage with the beautiful Rachel,
thinking that would give him what he craved.

And he had a beautiful wife, a less beautiful wife and eleven sons.

And then he worked his butt off
wrestling with Laban if you like
to get very rich.

And he's still looking for blessing.

His desire for blessing is not satisfied.

So here in this chapter,

Jacob is discovering that true blessing

doesn't come from the approval of your earthly Father

(though kids, it's not a bad idea to do things your father approves of -
especially on Father's Day)

true blessing doesn't come from the beauty of your spouse,

the number of children you are able to produce,

the wealth you are able to amass,

blessing comes from your connection to Almighty God.

And as Christians we must add

as revealed to us through his Son Jesus Christ.

God isn't going to appear

and have a night time wrestling match with you.
Our struggle for his blessing
comes from appropriating the work of Jesus on the cross.
And struggling, wrestling to hold on to the promises
that God makes to those who put their trust in him.

Here's how Tim Keller describes Jacob's realisation
that he needed God's blessing.

"What an idiot I've been!
Here is what I've been looking for all my life.
The blessing of God!
I looked for it in the approval of my father.
I looked for it in the beauty of Rachel.
But it was in you.
Now I won't let you go until you bless me.
Nothing else matters.
I don't care if I die in the process,
because if I don't have God's blessing,
I've got nothing.
Nothing else will do."
That captures the desperation of Jacob
clinging on to God and refusing to let go.

I feel like that explanation of the chapter helps me get what it means.
And it is very nice to have a confusing passage become clear.
Thank you, Tim Keller.
But actually that's only half the battle.
OK great, I know what it means.
But how do I put it into practice?
How do we go about struggling for God's blessing?
And what does it have to do with our idols?
Our idols, whatever they are,
whether it's money or kids,
power or moral living,
they will not be displaced by trying to beat them into submission.
Jacob was never going to be able to look at his flocks and herds,

and tell himself that they were quite large enough now.
He was never going to be able to look at Rachel and say to himself,
Yes it would be very nice to marry her,
but I really shouldn't obsess about her so much.
It's not going to happen.
You can only displace one love with another love.
We can only dispense with our idols
when we replace our overgrown love for the idol
with a love for God.
Jacob wasn't wrestling with God
trying to convince God to give him more flocks and herds,
or more beautiful wives.
He was wrestling with God desiring God himself.

Which leaves us with the final question,
how are we going to struggle for God's blessing?
God isn't going to turn up
and have a night time wrestling match with us.
So how do we cling on to him
and say I'm desperate for you, Lord?
We used to sing a song back in the 1980s that said,
"I seek the giver, not gift.
My heart's desire is to lift you high above all earthly kings."
How do we do that?

Psalm 27 is perhaps one of the most beautiful in the Bible.
It's David expressing his love for God.
His desire for God's blessing.
Not the physical blessings that God gives.
But the blessing of relationship with God.
This is Ps 27:4
"One thing I ask of the Lord,
this only do I seek:
that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life,
and to gaze on the beauty of the Lord,
and to seek him in his temple."

It's beautiful language isn't it?
Yes it is metaphorical.
David was never gazing on God
the same way that Jacob was gazing at Rachel.
God never had a physical form on earth to gaze at.
But he's speaking of being transfixed by God's goodness.
Being captivated by his love.
Being moved by his kindness,
his mercy towards those who are unworthy.
He's also speaking of being overwhelmed
by a desire to live in God's service.
So often we serve God because we know it's the right thing to do,
and we want to do the right thing.
We might even do that for the people we love.
I might ask Cherida
if she would like me to make her a coffee after lunch.
And she likes a coffee after lunch,
so she will usually be quite grateful.
But if I'm honest,
sometimes I'm asking the question
about whether Cherida wants a coffee
because I know it's the right thing to do.
It's not really because I'm so desperately in love with her
that I can think of nothing I would rather do with my time
than make coffees for her
or serve her in whatever way she would like me to serve her.
Don't get me wrong,
I love my wife.
But I am also a normal selfish human being,
and pleasing Tim is very often higher on my agenda
than pleasing Cherida.
Wouldn't it be lovely if instead of disciplining myself
to be a good husband and make my wife a coffee,
it just came naturally as an overflowing of my love for her.
Wouldn't it be lovely if the thrill of making her a coffee
gave me more pleasure than it gives her.

This kind of relationship that David is talking about in Psalm 27.
It notches up our love for God to another level.
That's what Jacob is crying out for
when he clings to God while they are wrestling,
and says 'I won't let you go unless you bless me.'
He wants to hear God speak words of love into his heart.
Maybe something like what God spoke over Jesus at his baptism.
"This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."
Maybe God's words over us might be,
"You are my beloved child.
You are accepted and enfolded in my love.
All your faults are erased by the blood of Jesus.
I made you and I love you."
And then because of that blessing of God,
love for God and his ways will just well up naturally in our hearts.
We won't need to discipline ourselves to live his way,
because it will be such a joy to live to serve him,
that it will be second nature.

That's a beautiful picture of the Christian life,
isn't it?
Unfortunately it's never going to be perfect in this life.
We will all be sinners until the day we die.
It's never going to be perfect.
But it can shift in that direction.
David wouldn't have been able to write Psalm 27
if it couldn't shift in that direction.

What the key to being hungry for the blessing of God to transform us?
The key has to be the gospel.
Jacob clung onto God after a wrestling match.
We cling onto the gospel.
Jacob was made weak by his hip being wrenched.
Jesus was made weak and powerless as he hung on a cross.
He hung there willing for you and for me.
Jesus didn't hang on the cross in a search for the Father's blessing.

The Father had already said to him,
"You are my beloved Son, in you I am well pleased."
Jesus hung on the cross that we might have the Father's blessing.
"You are my beloved child.
Your sins have been forgiven.
The gates of heaven are opened wide for you."
As Paul said to the Romans,
Rom 8:32 "He who did not spare his own Son,
but gave him up for us all -
how will he not along with him graciously give us all things."
It's in the gospel that we find the blessing of God.
If you find life is a struggle against these counterfeit gods,
it's the gospel that will defeat them.

Focus on the gospel and you will be transfixed by God's goodness.
You will be captivated by his love.
You will be moved by his kindness,
his mercy towards those who are unworthy.

If you want to struggle, to wrestle with God for his blessing,
the wrestle lies in keeping your mind captivated by the gospel.
Be like Jacob.
Don't let go.
Cling to the gospel come what may.
And in the gospel
you will find the blessing of God flows down upon you.
If like Jacob, you've been looking for blessing in the wrong places.
Turn your heart towards the gospel.
That is the fountain of all God's goodness to us.