

**Life Means Struggle**  
**Genesis 31 – 33 (excerpts)**  
Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church  
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**Introduction: What are you struggling with today?**

We have looked at the life of the patriarch Jacob in past weeks. Jacob is the most approachable of the ancient biblical patriarchs. Jacob teaches us that life is a struggle. Some struggles we choose. Some struggles are given to us. Other struggles are a consequence of sinful choices we have made. And, still others are simply part of life.

When Jacob was given the vision of the ladder, or ramp, between earth and heaven, he had just left his home of Canaan. He was heading for Haran, where his uncle and extended family resided. Jacob left quickly, fleeing his brother's wrath. He was alone, and penniless. In the intervening years, between that vision of the ramp to heaven, the spiritual unseen connection between earth and heaven, Jacob's life has changed dramatically. Twenty years have passed. Jacob is now a successful man. He has two wives, two concubines, twelve sons, servants and much livestock.

However, while Jacob is successful, it would not be correct to think that his life is easy. His relationship to his uncle Laban is at the breaking point. Jacob attempts to leave Haran without making proper farewells. Genesis 31 tells the story of his attempted escape. And, Jacob is returning to the land of Canaan and the inevitable reconnection with his estranged brother Esau. Even further, there is much family intrigue between Jacob's wives and concubines. Jacob is successful. But he is also a man carrying great burdens.

What burdens are you carrying this day? Do you, like Jacob, carry the burdens of the past?

**Do you carry the burdens of the past?**

<sup>55</sup> Early in the morning Laban arose and kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them. Then Laban departed and returned home.

As we looked at last week, Jacob loved Laban's daughter Rachel and worked seven years for him to pay the bride price for the marriage. But on the wedding night, Laban tricked Jacob, giving him Rachel's sister, Leah, instead. Jacob agrees to work for an additional seven years' labor to pay the bride price for both Rachel and Leah. Laban clearly takes advantage of his nephew. There was tension within the family. Jacob loves Rachel. What is his attitude toward Leah? She gives him sons, but is dismayed that Jacob does not return her love. And, it is not clear that Rachel returns Jacob's love. She expresses frustration at being childless but, unlike her sister Leah, offers no expressions of loving tenderness toward Jacob. As the family leaves Haran to travel to Canaan, it is certain that they are carrying the emotional baggage of past frustration,

disappointment, rivalry and resentment. These are some of the burdens of the past that Jacob and his family carried.

What burdens from the past are you carrying today? Do you carry the hurt of those who have sinned against you? Are there broken relationships in your family tree? Do you have a Laban in your family whom you feel has taken advantage of you? Are you, like Rachel and Leah, engaged in an unhealthy competition with one or more of your siblings? What burdens from the past are you carrying today?

Or, (or maybe “and”) are you worried about an uncertain future?

### **Are you worried about an uncertain future?**

<sup>7</sup>Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed. He divided the people who were with him... thinking, “If Esau comes to the one camp and attacks it, then the camp that is left will escape.”

Jacob leaves Uncle Laban behind, but he knows that in the future he must face his brother Esau. Esau, of course, has a justifiable complaint against Jacob. Uncle Laban took advantage of Jacob. Earlier, Jacob had taken advantage of his brother Esau. Esau had had twenty years to nurse his enmity, anger and hatred towards Jacob. In addition to carrying the emotional baggage of the strained and frayed relationships within his family, Jacob is also carrying the burden of “What if?” What if Esau still desires revenge? What if Esau comes in violence? How can Jacob face the uncertainty of this unknown future?

You too may face an uncertain future. You may be waiting on a report, a medical evaluation. Or you worry about the fact that your company is being acquired by another. What will that mean for your work; your career? Or, you may be on a contract that is coming to a conclusion. It may not be for yourself that the future is uncertain: you may worry about what lies ahead for your children; or grandchildren? There is an awful lot to worry about in life. What are you struggling with today?

I want us to look at how God led and guided Jacob. I believe that we will find in his story spiritual truths and insights that will encourage and guide us as we struggle with the past and face an uncertain future.

First, Jacob’s story teaches us to look for God’s messengers to you.

### **Look for God’s messengers to you**

Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. <sup>2</sup>And when Jacob saw them he said, “This is God’s camp!” So he called the name of that place Mahanaim.

I particularly appreciate the matter-of-fact manner in which the scriptures report this detail of Jacob’s encounter with the angels of God. It reflects an important dynamic in the spiritual life of a believer. We believe in the seen and the unseen world. God is part of the spiritual, the unseen world. At the same time, God communicates. He is there. He is not silent. God does reveal himself to those who are his. The word “*angel*” simply

means messenger. Angels are God's messengers to us. It is certainly appropriate to expect and look for ways in which God seeks to lead and guide us, to make clear that he is walking with us in the journey of our lives.

What is the Bible telling us when it says that the angels of God met him? Certainly it could be a reference to something mystical, to a literal vision of angels. God can and does lead in this way. As an aside, you may have seen the many reports of many Muslims throughout the Middle East converting to faith in Christ as a consequence of visions of the Lord Jesus appearing to them in dreams and visions. That said, I think that the meaning might be more ordinary. Recall that Jacob's spiritual walk began with the dream given him of a ramp connecting earth and heaven. On that ramp Jacob saw angels ascending and descending between earth and heaven. And, over all, Jacob saw the Lord God. This vision taught Jacob that God is active and at work in the world. Part of the meaning of this reference to the messengers of God refers to Jacob's increased understanding of who God is and how he is at work in our world. He understands God more fully and so he sees God's hand at work in the world more clearly.

Note the timing of the appearance of God's angels to Jacob. Jacob has just resolved the conflict with his uncle Laban. He is leaving Haran and stepping out in faith, returning to Canaan. The appearance of the angels confirms to Jacob that he is on the right path. He is following the Lord's lead. He is doing what he is supposed to be doing.

Jacob provides an example for us to look for God's messengers to us. Also, Jacob provides an example to pray and trust God's promises.

### **Pray and trust God's promises**

<sup>9</sup> And Jacob said, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your kindred, that I may do you good,' <sup>10</sup> I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant,

This verse is a significant indicator of Jacob's spiritual growth. Until now, God has always been the initiator of Jacob's spiritual encounters. In this verse, Jacob takes the initiative. He prays. He commits his future to God's care. He acknowledges his unworthiness. He remembers God's faithfulness to him. This verse reflects how, over the past twenty years in Haran, Jacob has grown. He has followed the spiritual path that began when he was given the vision of the ramp connecting earth and heaven. In prayer, Jacob asks God to lead and go before him.

Jacob's prayer reflects his trust in God's promise to him. Jacob had always hoped to one-day return to Canaan. But his return to his homeland is accompanied by risk. It means that he will one day meet his brother Esau again. When Jacob left Canaan, Esau nursed a murderous rage toward Jacob. Would Esau still desire revenge? What will happen when the two brothers meet once again? Jacob does not know the future. But he does know God. In prayer he takes his uncertain future and

lays it before God's throne. God is in control. Jacob trusts God. He gives his hope and future to him.

Jacob looks for God's messengers. He prays and trusts in God's promises to him. Next, Jacob takes appropriate practical steps.

### **Take appropriate practical steps**

<sup>13</sup> So he stayed there that night, and from what he had with him he took a present for his brother Esau,

The passage tells us, in some detail, of the gifts Jacob sends forward in propitiation to his brother Esau. He sends multiple gifts in sequence. Jacob's intent is to deflect any lingering animosity Esau may carry towards him. To propitiate simply means to turn away wrath. A propitiation is something that we give in order to turn aside someone's anger towards us. If a husband forgets a wedding anniversary, he might send flowers to propitiate his wife's disappointment. We are all guilty at times of doing that which causes hurt, anger, or offense. The art of propitiation is an important life skill.

We see Jacob discerning God's hand at work through the angelic messengers he has sent. Jacob prays. Jacob trusts. And, now we see Jacob doing what he can practically to address the situation before him. Not everything is in his control, but Jacob is doing what he can. This is an important point. God is sovereign. God is in control. But these truths are not a justification for passivity. God works in and through his people. God uses his people for his purposes. God's people pray, trust and do their part.

This leads us to our next point from this passage – one that is paradoxical – in the end, whatever your struggle, it is with God.

### **In the end, whatever your struggle, it is with God**

<sup>24</sup> And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day.

This is a mysterious passage. Jacob steps out in faith. He prays. He trusts God. He does what he can to turn aside Esau's anger. And then we are told: Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. Does Jacob in fact wrestle with a man, or an angel, or God? All three are suggested. How are we to understand this?

Remember, Jacob is at a turning point in his life. His walk of faith began twenty years earlier with the vision of the ramp to heaven. Now, in his walk with God, Jacob is brought to a place where it all might end. Esau may destroy him. Jacob has sent his wives, his children, his servants and his wealth on ahead. Jacob stays behind, on the far side of the river Jabbok. The question remains. Will Jacob cross the river? Will he do what God is calling him to do? Will he continue to walk with God, even if doing so means the loss of all that he loves and cares for, even the loss of his own life?

You have heard the philosophical question, "If a tree falls in the woods and no one is there to hear it, does it make any sound?" This question was first proposed, and answered, by the Christian philosopher, Bishop Berkeley. Berkeley's answer was that the tree makes a sound because God is present to hear it. All that happens in existence happens in God's presence. Practically, what this means for us is that God is the third party in all human interactions. Your marriage is not just you and your spouse, God is the third party. In business, it is not just you and your work. You do your work before God's presence. In your family, it is not just you and your children. Your family lives before God's presence.

This truth has a remarkable application. It tells us that whatever our struggles in life, maybe, ultimately, our struggle is with God himself. Jacob is about to meet up with his estranged brother Esau, but before he does so, he must first wrestle with God. You are familiar with the story of King David's adulterous relationship with Bathsheba. King David is also guilty of murdering Bathsheba's husband. Yet, when David writes his Psalm of confession (Psalm 51:4) he says to God, Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight. Whatever the specifics of his crime, David knows that ultimately he is guilty before almighty God. At its root, every battle we face begins and ends with our relationship to God. Before Jacob can struggle with Esau, he must first wrestle with God.

Jacob's spiritual walk began with a vision of God at the top of a ramp connecting earth and heaven. Now Jacob's spiritual walk brings him face to face with God. God is not far away, watching down from heaven. God is near at hand, wrestling with Jacob, bringing him to the point of full submission to God's will in his life. Jacob learned an important lesson that night on the banks of the river Jabbok. He thought his troubles sprang from his relationship to Esau, his brother. He sends everyone across the river while he ponders whether he is going to follow them or run away again as he had twenty years earlier. But Jacob was wrong. The root of the problems of his life lay not with Esau, but with his relationship to God. Before he could be reconciled with Esau, he must first be reconciled to God. He thought he was there alone on the river bank to struggle with himself. He finds that he is there to struggle with God.

Are you inclined to blame others for the problems you face? Do you want to blame your husband or your wife for the trials you face? Do you blame your work or your boss? Do you see your problems flowing from your parent's failure as parents? Do you believe that you have been more sinned against than sinning? What Jacob's example on the far side of the river Jabbok teaches us is that at its root, it is our relationship to God that is at issue. If you want to straighten out the horizontal relationships you have with others, you must first straighten out your vertical relationship to God. Resist the temptation to blame your trials on others. Your first battle is with your relationship to God.

I know that what I have just said may surprise, even shock you. You may want to rebel against this truth. That is natural. It is to be expected. When facing broken and strained relationships in life, we prefer to blame others. It is significant in this passage

that it is the mysterious man who initiates the wrestling match with Jacob. We prefer not to admit to ourselves that we have a God-problem.

This leads naturally to our next observation: God's purpose in our struggles is to teach us to hold on to God in faith.

### **God's purpose in your struggles is to bring you to hold on to God in faith**

<sup>25</sup> When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.

Imagine what is unfolding. Jacob has wrestled all night with this angelic representative of God. Jacob has held his own. Jacob is a tough nut. He struggles with God and his is not overcome by him. What happens at the end of the battle? The angel touches Jacob's hip and it pops out. Imagine if that happened to you. What would you do? What you would do is grab on to the nearest thing available in order to keep from falling down. His hip goes out and Jacob grabs a firm hold of the angel. Jacob holds on. And that, of course, is what God has desired of Jacob all along. God wants to draw us to himself. And, God sometimes wounds us for our own good. All his life Jacob has been a grabber. He was born holding on to Esau's heel. He was tenacious. Jacob's trouble was that he was always grabbing on to something other than God. Now his tenacious nature is turned in the right direction. He is holding on to God.

God desires that we hold on to him. And, in doing so, God purpose in our struggles is our transformation.

### **God's purpose in your struggles is your transformation**

<sup>28</sup> Then he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed."

Jacob wrestles with God. For Jacob, wrestling that one night on the banks of the river Jabbok is but the culmination of a lifetime of struggling against God. Will Jacob do what he knows he must do? Will he do what is right? Or will he run again, from Esau, and from God? He could do so. Years before Jacob had wrestled as he and his mother conspired to steal Esau's blessing. They were successful in the subterfuge, but doing so had made him a refugee, fleeing for his life. Jacob struggles a second time. He has sent everyone else across. Ultimately, he must cross. But will he? Or will he run, again? Jacob is struggling to acknowledge his dependence on God. The consequence of Jacob's struggle is his transformation. He is changed. He is reborn. He is renamed, Israel. The name Israel means "he strives with God." Jacob must settle his accounts with Esau. He must make amends for his conniving past. There must be reconciliation with his brother. Jacob is the patriarch. He carries the covenant begun with Abraham, passed on to Isaac and now to Jacob. You cannot properly take your father's place by destroying your father's sons. Fathers live equally in brothers. If you fight your brother, you are fighting your father. Jacob must be reconciled to Esau. He does so and this in turn reveals that he is a spiritually changed man.

## **Close: Who is your model?**

We have looked at the story of Jacob this morning, and in the previous two Sundays. I have argued that Jacob is the most approachable of the biblical patriarchs. Jacob is not a saint. Jacob is wily, crafty, and grabbing. His name means “one who grabs.” And, Jacob does not come easily to faith. His conversion story happens slowly, over time, taking twenty years. Jacob is an ordinary guy being brought to believing faith. He is like you. He is like me.

Where are you today in your walk of faith? Are you carrying the burdens of the past: sins and failures that are all too real to you today? Are you worried about the future, about what is coming down the road towards you today? Whatever the burden of the past or the worry for the future, Jacob teaches us that God is at work in our lives. Look for the messengers God may be sending your way. Believe that God is seeking to reveal himself to you. And in turn, pray to God and believe his word given to you. There may be some practical steps you need to take. Take them. And, in doing so, remember that in the end, your struggle is not against flesh and blood. It is not with another person. Your struggle is spiritual. In the spiritual struggle of your daily walk, God is seeking to bring you to himself. You may be wrestling with an angel as you wrestle with yourself. God’s purpose in your struggle is to bring change, transformation to your life.

I am inviting you to follow the example of the patriarch Jacob in your own life. You no doubt have your struggles in life. You know the reality of broken relationships, personal pain, sorrow, heartache and disappointment. Do you know that in your struggle you have opportunity to encounter Christ? God chased Jacob for twenty years. How long has God been chasing you? Before you lies your own river Jabbok. Like Jacob, permit the trials, troubles and struggles you face bring you to faith in God: new faith, or deepened faith. Turn in believing faith to Christ and cling to him.

Say “Amen” Somebody.

## Genesis 31:55 – 33:4 (excerpts)

<sup>55</sup> Early in the morning Laban arose and kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them. Then Laban departed and returned home.

**32** Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. <sup>2</sup> And when Jacob saw them he said, “This is God’s camp!” So he called the name of that place Mahanaim.

<sup>6</sup> And the messengers returned to Jacob, saying, “We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and there are four hundred men with him.” <sup>7</sup> Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed. He divided the people who were with him, ...<sup>8</sup> thinking, “If Esau comes to the one camp and attacks it, then the camp that is left will escape.”

<sup>9</sup> And Jacob said, “O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD who said to me, ‘Return to your country and to your kindred, that I may do you good,’ <sup>10</sup> I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps. <sup>11</sup> Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, that he may come and attack me, the mothers with the children. <sup>12</sup> But you said, ‘I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.’ ”

<sup>13</sup> So he stayed there that night, and from what he had with him he took a present for his brother Esau, ...<sup>17</sup> He instructed the first, “When Esau my brother meets you and asks you, ‘To whom do you belong? Where are you going? And whose are these ahead of you?’ <sup>18</sup> then you shall say, ‘They belong to your servant Jacob. They are a present sent to my lord Esau. And moreover, he is behind us.’ ” <sup>19</sup> He likewise instructed the second and the third and all who followed the droves, “You shall say the same thing to Esau when you find him, <sup>20</sup> and you shall say, ‘Moreover, your servant Jacob is behind us.’ ” For he thought, “I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterward I shall see his face. Perhaps he will accept me.” <sup>21</sup> So the present passed on ahead of him, and he himself stayed that night in the camp.

### **Jacob Wrestles with God**

<sup>22</sup> The same night he arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. <sup>23</sup> He took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had. <sup>24</sup> And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. <sup>25</sup> When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. <sup>26</sup> Then he said, “Let me go, for the day has broken.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” <sup>27</sup> And he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” <sup>28</sup> Then he said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.” <sup>29</sup> Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed him. <sup>30</sup> So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered.” <sup>31</sup> The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. <sup>32</sup> Therefore to this day the people of Israel do



not eat the sinew of the thigh that is on the hip socket, because he touched the socket of Jacob's hip on the sinew of the thigh.

**33** And Jacob lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, Esau was coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two female servants. <sup>2</sup>And he put the servants with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. <sup>3</sup>He himself went on before them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother.

<sup>4</sup>But Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.