

# Magnificent Defeat or Crippling Victory?

## SERMON BACKGROUND STUDY

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### *Genesis 32:22-31 (NRSV)*

[Jacob, with his family and flocks, is returning to Canaan and the long-dreaded reunion with Esau. Despite the passage of twenty years, Jacob still fears Esau's anger. So Jacob sent gifts ahead for Esau and crossed the river Jabbok in preparation. But once all his family and flocks are across the river, Jacob goes back to the other side by himself to sleep. Does he want the river between himself and Esau, even in the night?]

<sup>22</sup>The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. <sup>23</sup>He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. <sup>24</sup>Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. <sup>25</sup>When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the 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 is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." <sup>27</sup>So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." <sup>28</sup>Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, 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 place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." <sup>31</sup>The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

### *Psalms 17:1-7, 15 (NRSV)*

<sup>1</sup>Hear a just cause, O LORD; attend to my cry;

give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit.

<sup>2</sup>From you let my vindication come;

let your eyes see the right.

<sup>3</sup>If you try my heart, if you visit me by night,  
if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me;  
my mouth does not transgress.

<sup>4</sup>As for what others do, by the word of your lips  
I have avoided the ways of the violent.

<sup>5</sup>My steps have held fast to your paths;  
my feet have not slipped.

<sup>6</sup>I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God;  
incline your ear to me, hear my words.

<sup>7</sup>Wondrously show your steadfast love,  
O savior of those who seek refuge  
from their adversaries at your right hand.

<sup>15</sup>As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness;  
when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness.

*What an odd and puzzling story. What do we really make of it? Who really is Jacob's adversary? Is Jacob defeated, by virtue of his damaged hip, or is he the victor, by virtue of getting the blessing he seeks?*

Reading Scripture is an art. Sometimes we are called on to be especially skilled artists, and even better, humble ones. Today's story is one of the most elusive in the Bible, open to numerous valid interpretations.

For example, Frederick Buechner delivered a famous sermon on this story that he entitled, "The Magnificent Defeat." He wrote:

"Power, success, happiness, as the world knows them, are his who will fight for them hard enough; but peace, love, joy, are only from God. And God is the enemy whom Jacob fought there by the river, of course, and whom in one way or another we, all of us, fight: God, the beloved enemy. Our enemy because, before giving us everything, he demands of us everything; before giving us life, he demands our lives -- our selves, our wills, our treasure.

Will we give them, you and I? I do not know. Only remember the last glimpse that we have of Jacob, limping home against the great conflagration of the dawn. Remember Jesus of Nazareth, staggering on broken feet out of the tomb toward the Resurrection, bearing on

his body the proud insignia of the defeat which is victory, the magnificent defeat of the human soul at the hands of God.”

Walter Brueggemann, in his influential Genesis commentary<sup>1</sup>, wrote:

“Frederick Buechner has called this event ‘The Magnificent Defeat,’ and it can be read that way. It is a defeat because he limped. It is magnificent, nearly Promethean, in the prevailing. There is a different nuance if one should say, ‘The Crippling Victory.’ Jacob did gain a victory. And he limped every day thereafter to show others (and himself) that there are no untroubled victories with this holy One. Only now can Jacob understand that his exclamation of 28:16 (cf. 32:2) should not be made lightly: ‘God is in this place.’ That is cause for dread as well as exultation.

Yes, this is a story of defeat, as must be our own story with God. We must surrender to God, acknowledging our dependence on God and giving up our cherished sense of independence and self-sufficiency. But equally, this is a story of victory. Jacob gets his blessing and we get ours. God’s victory over sin and death is our victory too. We have died in Christ and we have been raised in Christ.

So perhaps the question is this: How is Jacob changed by this encounter with God? Terence Fretheim<sup>2</sup> points out four changes in Jacob:

*Jacob has a new name.* Names are always important in the Bible. They are not just a label, they mean something. For example, the narrator of Genesis gives us the meaning of the names give to each of Jacob’s sons. Here, God gives Jacob the name, Israel<sup>3</sup>. Its meaning is a bit ambiguous, perhaps intentionally so, as it could mean “one who strives with God,” putting the emphasis on Jacob. Or it could mean, “God strives,” putting the emphasis on God. Perhaps the ambiguity is meant to convey the mutuality of this struggle. We wrestle with God *and* God wrestles with us. Also, this name does not replace “Jacob,” as both are used later. We have the new “Israel,” but we also still have the old “Jacob.”

*Jacob is blessed.* We aren’t told what the blessing actually was, only that Jacob wouldn’t let go until he got it . . . and he did get it. As with the new name, the emphasis seems to be on the value and mutuality of the struggle. God has set aside God’s “Godness” to wrestle with Jacob in the night. There is nothing here about dreams or visions, rather it is a starkly physical depiction of struggle. And Jacob is blessed by it. Note that Jacob doesn’t get all he asks for. He wants to know the name of his adversary, though we soon learn that Jacob knows that it is God. Notice that God answers Jacob’s question with a question, rather than refusing Jacob’s request. God’s name will not be given to anyone until it is given to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3).

*Jacob sees God face to face.* Later, God tells Moses that he cannot see God’s face and live. One of the great promises of Revelation is that one day we shall all see the face of God. Yet, here, in this strange story, we are told that Jacob sees God face to face. Granted, the battle is over before the full light of day, but still . . . the face of God. What a remarkable statement about the relationship of God and his people.

*Jacob is injured.* Jacob takes some scars away from this encounter with God, as he limps off across the river for his confrontation with Esau. Jacob has struggled with God and survived (even prevailed?) but not without cost. Is this not how it is with us? Can we really expect that our life with Christ would be different? That we could truly embrace Jesus and his kingdom at no cost to ourselves? Here again the lie is put to the so-called “health and wealth” gospel that isn’t really good news at all.

Such a brief story. Such a puzzling story. Yet, in these few verses, the biblical writer wants us to grasp the humbling reality of our relationship with God. Like Abraham’s negotiation with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, Jacob’s wrestling match opens a window for us, revealing that God values us more than we value ourselves. God desires and respects wrestlers, those who struggle to reach an ever more genuine relationship with God. God does not seek passive, yes-people, but those who understand that the obedience God desires is born from an honest confrontation with our Creator.

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<sup>1</sup>His commentary is part of the *Interpretation* series from John Knox Press.

<sup>2</sup>From his commentary on Genesis in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, published by Abingdon Press. A copy is in the St. Andrew library.

<sup>3</sup>The name is Isra-el, with “el” being the word for God. Just as “Peni-el” means the “face of God.” Likewise “Beth-el,” from the story of Jacob’s dream, means “house of God.”

### “Be transformed . . .”

Jacob was transformed by his encounter with God by the river Jabbok. Paul urges us to be transformed by the renewing our minds. But what do we really mean by transformation. “Conversion” is a word that we often use when speaking about this transformation. But even here, what do we really mean? How would we describe it to someone else?

Several years ago, John Stackhouse wrote an article in *Christianity Today*, “What Conversion Is and Is Not.” In it he developed a highway metaphor to talk about the full meaning of conversion. I’ve used it many times in my teaching. Here is a portion:

“The New Testament speaks of conversion as *metanoia*: literally, a change of mind. But this is not merely to alter one’s opinion on this or that matter. *Metanoia* is a redirection of one’s fundamental outlook—what we might call one’s mindset or mentality. It means more than intellectual revolution, furthermore, as it entails change in one’s affections and will, the very core of one’s self. . . .

This organic metaphor points to the next consideration. Conversion, like the new life of a plant, can be seen in binary fashion, and in two senses.

To be converted (*metanoia*), then, does not mean to immediately have a fully converted mind, but to begin with a fundamentally reoriented mind (the first sense) that is then on its way to complete maturity in this new mindset (the second sense).

Suppose we intend to drive from San Francisco, in northern California, to San Diego, in the far south. I insist on driving, since I’ve actually visited California once or twice and I never, ever get lost. You graciously concede the wheel, and off we go. The miles and hours go by. You begin to feel uneasy, however, when we pass what looks for all the world like a sign welcoming us to the state of Oregon. I insist that ‘Oregon’ must be a region of California, and that Los Angeles surely must be coming up soon. As we drive through Portland, however, you are convinced I am heading in exactly the wrong direction. And as the Washington state line comes up, you become rather insistent on the point. In fact, you want very much to convert me to your opinion.

What is it, exactly, that you want when you want me to convert? First, you want me to recognize my error. I can’t take any further steps until I have agreed that I am, in fact, heading north instead of south. But let’s suppose I agree, and I say, ‘Yes, by golly, this sure looks a lot more like Pacific rain forest than California coastland!’—and yet *I don’t care*. ‘Hey, Washington is a beautiful place, too. Almost as nice as British Columbia!’

Surely true repentance is what you seek from me. Merely recognizing my mistake is not enough. I must regret that mistake. ‘I’m heading in the wrong direction, and I’m sorry.’ Then I must take further action. I must abandon the path I’m on (taking the next exit ramp); turn the car around by crossing over to the other side on the overpass; and get a new start (by getting on the entrance ramp in the opposite direction).”

“Suppose I do all this. Are you now satisfied? Have I fully converted? No. Not until I drive us all the way to San Diego, which was the point of the exercise. It’s good that I’m properly reoriented. In fact, that binary move is indeed the essential move that has to be made if I’m first heading in the wrong direction. But turning around is not enough. Getting to the goal is all or nothing; it is also a binary matter. I’m not there until I’m there. Many theologians thus speak of conversion in multiple stages: repentance (recognition and regret), regeneration (a new start), sanctification (getting closer and closer to the goal), and glorification (arriving at the final destination). Full conversion is all of this.”

Though Jacob is certainly transformed by that strange night spent wrestling with God, even getting a new name to signify this rebirth, he soon takes another detour when he deceives Esau one last time (Genesis 33:12-17). Jacob, ever the trickster! So it is with us. Even those who have come to faith in Jesus Christ still carry with them their sinful natures. Transformation is a lifetime’s work.

## READING WITH HEART & MIND

These chapters will take you part of the way through the story of Joseph. We’ll be in that story for the next two weeks.

**Monday, Genesis 37:** Joseph dreams of greatness and is sold into slavery by his brothers.

**Tuesday, Genesis 38:** The story of Judah and Tamar

**Wednesday, Genesis 39:** Joseph gets into trouble with Potiphar’s wife.

**Thursday, Genesis 40-41:** Joseph interprets the dreams of two prisoners, of Pharaoh, and then rises to power.

**Friday, Genesis 42:** Famine drives Joseph’s brothers to go to Egypt where they meet Joseph and are sent back to Canaan.

**Saturday, Genesis 43-44:** The brothers return to Egypt, this time with Benjamin, the youngest, who is retained by Joseph, whom the brothers still do not recognize.

