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BROKEN, BUT BLESSED

Genesis 32:22-32

by

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April 13, 1997

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Genesis Lesson 59

BROKEN, BUT BLESSED
Genesis 32:22-32

It's been said, "There are no atheists in foxholes." Even if you've never paid much attention to God before, a severe crisis has a way of turning you to Him. You realize that unless God comes through, you are not going to make it. And so you cry out, "Oh, God, help me!"

Some of you may be there right now. It may be a health problem; unless God intervenes, there's no hope. Perhaps it's a serious marital or family problem, a financial problem or a desperate need for work. It may be a personal problem, such as loneliness, guilt, anger, bitterness, or anxiety. It could be some life-dominating sin, such as alcohol, drugs, pornography, or gambling. But whatever the problem, you know that you need God, and you're calling to Him for help.

In Genesis 32, Jacob faced that kind of crisis. He was returning to Canaan in obedience to God, but that meant he would have to face his brother, Esau, whom he had cheated 20 years before. Jacob didn't know how Esau would receive him. When Jacob's messengers came back and said that Esau was coming to meet him with 400 men, Jacob froze with fear. Esau could easily wipe out everything that was of value to Jacob, including Jacob! And so he prayed, "Oh, God, deliver me from Esau!" (32:9-12).

What Jacob didn't know, and what we often don't realize in situations like that, is *how* God goes about helping us. What we have in mind is that God would somehow remove our problem or make our enemy go away. But God doesn't do it that way. God answered Jacob's prayer for protection from Esau by wrestling with Jacob until He left him limping as he approached his brother. His plan had been that if Esau attacked one camp, Jacob (in the

other camp) could escape. But now he couldn't run from Esau if he tried! He was totally dependent on the Lord.

The way God helps us is by breaking us of our inherent self-dependence so that we lean totally on Him. In that context, we can properly receive His blessings. Our problem, like Jacob's, is that all too often we want to use God and His blessings to further our own ends. All his life Jacob had been using God and people to get what he wanted for himself. But now God brings Jacob to see that you don't use God-- you submit to Him. When we submit to God, He blesses us.

God must break us of our self-dependence so that He can bless us as we cling to Him in our brokenness.

Brokenness is the path to blessing. Before God can use a man greatly, He must break him, because we all have a built-in propensity to trust in ourselves. Thus,

1. God must break us of our self-dependence.

God's wrestling match with Jacob was not a dream or vision-- dreams and visions don't leave a man with a wrenched hip. Jacob's opponent was the angel of the Lord, Jesus Christ in a preincarnate form. It was a physical fight with physical injury inflicted on Jacob, and yet there were obvious spiritual lessons impressed on him through this unforgettable experience.

It must have been terrifying for Jacob. He was already nervous about Esau's approach. He had sent ahead his elaborate gift of hundreds of animals. Then he tried to bed down for the night. But he couldn't sleep, so he woke up his family and moved them across the ford of the Jabbok. Then Jacob went back alone for a final check, to make sure nothing had been left behind. It's dark and spooky on the desert at night. Suddenly, out of the dark, a hand grabbed Jacob. Jacob must have just about had a heart attack! Who was this? A

bandit, trying to rob him? An assassin, sent by Esau? Instinctively, Jacob began to wrestle with this mysterious assailant, struggling for his very life.

We need to be clear that God was the aggressor here. Jacob was defending himself. Some preachers develop this text as a fine example of wrestling all night in prayer with God. But that is not the lesson behind the struggle. Jacob wasn't laying hold of God to gain something from Him; God was laying hold of Jacob to gain something from him, namely, to bring Jacob to the end of his self-dependence.

All his life, Jacob had thought that Esau and Laban were his adversaries. He had struggled and schemed to get the blessings he thought these men were taking from him, blessings that God had promised to give him anyway. But now, at some point in the struggle, he discovers to his horror that none other than God was his adversary. Actually, Jacob was his own adversary; but God had to wrestle him into submission to reveal this to him.

We're all like Jacob. We think that the enemy, the problem, is out there. "The problem is my wife ... my husband ... my parents ... my boss ... my poor circumstances. God, please take care of the problem for me." But the enemy or problem isn't primarily out there. The problem is in me, my flesh, my sinful, selfish nature that dominates my life. So God has to reveal to me the power of my flesh before I can be delivered from it.

A. God's breaking process reveals to us the power of our flesh.

Obviously, God could have crippled Jacob in the first minute of this contest. When He finally wanted to, He just touched Jacob's hip and Jacob felt excruciating pain as his hip was wrenched. So why didn't God do it

sooner? Why did He allow the match to go on all night long?

God wanted to show Jacob the power of his self-will. If you've ever wrestled, you know how exhausting it is to grapple with an opponent of equal or greater strength. A few minutes is enough. But Jacob kept at it all night! The Lord kept waiting to see if Jacob would surrender, but he kept fighting.

At what point do you suppose Jacob recognized that his opponent was not a mere man? Later (32:30) he acknowledged that it was God. The text doesn't tell us, but I'm sure that if he didn't know before, Jacob knew as soon as the Lord crippled him. But the Lord didn't use that power until He saw that Jacob would not yield (32:25). The flesh dies hard! Only God can tame it. Until God crippled him, Jacob wouldn't give in. God let him wrestle all night so that Jacob could see how strong his self-will really was.

To make sure that Jacob has learned the lesson, the Lord asks him a question which, at first, doesn't seem to fit the context. Jacob is finally subdued, and he clings to the Lord and says, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." The Lord responds, "What is your name?" (32:27). Remember, the Lord never asks questions to gain information. He knew the answer. He wanted Jacob to confess not just his name, but his character. He had to say, "My name is Jacob--the supplanter, the conniver, the schemer." Only after Jacob acknowledged that could the Lord bless him.

Part of the process of knowing God involves knowing ourselves. Until God reveals the power of our sinful nature to us, we tend to think that we're not so bad. I was raised in the church, so I've always known that I was

sinner. But yet I *didn't* know it. I was inclined to think, "I'm not a terrible sinner; in fact, as far as sinners go, I'm a pretty good sinner." But the more I've grown in the Lord, the more I've seen, as Paul said, that "nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh" (Rom. 7:18). Until the Lord reveals that to us (and He often has to do it through an all-night wrestling match!) we depend more on ourselves than on Him. God's breaking process reveals to us the power of our flesh.

- B. God's breaking process reveals to us the power of our God.

Before the Lord touched Jacob and crippled him, Jacob probably thought that the fight was pretty evenly matched. But then in one light touch, the Lord wiped Jacob out. Suddenly he saw that God was the lion and Jacob was the mouse. God had just been playing with him!

Until God breaks us, so that we walk with a limp, we have a tendency to view Him as a benign old grandfather, nice to have around, but not very strong. Until that time, we view obedience to God as an option available to us. But we're in control, directing things as we think best. We choose our careers, our lifestyles, and our schedules, all centered around what will make us happy. God is a nice, harmless grandfather to have around when you need Him. Then the lion roars and in one easy swipe, He cripples us. We learn His awesome power. We learn that obedience is not an option; it's our only reasonable course of action.

The frailty of our bodies should make us aware of our weakness and of our need to submit to God. Every time we're sick or get injured, or when we feel the aches and pains of older age, we should acknowledge, "I am not

God. I am weak and frail. Only God is God and I must depend totally on Him and live in submission to Him.”

A few years ago, the popular Australian actor, Paul Hogan, suffered a cerebral hemorrhage while he was lifting weights. Although he was in a semicomatose state for five days, he dismissed the attack as “just a freak thing that was wasted on me if it was supposed to provide some sort of revelation” (*Newsweek* [12/8/86], p. 79). Wake up, mate! You can be a specimen of fitness and health, but you’re only a heartbeat away from standing before Almighty God. If He touches your body, you’d better acknowledge your weakness and depend on His strength! You can either submit to Him and be blessed, or fight Him and suffer the consequences. But you’ll never win if you wrestle with God.

Some people resist God’s breaking process and grow bitter. Jacob could have gone that direction here. When the Lord crippled him, he could have angrily shouted, “Now look what you’ve done! I’ve got to go face my angry brother, and you’ve crippled me so that I can’t fight or run!” Jacob could have grown bitter, not better. But he didn’t. Instead, when the Lord said, “Let me go, for the dawn is breaking,” Jacob clung to Him and gave that marvelous reply: “I will not let you go unless you bless me” (32:26). This shows that

2. God blesses us as we cling to Him in our brokenness.

Often our greatest victories come out of the ashes of our greatest defeats. As soon as Jacob was crippled, he was able to hang on to the Lord for dear life. He knew now that if God didn’t bless him, he had no hope. He couldn’t trust in himself any longer, because he was crippled. He had to cling to the Lord, and in clinging to the Lord in his brokenness, Jacob received the blessing he had been scheming to get all his life.

A. We won't cling to the Lord until we're broken.

There's a paradox here, in that Jacob seems to have incredible strength in clinging to the Lord after he is wounded. Of course, the Lord could have loosened Jacob's grip and gotten away. But the Lord loves it when His children cling to Him in their brokenness and say, "I won't let You go until You bless me."

But we're all like Jacob: We won't cling to the Lord with all our strength until we have to. As long as there's an ounce of self-dependence left, we'll trust in ourselves. We can see this in the life of Peter. He was the natural leader of the twelve, always the spokesman. On a few occasions, he even had the audacity to correct the Lord. When Jesus predicted, "You will all fall away because of Me this night," Peter set the record straight: "Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away" (Matt. 26:33). Peter still didn't realize the power of his sinful nature; he wasn't weak enough to cling in dependence to the Lord. The Lord had to allow Peter to go through that dark night of the soul so that, crippled in himself, Peter would cling to the Lord in his brokenness. It was a broken, but dependent, Peter who boldly preached in the Lord's power on the Day of Pentecost.

The same is true in coming to Christ for salvation. Many people don't see their need to trust in Christ as Savior because they hang on to their belief in their own goodness. Their pride blinds them to their great need before God.

Andrew Bonar said that in the highlands of Scotland, sheep sometimes wander off among the rocky crags and get trapped on dangerous ledges. Attracted by the sweet grass, they leap down ten or twelve feet to get to it, but

they can't get back up. A shepherd will allow the helpless animal to remain there for days until it becomes so weak it's unable to stand up. Finally, he ties a rope around his waist and goes over the edge to the rocky shelf and rescues the one that has strayed. Someone asked Bonar, "Why doesn't the shepherd go down right away?" He replied, "Sheep are so foolish that they would dash right over the precipice and be killed if the herdsman didn't wait until their strength was nearly gone." (In "Our Daily Bread," Winter, 1980.)

So if you're thinking, "I'm not a terrible sinner. In fact, I'm a basically good person," God may have to let you go through some serious problems, until you see your desperate need for Christ. He came to save sinners, not pretty good people. Sometimes God has to let you hit the bottom, where you see that you cannot do anything to save yourself. It's when God cripples us and we see how weak we really are that we cling to Him until He blesses us.

- B. Even in clinging, we're prone to use God, not to submit to Him.

After the Lord asks Jacob his name and gives him a new name, Jacob asks the Lord to tell him His name (32:29). But the Lord replies, "Why is it that you ask my name?" Again, the Lord wasn't wondering about the answer to that question. He wanted Jacob to think about it, because the answer would teach Jacob something about himself.

I think that the Lord refused to tell Jacob His name because Jacob had the wrong motive in wanting to know. Jacob obviously knew that this was the Lord, as verse 30 shows. But the name reveals something about the Person. I think, in line with his lifelong tendency,

Jacob wanted to know God's name to get a handle on Him that he could use in the future. Even though he was now clinging to God, Jacob was prone to keep on using God as he always had done. But to keep Jacob submissive and seeking, the Lord refuses.

So even though we've had an experience where God has humbled us, we always have to be on guard against our tendency to use God rather than to submit to Him. The Lord is far above us, and while He graciously consents to reveal Himself to those who obey Him (John 14:21), He will remain distant to those who simply want to know Him so that they can use Him for their own purposes.

- C. Clinging to God in our brokenness is the key to power with God and with others.

When Jacob clings to the Lord and demands that He bless him, the Lord gives him a new name. To the Hebrews, the name reflects the character. So God, speaking prophetically, gives Jacob a new character: Instead of Jacob, he is to become Israel. Instead of supplanter, he is to become a prevailer. The name "Israel" either means, "he who strives [or, prevails] with God," or "God strives" [or, prevails]. Both meanings are true: Jacob wrestled with God and prevailed in the sense of hanging on until God blessed him. But, first, God prevailed over Jacob by crippling his stubborn self-dependence. Jacob's prevailing with men is a prediction of how God will now conquer Jacob's enemies (the most pressing being Esau) by His power rather than through Jacob's conniving ways.

If we come into the proper relationship with God, of clinging to Him in our brokenness, then we have power with Him. We prevail with Him who has prevailed over

us. And since God is over all, if we can prevail with Him, then we prevail over all others. As Jacob went limping to face Esau, he was more powerful in God's strength and his own weakness than he ever could have been in his own scheming and strength.

So above all else, devote yourself to seeking God's blessing. When you've got that, you've got everything! When you prevail with God through His prevailing over you, He will take care of your problems and enemies. Then you're not using God to solve your problems; you're submitting to God and clinging by faith to Him.

That was the lesson for Moses' readers, the nation Israel, poised to enter the land of Canaan. They would not gain victory in Canaan in the usual way nations gained victory, but rather through prevailing with God. The Canaanites could not prevent Israel from God's blessings in the land any more than Esau had prevented Jacob from entering the land. It was God who would defeat the Canaanites for them if they trusted Him. It was also God who would oppose Israel if they failed to submit to Him. Weak in themselves, they could lay hold of God's strength, and no one could prevail against them.

CONCLUSION

Two concluding applications:

(1) *Take time to get alone with God.* It was when Jacob was left alone that the Lord came to wrestle with him (32:24). Calvin states, "Would we bring down the pride of the flesh, we must draw near to God" (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], p. 202). When you get alone with the Lord, ask Him to break you of your sinful self-dependence, and then cling to Him in your brokenness until He blesses you. When He breaks us and prevails over us, then He will allow us to prevail over our problems.

(2) Use your victories which come out of God's breaking you, to teach others. When Jacob's family asked him why he was limping, he could have concealed the lesson to save face: "Just a little arthritis, I guess." But he was willing to let us in on what he learned. In verse 32, Moses explains a Hebrew custom which even continues to this day among orthodox Jews. They do not eat the sinew of the hip of animals because that is where God touched Jacob. That custom should serve as an object lesson to God's people of the truth Jacob learned, that God breaks us of our self-dependence so that He can bless us. As the Lord teaches that to you, pass it on to others. Your greatest problems can become your greatest victories if, when God breaks you, you cling to Him.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Brokenness can be a key factor in restoring strained relationships. Discuss how.
2. Some say we need proper self-confidence to get things done. Is this biblical? Consider 2 Cor. 3:5-6; Phil. 4:13; John 15:5.
3. If God wants us to know Him, why does He withhold knowledge of Himself (as He did here with Jacob)?
4. So often we use the Bible as a problem-solving manual. Is this wrong? What cautions do we need to have in this approach?

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