Genesis Sermon Series (21)

**“The Ultimate Wrestling”**

Genesis 32:22-31 / May 22, 2022

**Wrestlers**

In my childhood, all the adults in the neighborhood, including my father, loved boxing. It was before sports such as soccer, baseball, and basketball became popular in Korea, and it was the time when only boxing was loved by many people. On the days of famous boxers’ matches, villagers would gather in one house, watch TV together, and enjoy boxing matches while enthusiastically cheering for the players they supported. When the two players got tangled up with each other and fought, they had big wounds on their faces and bled.

Then, when a player collapsed after being punched by his opponent, people screamed, clapped, and quickly turned into a frenzy of excitement. In a way, boxing is a sport in which two people officially fight for money, and watching boxing is like watching a fight. Why do people like such violent sports? According to a sports psychologist, people like to watch fights because they are connected to human survival instincts.

Yes, a man/woman is a lifelong fighter. Humans fight to eat more, to have more, and to be recognized more. Not only do they fight to enjoy a lot of good things, but also, they fight to survive in a crisis. They fight with swords and guns, with conspiracy and strategy, and with hatred, jealousy, and gossip. Fighting, whether it is right or wrong, must be a fundamental human instinct for life and safety.

Jacob was a born fighter. Emerging from his mother's womb, he was born holding his brother's heels to keep up with his brother. All his life he fought with his brother Esau, his father Isaac, and his uncle Laban. In today's text, Jacob was fighting again. However, this fight seemed to be a qualitatively different one. Today, I'm going to think about something called a ‘qualitatively different fight’ that Jacob had on his way home. This fight was the most important event in Jacob’s spiritual journey. This story belongs to a past text, but I couldn't deal with it last time, so I'm going to talk about it today.

**Jacob’s Wrestling**

Jacob became very rich in a strange land as he constantly fought for success, but there was a sense of emptiness inside him. He got what he wanted, but he wasn't satisfied. He was hugely successful, but he wasn't satisfied. As we saw in the last time, while living in a foreign country, he continued to experience incidents that forced him to face shameful behaviors from his past. Through this process, Jacob looked back on himself and changed his goal in life from ‘having a lot’ to ‘becoming a true being.’

What is really important in spiritual life is not just to have any spiritual experience, but to change the goal of one’s life from ‘having a lot’ to ‘becoming a true being.’ This kind of change of consciousness is the real repentance and the beginning of a new life. When Jacob left the place where he had lived for 21 years, he piled up piles of stones and signed a contract with his uncle not to cross that boundary again. This signified Jacob's determination to leave behind the way he had lived in the first half of his life, the way of acquiring money and things

From this point on, Jacob truly began his journey into the second half of his life. It was a ‘to be’ journey or a true spiritual journey to live as a true being before God. However, whenever we try to walk that path, we are always blocked by some obstacle. It is usually ‘fear.’ Jacob was afraid and anxious. He was very afraid of whether it was the right way; whether his brother, who he would meet at the end of this journey, would forgive him, or would try to kill him. So Jacob was in deep agony and could not leave the Jabbok River.

When Jacob had left all his companions, including his family, and remained alone on a dark night in deep agony, a man appeared in front of him. The man wrestled with Jacob till daybreak, but he knew he couldn't beat Jacob and hit Jacob’s hip bone. But Jacob would not let him go unless he blessed him. Then he asked Jacob’ name. Here is a glimpse of the hidden purpose of this wrestling. The purpose of the wrestling was for Jacob to clearly realize his old name. This was because he could be reborn as a new being with a new name only when he was clearly aware of his old name, which meant a ‘deceiver.’

When Jacob confessed that his name was Jacob, or “deceiver,” the angel said, **“Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome." (32:28)** We need to think about the relationship between ‘the blessing that Jacob asked for’, ‘the new name of Israel’ and ‘the statement that he has overcome both God and men’ with the word of the angel. This will be the core of today's message.

**Blessing, A New Name, And A Victory**

Given Jacob's situation, at this moment Jacob should have prayed like this: “God, relieve the wrath of my brother. Protect me from my brother’s anger when I meet him.” But Jacob did not pray that way. If Jacob had prayed that way, it would have been evidence that he was still stuck in the pattern of the first half of life. But instead of praying like that, Jacob just asked for a blessing. What kind of blessing did he ask for?

In fact, ‘blessing’ is an important word for Jacob. Because it had ruined his whole life. He even stole blessings by deceiving his family to get what he wanted. His desire for that false blessing had led him to live a life of wandering from his hometown until then. Was Jacob again demanding the old blessing he had been seeking during the first half of his life? I don’t think so. The blessing he asked was a different one from what he had pursued in the first half of his life.

What is the blessing Jacob asked for in today’s text? If you look at what he received after asking the angel for a blessing, you can see the true nature of the blessing Jacob asked for. What Jacob received was a new name, Israel. The word Israel means “God reigns”. He was changed from a ‘deceiver’ to ‘a man ruled by God’. The master of his life changed from ‘himself’ to ‘God’. In other words, Jacob was blessed to become ‘Israel.’ To become a new being ruled by God in this way was the blessing Jacob asked for.

Then, what does it mean to say, “You have struggled with God and men and have overcome?” It means that the angels of heaven and the people of the earth cannot overcome those who live under the God's reign. In the end, the secret to victory in the wrestling in heaven and earth is to live with God under His reign. Please live with God under His reign. That is the way to victory in the wrestling with God and humans. That is the way to overcome all the struggles and battles of our lives.

At dawn, after fierce wrestling with the angel of God, when Jacob passed Peniel while limping due to his broken hip bone, the bright sun rose and shone on Jacob's head, and he was reborn as a new being. This is the famous the ‘Sun of Peniel.’ Peniel means ‘face of God’, and the sun is a symbol of victory in the Bible. The face of God illuminated the face of Jacob who overcame all the struggles and wrestling. He was so deeply moved, that tears of joy and gratitude flew down Israel’s face. Finally, he returned to his hometown.

My dear friends, we've really been struggling. We have fought all sorts of battles. But in future let's not engage in any more useless wrestling. Instead, let's engage in worthwhile wrestling. Let's overcome all sorts of wrestling with God and men. And then let’s become a new being ruled by God, not an old being who pursues our own desires and ambitions. Even if our hip bones are broken, the bright sun of Peniel, the face of God, will pour on us. Amen!