

Have you been to Jabbok?
Genesis 32-23
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Have you been to Jabbok?

To that place of confrontation and transformation, desperation, and passion

The place where your emptiness gives way to yearning for something more, where your eyes are opened to realize your old ways of self-reliance are no longer sufficient?

The place where you come face to face with God and your life is forever changed?

That is the story of Jacob in chapters 32-33 of Genesis

When he left Canaan for the land of Haran, Rebekah convinced Isaac it was to find a wife from among her relatives.

But the end of chapter 27 makes it clear that the primary reason, was to get him away from his brother Esau who had begun making plans to kill him for taking his birthright and his father's blessing.

It was only supposed to be for a short time. His mother Rebekah assured him that once Esau had cooled off, she would send for him to come home

Because it was supposed to only be for a short time, the only thing he took with him was his staff

But 20 years passed and no word came

During that time however, he hadn't been idle as he made the most of his situation

He had left home with only his staff and after 20 years away he had wives and children, flocks, and herds, he had become a wealthy man.

But he was still stuck in Haran

yet God's plan for him hadn't changed during all that time.

His plans which were far greater than living for himself, being defined as the heel grabber and schemer, and living apart from the land of promise

God's plan was the same as it had always been, not just to bless him, but to bless the world through him

It is the same plan God has for us as well. He sent Jesus to save us not just for our benefit, for the benefit of the world, that through us, our words and behavior, sharing the hope and mercy we have received in Christ so that all people might be blessed

So, after spending 20 years in Haran, God told him it was time to go home

But going home meant facing his past and more specifically, it meant facing his brother and the wrongs he had done to him

:3 of Genesis 32 begins,

"Jacob sent messengers ahead of him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. He instructed them: 'This is what you are to say to my lord Esau: 'Your servant Jacob says, I have been staying with Laban and have remained there till now. I have cattle and donkeys, sheep and goats, male and female servants. Now I am sending this message to my lord, that I may find favor in your eyes.' " When the messengers returned to Jacob, they said, "We went to your brother Esau, and now he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are

with him.” In great fear and distress Jacob divided the people who were with him into two groups, and the flocks and herds and camels as well. He thought, “If Esau comes and attacks one group, the group that is left may escape.” Then Jacob prayed, “O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, LORD, you who said to me, ‘Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper,’ I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two camps. Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children. But you have said, ‘I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.’ ” (Genesis 32:3–12)

after 20 years and never hearing word from his mother that Esau had calmed down, it’s understandable that he would be in great fear and distress when he heard that Esau was on his way to meet him with a small army of 400 men

Ever the schemer, Jacob then comes up with a plan to mollify his brother

“He spent the night there, and from what he had with him he selected a gift for his brother Esau: two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, thirty female camels with their young, forty cows and ten bulls, and twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys. He put them in the care of his servants, each herd by itself, and said to his servants, “Go ahead of me, and keep some space between the herds.” He instructed the one in the lead: “When my brother Esau meets you and asks, ‘Who do you belong to, and where are you going, and who owns all these animals in front of you?’ then you are to say, ‘They belong to your servant Jacob. They are a gift sent to my lord Esau, and he is coming behind us.’ ” He also instructed the second, the third and all the others who followed the herds: “You are to say the same thing to Esau when you meet him. And be sure to say, ‘Your servant Jacob is coming behind us.’ ” For he thought, “I will pacify him with these gifts I am sending on ahead; later, when I see him, perhaps he will receive me.” So Jacob’s gifts went on ahead of him, but he himself spent the night in the camp.” (Genesis 32:13–21)

In hopes of pacifying Esau, he divided the herds and sent them on ahead spaced apart so they wouldn’t arrive all at once.

He was trying to slow him down as he would have to then care for the animals and not push them too hard

In slowing him down, Jacob also hoped to wear him down and sooth any lingering anger and perhaps soften his heart and soothe any lasting resentment

Growing up, one of the differences between the brothers was that where Jacob was the planner and schemer

Esau was impulsive and acted without thinking which was seen when he was hungry and sold his birthright for nothing more than a bowl of stew to fill his stomach.

slowing him down, would give Esau time to reflect and perhaps not act impulsively

More significantly, his gifts to Esau also represented returning the birthright he had taken from Esau Twice he calls him master or Lord because the firstborn son’s birthright meant he would be the future family patriarch once Isaac died.

The birthright also meant receiving a double portion of his father's inheritance.

So here Jacob is making restitution for his past sins against Esau and restoring to him what was taken

Repentance and confession are not just saying I'm sorry or I did wrong, then moving on as if nothing ever happened

It's not just words but acting on those words to show we really mean them

it means making course corrections, changing direction, and taking steps to correct those past wrongs.

or as John the Baptist told the people coming to him for Baptism, do works that are in keeping with repentance

Max Lucado wrote, Some time ago my daughter Andrea got a splinter in her finger. I took her to the bathroom and set out some tweezers, ointment, and a band aid. She didn't like what she saw and said, "I just want a band aid, Daddy."

Sometimes we can be just like Andrea.

We come to Christ with our sin, but all we want is a band aid.

Something to cover the problem without having to really deal with it

We want to skip the treatment and continue to hide our sin, using confession like some magic formula simply say the words, and hocus pocus, God makes it all better

do we ever stop to ask if God, even in his great mercy, will heal what we try to conceal and correct what we try very hard to neglect

1 John 1:8-9 says If we say we have no sin, (if we try to hide or conceal, even deny them) we are fooling ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, he will forgive us our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

As Lucado points out in drawing a connection to his daughter's desire for only a band aid, How can God heal what we deny? How can God touch what we attempt to cover up? How can we have communion with God while we try to keep secrets from him? How can God grant us pardon when we won't admit our guilt?

Jacob may have been confronted with how he treated others by being treated the same way in the house of Laban, but nothing had really changed. He was still the heel grabber looking out for himself

He had yet to truly repent and seek to make things right rather than just talk about it

He had yet to confront his guilt and his past, which would require that he approach Esau.

When was the last time we did that?

Not just say the words I'm sorry or I did you wrong, but also take steps to back up those words with action, seeking to correct what we did

To make restitution to those we may have wronged?

It is when we do that, regardless of whether the other person receives it or not, we can be assured that we have received a clean slate, a new beginning before God

That is what God's forgiveness through accepting Jesus as our Lord, our savior is all about wiping our slate clean and giving us a new start

As Isaiah 1:18 says, though our sins be as scarlet, they shall become white as snow, though they are red as crimson, they shall become like wool

And the Psalmist declared as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

But we must do more than just say some words. We need to change our actions and redirect our lives. Confession and repentance go hand in hand, referring not just what we say but what then seeks to correct our actions

The timing of what happens as Jacob prepares to meet his brother and confront his past is telling.

It is there, all alone on the banks of the Jabbok, that Jacob finds himself wrestling with God

"That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome." Jacob said, "Please tell me your name." But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared." The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip. Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip, because the socket of Jacob's hip was touched near the tendon." (Genesis 32:22-32)

Jabbok comes from the Hebrew root word which means emptiness, having nothing inside, devoid of significance

It is that place in life where we finally realize just how empty and meaningless our lives are

It is only when we reach that place that we may finally begin to open up to the pull of God

As someone said, it is only when we reach the end of ourselves that we reach the beginning of God

That describes Jacob's state. He had lived his entire life seeking an angle, a way to get what he wanted even if it meant stepping on others to get it

He had wealth and possessions but what did he really have of true and lasting value?

Without the Lord, what do we have of true and lasting value?

As Jesus said what does it profit a man to gain the whole world yet forfeit his own soul

Yet how many, like Jacob, spend our entire lives pursuing pleasure, possessions, experiences

Merely going through the motions, living for ourselves

trying to fill the God sized void within us that only he can fill

Augustine said he has made us for himself and our hearts are going to remain restless until they find their rest in him

The Jabbok is that place where it all catches up to us and we are confronted with just how empty we are. Where we discover the truth of the words of Ecclesiastes, meaningless, meaningless, all is meaningless. It is meaningless because it is without the only one who can provide meaning to life.

After sending away his family and all his possessions, not knowing what dawn would bring when his brother would arrive, Jacob was left all alone with his fear there at the Jabbok.

Alone to come to terms with his emptiness and has to face the hardest test of his life, when God holds up a mirror for him to see who he really was.

In the silence of his solitude, Jacob finds himself wrestling with God who is trying to break through to him.

How we so often miss God and his call, because of all the noise we fill our lives with, so many distractions to divert our attention and drown out his voice.

Doesn't it sometimes seem like we fill our lives with racket and activity because we are afraid to be alone with our thoughts?

Afraid we might miss out; afraid our past might catch up to us?

We fill our lives with noise and ignore the need and importance of solitude and silence.

We fail to realize what virtually all the saints of old realized that these are necessary for God to break through to us.

In writing of this, Henry Nouwen said our inner lives have become like banana trees filled with monkeys jumping up and down.

So much noise, so many distractions.

It is generally not in the crowded highways and byways, but the solitary places where God makes himself known, where we find ourselves wrestling with him as he seeks to shape us to fulfill his purposes.

The solitary and quiet are the ideal setting in which to listen and discern his voice in order to overcome the desires of the flesh.

It is there on the shores of the Jabbok that we are driven to seek God's favor rather than the applause of men, to gain heaven's perspective on our lives rather than the voices and conditions of the world. So that the desires of the flesh give way to the call of the Spirit.

In the Gift of the Sea, Anne Morrow Lindbergh wrote, we seem so frightened today of being alone that we never let it happen. Even if family, friends, and movies should fail, there is still the radio and internet to fill up the void...now instead of planting our solitude with our own dream blossoms, we choke the space with continuous music, chatter, and companionship to which we do not even listen. It is simply there to fill the vacuum. When the noise stops, there is no inner music to take its place.

God brought Jacob to the Jabbok to confront his emptiness.

the place of solitude and quiet, to face his fears and his past so he could meet with him.

If we are having trouble hearing God, this is likely the reason, we have drowned out his voice with all our noise

at Jabbok, God gave him a new name

To change his name meant God was changing his character and his nature, making him a new person, no longer dominated and guided by his self-interest but his passion for God that will hold on to Him and never let go

when Jacob left the Jabbok, he was a changed man, no longer Jacob the heel grabber, but Israel, the one who wrestles with God and refuses to let go

That's what it means to wrestle with God and refuse to let go

To become a new creation, to put off the old and put on the new, to start that transformation in becoming like Christ

up until this point God was always referred to as the God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac.

He was only the God Jacob had heard about from others but never taken as his own
Jacob never referred to him as my God

Yet after wrestling with God and confronting his past when he met Esau, he built an alter and names it El, Elohim Israel which means "God, the God of Israel," or Mighty is the God of Israel."

At the Jabbok, he claims God for his own

Have you been to the Jabbok?

That place of confrontation and transformation, of desperation and passion?

That place where your emptiness gives way to yearning for something more because your old ways of self-reliance are no longer sufficient

That place where you lay hold of God and refuse to let go until he blesses you with a changed life and new heart

where Paul says because Jesus Christ is in our lives, old things and ways have passed away and we have become new

That is the challenge and the promise and the invitation of Jabbok