

Amazing Truths of the Pentateuch (8)
God's First Wrestling Match
(Genesis 32:1-32)

Introduction:-

In the mid to late nineteen seventies, the mention of wrestling recalls Saturday afternoon bouts broadcast on television. They were highly entertaining choreographed events, sometimes involving a masked, mystery contestant. Almost certainly the winner was fixed prior to the match! But Jacob's wrestling match was no staged managed entertainment. In fact, there were huge issues at stake for him personally, and through him, for all our destinies. When one approached failed in terms of God's dealings with his chosen people to be a blessing to the nations, he adopted another, even down to a wrestling match!! It is said of Charles Wesley, that after Calvary, no scene in all of Scripture held his evangelical imagination as did Jacob's encounter at Jabbok. Let us now begin to trace some of the geographical markers and features of Jacob's faith journey that may also bless and speak into our lives today, as we continue our journey with God.

1. The Beginning of Jacob's Struggle (Genesis 25:21-34; 27:36)

Before we get carried away, let us look at what the larger context and narrative tells us about Jacob. This will also help us to answer the question as to why there should be any struggle at all between God and Jacob, and what this will mean. For Jacob, the struggle really began back in the womb of Rebekah (Genesis 25:21-26), where we are told that the older son (Esau) would serve the younger son (Jacob), reversing the ancient law of the younger son being subservient to the older son. Thus, God's people would be subject to sovereign intervention in the affairs of humankind. But even in birth itself, Jacob was born grasping Esau's heel, and for this reason, was given the name Jacob, meaning, "he grasps the heel" or figuratively, "he deceives." Yet, neither Rebekah nor Jacob appeared to take God's promise seriously enough. Or at least, they decided to take matters into their own hands. Do we often find ourselves doing this as well, especially when it appears that the Will of God for our lives does not appear to be moving quickly enough for us, or as we would like it to. As a result, human deception and manipulation had to come into play, involving both Esau's birthright (Genesis 25:29-34), which included the inheritance rights of the firstborn, and then the patriarchal blessing from Isaac, which could not be reversed. Finally, this course of events led Esau to say at Genesis 27:36: "Isn't he rightly named Jacob? He has deceived me these two times: He took my birthright, and now he has taken my blessing." In Hebrew, the words for "birthright" (bekorah), and "blessing" (berakah), are similar, and even though Esau tried to separate them both in this verse, the former inevitably led to the latter, since both involved the inheritance of the firstborn, which Esau initially traded for a pot of meal. This connection is helpfully made at Hebrews 12:16-17, for when Esau later sought this blessing from his father Isaac, he was rejected. But in the meantime, Esau planned to kill Jacob because of these things. And when Rebekah heard of this, she advised Jacob to flee at once to her brother Laban in Haran. Then, with Isaac's added blessing, Jacob left Beersheba for Haran. This must have also given Jacob an added comfort and reassurance that his deception of Esau and Isaac were beginning to take on a much larger purpose in God's plan.

2. Jacob on the Run - From Bethel to Paddan Aram (Genesis 28:10-22)

In spite of Jacob's fear and fleeing from Esau, the experience at Bethel (= "House of God") indicated that the way to God was still open for Jacob, with his experience of angels ascending and descending on a ladder from Heaven, with the promise of descendants, as well as complete protection until he should return to this land again (Genesis 28:14-15). But true to form, Jacob replies with an "If" kind of faith, adopting a "wait-and-see" attitude to the promises (Genesis 28:20-22), and when he finally arrives at Paddan Aram, his deceitful practices are repaid in full by his host Laban with regard to Leah (the eldest) and Rachel (the younger). Further, his wages were changed ten times (31:7). The deceiver in name and practice had now been cheated and deceived, and the one who had tried everything to obtain the benefits of the firstborn had now, against his will, received the firstborn. But finally, Jacob was given both Leah and Rachel as his wives, for another seven years work. And even though throughout all of this time we search in vain for evidence of piety and prayer on Jacob's part, it can be said that the promise of Genesis 28:15 (= God's watching over Jacob), plus Jacob's own vow to God at Genesis 28:20-22, was always at work for his good, including progeny, protection, flocks and herds. In the end, on Jacob's own admission, it was a case of God's intervention and goodness in his life, rather than a matter of human ingenuity, superstition, and deception on his part, that gained God's blessing and favour (Genesis 31:4-13). Like Jacob, we too are most likely to experience God's presence with us, when we are fearful and on the run. Further, Proverbs 19:21 tell us that "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails." How true this was of Jacob's life story to the very end. He is portrayed as one who has gone to great lengths to secure his own well-being, but one whose efforts have proved pointless in view of the final outcome. Jacob continued to scheme and plan, yet it was God's own plans that ultimately prevailed in Jacob's life, making his own plans worthless. What promises from God's Word might we claim today, that can sustain and keep us in our faith journey with God? How might we place greater trust in God's plan for our lives today, and leave the finer details of its outworking to him?

3. The Road back to the Promised Land (Genesis 32:1-32)

Finally, after twenty years of long and difficult service, Laban pursued Jacob back to the Promised Land, where two camps (that of Laban and Jacob) finally met in hostility, and separated in peace. Then just before entering the Promised Land, Jacob met an encampment of Angels at a place he called Mahanaim (Genesis 32:1-2 = "two camps"), just before a further two camps (that of Esau and Jacob), were about to meet in hostility, but also separate in peace. Yet, Jacob also feared meeting with Esau, and so he divided his household into two camps, still trying to protect himself by his own devices. This finally led to Jacob remaining alone at the ford of Jabbok, just as it had been at Bethel, at the beginning of his journey at Genesis 28:10-22. Jacob had struggled all of his life to prevail, first with Esau, and then with Laban. And now, as he was about to re-enter Canaan, he was shown that it was with God that he must "wrestle" and prevail. It was God who held his destiny in his hands. And so it is also with us today. Up to this point, it can be argued that the struggle between Jacob and the Lord should not be painted as Jacob striving to win something from God. But here, Jacob wrestled with God, because he had no choice. After all, it was the Angel who took the initiative in this contest. This suggests that God had something further to teach Jacob at this point, that had not been fully grasped by Jacob up until this point. Yet the end of the narrative states that it was Jacob who wanted the contest to continue, and not the angel - In this, Jacob had won a victory (32:28) - "You have wrestled with God and men and have prevailed" - So, in what sense can it be said that

Jacob had prevailed? What was God really looking for? The answer can be found in verse 26 with Jacob's words - "I will not let you go unless you bless me" - They are words that God had waited to hear for over forty years - Why? Because Jacob had never fully trusted the Lord for His presence and blessing. Jacob's faith was a kind of "practical monotheism" from the days of his Bethel experience, of the kind "I will serve you if you prove to be this or that to me." But now he had fully realized and acknowledged that God was the source of all his blessing, and this would be now born through his new name "Israel" (meaning, "he struggles with God"). This is what the nation of Israel was now called to do, in order to know the blessing of God.

Conclusion:-

Today, is God wrestling with us with regard to some issue? Are we prepared to say with Jacob: "I will not let you go, unless you bless me?" Let us today bring fresh honour, joy, and glory to God by trusting Him for the blessings that he longs to give us. Then following this, could Jacob have ever dreamed or anticipated the response of Esau in the following chapter of Genesis (chapter 33), and his own response to Esau with the words, "For to see your face, is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favourably" (Genesis 33:10-11). With the case of Esau, not only were Jacob's worst fears not realized, but the "gift" that Jacob offered Esau is the same Hebrew word for the "blessing" that he taken from Esau by deceit back at Genesis 27:35. And so in a sense, Jacob gave back the blessing that he had earlier stolen from his brother. Ultimately, God was also working out his own good purposes in Jacob's story. And so this story finally tells us that we only prevail with God when we earnestly seek his plan and blessing for our lives, and leave the planning of our lives with Him, recognizing that all the blessings we strive for really come from Him. And when this happens, we will also prevail with men, as Jacob did, with both Laban and Esau. This was Jacob's amazing story. And it can be our story as well.

Amen.