

Between a Rock & a Hard Place Genesis 32:17-31

What do you do when you find yourself between a rock and a hard place? I'm talking about those times in life when there seem to be no good options. Your current job is almost unbearable, but there are no other jobs available—and you do need the paycheck. The people you're living with are crazy, but you don't have the money to get your own place. You need knee surgery, but you don't have health insurance. You may or may not be between a rock and a hard place right now, but at some point in your life, you will get in on the experience.

What do you do when nothing seems to work and you don't know what to do?

That's where Jacob was in our text this morning.

For the last 20 years he has been working for his uncle, Laban, in Mesopotamia. It has been a cat and mouse relationship: Laban constantly cheating Jacob; but Jacob coming out with increase anyway. Have you ever had a boss who wouldn't keep his word? Have you ever tried to work in an environment where others have no integrity? That's what Jacob was dealing with. He had made a deal with Laban to work for Rachel's hand in marriage. He worked the 7 years, and instead of giving him Rachel, Laban gave him his other daughter, Leah. So Jacob worked for another 7 years for Rachel. I cannot imagine the emotional pain and rejection Leah went through, the way these two men treated her—but that's another sermon.¹ After those 14 years, Jacob worked for Naman another 6 years for flocks and other livestock. During that time both men are manipulating and maneuvering. All that was stressful, but bearable.

Then Jacob overheard Naman's sons saying how much they hated Jacob for the way all this is going.² Jacob also realizes Naman has turned completely against him. The situation is no

¹ "Leah," by Richard Tow preached from Genesis 29:16-35 on October 25, 2008.

² Genesis 31:1-2

longer tolerable or even safe. This job is not going to work. The relationships have turned completely sour. Jacob has to leave and God gives him the go ahead to do so (Genesis 31:3).

Jacob cannot risk even telling Naman that he's leaving. He has to sneak out with his family and possessions. Later when Naman finds out that Jacob has gone, he is furious and pursues him. There is no telling what Naman would have done to Jacob, except that God intervened. In a dream God told Naman to not to harm Jacob.³ Still the bridges have been burned. Jacob cannot go back to Naman's place. That is no longer a possibility.

So Jacob proceeds to his homeland in Canaan. But there is a problem with that too. The reason Jacob had spent those 20 years with Naman is that he had to flee from Canaan for similar reasons. Do you remember the story of Jacob and Esau? They were twin brothers. Twice Jacob had cheated his brother Esau. Once he had manipulated him out of the firstborn birthright and secondly when he and his mother tricked Isaac in giving Jacob the covenant blessing instead of Esau. Esau was so enraged over what Jacob had done to him that he had decided to kill Jacob.⁴ That why Jacob fled from Canaan to Laban's place.

So here is Jacob's situation. Behind him is Laban—the proverbial rock. He can't go back there. In front of him is Esau, the proverbial hard place. He is terrified of what Esau will do—so much so that encountering a host of angels at the border of Canaan does not alleviate his fears. Consistent with his nature, Jacob develops a plan to appease Esau. He sends messengers ahead to ask favor and friendship of Esau. Maybe over time Esau's anger has cooled. Maybe Esau will let him return unharmed. But the messengers come back with an alarming message. Esau is coming to meet you and he has 400 warriors with him (Genesis 32:6). "This does not sound good. This sounds like a disaster about to happen. And I don't know what I can do about it. I can't go back to Laban—that door is shut. I

³ Genesis 31:21-31

⁴ Genesis 27 especially verses 41-45

don't have men to fight Esau's warriors—all I have is a few servants, women and children. If I flee to the left or right, they will easily overtake use."

Have you ever been in a place where there seem to be no viable answer? What do you do when Esau is coming at you with 400 warriors, you have burnt the bridges behind you, and there's no place to go with all this?

Jacob does two things.

First, he PLANS—he devises a scheme to deal with the fiasco. He divides his family and flocks up with the possibility that some might escape Esau's attack. And he sends lavish gifts ahead to Esau with the outside chance he might be able to appease him—but Jacob's schemes will not change Esau's heart—and down deep Jacob knows that.⁵

Follow with me as we read our text in Gen. 32:17-31 (Read).

Come back with me to verse 24, "So Jacob was left alone...." Have you ever been in a trial where you have felt alone—even though loved ones were nearby? "I know you would help me if you could, but this issue is so deep and so personal that I have to get it resolved just between me and God—all alone. I handled it emotionally while we were all active picking out the livestock to give Esau and situating the family. But now all that activity has ceased, the sun has gone down, and it feels really dark all around me. I need some answers—which way should I go? North, South, East, West—I'm caught here in the middle of these unfavorable circumstances and none of those directions work for me. God, I need your guidance in this situation."

So Jacob prays—he prays with fervor and intensity. Five key events occur during Jacob's night of prayer.

⁵ We do not know exactly when God changed Esau's heart. Perhaps his heart has already been changed and Jacob doesn't know that; if so, the danger is very real in Jacob's mind. Perhaps it happened as an answer to Jacob's prayers (Genesis 32:28). Even after prevailing in prayer, Jacob is still taking precautions with Esau (Genesis 33:1-3).

(1) God engages Jacob. We think of Jacob wrestling with the Angel; but verse 24 tells us that God was the initiator, "...and a man wrestled with him till daybreak." We know from verse 30 and other passages that the man, the Angel, in this story is a theophany of the Lord Jesus Christ. God Himself is wrestling with Jacob. What is the struggle? Jacob is contending for blessing. God is contending for change in Jacob so that Jacob can receive the blessing He has already planned to give him.⁶

When we find ourselves between a rock and a hard place, God is not trying to withhold blessing from us. He has situated us in a pressure cooker that will prepare our hearts to receive the blessing. We try to fix the circumstances. God is wanting to fix us. I once heard Jack Taylor put it this way, "If you fix the fix that God has fixed to fix you, He'll fix a bigger fix and still fix you." Jacob is in a fix. There are tremendous struggles going on in Jacob. The wrestling here is not a physical contention. God is dealing with Jacob's self-sufficiency. God is wearing Jacob down and teaching him the absolute necessity of God-reliance. How does Jacob ultimately prevail here? By coming to the end of himself and discovering God as His sufficiency. "Jacob, you don't have to scheme and manipulate for God's blessings to come to pass on your life. In fact, that's what got you into this fix. There is a better way and I am bringing you into it."

It wasn't that God could not overpower Jacob, anymore than my two-year-old grandson can overpower me when we're wrestling. But God was bringing Jacob through a struggle that would ultimately take him to higher ground. One thing Jacob always had going for him—was a high regard for the blessings of God and a tenacity in His pursuit of the things of God. He didn't always go about it in the right way, but at least he was pursuing

⁶ We enter into prayer contending for a certain thing usually related to our circumstances. One dynamic of the wrestling is that God is often contending for something more important (a change in us). Jacob's focus was externals; God's focus was internal character. The beautiful thing about Jacob's prayer is that God gave him what he asked for, but in the process gave something far more glorious: a change in Jacob himself.

the right thing in life—and that was in clear contrast to Esau’s pursuits.⁷ “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.” Have you set your heart upon the things of God as the number one priority in life? If so, you have made a giant step in the right direction. There may still be a lot to learn; there may be some hard places along the way. But at least you’re headed in the right direction.

(2) The Angel touched Jacob’s hip-socket and threw it out of joint, signifying the breaking of Jacob’s self-reliance. From that day forward, Jacob walked with a limp. In the natural, he leaves the encounter weaker than before. If you’re going to war with Esau, you don’t want to be hobbling around out there with a limp—not naturally speaking anyway. If you go on with God, you may lose some things that you were relying on quite heavily. It has cost me some things to get where I am today. But I have gained some things far more valuable.

(3) God presses Jacob for a confession or acknowledgement of the problem in him that needs addressing. “Jacob,” verse 27, “what is your name?” The name Jacob means “schemer, trickster.” “For you to advance in my plan, you need to acknowledge the problem. The problem is not Laban; the problem is not Esau—the problem is something in you that needs to change—and I’ve wrestled with you to bring about that change. The manipulating, scheming Jacob dies right here, right now. You shall no longer live as “Jacob.” This is a watershed moment in your life. “Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel”. Israel is usually taken to mean “Prince with God” or “God-governed.” In the Hebrew culture, your name identified your character or nature. Jacob (conniver) Israel (Prince with God).

So, what has happened here?

(4) In this struggle, God has brought Jacob up from one level to a higher level. The end result of this terrible struggle in prayer is that Jacob has become a better man—a spiritual promotion. This

⁷ Hebrews 12:16

is not about Jacob wrestling a blessing away from a reluctant God. God had always intended the blessing for Jacob. This is about God taking Jacob through a process of prayer—Hosea 12 describes the process as one of weeping & begging (NIV) that gets him where he needs to be. Jacob prevails because he gets real, real serious in prayer.

Effectual, fervent prayer happens in the struggles of real life. Desperation is the fuel behind the kind of praying Jacob did this night. God Himself led Jacob to a tight spot so that Jacob could wrestle through his issues and prevail. My experience is, the more desperate I am, the better I am at prayer. One of the most effective prayers Peter ever prayed was only three words, “Lord, save me!”⁸ When the waves of turmoil and trouble are rising up all around you, you pray from the heart. Have you ever lost control of your car on the ice—the prayer may just be one word (“Jesus”), but you suddenly know how to pray effectively.

This night was one of three or four watershed moments in Jacob’s life. In my journey with God, I can identify three watershed points when God took me up to another level. Of course, there is always a process that brings us to those points. And when we come to them, there is a struggle—we wrestle in prayer—we are touched by God—we experience transformation—and we may walk away with a limp and far less cockiness.

(5) God answered Jacob’s request. Esau did not attack Jacob; he received him with open arms. By God’s grace Jacob prevailed in prayer, and Genesis 32:29 ends with the statement, “And he (God) blessed him there.” God changed Jacob and God changed Esau.

Conclusion

I want to bring this whole message to one overriding point. If and when you find yourself between a rock and a hard place—the direction God is trying to get you to go is not north, south,

⁸ Matthew 14:30

east, or west. The direction He has for you is UP!!! You go that direction in the same way Jacob did here in our text—with prayer and supplication. You find yourself praying—“God you said in your word that you bless; I need you to intervene; I want the blessing you promised.” You persistently pursue God’s help. And God says, “I bless you beyond your wildest dreams. I not only bring to you the things you need, but I work the changes in you that will enable you to enjoy them.”

What do you do when you find yourself between a rock and a hard place? Pray. “Is anyone in trouble (James 5:13) let him pray”. God brings us into those tight places so we will pray. He designs it all so that He can prepare us for the blessing ahead. He has a promotion in mind for you!