

**THE MAGNIFICENT DEFEAT****GENESIS 32:22-31**

When I was a kid I used to love to watch professional wrestling on Saturday afternoons. I knew it was gimmicky and featured lots of play-acting, but I enjoyed those full body slams, half nelsons, pile drivers, and whatever else two mountains of human flesh dished out to each other. I knew all the good guys and all the villains as well as all the grudges and alliances. Fascinating! Somewhere along the way, professional wrestling lost its appeal to me, but I know it's still a very popular form of entertainment.

There's a story in the first book of the Bible – Genesis - that features a most unusual wrestling match. It was a very odd, strange conflict between a middle-aged man named Jacob and a supernatural being. No gimmick. No play-acting. But it wasn't like any wrestling match you or I have ever participated in or witnessed. It wasn't a dream or a vision either. It was a very real conflict of body and mind between two living beings. Intrigued? Good, let's read the story now.

There are stories in the Bible which are very hard to understand much less apply to our lives in some meaningfully spiritual way. That might be true of this story. This turned out to be a very important event in the life of Jacob, a grandson of Abraham. He was a major character in Genesis. Once you get familiar with Jacob's story, this incident helps us understand how he became the person he was –the father of the 12 men from whom the 12 tribes or clans of the nation of Israel were descended. On the one hand, Jacob's life is a story of misleading success, but on the other hand, what we just read was a story about a magnificent, but necessary defeat. And right in there we can find some truths applicable to our own lives. Let's think first about how Jacob's life was...

**A MISLEADING SUCCESS.**

If you happen to be the kind of person who needs to find nice, neat moral truths that apply to everyone in every Bible story all tied up and delivered with a cute bow, you will likely be frustrated by Jacob and his story. His story just doesn't turn out the way you think a nice Bible story should. In biblical times, your name often meant more than just whatever people happened to call you. Your name often pointed to something about your character. This was particularly true of Jacob. Do you know what Jacob means literally? "Deceiver, supplanter." It meant to take someone else's place through force or treachery. Frederick Buechner (some of whose thoughts on this passage I'm sharing with you today), suggested a good contemporary translation of Jacob's name: "Go-getter." And in a dishonest, cheater sense of that word. If there was any person who fulfilled the meaning of his own name, it was Jacob, the less than honest "go-getter."

Jacob was one shrewd, ambitious, and cunning individual. He seemed to have an innate ability to work almost any situation out to his advantage somehow. He was always on the lookout for your weak spot – the chink in your armor – so he could take advantage of you. For example, one day his older brother, Esau, returned from a hard day of hunting utterly famished. Jacob had made some tasty stew and Esau asked for some of it. Jacob was happy to oblige his brother... for a price. He wanted Esau's

rights as the first born son in the family in return. That was no small request. It meant you got the lion's share of the family's assets when your parents died. Esau, who was as dumb as a rock, thought he might actually die of hunger there and then. So he agreed to trade his rights as the first-born for a bowl of stew. That was Jacob the "go-getter" in action – shrewd, always aware, always scheming, and very capable.

In addition to happily taking advantage of your moment of weakness, Jacob wasn't above being dishonest if the situation called for it. As the first born son, Esau was also entitled to his father's blessing. Back then, the blessing wasn't some kind of vague, pleasant expression of good will like when we say to someone, "God bless you!" Oh, no, the father's blessing was a word of great power and impact. It conveyed something of the very energy and vitality of the father's soul to his son. This blessing was so final and powerful that once it was given out it could never just be taken back and given to someone else. While Esau was off hunting yet again, Jacob disguised his own appearance as well as his voice in order to trick his aged, blind father, Isaac. He pretended to be Esau. Isaac sensed something was amiss, but Jacob lied so convincingly that Isaac gave the blessing to Jacob that rightfully belonged to Esau.

Not an edifying story! And the results of it are even less edifying for us. If Jacob would have been punished somehow for tricking his blind father and cheating his brother – like falling on hard times, or been kicked out of his family, or gotten run over by a camel – we would probably all feel a little better about it. "You see, it just goes to show, doesn't it? You reap what you sow in life. You ultimately get what you deserve. Honesty is the best policy after all." But this is just not what happened! Once Jacob's dishonesty is exposed, there's surprisingly little fuss. Old Isaac seemed to take the news in stride. Rebecca, Jacob's mother, already love Jacob more than Esau so there were no hard words from her. Now, Esau was appropriately furious and vowed to kill his little brother the first chance he got. But nobody felt very sorry for Esau because, again, he was pretty much of a fool. Jacob had to leave home in a hurry – true enough – to escape Esau's bad intentions.

And it's right there we might expect and want God to zap Jacob with the lightning of judgement. But instead as Jacob slept, God granted him a vision of incredible beauty and grandeur. Jacob dreamt of a ladder reaching from Earth to Heaven upon which angels went up and down. Even harder to explain were God's words of comfort and blessing rather than correction or condemnation. "I am the Lord, the God of your grandfather Abraham, and the God of your father, Isaac. The ground you are lying on belongs to you. I am giving it to you and your descendants. Your descendants will be as numerous as the dust of the earth! They will spread out in all directions—to the west and the east, to the north and the south. And all the families of the earth will be blessed through you and your descendants. What's more, I am with you, and I will protect you wherever you go. One day I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have finished giving you everything I have promised you." (Gen. 28:13-16 NLT)

What? Where's the moral lesson we were expecting? Now, certainly, honesty is the best policy! But, a justifiable conclusion from this story anyway is that dishonesty isn't a bad policy to pursue either. I don't mean really bad stuff like murder or whatever! No, I mean Jacob's kind of dishonesty which is the kind of lack of integrity you and I might practice. The fact is Jacob's deceptive "go-getter" approach to life can take you a long way in this world. We would be fools to forget it or pretend it isn't true. It was true back then; it's still true today. The shrewd, ambitious person who possesses a strong gut but a weak conscience, the person who knows very well what he or she wants in life and directs their energies towards it – the Jacobs of this world, so to speak – all in all end up doing pretty well. Again, we're not talking about criminal activity. Instead, this is the kind of person who stays within the law, but who just knows how to manipulate other people to his or her benefit. Is it against the law to take advantage of other people's stupidity? The fact is this world is full of people like Esau – people who don't realize what they have until they've lost it, people who squander whatever opportunities they receive, and people who are just asking someone sharp to take advantage of them.

What does this "go-getter" approach to living life get you? You might expect me to say, "Nothing of any real or lasting value!" But the truth is that "go-getters" can and often do get a lot even when they're dishonest and lack integrity like Jacob. It can get the "go-getter" that all important promotion or invitation. It can get the "go-getter" the plum job or the good looking spouse. It can get the "go-getter" a lot of what the world defines as happiness. We'd be foolish to assume pursuing success by being shrewd, cunning, and ambitious – even it also means being a bit dishonest, devious, and lacking in integrity – always end up in miserable failure. Not so. It's a very potent reality. And that's where we find Jacob when we read about the wrestling match in Genesis 32. This was decades later after he fled his parents' home and Esau's wrath. Jacob had lived outside of Canaan for a number of years. In the meantime, he'd become very rich. He'd gotten married and had kids. In other words, from a worldly perspective, Jacob was doing just fine! Successful. Happy. A man in full bloom. But Jacob wanted to go home again – back to the land God had promised to him as a gift many years previously when he had that dream. And so Jacob the "go-getter" – who knew very well what he wanted and how to get it – went back to claim the land God had promised. And I mean GET it!

But success as defined by a world that ignores God is misleading. One top, powerful business executive admitted the following in an interview. "I have found the road to success no easy matter. I started at the bottom. I worked fourteen hours a day. I sweated. I fought. I maneuvered. I schemed. I took abuse. I did things others might not approve of. But I kept on climbing the ladder." The interviewer asked, "And now, of course, you're a success, [right]?" "No, I wouldn't say that," said the executive. "[Let's just say] that I have become expert at climbing ladders."

That sound a lot like Jacob to me. Mr. "Go-getter" – Jacob's - success was real enough, but there was something misleading about it as well. Yes, his approach to life resulted in worldly success – possessions, things, achievements, impact and influence over others, and a kind of happiness. But they never gave Jacob what only God can

ever give as His gift to us – things like peace, joy, and love. In order to get those greater and more important possessions, Jacob – Mr. “Go-getter” – had to suffer...

### **A MAGNIFICENT DEFEAT.**

Earlier in Genesis 32, Jacob sent messengers to his older brother, Esau, telling him Jacob was about to return to Canaan. When he heard back the news that Esau was coming to meet him with 400 men, Jacob expected the worst. He thought Esau was going to hand out some well-deserved vengeance. Jacob got at the very end of his long caravan of wives, children, servants, and livestock. In addition, he sent no less than 580 animals ahead of him as a peace offering to Esau. Jacob had his entire family and all of his possessions cross over the Jabbok River while he remained behind and camped on the far side of the river. Why? Maybe he thought it was safer there. Maybe he just wanted to think about how to approach his imminent encounter with Esau.

That’s when it happened. Out of the blackness of the night, a stranger hurled himself at Jacob. It was so dark, Jacob never saw the face of his attacker. But even worse was the incredible, superhuman strength of this being – far more than a mere man. All through the night they wrestled in silence until just before dawn when it looked like a miracle was about to happen. Jacob had been losing big time until then, but now it seemed as if he was getting the upper hand. The stranger cried out asking to be released before the sun rose. Jacob refused. And then, in an instant, everything went sideways for Jacob. The anonymous wrestler just touched Jacob’s hip and it was immediately thrown out of joint. Jacob lay there crippled and helpless, but still clinging to and hanging on to his attacker for dear life. Jacob’s grip wasn’t about defeating his attacker now. That wasn’t going to happen. Instead, it was a grip full of need - kind of like the grip of a drowning man on the person who jumps into the water to save him.

Apparently, the stranger who had attacked Jacob during the night had simply held back until that moment refusing to exert his full strength. He had allowed Jacob to exert all of his strength and almost prevail in their wrestling match, but then get utterly and convincingly defeated. The trickster had been tricked. Mr. “Go-getter” had been beaten. Jacob’s shrewdness, cunning, brute force, and strength wasn’t enough this time. I think it was then that Jacob recognized fully that his all-night opponent was no man, but someone far more terrible and far more wonderful. Because, it was then Jacob cried out and made a strange request of someone who was only an enemy, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” (Gen. 32:26 NLT)

This wasn’t a blessing Jacob could obtain by being deceitful or shrewd. No, this was a blessing that Jacob could only ever get as a gift. And what a gift it turned out to be! Jacob was given the gift of a new name. “‘What is your name?’ the man asked. He replied, ‘Jacob.’ ‘Your name will no longer be Jacob,’ the man told him. ‘From now on you will be called Israel, because you have fought with God and with men and have won.’” (Gen. 32:27-28 NLT) Jacob became Israel. It meant he was given a new

character. The name Israel means “the one who struggles or wrestles with God, the one who interacts with God.”

In that all night wrestling match, Jacob came face to face with his helplessness. He was defeated, yes, but it was a necessary and magnificent defeat. The place of Jacob’s greatest weakness became the place for God’s great power to be experienced and received. What did it reveal to Jacob? Yes, all his shrewdness, “go-getter” ability, and “get-after-it” attitude had served him pretty well thus far in life, but not when it came to what can only come from God. The only way to ever receive God’s peace, God’s joy, and God’s love is to get defeated by God. Unconditional surrender. And just like Jacob, you and I can only receive those greatest blessings when we submit and surrender ourselves to God in faith and trust. It was there on the banks of the River Jabbok that Jacob received the true mark of a relationship with God Himself – surrender to, submission to, and utter dependence upon God alone. That was the place Jacob was magnificently defeated. It was magnificent because Jacob’s defeat meant receiving the blessing of what only God can give: His peace, His joy, and His love. It was magnificent because it meant getting what lasts forever and can never be taken away because God Himself guarantees it.

That idea of being magnificently defeated can be observed again in another story – a far greater story. The death of Jesus on the cross looked like the greatest of all defeats. Jesus was spat upon, cursed, beaten, tortured, and then killed. And yet we know it was a magnificent defeat because it made our salvation possible and the defeat of Satan and evil real. Can you picture Jesus on the very first Easter Day – kind of staggering out of the tomb on broken feet, bearing in His body the proud signs of His “defeat” on the cross? It was a magnificent defeat because it turned out to be the greatest victory.

This morning we have before us the symbols of that magnificent defeat – the broken bread that reminds us of Jesus’ broken body and the cup that speaks of His blood shed for us. Every time we celebrate the Lord’s Supper we rejoice in the most magnificent defeat ever. Jesus died and then rose again so we could have life – eternal life. And that life was given to us not because we earned it by being shrewd, or cunning, or manipulative, or capable. It can only be given and received as a gift.

Do you remember the story of Samson in the Bible? His enemies finally found out the secret of his supernatural strength and so they blinded him. Do you remember how Samson died? His enemies brought him into their temple while they feasted in order to make him the focus of their mockery and scorn. Samson asked the boy who had led him by the hand to help him put his arms around the pillars that held up the pagan temple where he and his tormentors were located. There, he prayed to God asking Him to give him that supernatural strength just one more time. God did it. Samson pulled those pillars down killing both himself and his enemies. Jesus on the cross was kind of like that. With His eyes blinded with love for you and me, Jesus put one arm around the dark pillar of sin and the other arm around the dark pillar of death. Then Jesus pulled those pillars down with all of His might and died. At that moment, Satan’s empire fell.

It was God that Jacob fought there by the River Jabbok. Jacob said, “I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been spared.” (Gen. 32:30 NLT) I don’t pretend to comprehend it, but somehow God allowed Himself to take on human form and wrestle with Jacob. And, it is God Himself with whom we all wrestle and struggle at times – God, our beloved “enemy.” Well, that brings us back to you and me this morning. The magnificent defeat symbolized in the Lord’s Supper is to be gratefully shared by anyone and everyone who has been magnificently defeated by Jesus. We can treat Him like an enemy because before giving us everything worth having, he demands our unconditional surrender to Him – our lives, our treasure, our very self. And most of us don’t like to surrender, but if we’re ever going to receive what God alone can give, it needs to happen. Like Jacob, we need to be defeated – magnificently. I’m captivated by that image of Jacob limping home into Canaan – the Promised Land – with the glory of the rising sun in front of him. It was a picture of magnificent defeat. It’s something you and I need to experience as we encounter God in this life – getting all God wants us to have because we’ve been magnificently defeated by Him.

During the Vietnam War, the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong Communist soldiers were told to avoid surrender to the Americans at all costs. They were told we would torture them, beat them, and starve them to death. But some of them surrendered anyway. They were taken to prisoner of war camps where they were treated better by their enemies than by their own comrades and fellow soldiers. After the war, some of them chose to come and live permanently in the United States. Some have become American citizens and now enjoy living in a land of freedom and abundance. For them, surrender was the very best thing they could have done.

How much more true that is of our surrender to Jesus! When we turn our lives over to His control, we find life in all of its greatness and abundance. Have you ever been magnificently defeated by God like Jacob was? Is there a spiritual limp in your life that mirrors Jacob’s literal limp? Is there something that indicates you’ve encountered God... and lost? Lost gloriously and wonderfully so that you might be given what only God can give you for eternity. Then, come again to the Lord’s Table and celebrate the magnificent defeat of the cross itself. At the same time, thank God that you’ve been magnificently defeated and now live life enjoying His blessing.