

January 16, 2011

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Genesis 35:1-15

WRESTLING WITH GOD
“The Triumph Of Grace”

*“After Jacob returned from Paddan Aram,
God appeared to him again and blessed him.”*

One of my favorite TV shows growing up was a program called, “*Welcome Back Kotter.*”

Anybody remember that show?

I know, it kinda dates me!

Anyway – “*Welcome Back Kotter,*” was the story of a former juvenile delinquent who returns to his old Brooklyn High School years later as a teacher.

And, the class he’s assigned ironically turns out to be filled with exactly the same types of students that Kotter himself was when he was in school...

A group of underachieving – mischief-seeking – motivationally challenged – misfits, collectively known as the “Sweathogs.”

And, if you remember the show, you’ll remember a cast of great characters like Vinny Barbarino (played by a young John Travolta)...

Freddy “Boom - Boom” Washington...

A Puerto Rican Jew named, Juan Epstein...

And, of course, Arnold Horshack!

Now, Kotter himself was the original founder of the “Sweathogs” some years back. So, in a way, he understands the kids in his class and can relate to them.

At the same time, though, he's a teacher now. And, Kotter's mission is to make a difference in these kid's lives by showing them they're smarter than they think and that they can be more than they've imagined.

That they can make it – just like he made it!

It was a great show – centered around a great theme of one guy going home again.

But, it begs the question for us today: “Can you really go home again?”

And, if you can...

If you really *can* go home again...

“Do you go home the same person you were before?”

Now, this is an important question because as we come to the end of our series, we find Jacob, coming home again to where it all started.

He returns to a place called Bethel – which means – in some sense, he's come “full circle”.

He's back where it all began.

But, while the place is the same, Jacob himself is different!

For one thing, it's more than 20 years later.

Jacob's no longer a kid!

He's older – wiser – more seasoned now.

He's got a family and has become a pretty big deal!

He's an important person!

So, things are different for Jacob.

He's different!

He's matured – as any of us hopefully have matured over the years too.

But, the biggest difference in Jacob isn't his maturity, but his relationship with God and that fact that he's been changed by Grace!

That God's been actively working in Jacob's life.

That's why Bethel's so important!

It's the place where Jacob first started becoming aware of God's Presence in his life...

And, where he returns to thank God today.

Now, much like Jacob, we all have significant places in our lives...

Places where something dramatic happened to us – or where we perhaps reached a fork in the road and had to make an important – maybe even a life-changing decision.

One of the most significant places in my life is a little town called Tarkio, in northwest Missouri.

Now, Tarkio's only got about 2,000 people in the whole town. So, it's really small.

It's surrounded by cornfields and has one grocery store – a couple banks – a convenience store – one or two gas stations – and really not a whole lot else!

It's the kind of place where they roll the sidewalks up at night when everybody goes to bed.

Now, you might not think a little town like that could be so important for a guy like me coming from Big City New York.

I mean, there were more people in some of the buildings I've been in than there were in that whole town!

But, the reason that place is so significant to me is because I met two very important people there who changed my life.

The first person I met was Faith – a cute strawberry-blonde coed who instantly inspired me to try to be a better person.

And, the second person I met there was Jesus Christ – who showed me that knowing “about” God and actually knowing God were two different things!

Please remember that!

Knowing “about” God and actually “knowing” God are two different things.

So, no matter where I go or what I do, Tarkio, Missouri will always be a special place to me because of whom I met there.

Well, that's the way I figure it was for Jacob at Bethel.

Bethel wasn't just some dusty hole-in-the-wall along the way...

It was that – for sure!

But, Bethel was also where Jacob first met God and where he started becoming aware of God's Grace in his life.

You see, if you remember back earlier in this series, Bethel was where Jacob had stopped for the night when he was running away from his brother Esau.

And, at that time, things were looking pretty grim for Jacob!

I mean, even though he'd swindled his brother out of his birthright and stolen his blessing – Jacob himself seemed to be anything but blessed!

He was alone and broke – without a friend in the world!

In many ways it was the lowest point of Jacob's life!

But, it's at that point that God breaks through to Jacob in a dream and reveals how He's gonna bless Jacob and, through him, continue the covenant promise made to Jacob's grandfather, Abraham, and his father Isaac, many years before.

Now, this must've all seemed pretty incredible to Jacob at the time.

I mean, he's camped out on the ground with a rock for a pillow...

He doesn't have two nickels to rub together or anything to call his own...

He's leaving behind the only family he knows for a place he's never seen...

And, yet God tells him that not only will he inherit the land he's sleeping on, but that his descendants will be like the dust of the earth – spreading near and far...

And, that through him and his offspring, "all" peoples on earth – including you and me – will be blessed!

It seems too good to be true!

And, if you remember, Jacob is so overwhelmed by it all, he sets up a pillar and anoints it. Then he makes a vow – but it's a very conditional vow – promising to honor God if God would honor His promises to him first!

So, to Jacob, tries turning the whole thing into some sort of a deal...

A business arrangement – really.

“If God will honor His promises to me – then I’ll honor my promises to Him.”

But, the funny thing about God’s promises...

And, something Jacob’s gonna learn...

Is that God’s promises don’t always come when “we” think they should come.

And, they’re not always fulfilled the way “we” think they should be fulfilled.

Because the truth is, that Jacob got a lot of hard times ahead. And, he’s got a lot of obstacles to overcome before he can begin to even appreciate how God’s been working in his life.

But, all these hard times serve a purpose!

They give him perspective! And, perspective’s a wonderful thing!

You know the kind of difference “perspective” makes?

Take the difference between dogs and cats.

I know some people are “dog” people and others prefer cats.

But, I suspect whether you like one or the other all has to do with perspective.

You see...

A dog says, “*You love me – you feed me – you shelter me and care for me.*”

“You must be God.”

But, a cat says, “*You love me – you feed me – you shelter me and care for me.*”

“I must be God!”

It's all a matter of perspective!

You see, when Jacob returns to Bethel more than 20 years later, he's got a new perspective about who he is and who God is.

And, even though he's coming back to the same place...

He's not the same man...

Because he's been changed by Grace!

Now, evidence of this change, of course, is seen in how thoroughly and how completely Jacob purges his household of any idols and how carefully he prepares his family before they go to worship God at Bethel.

I mean, compared to when he was at Bethel before –you know when he promised to honor God *if* God would bless him – Jacob's done a complete "about-face" in terms of attitude and outlook.

The arrogance with which he approached God before has been replaced by a holy reverence and awe!

You see, Bethel's a reminder not only of where he's been...

But, also how far he's come!

But, it's important to understand that Bethel's not only about the past!

It's also about God's "continuing" work in Jacob's life!

Because there at Bethel, as Jacob's journey comes "full circle" – God reaffirms the Divine promise and blesses Jacob's future too!

The LORD promises Jacob that a community of nations and kings will come from his body and that the land given to Abraham and Isaac would be given to him and his offspring too!

In essence, God promises that His work in Jacob's life would be on-going!

And, just as he did when he first left Bethel – Jacob sets up a stone pillar as a memorial and remembrance to God!

So, what are we to make of all this as we wrap up our series today?

Well, I like to think of it like this...

Recently Faith has been going through all our old photos – sorting them and putting some on display.

Some of the photos are of me and her as a young married couple...

Some are of the kids...

Some pictures are when we were in Pennsylvania...

Some are from Texas...

Or, while we're at the beach or celebrating Christmas!

Just a variety of pictures! Pictures we haven't looked at for a long time. But, it's been really fun to see them again and remember.

But, one of my favorite photographs is a picture of me and my grandmother 20 years ago when I graduated seminary.

In the picture, my grandma's got a really big smile on her face because I've just sneaked up behind her – swooped her up in my arms – and am cradling her.

I used to do that all the time – pick her up when she wasn't expecting it.

But, I love that picture – not only because I loved my grandmother...

But...

Well, how can I put this delicately?

I love it because I look really, really good in it!

I mean, I'm young! About 27!

I'm tanned and fit!

The muscles in my arms and neck are ripped as I'm holding my grandmother.

I don't think I've ever looked so good in my life!

And, sometimes I look at that picture – just like you might do some of your own, I suppose...

But, sometimes I look at that picture and wish I could go back then to when I was that young again!

Who wouldn't?

Right?

Who wouldn't want to be youthful and fit and trim and have their whole life ahead of them again?

But, when I really think about it, I realize that given the choice, I really wouldn't want to back after all.

Because even though I'm not as young as I used to be...

Even though I'm softer around the middle...

And, even though my hair is turning gray and sometimes I have to wear "two" pair of glasses at the same time...

I like who I am now a whole lot better than who I was back then!

Now, don't get me wrong!

I wasn't a bad person – in the traditional sense.

It's just that I wouldn't trade the experience of God's Grace and how that Grace has been changing me through the years!

Not for anything!

I mean, the journey has been long and sometimes the journey's been hard.

But, the journey's also been good because it's brought me closer to God and there's nothing in the world I'd trade for that!

You see, that's what Jacob was experiencing at Bethel.

He's experiencing Grace in a way he really couldn't appreciate before – at least not fully!

And, even though it's been a long hard journey, it's been worth it because God has been using that journey to bring Jacob closer to Himself.

One of my favorite Bible verses is in Ecclesiastes 7:8, where it says, "*The end of a matter is better than its beginning.*"

Another way of putting it is, "Where you end up is more important than where you begin."

It was true for Jacob!

And, it's true for us too!

In C.S. Lewis' book, *Prince Caspian*, which is part of *The Chronicles of Narnia* series, there's a wonderful scene in which one of the main characters – a little

girl named Lucy – is reunited with Aslan – who is the Christ-figure in the story.

Aslan’s been gone a long time. Then Lucy suddenly sees him. And, Lewis writes:

She rushed to him. She felt her heart would burst if she lost a moment. And the next thing she knew was that she was kissing him and putting her arms as far round his neck as she could and burying her face in the beautiful rich silkiness of his mane.

“Aslan, Aslan. Dear Aslan,” sobbed Lucy. *“At last.”*

The great beast rolled over on his side so that Lucy fell, half sitting and half lying between his front paws. He bent forward and just touched her nose with his tongue. His warm breath came all around her. She gazed up into the large wise face.

“Welcome, child,” he said.

“Aslan,” said Lucy, *“you’re bigger.”*

“That is because you are older, little one,” answered he.

“Not because you are?”

“I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger.”

You see, what C.S. Lewis is saying here is that our capacity to receive and perceive more and more of God grows as we grow in God’s Grace.

This is what Jacob finally understands at Bethel.

And, it’s what this “journey of faith” each of us are on, is all about!

It’s about growing in Grace!

Last summer we re-landscaped our front yard...

We put in a new walkway and steps...

We added flower beds and ornamental trees...

And reseeded the lawn.

A complete overhaul!

The thing about landscaping – though – is that it never looks as good as you want it to look right away.

Shrubs have to grow...

Trees have to mature...

Grass has to take root.

In fact, at first, it seems like a colossal waste of money! And, you're a little disappointed.

At least I was!

But, bit by bit, you begin to see the changes...

You start to notice the growth...

You watch everything begin to bloom...

And, you know it's gonna be all right!

It'll take time!

But, you know it's going to be all right!

The Scriptures say: "...He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6).

You see, each of us are a continuing work in progress – just like Jacob was!

But, the blessing is that we know God's in charge!

And, the great thing about God is that He always finishes what He starts!

And, in this journey of faith, the chief thing to remember is that where you end up is more important than where you begin.

So long as you end up at the cross...

Where your salvation...

Is the Triumph of God's Grace...

Through Jesus Christ the Lord!

Amen.