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Genesis 33:1-17

WRESTLING WITH GOD

“Believe It Or Not!”

“For to see your face is like seeing the face of God...”

In an article he wrote for *The Los Angeles Times*, Dave Hagler – a former referee and amateur baseball umpire – shares the following story...

“One day I was driving a little too fast in the snow in Boulder, Colorado, and a policeman pulled me over and gave me a speeding ticket.

I tried to talk him out of it – telling him how worried I was about insurance – what a good driver I was – and so on...

But he just callously told me that, if I didn’t like it, I could go to court.”

Well, as Hagler continues, he says that the following spring he was umpiring behind the plate for the first game of the season...

And, guess who should step up to bat?

Ironically, it was the very same policeman!

“I recognized him,” Hagler says. And, “He recognized me.”

Well, as soon as the policeman saw who was umpiring, he sheepishly asked Hagler, “How did the thing with the ticket go?”

Hagler’s reply?

“I just looked at him and said, ‘Swing at everything.’”

Now, I suppose, like Hagler, we all want our pound of flesh whenever we feel we’ve been wronged or mistreated or even just plain misunderstood.

Right?

I know that's how I feel!

A couple months ago, for example, I was pulled over for speeding myself – on 21st Street.

I was just trying to get around someone so I could get in the right lane and exit onto the highway.

But, I got nailed! And, truthfully, I was guilty! I didn't even try arguing.

But, you shoulda heard what I was *thinking* as that State Trooper wrote out a speeding ticket for \$160 dollars!

“Boy, that guy better never come to me for a Baptism!”

Honestly! That's what I was thinking!

Ridiculous?

Of course it was! But, I only tell you that now to make the point that anger and resentment and retaliation are often our first impulse when we feel we've been wronged or treated unfairly in any way.

In my case, I was speeding! No argument there!

I just thought \$160 bucks was a bit excessive – and so I chose to take out my silent frustration on a guy who was simply doing his job!

Now, the reason I mention this is because we all know that's the way the world works!

You do me wrong – and I'm going to pay you back in spades – if I can!

And, quite frankly, this was Jacob's worry as he limped away from his encounter with God at Peniel and looked up and saw his brother Esau coming with 400 men!

Jacob was worried that Esau was coming to settle an old score...

To pay him back for swindling him out of his birthright and stealing his blessing!

It's the only reasonable assumption Jacob can make!

That the 20 long years he'd been away from home hadn't quenched Esau's thirst for revenge and that a potential massacre was in the making!

Now, no doubt, these 20 years had been important!

Not only did they give Esau a chance to cool off – but God had been using those years to work on Jacob too...

In a sense, to change his heart and develop his character!

None of it had been easy – of course. But, even through adversity, God had been with Jacob and blessed him and caused him to prosper...

So that the man who's returning home is far different than the man who had left!

Still, there was a lot of uncertainty clouding Jacob's homecoming.

Especially when he received news that Esau was coming to meet him backed up by a small militia!

And, that news brings Jacob to the crisis point of his life!

Now, Jacob thinks this crisis, of course, is rooted in all his troubles with Esau.

That's what he thinks!

But, what he discovers – and what we learned last time as Jacob wrestled with a Mysterious Stranger in the dark – is that the root of all Jacob’s problems has nothing to do with his brother or his father or anybody else!

The real root of his problems is that Jacob has been struggling with God!

In a sense, resisting His grace.

And, that struggle has been going on all his life!

But, then comes that transforming moment in Genesis 32 when Jacob wrestles God in the dark!

Where God reaches out and, with just a touch, both cripples and blesses Jacob.

And, it’s at that moment...

The moment of Jacob’s pain...

That he finally begins to understand what God’s grace is all about.

And, Jacob walks away from that encounter a new man and with a new name!

But, if you notice something interesting in today’s passage and something that continues throughout the remainder of Genesis...

Is that even though God blesses Jacob and gives him the new name – Israel – which means, “*He who struggles with God and overcomes*” – he’s going to continue to alternately be known by one or the other name the rest of his life.

In some places he’s still gonna be called “Jacob.”

In other places, “Israel.”

And, that’s significant because even though Jacob’s truly a new man -- vestiges of the old man still pop up from time to time.

And, it reminds us that growing in God's grace is never a straight line from one point to another...

But, is usually marked by a lot of twists and turns and detours along the way.

That's important to remember for our own lives!

I mean, consider what happens here with Esau...

Jacob's expecting the worst!

And, he's got good reason to feel that way!

Jacob's really mistreated his brother. He's taken advantage of him and hurt him. And, naturally, he's worried that Esau might still be holding a grudge.

He doesn't know!

All he knows is Esau and his army are on the march -- coming to meet him and -- of course -- that doesn't sound good!

But, the fact that Jacob continues on to meet his brother is evidence of his growing faith and his confidence in God because that's something the old Jacob would never have done.

The old Jacob would have high-tailed it outta there!

But, the "new" Jacob moves forward in faith! Now, it's still a very anxious and tense moment, of course -- because Jacob doesn't know what to expect.

But, while it's fair to say that Jacob might have imagined all sorts of ways this reunion could have played out -- none of them good...

Never in a million years did Jacob ever envision what happened next!

You see, after arranging his family, Jacob goes on ahead to meet Esau -- bowing 7 times as he approaches -- much like a slave in those days would bow before a king.

Jacob's posture is completely deferential!

He completely throws himself on his brother's mercy!

But, what does Esau do?

This same Esau who had so many reasons to hate his brother?

Well...

Esau runs to meet Jacob...

He embraces him in a huge bear-hug...

Kisses him...

And the two men dissolve into a flood of tears!

It's a beautiful scene – made even more beautiful by the verbs that punctuate the story! Listen again...

Esau *ran* to meet Jacob...

***Embraced* him...**

***Threw* his arms around his neck...**

***Kissed* him.**

And they *wept*.

Ran – Embraced -- Threw – Kissed – and Wept!

The only other place in Scripture I know where we find a collection of verbs so similar and so descriptive and so full of passion and love is in the parable of the Prodigal Son!

Remember where it says: “*But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him*” (Luke 15:20).

You see, in both cases...

In the parable of the Prodigal returning home to his father and in the story of Jacob and Esau's reunion, the theme is the same! It's all about reconciliation.

And, the moment is so profound – so holy -- that Jacob recognizes it exactly for what it is...

Yet another example of God's grace in his life.

That's what he says himself!

He tells Esau, "*For to see your face is like seeing the face of God...*"

But, what's Jacob mean by that?

Well, think of it like this...

In all of Scripture we never find Jacob acting above board when it comes to his brother.

Never! Not even once!

At birth Jacob comes out of the womb grasping Esau's heel.

As young men, Jacob cons Esau out of his birthright for a lousy bowl of soup.

Sometime later he outright steals his blessing.

Time after time after time Jacob does nothing but abuse and misuse and mistreat his brother.

But, now this same brother's hugging him and sobbing uncontrollably because he's so glad to see him.

And, Jacob knows he doesn't deserve any of it!

He knows he doesn't deserve his brother's kindness – especially for not killing him!

He knows he doesn't deserve his brother's tears or his embrace!

And, most of all, he knows he doesn't deserve his brother's forgiveness!

And, that's what makes this such a profound moment of grace!

Because Jacob knows he doesn't deserve any of it!

John D. Rockefeller was the founder of Standard Oil Company – and – dollar for dollar – quite possibly the richest man in American history.

He was also a man who had high expectations from his employees. And, one day, it came to his attention that one of his executives had made a mistake that cost Standard Oil two million dollars.

Well, as word of the man's costly error circulated throughout the company, Standard executives began to make themselves scarce – afraid of Rockefeller's reaction.

Nobody wanted to cross his path.

One man, however, didn't have any choice since he had an appointment with the boss.

So, he straightened his shoulders – summed up his courage – and walked into Rockefeller's office.

As he approached Rockefeller's desk – the oil tycoon looked up from a piece of paper he'd been scribbling on.

"I guess you've heard about the two million dollar mistake our friend made," he abruptly said.

“Yes,” said the executive – expecting Rockefeller to explode and take it out on him.

“Well, I’ve been sitting here listing all of our friend’s good qualities on this sheet of paper, and I’ve discovered that in the past he has made us many more times the amount he lost for us today by his one mistake.”

“His good points far outweigh this one human error.”

“So I think we ought to forgive him, don’t you?”

Well, it was certainly a nice sentiment on Rockefeller’s part.

And, I’m sure if you were that employee you would have appreciated the fact that you still had a job at the end of the day.

But, let’s not fool ourselves here – or overlook the obvious.

This isn’t what forgiveness is about!

This was “accounting” pure and simple– Rockefeller adding up all the guy’s credits against one “gi-normous” debit.

And, fortunately for that guy the balance tipped in his favor!

But, that’s not forgiveness! That’s not grace!

But, what Jacob experiences is!

**It is because he knows there’re no positives balancing the ledger in his favor!
Nothing he can do can make up for what he’s done to his brother!**

And yet, his brother forgives him anyway – which is why it becomes such a moment of transcendent grace for him!

Because in this one act Jacob realizes – yet again – how good God has been to him.

Esau’s welcome and forgiveness is another sign of God’s grace in his life...

Because he knows he's getting what he doesn't deserve!

But, it is too good to be true?

You see, that's what Jacob really wonders here!

I mean, the narrative clearly shows Jacob still doesn't trust Esau completely!

He still harbors lingering doubts whether this incredible act of forgiveness is really genuine.

It's almost too good to be true!

That's why Jacob declines Esau's generous offer to accompany him the rest of the way on his journey.

It's because while Jacob truly is a new man – he still can't quite grasp the totality of grace! And so, he lives with this nagging sense of fear and doubt and uncertainty.

And, ironically, Jacob was where many of us still are today!

Deep down wondering if it's really true!

Whether God's love and Grace and Forgiveness are all-encompassing...

And, whether Jesus Christ could really love and want people like you and me!

In our home we don't let our dog on the carpet.

It's nothing personal – but Biscuit is a Golden Retriever. She's really hairy and so we try to limit her to a couple of rooms so she won't get hair all over the place.

But, the other day Faith and I were in the hallway outside our bedroom and Biscuit poked her head around the corner. And, it was obvious she wanted to come where we were.

And yet, our no carpet rule “froze” her in place like an invisible force-field – so she wouldn’t dare venture where she knew she wasn’t supposed to go.

But, she looked so cute and pathetic really that I broke down and told her to “Come!”

And, it was like she almost couldn’t believe it!

I had to tell her several times. And, when she finally did come, it was with such tentative – nervous little steps – like she was almost waiting for the hammer to fall!

Now, of course, it didn’t!

But, that’s how often we approach God – like we really can’t believe His offer of love and forgiveness and grace is true!

But, it is!

God’s desire for us in Christ is genuine and the only thing that limits our experience of His Grace is our reluctance to embrace it as fully as God intends.

I mean, consider this...

Dr. Ray Pritchard of *Keep Believing Ministries*, says that in this Scripture lesson today Esau comes off looking way better than Jacob!

And, he does! Doesn’t he?

Compared to Jacob, Esau is a sweetheart of a guy!

But, that’s the shock of the story!

As Pritchard says,

At every point, Esau seems more ready to forgive than Jacob is to be forgiven... While Jacob bows and scrapes, Esau is the one who runs to meet him. While Jacob calls him “my lord,” Esau throws his arms around his neck. While Jacob forces the gift upon him, Esau invites him to his home.

Time after time Esau always seems to have it over Jacob!

And yet – which one does God choose?

Which one was the son of the Promise?

Which one knows the LORD and is the one through whom God would bless the world in Christ?

It’s Jacob!

It’s Jacob – if for no other reason than to prove that the way God works in this world is not by human effort or based on our own merit!

But, by Grace and Grace alone!

That’s what the cross is all about!

It’s about outrageous grace!

It’s about being told that we’re loved and forgiven and freed to live transformed lives!

It’s about really believing what God has said is true!

And, it’s about getting what none of us deserve – through the Blood of Jesus Christ the Lord!

A couple weeks ago on Christmas Eve, 190 people flying on *Spanair* Flight JK5208 from Barcelona, Spain got a wonderful surprise when their plane landed in the Canary Islands.

Unknown to them, *Spanair* had a Christmas present waiting for every passenger on the flight.

Now, these weren't just any ordinary presents – no company employee standing there handing out *Spanair* pens or tee-shirts.

Nothing like that!

For two months, airline officials had been researching the flight – the last one on Christmas Eve – and had been carefully customizing special gifts for every man, woman and child on the plane.

For example, children received teddy bears, toys, candy and costumes.

Adults received personal care products and hats.

One couple vacationing there even received an underwater camera!

Each gift selected specially for them...

And, each beautifully packaged in bright boxes adorned with festive bows.

But, the best part...

And, you can see it for yourself on *youtube*...

The best part was how *Spanair* distributed the Christmas presents.

As passengers stood at the luggage carousel waiting for their bags to come out, the gifts suddenly appeared instead.

And, the look of amazement on the passenger's faces is priceless as gift-wrapped Christmas presents – each individually labeled with their own names -- suddenly began rolling past them on the conveyer belt.

It's as if people couldn't really believe it!

Now, they were tentative at first!

A little nervous and not really sure what to make of it all!

I mean, it seemed too good to be true!

But, as soon as they realized that this wasn't some sort of joke and that there really was a special gift was waiting there for each and every one of them – passengers – pilots – flight attendants – it became one huge celebration with everyone applauding at the end!

What a neat idea – huh?

But, if you think about it, the only thing more outrageous than the airline's extreme generosity, would have been the passenger's unwillingness to receive it...

Simply because it seemed too good to be true!

Well, we don't want to leave the gift of God's love and grace and forgiveness unclaimed because it seems too good to be true either!

So, receive it now!

Receive it all!

And, start living the life of freedom and joy God always intended for you to live...

Which He made possible through the reconciling work of Jesus Christ, His Son!

Amen.