

The Night Of Crippling

Genesis 32:22-21

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I want to read the whole passage, then we'll come back and unpack it, section by section.

This passage is in the middle of a story in the life of Jacob, the great patriarch. "And he..."—that is, "Jacob"—"...arose that night..."—here's our night scene—"...and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven sons, and crossed over the ford of Jabbok." That means "emptying." "He took them, sent them over the brook, and sent over what he had. Then Jacob was left alone; and a Man wrestled with him until the breaking of day. Now when He saw that He did not prevail against him, He touched the socket of his hip; and the socket of Jacob's hip was out of joint as He wrestled with him. And He said, 'Let Me go, for the day breaks.' But he said, 'I will not let You go unless You bless me!' So He said to him, 'What is your name?' He said, 'Jacob.' And He said, 'Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed.' Then Jacob asked, saying, 'Tell me Your name, I pray.' And He said, 'Why is it that you ask about My name?' And He blessed him there. And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: 'For I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.' Just as he crossed over Peniel the sun rose on him, and he limped on his hip."

This night-scene story is one of the most loved and one of the most mysterious stories in the Bible. It is a story of a nighttime wrestling match. It was Jacob wrestling with a Man in the dark of night. He was wrestling with an angel, and he's actually wrestling with the angel of the Lord, which is a reference to Jesus. It's what theologians call a "Christophany" or a pre-Incarnate appearance of Christ in the Old Testament. This is not an Incarnation, but it's a manifestation. So the Man Jacob was wrestling with that night by the brook Jabbok is none other than Jesus Christ Himself. Then Jacob comes to the realization that he was actually wrestling with God.

Talk about a mind-blowing thing! God takes the appearance of a man, He grabs Jacob in the middle of the night, maybe in a head lock, and maybe Jacob wiggles out of it and grabbed Him. So they wrestle all night long.

By the way, Jacob is in his 90s, a 90-year-old man wrestling with God all night long! I remember when I was a boy, we used to wrestle in the front yard. We would go all day wrestling in the grass. I can still remember the itchy grass all over me. It was exhausting wrestling all day in the yard.

But I think all night long Jacob was wrestling with God until the angel of the Lord said, "Let Me go, for the day breaks." Jacob said, "I will not let You go unless You bless me!" So Jacob is hanging on to Him; maybe he had Him in a headlock. Then the angel of the Lord asked, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." The angel of the Lord then said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed." When He touched Jacob's hip, it dislocated it. And then when he was going back

over the brook Jabbok, in verse 31, he was limping, as he was going to meet his brother, Esau.

We are starting in the middle of a story, but I want to give you four parts or four scenes. They all picture Jacob. The first scene is Jacob trembling, verses 22-23. "And he..."—that is, "Jacob"—"...arose that night and took his two wives." They were Rachael and Leah. He loved Rachael but didn't really want to have Leah. Laban tricked him and gave him Leah instead of Rachael.

So Jacob passed over with his two wives and "...his two female servants, and his eleven sons." He would eventually have 12 sons, who became the 12 tribes of the nation of Israel. Verse 22, "...and crossed over the ford of Jabbok." If you look at a map of the patriarch period, Jabbok is on the east side of the Jordan River, which runs from the Sea of Galilee in the north to the Dead Sea in the south, right down the center of Israel. The Jordan River has a tributary called the Jabbok, which is between the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee, running from east to west.

After 20 years Jacob will come back to his home and has a reencounter with his brother, Esau, who he tricked into stealing his birthright. Esau vowed to kill him, so Jacob is going to be afraid to meet his brother. So he actually split his family into two groups. If Esau attacks the first group, then the second group can escape. So Jacob's scheming and planning and going back to the land of Canaan. So verse 7 says that "Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed."

There were four things that Jacob did. First, Jacob looked back that night before he met his brother, Esau, and he remembered his sins. Our past sins can make us cowards. He hadn't dealt with them; he hadn't confessed them. So when he knew that Esau was coming to meet him with 400 armed men, he freaked out. Jacob remembered that he had lied to his father, Isaac, he lied to his brother, Esau, and his mother had to send him away, and he lied to Laban and tricked him. So he was living with the guilt of past scheming.

Jacob, by the way, represents a carnal Christian. It's a person who knows God, believes in God, loves God but doesn't live for God. They live for self. They still have self on the throne. They haven't been filled with the Spirit. They haven't made Christ the Lord of their life. There are a lot of people who say, "I'm a Christian," but you'd never know it by the way they live, because they are living for the things of this world. They're scheming or they're on and off in their walk with God. Jacob is a picture of that flesh or that carnal Christian life.

So Jacob looked back and saw his sinful scheming, and he looked ahead and saw Esau coming. Esau had 400 men armed to the teeth. Jacob basically said, "I'm a dead man!" That's why he was so freaked out. Then he looked up and saw God and he started to pray. It's a good thing when you're afraid to look to God. In chapter 32, verses 9-12, he prayed, "God, this coming back to the land is Your idea. I'm not worthy of Your blessings. I want You to deliver me, because I'm afraid of my brother, Esau. Remember You made a covenant with my grandfather, Abraham, with my father, Isaac, and then You reinstated the covenant with me. So God, I'm trusting You, I'm pleading Your promises that You'll protect me and You'll go with me." Jacob is freaking out.

Faith and fear are mutually exclusive. They can exist together, but you're really not trusting God if you're freaking out. If you're a Christian and you're biting your fingernails and freaking out, worrying and fretting, then you're not resting in and trusting God by faith. The Bible says, "Perfect love casts out fear."

If you know God loves you, you love Him and you're resting in His purpose, in His providential care, then you don't need to worry about your past, you don't need to freak out about your future. You can turn to God and trust Him with your present. God will take care of you.

But Jacob is still Jacob, so he starts to scheme. The background to chapter 32, verses 22-23 was that he was going to give gifts to Esau of about 580 different animals in five different groups to try to appease Esau and win him over so he wouldn't attack him and kill him. Jacob is still scheming, still in the flesh and he hasn't been broken by God yet.

The second picture we see in our story is Jacob wrestling with the Lord, verses 24-25. We go from Jacob trembling in fear to Jacob wrestling with the Lord. "Jacob was left alone." That's a good thing, by the way. Sometimes we're too busy with our computer, the TV, with our cell phones, with people. Have you ever seen a roomful of people who are all looking at their phones? No one's talking. They're all spaced out.

I was getting my car serviced the other day and went into a waiting room where there were about 20 people waiting. They're all on their phones. "Phone zombies" I call them.

So you have to get alone, leave your phone aside, pray, wait on the Lord and look to Him. Take some time to seek the Lord.

In our text, Jacob is alone, so it's a perfect time for God to get ahold of him. And sometimes being alone is a perfect time for God to be alone with us.

Now God began to wrestle with Jacob. Who is this Man, in verse 24, who is wrestling with Jacob? Hosea 12:5 tells us that it was "the Lord God of hosts." So it was the Lord God of Israel. I believe it was Jesus Christ, the second Person of the Godhead, who came in the form of a man, who comes in the form of the angel of the Lord, who was actually wrestling with Jacob.

And I want you to notice that it wasn't Jacob who initiated the wrestling match; it was the Lord who wrestled with Jacob. Jacob is only hanging on to Him. He is resisting Him, but God is trying to subdue him.

God wants to subdue you. God wants to break you. If He wants you to be a blessing, He must bring brokenness into your life. It's called the blessing of brokenness.

God wants to subdue Jacob, so it is actually God wrestling with Jacob, with Jacob only hanging on and pleading to be blessed of the Lord. So Jacob comes to the conclusion that he is wrestling with God. Verse 25, "Now when He saw that he did not prevail against him, He

touched the socket of his hip; and the socket of Jacob's hip was out of joint as He wrestled with him."

Can you imagine? Everyone is gone, you're fearful to meet your brother, you're sitting there all alone in the pitch black of night, and wham! Somebody jumps on you and grabs you in a headlock. You don't even know who it is. So you just start wrestling in the dark and fighting with this guy. And little do you realize, until the wrestling match progresses, that it is none other than God in the flesh. In verse 30, Jacob says, "I have seen God face to face." This is actually God appearing and wrestling with Jacob. This is a mind-blowing story. So God is trying to subdue Jacob, break Jacob and trying to work in Jacob's life, as God often does with us.

Have you ever had God interrupt your life and put it "out of joint"? Or have you ever had God take your plans and "dislocate" them? God shows up, and everything you had planned, everything you wanted to do—"I'm going to retire, buy a motorhome and travel around the United States"—goes to naught, because you have a stroke. "We're going to have three kids," but you don't have any kids. Or you say, "We're not going to have any kids," but you have five kids. "God, what are you doing?! Why are you punishing me?!" Children are a gift from God. "The fruit of the womb is a reward." How we are enjoying our grandkids right now. What a blessing.

But what God does is He comes into our lives and cripples us. He puts our plans "out of joint." He doesn't always do what we want Him to do. He doesn't always lay things out the way you want Him to do it. He cripples your ambitions and your goals. Maybe He's crippled your health, crippled your wealth, crippled your work or your career. Maybe your family has been crippled or maybe your ministry.

I've talked to a young man who said he tried to do the work of the ministry and failed. Then God sent him in a different direction. God has a purpose and a plan. What do you do when God shows up, starts to wrestle with you, cripples you and now you're walking with a limp?

Then the third picture in this story is, in verses 26-27, Jacob is clinging and confessing. We saw that Jacob was trembling and wrestling, and now he is clinging and confessing. "And He said, 'Let Me go, for the day breaks.'" That's the angel of the Lord, Jesus, talking to Jacob. Then Jacob said, "I will not let You go unless You bless me!" So He said to him, "What is your name?" He said, "Jacob."

So we find here that Jacob is wrestling with the angel of the Lord, and the angel of the Lord says, "Let Me go." God is in control, so when God wrestles with you, He wins. But He wins when we surrender, when we submit. When we lose, we win. When we are broken, we are blessed. That's the principle that we learn in this story.

In verse 26, He said, "'Let me go, for the day breaks.' But he said, 'I will not let You go unless You bless me!'" So here we have Jacob clinging to the Lord. In Hosea 12:4-5, it says, "He..."—that is, "Jacob"—"...struggled with the Angel and prevailed. He wept, and sought favor from

Him....That is, the Lord God of hosts." So these verses are a divine commentary on our story in the book of Genesis.

Jacob wasn't in control; he was crying and broken. He's sweating, bloodied and bruised and his clothes are torn. He has dirt all over himself, and he's been wrestling with the Lord. He finally says, "I will not let You go unless You bless me!"

One of the things you need to do when God is in the breaking process of your life is you need to cling to Him. Hold on to Him. If you find that you're struggling right now in a difficult time, hold on to God. He's holding on to you. Seek the Lord and seek the blessings of God, and He will bless your life. Jacob discovered that he was wrestling with God.

In verse 27, Jacob now confesses who he is. When God asked Jacob, "What is your name?" He didn't need to know the answer. Whenever He asks a question, he already knows the answer. We need to know the answer. Why would God ask Jacob for his name? God knew his name was Jacob. He wanted Jacob to know His name.

In the Bible, your name speaks of your character and who you are. So they would name people in hopes that they would live up to their name and who they were.

So God wanted Jacob to know what his name was. God already knew. When God lost Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and asked, "Adam, where are you?" do you think God's freaking out? "I just made them, and now I lost them! I don't know where they went. What am I gonna do? These little critters just snuck off!" No.

Why would Jesus ask a question? He knows everything! Because He wants us to know the answers. He wants us to look at our own hearts. So I believe that when Jesus asked Jacob what his name was and Jacob said that it was "Jacob," it was a confession of his sinful past. It would be saying, "I'm the schemer, the conniver."

The name "Jacob" literally means "heel-catcher." The concept of heel-catcher means that he was a trickster, a schemer, a conniver. Jacob and his brother were in the womb at the same time, but when they were born, Esau was born first. But Jacob was born holding on to Esau's heel. And God said, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated." God chose Jacob over Esau.

So that was actually a picture of Jacob's whole life. He lied to his parents, he lied to his brother, he stole his brother's birthright, he lied to Laban, his father-in-law. He was always pulling tricks, always scheming, always conniving to get his way. God said, "No longer. I'm going to break you. You're going to become Israel. No longer are you going to be called Jacob. You're going to be governed by God."

Then Jacob confesses who he is. Jacob had to helplessly hang on to God and he confessed his sin. 1 John 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." So hang on to God and confess your sins. God will be faithful to forgive you.

Charles Wesley, the great hymn writer, wrote:

“Other refuge have I none,

Hangs my helpless soul on Thee.”

I like that. My soul hangs on no other refuge or rock; only on Him.

Now Jacob is going to be blessed, verses 28-30. “And He said, ‘Your name shall no longer be called Jacob...’—schemer, conniver, trickster—“...but Israel.” The name “Israel” means “God fights” or “God strives”; it has the idea of God ruling over. Now God tells Jacob that He’s going to rule over him. His name will now be Israel. He’s found power with God and with men. So in this context, it’s saying that God is going to rule over your life. You tried to rule your own affairs and botched everything up.

Verse 28, “...for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed.” Now remember that Jacob is crying, praying to God, he’s broken, yet he had prevailed because he had surrendered. “Then Jacob asked, saying, ‘Tell me Your name, I pray.’ And He said, ‘Why is it that you ask about My name?’ And He blessed him there. And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: ‘For I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.’ Just as he crossed over Peniel the sun rose on him, and he limped on his hip.”

You ask, “What kind of a blessing was his limping? He’s crippled.” This is the crippling that counts. When God cripples us, it’s for our good and for His glory. We need to learn that lesson.

I want you to notice how Jacob was blessed. In verse 28, He blessed him. This is the blessing of brokenness. First, He gave Jacob a new name. He named him “Israel.” He would be dependent upon God, controlled by God and governed by God. Israel is the name God gave Jacob. So the patriarchs are Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Jacob had 12 sons, which became the 12 tribes of Israel. Being given a new name speaks of receiving a new character; he would live in a new dependence on God and rely on His grace.

Secondly, Jacob got a new revelation of God, of who He is, verse 30. Jacob said, “I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.”

This is not an Incarnation, which happened when Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Jesus came into the world through the womb of the Virgin Mary. In Jesus, humanity was fused with deity for all eternity when He was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary. Jesus is the God-man exalted in heaven. He still bears the scars of His Crucifixion. But before Bethlehem, all the way back in the book of Genesis, Jesus came from heaven and manifested—not the Incarnation, but a manifestation—as being a man.

The Bible says that sometimes you can “unwittingly entertain angels.” So be careful how you deal with strangers. That weird person who helped you out on the highway could be an angel. You wondered why his coat was sticking out. Those were his wings underneath his coat.

Check it out. To think that God would become an angel and come down to help me is a mind-blowing thought!

But here Jesus appears and Jacob wrestled with Him, so Jacob says, “I have seen God face to face.” Yet God says, “No man shall see Me and live.” So how do you reconcile these two verses? Jacob saw God manifested; he didn’t see God in His essence. God is a spirit, so you can’t see God. You can’t see God in His essence, but you can see a manifestation of God as He took on the form of a man, in this case the angel of the Lord.

So Jacob got a new name, a new revelation of who God is—and that’s what happens when God cripples us; we see Him more clearly—and thirdly, Jacob got a new crippling, verse 31. “He limped on his hip.”

When Jacob left his family in Canaan 20 years earlier, he went out into the night. When he went to bed, he put his head on a rock, and he had a dream. In that dream, heaven opened up and there was a ladder from earth to heaven with angels descending and ascending on the ladder. It’s called “Jacob’s ladder.” So obviously God was with him, but He still had to break him, to take him from being Jacob, which we sometimes are, to Israel. God doesn’t want us to be Jacobs; He wants us to be Israel, governed and controlled by God.

So this crippling, in verse 31, is the most important or key message of this story. “He limped on his hip.”

If you had seen Jacob limping, you would probably assume that God had punished him, judged him by crippling him. In reality, God was blessing him. It’s the blessing of brokenness. If you’d have looked into Jacob’s face, you’d see all the cunning and trickery gone. You’d see a different man; he’s Israel now and not Jacob any longer. So this crippling is a crowning from God.

Jacob, now Israel, prevailed when he came to the end of himself. We, too, must come to the end of ourselves. His weakness birthed strength. His defeat brought victory.

Your greatest asset is not your strength; it’s your weakness. That’s why Paul said, in 2 Corinthians 12:10, “When I am weak, then I am strong.” Why? Because it forces me to depend on God’s strength. When I’m living independent of God and not trusting in God, I say, “It’s my intellect and my money. No matter what happens I still have my Visa card. All I need is this plastic card. I have family who will help me. I have people I can tap into. I can figure it out.”

But in your weakness, God “Hangs my helpless soul on Thee.” “God, if You won’t do it, it won’t get done. God, I need You and You alone.” God says, “That’s right where I want you to be.” In your marriage, on your job, with your health, with your finances, you must helplessly cling to God and to God alone.

It doesn’t mean that you don’t use your brains, but you’re not depending upon your intellect. It doesn’t mean that you don’t use your ingenuity. It means you’re dependent on God and trusting in Him and in Him alone.

Jacob's end is his beginning. His brokenness was his blessing.

There is a daily devotional for the year I've read for many years. It's called Streams in the Desert. On August 15th, you read these words: "The best things in life come out of wounding. Wheat has to be crushed before it becomes bread. Incense must first be cast upon fire before its odors are set free. The ground must first be broken with a sharp plow before it's ready to receive the seed. It is the broken heart that pleases God. The sweetest joys of life are the fruits of sorrow."

Someone once said, "Oh, if you only knew what peace there is in an accepted sorrow." That's so profound. The problem is that we fight against God, we resist God, we struggle with God. Jacob wrestled all night long with God. How long did it take Jacob finally to say, "Bless me! I'm broken." It took all night.

Don't wait that long. If God's wrestling with you right now, cry "Uncle!" Don't even wait to the end of this sermon. If God has thrown your marriage out of joint, say, "God, save me! Help me!" If God is wrestling with your finances right now, he's crippled them and put them out of joint, cry out to Him right now. Say, "Lord, I need Your help. Lord, only You can save me." The Lord "hangs my helpless soul on Thee," and on Thee alone.

So Jacob was broken and crippled. The limp that he had, for the rest of his life, was a reminder that he was to be governed and controlled by God. Florence White Willett put this in a poem:

"I thank God for bitter things;

They've been a 'friend to grace';

They've driven me from paths of ease

To storm the secret place.

I'm grateful, too, that through all life's way

No one could satisfy,

And so I've found in God alone

My rich, my full supply!"

How true that is. Coming to the end of self, we discover God. We give up our weakness, and He gives us His strength.

I want to give you three simple takeaways, as I wrap this up. Number one, God's crippling counteracts pride. Don't forget it. One of the worst things you can ever do is to be proud. The Bible says, "The proud He knows from afar." It also says, "Pride goes before destruction, and a

haughty spirit before a fall.” It was the first sin committed in heaven by Lucifer. He tried to exalt himself over the throne of God, so he had to be kicked out of heaven. Lucifer became Satan, the devil, because of pride. God gives us crippling in order to humble our pride to keep us useable.

Paul’s thorn in his side was for the same purpose, 2 Corinthians 12. It was “a messenger of Satan to buffet me,” Paul said. Why? “Lest I be exalted above measure.” God gave him a paradise experience. He was caught up to heaven and heard and saw things. So that he wouldn’t be proud and puffed up, God gave him “a thorn in the flesh.”

It’s a fearful thing when you don’t need God. “I’m strong. I’m smart. I’m rich. I’ve got it together.” I don’t want to watch. God’s going to break you. God’s going to humble you.

You say, “Well, that’s not very loving.”

It’s the most loving thing He could ever do. Because He knows that you need to “seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.” So He may take your job away. He may take your health away. He may take a loved one away. You don’t know what’s going to happen, but God has a way of breaking us and humbling us. This is the bitter thing that we can be thankful for when we see the blessings that are coming to us.

Number two, God’s crippling is the secret to victory. Jacob lost the battle but won the victory. I think of the fact that so many times we resist God’s wrestling in our lives. We don’t surrender and yield to Him, so we only forestall the good thing that God wants to do in our lives.

Number three, God’s crippling makes us think little of this world but much of the next. From this point on, Jacob said he was a pilgrim, a sojourner and he was living for heaven. Like Abraham, his forefather, “He waited for the city...whose builder and maker is God.”

Those who have done the most for God in this world are those who think most of the next world. Our problem isn’t that we’re so heavenly minded we’re no earthly good; our problem is that we’re so earthly minded we’re no heavenly good. Oh, to think more about heaven! Oh, to be motivated by heaven.

Heaven isn’t just a destination; it’s a motivation. It’s not that just some day in the sweet by-and-by, I’m going to be in heaven. I want to live for heaven now. I want to follow the Lord of heaven. I want to speak heaven’s language. I want to follow heaven’s laws.

If you’re a Christian, this world is not your home. Don’t get too comfortable here. Don’t get too attached. Let your contact with the world be as light as possible. Heaven is your real home. Keep that in perspective.

So the crippling counteracts pride, it keeps us humble and dependent on God, it is a step to victory by surrendering and giving up to God’s will and it keeps us focused on eternity: the things that really matter in life.