

WRESTLING FOR CHANGE

→ If we take a moment to look back over the years of our life, I'm sure that all of us will recognise where changes have occurred. Physically, we will all look different now from how we looked twenty years ago. The experiences we have had during those years will have shaped us emotionally and spiritually. The people we have spent time with will have had an influence on us. Hopefully we will have had many positive experiences during those years, but we will also have made some mistakes and learned from them. And perhaps as you look back over the years you will be able to see where God's hand has been at work in all of this.

.....God is committed to bringing about positive changes in our lives. Our weaknesses and our failures don't stop him from seeing the potential in us. And God has worked with plenty of raw and rough material over the years, Jacob being one such case in point!

.....It's fairly clear that Jacob had some flaws in his character. He was sneaky and deceitful and crafty and dishonest and selfish. His name literally means "heel grabber" because apparently he came out of his mother's womb, holding onto the heel of his brother Esau.

..... Now Esau, his brother, was rough and tough and hairy apparently! An outdoor man; a hunter; a real man's man, you might say! But by contrast Jacob was a smooth-skinned lad who seemed to be always hanging onto his Mum's apron strings. As a result, both boys became the favourite of one of their parents; Rebekah loved Jacob, but Isaac loved Esau.

.....You may recall from your reading of Genesis that one day, Jacob deceived his blind father Isaac and his mother helped him do it. They covered Jacob's body with goatskins so that he felt just like his hairy brother and by doing that he managed to steal the birthright and blessing that belonged to his brother. Esau was pretty angry about it of course, and vowed that he would kill Jacob as soon as their father had died, so Jacob had to run for his life. He may have got the blessing he wanted, but deceiving his father in that way cost him a great deal!

.....He never saw his mother again. His brother still wanted to kill him. His family was torn apart by the disagreements and he became an exile. And to top it all he worked for seven years in order to earn the right to marry the girl of his dreams only to walk her down the aisle, lift the veil to kiss her and discover that it wasn't her at all. It was her sister. The deceiver had been deceived. So he worked for seven more years in order to win the girl that he really wanted.

→ But, whilst it is obvious to see Jacob's weaknesses and flaws, he had his strengths too. His methods weren't always respectable, but his determination, skill and patience perhaps have to be admired. Jacob was a determined man and last Sunday morning we remembered what an important attribute that is in those of us that are seeking to follow Jesus.

.....Jacob was a determined man. When he saw something he wanted, he didn't stop until he got what he wanted. When he had a goal he would go after it

relentlessly. Nothing could get in his way once he had made up his mind. And we witness that same determination here in this unusual event where he literally wrestles all night long with God. Up to this point he has lived his life doing things his way. His life has been all about him. But this night would be different. Confronted with the pain of his past failures, Jacob found himself “wrestling for a change.”

→ So, why do we need to know about this event? What is there for us to learn from it? Well, this morning, I’d like to suggest that there are perhaps four things that we can take away with us from this story. First of all there’s the reminder that in moments of great fear, God is there. What we didn’t read in the first half of Genesis 32 is that Jacob is about to meet his brother Esau again for the first time in about twenty years. Just imagine how Jacob might have been feeling about that. He’s about to come face to face with the brother that he has deceived. He hasn’t set eyes on him since the day he ripped him off. He’s no doubt feeling pretty apprehensive and scared. What will tomorrow hold? How will Esau react? What will happen to me, and to my family?

.....Not surprisingly he can’t sleep and he needs consolation and he needs guidance. So, just like you and me and most people actually, when in a tight spot, he thought, “I’d better pray!” So he sends his wives and all his belongings across the river and he’s there all alone in the dark with his fears. But not for long! A man comes and wrestles with him, but he was more than a man because later Jacob says that he has seen God face to face and yet his life has been spared!

.....In spite of everything that had gone before; despite Jacob’s many failures, God was there for him in his time of fear. But, God didn’t show up just to comfort him! No, God had apparently come to confront him and to make him face up to the truth, to force him to wrestle with the issues that had brought him to this place. Are there things in your life that you’re afraid of; things that you would rather not face up to but you know that you should? Is God trying to encourage you to finally face up to the weak spots in you so that you can actually be rid of your fears and be free to enjoy the fullness of life that’s on offer with God? God is with us in our moments of fear but he wants to help us overcome those fears by facing them.

→Secondly, this story perhaps reminds us that answers to our prayers don’t always come easily or quickly. Sometimes we need to struggle in our prayers and most of us perhaps don’t like the notion of that. We want answers that come quickly and easily and sometimes that’s just what we get with some of the smaller things about which we pray. But when we are faced with some heavier problems, then we sometimes find perhaps that we are a bit out of shape when it comes to struggling in prayer; being persistent day after day after day even when no answers seem to come; praying and praying because we are so keen for things to change or for us to change!

.....Jacob was fairly desperate on this night in question. He was having to face up to lifelong problems and patterns of behaviour and he needed some answers. And in a most unusual fashion, God appeared to him in a physical form to test his endurance and his determination. He came to see just how badly Jacob wanted things to change and they wrestled together all night long.

.....It's a reminder to us perhaps that answers to our prayers don't always come quickly or easily and that there is a need for us to persist in our praying and really express our longing for whatever it is that we are praying for!

→ Then, thirdly this story helps us to see that what Jacob perhaps lacked in spiritual maturity he made up for with dogged determination. We know that Jacob had many flaws but it was perhaps on this night and during this struggle that he eventually recognised them. Many of us are perhaps aware of flaws in our characters but that will never change until we decide to do something about it. God wants to change us but it won't happen unless we are willing to let him enter into that struggle of change with us. Jacob had longed for the blessing of God on his life, but sadly he kept taking matters into his own hands instead of letting God work through him.

.....You see Jacob would have received the birthright and blessing that he stole anyhow if he had just waited! When his mother Rebekah was pregnant with Jacob and Esau, the babies fought in the womb. When Rebekah asked God why that was happening, it's recorded in Genesis 25 that God answered, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one will be stronger than the other and the older will serve the younger."

.....So, there it is! We don't know how it would have happened, but Jacob would have received the birthright some other way if he and his mother had just waited for God to work things out his way and in his time! All the lying, cheating, deceiving and running away, all the hiding, living in fear, guilt and separation from his family could all have been avoided if Jacob hadn't insisted on doing things his way! He usually got what he wanted but at some cost to himself and others.

.....He had willed his way to the top but all his gains had been achieved through deception. But on this night, alone with God, perhaps for the first time ever, Jacob wrestled with who and what he was. Before he could face Esau, he had to face himself. And so there was a struggle going on as Jacob realised that he needed to change his ways and he wasn't going to let go of God until he had received God's blessing. Suddenly all of Jacob's determination is aimed at a much more worthwhile goal. He is wrestling for a change.

→ And it paid off. Jacob's name was changed to Israel and God blessed him. And that's what happens when we are determined and serious about our relationship with God. He can change our attitudes, our hearts, our thoughts and our habits! He can make "old things pass away!" We can become new and different people! Oh, it may not happen overnight as it seemed to do for Jacob, but it can happen!

.....It certainly won't be easy – it's not necessarily meant to be and notice how after this event Jacob walked away with a limp – a reminder perhaps of the numerous crippling decisions that he had made when he insisted on doing things his way. But he also walked away with God's blessing and with a new name. Jacob, the heel-grabber and deceiver had now become Israel meaning one who struggles with God and people and overcomes. And not only had his name changed but his character changed too.

.....And God longs for each and everyone of us to change too. Not because he doesn't love us just as we are – he does! But he doesn't want us to suffer all the agony that often accompanies doing things our own way. He wants to bless us and we don't have to fight for it. God offers blessing to us if we will simply live life his way. He wants to write his name upon our hearts if we will let him. Will you let that happen or will you be one of many Christians who want enough of God to be sure of heaven, but not so much of God that they need to change anything in the here and now?

.....The apostle Paul encourages us to “throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus.” In other words see the wrong things in our lives as baggage that's just too heavy to carry and wrestle to get rid of it now. Otherwise you will go on living with the pain of the guilt and the failure and the hurt or whatever it is that gets in the way of you being able to really experience the fullness of life that God offers.

→ What are you wrestling with right now or what do you need to wrestle with? Is there something that you are afraid of? If so, remember that God is there with you in it and wants to help you face up to those fears. Is there something that you've been praying about for a while and you feel like giving up? Remember that sometimes you need to persist in that praying until eventually you get an answer. Be determined to see the change that you long for in yourself or in a particular situation. Stick at it – today might just be the day when the answer you've been looking for comes.

.....After his night of wrestling, Jacob knew God's blessing on his life and he had a new identity. The same can be true for us if we are willing to face up to the truth about ourselves and let God make the changes in us that are necessary for us to become more like him.