

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

..... *GENESIS*

Strengthening Kingdom Citizens: Genesis 32-33

Pastor Anthony Ferguson

We are beginning 2021 the same way we started in 2020: by studying Genesis. I hope for us to finish our study in Genesis the week before Palm Sunday. We will then study the events of Holy Week. Then, for the rest of 2021 – at least until Reformation Sunday – we will study Matthew together.

Today, we are focusing on Genesis 32-33, and the main point of today's sermon is that God strengthens his people through trials. God upholds us by holding onto us through trials. This remarkable fact strengthens us to then cling to God amid trouble.

We experienced many trials last year, and we will experience many more this year. Church family, one thing that God is doing this season is strengthening us to cling to Christ. I hope to encourage us and to equip us to cling to Christ during this challenging season.

JACOB'S PLAN (32:3-8)

In Genesis 32, Jacob has just departed from Laban. Almost immediately, he learns that Esau is coming to meet him with 400 men. This group of men is nothing short of an army (32:6). Jacob hears this news and is understandably frightened. Moses tells us that Jacob was very afraid and distressed (7). This fear leads him to plan. Jacob divides his people, flocks, herds, and camels into two camps. If Esau attacks him, at least one camp will survive (7-8).

JACOB'S PRAYER (32:9-12)

This fear, however, does not lead him simply to plan; it leads him to prayer. Jacob's prayer is very good. This detail is a surprise since Jacob has fallen drastically short of covenant faithfulness up to this point. There are several important points to note about this prayer.

First, Jacob trusted in God's word, not in his circumstances. We see this in verse 9. God told Jacob to return to his family in Genesis 31:3. Let's explore what just happened because it was significant. Jacob's circumstances appear to conflict with God's promises at this moment. Esau is coming with a 400-person army; this sight is a sign of destruction. Yet, God promises that God will multiply his offspring as the sand of the sea (32:12) and bring him home safely (32:9).



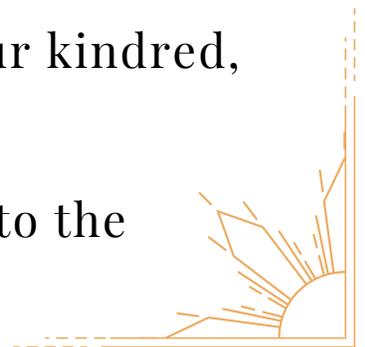
This reality presents an apparent conflict. In the past, this reality, this conflict of circumstances with God's promise, led Jacob to sin, but not here. This reality now leads Jacob to pray and pray very well. God has tested Jacob for 20 years in Haran, and he continually failed the test. Yet, the purpose of those tests was to cultivate trust for this moment. God has proven himself faithful to Jacob despite Jacob's continual faithlessness, and that has led Jacob to trust him. Do you see the glory of our God here? It is his continual kindness to Jacob despite Jacob that leads Jacob to this faithful moment of prayer.

Second, Jacob trusted in God's character. Let's look again at verse 9: Jacob says here that the Lord told him to "return to your country and to your kindred, that I may do you good" (9). How does Jacob know that God has called him home to do good to him? When you compare Jacob's statement to God's words recorded for us, we see a significant difference. Let's notice the differences:

Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you. (Genesis 28:15)

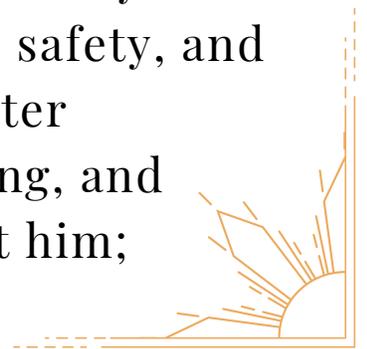
Return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred, and I will be with you (Genesis 31:3).

Now arise, go out from this land and return to the land of your kindred (Genesis 31:13).



We see here that God did not tell him to return home that he might do good to him. Yet, this is what God meant when God said to him that he would be with him and bring him back to his home, and Jacob knew this because he trusted God's character. Namely, he trusted that God is faithful to his promises. Therefore, Jacob concluded that God's call to go home was none other than a commitment to do good to him. Jacob made this conclusion because Jacob trusted God's character. Remember, we have learned elsewhere that God promised to establish Jacob's family as God's very own kingdom (Genesis 28:13-17; 35:9-12). Jacob knew this promise, remembered this promise, and concluded that God was bringing him home to do good to him because he trusted his character.

Third, Jacob knew that he did not deserve God's love or kindness (32:10). He says that he is unworthy, or too small, for any of God's acts of steadfast love and faithfulness. In other words, there is not one, not a single act of God's love that Jacob deserves. Jacob knows this fact – this gospel-centered fact – that we do not deserve any of God's lovingkindness because Jacob had lived it. This reality is Jacob's life. His continually planning motivated by a desire for comfort, safety, and security rather than God's word and character manifested itself in a life of cheating, stealing, and cowardice. Yet, God was with him; God kept him;

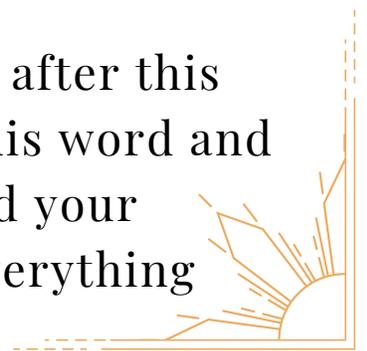


God did good to him despite him! Jacob crosses over the Jabbok river with two camps of people and goods; formerly, he crossed it with a mere stick (10). Jacob visibly sees God's faithfulness to him, and he knows that it is despite him. Jacob embraced this truth.

Fourth, based on these details – God's word, God's kindness, God's undeserving grace – Jacob asks for help (11). Wow! In verse 9, Jacob embraced God's trustworthiness to do good to him. In verse 10, he embraced his unworthiness of this kindness. These realities led Jacob to a bold request for help. In other words, the person who takes God's word plus their own sinfulness seriously can boldly request for salvation from trouble. Praise to our Lord.

Fifth, Jacob appeals to God's word (12). Jacob ends the prayer the same way he began it: by appealing to God's word. Jacob's life is, therefore, no longer defined by his circumstances. Indeed, his circumstances are still frightening. In verse 11, Jacob confesses his fear; yet, this fear does not define what he will do. At least at this moment, Jacob makes decisions based on God's word, God's character, and his own character, not fear.

Church family, we should model our prayers after this prayer. As we pray, appeal to God based on his word and his character. Do not hide your weakness and your sinfulness; confess it. Do not pretend that everything



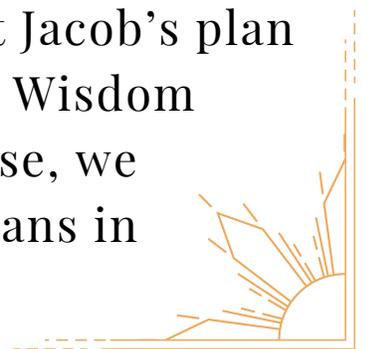
is fine while you pray. Confess your brokenness, sadness, and pain. Then, by taking God's word and character and your own character seriously, ask God for help. In our fears, let's come to God this way. This way is the pathway of faith, not fear.

JACOB'S MORE

DETAILED PLAN (32:13-21)

After praying, Jacob develops a more detailed plan. The first messengers went to Esau to find favor (5), and it appears that they did not find favor with Esau since Jacob develops this new plan (13-21). In this plan, Jacob hopes to appease Esau with presents (13, 20). Verses 14-16 details this gift, and we should note that this is an extravagant gift. In addition to these gifts, several messengers will precede Jacob, who will repeat the same soft, gentle words that Jacob is coming with gifts for my Lord Esau (20). Jacob's hope is apparent. He hopes to appease Esau's anger with time, gifts, and kind words. In light of what Jacob has done to him, this is a wise plan.

Church family, I think it was wise for Jacob to develop a plan. In other words, some might think that Jacob's plan demonstrates a lack of faith, but I disagree. Wisdom leads God's people to pray and plan. Likewise, we in need or fearful, we too should develop plans in wisdom.



JACOB'S WRESTLING MATCH (32:22-32)

Jacob approaches the Jabbok river that night. The Jabbok is a stream that flows east-west and empties into the Jordan south of the Sea of Galilee. He sent his family and his possessions across the river but returned to the other side. Now, all alone, on the other side, a man appears and wrestles with Jacob (24). This man, however, is not a mere man, but a messenger from God (Hosea 12:3) who is none other than God himself. This fact is evident since Jacob names the place Peniel because he saw the Lord face to face and was delivered (Genesis 32:30).

Let's be clear here: Jacob is no match for the Lord. Notice that the Lord has the freedom to end the match on his terms: he touches the hip socket of Jacob and ends the contest (25). Jacob, however, hangs onto him and pleads with him to bless him (26). Again, we see the superiority of the Lord since Jacob asks for the "man" to bless him.

This messenger, therefore, renames Jacob, Israel. This act is quite significant since, in the storyline of Scripture, God renames people. He renamed Abram, Abraham, and Sarai, Sarah. In the ancient Near East, when two kings would make a covenant together, the superior king would at times rename his servant-king. Jacob must relate to the Lord as his ambassador wherever he goes. His new name reminds him of this covenant relationship.



I believe that Jacob's wrestling match with God is a historical illustration of Jacob's spiritual state. Jacob's whole life can be described as a wrestling match. He wrestled with Esau, Laban, and now God. The purpose of these wrestling matches was to teach Jacob to cling to God for blessings. That is why this contest appears "close," but it was not. The point was to teach Jacob to cling to God for blessings. He needed to learn visibly that his ingenuity, planning, and strength were not the pathway to kingdom blessings; rather, clinging to God in faith is the pathway, and that is what we see Jacob do in Genesis 32:26.

Church family, Jacob clings to God at this moment because, throughout his entire life, God held him fast in his arms. Remember Genesis 31:22. God warned Laban not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad. God had held Jacob fast, and that faithfulness moved Jacob now to hold fast to God. The gospel, then, is the source of our strength. So, how do I encourage you, my church family, to be strong in the Lord? I preach the gospel to you. Remember how God has held onto you, and in gratitude, hold onto him!

THE ENCOUNTER AND RESOLUTION (33:1-18)

Incredibly, God delivers Jacob from Esau. Esau was coming with 400-men: an army, but something changed. God answered Jacob's prayer and delivered Jacob from his brother. Church family, our God loves to



APPLICATION

Our God holds his people fast. Church family, our echo prayer app is a testament to this reality, as is every story in Scripture. Therefore, church family, let's cling to Christ. Let's tighten our grip on God and hold onto him during the many trials we will encounter in 2021.

Jacob held onto Christ by embracing God's word, God's character, and his own sinfulness. These realities led him to pray for protection amid trouble. Let's do the same. Let's hold onto Christ through prayer by embracing these great doctrines. Of course, the more we understand God's word, God's character, and our sinfulness, the tighter our grip on God will be. This is where our reading plan and handout come in. This handout represents our church's strategy about how you can hold onto Christ more firmly amid all trials and difficulties. Let's use this handout in 2021, church family. As we do, we will cling to Christ, and we will show the world that he is worthy of us clinging to amid all trials and troubles. For the glory of God and our joy, let's read the Scripture together well.

PRAYER

Help us, Lord, to hold onto you tightly in 2021 for your glory. When we fail, please hold onto us. As we enter this new year, give us the grace to learn more about your glorious character. Help us to read your word consistently and to pray well this upcoming year. We pray these things in Jesus' name, amen.