

Cargo Cult to Panting Deer **(Genesis 32:1-33:11 May 18, 2008)**



The Christian life is a journey. It has its ups and its downs. It has days of soaring faith and days of crushing sin. Days where you run – and days when you can't even crawl.

The journey begins on the day of your salvation and ends on the day you enter eternity.

But what happens along the way varies greatly. There are some believers who seem to enter eternity barely more mature than when they were saved.

Others seem to grow greatly in knowledge and grace.

But for every saint who truly comes to grips with what it means to be in Christ, there is one crucial milestone along the way – the day when they come to realise that all they truly need is Christ Himself.

The day when their heart finally comes to grips with a truth their head has known for some time. Wealth won't ultimately satisfy. Possessions won't ultimately satisfy. Family won't ultimately satisfy. The only thing that will truly satisfy a hungry heart is the Lord Jesus Himself.

Without doubt – this is the milestone that sets us free to enjoy Christ and savour Him.

But the reality is that we are so bound to the pleasures and temptations of this life that this is not an easy milestone to achieve. Our hearts cry out that the world will satisfy. Shedding this fallacy comes at a great cost. It comes through failure and struggle and pain.

Yet, if you come to this milestone – if you grasp this truth – then you are set free to really live.

The Patriarch Jacob came to this place in his spiritual life relatively late.

He left Canaan when he was 77 years old. He left Aram to return to the Promised Land when he was a 97 year old man.

And if you had to characterise his life to that point – it would be like this – Jacob had been given every blessing but struggled to find satisfaction – because his life was one of looking for meaning in all the wrong places.

He grew up knowing that God Himself had promised that the Abrahamic blessing would be his. But to him – the blessing was primarily a physical blessing – wealth – family leadership. He wanted this blessing. His heart said it would satisfy him. He had to have that blessing. He managed to gain the birthright for a bowl of stew and deceived Isaac to gain the blessing.

Remember that when Isaac pronounced the blessing over him he said:

May God give you of heaven's dew and of earth's richness—an abundance of grain and new wine. May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you. May those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed.

To Jacob – this sounded like he had arrived – earthly riches and family leadership. The stuff he had longed for was in his grasp.

But there was to be no satisfaction in this. He was forced to flee Canaan with nothing but his staff. He would never see his beloved mother alive again.

In Aram – his heart cried to seek satisfaction in Rachel. He gained her as a wife but she did **not** satisfy. He ended up with not just Rachel but Leah and two maid-wives – and Rachel demanding he cure her infertility.

He saw a graphic picture of what greed can do to a man's soul in the life of Laban – but he still found himself concerned for his own prosperity.

But now as chapter 32 opens – despite all of these lessons – Jacob has not yet learned the one great lesson about satisfaction in this life. But the day of reckoning is upon him.

Jacob is getting on in years. He is 97 years old. He is extraordinarily wealthy. He has been blessed with a large family – two wives, two concubines, eleven sons and one daughter.

He is heading back to Canaan – back to the Promised Land. If he can just get past Esau – then he will have everything.

What I want you to notice is the significance of the structure of the next section.

Jacob seeks to preserve his worldly blessing Genesis 32:1-21

**Jacob becomes Israel
Genesis 32:22-32**

Israel seeks to renounce his worldly blessing Genesis 33:1-11

Jacob seeks to preserve his worldly blessing

Genesis 32:1-21

Jacob becomes Israel

Genesis 32:22-32

Israel seeks to renounce his worldly blessing

Genesis 33:1-11

The section begins with Jacob preparing to meet Esau and the focus is on preserving his worldly blessing – his life, his wealth, his family.

The section ends with Jacob meeting Esau – but now something is different. Jacob actually seeks to return the worldly portion of the stolen blessing.

And the reason for the change is found in what happens during the night. Jacob meets God and wrestles with Him and becomes Israel.

This is a fascinating section of Scripture with much to teach us.

Chapter 31 finished with Jacob separating from Laban at Galeed and continuing the journey home.

Jacob is drawing near to the Promised Land – but with each step closer to home – the one thought that grows ever stronger is the coming encounter with his brother Esau.

He stole Esau's blessing. Esau had sworn to kill Jacob as soon as Isaac died.

It had been twenty years. Was Esau's wrath just as strong – or had it faded with time?

The thought of Esau was consuming Jacob. Look with me at chapter 32 verses 1-2:

Jacob also went on his way, and the angels of God met him. When Jacob saw them, he said, "This is the camp of God!" So he named that place Mahanaim.

Jacob is heading home and suddenly – the angels of God appear.

The point is to remind him of his encounter at Bethel where the angels of God marked the presence of God.

There, the Lord had made this promise. Genesis 28:15:

I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.

God – the Creator of the heavens and the earth had made a solemn vow to Jacob – I will bring you back to the land. I will watch over you. I am with you.

This same God had protected Jacob and caused him to prosper in supernatural ways while he was in Haran.

We think of the miracle of the spotted and speckled sheep.

We think of how God had delivered Jacob from the hand of Laban. After Jacob left, Laban had rounded up his household and pursued Jacob. He had planned to harm Jacob. But the same God who promised to protect Jacob had intervened and warned Laban not to harm Jacob.

And yet, despite the evident hand of God protecting and blessing him – as he came near his home the same thoughts – the same fears – fears for his life and prosperity were returning to weigh Jacob down.

Jacob had a promise from God to be with him and return him safely to the land. The Lord had shown His power to prosper and protect Jacob. And yet, with every step the foreboding grew – Will Esau kill me – will he take my family?

Jacob thinks that great obstacle is to overcome Esau. If he can get past Esau. If he can get into the land with his life, his family, his possessions – all will be well. But in this he misses the real point. He is spending his energy and passion in the wrong place.

Every one of us has been there haven't we? Worrying far more about this life than on our souls and our relationship with God.

We have seen the blessing of God on our lives countless times. We remember how many times we lost sleep worrying and then somehow – God worked all things together for good. And then when the next problem rises up – instead of trusting God – instead of turning to God – we worry and fret.

God gracious reminds Jacob that He is with him. He sends his angels.

Jacob gets the point and names the place – Mahanaim – two camps. The place where two camps met – the camp of man and the camp of God.

God is with him. So in a small step of faith, he sends out messengers to Esau.

Verses 3-5:

Jacob sent messengers ahead of him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. He instructed them: "This is what you are to say to my master Esau: 'Your servant Jacob says, I have been staying with Laban and have remained there till now. I have cattle and donkeys, sheep and goats,

menservants and maidservants. Now I am sending this message to my lord, that I may find favour in your eyes.'

Jacob sends a message to gauge how Esau will respond to this news that he is returning.

Verse 6:

When the messengers returned to Jacob, they said, "We went to your brother Esau, and now he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him."

Esau is coming – and his response is to set out with four hundred men!

You know when you fight with your brother and he yells – I'm gunna kill you! And you yell back – Yeah – well you and whose army?

Well, it is Esau and his four hundred man army.

Jacob hears this news and immediately assumes the worst. His faith evaporates. He is going to die.

How tragic. Remember Elisha's servant who looked out on the army of the King of Aram and panicked. And Elisha prayed, "O LORD, open his eyes so he may see." Then the LORD opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire (2 Kings 6:17).

Instead of trusting God – instead of remembering the camp of angels – instead of knowing that God is with him – instead of trusting that He who is with Jacob is mightier than any army – Jacob decides to take matters into his own hands.

Verses 7 and 8:

In great fear and distress Jacob divided the people who were with him into two groups, and the flocks and herds and camels as well. He thought, "If Esau comes and attacks one group, the group that is left may escape."

He spilt everyone and everything into two groups – wives, children, flocks, servants. The hope was that one group might make it.

Verses 9-12:

Then Jacob prayed, "O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, O LORD, who said to me, 'Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper,' I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two groups. Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children. But you have said, 'I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.'"

This is such a self centred prayer.

Lord – You told me to come home. I did what You said.

Yes, You blessed me. You turned me from a 77 year old man with nothing but a staff into a man with a huge family and many possessions. But now my brother is about to kill me and my family and take everything. But let me remind You that You said You would cause me to prosper – so please save me and everything I have.

Notice the repeated use of prosper. Notice the emphasis on possessions.

He is worried he will lose everything – his life, his family, his possessions – the very things that he is still looking to find satisfaction in.

I couldn't help but compare this with another prayer. Another man about to be destroyed by a greatly superior army. King Hezekiah was about to be slaughtered by the Assyrians and in Isaiah 37:16-20 he prayed this:

O LORD Almighty, God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. Give ear, O LORD, and hear; open your eyes, O LORD, and see; listen to all the words Sennacherib has sent to insult the living God. It is true, O LORD, that the Assyrian kings have laid waste all these peoples and their lands. They have thrown their gods into the fire and destroyed them, for they were not gods but only wood and stone, fashioned by human hands. Now, O LORD our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all kingdoms on earth may know that you alone, O LORD, are God.

That is a prayer of faith. A prayer for the glory of God to be sustained. It is not a self-centred prayer.

God had recently saved Jacob from Laban's army. God had sent His angels as tangible proof that He is with Jacob. And Jacob's faith fails.

The problem is with Jacob's view of God – He views a relationship with the living God like a cargo cult.

Cargo cults developed on many south-western Pacific islands after missionaries arrived. These white men came talking about their God. They flattened the jungle – and then their God sent huge metal birds filled with food and clothes and every luxury imaginable.

If the natives worshipped that God in that way – maybe He would send them all these good things too.

In a sense that is Jacob. He wanted the blessing of God because it meant prosperity and leadership.

At Bethel he said – **if** You bless me with material prosperity – **then** I will worship You.

In Aram – God did bless him and prosper him and he became wealthy and the head of a large family.

Now he faces the threat of losing the lot.

Jacob received the greatest promise a man can have – God Himself saying – I am with you.

Jacob merely saw this as a path to prosperity and blessing. In Laban – he had a living example of the truth that prosperity does not make you happy. The desire for wealth cost Laban everything.

Somewhere Jacob knows this – but it hasn't reached the deep inner portions of his heart. He still clings to life and wealth and family – as if they can satisfy him.

The problem is that Jacob still does not grasp the truth that God created us to find satisfaction in Him and Him alone.

He is more worried about facing Esau than seeking the face of God.

How often is that us? Problems come and all our energies go to worrying, to working our way around the problem – and little energy goes to seeking the face of God and trusting Him.

Jacob feels he has to act. Verses 13-21:

He spent the night there, and from what he had with him he selected a gift for his brother Esau: two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, thirty female camels with their young, forty cows and ten bulls, and twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys. He put them in the care of his servants, each herd by itself, and said to his servants, "Go ahead of me, and keep some space between the herds." He instructed the one in the lead: "When my brother Esau meets you and asks, 'To whom do you belong, and where are you going, and who owns all these animals in front of you?' then you are to say, 'They belong to your servant Jacob. They are a gift sent to my lord Esau, and he is coming behind us.'" He also instructed the second, the third and all the others who followed the herds: "You are to say the same thing to Esau when you meet him. And be sure to say, 'Your servant Jacob is coming behind us.'" For he thought, "I will pacify him with these gifts I am sending on ahead; later, when I see him, perhaps he will receive me." So Jacob's gifts went on ahead of him, but he himself spent the night in the camp.

He still doesn't really trust the promise of God to do what is best for him in this coming encounter. He seeks to pacify Esau through his own efforts.

He picks out a huge number of animals from his flocks – divides them into various herds and sends each one off towards Esau with a few servants.

The idea is that Esau will meet the first herd and say – who does all of this belong to? – and they say – they are a gift from Jacob to his wonderful brother Esau.

Esau meets herd after herd – gift after gift – and by the time he gets to Jacob – how could he be angry?

Here is the problem. Jacob thinks that overcoming Esau – getting past Esau – is what will bring him satisfaction.

If he can overcome Esau – **if** he can prevail here – preserve his life, his family, his flocks – **then** he will find joy.

And up in heaven – the Lord is shaking His head saying – My son, you still haven't learned. You are still seeking satisfaction in all the wrong places. The One you have to come to terms with is not Esau – but Me.

The important event coming is not meeting Esau tomorrow – it is meeting God tonight.

So the Lord orchestrates the most significant encounter in Jacob's life.

Verses 22-23:

That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions.

He has sent all the little gift herds – now he sends his family, his servants and all his own flocks over the river. He is left alone.

It is almost as if Jacob can't bear the thought of meeting Esau. Wait and see if the gift flocks work. Wait and see if the family are slaughtered. Wait and see if life as he knows it is about to end.

Then, verse 24:

So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak.

The picture is this. Jacob is there – alone – at night – quiet, dark – when a man suddenly appears and begins to wrestle with him.

I would imagine Jacob would have been petrified. This is the night before the great day. He is worried enough and suddenly a man jumps him and attacks him and will not let him go.

Did Jacob know from the start that this was God? – Hard to say but probably not.

In fact at this point he is probably fighting just to get away from this attacker.

Jacob might be 97 – but remember the Patriarchs were very long lived. At 77 – Jacob had the physical strength to roll away a stone that usually took several men to move. He is still a strong vigorous man.

But try as he might he can't shake this attacker. The struggle goes on through the night.

I'm not much of a wrestler. In fact my only wrestling was with my brother when I was young.

But I did find that wrestling takes every muscle in your body and is exhausting. Olympic wrestling involves just three two minute periods because it is so draining. So to wrestle all night would be totally exhausting.

Verse 25:

When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man.

In Olympic wrestling – both competitors have to meet strict weight requirements – to make sure they are evenly matched.

Jacob is wrestling God. How much does God weigh? What does omnipotence register on the scales?

God could have exerted the merest portion of strength and flattened Jacob.

This comment that the man could not overpower him does not mean God could not beat Jacob in a one on one wrestling match.

No! God came as a man – tempered his ability to the point where he could wrestle Jacob all night. The point is that Jacob was not going to give in. God wrestled all night and Jacob would not surrender.

It seems that somewhere through the fight – Jacob came to realise who this was – and the struggle moved from Jacob trying to get away – to Jacob refusing to let God go.

Finally, face to face with God – Jacob realised the truth – what I need is the blessing of God. If I lose my life, my family, my possessions – it is OK as long as I have the blessing of God.

Suddenly the lights went on – all he needs is God – the real One he has to wrestle with is God *not* Esau – and he will not let go until God blesses him.

He wrestles all night and finally, the Lord struck Jacob's hip – dislocating it.

As a doctor I only saw one dislocated hip. It came after a high impact car accident and the man was in absolute agony.

This is not like a dislocated finger – or even a dislocated shoulder – this is the most intense agony.

Verse 26:

Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."

God says – we have wrestled all night. Your hip is dislocated. C'mon Jacob – deceiver – self-centred man – just let go.

But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

This is one of the most incredible verses in Scripture.

Watch Rugby League. Someone does an anterior cruciate ligament or dislocates a shoulder in a tackle. They let go of the tackle straight away rolling on the ground in agony.

Jacob is utterly exhausted – his hip is dislocated – he is in agony – and he says – I ... will ... not ... let... You ... go ... unless ... You ... bless ... me.

All his life he strove to find meaning in all the wrong places. Now he finally knows where it can be found. Despite the pain and exhaustion and cost – he won't let go. He has to have the blessing of God Himself.

This is a prayer. This is so different to his prayer at Bethel. **If** you bless me materially – **then** I will serve you.

There is no 'if ... then' here. No do something for me.

This is different to his prayer earlier in the night when he asked God to save His life and spare his prosperity.

This is Job 13:15:

Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him.

This is a man who finally understands that he has to have the blessing of God at any cost.

Verses 27 and 28:

The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome."

All his life – Jacob has struggled with God and man. He came out of the womb grasping Esau's heel. He struggled with Esau for the blessing and the birthright. He struggled with Laban. He struggled with God who only wanted to bless Him and be with him and Jacob wanted a more earthly blessing.

Jacob spent his life struggling with God and man to find satisfaction and the peace in his soul we all long for.

Jacob was a deceiver and as Esau said in Genesis 27:36 – “Isn’t he rightly named Jacob? He has deceived me these two times.”

God asks – what is your name? He says with great shame – It is Jacob – I have spent my life deceiving men to get what I want. My life has been one of Jacob – deception.

But now – the Lord says – now you will be known as **Israel**.

There is much debate about what the name Israel means. Some have suggested it means – **he has striven with God**. But the most likely translation is – **Let God rule**.

Here is the great transition. Up until this point – the ruler of Jacob’s life is Jacob. He decides what he needs, what will satisfy, what will bring joy. He deceives, he uses, he makes deals, he does whatever it takes to bring what he thinks will satisfy him.

Finally, the lights come on. He was created to *Let God Rule* his life.

All he needs is God. God will feed his soul. God will be his joy. God will give him all good things. God will satisfy the ache he has spent his life looking to feed.

Saving his life, preserving his family and possessions, overcoming Esau – these will not bring the joy and peace that the blessing of God will bring. Finally, this truth sinks in.

Verse 29:

Jacob said, “Please tell me your name.” But he replied, “Why do you ask my name?” Then he blessed him there.

Jacob asks God for His name. His reply basically means – You know who I am. I am God.

The Lord then blesses Jacob. Verse 30:

So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.”

Jacob can barely believe that he has wrestled with God, seen His face and lived. Verse 31:

The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip.

The movement from night to day is symbolic of Jacob moving from self dependence to dependence on God – from soul night to soul day. And Jacob still bore the pain of His struggle with the Lord.

Verse 32:

Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip, because the socket of Jacob's hip was touched near the tendon.

By this practice – the Israelites memorialised the day Jacob became Israel.

Jacob left that night a changed man. And having wrestled with God – having come to know that all he needs is the blessing of God. Knowing that to live is Christ and to die is gain – he was finally ready to meet Esau.

Genesis 33:1-2:

Jacob looked up and there was Esau, coming with his four hundred men; so he divided the children among Leah, Rachel and the two maidservants. He put the maidservants and their children in front, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph in the rear.

It is interesting to note that when Abram became Abraham – he was only known as Abraham from that day forward. The same as Sarai becoming Sarah.

But – Jacob is known as **both** Jacob and Israel from this day forward – because while he is now Israel – **Let God rule** – there are still elements of the old Jacob – the deceiver.

When he summons his sons and blesses them in Genesis 49:22 he says:

Assemble and listen, sons of Jacob; listen to your father Israel.

He is both Jacob and Israel.

We see the old Jacob in decisions such as favouring Joseph and Benjamin over his other sons.

But we see the faith of Israel when he insisted on having his body taken from Egypt back to Canaan to be buried in the cave of Machpelah.

Even in this chapter – chapter 32, we see Jacob and Israel.

He is Jacob in that he shows favouritism among his wives and children. Put Rachel and Joseph at the back – the safest part. But he is Israel in that he sets out in front to meet Esau.

In chapter 31 – he remained at the rear – behind the gifts, the wives, the children and the possessions. Here he is out in front. He no longer is fearful of his life. To live is Christ, to die is gain.

It took courage to head out alone to Esau and the four hundred men. But Jacob went in faith – God would be with him.

Verses 3-11:

He himself went on ahead and bowed down to the ground seven times as he approached his brother. But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept. Then Esau looked up and saw the women and children. "Who are these with you?" he asked. Jacob answered, "They are the children God has graciously given your servant." Then the maidservants and their children approached and bowed down. Next, Leah and her children came and bowed down. Last of all came Joseph and Rachel, and they too bowed down. Esau asked, "What do you mean by all these droves I met?" "To find favour in your eyes, my lord," he said. But Esau said, "I already have plenty, my brother. Keep what you have for yourself." "No, please!" said Jacob. "If I have found favour in your eyes, accept this gift from me. For to see your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favourably. Please accept the present that was brought to you, for God has been gracious to me and I have all I need." And because Jacob insisted, Esau accepted it.

Jacob approaches Esau. The key to understanding what is going on here is in verse 11. It is unfortunate that many translations use – gift or present in verse 11 when the word is blessing. The same word that describes the blessing Jacob stole. Verse 11 literally reads:

Please accept the *blessing* that was brought to you, for God has been gracious to me and I have *all*.

Jacob stole Esau's blessing because he wanted the prosperity and leadership that came with it.

Listen to the blessing Isaac gave Jacob in Genesis 27:28-29:

May God give you of heaven's dew and of earth's richness—an abundance of grain and new wine.

God blessed Jacob with flocks and herds. Jacob now presents this gift to Esau.

May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you.

But Jacob bows down seven times to Esau. He calls Esau – My lord.

May those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed.

Jacob seeks favour from Esau who cursed him.

Jacob knows that the Abrahamic blessing is his – God gave it to him. But the aspects of the blessing that once drove him – prosperity, leadership, worldly acclaim – these aren't what drive him now.

He offers these to Esau. It is a form of restitution. Jacob has to do this to restore the relationship – that is why he presses Esau to take the gift.

But Esau declines. What once drove Esau no longer drives him. Esau has 400 men – he is obviously prospering without the blessing.

When Jacob says – to see your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favourably – means that Jacob saw the face of God at Peniel and lived and now he has seen the face of Esau and lived.

His life, his possessions, his family – they no longer occupied the supreme place in Jacob's heart – it was God.

Jacob once saw God and the blessing of God as a means to an end – a cargo cult view of God.

Now he knows – God is an end in Himself. The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

Now Jacob can echo the words of David in Psalm 42:1-2:

As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?

As we conclude, there is one dominant question that arises from this passage – have you wrestled with God at Peniel – and come to the place where you will not let Him go till He blesses you?

Do you want God for Himself or for the worldly blessing He might give you?

Do you know in your heart – not just your head – these other things can't satisfy – I need God?

Jacob became Israel – Let God Rule. And Israel became the name of the nation. They were to be a nation ruled by God – corporately and individually.

Then, in the fullness of time, One appeared who was the true Israel – Jesus. Who although He was God did not regard equality with God something to be grasped.

He did not seek satisfaction in wealth, or worldly power, or anything of this world. His food was to know God. He spent hours in prayer and meditation. He submitted Himself fully to God – and thus was fully satisfied in this life.

And He said – in Me is life. Know me and live. Satisfy yourself in Me. You cannot serve two masters. You cannot find joy in the world. You were created to know Me and live.

You and I know this. But Jacob knew it. For decades he kept going back to his old ways. Seeking joy in things and people and the world.

We do the same. We gather on Sundays and sing of how God and God alone is all we need. Then we spend our week seeking things and crying out to God when we don't get them.

We look for satisfaction in TV and relationships and houses and ipods – and even though we know they don't satisfy – we keep going back.

And as for prayer and the Word and meditation and fasting and fellowship – the disciplines that draw us to God and feed our soul – they shrivel and waste away – even though we know that is where life is.

But if we are to find joy – somewhere we have to come to our Peniel and wrestle with God. Come to the place where no matter the cost, the pain – we have to have that blessing – nothing else will do!

When I read this account a couple of things jumped out at me. Here is Jacob – alone – worried about Esau and his life and his family and his flocks. Why didn't God come to him and say:

Jacob, Jacob, Jacob – how many times must I tell you – find your joy in Me!
Don't worry about Esau – seek Me.

Why just turn up and physically wrestle with him?

And why oh why did God maim Jacob – cripple him for the rest of his days?

Here are the answers. It is a rare sermon that changes your life. I would guess that it is a very rare Sunday that you learn something important you didn't already know. It is a far rarer Sunday that a sermon actually changes the way you live.

We don't learn in the depths of our soul in a way that changes us – just through just hearing. We learn through pain and struggle and wrestling.

Listen to Romans 5:1-5:

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

Suffering teaches us about God. It is through suffering that we develop the perseverance and character and hope that leads us to peace with God.

Suffering weans us from this world and shows us that what we really need is Jesus Christ.

When Jacob had his Peniel – I am sure he wept over the lost decades. Years he spent searching for peace and joy in all the wrong places – when he knew where to look – he just didn't turn to God alone.

You and I spend years amassing stuff – that ends up in a garage sale and working huge hours when our kids are young and we wonder why our souls are shrivelling.

God didn't come to give us stuff and families and careers – He came to give us Christ and in Him to find life.

Jacob limped every day for the rest of his life – and I believe that he thanked God for it daily. The pain of the limp reminded him of Peniel – all he needs is God. The rest is fluff.

When the children of Israel asked their fathers – Father, why don't we eat the tendon on the hip? – they could say – because that is when Jacob became Israel – the deceiver realised that he had to let God rule. And we are Israel – the people who let God rule our lives. Seek God and God alone my son.

I am sure you have your limps and scars. Times when you have wrestled with God.

A struggle with cancer that showed you – God is what is really important. To live is Christ, to die is gain. A scar from having sought wealth only to find it didn't satisfy when you got it. A failed relationship that could never take the place of God.

You don't learn the great lessons in times of prosperity – they come in times of wrestling and suffering. Times that really cost us. Times that teach us the truth of Psalm 73:25-26:

Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.
My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

The question is – have you learned their lesson – or are there more struggles to come? Does God have to come down – wrestle you all night – shatter your hip – to get your attention?

God wants you to find joy in Him. He wants you to live for Him. He wants you to be a true Israel – panting for Him like the parched deer pants for the water brooks.

Then you will know life. Then your soul will live. Then you can face life or death – poverty or wealth – marriage or singleness – freedom or persecution – because you have Christ and nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Brothers and sisters. I can stand here and tell you that apart from Christ – money doesn't satisfy – relationships don't satisfy – the world doesn't satisfy – till I am blue in the face. But the truth is – while I know it – I still feel pull of money and the world.

I don't learn that way. I learn like Jacob – chasing it – living for it – sacrificing family for it – only to find it tastes bitter. Only to find my soul finally turning to God and finding joy. This is how I learn.

Brothers and sisters. You know what satisfies your soul. You know what does not satisfy your soul.

But have you had your Peniel? The night when you wrestle with God and He maims you for life – to teach you that He and He alone can satisfy.

How many times will you strive and come up empty before you cease striving and know He is God? What will it take to break you from suckling on the dry breast of this world?

But this is a lesson we have to learn if we are to become the people God called us to be.

Listen to Paul. Philippians 3:7-11:

But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

This is the real lesson of Jacob who became Israel – I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.