

Midweek Meditation, January 27, 2021

Genesis 32

You may remember from last week, Jacob made all of the arrangements to sever his ties with his Uncle Laban. He had been working for Laban for 20 years now. He set out from Canaan 20 years ago, partly to run away from his brother Esau, after stealing Esau's birthright, and partly, Jacob was sent to find a wife from the people of the homeland of his parents. On his journey, he had a dream where he was standing at the entrance to the kingdom of heaven. He could see angels coming and going up and down a stairway that led to heaven. When he woke up, he made a vow, that if God was with him on this journey, he would give 1/10th of the blessing that he had received from God. I believe that Jacob's perception was that God led him to Rachel. But beyond that, for the next 20 years or so, Jacob pretty much trusted in Jacob. He worked for Laban for 14 years and for his troubles, he ended up with one wife who he loved and one wife that he didn't love. He also ended up with two other wives who were the maidservants of Rachel and Leah, his first two wives. Along with his wives, he received a lot of family turmoil because of the dysfunctional nature of his family. He also was blessed with 12 sons and of them one was of Rachel and that child, Joseph, was his favorite, because he shared Joseph with the one of his wives that he truly loved, Rachel. When he arrived in Paddan Aram, Jacob started with almost nothing. He had the blessing of his dream about the stairway to heaven, and almost immediately upon his arrival in Paddan Aram, he fell in love with Rachel. Other than that, he had his staff. We have spent the last several meditations talking about how Jacob worked for his Uncle Laban mostly so that he could be given the hand of Rachel in marriage. In the process, Laban, by taking advantage of Jacob and his daughters, Leah and Rachel, becomes wealthy over the next 14 years. Jacob, in frustration, asks, when are some of my labors going to benefit my family. So Jacob feels compelled to take his wives and his family and go back to Canaan. But Laban talks him into staying for 6 more years and in that time, because of God's blessing, Jacob becomes wealthy, and Laban loses much of his wealth. That makes Laban angry, and so Jacob decides that it is time to go, and leaves in secret with all of his family and livestock. Laban pursues Jacob, and in the end. Laban and Jacob come to a peaceful covenant. That summary leads us to where we are now in chapter 32

of Genesis. The important thing that we need to know about Jacob is that, in this whole 20 years of serving Laban, Jacob demonstrates very little, to no trust or dependence on God. He tries to navigate every single encounter using his own resources. The first mention of God in the whole story is when he acknowledges that his wealth and success in his final 6 years with Laban was only by the providence of God. We pick up the story after Laban and Jacob come to their agreement of borders and peace. Jacob and his clan are on the outskirts of the land of Canaan. Jacob realizes that he is going to have to encounter his brother, Esau. And he has no idea if Esau's anger has subsided or grown more intense over the years. Not long after Jacob and Laban parted ways, angels came to Jacob and told him that "This is the camp of God." Now, one would think that Jacob would feel some comfort about his coming encounter with Esau. Perhaps if he is dwelling in the "camp of God," he would feel that God might protect him from the wrath of his brother. But Jacob seems to continue to try to manage his own affairs rather than trusting in God's provision and protection. He sends out messengers to his brother, Esau. He tells the messengers, "This is what you are say to my master, Esau; 'Your servant, Jacob says, I have been staying with Laban, and have remained there until now. I have cattle and donkeys, sheep and goats, menservants and maidservants. Now I am sending this message to my Lord that I might find favor in your eyes. Jacob does his best to humble himself before his brother, Esau, as is shown by the humble words that he uses in the message that he sends to Esau. But the news, at least in Jacob's eyes, does not sound too good. Esau is coming to meet him okay, but he is bringing 400 of his friends with him. And that terrifies Jacob, so he decides to divide his company in two groups, hoping that if one group gets attacked by Esau, then the other might escape his wrath. Then he prays. And for Jacob, this prayer is a key reflection of this process of Jacob, growing from Jacob the trickster; Jacob the deceiver, Jacob the controller of his own destiny, into the servant of God that he was destined to become. In his prayer, he either he reminds God of all the things that God has promised, Or, he is praising God for all of those blessings. Either way, it is the first time in a while, that Jacob has decided to turn it over to God. In his prayer he reminds God, I am here, because this is what you told me to do. He says to God, 20 years ago, I had only my staff, and now I have all of your blessings. I am not worthy of all of this blessing. Save me, I pray. I am afraid that my brother will

attack me and my family. He kind of says to God, this can't be the end, you promised me that you would cause me to prosper and have many descendants. It can't end this way, Can it? After his prayer, he sort of took the reigns back from God and took matters back into his own hands again. He sent his servants out in several groups to find Esau. The servants were bearing all kinds of gifts in the hope of causing Esau to show him mercy. That night, after the servants had gone ahead of him, Jacob got up and he took his two wives and his two maid servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok River. After he has sent his family and all of his belongings across the river, Jacob was alone when he encountered a man and the man wrestled with him all night until daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower Jacob, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that Jacob's hip was wrenched. This verse, is probably better understood to mean, that when the man, who was God, saw that Jacob was not willing to give up; not willing to submit, then the man asked Jacob to let him go. But Jacob said that he would not let the man go unless the man would bless him. In this, God showed Jacob and really all of us, that simply by the touch of God's hand, God could take control. Then the man asked Jacob, "What is your name." Jacob replied, "My name is Jacob." Then the man, who Jacob now, obviously recognized as God, said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome." Then Jacob said, "Please tell me your name." But the man replied, "Why do you ask my name" God was calling Jacob out. You just asked for my blessing, meaning you know that I am God, so why to you ask me what my name is. Then the man blessed Jacob right there and then. Then Jacob called that place Peniel, because Jacob saw God face to face and survived. Chapter 32 is a lot to cover, but we have to look at this story as a whole, or it would not make sense. Jacob is now Israel. He has now been ordained by God for the work that would occupy the rest of his life. All of the components of his life have helped to shape and mold him in to the servant of God that he has become. Through all of his trials, climaxing with him actually wrestling with God, he has been transformed from Jacob, the trickster, Jacob the deceiver, Jacob the finagler, into Israel, God's chosen to lead the nation of God's chosen people. In the Old Testament a change of a name meant the change of a person's character. Abram to Abraham. Jacob to Israel. God may not change our name, but God does transform our character if we allow him to do so. Just

think of how one part of your life prepares you for another. Often, we don't even realize that God is using the events of today to prepare us for the role he has instore for us tomorrow. Jacob's journey mirror's Peter's. Peter, just like Jacob, thought he knew best. I will never fall away, even if I must die with you. How did that work out for Peter? Peter said to Jesus, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus said, If I don't wash your feet, you will have no part in me." When the rooster crowed, Peter found himself completely separate from God, because he thought he knew better, and he tried to do it on his own not unlike Jacob. Peter, as it turned out, had his own Jacob experience, and he was transformed by God. Paul had his own Jacob experience, and he too was transformed by God. I believe that if we are willing to live in the glory of the cross of Jesus, And the glory of the of the sacrifice that Jesus made for us, then, by God's grace, we can all have our own Jacob experience, where we are transformed into the instrument of God's purpose, that God intended for us, from before we were born. We need only to accept our new name, Christ's own, and stay in the new place that is the result of the transformation that accompanies the process of us accepting God's love. Next time, we will see what happens to Jacob and his company when they encounter Esau and reenter the land of Canaan. Let us Pray