

More than a Conqueror?

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[0 : 0 0] take two sermons worth to get through it, but it will help to have it in front of us as we look at these words, and let's pray as we do so. Father, we thank you for this wonderful narrative of your grace towards the fathers of the faithful. We thank you, Lord, because we know if we are in Christ that this is our family history, our story, and we thank you that in Christ that same grace has come to us. So please, Lord, through our time in your word today, speak to us and draw us near to Christ our Savior so that we might experience more of your grace, for we ask in his name. Amen.

Well, we have been on quite a journey. We set out on an epic journey, didn't we, with Jacob in chapter 28, and today we're coming full circle back in chapter 33. Jacob ran from a brother who vowed to kill him. Now, after 20 years, Jacob has to go back and face that brother again, and it's a long story, isn't it? It's quite hard for us to hold it all together in our heads, especially when we're kind of just coming back each Sunday to it, but it's a little bit like the Lion King. Hey, you've seen that, haven't you, the Lion King? Uncle Scar frightens Simba away, and then there's that kind of time lapse where Simba goes from being the kind of the baby cub lion to the big lion with his mane, and then comes the time, all grown up, when he has to go back and face Uncle Scar again, and he is afraid afraid of facing up to the consequences of what he thinks he has done. I hope that helps us. Obviously, this isn't the Lion King. The big difference, I guess, for our understanding of this, these words, is that Jacob really has done something that he should feel deeply ashamed of, and has good reason to fear facing up to you. Okay, spoiler alert, Simba didn't kill Mufasa, but Jacob did steal his brother's identity and lied to their father so that he could steal his brother's blessing. That's why he had to leave home in the first place, remember? But it turned out, didn't it, that lying, cheating, and stealing ran in the family. Uncle Laban had been playing that game much longer than Jacob, and so while Jacob was living under Laban's roof, he was slowly hung on his own gallows.

The deceiver was deceived, until at last Jacob leaves Laban and starts heading home, but now, now he hears that Esau is on his way to meet him with 400 men. So, out of the frying pan, into the fire, or is it? Will these brothers simply pick up where they left off in a fight to the death, or has everything changed now? Is this the same Jacob that we saw leave home all that time ago, or is he different now that he has been on the road with God? Will this be Jacob's downfall, or will it be the triumphant homecoming that God promised him back at the beginning?

Will God keep his promises, and will Jacob trust him to keep them? Well, let's get into it and see, and on our way through, we'll see how it connects with us today. We've got three points this morning. Firstly, Genesis shows us Jacob's fear-driven faith.

Fear-driven faith. If that sounds a bit complicated, it's a bit of a tongue twister, isn't it, really? Well, I think that that is because Jacob's heart is a bit complicated.

[4 : 0 6] Okay, Jacob sends a message to Esau saying, look, I'm coming home, brother, and I really hope we can bury the hatchet. Let's put our issues to rest. I can pay you back for what I stole. I've got animals, I've got servants. Please just let's be at peace. I have sent to tell my Lord in order that I may find favor or grace in your sight. And back come the messengers, but no reply from Esau.

Instead, verse 6, the messengers return to Jacob saying, we came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and there are 400 men with him. Now, those 400 men could be an army coming out to fight against him, or it could be a welcoming party coming to celebrate his return. It's not clear in the text.

What is clear is which one Jacob thinks it is. You can see it, can't you? The blood drains from his face, and his chest tightens. Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed. Now, Old Testament stories don't often tell us how people felt. Normally, we're left to wonder, but here we're told, Genesis is telling us up front that everything that Jacob does next is being driven by overwhelming fear.

Okay, Jacob has been running from his past sins, but now he has nowhere to hide, right? It's like the letter from the bank saying, we're going to repossess your house, or from the police saying, we're pressing charges, and he knows he's in the wrong. So first, he turns to damage control, doesn't he?

Splits everything he owns into two halves and sends them in opposite directions. So he thinks if Esau comes to one camp and attacks it, then the camp that's left will escape. And later on, he starts, doesn't he?

[6 : 12] He's sending gift after gift after gift to Esau. And not just what he had kicking down the back of the drawer, but his very best stuff. Literal flocks of sheep and goats and herds of cows and donkeys. I don't know what a group of donkeys is, but groups of donkeys and camels and calves, doesn't he? Right?

Take my Porsche and the Bentley and the Rolls Royce. Take half my business and my pension and my savings, he says. And finally, when night comes, he sends his family, whatever's left, across the river and goes back to bed alone. He's getting those panicky thoughts in the night, isn't he? Did I lock the door? Just go down and check. Just better put the bolt on, haven't I? Just in case he comes.

He's doing everything in his power to turn away Esau's wrath and to protect his family. So much so, he reflects in his prayer, doesn't he, that he first crossed the river 20 years ago, just him and his walking stick. Well, just think in one evening, he's put himself right back to where he began. Him and his stick. That's how far he's gone. He's let go of everything he has and it is being driven by one thing, rampant, uncontrolled fear. Now, I imagine that we all know what that feels like to some extent, right? The situation is spinning out of control and overwhelming dread hangs over us and starts to make our decisions for us, right? Fear takes over our control center and we begin to decide things and do things and say things because we are afraid, right? Fear drives us, doesn't it, to say things we would never think to say when we feel in control, to do things we'd never think to do when we are in control. And friends, it doesn't have to be a crisis, does it? If you know that you've wronged someone or you're living out of step with God's word, fear of facing up to it hums in the background of our hearts all the time, doesn't it? Fear of being caught, found out, facing the music. And that fear will burst out of us in rash decisions, overreactions, harsh words.

I wonder as you look back at the last week or months, perhaps you see that kind of behavior in you. Worth asking, isn't it, are they symptoms of a guilty conscience?

Am I putting off facing up to God or facing up to someone else who I know that I have wronged for fear of what I think will happen to me if I do? But in the middle of that panic, Jacob also prays the best prayer we have on record that he ever prayed. And friends, that's why it's such a spiritual tongue twister, because in his heart is a paradox of attention, fear, and faith, right? Just look at his prayer with me in verse 9. It's worth hearing it again, isn't it? Jacob said, O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord who said to me, return to your country and to your kindred that I may do you good. I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you've shown to your servant.

[10:01] For with only my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now I've become two camps. Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, that he may come and attack me, the mothers with the children. But you said, I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea which cannot be numbered for multitude. It's a brilliant prayer, isn't it? It just captures the difference that those 20 years have made in his life, right? Back when God first revealed himself to Jacob, he said, I am the God of your father Abraham and of Isaac, and he calls him that, doesn't he? But he also calls him, look, Lord in capitals, which stands in our translation for God's personal name. So God in those 20 years has gone from being a sort of distant family friend to being his personal God who he walks with. They're on first name terms now, him and God, a personal relationship. And he recognizes God's faithfulness to him over the years, doesn't he? There's two words in verse 10 that stand out. We've met them before in Genesis. Steadfast love and faithfulness.

In Hebrew, *chesed* and *emet*. And they often come together in the Old Testament, and they sum up God's unchanging stance or posture towards his people. And Jacob counts up, doesn't he, all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that the Lord's shown him? As if in his head, he's got these two columns, right? That he's just kind of itemizing each act of love and faithfulness, faithfulness and love. The list goes on and on, and he admits that he does not deserve even the smallest item on either of those lists. Not the least *chesed* or *emet* that God has shown. God's love and faithfulness are seen in his camps and his family, right? God at first promised, didn't he, to give him all that he needed and to grow his family. He remembers that God's promise from that sleepless night that his children would outnumber the grains of sand by the sea. And so now on the back of who he knows God to be, and all that God has done for him, he prays that God would please deliver me from the hand of my brother, for I fear him. Fear-driven faith. And it's fear-driven faith because this prayer for all of its beauty is one of four things, right, that Jacob does to avoid facing the consequences for his sin.

It is still, brothers and sisters, it is still a genuine and a heartfelt prayer to the true God. But it's like we know, don't we, when things are closing in on us, and when things are getting too much, we do everything we can until we run out of things to do, and then what do we say?

There's nothing we can do now but pray. Or it's like those desperate prayers we throw up quickly before we set out trying to fix it ourselves. Don't we do that? We save real desperate prayer for a crisis and then only pray as a last resort, or throw away line or two. Fear has driven Jacob to his knees, but we know from the rest of the story that that's really where he could have stayed.

Because we find out the other three things he does are a complete waste of time. The only thing that makes a difference here for Jacob and in our lives, brothers and sisters, is clinging to our faithful God and loving Heavenly Father and telling him, we're afraid.

[14:14] I fear him. And asking him, please, to have mercy on us and spare us what we fear. Remembering, of course, that if we are in Christ, then he has already spared us the most fearful consequences of what we have gotten wrong by sending his son to take the eternal punishment for our sin so that we would never have to face that consequence.

Friends, how readily, how fully do you turn then to our loving and faithful God for help and rescue from what you fear? What are your prayers like when you are in a panic or in a crisis?

I wonder, do you have a fear-driven faith? A faith that hedges your bets and spreads the risk? Jesus, Jesus plus whatever I can do. Prayer is a last resort. Or do you have a faith-driven fear?

That's our second point, faith-driven fear. And we see the shift in the second half of chapter 32 in this really strange encounter, right? Jacob was left alone and a man wrestled with him.

Now, if you're new to the Bible this morning, let me just say that this doesn't happen all the time on every page of the Bible, just strange figures turning up and wrestling people, right? It's mysterious.

[15 : 47] And it's hard to know where to start. But let's just try and get a sense of it, shall we? Firstly, it's the man who initiates the struggle with Jacob, not the other way around, okay? It's a man wrestled with him, not he wrestled with a man, okay? So the man has the initiative. Secondly, when we hear wrestling, I don't know what you think of. My mind goes straight to like WWE, like SmackDown, WrestleMania, like, or maybe, you know, rolling around with the kids of an evening. If you popped around at six o'clock on most evenings, you would find that kind of wrestling, okay? Rolling about the floor.

This here is more like sumo or judo wrestling. Maybe you saw that during the Olympics on the TV, where the two guys are locked in a struggle, right? They're clinging to each other. They're trying to get each other in a hold. Hence why this man says, verse 26, let me go, right? Jacob is clinging onto him. It's that kind of wrestling, which is weird, isn't it? When you think, Jacob's been set upon by this mysterious figure in the night. Surely he'd be trying to get rid of him, right? Not hold onto him. Isn't that strange? And the man has come to him and wants to get away by that point. Let me go, he says. But he doesn't. So thirdly, this man shows he could have easily floored Jacob at any point he wanted. With a touch, verse 25, Luke, he puts his hip out of joints.

Those of you who've dislocated joints know how painful that is, maybe how hard you have to work to get it back in. But with a touch, he dislocates his hip without even trying. So when it says that this guy didn't prevail against Jacob, we're not meant to imagine that they are equally matched, right? I think the point is that the so-called man has brought himself down to Jacob's level and held back his strength. And Jacob has met him and hasn't given up or let go.

So this match, this wrestling match, isn't a simple test of strength, like who's stronger of these two. It's a test of Jacob's grip. How firmly can he hold on to one who is countless times mightier than him?

The key, of course, to the mystery is in verse 30. Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, for I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered. So it wasn't a man.

[18 : 41] After all, it was God all along, which raises even more questions, doesn't it? Which Genesis is not interested in, okay? How did God come as a man? Come and ask me afterwards, and I'll happily talk that through with you. But for now, it's enough to see that it is God who wrestled Jacob, and that begins to unpick the mystery and the point, okay? Jacob went to bed terrified of being attacked by a man, and he prayed that God would deliver him from that. And so the last thing we think that God would do in answer to that prayer is come as a man and attack him, right? That is not the rescue he wanted or that we imagined, but it is the struggle and the rescue that Jacob needed. Because think about it, his real problem isn't his brother. It's his fear. And when we think about it, this is an even more miraculous rescue than, than say, God sending an army of angels to protect him or sending a bolt of lightning to strike Esau, isn't it? Because it's God himself who comes down and draws near and lays his hands on Jacob and brings the struggle and the blessing into his life. Friends, let me just bring this down, right? Sunny Sunday morning. Let me just try and bring it down for us today. If you are a Christian and the Christian life feels like a struggle for you, and if it felt like a fight even to be here today, and you feel like God is battling just for you to stay in it, if life feels like a wrestling match with God, that is not a bad thing. Right? The pastor John Calvin said it best when he wrote of God's people that it is necessary for them to wrestle with God, for while with his left hand he fights against us, with his right hand he fights for us. For at the same time as he lightly opposes us, he supplies invincible strength whereby we overcome. Right? Sorry to any lefties in the room, but his point is that it's with his weaker hand that he wrestles our fearful and our stubborn and proud hearts in a way that cripples us and leaves us limping. At the same time as with his stronger hand he fights against our enemies and gives us victory over sin and death and the devil. See brothers and sisters, can you see this? That the Lord is fighting for

Jacob by fighting against him. He's giving him the victory by giving him the struggle. He's delivering him from the controlling power of his fear by giving him a lifelong limp.

Right? Back at the start of this journey, a long time ago now, I introduced you to The Crook and the Lot by Thomas Boston, the man who said, remember, that everybody's lot in life has some crook or some struggle in it. And I went back and listened to all of that again and something really struck me, and I think it's true here in this passage, that while the struggle or the crook in our lives is painful and sometimes leaves us with a limp, we can trust that by wrestling with us and weakening us in that particular way, God is sparing us from the worst consequences that would result if we were left untouched by him. It's the repetitive or the tedious job that stops us from trusting in our work to give us the life we want. It's the difficult relationship at home that maybe you struggled with growing up or is a struggle now or the lack of relationship that stops you from resting your hope in home life or marriage or family for satisfaction. It's the illness that stops us looking for physical pleasure and comfort in this life only. It's the struggle that delivers us. It's the fight that sets us free.

Now, if that's something that you want to talk more about, please come and find me after or one of your life group leaders to have a chat. I know that this is touching a raw nerve, but our passage reminds us, brothers and sisters, that it is God who initiates those battles in our lives so that we would, what, what, go from having a fear-driven faith to a faith-driven fear that does not let him go.

Right, so that by the start of chapter 33, Jacob is able to meet Esau, isn't he, calmly and fearlessly. Why? Because he has wrestled with someone far mightier than Esau and has prevailed.

[23 : 54] And I take it that by prevailed there, it means the way that Jacob clung on to God and didn't let him go. Right, there was plenty during the day, wasn't there to set his hands to, to do this and that thing.

But it was when he refused to let go of the Lord. Let me go, he says. And what does Jacob say? Not without your blessing. He clung on. And it was only then that he started to know God's power at work in his life and experienced victory over the fear that ruled over him about the consequences of his sin.

And friends, that's true of us if we're Christians too. Notice that the Lord renames Jacob here Israel, which it tells us means strives with God or God strives. Both are true, aren't they, in Jacob's life.

But that comes to be the name not only of this individual, but of this family, the people of Israel. As if this moment in time, right, this scene in his life, this identity, one who wrestles with God and through that struggle experiences his strength and blessing, it becomes the identity and the experience of all of God's people.

It's who we are today, isn't it? If we're Christians, people who, because we trust God, therefore cling to him and refuse to give him up or let him go.

[25 : 22] And we hold on during the ups and downs of life. We wrestle with his providence and his will, knowing that he loves us and is true to us. Because in that struggle, not with our circumstances and situations, but in our struggle with him, we are given victory over our fear and shame and the consequences of our wrongdoing in each situation and each circumstance of our lives.

Paul writes in Romans 8 about the groaning that we do as we go through life in a world of sin. That is real groaning, isn't it? I trust you know that.

But then into that groaning, he writes this, Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?

No. In all these things, he says, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. How?

How? How? For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

[26 : 48] Now, we wouldn't have called Jacob more than a conqueror at the start of this chapter, would we? But by the end, God says he is. And not because he overcame his own fears and struggles, but because the Lord showed him a greater fear and a deeper struggle.

And by holding on to the Lord, instead of wrestling with his circumstances, he overcame his fear. You see, it was when he couldn't be separated from the love of God in the flesh that he became more than a conqueror.

Because in his steadfast love and faithfulness, the Lord has fought for us and overcome the penalty for our sins on the cross and given victory to those who take hold of him by faith and do not let him go.

So that, brothers and sisters, we do not need to be afraid anymore of the consequences of our sins or of our past catching up with us or of what someone might do or say to us who we've wronged.

Because our God has dealt fully with the consequences on the cross and now nothing can separate us from his love in Christ. And so, friends, let me ask you this morning, how is your hold on this God?

[28 : 18] How is your hold on him? Do you have a fear-driven faith in God, a loose grip on him that comes and goes as you set your hand to other things, this and that thing to protect you?

Or do you have a faith-driven fear of God that will not let him go without his blessing? Both can be genuine faith, but only one lets us experience the strength and victory that are ours in Christ.

Only one changes who we are and rewires our hearts. And perhaps you, as you think about that, you think, I don't really have any real grip on God this morning.

I don't know if I'd call myself a Christian. If that's you, so glad that you're here. I hope hearing about this that it's something that you want. Right? That you can have this freedom and security of this fully engaged relationship with God.

So, how can we put our faith in God fully and know that this is the life that we will really have? Well, briefly, our final point this morning, grace-driven faithfulness.

[29 : 29] Jacob calmly but cautiously greets Esau, doesn't he, the next day? It's clearly a different Jacob than we met at the start of the sermon.

A very different Jacob than we met earlier in our series. He is sorry for what he's done, isn't he? He wants to make up for it. And the evidence that God really has gone before Jacob and fought for him is that Esau doesn't need any of those gifts or strategies or cunning to be glad to see his brother again.

Right? Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him and he wept. What's it saying? The Lord has it all in hand. He's sorted it all out. But it's where the chapter ends that shows us the faithfulness of God in HD.

He's kept his promises to protect and provide for Jacob, to grow his family, to be with him wherever he's gone. But remember he also promised, didn't he, to bring him back again.

Which is what finally happens in verse 18. And Jacob came safely, safely to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan.

[30 : 37] And he buys that plot of land where he settles down. So now he owns his own patch of the promised land. So Jacob really is home.

Happily ever after. And what he does now, I think, is a really poignant and important thing to see. Perhaps you remember way back, Jacob said, If God will be with me, if he will keep me in the way that I go, if he will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, if, if, if, then the Lord will be my God.

Remember that? All those chapters ago. Well, now he's been on that epic journey with God. And he sets up an altar and calls it what in verse 20?

What does he call it, Luke? El Elohei Israel, which means the God, the God of Israel.

My God. My God. You did just what you promised, Lord. You have been as good as your word.

[31 : 47] Protect, protecting, providing your presence with me on the way. And now I'm home. So then, you are my God, who I worship and I live for.

And I find this really, really poignant and quite moving, because I know that one or two of you have started walking with God since we heard those words in the book of Genesis.

And you're walking with him today. And friends, dear friends, let this altar convince you that since you have started on that journey and put your trust in the promises of this God, that he will not leave you until he's done what he promised.

And you can worship and thank him as your faithful God today and raise that altar in your heart to him. And you can have faith in him as we all do.

Praise to you. Praise to you, the God, who kept Jacob wherever he went, through the highs and lows, the joys and the tears on every good day and bad, who was as good as his word and so is worthy of our faith.

[32 : 59] Friends, is this your God today? Is he your God? Whoever you are, you can take hold of him today as Jacob did and know that he will be with you and will bless you in Christ wherever you go.

So that with his people, you strive with him and walk with him, you can say confidently and sing with us as we will in a moment. It's his grace that has brought us safe this far and his grace will see us home.

Let's praise God as we pray together and then sing. Let's pray. God, our Father, God of steadfast love and faithfulness, how we thank you that in Christ we can call you our God and our Father, that we can really know you and walk with you and wrestle with you.

And Father, this morning we want to thank you for those difficult things in our lives that we wrestle with. Lord, we struggle, we wrestle, we weep, we limp.

But Lord, we know whose hand they come from and so we thank you for the struggles that free us from the sinful inclinations of our hearts and putting our trust in what is false and strip away the dross so that we might put an ever purer faith in you and rest upon you all the more fully.

[34 : 41] Father, we pray that when that struggle is hot and it is hard and heavy, that you would remind us that you give invincible strength to overcome to those who cling to you by faith.

Help us to do so, we pray. And Lord, by your grace that has brought us here, please do bring us home, keep us going, keep us wrestling and walking with you. And Father, I want to pray especially for those who have started out with you just in recent months and in the last year.

And Lord, that every step and every day of their lives, that they would raise that altar to you as their God, the God who is true to them and the God in whom they have trusted.

This we pray in your name. Amen. Amen.