

**SERMON: God Changes His People Through Struggles**

**SCRIPTURE: Genesis 32 & 33**

**SPEAKER: Josh Black**

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As many of you know my wife Maggie and I had our fifth baby 2 weeks ago. We already have 4 girls, and were blessed this time with a baby boy! His name is Abe. Many of you reminded us after he was born how much help we would be receiving from his 4 older sisters. You were right. The girls are so much help sometimes we wonder what we would do without them. They always want to hold him. That's their main way of helping. And so on top of the normal demands of having a baby we also have the privilege of managing whose turn it is to "help" hold the baby. Now don't get me wrong, we are very appreciative. And the motives are good. I think a couple of our girls would nurse little Abe if they were able. But there are just some things that big sisters can't do to help with a baby – they need Maggie and me to help. But there are also a whole host of things they're not interested in doing. For example, when Abe is crying, it's amazing how nobody's arguing about who gets to hold him anymore. Or if he has a dirty diaper only 2 out of the 6 of us are ever volunteering to help. Having a new baby in the house is a great joy for all of us, but it's also a big job. I've become convinced over the last 12 years of being married and having kids that the joys outweigh the hard work, but it's the hard parts of family life that make us better. God uses our struggles to change us into the people he wants us to be.

You and I aren't much different than my girls. We're really eager to do everything ourselves, as long as it isn't too much of a struggle. But there are some things in life that we really need help with. And sometimes it's only in the struggles that we really grow and change. We need God to do for us what we can't do for ourselves, and we need to let him work in us through our struggles. In the book of Genesis we meet a character named Jacob who had to learn some of these lessons the hard way.

Turn with me in your Bibles to Genesis 32 and 33. This is the story of Jacob, who is returning home to Canaan from his exile in Haran. Abraham also lived in Haran for a time on his way to Canaan. When Abraham arrived in the land of Canaan God promised him that he would make Abraham into a great nation, and that many nations would be blessed through Abraham's descendants. He promised Abraham that those who blessed him would be blessed and those who cursed him would be cursed. He promised Abraham that his descendants would be as many as the stars and that they would inhabit the land of Canaan. Sin had entered the world through the first man Adam, and by the time of Abraham, the world was a pretty messed up place. But God promised that he would bring salvation and redemption through Abraham's descendents. Abraham had a son Isaac. God said that the promise would be extended through Isaac. Isaac then had two sons, Jacob and Esau.

Where our story this morning picks up, Jacob has been in Haran with his uncle Laban for the last 20 years. On his way home, Jacob decides to initiate contact with his brother Esau, whom he has been estranged from since he left Canaan. Esau lives outside of the land of Canaan to the south, in the land of Edom. Our story takes place about 5 miles north of the Dead Sea on the East side of the Jordan, the river that served as the eastern border to the land of Canaan. This story is told

in 5 scenes. The first scene sets up the conflict between Jacob and his brother Esau. Please follow along as I read chapter 32 verses 1-5.

**Scene I: *Setting the Stage, Jacob's Conflict with Esau.*** (Gen. 32:1-5; Gen. 25-27)

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**Gen. 32:1-5:** *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 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 favor in your eyes.'"*

The angels mentioned in verse one seem to play no role in the rest of the story, but they indicate, first of all, that what is getting ready to take place is very significant; for God's angels never show up for no good reason. Secondly, these angels mark the presence of God in what will follow. God's hand is working throughout this entire story and throughout all of history. Nothing happens in this story or in our lives without God's involvement.

But the angels are still only backdrop. The question that concerns us most at this point is why Jacob would want to find favor in the eyes of Esau? Twenty years earlier Jacob stole the blessing that their father Isaac had intended for the firstborn son, Esau. They have been estranged ever since. And so when Jacob instructs his servants to refer to Esau as 'lord,' and himself as Esau's "servant" he is acknowledging his debt to Esau and is indicating that he would like to make peace.

But the injury to Esau goes even deeper than the stealing of the blessing. That wasn't the first time that Jacob had tried to take something that wasn't his. Jacob and Esau were twins and Jacob was wrestling with Esau even in the womb. As Esau was born Jacob reached out of the womb and grabbed him by the heel. That's why he was named Jacob. The name Jacob means "he grasps the heel;" or figuratively, "he deceives." The name Jacob resembles a Hebrew verb which means, "to wrestle" or "to struggle" or "to strive" or "to fight." Jacob's very name was a reminder of what had marked his life. Jacob also tricked Esau into selling his birthright for a bowl of soup. But stealing Esau's blessing was the biggest offense, and with their history, peace would be a major accomplishment. Turn in your Bibles to Genesis 27 to see exactly what Jacob took from Esau.

Jacob went to his father Isaac, who was blind in his old age, and pretended to be the firstborn Esau, so that he could get the blessing from Isaac that was intended for Esau. After lying to his father, Jacob convinced him that he was Esau and received the blessing from his father. In Genesis 27:28-29 we read what the blessing was.

**Gen. 27:28-29:** *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.*

Do you see how big this is? He's not just stealing some nice words from his father. He's receiving the very blessing given to Abraham: "May those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed." The baton of the covenant promises are being passed to Jacob instead of the firstborn, Esau. And what does Esau get in return?

**Gen. 27:34-40:** *When Esau heard his father's words, he burst out with a loud and bitter cry and said to his father, "Bless me – me too, my father!" But he said, "Your brother came deceitfully and took your blessing." Esau said, "Isn't he rightly named Jacob? He has deceived me these two times: He took my birthright, and now he's taken my blessing!" Then he asked, "Haven't you reserved any blessing for me?" Isaac answered Esau, "I have made him lord over you and have made all his relatives his servants, and I have sustained him with grain and new wine. So what can I possibly do for you, my son?" Esau said to his father, "Do you have only one blessing, my father? Bless me too, my father!" Then Esau wept aloud. His father Isaac answered him, "Your dwelling will be away from the earth's richness, away from the dew of heaven above. You will live by the sword and you will serve your brother. But when you grow restless, you will throw his yoke from off your neck.*

You can hear the desperation in Esau's voice and only imagine the emotion that must have been pent up inside of him as his inheritance was taken from him in a moment. But this reversal of the blessing and inheritance was not a sudden thing in God's eye. It was actually prophesied before the boys were even born. Turn to Genesis chapter 25. Before the boys were born, this is what God told their mother Rebekah.

**Gen. 25:23:** *The LORD said to [their mother, Rebekah], "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger."*

When Jacob stole Esau's blessing we don't know if he knew he was the one God intended to pass Abrahamic blessing on to. But we do know the way he went about obtaining the blessing was surely not according to God's will. He acted as a thief. He was deceptive. He did whatever it took to get what he wanted. He lied to his father. So is it any surprise that Esau did not view Jacob with favor? Jacob fled to Haran because the last he knew Esau was comforting himself only with thoughts of Jacob's murder.

And therefore in view of all of these things, it is no surprise Jacob is hoping to find favor in the sight of Esau. He is obviously aware of the significance of his actions and the intensity of Esau's anger. So he tells his servants to refer to Esau as "lord" and to make sure Esau knows that Jacob is now rich, with livestock. Maybe there could be a bargain for peace. But the news back from his messengers doesn't help matters. This news is actually what creates the crisis in our story. As we move to scene two, please turn back to Genesis 32; I'll resume our story in verses 6-8.

### **Scene II, *Crisis and rising tension: Jacob prepares to meet Esau.* (32:6-23)**

**Gen. 32:6-8:** *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." 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."*

The narrator gives us no indication as to whether Esau received the messengers with favor. All Jacob knows is he sent messengers south to Seir, to try to win the favor of Esau and now Esau is coming to him with 400 men. The suspense is really building at this point. What will happen? Maybe the only glimmer of hope is in the fact that Esau didn't abduct or kill the messengers. But regardless, Jacob prepares for the worst. He divides his camp into two. Calculating the loss; it would be better to lose half of my camp than all of it, if defeat is inevitable.

Jacob was probably wondering at this point if all of his "striving" for blessing was worth it. Since Jacob left Canaan he has become a very rich man. He left with nothing, but now he has an entourage. He's married with 12 kids: 11 boys and 1 girl. But all of these things are surely in vain if he is to lose his very life now. He has been striving to gain external riches and blessing his whole life. Maybe his motivation has been to gain acceptance, significance, or security, but now he is at the end of himself and doesn't feel very significant. Defeat seems inevitable if he continues to go in the same direction he's been going.

Do you identify with Jacob at this point in the story? Are there problems in your life now that are consequences of your past actions? Maybe you have problems in your life that have nothing to do with anything you've done, good or bad, but they're problems nonetheless. Are there areas in your life where defeat seems inevitable? Is it a health problem, a financial crisis, a broken relationship, conflict in your family or marriage, unemployment, loneliness, depression? How are you responding to those situations? Are you "striving" and "fighting" to solve those problems on your own? Or is God's presence shaping your problems? In spite of Jacob's history he actually responds quite well to his situation. There is some evidence in verses 9-12 that God has been working on Jacob over the last 20 years, for Jacob responds by praying.<sup>1</sup>

**Gen. 32:9-12:** *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.'"*

Twenty years ago, when Jacob stole his brother's blessing he may or may not have had knowledge into God's plan for his life. But since that time Jacob has had more than one encounter with God, where God has made it clear to Jacob that the promises made to Abraham were being extended to him. These encounters with God have begun to transform Jacob.

The promises of God in some ways may seem far from possible at this crisis in Jacob's life, but this prayer is calling on the promises made not only to Jacob, but even to Abraham and Isaac. Even though Jacob has a history of throwing his weight around to get his way, he is acknowledging in this prayer that all of his blessings are from God. He puts his trust in God; that God will continue to be the source of his deliverance. God delivered his father and his

grandfather. God is able to deliver him. God made good on the promises to his father and his grandfather. God can make good on his promises to Jacob. He calls on God to do what he is unable to do. But is this prayer sincere?

For the next thing Jacob does, in vv. 13-18, is he prepares a huge gift to pacify Esau. He instructs his men to take 3 waves of gifts to Esau and to tell Esau that these gifts were from Jacob who was coming up behind them.

**Gen 32:20-21:** *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.*

Why is he doing all of this? Is this an indication that he doesn’t trust God? Did he not believe what he just prayed - that God would make good on his promises? Or is his behavior proof that he does trust God? Is this faith in action? Are the gifts given in fear or are they simply an acknowledgement of how great Jacob views the sin he has committed? I think it is fair to say that there may be a mixture here of faith, fear, and doubt. It is common in my life to experience this mixture of emotions when I’m at a crossroads. The next scene further reveals Jacob’s emotional state.

**Gen 32:22-23:** *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.*

These verses describe restlessness. He can’t sleep, maybe for two nights in a row. He’s trusting God, but his behavior seems to stem from great anxiety. He has been micromanaging his servants. He almost seems to be pacing, trying to decide if he’s made the right decision.

He says that he wants to meet Esau face to face, but only after he has pacified him with gifts. He wants to meet Esau face to face, but only after he spends another sleepless night in the camp (v. 21). He wants to meet Esau face to face, but he wants to be the last one to do it (in the back of the procession). Fed up and in a moment of desperation he has a sudden change of mind. He takes his family and possessions across the stream, but he goes back, presumably to go to the front of the line. He’s going to meet Esau face to face without all of these distractions. But, to his surprise, instead of meeting Esau, he has one of the most mysterious meetings recorded in all of Scripture. Look with me at verses 24-32 as we begin the third scene in this story.

### **Scene III, A Plot Twist: Jacob has an unexpected meeting with God (32:24-32)**

**Gen. 32:24-32:** *So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. 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. Then the man said, “Let me go, for it is daybreak.” But Jacob replied, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” 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.” Jacob said, “Please tell me your name.” But he replied, “Why do you ask my name?” Then he blessed him there. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my*

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

Jacob’s whole life has been marked to some degree by wrestling and fighting. He was anticipating another fight with his brother Esau this very night. But he would have never imagined wrestling with this mysterious “man.” The identity of the man is uncertain, for it is night and Jacob can’t see the man. For one reason or another, Jacob is strong enough that this mysterious man does not prevail against him, even though the man puts Jacob’s hip out of joint. Jacob seems to wrestle with the man for a good portion of the night until the man finally tells Jacob to let him go before morning breaks, presumably because he doesn’t want his identity to be revealed. But Jacob, who has been fighting and struggling and wrestling his whole life, is unwilling to stop unless he is blessed by the man whom he now suspects is something more than man. He’s received blessing upon blessing, but he still seems eager to acquire more. But in reply to Jacob’s request the man asks Jacob his name. By asking Jacob’s name, the man indicated his superior position to Jacob. Jacob won’t be doing the asking anymore, now this man is going to lead.

Jacob’s answer, though seemingly simple, is quite astonishing. For there was another time when Jacob was asked his name before being blessed; it was when Isaac asked his name. But at that time Jacob lied and told Isaac that he was Esau, his firstborn. He cheated then to get his blessing from Isaac. He is honest now. Also, the utterance of Jacob was a confession that his identity was as a heel grabbing, deceiving, struggling, lying cheat, who had used high handed tactics to obtain his previous blessing.

The new name given to Jacob is also remarkable. I’d like to show you two meanings that the name Israel has, and their corresponding applications for us.

First, the text and the footnote in your NIV Bibles tell us that Israel means “he struggles with God.” Jacob’s name and old life were marked by him struggling and trying to obtain blessing at all cost, but now he struggles with God; or at least an angel sent by God. I think it is interesting that Jacob thought his potential “striving” with Esau was the biggest problem facing him. But his bigger struggle was surely with God. He set out to see Esau face to face, but now he has met God face to face. If you didn’t already know this story you would have never guessed that Jacob would have had an encounter like this. All of the suspense in this story has been moving towards an unknown encounter with Esau, but now Jacob has an encounter with God. We’ll pick up the conflict with Esau in chapter 33, but this is the true climax of the story and it takes center stage for a reason. We have a lot of struggles in our lives. But God wants to meet us in those struggles. God doesn’t want our lives to be marked simply by “struggling,” but by “struggling with God.” A lot of times the problems facing us in our lives block out what God may be trying to do in the midst of the problem. God wants all of our lives to be marked by his presence.

But in addition to this plain meaning, there is another meaning to the name Israel. Israel is a compound word that could also mean, “God fights.” Other translations include this additional meaning in their footnote (ESV). The *Isra* part of the word is a Hebrew verb that means “to fight or strive.” The *el* part, at the end of the word, means “God.” Putting them together you have Isra

– El, “God fights.” Now I don’t want to do more with words than the text is doing with them, and the text is explicit in telling us that Israel means, “He struggles with God.” However, one of the driving themes in this whole story is the understanding that everything Jacob has come from God’s work, not from Jacob’s striving. The history of the nation of Israel in the OT contains the same idea; God fights for his people, and it is his work, not their own work that is effective in saving them and securing their victory. Jacob knew this truth. He knew that it is God who fights and God who provides and God who does the work of transformation; he just prayed a prayer that showed us he knew this. But Jacob, like us, needed to be constantly reminded that it is God who has to do the work of changing and transforming. Any successes we could possibly hope for will only be found in the LORD.

At some point in most of our lives we trusted God for our salvation, but how many of us since then have been trusting in our own “striving” for everything else. We believe that we are saved by Jesus alone, but then when a real crisis comes we look to our own strength or the wisdom of the world to fix our problems. If Jesus is the only one who can save us from the most serious problem we have – sin, then how can we expect something else to save us from lesser problems. We, like Jacob, need to be reminded over and over again that it is only the work of God in us that can change us.

In addition to being given a new name, Jacob is also given a new identity. His identity is marked not by his previous ways, but by an encounter with God himself. His identity is also marked by the fact that he has been wounded in the process. He now has a limp; his identity will now be known by all. His life is marked by his encounter with God. Godly change doesn’t always look like victory, in the worldly sense. Jacob’s transformation was one from strength to weakness; from health to handicap. Jacob’s transformation was from self-help, to God-help. God does the work of blessing and changing his people for his purposes, but he does it through struggles.

I can’t help but think that up to this point in Jacob’s life a lot of his identity was wrapped up in the things that he had acquired and the successes he’d had in business with his uncle Laban. In regard to faith I bet he put a lot of stock in his father Isaac and his grandfather Abraham. But there is now no doubt Jacob has now had his own encounter with God. I bet there are a lot of people here this morning who have been putting stock in the fact that they go to church every week or in the fact that they grew up in a Christian home. But have you met God face to face? What I mean is do you have a personal relationship with God? Do you meet with him on a regular basis? Is your life marked by change? Or are you still the same person you were 20 years ago, 10 years ago, 5 years ago, 1 year ago? Is God in the process of transforming your life? Is God changing your old “Jacob” life into an “Israel” life?

I can’t help but think of the students in the room. Do you have your own faith in God or are you putting your confidence in the faith of your parents? It’s okay to wrestle with God and struggle through the hard questions about faith. There’s probably no better time to struggle through hard questions about faith and decide if you really believe what your parents believe and what this church believes. This is a safe place to have doubts and questions. This is a safe place to wrestle with God and your feelings concerning him.

What is your identity marked by? Are you Jacob? Is your identity marked by your own striving and the consequences and turmoil that come from taking matters into your own hands? Or are you Israel? Is your identity wrapped up in God fighting; God working through you? Do you approach problems in your life with fear and anxiety or do you go to the Lord in prayer? Are the crises in your life marked by God's presence or are you fighting alone? Are there lasting indicators in your life that demonstrate that you have met God face to face? Do you walk with a "limp" today because of what God has done in your life? If your identity is defined by ongoing encounters with God it will be visibly noticeable, just like Jacob's limp would have been noticeable. His limp even changed the way the Israelites would eat forever. Are your encounters with God having an impact on the way that others live their lives?

The name of the place where Jacob wrestled with God was changed to Peniel. What will your home be called? What will your place of business be called? What will your school be called? None of these places are sacred in and of themselves, but they could be a Peniel for you and take on significance because they are places where you regularly meet with God, and are changed in the process. What will First Free be called? Is this a church that is marked by us meeting with God or is this a place where we go through the motions? I pray that our lives, our homes, our communities, our schools, and this church would be places where God's work of transformation would be evident to all for the sake of his glory!

God does the work of blessing and changing his people for his purposes, but he does it through struggles. And our present struggles end up shaping us for the other struggles that lie ahead. The unexpected conflict with God in this story ended up shaping the original conflict with Esau. Let's turn now to Genesis 33 and to scene 4 in our story as we see how the original conflict with Esau is resolved.

#### **Scene IV, *Resolution*: Jacob finally meets Esau (33:1-11)**

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When Jacob limped away from Peniel at dawn he looked up and saw Esau. But Esau didn't kill Jacob. Verse 4 says that instead of killing Jacob, that he...

**Gen 33:4:** *ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept.*

After asking about Jacob's family Esau asked about the meaning of all of the gifts. Jacob explained that they were to find favor in the eyes of Esau. Esau said that the sacrifice was not necessary, but Jacob insisted.

**Gen. 33:10-11:** *No, please!" said Jacob. "If I have found favor 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 favorably. 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.*

In scene 3 we saw that after seeing God face to face, Jacob saw himself for who he was: Full of sin; he is weak and in need of God. And now he sees Esau more clearly because he has seen God face to face. That's why he says in verse 10, "*Seeing you is like seeing the face of God.*" He insists that Esau take his gifts, proving he understands the meaning of his new name, Israel;

“God fights,” God provides. God has provided graciously and God has blessed. He can bless Esau because he has been blessed. Jacob wanted peace before, but now it all makes much better sense to him. He’s saying, “Take these blessings, for God has given me more than enough. Forgive me, for now I see more than ever my sin, and God’s goodness.”

But notice that Jacob doesn’t ever relinquish his God-given blessing or give up on the promises God has made to him. His previous actions hindered him from living his life with purpose and peace, but they didn’t strip him of the blessing he had received from God. Sometimes our actions can disqualify us from ministry or completely destroy a relationship, but most of the time we, like Jacob, simply need renewed perspective, found in God’s presence, reminding us of who’s in control and responsible for all we have. We need healing and reconciliation which can only happen through God’s pervasive presence in whatever situation we find ourselves. We need to see God for who he is, see ourselves for who we are and thus see people with a godly and humble perspective. Then we need to let God to do the work of transforming our lives and our relationships, even if it is through hard times, struggles, brokenness, and conflict. Let’s now wrap up this story by looking at the fifth scene in verses 13-20.

**Scene V, Conclusion:** Jacob arrives back home. (33:13-20)

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There is great irony in Jacob’s words to Esau in the previous scene. He insists that Esau take the blessings and gifts that were given to him by God. And Esau does. But as the story closes in vv. 13-20 we see Esau going back to Seir, the land of Edom, and Jacob going to Canaan.

**Gen. 33:16-18** *So that day Esau started on his way back to Seir. Jacob, however, went to Succoth, where he built a place for himself and made shelters for his livestock. That is why the place is called Succoth. After Jacob came from Paddan Aram, he arrived safely at the city of Shechem in Canaan and camped within sight of the city.*

Esau has received this blessing from Jacob, but Jacob is receiving *the* blessing from God. The whole movement of this story has been the movement of Jacob coming into the land and receiving the promises made to him and his fathers, but more importantly it is showing God’s movement; the progress of God’s work of redeeming a people for himself. God was faithful to his promises made to Abraham and they are being fleshed out in this story, as God works in spite of the sin of Jacob.

God’s work in redeeming a people for himself was most perfectly seen in Jesus. It was on the cross that God’s work prevailed most clearly, in spite of human sin. What we couldn’t do, God did for us. Our own striving has never been enough, but God’s work and God’s fighting for us is enough. You can stop fighting for your own blessing today and let God’s work transform your life for his purposes through your struggles. That is good news! God provided salvation for you on the cross through Jesus’ death. He paid the debt to God incurred by your sin.

God’s blessing was primarily limited to Abraham and his descendents for 2000 years, but in Jesus the work of God becomes a blessing to all people. You can receive that blessing this morning. You can give up your way of life, surrender to God, and receive the blessed salvation he offers to you through Jesus. The rest of your life can be marked by his work in your life. But life won’t be all better if you’re a Christian. Jacob wasn’t all better after his encounter.

Even after his amazing encounter with God and the gracious reconciliation he had with Esau, Jacob struggles with some of his old issues. After he was reconciled with Esau, Esau tries to get him to go to Seir with him (v. 12). But Jacob is deceptive and gives Esau this big story and a host of excuses as to why he can't go with him. Then he says that he'll meet up with him in Seir later (vv. 13-15). But Jacob had no intention of ever going to Seir. I found this to be a troubling interaction after the last two amazing scenes. However, the more I look at this, the more I see that this is kind of how my life looks. I meet with God, and I experience some breakthroughs in my relationship with Christ and my relationship with others, and then the very next moment I find myself doing something stupid again. But the good news is that God works in us and through us, in spite of our sin. God uses people like Jacob in his work of redemption. God changes sinners and uses us in his work of changing other sinners.

This sermon had an influence on the name we chose for our son. He goes by Abe, but his name is Joshua Abraham. The work on this sermon made me want to choose a name for our child that would be a prayer for his life. Joshua means "God saves." Abraham means "Father of many nations." I don't want Abe to be the father of many nations, but I do want his life to be marked by the saving work of God and I want his life to be used by God as a blessing to many people. I guess my prayer for Abe is my prayer for all of us this morning. I pray that God's work would change you, that you would live lives marked by the transforming power of God, and that you would be used by God to impact other people's lives. I mentioned at the beginning that I'm convinced that God uses the hard parts of family life to mold us. I think the same is true in all areas of life. God works in us to change us for his purposes, but he does that through struggles.

Our family has been struggling through separation while I'm away at school, but we trust that through this time God is working in us to draw us closer to himself and closer to each other. There are men in this congregation who are serving overseas in the military – I know those families too are struggling to cope with separation. Many of you are out of work now. The financial crisis has hurt everyone in one way or another. Others are struggling with health problems. I know there are some who have major conflict in their marriage or other family relationships. There are some in the congregation who are fighting loneliness or depression. All of us face daily the battle with sin. Whatever struggle you're struggling with today God wants to use that struggle as an opportunity to change you. Whatever struggle you're struggling with God wants to be present with you in it. When things are hard and you don't understand God or don't trust him, or you don't see how he could possibly get you out of this situation, it is at that moment that God wants you to wrestle with him, to challenge him, to pray to him, and to ask him to bless you. He wants you to acknowledge that you can't do life on your own. Struggling through life on our own will result in brokenness and failure. But God has fought the battle for us on the cross and he continues to fight for his people. God works to change and bless his people, but he does it through struggles. Will you become Israel? Will you prevail through the work of God in your struggles? I pray that you will.

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<sup>i</sup> When you're reading stories in the OT and you run into a prayer, stop and pay attention. There is likely a lot to be learned about God, the character praying, and the meaning of the story. This prayer is particularly significant, for it is the longest prayer in all of Genesis. It is also the first time that Jacob initiates contact with God.