

Closer Than You Think

Main Text: Genesis 32:22-32

Has there ever been a moment in your life where you desperately wanted to hear God's voice? Like when you have to make a big life decision, or you were conflicted between different choices and all you can hear are the voices of the people around you. All this noise and then someone hits you with the "pray about it. See what God says"? What does that mean? How can we hear the voice of God, or know the direction that God has for us? This is a question that I wrestle with all the time, because I have never audibly heard the voice of God. So if I can't *hear* God, how do I know this is what God wanted me to do?

I remember in July of 2021, before I first started officially working at my church, I was really wrestling with this thought "I wonder if God really wants me to be here". And I'm sure many of you can relate with me right? You may be at your work, or at a church, or even serving somewhere, and you just get hit with this reality check of "huh. I wonder if I'm really meant to be here". I was really going through that. I began interning at my church, and my best friend was already pastoring somewhere else in California and I had to sit with this idea of, "Maybe God is calling me to go to California. Leave here and go". I was so torn between the two choices and I was so desperately seeking the voice of God. "If God wants me to go, I will go. What can anybody say?" but I never heard his voice. How I knew God wanted me to stay here and be faithful to this church was in that same week that I was really struggling with this decision, the previous children's pastor had decided to step down and recommend me to be the predecessor of the children's ministry. In my heart, I felt that this was God opening up this door, and even though I didn't *hear* his voice, I knew in my heart. I'm sure many of you guys can relate more in this aspect where you felt God opening doors and in faith, you stepped in. But in our text here today, we see that Jacob not only hears God, but physically wrestles with him!

Right now, Jacob is on his way to reunite with his brother Esau. I use the term reunite very loosely here because it's not one of those "separated at birth" stories where two brothers are brought back together after being separated by a tragic event or situation, but this is going to be Jacob's first time seeing Esau in 20 years (Gen. 31:41) after 1. taking his birthright, 2. stealing his blessings from their father, and 3. running away from the anger that Esau had for Jacob. This plays into what kind of man Jacob was. He's a liar, a cheater, a manipulator, someone who bends the rules for his own favor, and when he heard that his brother was coming to see him, he must've felt like all his wrongdoings and punishments are catching up to him. Anyone ever have that feeling? Growing up with siblings, I can't help but to understand Jacob in this matter though. I have two younger siblings, so I can't relate with the younger sibling arc as I can with this idea of always having to wrestle for what you want. Whether it was some sort of recognition, or acknowledgement, or money, there's always this tension, this struggle growing up. I remember one time going on a vacation to Florida with my family, and we rented out this large air bnb house, one with two floors and a memorable giant spiral-y stairs that connects the top to the bottom floor. I remember being on the bottom floor and my brother was on the top floor and I called him to come down. As he was coming down, I grabbed a throw pillow and was there waiting for him. He comes down, I throw it like a frisbee straight to his face, it smacks him dead on, he takes a few steps back, and throws the pillow back at me, laughing. This is what I thought would've happened but what ended up happening was I threw the throwpillow like a frisbee, it hits him straight in the face, he falls back, hits the back of his head on the banister of the stairs, and starts bleeding. This was a memorable start to me and my brother's rivalry *because* when the parents came to aid him and see what happened, they immediately were like "why did you fall? Why didn't you walk down carefully?" and to this day, our family thought it was him. Only my brother and I knew what really happened. But in that moment, knowing that I harmed my brother and got away with it, there was something about that feeling of getting away with something that makes doing things we're not supposed to, so much more irresistible.

I think Jacob here is in this similar situation here where all the wrongdoings he did, going unpunished, getting away with all this trouble making, is finally catching up to him and he's going to pay the biggest price. And so in order to prepare to meet his brother, he sends all his family across the stream first, and Jacob is left alone.

I think the timing of this encounter is not coincidental but rather very intentional and timed by God. God waited for a moment when it was just Jacob. Not him with his wives, or his children, not him with his possessions, or his army. Just him and God. No distractions, nothing to hide behind or with. And I want us to keep that in mind, as we continue this story, because I think many of us here are scared to meet with God without the things that we think will save us. When was the last time we came before the Lord, just us. Without our achievements, without our accolades or our trophies, without our requests and prayers that we so desperately need done now. But today, I hope that this message will encourage you that God doesn't want you for what you do, but for who you are. I know we think that without the things that we can offer, God will never accept us, He will never love us. "Oh God, if you really knew who I was, if you really knew what I thought, or what I'm thinking, if only you knew what I did, then you will take back your love. You will take back your salvation. But the encouragement is that God waited until Jacob was alone. Why? Because he wanted Jacob and just Jacob. And God wants you, for who you are. Just you. There's going to be a time when it's going to be just you and God. How will you respond?"

Jacob responds by wrestling with him. We don't know who initiated it, or if there was a conversation that took place beforehand. The scripture does not specify but what we do know is that this was a wrestling between the two individuals. A "man" who come to find out is God, and Jacob, and it's not just Jacob wrestling and fighting the man, or vice versa, but there is a mutual hustle and tussle. And when the man saw that it could not prevail against Jacob, he touches the hip socket of Jacob, injuring Jacob. If we look ahead to our passage, it talks about how Jacob walked with a limp, for God crippled Jacob, giving him a limp at the end of their struggle. Why? Clearly injuring Jacob did not help God win in this struggle, for Jacob *still* would not let go. I think God did this because he saw the character of Jacob, a man who did everything he could to get whatever he wanted, a man who was stubborn, with a very strong mind, will, and body. According to one of the commentaries I read on this passage, it says:

"Now crippled in his [Jacob's] natural strength he became bold in faith"

Jacob thought that he could muscle his way to receiving the blessing of God, just as he muscled and tricked his way into everything in his life, and in the same way, he thought if he could beat this man, be stronger and have this man submit to him, that he would be superior, and prevail. But in this moment where God touches his hip, the switch must've flipped. He realized that this isn't a physical battle that he could win, but it's a spiritual blessing that he must receive. God had to cripple Jacob in that moment to get him to realize that God's blessings are given only through the grace of God and not something that he could've done to receive. And some of us here are still stuck in that mindset. It's always works before faith, and through my works, I will receive faith and God's blessings. "The more I do, the more God will bless me". Brothers and sisters, salvation cannot be earned. It cannot be fought for, it cannot be bought by anything that we can ever offer or sum up. That is why it is called the GIFT of God, that by the GRACE of God, we have been saved. We are washed, we are clean, we can come before God freely and willingly. Yet many of us are still fighting for the blessing of God, trying to win it, to earn it, and we're doing it on our own will, our own timing, and our own way.

There is a huge understanding of God's grace in this moment. In every moment, all throughout Jacob's life, God could've taken away all that Jacob had accomplished. God could've punished and destroyed Jacob, but he spares him and it is in this moment, Jacob is able to finally realize and acknowledge the grace of God in his life. Amidst the pain of his hip, the struggling all throughout the night until sunrise, Jacob would not let go of God. And many people hear this story and they think "wow it's possible that a man can wrestle with God" or they see it as "man I'm really wrestling with God right now and I need to hold on". But I want to present this passage in a different light, in what may be a more unpopular route, which is "how many of us need to wrestle with God in order to know who He really is?". All of us have different idealizations of who God is. To the kids I preach to, God is a magic genie, who will answer their prayers only when they ask Him to, and He can get a little bit scary sometimes. To some non-believers, God is a war-loving, violence-promoting deity who "nobody has seen". Who is God to you? What role does God have in your life? Is God just someone that you come to sing about and listen about for 2 hours on a Sunday? Is He someone that you don't know and don't want to know? To Jacob, God was a distant and far supernatural being that he from birth, was inducted into religion. But Jacob didn't know God on a personal level.

Genesis 32:9, which is 13 verses before this struggle:

9 And 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,'

Jacob refers to God as "God of my father Abraham, and my father Isaac". The way that Jacob saw God was he was the God of his fathers, but not his own God. He heard the stories of how God moved and changed the lives of Abraham and Isaac, and he saw God as their God, but never did Jacob ever see God as his God. And there are people in this room who I know see God the same way. God of your mother, God of your father, God of your grandparent, God of your friend who just dragged you to church. But can I tell you that God is desiring, He is wanting, He is moving mountains so that you would know that He is *your* God. God didn't wrestle Jacob to bless him but He wrestled him so that Jacob would know who God was, to have a personal relationship with God, and in that relationship came the blessing. We think that the blessing comes first and then we know God, but what we are seeing here is that we need to know God first, and then the blessings will just come from just knowing him.

But have you guys ever wondered why Jacob? Like why Jacob and not Esau? Esau seemed like the better "fit". He was the first born of Isaac, he was a hunter, so we can assume he was a fighter, he was probably brave. When we think of leaders and warriors, Esau is more of the type we imagine. Muscular, macho, hairy. Jacob on the other hand, like we established, was conniving, took shortcuts, manipulative, so on and so forth. So why Jacob over Esau? And why change Jacob to ISRAEL! Out of all the names he could've changed it to. He changed Abram to Abraham, Simon to Peter, Saul to Paul, but why... Jacob... to Israel, the name of the nation that will be God's chosen people? I believe that the answer to both of those questions goes beyond Jacob, but extends to us. Jacob was the lesser of the brothers, he wasn't the most honest, hardworking, upstanding citizen, and we learned that he did not even have that personal relationship with God until later in his life. But when Jacob wrestled God and God changed his name to Israel, He changes his identity, his future, his family lineage. He affirms His covenants, and reminds His people once again, time after time, of His faithfulness. I believe that this is God's way of reminding us that He is not an exclusive God for the powerful. For the well kept and mighty. Jesus's ministry was for the poor, the broken in spirit, in lost, the hopeless. And by God choosing to rename Jacob out of everyone in his lineage, of keeping that covenant and promise through Jacob for thousands of years, that promise remained the same and remains the same.

I think that there are some of us in here who, no matter what your background is, whether you've grown up in church all your life, or your new, or you were at church and left, and are coming back. Whatever your story is, there is a God who is seeking you, who wants you to get to know Him. All it takes is for you to come as you are, lay aside the things that distract you, lay aside the things that you hide behind. God is wanting a personal and intimate relationship with you. He wants you to live in His promise and covenant. He wants to answer and speak to you. He wants to comfort you.

Steve story:

- God is wrestling us, grabbing us and saying "I love you. I know you. I'm here for you. But when God grabs a hold of us, we try to run. We try to fight. We think God says otherwise, but PIF, God is grabbing you, He is wrestling you so that you may know Him.
- Lets pray that when God wrestles us, we will not aim to win the battle, but to receive the blessing.
- Wrestling for long time. Lay it down. Surrender