

Genesis 32:22-32

Richard J. Koch

"Against All Odds"

November 17, 1991

Text: *"Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed."* (Gen. 32:28)

The one thing my wife and I have noticed about our children is neither of them is anything like us. Basically, they don't carry on any of our personal traits except occasional looks now and then. Who do they take after if they are not like Mary or me? Their grandparents, of course, and sometimes even their great grandparents; though none of them is alive. In each one of our sons the evidence is clear. Grandparent personalities from both sides of the family surface like fingerprints at a crime scene. I won't embarrass our boys by labeling any of our specific findings in front of the one set of grandparents certain to hear this sermon, but it is sufficient to say that Mary and I are presently at a loss. I can assure you, the odds are against us. How do we raise miniature characters of our parents? The next time Mary's dad is in town and we all visit my parents for dinner I'm threatening to put the entire set of grandparents and our boys together at their own table. The mystery will continue for many years as our parents haunt us through our children and we can only hope that our grandchildren will someday be just like us. Oh, what splendid children they will be!

I noticed too, a peculiar coincidence found in the Bible. Abraham's son Isaac is a lot like his grandfather Terah. Both Isaac and Terah stayed put in and around the land of their birth. Both led fairly stable and respectable lives. Their sons however, were a different story. Terah's son was Abraham who heard the call of the Lord and pulled up his family roots and journeyed to distant and unknown lands. We don't know how Terah felt about this, but it is fairly certain he never saw his son again. Abraham had Isaac (the stable one) and Isaac had Esau and Jacob - twins. These two boys were full of mischief and guile. After Jacob deceived his father Isaac and stole his brother's birthright he became a lot like his grandfather Abraham wandering around different lands and hearing the word of God; a nomad, or pilgrim of faith. Even with God on his side, Jacob could run a slick deal. (Not unlike his grandfather Abraham who bargained with God over the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.) The two of them today would probably be able to sell a used Chevy to Lee Iacoca.

Nevertheless, as we begin to understand the life of Jacob we begin to realize he was always scrapping against the odds. Self confidence,

brain power, and a little deceit always seemed to get him to the next road sign of life. He was an ancient flimflam man, con artist, and one of the original wheeler-dealers. He worked the odds and somehow always came out just enough ahead to make it another day. But, as life wore on, he began to get weary of the games and wished for a way back home. Jacob began looking for the settled life and sought after a security I'm not sure he fully understood until he reached the banks of the river Jabbok; a river he had to cross before he could reach the land of his birth.

What kinds of scams do we run in order to stay ahead of the odds we face in life? A lot of truth is being hid in order to satisfy what we think is better for our lives. Sometimes we deny a health problem to put on the appearance of being physically fit and are afraid of what changes, being unfit, may bring to our lives. We may reduce the amount of volunteer service we provide and claim it is because of "this reason or that," when in reality it is because we have made choices which reflect a desire on our part to spend our time more and more with social or entertaining affairs. We may cut back on our charitable giving for reasons which blame others, but know deep in our hearts it is because we have chosen to spend our money more on material gratification and security and less for the needs of our world. We deny our addictions and believe we can handle them. We avoid problem plagued areas and pretend they don't exist. We flimflam our way from one end of life to another trying on different personalities and masks with which to cover our real selves and all the time hope for luck to carry us gently toward our personal definition of security.

On the night he was to cross the river Jabbok, Jacob thought his problem was going to be his brother Esau. He planned another scam to beat the odds against him. First, send forward servants and parts of his tribe all bearing gifts to appease his brother whom he hadn't seen since he jilted him out of his birthright years before. When evening came, all the wives and children, the herds and flocks, the servants and gifts, were across the river. Soon Jacob's real test would begin. It would be a fight against ultimate odds and he wasn't aware of what was about to hit him. Scripture merely states a man wrestled with him all night to the break of day. Further reading into the story implies that for once, Jacob had an honest, bone crunching, all star fight on his hands. No more scams and no more lies. This was for real and Jacob hung on for all he was worth. He was tenacious. He was stubborn. He used all the qualities which had gotten him through life, but he could not con the visitor of the night.

Biblical Scholar Walter Russell Bowie adds this insight. *"[Jacob's] story is dramatizing here the consequence that comes to every soul that*

has tried too long to evade the truth about itself. Thus far Jacob's life had seemed successful. By one stratagem and another he had outwitted [and]...made his smooth way ahead among people.... He was brought up short to a reckoning with himself, which was a reckoning with God.... Jacob knew that henceforth he could never walk in lofty arrogance again." In Charles Wesley's hymn 'Come, O Thou Traveler Unknown' one can hear the cry:

*"Yield to me now, for I am weak,
But confident in self-despair;
Speak to my heart, in blessing speak;
Be conquered by my instant prayer."*

The old Jacob was conquered by the nature of God's ever present Spirit which brings change to people who live in the shadow of truth and cannot quite bear to be revealed in the reality of God's Kingdom. All of us from time to time and maybe even more often than not, behave like Jacob did before he reached the banks of the river Jabbok. Life has its pitfalls and sometimes we dig the potholes with our untruths. God is present to help us change. Like Jacob, we may struggle with that change, but when it comes to us we face life with a newness much like the image or symbol of Jacob, having just finished his struggle, letting the Spirit go just in time for the arrival of a new day - the dawning of a new time for his life.

Wendy Sue Earle recently shared with me this appropriate poem by Myra Brooks Welch entitled *"The Touch of the Master's Hand."*

*'Twas battered and scarred, and the auctioneer
Thought it scarcely worth his while
To waste much time on the old violin
But held it up with a smile.*

"What am I bidden, good folks," he cried.

"Who'll start the bidding for me?"

"A dollar, a dollar"; then, "Two! Only two?

Two dollars, and who'll make it three?

Three dollars once; three dollars, twice;

Going for three..." But no,

From the room, far back, a gray-haired man

Came forward and picked up the bow;

Then wiping the dust from the old violin,

And tightening the loose strings,

He played a melody pure and sweet

As a caroling angel sings.

The music ceased, and the auctioneer,

With a voice that was quiet and low,

*Said: "What am I bid for the old violin?"
 And he held it up with the bow.
 "A thousand dollars, and who'll make it two?
 Two thousand! And who'll make it three?
 Three thousand, once, three thousand, twice,
 And going, and gone," said he.
 The people cheered, but some of them cried,
 "We do not quite understand
 What changed its worth." Swift came the reply:
 "The touch of the master's hand."*

*And many a man with life out of tune,
 And battered and scarred with sin,
 Is auctioned cheap to the thoughtless crowd,
 Much like the old violin.
 A "mess of pottage," a glass of wine;
 A game - and he travels on.
 He is "going" once, and "going" twice,
 He's "going" and almost "gone."
 But the Master comes, and the foolish crowd
 Never can quite understand
 The worth of a soul and the change that's wrought
 By the touch of the Master's hand."*

What change is wrought in Jacob's life when touched by the Master's hand? His name is called Israel and his mission becomes one of raising a great nation of God's people. What change is wrought in our lives when we are touched by the Master's hand? Our mission becomes changed from persons who dwell in the uncertainty of life's games to people who exist forever in the light of God's truth. As people who walk this earth alone we are against all odds. As people who choose to walk with God we are born to a new life and a new mission to accomplish for God's purposes. My good friend Rob Fredrickson who directed our state Sr. High camp last summer recently noticed this catchy sermon title on the outside marquis of a Baptist church. It simply stated "*Mission Possible.*" When God changes our lives, then it truly is, for us, mission possible to find the sure and certain hope and security we've been looking for. Poor health, financial insecurity, loss of work, uncertain friendships, troubled marriages, and so on and so forth; life comes to us. Even death itself cannot separate us from the mission God makes possible for you and me.

The good news is we have the freedom and the power to accept the refreshing changes God brings to our lives. Jacob could have let go of the Spirit he was wrestling with, but chose to hang on for the reward of a

blessing. We need to have the power and the tenacity of Jacob in order that we might gain the reward of God's truth working in our lives. Portian Nelson illustrates our power perfectly in his work "Autobiography In Five Short Chapters."

- 1) *I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I fall in.
I am lost...I am hopeless.
It isn't my fault.
It takes forever to find a way out.*
- 2) *I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend I don't see it.
I fall in again.
I can't believe I am in the same place.
But, it isn't my fault.
It still takes a long time to get out.*
- 3) *I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I see it is there.
I still fall in...it's a habit.
I know where I am.
It is my fault.
I get out immediately.*
- 4) *I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.*
- 5) *I walk down another street.*

If you have never wrestled with God's Spirit, or are not presently struggling or working with your God given mission in life, I urge you to attend to the matter immediately. Only through such struggle can we become aware of God's plan for us and be willing participants in God's Kingdom. To let the matter rest will only prolong the inevitable and lead us on a circular path of our own scheming design. Let us all join the adventuresome Jacob at the banks of the river Jabbok and seek the true mission designed for each one of us. Let it be a place in our hearts where we let go of the old and grasp that which is new. May we find peace in our searchings and joy in the life we live. Amen.