

“SAY UNCLE” (Genesis 32:22-32)

This morning as we continue our study of the life of Jacob, we come to the pivotal story in Jacob’s life – a story that highlights one of the key principles of the Christian life, and it centers around a wrestling match. There’s something in a boy’s DNA that loves to wrestle – they love to wrestle their dads and they love to wrestle other boys. When I was growing up, when one of us would have the other person pinned or in a head or arm lock, we’d say, “Say uncle.” The losing opponent would consider his options, and even in great pain, they’d maintain their pride and dignity and say, “No. I’m not going to say it.” Say it! “No.” And the other person would ratchet up the pain and twist the arm a little tighter... “Say uncle!” Finally, when the pain became unbearable and every option of breaking free had been exhausted, you’d grudgingly say it... “Okay, okay, Uncle!” No one knows how the term originated, but it came to be a symbol of surrender and submission – a way of saying, “I give up!” Saying “uncle” is humiliating – it means that you are declaring your opponent as superior, and some people – no matter how much pain they have to endure – refuse to say uncle.

In our story today, Jacob is going to have a wrestling match, and he’s going to give it his all. He is going to fight to the bitter end, but eventually he will submit to his opponent and say “uncle.” Yet his defeat will prove to be his greatest victory as he emerges from his wrestling match broken, humbled, and ready to fulfill God’s purposes for his life.

Jacob’s life can be defined in three stages...

- The faking of a man.
- The breaking of a man.
- The making of a man.

In chapters 25-28 we saw Jacob fake his way through life – scheming and deceiving to get what he wants – and for the most part, it worked for him. He got his father’s blessing he had long coveted, but in doing so he incurred the wrath of his brother he took it from him, and was forced to flee to Haran – 500 miles away – to get away from Esau.

In chapters 29-32 we see the breaking of Jacob. God is going to bless Jacob greatly and make him the man He wants him to be, but He first must break him. Jacob is spiritually immature and self-reliant – he’s full of himself – and God enrolls him in the school of hard knocks to break Jacob of his self-destructive patterns and to teach him to rely on Him. He meets his match in his Uncle Laban, and over the course of twenty years he will say “uncle” to his uncle many times and be under his control.

After his time of exile, in chapter 32 God tells Jacob to return to the land. But returning to the Promised Land means that Jacob will have to confront his past. As he nears the border of the land, he hears that Esau – the brother he cheated out of his inheritance – is coming to meet him with 400 men. Jacob is overcome with fear and in desperation prays ... “Lord, save me!” He prays a great prayer of faith, but then immediately resorts back to his old pattern of scheming and devising his own way out of his problem. Jacob has not yet reached the point where he’s said “uncle” to God – he stubbornly clings to his own self-sufficiency and has not surrendered his life to God. But that is about to change.

We’re in Genesis 32, and we begin reading in verses 22-23... “That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants 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.”

Jacob is under heavy duress. Esau's army is coming towards him, and he decides that he has to do something. Under the cover of darkness he sends his family and all his herds across the ford – or the shallow part – of the Jabbok River. The Jabbok – which sounds just like Jacob in the Hebrew – was a tributary of the Jordan River. The Jordan River flows from north to south, from the Sea of Galilee in the north and the Dead Sea to the south, and was viewed as the border of the Promised Land. The Jabbok River flowed into the Jordan from the east. We're not told why Jacob sent his family and herds across the river – he somehow saw that as a strategic advantage – but the main point is that Jacob stayed behind by himself. It's dark, it's quiet, Jacob is all alone, and then – all of a sudden – he's no longer alone.

Verses 24-26... 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."

These verses leave us with all kinds of questions, and the first one is: Who is this man who suddenly appears and attacks Jacob? Jacob probably assumes it's Esau – Esau finds out where Jacob is camped and attacks him. It's dark, so Jacob doesn't know who it is. But he fights back. Jacob is a pretty strong guy – back in Harran he moved the stone guarding the well all by himself – and he wrestles his assailant until daybreak. Finally, after several hours of wrestling, Jacob's attacker touches his hip and incapacitates him. His hip is either dislocated or injured so severely that he can no longer fight. All that's left to do is say "uncle."

Once he's injured, instead of fighting his assailant, Jacob clings to him. He's no longer wrestling, but clinging. The man says, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." He does not want Jacob to see him. You'd think that Jacob would be relieved to see his attacker go, but he says, "I won't let you go until you bless me."

Who is this man? I don't want you to look ahead just yet, but later in the passage Jacob says he saw God face to face. When the prophet Hosea later talked about this encounter, he said of Jacob... "In the womb he grasped his brother's heel; as a man he struggled with God. He struggled with the angel and overcame him; he wept and begged for his favor" (Hosea 12:3-4).

The man Jacob wrestled with was God appearing as a man. This is not the first time God has done this. In Genesis 18, three men visit Abraham who are identified as the Lord and two angels. They appear as men and even enter Abraham's tent and eat with him. God's appearances in human form are what theologians call a theophany – God manifesting Himself to us in a way that is understandable to us. Theophanies showed God's desire to connect with His creation, and foreshadowed the coming of Christ to earth in human flesh to dwell among us. One of the reasons God appears in human form is because Exodus 33:22 says that no man can see the glory of God and live. But God comes as close to a human being as He can get when He wrestles with Jacob.

The next question is: Why would God attack Jacob? The answer is because Jacob was not yet surrendered to the Lord. To be the man God wanted him to be, Jacob needed to be humbled and broken – he needed to be wrestled into submission so that he depended on no one but the Lord. But Jacob's not going to go down without a fight. He wrestles his assailant for several hours, and it's not until the man puts Jacob's hip out of commission that he gives up the fight.

A.W. Tozer, the great Christian writer of yesteryear, said, “It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly until He has hurt him deeply.” I don’t want to believe that, but I think Tozer is right. Over and over in scripture we see that God uses pain and suffering to shape His servants into the people He wants them to be. He wants to bless us and use us, but He first must break us of our pride and self-reliance, and the process of breaking us can be very painful.

One of the purposes of pain is to alert your body that something is wrong – that something needs attention. If you have a toothache, it’s a signal that you have a cavity or some other problem and it’s time to go to the dentist. When God puts Jacob’s hip out of joint, it serves as a wake-up call to Jacob... “Something’s wrong, Jacob, and what’s wrong is that you’re self-reliant – you think you can solve every problem through your own ingenuity and cleverness. You’ve not surrendered control of your life to me, and to get your attention I have to make things hurt – I have to cripple you.”

C.S. Lewis said, “Pain insists on being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, but shouts to us in our pain. Pain is God’s megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” The harder-of-hearing we are, the louder God’s megaphone needs to be – and the longer we resist God, the more severe the pain often is. Sometimes that pain comes in the form of a physical setback or limitation – sometimes it comes through the death of a loved one – sometimes it comes through the death of a dream or desire – sometimes it comes through a broken relationship or a child’s rebellion – only then does it become evident that we’re not in control of our lives.

We’re tempted to think that pain is a sign that God doesn’t love us, but Hebrews 12:10b-11 tells us just the opposite... “God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.” God loves us just the way we are, but He loves us too much to let us stay the way we are. He’s committed to transforming our lives and forming our character. The end result of transformation is that we look like Christ – we are mature and stable and completely dependent on Him.

Once Jacob’s hip is injured and he’s incapacitated, he does something interesting. He hangs on to his attacker. You’d think he’d let go and give up, but he clings to the one who has just hurt him. The man says, “Let me go, for it is daybreak... it’s time for me to go.” But Jacob says, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”

When I was in High School, I took a water safety training course to be a lifeguard. I never did become a lifeguard, but I remember how we were taught to rescue a drowning person. The instructor said that you can’t save someone who is thrashing around and panicked – if they’re trying too hard to help themselves, they’ll pull you under as well and you both could drown. The key is to wait until they give up trying to help themselves and they trust you to help them. You stay just far enough away so that they can’t grab you – then you wait – you wait until they finally give up and surrender – then you make your move. Once their body is relaxed and pliable, they won’t try to work against you, but will let you help them.

I was talking to an older lifeguard one time who said he was taught back in his day that if a drowning person will not cooperate with you, you punch them and incapacitate them. It sounds extreme, but it’s sometimes the only thing you can do to save them.

Once Jacob is incapacitated, he clings to God. One second earlier, he was fighting God, now he holds onto God with all he has. Like the hymn says, “Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to thy cross I cling.” Jacob can no longer depend on himself – he is broken and injured – and his only hope is to depend on the Lord.

He says, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” He knows that without God’s blessing, he has no hope. Up to this point he’s relied on his wit, his schemes and plans – but he can no longer rely on himself because he’s crippled – his only hope is to cling to Lord and trust Him to protect him and his family.

God does bless Jacob and it’s expressed in the form of a name change. Verse 27... The man asked him, “What is your name?” “Jacob,” he answered. The Lord obviously knows who Jacob is – His real question is, “Jacob, do you know who you are?” In Jacob’s day children were often named by some characteristic or event surrounding their birth. When Jacob was born, he was grabbing the heel of his twin brother Esau, so his parents name him Jacob, or “heel-grabber.” What’s your name? Heel-grabber. It’s not a very flattering name, but it was prophetic of the fact that Jacob would be a person who grasped and schemed and cheated his way through life.

By asking Jacob, “What is your name?” the Lord is asking, “Are you ready to admit who you really are? Are you ready to confess the truth that you’re a heel-grabber and deceiver?” Jesus said, “The truth will set you free.” It is only when we understand who we really are – sinful, prideful, self-reliant – that we can be set free from sin and be who God made us to be. The truth will set you free, but facing the truth is hard work. “Who are you?” the Lord asks. Jacob says, “I’m...I’m... I’m a heel-grabber, a deceiver... that’s who I am.”

By God’s grace, He accepts us as we are. Romans 5:8 says that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. To be saved, you don’t have to clean up your act and make yourself presentable to God – you simply come as you are – with all your sin and baggage – humble yourself before God and cry out for His mercy. But once you’re saved, God says, “You’re no longer the person you used to be – you have a new identity – you’re no longer a heel-grabber, you’re no longer a cheater or liar or thief, you’re no longer a person who lives according to the world’s values – you’re a child of God – you’re a new creation in Christ” – and God begins a lifetime process of changing us and conforming us to the image of Christ.

Verse 28... Then the man said, “Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.” Jacob’s new name establishes a new identity. The name Israel is a combination of two word. *Sarah* means “strive or struggle,” and *el* is the word for God. Jacob will no longer be known as the heel-grabber, but the one who struggled with God and overcame.

But didn’t Jacob lose the wrestling match? Didn’t his attacker incapacitate Jacob, and didn’t Jacob give up the fight? Yes, Jacob lost, but by losing he also won. How can that be? Jesus put it this way in Mark 8:35... “Whoever wants to save his life will lose it” (Mark 8:35). If you want God to save your life – to bless your life – you must first lose your life. To lose your life means to surrender ownership of your life to Jesus, so that as Galatians 2:20 says, “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.” Losing your life to Christ means life is no longer about me, but about Christ who lives in me.

The name “Israel” would not only give Jacob a new identity, but it would shape the identity of Jacob’s descendants as God’s people. Each new generation of Israelites would read this story and be reminded of God’s hand of blessing on their nation. As long as they clung to the Lord and trusted Him, He would go before them and fight their battles – which we see over and over in the book of Joshua as the Children of Israel return to the land and conquer their enemies. But God also reminded them that if they became self-dependent and forgot the Lord, they would lose and be conquered by their enemies. The name Israel would be a constant reminder that the strength of their nation depended on them clinging to God.

Verses 29-30... 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.” By this time, Jacob knows that his assailant is more than a man – only God has the right and authority to change his name – but Jacob wants to know his name. Jacob was known to commemorate his special encounters with the Lord with names. “What shall I name this place? Who are you?”

The man says, “Why do you want to know?” The implication is that you already know who I am, and that’s enough for you to know right now. God reveals many things about Himself in His Word, but there are some things – Deuteronomy calls them secret things – that God keeps to Himself. We should rejoice in the revelation God has given us and be content with what He has chosen not to reveal.

Jacob names the place Peniel, which means “face of God.” He says, “I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.” By saying that he had seen God face to face meant that he had seen the theophany of God – he had seen a human manifestation of God. He had gotten as close as man can get to God and live to tell about it. If he had seen God is all His glory, he would be dead. But God was gracious to appear to Jacob as a man, and he got so close to God that he could say they were face to face.

The longing of every believer is to see God face to face, and Christ’s incarnation makes that possible. By becoming human, Christ bridges the gap that separates sinful man from a holy God, and His death on our behalf restores our relationship with God. Jesus said, “Blessed are the pure in heart (those who have been made righteous in Christ) for they will see God” (Matthew 5:8).

One day, at our final transformation, we will be fully in the presence of God and see Him face to face. 1 Corinthians 13:12a says, “For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face.” In this life our knowledge of God is limited, but when we see Him there will be no more mystery, no more questions, no more wrestling – we will enjoy face to face intimacy with God. 1 John 3:2b says, “We know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” Whether we die and go to be with the Lord in heaven, or we are transformed when He returns to earth, we will be like Christ and see Him as He is. We will see him face to face.

Verses 31-32... “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.”

This event left such an impression on the nation of Israel 400 years later, that they started a tradition of not eating the tendon of animals that were attached to the socket of the hip. This part of the body served as a sacred reminder of how their nation was born – it was born in struggle – and by clinging to God they would overcome any obstacle set before them.

By clinging to God Jacob won the wrestling match, but he also emerged with a limp. From a physical standpoint, Jacob's limp put him at a disadvantage – he could not move as well, he could not run, and he could not put up much of a fight. But from a spiritual standpoint, Jacob's limp gave him an advantage because it made him depend on God and experience God's power working through him. If Jacob had come out of his fight without being weakened – without a limp – he would likely continue being self-reliant and full of himself. But his limp forced him to lean on the Lord and depend solely on Him.

The Apostle Paul put it this way... “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me” (2 Corinthians 12:9). Paul was a very self-driven, can-do guy, who God had just allowed to see a vision of heaven. If anyone would be puffed up with pride, it was Paul. But God says, “I need to know that you trust me and rely on me and to know that you can't make it in your own power. And I can't just lecture you on this... I've got to hurt you.” God gave Paul a thorn in the flesh – we don't know what it was – but it weakened him. He pleaded multiple times for God to take it away, but God said “No... my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

Paul goes on to say, “That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (12:10). Learning to rely on God is a huge part of our spiritual development. You may be the smartest kid in the class or have amazing natural skills – but God cannot use you until you come to that place of complete lack of confidence in ourselves and complete trust in Him. And you can't lecture anybody on that.

A. W. Tozer was right – It's doubtful God can bless a man greatly until He has hurt him deeply. Every person we see in scripture that God uses, first goes through a weakening process where they are stripped of all they rely on and come to depend solely on the Lord – and once they are weakened in their own strength, the power of God is free to work in their lives.

I'm not sure how this message hits you this morning, but could it be that you've making your way through life on your own, relying on your own strength and power? You make God a part of your life, but you don't really trust Him? And could it be that to get your attention, God has had to hurt you in some way – He has weakened you so that His strength may be displayed in your life?

If so, God's message to you is to say “uncle” – to stop fighting and start clinging – to surrender control of your life to God, hold tightly to Him, and let His power work in you and through you.