

Series: "Back to The Beginnings Again"

Sermon: "What Is Your Name?"

Text: *Genesis 32; 2 Corinthians 12:7-10*

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- What made Israel— *iss-ra-EL*?
- Was it the family? Was it the material blessings? Was it the Land?
- What made Israel, unique among all the nations of the earth?
- What was at the "heart" of Israel?
- What was Israel's most important governing value?
- What was Israel's "identity?"
- It will be of vital importance for the next generations of Israelites to know this.
- If Moses is indeed writing *Genesis* not simply to record *history* or to provide a rational foundation for *Creation Science*, but to relay something of importance to the generation of young Israelites about to finally leave the wilderness and "go home" to the *Promised Land*...indeed, if this is the case, what central matter of their identity must they absolutely absorb to be Yahweh, the LORD God's, Israel?
- What must all succeeding generations of the OT people of God know to *truly* be His people?
- What must Christians know to truly be the NT people of God?
- What must Raleigh Gene Gresham Jr know to truly know his identity in Jesus Christ?
- What must you know?
- One of my 3 most cherished passages in all of Scripture, the other two are Romans 12 and Philippians 2—one of my most cherished passages is the passage we have the honor and opportunity to consider together this morning—*Genesis 32*.
- I would preach through all of *Genesis* again and again, just for the opportunity to consider the truth of this passage of God's revealed Word in its full context.
- If you learn nothing else from me in 20 years—learn this truth!
- *Genesis 32* can change your life. **Or not**...It will be your choice.

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- We have reached the point in Jacob's story—strangely, for us, in Israelite thinking, Jacob's story is told in the *toledote* of Isaac. Hebrew *toledote* means roughly "what came from someone."
- What a privilege and a responsibility as well to know that your story is really written by those who come from you—your family—more so, your influence. What you cultivate in the next generation of believers is your "toledote."
- This is the point in Jacob's *soap opera* of a life journey where God has extricated him from living in the mess he has made of a household shared with fellow cheat, Uncle Laban. Laban, after creating lots of family drama for the last time, turns around and returns home. Jacob is now on his way "**home**" again as well. But there is another big relational issue facing him where he is heading.
- Moses shows us that Jacob's faith in the LORD is now more evident. He seems to understand that the LORD is active in his life. He recognizes the LORD is keeping his promises of presence and protection or salvation in context in spite of the consequences of Jacob's failures and sins and the undesirable circumstances these failures have created.
- Jacob has more revealed evidence that he, along with his family, can participate in the LORD's plan of patriarchal covenantal promises that are advancing God's plan in real time and in real circumstances here on earth.
- Independent, *I-can-do-this*, Jacob, has even become a praying man sometimes—at least when it suits him to *need* the LORD.
- Jacob, and all of Israel for that matter, now stand at a turning point in their identity. Who will Jacob and *iss-ra-EL* be?

- The first part of *Genesis 32* sets the context beautifully for one, life-changing *struggle* Jacob will never totally forget and iss-ra-EL should never forget.

- The view of Uncle Laban disappears in the distance and chapter 32 begins to set the scene... **READ Genesis 32**

32 Jacob also went on his way, and the angels of God met him. ² When Jacob saw them, he said, "This is the camp of God!" So he named that place Mahanaim.

- OK, we have to stop here for just a moment. Unlike at Beth-El where Jacob sensed the presence of the LORD's mighty angels out of the corner of his eye—no more than a glimpsing in his *dreamy* peripheral vision—here he sees their "**camp**"—their *military bivouac*.
- Not only is the LORD with him, the LORD has brought his otherworldly army.
- "*Phew,! Says Jacob. I will be fine with the LORD's continued protection he has so clearly shown me.* Right? Wrong? Look at v3...

³ Jacob sent messengers ahead of him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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.' "

⁶ 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."

⁷ 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. ⁸ He thought, "If Esau comes and attacks one group, the group that is left may escape."

- First, notice the *groveling* contrary to reality. Jacob has the birthright and the blessing. He cheated, tricked and stole them from his brother Esau. That has precipitated this potential angry mess—but they are his! He is NOT Esau's servant. Esau is NOT his master—NOT his human lord. In reality, Jacob is Esau's human master—his ruling lord. But what is a little changing around of words when you need to manipulate a situation. Say whatever might work, right?
- Truth doesn't matter. Whatever words work to get the outcome you want is what matters. Any good **pragmatist** knows this principle.

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- In a time when we have nuclear weapons, an army of 400 men doesn't seem like much of a threat. In those days, this was a *kingdom-sized* force coming at Jacob from a potentially murderous brother.
- Moses doesn't want to bury the lead. He makes it very clear. Jacob finds himself, "***In great fear and distress...***"
- So, as we would do, the first thing Jacob does is pray. Oh, wait a second. I skipped the rest of verse 7 and verse 8.
- As we so often would do, the first thing Jacob did when in a situation of "great fear and distress," he made a plan to fix it—to control it—a plan to produce the outcome he wanted. Could Moses be any more obvious?! Back to **verse 9...**

⁹ 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,' ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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. ¹² 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.' "

- **THEN**—after making his plan to fix things—to control things—to produce his desired outcome—only **THEN**, did Jacob the *praying* man—the *more-religious-than-he-had-been* man, prays to the LORD.
- In his prayer, he explains his plan and intended outcome to the LORD. He reminds the LORD that the LORD seems to have has promised to be a *magical genie* and make all his plans come true if Jacob will but rub the lamp and wish upon a star.
- Jacob does what all **religious** people do in times of trouble or need. He calls on God to bless his human pans and give him the desired outcomes. "***God, please make me a success! God, I said 'please!'***"
- Of course Jacob's plan is pragmatic and that measure his metric for success can be as well. "*If 50% make it through we will call that a "success."*

- Why are numbers so important to pragmatists? We can make them read a success however we need to do so. The immeasurable, at least not in numbers, hidden work of God, that always requires faith, well, we won't make that part of our metric. **50% is good enough!**

- **Go on to verse 13...**

¹³ He spent the night there, and from what he had with him he selected a gift for his brother Esau: ¹⁴ two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, ¹⁵ thirty female camels with their young, forty cows and ten bulls, and twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys. ¹⁶ He put them in the care of his servants, each herd by itself, and said to his servants, "Go ahead of me, and keep some space between the herds."

¹⁷ He instructed the one in the lead: "When my brother Esau meets you and asks, 'To whom do you belong, and where are you going, and who owns all these animals in front of you?' ¹⁸ then you are to say, 'They belong to your servant Jacob. They are a gift sent to my lord Esau, and he is coming behind us.' "

¹⁹ He also instructed the second, the third and all the others who followed the herds: "You are to say the same thing to Esau when you meet him. ²⁰ 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." ²¹ So Jacob's gifts went on ahead of him, but he himself spent the night in the camp.

- Jacob prayed and then, as all good, **self-reliant religious** men do, he put **his** plan into action. After all, we all know, it is a settled truth that it is better to **do something—anything at all**—but **do something**—rather than to do nothing even if we are trying to wait on God.
- I must **fix** this and I define the outcome that means it is **fixed** so as often as not, my plan can be a **success**—even at 50%--even without much need for any faith in God—even as a religious man.
- That is the setting for the battle that defines the identity of Iss-ra-EL and, by the way, the same sort of setting that will define **me, you, us** and define **FBC** for the future. The battle is now here. **Look at v. 22**
²² That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³ After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. ²⁴ So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. ²⁵ 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.

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- The last part of the plan was to send what was most precious to him over as a shield in front of himself—to put something between himself and his enemy. At least in Jacob's plan, Esau was the enemy.
- **BUT MAYBE JACOB HAD IT WRONG!** Maybe Jacob the religious, praying, planning, doing, fixing, controlling human being couldn't see the whole picture. Or maybe he wouldn't see the whole picture because if he did, he and his plan and his ability to pull it off might not turn out to be the success he wanted to be.
- In the dark, on the bank of the river Jabbok, Jacob, the religious, praying, success-seeking man finds himself **all alone** but hopefully shielded from his mortal enemy.
- But then, some dude in *ANE wrestling tights* shows up out of nowhere and begins to fight Jacob to the death.
- The roll around in the dirt and the mud on that riverbank for what seems like hours. Neither Jacob nor the mysterious wrestling assassin can seem to gain the victory in their hand-to-hand combat to the death.
- When the ongoing fight has proven beyond a doubt that human physical prowess alone, on the part of either combatant, would not win the fight, the strange wrestler from out of nowhere seemingly flips a switch, that had been there all along, and turns on the super-natural—super-human power in the battle.
- A single, probably very light touch, now twists a very strong human joint, Jacob's hip. His hip is torn. For all intents and purposes the battle is now absolutely over but the two fighters-to-the-death remain entwined in a wrestler's hold.
- The strange, supernatural wrestler, who could easily have "touched" Jacob's head as he merely touched Jacob's hip, and killed him instantly. But instead, he makes a request—actually gives a command to Jacob who is hanging on for dear life.
- A very strange but **human, history-changing** conversation ensues.

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- **Look at v. 26...**

²⁶ Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."

But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

²⁷ The man asked him, "What is your name?"

"Jacob," he answered.

²⁸ 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."

²⁹ Jacob said, "Please tell me your name."

But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.

- "The man," as Moses has called him so far leaving us to assume his identity until Jacob later tells us he knows who it was—"the man" who could have torn human Jacob limb from limb and wiped out his existence with a single word, let alone a touch—the man lowers himself to say "**Let me go, for it is daybreak.**"
- The man has placed a limitation on the conflict and Jacob's response to it. He will not wrestle in the dirt beyond the night
- It is time to decide something Jacob! Right now!
- Jacob, the created human, injured and unable to fight "the man" any longer has learned something critical.
- Jacob, the human cannot go on without the powerful blessing he knows "the man" can give him. Jacob has decided.
- With a broken, in great pain from the long struggle, now clearly beaten in battle, while *autonomously* using only his own human strength, Jacob knows his identity is that of a **needy man**.
- He is a man who, absolutely above all else—above all he could plan and do--**he absolutely needs to be blessed by "THE MAN"** or it is all over—all is a waste of life even if he can claim a metric 50% by his own power as being a "success."
- Jacob was fighting the wrong enemy. Jacob thought his enemy was Esau when, in reality, his enemy was—well, let's go ahead and say what we all know already—**his real enemy was God!**
- The real enemy of religious, praying, planning, doing, 50% successful men is not who they make that enemy. It is not presumed metrics

failure and loss of significance that is their enemy. ***Their real enemy is God.***

- God cared so much that Jacob would finally learn and appropriate this transforming truth that he came to earth—to the bank of the River Jabbok in the middle of the night and wrestled in the mud with this ***self-made man*** so that he would become a ***God-made*** man and know that that was who he was—he would know that was his identity—***a man made by faith in God rather than faith in himself.***
- What was the “blessing” in this moment? It was a name change. But, more than just different letters making different sounds, this name change was a change in ***identity!***
- Jacob, the autonomous, self-made, cheating, ***heel-gripper*** of a man Jacob, is now ***iss-ra-EL!!!!***
- What does Israel mean? What identity does it give the OT people of God as who they are at their very core? Jacob was a man and Israel is to be a people who ***“fought with God and with men and came out the winner.”***
- But, wait Raleigh, you say, Jacob lost the fight to the death with God. Oh really??!! ***Did he lose or did he win?***
- Two millennia later another Son of Abraham wrestled with God to the death of his self-sufficiency—the death of his plan—his 50% metrics—the death his intended outcomes. He was a man whose name was changed from Saul to Paul because his identity had changed.
- He wrote to people in a city where religious men prayed and worked their plans and established their own metrics and deemed their own successes as successful enough. Their own autonomous significance from DOING and CONTROLLING is what really matter. This Israelite who was quite a capable human with a record of quite elevating human experiences and some quite big human successes, around 2,000 years later wrote...

- (2 Corinthians 12) ⁷ To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. ¹⁰ 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.
- Did Paul lose or did Paul win the fight over trusting his own power or God's? Did Paul lose or did he win the fight for his core identity as a man who must trust God to truly be blessed in anything he did.
- Oh, it took Jacob such a long time. It took Paul a such a long time to learn this truth about his identity in Jesus Christ. Losing to God we win and we can do more than the 50% that makes us feel significant.
- So, to finish the chapter, after this strange fight to the **DEATH** that was really a fight to the **LIFE**, did Jacob finally understand and believe? Did he finally see his **identity** as a man who must trust God in order to be who he is made to be? Look at the remaining verses **starting at Verse 30...**

³⁰ So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

³¹ The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip. ³² 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—excuse me, Iss-ra-**EL** I wouldn't want to "**dead name**"--Israel figured out who his opponent had been in the death match, in the dirt on a lonely riverbank that night.
- He had not only glimpsed the "face of God" and survived. He has grappled for hours with God in the mud and survived. He has clung to God for God's blessing and had survived.
- This was not how it was supposed to work when a human saw, let alone touched God. That is unless, in his perfect plan God is willing to let us die to our autonomous selves and our expected outcomes with our 50% metrics and then we might truly live by his blessing—his power for his glory rather than our own.

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- The victor who lost but won limped the rest of his life. What a reminder! Our limps remind us of the battle we lost to God in order truly win.
- We limp because of weakness or pain or maybe both. Our life-limps call out "***My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.***" Our pains and our weaknesses shout, "***I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.***" Our inability to bring about our desired outcomes by doing something—doing anything instead of nothing, and settling for 50% or less of God's plan scream, "***For when I am weak, then I am strong.***"
- Do we "*hear what our limps are trying to tell us*" as God wrestles with us in the mudds of our lives? Or do we, even as religious, praying me, keep trying to win the fight with God by medicating the pain of his *touch* with the momentary relief we find in autonomous **success** and mere earthly **significance**?
- It took Jacob a long time. It took Paul a long time. It took me a long time to even begin to believe that God's grace is sufficient—that God's power is perfected in my weakness rather than my human strength—that my weaknesses are grounds for God's glory—and that when I am weak, then I am strong.
- I still don't believe those truths 100%. I still forget them more often than I would like. But I am not alone in this weakness of remembering my true identity. I skipped past verse 29 back in *Genesis 32*, to raise the matter here. Even in that setting—even clinging to God knowing what he needed—there was still within Jacob a need to be in control—to have a plan—to get his intended outcome.
- That night, knowing his identity was nothing apart from the blessing of God, he asked for "wrestler's name." Why? Because in Jacob's world, to possess a name was to possess potential control—power. He could put that in his back pocket for later success!

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- We are all that way. We all know who we are—our identity-- in one moment and then the flesh jumps up to try to work its plan for its own glory.
- This is the inevitable fight to the death we will all continue to experience until that day we are made to be like the Lord Jesus Christ in our new bodies that know exactly who they are and whose they are forever.
- Jacob fought with God and died to become Israel a man with a limp for the rest of his life to remind him of his identity—a man made by God not himself.
- Paul the capable self-made man of great promise fought with God and died to his own abilities to do God's will so that he could live his true identity—a man made by God not himself.
- I mentioned this is one of my three most cherished passages of Scripture. I should quickly tell you why if you have not already figured it out.
- In 1985 I was in my last year of a 4 year program at DTS. I had gone to DTS because it was known at the time to be a rigorous academic program of study. Even the "Wittenberg Door" magazine, the Christian "Mad Magazine" and the Babylon Bee of its day had written about DTS that *"they don't give their degrees away there!"*
- I had learned the unspoken rules of academia—who to use that world for gaining personal significance.
- Like the police force my dad was part of or like the military, there were certain givens. If you did this, you would be awarded with this promotion or this degree. They would even give you a badge or a stripe or a robe and a hood that said: "This man has achieved this!"
- However, in all such situations, there is not as much room at the top. So, the closer you move to the top, the harder the game for gaining significance can become. To be a Colonel is an honor that can bring

significance. To be a General is an honor that can bring even more significance but there are far fewer spots open to be a general.

- I was certainly a religious praying man but I was a religious praying man who had found I could succeed and even gain significance in the academic world.
- For one of my last Hebrew Bible classes, I took the elective on the book of *Genesis* taught by one of the best OT profs. of his day, Dr. Alan Ross. By some measures Dr. Ross a graduate of Cambridge University with post-doctoral work in other universities in Europe—was a guy who I wasn't sure knew me, let alone cared much about me. In my opinion, we were both of us just in the academic game of self-made significance and he was just a few years ahead.
- The one assignment that mattered most in the *Genesis* elective was an exegetical paper that amounted to short thesis on one passage in *Genesis*.
- The Professor, Dr. Ross assigned your passage to you. The class wasn't very large so not all passages were assigned. It was as if Dr. Ross picked the passages and assigned them based upon what he knew about the student and what the student needed. I think, contrary to his demeanor at times, he truly did watch us, get to know us and care about who we were going to be for God's glory on God's mission.
- Dr. Ross assigned me *Genesis* 32. I never worked harder on understanding any Scripture then I worked on *Genesis* 32. I had all semester to work. I had as many pages as I needed (within reason) to write my conclusions singled spaced in 10 point type.
- My conclusion could have been recorded in one short, three-word sentence that went like this: ***I am Jacob!*** I, Raleigh Gresham, soon to be awarded at graduation with academic accolades that I Raleigh Gresham had worked for and deserved—***I am Jacob!***

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- I needed to die to the need for self-made significance no matter how real it felt in the world I was in and live only by the blessing of God.
- I needed to give up my 50% human goals—human metrics of success which were actually goals of always getting 100% (at least by the academic standards of the world).
- I needed to truly at least begin to believe that God's power is perfected in my weakness rather than my human strength—that my weaknesses are grounds for God's glory—and that when I am weak, then I am strong.
- Like Jacob, and I'm sure even like the Apostle Paul I still sometimes forget and try to get God's name out of him when we are wrestling so I might use it later for some 50% goal.
- But, *Genesis 32* changed me. It showed me where I needed to get my real identity. It also showed me that God's Word—the Scriptures—were indeed LIVING and POWERFUL. I didn't need new dreams and visions for God to reveal himself to me and change me in a living and relational way apart from his Word. I saw how powerfully transforming God's Word could be of a man's basic identity and I didn't need to produce any of that power to get significance from the experience. I simply needed to let God's truth win the fight to the death.
- I don't know whether Al Ross knew what he was doing. I never asked him but I think I detected a bit of a wry smile when I presented my *Genesis 32* paper to the class and included this testimony.
- Why am I not driven to see Church success as so many others see it? Numbers, buildings, programs, satisfied customers, public recognition? Why? A big part of it is my fight to the death of me in *Genesis 32* 40 years ago.
- I pray our elders, our FBC teachers all of us FBC folks, as we think of our future as FBC, will remember what **died** and what **lived** that dark, lonely night in the mud on the banks of the Jabbok River.