



Poland Presbyterian Church

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**The fourth in a series by  
Brent J. Eelman**

### **The Jacob Chronicles: A Homecoming**

#### **Genesis 32: 22-32**

*<sup>22</sup> The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. <sup>23</sup> He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. <sup>24</sup> Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. <sup>25</sup> When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. <sup>26</sup> Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." <sup>27</sup> So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." <sup>28</sup> Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." <sup>29</sup> Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. <sup>30</sup> So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." <sup>31</sup> The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. <sup>32</sup> Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle*

#### **Matthew 10:34-39**

*<sup>34</sup> "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. <sup>35</sup> For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; <sup>36</sup> and one's foes will be members of one's own household. <sup>37</sup> Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; <sup>38</sup> and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. <sup>39</sup> Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*

I can still hear the voice of my college Phys-Ed instructor: "Eelman-you've got a lot of fights ahead of you." The occasion for those words was a wrestling match. My college required Physical Education, and for two months we wrestled. I'll never forget that day, when the matches were announced at the beginning of class. I was to wrestle this guy who looked like Attila the Hun. He was one of these individuals who shaved twice a day, and no one ever saw him smile. He was tough. I, by contrast, stood 6-4 and weighed all of one hundred and sixty five pounds.

I begged and pleaded with that instructor. "Please, don't make me go out there and wrestle this guy...I'll get killed!" I then resorted to my ultimate verbal weapon: "I came to college to be minister. This isn't relevant!" With sadistic glee, the instructor said: "Eelman, you don't think you will face combat in the ministry? You've got a lot of fights ahead of you." I went out to the match and wrestled for three minutes. I hung on for dear life.

I did not win, but my shoulders never touched the mat. It has been over 45 years since that day, but his words are still vivid. He was right. There have been many wrestling matches in my life, and they make my opponent that day seem quite benign. The matches I have faced have been gut-wrenching decisions, problematic issues, and larger than life opponents. These are the big wrestling matches in our lives. It is from this perspective that we need to view the next chapter in the Jacob Chronicles.

When Jesus uttered those troubling words: "I have not come to bring peace but a sword." He was speaking about this type of encounter. Today, I want to look at this sword as it entered Jacob's life. First, telling the story in an interpretive manner. Then I want to draw some conclusions for our day.

## I

Jacob: the patriarch of the Hebrew nation experienced the sword of which Jesus spoke. Jacob could be our contemporary. Today he might be an executive, a sales person, a banker or broker. He was a bright, busy and very successful person. He was a success. He had it made. He had done well in life and he wanted to return home. He was on his way home with his wives, his twelve children, and all of his possessions. He was probably eager to show the relatives that he had done well. He was not a prodigal son returning home for food, No, Jacob returned home as a worldly success. He could point to all the visible symbols of his life: his wives, his children, his herds, his servants, his possessions. This was the evidence that he had it made.

In his mind there was only one confrontation left, and that was Esau. Jacob was smart and sure of himself. He had finessed Esau a number of times, and he could do it one more time. Perhaps he had the words already in his head, what he would say when he, at last, saw his brother. He knew he could handle even that confrontation. Perhaps this self-confidence was the reason he sent everything on ahead. He wanted Esau to see all these things: all of his accomplishments. He wanted to send his "resume" ahead, just as one does before a big job interview. Then, as if to savor the moment alone, he lay down on the bank of the river and went to sleep.

This was the moment of attack. The ancients believed the rivers possessed demons that attacked humans at night. The book of Genesis says that "a man" wrestled Jacob that night. Think for one moment. Who was it? Could it be Esau? Certainly Esau had every reason to attack his brother. Certainly Esau was a threat to Jacob. But it was not Esau. Was it Laban, his father-in-law? No, there was an uneasy peace between the two. Neither represented a threat to Jacob. Who was it? **IT WAS GOD!**

Think about Jacob's life until this point. Everything in his life contributed to his success. In every way Jacob was done well. He had matured and even grown spiritually, but there was one confrontation left. He had to face the truth of himself. His wits and his intellect had held him in good stead, but now he faced the reality of who and what he was: not in the presence of others, but in the presence of God.

This is a wrestling match, indeed, a struggle. It is the same struggle that Jesus brings to our lives when he says that "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." It is a disquieting struggle that

requires us to deal with the reality of who we are and what we are to be. Jacob has beaten every earthly foe. He has wrestled with all the people in his life and he has triumphed. But the stranger by the shore of the river did not allow him to win. Instead, at daybreak, the stranger touched Jacob's thigh, and put it out of joint. Jacob suddenly realized that his opponent could have, (at any time,) won the match. So Jacob does not let go until he is blessed by the mysterious stranger.

## II

Does this struggle seem real to you? It is indeed a fearful one: one that can come upon us at any time.

- It visits us at times when we think that we have the world by the tail.
- It is a struggle that forces us to be truthful about ourselves.
- It is a struggle that creates integrity.
- It calls us to confront our very soul, our very person.
- It is then that we see ourselves unmasked before the throne of the Almighty.

The struggle can occur at any time. Indeed, it literally mugs us. It grabs us and wrestles us to the ground.

Read the lives of the great women and men of history:

- Martin Luther struggled with the meaning of grace and forgiveness, not in terms of impersonal doctrinal theology, but in terms of his own life. He knew well the one with whom Jacob wrestled.
- The Medieval visionary, Hildegard of Bingen, literally became physically ill as she struggled to communicate the visions that she had of God.
- The Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross, spoke of this struggle as the "dark night of the soul."

This struggle has much to teach us, and if we wrestle this opponent with integrity, it offers us a blessing.

**First,** DON'T LET GO! Hang on to that struggle like Jacob, who hung on to the man by the bank of the river. Don't let go. It is a painful struggle. Jacob went away limping. You too might suffer scars. But there is a blessing in that struggle. It is then that we come face to face with the very being of God. It is then that God's still small voice becomes an unbearable shout. That is the sword that Jesus brings to our lives. That is the sword that disturbs the easy peace, indeed the false peace, which we try and create.

If that sword is real to you, if you are intimate with that struggle, hang on and know the love of God: a God who loves us enough to grapple with us, indeed a "love that will not let us go."

**Second.** There is meaning and purpose to the wounds that often occur in this struggle. The story ends with Jacob limping off to see his brother Esau. He was wounded in the encounter with God. I am coming to believe that many of the important, soul making events in our lives leave wounds. There are tender places in our hearts and souls that even the strongest cannot bear to have touched. It is my conviction that these wounds are the portals through which the grace of God enters our lives. The

Jacob Chronicles tell us that there is a powerful bond between our blessings and our pain.

**Third**, it puts all of life's struggles in perspective. There are many things with which we wrestle and fight. We struggle for success. We battle life's opponents and rivals. We struggle with circumstance and coincidence. These struggles are often consuming... but the biggest struggle that we have is the one that Jacob encountered that night.

Life's biggest battle is the struggle to claim our own soul. It is the struggle to be genuine in the presence of God. A person can win all the battles of life, and still creep like a coward from this encounter.

"Eelman, you have more fights in the future." Truer words could not have been spoken, and some of the foes make my opponent that day seem like a teddy bear. You, too, have many matches ahead. They contain the promise of a blessing. Jacob wondered who his opponent was that evening. The name, *Peniel*, indicates that he wrestled with God. If you are struggling with something painful. If you are struggling with a reality that you cannot identify, but seems real nonetheless; wonder not who your opponent is. Hang on! Christ's sword may have pierced your life. Hang on. Now his peace and rest will also become real. This is the good news. Amen.