

October 16, 2022

Genesis 32:22-30

“Jesus: Friend or Foe?”

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Do not grieve when hardship increases in your life for the Lord God is still doing great things for those who believe in him and his salvation. Our Old Testament lesson is about Jacob. He had experienced much misery since he had left home. He had narrowly escaped the wrath of his treacherous father-in-law and was now in great terror on account of his brother who, at one point, wanted to kill him. Having sent his family and all that he had ahead of him Jacob was now left alone.

There are times in life when we think that things cannot get any worse. There are times in life when we feel like everything is closing in on us. There are times in life when we feel that we are all alone. We begin to wonder about **Jesus: Friend or Foe?**

Jacob had been through a lot in his life. It was one of those moments that we often capture with the words: “If one more thing goes wrong I think I’m going to lose it!” But then one more thing wrong comes along without warning. Listen to the words of an old Lutheran Theologian:

[Lord God] It is not enough that those who love You must be afflicted by the faithless world, contend with their own flesh and blood, and come to blows with the devil, but in addition to all this misery comes the greatest of all: that they must struggle with you Yourself. The hearts of the upright often fall under such tribulation that it seems as if You [Lord God] forgot to be gracious, as if you refused to listen any more and preferred to let them perish in their misfortune ... what anguish above all anguish it is not to know whether You [Lord God] are friend or foe!

While Jacob was all alone, a stranger seized him and wrestled with him violently as if to kill him. After all the promises of the Lord God to be with him and protect him, Jacob now has to endure this moment. The stranger even dislocates his hip socket. Did the Lord God forget his word? Is the Lord God angry? Are all of Jacob’s hopes going to crash and burn? Do we not feel that way when we are worried, confused, or annoyed so that we do not know what to do and what may be coming next?

The hardest thing to realize and accept is that the stranger in this text is the Son of God before he was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. Yes! Jacob wrestled with Jesus and Jesus touched his hip socket so that his hip was out of place. That had to be incredibly painful. The prophet Hosea says of Jacob: “... in his manhood he [Jacob] strove with God. He strove with the angel [the messenger] and prevailed; he wept and sought his favor (Hosea 12:3b-4).”

Jacob strove with God. He wept. He sought God’s favor. Jacob prevailed. Four very important thoughts to remember.

First Jacob strives with God. One could say that the Lord Jesus was almost at play with Jacob so that in the beginning he does not know with whom he is wrestling. But at the end of the wrestling he will know with certainty that he has wrestled with the Savior. Why would the Lord God do such a thing as this?

Well, he is removing certain impurities in Jacob's character and thereby strengthening his trust in him no matter what. What is tough to accept is that this can only happen through anguish of heart. It is one thing to think you are trusting in Jesus when he appears to be your **friend**. It is the highest trust in Jesus when he appears to be your **foe**. Luther writes:

So, God plays with [Jacob] him to discipline and strengthen his faith just as a godly parent takes from his son an apple with which the boy was delighted, not that he should flee from his father or turn away from him but that he should rather be incited to embrace his father even more and ask him, saying: "My father, give back what you have taken away!" Then the father is delighted with this test, and the son, when he recovers the apple, loves his father more ardently on seeing that such love and child's play gives pleasure to the father.

This kind of thing between a father and a child is quite common, but when it comes to the Christian, this test is very serious and difficult. But we should remember what it says in Proverbs 3:12, "... the Lord reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights." In the end Jacob sees the face of Jesus and is truly blessed with a greater purity of heart and a much stronger faith that will see him through the rest of his life and in his hour of death. In such a trial as this we are taught to see that there is a loving heart and smiling face behind what appears to be Jesus as our foe. He is not our **foe** but a **friend** above all friends. It says in Job 13:15, "Though he slay me, I will hope in him ..."

It is here that one learns what the good and acceptable and perfect will of God is. It is life in him and the salvation of our souls. Yes! New joy and life rises from weeping. Jacob wept and we weep too. But consider the words of James when he writes: "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (1:2-4)."

Jacob strove, he wept, but he also sought God's favor. Can you imagine that?! He sought God's grace when everything seemed to be against it! He would not let go! This is what faith and hope are supposed to do when they are confronted with Jesus as **foe**. Faith and hope grounded in the cross and empty tomb hold onto Jesus as **friend**. The forgiveness of sins and the life it gives is our life preserved. Our Old Testament records for us: "When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, 'Let me go, for the day has broken.' But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go unless you bless me.'"

Jacob believed that blessing was to be found in this man who was wrestling him. He was right, for the man who was wrestling him was the one who would one day come to fulfill all the promises that had already been given to Jacob. And Jacob was blessed, his life was preserved, and he continued on that journey which would lead to the words we say in our day: "... conceived by Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried, he descended into hell. The third day he rose again from the dead." Jacob would not let go. From the New Testament perspective we may also hold on to Jesus no matter what. Luther puts it in a shocking and memorable way:

If He [God] should cast me into the depths of hell and place me in the middle of devils, I would still believe that I would be saved because I have been baptized, I have been absolved, I have received the pledge of my salvation, the body and blood of the Lord in the Supper. Therefore, I want to see and hear nothing else, but I shall live and die in this faith, whether God or an angel or the devil says the contrary.

In the end of our Old Testament lesson we are told that Jacob prevailed. His name is changed to “Israel,” which expressed the idea that Jacob was a “ruler and conqueror.” He ruled and conquered the stranger who wrestled with him. He ruled and conquered Jesus before the incarnation. It’s a miracle that Jacob lived to tell the story. He saw the Savior of the world who is the Son of God and was delivered. Our lesson states: “So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, ‘For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered.’”

In this way, Jacob was delivered from the pain of the past and was made ready for whatever the future would hold. And his future was clearly one of holding on to Jesus as **friend** even when he looked like **foe**. And when you hold onto Jesus as **friend** and savior, you rule and conquer all. Therefore, despite the anguish we do not remain in the anguish. By holding on to the cross and empty tomb we gain comfort and help. We are blessed. Let us then not lose heart when we face trials. Only hold on to Jesus and you will be delivered.

Jesus: Friend or Foe? If Jesus had been Jacob’s **foe**, Jacob would have been defeated. But when you have Jesus as your **friend** you are the ruler and conqueror over sin and death and hell. As Jesus says, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” And we are his friends, for by his Spirit and the means of grace he has commanded and created faith and hope in him and love for him and one another. Therefore we hold on! We do not let go!

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott