

**May 17, 2009**  
**Between a Rock and a Hard Place ...**  
**Genesis 32:1-12**

Our idea was to climb up to the ridge above Thunder Lake and work our way back to the campsite along the ridge. So Dave and I set off up the slope. We were both (fairly) experienced climbers. The rock looked solid and felt solid - at first. Then it became more broken. Soon it was loose pebbles. We were struggling between the more solid outcrops. We ended up moving further and further south, above a sheer rock wall. Then the solid rock disappeared completely, and we were on a steep slope of loose scree. We could not go up. We could not (easily) go down. We had no equipment. I thought we were going to die.

Have you ever been in a similar situation. Your throat gets dry. Your stomach goes funny. Your mind goes in all sorts of odd places. And of course, you pray.

At time we get trapped by life. It happens. For you it may not happen climbing in places you should not be. It may not even be life threatening. But you will experience moments when you feel caught between the hammer and the anvil. It's not a pleasant place to be. What do you do?

*What does Jacob do?*

Jacob is on the run because he has swindled his father-in-law, Laban, out of most of his flocks. *"Laban's sons were grumbling about him. "Jacob has robbed our father of everything!" they said. "He has gained all his wealth at our father's expense." And Jacob began to notice a change in Laban's attitude toward him"*(Genesis 31:1-2). Should Jacob have been surprised? After all that has happened, I think he could have guessed this was coming ...

What does Jacob do? *"Jacob deceived Laban by not telling him he was running away"*(v.20). Ten days later Laban catches up with Jacob. There is an awkward, uncomfortable meeting, more dishonesty, and a peace treaty (of sorts) set up - Jacob will stay on his side of the fence and never have anything to do with Laban any more - and vice versa. Not exactly good relations!

But now Jacob is in his brother Esau's backyard - the same brother whose birthright he had stolen and whose blessing he had stolen; the same brother who held a grudge against Jacob and had been muttering and scheming, *"Soon my father will be dead ; then I'll kill Jacob"* (Genesis 27:41). Jacob is caught between the hammer and the anvil. He can't go back; he can't go on.

The tragedy of Jacob's life is that he has left a trail of broken relationships behind him: he has no relationship with his father, his brother, his father-in-law, one of his wives (Leah), and (we shall see) shows favouritism to only one son, alienating his other children. He has no friends that we know of. Jacob may have manipulated himself into some sort of material comfort, but he is a lonely, fearful, guilt-ridden, stressed-out person. He has no ongoing relationship with God. He is not content, not joyful, and not fulfilled.

But now, for the first time, we read these words: "*Then Jacob prayed ...*" (Genesis 32:9). Caught between the hammer and the anvil, Jacob finally prays. But in his prayer he mostly complains that it's God's fault that his life isn't a bed of roses! He continues to tell God what God has to do for him. It's still all about Jacob "getting his due."

The tragedy of Jacob's life is that until now he has tried to outsmart, out-plan, outwit, out-fox his family and the Lord. Now, when he is caught between the hammer and the anvil - the father-in-law whom he has offended and stolen from, and the brother he has offended and stolen from - he finally prays! How many people never pray until they are in a jam!?!? And when we are in the jam, how many of us blame God for the mess we've got ourselves into?

### *What's missing?*

Way back, Rebekah, Jacob's mother, had been given a promise that Jacob would be just fine. In fact, God promised Jacob would be the "man of the household" not his older brother Esau (Genesis 25:22-23). No doubt Jacob knew of this promise too. So Rebekah and Jacob forced the issue: they systematically played on Isaac's and Esau's weaknesses by deception and trickery. The backlash, however, was that Jacob was forced to flee for his life.

On the run to Uncle Laban's, God promises Jacob that he will get his inheritance, be well cared for, and be the one through whom God's blessing will come to "*all the families of the earth*" (Genesis 28:14). But over the next twenty years Jacob will force the issue again: he will deceive, trick, and swindle every cent (Ok, every sheep and goat) he can out of his father-in-law to make sure he gets his due.

What's missing from his life? God. We see God, moving in the background. But Jacob ignores Him completely. Jacob bulls his way forward, oblivious to God's presence or power.

When God had promised to care for and bless Jacob, Jacob's response had been: "*If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's house, then the LORD will be my God ... and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth.*" (Genesis 28:20-22)

Notice:

- Jacob isn't even talking to God. This is a third person prayer - it's as if Jacob is muttering it to himself. We are listening in on Jacob's deepest personal thoughts.
- Jacob doesn't trust God - God has promised, "*I am with you, and I will protect you wherever you go ... I will not leave you ...*" (Genesis 28:15). Jacob is adopting a wait-and-see attitude.
- Jacob is setting the ground rules for his relationship with God: if God does what Jacob wants him to do, then Jacob will do something for God in return. But Jacob is the one trying to set the "rules of engagement" here. He is trying to cut a deal with God.

Over the succeeding years, God will more than honour his part of the agreement. But Jacob doesn't honour his ... we never read of him fulfilling his part of his own deal ... Who is the one who has integrity? Who is really trustworthy? God? Or Jacob?

Have you ever tried to make a deal with God?

- When you're in a jam, you promise, "*Lord, if you would only get me out of this, I will ...*"
- When you really, really want something to happen, you pray, "*God, if you just help me this one time, I'll go to church/give an offering/read the Bible/pray every day ...*"
- You've really messed up, so you pray, "*Jesus, just forgive me this one time - let nothing bad happen to me (no one finds out) - and I'll never, ever sin again ...*"

How has that worked for you?

In my experience, God often does get me out of the hard spot. But I often fail to follow through on my side of the bargain.

Think about it. Can we really make deals with God? They sound sensible in the emotion of the moment of crisis. But from a comfortable distance - like a long weekend in May - does this make sense?

- Is this how God relates to us? Is this how any healthy relationship works?
- Is it reasonable to assume that I can dictate the terms of my relationship with God to the King of Kings and Lord of Creation?
- Do I really think God believes me when I make grand promises I know (and He certainly knows) I cannot possibly live up to?

### *An alternate reality ...*

A few weeks ago we reminded ourselves that the good news is that "*God is God, Jesus is Lord, the powers of evil have been defeated, God's new world has begun.*"<sup>1</sup>

Being a disciple of Jesus means living life in the Kingdom of God. "*The whole point about a relationship with God,*" writes John White, "*is not what one gains in personal safety or material prosperity but in fellowship with him and peace of mind. You can be perfectly safe yet experience no peace at all. Did Jacob but know it, he was safe. God had not intention of allowing Laban (or Esau) to hurt him (Genesis 31:24). But Jacob enjoyed neither the peace that God's protection could have given him not the sweetness of his fellowship. He was a man haunted by greed, by terror, and by a troubled family life.*"<sup>2</sup>

I certainly appreciate the presence of God when I am between a rock and a hard place. God often does get me out of tight spots. But if that were only experience of God, that would not be much of a relationship. How does a parent feel if their child only speaks to them when they

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<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, p. 227

<sup>2</sup> John White, *Daring to Draw Near*, p. 32.

really need money or are in a really tight spot? How does a child feel if his parent totally ignores her unless they want something. It wouldn't be much of a relationship.

I don't want a relationship with God that is just for the desperate times - I want a relationship with God every moment of every day. The presence of God - every moment of every day - is what really brings joy and fulfillment to my life. Learning from, living with, and seeking to please Jesus is the most rewarding aspect of my life.

Jacob struggled half his life to gain for himself what God had planned to give him anyway. In the end he had exactly what God had promised (but no more). The tragedy of Jacob's life is that along the way he missed the peace, contentment, joy, and satisfaction and fellowship with God he could have enjoyed. If Jacob had spent time with God, had he taken time to pray more often, he would likely still be in healthy relationships with his family. And if Jacob had worked on knowing God, he would know the strength, peace, joy, and wisdom that come from a relationship with His Creator, His Sustainer, and His Ever-Present Helper. Instead Jacob had decades of anxiety, stress, fear, scheming, guilt, and pain.

It takes discipline to cultivate a meaningful relationship with anyone. "Discipline" is not a popular word these days. But if you want a rich, satisfying friendship, you have to discipline yourself to spend time with another person. If you want a fulfilling marriage, relationship with your parents, kids, or grandkids, you have to discipline yourself to spend quality time with them. And if you want to know the joy, peace, contentment, and fulfillment that come from Jesus, you are going to have to discipline yourself to spend time with Him.

When I discipline myself to spend quality time with God, life becomes so much fuller, richer, and more meaningful. It does take energy and discipline to spend quality time with God every day; I can easily let the relationship slip away. It takes effort and discipline to remind myself every moment that God is with me, He cares for me, and He desires to help me through the situations I face; I can easily think I am all on my own. When times are going Ok, I can easily forget Him.

But at all times - in the good times and the hard times - when I work at cultivating my relationship with God, life is infinitely more meaningful. How are you doing at a personal relationship with Jesus? What do you need to do to make it better? In Jesus' own words, *"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me"* (Revelation 3:20). The imagery of eating together is an image of relationship - of sharing life together. It comes down to choices. To priorities. To what really matters most. Is that relationship with Jesus something you value? What will it mean for you to open the door and let Jesus in? What will it mean for you share your life with Jesus?

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