

CHAPTER 8

FACE-TO-FACE WITH YOURSELF

Genesis 32:1–32

- You thought you had the wherewithal to save your career. Just log more hours, call on more clients, put in more effort. For years the approach worked. But then the walls collapsed.

The economy nose-dived. The company went under, and it threatens to take you with it. All of a sudden you feel your world spinning out of control.

- Your marriage has always been a challenge, yet the two of you have kept it together. Little by little, however, the bridge has eroded. You're running out of cope, running low on hope. For the last few weeks you've hardly spoken. You share the same house but not the same heart. It's a wrestling match, this marriage.
- You've kept your addiction a secret. You've mastered the ability to appear sober. You know which vodka to drink and which mouthwash to use. You convinced yourself you could manage. But you didn't see the stoplight. Now the car is a wreck, and so are you. You've never known the inside of a jail cell before. You will tonight.

Life comes with inflection points, junctures in which we know our world is about to change. Events that time-stamp life. Crossroads that demand a decision. Go this way? Or that? Everyone has them. You do. I do. Jacob did. Jacob's came with a name: Jabbok.

By this point Jacob had bidden adieu to Laban. Mesopotamia was in his rearview mirror. He'd arrived a man on the lam, only his staff in hand, fleeing his behemoth brother. He left two decades later with four women, eleven sons, and one daughter. He led a tribe of servants and droves of sheep, cattle, goats, and camels.

We are not told if Jacob thought of Esau during his exile. But he must have. Jacob must have feared the rage that awaited him upon his return. He'd hoodwinked the birthright from his older brother and turned Esau into the laughingstock of the clan. The last time Jacob heard Esau's name,

it was couched in panic. His mother had warned, "Get out before your brother kills you!"

Esau would have.

By now the older brother was a squire of sorts. His household numbered in the hundreds and flocks in the thousands. Jacob could not survive in Canaan apart from Esau's favor. Would Esau be resolute on revenge? Or would he let bygones be bygones?

That was the concern on Jacob's mind as he headed south through the hills on the eastern side of the Jordan River near Jabbok.

So God gave Jacob some assurance. He revealed the army of angels that surrounded him. "And Jacob went his way. Angels of God met him. When Jacob saw them he said, 'Oh! God's Camp!' And he named the place Mahanaim (Campground)" (Gen. 32:1-2 THE MESSAGE).

The word used here for *camp* appears elsewhere in Scripture to describe hundreds of thousands

of soldiers (1 Chron. 12:22). When Jacob left Canaan, the angels met him (Gen. 28:12), and then upon his return, they met him again. Rank upon rank, they moved in the sky like iridescent waves of the aurora borealis. Perhaps it was their presence that gave Jacob the courage to send servants ahead to his brother.

He told them, "Give this message to my master Esau: 'Humble greetings from your servant Jacob I have sent these messengers to inform my lord of my coming, hoping that you will be friendly to me.'" (Gen. 32:4–5 NLT).

Do you hear the language of Jacob? "My master Esau . . . ," "inform my lord . . . ," "hoping that you will be friendly to me . . ." Jacob, at least in dialect, came in humility, pleading for mercy. Did his appeal make a difference? Read the next verse and see what you think.

The messengers came back to Jacob and said, "We talked to your brother Esau and he's on his way to meet you. But he has four hundred men with him." (Gen. 32:6 THE MESSAGE)

Gulp. Four hundred clansmen thundered toward Jacob. But that's no problem. An army of angels hovered above him. Jacob gathered himself, told his family not to fear, and moved forward, right? Not quite.

Jacob was scared. Very scared. Panicked, he divided his people, sheep, cattle, and camels into two camps. He thought, "If Esau comes on the first camp and attacks it, the other camp has a chance to get away." (Gen. 32:7–8 THE MESSAGE)

Oh, how Jacob could vacillate. Communing with angels in one instance, frightened by sol-

diers the next. Our hero had more waffles in him than IHOP.

Yet, lest we be too hard on Jacob, hurry to the next passage. Jacob, for the first time that we know of in twenty years, offered a prayer. And a wonderful prayer it is!

O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD who said to me, "Return to your country and to your kindred, that I may do you good," I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps. Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, that he may come and attack me, the mothers with the children." (Gen. 32:9–11 ESV)

Who is this Jacob? He prays like a man who

depends on God's goodness. Has he learned the Laban lesson? He reminded God of the promises God had made. He acknowledged that he was unworthy of God's unfailing grace and faithfulness. He gave God credit for his abundant wealth. And then he said, in so many words, *If you don't help me, I'm burnt toast.*

Jacob kicked into high gear, desperate to avert a bloodbath. He began sending gifts to Esau. One drove after another of flocks: goats, ewes, lambs, camels, bulls, donkeys. He sent some 550 animals arranged in six groups.

Jacob instructed the herdsmen to tell Esau that "your servant Jacob is on his way behind us" (Gen. 32:20 THE MESSAGE). The Hebrew word used here for "servant" was to acknowledge a status of inferiority;¹ as if Jacob were saying, "I'm a jerk. I'm a chump. You're the class act in the family." Within short order the gifts were delivered. He

sent everyone across the river and stayed behind to spend the night alone.

In my opinion what happened next warrants a place in the great hall of holy moments: Moses on Mount Sinai. Elijah on Mount Carmel. Jesus in the Jordan River and on Mount Calvary. You make your list. I'll make mine, but let's make sure both lists include Jacob at Jabbok.

Jabbok. The very name of the river has a thrust to it. *Jab! Buck!* Jacob is about to be jabbed and bucked for the entire night.

But Jacob stayed behind by himself, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he couldn't get the best of Jacob as they wrestled, he deliberately threw Jacob's hip out of joint.

The man said, "Let me go; it's daybreak."

Jacob said, "I'm not letting you go 'til you bless me."

The man said, "What's your name?"

He answered, "Jacob."

The man said, "But no longer. Your name is no longer Jacob. From now on it's Israel (God-Wrestler); you've wrestled with God and you've come through." (Gen. 32:24–28 THE MESSAGE)

This passage is as mysterious as the stranger it describes. Here is where my imagination takes me.

Someone grabbed Jacob around the neck and threw him to the ground. Jacob jumped up and jumped at him, driving his shoulder into the gut of the attacker until the two fell flat. The stranger pushed him off and pounced on Jacob, pressing his shoulders into the muddy bank.

Back and forth the two struggled. Jabbok's water surging. The night wind howling. The duo grunting, elbowing, scraping, clawing, straddling, and wrestling. Jowl to jowl.

Jacob on top.

The stranger on top.

Jacob tried to run. The attacker dragged him back. Bodies slippery with mud. Skin wet with sweat. They said no words. They panted like stallions. They leapt like gazelles. A blur of fury. Flipping, slipping, dodging, and wrestling.

Jacob had always handled his problems on his own. Did he not survive the walk through the wilderness? Outlast Laban and his tricks? Amass a fortune and a clan? He fought his own fights. He was savvy, smart, and slippery. He'd made a life of coming out on top. He'd do it again.

But the Man would not retreat.

Hours passed. On and on through the night they wrestled. Finally Jacob saw the first shudder of a sunrise on a distant hill. "When the man saw that he would not win the match, he touched Jacob's hip and wrenched it out of its socket" (v. 25 NLT).

Who was this stranger? Jacob would later say,

"I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been spared" (Gen. 32:30 NLT).

Did Jacob actually prevail against God? The answer is yes, until God made his point.

God let Jacob fight until it appeared that Jacob was in control. Then, with one touch, God dislocated the hip, leaving Jacob to limp back to his family. It's as if God said, "That's enough, Jacob." He touched Jacob with a force that Jacob had never felt. Jacob crumpled to the ground, broken and humbled.

I see symbolism in this injury. The hip is the largest weight-bearing joint in the body, and it engages some of the strongest muscles. Yet it was putty at the touch of the Stranger. What's more, this damage to Jacob's hip was more than damage to a joint. The word used in this text can refer to vital organs.² The touch left Jacob's manhood redefined.

The message of the dislocation? “You aren’t as strong as you think. Rely on me.”

Do you know the mud of Jabbok?

I do. My journal entries don’t use the river’s name. But they certainly speak of occasions in which I’ve wrestled with God.

One of the most dramatic occurred some twenty years ago; I was about fifty years old. To the casual observer I was on top of the world. Our brand-new church sanctuary was bursting at the seams. We added new members every week. The congregation had very little debt and absolutely no doubt that their pastor was doing a great work.

Our church actually appeared on the list of popular San Antonio attractions. Tour companies bused tourists to our services. The magazine *Christianity Today* sent a reporter to write a profile on me. The writer called me “America’s Pastor.” *Reader’s Digest* designated me as the “Best

Preacher in America.”

All cylinders were firing. I turned sermons into books. My publisher turned books into arena events. I wrote kids stories and recorded kids videos. It was wild!

What no one knew was this: I was a mess.

Our staff was struggling. Departments were squaring off against one another. Tacky emails were flying like missiles. Ministers were competing for budget dollars. A couple of invaluable employees, weary from the tension, quietly resigned. And since I was the senior pastor, it fell to me to set things in order.

Yet, who had time for intramural squabbles? I had lessons to prepare. The problem with Sundays is that they happen each week! In addition I led a midweek prayer service and taught a weekly early morning men’s gathering. Deadlines were coming at me from all sides. I needed time to think, to pray, to study.

What's more (or consequently) I was unhealthy. My heart had the rhythm of a Morse code message: irregular and inconsistent. The cardiologist diagnosed me with atrial fibrillation, put me on medicine, and told me to slow down. But how could I?

The staff needed me.

The pulpit required me.

The publisher was counting on me.

The entire world was looking to me.

So I did what came naturally. I began to drink.

Not publicly. I was the guy you see at the convenience store who buys the big can of beer, hides it in a sack, and presses it against his thigh so no one will see as he hurries out the door. My store of choice was on the other side of the city lest I be seen. I'd sit in the car, pull the can out of the sack, and guzzle the liquid until it took the edge off the sharp demands of the day.

That's how "America's Pastor" was coping with

his world gone crazy.

My Jabbok, as it turned out, was a parking lot. The wrestling match lasted for the better part of an hour on a spring afternoon. I told God I had everything under control. The staff issues were manageable. The deadlines were manageable. The stress was manageable. The drinking was manageable. But then came a moment of truth. God didn't touch my hip, but he spoke to my heart. *Really, Max? If you have everything together, if you have a lock on this issue, then why are you hiding in a parking lot, sipping a beer that you've concealed in a brown paper bag?*

Jabbok. That moment in which God brings you face-to-face with yourself, and what you see you don't like.

Jabbok. When you use all your strength, only to find your strength won't give you what you need.

Jabbok. A single touch on the hip that brings you to your knees.

Jabbok. Jab. Buck.

Yet even in the moment, or especially in that moment, God dispensed grace. Look what happened next to Jacob.

“What is your name?” the man asked. He replied, “Jacob.” (Gen. 32:27 NLT)

On the page of your Bible, there is scarcely a space between the question and the reply. In real time, however, I sense a pause, a long, painful pause. *What is your name?* There was only one answer, and Jacob choked to spit it out. *My . . . name . . . is . . . Jacob.* This was a confession. Jacob was admitting to God that he was, indeed, a *Jacob*: a heel, a cheater, a hustler, a smart operator, a fraud. “That’s who I am. I’m a Jacob.”

“Your name will no longer be Jacob,” the man told him. “From now on you will be called Israel, be-

cause you have fought with God and with men and have won.” (v. 28 NLT)

Of all the times to be given a new name. And of all the times to be given *this* name.³ *Israel* means “God fights” or “God strives.” The name celebrated, and celebrates, God’s power and loyalty.

The old Jacob fought for himself. The old Jacob relied on his wits, trickery, and fast feet. Jacob, himself, took care of himself. The new Jacob had a new source of power: God. From this day forward each introduction would be a reminder of God’s presence. “Hello, my name is God fights.” Each call to dinner a welcome instruction, “God fights, it’s time to eat.” His email address was godfights-@israel.com. His business card reminded all who read it of the true power of Israel: “God fights.” His old name reflected his old self. His new name reflected his new strength. “God fights.”

What grace.



God extended it to me. Abundantly. I confessed my hypocrisy to our elders, and they did what good pastors do. They covered me with prayer and designed a plan to help me cope with demands. I admitted my struggle to the congregation and in doing so activated a dozen or so conversations with members who battled the same temptation.

We no longer see tour buses in our parking lot,

and that's fine with me. I enjoy an occasional beer—but for flavor, not stress management. And if anyone mentions the “America's Pastor” moniker, an image comes to mind. The image of a weary, lonely preacher in a convenience store parking lot.

God met me there that day. He gave me a new name as well. Not Israel. That one was already taken. But “forgiven.” And I'm happy to wear it.