

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Paul Zahl

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The story in Genesis 32 of Jacob's wrestling with the angel is a beautiful story of healing and reunion on the basis of a struggle that arises out of the past.

In this ancient event, Jacob and Esau were fraternal twins. Jacob was favored by his mother. He was the favorite child. And Jacob received all sorts of support from her to win from his brother Esau some money. (This is called Life Among The Trust Funds. And if you have ever known about family litigation, many of you have known that brothers and sisters can be pitted against one another in litigation over money.) And there was a way in which Jacob destroyed his brother's hope of success by cheating relevant to money, and years later after Jacob was married and had cattle and wealt, he heard that his brother was on his way to see him. And he was filled with dread and said this to God: "Deliver me, I pray thee, from the hand of my brother, for I fear him lest he come and slay us all, including the mothers with my children." because there was a bone to pick. And so he went to sleep the night before this fated and fearful encounter with his brother. And he proceeded to see that an angel came to him, a man, and they wrestled all night. And they wrestled and they wrestled.

Now, what is this about? It is about the appearance from out of the past of unfinished business. Now, I am not just talking about your income tax report in 1981. But I am talking about the things from out of the past that create tremendous blockages in people. I am constantly meeting "stuck" people. I am no different from you. But I am often aware that a person in middle years, younger years or older years is essentially stuck. There was a crisis in earlier years

that was not sufficiently navigated. There was a developmental crisis of a child when he was in late adolescence. And it was not sufficiently worked through, and the child is basically in arrested development, whether it is in late adolescents who are now seventy or whether it is people who have had terribly unpleasant love affairs in their twenties and they are in their fifties and they are still focused on bereavement and separatedness and hostility towards men. I have run into constantly stuck individuals, certain people whom I know who have run into terrible trouble in their professional life and they have never gotten over a reversal in their forties and they are angry and upset and bitter.

And unfinished business from the past creates stuckness in the present. Now, let me just ask you a question. Do you know anyone who is stuck? These are the signs of stuckness: repeating behavior, always focusing on a particular resentment, going back again and again to one particular bitter thing that was done to you. You see it in your children. You see it in your parents. Do you see it in yourselves?

And what Jacob was faced with. He had been favored by his mother. He had done a highly unethical thing in cheating his brother out of an inheritance, and now he was facing it. It was coming to him. It has to happen. And, by the way, pray that people who are stuck will come to terms with what got them going. What was the thing that caused the stuckness in the first place?

I had an amazing experience recently on an out of town ministry that Mary and I were doing somewhere. And we saw a little child doing something that will come to roost in twenty years. It is very rare that I see a thing actually occurring in a four-year-old that is going to take its cost in their forties. We were with a little four-year old child, a beautiful child, but like many four-year-old daughters today with an acute sense of entitlement. She is absolutely helicoptered by her parents. They are utterly and

completely about their four-year-old daughter, obviously out of guilt. But when they are there – of course they are never there- but when they are there, this little child is the ruler of the galaxy. And there is a kind of imperious, autonomous entitlement on the part of this little child and, interestingly enough, it played out in a public situation. We were with many people and the child of four played it out, and it ended up with an injury and someone had to go to the hospital. Now, I thought to myself, this situation is causing a degree of narcissistic entitlement and autonomous Little King behavior that is going to get this young little girl in big trouble in her late teens. And it is going to hit big time when this pattern at age four (I saw it! This is unfinished business.) emerges in the twenties and thirties of this lovely looking child.

Unfinished business. And Jacob had it. Now, he encountered the messenger of God and they began to struggle and to fight and they wrestled. And Jacob was given to struggle until it was over. And that is what is powerful. He says: “The man did not prevail against Jacob and he put Jacob’s thigh out of joint. And he said Let me go, but Jacob said I will not let you go unless you bless me.”

Now, what happens in a lot of situations when you finally look at what is going on in your life. You look at a problem and then, as quickly as possible, you try to make things the way they were before. I know someone who when her husband died was thrown into the most cosmic grief imaginable. It has never ended. And I asked: “Well, did you ever get any help?” And she said: “Yes. I went to see a psychiatric social worker...once.” It wasn’t enough. She didn’t wrestle until daybreak. What we do is we have an issue and a problem and we get a little help and things get a little better. (It is commonly called a flight into health.) And then, of course, the problem is so heavy and opprobrious that it drags us down eventually and we do not get the blessing. We do not wrestle until the break of day. Now this man wrestled until the break of day and

what this tells us is that when we have an issue, take it to the limits, work with it, go for it.

I was with this very successful clergyman recently. (I happen to hang around with clergymen. You probably hang around with normal people.) But he is extremely gifted and he is very successful. He is one of those rare clergymen with a vastly growing parish and a tremendous following. And he is very talented. And he is about fifteen years younger than I, and I said: “Well, don’t you have any problems?” (He sort of thought: “Paul is looking for an Achilles heel.”) And he said “No. None of my children are Christians and they have all married non Christian partners but, apart from that, no problem.” Basically, what he was telling me was “There is a problem. I am not thrilled about where my girls are, but, hey, let’s go forward.” That’s called taking no blessing.

And what Jacob did, and it is really a very touching thing, and it is really the only way to go in human life when you have a problem, he fought all night. He stayed up all night.

You remember “Great Expectations” and the beautiful heroine is stuck because her aunt is stuck and Pip, lovely Pip, sweet Pip, fights for her and he gives it ten years to help her come to love, come to open the doors and lift the constraints and pull up the curtains, and because he does not let her go he gets the benefit and they are married and it is a very powerful conclusion to Great Expectations.

Now, this man, Jacob, wrestled all night. And so powerfully did he wrestle that the angel of the Lord said: “Your name shall no more be called Jacob but Israel for you have striven with God and man and hath prevailed.”

Now, what does that mean? You know, we talk about becoming born again, and it is not some kind of mantra. It is really real. Being born again means that having come into this life with a tremendous psychogenetic impediment – sin – which was made worse by all sorts of false compromises we made with life caused a very worldly personality to come to birth, which is you and which is me. We need to be born again in the context of grace, love and mercy. And it creates a human being. It is no longer Paul with all his givens and eccentricities and certain reactivities and little sensitive areas. Do you know what I am talking about? You have a sensitive area. Somebody you know you are always walking on eggs with because they have a little sensitive trigger. That all needs to go. Don't die with those things in place because they are all forced, artificial, worldly personalities based on insanely defeated and misconceived mechanisms.

And we believe that when a man and a woman come to the gate of mercy and love that gives space and gives amnesty, a new being is created, and that is why the metaphor of born again-ness is much more than a metaphor. It is the truth of life.

And this was expressed in Jacob's life by the word Israel. He said: "Jacob, you were Jim (Jacob is the word for Jacobus or Ji), but now you are Israel." He meant "You were criminal, envious Jim, and now you have become a human being." "Now you are a Universal Person. Now you know what is true about defeat and you also know what is true about love. You know what is true about struggle and you know what is true about the gift of God's mercy. You are no longer Jim. You are Israel. You are a Universal Person. You are a human being.

There is one other thing to say about it. First is that everybody here is a Jacob. We all have unfinished business. And the great question is: "Are you actually able to deal or are you going to continue to flee?" I am sympathetic. You probably will flee. This sermon is

totally in vain and I might as well sit down. However, fleeing unfinished business creates sleepless nights like Jacob had. Jacob struggled. He decided it was important. He fought all night to get through it. And he did. And he was given the name of Universal Human Being. Because he had come to terms with his own sin and constraints and givens and found engagement with a forgiving God.

And yet – and this is the last point --“he lived forever on.” It says: “The sun rose upon him that morning as he passed Peniel limping because of his wrestling match. Therefore, to this day the Israelites do not eat the sinew of the hip because Jacob limped forever.

And the interesting thing about these kinds of struggles is that you still will be the person you are. I may be Universal Person in some ways and you may be, too. But you are still Bill. You are still Jim. And you are still Paul. And never think that you will be fully rid of a thing because you will limp till the day you die because you are still the person you were but God gave you a great victory.

So, a fundamental problem of the constantly recurring compulsive issue that has caused the anger and the resentment of the last thirty years or fifteen months has been healed because you have worked it through and God is merciful. And He has given you hope.

So, I hope that we will all be limping for a very long time but in the hope that you won't stop short, like so many, of gaining the blessing of seeing this through.