

Wrestling With God 2) To Hold Tightly To His Blessing

Genesis 32:6-32 • 2020-09-06 • Wrestling with God Series



Some things are just too important to leave behind. You ever get the feeling when you go on a trip that you've forgotten something? I had this feeling once. I was all geared up to go on a canoe trip with my brother. We had picked out a river we wanted to canoe down together. It wasn't until I was already half the way to the river when it dawned on me: it's hard to go canoeing without any paddles. The canoe was securely strapped to the roof of my vehicle, but the paddles were still sitting all neat and organized on my garage shelf at home. It's sort of a helpless feeling having a canoe without a paddle. I submit to you that a Christian can treat life this way. We can have all our life in order and have everything all set and strapped secure but sometimes not realize we are forgetting what is most crucial in life: God's promises. We leave them behind and find it is impossible to navigate life without them. And when we face hardship, fears, and death, we are totally unprepared without his promises. Today we are going to look at a man who was richly blessed by God. He had gone from having only his staff and a rock for a pillow to having a huge family and numerous flocks and possessions. He seemingly had it all together. But as he was about to face danger and cross a river, he was full of fear. He had nearly forgotten to take something crucial with him: God's promises. Today we'll look at his river crossing and see why it is so important to hold tightly to God's blessing.

Jacob certainly had many blessings from God. Before he was even born, the Lord God told his mother that her son would be blessed. God also shared his promises of blessing directly with him. As Jacob left his homeland, he received a vision of heaven open and a promise spoken from God. (Genesis 28:14-15) *"I am the LORD.... In you and in your seed all the families of the earth will be blessed. Now, I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back again into this land. Indeed, I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised to you."* Jacob held a load of promises from God!

But don't think that having promises from God means your life will be trouble-free. Jacob's brother, Esau, grew increasingly resentful of him. Finally, Jacob was forced to leave behind his homeland and flee from his brother who wanted to kill him as soon as their father was dead. Even after he fled to a faraway land to live with his uncle, trouble followed. Jacob was only jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire. His uncle gave him troubles and grew increasingly resentful of him. Jacob feared to stay with his uncle, and God directed Jacob to go back to his homeland.

Jacob knew how to deal with his troubles. He was a wrestler. It wasn't beyond him to pry the birthright from his brother. He saw the opportunity and bargained for it with a stew he made. It wasn't beyond him to deceive his father in order to get Esau's blessing from him. It wasn't beyond him to hide and run from his angry brother. It wasn't beyond him to practice superstitious rituals so that he might increase his flocks. It wasn't beyond him to slip away when his uncle wasn't looking. Yes, Jacob had God's promises. But that wasn't what he held onto the tightest. He lived by the mantra, "God only helps those who help themselves." His name, you see, was rather fitting. It meant, "one who grabs the heel," a figurative expression for one who deceives. And with his actions he got by more than fine. He got by fine until now.

At the Jabbok river, near his homeland, he was gripped with fear. Now he was about to face the brother who hated him and wanted him dead. How could he deceive his way out of this one? Jacob fearfully works his best to carry out his plans. He plans his crossing the river under the safety of darkness. He plans by splitting his family in two groups so at least one might survive. He was so wrapped in fear that he spent the night alone. This was a night of prayer if anything!

Jacob certainly had much. But he still had a sleepless night of prayer and fears. "What about my family, servants, livestock, riches, wealth?" Brothers and sisters in Christ: it doesn't matter how much you hold in your hands if you don't hold tightly to God's promises for you. You can be tormented by the fear of losing it all.

Are we always comfortable when facing threats of loss and threats of death? We are often blessed. But should we ever work with the fear that God will forget his own? We may not share the same promise Jacob did to have God bring him back to his homeland in safety. But God has said, "I am with you always." And he tells us, "call on me in the day of trouble and I will deliver you." But do we hold tightly to that promise for comfort? Jacob wasn't alone in walking around with a load of promises from God. Hasn't the God of Jacob also told you, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."? We put up security measures, buy insurance, and live with utmost care. But why are our hearts still at times so afraid?

As he prepared to cross the Jabbok river, Jacob was afraid because he was missing something far more important than the paddle. Was he trusting and holding onto God and his blessing? Or was he still relying on his own power and strength?

Jacob couldn't possibly think that he had been so blessed this far by mere luck. Nor could he possibly think he could go on by his own mere wit and cunning. If he did, he would have to cross the river wondering if God really did ever bless him. He would have to wonder if his luck or his skill would hold out as he faced the threats ahead. Turning to our own plans and strength will never be enough. Is God merely a side stage performer watching our lives? He is far more! If not for God we'd be left with far worse than darkness and fear. How could we ever place our confidence in our own strength and our own devices? We would be left in our sin and to face our greatest fears alone. We'd have to cross the river from death to life without hope. If we were to let go of God's promises we'd be in a far worse position than Jacob found himself at the

Jabbok river. We can't let go of God's promise without losing everything good and gaining every evil. We'd rightly deserve to drift down the river of life until we meet death, darkness, and hell for not holding tightly to God's great promises!

God was about to teach Jacob how important it is to hold tightly to his promises. He had told him he was never alone. During that night, a man in the cover of darkness came and wrestled with Jacob. Never the one to give up Jacob wrestled with the man until it was nearly daybreak. But this was no ordinary man. It was God himself. And Jacob was about to learn something about holding God to his promises. The man who wrestled with Jacob did something no ordinary man could do. After Jacob withstood with an entire night of wrestling, he learned how helpless he really was. The man simply touched the socket of Jacob's hip and his leg was immediately dislodged and he was incapacitated.

What was Jacob now left with? He couldn't flee or run from Esau. He could only limp. He was left relying on God. Jacob held onto him and said, "I'm not letting go until you bless me!" God asks him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. God knows his name, but he is going to redefine this "heel grabber" into one who would fully rely on him. God said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have won."

How did Jacob overcome? In helplessness and holding onto God for blessing! Now, limping to his family he had no choice but to rely on the promises of God. "Bless me God, just as you said you would!" Only in that sense is God ever overcome.

Hold God to his promise! He will not ever turn you away! See how God responds to the one who holds him to his promises? God answered Jacob's request. When Jacob asked for the man's name, he found out just who this man really was as the man blessed him. "I saw God face to face," Jacob marveled. And he knew his life was spared! God gave him a blessing. Esau wouldn't harm him. He would safely return to his homeland. Israel was his new name. "One who wrestles with God." If God would come to him and remind him to hold God to his promises, what would he ever have to fear?

Jacob was left with a whole new outlook on life. He had been fearful of meeting Esau. He had been poised to flee, appease his brother in whatever way. But he had seen God face to face. He had been reminded of God's promised blessing. He went ahead of all his family and met Esau. Jacob could no longer rely on his own strength. He limped away to face Esau. But his confidence had never been better as he had God's blessing and love.

You have been shown the same favor and mercy of God. You have great promises from God to hold him to! You are spiritual descendants of Abraham through faith in God's promise. You are like Jacob. And that promise given through Abraham and passed on to Jacob is that God would bless all nations. That promise is also yours in Jesus.

God carried out every promise to Israel. At the mention of the birth of Jesus, Mary exclaimed, "*He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful.*" She knew that God had come to carry out the blessings which all of true Israel had longed for and held onto for so many years. God did meet this world face to face. And it wasn't just under the cover of darkness that night with Jacob. It was in plain sight of all of Israel. He lived and walked on this earth in the same place which Jacob did. Our own struggle against sin and death would have been helpless. But Jesus, the holy Son of God, came to fight for us. Like Jacob, Jesus spent the night in prayer before he met all our enemies and our fears. His night of prayer ended with a resolute desire to go forward to remove all our fears. He did not gain victory by cunning or deceit, but by his great act of love and sacrifice. The Holy One of Israel faced all our fears on the cross. He gave his life in our place to die for our sins and take our punishment in death.

Jesus held onto what was promised in Scripture –that his death would cover our sins and he would be restored to life. He rose to life to guarantee that we too will rise one day to life. Death cannot even give us fear anymore. We live, work, and rest with confidence. He has overcome all for us! The living Jesus tells us, "I will bless you. I will be with you wherever you go. I will bring you safely home to live forever with me." If God has kept this promise in Jesus, won't he also along with him give us everything else he has promised?

Though we are guilty of not holding tightly to his promises, God comes to his and meets us with his Word. We wrestle with his Word until we find out we are utterly helpless on our own. He leads us through that Word to hold tightly to Jesus looking for the promised blessing. Come to God in helplessness and with all your fears and say, "I will not stop holding onto you." Rely on him when trouble is near. Pray, "Lord, remember your promise!" Is your family threatened or in any danger? Hold God to his promises, "Lord, send your angels to watch over us. Keep your promise to deliver us from evil and in the end, bring us safely into your kingdom." And don't do this relying on your own strength in the struggle. Don't think that by your great faith or power you will move God to do any more than just what he has promised. Like a man limping toward his fears, you must rely on God's promise alone. "Lord, for Jesus sake, bless me."

It doesn't matter if we have the whole canoe and every other blessing strapped secure. We need what is most crucial to cross the river and face all our fears. We need God's promise of forgiveness, protection, and eternal safety or all else is lost. We need to hold to his promises and never loosen our grip. Hold God to his promises. Rely on him when trouble is near. Let him take away all fear.