Jacob Prepares to Meet Esau

When did you die? That would be an odd question to ask someone, wouldn’t it? After all, if you’re dead you can’t answer and if you’re alive you haven’t died. Yet that is precisely the question posed to Joe Youngblood by a fellow pastor. Joe described this conversation in a sermon during a revival at our church several years ago. Not only was Joe not surprised at the question, he had an answer for it because he had in fact died although I must say, he looked pretty healthy for a dead guy. He was talking about not a physical death but putting to death his former self. This is not describing the moment of salvation but rather a process of growth and maturity as a Christian, perhaps culminating in a watershed moment where one finally lets go and gives God control. Steve talked about inward peace in his sermon yesterday which is separate and apart from the outward peace with God occurring with salvation. Steve described it as an elusive tranquility, a hidden peace or peace/peace. When we are saved, we become new creatures, or born again as Jesus told Nicodemus (John 3:3). Paul wrote about this extensively in Romans chapter 6 and in other letters (see Eph. 4:22-24, Coll. 3:10, 2nd Cor. 5:17). While we are new people, the old person is surprising resilient which Paul writes about in Romans (7:21-25). As Christians we are perfectly capable of reverting to some of our old ways and even those who gain that elusive peace/peace are still flawed people just as Paul was “*Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus.”* (Philippians 3:12 KJV). Genesis chapter 32 could have the alternate title of “The Death of Jacob”.

The chapter begins with Jacob continuing on his journey to Canaan after his confrontation with Laban. Jacob saw angels, naming the place Mahanaim which means 2 camps. Matthew Henry wrote that the angels attended him during his meeting with Laban and now God revealed them to him because he would soon be facing greater danger. He sent some of his servants ahead to let Esau know that he was returning and they came back to let him know that Esau was coming to meet him with 400 men. Since Esau had previously sworn to kill him (27:41), Jacob was understandably afraid. He split his party into 2 groups hoping that some could escape if Esau attacked and sent both groups with gifts of substantial livestock hoping to appease Esau. Note that he did not send gifts with the original messengers. Jacob displays humility by referring to himself as a servant of Esau and in his prayer to God acknowledging that he is not worthy of all God had given him.

Jacob was camped with his family in Gilead by the Jabbok River which was the border of Canaan. After sending his wives and children across the river, Jacob wrestled with a man throughout the night. Ray Pritchard wrote that God arranged the circumstances so that He could get Jacob alone at a moment when he felt helpless. Jacob probably thought at first that he was being attacked maybe by one of Esau’s servants. He was not wrestling with a man but with God Himself in the form of a preincarnate appearance of Jesus (see v. 28, some, including Matthew Henry believe that it was an angel). While Jacob thought he was in a physical wrestling match, maybe for his physical life, Jesus was wrestling for control of Jacob’s life. Verse 25 is particularly curious stating that Jesus could not overpower him. That could be symbolizing that Jacob would not give in. Jesus merely touched his thigh crippling him to show that He was in control. Ray Pritchard puts it much better than I could: “*The man said, ’Let me go for it is daybreak,’ But Jacob replied, ’I will not let you go unless you bless me.’” That’s a new determination. Up until this point in Jacob’s life, he used all his strength and ability to achieve his own ends. For the first time, he’s come to the end of his own resources. Before this night, Jacob was running the show. Now he realizes that without God, he’s nothing. All his huffing and puffing has brought him to realize how helpless he is when compared with the strength of God. Whereas before he used his wits to deceive Esau and trick Isaac, now he is learning the great lesson of Zechariah 4:4, “Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord.”*

Jacob realized that he was wrestling with God and asks for a blessing. God’s answer is the question “What is your name?”. He was asking “Who are you, what is your identity?”. Ray Pritchard wrote *“What is your name? Until you can say, “My name is bitterness,” you can’t be healed. Until you can say, “My name is greed,” you can’t be healed. Until you can say, “My name is deception,” you can’t be healed. Until you say, “My name is unfaithfulness,” you can’t be healed”*. Jacob was forced to confess that he was a trickster, a deceiver, a sinner. This confession earns him a new name, Israel signifying a new life similar to Abram being renamed Abraham and Simon being renamed Peter.

Perhaps a good answer to the question “When did you die? Might be “I’m not dead yet but I’m working on it”.