

When You Fear to Encounter an Adversary

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[Genesis 32:9-12] Then Jacob prayed, "O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, Lord, you who said to me, 'Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper,' 10 I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two camps. 11 Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children. 12 But you have said, 'I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.'"

The promise of blessing God had given to Abraham became a possibility through the life of his grandson Jacob. Jacob's twelve children became a nucleus of achieving the promise that his descendants will be as numerous as the sand of the sea and the stars in a night sky. God had told this promise to Jacob as He had done to Abraham and Isaac [v. 12]. The God, who had appeared to Jacob in Bethel when he was fleeing from the threat of his twin brother Esau, continued to help him, helped him prosper, and guided his steps during the 20 years he served his uncle Laban in Syria. God's words to Jacob, *"I will surely make you prosper and make your descendants like the sand of the sea,"* gave him the courage to break away from Laban and start a journey toward the promised land Canaan with his significant family and large herds of flocks.

As he started the journey, he had two fears: One was of his uncle Laban who was sure to pursue him, and the other was of his twin brother Esau, whom he would surely encounter down south. Fortunately, Laban left him to go in peace thanks to God's intervention. Esau, however, was a dreadful adversary who must be harboring extreme hatred and enmity toward Jacob, even after twenty years. Esau was an eventuality of Jacob's act of deceit, through which he had secured the birthright and his father's blessings. Esau was a must-go-through rite of passage before Jacob could make God's promise of blessing as his own.

Some of us may also have a consequence of our sin or foolishness in the past—an adversary whom we must encounter someday and face a resolution, either for good or for bad, just as Jacob feared of his sure-to-come encounter with his brother Esau. The thought of the coming encounter is so fearful and domineering that robs us of sleep and peace of mind. The nature of our past sin or foolishness and the magnitude of our adversary might be different by person. Yet, we must need to face this adversary somehow. What is troubling is that we are at a loss as to how to prepare for the encounter.

One of the ways Jacob devised for mitigating Esau's enmity toward him was to prepare a series of livestock as a gift to Esau, a total of over 550 animals including 220 goats, 220 sheep, 30 camels, and their young ones, 50 cows and bulls, and 30 donkeys. He had them in groups by kind to go before him. Secondly, he had his concubines with their children go behind the herds, followed by Leah with her children, then trailing were Rachel and her children, and he was at the tail end of the long trail so that he could have time to prepare in case Esau chose to exercise a violent attack on them. But, how could he fight a fierce group of 400 armed men with a handful of shepherds? He knew that the only sure way of coming out alive through the encounter with his brother was the way provided by God and no other way could assure his safety and his family. So, Jacob spent the night by the river Jabbok all alone, holding unto the garment of God's angel whom he wrestled all night until he received God's assurance of safety and blessing.

Three changes occurred to Jacob through the wrestling with the angel at Jabbok stream. First, his name was changed from Jacob to Israel, which meant the start of a new journey with God as his protector and benefactor. The second change was he secured the Lord's reassurance of blessing including the safety of the coming encounter [Genesis 32:29]. At every important step we take in this life, we ought to cling to God to hear His word of assurance, so that we could take the next step in confidence and joy of His presence and blessing. Thirdly, the angel hit the soft spot in Jacob's thigh so that he became a crippled person. When the sun rose the next morning, Jacob's walk was changed from a confident strong stride to a cripple's limping walk. Instead of a rich

man who amassed a large group of herds and an extended family of wives and children, he became a humble crippled man and his walks showed this significant change.

As the fateful day dawned, the mighty group of Esau with his armed 400 men approached. Esau encountered multiple groups of herds of 550 animals by kind, led respectively by their shepherds. When he found out that they were for him as gifts from Jacob, his animosity started to melt and curiosity started to work in his mind. He then met the four wives and their numerous children with many attendants and more herds of animals. These groups must have impressed Esau and now he was curious to meet Jacob who was the master of such impressive groups of fortune and family. When he finally observed Jacob bowing seven times to the ground in the apparent manifestation of humility and condescension, exhibiting limping walks, it must have melted the hatred and animosity in Esau's heart sufficiently so that the two brothers made peace there on this fateful day of the encounter after twenty long years.

Lord Jesus taught that we must reconcile with a brother who has become an adversary before we offer a sacrifice to God or worship Him.

[Matthew 5:23-26] "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First, go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift. 25 "Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. 26 Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

If it takes some of our material possessions to reconcile with a brother, I pray that we do not consider it a sacrifice. Rather, I encourage you to gladly use it to buy peace with a brother or sister or family who has taken offense at you because of your foolishness or sin. Taking a step further, I hope you humble yourself as Jacob was forced to do so that you approach the encounter with the adversary in the spirit of a humbled cripple. These are ways of godly wisdom that Jacob learned and practiced. Through them, he was able to make peace with his adversary Esau. Many Jews and Christians never learn this wisdom and allow their material possessions to become a hindrance to their spiritual wellbeing. Such people make themselves subjects of criticisms and hatred to the world and yet fail to become the light of Christ before others.

As Jacob's life was forever changed through the struggle of the night at River Jabbok, let us struggle with our fears in our honest pursuit for peace and divine assurance of God's blessings, so that we are also transformed to start a new journey of humility, wisdom, and peace with our family and friends. The nighttime wrestling was well worth it for Jacob. It might be a time for you to enter a wrestling match with God. Good wrestling!