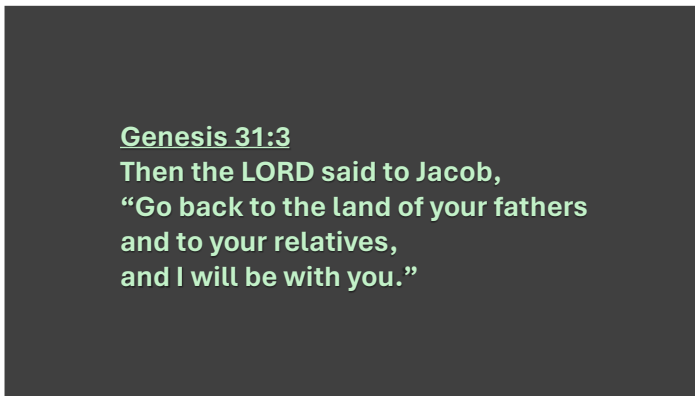




When Jacob left Paddan Aram and returned to Canaan, he did so because God had told him to come back.



Jacob's going back... marked the beginning of a new chapter in his life... for like his grandfather and father, he too would live by faith in the land of Canaan as a stranger and alien.

In his past, Jacob had resorted to deception and manipulation.... He had done so in an attempt to fulfill by his own initiative what the LORD had said to his mother.

Genesis 25:23

Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples from within you
will be separated;
one people will be stronger
than the other,
and the older will serve the younger.

As the first born, Esau would have inherited from his father the birthright and the blessing.

The birthright would have given Esau a double portion of his father's estate; and made him the head of the family.

The blessing would have placed Esau in covenant-relationship with Yahweh with all its ensuing privileges and responsibilities.

<https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/birthright/>

But rather than waiting for God's timing and means... to bring about the reversal which the LORD had foretold, "the older will serve the younger," Jacob, attempted to force the reversal, and in doing so, tragically damaged his closest relationships.

But in the decades that followed, the God who had chosen Jacob while he was in his mother's womb; graciously worked in and through the circumstances of his life, to progressively transform his character.

Let's interact with the story told in Genesis 32.

Read 32:3-5.



When they came to where his brother was Jacob instructed the messengers to address him as, v.4 – “my master Esau,” and when speaking to Esau about Jacob, he told them refer to him as v.4 – “your servant Jacob.”

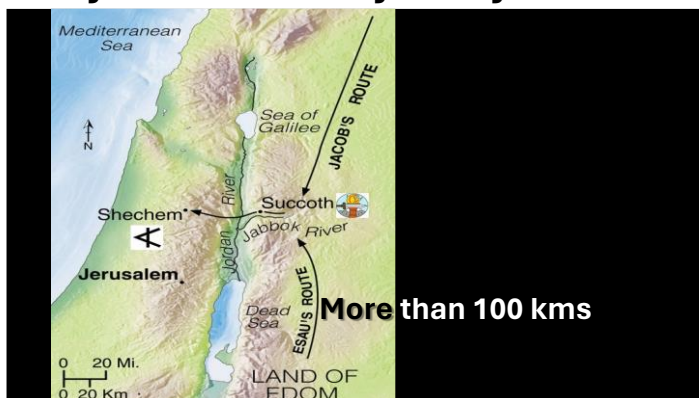
I believe we see Jacob acting with humility.

Jacob’s message to Esau was to the point.

In six words he summarized where he had been the past twenty years – **“I have been staying with Laban.”**

His petition of Esau was equally concise.

“May I find favor in your eyes.”



During the the twenty years Jacob had been away, Esau had moved from Canaan to Edom and had begun to dispossess the Horites who lived there.

By the time of Moses... Esau’s descendants had finished what he began.

Deuteronomy 2:12
The Horites used to live in Seir,
but the descendants of Esau
drove them out.

Read 32:6.

The news that Esau was coming to meet him, wasn't in and of itself alarming... Jacob had sent messengers to initiate contact. But there was a measure of ambiguity in Esau's response which confused Jacob.

If Esau's intent had been to harm him, he could have held captive Jacob's messengers and made a surprise attack on Jacob.

But he didn't.

And yet, coming with 400 men seemed somewhat excessive for a happy family reunion.

Read 32:7-8.

Jacob could not retreat.

Remember... he had made a covenant with Laban.

There was a boundary marker which he had promised not to cross.

Read 32:9-12.

Jacob prayed with desperation.

He acknowledged to God his fear.

Jacob appealed to God to keep his word and to stop Esau from destroying him and his family.

We are not told whether God directed Jacob to do what he did next. But when he finished praying, Jacob prepared a gift to send to Esau.

Read 32:13-21.

200 female goats
20 male goats
200 ewes
20 rams
30 female camels with their young
40 cows
10 bulls
20 female donkeys
10 male donkeys

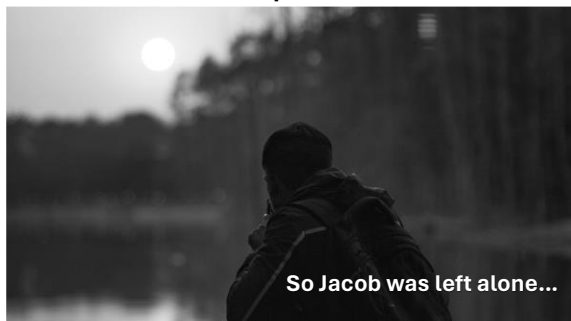
The word “pacify” literally means “cover his face.”
Jacob hoped his gifts might cover the anger Esau held towards him.

It was Jacob’s desire that Esau might, as v.20 says... “receive him,” meaning that Esau would not only spare his life but that he might choose to forgive Jacob for the offenses Jacob had committed in defrauding him of his birthright and blessing.

Read 32:22-23.

Jacob took his family across the ford of the Jabbok.
I think he did so that they could make an early start the following morning... to set out to meet Esau.

But for reasons we are not told, Jacob went back across the ford to where his camp had been; a camp that was now deserted.



This was when a stranger came towards him.

Read 32:24b-31.

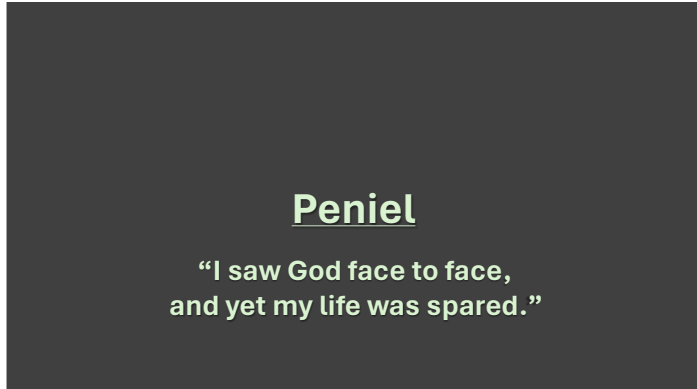
Who was this person who wrestled with Jacob?

v.24 says – “a man wrestled...”

v.25 says – “When the man...”

v.28 says – “Then the man said...”

But when Jacob named the place where he and this man had wrestled, he called it Peniel, v.30, because ...



God came to Jacob in the form of a man.

But why when he came... did he wrestle with Jacob?

And remember, it was not Jacob who initiated this contest, but God.

The Hebrew word for “wrestle” means “to get dusty.”



We see here our glorious God who is willing to “become dirty” in order to save his people, to free them from folly; to bring them to their senses.

This is who Jesus revealed God to be.... the God of dust... and sweat... and blood... and tears.

Yahweh, the One Name of the Father, the Son and the Spirit is no dainty, breakable God.



Yahweh wants to wholeheartedly *engage* with those he calls into relationship with himself.

He welcomes his own to speak, to even debate with him frankly and persistently, for he can handle our questions and doubts.

But we must know this... Yahweh will also challenge and uncover... our stubborn trust in ourselves;
...when necessary, he will force into the light... lies that we've repeated so often that we believe them to be true;
...if it is there, he will... for our sake... expose treasonous attitudes within our hearts towards God.

Why does he do this?

To rescue us from ourselves and the death-grip sin has upon us.

Is this happening to you right now?

If it is, take courage.

As painful as it may be, the LORD is acting in love to save you.

We see in this wrestling match that Yahweh is mysterious; he is unpredictable; he is not tame.

We need to be reminded of this regularly.

As CS Lewis wrote about Aslan, "He is not safe, but he is good."

So it is with the triune God.
He is not safe, but he is good.

In a sermon entitled... “The Magnificent Defeat,” Frederick Buechner describes the pivotal moment in that wrestling match between God and Jacob.



“All the night through... they struggled in silence... until just before morning... when it looked as though a miracle might happen. Jacob was winning.

The stranger cried out to be set free before the sun rose.
But Jacob refused.

And then, suddenly, all was reversed.

The stranger merely touched the hollow of Jacob’s thigh, and in a moment, Jacob was lying there crippled and helpless.

The sense we have, which Jacob must have had...

... that the whole battle....

... right from the beginning was fated to end this way...

... that the stranger had simply held back...

... letting Jacob exert all his strength and almost win...

... so that when he was defeated...

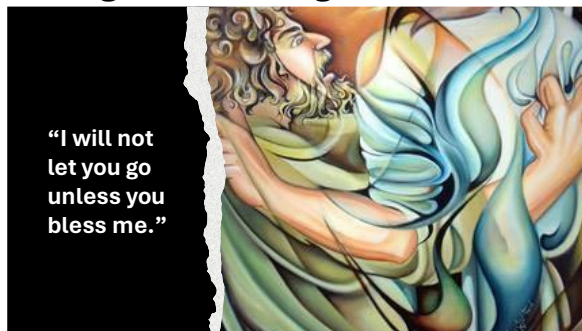
... he would know that he was truly defeated...

... and that all the shrewdness, will, brute force that he could muster were not enough... and never could be.

But even then, Jacob would not release his grip, only now it is a grip... not of violence but of need, like the grip of a drowning man.”

As he did with Jacob, God will act to bring you and me to the end of ourselves.

Though the stranger asked to be released Jacob said:



It is intriguing that instead of blessing him, God first asked Jacob his name.

Why did he do this?

God knew his name.

However, Jacob needed to speak it out.

Remember... his name meant "he who grasps the heel," and figuratively his name implied "one who deceives."

This had been the practice of Jacob's life.

But as the sun began to rise, God changed Jacob's name.

Jacob was no longer to be known as the one who had obtained blessing by deception.

His name would now be "Israel" ...which means "he struggles with God."

And that night, it was revealed to Jacob... that God would never release him... to his own folly.

God blessed him, not because Jacob had gained the upper hand with God, but because Jacob had tenaciously held on to the God who held on to him.

This is what changed Jacob and why he was blessed.
This is the story of all who come home to God.
Our encounter with the triune God changes us.

It was the practice of those who walked with God in the time of the OT to name the places where God revealed himself to them.

This is what Jacob did.

He named the place where he and God had wrestled, Peniel, which means face of God.

It's important that we too, remember...

...the "Peniels" where God met us in the darkness.

... the places where God unexpectedly and mysteriously grabbed hold of us and pulled us towards salvation.

... those places where we exhausted our own strength, and finally collapsed into God's. <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2703-the-limp-and-the-blessing>

Our culture stresses "to live, to be in the moment."

Our passage impresses upon us the importance of remembering and celebrating his past goodness.

In this regard the past will give clarity to the present.

As God has been, so he will be.

We are prone to forget.

This is why in our worship we intentionally remember him – in our songs, in our scripture readings, in the teaching, in our prayers.

The blessing which was given to Jacob came at a price.

As the sun rose and he crossed the ford of Jabbok, to join his family, Jacob walked with a limp.

<https://www.christianstudylibrary.org/article/genesis-3222%E2%80%9333-jacob-wrestles-%E2%80%9Cmysterious-stranger%E2%80%9D-peniel>

One commentator wrote:

“Blessing and bruising are not mutually exclusive
in the realm of God.

We can limp and prevail at the same time.
We can experience healing in brokenness.

If we want to engage with God,
then we must expect
that we will be changed in the process
— and not always in ways that are painless
or comfortable or easy.”

<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2703-the-limp-and-the-blessing>

We can't dictate the terms of God's blessing.

We can't say,
“I want the blessing but not the limp.”

Sometimes, the blessing is the limp.”

<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2703-the-limp-and-the-blessing>

Jon Bloom as he thought upon this passage wrote:

As we spiritually grow, there may very well be times when God graciously determines that...

- ... it isn't soft words of comfort we need,
- ... or time alone to sort out our own thoughts,
- ... or a quiet night of rest,
- ... or even to be granted good health.

God's goodness may burst into our life in unexpected and even unwanted ways.

This is why it is of the utmost importance that we know and live in the story of the Bible.

God is the same, yesterday, today and forever.

Like he did with those who lived before us...God may come to us... he may even pounce upon us.

Like hurricane winds... he may shake our world.

He may deliberately ... our status quo.

He may push us out... of our comfort zone.

And if and when he does so, it is not because he hates us, but because he loves us.

He has committed himself to finish in us what he has begun.

God's goodness may burst into our life in unexpected and even unwanted ways.

It is a great mercy when God draws us out of fearful preoccupation and compels, even forces us to focus on him.

The God of Jacob, of Israel... is trustworthy.

Because he is, we are encouraged to not give up on him... or to let go of him... “

Stretch out empty hands towards heaven to receive grace from him.

Let's pray.

Speak Lord for we are listening.

Convict us Spirit of God for we would keep in step with you.

Our Father, may your will be done in our lives.

Amen.