

# Touched By God: Not what you expected?

## Genesis 32:22-32

*The most profound changes in our lives come through suffering*

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# **Touched by God: Not what you expected?**

## **Genesis 32:22-32**

I had a friend who continues to hold a vivid place in my memory. He was about five years older than I am. He got a pretty rocky start in life. He was born a dwarf. He had to go through primary school, middle school, and high school enduring the teasing and the jokes. However, he developed a great sense of humor and a strong will to succeed. He worked out and became strong enough to participate in high school sports.

After high school, he attended and graduated from the prestigious *Goodman School of Drama*. Soon after graduation, he was acting in off Broadway plays and many local venues in the Chicagoland area. He had an extremely promising future and was even being looked at for some Hollywood roles. A promising career indeed, until one night on the way home from a performance, his car hit a patch of ice on I-294. The car spun out of control, flipped several times, a piece of glass severed his spinal cord, and he was left a quadriplegic. He finally woke up in a rehabilitation center only to hear from the doctors that he would never walk again.

My friend then went on to teach retarded children and overcame his new disability by learning to maneuver around in an electric wheelchair.

About 10 years ago, he decided he wanted to work with adults, so at about 50-years-old, this quadriplegic dwarf enrolled in college. It was difficult learning to obey rules, studying late into the night, and interacting with young people. It was a difficult 5 years. Yet through a lot of hard work, he finally completed his degree. What an accomplishment and what a promising future. He died a month later.

I know that this sounds like a tragic story, but to hear my friend Richard tell it, you would never have heard any regrets or any bitterness. I was able to spend some time with him a couple of months before he died. One of the things that stand out in my mind was that he knew that had he not experienced a life full of difficulties, he never would have found Jesus as his Lord and Savior. To Richard, finding Jesus and knowing that his final destination was Heaven made all the suffering worthwhile.

I want you to know that life was difficult and humiliating for him every day. He had to be washed, dressed, taken to the bathroom, and cleaned up by someone else. He was often in pain and had to make frequent trips to the hospital. Yet, at the end of the day, he was thankful for it all, because without all the suffering, he may have tasted many of the pleasures of this world, but he never would have found Jesus. Those are his thoughts and words, not mine.

I hear sincere Christians say things like, "I wish God would speak to me, or visit me." The problem with that kind of thinking is that we only want to hear God speak words we want to hear, and we only want Him to visit us with pleasant things.

The fact of the matter is this. The purpose of our lives is to become more and more like Jesus. In order for God to help us achieve this goal, He must allow suffering to come into our lives.

The main idea of this evening's text is this. **The most profound changes in our lives come through suffering.** God does not exist to make us happy. God exists, and Jesus came, to make us holy.

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# I. The Nature of Life

## *We Have Deceived Ourselves Into Thinking That Life Is All About Seeking Pleasure.*

God had a plan for Jacob's life. God has a plan for our lives. If that's the case, then perhaps we need understand the nature of life as described in verse 22 through the first half of verse 24. You see the great tragedy is that **we have deceived ourselves into thinking that life is all about seeking pleasure.** This is a really appropriate topic for two reasons. First of all, we have been studying through the nature of suffering on Sunday mornings. And secondly, we are celebrating Thanksgiving. Can we truly be thankful that God is making and molding us into the men and women he created us to be?

I think the existentialists and phenomenologists describe how we live in time nicely. They tend to think of time as fluid. In other words, we are constantly being pushed by the past and pulled by the future. Our present is always influenced by both.

### A. The Past

Jacob had a past. Jacob's name means "conman", "swindler", "cheater", or "heel grabber". About 20 years earlier, Jacob conned his brother Esau out of his birthright. And then he deceived his father into giving him the family blessing. The consequence of that little deal was that he had to run far away from home to avoid getting killed by his brother. Jacob never saw his mother again.

While spending time with his Uncle Laban, who had a nature much like Jacob, they spent the next 20 years trying to out-con one another. When Jacob, along with his wives, children, and herds, snuck away from Laban's house, Laban chased him and pursued him. Jacob again barely escaped with his life. Jacob spent most of his life conning people and getting away with it.

### B. The Future

He was headed back to his home of origin. His future also looked bleak. In his mind, Esau must have spent the last 20 years plotting how he would kill him if he ever saw

him again. Jacob had nowhere else to go. He had developed a lifestyle for himself that consisted of deceit and pleasure.

If we really stopped to examine our lives, aren't we just like Jacob? I heard a powerful sermon about three months ago, and I am still thinking about it. The preacher asked, "If you could be guaranteed not to go to Hell, live a pain-free, bump-free, prosperous life, and your kids grew up to be healthy and successful, would that be enough for you?" I emphatically answered, "Yes! Life can't get much better than that!"

But as he went on in his message, I realized what an empty life that would be. Wouldn't I want a personal, intimate, and passionate relationship with Jesus? Wouldn't I want to know what it felt like to be loved by God, touched by God, visited by God?" I think that the answer for most of us would be, "No. My goal is to get the most pleasure out of life, and then spend eternity in Heaven." I think that if most of us were offered the opportunity to not suffer at all in life and spend eternity in Heaven, we would jump at that offer. I am very ashamed to admit this, but I think I may be tempted to take that offer right now.

With many conflicts behind him and one conflict ahead of him, Jacob finds himself in a very precarious present. As we say today, he was between a rock and a hard place. During the night, Jacob moved all his family and possessions across the river under cover of darkness. Once they were all safely on the other side, Jacob remained behind. The author dramatically said, "This left Jacob all alone in the camp."

I think that the most common reason we don't hear God speak to us is because we fill our world with noise and activity. We are too busy to stop, quiet ourselves, and wait for God. Pain and suffering have a way of getting us alone with our thoughts. I think one of the things that happen when we experience loss is that we feel alienated from everyone around us. Suffering has a way of making us feel that no one understands what we are going through. We find ourselves much like Jacob, our family, friends, achievements, and the world as we know it is across the river, while we sit on the other side of the river alone. Suffering, sickness, death, and loss have a way of demonstrating how powerless we really are. We are forced now to turn to God and God alone. Of course, there are people who continue to be proud and arrogant and

continue to spit into the wind.

### **C. The Present**

We live in the present often wanting to hang on to the past and fearful of the future. Look, if we want to be genuinely thankful for everything, we must first understand that God's goal for our lives is that we become more holy and more like His Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ. We must first correct our thinking. **We have deceived ourselves into thinking that life is all about seeking pleasure.** Instead, we must focus our attention on pursuing holiness. In suffering, God provides us with the opportunity to see how powerless the things of this world are. In suffering, God invites us to turn to Him for a touch.

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## **II. The Nature of God's Touch**

*If We Truly Understood What It Meant To Be Visited And Touched By God, Would We Still Want It?*

The second half of verse 24 through verse 26 describes the nature of God's touch. This section begs the question **"If we truly understood what it meant to be visited and touched by God, would we still want it?"** Through visions and experience, Jacob has come to understand God intellectually and philosophically. However, he doesn't know God in an intimate, passionate, emotional, and relational way. I think that is an adequate description of how most of us, including me, know God. We know a lot about God, but I think there is something inside of us that really understands the danger of getting close to God relationally, and with good reason.

### **A. Ambushed by God**

Jacob is all alone with his fears, his doubts, and his aloneness. All of a sudden he finds himself ambushed by God. Jacob doesn't realize who it is. A man grabs him and starts wrestling with him. Is it a robber? If so, the robber is out of luck because Jacob has no worldly valuables on him. They are all on the other side of the river. Could it be an assassin hired by his father-in-law or his brother? Surely the assassin would have simply cut his throat. Who is this man fighting with him and what does He want?

It is God, and He wants to profoundly change Jacob's life. He has come to bless Jacob. Some blessing. God is slapping him around. Jacob is in for the fight of his life.

This describes how we often react to suffering. We fight against everything God is trying to do in our lives. We want to hang on to our pride and our arrogance. We want to hold on to our possessions and our lifestyles. We really don't want to change; we just want our problems to go away. In other words, we really don't want to change. We want God and our circumstances to change. If that's the case, then we could be in for a long, dark night of the soul.

## **B. Mugged by God**

But even though Jacob is up for the fight, he ends up being mugged by God. The battle goes on all night. There is a sentence here that baffles me. Verse 25 says that when God could not overpower Jacob, He crippled him by dislocating his hip. What could that mean? Obviously God could just blink and Jacob would be dust. I think this is a very good metaphor for how we often deal with suffering. God gives us an incredible amount of free will and latitude. God has chosen not to overpower our will. We can either grow closer to God through suffering, or further away. God allows suffering into our lives to correct faulty thinking, bad attitudes, misguided thinking, and bad behavior. He will continue to apply the right amount of pressure. The sad thing is, that even though we continue to suffer, we refuse to let go of these things. It's almost as if we become proud and comfortable in our suffering. Sometimes we have known it so long, that we don't want to get rid of it.

But it seems as if in the mugging, Jacob's attitude is changing. He is no longer interested in his possessions or anything else on the other side of the river. He desires now to hang on to God.

## **C. Hanging on to God**

He is now hanging on to God. Look, his hip joint is out of the socket. Anyone who has had a dislocated joint knows how painful it is. He can't move his legs. He is in extreme pain, but he is now hanging on to God panting, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." Jacob wants God to bless him. He doesn't care about the pain. He has forgotten about his successes and his failures. He is not thinking of his bank

accounts or the threats on his life. He is totally focused on God.

This is the perfect description of suffering accomplishing its work. When we give up all our own ideas, and anything else we have been depending on, and latch on to God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, we are definitely in the right place, and suffering has accomplished its full purpose. Did you ever think that when we ask to be visited by and touched by God, it meant all this? In other words, **if we really understood what it means to be visited and touched by God, would we still want it?**

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### III. The Nature of Permanent Change

*Once We Have Been Deeply Touched By God, We Will Never Be The Same.*

I hope so, because the nature of permanent change, as described in verses 27-32, is really worth it. The Bible tells us that **once we have been deeply touched by God, we will never be the same.** That's the promise we receive in Scripture. The Bible never promises we will not suffer. In fact Jesus boldly declares that we will suffer. But in suffering, He promises that we shall become like Him and overcome the world as He has overcome the world.

#### A. A profound change in character

A profound change in character takes place in Jacob's life. God asks Jacob, "What is your name?" Keep in mind as we study through this section that a name in the Bible is not something that you were identified by. Name represented character. Jacob replied, "Jacob." In other words, he was saying, "I am conman, cheater, manipulator, heel grabber."

As Jacob came to see, own, and admit his defective character, God changed his character. God said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob. It is now Israel." The best English translation of Israel would be "overcomer." This character was passed on from Jacob throughout history even until today. Since the beginning of the birth of Israel as a nation over 4,000 years ago, nations have tried to wipe them off the face of the Earth. Just recently, the leader of Iran publicly stated that Muslims should rise up

and bury Israel in the sea. However, throughout history, Israel has always overcome her enemies. She still exists today.

In our suffering, God builds character in us. He makes us the men and women He created us to be. He prepares us for ministry and for testimony. Here is a great test for us to see if we are truly on the right track. In suffering, are we becoming more joyful, peaceful, patient, strong, and loving or are we becoming more bitter, angry, agitated, and unhappy? God wants to change our characters through suffering.

### **B. A profound change in outlook**

If suffering is accomplishing its true purpose, then we will have a profound change in our outlook. Jacob was so overwhelmed by God's visit, God's touch, and God's blessing, that he named this place of loneliness, depression, fear, and alienation, "The face of God." Jacob realized that he had met, struggled with, and survived an up close and personal encounter with God. He realizes that it was a blessing simply to be spared from death.

If we have been truly touched by God and if we have received it, then our outlook should be that of Jacob's. If we have received eternal life, if our eternal destinies have been changed from death to life, from Heaven to Hell, from alienation to adoption, then there is nothing else that matters. Everything else we receive from God is a bonus. Jacob wasn't worried about anything else. He met the one True and living God.

### **C. A profound change in being**

If the encounter with God has truly found its mark, there will be a profound change in being. I don't want us to miss this. Verse 31 says, "The sun rose as he left Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip." Jacob was crippled. He was in extreme pain, and he would be for the rest of his life. He had to use a cane and he limped through life. Every morning he would wake up in pain, look down at his leg, and remember the night he met God.

Is this our idea of what it means to be touched by God? We may be left with permanent damage by drugs, and children out of wedlock, AIDS, or some other incurable sexually transmitted disease. We may be left with scars from abuse and have

to live with depression and other emotional and psychological disorders. But the questions we must ask are, “Has God changed us in a deeply profound way? Has the suffering accomplished its purpose and are we now more holy?” The fact is this. **Once we have been deeply touched by God, we will never be the same.**

God touches lives every day. I know many among us are suffering. But I also know that if we submit to the process, God will touch us, change us, and make us whole. Remember, **the most profound changes in our lives come through suffering.**

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## IV. Epilogue

I started this sermon by telling you the story of my friend who was a quadriplegic. Many of you knew him and the great spirit he had.

A more famous quadriplegic, Joni Eareckson Tada, in coming to terms with the diving accident that radically altered her life and future, talks about how we tend to view suffering. She says:

*“Every person alive fits somewhere onto a scale of suffering that ranges from little to much. However much suffering we have to endure, there are always those below us who suffer less, and those above us who suffer more. The problem is, we usually like to compare ourselves only with those who suffer less. That way we can pity ourselves and pretend we’re at the top of the scale. But when we face reality and stand beside those who suffer more, our purple heart medals don’t shine so brightly.”*

Keep this in mind. Jesus continues to bear the scars in His hands, His feet, and His side. He changed salvation history for the whole human race; for you and me.

Take a look at the scars and limps left in your life. My prayer is that the scars and limps in our lives are constant reminders of how God has visited us, touched us, and made us whole.