

“About Face”

Sermon for 31 May 2020

Text: Genesis 33:1-11

A narrow, dilapidated aging chicken coop and a broken pasture gate, that's what confronted me this past week. They didn't just show up one day, in disarray and begging for repair . . . the truth is they have been longing for some TLC for awhile now. That is how they came to their present state, the laws of entropy and the result of neglect. And, because they will not repair themselves, I ran a power cord down the hill, loaded up my wheelbarrow with tools, made a short list of materials required and, after a trip to Lowe's, I applied myself to expanding, improving the coop and repairing the gate. You know, this state of disrepair forcefully reminded me of what can happen to my working theology! A hodge podge of dilapidated doctrines and broken gates.

This week's message was birthed in my devotions. Then I did a very basic thing: I read the passage Genesis 33:1-11. Then I walked through it again, verse by verse. And as I did this, questions began to arise from the text itself. **Jacob lifted up his eyes and BEHOLD, Esau was coming, and four hundred men with him.** The first verse does everything it can to compel us into the moment. We sense what is transpiring *presently*—as if we were there with Jacob. Then he organizes those with him (his wives, children and servants **with Rachel and Joseph last** (v.2). The group is largely composed of mothers and children: servants with children, Leah and her children and Rachel with her child. **THEN he himself went on before them** and despite the pain and discomfort from his freshly injured thigh (!) **he bows himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother.** (v.3) It is this **he himself went on before them** that caught my attention, and it is that business that I wish to draw your attention to: the *going before* represents the “About Face!” which supplied the title for this message. It signifies that a change has come about in Jacob.

A change has come about in Jacob. That change is related to the all night wrestling match recorded in the later part of Gen. 32. What Jacob endured was *affliction*, divinely appointed suffering, of which the “wound” would serve from that day forward as a reminder. So, it was a blessed affliction. As a blessed affliction it is purposeful: it brings about an engagement with the God of Mercy and God of all Comfort (this twin title is ascribed to God by Paul, writing in 2 Corinthians 1:3-5):

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, 4 who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in [a]ny affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

5 For just as the sufferings of Christ are [b]ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ.

Footnotes:

a. 2 Corinthians 1:4 Lit **every**

b. 2 Corinthians 1:5 Lit **to us**

(I have included the literal rendering of “**every affliction**” and “**just as the sufferings of Christ to us**” rather than **ours** because, while more challenging to understand, they

are closer to the original rougher meaning.) Verse 5 is particularly for us believers because it explains how, **in Christ**, we have blessings not revealed as yet to Jacob.

What have we here? We have, in the twin titles, **Father of Mercies** and **God of all Comfort**, God's presence, **in all our affliction**. In trials, troubles, burdens and sufferings, God is **mercy** and **comfort**. John 16:33: 33 **These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation/afflictions, but take courage; I have overcome the world.** "This is, however, not the end of the matter because there is a rationale offered for why God shows mercy and extends comfort and it is *so that we can extend that mercy and comfort, which we have received, to others, who like us are suffering*. This means that Jacob is "delivered" from the sin disposition which besets his life, so that he can extend the grace received to those who need it—as a patriarch of Israel, as husband and father. By whom I mean Leah and Rachel, as well as his whole household. This is our hope, and as Paul writes, **it is unshaken**. (v.7)

If we ask what *comfort* does Jacob receive? We have this answer: on top of mercy, guidance, protection (food and raiment) and promises: abundant provision. Jacob has "enough," and, interestingly, Esau has "enough, as well." There is enough, more than enough for both of them, and that comfort silences **the craving for more**, a root of covetousness, as well cutting off greed ("I must have it all"). Behind the scenes, silently, over the years, God has been preparing a better outcome for Jacob and Esau; *better than they could possibly imagine*¹. That is the form his mercy and comfort takes in their lives. I know that this sounds so "ordinary" but that doesn't make it less real.

So, we are to be looking at the "About Face!" in Jacob's life which came about through his living encounter with God! And here are four concepts we are going to have to understand in order to get to the real significance of Jacob's conversion. *First*, there is one's "sin disposition." A sin disposition is prior to any actual sin; it is what leads us to sin—it is as it were the root and cause of sinning. It must be dealt with: wrestled with and overthrown in us (as it was in Jacob). The sin disposition of Jacob is *covetousness* *our second concept*. Covetousness would be *the second* concept we need to master. Covetousness is greed, the lust for whatever someone else has, which belongs to them, including persons, and properties and we want for ourselves. Covetousness covers both envy and jealousy; it is a very evil disposition. Covetousness makes the world a much less safe place because it spawns thieves, robbers, bandits and pillaging armies which take by force what is not lawfully theirs.

The sin disposition, in Jacob's case, **covetousness**, is what led him to trick, deceive and steal. However, remember it is Jacob's covetousness and it is Jacob who is the agent of the sin. He is morally culpable for what he does. So aren't we all! State baldly, that's the problem. Jacob needs deliverance, *our third* concept, from his sin disposition as well as *forgiveness* for his sinning against God and against Esau (and Isaac, too, because he was abused by Rebecca and Jacob's deceit). Deliverance cuts off the sin disposition at the root! This can be a painful process, it is costly. Deliverance frees Jacob from his past and allows him to replace cowardice with courage as signified by **his going on before them** instead of hiding behind his human shields in **fear of Esau**. (Gen. 32:7) And deliverance transpires in what we shall call **the presence**

¹ Including a transcendence of their past, escape from their history of hurt, guilt and disappointment.

chamber of God, our fourth and final concept. The *presence chamber of God* is where Jacob comes “face to face” with God, wrestling beside the stream Jabbok. The first thing to note about the *presence chamber of God* is that it is “a moveable feast.” We find it wherever and whenever God wills it to be; it is like the “tabernacle of meeting” which went with the people through the wilderness. So, sin disposition, covetousness, deliverance and the ‘presence chamber of God’ are the four concepts we need to master so as to make sense of Jacob’s conversion experience.

Hear these are the words of Moses. **The Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you, to see what is in your heart.** (Deut. 8:2)

The words **led you** refers to God’s personal *shepherding*, his “on foot” presence and personal protection and guidance *is in view*. **Testing you** refers to the afflictions² the people underwent in the wilderness which were divinely aimed at exposing **what is in your heart**. For the sake of exploration we might paraphrase this scripture to read:

The Lord has led you, Jacob, these past twenty years in Paddan-aram, in the household of Laban, that he might humble you in order to expose to you what is in your heart.

To answer what is in Jacob’s heart, we need only go to Gen. 32:20: **For he thought, “I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me and afterward, I shall see his face.** Now a more literal translation of this last phrase is **appease his face**. **Perhaps he will accept me**. And that **accept me** further, literally reads: **lift my face**.

Do we see how Jacob is thoroughly absorbed with 1. fear of man, and 2. pleasing man. *This is an enormous spiritual problem*. It is not the “face of Esau” with which Jacob ought to be primarily concerned—no, it is ***the face of God***. He needs to get into the *presence chamber* of the Almighty and transact some business with God! Reconciling with others and getting right with others (social justice issues included) follows ***getting right with God and no the other way around!*** Unless transformation precedes reformation, the latter is only window dressing!

Secondly, the human gesture of appeasement, the sending forth of all his possessions, flocks and herds, and his wives and children is, as I said, not just prudent, but cowardly. He is hiding behind all of them due to his *fear of man*, of Esau particularly. In order for this to be corrected, Jacob will have to get to the place where he does an “about face!” He will have to find the courage to reverse positions and go first. *He needs to be out front, facing the danger first himself*. That would be proper, manly, it would be “face saving!” Saving face is a powerful metaphor for justification.

What initiates this “about face” is, of course, the wrestling match (Jacob’s deliverance!)—the deep significance of that wrestling match, *according to Jacob himself*, is caught up in the name he gives to the event, Peniel, which, literally, means “*the face of God*.” **For I have seen God face to face and yet my life** (5315. *nephesh*:

²Troubles and trials—afflictions—are the topic of Thomas Case’s A Treatise on Afflictions, (1653) or The Rod and the Word, A Treatise on Afflictions, the original title) This is a wonderfully comforting and instructive book on afflictions in the Christian life, penned in the Tower of London.

a soul, living being, life, self, person, desire, passion, appetite, emotion) **has been delivered** (5337. **natsal**: meaning “to strip, plunder, deliver oneself, be delivered, snatch away, deliver (a passive verb)—and **not merely spared!** (32:30) **This language drives our interpretation, signifying that Jacob needed “deliverance.”**”

Nephesh with **natsal** suggest that *more than physical survival* is being addressed: *I have seen God face to face and my soul has been altered—I have been delivered from whom I have been* to someone quite other! This is not exactly “approval,” this is transformation, a complete soul change—*meaning deliverance from his sin disposition which fed his covetousness*. The coward dies, the deceiver dies instantaneously and completely. **That** is the significance of the “God encounter” by the stream Jabbok!! Peniel.³ When the sin disposition of man is brought into the “presence chamber” of Almighty God, **it is utterly broken and that is what scriptures testifies to in Genesis 32**. Spiritual **alignment** occurs in the purifying/sanctifying presence of the Lord, **before his face**—such alignments are among the profound, astonishing and amazing things, according to scripture, that happen *when persons encountered Jesus*. Still happens.

Do you recall Peter’s exclamation, “**Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!**”? (Luke 5:8) And now for something more directly related to covetousness, do recollect the change that over came Zacchaeus in Jericho (when he encountered Jesus). **Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.** (Luke 19:9-10) We should also remember Luke 6:19: **And all the crowd sought to touch him, for power came out from him healing them all?** Jesus was the “presence chamber” of God (!) wherever he went! There we encounter the power to change by losing our sin disposition.

God so loved Jacob that he came, seized hold of him, and threw (a wrestling term) the sin disposition from its reigning place of power in his heart. **This is so apt**, and I know that I mentioned this in a previous sermon, that Jacob’s “physical prowess” is underscored here. Such **strength** and endurance! **And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day.** (v.24b) Remember Gen. 29:7ff And Jacob said, **Behold it is still high day . . . water the sheep and go, pasture them. But they said, “We cannot until all the sheep are gathered together and the stone** (the large one which covered the well’s mouth) **is rolled from the mouth of the well.** So, **Jacob drew near** (not a group of shepherds!) **and rolled the stone from the well’s mouth.** (v. 10) I suggested then that this was an impressive feat of physical strength **and I am sticking to that line here.**

Here’s a parallel: Jacob rolled the well cover away to fetch water/ life from the well and God, through their physical contest, rolled away the sin impediment to Jacob’s freer life! **He was recovered by being uncovered. The covetousness in his heart was exposed and disposed of.** Note: this rescue came from outside Jacob—it was God’s doing, **not** self-actualization, not maturation or personal growth! Thereafter, Jacob is freer *limping* than he ever was running on his own. See, for example, Zechariah 3:1-5:

1 Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. 2 The Lord

³ The proper place name of this site, East of the Jordan, is linguistically close to Peniel; it means “face of God.” (It was later the site of battle fought by Gideon, the judge of Israel.)

said to Satan, “The Lord rebuke you, Satan! Indeed, the Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! *Is this not a brand plucked from the fire?*” 3 Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments and standing before the angel. 4 He spoke and said to those who were standing before him, saying, “Remove the filthy garments from him.” Again he said to him, “See, I have taken your iniquity away from you and will clothe you with festal robes.” 5 Then I said, “Let them put a clean turban on his head.” So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him with garments, while the angel of the Lord was standing by.

It is singularly unhelpful to psychologize such spiritual interactions. In my study bible, the exchange is framed like this: Jacob’s “profound existential anxiety” (his insecurity?) is “that (which) *had made him* the deceiver he had been all his life.” (Gospel Transformation Bible, (Crossway, ESV, 2013, p.49) While this is in a study note, it is just “cringeworthy.” *Psychological determinism explains covetousness by anxiety, and insecurity—and why not throw in: “existential angst.”* Mental state causation almost legitimates the sin! This *psychologized* remark demonstrates what happens when we adopt a *man-centered approach* to the Scriptures! And here is what I find most objectionable: anxiety rationalizes deception! It normalizes sin, for who is there who doesn’t feel anxious?! It clouds a very important matter: anxiety is not sin, nor is it “evil.” *Covetousness*, on the other hand, *is sin* and so is the deception that serves it. Psychological causation is very, too close to rationalization. Jacob needs deliverance, not therapeutic counseling. If sin is an extension of personal neediness, then welfare will work and no cross is needed!

The wrestling match, I believe, was more than an anxiety attack; in fact it was nothing of that sort at all. *Unless the text sustains anxiety as Jacob’s motivation—we are importing categories both extraneous and irrelevant to Jacob’s story. It is about deliverance from a sin disposition.* Better, let us say, Jacob was *evidentially covetous* and this, his sin disposition, not his “profound existential anxiety,” is what explains his *deceptiveness*: the lying, treachery and deceit and, following, the theft. Sin, I say, wants no excuse; but it does necessitate repentance.

And, yes, after *sinning* repeatedly in such a manner, one would be *insecure*—even *fearful* at being found out and, *as now looks imminent*, slapped with the consequences! Insecurity and fearfulness might be the origin of his cowardice. However, for us, the crucial thing is that God faced Jacob, dealt with his sin so as to release him from his former life and equip him for what is to follow. It was God’s choice to bless Jacob that resulted in the wrestling match and *the “wound.”* A constant **reminder** of “whose” he was and that, fearing God, he need not fear Esau, or any man ever again. Those who know their acceptance by God are not nearly as consumed with anxiety, nor with seeking the approval of others (=troubled by the *fear of man*?) as those who do not! ***All Jacob had to demonstrate was his desire of divine blessing!*** And that same desire even today moves heaven!

So, it is *the delivered man*, the new man; it is Israel(!) ***who performs an “about face”*** and takes up a manly position in front—facing the music and facing the danger head-on. God was his life now, what is death compared to that?! Jacob’s vertical growth, overnight, was astonishing—and the change was most impressive. Those who were being used as human shields were certainly impressed with the change in him. **The last shall be first** was just as true for Jacob—and for Joseph, who actually was

next to last (and the last born) before Jacob (also last born) went forth to meet Esau. Jacob was a true husband, and a real Dad—at last. *He stopped running and started advancing!* Courage supplanted the cowardice and Esau even dimly recognized that this man of God was not to be trifled with! Again, four hundred men were insufficient to overthrow Israel! Self-advancement, self-protection and “the survival of the most selfish,”—***all our ‘household gods’ so to speak!***—all appeared to have been overthrown, defeated⁴.

Jacob is no longer looking out for #1! When the Nazis wanted to select the Jews in a prisoner of war camp, the brave captain of the prisoners declared, “We’re all Jews here.” And his noncompliances stunned the Nazis. Jacob appears to not be finding his significance. or his security in his accumulated wealth—of all sorts. I would suggest that his “inner materialist” had died and a spiritual man replaced him! The notion that he who dies with the most toys wins no longer made sense to him: **God has dealt graciously with me!** Success, in human terms, no longer matters quite so much. Fear no longer drives him! When you have gained everything, what’s to lose?

Have we well considered the biblical root of lust? Self-promotion, “advancement,” wealth and pride? Yearning, dissatisfied eyes, envious eyes? Is it actually the fear of missing out? Doesn’t envy feed the “got to have” which drove Jacob to steal Esau’s birthright and blessing? Do stolen fruits taste sweetest? Covetous eyes want the “all” that they *imagine* others have—even as those others lust for someone else’s things, stuff. *If only I had what they have*, I’d be satisfied. No you wouldn’t. And what you imagine others have may be far wide of the mark. Fantasy never matches with reality. And if one were to obtain it, it is bound to be disappointingly ordinary, plain, common (like paving stones in heaven!), just as *imperfect* as what we have grown tired of, or bored with. “New” rarely survives the trip home and, once you are home, it’s just yours. Acquiring is some much more alluring than actually owning. Those into “more,” rarely have enough!

Deliverance for Christians is not necessarily like a wrestling match. Although staying free may entail quite a struggle! Let’s refresh the dynamics of our deliverance. Christ is our Deliverer. First he is propitiation of our sin (the retirement of the mortgage, the payment in full, the satisfaction of sin’s offense). Then, he operates before God’s bar, the bar of divine judgment, where he accepts all charges (accusations of sin) against us as his own. We have an Advocate with God! *And this he must do, because if our sins are ignored, hidden or lessened to any degree, we die deprived of vindication.* Christ, lovingly and lawfully, absorbs our sin into his own body, of which we are the members, hands and feet, and if he lives, we live. As he is raised, we are raised with him!

There is perfect harmony between the offices of Christ (or, perfect integration); as *sacrifice* (Isaiah 53) our sins are laid on him; as *priest* (Exodus 28:38) he bears them before God; and as *Advocate* (Psalm 69:5) he owns our sins as his own. The cross shatters the sin disposition! ***The quarrel is no longer between Satan and ourselves—Christ, our second, has taken up our quarrel with the foe! He acts for us, in our stead.*** Thus does Christ manage these things for us—we being largely oblivious!—he is that bold, kind and gracious. And, as all the worthiness of his own self, his being, and his life of perfect, sinless obedience is presented on our behalf to God.

⁴ He is no longer “hooked” by his need for human acceptance. having acceptance with God. That is life, liberation and satisfaction. **They lovingkindness is better than life!**

We are acquitted of all charges. Jesus calls for a just verdict based upon his satisfaction of the law—all the while bearing our sins! Jesus knows how to deliver lost sinners; that is, by himself and he does in the way of justice (relying on his satisfaction of the Father's wrath against sin). This is a most wonderful thing! It is a deliverance which simultaneously shames and defeats Satan, and glorifies God's perfect justice and holiness. Christ effects your deliverance through faith by grace! So you obtain your whole hope and your entire salvation. This is not a better way but it is the best one!

So, by grace God chooses to act for us. He chooses us, he reconciles to us, He redeems the unredeemable, the unworthy and espouses them to his Son. Can you echo the sentiments of Jacob?

God has spared me
God has prospered me
God has loved me . . . by contacting me, engaging with me, visiting and touching me—even to wounding me and healing me

Again, Jacob reminds us: God chooses, God delivers, God saves, God humbles and exalts whomsoever he will. . . and God chooses to grant eternal life in his loving and eternal realm to whomever believes in the Son and trusts in his finished work.

And you, now justified, utterly forgiven and saved, can effect your own "About Face!" Yes, as a child of God, a son of Abraham, a citizen of heaven you can face danger, live courageously . . . escape self-centeredness. . . obtain a good testimony. Things being right between you and God, you can begin to set all things in order . . . repair the broken gate and renovate the coop. Or. rescue the perishing.

Amen