

He paced back and forth on the shores of the shallow river. It was the middle of the night, but sleep was the last thing on his mind. He'd made some big mistakes in his life and he wore a path on the shores of this river because all those mistakes, like chickens, were coming home to roost.

For the last twenty years he had worked his tail off to provide a life for himself and his family. He had put in the hours and had the bankroll to prove it. His family was wealthy, secure... at least for the moment... but sometimes your past has a way of coming back to haunt you.

He paced those shores in the middle of the night knowing that when the morning came he could very well lose everything he loved and everything he had. So sleep, yeah, that was the last thing on his mind.

This reckoning had been a long time in coming... really, since the day he was born.

You see, his birth was an unique one. The second of fraternal twins he came out holding on to his twin brother's heel. His father took one look at him and named him Jacob – a normal enough name in modern English, but in Hebrew, יַעֲקֹב, means “grabber”. *Grabber* would be bad enough for a name except in Hebrew the connotation is more than that – in Hebrew if you called someone יַעֲקֹב it has the connotation of someone who is dishonest, someone who takes things that don't belong to them. Essentially, this would be like naming your little boy “Shifty.” Here comes Shifty Hoff... imagine that!

But by the time he stood on the shores of the river Jabok, Jacob had done plenty to earn his name.

God had told Jacob's mom and dad, Isaac and Rebekah, that Jacob and not his older brother Esau would be the special child in this very special family. This family was the one family chosen from all the families in the world by God to be the beginning of a whole nation that God would foster and grow and bless in a very unique way. This family had the very special promise that eventually one of their children would be the Savior of the world that God had been promising since Adam and Eve first fell into sin in the Garden of Eden.

This beautiful promise and blessing had started with Grandpa Abraham, been passed on to Isaac, and now God told them it would go to the younger twin – Jacob.

But Isaac wasn't so sure about that – it was his deeply engrained cultural norm that the oldest son got the biggest blessings in the family. Giving Jacob this special blessing would have been just as crazy to Isaac as you arranging the marriage of your daughter – it would have felt backwards and wrong because it simply wasn't how his culture operated. And so, in spite of what God had clearly told him, Isaac planned on passing down this special blessing to Esau instead of Jacob.

Well, יַעֲקֹב, *Shifty* and his mom had other plans. Rather than let God sort out the details they took matters into their own hands and through a couple deft and deceitful maneuvers Jacob bought, manipulated, and lied his way into receiving the blessings Isaac intended to give to Esau.

Not surprisingly, Esau was mad – mad enough to kill his brother. He had too much respect for his father to do it while he was still alive, but the second dear old dad was dead, Jacob would be dead too.

Well, Jacob got wind that his brother planned on killing him and rather than sticking around and waiting for it to happen, he left his home and his family, everything and everyone he had known and fled for his life. He left the comforts of home with nothing but the clothes on his back and a walking stick in his hand.

Alone, cut off from his family because of his shiftiness, Jacob was understandably at a low. And it is right here, right now, that God steps in. He appears to Jacob with a life-changing message – with life-changing love: **“I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac... I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land.”** I will be with you. I will bless you.

Important Biblical truth about God at work here: His love and his blessings have always been a gift – the relationship between humans and God has never been one of *earning* God's love and blessing, it has always been an undeserved gift. All of the great people of the Bible (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David) were all deeply flawed people. None of them earned the right to be this special family. God's appearing to Jacob now, when he is suffering what he deserved for a life of manipulation and deceit, wasn't a coincidence. “Jacob you don't deserve this, but I'm going to bless you anyway, and through you I'm going to bless the whole world because one day one of your kids is going to be the Savior of the world, a Savior from sin – sins like the ones that got you in this lonely, desperate place.”

I've got to imagine Jacob woke up the next day with a new God-given spring in his step. Encouraged by this amazingly undeserved promise of God he got up and traveled a couple hundred miles away to live with his uncle, Laban.

It turns out that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Uncle Laban, his mother's brother, taught *Shifty* a thing or two about being shifty. Laban was one of those just slimy businessmen. For over twenty years Jacob lived in Laban's house under Laban's rules which were far from fair. Time and time again Laban tricked and deceived and tried to short-change his nephew – he tricked him into marrying the wrong sister, changed his wages time and again. But through it all was true to his promise. Read these chapters of Genesis and time and time again, no matter how Laban tried to change the terms of their arrangement to short Jacob, God blessed Jacob and over twenty years later when God finally told Jacob that it was time to go

back home, Jacob left Laban's house a *very* wealthy man with a large, healthy, and growing family.

Jacob left Laban's house with twenty years of proof that when God makes a promise, he keeps it, no matter how hard people try and get in the way. God promised to be with Jacob and bless him, and time and time again he had delivered.

As he set off for home though, having experience how aggravating it is to be on the receiving end of shiftiness, Jacob couldn't help but think of big brother Esau – was he still waiting for vengeance?

He sent some messengers to tell Esau that he was coming home – to kind of test the waters and see how Esau would respond. Those messengers came back with less than comforting news... Esau was coming to meet Jacob, and he had 400 men, armed for battle with him – you don't go out for a casual stroll to welcome back a long lost brother with 400 men unless you still have vengeance on the mind...

And so there Jacob paced on the shores of the Jabok river in the middle of the night. By all appearances his past was coming back to haunt him in a big way. Just try and put yourself in his place. Imagine the nervous desperation, the racing mind. Jacob was so desperate, so terrified of what would happen the next day he divided his family and everything he had into two groups thinking, "While Esau is slaughtering half of my family, maybe the other half can get away." Talk about a desperate situation when the best case scenario is only losing half of your family and possessions.

He's desperate. He's terrified. He has no idea what the future holds, but it doesn't look good...

There are days when in all of our lives when the darkness creeps in and we are forced to wrestle with our past mistakes because, like chickens, they have come home to roost. Have you ever had a moment when you look at your life and wonder if you are going to lose half of it?

But it's right here, at this moment of desperation and terror, when we can learn something from Jacob, this man of God. It's right here, desperate and terrified that Jacob prays. The words of this prayer are really a model for us. It's not in your service folder because it happens right before our lesson from Genesis 32. I'm going to read it, if you want to follow along it is in Genesis 32... it's just beautiful.

"O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac," – I'm talking to the God I know, the God who was with my grandpa and my dad.

Then he says, "O LORD, who said to me, 'Go back to your country and relatives, and I will make you prosper,'" – He's reminding God and himself, God I'm just doing what you told me to! I'm doing exactly what you said.

"I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant." – This is a big one, he acknowledges that God doesn't owe him *anything*.

Isn't that a hard thing for us when we approach God in prayer? Deep down inside we think that God should listen to us, that he does owe us something. But Jacob saw himself as a sinner and his God as holy and he knew he deserved *nothing*.

"I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two groups." – I came here with nothing and this is what you have done! You've kept all your promises, every single one! This too is really important because when you feel like Jacob did, like your world is about to come crashing down around you, you cannot see the future. You don't know what tomorrow brings. We cannot see the future, but we can see the past. You can look back and see what God has done for you and other believers like Jacob.

Then the very next line, "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." Save me... it's the prayer of a man who can bring nothing to God but need everything from him. Save me because I am afraid. You never need to hesitate to tell God when you are scared, when you are freaked out and panicking..

And now the best part of this prayer: "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.'" He finishes the prayer by pointing back to the promises of God. Here is a central truth to Christianity: the things that God promises you, you can demand from him.

The things that God promises you, you can demand from him, because we have a God who does not lie or change his mind.

Jacob could demand from God everything God had promised him – his promise to bless him, to protect him, to make his family great.

Here's an important asterisk though: God has not promised you the same things he promised Jacob. He has not promised you that you will be rich. He didn't promise you a long life or health. You can't demand things from God that he has not promised – you can ask, but you can't demand.

But I tell you what, he has promised you something far better than those little things we set our hearts on – he has promised you will never have to know what it is like to have your sins come home to roost. You will never have to watch your whole world come to an end because of the mistakes of your past. He will never call you to account for your sins because all of those sins have been forgiven because of Jesus. He has promised that he will get you through whatever this world can throw at you and bring you safely to his side in heaven. That is something he has promised. That is something we can rightfully demand from him when, like Jacob, the future gets hazy.

Jacob stood there on the banks of that river, terrified by what the next day would bring, and something amazing happened. Out of the darkness came a man who started wrestling with Jacob – and this was no ordinary man, this man was

God, this is Jesus in the OT. Now, why in the world would God come and wrestle, fight against Jacob?

Have you ever felt like God is working against you, like God is pinning you down to the ground and rubbing your face in the dirt? I bet every one of us knows someone who got mad at God because they felt like God was fighting against them and they turned and walked away from God.

But look again at what happened on that bank. Is this a God who is out to hurt Jacob? The almighty God wrestles with Jacob and Jacob wrestles him to a draw – this is like a dad wrestling his child and letting him win. God made clear, “Jacob, if I were here to hurt you, all I would have to do is touch your hip... and there it went.”

So, Jacob realizes who this is. He realizes this is a fight he is never going to win. What does he do? Does he give up? Does he quit and walk away when God himself is fighting against him?

No, the opposite, in fact... He just held on. He held on and he waited for dawn. He grabbed hold of God and he said, **“I will not let go until you bless me.”**

There are times in life when it feels like God is out to hurt you. When he is rubbing your face in the dirt and it is at times like that when you need to look back at the promises of God and just grab hold and not let go. Sometimes that is all we can do, just grab ahold of God and his promises and wait till dawn.

God says to Jacob, **“What is your name?”**

“יַעֲקֹב ... Shifty.”

God says, “Not any more. **I’m giving you the name *Israel*** (which means “one who wrestles with God”) **because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.”**

Jacob grabbed hold of God and refused to let go until dawn and God saw the kind of faith he wants from all of us. When it seems like God is fighting against you, he is really just trying to draw you close and let you demand from him what he promises you.

This name, Israel, will be used 1800 more times in the Bible, and every time God wants you to think of this man, on this night, at this river grabbing hold of his God and refusing to let go.

He gave Jacob another reminder – a limp – so that wherever he went he would know he was going armed with nothing but the promises of God.

Brothers and sisters there will be some dark days that come in your life. When it seems like God is fighting against you remember what kind of God you have – he’s not out to hurt you, he’s out to save you. You grab hold of him and don’t let go till dawn.

Amen.