



That Others Might Live

Genesis 32:22-31; Isaiah 55:1-5; Mat 14:13-21; Rom 9:1-5

Jesus gave his life that others might live. Are we willing to do the same?

So many of our Biblical heroes are messed up characters. Jacob's is a colorful history, and that very history brings him to the quandary in today's story. We read of Jacob's wrestling match with God, but there is much more to it. His struggle was first of all with his own history and doings. Having begun life as a deceiver, he had left home with his brother ready to repay his actions with revenge. Now on his return, he is responsible for more than his own life. He returns with an entourage of servants, flocks, wives, and children. He must think of more than himself as he makes contact once again with his estranged brother.

On one level, Jacob wrestles with God, on another level, he wrestles with his brother and others. On quite another level, Jacob wrestles with himself. The struggle with his brother is of his own doing. His struggle with God begins with his own response, as well. His struggle with others has much to do with his own character.

Jacob's history with his brother takes the forefront of the scene in Genesis 32. He had tricked his brother and manipulated him such that he had earlier fled home for his life. His deeds had caught up with him and he could expect to receive a welcome fitting the character of his own actions in the past. In dealing with this history come back to haunt his present, he must determine how he will live and operate for the future. He has the opportunity to continue living life for his own benefit at the expense of others. He has the opportunity to trust God as he lives for others, putting their needs ahead of his own.

Jacob has no control over Esau's response. There is little reason for God to intervene to help him in this encounter. There is only God's promise to his grandfather Abraham and himself. Trickery and underhanded ploys can do nothing to help him through this time. Esau is not to be deceived. His only recourse is to trust God, but that is a scary prospect for Jacob. Will God care enough to see him through a predicament he created for himself? What is to become of the family and others who now depend on him? Sending them on ahead spares his life, but it also places their chance of survival ahead of his own.

Isaiah's words are strange. Come to market where all is free! Isaiah calls us out of our drudgery and belief that life depends on our initiatives. The race is not to the fleet, the match is not for the strong, the prize is not for the winners. We are called rather to dependence upon God. It is in this dependence on God's faithfulness that we begin truly to live. What a far cry from our cultural and social norms, values, and sense of worth! God cares less for our accomplishments, and more for our character and relational dependence on God.

It is interesting to note how Isaiah's words are tied to God's provision in the feeding of the five thousand. Neither passage is about those things that we control. They are about God's provision above and beyond our limited resources and abilities. They are both calls to allow God to work above and beyond what we can see and foresee.

The disciples saw a crowd of five thousand men, plus their families. They could see a looming problem. As the crowd got hungry, there were likely to become disorderly. There was no place nearby

to purchase nearly enough to feed them. Popcorn vendors and rolling hot dog stands had not made an appearance on the Judean hillside. If Dominoes could have delivered, they did not have the funds to pay for five thousand pizzas. The problem was so big, that rather than do anything, they felt compelled to do nothing. Disperse the crowd and rid themselves of the burden they represented.

Jesus had other ideas. Give them what you have. They felt woefully unprepared and lacking resources to accomplish anything before the need at hand. Like the congressman in *Evan Almighty*, there was so little they felt they could do with so few resources. Yet when God takes those meager resources, there is so much more to be accomplished.

How often do we limit God because of our limited vision and understanding? The disciples were not simply limiting God. They were ignoring the fact of God's presence and action above and beyond their limitations. They simply kept God out of the picture, as though God had nothing to do with the challenges of life they faced. Now that's a story I've heard before, haven't you?

Paul opens his heart to the Roman believers in reference to his own people. If it were somehow possible, he would give his own life that they might be redeemed to Christ. In fact, it was the process of his ministry to do all he could to bring the good news of Christ to Jews and gentiles alike. In so doing, he had been through one hardship after another. He bore the scars on his body of from the many times he had been injured and left for dead because of the call of Christ Jesus on his life. He knew that it was not a question of what he could do, but what Christ could accomplish through him. He invested his all to allow God to live and operate through him.

Paul had settled the issue of struggling with himself and with God. He had given his life to serving God that others might find a true reason for living in Christ.

Jacob's wrestling with God was ultimately about a change of perspective and direction. He had to begin a new course if he were to continue living. He had to begin trusting God, rather than his ability to be crafty and deceive others. He had to put the needs of others before him, assuming responsibility for more than his whims and short term stratagems.

Jesus was concerned with feeding the crowd, but more so with teaching the disciples to trust. It was a lesson that would serve them well over the balance of their lives. It is easier to worry about our own issues than trust God to allow the needs of others to take prominence in our concerns.

Paul had started out life concerned with his own advancement and interests. His encounter with Jesus had transformed that direction completely. Rather than holding onto tradition, he had placed his life in the service of the gospel. That meant that the needs of others came first, just as they had for Jesus Christ. As Christ had given his life that we might live, so the gospel had placed that same perspective at the heart of Paul's existence.

Are we willing to lay aside our extraneous struggles and trust God? After all, it is when we give up control of our lives that we truly begin experiencing God's provision and direction. It is in so doing that we learn to give our lives even as Christ Jesus gave his own that others might live. Are we ready to follow the example of Christ Jesus?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*