

For anyone that has ever been involved in the Alpha Course, you may recall the story of Shane Taylor. Shane was considered one of the most dangerous men in the UK prison system. Originally he was jailed for attempted murder, he had his sentence extended by four years when he attacked 2 prison officers with a broken glass and stabbed them both. He was put in a segregation unit inside a maximum security prison – he was given food through a hatch – and his door was not opened unless there were 6 officers armed with riot shields waiting outside. After a transfer to another prison, Shane was invited to attend the Alpha Course. And through that course, he encountered the love of God on his life for the first time. During the course he prayed this prayer, “God, if you’re real, come into my life because I hate who I am. Please forgive me. At that moment he was filled with the Holy Spirit – he cried and cried and cried. His behaviour changed so much that he went from living in total segregation to getting a trusted job in the prison chaplaincy. He prayed for the prison officers and for his enemies and, when he came out of prison, he got involved in a church. He met a young woman called “Sam”, who had also had a tough life and had been involved with drugs and criminal activity. She also came to faith in Jesus. Now, they are married and have five children. Shane continues to reach into prisons to tell many about the love of Jesus. That folks is a life changed.

Looking at that situation, if you hadn’t heard the whole story, you might think to yourself – that guy is lost, there’s no chance for him. He’s going to be wrapped up in crime all his life. How on earth is there any hope for change. And yet the story shows that change is possible.

Whilst none of us are involved in serious crime, in all of our lives, there will be times or there have been times where you know that there needs to be a change. There may be people that you know, maybe in your family, that you hope they will change from whatever they are doing in their lives. And I know that in my life, there are times when reflecting on sin, that question will resonate in my mind, “Can I change? I know I need to Lord. I can’t remain the same”. I suppose if that’s never happened to you, that moment of your own self-reflection, then I would worry, because it’s important that throughout our lives we are open to change in our own lives. But knowing how to change long term is more difficult than it sounds.

And so here we sit in Genesis 32. It’s the story of a desperate man who is deeply flawed and who is in the fight of his life. It’s a fork in the road where some serious decisions have to be made. I reminds me of that phrase ‘between a rock and a hard place’. You know that place where if you go one way you are in trouble, and if you go the other you’re also in trouble. And that’s where Jacob has found himself. For 20 years he has served his uncle Laban who was a master deceiver just like Jacob. But during that time Jacob had become very wealthy. He had acquired much, but this wealth created tension with his relatives, because jealousy filled the hearts of Laban’s children. They are looking at him and thinking about where all their inheritance was going. And so there was great risk staying there. But in Genesis 31 we read that God instructed Abraham to return back to the land of his fathers – Abraham and Isaac – to Canaan. But there’s a problem. In order to do that Jacob would have to pass through the land where his twin brother Esau lived. And so Jacob’s past begins to threaten him. You remember how Jacob had stolen the blessing from his brother when he deceived his father Isaac. Esau was born just before Jacob, you remember, who came out holding on to his older brother’s heel as if he was trying to pull Esau back into the womb so that he could be born first. That’s why the name Jacob means “he grasps the heel” or better known as the “deceiver”.

So in the verses before today’s reading, Jacob is praying a most desperate of prayers that God would save him from the hand of Esau who wants to kill him. He’s frightened for the future. He doesn’t know whether as he returns home, his brother will come in peace to reconcile or will he come in war. Verse 24 says that Jacob is all alone, Behind him is Laban and in front of him is Esau. This is the dark night of Jacob’s soul. He has no more plots; he

has no more plans. He has no more schemes; he has no more strategy. And now into that moment, this mysterious man comes to him in this climactic scene and wrestles with him until the breaking of the day. Later Jacob would say that he had seen God face to face, so we can presume that this manifestation is Jesus himself. Jacob wrestling with God is a picture of all of Jacob's life.

Jacob, in so many ways, represents a carnal Christian. It's a person who knows God, believes in God, loves God but doesn't live for God. They live for self. They come to church, but the rest of their lives shows no signs of them considering God. They haven't truly made Christ the Lord of their life. There are a lot of people who say, "I'm a Christian," but you never hear them talking about how Jesus has changed them. They say they're a Christian, and yet they don't come to church to hear God's word proclaimed. Or they come to church, but that's it. That's a picture of Jacob, but God isn't going to give up on him. He wrestles with him to bring him to the point of complete reliance on him.

Notice that the man wrestled with Jacob and not the other way around. Jacob is only hanging on to Him. He is in many ways resisting Him, but God is trying to subdue him. And for humanity today, God wants to subdue many of us, and that might mean bringing us to that place of a crossroads like Jacob was at, so that we truly turn to him as our refuge. It was the late Tim Keller in a sermon he gave in 2001 entitled 'The Fight of your life', said this *"in general, God has to wrestle us into a transformed life rather than comfort us into a transformed life"*. Now you might say, that's not possible, after all God loves us. That is correct. And God loved Jacob. No one could snatch Jacob out of the Lord's hands. And it was because God loved him that He wrestled him into a changed life.

So in the midst of this fight, God reaches out and He touches and dislocates Jacob's hip socket in verse 25. I was reading this week that the hip bone is an extremely powerful joint in the body which provides impressive stability for walking – this is partly due to the muscles and ligaments that reinforce its strength. It's also incredibly flexible which gives it an incredible range of movement, second only to the shoulder joint. So Jacob is incredibly disabled due to the dislocation.

It made me think about my own life and what would be the one thing that if broken would cause me the most instability. I think having been in Africa this summer, I would admit it to be the stability of a comfortable home. So what would happen if I didn't have that comfort and stability? Would it make me more fervent in prayer and more dependent on God? And so what would that thing in your own life, if taken away or disabled, would cause the most discomfort? For Jacob, God had to disable him in order to get Jacob's heart. It was to draw Jacob closer. Jacob was alone, he's now disabled, and he has nothing of himself that he can rely on any longer. No longer can he manufacture some outcome in the way that he did with Esau when he was younger. He cannot manipulate or win the battle. And here God blessed Jacob – he blessed him in the place of crippling. Before God blessed him, he weakened Jacob. Folks, this isn't an isolated example in the scriptures. Have a look at Paul's life in 2 Corinthians 12. He calls out – I have cried out the Lord so many times that he would remove this thorn from me, and then God said to me *My grace is sufficient for you, my power is made perfect in weakness"*. Therefore Paul said he would boast more gladly in his weaknesses for when I am weak, then I am strong. Peter, the same illustration, when Christ in the resurrection appearance making breakfast on the beach. All his followers had deserted him, fearful of the Jews, Peter was declaring that he didn't even know Christ. And yet when Peter comes to a place of brokenness Christ restores him to build his church. And so it would be the same with Jacob.

And so as Jacob is crippled, a bit like a child needing the support of their parent, he clings on to the Lord. He says to the Lord, "I will not let you go, please don't leave me". Isn't it ironic that Jacob was in so many wrong ways, whether at birth as he clinged onto his brother's

heel, or when he disguised himself in order to be there Infront of his frail father, in it all he's seeking blessing for himself. But now in the wrestling, he clings to the Lord because he realises that he needs the Lord. He doesn't need any other superficial blessing, he knows he needs God. And the reason why some of remain unblessed, or unfilled, is because we don't cling to God and we don't cling to his word. And we display by our actions, that frankly we don't care whether he blesses us or not. We're content to exist in this world that gives us all that we think we need. So the question is this - are you clinging to God, or to put it another way what are you clinging to in your life? What do you need the most? There's a difference between seeking this blessing as an extra in our lives or seeking it as a necessity for our lives. The greatest need I realise more and more in my life as I grow older is that God would bless me, that's what I need more than anything else – to know his blessing on my life every day, of his provision by his word as he feeds me through it, of the enjoyment of Christian fellowship, and the desire to witness to others of his goodness – I need his blessing. It reminds me of the words of an old hymn that says this in the chorus, "Give me Jesus, You can have all this world, but give me Jesus".

And so this was the turning point for Jacob. It was a confession. The young man in Luke 15 is similar – he's going nowhere, he's wasted all his inheritance, and then he comes to his senses, he realises he has sinned, and he turns back home to receive the forgiveness from his father. And the father of the prodigal celebrates his return and blesses him – the past is in the past.

And for Jacob, as part of the change in his life, God leaves the past behind, and gives him a new identity. In verse 28, the man said "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome". "Everything about your past, Jacob, that is no longer you. Your identity, Jacob, it's not in your baggage; you past is gone. You are not identified by what has happened. You are a new creation". Jacob is a changed man from the inside out. In that moment, that moment of change, Jacob is able to reorientate himself. The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, but he continued to limp. Every morning he would waken, and pull his trousers on, but he would remember how gracious God had been to cripple, to cleanse and to bless him. Peniel would be the place to remind him of where his encounter with God began.

I wonder is there a Peniel in your life, a reminder of how merciful God has been to you – a sinner? Maybe a reminder that there needs to be a place, a proper encounter with God, a call from him to once a for all wise up, to stop clinging on to other things in life, to stop playing church, to stop existing in one life from Monday to Saturday and then putting on a mask on a Sunday. Has there truly been that point in life, where the Lord has humbled you, and caused you to limp with an awareness of your own weakness and your real need for him. God wants to remind you that he offers you a new identity where you are a new creation in his sight. Today cling on to him, because nothing else matters. As you come to receive at the Lord's table, may this be the point where you declare "I surrender all".