

A Severe Mercy

by Bruce Waltke

Bruce Waltke's sermon explores Jacob's transformation as a metaphor for personal spiritual growth through God's grace and presence in our struggles.

Duration: 41:14

Scripture: Genesis 32:22

Topics: "Mercy"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the process of transformation and how it can be achieved through the practice of 'leptio divina,' which involves reading, meditating, and praying on the text. The speaker uses the story of Jacob wrestling with a man as an example of personal transformation. Jacob, who was initially a deceiver, is transformed into someone who prevails with God. The sermon emphasizes that real change is possible for all of God's people, and it requires the Spirit's illumination and God's grace.

Transcript

Our text this morning is Genesis chapter 32, verses 22 through 32. That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants, and his eleven sons, and crossed the Jordan of the Jabbok. After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions.

So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip, so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, let me go for it is daybreak, but Jacob replied, I will not let you go unless you bless me.

The man asked him, what is your name? Jacob, he answered. Then the man said, your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome. Jacob said, please tell me your name.

But he replied, why do you ask my name? He blessed him there. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, it is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared. The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip.

Therefore to this day, the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip, because the socket of Jacob's hip was touched near the tendon. Shall we pray? Father, thank you that you have

revealed yourself, that we may know your character, your purposes, and that we may also understand ourselves. Thank you that you have inspired Holy Scripture, that at the very source is coming from your breath, is inerrant, and will not mislead us, and because it has all of your authority about it, it's utterly infallible for our faith and for our practice.

Now Lord, we pray that you will complete that circle of revelation by illumination, for we cannot hear and understand. We cannot see and perceive, because of the darkness of our own hearts, and the deafness of our own ears, unless your Spirit is pleased to change our night into your light, and our deafness into your songs. So grant us that grace, we pray, in Christ's name, amen.

First of all, I want to thank the session and the pastors for entrusting the sacred lectern to me this morning. The church, week after week, has blessed Elaine and me greatly. And I am thankful for an opportunity, if God be pleased, to give back to you, perhaps, from the texts that we're up to in our study of Genesis, a small spiritual blessing.

I can think of no greater tragedy or condemnation than God's writing as an epitaph on a person's tombstone, I hated this person, he repulsed me. I can think of no more blessed ending to a person's life than God to write as an epitaph, I loved this person, I delighted in him. Yet that is the epitaph that is written on the tombstones of these twin brothers, Jacob and Esau, at the end of the Old Testament.

Malachi 1, 2, and 3, God speaking, I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated. That epitaph is confirmed and written for all eternity in the New Testament, in Romans chapter 9, verse 13, for as it is written, Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated. I'm convinced that God, because of the love of his son, the cleansing of his blood, the gift of his spirit, says of almost all of us, I love that person.

He has given us the gift of faith, and he loves us. This morning it's my prayer that by the illumination of the Spirit, you might see how he transforms saints from being unlovely, humanly speaking, into loveliness, from being unlovable to being lovable. Few characters in the Old Testament are as unlovely and unlovable as Jacob when he starts his pilgrimage.

Gerhardus Voss writes in his excellent Biblical theology, Jacob's reprehensible features are rather strongly brought out. This is done in order to show that the divine grace is not the reward for, but the source of noble traits. Grace overcoming human sin and transforming human nature is the keynote of the revelation here.

Where we are in our study this morning, we're at really the climax of Jacob's life. The peaking of this transformation, the change, the transformation that is now coming to a climax with which God has been working from this man from his mother's womb when he was elected before he had done anything good or evil, but chosen by God, is symbolized by the very scenic depiction that we have here. You notice the text begins with that night, its darkness, and it ends with verse 31, The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel.

It starts in darkness, it ends in night. It begins with his name Jacob, heel clutcher, deceiver, all that that name indicates, and ends with the abbreviated form of Yisrael, the one who prevails with God. The text is telling us, as the title of the sermon in the bulletin last week also said, that real change is possible as God transforms us from that which is unlovely and odious into a sweet saving in his nostrils.

What was personal and particular in this incident that occurred about 3,000 years ago on that night is an exemplar for all of us. This incident is now recorded for all of God's people, and it will take the Spirit's illumination for you to sympathize with it and make it your experience. It will take God's grace.

Perhaps when you came to church this morning, as you look at your horizon, it's dark, and as you're really honest with yourself, you feel like you're a Jacob. But it can happen in a sermon that when you leave this morning, the sun will be rising, and you will understand your name is Yisrael, as you really are. There are four steps in this process of transformation as I understand my text, and I'm going to use the method that I used in chapel for the first time a month ago, and the students responded well to the method.

It's my method of having my time with the Lord every morning. The medievalist monks called it the *Lectio Divina*. The *Lectio* is the reading, and the reading was followed by the *Meditatio*, the meditation on the text.

In my case, with each *Meditatio*, meditation, I'm going to leave you with an oxymoron that is a statement of contradictions that I hope will give you an insight into the truth I'm trying to make. The *Lectio* and *Meditatio* normally should be followed then, as I do in my morning time, by the *Oratio*. I take the text and I pray it, I adore God, I confess, I find renewal, I intercede for others, I petition for myself, I seek to enter into praise and thanksgiving with my text.

And then, with some image in my mind, I sit and *contemplatio*, contemplate and let it percolate and become part of my imagination for that day. The first step then, in the *Lectio*, is found in verses 22 and 24 of our text. That night, Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants, and his 11 sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok.

After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. So, Jacob was left alone and a man wrestled with him. To understand the text, we need to set a bit of the background at this point.

We have to go back to chapter 27, when Jacob stole the blessing. I think for our understanding, it would be sufficient to say, he stole the family fortune, the family inheritance from his twin brother Esau, because being several years older, it was rightfully Esau's. He stole it by deception.

Esau, a mighty hunter, in his anger, has deliberated and intended and consoled himself with the thought that when my parents die, I'm going to kill that guy. Alarmed, his parents counseled Jacob to flee into exile with his uncle Laban in Syria. He spends 20 years there, and during that time, God's blessing is on him.

His family increases, his flocks increase numerously, but he must come back. The runaway must confront his past. When we come to this chapter, it falls into alternating cycles.

There is a sending of messages. There's preparation to protect his family, and then he turns to God twice. And the first time he sends out the messages, it's for information.

It's to inform Esau he's coming, and they bring back the information that Esau, his powerful older brother, is coming to meet him with 400 armed men. In dismay, Jacob divides his family into two sections so that if Esau and his men fall on one section and attack and kill them, the other section can flee and escape. Thereupon, he turns to God in prayer, and he commits himself to God's covenantal promises to him.

Then he sends out messages again, this time with tribute sacrifice, tribute offerings. A huge, immense amount by droves, 200 rams, 200 ewes, 20 rams, 200 she-goats, 20 he-goats, 30 milking camels, another

drove, 40 cows, 10 bulls, 20 she-donkeys, 10 he-donkeys, drove after drove, thinking that he will appease his brother and indicate something of his wealth. It's at night, and now he has his family for the difficult fording of that Jabbok.

It's a deep ravine where water runs strong in the springtime, and he sends them over to the other side. He's left alone, contemplating the next day, full of fear in his heart. The first stage in his understanding is that he must change his understanding of his predicament.

And here's the oxymoron. When you feel most alone, you are not alone. We feel most alone when we confront a danger, a heart attack.

No one can be there with us. A dreaded disease, nobody can be there with us. A divorce, people try to help us, but we feel very alone.

Financial reverses, bankruptcy, others may come, but we feel most alone. And my text is saying, when you feel most alone, you are not alone. Well, you see, David, he is there alone, and you have this strange juxtaposition.

So Jacob was left alone, and a man. That's a contradiction. And it turns out that man is the God-man, for at the end of it, he says, he called the place saying, it is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.

What's interesting here is the way in which God appears to him. It's what theologians call the *deus absconditus*, the hiddenness of God, the mystery of God. God appears to his people in various ways.

To Moses, he appeared in a burning bush to symbolize, so they understand, while he is a purifying fire, he didn't consume the bush. He doesn't consume his people. Later on, he appears to Moses face to face, so that we might understand there is an immediacy, there's a clarity to that revelation, and there's a superiority to Moses.

But Christ is even superior to him. But there's a way God appears to us that we don't like. It's in darkness.

It's in hiddenness. It's in mystery, and that's why the man said, let me go, for it is daybreak, for in this experience, you cannot see him. You must feel the tension of that darkness, that mystery, and even sometimes in life, that hostility that we have, that God engenders in his grace between him and me.

We cannot control him. Jacob wants to know his name. He wants to know his name, so this man who is always controlled can control.

But he won't give him his name. You must trust him with mystery, hiddenness, the *deus absconditus*. This coming as the God-man to him, of course, is a foreshadowing of the Christ, who is the God with us.

The Gospels, this is their message, God is with us. This is how Matthew begins, God is with us. His name shall be called Emmanuel, because it means God is with us through the virgin birth of his Son, Jesus Christ.

And then Jesus changes the meaning of what it means God is with us, for later on in Matthew's Gospel, he will say, where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in their midst, it will be a spiritual presence that I have with you. As I pointed out in the chapel talk, every Gospel ends with that promise, I am with you, but there is a chronological and geographical progression of that revelation. In Matthew it

ends on a mountain in the north.

In the last words, as Jesus talks to his disciples, having given them all authority, he says to them, and surely I am with you. He means in his spirit, as he administers the Holy Spirit, surely I am with you to the very end of the age. Luke takes us a little later.

We're now in Bethany, at the time of the Ascension, across from Jerusalem, and his last words in Luke 24, 50 and 52, when he led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his pierced hands, I put pierced in there, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.

In Mark, if we can go by the long ending of Mark, he is now in heaven after the Ascension. After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into the heaven, and he sat at the right hand of God. Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by signs that accompanied him.

That's the meditatio. When you are alone, you are not alone. Now normally in my meditation, Lectio Divina, I would now move into the oratio, but for reasons of preaching, let me leave you with an image.

The one from Luke is the one I enjoy most. I see the ascended Christ in my imagination, and it represents the truth spiritually of the Christ with his pierced hands, the hands that cleansed the leper, the hands that gave sight to the blind, the hands that raised Jairus' daughter from the dead. Those hands, they're reaching out to you and to me with blessing, though you may not see it in the darkness.

Now if you wish to pray with me the oratio that I prayed in preparation. We adore you, God, because you sent your beloved Son to be with us even in our darkness. Though you hide yourself, give us the grace to believe that Christ leads us as a shepherd through the valley of deepest darkness.

With you to cheer us, the night shines as the day. I now turn to the second step in the metamorphosis, from a Jacob to Israel. A man wrestled with him till daybreak, when the man saw, the God-man saw, that he could not overpower him.

The meditatio, the point it seems to me, is there is a changed understanding of his problem. He told him it was Esau, but he realizes now his problem is God, who is wrestling with him. My oxymoron here is this.

The horizontal points to the vertical. An impossibility, but it does. The horizontal points to the vertical.

He has failed in his relationship with Esau, because he has a flawed relationship with God. When we have failed relationships, it is possible that God is working with us, that we might look within and examine ourselves to see if indeed we have a failed relationship with God. It certainly is true of Jacob.

And I think one way you can tell this is whether you are full of fear. Perfect love casts out all fear. And if there is fear in your life, examine yourself.

It's the red lights on a flash board. Don't smash the flash board. Correct the engine.

Look within. This wrestling match, in order to meet Esau, he has to be right with God. That's why he will say in the next chapter, in chapter 33 and verse 10, when he sees Esau, Jacob said, if I found favor in your eyes, accept this gift from me.

For to see your face is like seeing the face of God. Now that you have received me favorably, he has gone through that wrestling match and now he's ready to face Esau before the other. That all-night wrestling scene encapsulates Jacob's lifelong internal struggle with God.

The problem with Jacob is he's double-minded. He has faith, but it's not pure. And that's what makes him unlovely.

He shows his faith by his wanting the birthright, the right to be the successor to Abraham, Isaac. And now he will be the successor, Jacob. That's what he wants.

We understand that Abraham was 15 years old when these boys were 15 years old when Abraham died. Here's the great patriarch Abraham putting these twin boys on his knees and pointing to the skies with them and saying, boys, you see those skies? Our descendants are going to be like the stars. You see this land? We're going to own this land.

And you know what? We're going to bless this earth with justice and righteousness. The text says Esau despised it. Stars like the descendants? Why, we're scarcely here.

What are we talking about? The land? What do we own? A cemetery plot that Grandpa bought with his own money. God's given us nothing. And a blessing? You're kidding me.

I'm no good. And that twin brother of mine, he's worse. But Jacob believed it.

He wanted it with all of those imperfections. But Jacob's problem is he wants to take his own initiative to fulfill those blessings. He cannot let go.

He cannot trust God. The birthright would have been his, against all odds. God had decided that.

He knew that. But he has to extort it out of his brother. Instead of treating his famished brother with hospitality, he'll use the occasion and bargain with him to get it.

The blessing would have been his. God would have worked it out. But no, he has to steal it.

And he's still conniving in his chapter. God would have given him grace with his brother, but no. He's got his things to himself.

I've got to bargain with him. I'll send him all these gifts. Maybe he'll be pleased with me.

That's how he goes through life. Mixed. Double-minded.

Unloved. Unlovely. Broken relationships with his family wherever he goes.

Broken relationships with David. Broken relationships with his wife. He's a self-victim because he can't let go and let God for the contemplatio.

I want you to picture Christ reaching down with blessings from his blessed hands. But you're looking down. You're holding your bank security box.

It has your jewels. It has all your precious pictures in it. It has your wealth in it.

This is it. You're holding it tightly. You'll fight off everybody to keep it.

All of it. Unloved. Unlovely.

Theoraxion. My prayer. Maybe you want to join me.

Lord, give us the grace to see how self-ambitious we really are. We confess that we focus on our problems, not on your blessings and your promises to provide for all our needs. We confess that we foolishly seek significance and security apart from you and depend upon ourselves to achieve our success.

We confess we lack the faith to let go of our possessions and our reputations. We cling to those visible things that make us feel secure and significant, not on you, whom we cannot see. Like the rich young ruler, we find it impossible to sell all that we have.

But unlike him, Lord, our faces do not fall. We do not walk away from you. Rather, we pray, Father, purify our love and our faith.

And now turn to the third step in the transformation. Verse 25. He saw that he could not overpower him.

Think of that. The God-man cannot overpower this Jacob. And I don't know, how about you? But sometimes the God-man can't overpower me either.

I'm so strong, so fearful to let go. I've struggled with it all my life. I can't let go.

I'm so powerful. He can't overcome it, it seems. When the man saw he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man.

A changed understanding of God's presence. That's the meditatio. It's a changed understanding of God's presence.

We think of God's presence as his blessings upon us. And well, we might. They certainly were that to Jacob up to this point.

But there's another side to God's presence with us. It's the title I gave to the sermon. It's a severe mercy.

Sometimes there's a hard, severe is harsh and it's cold. There's a hard side and a cold side to God. But it's always there for his mercy.

God's presence involves both will and woe. One time at a college where I teach, there was a course of Michelangelo called the Agony and the Ecstasy. And a student called up the registrar, joking with her.

And he says, I want the course on the Agony and the Ecstasy. And she said, fine, it's a two-hour course. He says, no, I just want the one hour, just one hour.

No, no, it's a two-hour course. No, no, one hour. No, two hours.

No, one hour. I want the ecstasy, no agony. And that's how we are.

We don't want the ecstasy. But his presence will have agony. That's his severe mercy.

He wants to change us. Salvation came into my home through a severe mercy. On my paternal side, my grandmother there, she lost her child at six years of age.

My grandfather's business burned down. And with the loss of their business and the loss of their child, my grandmother turned to God finally. She wrestled all her life.

On my mother's side, my grandmother opposed one of the girls going to be a missionary. And then she was stricken with arthritis and she spent the last 27 years flat on her back. And the people who were with my aunt had to go into the mission field.

They came and they prayed with my grandmother and she came to faith on her sickbed and became the most beautiful saint I knew. Last summer after I left you all, I was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. It was a severe mercy.

I read all about the disease. It's gruesome. The future looked bleak.

It was a severe mercy. It enabled me to see my life in perspective, get my priorities straight. I thanked God for it.

I also thanked him to learn I was misdiagnosed two months later. But it was a severe mercy for those two months. I learned a lot.

The contemplation. I want you to see you're holding on to that bank security box. And I want you to there in the darkness and you feel the hand of God.

And he's been wrestling with you. He's been trying to pull that security box out of your hand. But you can't let it go.

And in severe mercy, he breaks your hand finally. And now you have to let the severe mercy, the prayer. Lord, give us the grace to interpret our sufferings and our conflicts as your severe mercy.

Finally, the fourth step in the transformation is a changed understanding of his power. Verses 26 through 28. Then the man said, Let me go for this daybreak.

But Jacob replied, I will not let you go unless you bless me. The man asked him, What is your name? Jacob he answered. Then the man said, Your name will no longer be Jacob.

But Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome him. The meditation is a changed understanding of his power. The oxymoron is Paul's famous oxymoron.

2 Corinthians chapter 12 and verse 10. When I am weak, then I am strong. If there's one characteristic that stands out in Jacob, it is ambition.

But as the Roman philosopher Cluntilius said, Ambition is a vice, but it can be the mother of virtue. Ambition is a vice, but it can be the mother of virtue. Up to now, it's been a vice for Jacob.

It's a quality, but now it becomes the mother of virtue. For he doesn't let go of God. Broken, he doesn't go down in defeat.

Broken, he doesn't walk away from it in bitterness. Broken, he turns to God in prayer and clings to Him and loves it. He loves somebody who's struggling, fighting, not indifferent, tepid, lukewarm.

That's not Jacob. He's involved. And all the strength now is changed to a wrestling in prayer and that's a different kind of wrestling.

Elsewhere I wrote, in this scene, ambition is harnessed into humble prayer. To be sure, prior to the encounter with the God-man, he prays to God on the basis of God's promises. But he does not yet prevail because he has not yet been humbled.

Only when he is broken does he prevail with God and humans. In the wrestling match initiated by God, he loses his physical strength and prevails only through prayer. The man who was prayerless and caused so much trouble, sorrow and anguish is now transformed as he commits himself to God in prayer.

In other words, he prevails with words, not with might, strategy and cunning. Hosea put it this way, Jacob struggled with the angel and overcame him. Think of that.

And how? Clinging to him. Praying to him. Bless me.

He struggled with the angel and overcame him with a broken hip. He wept and begged his favor. What a strange oxymoron.

He overcame him. He wept and begged his favor. It's an impossibility.

Yet in that weeping and begging, not letting go, he prevailed. He overcame and his name is with us. And he's the patriarch.

My contemplatio, yes. Picture the Christ with his hand of blessing. Picture his hand wrestling your hand.

Picture his hand breaking your hand. You're letting it go, but at the end you're clinging to him. Your arms wrapped around him to receive his blessing.

And those that do so are still with us. That's the church. The oratio.

Give us the grace to be like Jacob who would not let go until you blessed him. May we be like Epaphras who was one of the saints of Colossae and was always wrestling in prayer for the other saints at Colossae. What is your name? How do people define you? How do you define yourself if you are willing with Christ baptized into him to count yourself dead to sin seeking security and significance apart from him.

Count yourself dead but alive to God in Christ Jesus and clinging to him. You that bear the name timid will become triumphant. Are you feckless? Your name will be faithful.

Complainer? Contentment. Selfish? Your new name will be selfless. The old name, is it lazy? You will become aspiring.

Hard-boiled? You'll be gentle. Hard-fisted? You'll be kind. Fool? Your name will be wise.

Instead of concluding with a hymn I'll conclude with a ballad. The ballad of the fatally wounded gunslinger. Take this gun away from me.

I don't need it anymore. I'm so tired. So very tired and weak.

I'm knocking on heaven's door. Take this gun away from me. I don't need it anymore.

I'm so tired. So very tired and weak. I'm knocking on heaven's door.

Father, thank you that you don't let go. Thank you that you wrestle with us. Give us the grace to understand your reality in our life.

Give us the grace to understand that often our problems are really not the problem with others but the problem we have with you. Give us the grace to accept your severe mercies and thank you for the crises in our lives to purify our love, to purify our faith. And thank you that you're there.

You're more desirous that we cling to you than we are ourselves. You will never turn away. A beggar for your blessings.

In Jesus' name, amen.

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