

“Stories of Jacob: The Big If”

minister. They didn't realize it, but tacitly and functionally this couple approached God like Jacob. They were thinking, “If God acts as we expect God to act then we will continue confidently in our faith.” And because they couldn't shift their point-of-view, their faith faced a crushing challenge.

I believe Christians today are more vulnerable to these Jacob-like challenges than in days gone by. Never before in our 2,000 year history of Christianity have Christians struggled more with doubt than we do today. The theologian Robert Webber describes “why” this is the case very succinctly. For generations, he wrote, belief held people. Belief was the core. And when life knocked you around belief as your core held you steady. And if experience called some aspect of God into question, core belief prompted Christians to question and adjust their beliefs, because belief held them. Our age is different. Webber writes, for generations belief held people. Today, he says, people hold beliefs. For many people faith is not core. In our culture that promotes individualism and relative truth, our culture says that we get to decide what we think the nature of God is. We are told that we can relate to God on our terms. In other words, being like Jacob is the way we should be. But the consequence is that for many Christians belief no longer hold them. And when our experience challenges some belief we have about God we can end up jettisoning everything. But if belief holds us then challenges prompt reflection that perhaps will lead us to new appreciations of God.

I occasionally think about that Baptist minister and his wife. What happened to them? Did belief hold them when God did not live up to their expectation of God? Or did he walk away from his faith, because a belief he held proved untrue? I can't imagine what it would be like to live with that kind of faith crisis. But here is the good news for that pastor, for you and for me. The God who was dealing with Jacob is the same God that deals with us. Even though Jacob wanted God on his terms, and we easily want the same, God always comes to us on God's terms. And what were those terms to Jacob? God said to Jacob, “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you”.

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Text: Genesis 28: 10 - 22
Rev. Peter Coutts

Jacob was on the run. As we saw last week, he had robbed his brother Esau first of his inheritance and then of his father's blessing. Esau was furious and began to plan his revenge: murder. So Jacob was on the run. He left home alone, with nothing, uncertain whether he would even benefit from these thefts. But he was not alone, actually. One night Jacob had this vision of God. And despite how different Jacob was compared to his grandfather Abraham, God still intended to keep the promises made to Abraham. So God told Jacob: this “promised land” is for your descendants. Your descendants will be as numerous as the dust of the earth. All the families of the earth will be blessed through your offspring. Then, on top of all this, God gave Jacob a guarantee. “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you”. In other words, God was going to work with what God got, even if that meant Jacob.

Now if you had experienced God in this clear and direct and powerful way, how would you respond? I would be soaring high! I would have such confidence in God. I would live my life so fully in honour of the One who made such assurances to me. How could you not? This was Jacob's initial reaction as well. He was awestruck, jubilant and afraid all at the same time. He was totally convinced he had met God, and so built a crude monument to mark the place and the event.

But then, Jacob's true nature surfaced again. After having this powerful experience of God, and after God making this great commitment to him, Jacob decided the following: “**IF** God will be with me, and **IF** God will keep me in this way that I go, and **IF** God will give me bread to eat and **IF** God gives me clothes to wear, so that I do come again to my father's house in peace, **THEN** the Lord shall be my God” (vs 21-22). Last week, in Jacob's abuse of his family, his dishonour of his father, and stealing from his brother we saw that Jacob did not love his neighbour as he loved himself. Far from it. Now we see that Jacob does not love the Lord his God with **all** his heart, soul and mind, despite God's direct intervention and spectacular promises. Rather than accept and believe God, Jacob's response to God's promises was “show me the money!” Let me see these blessings coming true first, and **IF** they do then I will recognize and honour you.

What are we seeing here? When Abraham looked at his relationship with God it was all about God. For Jacob, it's all about him. Jacob wanted to relate to God on Jacob's terms. Now as Presbyterians our instant reaction can be, "that's just so wrong!" After all, our theology is rooted in the premise of the sovereignty of God. God sets the agenda and we conform. But if we were to really stop, and reflect on our own life, how much are we like Jacob, wanting God to be and act on our terms?

Some people only look for God when they NEED God, and even then only want God on their terms. In the 1978 movie "The End" actor Burt Reynolds plays the part of a man who wants to commit suicide. The plan was to swim as far out to sea as he could, to the point of exhaustion, to the point of no return. But when he got out there he changed his mind. So he began bargaining with God as he swam back to shore. "God, if you save me, I will give 80% of my money to you, I will live out all the 10 commandments". But as the shore came nearer, and safety closer, he backed down on his commitments. "I will learn the 10 commandments and give you 10% of all my money". Finally as he crawled up on shore he prayed "OK God, forget what I said. I can take it from here". Like Jacob he wanted a relationship with God on his own terms. And when death was no longer a threat he no longer wanted God at all.

This is a great thing to reflect on occasionally. To ask: as a follower of Jesus, where does my life conform to how God would have me live? Where is it that I want to relate to God on my terms? Where is it that I may be like Jacob? The way of discipleship is a life long path to greater and greater maturity in faith. No matter the strength of your faith or your age, we are always called to go deeper into God and to stretch how we are a blessing in the world. Asking these kinds of questions can help us deepen our faith. But reflecting on these kinds of questions is also crucial for the maintenance of our faith. One of the two reasons the church is in decline in Canada is because Christians—church folk—are dropping out of involvement. The #1 reason, by far, for dropping out is that people no longer believe what they once believed. Among protestants it accounts for half of drop outs, and it accounts for 2/3's of dropouts among Roman Catholics. It often happens because we are more like Jacob than we might first realize. We can expect God to be and act in certain ways, and this becomes our "if...". And IF God doesn't live up to our expectations, we can dropout from church and even turn away from our faith. That happens when our point-of-view is too rigid.

A personal example. Several years ago I came to realize that I've always wanted God to be a miracle worker. I've wanted God to answer prayer in obvious ways. I've wanted to clearly see the hand of God intervening in my life, in the church, in the world. And there have been a small handful of moments like that for me, thankfully! But over time

there developed in me a vague chronic concern and a growing disappointment that God was not living up to what I thought God should be doing. What do you do with that kind of gnawing disappointment? For many people they will look at their experience—their disappointment—through their current point-of-view and many people end up thinking, "well, if it is like this, then God probably doesn't exist." But for others—like me in this case—they take that concern and disappointment as a moment to reflect on their point-of-view. To ask questions like, "God is not being the kind of miracle worker I think God should be. So what does this suggest about my beliefs? How might my understanding of God be adjusted around my experience?" My reflections helped me make two adjustments to my point-of-view. First, I settled in on the idea that God may not be in the business of big gestures, mostly. Second, I settled in on the notion that my not seeing God responding to prayer was probably more related to my own hesitancy to interpret things as possibly answers to prayer. I said I used to have one small handful of experiences that I would confidently call God's answers to prayer. Because of the change I made to my point-of-view, I now have two small handfuls of experiences. But my chronic concern and that gnawing disappointment are now gone... and my faith is better for it. I was like Jacob. I wanted God in my terms. And I could have kept my terms for God—my understanding of what I expected from God—fixed and unchanged. If I did, I might have perhaps walked away from faith. "IF God is not going to be the miracle worker, then I won't honour God". I didn't go there, because I came to a different understanding of God.

Here's another story about the same thing that ended very differently. Back when I was studying for the ministry I did a full-time, four month long program in hospital chaplaincy at Sick Children's Hospital in Toronto. One family I dealt with, the father was my age and a newly ordained Baptist minister. They had flown in from Vancouver with their two month old daughter so she could have her third open heart surgery of her short life. The odds of her surviving the surgery were stacked strongly against her. With the parents I gently broached the question, "what if she doesn't make it?" The parents could not even entertain that question. They held firmly to one teaching of Jesus, (Mark 11.24) "Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." Because of this verse and their convictions they were confident their daughter would be fine. God would answer their prayer. And you may already be anticipating what happened. Their daughter died. The parents were doubly devastated at the loss of their daughter but also devastated just as much by the ensuing faith crisis. In their faith crisis there was only two possible answers. Either this assurance found in Mark's gospel could not be believed, or they as the parents did not pray with sufficient confidence in God (and that would mean their daughter died because of them). The father headed back to Vancouver unsure whether he could carry on as a Baptist