

March 16, 2025

Reminiscere

Texts: Genesis 32:22-32; Matthew 15:21-28

Does Jesus love you? When all is going well, the answer is easy. But when trouble comes, doubts might come as well. That's why our God gives us the Scriptures we are blessed to hear today.

Did God love Jacob? That's a question that we might ask in relation to our Old Testament reading. And the answer is yes, yes, He did – and still does! The Bible shows us this. At the time of our reading from Genesis, Jacob is returning home. He had to leave – to flee – after deceiving his father Isaac and enraging his brother Esau. When Jacob was fleeing, the Lord appeared to him in the dream we often refer to as “Jacob's Ladder.” There, gave Jacob the promise first given to Abraham concerning the promised land and the seed of the Messiah, and He promised to bring Jacob back to his home.

So Jacob went to live with his relatives, and there the Lord had blessed him richly. He was given a large family, many possessions, and even protection from those who wanted to do him great harm. The Lord continually showed great faithfulness to Jacob. And so in Genesis 32, Jacob is on the way back home, the recipient of God's faithfulness, God's provision, God's love.

Another question arises, then. Did the God who loves Jacob also attack him? Yes. We read, “And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day.” Now if we're just skimming through this portion of Genesis, we might think, “Yes, yes, God wrestled with Jacob, and it all turned out well.”

But put yourself in Jacob's place. This would have been a terrifying experience for him, at first. Why is Jacob left alone? Because he's split up his caravan and remained by himself. Why did he do that? Because he has heard that his brother Esau is coming his way, and he remembers that Esau's last desire was to kill him. So now he's suddenly attacked in the middle of the night by some stranger. Maybe this is Esau, or one of Esau's men, trying to make good on his threats from all those years ago.

And even if the stranger isn't from Esau, well, you don't just have friendly wrestling matches for sport suddenly come upon you in the middle of the night. If you get attacked while sleeping along a trade route or in the middle of nowhere, you're probably getting mugged at best, and murdered at worst.

So again, this was probably a terrifying experience for Jacob, at first. But then, as the match goes on, things change. At some point, Jacob gets an idea of who is attacking him. This isn't one of Esau's goons, or a roving bandit. This is either one of God's angels, or, as Jacob will realize for certain at the end, God Himself. What brings Jacob to this understanding? We're not told exactly.

Perhaps it was tied to the miraculous way in which the stranger dislocated Jacob's hip merely by touching it – no ordinary man can do that. But I think in addition to that, this is also a realization that Jacob has by faith. When Jacob is attacked, no doubt he started crying out to God, if not out loud then certainly in his heart. And when crying out to God, Jacob would've recalled the promise God made to him, to bring him back home.

The attack would have made Jacob cry out this promise to God, to pray that God keep His promise. And – because this is how prayer works – as Jacob prayed this, the Holy Spirit would've grown Jacob's faith in that promise. It's like how when we pray the Lord's Prayer, God increases our faith that He will in fact bring His Kingdom and give us our daily bread and deliver us from evil.

Finally, after miraculously putting Jacob's hip out of joint, the man demands to be let go. But what does Jacob say? "I will not let you go unless you bless me." That's not something you say to a robber who you've managed to wear out. Jacob says that because he has realized, by faith, that this whole ordeal is from God. And because he realizes that this is from God, who he knows loves him, he knows that God can turn it for good, for blessing. So in the boldness of faith, Jacob demands a blessing.

And how does the stranger respond? "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." Jacob is given a new name, showing that God's blessing is his very identity. When it's all over, Jacob realizes that he has seen God face to face and yet has lived – a sign of divine favor and love if ever there was one! As he resumes his travels, Jacob is limping. His wrestling with God has left him with pain, but that pain is temporary. The blessing, on the other hand, will endure into eternity.

So in Jacob we see a pattern: God loves Jacob, and God makes Jacob struggle, but in the end, the pain of the struggle is eclipsed by greatness of the blessing. We also see this pattern in the Canaanite woman.

Does God love this woman? Yes! Jesus is the God who is love, the God has come and taken on the flesh of an ordinary man, that people might look upon His face without the fear like Jacob had. Jesus has gone about teaching the love of God, to call sinners to repent and believe in the Gospel, and who has shown forth the love of God through all manner of miracles. He has even called tax collectors, prostitutes, and other public sinners to leave their sinful ways and follow Him.

And most notably, we see that God has put faith into the heart of this woman, for she confesses Jesus to be the Lord and the Son of David. It is the love of God for this woman that caused Him to work saving faith in her heart.

Yet though God loves this woman, does He also inflict suffering upon her? Yes. She is not physically attacked, like Jacob. No, she is attacked in her spirit.

As you did with Jacob, now put yourself in her place. You have heard so many wonderful things about this Jesus of Nazareth, and by faith you truly believe Him to be the Savior, the Messiah. When your daughter is horribly afflicted by a demon, you seek out this Jesus, who by God's providence has come out of His usual area of ministry and into your land. He has helped so many others, cast out many other demons – surely He will help your daughter. You get to Jesus and you cry out for mercy... and what happens?

"But he did not answer her a word." Silence. Here is a mother with genuine faith, and a genuine need, approaching with a genuine request for mercy... and it seems like she is ignored. Imagine how much that tested her faith, how much doubt would've attacked her at that moment. Was

this Jesus truly the Messiah? Had she been wrong? Was her daughter going to be left in the power of the demons?

Yet the Lord who gave her that faith is also the Lord who would never let her be tested beyond what she was able to bear. She continues to cry out in faith, and finally the disciples – either in frustration or in mercy – beg Jesus to send her away. Jesus responds, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

As harsh as this may sound, it’s actually a turning point. Here, as with Jacob, the woman’s spiritual wrestling begins to lead her to a greater faith. Jesus says He only came for the lost sheep of Israel. But notice that He didn’t say she wasn’t one of them. He is putting forth a word to see if she will recall from the words of the prophets that the Messiah would come to gather in people from all nations into the spiritual house of Israel, the Israel of promise. Jacob’s wrestling forced him to recall the promises of God; that’s what Jesus is causing this woman to do as well.

We see this with Jesus’ next words to her: “It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.” What – or who – is the bread of God, and who is it for? The woman responds in faith: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.” She knows that the Lord supplies bread for all, that even the crumbs of blessing that would fall from the table are more than enough. Perhaps she has heard the words Jesus spoke elsewhere, that He Himself is the bread of life sent from heaven, and so she confesses that to have even the smallest part in Him is worth more than all the world could possibly offer.

Her trial concludes with Jesus declaring, “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” The ordeal has been a great strain, her faith being pushed to the limit. But again, Jesus would never allow her to be pushed beyond that limit.

And through this trial, she has received blessings: the worldly blessing of her daughter being released from the power of the demons, and the heavenly blessing of a strengthened faith. Her salvation is now all the more sure, her worry in the face of upcoming trials decreased, her confidence in the love of God for her grown enormously.

What was true for Jacob and for the Canaanite woman is also true for you. Does God love you? Yes! The children’s hymn is true for each and every one of you. “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” And how does the Bible tell you that God loves you?

First off, it tells you that God loves you because God created you. You are not an accident, a mistake, or even some sort of mass-produced product. Each and every person is a masterwork of God Himself, knit together by Him in the womb. And the Bible is clear that God creates every single person out of love.

Secondly, God’s love is shown in the fact that He has redeemed you. The Bible says, “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” The Lord of all came to earth and died on the cross for you – each and every one of you. You are so precious to Him that He endured the wrath of hell for you, that you might never have to know that wrath, but only the joy of paradise with Him.

And third, God shows His love for you in that He comes to dwell with you, even in you, in this life. Jesus promises His disciples, “And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.” God’s love is shown in the fact that He, by the Holy Spirit, dwells within you, guiding you toward good and away from evil, growing your fear, love, and trust in Him, transforming you as He recreates the image of God within you. Creation, redemption, sanctification – these all show the love of God for you.

And yet, does the God who loves you send you trials and suffering? Yes. This might surprise you. You might think that it’s the devil who sends you these, or that they are the result of sin. It’s true that God often does use the devil as His tool, even if the devil doesn’t realize it, and it’s true that suffering came about because of sin.

But the Bible is clear that God is the one who sends suffering. The Lord declares of Himself, “I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.” Or in the great Psalm of repentance, Psalm 51, David declares of God, “Make me hear joy and gladness, that the bones You have broken may rejoice.” Or consider the words St. Peter writes to the Church, “Therefore let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.”

God being the one who breaks bones, who wounds, whose will it is that you suffer... it may sound very foreign, very wrong to you. These words of God might strike you with fear, like Jacob being suddenly attacked by God in the night, or with doubt, like the Canaanite woman having her desperate pleas met with silence. How could God be the one doing this to me, sending me this trouble?

Yet the Lord sends these to you, wrestles with you, that you might grow and be blessed. As with Jacob, the troubles God sends make you cry out to God with the promises that He has given. This is what is seen in some of the Psalms of lament, for example. In the midst of suffering, you call out to God, telling Him that He has said you are not made for the purpose of suffering, that He does not afflict you from His heart, but that He has promised to care for you and be with you always, even to the very end of the age. And as you pray these promises, the Holy Spirit uses those prayers to strengthen your faith in the promises.

Like the Canaanite woman, your Lord also sends you trials that you might cling to His word and go deeper into it. When it seems like life is a storm that is threatening to drown you, look to the disciples caught in the storms of the Sea of Galilee, and know that your Lord is not asleep but will calm the storm when He knows is best for you. When it seem like it’s too late, that there’s no way that God can help now, hear Jesus’ words to the father of the dying little girl: “Do not fear; only believe.” When walking as a faithful Christian causes you feel the world’s rejection, hear in the Scriptures how the sinful world has always rejected the faithful, and even Christ Himself, and realize you are in the best of company. Even the passages telling you that God is the one who sends suffering are a source of comfort, because that means that God is still in control and will not let His children be overwhelmed.

In our bodies, when a bone is broken, if the break is set correctly, that bone will grow back stronger. When the Lord sends you things that seem to break your bones, as David confessed, know

that He does this because He loves you and wants to strengthen your faith. Let me leave you with the beautiful words of Psalm 30, which fit this all very well:

“Sing praises to the Lord, O you his saints, and give thanks to his holy name. For his anger is but for a moment, and his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.”

In the name of Jesus, amen.