

Wrestling: The Gift of Desperation

Genesis 32:22-32

Mark Vroegop

22 The same night he arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. 23 He took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had. 24 And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. 25 When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. 26 Then he said, "Let me go, for the day has broken." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." 27 And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." 28 Then he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." 29 Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. 30 So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered." 31 The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. 32 Therefore to this day the people of Israel do not eat the sinew of the thigh that is on the hip socket, because he touched the socket of Jacob's hip on the sinew of the thigh (Genesis 32:22–32).

If you've ever ridden the New York City subway, you know there is an interesting culture on board. Most people sit or stand quietly as they read a book, scroll through their phones, or listen to music. New York subways are packed and quiet.

That's why it was so striking when a young boy—about 11-12 years old—started shouting. At first it sounded like he said, "I want my mommy." That's what made everyone stop whatever they were doing. Was he hurt? Was he lost? Why would a 12-year-old boy cry for his mommy?

But he wasn't saying "mommy." He was saying "Money—I want my money!" as he pointed at a man who was clearly ignoring him. The issue became clearer as the boy was holding a bag of assorted candies, and he was selling them to people on the subway. The man, apparently, had not paid. "I want my money!" he said louder and louder as the subway came to stop. The doors opened. But before the rush of humanity began, the boy jumped between the doors and blocked the entrance. Both hands were outstretched like he was holding back the doors. "I want my money!"

Now everyone wanted the kid to get his money. People looked at the man, signaling him to quickly pay up. The pressure of moment and the looks of the strangers caused him to pull out his wallet and give the boy more than he deserved. The kid's persistence paid off.

He was desperate.

Regardless of the culture of the subway, how embarrassing it might be, or what the man would think of him, the boy wouldn't stop. His desperation drove him to cry out.

Biblical Desperation

Do you know how often the Bible highlights desperate people, just like the boy on the subway? Let me give you a few examples. In the Old Testament, we find the Abraham nearly sacrificing his only son Isaac (Gen. 22), Israelites trapped between Pharaoh and the Red Sea (Ex. 14), David running for his life from a crazy king and writing songs about it (Psalm 59), and Hezekiah reading a threatening letter from the king of Assyria (2 Kings 19).

In the New Testament we find Peter sinking in the waves (Matt. 14), a blind man crying out on the side of the road, "Jesus have mercy on me," (Mark 10), and a non-Jewish woman pleading for Jesus to deliver her demon-possessed daughter (Mark 7).

Beyond people and experiences, there were the parables of Jesus where He highlighted the spiritual value of desperation. In Luke 18 it sounds like a woman who keeps coming to a judge in order to get justice. In Luke 11 it is a persistent friend who keeps knocking on a neighbor's door to provide for his guests.

The story-line of the Bible involves people who cry out to God for help. In fact, that is the basis of the gospel: sinful people cry out to Jesus to be saved from their sins. But that is only the beginning. Desperation, crying out to God in your need, is central to what it means to be a Christian. We begin following Jesus by totally relying on Him. And that is not supposed to stop.

C.S. Lewis said, "God cannot bless us until He has us. When we try to keep with us an area that is our own, we try to keep an area of death. Therefore, in love, He claims all. There's no bargaining with Him."¹

We Need Desperation

But I don't know about you, but my life tends to drift **away** from desperation. The gravitational force of my self-sufficiency and pride, combined with the comfort-craving, assurance-providing nature of our culture combine to wage war on my desperation for God. It's crazy, but desperation usually comes because of a crisis—something that happens to me. It goes like this. I know I need God, but my desperation-awareness wanes as I'm able to solve my own problems, strategize my way out of issues, or just (frankly) trust in myself.

Then a crisis hits. Now God has my attention. Now I need His help. That's when I'm desperate.

The vision for the next four weeks is for us to see if we can take some steps in embracing spiritual desperation. For some of you, that won't be very difficult because you are already at the bottom. This series, I hope, will encourage you to persevere and give you some new resources. For others, I'm praying this series will awaken something within you to realize your drift away from desperation.

¹ Quoted in Michael Catt, *The Power of Desperation – Breakthroughs in our Brokenness*, (Nashville: B&H Books, 2009), 5.

During the month of August, we will have a number of opportunities for you to put this into practice. Our staff is spending every Tuesday this month seeking God's face and talking about where we sense the Lord leading us. This month we'll send the 150 people who will be planting College Park Greenwood. The Castleton congregation has transitioned to live preaching. In November, Fishers will be moving to self-governing. We've begun call-out meetings for a church in Pike Township. There is a new momentum with our student ministries. Our attendance for the summer is up eight percent. And I hope you saw the beautiful article from The Gospel Coalition on our urban ministry in Brookside. I'm hearing great stories from people who are engaging their neighbors with intentional conversations.

But beyond all of this, we want to seek the heart of God for what is next for us. Specifically, how can we strengthen and deepen our spiritual roots so that we can continue to be a group of people who live on mission? How can we intentionally embrace a spirit of desperation?

How can we cry out to God and say, "We want you. We need you!"

Jacob's Desperation

We are starting our journey in Genesis 32. It is the story of Jacob's wrestling with God at a very critical time in his life. This encounter with God resulted in his name being changed to Israel, and he walked with a limp for the rest of his life. And this moment becomes a harbinger for many other moments in the Bible when God's people are desperate.

But as hard, inconvenient, and traumatic as this moment was for Jacob, it was actually a gift. He left a changed man.

Our text begins in verse 22-23 where it references the "same night" and that Jacob transported his family and all his possession across the Jabbok River, a river that empties into the Jordan River about fifteen miles north of the Dead Sea. Jacob was trying to protect his family.

Jacob's family, like every family, had a history. His name means "deceiver," and he was estranged from his older twin brother, Esau. Years earlier, Jacob had convinced an impetuous Esau to sell him his birthright because he was famished. And at the end of his father's life, Jacob conspired with his mother to receive the blessing that was due Esau as the eldest.

Genesis 27:36 and 41 give us a good summary of their relationship:

³⁶ Esau said, "Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has cheated me these two times. He took away my birthright, and behold, now he has taken away my blessing." Then he said, "Have you not reserved a blessing for me?" ⁴¹ Now Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him, and Esau said to himself, "The days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob."

Jacob, being warned by his mother, fled to his Uncle Laban, 260 miles away, where he lived for twenty years. Now he's on his way back to Canaan, and he sends word in advance to his brother that he's coming home. His message was intended to "find favor" in the eyes of Esau (Gen. 32:5). Reconciliation

seems to be his goal. But Jacob receives terrifying news. Esau received his message and is coming to meet him with four hundred men—a small army. That is why Jacob moves his family across the river.

The same night was also when Jacob cried out to God in a lament:

⁹ And Jacob said, “O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord who said to me, ‘Return to your country and to your kindred, that I may do you good,’¹⁰ I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps.¹¹ Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, that he may come and attack me, the mothers with the children.¹² But you said, ‘I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.’” (Gen. 32:9–12).

Additionally, Jacob sent a gift of 220 goats, 200 ewes, 20 rams, 30 milking cows with calves, 40 cows, 10 bulls, and 30 donkeys to Esau. That’s over 500 head of cattle—as a gift! Further, Jacob sent them in waves, in an effort to reach the heart of his estranged brother.

Alone and Desperate

Now after all this activity, verse 24 says, “And Jacob was left alone.” His family is gone. His future is uncertain. He’s done everything he can. And now he’s alone.

As I surveyed Jacob’s life, it was exhausting. His conflicts, his mistakes, his family’s disfunction, and the problem with Esau created a lot of tension in me as I rehearsed the story. I can only imagine the depth of his isolation.

Maybe your life has not been as traumatic as Jacob’s, but I’m sure most of us can relate to a moment where we felt utterly alone. You can probably think of a time when the promises of God or any hope of things changing seemed like a complete fallacy.

I remember sitting alone in a hospital room after Sarah was wheeled away for a medical procedure related to a false pregnancy after the death of our daughter. I was scared. I was tired. I was alone. I couldn’t cry anymore. There was no one to call. It was just me and God. I was completely desperate.

Perhaps that is where you are today. Or maybe you were just there recently. Or there’s a chance that you’ll be there in the next few months. Here’s what I’d want you to know:

First, being alone and desperate is hard but normal. I started this message with a few examples, and I could give you many more. Jesus in the Garden, John on the Isle of Patmos, or the apostle Paul when he said, “. . . we thought we had received the sentence of death . . .”(2 Cor. 1:10). Or when he said, “At my first defense, no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me . . .” (2 Tim. 4:16). Being a follower of Jesus means seasons of desperation.

But I also want you to know that those are the seasons where God’s grace is sweetest. There is a painful paradox here—one that I’ve experienced and observed in others. I’m sure many of you could testify to

the fact that moments of desperation, while hard (really hard) are transformative. Even though Paul thought he had received the sentence of death, he went on to say, “. . . but that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead” (2 Cor. 1:10). And after being abandoned, he said, “. . . but the Lord stood by me and strengthened me” (2 Tim. 4:17).

So, if you are in one of those “alone” seasons right now, take heart. Michael Catt, in his book, *The Power of Desperation*, says:

“My greatest times with the Lord have not been on the mountaintop. It has been in the battles – personal as well as those that arise in the ministry – where I have found Him ready to meet me. That’s because God is attracted to weakness. He hears the cry of the desperate. Over and over again in the Scripture, we see God respond to his people when they cry out to him. He is not an indifferent deity. He is a loving God who allows us to be broken so he can remake us more and more into his image.”²

That is why desperation is a gift.

A Strange Wrestling Match

What follows, beginning in verse 24, is a strange account of a wrestling match between Jacob and an unknown man. Perhaps he thought it was a local adversary or maybe someone sent from Esau. All we know is that the battle continued through the night. At some point, Jacob prevailed against the man with whom he was wrestling. But not before he was seriously injured. His hip was dislocated.

Throughout the night he also became convinced that he was actually wrestling with God. The sun started to rise (v. 26), but Jacob refused to let the man go until he was blessed by Him. Look at what follows in the text:

²⁶ Then he said, “Let me go, for the day has broken.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”²⁷ And he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.”²⁸ Then he said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.”²⁹ Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed him. Genesis 32:26–29 (ESV)

Now what is the point of this passage? It marks an important turning point in Jacob’s life. Remember, it was God who initiated the wrestling match. There was a point to all of this. In Jacob’s desperation, he looked to God for the blessing he needed. Griffith Thomas (1861-1924) summarizes the point well:

“The wrestling was an endeavor on God’s part to break down Jacob’s opposition, to bring him to an end of himself, to take from him all self-trust, all confidence in his own cleverness and resource, to make him know that Esau is to be overcome and Canaan obtained not by craft or flattery, but by Divine grace and power.”³

² Michael Catt, *Power of Desperation*, 2.

³ Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Genesis*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 122.

John Calvin suggests that God's purpose was to prove Jacob just before he stepped into the promised land. "But I think Jacob was admonished, at his very entrance of the promised land, that he was not there to expect a tranquil life for himself . . . It was necessary for him to be taught what his future condition should be."⁴

In other words, Jacob needed to be broken and to realize his need for God's blessing in his life. That's why this moment of wrestling was such a gift. Moments of wrestling create the brokenness that opens the door for God's grace.

So, if you are walking through a season right now where the words "alone" or "wrestling" fit you, let me just encourage you to allow the Lord to do His work in your life. Instead of fighting against Him or struggling to admit that you need His help, why not embrace it? Why not be thankful for the dark valleys and the hard moments because of what they will show you about yourself and God's grace?

Walking with a Limp

Our story ends with two major changes in Jacob's life that will mark him for the rest of his life. The first was a change in his name. His name was changed from "deceiver" to "strives with God." All of his life, Jacob was striving with people: his father, his brother, his wives, and his father-in-law. Some commentators point to this moment as the time when the God of his father became his own.

Some of you know that it took a major crisis in your life to awaken you of your need for God's grace. There may have been some issue that helped you see the emptiness of what you were trusting in. Your wrestling with God opened your eyes to see your need to come to Jesus.

Jacob's encounter with God caused him to name the place something special. He called it Peniel because it was there where "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered" (v. 30). Hardship, suffering, or frustration have the potential to clarify what we believe. Job was a man who knew suffering, and he said, "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you" (Job 42:5).

But there's another thing we see as this scene closes: Jacob walks with a limp. The wrestling with God marked him for the rest of his life. Have you found this to be true in your life? I certainly have. I remember Dale Shaw telling me about a friend who told him that desperate times mark you for life—you walk with a limp. If you were to talk to each of our pastors, you'd find a consistent theme in their lives. At some point, God broke each of us.

I was talking with Collin Hansen from The Gospel Coalition about longevity in ministry in light of the number of high-profile failures. He said that it is interesting to him that the guys who are faithful tend to be the ones who were broken.

⁴ John Calvin, *Commentaries on Genesis – Vol 2*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 199

Do you see why desperation should be considered a gift? God's desire is to help us understand that we cannot make it without Him. We need His forgiveness, and we need His grace. And that is not just true for us individually; it is also true for our entire church.

Candidly, the last eight months have been some of the most exciting and the most challenging that I've seen in the last 20 years of ministry. And yet I'm rejoicing because it created this series. I had other plans for the month of August but felt the Lord clearly leading me to talk about this important issue. When we are desperate, God finally has our attention.⁵

Applications

Where do we go with this text? Here are three key thoughts I want to go with you:

1. Embrace desperation as a gift from God. This is not a new application. I've mentioned it throughout the sermon. But I emphasize it here again because for some of us the greatest hindrance to our spiritual walk is that simple fact that we see desperation as something negative. This leads some people to be angry, bitter, and depressed; it leads some to even walk away from Christianity all together. I want you to agree with Paul when he said, "I will boast more gladly of my weaknesses so that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (2 Cor. 12:9). Would you do that this week? Would you do that even now? Can you thank God for the desperation in your life?

2. See the danger of living desperation-lite. We live in a culture that thrives on self-reliance. And the more money, the more intelligence, and the more experience you have, the easier it is to live desperate-lite. You can buy your own security, create your own solutions, and figure your way out of problems. And in so doing, you live as if God wasn't even needed. Church, let's be careful to remember that our experience, our wealth, our successes, and our strategies mean nothing if God's isn't in them.

3. Take steps to cultivate desperation. We'll talk more about this next week. The entire message will be dedicated to this issue. But I'd like to issue you a two-fold challenge: What one thing could you give up to make more room for God's grace in your life, and what's one step you could take to facilitate more desperation in your life? Where do you need to make room for seeking God? What step of faith do you need to take to open the door for more grace?

Imagine what it would be like if everyone of us pursued God with the reckless passion of the boy in the New York subway. What if, for the next month, we all found ways to say, "I want you, Jesus! I need your grace!"

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⁵ Michael Catt, Power of Desperation, xii.