

July 29, 2012

Jacob

Atlas or Jesus Christ?

Genesis 32:22-32

**Opening words:**

I hope you didn't miss it. Last Monday night, July 24, was the 1000 episode of professional wrestling's Monday Night Raw. How many people here took time out of your busy schedules to watch it? I will be honest with you. I didn't watch it but I have watched my share of professional wrestling. I can not tell you how many hours my best friend Jimmy Thompson and I watched wrestling. In those days the names that dominated the sport were Bulldog Brower, John Powers and Haystacks Calhoun. Younger generations got to know John Cena, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, The Undertaker and Triple H. Like it or not but wrestling is part of the fabric of American society. Answer this question in your heart. Isn't there someone in your life you would like to smack down? This morning we find Jacob wrestling with God.

This is message number seven in my summer sermon series on Jacob. Our hero's journey is nearing an end. After a twenty year absence, he is home again. His heart is filled with mixed emotions. May God give you ears to hear this morning's scripture lesson, Genesis 32:22-32. Let me call this message *Atlas or Jesus Christ?*

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**Genesis 32:22-32**

22 That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. 23 After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. 24 So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. 25 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. 26 Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." 27 The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. 28 Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome." 29 Jacob said, "Please tell me your name." But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there. 30 So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared." 31 The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip. 32 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.

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On Fifth Avenue in New York City stands the RCA Building. In front of that building stands a gigantic statue of Atlas. You know the image. His muscular body is straining to keep the whole world in his shoulders. Also, on Fifth Avenue stands Saint Patrick's Church. Behind the high altar is a little shrine of the boy Jesus. He is approximately eight or nine years old. He is holding the entire world in one hand. The contrast between Atlas and Jesus is striking. Together the two statues make a powerful statement. Are we going to play the part of Atlas, who is attempting to support the

whole world? Or are we going to surrender your life to Jesus, who carries the whole world in his hand? The choice is yours. With this in mind let us look at the text for this morning together.

It has been several weeks since we have looked at Jacob's life so let me review a few facts. Jacob's grandfather was Abraham and his father was Isaac. His fraternal twin brother was Esau, who was born red and hairy. (He must have been a handsome lad!) He was the one who lost both the birthright and the blessing. Don't just rush past these stories. Those events caused a rift within the family. The relationship between the twins was so bad; Esau threatened to take his brother's life. Taking that threat seriously, Jacob decided to leave home and live with his Uncle Laban. It is during this time away Jacob begins to change. First, Jacob becomes a rich man. That fact is important because if you are going to have two wives you need to be a rich man. Also, you would have to be a rich man to care for twelve sons. How can you ever forget? Those sons became the twelve tribes of Israel. In many ways the time in that foreign land was good but in other ways it was very challenging. Jacob had grown tired of his business partnership with Uncle Laban. He is so unhappy he decides to return home and face his old nemesis, Esau. Does any of this sound familiar?

Today, we are in the thirty-second chapter of Genesis. It is important that you understand the timeline. Jacob has been gone for twenty years. He left to escape the family tension that he created. His twin brother, Esau, was mad at him because he stole the birthright. His father was upset with him because he exploited his poor eyesight. Think about this next line. He hid for twenty years but now he is coming home. He is about to confront his twenty year old problems. Twenty years is a long time! A great deal can change in twenty years. For example, baby boys and girls become men and women. However, certain things can remain the same. His father was still his father and his brother was still his brother. Jacob must have been hoping their attitudes toward him had changed. With every homeward step he envisioned this family reunion. With every step his past demons were drawing nearer.

Verses 22-24 are key. They say, "*That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven 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 till daybreak.*" Why is that important? It meant that Jacob's journey was complete. He was home and was about to enter his brother's land. The day that Jacob had been dreading had finally come. Within a few hours he would be face to face with his brother. It is important that you remember the journey home did not originate in Jacob's heart. The journey home originated in the heart of God. The Almighty told Jacob to go home. (31:3) Jacob simply surrendered to God's will. It was easy to surrender to God's will when you are running away from Uncle Laban. It was something completely different when you are about to confront Esau. Jacob wrestles with God that entire night over one thing, control. It is at this point that Jacob must answer the question we have all struggle with, how far do you trust God? Are you going to play the part of Atlas, who carried the whole world on his shoulders? Or are you going to trust Jesus, who has the whole world in his hand? How far do you trust God? Today, I want to talk about three areas in your life that you need to surrender to God.

These are the three. Is anyone here willing to trust God with your problems? Is anyone here willing to trust God with your people? Is anyone here willing to trust God with your very presence? Remember each one of us decides how we are going to live. Each one of us must decide how far we trust God. Are you going to play the part of Atlas, who carried the whole world on his shoulders? Or you going to trust Jesus, who has the whole world in his hand? If you are ready to begin say, **"Amen!"** How far do you trust God?

### **Problems**

Do you trust God with your problems? Jacob had no shortage of problems. Twenty years ago, he left home and burned all of his bridges. His red hairy brother was mad at him. His blind and aging father was upset with him. His mother loved him but knew the best thing he could do was simply go away. Twenty years later, he returned home a new man but he was facing the same old problems. God told him to return home but how far can you really trust God? Do you trust God with your problems? Are you playing the part of Atlas, who carried the whole world on his shoulders? Or do you trust Jesus Christ, carries the whole world in his hand? How far do you trust God?

One of the classic baseball television shots comes from the 1975 World Series, in which NBC captured Carlton Fisk, jumping up and down, waving his arms, trying to coax his hit to stay fair. It did--for a home run. That colorful close-up would have been missed had the cameraman followed the ball with his camera, as was his responsibility. But the cameraman inside the Fenway Park scoreboard had one eye on a rat that was circling him. So instead of focusing the camera on the ball, he left it on Fisk. How many times in life do we miss the big picture because we are preoccupied with our personal problems?

Has anyone here ever had a problem? There is no shortage of problems in our world today. How many people do you know are facing some health or financial problems? How many people do you know have marital problems or family problems? How many people do you know are living without hope because the problems in their life seem so great? No matter how hard you try, you are blind to the big picture because your rats are circling. How many of your problems are bigger than your resources? Don't be an Indian giver. Who takes back what is even away. Pass your problems on to Jesus. Chuck Swindoll once said, *"Every problem is an opportunity to prove God's power. Every day we encounter countless golden opportunities, brilliantly disguised as insurmountable problems."* I think that is true. If you can remember that the next time you are cornered by your problems say, **"Amen!"**

### **People**

Do you trust God with your people? Jacob was not traveling alone. The scripture says it clearly. Traveling with him were his wives, their maidens, his children and his property. How he will be accepted by Esau would not just affect him. It would affect all of them. This is the question. Are you willing to trust God with the people in your life? Are you playing the part of Atlas, who carried the whole world on his shoulders? Or do you trust Jesus Christ, who carried the whole world in the palm of his hand? How far do you trust God?

Did you know the average United Methodist pastor officiates at one baptisms annually? We are above the norm. I have baptized six babies this calendar year. Baptisms are one of the great privileges I have in my calling. Every baptism is different yet every baptism always has one thing. I have never baptized a baby that wasn't loved. Baptisms are a wonderful opportunity to celebrate the faith. However, you know it is true. Babies don't stay babies for long. Babies grow up and in time babies become adults. This is not an easy fact for some. Many struggle seeing their baby leave home and enter the adult world. Have you ever stopped to consider we only care for our children a short time? That means you can only protect your baby for so long. Our children are only on loan from God. They are always God's children. Do you trust God to protect your adult children? Do you trust God to care for all your loved ones? How far do you trust God? If that makes you think say, "**Amen!**"

### **Presence**

Do you trust God with your very presence? Do you remember why Jacob left twenty years earlier? He left because he tricked his own father out of the blessing. When Esau lost the blessing, he lost both future respect and money. The one receiving the blessing received a double share of the inheritance. Esau did not take the news well and responded by threatening to kill Jacob. Jacob responded by running away. That was twenty years earlier. Jacob didn't know how Jacob felt about him on that day. There is no reason to believe Esau had softened his opinions toward Jacob. His very life could have been in danger. When God told Jacob to go home, he was risking his very life. Do you trust God with your presence? In other words, do you believe God is everywhere? Or do you believe God just lives in your comfort zone?

Last summer, Western Reserve co-hosted Mill Creek Workcamp. We welcomed approximately 400 people to Youngstown to work on homes. They stayed at Chaney High School and gathered every night for worship. It was good for my soul to see so many young people excited about Jesus! I invited everyone I knew to worship with us. Very few of those invitees came but only one told me why. She looked at me and said, "Russ, I would love to come but I can't." Why? "I won't go because Chaney is located within the city limits of Youngstown. I don't go into Youngstown because bad things happen in Youngstown." In other words, she said, "I am afraid." Is anyone here afraid to go into Youngstown? Is there anyone here who is living only a partial life because of fear? Do you trust God with your very presence? Are you playing the part of Atlas, who carried the whole world on his shoulders? Or are you trusting Jesus Christ, who carries the whole world in the palm of his hand? God is everywhere!

I have had a week to emotionally recover from my trip to Haiti. I can not tell you how many times I have looked through my pictures. I can not tell you how many memories I have recalled. My most powerful memories came from the back of a truck. That is how we were transported from one spot to another. We sat on wooden benches sitting back to back, holding fifteen to seventeen people. There were no seat belts; There was no cap. We simply sat on those wooden benches in the open air as we travel on Haiti's bumpy mountainous roads. It was all part of the adventure. As we traveled we passed countless Haitians. Our white faces stood out in that society. The locals were used to

seeing white faces. They called us "bulonks." However, their reaction to us was generated from a sincere heart. We would wave at them. They would smile and wave back at us. Along the road were countless stands manned by lucky people. They were part of the 20% of the Haitian population that had a job. Near the main intersection in that little corner of the world, the stands clustered together. In one booth there was fruit. In the next booth there was motor oil. The next booth sold wood to light their fire and the next booth sold some foul smelling food. It was fun to drive by them at a high rate of speed but it was a little intimidating to stop. Our hosts, Dale and Ingram, were excellent babysitters. They insisted we stay on the truck because we would be overcharged. Those orders were unnecessary. I didn't want to get off the truck. It wasn't because I was afraid of being cheated. The average Haitian makes \$2.50 per day. If I was over charged and helped them make \$5.00 that day so be it. Do you know why I wanted to stay on the truck? This is the truth. I was afraid to become part of that crowd. There was a part of me that feared being carried off into the Haitian wild. My fear was not based on logic; My fear was based in emotion. Just think about it for a minute. I was brave enough to travel all the way to Haiti. However, I wasn't brave enough to get off the truck and be with Haitians. Can I ask you a question? How brave are you? How far do you trust Jesus? God is everywhere! And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

Jacob was brave enough to travel through a foreign land but he wasn't brave enough to travel home. He wrestled with God yet he was really wrestling with himself. How far do you trust God? Do you trust God with your **problems**? Don't be an Indian giver. Let God have them. Do you trust God with your **people**? There is nothing stronger in the world than love. Do you trust God with your **presence**? Life is a great gift. Why don't you start living at full life? The Master once said, *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**