

Sermon Notes

11/23/08

In the Arena: Wrestling to Reach Maturity and Limping to Victory

Genesis 32:22-32

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As I said in the sermon, I think Jacob is a badly misunderstood figure (as is Rebekah). However, several biblical interpreters have done good work grasping the shape and meaning of Jacob's life. Martin Luther did a nice job in his commentary on Genesis (especially because he sees the place of righteous deception in the lives of the patriarchs). The best treatment on Jacob by far is found in James Jordan's book *Primeval Saints*. In fact, the bulk of the exegesis of Gen. 25-32 in my sermon was a condensation of Jordan's work. (Thankfully, Jim is a friend, so I do not have to worry about being sued for plagiarism!!)

Obviously, my survey of Jacob's life was, at most, a bird's eye overview. There are many fascinating details that will have to be explored at another time. All I want to do here is point out a one more feature of the main passage we looked at, Genesis 32:22-32. By the end of the story Jacob has been changed. He's matured. He's a new man. The process that began in the womb is culminated with his victory at Jabok/Peniel. And yet a memory of Jacob's struggles will go on with him: he will walk with a limp for the rest of his life. The narrator ends the story with a seemingly strange comment: "Therefore to this day the children of Israel do not eat the muscle that shrank, which is on the hip socket, because He touched the socket of Jacob's hip in the muscle that shrank." What is this comment doing here? Why did this ritual practice arise in Israel and why is it mentioned at the end of this episode?

First, we must remember the biblical correlation between animals and people (and especially sacrificial animals and Israelites). Animals represent people (cf. Gen. 22, where the ram substitutes for Isaac). When the Israelites brought animals to offer to God in worship, they were really offering themselves. They drew near to God by proxy, as the animal was placed on the altar and turned into ascending smoke on their behalf.

In most sacrifices, the portions of the animal that were eaten were shared between God, the priests, and the worshipper. God "ate" his portion as it was consumed by the altar fire. The holiest pieces of the animal were eaten only by God. Here in Gen. 32:32, we find that the part of the animal corresponding to Jacob's leg injury was reserved for God. Or, perhaps more clearly, Jacob himself

has become a sacrificial portion reserved exclusively for God. If this part of the animal now symbolizes Jacob, another symbolic connection opens up: Jacob's name can also mean "heel," and so, in terms of Gen. 3:15, Jacob's wounding is the bruising of the heel. Jacob is a down payment, an anticipatory fulfillment on the promised seed of the woman God had already promised. Jacob, thus, belongs to God in a unique way and the part of the animal that connects with Jacob is too holy for Israelites to eat.

The text says the Lord struck the socket of Jacob's thigh. More literally, the Lord struck the "palm" of the thigh – that is, the inward part of the thigh. The same word is used in Gen. 24:2, 9, when Abraham has his servant swear an oath, grabbing his thigh. This is basically his "private parts," and thus is associated with the promise of the seed. This is a kind of super-circumcision, a reminder that the seed will not come through human strength, but as a divine gift. When the seed does come, the seed will be bruised on the heel – but through being bruised, the seed will prevail and win the victory, as typified in Jacob's experience.