

LIVING THE CHRISTIAN LIFE VICTORIOUSLY

PART 4 – WHEN DOES DEFEAT SPELL VICTORY?

A familiar cry around these parts, ...a bit to my dismay I might add..., is the chant, “GO GATORS!” It is an encouragement to those UF students who are participants in a sport to conquer their opponents. It is a call to victory.

And in most sports, victory comes with a price. There is the price of practice, the continual performance of drills that instill the basics, the drills that are designed to build muscle strength, the calisthenics that are designed to stretch out muscles and prepare them for rigorous activity.

There is also the price of suffering injury, and every sport has them; the diver that hits his or her head on the diving board, the cyclist who suffers a wreck, the football player that pulls a hamstring.

And of course there is the ultimate price that is sometimes paid in the performance of a sport, death.

And the cries and encouragements to drive to victory are not limited to the field of sports competition, we see competitiveness in our schools, our places of work, and in our homes.

Our children vie to be the Valedictorian of their class, we trample over people in our work place as we struggle to be chosen for the promotion, we select the best neighborhoods to live in so that our children will have the best education possible. The competition in our lives never seems to let up.

And the competition is all geared towards our being victorious. Having the best grades, the best job, the best children, the best of everything. And throughout all this struggle and strife, we grow farther and farther from those things in life that make a difference.

I have had the opportunity to counsel people to be careful of the time that they spend competing in their workplace at the expense of spending time with their children and family. I am well versed in what can happen to relationships with children as you spend more and more time seeking success in the work environment at the expense of time spent with your children.

And I can testify to the fact that it is better to eat gruel and soup while spending time with your kids than putting prime rib roasts on the table that are eaten in your absence. The time with your children that you lose pursuing that ever distant goal of success can never be recovered, and soon the time is up, and they are gone, and instead of being able to say, “We’ll play catch tomorrow,” you hear yourself saying, “I wish they lived closer so we could see them.”

Too soon we learn that the sweet goal of victory has its price and too often we learn that the price that we paid is far greater than we anticipated.

So it is with our relationship with God. It is an interesting fact that we all need to learn, and that is, the Lord cannot fully bless us until He has first conquered us.

Perhaps this statement sounds harsh to your ear, or perhaps even unreasonable, after all, haven't we all learned in Sunday school that God is love.

But, for the sake of maintaining the title of Bereans, let's search the scriptures for an example. If we start in Genesis, the first book of the Bible, our search will bring us to Chapter 25 of Genesis where we will read about the birth of a man who spent most of his life struggling. Rather than read all of the scriptures today, let me just encourage you to read Chapters 25 through 37 on your own.

Starting at verse 20 of Chapter 25 of Genesis we read where Isaac, after 20 years of marriage to Rebekah with no children, pleaded with the Lord for Rebekah to bear a child. And so the Lord blessed Rebekah with not one child but with twins. But at verse 22 we read that the children struggled within her and she asked the Lord why this was so, and the Lord told her that she was carrying two nations in her and that,

One people shall be stronger than the other,

And the older shall serve the younger."

²⁴ So when her days were fulfilled *for her to give birth, indeed there were twins in her womb.* ²⁵
And the first came out red. He was like a hairy garment all over; so they called his name Esau. ²⁶
Afterward his brother came out, and his hand took hold of Esau's heel; so his name was called Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

²⁷ So the boys grew. And Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field; but Jacob was a mild man, dwelling in tents.

This is the record of the birth of Esau and Jacob, two brothers, but who is it that spent his life struggling?

Esau was born with no mention of struggling; but Jacob came out clutching hold of Esau's heel. It was as if Jacob wanted to be the first born and was trying to pull himself up in front of Esau.

There is yet another clue in that the name Jacob means "he who supplants." One who supplants another is one who takes the place of somebody by force or intrigue. And if we follow Jacob's life we will learn that he did both.

We just read verses 20 – 27 about how at birth he tried using force.

Verses 29 – 34 tells us how, as a young man, Jacob duped his brother Esau out of his birthright,

In Chapter 27, you can read the intrigue where Jacob and his mother plotted to rob Esau of his father's blessing, and having been successful, we read at verse 41,

⁴¹ So Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father blessed him, and Esau said in his heart, “The days of mourning for my father are at hand; then I will kill my brother Jacob.”

But Rebekah, Isaac's wife who loved Jacob over Esau, heard of Esau's plan and convinced Isaac to send Jacob packing off to her brother Laban who lived in Padan Aram.

In Chapter 28, we read about Jacob's journey to Padan Aram, and how on his way he laid down to rest and how that in a dream Jacob saw what has become known as “Jacob's ladder,” and how that in the dream, the Lord stood above the ladder and spoke to Jacob. Upon awaking in the morning Jacob recalls the dream, and makes this vow:

“If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on,²¹ so that I come back to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God.²² And this stone which I have set as a pillar shall be God's house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You.”

In Chapters 30 and 31 we can read where Jacob and Laban agree to terms for Jacob to build his own herds from Laban's stock, and how Jacob schemed to ensure that the animals that were born to him were strong while those born to Laban were weak. Then in Chapter 31, Jacob sneaks out and leaves with his wives, and flocks without telling Laban. When Laban learns three days later of Jacob's departure, he is angered and pursues Jacob. I'll let you read for yourselves how that turned out.

In Chapter 32, we read how, as Jacob drew near his home country, he began to think about the 20-year old unsolved problem he had left behind him. Soon he must face Esau, the brother who he had deceived and from whom he had fled—the brother who had vowed to kill him. Jacob's past had caught up with him. As he went on his way, God tried to relieve his fears. But Jacob was too preoccupied with his own problem to recognize and comprehend what was in the messages that God had sent him.

Jacob had struggled and gotten everything he wanted. But the one thing he wanted most now, escaped him; he had no peace. His heart was consumed with fear. He feared for his life. He feared losing everything he had worked to get - his family and his wealth. His scheming and conniving, his wealth and endeared family, success and human achievement had not prepared him to meet Esau. His successes only brought him fear, distress and anxiety. He couldn't go back, because angry Laban was behind him. He was trapped by the fruit of his own sins.

He decided to send a peace offering to Esau ahead of him, hoping to learn of Esau's demeanor. That didn't help so he sent more gifts, but each new gift he sent did nothing to relieve the fears.

That night Jacob wrestled with God. He would not give up. Even when his hip was thrown out of joint, he held on. He said, “I will not let You go unless You bless me!” Jacob had everything. What blessing could he want?

He wanted peace.

He wanted freedom from fear.

He wanted a spiritual blessing.

Jacob had a restless and empty heart from birth and tried to fill it with external things, plotting and scheming to gain whatever he thought would fill the void. Yet after he wrestled with God, knew that though he had worked hard, he had succeeded only because he had God's blessing. But in His blessing 20 years before, God had said, "*I am the LORD God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants.*"¹⁴ Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.¹⁵ Behold, *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 spoken to you."

Jacob knew that the Lord had been faithful in providing for him, yet the blessing he had received had been one to prosper him, and though he had indeed prospered, he had never known peace. And so it is that he held on as if with a death grip wanting only to receive a spiritual blessing. He wanted God's living presence in his life. He wanted to be a spiritual man.

²⁷ So He said to him, "What *is* your name?"

He said, "Jacob."

²⁸ And He said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed."

Following his struggle with God, Jacob comes face to face with Esau, and I'll let you read Chapter 33 to learn just how that confrontation went. I will say this, Jacob, or Israel as he is now called, survived the meeting.

In Chapter 47, Verse 9 as Jacob nears the end of his life, he says, "*The days of the years of my pilgrimage are one hundred and thirty years; few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not attained to the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their pilgrimage.*"

Jacob confesses that man's life is a pilgrimage. This is a precious truth that we all need to grasp and cherish. Even though we work hard and live well, we must not forget that man's life is a pilgrimage. Jacob became a new man – the stubborn, self assured, ego centric rebel was transformed into a meek and dignified friend of God.

It is not just Jacob that needs God's blessing, it is we too that we need God's blessing. We must realize that we each have indeed received the first blessing, the one Jacob received on his way to live with Laban. Each of us lives in more comfort and in better conditions than over 85% of the world's peoples.

What we need to appreciate is that regardless of the fact that we have been blessed by God in our physical needs, no matter how hard we work, without God's spiritual blessing our lives are empty, miserable, filled with doubt and fear, and they are not victorious.

While we may not admit it, many of us are struggling with God and do not have the peace that Jacob received, we do not have the spiritual blessing from God.

It is not for lack of struggling in this world, rather it is from a lack of struggling with God, failing to seek God's truths, truths that are found in Scripture, truths that are found in both the Old Testament and New Testament; it is from a lack of wrestling with God and seeking His blessing which manifests itself in the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives; it is from a lack of asking Jesus to fill us with His Holy Spirit and appropriating His promise that we have received it.

We have covered a lot of scripture in a short time, I hope that you will take the time to go back home and read Genesis Chapter 25 through Chapter 37. It is rich with intrigue and mystery and it is well worth reading multiple times. But I want to end with reading a translation from the Italian of Michaelangelo which was translated by William Wordsworth.

Listen if you will to the beautiful verse and the striking imagery as the author encourages us to turn and seek to be the spiritual man that the Lord wills for us.

No mortal object did these eyes behold
When first they met the placid light of thine,
And my Soul felt her destiny divine,
And hope of endless peace in me grew bold:
Heaven-born, the Soul a heaven-ward course must hold;
Beyond the visible world she soars to seek
(For what delights the sense is false and weak)
Ideal Form, the universal mould.
The wise man, I affirm, can find no rest
In that which perishes: nor will he lend
His heart to aught which doth on time depend.
'Tis sense, unbridled will, and not true love,
That kills the soul: love betters what is best,
Even here below, but more in heaven above.
– From the Italian of Michaelangelo translated by William Wordsworth