

Saints under Pressure 1
Jacob: Wrestling with God.

Genesis 32:22-32

'Saints under pressure' is a description of the contemporary Body of Christ, across the nations. 'Saints', or in Greek the 'holy ones (the ones being made holy.)', are what those who have surrendered their lives to Christ are, not by their own virtue or by papal dictate but 100% because of Jesus and his righteousness. 'Under Pressure' is the reality of living a Christian Life of intentional discipleship which clearly goes against the flow of the prevailing culture of the world. This short series highlights three Bible characters and how they coped with such pressure and overcame: each message will hopefully help us put together a composite picture of the overcoming.

So today let's look briefly at Jacob: this is the stuff of the epic proportions and shows how God can redeem and use even the most compromised of lives. Sibling rivalry with Esau, the selling of the birthright, the deception of the stolen blessing, Esau's rage and Jacobs's getaway! Thence to Bethel and dreamtime: stairway to heaven. The Lord has an unerring way of getting your attention! Thence the original blind date: deceiving Jacob takes his own medicine. Instead of getting his Rachel (lovely in form and beautiful) he gets Leah (with weak eyes): seven years of servitude times two, he eventually gets both plus two handmaids, Bildad & Zilpah. Rachel barren, Leah fertile, 11 sons by Leah, Bildah & Zilpah, then graciously the Lord opens Rachel's womb and Joseph is born. Then there's trouble with the Father-in Law Laban, the charge was deception again (amazing how sins come bouncing back when we don't truly repent of them). Eastenders and Corrie eat your heart out: this is great drama and true, not made up! Finally the showdown with Esau, but before that happens we find Jacob sending gifts ahead of him, and then his family. Then by the ford of Jabbak he spends a night of transformation,

which changes him from the inside out (the only real change that's worth having).

You see its not so much what happens to us in life, it's how we deal with it and grow from it that matters: Saints under pressure can lament their position or learn from it, and trust God through it.

And so to our reading: "Then Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with Him until the breaking of day."(32:24) Jacob was a man whom lived in two worlds. He knew what it was to depend on God and he knew what it was to depend on himself. He could put his trust in the supernatural power of heaven and he could put his trust in his own natural ability, leaning on his own skill and ingenuity. All of his life, the pattern was the same: where there was no way, Jacob made a way - until now! Is this the place you or I have been or are in: trusting God only when all else fails? It didn't work for Jacob and it won't work for us. So now Jacob was returning to his homeland after more than 20 years in Padan Aram, and he had to pass through the territory of his brother Esau. But messengers had just come with a terrifying word. "Your Brother Esau is coming to meet you with 400 men." This could mean the wholesale slaughter of Jacobs wives, children, concubines and servants - a day of disaster. Esau's last words 20 years ago were hate filled and murderous; "the days of mourning for my Father are at hand; then I will kill my brother Jacob." (27:41) And Esau had had more than 20 years to simmer and stew in his rage and resentment towards the one who had stolen his birthright and his blessing. Now it was payback time - and he was coming with 400 men. Jacob hatched a plan, arranging 9 gift-bearing entourages to placate Esau along the way, and then he separated his wives and children from the rest of the camp. But it was not enough. Somehow Jacob must have realised that he had come to the end of his rope, that there was no human solution to this problem, and that His only hope was in God. And so he

wrestles in prayer, refusing to let go. To let go would mean certain death. That's how Jacob could find the strength to engage in an all-out wrestling match for hours without a break (remember; this was not the made up TV version of professional wrestling, but a real life death struggle) - "I will not let you go until you bless me! I cannot let you go until you bless me. If I am blessed by you, I will live, my family will live, and your purposes for my seed will be fulfilled. If I let go without the blessing, its over and we will all die."(32:22-29). And so Jacob prevailed with God and with man, becoming Israel that day. Jacob the deceiver had become Israel the Lords Soldier - our names have enormous meaning for our lives and can be prophetic in terms of our destiny. Hosea wrote of his heroic battle: "He struggled with the Angel and prevailed: He wept, and sought favour from Him. He found Him in Bethel, and there He spoke to us"(Hosea 12:4). This is how Jacob, a tarnished Saint under pressure obtained the blessing of God and had a transforming and renewing personal encounter with God, and that is how it happens for us too: there is no other way!!

So Saints under pressure need three things:

1. **They need time alone with God:** we want a fresh encounter with God, we want and desire more of God, but are we giving God space and time in our busy lives for Him to visit us. Read about the life of anyone who has done significant things for God and you will notice a common denominator: the more they served God and His purposes, the more they found and prioritised time alone with Him! Jacob arranged to be alone because he had finally realised that God must be allowed to deal with him in a very personal way.
2. **They need to let God take the initiative:** Jacob lets him do that eventually: and we need to too! It has always been this way. At times when we are desperate God has a habit of stepping in. God appears to Jacob: a very tangible figure appears. There is a fight, which is real and which is physical. This is not an

'incarnation'; it is not like God's becoming man in Jesus. It is actually an Angel. Yet the Angel appears in human form, and is representing God. It becomes clear that the figure is God (32:30): at least Jacob thought so. Hosea in the previous verse (12:3) had said Jacob had struggled with God. This Angel is not like a ghost or a spirit. He has material form and He starts wrestling with Jacob seeking to throw him to the ground. God has taken the initiative in dealing with Jacob, and we need to allow Him to take the initiative in our lives too. Are you under pressure at this time: then you can do no better than stop trying to sort things out yourself and start afresh to open up your life to God!

3. They need to understand that God is a gentle God: "A man wrestled with him until daybreak"(32:24) but the supernatural figure was not able to prevail against Jacob. What can this mean? Why is it that a supernatural figure representing God Himself is not able to defeat Jacob and throw him to the ground? God wrestles with Jacob all night, but He is not successful! The reason must be that God is being gentler than He could be. God is quite capable of immobilising Jacob at any time He likes. But His method of fighting is gentle. He will defeat Jacob only if Jacob gives in. The battle with Jacob is quite literal, yet at the same time it is a parable of the way in which God has been dealing with Jacob for many years. For over twenty years God has been fighting to get Jacob to change his character and become a new man in God. But God's way of fighting has been gentle. He has been forcing Jacob to surrender his devious ways.

Jacob refuses to give in or admit defeat. He withstands His mysterious assailant. "The Man" will have to fight more aggressively if he is to win. The Angel of God wishes not to be totally seen. He has visited Jacob at night in order to veil his appearance. As the first streaks of dawn appear God wishes to leave, but He has still not defeated Jacob. Jacob is not the kind of person who gives in easily. Throughout his life God has not

been breaking Jacob in a violent way. He has been gentle. He has been inviting Jacob to admit defeat, abandon his manipulative ways, and let God be his leader, his guide, his vindicator. The literal fight is typical of the spiritual battle God has been having with Jacob for many years. So for those of you who have given way to a spirit of fear that if you truly surrender to God He will treat you harshly; understand that this could not be further from the truth. God deals with us gently yet profoundly and as we surrender to him the result is transformation and blessing, so don't miss out!

So Saints under Pressure: God is restraining Himself. God wants to change us, but it is possible for God to fight with us and not be winning! Why? Because God wants our willing submission. He wants us to surrender to Him without His having to knock us down or injure us. Jacobs's holy desperation led him to a new place where God could use him to fashion a nation for Him. Nothing less than that could await you when under pressure you choose a fresh surrender to Him!

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