

The Great Contender

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- [0 : 00] I ask for God's blessing on our time. Would you pray with me? Father, thank you that you draw near to us in your word to reveal to us, Jesus.
- We pray by your spirit's presence that for each of us, there would be a fresh insight. There would be a particular encounter.
- Lord, there would be a moment where we are more aware of your grace and mercy given to us in Christ than anything you are calling us to do.
- Thank you, Lord, for the blessing of this gathering, for what you're doing in and amongst the people of Trinity Cambridge, for your glory and the good of this community.
- Join us now for Jesus' glory. We pray this in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Well, that was a gracious introduction by Sean.
- [1 : 04] And thank you, brother, for those kind words. I do wish that my wife, Linda, could be here. She is with our church in Franklin, Massachusetts, a sister church of yours.
- And you'll hear about her later in the message. But she sends her regards to you, and as does our congregation. I actually discovered that two of our members are here celebrating their anniversary.
- So I hope you'll get to know them, Tina and Mike Chang, who can you just wave at the... That's great. I feel bad that they have to sit and listen to me, having heard this message, and would be eager for them to come again so they can be ministered to by your lead pastor.
- But happy anniversary to the Changs. Real quick, when Sean comes to our church, we always ask for a Trinity update. So I'm assuming he would want me to give you, in two minutes, a Crossway Church update.
- We're celebrating our 16th year, the beginning of our sixth in Franklin. We started in a small community called Mansfield. We were planted through Sovereign Grace Churches back in 2001.
- [2 : 17] This past summer's been quite full for us as a congregation. We attempted to do three things in the course of about six weeks.
- The first of which you may have heard of was the celebration event in Lancaster, PA. We had several families and singles participate in that, which was a conference principally sponsored by Sovereign Grace Churches in the Northeast, but there were others who joined us.
- That was immediately followed by a week of serving and loving a community in East Providence, a subset of Providence.
- There's a new church work there called Godspeed, and we've been working with them, and they've been partnering with us for years, and they recently moved into that community.

And so it's a ministry among the urban poor, and we're joining them because our desire is in a couple of years to plant a church into another suburb of Providence, Pawtucket, and learn not only the rhythms of life there and meet the people, but partner with churches in our region for the sake of the gospel.

[3 : 29] So we did that for a week. Tina and her daughters were part of that, and I believe they were part of the celebration too. And then last week we had youth camp with friends in Pennsylvania and Maryland.

And I don't know if you've ever been to a youth camp. At 54 years old, a youth camp means no sleep, radical change to your diet, high energy activities all day, and then when you return home, about three days of foggy brain.

So I'm somewhere in that three day of foggy brain. But glad to be here with you. Thankful that we are partnering in our mission together and thankful that you are a part of this community as we are a part of our community seeking to love our neighbors and through our love point them to Christ our Savior.

It's a privilege to be here. Our church, I believe, our youth group was here with you earlier this year. One of those was my daughter, and so I'm glad now to see the Lusitania with my own eyes with you in it.

How many of you, as we turn our attention to the text, how many of you this summer have been to either a show or a concert or even seen a movie this summer?

[4 : 54] Just shut by way of hands. Great. Then you can identify with this illustration as we think about our passage this morning. Where you sit when you attend Shakespeare on the Common in downtown Boston or watch Dunkirk, the movie, if you take it in a theater, or in my case, the U2 concert at Gillette, where you sit shapes your experience and perspective of what you see, doesn't it?

So where I sat at U2 was the only place I could afford to sit, which was the standing room-only free space, which if you've been to Gillette Stadium, you know that as you come from the upper level to the lower level, below the restaurant CBS scene, there are some stairs there, and there's a courtyard, and they allow you for every concert, whether it was Coldplay on Friday night or U2 back in June, to stand there, and then when the concert begins and they clear away the security, they actually allow you to move all the way up to where the fake lighthouse is and the bridge, and you can have a clear sight view of the band performing.

What I didn't realize is, though it was a great concert because it was free, is that I had friends, actually church-planning friends, who were in the cheap seats, the nosebleed seats.

They were inside but up high, and I could tell because as I was tweeting out during the concert, excerpts from, they were seeing my tweets and texting me back, where are you sitting?

I'm in the cheap, free spot. Oh, we're up high. And they had the panoramic view, you know, where everyone does their thing with their cameras and their lights and so there. And then before the concert was over, I realized that we had acquaintances that were about 30 feet from the front of the stage in the general admission, and so they let me know at the end of the show that they actually were in there.

[6 : 53] They didn't want to see me since they had paid so much for their seats, but they were, and you know what I realized in that moment? I realized in that moment that where you are during a concert or an event shapes your perspective.

The book of Genesis is a lot like that, isn't it? We are given in the book of Genesis chapters that cover years, maybe even decades in the life of a character, and so we get more of the nosebleed or the panoramic view of the story for God's purposes, but this morning we're in the general admission.

We're 30 feet from the stage because the narrative slows down, and God by his spirit through this inspired word brings us up close into literally a few hours of Jacob's life, pivotal hours, so that we don't miss the details of this particular moment.

Why that's encouraging to me as not only are you learning how to read the scriptures, it'll still encourage to me how God relates to us. In Christ, God has brought you and I in close to him so we don't miss a single detail of what he's like, but if you're like me, oftentimes in our relationship with God, we feel as if God is far away, and we're up in the cheap seats looking down, and we know God's at work, we don't quite understand what he's doing in the details of our life, or we can even feel that we're outside looking in, but the good news is that this passage reminds us is wherever we feel we're sitting, God draws near to us.

He continues to search and seek and find us because of his great love, which invites us as we consider the life of Jacob this morning to entrust ourselves to God again because of his gracious promises which are unfailing, and that's the main point this morning.

[9 : 05] Wherever you find yourself this morning, wherever you are in your understanding of the scriptures, your exploration of Christianity, your understanding of the gospel, perhaps you're new to this church or new to the faith, the good news of Genesis 32 and 33 is we can entrust ourselves to God because his gracious promises to us are filling, but that's also true for us who have been walking with him for a long time.

We need to be reminded, we need to be renewed in our hope that we can entrust ourselves to God because of his gracious and unfailing promises to us.

This is a great Old Testament chapter. It's great because not only does the narrator slow down in order to help us focus on Jacob's remarkable transformation as he returns to Canaan, confronts his fears, and wrestles with God in preparation for his unexpected and surprising reconciliation to his brother Esau, but it's a great chapter because of what it reminds us of Christ and his purposes and plans for our lives.

I'm breaking down, I'm going to limit my comments to chapter 32 and the structure of the passage. We're going to look at three sections this morning. The first section, the opening section, verses 1 and 2, Jacob's mounting fears and reassurance of faith.

And then the second section, which we'll get to in a moment, beginning in verse 22, Jacob's mortal combat with the mysterious figure and then his memorable reconciliation with Esau at the end.

[10 : 49] Let's look at the first section, verses 1 and 2, Jacob's mounting fears and reassurance of faith.

Let's look again at what is recorded here. Jacob went on his way. The angels of God met him and when Jacob saw them, he said, this is God's camp.

So he called the name of the place Mahanaim. The chapter opens with the sudden visitation of many angels.

These mighty messengers of God, Jacob exclaims, are camping near his camp. So did you notice that as Jacob departed the land with a vision of angels, he now reenters the land accompanied by a host of angels.

In the story of Jacob, when he left as a fugitive, having stolen his brother's birthright, he left Canaan with a vision or dream of angels.

[12 : 04] Now he reenters the land and he is accompanied by a host of angels. And it begs the question, I'm sure you asked this question, why?

Why do these angels, these mighty messengers of God, suddenly reappear to the patriarch? And I think, I submit for your consideration, the abrupt appearance of not just the angels, but what does Jacob call it?

Look down at your camp. Look down at your text. The camp of God. The abrupt appearance of these mighty messengers, the camp of God, is because God wants to reassure Jacob of his presence.

When our fears are mounting, God wants to reassure us of his presence too.

Turn back to Genesis 28. Just look briefly at verse 12 with me. Jacob has a dream. the twisted one, the manipulator, the one who steals from his brother and lies to his father to get what he wants, now is a fugitive fleeing his brother Esau's murderous plans and he has a dream.

[13 : 29] And what does he see in the dream? He sees angels ascending and descending on the ladder into heaven, God's throne room. Now, in this chapter, chapter 32, God gives him a second vision of angels.

But this is on his return into the promised land. Why is God doing this? What does it trigger perhaps in Jacob's memory as God do this?

Besides his awe of the presence of these mighty angels, God is reminding Jacob that he is not alone.

God is not this is the reminder through his presence of the promises God made to Jacob when he left.

the Lord Why should that be important to you? Why is that important to Israel too who originally received the story? Why should that be important to us at Trinity Cambridge?

[14 : 31] is because God never forgets his promises to us, even when we do. He never forgets his promises.

But he often has to remind us of his promises because we often forget his promises, even those promises found his word.

Now, think about it. If your friend made you a promise that was particularly meaningful and important to you, would you forget it? Probably not.

If you're married and your spouse makes a promise to you that's important to you, do we forget it? Never.

If your employer makes a promise to you at the end of this year, I promise you, do we forget that?

[15 : 29] Not on our lives, but I often forget the very promises God has made to me and keeps in Christ.

This chapter reminds me that even when I forget God's promises, he remains faithful to keep them and he will often remind me of them, often in the context of God's gathered community, but every day that I look to him for reassurance of his grace.

No more do we need this than when fears are mounting and decisions are looming and conflicts are impending as was all facing Jacob.

What is the purpose of this vision for Jacob? The purpose of this section is to help Jacob think about God's word to him in the past, remember his word of promise in the presence, and reassure him of his presence so that he can be confident that as he pursues reconciliation with Esau, God is helping him too.

Friend, here's a question for purposeful reflection application. What promise might God be helping you to remember this week as you obey him in the daily moments of life?

[17 : 05] If you're not sure, may I urge you to consider your order of service, which contains many promises from God's word of his forgiveness, of his presence, of his provision, and ultimately of his blessing given to us in Christ.

God never forgets his promises. Indeed, he often providentially reminds us of them so that we might not forget. That's part one. Part two, as we transition.

Encouraged by the vision of the angels, Jacob now decides to do a hard thing first to a matter that has been increasingly heavy on his heart for 20 years.

He decides to come back to Canaan to pursue reconciliation with his brother after his terrible mistreatment of him and their broken relationship.

Look again at verse 3. Chapter 32. And Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau, his brother, in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, instructing them, Thus you shall say to my lord Esau, Thus says your servant Jacob, I have sojourned with Laban and stayed until now.

[18 : 34] I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male servants and female servants. I have sent to tell my lord in order that I may find favor in your sight.

It's interesting as we look at this next section that Esau does not block Jacob's return trip into Canaan.

He had settled far to the south at Mount Seir in Edom, but apparently it was a spiritual necessity for Jacob for making things right with his brother that drove Jacob to journey south first to where Esau was for Canaan lies to the west.

In support of this, Derek Kidner, a wonderful Old Testament commentator, observes that the sequence of chapters 32 and 33, which culminates in chapter 35, powerfully acts out the principles of spiritual reconciliation outlined in the New Testament.

But did you notice Jacob's faith in God is tested as he begins his journey home? Not by wild animals that crouch at the border, nor by raiding nomadic tribes that threaten to kill him as an unwelcome visitor.

[20 : 02] Jacob's faith is tested by those noisemakers that reside within our hearts too. Fear. The voice of fear. And the reason it's often a test of our faith is because the voice of fear is our own.

It's our own voice. The thing about fear in my life, it's not only that it's a familiar voice, but fear, as people have often noted, never travels alone.

It's a pack animal. And it always gathers friends. Friends like good desires that I have that now feel threatened by this course of action or this indication by God to do something, which then makes the fear a test of my faith in God's faithfulness and his call to my obedience.

But notice how Jacob responds. Jacob responds to his fears with a peaceful gesture to Esau. He sends to his brother donkeys and oxen and flocks and male servants and female servants, verse 5, so that he would find favor in his sight.

He sends messengers with gifts and he sends them with a message of peace. The message Jacob tells his messengers to share with Esau speak of how God has blessed him with so many things while serving Laban and Parinarum.

[21 : 44] Jacob is not trying to aggravate or tweak Esau here. He's basically saying to his brother, I am a very wealthy man. I don't need anything of yours. I don't want to take anything of yours.

I'm not going to trick you out of anything that is yours. You can have everything that's yours because I don't need it because God has prospered me. Jacob, I seek nothing that belongs to you except your face.

Wow! Has Jacob changed from 20 years before? The twister, the manipulator, the liar, the cheater, the schemer.

The thief now returns to Jacob and wants to make peace. Did you notice how he addresses his brother?

He addresses his brother as Lord. Verse 5, I have sent to tell my Lord.

[22 : 50] These words may indicate Jacob's repentance for stealing his older brother's blessing. And so now he wants to honor Esau, his older brother, not only with gifts, but with deference and respect.

But verse 6 tells us that the report of the messengers is disturbing. When we came to your brother Esau, he's coming now to meet you and there are 400 men with him.

That would not indicate that they had been able to convey successfully Jacob's overture to Esau. So Jacob, verse 7, is filled with great distress.

It would distress me if I hadn't seen him for 20 years only to hear the news that he's coming to me with an army of 400 men. Oh my.

Let's pause for a moment and consider this. God is at work in Jacob's life. And of course, that of Israel's who first received the story about the end of the promised land to strengthen their faith and renew their obedience in him.

[24 : 02] First, he does so by reminding us that God often strengthens our faith not by removing all danger and pressure from our lives, but by sustaining us through it. God strengthens our faith not by removing our trials, but by upholding us through them.

Now let me just make a pause. This is a... We just spent a week at youth camp in Daniel. So I'm going to use this as an illustration. It is true that God doesn't remove us from all of our trials and temptations, but to strengthen our faith.

But did you notice when those of you that have read the book of Daniel that when we get to chapter 3 and the famous story of his three companions who were thrown into the fiery furnace for not bowing to the idols, what it says of Daniel right before that chapter?

Daniel's doing the king's work. He's on an assignment and Daniel is spared the trial of the fiery furnace at the end of chapter 2.

And as I read that and then read of the... really the remarkable courage and faith of the three that were thrown into the fiery furnace and stood faithful to God, I had this thought.

[25 : 19] How many fiery afflictions has God spared me that I'm unaware of? And how often do I just simply pause and say, Lord, thank you, notwithstanding the fiery trial I'm in for the many ways you have spared me or shown mercy to me or been uncommonly kind to me, which then brings perspective and hope to the trial and fears that I now face.

So when I say to you, God often strengthens our faith not by removing us from all danger and pressure. I don't want to imply by that that the Christian life is just one trial of our faith.

There are many, many stops along the way where we can simply pause and say, thank you, Lord, for your faithfulness in providing and protecting and delivering me.

But he does not remove us from all of our trials. So it took Jacob enormous courage to return to his homeland and continue to seek out Esau.

And so here's a final application point. Spiritual courage from our faith is not found merely by God removing all danger from our lives, but by faith facing our fears, obeying God's word, and through God's blessing growing in our faith and dependency in Christ.

[26 : 51] Friend, where might God be testing your faith today? Where might God be testing the corporate faith of Trinity Cambridge Church?

Where might God be testing and proving the faith of Crossway Church or even the broader body of Christ in this city or this region? It's not by removing every danger or difficulty from our life, but by helping us face it in order to deepen our faith and our courage through Christ this week.

How might God be encouraging you to respond? God strengthens our faith, not by removing all danger and pressure, but by sustaining us through it.

Which begs the question, how does God sustain Jacob through it? How did God do it? And what would God have to teach Israel through it? And what did God, by implication, teach us?

Verse 9, Jacob's first recorded prayer in all of Scripture. One of the ways Jacob is sustained and finds the spiritual courage necessary to face his brother Esau is Jacob is learning how to pray.

[28 : 03] Verse 9, let's look at it again. O God of my father, Abraham, and God of my father, Isaac. Notice he addresses God by his covenant name. O Lord, L capital O capital R capital T, O Yahweh, who said to me, return to your country and to your kindred that I may do you good.

I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and of faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I cross this Jordan. And now I have become two camps.

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. But you said, I will surely do you good and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for the multitude.

What a prayer. What a prayer. prayer. Jacob provides Israel with a model prayer. Jacob provides us with a model prayer.

But here's what's interesting why this encourages me. It's not a model prayer. This is Jacob's first recorded prayer in Scripture, meaning much of his life that has been walked out with God has not enlisted the grace reserved for prayer.

[29 : 30] But he is learning. God in his mercy and grace is teaching him. Even at this late juncture in this significant moment, God is helping him to express his need.

But notice, not only does he express his need, he contemplates God's promises while he prays. Verse 12. He bases his entire prayer on the covenant promises God has already given to him.

You know, it's interesting. Jacob's phrase here in verse 12 borrows both from what God said to him in Genesis 28, but also from Genesis 22. And so conceivably, the language here of these prayers is not just what God has personally spoken to Jacob, which he has, but he is reciting the promises God gave to his ancestor Abraham.

As if to say, God's promises are unfailing. And therefore, my faith, listen, is in God's word and not my ability to be faithful.

Let me say this again. His model prayer reminds me, reminds, is reminds us, is our faith has a sure and lasting hope.

[30 : 57] It's in God's word and God's promises and not in our faithfulness. Why will Trinity Cambridge prosper in the biblical sense of that word?

He will use our efforts. He will be faithful to our sacrifices. He will, he hears our prayers, but ultimately, he will be faithful to Trinity Cambridge Church in East Cambridge as he is faithful to every Bible-believing, gospel-believing church in this city and in this region and in this nation.

not because of our faithfulness. He will be faithful because he is faithful to his promises. God's word is a sure foundation.

And so Jacob is pleading God's promises as he prays. Friend, can you help me? And can we help one another in the situations or difficulties we face?

not only to turn to the Lord in prayer this week, but to remember, remember specific promises that help us put our trust in God's love and faithfulness and promises to you.

[32 : 16] Let me give you one and we'll turn for home, Sean, to close this out. Psalm 9. Turn with me to Psalm 9. It's a simple verse from Psalm 9.

And I need simple at 54 to remember scripture. These people who memorize the book of Hebrews and recite them at conferences, I have nothing in common with them.

I can't remember my birthday and my pin numbers anymore or how old I am. But I can remember this. Psalm 9, verse 9 and 10.

The Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. And those who know your name put their trust in you.

For you, O Lord, have not forsaken those who seek you. What a promise. Those who know your name, those who know Jesus, those who by grace and mercy God in His kindness has opened our eyes to not only believe in Him but receive from Him His precious promises of forgiveness and salvation and comfort and an abiding presence.

[33 : 33] Those who know your name not only put their trust in you, but when we seek first your kingdom and its righteousness, what's the promise? He does not forsake us.

Wow. Wow. That simple promise becomes the fuel for our intercession when fears are mounting and difficulties are real and the report of our messengers is disturbing.

Friend, where might God be desiring to strengthen your faith this week in courage? Not by removing danger, but by having you simply remember and recite and reflect on God's promises in His Word while you pray.

Plead the promise while you pray because He is faithful. Let's conclude the passage with His Mortal Kombat 22 to 32.

What a stunning turn of events. What a surprising reversal as God deals first with Jacob before Jacob has to deal with Esau.

[35 : 04] It would probably be one of the darkest nights of Jacob's life as he sat alone reflecting on his past. He sent everyone ahead of him across the brook and as he sits there, have you ever had one of those sleepless nights where your thoughts are racing and you're considering what tomorrow might bring?

Jacob has an unexpected, unplanned visit by this mystery figure and the effect and my final point is of this encounter is that God grows Jacob's faith by transforming his weakness into his greatest strength.

He now limps. That becomes his strength, his asset, his spiritual gifting. He now will limp.

It's a crippling combat. I don't know what to compare it to. I don't do boxing. I never wrestled. I played tennis.

I mean, they're wrestling and sweating and gouging and pulling and butting heads and I think there's bleeding going on and there's no tap out and all Jacob could do was cling on to this angelic mystery figure or lose the battle and he's not even sure who it is he's wrestling with.

[36 : 45] It's dark. It's not like he can whip out his phone and flip on his flashlight and put it in the things fit. Oh, this is the angel Lord. Oh, this is the pre-incarnate Christ. Oh, this is a theophany or all things we do to make sense of it.

But Hosea chapter 12 tells us Jacob strove with the angel. Jacob was wrestling with God and God's purposes as he always struggled with God and God's purposes.

And yet what he had no idea was that the figure was not there to punish Jacob. He was not there to condemn him. He was in the grip.

I love this language that Ian DeGuit has given us of God's relentless grace. In verse 25 it says, 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.

In other words, Jacob for the rest of his life was reduced to weakness. His injured leg useless and dangling. But, here's amazing grace, though physically weak, by faith he hung on, didn't he?

[38 : 07] Till God blessed him. Jacob wrestled with the angel. He is reduced to a limp, but he hangs on to receive blessing.

And the blessing comes in two forms. He receives a new name, where we're told that you will no longer be called Jacob, but you will be called Israel, God's name for his covenant partner and for his chosen people.

But also, there will be a memorial that will be established of this event, which will remind his descendants of this event and its significance, that in this new name and in this new identity in which God is a witness between them and him.

The limp to which they now have received is their greatest strength. No longer would they be known for proud self-sufficiency, for figuring it out, but they will be known by grace as weak and dependent and dearly loved by the God who keeps his promises.

As we conclude and we think about the implications of this passage to us, let us remember that not only does God keep his promises to us, but the new name we receive in Christ, we are now his sons and daughters.

[40 : 11] And the weaknesses that we often feel as Christians, both to remember God's promises and to be faithful to them.

That the promise of this passage is notwithstanding our new identity and notwithstanding our weaknesses that Jacob held on by grace and that we through Christ are given the faith and the stamina, albeit weak, the ability to hang on to God by grace and God has promised even in our moments of greatest defeat to hang on to us until his purposes are performed.

In just a few weeks we're going to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation and in particular the moment where Martin Luther nailed his protests if you will to the church door in Bittenberg, his 95 thesis.

Isn't it interesting that the hymn that Luther wrote, A Mighty Fortress of Our God, has as its second verse did we in our own strength confide our striving would be losing?

Did we in our own strength confide our striving would be losing? Rather, Luther with us invites us to entrust ourselves to God because his blessings are the result of his graciousness to the undeserving.

[42 : 14] thing. He is faithful to his promises. He has committed himself to love us eternally. And in Christ, he is with us to the very end.

His purpose is to perform. How blessed we are when we can yield to God in the struggle the way Jacob did. How blessed we are when a crisis comes upon us and God lays his hand upon us in that crisis so that we become weak and limp and out of joint with an appalling sense of our own weakness so that we can surrender and say, Lord, I cling to you.

Maybe God is wrestling with you today. He may be saying to you and to me, although you're clever and astute and capable, although you have believed in me, you still like to make your own arrangements.

You still like to manipulate the circumstances of your own life. You still like to be in charge. My child, what is your name?

Let's pray. Lord, we're grateful that in Christ we live in the grip of your relentless grace, and we're thankful for this story, your story, God's story, of your faithful purposes and plans for your people then and your people today.

[44 : 04] Lord, you've given us an up-close view of one man's struggles, and in so doing, for many here, you've reminded us of those up-close struggles that we live with every day.

First, thank you for your faithful promises, promises, even when we are weak and feel like our grip is failing. Now, Lord, help us by faith to respond to your word, to receive mercy this morning, and be renewed in our hope that even if my grip feels like it is fading, one holds tightly to me, Christ, my King.

And may we, Lord, leave here confident, more confident than we are on, not in our efforts, but in your relentless grace for Christ's glory, and for our good.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Everybody said, Amen.