

Grappling with God

Rev. Young Tae Choi

Scripture reading: Gen. 32:22-31; Psa. 121; 2 Tim. 3:14-4:5

Big idea: Go deeper with God through our weakness.

Purpose: to end false security in ourselves and to trust in the divine security

Intro

We just read three scripture readings according to the lectionary. Those texts share one theme in common: God's protection. First, in Genesis 32, we see Jacob wrestling with God. Through the match, God teaches him about what it means to follow a God who protects. Second, Psalm 121 is one of the famous songs about God as the source of our help. The Psalmist expresses deep confidence in God's ability to protect His people. Last, our New Testament reading is 2 Timothy chapters 3:14-4:5. This passage shows that God keeps our salvation safe through sound teachers like St. Paul. Paul here encourages his spiritual son Timothy to continue his ministry in the Scriptures with much patience and careful instruction. Among those texts in the lectionary, today's main text will be Genesis 32, and what we are going to look at in the passage is the idea of divine security in our weaknesses. Let me pray before I begin:

Prayer

Lord, by your Spirit, plant your truth deep within us and shape us in your likeness, so that the light of Christ will be seen in our actions and decisions.

Amen.

Sermon

Imagine you were in a room in your place. It was completely dark; not even streetlights or moonlight was coming through. Your eyes were wide open but all you could see was the pitch blackness, the darkness on all sides. You might try to find someone like your spouse or children, to figure out what happened to you. But you found out that all the other rooms were already empty and that security alarm lights did not flicker, either. You might check if the lights had blown a fuse. You kept groping for the light power switch. On the way, you fell down in the dark several times. There was nothing you could see with your eyes. The sun was supposed to rise but it hadn't for a month or more. You were all by yourself. If you were there, you would feel hard pressed on every side. Fear would invade your mind and heart. You would feel frightened and helpless. In short, you would be left alone in absolute insecurity. You might raise a question here: where is a God who promised to His children, *'I watch over you. I stand beside you as your protective shade'* (Psa. 121:5)? This is just an imaginary description of the state of being insecure and unknown. But, we do sometimes encounter such a hopeless moment in life unexpectedly.

Here is a real example. Back in 1990s, there were only three Korean barbershops in Greater Vancouver. Due to this business environment, they were able to draw local Korean customers so easily that they could make a lot of money. No wonder that their hair cut businesses were successful. They were satisfied with their immigrant lives in Canada. One of the rich barbers was Christian. Many Korean Christian customer in that area knew about him because he was gifted at hair-design and cutting, and he was very kind to his customers. Even a haircut price in his barbershop was quite modest—15 dollars for adults; 10 dollars for kids, students, pastors and missionaries in need, and seniors. He became widely known and

respected among local customers just like a public figure. His life seemed good enough with what he had.

However, his life got smashed to pieces by big accident one day. A running-dump truck crashed his car stopped on the street. He was in the car. He lost a leg; he got repeated surgeries; he closed his barbershop; his wife left him with a half of his possessions and their daughter; he got depressed; he got drunk; as some of us are assuming, he tried to commit suicide several times. Yes, he might have been right there, the imaginary place where I described earlier. He became alone without anything to protect his life—job-less, money-less, family-less, friend-less, health-less, reputation-less, faith-less...nothing left to him. His own ability to make his life work properly was totally over. ‘How could a God of protection do this to me?’ He might have brooded over this question every day and night in the darkest valley of insecurity. Most likely, he was struggling with the invisible God about the visible tragedy he had to go through.

In a similar way, Jacob’s security was threatened by his older brother, Esau, for a long time. Living up to his name—Jacob in Hebrew means “he cheats,” — Jacob bargained for Esau’s birthright by means of a trick. Because of this fraud, Jacob became the bearer of God’s promises and the inheritor of Canaan, and the skillful hunter, Esau, got very angry at him. Esau wanted to kill his brother. In addition, Jacob’s mother, Rebekah, showed partiality for Jacob, fostered continuing hostility between Esau and Jacob. Jacob’s home was never safe for Jacob. Rebekah decided to arrange for Jacob to escape Esau’s wrath. At age 40, Jacob fled his home to begin his life on his own.

About 57 years from then, Jacob was heading toward the Promised Land where God called him to go. In fact, he did not want to return there because his angry brother lived there. Also, he had just heard from his messengers that Esau was coming to him with an army of 400 men. He was terrified at the news. He must have been afraid of Esau's revenge. Jacob had to find a way to appease Esau's wrath in order to respond to God's promise. To resolve this, Jacob shrewdly sent an enormous gift to his brother ahead of him. It was 200 goats, 220 sheep/rams, 30 camels plus their young, 50 cows/bulls, and 30 donkeys. By implication, 'I am not going to try to trick you, my brother, out of anything this time. I have plenty.' In addition, he divided his retinue into two groups. Each group was large enough to defend itself or to escape if the other was attacked. To his scheme, Jacob added prayer, remembering God's promise. Here is the prayer: *O Lord, you told me, 'Return to your own land and to your relatives.' And you promised me, 'I will treat you kindly and I will multiply your descendants.'... O Lord. please rescue me from the hand of my brother, Esau. I am afraid that he is coming to attack me, along with my wives and children (vv. 10-12).*" When all his family and servants with all his possessions had crossed the Jabbok River to Esau, Jacob was left alone in the camp without any possessions or any protection. It was a solitary night. Yet, his heart must have been struggling with God's promise, as to whether it was real because there was nothing tangible to secure his life in that cold wilderness. Probably, this place was where God wanted him to be, to learn exactly what it meant to rely on the Lord. Now we see that the real struggle begins in today's passage.

Genesis chapter 32, verse 24 begins with God who initiates the match, not Jacob. It is God through His angel or in the form of man who comes to Jacob for the wrestling. Jacob grapples with him until the dawn begins to break. The fight is a neck

and neck race. As the dawn is breaking, the Opponent touches Jacob's hip and wrenches it out of its socket. Jacob's pivot of strength is completely broken. Yet, Jacob still refuses to release his Antagonist. Jacob demands a blessing from him, possibly a blessing of protection to prevail over his enemies, not that of prosperity because he already got enough possessions. Interestingly, the Opponent asks Jacob one question: "*what is your name?*" "*Jacob*" (v. 27). That is, "I'm a cheater." By telling it, Jacob acknowledges his devious past and admits his bad character. As elsewhere in the Bible, midlife name changes represent a change of character such as Abram to Abraham and Simon to Peter. The Opponent blesses him in renaming Jacob to Israel: *Your name will no longer be Jacob...From now on you will be called Israel* (v. 28)." Jacob becomes a new Jacob—Israel, the one on whose behalf God strives, which heralds the beginning of Jacob's new life. Then, Jacob names this place "Peniel" which means "face of God," for he has seen God face to face, yet his life has been spared.

Being blessed by God through the man, the sun rises. Israel leaves the place to meet his brother. Right, his appearance behind is different from yesterday's Jacob. Yes, he limps. Yes, he can no longer live his life on his own strength; since God broke his strength. God gave him a crippled body but a strengthened faith. Yes, he can rely on no help but the Lord's. An Old Testament scholar, Bruce Waltke, describes this scene like this: "This limp is the posture of the saint, walking not in physical strength but in spiritual strength."¹ Right here, Israel's history begins the original ancestor of the nation of Israel and father of the 12 ancestors of the 12 tribes of Israel. When Jacob is dead in his power, Israel is born in God's power. Mysteriously, God did not grant Jacob a blessing of power to prevail over enemies like his brother; but rather

¹ Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 2001), 450.

by taking Jacob's tendon, the centre of his own strength away, God granted him a blessing of protection that is in God almighty. This moment echoes through Paul's paradoxical life in suffering for the sake of the Gospel of Christ: *"I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, I am strong"* (2 Cor. 12:9b-10).

I go to the barbershop run by the man whom I mentioned. I am his regular customer. I plan to spend an hour or an hour and a half with him whenever going there to get a haircut from him. Of course, this is not because it takes an hour to have a haircut, especially my short look, but partially because he hobbles off with his artificial leg, and mostly because we have a deep chat afterward. Interestingly, he is one of the lay Christians whom I know that has in mind many theological questions about his pains and God. Last week, he told me:

Young Tae, I think that the car accident was a crucial transition in my life. Actually, I had no question about God before the accident. I might not need to ask questions about God because I did not need Him desperately at that time. But since that car crash, I have had struggles with God to understand my ongoing pains. Sometimes, I feel I am playing seesaw as to whether God's protection is real. But, one thing is clear. God did not grant me a new leg; but he has changed my life through the long period of wrestling with Him. I have come to think of, meditate on, ask to, cry to, run to, and depend on the Lord more than ever. I am very aware that there is nowhere to go but God in my incomprehensible reality.

We wrestle with God, too. Just like Jacob and the barber my friend, a God who protects can initiate the match with us on our journey of life, when we are too

strong in ourselves to need God, when we stubbornly cling to our fake satisfactions and sinfulness, or when we dwell in false security. God wants us to end wrong beliefs and things that we place false security in by taking us to the place of Peniel. He wants to purge our souls of the state of being fatty and stained by cultural myths. Therein, our security system, our proud careers, our stable status, our wealth or the health of our family, life-insurance, increasing reputation, personal connections, religious programs, political power, unmanned cameras, whatever we believe to protect us are, would not work out. This is because the gateway to graduate from this course set by the Lord is a spirit of submission. God leaves us here until we let Him break the very pivot of our strength, the self-reliance.

Now, let us ask ourselves one simple question in the light of the message here: *where does my strength come from?* Is it from myself, what I own? or from a God who protects us in a mysterious way that weakens our own strength and so magnifies our faith and hope in the power of God? Remember what the Psalmist sings: *I look up to the mountains—does my help come from there? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth!... The Lord himself watches over you! The Lord stands beside you as your protective shade* (Psa. 121:1-2, 5). Let us go deeper with God in lifting our weakness to Him and trusting His guidance. Amen.

Prayer of Application

Lord God, we pray for Your protection as we begin this week. You are our hiding place, and under Your wings we can always find refuge. Protect us from temptation, sin, evil, false teachings, and all the fake satisfactions. No matter where we are, we will look to You as our Protector, the One who fights for us every day. Your love and

faithfulness, along with Your goodness and mercy, surround us daily, so we will not fear whatever might come against us. Our trust is in You, God, and we give thanks to You for Your mysterious love and protection. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.

***Written by Rev. Young Tae Choi
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