

Today, we will read together the story of Jacob from Genesis 32 in the Old Testament. This passage records a very striking event: Jacob wrestling with God on the banks of the river Jabbok. Jacob is now preparing to return to his homeland of Canaan after twenty years. However, a heavy burden weighed on his heart—a sense of guilt toward his brother. This stemmed from the pain of his conscience over having once conspired with his mother Rebekah to disguise himself as his elder brother Esau. Through this deception, he unjustly took the blessing from their father Isaac that rightfully belonged to Esau as the firstborn son. Upon learning of this, his brother became furious and resolved to kill his younger brother once their father died. To avoid this, Jacob fled to the land of Haran, where his mother's family lived. There, he worked for his uncle Laban and, after being given two wives and children, finally returned to his homeland of Canaan.

After twenty years had passed, facing his reunion with his brother Esau, Jacob said, "I am afraid of my brother" (32:12). This was because he had heard from a messenger that his brother was coming toward him with four hundred men. To appease his brother's anger, Jacob sent ahead as gifts over five hundred animals—sheep, cattle, camels, and donkeys. He wanted his brother's forgiveness that badly. Unless this matter was settled, he couldn't move forward. With this on his mind, on the eve of crossing the Jabbok River—the eve of the decisive battle, so to speak—Jacob sent his entire family across ahead of him and remained behind alone. He stood before God as a solitary individual.

In our own lives, we may sometimes experience something similar to what Jacob faced at that time. No matter how much worldly success we achieve, no matter how much praise and honor we receive from others, the burdens weighing on our hearts remain entirely unresolved. For this reason, we must pray deeply. At such times, one cannot help but stand alone before God. There was a philosopher and French literature scholar named Mori Arimasa. His grandfather, Mori Arinori, served as Minister of Education in the Ito Hirobumi cabinet. Mori Arimasa himself was a baptized Christian. He studied at First Higher School and the University of Tokyo, later becoming a professor of French at the University of Tokyo. He once said, "Every person possesses a corner of their heart that they can never show to another." There is the Latin word *persona*. This word is the origin of the English word "person," but originally, 'persona' meant "mask." In ancient Greece and Rome, actors wore masks when performing plays. However, since they wore masks, they were not showing their true faces. They might be acting out a sorrowful scene while smiling beneath the mask. The Romans believed that people similarly wore masks when interacting with others. Jacob, at this moment, had to remove his mask. Facing his brother, he honestly acknowledged his own weakness and deceit, and then prayed for forgiveness of his sins.

At that time, the Bible records that someone appeared before Jacob and wrestled with him until dawn. The key point is that this person appeared in the darkness. He did not show his face. No, he could not show it. This person was undoubtedly an angel of God. For the Bible states that no one can see God and live. Therefore, he had to conceal his form before daybreak. Jacob fought desperately with this person, wrestling so fiercely that his hip socket was dislocated. Why? Because he sought a blessing from this person.

Looking back on my own life, I see that often, regarding the things I have prayed for and desired, God does not proceed according to the scenario I envisioned. Even when I believed and staked everything on a choice I made, I sometimes thought, "This wasn't supposed to happen..." Becoming a pastor doesn't mean everything goes my way. What do I do in such times? Like Jacob, I persistently resist before God. I know a church member who, while working, studied through correspondence courses in his youth to earn his tax accountant qualification. He is a member of Tokiwadai Church who was baptized there. However, no matter how many times he took the tax accountant exam, he failed and things didn't go well. One day during evening worship, he stood on the pulpit and testified, saying, "During my youth, I spent years continually resenting God." That is just one example. There are times when we cry out, groaning, "God, why? Why?"

However, I believe this is only natural in the life of faith. Reading today's story of Jacob, I realize that it is okay to bring our questions about life's various hardships, the contradictions and absurdities of this world, directly to God. Yet, speaking from my own experience, even when we bring such questions, God does not always give us an immediate

answer. Even when we wrestle with God, the situation often remains unchanged, and problems are not instantly resolved. Yet what is crucial in today's passage is that Jacob did not abandon God during this struggle. As it says, "No, I will not let you go unless you bless me" (verse 27). He continued to seek and pray to God, yet his request remained unfulfilled. Jacob did not utter a parting shot like, "God, that's enough. I won't rely on you anymore," and walk away from God's presence. Genesis depicts Jacob's life so thoroughly that it could be called the story of Jacob. This is not because he was a person of outstanding character or exceptional intelligence. Jacob was, rather, an ordinary man burdened with weakness and brokenness. Precisely because of this, he knew he could not live without God's blessing. This Jacob is, in fact, a reflection of ourselves.

Let us continue reading the story. In verse 28, God asks the man a question. He asks Jacob, "What is your name?" Jacob answers, "Jacob." This exchange carries meaning far beyond a simple request for a name. Hebrew names always have meaning, just like Japanese names. Jacob means "he who grasps the heel, deceives, or cheats." The moment Jacob spoke his name, he likely became acutely aware of who he truly was. After all, he was speaking to God. And he knew he had lived his life cunningly, just as his name implied. He knew it well. Perhaps that's why he feared meeting his brother. By telling God his name at this moment, he laid bare his true self before God.

But God must have seen through everything. He said to this cunning man, "You are no longer Jacob, but shall be called Israel." The meaning of these words is difficult to grasp. They are said to carry meanings like "God reigns," "wrestling with God," or "God prevails." However, as verse 29 states, I don't think we can definitively say Jacob won this wrestling match. After all, his hip socket was dislocated. Perhaps at that moment, Jacob thought his life was his own, that he could manage things by his own strength, and he tried to overpower God. Though it was utterly impossible, he attempted to defeat God. Yet, it didn't go that way. In the midst of the struggle, his hip was dislocated. That meant the fight was over. Jacob was defeated by God. Yet strangely, it was a pleasant defeat. In the struggle with God, a person is made aware of their own weakness, and by being overcome by God, they are instead brought into God's blessing. The Bible writes that by losing to God, Israel actually won. This is clearly a paradox. Isn't the truth being spoken here that when facing God, losing is winning?

Here, I recall a poem attributed to an anonymous soldier in 19th-century America:

*I asked God for strength to accomplish great things, yet He made me weak to learn humility.
I sought health to do greater deeds, yet He gave me sickness to do better ones.
I pursued wealth to find happiness, yet He granted me poverty to gain wisdom.
I asked for success to win the world's praise, but was given weakness to keep seeking God.
I asked for everything to enjoy life, but was given life to enjoy everything.
Not one thing I asked for was granted, yet all my wishes were heard.
Though I am unworthy of God's favor, every unspoken prayer in my heart was answered.
I am the most richly blessed of all people. (Translated by Kazuko Watanabe)*

In this poem, the author contemplates how their desires went unfulfilled, and instead, God granted them the exact opposite reality. Yet, they still accept what is given to them now as God's will, seeking to find God's blessing within it. In other words, the poet declares that whether his wish is granted or not, a greater truth—namely, that he is in God's hands—is far more important. Therefore, even if not a single thing he desired is given, he can confidently say he is most richly blessed. He is winning even in defeat.

And so, before dawn, this man departed from Jacob without revealing his name. Yet in doing so, he left behind a decisive act of salvation for Jacob. It was that very blessing Jacob had so desperately sought. Before departing from Jacob, the divine messenger blessed him. This blessing was incomparable to the one Jacob had received from his father twenty years earlier. This being knew Jacob was unworthy—weak, cunning, and sinful. Knowing this, God forgave Jacob, accepted him, and extended a blessing to this sinner, inviting him to walk a new path in life. Israel is Jacob's new name. We too are Israel. We struggle against God, but we cannot overcome Him. Instead, by surrendering completely before God, we receive new life and blessing.

Let us pray.